



JULIA QUINN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BRIDGERTON

PREQUELS COLLECTION:



Because of Miss Bridgerton
The Girl with the Make-Believe Husband
The Other Miss Bridgerton
First Comes Scandal

All Four Novels in the Bridgerton Prequel Series

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Bridgerton Prequels Collection

Because of Miss Bridgerton
The Girl with the Make-Believe Husband
The Other Miss Bridgerton
First Comes Scandal

Julia Quinn



AVON

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BECAUSE OF MISS BRIDGERTON

A BRIDGERTON PREQUEL



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JULIA QUINN



AVONBOOKS

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Dedication

*For Susan Slater.
You amaze me every day.*

*And also for Paul.
A well-timed phone call is the mark of an excellent husband.
May you touch the sky this time.*

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Chapter 1

*The roof of an abandoned farmhouse
Midway between Aubrey Hall and Crake House
Kent, England
1779*

It wasn't that Billie Bridgerton was lacking in common sense. On the contrary, she was quite sure that she was one of the most sensible people of her acquaintance. But like any thoughtful individual, she occasionally chose to ignore the little voice of reason that whispered through her mind. This could not, she was certain, be considered recklessness. When she ignored this cautionary voice, it was a conscious decision, made after a (somewhat) careful analysis of her situation. And to her credit, when Billie made a decision—one that most of humanity would deem beyond foolish—she usually landed quite sprightly on her feet.

Except when she didn't.

Like right now.

She glared down at her companion. "I ought to throttle you."

Her companion let out a rather unconcerned meow.

Billie let out a rather unladylike growl.

The cat assessed the noise, judged it to be beneath its notice, and began to lick its paws.

Billie considered the twin standards of dignity and decorum, decided they were both overrated, and returned volley with an immature scowl.

It didn't make her feel any better.

With a weary groan, she looked up at the sky, trying to gauge the time. The sun was wedged quite firmly behind a layer of clouds, which complicated her task, but it had to be at least four o'clock. She reckoned she'd been stuck here for an hour, and she'd left the village at two. If she

factored in the time it took to walk . . .

Oh bloody hell, what did it matter what the time was? It wasn't going to get her off this damned roof.

"This is all your fault," she said to the cat.

Predictably, the cat ignored her.

"I don't know what you think you were doing up in that tree," she continued. "Any fool would have known you couldn't have got down."

Any fool would have left it up there, but no, Billie had heard the mewling, and she'd been halfway up the tree before it occurred to her that she didn't even *like* cats.

"And I *really* don't like you," she said.

She was talking to a cat. *This* was what she'd been reduced to. She shifted her position, wincing as her stocking caught on one of the weatherworn roof shingles. The snag jerked her foot sideways, and her already throbbing ankle howled in protest.

Or rather her mouth howled. She couldn't help it. It *hurt*.

She supposed it could have been worse. She'd been well up in the tree, easily a good eight feet above the roof of the farmhouse, when the cat had hissed at her, flung out a well-clawed paw, and sent them both tumbling.

The cat, needless to say, had made its descent with acrobatic grace, landing without injury, four paws on the roof.

Billie still wasn't sure how *she'd* landed, just that her elbow hurt, her hip stung, and her jacket was torn, likely from the branch that had broken her fall two-thirds of the way down.

But the worst was her ankle and foot, which were killing her. If she were home, she'd prop it up on pillows. She'd witnessed more than her fair share of twisted ankles—some on her own body, even more on others—and she knew what to do. Cold compress, elevation, a sibling forced to wait on her hand and foot . . .

Where were her minions when she needed them?

But then, off in the distance she saw a flash of movement, and unless the local beasts had recently made the move to bipedalism, it was quite clearly human.

"Helloooooooo!" she called out, then thought the better of it and yelled, "Help!"

Unless Billie's eyesight was deceiving her—and it wasn't, it really wasn't; even her best friend Mary Rokesby admitted that Billie Bridgerton's

eyes wouldn't dare to be anything but perfect—the human in the distance was male. And there wasn't a male of her acquaintance who could ignore a feminine cry for help.

“Help!” she yelled again, feeling no small bit of relief when the man paused. She couldn't quite tell if he'd turned in her direction—perfect eyesight only went so far—so she let out another holler, this one quite as loud as she could make it, and nearly sobbed in relief when the gentleman—oh, *please* let him be a gentleman, if not by birth, then at least by nature—began to move in her direction.

Except she didn't sob. Because she never sobbed. She would never have been that sort of a female.

She did, however, take an unexpected breath—a surprisingly loud and high-pitched unexpected breath.

“Over here!” she called out, shrugging off her jacket so that she could wave it in the air. There was no point in trying to appear dignified. She was, after all, stuck on a roof with a twisted ankle and a mangy cat.

“Sir!” she all but hollered. “Help! Please!”

The gentleman's gait adjusted ever so slightly at the noise, and he looked up, and even though he was still too far away for Billie's perfect eyes to see his face, she *knew*.

No. No. *No*. Anyone but him.

But of course it was him. Because who else would stroll by at her lowest moment, at her most awkward and embarrassing, at the one bloody time *she* needed rescuing?

“Good afternoon, George,” she said, once he'd drawn close enough to hear.

He put his hands on his hips and squinted up at her. “Billie Bridgerton,” he said.

She waited for him to add, “I might have known.”

He didn't, and somehow that made her even more irritated. The world was not in balance when she couldn't predict every inflated, pompous word that rolled out of George Rokesby's mouth.

“Getting a bit of sun?” he inquired.

“Yes, I rather thought I could use a few more freckles,” she snapped.

He did not immediately respond. Instead he removed his tricorne hat, revealing an unpowdered head of thick, tawny brown hair, and regarded her with a steady, assessing gaze. Finally, after carefully setting his chapeau

down on what had once been a stone wall, he looked back up and said, "I cannot say that I'm not enjoying this. Just a little bit."

Any number of retorts danced on Billie's tongue, but she reminded herself that George Rokesby was the only human being in sight, and if she wished to touch her feet to the ground before May Day she was going to have to be nice to him.

Until he rescued her, at least.

"How'd you come to be up there, anyway?" he asked.

"Cat." Said in a voice that might charitably have been described as *seething*.

"Ah."

"It was in the tree," she explained, although heaven knew why. It wasn't as if he'd requested further explanation.

"I see."

Did he? She rather thought he didn't.

"It was crying," she ground out. "I couldn't very well ignore it."

"No, I'm sure you couldn't," he said, and even though his voice was perfectly cordial, she was convinced he was laughing at her.

"Some of us," she pried her teeth apart long enough to say, "are compassionate, considerate individuals."

He cocked his head. "Kind to small children and animals?"

"Quite."

His right brow arched in that monstrously aggravating Rokesby manner. "Some of us," he drawled, "are kind to *large* children and animals."

She bit her tongue. First figuratively, and then literally. *Be nice*, she reminded herself. *Even if it kills you . . .*

He smiled blandly. Well, except for that little smirk at the corner.

"Are you bloody well going to help me down?" she finally burst out.

"Such language," he scolded.

"Learned from *your* brothers."

"Oh, I know," he said. "Never could quite convince them you were actually a girl."

Billie sat on her hands. She actually *sat* on her hands, she was so sure she would not be able to resist the urge to throw herself off the roof in an attempt to strangle him.

"Never could quite convince *myself* you were actually human," George added, rather offhandedly.

Billie's fingers hardened into claws. Which was *really* uncomfortable, all things considered. "George," she said, and she heard a thousand different things in her tone—pleading, pain, resignation, remembrance. They had a history, they two, and no matter their differences, he was a Rokesby and she was a Bridgerton, and when push came to shove, they might as well be family.

Their homes—Crake House for the Rokesbys and Aubrey Hall for the Bridgertons—lay a mere three miles apart in this cozy green corner of Kent. The Bridgertons had been there longer—they had arrived in the early 1500s, when James Bridgerton had been made a viscount and granted land by Henry VIII—but the Rokesbys had outranked them since 1672.

A particularly enterprising Baron Rokesby (so the story went) had performed an essential service to Charles II and been named the first Earl of Manston in gratitude. The details surrounding this elevation of rank had become murky over time, but it was generally accepted that it had involved a stagecoach, a bolt of Turkish silk, and two royal mistresses.

Billie could well believe it. Charm was inherited, was it not? George Rokesby might be precisely the sort of stick-in-the-mud one would expect of the heir to an earldom, but his younger brother Andrew possessed the sort of devilish *joie de vivre* that would have endeared him to a notorious philanderer like Charles II. The other Rokesby brothers were not quite so roguish (although she supposed that Nicholas, at only fourteen, was still honing his skills), but they easily outstripped George in all contests involving charm and amiability.

George. They'd never liked each other. But Billie supposed she could not complain. George was the only available Rokesby at the moment. Edward was off in the colonies, wielding a sword or a pistol, or heaven only knew what, and Nicholas was at Eton, probably also wielding a sword or a pistol (although hopefully to considerably less effect). Andrew was here in Kent for the next few weeks, but he'd fractured his arm doing some such derring-do in the navy. He could hardly have been helpful.

No, it would have to be George, and she was going to have to be civil.

She smiled down at him. Well, she stretched her lips.

He sighed. Just a little. "I'll see if there's a ladder around back."

"Thank you," she said primly, but she didn't think he heard her. He'd always had a fast, long-legged stride, and he'd disappeared around the corner before she could be properly polite.

A minute or so later he came back into view, his arm slung over a ladder that looked like it had last seen use during the Glorious Revolution. “What actually happened?” he called up, setting it into place. “It’s not like you to get stuck.”

It was as close to a compliment as she’d ever heard from his lips. “The cat was not as grateful for my assistance as one might have expected,” she said, every consonant a haughty ice pick directed at the monstrous little feline.

The ladder *thunked* into position, and Billie heard George climbing up.

“Is that going to hold?” she asked. The wood looked somewhat splintered and was emitting ominous creaking noises with every step.

The creaks paused for a moment. “It doesn’t really matter if it holds or not, does it?”

Billie swallowed. Another person might not be able to translate his words, but she’d known this man since the dawn of her memory, and if there was one fundamental truth to George Rokesby, it was that he was a gentleman. And he would never leave a lady in distress, no matter how fragile a ladder’s appearance.

She was in trouble, ergo he had no choice. He had to help, no matter how aggravating he found her.

And he did. Oh, she knew he did. He had never made any effort to disguise it. Although to be fair, neither had she.

His head popped into view, and his Rokesby-blue eyes narrowed. All the Rokesbys had blue eyes. Every last one of them.

“You’re wearing breeches,” George said with a heavy sigh. “Of course you’re wearing breeches.”

“I would hardly have attempted the tree in a dress.”

“No,” he said dryly, “you’re much too sensible for that.”

Billie decided to let this one pass. “It scratched me,” she said, jerking her head toward the cat.

“Did it?”

“We fell.”

George looked up. “That’s quite a distance.”

Billie followed his gaze. The nearest branch was five feet up, and she had not been on the nearest branch. “I hurt my ankle,” she admitted.

“I reckoned as much.”

She looked over at him in question.

“You would have just jumped to the ground, otherwise.”

Her mouth twisted as she peered past him to the packed dirt that surrounded the ruins of the farmhouse. At one point the building must have belonged to a prosperous farmer because it was two full stories high. “No,” she said, assessing the distance. “It’s too far for that.”

“Even for you?”

“I’m not an idiot, George.”

He did not agree with her nearly as fast as he should have done. Which was to say, not at all.

“Very well,” was what he *did* say. “Let’s get you down.”

She breathed in. Then out. Then said, “Thank you.”

He looked over at her with a strange expression. Disbelief, maybe, that she’d uttered the words *thank* and *you* in the same sentence?

“It’s going to be dark soon,” she said, her nose crinkling as she looked up at the sky. “It would have been awful to have been stuck—” She cleared her throat. “Thank you.”

He acknowledged this with the briefest of nods. “Can you manage the ladder?”

“I think so.” It would hurt dreadfully, but she could do it. “Yes.”

“I could carry you.”

“On the ladder?”

“On my back.”

“I’m *not* getting on your back.”

“It’s not where I’d want you,” he muttered.

She looked up sharply.

“Right, well,” he continued, climbing another two rungs up. The edge of the roof was now even with his hips. “Can you stand?”

She stared at him dumbly.

“I would like to see how much weight you can put on that ankle,” he explained.

“Oh,” she mumbled. “Of course.”

She probably shouldn’t have attempted it. The slant of the roof was such that she’d need both her feet for balance, and her right was near to useless by this point. But she tried, because she hated showing weakness in front of this man, or maybe she tried just because it wasn’t in her nature not to try—*anything*—or maybe she just didn’t think the matter through in the first place, but she stood, and she stumbled, and she sat right back down.

But not before a choked cry of pain tore across her lips.

George was off the ladder and on the roof in a second. “You little fool,” he muttered, but there was affection in his voice, or at least as much affection as he ever showed. “May I see it?”

Grudgingly, she poked her foot in his direction. She’d already removed her shoe.

He touched it clinically, cupping her heel in one hand as he tested her range of motion with the other. “Does it hurt here?” he asked, pressing lightly on the outside of her ankle.

Billie let out a hiss of pain before she could stop herself and nodded.

He moved to another spot. “Here?”

She nodded again. “But not quite as much.”

“What about—”

A bolt of pain shot through her foot, so intense it was positively electric. Without even thinking, she yanked it back from his hands.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said with a frown. “But I don’t think it’s broken.”

“Of course it’s not broken,” she practically snapped. Which was a ridiculous thing to say because there was no *of course* about it. But George Rokesby always brought out the worst in her, and it didn’t help that her foot *hurt*, damn it all.

“A sprain,” George said, ignoring her little outburst.

“I know.” Petulantly. *Again*. She hated herself right now.

He smiled blandly. “Of course you do.”

She wanted to kill him.

“I’ll go first,” George announced. “That way if you stumble I’ll be able to stop you from falling.”

Billie nodded. It was a good plan, the only plan, really, and she’d be stupid to argue just because he was the one who’d come up with it. Even if that *had* been her initial impulse.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded again. “You’re not concerned that I’ll knock you off the ladder?”

“No.”

No explanations. Just no. As if it were absurd even to ponder the question.

She looked up sharply. He looked so solid. And strong. And *dependable*.

He'd always been dependable, she realized. She was just usually too busy being irritated by him to notice.

He edged carefully back to the end of the roof, turning around so that he could set one foot on the top rung of the ladder.

"Don't forget the cat," Billie directed.

"The cat," he repeated, giving her a *surely you jest* look.

"I'm not going to abandon it after all this."

George gritted his teeth, said something quite unsavory under his breath, and reached out for the cat.

Which bit him.

"*Mother of—*"

Billie scooted back an inch. He looked ready to tear someone's head off, and she was closer than the cat.

"That cat," George growled, "can rot in hell."

"Agreed," she said, *very* quickly.

He blinked at her speedy acquiescence. She tried for a smile and settled for a shrug. She had two brothers by blood and three more who might as well have been brothers in the Rokesby household. Four if she included George, which she wasn't quite sure she did.

The point was, she understood men, and she knew when to keep her mouth shut.

Besides, she was *done* with that cursed animal. Never let it be said that Billie Bridgerton was in possession of a sentimental heart. She'd tried to save the mangy beast because it was the right thing to do, then she had tried to save it again, if only because it seemed like a waste of her previous efforts not to, but now . . .

She stared down at the animal. "You are on your own."

"I'll go first," George said, moving over to the ladder. "I want you right in front of me the whole way. That way if you stumble—"

"We'll both go down?"

"I'll catch you," he ground out.

She'd been joking, but it didn't seem the wisest course of action to point that out.

George turned to descend, but as he moved to set his foot on the highest rung, the cat, which had apparently not liked being ignored, let out a bloodcurdling screech and dashed through his legs. George pitched back, arms pinwheeling.

Billie didn't think. She didn't notice her foot, or her balance, or anything. She just leapt forward and grabbed him, pulling him back to safety.

"The ladder!" she shrieked.

But it was too late. Together they watched the ladder pivot, spin, then fall with a strange balletic grace to the ground.

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Chapter 2

It would be fair to say that George Rokesby, eldest son of the Earl of Manston and currently known to the civilized world as Viscount Kennard, was an even-tempered gentleman. He had a calm, steady hand, a relentlessly logical mind, and a way of narrowing his eyes *just so* that ensured that his wishes were met with cool efficiency, his desires granted with breathless pleasure, and—and this was the most important part—all of this occurred according to *his* preferred schedule.

It would also be fair to say that if Miss Sybilla Bridgerton had any idea how close he was to going for her throat, she would look a lot more frightened of him than she was of the gathering darkness.

“That’s *most* unfortunate,” she said, peering down at the ladder.

George did not speak. He thought this best.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said.

He unclenched his jaw for just long enough to say, “I am not certain that you do.”

“You’re trying to decide which of us you’d rather toss from the roof. Me or the cat.”

She was a lot closer to the truth than one might have predicted.

“I was only trying to help,” she said.

“I know.” Said in a tone that was *not* meant to encourage future conversation.

But Billie just went right on talking. “If I hadn’t grabbed you, you would have fallen.”

“I *know*.”

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, and for one blessed moment he thought she was going to let the matter drop.

Then she said, “It was your foot, you know.”

He moved his head about an inch. Just enough to indicate he’d heard. “I

beg your pardon?”

“Your foot.” She motioned with her head toward the extremity in question. “You kicked the ladder.”

George gave up all pretense of ignoring her. “You are *not* blaming this on me,” he all but hissed.

“No, of course not,” she said quickly, finally showing a shred of self-preservation. “I merely meant— Just that you—”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Never mind,” she mumbled. She let her chin rest on her bent knees and gazed out over the field. Not that there was anything to see. The only thing moving was the wind, declaring its presence through the light ruffling of the leaves on the trees.

“I think we have another hour before the sun goes down,” she murmured. “Maybe two.”

“We won’t be here when it gets dark,” he told her.

She looked at him, then down at the ladder. Then back at him with an expression that made him want to leave her in the proverbial dark.

But he didn’t. Because apparently he couldn’t. Twenty-seven years was a long time to have the tenets of gentlemanly behavior schooled into one’s brain, and he could never be so cruel to a lady. Even *her*.

“Andrew should be along in thirty minutes or so,” he said.

“What?” She looked relieved, then annoyed. “Why didn’t you say something? I can’t believe you let me think we would be stranded up here all night.”

He looked at her. At Billie Bridgerton, the bane of his existence since her birth twenty-three years earlier. She was glaring at him as if he’d committed some unspeakable affront, her cheeks high with color, her lips pursed like a furious rose.

With great and icy enunciation he said, “One minute has passed between the time the ladder hit the ground and this moment, right now, as these words are leaving my lips. Pray, tell me, when, during your enlightening analysis of the motion by which my foot connected with the ladder, was I meant to offer this information?”

The corners of her mouth moved, but it wasn’t quite a smirk. It was nothing that indicated sarcasm. If she were anyone else, he would have thought her embarrassed, or maybe even sheepish. But this was Billie Bridgerton, and she didn’t *do* embarrassment. She just did as she pleased and

damn the consequences. She had done her entire life, generally dragging half the Rokesby clan down with her.

And somehow everyone *always* forgave her. She had that way about her—it wasn't charm exactly—it was that crazy, reckless confidence that made people flock to her side. Her family, his family, the entire bloody village—they all adored her. Her smile was wide, and her laugh was infectious, and God in heaven but how was it *possible* he was the only person in England who seemed to realize what a danger she was to humanity?

That twisted ankle of hers? It wasn't the first. She'd broken her arm, too, in typically spectacular fashion. She'd been eight, and she had taken a tumble from a horse. A barely trained gelding she'd had no business riding, much less trying to jump a hedge on. The bone had healed perfectly—of course it did, Billie had always had the devil's own luck—and within months she was back to her old ways, and no one thought to scold her. Not when she rode astride. In breeches. On that same damned gelding over that same damned hedge. And when one of his younger brothers followed her lead and knocked his shoulder out of joint . . .

Everyone had laughed. His parents—and hers—had shaken their heads and laughed, and not a one of them thought it prudent to take Billie off the horse, shove her into a dress, or better yet, pack her off to one of those girls' schools that taught needlework and deportment.

Edward's arm had been hanging from its socket. Its socket!! And the sound it had made when their stablemaster had shoved it back in . . .

George shuddered. It had been the sort of sound one felt rather than heard.

“Are you cold?” Billie asked.

He shook his head. Although *she* probably was. His coat was considerably thicker than hers. “Are you?”

“No.”

He looked at her closely. She was just the sort to try to tough it out and refuse to allow him to behave as a gentleman ought. “You would tell me if you were?”

She held up a hand as if to make a pledge. “I promise.”

That was good enough for him. Billie didn't lie, and she didn't break promises.

“Was Andrew in the village with you?” she asked, squinting off at the horizon.

George gave a nod. “We had business with the blacksmith. He stopped in to speak to the vicar afterward. I didn’t feel like waiting.”

“Of course not,” she murmured.

His head snapped around. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Her lips parted, then hovered for a moment in a delicate oval before she said, “I don’t know, actually.”

He scowled at her, then turned his attention back to the roof, not that there was a damned thing he could do at the moment. But it was not in his nature to sit and wait. At the very least he could examine the dilemma, reassess, and—

“There’s nothing to be done,” Billie said blithely. “Not without the ladder.”

“I’m aware,” he bit off.

“You were looking about,” she said with a shrug, “as if—”

“I *know* what I was doing,” he snapped.

Her lips pressed together in perfect concert with her brows, which rose into that annoying Bridgerton arch, as if to say—*Go ahead, think what you wish. I know better.*

They were silent a moment, and then, in a smaller voice than he was used to hearing from her, she asked, “Are you quite certain that Andrew will come this way?”

He gave a nod. He and his brother had walked to the village from Crake House—not their usual mode of transport, but Andrew, who had recently been made a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, had broken his arm doing some damn fool stunt off the coast of Portugal and had been sent home to recuperate. Walking was currently easier for him than riding, and it was an uncommonly lovely day for March.

“He’s on foot,” George said. “How would he come if not by here?” There were many footpaths in the area, but none that wouldn’t add a mile to the journey home.

Billie tipped her head to the side, gazing out over the field. “Unless someone gave him a ride.”

He turned slowly toward her, dumbfounded by the utter lack of . . . *anything* in her tone. There was no one-upmanship, no argument, not even a hint of worry. Just a bizarre, matter-of-fact—*Hmmm, here’s a disastrous thing that might have happened.*

“Well, he could have done,” she said with a shrug. “Everyone likes

Andrew.”

It was true, Andrew had the sort of devil-may-care, easy charm that endeared him to everyone, from the village vicar to the barmaids at the public house. If someone was heading his way, they’d offer a ride.

“He’ll walk,” George said firmly. “He needs the exercise.”

Billie’s face took on a decidedly dubious mien. “Andrew?”

George shrugged, not wanting to concede the point, even though Andrew had always been a superb athlete. “He’ll want the fresh air, at the very least. He’s been climbing the walls all week. Mother has been trying to put him on broth and bedrest.”

“For a broken arm?” Billie’s snort gave way to a giggle.

George glanced at her sideways. “Taking joy in the misery of others?”

“Always.”

He smiled despite himself. It was difficult to take offense, not when he’d spent the last week enjoying—nay, encouraging—his younger brother’s frustration.

Billie gingerly shifted her position, bending her legs so that she could rest her chin on her knees.

“Watch that foot,” George said, almost absently.

She nodded, and together they lapsed into silence. George stared straight ahead, but he could feel every motion Billie made at his side. She brushed an errant strand of hair from her eyes, then stretched one arm out in front of her, her elbow creaking like an old wooden chair. Then, with the tenacity she displayed in all aspects of her life, she circled back around to their previous conversation and said, “All the same, he could have got a ride.”

He almost smiled. “He could.”

She was quiet for a few more seconds, then said, “It doesn’t look like rain.”

He looked up. It was overcast, but not thickly so. The clouds were too pale to be holding much water.

“And surely we will be missed.”

He allowed himself a smirk. “I will, at least.”

She elbowed him. Hard. Hard enough to make him laugh.

“You’re a terrible person, George Rokesby.” But she was grinning when she said it.

He chuckled again, surprised by how much he enjoyed the light fizz of amusement in his chest. He wasn’t sure that he and Billie qualified as friends

—they’d butted heads far too many times for that—but she was familiar. That wasn’t always a good thing, but right now . . .

It was.

“Well,” she announced, “I suppose there’s no one with whom I’d rather be stranded on a roof.”

He swung his head toward her. “Why, Miss Bridgerton, was that a compliment?”

“You can’t tell?”

“From you?” he parried.

She smiled in an endearingly lopsided manner. “I suppose I deserve that. But, you know, you’re very dependable.”

“Dependable,” he repeated.

She nodded. “Very much so.”

He felt himself scowl, although for all that was holy, he had no idea why.

“If I hadn’t hurt my ankle,” Billie continued blithely, “I’m sure I would have found a way down.”

He regarded her with clear skepticism. Aside from the fact that this had nothing to do with his dependability . . . “Didn’t you just say that it’s too far to jump?”

“Well, yes,” she said, her hand making a dismissive little wave in front of her face, “but I would have thought of something.”

“Of course,” he said, mostly because he lacked the energy to say anything else.

“The point is,” she continued, “that as long as I’m here with *you* . . .”

Her face went suddenly pale. Even her eyes, normally a fathomless shade of brown, seemed to blanch down to something decidedly more tepid.

George’s heart stopped. He had never, *ever* seen Billie Bridgerton with such an expression on her face.

She was terrified.

“What is it?” he demanded.

She turned to him. “You don’t think . . .”

He waited, but she seemed beyond words. “*What?*”

Her ashen face took on a greenish hue. “You don’t think that someone would think that you . . . that we . . .” She swallowed. “That we disappeared . . . *together?*”

George’s entire world lurched. “*God*, no,” he said. Instantly.

“I know,” she agreed. With equal alacrity. “I mean, you. And me. It’s

laughable.”

“Absurd.”

“Anyone who knows us . . .”

“Will know we’d never . . .”

“And yet . . .” This time Billie’s words did not merely trail off, they sank into a desperate whisper.

He gave her an impatient look. “What?”

“If Andrew doesn’t come along as expected . . . and you’re missed . . . and I’m missed . . .” She looked up at him, her eyes huge and horrified in her face. “Eventually someone will realize that we’ve both been missed.”

“Your point?” he snapped.

She turned to face him directly. “Just that why wouldn’t someone assume . . . ?”

“Because they have a brain in their head,” he shot back. “No one would ever think I would be with you on *purpose*.”

She lurched back. “Oh, well, *thank you*.”

“Are you saying you wish someone *did*?” he retorted.

“No!”

He rolled his eyes. *Women*. And yet, this was Billie. The least womanly woman of his acquaintance.

She let out a long, steadying breath. “Regardless of what you think of me, *George* . . .”

How did she make his name sound like an insult?

“. . . I do have my reputation to consider. And while my family knows me well enough, and”—her voice took on a reluctant edge here—“I suppose trusts *you* well enough to know that our concurrent disappearances signify nothing untoward . . .”

Her words trailed off, and she chewed on her lip, looking uncomfortable, and, if one was honest, vaguely ill.

“The rest of the world might not be as kind,” he finished for her.

She looked at him for a moment, then said, “Quite.”

“If we’re not found until tomorrow morning . . .” George said, mostly to himself.

Billie finished the horrifying sentence. “You’d have to marry me.”

Chapter 3

“What are you doing?” Billie nearly shrieked. George had sprung to his feet with speed that was *highly* reckless, and now he was peering over the edge of the building with a calculating, furrowed brow.

Honestly, it looked as if he was performing complicated mathematical equations.

“Getting off the damned roof,” he grunted.

“You’ll kill yourself.”

“I might,” he agreed grimly.

“Well, don’t I feel special,” Billie retorted.

He turned, staring down at her with heavy-lidded superiority. “Are you saying you *want* to marry me?”

She shuddered. “Never.” But at the same time, a lady didn’t want to think that a man would prefer to hurl himself from a roof just to avoid the possibility.

“In that, madam,” George said, “we are agreed.”

And it stung. Oh, how it stung. Ah, irony. She didn’t *care* if George Rokesby didn’t want to marry her. She didn’t even like him most of the time. And she knew that when he did deign to choose a bride, the oh-so-grateful lady wasn’t going to be anything like *her*.

But still, it stung.

The future Lady Kennard would be delicate, feminine. She would have been trained to run a grand house, not a working estate. She would dress in the latest of fashions, her hair would be powdered and intricately styled, and even if she possessed a backbone of steel, she would hide it beneath an aura of genteel helplessness.

Men like George loved to think themselves manly and strong.

She watched him as he planted his hands on his hips. Very well, he *was* manly and strong. But he was like the rest of them; he’d want a woman who

flirted over a fan. God forbid he married someone *capable*.

“This is a disaster,” he spat.

Billie only somewhat resisted the urge to snarl. “You’re just realizing this now?”

His response was an equally immature scowl.

“Why couldn’t you be *nice*?” Billie blurted out.

“Nice?” he echoed.

Oh, God, why had she said that? Now she was going to have to explain. “Like the rest of your family,” she clarified.

“Nice,” he said again. He shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe her gall. “Nice.”

“I’m nice,” she said. Then she regretted *that*, because she wasn’t nice. At least not all the time, and she had a feeling she wasn’t being particularly nice right now. But surely she could be excused, because this was George Rokesby, and she couldn’t help herself.

And neither, it seemed, could he.

“Has it ever occurred to you,” he said, in a voice that was positively bathed with a lack of niceness, “that I am nice to everyone but you?”

It hurt. It shouldn’t have, because they’d never liked each other, and damn it, it shouldn’t have hurt because she didn’t *want* it to.

But she would never let it show.

“I *think* you were trying to insult me,” she said, picking disdainfully through her words.

He stared at her, waiting for further comment.

She shrugged.

“But . . . ?” he prodded.

She shrugged again, pretending to look at her fingernails. Which of course meant that she *did* look at her fingernails, which were revoltingly filthy.

One more thing she didn’t have in common with the future Lady Kennard.

She counted silently to five, waiting for him to demand an explanation in that cutting way he’d perfected before he’d been old enough to shave. But he didn’t say a word, and finally she was the one to lose whatever asinine contest was simmering between them, and she lifted her head.

He wasn’t even looking at her.

Damn him.

And damn her, because she just couldn't help herself. She knew that anyone with an ounce of restraint would have known when to hold her tongue, but no, she had to open her stupid, stupid mouth and say, "If you can't muster the—"

"Don't say it," he warned.

"—generosity of spirit to—"

"I'm warning you, Billie."

"Are you?" she shot back. "I rather think you're threatening me."

"I will do," he nearly spat, "if you don't *shut*—" He cut himself off with a muffled curse, snapping his head in the other direction.

Billie picked at a loose thread on her stocking, her mouth pressed into an angry, trembling pout. She shouldn't have said anything. She'd known that even as she spoke, because as pompous and annoying as George Rokesby was, it was entirely her fault that he was stuck up on the roof, and she'd had no call to be so provoking.

But there was something about him—some special talent that only he possessed—that stripped her of years of experience and maturity and made her act like a bloody six-year-old. If he were anyone else—*anyone* else—she'd be lauded as the most reasonable and helpful female in the history of Christendom. Tales would be spread—once they'd got off the roof—of her bravery and wit. Billie Bridgerton . . . so resourceful, so reasonable . . . It's what everyone said. It's what everyone had reason to say, because she *was* resourceful, and she *was* reasonable.

Just not with George Rokesby.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

His head turned slowly, as if even his muscles could not believe what they'd heard.

"I said I'm sorry," she repeated, louder this time. It felt like an antidote, but it was the right thing to do. But God help him if he made her say it again, because there was only so much of her pride she could swallow before she choked on it. And he ought to know that.

Because he was just the same.

His eyes met hers, and then they both looked down, and then after a few moments George said, "We are neither of us at our best just now."

Billie swallowed. She thought maybe she ought to say something more, but her judgment had not done her any favors thus far, so instead she nodded, vowing that she was going to keep her mouth shut until—

“Andrew?” George whispered.

Billie snapped to attention.

“Andrew!” George all but bellowed.

Billie’s eyes did a frantic scan of the trees at the far end of the field, and sure enough . . . “Andrew!” she screamed, reflexively starting to rise before remembering her ankle.

“Ow!” she yelped, plunking back down on her bottom.

George did not spare her so much as a glance. He was too busy over by the edge of the roof, waving his arms through the air in wide, vigorous swoops.

There was no way Andrew could miss them, hollering like a pair of deranged banshees, but if he picked up his pace, Billie couldn’t see it. But that was Andrew. She should probably be glad he hadn’t fallen over with laughter at their predicament.

This was not something he was going to let either of them forget.

“Ahoy there!” Andrew called out, once he’d halved the distance between them.

Billie glanced over at George. She could only see him in profile, but he looked visibly relieved at his brother’s appearance. Also, oddly grim. No, not odd at all, she realized. Whatever ribbing she was going to get from Andrew, George would suffer it a hundredfold.

Andrew drew closer, a spring in his step despite the sling on his arm. “Of all the delightful surprises,” he declared, his face nearly split by his grin. “If I thought and thought and thought . . .”

He stopped, holding up one elegant forefinger, the universal sign, Billie realized, to ask for a moment’s pause. Then he tipped his head as if getting back into the swing of things, and said, “and *thought*—”

“Oh, for the love of Christ,” George growled.

“All that thinking for *years* . . .” Andrew chortled. “I still couldn’t have come up with—”

“Just get us off the bloody roof,” George snapped.

Billie rather sympathized with his tone.

“I’ve always thought the two of you would make a splendid pair,” Andrew said slyly.

“Andrew,” Billie growled.

He rewarded her with a purse-lipped smile. “Truly, you needn’t have gone to such extremes for a moment of privacy. The rest of us would have

been more than happy to oblige.”

“Stop it,” Billie ordered.

Andrew looked up, laughing even as he affected a frown. “Do you really want to take that tone, Billie-goat? I *am* the one on *terra firma*.”

“Please, Andrew,” she said, trying her very best to be civil and reasonable. “We would very much appreciate your help.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” Andrew murmured.

“I’m going to kill him,” she said under her breath.

“I’m going to break his other arm,” George muttered.

Billie choked down a laugh. There was no way that Andrew could have heard them, but she looked down at him, anyway, and that was when she realized he was frowning, his good hand on his hip.

“What is it now?” George demanded.

Andrew stared down at the ladder, his mouth twisting into a curious frown. “I’m not sure if it has occurred to either of you, but this isn’t the sort of thing that’s easy to do one-handed.”

“Take it out of the sling,” George said, but his last words were drowned out by Billie’s shriek of “Don’t take it out of the sling!”

“Do you really want to stay on the roof?” George hissed.

“And have him reinjure his arm?” she returned. They might have joked about breaking Andrew’s good arm, but *really*. The man was a sailor in the navy. It was essential that his bone healed properly.

“You’d marry me for the sake of his arm?”

“I’m not going to marry you,” she shot back. “Andrew knows where we are. He can go get help if we need it.”

“By the time he gets back with an able-bodied man, we’ll have been up here alone for several hours.”

“And I suppose you’ve such a high opinion of your male prowess that you think people will believe you managed to compromise me on a roof.”

“Believe me,” George hissed, “any man with sense would know you are thoroughly uncompromisable.”

Billie’s brows came together for a second of confusion. Was he complimenting her moral rectitude? But then—

Oh!

“You are despicable,” she seethed. Since that was her only choice of reply. Somehow she didn’t think *You have no idea how many men would like to compromise me* would earn her any points for dignity and wit.

Or honesty.

“Andrew,” George called down, in that haughty *I-am-the-eldest-son* voice of his, “I will pay you one hundred pounds to take off that sling and fix the ladder into place.”

One hundred pounds?

Billie turned on him with wild disbelief. “Are you *insane?*”

“I don’t know,” Andrew mused. “It might actually be worth one hundred pounds to watch the two of you kill each other.”

“Don’t be an ass,” George said, flicking a furious look at him.

“You wouldn’t even inherit,” Billie pointed out, not that Andrew had ever wished to succeed his father as Earl of Manston. He was far too enamored of his footloose life for that sort of responsibility.

“Ah, yes, Edward,” Andrew said with an exaggerated sigh, referring to the second Rokesby son, who was two years his senior. “That does throw a fly in the ointment. It’d look deuced suspicious if both of you perish in curious circumstances.”

There was a moment of awkward silence as they all realized that Andrew had, perhaps, made light of something far too heavy for offhand quips. Edward Rokesby had taken the proudest route of second sons and was a captain in His Majesty’s 54th Regiment of Foot. He’d been sent to the American colonies over a year earlier and had served bravely in the Battle of Quaker Hill. He’d remained in Rhode Island for several months before being transferred to British Headquarters in New York Town. News of his health and welfare came far too infrequently for anyone’s comfort.

“If Edward perishes,” George said stiffly, “I do not believe that the circumstances would ever be described as ‘curious.’”

“Oh, come now,” Andrew said, rolling his eyes at his older brother, “stop being so bloody serious all the time.”

“Your brother risks his life for King and Country,” George said, and truly, Billie thought, his voice was clipped and tense, even for him.

“As do I,” Andrew said with a cool smile. He tipped his injured arm up toward the roof, his bent and bound limb hinging at the shoulder. “Or at least a bone or two.”

Billie swallowed and looked hesitantly over at George, trying to gauge his reaction. As was common for third sons, Andrew had skipped university and gone straight into the Royal Navy as a midshipman. He had been raised to the rank of lieutenant a year earlier. Andrew didn’t find himself in harm’s

way nearly so often as Edward, but still, he wore his uniform proudly.

George, on the other hand, had not been permitted to take a commission; as the heir to the earldom, he had been deemed far too valuable to throw himself in front of American musket balls. And Billie wondered . . . did that bother him? That his brothers served their country and he did not? Had he even wanted to fight?

Then she wondered . . . why had she never wondered about this? True, she did not devote much thought to George Rokesby unless he was standing in front of her, but the lives of the Rokesbys and Bridgertons were thoroughly intertwined. It seemed odd that she did not know this.

Her eyes moved slowly from brother to brother. They had not spoken for several moments. Andrew was still staring up with a measure of challenge in his icy blue eyes, and George was looking right back down with . . . well, it wasn't anger exactly. At least not any longer. But nor was it regret. Or pride. Or anything she could identify.

There was far more to this conversation than rose to the surface.

"Well, *I* have risked life and limb for an unappreciative feline," she declared, eager to direct the conversation back to less controversial topics. Namely, her rescue.

"Is that what happened?" Andrew murmured, bending over the ladder. "I thought you didn't like cats."

George turned to her with an expression that went somewhere beyond exasperation. "You don't even like cats?"

"Everyone likes cats," Billie said quickly.

George's eyes narrowed, and she knew there was no way he believed that her bland smile was anything but a placation, but thankfully Andrew chose that moment to let out a muffled curse, causing both of them to return their attention to his struggles with the ladder.

"Are you all right?" Billie called out.

"Splinter," Andrew bit off. He sucked on the side of his little finger. "Bloody hell."

"It's not going to kill you," George snapped.

Andrew took a moment to fix his brother with a livid glare.

George rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the love of God."

"Don't provoke him," Billie hissed.

George made an odd, growly sound, but he remained silent, crossing his arms as he stared down at his younger brother.

Billie scooted a tiny bit closer to the end for a better view of Andrew as he wedged one of his feet against the bottom of the rail and then bent over to grasp a rung. He grunted audibly as he pulled the ladder upright. The physics of the maneuver were all wrong, but there was only so much a one-armed man could do.

But at least he was a strong one-armed man, and with great exertion and not a little inappropriate language, he managed to set the ladder into place against the side of the building.

“Thank you,” George breathed, although from his tone Billie wasn’t sure if he was thanking his brother or the Almighty.

With Andrew to brace the ladder—and no cats underfoot—the descent was considerably simpler than their first attempt. But it hurt. By God, the pain in her ankle stole the very breath from her body. And there was nothing she could do about it. She couldn’t very well hop down the rungs, so with each step she had to put some weight on her injured ankle. By the time she reached the third-to-last rung, it was all she could do to keep her tears silent.

Strong hands settled at her waist. “I’ve got you,” George said quietly, and she let herself collapse.

Chapter 4

George had had a feeling that Billie was in more pain than she'd let on, but he didn't realize how much until they finally made their way down the ladder. He briefly considered taking her down on his back, but it seemed safer to have her follow him instead. He moved down three rungs before she set her good foot onto the ladder, then he watched as she gingerly followed with its injured companion. For a moment she stood still, probably trying to decide how best to proceed to the next rung.

"I'd lead with the good one," he said quietly, "and grip the rails hard to absorb some of your weight."

She gave a tense nod of acknowledgment and followed his instructions, her breath escaping with an agonized hiss when her good foot was solid and secure, and she was able to lift the injured one from the upper rung.

She'd been holding her breath. He didn't blame her.

He waited as she composed herself, well aware that he needed to remain only a few rungs ahead; if she fell—and she might; he could see that her ankle was very weak—he had to be close enough to stop her from tumbling all the way to the ground.

"Maybe if I try it the other way . . ." she said, breathing hard through her pain.

"I wouldn't," he replied, keeping his voice purposefully even and humble. Billie had never taken well to being told what to do. He supposed he understood this better than anyone. "You don't want your lower foot to be the weak one," he said. "Your leg could buckle—"

"Of course," she said tightly. Not angrily, just tightly. He knew that tone. It was the tone of one who had conceded a point and *really* didn't want any further elucidation on the matter.

It was one he himself used quite often.

Well, as often as he deigned to concede points.

“You can do this,” he said. “I know it hurts.”

“It really does,” she admitted.

He smiled a little. He wasn’t sure why, but he was glad she couldn’t see his face. “I won’t let you fall.”

“Everything all right up there?” Andrew called out.

“Tell him to shut up,” Billie ground out.

George laughed despite himself. “Miss Bridgerton requests that you shut the hell up,” he called down.

Andrew let out a bark of laughter. “It’s all good, then.”

“I wouldn’t say *that*,” Billie grumbled, gasping her way through another step.

“You’re almost halfway there,” George said encouragingly.

“You’re lying, but I do appreciate the show of support.”

He smiled, and this time he did know why. Billie might be a right pain in the ass most of the time, but she’d always had a good sense of humor. “You’re halfway to halfway, then,” he said.

“Such an optimist,” she muttered.

She made it down another rung without incident, and George realized that their conversation was proving an able distraction. “You can do this, Billie,” he said.

“You said that already.”

“It bears repeating.”

“I think—” She hissed, then sucked in her breath as she moved down another rung.

He waited while she collected herself, her body quivering as she balanced for a moment on her good foot.

“I think,” she said again, her voice more carefully modulated, as if she were determined to get the sentence out in an orderly manner, “that this might be the most amiable you have ever behaved in my presence.”

“I could say the same,” he commented.

She made it down to the halfway mark. “Touché.”

“There is nothing quite so invigorating as an able opponent,” he said, thinking of all the times they had crossed verbal swords. Billie had never been an easy person to best in conversation, which was why it was always so delicious when he did.

“I’m not sure that holds true on the battle—oh!”

George waited as she gritted her teeth and continued.

“—on the battlefield,” she said, after a rather angry-sounding inhalation. “My God, this hurts,” she muttered.

“I know,” he said encouragingly.

“No you don’t.”

He smiled yet again. “No, I don’t.”

She gave a terse nod and took another step. Then, because she was Billie Bridgerton and thus fundamentally unable to allow an unfinished point to lie dormant, she said, “On the battlefield, I think I might find an able opponent inspiring.”

“Inspiring?” he murmured, eager to keep her talking.

“But not invigorating.”

“One would lead to the other,” he said, not that he had any firsthand experience. His only battles had taken place in fencing salons and boxing rings, where the most serious risk was to one’s pride. He eased down another step, giving Billie room to maneuver, then peered over his shoulder at Andrew, who appeared to be whistling while he waited.

“Can I help?” Andrew asked, catching his glance.

George shook his head, then looked back up to Billie. “You’re almost to the bottom,” he told her.

“Please tell me you’re not lying this time.”

“I’m not lying.”

And he wasn’t. He hopped down, skipping the last two rungs, and waited for her to draw close enough for him to grab her. A moment later she was within reach, and he swept her into his arms.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured, and he felt her collapse a little, for once in her life allowing someone else to take charge of her.

“Well done,” Andrew said cheerfully, poking his head in close. “Are you all right there, Billie-goat?”

Billie nodded, but she didn’t look all right. Her jaw was still clenched, and from the way her throat worked, it was clear she was trying her damndest not to cry.

“You little fool,” George murmured, and then he knew she wasn’t all right, because she let that pass without a word of protest. In fact, she apologized, which was so wholly unlike her as to be almost alarming.

“Time to go home,” George said.

“Let’s take a look at that foot,” Andrew said, his voice still an obnoxiously bright note in the tableau. He peeled off her stocking, let out a

low whistle, and said with some admiration, “Ech, Billie, what did you do to yourself? That looks brutal.”

“Shut up,” George said.

Andrew just shrugged. “It doesn’t look broken—”

“It’s not,” Billie cut in.

“Still, you’ll be off it for a week, at least.”

“Perhaps not quite so long,” George said, even though he rather thought Andrew was correct in his assessment. Still, there was no point in debating her condition. They weren’t saying anything Billie didn’t already know. “Shall we go?” he said.

Billie closed her eyes and nodded. “We should put the ladder away,” she mumbled.

George tightened his arms around her and headed east toward Aubrey Hall, where Billie lived with her parents and three younger siblings. “We’ll get it tomorrow.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Everything.”

“That covers quite a lot,” he said in a dry voice. “Are you sure you wish to be in such debt?”

She looked up at him, her eyes tired but wise. “You’re far too much of a gentleman to hold me to it.”

George chuckled at that. She was right, he supposed, although he’d never treated Billie Bridgerton like any other female of his acquaintance. Hell, no one did.

“Will you still be able to come to dinner tonight?” Andrew asked, loping alongside George.

Billie turned to him distractedly. “What?”

“Surely you haven’t forgotten,” he said, laying one dramatic hand over his heart. “The Family Rokesby is welcoming the prodigal son—”

“You’re not the prodigal son,” George said. Good God.

“A prodigal son,” Andrew corrected with good cheer. “I have been gone for months, even years.”

“Not years,” George said.

“Not years,” Andrew agreed, “but it felt like it, didn’t it?” He leaned down toward Billie, close enough to give her a little nudge. “You missed me, didn’t you, Goatrix? Come now, admit it.”

“Give her some room,” George said irritably.

“Oh, she doesn’t mind.”

“Give *me* some room.”

“An entirely different matter,” Andrew said with a laugh.

George started to scowl, but then his head snapped up. “*What* did you just call her?”

“He frequently likens me to a goat,” Billie said in the flat tone of one who has given up taking offense.

George looked at her, then looked at Andrew, then just shook his head. He’d never understood their sense of humor. Or maybe it was just that he’d never been a part of it. Growing up, he had always felt so separate from the rest of the Rokesbys and Bridgertons. Mostly by virtue of his age—five years older than Edward, who was the next one down the line—but also by his position. He was the eldest, the heir. He, as his father was quick to remind him, had responsibilities. He couldn’t bloody well frolic about the countryside all day, climbing trees and breaking bones.

Edward, Mary, and Andrew Rokesby had been born in quick succession, separated from each other by barely a year. They, along with Billie, who was almost precisely Mary’s age, had formed a tight little pack that did everything together. The Rokesby and Bridgerton homes were a mere three miles apart, and more often than not the children had met somewhere in the middle, at the brook that separated the estates, or in the treehouse Lord Bridgerton had had built at Billie’s insistence in the ancient oak by the trout pond. Most of the time George wasn’t sure what specific mischief they’d got up to, but his siblings had tended to come home filthy and hungry and in blooming good spirits.

He hadn’t been jealous. Really, they were more annoying than anything else. The last thing he’d wanted to do when he came home from school was muck about with a pack of wild urchins whose average age didn’t even scrape into the double digits.

But he had been occasionally wistful. What would it have been like if he’d had such a close cadre of companions? He’d not had a true friend his own age until he left for Eton at the age of twelve. There simply hadn’t been anyone to befriend.

But it mattered little now. They were all grown, Edward in the army and Andrew in the navy and Mary married off to George’s good friend Felix Maynard. Billie, too, had passed the age of majority, but she was still Billie,

still romping around her father's property, still riding her too-spirited mount like her bones were forged of steel and flashing her wide smile around the village that adored her.

And as for George . . . he supposed he was still himself, too. Still the heir, still preparing for responsibility even as his father relinquished none of it, still doing absolutely nothing while his brothers took up their arms and fought for the Empire.

He looked down at his own arms, currently cradling Billie as he carried her home. It was quite possibly the most useful thing those arms had done in years.

"We should take you to Crake," Andrew said to Billie. "It's closer, and then you'll be able to stay for dinner."

"She's hurt," George reminded him.

"Pfft. When has that ever stopped her?"

"Well, she's not dressed properly," George said. He sounded like a prig and he knew it, but he was feeling unaccountably irritated, and he couldn't very well take it out on Billie while she was injured.

"I'm sure she can find something to wear in Mary's wardrobe," Andrew said dismissively. "She didn't take everything with her when she got married, did she?"

"No," Billie said, her voice muffled against George's chest. It was funny, that, how one could *feel* sound through one's body. "She left quite a bit behind."

"That settles it, then," Andrew said. "You'll come for supper, you'll spend the night, and all will be right with the world."

George gave him a slow look over his shoulder.

"I'll stay for supper," Billie agreed, moving her head so that her voice slid out into the air instead of George's body, "but then I'll go home with my family. I'd much rather sleep in my own bed, if you don't mind."

George stumbled.

"You all right?" Andrew queried.

"It's nothing," George muttered. And then, for no reason he could discern, he was compelled to add, "Just one of those things when one of your legs goes weak for a moment and bends a bit."

Andrew gave him a curious look. "Just one of those things, eh?"

"Shut up."

Which only made Andrew laugh.

“I have those,” Billie said, looking up at him with a little smile. “When you’re tired and you don’t even realize it. And your leg surprises you.”

“Exactly.”

She smiled again, a smile of kinship, and it occurred to him—although not, he realized with some surprise, for the first time—that she was actually rather pretty.

Her eyes were lovely—a deep shade of brown that was always warm and welcoming, no matter how much ire might lie in their depths. And her skin was remarkably fair for one who spent as much time out of doors as she did, although she did sport a light sprinkling of freckles across her nose and cheeks. George couldn’t remember if they’d been there when she was young. He hadn’t really been paying attention to Billie Bridgerton’s freckles.

He hadn’t really been paying attention to her at all, or at least he’d been trying not to. She was—and always had been—rather difficult to avoid.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“Your freckles.” He saw no reason to lie.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “They’re there.”

Her lips pursed, and he thought that would be the end of the conversation. But then she said, somewhat abruptly, “I don’t have very many of them.”

His brows rose.

“Sixty-two,” she said.

He almost stopped walking. “You counted?”

“I had nothing else to do. The weather was beastly, and I couldn’t go outside.”

George knew better than to inquire about embroidery, or watercolors, or any of a dozen other indoor pursuits commonly taken up by ladies of his acquaintance.

“Probably a few more now,” Billie admitted. “It’s been a prodigiously sunny spring.”

“What are we talking about?” Andrew asked. He’d got a bit ahead of them and they’d only just caught up.

“My freckles,” Billie said.

He blinked. “My God, you *are* boring.”

“Or bored,” Billie countered.

“Or both.”

“Must be the company.”

“I’ve always thought George was dull,” Andrew said.

George rolled his eyes.

“I was talking about *you*,” Billie said.

Andrew only grinned. “How’s the foot?”

“It hurts,” she said plainly.

“Better? Worse?”

Billie thought about that for a moment, then answered, “The same. No, better, I suppose, since I’m not putting weight on it.” She looked back up at George. “Thank you,” she said. “Again.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, but his voice was brusque. He didn’t really have a place in their conversation. He never had.

The path forked, and George turned off to the right, toward Crake. It was closer, and with Andrew’s arm in a sling, he was going to have to carry Billie the entire way.

“Am I too heavy?” she asked, sounding a touch sleepy.

“It wouldn’t really matter if you were.”

“*Gad*, George, no wonder you’re starved for female companionship,” Andrew groaned. “That was a clear invitation to say, ‘Of course not. You are a delicate petal of womanhood.’”

“No, it wasn’t,” Billie said.

“It was,” Andrew said firmly. “You just didn’t realize it.”

“I’m not starved for female companionship,” George said. Because *really*.

“Oh, yes, of course not,” Andrew said with great sarcasm. “You’ve got Billie in your arms.”

“I think you might have just insulted me,” she said.

“Not at all, m’dear. Just a statement of fact.”

She scowled, her chestnut brows drawing down hard toward her eyes. “When do you go back to sea?”

Andrew gave her an arch look. “You’ll miss me.”

“I don’t believe I will.”

But they all knew she was lying.

“You’ll have George, at any rate,” Andrew said, reaching up and swatting a low-hanging branch. “You two make quite a pair.”

“Shut up,” Billie said. Which was a lot tamer than what came out of George’s mouth.

Andrew chuckled, and the three of them continued on toward Crake

House, walking in amiable silence as the wind whistled lightly through the newly budded tree leaves.

“You’re not too heavy,” George suddenly said.

Billie yawned, shifting slightly in his arms as she looked up at his face. “What did you just say?”

“You’re not too heavy.” He shrugged. For some reason, it had seemed important to say it.

“Oh. Well.” She blinked a few times, her brown eyes equal parts puzzled and pleased. “Thank you.”

Up ahead, Andrew laughed, although for the life of him, George didn’t know why.

“Yes,” Billie said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yes,” she said again, answering the question he didn’t think he’d asked, “he’s laughing at us.”

“I had a feeling.”

“He’s an idiot,” she said, sighing into George’s chest. But it was an affectionate sigh; never had the words *he’s an idiot* been imbued with more love and fondness.

“It’s nice to have him home, though,” George said quietly. And it was. He’d spent years being annoyed by his younger brothers, Andrew most especially, but now that they were grown and pursuing a life beyond the ordinariness of Kent and London, he missed them.

Almost as much as he envied them.

“It is nice, isn’t it?” Billie gave a wistful smile, then she added, “Not that I’d ever tell him so.”

“Oh no. Definitely not.”

Billie chuckled at their shared joke, then let out a yawn. “Sorry,” she mumbled. She couldn’t very well cover her mouth with her arms around his neck. “Do you mind if I close my eyes?”

Something odd and unfamiliar lurched in George’s chest. Something almost protective. “Of course not,” he said.

She smiled—a sleepy, happy thing—and said, “I never have trouble falling asleep.”

“Never?”

She shook her head, and her hair, which had long since given up any attempt to remain confined with pins, crept up and tickled his chin. “I can

sleep anywhere,” she said with a yawn.

She dozed the rest of the way home, and George did not mind it at all.

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Chapter 5

Billie had been born just seventeen days after Mary Rokesby, and according to their parents, they had been the best of friends from the moment they'd been placed in the same cradle when Lady Bridgerton called upon Lady Manston for their regular Thursday morning visit.

Billie wasn't sure why her mother had brought along a two-month-old baby when there had been a perfectly able nanny back at Aubrey Hall, but she suspected it had something to do with her rolling over from front to back at the improbably early age of six weeks.

The Ladies Bridgerton and Manston were devoted and loyal friends, and Billie was quite sure that each would lay down her life for the other (or for the other's children), but it had to be said, there had always been a strong element of competition in their relationship.

Billie also suspected that her stunning prowess in the art of rolling over had less to do with innate genius and more to do with the tip of her mother's forefinger against her shoulder, but as her mother pointed out, there were no witnesses.

But what *was* witnessed—by both their mothers and a housemaid—was that when Billie had been placed in Mary's spacious cradle, she had reached out and grabbed the other baby's tiny hand. And when their mothers tried to pull them apart, they both started howling like banshees.

Billie's mother told her that she had been tempted to just leave her there at Crake House overnight; it was the only way to keep both babies calm.

That first morning was surely a portent of things to come. Billie and Mary were, as their nannies like to say, two peas in a pod. Two very different peas that happened to be quite fond of each other.

Where Billie was fearless, Mary was careful. Not timid, just careful. She always looked before she leapt. Billie looked, too; she just tended to do it in a somewhat more perfunctory manner.

And then she leapt high and far, often outdoing both Edward and Andrew, who had been more or less forced to befriend her after they realized that Billie would A) follow them to the ends of the earth except that B) she'd probably get there before they did.

With Mary—after a careful consideration of the ambient danger—right at her heels.

And so they became a foursome. Three wild children and one voice of reason.

They did listen to Mary occasionally. Truly, they did. It was probably the only reason all four had reached adulthood without permanent injury.

But like all good things, it came to an end, and a few years after both Edward and Andrew left home, Mary had fallen in love, got married, and moved away. She and Billie exchanged letters regularly, but it wasn't the same. Still, Billie would always call Mary her best friend, and thus, when she found herself at Crake House with a sprained ankle and nothing to wear but men's breeches and a rather dusty shirt and coat, she had no compunction raiding her friend's wardrobe for a garment suitable for a family dinner. Most of the dresses were a few years out of fashion, but that didn't bother Billie. In all truth, she likely wouldn't have even noticed if the maid who was helping her to dress for dinner hadn't apologized for it.

And they were certainly more stylish than anything she possessed in her own closet.

Billie rather thought that the bigger problem was the length, or rather, the excess of it. Mary was taller than she was, by at least three inches. It had always irked Billie (and amused Mary) to no end; it had always *seemed* like she should be the taller of the two. But as Billie couldn't even walk, this was less of an issue than it might have been.

Mary's gowns were also a bit too large in the chest. But beggars could never be choosers, and so Billie tucked two extra fichus into the bodice and decided instead to be grateful that Mary's wardrobe had contained a relatively simple round gown in a shade of forest green that Billie liked to think flattered her complexion.

The maid was tucking a few final pins into Billie's hair when a knock sounded on the door to Mary's old room, where Billie had taken up residence.

"George," she said with surprise when she saw his strong form filling the doorway. He was elegantly dressed in a midnight blue coat that she suspected

would complement his eyes if he wore it in the full light of day. Gold buttons twinkled in the candlelight, adding to his already regal mien.

“My lady,” he murmured, executing a small bow. “I’ve come to help you down to the drawing room.”

“Oh.” Billie wasn’t sure why she was surprised. Andrew couldn’t very well do it, and her father, who was surely already downstairs, wasn’t as strong as he used to be.

“If you prefer,” George said, “we could summon a footman.”

“No, no, of course not,” Billie replied. A footman seemed most awkward. At least she *knew* George. And he had already carried her once.

He came into the room, clasping his hands behind his back when he reached her side. “How is your ankle?”

“Still quite painful,” she admitted, “but I bound it with some wide ribbon, and that seems to be helping.”

His lips curved, and his eyes took on an azure sparkle of amusement. “Ribbon?”

To her maid’s horror, Billie hiked up her overlong skirt and stuck out her foot, revealing an ankle bound in a length of festive pink ribbon.

“Very stylish,” George commented.

“I could not justify tearing up a bedsheet when this would do just as well.”

“Ever practical.”

“I like to think so,” Billie said, her jaunty voice giving way to a slight frown when it occurred to her that this might not have been a compliment. “Well,” she said, brushing an invisible speck of dust off her arm, “they’re your sheets, at any rate. You should thank me.”

“I’m sure I do.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m mocking you. But only a little.”

Billie felt her chin rise an inch or so. “So long as it’s only a little.”

“I wouldn’t dare otherwise,” he replied. He leaned in, just a bit. “At least not in your presence.”

Billie stole a glance at the maid. She appeared thoroughly scandalized by the exchange.

“In all seriousness, though, Billie,” George said, proving that a sympathetic heart did beat somewhere in his chest, “are you certain you’re well enough to dine?”

She fastened an earring. Again, Mary's. "I have to eat. I might as well do it in good company."

He smiled at that. "It has been too long since we have had everyone—well, at least as many as we have tonight—together."

Billie nodded, feeling wistful. When she was a child, the Rokesbys and Bridgertons had dined together several times each month. With nine children between the two families, suppers—or luncheons, or whatever odd holiday they'd elected to celebrate—could not be anything but loud and boisterous affairs.

But one by one, the boys left for Eton, first George, then Edward, and then Andrew. Billie's two younger brothers, Edmund and Hugo, were boarding there now, along with the youngest Rokesby, Nicholas. Mary had found love and moved to Sussex, and now the only ones left in regular residence were Billie and her younger sister Georgiana, who at fourteen was perfectly pleasant but no bosom bow for a grown woman of three and twenty.

And George of course, but—eligible unmarried gentleman that he was—he split his time between Kent and London.

"Penny for them," George said, crossing the room to where Billie sat at the vanity.

She shook her head. "Not worth even that, I'm afraid. It's all quite maudlin, really."

"Maudlin? You? I must learn more."

She gave him a look, then said, "We are so diminished in number now. There used to be so many of us."

"There still are," he pointed out.

"I know, but we're so rarely together. It makes me sad." She could hardly believe she was speaking so frankly with George, but it had been such an odd, trying day. Perhaps it was making her less guarded.

"We shall all be together again," he said gamely. "I'm quite sure of it."

Billie lifted a brow. "Have you been assigned to cheer me up?"

"Your mother offered me three quid."

"What?"

"I jest."

She scowled, but with no real feeling behind it.

"Here, come now. I'll carry you down." He bent down to take her into his arms, but when he moved to the right, she moved to the left, and their heads bumped.

“Ooof, sorry,” he muttered.

“No, it was my fault.”

“Here, I’ll . . .” He made to put his arms behind her back and under her legs, but there was something inescapably awkward about it, which was the oddest thing, since he had carried her for over a mile just a few hours earlier.

He lifted her into the air, and the maid, who had been standing at quiet attention throughout the conversation, jolted out of the way as Billie’s legs swung around in an arc.

“A little less pressure on my neck, if you would,” George said.

“Oh, so sorry.” Billie adjusted her position. “It was just the same as this afternoon.”

He moved out into the hall. “No, it wasn’t.”

Maybe not, Billie conceded to herself. She’d felt so at ease when he had carried her through the woods. Far more at ease than she’d had any right to in the arms of a man who was not her relation. Now it was just plain uncomfortable. She was excruciatingly aware of his nearness, of the bold heat of his body, seeping through his clothing. His coat collar was properly high, but when her finger grazed the very top of it, a little lock of his light brown hair curled down over her skin.

“Is aught amiss?” he asked as they reached the top of the staircase.

“No,” she said quickly, then cleared her throat. “Why would you think so?”

“You haven’t stopped fidgeting since I picked you up.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t really think of anything to say to that. “It’s just that my foot hurts.” No, apparently she *could* think of something. Pity it was completely irrelevant.

He paused, gazing down at her with concern. “Are you sure you want to come to dinner?”

“I’m *sure*.” She let out an exasperated snuff of air. “For heaven’s sake, I’m already *here*. It would be ridiculous to quarantine myself in Mary’s room.”

“It’s hardly a quarantine.”

“It would feel like quarantine,” she muttered.

He regarded her with a curious expression. “You don’t like being by yourself, do you?”

“Not when the rest of the world is making merry without me,” she retorted.

He was quiet for a moment, his head cocking just far enough to the side to indicate that he found her words curious. “What about the rest of the time?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“When the world isn’t gathering without you,” he said with a vaguely condescending tone. “Do you mind being on your own?”

She felt her brows come together as she gazed up at him. What on earth could be prompting such probing?

“It’s not a difficult query,” he said, something slightly provocative bringing his voice down to a murmur.

“No, of course I don’t mind being alone.” She pressed her lips together, feeling rather peeved. And peevish. But he was asking her questions she never even asked herself. But then, before she realized she was planning to speak, she heard herself say, “I don’t like—”

“What?”

She gave her head a shake. “Never mind.”

“No, tell me.”

She let out a sigh. He wasn’t going to let up. “I don’t like being cooped up. I can spend all day in my own company if I’m out of doors. Or even down in the drawing room, where the windows are tall and let in so much light.”

He nodded slowly, as if he agreed with her.

“Are you much the same way, then?” she asked.

“Not at all,” he said.

Well, then, so much for her being able to interpret his gestures.

“I quite enjoy my own company,” he continued.

“I’m sure you do.”

His mouth managed half a smile. “I thought we weren’t insulting each other tonight.”

“We weren’t?”

“I *am* carrying you down a flight of stairs. You’d do well to speak kindly to me.”

“Point taken,” she acceded.

George rounded the landing, and she thought they were done with the conversation when he said, “The other day it rained . . . all day long, unremittingly.”

Billie tipped her head to the side. She knew which day he was talking

about. It had been miserable. She had been planning to take her mare Argo out to inspect the fences at the southern end of her father's lands. And maybe stop at the wild strawberry patch. It was much too early in the season for fruit, but the blossoms would be starting to emerge, and she was curious as to their abundance.

"I stayed indoors, of course," George continued. "There was no reason to go out."

She wasn't quite sure where he was going with this, but obliged him by inquiring, "How did you occupy yourself?"

"I read a book." He sounded quite pleased with himself. "I sat in my study and read an entire book from start to finish, and it was quite the most pleasant day in recent memory."

"You need to get out more," she deadpanned.

He ignored that entirely. "All I'm saying is, I spent the day cooped up, as you call it, and it was delightful."

"Well. That just proves my point."

"We were making points?"

"We're always making points, George."

"And always keeping score?" he murmured.

Always. But she didn't say it out loud. It seemed childish. And petty. And worse, like she was trying too hard to be something she wasn't. Or rather, something she *was* but that society would never allow her to be. He was Lord Kennard, and she was Miss Sybilla Bridgerton, and while she'd gleefully stack her inner fortitude up against his any day of the week, she was no fool. She understood how the world worked. Here in her little corner of Kent, she was queen of her domain, but in any contest held outside the homey little circle drawn 'round Crake and Aubrey Hall . . .

George Rokesby would win. Always. Or if not, he'd give the appearance of having done so.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

"You look uncommonly serious all of a sudden," he said, stepping onto the polished parquet of the ground-floor hall.

"Thinking about *you*," she said truthfully.

"A dare if ever I heard one." He reached the open door to the drawing room, and his lips moved closer to her ear. "And one I shall not take."

Her tongue touched the top of her mouth, readying a reply, but before she could make a sound, George had stepped through the entry to Crake House's

formal drawing room.

“Good evening, everyone,” he said grandly.

Any hope Billie might have had at making a subtle entrance was squashed immediately when she realized they were the last to arrive. Her mother was seated next to Lady Manston on the long sofa with Georgiana in a nearby chair looking vaguely bored. The men had congregated over by the window. Lords Bridgerton and Manston were chatting with Andrew, who was happily accepting a glass of brandy from his father.

“Billie!” her mother exclaimed, practically hopping to her feet. “In your message you wrote that it was just a sprain.”

“It *is* just a sprain,” Billie replied. “I’ll be as good as new by the end of the week.”

George snorted. She ignored him.

“It’s nothing, Mama,” Billie assured her. “I’ve certainly done worse.”

Andrew snorted. She ignored him, too.

“With a cane, she might have made it down on her own,” George said as he set her down on the settee, “but it would have taken her thrice as long, and neither of us has the patience for that.”

Billie’s father, who had been standing by the window with a glass of brandy, let out a hearty guffaw.

Billie gave him a bit of an evil eye, which only made him laugh with more vigor.

“Is that one of Mary’s gowns?” Lady Bridgerton asked.

Billie nodded. “I was in breeches.”

Her mother sighed but made no comment. It was an endless argument between them, and their truce was maintained only by Billie’s promise to always dress properly for dinner. And among guests. And at church.

There was actually a rather long list of events for which she was required to attire herself to her mother’s specifications. But in the matter of Billie wearing breeches while conducting business around the estate, Lady Bridgerton had acquiesced.

To Billie, it had felt like a victory. As she had explained to her mother—repeatedly—all she really needed was permission to dress sensibly when out and about. The tenants surely called her something more colorful than eccentric, but she knew she was well-liked. And respected.

The affection had come naturally; according to Billie’s mother, she’d emerged from the womb smiling, and even as a child, she’d been the tenants’

favorite.

The respect, however, had been earned, and for that reason it was all the more fiercely treasured.

Billie knew that her younger brother would one day inherit Aubrey Hall and all its lands, but Edmund was still a child, eight years her junior. Most of the time he was away at school. Their father wasn't getting any younger, and someone had to learn how to properly manage such a large estate. Besides, Billie was a natural at it; everyone said so.

She'd been an only child for so many years; there had been two babies between her and Edmund's births, but neither had lived past infancy. During those years of prayers and hopes and wishing for an heir, Billie had become something of a mascot to the tenants, a living, smiling symbol of Aubrey Hall's future.

Unlike most highborn daughters, Billie had always accompanied her parents on their duties around the estate. When her mother brought baskets of food to the needy, she was right there with apples for the children. When her father was out surveying the land, she could more often than not be found at his feet, digging up worms as she explained why she thought rye would be a much better choice than barley in such a sun-starved field.

At first she'd been a source of amusement—the energetic little five-year-old who insisted upon measuring grain when the rents were collected. But eventually she became a fixture, and now it was expected that she would see to the needs of the estate. If a cottage roof was leaking, she was the one who made sure it was mended. If a harvest was lean, she went out and tried to figure out why.

She was, for all intents and purposes, her father's eldest son.

Other young ladies might read romantic poetry and Shakespearean tragedies. Billie read treatises on agricultural management. And she loved them. Honestly. They were ripping good reads.

It was difficult to imagine a life that might suit her better, but it had to be said: it was all much easier to conduct without a corset.

Much as it pained her mother.

"I was out seeing to the irrigation," Billie explained. "It would have been impractical in a frock."

"I didn't say anything," Lady Bridgerton said, even though they all knew she'd been thinking it.

"Not to mention difficult to climb that tree," Andrew put in.

That did get her mother's attention. "She was climbing a tree?"

"Saving a cat," Andrew confirmed.

"One might assume," George said, his voice purring with authority, "that had she been wearing a frock, she would not have attempted the tree."

"What happened to the cat?" Georgiana asked.

Billie looked to her sister. She'd almost forgotten she was there. And she had definitely forgotten the cat. "I don't know."

Georgiana leaned forward, her blue eyes impatient. "Well, did you save it?"

"If so," Billie said, "it was entirely against its wishes."

"It was a most ungrateful feline," George said.

Billie's father chuckled at the description and gave him a manly slap on the back. "George, m'boy, we must get you a drink. You'll need it after your trials."

Billie's mouth fell open. "*His* trials?"

George smirked, but no one else saw it, the bloody man.

"Mary's gown looks lovely on you," Lady Bridgerton said, steering the conversation back to more ladylike pursuits.

"Thank you," Billie replied. "I rather like this shade of green." Her fingers flitted to the lace along the round neckline. It was really most becoming.

Her mother stared at her in shock.

"I like pretty dresses," Billie insisted. "I just don't like wearing them when it's impractical to do so."

"The *cat*," Georgiana persisted.

Billie flicked her an impatient look. "I told you, I don't know. Honestly, it was a horrid little creature."

"Agreed," George said, raising his glass in salute.

"I can't believe you're toasting to the possible demise of a cat," Georgiana said.

"I'm not," Billie replied, glancing around to see if someone might bring her a drink. "But I'd like to."

"It's all right, darling," Lady Bridgerton murmured, giving her younger daughter a reassuring smile. "Don't fret so."

Billie looked back at Georgiana. If their mother used such a tone on her, she would likely go mad. But Georgiana had been sickly as a child, and Lady Bridgerton had never quite learned to treat her with anything less than

solicitous concern.

“I’m sure the cat survived its ordeal,” Billie told Georgiana. “He was quite a scrappy fellow. Had the look of a survivor in his eye.”

Andrew loped over and leaned down near Georgiana’s shoulder. “Always lands on its feet, that one.”

“Oh, stop!” Georgiana batted him away, but it was clear she wasn’t angry about the joke. No one was ever angry at Andrew. Not for long, at least.

“Is there any news of Edward?” Billie asked Lady Manston.

Lady Manston’s eyes clouded as she shook her head. “None since the last letter. The one we received last month.”

“I’m sure he’s well,” Billie said. “He is such a talented soldier.”

“I’m not sure how much talent plays into it when someone is aiming a gun at your chest,” George said darkly.

Billie turned to glare. “Don’t listen to him,” she said to Lady Manston. “He’s never been a soldier.”

Lady Manston smiled at her, an expression that was sad and sweet and loving, all at once. “I think he would like to have been,” she said, peering up at her eldest. “Wouldn’t you, George?”

Chapter 6

George forced his face into an impassive mask. His mother meant well; she always did. But she was a woman. She could never understand what it meant to fight for one's king and country. She could never understand what it meant *not* to do so.

"It doesn't matter what I wanted," he said gruffly. He took a large gulp of his brandy. Then he took another. "I was needed here."

"For which I am grateful," his mother declared. She turned back to the other ladies with a determined smile, but her eyes were overbright. "I don't need *all* of my sons going off to war. God willing, this nonsense will be over before Nicholas is of an age to take a commission."

At first no one spoke. Lady Manston's voice had been just a little too loud, her words just a little too shrill. It was one of those awkward moments that no one quite knew how to break. George finally took a small sip of his drink and said in a low voice, "There will always be nonsense among men."

That seemed to let some of the tension out of the air, and sure enough, Billie looked up at him with a defiant tilt to her chin. "Women would do a far better job if we were allowed to govern."

He returned her volley with a bland smile. She was trying to goad him. He refused to indulge her.

Billie's father, however, was hooked quite neatly on her bait. "I'm certain you would," he said, with enough placation in his voice for everyone to know he did not mean it.

"We would," Billie insisted. "Certainly there would be less war."

"I would have to agree with her there," Andrew said, lifting his glass in her direction.

"It's a moot point," Lord Manston said. "If God had wanted women to govern and fight, he would have made them strong enough to wield swords and muskets."

“I can shoot,” Billie said.

Lord Manston looked at her and blinked. “Yes,” he said, almost as if he were contemplating an odd scientific curiosity, “you probably can.”

“Billie brought down a stag last winter,” Lord Bridgerton said, shrugging as if this were a normal occurrence.

“Did you?” Andrew said admiringly. “Well done.”

Billie smiled. “It was delicious.”

“I can’t believe you allow her to hunt,” Lord Manston said to Lord Bridgerton.

“Do you really think I could stop her?”

“No one can stop Billie,” George muttered. He turned abruptly and crossed the room to get another drink.

There was a long silence. An uncomfortable silence. George decided that this time he didn’t care.

“How is Nicholas?” Lady Bridgerton asked. George smiled into his glass. She’d always known how to deflect a conversation from delicate topics. Sure enough, her perfect social smile was evident in her voice as she added, “Better behaved than Edmund and Hugo, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure he *isn’t*,” Lady Manston returned with a laugh.

“Nicholas wouldn’t—” Georgiana started to say.

But Billie’s voice came out on top. “It’s difficult to imagine anyone getting sent down more often than Andrew.”

Andrew held up a hand. “I hold the record.”

Georgiana’s eyes grew wide. “Among Rokesbys?”

“Among everyone.”

“That cannot be true,” Billie scoffed.

“I assure you, it is. There’s a reason I left early, you know. I reckon if I showed up for a visit, they would not let me back through the gate.”

Billie gratefully accepted the glass of wine the footman finally brought over and then lifted it toward Andrew in a skeptical salute. “*That* only shows that the headmaster should be applauded for his great good sense.”

“Andrew, stop your exaggerations,” Lady Manston said. She rolled her eyes as she turned back to Lady Bridgerton. “He did get sent down from Eton more than once, but I assure you, he has not been banished.”

“Not for want of trying,” Billie quipped.

George let out a long breath and turned back to the window, peering out into the inky night. Perhaps he was an insufferable prig—an insufferable prig

who, as it happened, had never been sent down from Eton *or* Cambridge—but he really didn't feel like listening to Andrew and Billie's endless banter.

It never changed. Billie would be deliciously clever, and then Andrew would play the rogue, and then Billie would say something utterly deflating, and then Andrew would laugh and twinkle, and then *everyone* would laugh and twinkle, and it was always, *always* the same damned thing.

He was just so bored of it all.

George glanced briefly at Georgiana, sitting morosely in what was, in his opinion, the least comfortable chair in the house. How was it possible that no one noticed she'd been left out of the conversation? Billie and Andrew were lighting up the room with their wit and vivacity, and poor Georgiana couldn't get a word in. Not that she appeared to be trying, but at fourteen, how could she hope to compete?

Abruptly, he crossed the room to the younger girl's side and leaned down. "I saw the cat," he said, his words disappearing into her gingery hair. "It dashed off into the woods."

It hadn't, of course. He had no idea what had become of the cat. Something involving brimstone and the wrath of the devil, if there was any justice in the world.

Georgiana started, then turned to him with a wide smile that was disconcertingly like her sister's. "Did you? Oh, *thank you* for letting me know."

George glanced over at Billie as he straightened. She was regarding him with a keen eye, silently admonishing him for lying. He returned the expression with equal insolence, his quirked brow almost daring her to call him out on it.

But she didn't. Instead she dismissed him with a one-shouldered shrug so tiny no one could possibly have noticed it but him. Then she turned back to Andrew with her usual sparkle and charm. George returned his attention to Georgiana, who was clearly a cleverer girl than he'd ever realized, because she was watching the scene with slow-rising curiosity, her eyes moving back and forth between all of them, as if they were players on a field.

He shrugged. Good for her. He was glad she had a brain in her head. She was going to need it with her family.

He took another sip of his brandy, losing himself in his thoughts until the conversation around him descended into a low hum. He felt restless tonight, unusually so. Here he was, surrounded by people he'd known and loved his

entire life, and all he wanted . . .

He stared toward the window, searching for an answer. All he wanted was to . . .

He didn't know.

There was the problem. Right there. He didn't know what he wanted, just that it wasn't here.

His life, he realized, had reached a new depth of banality.

"George? George?"

He blinked. His mother was calling his name.

"Lady Frederica Fortescue-Endicott has become betrothed to the Earl of Northwick," she said to him. "Had you heard?"

Ah. So this was to be tonight's conversation. He finished his drink. "I had not."

"The Duke of Westborough's eldest daughter," his mother said to Lady Bridgerton. "Such a charming young lady."

"Oh, of course, lovely girl. Dark hair, yes?"

"And such beautiful blue eyes. Sings like a bird."

George stifled a sigh.

His father slapped him on the back. "The duke set her up with a good dowry," he said, coming straight to the point. "Twenty thousand *and* a piece of property."

"As I've missed my chance," George said with a diplomatically impassive smile, "there can be no benefit to the catalogue of her many attributes."

"Of course not," his mother said. "It's far too late for that. But if you had listened to me last spring—"

The supper gong sounded—*thank God*—and his mother must have decided that there was no use in further pressing her matchmaking points because the next words out of her mouth had to do with the evening's menu, and the apparent lack of good fish this week at market.

George made his way back to Billie's side. "Shall I?" he murmured, holding out his arms.

"Oh," she exclaimed lightly, although for the life of him, he couldn't imagine why she'd be surprised. Nothing had changed in the past quarter of an hour; who else was going to carry her into the dining room?

"How very gallant of you, George," his mother said, taking her husband's hand and allowing him to lead her across the room.

He gave her a dry smile. “I confess it’s a heady feeling to have Billie Bridgerton at my mercy.”

Lord Bridgerton laughed. “Enjoy it while you can, son. She doesn’t like to lose, that one.”

“Does anyone?” Billie retorted.

“Of course not,” her father replied. “It’s more of a question of how gracefully one concedes.”

“I’m perfectly gr—”

George scooped her into his arms. “Are you sure you want to finish that sentence?” he murmured. Because they all knew. Billie Bridgerton was rarely graceful in defeat.

Billie clamped her mouth together.

“Two points for honesty,” he said.

“What would it take to earn three?” she shot back.

He laughed.

“And anyway,” Billie said to her father, fundamentally unable to let a point drop, “I didn’t *lose* anything.”

“You lost the cat,” Georgiana said.

“And your dignity,” Andrew added.

“Now *that* earns three points,” George said.

“I sprained my ankle!”

“We know, dear,” Lady Bridgerton said, giving her daughter a little pat on the arm. “You’ll feel better soon. You said so.”

Four points, George started to say, but Billie fixed him with a murderous glare.

“Don’t you dare,” she ground out.

“But you make it so *easy*.”

“Are we mocking Billie?” Andrew asked, catching up as they entered the hall. “Because if we are, I’ll have you know I’m hurt that you would begin without me.”

“*Andrew*,” Billie all but growled.

Andrew laid his good hand on his heart in feigned affront. “Hurt. Hurt, I say.”

“Do we think we could not mock me?” Billie asked in an exasperated voice. “Just for one evening?”

“I suppose,” Andrew said, “but George isn’t nearly so much fun.”

George started to say something, but then he caught a glance at Billie’s

face. She was tired. And in pain. What Andrew had taken as customary banter was actually a plea for relief.

He brought his lips close to her ear, lowering his voice to a quiet murmur. “Are you certain you’re up to supper?”

“Of course!” she replied, visibly chagrined that he’d asked. “I’m fine.”

“But are you well?”

Her lips tightened. Then trembled.

George slowed his pace, allowing Andrew to amble ahead of them. “There is no shame in needing a rest, Billie.”

She looked up at him, something almost rueful in her eyes. “I’m hungry,” she said.

He nodded. “I can ask that a small ottoman be placed under the table so that you might elevate your leg.”

Billie blinked up at him in surprise, and for a moment he could have sworn he could hear the sound of her breath passing across her lips. “That would be most welcome,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Consider it done.” He paused. “You do look rather fetching in that gown, by the way.”

“What?”

He had no idea why he’d said that. And judging from her shocked expression, neither did she.

He shrugged, wishing he had a free hand to adjust his cravat. It felt unaccountably tight. And of course he would say something complimentary about her gown; wasn’t that what gentlemen did? Plus, she’d looked as if she could use a little boost. And it did suit her quite well. “It’s a nice color,” he improvised. He could be occasionally charming. “It, eh, brings out your eyes.”

“My eyes are brown.”

“It still brings them out.”

She looked vaguely alarmed. “Good heavens, George. Have you ever paid a lady a compliment before?”

“Have you ever *received* one?”

Too late he realized how awful that sounded, and he stammered something that was meant to approximate an apology, but Billie was already shaking with laughter. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she gasped, wiping her eyes on her shoulder since her hands were around his neck. “Oh, that was funny. Your face . . .”

Amazingly, George felt himself smile. "I was trying to ask if you'd ever *accepted* one," he was compelled to say. Then he muttered, "Obviously, you've received them."

"Oh, obviously."

He shook his head. "Truly, I'm sorry."

"You're such a gentleman," she teased.

"This surprises you?"

"Not at all. I think you would die before insulting a lady, however inadvertently."

"I'm fairly certain I've insulted you at some point in our history."

She waved that off. "I'm not sure I count."

"I will confess," he said, "you do seem more of a lady than usual this evening."

Her expression grew shrewd. "There is an insult in there somewhere, I'm sure."

"Or a compliment."

"No," she said, pretending to give it serious thought, "I don't think there is."

He laughed, full and throaty, and it was only when his mirth had subsided to a light chuckle that he realized how unfamiliar it had felt. It had been a long time since he had given himself over to laughter, allowing it to tickle through his body.

It was a far cry from the social titters one encountered in London.

"I *have* received a compliment before," Billie said, her voice softening when she added, "but I will own that I am not well-skilled in accepting them. At least not for the color of my gown."

George slowed his pace yet again as he turned a corner and the door to the dining room came into view. "You never did go to London for a Season, did you?"

"You know I didn't."

He wondered why. Mary had done so, and she and Billie usually did everything together. But it didn't seem polite to ask, at least not now, just as supper was about to commence.

"I didn't want to," Billie said.

George did not point out that he had not asked for an explanation.

"I'd have been dreadful at it."

"You'd have been a breath of fresh air," he lied. She *would* have been

dreadful at it, and then he'd have been conscripted to be her social savior, making sure her dance card was at least halfway filled, and then defending her honor every time some brainless young lord assumed she was lax of morals because she was a bit too loud and free.

It would have been exhausting.

"Excuse me," he murmured, pausing to ask a footman to find her an ottoman. "Shall I hold you until he returns?"

"Hold me?" she echoed, as if she had suddenly lost her command of English.

"Is something wrong?" his mother asked, watching them with undisguised curiosity through the open doorway. She, Lady Bridgerton, and Georgiana had already taken their seats. The gentlemen were waiting for Billie to be set down.

"Sit," George told them, "please. I've asked a footman to bring something for under the table. So that Billie may elevate her foot."

"That's very kind of you, George," Lady Bridgerton said. "I should have thought of that."

"I've turned an ankle before," he said, carrying Billie into the room.

"And I have not," Lady Bridgerton returned, "although one would think I'd be an expert on them by now." She looked over at Georgiana. "I think you might be the only one of my children who hasn't broken a bone or twisted a joint yet."

"It's my special skill," Georgiana said in a flat voice.

"I must say," Lady Manston said, looking over at George and Billie with a deceptively placid smile, "the two of you make quite a pair."

George speared his mother with a stare. *No*. She might want to see him married, but she was not going to try *this*.

"Don't tease so," Billie said, with exactly the right amount of affectionate admonishment in her voice to put a halt to that line of thinking. "Who else would carry me if not George?"

"Alas, my fractured limb," Andrew murmured.

"How did you break it?" Georgiana asked.

He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling like the sea. "Wrestled with a shark."

Billie snorted.

"No," Georgiana said, unimpressed, "what really happened?"

Andrew shrugged. "I slipped."

There was a little beat of silence. No one had expected anything so mundane as that.

“The shark makes for a better story,” Georgiana finally said.

“It does, doesn’t it? The truth is rarely as glamorous as we’d like.”

“I thought at the very least you’d fallen from the mast,” Billie said.

“The deck was slippery,” Andrew said in a matter-of-fact manner. And while everyone was pondering the utter banality of this, he added, “It gets that way. Water, you know.”

The footman returned with a small tufted ottoman. It was not as tall as George would have liked, but he still thought it would be better for Billie than letting her foot dangle.

“I was surprised Admiral McClellan allowed you to recuperate at home,” Lady Manston said as the footman crawled under the table to set the ottoman into place. “Not that I’m complaining. It’s delightful to have you at Crake where you belong.”

Andrew gave his mother a lopsided smile. “Not much use for a one-armed sailor.”

“Even with all those peg-legged pirates?” Billie quipped as George set her down in her seat. “I thought it was practically a requirement to be missing a limb at sea.”

Andrew tipped his head thoughtfully to the side. “Our cook is missing an ear.”

“Andrew!” his mother exclaimed.

“How gruesome,” Billie said, eyes aglow with macabre delight. “Were you there when it happened?”

“Billie!” her mother exclaimed.

Billie whipped her head around to face her mother, protesting, “You can’t expect me to hear about an earless sailor and *not* ask.”

“Nevertheless, it is not appropriate conversation at a family supper.”

Gatherings between the Rokesby and Bridgerton clans were always classified as family, no matter that there wasn’t a drop of shared blood between them. At least not within the last hundred years.

“I can’t imagine where it would be more appropriate,” Andrew said, “unless we all head out to the public inn.”

“Alas,” Billie said, “I’m not allowed this time of night.”

Andrew flashed her a cheeky grin. “Reason seven hundred and thirty-eight why I’m glad I was not born a female.”

Billie rolled her eyes.

“Are you allowed during the day?” Georgiana asked her.

“Of course,” Billie said, but George noticed that her mother didn’t look happy about it.

Neither did Georgiana. Her lips were pursed into a frustrated frown, and she had one hand on the table, her index finger tapping impatiently against the cloth.

“Mrs. Bucket makes the most delicious pork pie,” Billie said. “Every Thursday.”

“I’d forgotten,” Andrew said, shuddering with delicious culinary memory.

“How on earth could you? It’s heaven in a crust.”

“Agreed. We shall have to sup together. Shall we say at noo—”

“Women are bloody,” Georgiana blurted out.

Lady Bridgerton dropped her fork.

Billie turned to her sister with an expression of cautious surprise. “I’m sorry?”

“Women can be bloody, too,” Georgiana said, her tone approaching truculence.

Billie seemed not to know what to make of that. Normally George would be enjoying her discomfiture, but the conversation had taken such a sharp turn into the bizarre that he could not bring himself to feel anything but sympathy.

And relief that he wasn’t the one questioning the young girl.

“What you said earlier,” Georgiana said. “About women, and how we would wage war less frequently than men. I don’t think that’s true.”

“Oh,” Billie said, looking mightily relieved. Truth was, George was relieved, too. Because the only other explanation for women being bloody was a conversation he did *not* want to have at the dining table.

Or anywhere for that matter.

“What about Queen Mary?” Georgiana continued. “No one could call her a pacifist.”

“They didn’t call her Bloody Mary for nothing,” Andrew said.

“Exactly!” Georgiana agreed with an enthusiastic nod. “And Queen Elizabeth sank an entire armada.”

“She had her *men* sink the armada,” Lord Bridgerton corrected.

“*She* gave the orders,” Georgiana shot back.

“Georgiana has a point,” George said, happy to give credit where it was due.

Georgiana gave him a grateful look.

“Indeed,” Billie said with a smile.

At that, Georgiana seemed ridiculously pleased.

“I did not mean to say that women couldn’t be violent,” Billie said, now that Georgiana was done with her argument. “Of course we can, given proper motivation.”

“I shudder to think,” Andrew murmured.

“If someone I loved was in danger,” Billie said with quiet intensity, “I’m quite certain I could be moved to violence.”

For years George would wonder about that moment. Something changed. Something shook and twisted. The air crackled electric, and everyone—every last Rokesby and Bridgerton at the table—sat almost suspended in time, as if waiting for something none of them understood.

Even Billie.

George studied her face. It was not difficult to imagine her as a warrior, fierce and protective of the people she loved. Was he counted among that number? He rather thought he was. Anyone with his surname would fall beneath her protection.

No one spoke. No one even breathed until his mother let out a laugh that was really nothing more than a breath, and then declared, “Such a depressing topic.”

“I disagree,” George said softly. He didn’t think she’d heard him. But Billie did. Her lips parted, and her dark eyes met his with curiosity and surprise. And maybe even a hint of gratitude.

“I do not understand why we are talking of such things,” his mother continued, thoroughly determined to steer the conversation back to sweetness and light.

Because it’s important, George thought. *Because it means something.* Because nothing had meant anything for years, not for those who had been left behind. He was sick of being useless, of pretending that he was more valuable than his brothers by virtue of his birth.

He looked down at his soup. He’d lost his appetite. And of course that was when Lady Bridgerton exclaimed, “We should have a party!”

Chapter 7

A party?

Billie carefully set down her napkin, a vague sense of alarm washing over her. “Mother?”

“A house party,” her mother clarified, as if *that* had been what she’d been asking about.

“This time of year?” her father asked, his soup spoon pausing only briefly on its way to his mouth.

“Why not this time of year?”

“We usually have one in the autumn.”

Billie rolled her eyes. What typically male reasoning. Not that she disagreed. The last thing she wanted right now at Aubrey Hall was a house party. All those strangers tramping around her home. Not to mention the time it would take to play the part of the dutiful daughter of the hostess. She’d be stuck in her frocks all day, unable to tend to the very real responsibilities of running the estate.

She tried to catch her father’s eye. Surely he realized what a bad idea this was, no matter the season. But he was oblivious to anything but his wife. And his soup.

“Andrew won’t be home in the autumn,” Lady Bridgerton pointed out. “And we should celebrate now.”

“I do love a party,” Andrew said. It was true, but Billie had a feeling he’d said it more to smooth the tension at the table. Because it was quite tense. And it was oddly clear to her that no one knew why.

“It’s settled, then,” her mother said. “We shall have a house party. Just a small one.”

“Define small,” Billie said warily.

“Oh, I don’t know. A dozen guests, perhaps?” Lady Bridgerton turned to Lady Manston. “What do you think, Helen?”

Lady Manston surprised no one when she replied, "I think it sounds delightful. But we shall have to act quickly, before Andrew is sent back to sea. The admiral was quite explicit that his leave was for the duration of his convalescence and not a moment longer."

"Of course," Lady Bridgerton murmured. "Shall we say in one week's time?"

"One week?" Billie exclaimed. "You can't possibly ready the house in one week."

"Oh, pish. Of course I can." Her mother gave her a look of amused disdain. "I was born for this sort of thing."

"That you were, my dear," her father said affectionately.

He would be no help at all, Billie realized. If she was going to put a stop to this madness, she was going to have to do it herself. "Think of the guests, Mama?" she persisted. "Surely you must give them more notice. People lead busy lives. They will have plans."

Her mother waved this away as if it were of no consequence. "I'm not planning to send invitations across the country. We've plenty of time to reach friends in the nearby counties. Or London."

"Who will you invite?" Lady Manston asked.

"You, of course. Do say you'll come and stay with us. It will be so much more fun to have everyone under one roof."

"That hardly seems necessary," George said.

"Indeed," Billie agreed. For the love of God, they lived only three miles apart.

George gave her a look.

"Oh, please," she said impatiently. "You can't possibly take offense."

"I can," Andrew said with a grin. "In fact I think I will, just for the fun of it."

"Mary and Felix," Lady Bridgerton said. "We cannot possibly have a celebration without them."

"It would be nice to see Mary," Billie admitted.

"What about the Westboroughs?" Lady Manston asked.

George groaned. "Surely that ship has sailed, Mother. Didn't you just tell me that Lady Frederica has become engaged?"

"Indeed." His mother paused, delicately lifting her soup spoon to her lips. "But she has a younger sister."

Billie let out a choked laugh, then quickly schooled her face into a frown

when George threw her a furious scowl.

Lady Manston's smile grew positively terrifying. "And a cousin."

"Of course she does," George said under his breath.

Billie would have expressed some sort of sympathy, but of course *that* was the moment her own mother chose to say, "We shall have to find some nice young men, too."

Billie's eyes widened in horror. She should have known that her turn was coming. "Mother, *don't*," she cautioned.

Cautioned? Ordered was more like it.

Not that this had any effect on her mother's enthusiasm. "We'll be uneven if we don't," she said briskly. "Besides, you're not getting any younger."

Billie closed her eyes and counted to five. It was either that or go for her mother's throat.

"Doesn't Felix have a brother?" Lady Manston asked.

Billie bit her tongue. Lady Manston knew perfectly well that Felix had a brother. Felix Maynard was married to her only daughter. Lady Manston had likely known the names and ages of his every first cousin before the ink was dry on the betrothal papers.

"George?" his mother prompted. "Doesn't he?"

Billie stared at Lady Manston in fascinated amazement. Her single-minded determination would do an army general proud. Was it some kind of inborn trait? Did females spring from the womb with the urge to match men and women into neat little pairs? And if so, how was it possible that *she'd* been skipped?

Because Billie had no interest in matchmaking, for herself or anyone else. If that made her some kind of strange, unfeminine freak, so be it. She would much rather be out on her horse. Or fishing at the lake. Or climbing a tree.

Or anything, really.

Not for the first time Billie wondered what her Heavenly Father had been thinking when she'd been born a girl. She was clearly the least girlish girl in the history of England. Thank heavens her parents had not forced her to make her debut in London when Mary had done so. It would have been miserable. *She* would have been a disaster.

And no one would have wanted her.

"George?" Lady Manston said again, impatience sharpening the edge of her voice.

George started, and Billie realized he'd been looking at her. She couldn't begin to imagine what he had seen on her face . . . what he'd *thought* he'd seen there.

"He does," George confirmed, turning toward his mother. "Henry. He's two years younger than Felix, but he's—"

"Excellent!" Lady Manston exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

"But he's what?" Billie asked. Or rather, pounced. Because this was her potential mortification they were talking about.

"Nearly engaged," George told her. "Or so I've heard."

"It doesn't count until it's official," his mother said airily.

Billie stared at her in disbelief. This, from the woman who had been planning Mary's wedding from the first time Felix had kissed her hand.

"Do we like Henry Maynard?" Lady Bridgerton asked.

"We do," Lady Manston confirmed.

"I thought she wasn't even sure he had a brother," Billie said.

Beside her, George chuckled, and she felt his head draw close to hers. "Ten pounds says she knew every last detail of his current courtship before she even mentioned his name," he murmured.

Billie's lips flickered with a hint of a smile. "I would not take that bet."

"Smart girl."

"Always."

George chuckled, then stopped. Billie followed his gaze across the table. Andrew was watching them with an odd expression, his head tilted at the slightest of angles and his brow pleated into a thoughtful frown.

"What?" she said, while the mothers continued their plans.

Andrew shook his head. "Nothing."

Billie scowled. She could read Andrew like the back of her hand. He was up to something. "I don't like his expression," she murmured.

"I never like his expression," George said.

She glanced at him. How odd this was, this silly little kinship with George. It was usually Andrew with whom she was sharing muttered quips. Or Edward. But not George.

Never George.

And while she supposed this was a good thing—there was no reason she and George *had* to be at constant loggerheads—it still made her feel strange. Off-balance.

Life was better when it pattered along without surprises. It really was.

Billie turned to her mother, determined to escape this growing sense of unease. “Do we really *have* to have a party? Surely Andrew can feel celebrated and adored without a twelve-course meal and archery on the lawn.”

“Don’t forget the fireworks and a parade,” Andrew said. “And I might want to be carried in on a litter.”

“You want to *encourage* this?” Billie asked, gesturing to him with an exasperated hand.

George snorted into his soup.

“Will I be permitted to attend?” Georgiana asked.

“Nothing in the evening,” her mother said, “but certainly some of the afternoon entertainments.”

Georgiana sat back with a cat-in-the-cream smile. “Then I think it’s an excellent idea.”

“*Georgie*,” Billie said.

“*Billie*,” Georgiana mocked.

Billie’s lips parted in surprise. Was the entire world tipping on its axis? Since when did her younger sister talk back to her like *that*?

“It’s settled, Billie,” her mother said in a tone that brooked no dissent. “We are having a party, and you will attend. In a dress.”

“Mother!” Billie cried out.

“I don’t think it’s an unreasonable demand,” her mother said, glancing about the table for confirmation.

“I *know* how to behave at a house party.” Good Lord, what did her mother think she would do? Come to dinner with riding boots under her gown? Race the hounds through the drawing room?

She knew the rules. She did. And she didn’t even mind them under the right circumstances. That her own mother thought her so inept . . . and that she would say so in front of all the people Billie cared most about . . .

It hurt more than she could ever have imagined.

But then the strangest thing happened. George’s hand found hers and squeezed. Under the table, where no one could see. Billie jerked her head to look at him—she couldn’t help it—but he’d already let go and was saying something to his father about the price of French brandy.

Billie stared at her soup.

What a day.

Later that evening, after the men had gone off to have their port and the ladies were congregated in the drawing room, Billie stole away to the library, wanting nothing more than a spot of peace and quiet.

Although she wasn't really sure if it counted as *stealing away* when she was required to beg a footman to carry her there.

Still, she'd always liked the library at Crake House. It was smaller than the one they had at Aubrey Hall, and it felt less imposing. Almost cozy. Lord Manston had a habit of falling asleep on the soft leather sofa, and as soon as Billie settled into the cushions she understood why. With a fire in the grate and a knitted blanket thrown over her legs, it was the perfect place to rest her eyes until her parents were ready to return home.

She wasn't sleepy, though. Just weary. It had been a long day, and her entire body ached from her fall, and her mother had been spectacularly insensitive, and Andrew hadn't even noticed that she wasn't feeling well, and George *had*, and then Georgiana had gone and turned into someone she didn't recognize, and—

And, and, and. It was all *ands* this evening, and the sum of it all was exhausting.

“Billie?”

She let out a softly startled shriek as she lurched into a more upright position. George was standing in the open doorway, his expression made unreadable by the dim, flickering candlelight.

“Sorry.” She squeezed her eyes shut, taking a moment to catch her breath. “You surprised me.”

“My apologies. It was not my intention.” He leaned against the doorjamb. “Why are you here?”

“I needed a bit of quiet.” She still could not see his face clearly, but she could well imagine his bemused countenance, so she added, “Even I need quiet every now and again.”

He smiled faintly. “You don't feel cooped up?”

“Not at all.” She tipped her head, acknowledging the riposte.

He took a moment to consider this, then said, “Would you like me to leave you to your solitude?”

“No, it's all right,” Billie said, surprising herself with her statement. George's presence was oddly calming, in a way Andrew's or her mother's or really any of the others' never were.

“You're in pain,” he said, finally stepping into the room.

How had he known? Nobody else had. But then again, George had always been uncomfortably observant. “Yes,” she said. There was little point pretending otherwise.

“A great deal?”

“No. But more than a little.”

“You should have rested this evening.”

“Perhaps. But I enjoyed myself, and I think it was worth it. It was lovely to see your mother so happy.”

George’s head cocked to the side. “You thought she was happy?”

“Didn’t you?”

“To see Andrew, perhaps, but in some ways his presence only serves to remind her that Edward is not here.”

“I suppose. I mean, of course she’d rather have two sons home, but the reminder of Edward’s absence is surely outweighed by the joy of Andrew’s presence.”

George’s lips pressed into a wry, one-sided curve. “She did have two sons home.”

Billie stared at him for a moment before— “Oh! I’m so sorry. Of course she did. I was just thinking of the sons who aren’t normally at home. I . . . Good God, I’m really sorry.” Her face was burning. Thank heavens the candlelight hid her blush.

He shrugged. “Think nothing of it.”

She couldn’t, though. No matter how even his mien, she couldn’t help but think she’d hurt his feelings. Which was mad; George Rokesby did not care enough for her good opinion to be bothered by anything she said.

But still, there had been something in his expression . . .

“Does it bother you?” she asked.

He came further into the room, stopping by the shelf where the good brandy was kept. “Does what bother me?”

“Being left behind.” She bit her lip. There had to be a better way of saying it. “Remaining home,” she amended, “when everyone else is gone.”

“You’re here,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but I’m hardly a comfort. To you, I mean.”

He chuckled. Well, not really, but he did exhale a bit through his nose, and it sounded amused.

“Even Mary’s gone to Sussex,” Billie said, shifting her position so that she could watch him over the back of the sofa.

George poured himself a brandy, setting the glass down as he returned the stopper to the decanter. "I can't begrudge my sister a happy marriage. To one of my closest friends, no less."

"Of course not. Nor could I. But I still miss her. And you're still the only Rokesby in regular residence."

He brought his glass to his lips, but he didn't quite take a sip. "You do have a way of cutting right to the heart of the matter, don't you?"

Billie held her tongue.

"Does it bother *you*?" he asked.

She didn't pretend to misunderstand the question. "My siblings aren't all gone. Georgiana is still home."

"And you have so much in common with her," he said in a dry voice.

"More than I used to think," Billie told him. It was true. Georgiana had been a sickly child, worried over by her parents, stuck inside while the rest of the children ran wild across the countryside.

Billie had never disliked her younger sister; but at the same time, she hadn't found her very interesting. Most of the time, she'd forgotten she was even there. There were nine years between them. Really, what could they possibly have had in common?

But then everyone else went away, and now Georgiana was finally growing close enough to adulthood to become interesting.

It was George's turn to speak, but he did not seem to have noticed this fact, and the silence stretched for long enough to be vaguely unsettling.

"George?" Billie murmured. He was looking at her in the oddest manner. As if she were a puzzle—no, not that. As if he were thinking, quite deeply, and she just happened to be in the way of his eyes.

"George?" she repeated. "Are you all—"

He looked up suddenly. "You should be nicer to her." And then, as if he hadn't just said the most appalling thing, he motioned to the brandy. "Would you like a glass?"

"Yes," Billie said, even though she was well aware that most ladies would have refused, "and what on earth do you mean, I should be nicer to her? When have I ever been unkind?"

"Never," he agreed, splashing a bit of liquid into a glass, "but you ignore her."

"I do not."

"You forget about her," he amended. "It amounts to the same thing."

“Oh, and you pay so much attention to Nicholas.”

“Nicholas is at Eton. I can hardly shower him with attention from here.”

He handed her a brandy. She noticed her glass was considerably less full than his had been.

“I don’t ignore her,” Billie muttered. She didn’t like being scolded, especially by George Rokesby. Especially when he was right.

“It’s all right,” he said, surprising her with his sudden kindness. “I’m sure it’s different when Andrew isn’t home.”

“What does Andrew have to do with anything?”

He turned to her with an expression that hovered somewhere between surprised and amused. “Really?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Maddening man.

George took a long sip, and then—without even turning toward her—he managed to give her a condescending look. “He should just marry you and be done with it.”

“What?” Her surprise was unfeigned. Not that she might marry Andrew. She’d always thought she’d one day marry him. Or Edward. She didn’t really care which; it was all the same to her. But that George was actually speaking of it in such a manner . . .

She didn’t like it.

“I’m sure you’re aware,” she said, quickly regaining her composure, “that Andrew and I have no understanding.”

He waved that off with a roll of his eyes. “You could do worse.”

“So could he,” she retorted.

George chuckled. “True enough.”

“I’m not going to marry Andrew,” she said. Not yet, anyway. But if he asked . . .

She would probably say yes. It was what everyone expected.

George took a sip of his brandy, watching her enigmatically over the rim of his glass.

“The last thing I’d want to do,” Billie said, unable to leave the silence be, “is get engaged to someone who is going to turn around and leave.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” George said with a thoughtful frown. “Many military wives follow their husbands. And you’re more adventurous than most.”

“I like it here.”

“In my father’s library?” he quipped.

“In Kent,” she said pertly. “At Aubrey Hall. I’m needed.”

He made a patronizing sound.

“I am!”

“I’m sure you are.”

Her spine stiffened. If her ankle weren’t throbbing, she’d have probably jumped to her feet. “You have no idea all I do.”

“Please don’t tell me.”

“What?”

He made a dismissive motion with his hand. “You have that look about you.”

“What loo—”

“The one that says you’re about to launch into a very long speech.”

Her lips parted with shock. Of all the condescending, supercilious . . . Then she saw his face. He was enjoying himself!

Of course he was. He lived to get under her skin. Like a needle. A dull, rusty needle.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Billie,” he said, leaning against a bookcase as he chuckled. “Can’t you take a ribbing? I know you help your father from time to time.”

From time to time? She ran the bloody place. Aubrey Hall would fall apart without her direction. Her father had all but ceded the ledgers to her, and the steward had long since given up protesting about having to answer to a woman. Billie had, for all intents and purposes, been raised as her father’s eldest son. Except that she couldn’t inherit anything. And eventually Edmund would grow up, take his rightful place. Her younger brother wasn’t stupid; he’d learn what to do quickly enough, and when he did . . . when Edmund showed all of Aubrey how capable he was, everyone would breathe a sigh of relief and say something about natural order being restored.

Billie would be superfluous.

Replaced.

The ledgers would be quietly removed from her purview. No one would ask her to inspect the cottages or settle disputes. Edmund would become lord of the manor, and she’d be his long-toothed older sister, the one people quietly pitied and mocked.

God, maybe she *should* marry Andrew.

“Are you sure you’re not unwell?” George asked.

“I’m fine,” she said curtly.

He shrugged. “You looked rather ill all of a sudden.”

She'd felt rather ill all of a sudden. Her future had finally danced before her, and there was nothing bright and beautiful about it.

She tossed back the rest of her brandy.

"Careful there," George cautioned, but she was already coughing, unaccustomed to setting her throat on fire. "It's better to sip it slowly," he added.

"I *know*," she ground out, well aware that she sounded like an idiot.

"Of course you do," he murmured, and just like that, she felt better. George Rokesby was being a pompous ass. Everything was back to normal. Or almost normal.

Normal enough.

Chapter 8

Lady Bridgerton began planning her assault on the social Season the very next morning. Billie hobbled into the small dining room to break her fast, fully prepared to be drafted into service, but to her relief and amazement her mother said that she did not require Billie's assistance with the planning. All she asked was that Billie write a note of invitation to Mary and Felix. Billie nodded her grateful agreement. This she could do.

"Georgiana has offered to help me," Lady Bridgerton said as she signaled to a footman to prepare a breakfast plate. Billie was agile on her crutches, but even she could not fix her own meal from the sideboard while balanced on a pair of sticks.

Billie glanced at her younger sister, who appeared quite pleased at this prospect. "It will be great fun," Georgiana said.

Billie swallowed a retort. She couldn't think of much that would be *less* fun, but she did not need to insult her sister by saying so. If Georgiana wanted to spend the afternoon penning invitations and planning menus, she was welcome to it.

Lady Bridgerton prepared a cup of tea for Billie. "How do you plan to spend your day?"

"I'm not sure," Billie said, nodding her thanks to the footman as he set her plate in front of her. She gazed wistfully out the window. The sun was just beginning to break through the clouds, and within an hour the morning dew would have evaporated. A perfect day to be out of doors. On horseback. Being useful.

And she had so much to do. One of the tenants was rethatching the roof of his cottage, and even though his neighbors knew they were expected to offer their aid, Billie still suspected that John and Harry Williamson would try to weasel out of it. Someone needed to make sure that the brothers did their share, just like someone needed to make sure that the western fields

were being planted properly and the rose garden had been pruned to her mother's exact specifications.

Someone needed to do all that, and Billie had no idea who that would be if not her.

But no, she was stuck inside with a stupid swollen foot, and it wasn't even her fault. All right, maybe it was a little bit her fault, but certainly more the cat's fault, and the bloody thing hurt like the devil—her foot, that was, not the cat, although she was small-minded enough to hope that the beastly little creature also had reason to limp.

She paused to consider that. When it came right down to it . . .

"Billie?" her mother murmured, eyeing her above the rim of her bone china teacup.

"I think I'm not a very nice person," Billie mused.

Lady Bridgerton choked so hard tea came out her nose. It was quite a sight, really, and not one Billie had ever expected to see in her lifetime.

"I could have told you *that*," Georgiana said.

Billie flashed a scowl at her sister that was, all things considered, rather immature.

"Sybilla Bridgerton," came her mother's brook-no-dissent voice. "You are a perfectly nice person."

Billie opened her mouth to speak, not that she had anything intelligent to say.

"If you're not," her mother continued, her voice leaping into the moment with a *don't-you-dare-think-of-contradicting-me* punch of volume, "it reflects badly upon *me*, and I refuse to believe I am so derelict a mother as that."

"Of course not," Billie said quickly. Very quickly.

"Therefore I will repeat my question," her mother said. She took a delicate sip of her tea and gazed upon her elder daughter with remarkable impassivity. "What do you plan to do today?"

"Well," Billie stalled. She glanced over at her sister, but Georgiana was no help. She just lifted her shoulders in a helpless little shrug that could have meant anything from *I-have-no-idea-what's-got-into-her* to *I-am-enjoying-your-discomfort-immensely*.

Billie scowled. Wouldn't it be lovely if people just said what they thought?

Billie turned back to her mother, who was still regarding her with a deceptively placid expression. "Well," she stalled again. "I might read a

book?”

“A book,” her mother repeated. She dabbed at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “How delightful.”

Billie eyed her cautiously. Any number of sarcastic retorts sprang to mind, but despite her mother’s serene demeanor, there was a gleam in her eye that told Billie she’d be wise to keep her mouth shut.

Lady Bridgerton reached for the teapot. She always drank more tea at breakfast than the rest of the family combined. “I could recommend something, if you like,” she said to Billie. She also generally read more books than the rest of the family combined.

“No, that’s all right,” Billie replied, cutting her sausage into rounds. “Father bought the latest volume of *Prescott’s Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* when he was in London last month. I should have already started it, but the weather has been so fine I haven’t had the chance.”

“You could read outside,” Georgiana suggested. “We could put down a blanket. Or drag out a chaise.”

Billie nodded absently as she stabbed a sausage disc. “It would be better than remaining in, I suppose.”

“You could help me plan the entertainments for the house party,” Georgiana said.

Billie gave her a condescending look. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not, darling?” Lady Bridgerton put in. “It might be fun.”

“You just told me I didn’t have to take part in the planning.”

“Only because I didn’t think you wanted to.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Of course not,” her mother said smoothly, “but you *do* want to spend time with your sister.”

Oh, hell. Her mother was *good*. Billie pasted a smile on her face. “Can’t Georgie and I do something else?”

“If you can convince her to read your agricultural treatise over your shoulder,” her mother said, her hand flitting delicately through the air.

Delicately like a bullet, Billie thought. “I’ll help with *some* of the planning,” she conceded.

“Oh, that will be marvelous!” Georgiana exclaimed. “And so very helpful. You’ll have much more experience with this sort of thing than I.”

“Not really,” Billie said frankly.

“But you’ve *been* to house parties.”

“Well, yes, but . . .” Billie didn’t bother finishing her sentence. Georgiana looked so happy. It would be like kicking a puppy to tell Georgiana that she had hated being dragged to house parties with their mother. Or if *hate* was too strong a word, she certainly hadn’t enjoyed herself. She really didn’t like traveling. She’d learned that much about herself.

And she did not enjoy the company of strangers. She wasn’t shy; not at all. She just preferred being among people she knew.

People who knew *her*.

Life was so much easier that way.

“Look at it this way,” Lady Bridgerton said to Billie. “You don’t want a house party. You don’t like house parties. But I am your mother, and I have decided to host one. Therefore, you have no choice but to attend. Why not take the opportunity to mold this gathering into something you might actually enjoy?”

“But I’m not going to enjoy it.”

“You certainly won’t if you approach it with that attitude.”

Billie took a moment to compose herself. And to hold down the urge to argue her point and defend herself and tell her mother that she would not be spoken to as if she was a child . . .

“I would be delighted to assist Georgiana,” Billie said tightly, “as long as I get some time to read my book.”

“I wouldn’t dream of pulling you away from *Prescott’s*,” her mother murmured.

Billie glared at her. “You shouldn’t mock it. It’s exactly that sort of book that has enabled me to increase productivity at Aubrey Hall by a full ten percent. Not to mention the improvements to the tenant farms. They are all eating better now that—”

She cut herself off. Swallowed. She’d just done exactly what she’d told herself not to do.

Argue her point.

Defend herself.

Act like a child.

She shoveled as much of her breakfast into her mouth as she could manage in thirty seconds, then stood and grabbed her crutches, which were leaning against the table. “I will be in the library if anyone needs me.” To Georgiana she added, “Let me know when the ground is dry enough to spread a blanket.”

Georgiana nodded.

“Mother,” Billie said to Lady Bridgerton with a nod to replace the normal bob of a curtsy she gave when she took her leave. Yet another thing one couldn’t manage on crutches.

“Billie,” her mother said, her voice conciliatory. And perhaps a little frustrated. “I wish you wouldn’t . . .”

Billie waited for her to finish her sentence, but her mother just shook her head.

“Never mind,” she said.

Billie nodded again, pressing a crutch into the ground for balance as she pivoted on her good foot. She *thunked* the crutches on the ground, then swung her body between them, her shoulders held tight and straight as she repeated the motion all the way to the door.

It was bloody hard to make a dignified exit on crutches.

George still wasn’t sure how Andrew had talked him into accompanying him to Aubrey Hall for a late morning visit, but here he was, standing in the grand entry as he handed his hat to Thamesly, butler to the Bridgertons since before he was born.

“You’re doing a good deed, old man,” Andrew said, slapping George’s shoulder with surely more force than was necessary.

“Don’t call me old man.” God, he hated that.

But this only made Andrew laugh. Of course. “Whomever you might be, you’re still doing a good deed. Billie will be out of her mind with boredom.”

“She could use a little boredom in her life,” George muttered.

“True enough,” Andrew conceded, “but my concern was for her family. God only knows what madness she’ll inflict upon them if no one shows up to entertain her.”

“You talk as if she’s a child.”

“A child?” Andrew turned to look at him, his face taking on an enigmatic serenity that George knew well enough to find suspicious in the extreme. “Not at all.”

“Miss Bridgerton is in the library,” Thamesly informed them. “If you will wait in the drawing room, I will alert her to your presence.”

“No need,” Andrew said cheerily. “We will join her in the library. The last thing we want is to force Miss Bridgerton to hobble about more than is necessary.”

“Very kind of you, sir,” Thamesly murmured.

“Is she in a great deal of pain?” George inquired.

“I would not know,” the butler said diplomatically, “but it may be worth noting that the weather is very fine, and Miss Bridgerton is in the library.”

“So she’s miserable, then.”

“Very much so, my lord.”

George supposed *this* was why he’d allowed Andrew to drag him away from his weekly meeting with their father’s steward. He’d known Billie’s ankle could not have been much improved. It had been grotesquely swollen the night before, no matter how festively she’d wrapped it with that ridiculous pink ribbon. Injuries like that did not resolve themselves overnight.

And while he and Billie had never been friends, precisely, he felt a strange responsibility for her well-being, at least as pertained to her current situation. What was that old Chinese proverb? If you saved a life, you were responsible for it forever? He certainly had not saved Billie’s life, but he had been stuck up on a roof with her, and . . .

And bloody hell, he had no idea what any of this meant, just that he thought he ought to make sure she was feeling at least somewhat better. Even though she was the *most* exasperating female, and she bloody well set his teeth on edge half the time.

It was still the right thing to do. That was all.

“Oh, Billie . . .” Andrew called as they made their way to the back of the house. “We’ve come to rescue you . . .”

George shook his head. How his brother survived in the navy he would never know. Andrew had not a serious bone in his body.

“Billie . . .” he called again, his voice warbling into a ridiculous singsong. “Where aaaaaarrrrre you?”

“In the library,” George reminded him.

“Well, of course she is,” Andrew said with a blinding grin, “but isn’t this more fun?”

Naturally, he did not wait for an answer.

“Billie!” he called again. “Oh, *Billiebilliebilliebill*—”

“For heaven’s sake!” Billie’s head popped out of the doorway to the library. Her chestnut hair had been pulled back into the loose coiffure of a lady with no plans to socialize. “You’re loud enough to wake the dead. What are you doing here?”

“Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“I saw you last night.”

“So you did.” Andrew leaned down and dropped a brotherly kiss on her cheek. “But you had to go without for so very long. You need to stock up.”

“On your company?” Billie asked dubiously.

Andrew patted her arm. “We are so fortunate that you have this opportunity.”

George leaned to the right so that he could see her from behind his brother. “Shall I strangle him or will you?”

She rewarded him with a devious smile. “Oh, it must be a joint endeavor, don’t you think?”

“So that you may share the blame?” Andrew quipped.

“So that we may share the joy,” Billie corrected.

“You wound me.”

“Happily, I assure you.” She hopped to the left and looked at George. “What brings you here this fine morning, Lord Kennard?”

He gave her a bit of a look at her use of his title. The Bridgertons and Rokesbys never stood on occasion when it was just the two families. Even now, no one so much as blinked at Billie being alone with two unmarried gentlemen in the library. It wasn’t the sort of thing that would be permitted during the upcoming house party, though. They were all well aware that their relaxed manners would not stand in extended company.

“Dragged along by my brother, I’m afraid,” George admitted. “There was some fear for your family’s safety.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Really.”

“Now, now, Billie,” Andrew said. “We all know you don’t do well trapped indoors.”

“I came for *his* safety,” George said with a jerk of his head toward Andrew. “Although it is my belief that any injury you might do to him would be entirely justified.”

Billie threw back her head and laughed. “Come, join me in the library. I need to sit back down.”

While George was recovering from the unexpectedly marvelous sight of Billie in full joy, she hopped back to the nearest reading table, holding her light blue skirts above her ankles for easier motion.

“You should use your crutches,” he told her.

“Not worth it for such a short trip,” she replied, settling back down into her chair. “Besides, they tipped over and it was far too much trouble to

retrieve them.”

George followed her gaze to where the crutches lay askew on the ground, one slightly atop the other. He leaned down and picked them up, setting them gently against the side of the library table. “If you need help,” he said in a quiet voice, “you should ask for it.”

She looked at him and blinked. “I didn’t need help.”

George started to tell her not to be so defensive, but then he realized she *hadn’t* been defensive. She was merely stating a fact. A fact as *she* saw it.

He shook his head. Billie could be so bloody literal.

“What was that?” she asked.

He shrugged. He had no idea what she was about.

“What were you going to say?” she demanded.

“Nothing.”

Her mouth tightened at the corners. “That’s not true. You were definitely going to say something.”

Literal *and* tenacious. It was a frightening combination. “Did you sleep well?” he asked politely.

“Of course,” she said, with just enough of an arch to her brows to tell him that she was well aware that he’d changed the subject. “I told you yesterday. I never have trouble sleeping.”

“You said you never have trouble falling asleep,” he corrected, somewhat surprised that he recalled the distinction.

She shrugged. “It’s much the same thing.”

“The pain did not wake you up?”

She glanced down at her foot as if she’d quite forgotten it was there. “Apparently not.”

“If I might interrupt,” Andrew said, bowing to Billie with a ridiculous sweep of his arm, “we are here to offer our assistance and succor in any way you deem necessary.”

She gave Andrew the sort of look George normally reserved for small, recalcitrant children. “Are you sure you want to make such a sweeping promise?”

George leaned down until his lips were at the same latitude as her ear. “Pray remember that he uses ‘we’ as a grandiose gesture, not as a plural pronoun.”

She grinned. “In other words, you want no part of it?”

“None whatsoever.”

“You insult the lady,” Andrew said without a hint of protest in his voice. He sprawled in one of the Bridgertons’ fine wingback chairs, his long legs stretched out so that the heels of his boots rested against the carpet.

Billie gave him an exasperated glance before turning back to George. “Why *are* you here?”

George took a seat at the table across from her. “What he said, but without the hyperbole. We thought you might need company.”

“Oh.” She drew back a touch, clearly surprised by his frankness. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

“*Thank you, that’s very kind of you?*” Andrew echoed. “Who *are* you?”

She whipped her head to face him. “Was I supposed to curtsy?”

“It would have been nice,” he demurred.

“Impossible on crutches.”

“Well, if *that’s* the case . . .”

Billie turned back to George. “He’s an idiot.”

He held up his hands. “You will find no argument here.”

“The plight of the younger son,” Andrew said with a sigh.

Billie rolled her eyes, tipping her head toward Andrew as she said to George, “Don’t encourage him.”

“To be ganged up upon,” Andrew went on, “never respected . . .”

George craned his neck, trying to read the title of Billie’s book. “What are you reading?”

“And,” Andrew continued, “apparently ignored as well.”

Billie rotated her book so that the gold leaf lettering faced George. “*Prescott’s Encyclopaedia of Agriculture.*”

“Volume four,” he said approvingly. He had volumes one through three in his own personal library.

“Yes, it was only recently published,” Billie confirmed.

“It must have been very recently, or I would have purchased it when I was last in London.”

“My father brought it back from his most recent trip. You can read it when I’m done if you wish.”

“Oh, no, I’m sure I’ll need a copy of my own.”

“As a reference,” she said with an approving nod.

“This might be the dullest conversation I have ever beheld,” Andrew said from behind them.

They ignored him.

“Do you often read such tomes?” George asked, nodding at the Prescott book. He’d always thought ladies preferred slim volumes of poetry or plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe. It was what his sister and mother seemed to enjoy reading.

“Of course,” she replied, scowling as if he’d insulted her with the very question.

“Billie helps her father with the land management,” Andrew said, apparently bored of making fun of them. He pushed himself to his feet and wandered over to the wall of shelves, selecting a book seemingly at random. He leafed through a few pages, frowned, and put it back.

“Yes, you mentioned you’d been assisting him,” George said. He looked at Billie. “Very singular of you.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“That was not meant as an insult,” he got in before she could open her rash little mouth, “just an observation.”

She did not look convinced.

“You will concede,” he said smoothly, “that most young ladies do not assist their fathers in such a manner. Hence, your singularity.”

“I swear, George,” Andrew said, glancing up from the book he was paging through, “you even give your compliments like a conceited ass.”

“I’m going to kill him,” George muttered.

“You’ll have to form a line,” Billie remarked. But then she lowered her voice. “It’s a little bit true, though.”

He drew back. “I beg your pardon?”

“You did sound a little . . .” She waved her hand in the air as a substitute for actually finishing her sentence.

“Like an ass?” George supplied.

“No!” She said this with enough speed and conviction for him to believe her. “Just a little bit . . .”

He waited.

“Are you talking about me?” Andrew asked, settling back in his chair with a book in his hand.

“No,” they said in unison.

“I don’t mind if it’s complimentary,” he murmured.

George ignored him, keeping his eyes on Billie. She was frowning. Two small lines formed between her brows, curving against each other like an hourglass, and her lips tightened into a curious pucker, almost as if she were

anticipating a kiss.

He'd never watched her think, he realized.

Then he realized what a staggeringly odd observation *that* was.

"You did sound a *little* conceited," Billie finally said. Her voice was quiet, meant for their ears only. "But I think that's understandable?"

Understandable? He leaned forward. "Why are you saying that like it's a question?"

"I don't know."

He sat back and crossed his arms, quirking one brow to indicate that he was waiting for her to continue.

"Fine," she said, less than graciously. "You're the eldest, the heir. You're the brilliant, the handsome, oh, and we must not forget, the *eligible* Viscount of Kennard."

George felt a slow smile spread across his face. "You think I'm handsome?"

"This is exactly what I'm talking about!"

"Brilliant, too," George murmured. "I had no idea."

"You're acting like Andrew," Billie muttered.

For some reason, this made him chuckle.

Billie's eyes narrowed into a glare.

George's smile stretched into a full-fledged grin. By God, it was fun to needle her.

She leaned forward, and in that moment he realized just how well people could speak through clenched teeth. "I was trying to be considerate," she ground out.

"I'm sorry," George said immediately.

Her lips pressed together. "You asked me a question. I was trying to give you an honest, thoughtful answer. I thought you deserved as much."

Well, *now* he felt like an ass.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and this time it was more than an ingrained bit of polite manners.

Billie let out a breath, and she caught the inside of her lower lip between her teeth. She was thinking again, George realized. How remarkable it was to see another person think. Was everyone this expressive as they pondered their ideas?

"It's how you were brought up," she finally said. "You're no more to blame than . . ." She exhaled again, but George was patient. She would find

the right words.

And after a few moments, she did. “You’ve been raised—” But this time she stopped herself quite suddenly.

“To be conceited?” he said softly.

“To be confident,” she corrected, but he had a feeling that his statement was a lot closer to what she had been about to say. “It’s not your fault,” she added.

“Now who’s being patronizing?”

She gave him a wry smile. “Me, I’m sure. But it’s true. You can’t help it any more than I can help being a . . .” She waved her hands again, which was apparently her all-purpose gesture for things that were too awkward to say aloud.

“What I am,” she finally finished.

“What you are.” He said it softly. He said it because he had to say it, even if he didn’t know why.

She looked up at him, but only with her eyes. Her face remained tipped slightly down, and he had the oddest notion that if he did not meet her gaze, if he did not hold it with his own, she would return hers to her tightly clutched hands, and the moment would be lost forever.

“What are you?” he whispered.

She shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“Is anyone hungry?” Andrew suddenly asked.

George blinked, trying to snap himself out of whatever spell had been cast over him.

“Because I am,” Andrew continued. “Famished. Utterly. I ate only one breakfast this morning.”

“*One* breakfast?” Billie started to say, but Andrew was already on his feet, bounding over to her side.

He set his hands on the table, leaning down to murmur, “I was hoping I’d be invited to tea.”

“Of course you’re invited to tea,” Billie said, but she sounded just as off-balance as George felt. She frowned. “It’s a little early, though.”

“It’s never too early for tea,” Andrew declared. “Not if your cook has been making shortbread.” He turned to George. “I don’t know what she puts in it, but it’s divine.”

“Butter,” Billie said absently. “Quite a lot of it.”

Andrew cocked his head to the side. “Well, that makes sense. Everything

tastes better with quite a lot of butter.”

“We should ask Georgiana to join us,” Billie said, reaching for her crutches. “I’m meant to be helping her plan the entertainments for the house party.” She rolled her eyes. “My mother’s orders.”

Andrew let out a bark of laughter. “Does your mother even *know* you?”

Billie threw an irritated look at him over her shoulder.

“Seriously, Billie-goat, what will you have us do? Head out to the south lawn to plant barley?”

“Stop,” George said.

Andrew swung around. “What was that?”

“Leave her alone.”

Andrew stared at him for so long George could not help but wonder if he’d been speaking in tongues.

“It’s Billie,” Andrew finally said.

“I know. And you should leave her alone.”

“I can fight my own battles, George,” Billie said.

He glanced over at her. “Of course you can.”

Her lips parted, but she seemed not to know how to respond to that.

Andrew looked back and forth between the two of them before offering Billie a small bow. “My apologies.”

Billie nodded awkwardly.

“Perhaps I might help in the planning,” Andrew suggested.

“You’ll certainly be better at it than I am,” Billie said.

“Well, *that* goes without saying.”

She poked him in the leg with one of her crutches.

And just like that, George realized, all was back to normal.

Except it wasn’t. Not for him.

Chapter 9

Four days later

It was remarkable—no, *inspirational*—Billie decided, how quickly she'd weaned herself from her crutches. Clearly, it was all in the mind.

Strength. Fortitude.

Determination.

Also, the ability to ignore pain was helpful.

It didn't hurt *that* much, she reasoned. Just a twinge. Or maybe something closer to a nail being hammered into her ankle at intervals corresponding to the speed at which she took her steps.

But not a very big nail. Just a little one. A pin, really.

She was made of stern stuff. Everybody said so.

At any rate, the pain in her ankle wasn't nearly as bad as the chafing under her arms from the crutches. And she wasn't planning to go for a five-mile hike. She just wanted to be able to get about the house on her own two feet.

Nevertheless, her pace was considerably slower than her usual stride as she headed toward the drawing room a few hours after breakfast. Andrew was waiting for her, Thamesly had informed her. This was not terribly surprising; Andrew had called upon her every day since her injury.

It was really quite sweet of him.

They'd been building card houses, a characteristically perverse choice for Andrew, whose dominant arm was still immobilized in a sling. He'd said that as long as he was coming over to keep her company, he might as well do something useful.

Billie didn't bother pointing out that building a house of cards might very well be the definition of *not* useful.

As for his having only one working arm, he needed help getting the first

few cards balanced, but after that, he could set up the rest just as well as she could.

Or better, really. She'd forgotten how freakishly good he was at building card houses—and how freakishly obsessed he became during the process. The day before had been the worst. As soon as they'd completed the first level he'd banned her from construction. Then he banned her from the entire area, claiming that she breathed too hard.

Which of course left her with no choice but to sneeze.

She might also have kicked the table.

There had been a fleeting moment of regret when it had all come down in a spectacular earthquake of destruction, but the look on Andrew's face had been worth it, even if he had gone home immediately following the collapse.

But that was yesterday, and knowing Andrew, he'd want to start again, bigger and better the fifth time around. So Billie had collected another two decks on her way to the drawing room. It should be enough for him to add another story or two to his next architectural masterpiece.

"Good morning," she said as she entered the drawing room. He was standing over by a plate of biscuits someone had left out on the table that ran behind the sofa. A maid, probably. One of the sillier ones. They were always giggling over him.

"You've jettisoned the crutches," he said with an approving nod. "Congratulations."

"Thank you." She glanced about the room. Still no George. He had not visited since that first morning in the library. Not that she had expected him to. She and George were not friends.

They weren't *enemies*, of course. Just not friends. They never had been. Although maybe they were a little bit . . . now.

"What's wrong?" Andrew asked.

Billie blinked. "Nothing's wrong."

"You're scowling."

"I'm not scowling."

His expression turned condescending. "You can see your own face?"

"And you're here to cheer me up," she drawled.

"Gad no, I'm here for the shortbread." He reached out and took some of the playing cards from her. "And maybe to build a house."

"At last, some honesty."

Andrew laughed and flopped down on the sofa. "I have hardly been

hiding my motives.”

Billie acknowledged this with a flick of her eyes. He had eaten a prodigious amount of shortbread in the past few days.

“You’d be kinder to me,” he continued, “if you knew how horrid the food is on a ship.”

“Scale of one to ten?”

“Twelve.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said with a grimace. She knew how Andrew liked his sweets.

“I knew what I was getting into.” He paused, frowning with thought. “No, actually I don’t think I did.”

“You wouldn’t have entered the navy if you’d realized there would be no biscuits?”

Andrew sighed dramatically. “Sometimes a man must make his own biscuits.”

Several playing cards slid from her grasp. “*What?*”

“I believe he’s substituting biscuits for destiny,” came a voice from the door.

“George!” Billie exclaimed. With surprise? With delight? What was that in her voice? And why couldn’t she, of all people, figure it out?

“Billie,” he murmured, offering a polite bow.

She stared. “What are you doing here?”

His mouth moved into a dry expression that in all honesty could not be called a smile. “Ever the model of gentility.”

“Well”—she bent down to gather the cards she’d dropped, trying not to trip on the lace trim of her skirt—“you haven’t visited for four days.”

Now he did smile. “You’ve missed me, then.”

“No!” She glared at him, reaching out to snatch up the knave of hearts. The annoying little rascal had slid halfway under the sofa. “Don’t be ridiculous. Thamesly said nothing about your being here. He mentioned only Andrew.”

“I was seeing to the horses,” George said.

She immediately looked to Andrew, surprise coloring her features. “Did you ride?”

“Well, I tried,” he admitted.

“We went very slowly,” George confirmed. Then his eyes narrowed. “Where are your crutches?”

“Gone,” she replied, smiling proudly.

“I can *see* that.” His brow pulled down into a scowling vee. “Who told you you were allowed to stop using them?”

“No one,” she bristled. Who the devil did he think he was? Her father? No, definitely not her father. That was just . . .

Ugh.

“I rose from bed,” she said with exaggerated patience, “took a step, and decided for myself.”

George snorted.

She drew back. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Allow me to translate,” Andrew said from the sofa, where he was still stretched out in a boyish sprawl.

“I *know* what it meant,” Billie snapped.

“Oh, Billie,” Andrew sighed.

She swung around to glare at him.

“You need to get out of the house,” he said.

Please, as if she didn’t know *that*. She turned back to George. “Pray, excuse my impoliteness. I wasn’t expecting you.”

His brows arched, but he accepted her apology with a nod and took a seat when she did.

“We need to feed him,” Billie said, tilting her head toward Andrew.

“Water him, too?” George murmured, as if Andrew were a horse.

“I’m right here!” Andrew protested.

George motioned to the day-old copy of the *London Times*, which lay freshly ironed on the table next to him. “Do you mind if I read?”

“Not at all,” Billie said. Far be it from her to expect him to entertain her. Even if that had been his implied purpose in stopping by. She leaned forward, giving Andrew a little tap on his shoulder. “Would you like me to get you started?”

“Please,” he said, “and then don’t touch it.”

Billie looked at George. The newspaper was still folded in his lap, and he was watching the two of them with amused curiosity.

“In the center of the table,” Andrew said.

Billie gave him a bit of a look. “Autocratic as always.”

“I am an artist.”

“Architect,” George said.

Andrew looked up, as if he’d forgotten his brother was there. “Yes,” he

murmured. “Quite.”

Billie slid from her chair and knelt in front of the low table, adjusting her weight so as not to put pressure on her bad foot. She selected two cards from the messy pile near the table’s edge and balanced them into the shape of a *T*. Carefully, she released her fingers and waited to see if it was secure.

“Nicely done,” George murmured.

Billie smiled, absurdly pleased by his compliment. “Thank you.”

Andrew rolled his eyes.

“I swear, Andrew,” Billie said, using a third card to transform the *T* into an *H*, “you turn into the *most* annoying person when you’re doing this.”

“But I get the job done.”

Billie heard George chuckle, followed by the crinkling sound of the newspaper opening and then folding into a readable shape. She shook her head, decided that Andrew was extraordinarily fortunate she was his friend, and set a few more cards into place. “Will that be enough to get you started?” she asked Andrew.

“Yes, thank you. Mind the table when you get up.”

“Is this what you’re like at sea?” Billie asked, limping across the room to get her book before settling back down. “It’s a wonder anyone puts up with you.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes—at the card structure, not at her—and placed a card into position. “I get the job done,” he repeated.

Billie turned back to George. He was watching Andrew with a peculiar expression on his face. His brow was furrowed, but he wasn’t precisely frowning. His eyes were far too bright and curious for that. Every time he blinked, his lashes swept down like a fan, graceful and—

“Billie?”

Oh, God, he’d caught her looking at him.

Wait, *why* was she looking at him?

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “Lost in thought.”

“I hope it was something interesting.”

She choked on her breath before answering, “Not really.” Then she felt kind of terrible, insulting him without his even knowing it.

And without her really meaning to.

“He’s like a different person,” she said, motioning to Andrew. “I find it very disconcerting.”

“You’ve never seen him like this before?”

“No, I have.” She looked from the chair to the sofa and decided on the sofa. Andrew was now on the floor, and he wasn’t likely to want his spot back anytime soon. She sat down, leaning against the arm and stretching her legs out in front of her. Without really thinking about what she was doing she reached for the blanket that lay folded over the back and spread it over her legs. “I still find it disconcerting.”

“He is unexpectedly precise,” George said.

Billie considered that. “Unexpected because . . . ?”

George shrugged and motioned to his brother. “Who would think it of him?”

Billie thought for a moment, then decided she agreed with him. “There’s an odd sort of sense to that.”

“I can still hear you, you know,” Andrew said. He’d got about a dozen more cards into place and had pulled back a few inches to examine the house from several angles.

“I don’t believe we were aiming for stealth,” George said mildly.

Billie smiled to herself and slid her finger into the correct spot in her book. It was one of those volumes that came with an attached ribbon to use as a bookmark.

“Just so you are aware,” Andrew said, moving to the other side of the table, “I will kill you if you knock this down.”

“Brother,” George said with impressive gravity, “I am barely breathing.”

Billie stifled a giggle. She rarely saw this side of George, teasing and dry. Usually he was so irritated by the rest of them that he was left entirely without humor.

“Is that *Prescott’s*?” George asked.

Billie turned to look at him over her shoulder. “Yes.”

“You’re making good progress.”

“Despite myself, I assure you. It’s very dry.”

Andrew didn’t look up, but he did say, “You’re reading an encyclopedia of agriculture and you’re complaining that it’s dry?”

“The last volume was brilliant,” Billie protested. “I could hardly put it down.”

Even from the back of his head, it was obvious that Andrew was rolling his eyes.

Billie returned her attention to George, who, it had to be said, had not once maligned her for her reading choices. “It must be the subject matter. He

seems terribly stuck on mulch this time.”

“Mulch is important,” George said, his eyes twinkling in what was an impressively somber face.

She met his gaze with equal seriousness. And perhaps just the littlest twitch of her lips. “Mulch is mulch.”

“God,” Andrew grunted, “the two of you are enough to make me want to tear my hair out.”

Billie tapped him on the shoulder. “But you love us.”

“Don’t touch me,” he warned.

She looked back over at George. “He’s very touchy.”

“Bad pun, Billie,” Andrew growled.

She let out a light laugh and returned to the book in her hands. “Back to the mulch.”

She tried to read. She really did. But *Prescott’s* seemed so dull this time around, and every time George moved, his newspaper crinkled and then she *had* to look up.

But then *he* would look up. And then she’d have to pretend she’d been watching Andrew. And then she really *was* watching Andrew, because it was bizarrely riveting to watch a one-armed man build a house of cards.

Back to *Prescott’s*, she admonished herself. As dull as mulch was, she had to get through it. And she did, somehow. An hour drifted by in companionable silence, she on the sofa with her book, George in his chair with the newspaper, and Andrew on the floor with his cards. She got through the straw mulch, and she got through the peat mulch, but when she got to sour mulch, she just couldn’t do it any longer.

She sighed, and not elegantly. “I am so bored.”

“Just the sort of thing one says to company,” Andrew quipped.

She gave him the side eye. “You don’t count as company.”

“Does George?”

George looked up from his newspaper.

She shrugged. “I suppose not.”

“I count,” he said.

Billie blinked. She had not realized he’d even been listening.

“I count,” he said again, and if Billie hadn’t been looking at him she would have missed it. She would have missed the blaze of fire in his eyes, hot and intense, burning for less than a second before he banked it and returned his attention to his newspaper.

“You treat Andrew like a brother,” he said, turning a page with slow, deliberate movements.

“And I treat you . . .”

He looked at her. “Not like a brother.”

Billie’s lips parted. She couldn’t look away. And then she *had* to look away, because she felt very strange, and it was suddenly imperative that she get back to the sour mulch.

But then George made a noise, or maybe he just breathed, and she couldn’t stop herself, she was looking at him again.

He had nice hair, she decided. She was glad he didn’t powder it, at least not for everyday. It was thick, with just a hint of a wave, and it looked like it would curl if he grew it long. She gave a little snort. Wouldn’t her maid love hair like that? Billie usually just tied her hair back in a queue, but sometimes she had to fancify herself. They had tried everything with her hair—hot tongs, wet ribbons—but it just wouldn’t take a curl.

She liked the color of George’s hair, too. It was like caramel, rich and sweet, tipped with strands of gold. She would wager he sometimes forgot to wear his hat in the sun. She was the same way.

It was interesting how all the Rokesbys had the exact same color eyes, but their hair ran the gamut of browns. No one was blond, and no one ginger, but even though they were all brunet, no one had quite the same coloring.

“Billie?” George asked, his voice somewhere between confused and amused.

Oh, bloody hell, he’d caught her looking at him again. She winced out a smile. “I was just thinking how you and Andrew resemble each other,” she said. It was sort of the truth.

Andrew glanced up at that. “Do you really think so?”

No, she thought, but she said, “Well, you both have blue eyes.”

“As does half of England,” Andrew said dryly. He shrugged and got back to work, his tongue catching between his teeth as he pondered his next move.

“My mother has always said that we have the same ears,” George commented.

“*Ears?*” Billie’s jaw fell about an inch. “I’ve never heard of anyone comparing ears.”

“As far as I know, no one does, aside from my mother.”

“Dangling lobes,” Andrew put in. He didn’t look at her, but he did use his good hand to tweak his lobe. “Hers are attached.”

Billie touched her own earlobe. There was no way *not* to, now. “I didn’t even realize there was more than one kind.”

“Yours are also attached,” Andrew said without looking up.

“You know this?”

“I notice ears,” he said unapologetically. “I can’t help it now.”

“Nor can I,” George admitted. “I blame Mother.”

Billie blinked a few times, still pinching her lobe between her fingers. “I just don’t . . .” She frowned and swung her legs off the sofa.

“Watch out!” Andrew snapped.

She shot him a look of great irritation, not that he was paying attention to her, and bent forward.

Andrew turned slowly. “Are you examining my ears?”

“I’m just trying to see what the difference is. I told you, I didn’t even realize there was more than one type.”

He flicked his hand toward his brother. “Go look at George’s if you must. You’re too close to the table here.”

“I vow, Andrew,” she said, carefully edging herself sideways until she was out of the space between the sofa and the table, “this is like a disease with you.”

“Some men turn to drink,” he said archly.

George stood, having seen that Billie had come to her feet. “Or cards,” he said with a sly half-smile.

Billie snorted a laugh.

“How many levels do you think he’s laid down?” George asked.

Billie leaned to the right; Andrew was blocking her view. One, two, three, four . . .

“Six,” she told him.

“That’s remarkable.”

Billie quirked a smile. “Is this what it takes to impress you?”

“Quite possibly.”

“Stop talking,” Andrew snapped.

“We move the air with our breath,” Billie explained, giving the statement gravity it absolutely didn’t deserve.

“I see.”

“Yesterday I sneezed.”

George turned to her with full admiration. “Well done.”

“I need more cards,” Andrew said. He backed up from the table very

slowly, scooting along the carpet like a crab until he was far enough away to rise without risking knocking into anything.

“I don’t have any,” Billie said. “I mean, I’m sure we do, but I wouldn’t know where to find them. I brought you the last two decks from the game room earlier.”

“This won’t do,” Andrew muttered.

“You could ask Thamesly,” she suggested. “If anyone would know, it would be he.”

Andrew nodded slowly, as if he were working it all out in his head. Then he turned and said, “You’ll have to move.”

She stared at him. “I beg your pardon.”

“You can’t stand there. You’re too close.”

“Andrew,” she said plainly, “you’ve gone mad.”

“You’re going to knock it down.”

“Just go,” Billie said.

“If you—”

“Go!” she and George yelled together.

Andrew threw an evil eye at them both and left the room.

Billie looked at George. He looked at her.

They burst into laughter.

“I don’t know about you,” Billie said, “but I’m moving to the other side of the room.”

“Ah, but then you are admitting defeat.”

She tossed him a glance over her shoulder as she walked away. “I prefer to think of it as self-preservation.”

George chuckled and followed her to the bank of windows. “The irony,” he said, “is that he’s terrible at cards.”

“He is?” She wrinkled her nose. It was odd, really, but she didn’t think she and Andrew had ever played cards.

“All games of chance, actually,” George went on. “If you ever need some money, he’s your man.”

“Alas, I don’t gamble.”

“With cards,” he countered.

She had a feeling he’d meant to sound droll, but to her ears it was patronizing in the extreme. She scowled. “What do you mean by that?”

He looked at her as if he were mildly surprised by her question. “Just that you gamble quite happily with your life all the time.”

She felt her chin draw back. "That's absurd."

"Billie, you fell out of a tree."

"Onto a *roof*."

He almost laughed. "This counters my argument *how*?"

"You would have done the exact same thing I did," she insisted. "In fact, you did."

"Oh, really."

"I went up the tree to save a cat." She jabbed him in the shoulder with her index finger. "You went up to save me."

"First of all," he shot back, "I did not go up the tree. And secondly, you're comparing yourself to a cat?"

"Yes. No!" For the first time she was grateful she'd injured her foot. She might have stamped it, otherwise.

"What would you have done if I hadn't come along?" he demanded. "Truly, Billie. What would you have done?"

"I'd have been fine."

"I'm sure you would have. You've the devil's own luck. But your family would have been frantic, and likely the entire village would have been called out to search for you."

He was right, damn it, and that just made it worse. "Do you think I'm not aware of that?" she demanded, her voice dropping to a low hiss.

He regarded her for just long enough to make her uncomfortable. "No," he said, "I don't."

She sucked in her breath. "Everything I do, I do for the people here. My whole life . . . everything. I'm reading a bloody encyclopedia of agriculture," she said, her arm jerking back toward the book in question. "Volume *four*. Who else do you know who—" Her words came to a choking halt, and several moments passed before she was able to continue. "Do you really believe me to be so uncaring?"

"No." His voice was devastatingly low and even. "I believe you to be unthinking."

She lurched back. "I can't believe I thought we were starting to be friends."

He didn't say anything.

"You're a terrible person, George Rokesby. You are impatient and intolerant and—"

He grabbed her arm. "Stop this."

Billie yanked back, but his fingers were too firmly wrapped around her flesh. “Why did you even come here this morning? You only look at me to find fault.”

“Don’t be absurd,” he scoffed.

“It’s true,” she shot back. “You don’t see yourself when you’re near me. All you do is frown and scold and—and—everything about you. Your manner, your expressions. You are so disapproving.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

She shook her head. She felt almost revelatory. “You disapprove of everything about me.”

He stepped toward her, his hand tightening on her arm. “That is so far from the truth as to be laughable.”

Billie’s mouth fell open.

Then she realized that George looked as shocked by his words as she did.

And that he was standing very close.

Her chin tipped up, bringing her eyes to his.

She stopped breathing.

“Billie,” he whispered, and his hand rose, as if to touch her cheek.

Chapter 10

He almost kissed her.

Dear God, he almost kissed Billie Bridgerton.

He had to get out of here.

“It’s late,” George blurted.

“What?”

“It’s late. I need to go.”

“It’s not late,” she said, blinking rapidly. She looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

I don’t know, he almost said.

He’d almost kissed her. His eyes had dropped to her mouth and he heard the tiny rush of her breath across her lips, and he’d felt himself leaning, wanting . . .

Burning.

He prayed she hadn’t realized. Surely she’d never been kissed before. She wouldn’t have known what was happening.

But he’d wanted her. By God, he’d wanted her. It had hit him like a swell, sneaking up and then washing over him so fast and hard he’d barely been able to think straight.

He still wanted her.

“George?” she said. “Is something wrong?”

His lips parted. He needed to breathe.

She was watching him with an almost wary curiosity. “You were scolding me,” she reminded him.

He was fairly certain his brain had not resumed its normal workings. He blinked, trying to absorb her words. “Did you want me to continue?”

She shook her head slowly. “Not particularly.”

He raked a hand through his hair and tried to smile. It was the best he could do.

Billie's brow knitted with concern. "Are you sure you're well? You look very pale."

Pale? He felt like he was on *fire*. "Forgive me," he said. "I think I'm somewhat—" What? Somewhat *what*? Tired? Hungry? He cleared his throat and decided on: "Light-headed."

She did not look as if she believed him. "Light-headed?"

"It came on suddenly," he said. That much was true.

She motioned toward the bellpull. "Shall I get you something to eat? Do you want to sit down?"

"No, no," he said stupidly. "I'm fine."

"You're fine," she repeated, her lack of belief in this statement practically radiating from her.

He gave a nod.

"No longer light-headed."

"Not at all."

She was staring at him as if he'd gone mad. Which was quite possible. He couldn't think of any other explanation.

"I should go," he said. He turned, striding to the door. He could not get out of there fast enough.

"George, wait!"

So close. But he stopped. He had to. He could no more leave the room when a gentlewoman was calling his name than spit in the face of the King. It had been bred into his bones.

When he turned around he saw that she'd moved several steps closer. "Don't you think you should wait for Andrew?" she asked.

He exhaled. Andrew. Of course.

"He'll need help, won't he? With his mount?"

Bloody hell. George exhaled. "I will wait."

Billie caught her lower lip between her teeth. The right side. She only ever worried the right side, he realized.

"I can't imagine what is taking him so long," she said, glancing at the door.

George shrugged.

"Maybe he couldn't find Thamesly."

He shrugged again.

"Or perhaps my mother waylaid him. She can be a nuisance that way."

He started to shrug for a third time, realized how inane he looked and

instead opted for a *who-can-guess* sort of smile.

“Well,” Billie said, apparently out of suggestions. “Hmmm.”

George clasped his hands behind his back. Looked at the window. At the wall. But not at Billie. Anywhere but Billie.

He still wanted to kiss her.

She coughed. He managed to look at her feet.

This was awkward.

Insane.

“Mary and Felix arrive in two days,” she said.

He gave a shove to the part of his brain that knew how to make conversation. “Doesn’t everyone arrive in two days?”

“Well, of course,” Billie replied, sounding somewhat relieved to have an actual question to answer, “but they’re the only ones I care about.”

George smiled despite himself. How like her to throw a party and hate every minute of it. Although in truth she hadn’t had much choice; they all knew that the house party had been Lady Bridgerton’s idea.

“Has the guest list been finalized?” he asked. He knew the answer, of course; the guest list had been drawn up for days, and the invitations had gone out with swift messengers with orders to wait for replies.

But this was a silence that needed filling. She was no longer on the sofa with her book and he in the chair with the newspaper. They had no props, nothing but themselves, and every time he looked at her, his eyes fell to her lips, and nothing—*nothing* could have been more wrong.

Billie wandered aimlessly toward a writing desk and tapped her hand on the table. “The Duchess of Westborough is coming,” she said. “Mother is very pleased that she has accepted our invitation. I’m told it’s a coup.”

“A duchess is always a coup,” he said wryly, “and usually also a great bother.”

She turned and looked back at him. “Do you know her?”

“We’ve been introduced.”

Her expression turned rueful. “I imagine you’ve been introduced to everyone.”

He thought about that. “Probably,” he said. “Everyone who comes to London, at least.” Like most men of his station, George spent several months each year in the capital. He generally enjoyed it. He saw friends, he kept himself up-to-date on affairs of the state. Lately he’d been eyeing prospective brides; it had been a far more tedious endeavor than he had anticipated.

Billie caught her lip between her teeth. "Is she very grand?"

"The duchess?"

She nodded.

"No grander than any other duchess."

"George! You know that's not what I'm asking."

"Yes," he said, taking pity on her, "she's quite grand. But you will—" He stopped, looked at her. Really looked at her, and finally caught the way her eyes lacked their usual sparkle. "Are you nervous?"

She picked a piece of lint off her sleeve. "Don't be silly."

"Because—"

"Of course I'm nervous."

That drew him up short. She was nervous? *Billie?*

"What?" she demanded, seeing the incredulity on his face.

He shook his head. For Billie to admit to nerves after all the things she'd done . . . all the things she'd done with a mad grin on her face . . . it was inconceivable.

"You jumped out of a tree," he finally said.

"I fell out of a tree," she returned pertly, "and what has that to do with the Duchess of Westborough?"

"Nothing," he admitted, "except that it's difficult to imagine you nervous about . . ." He felt his head shaking, slow, tiny movements, and a reluctant admiration rose within him. She was fearless. She had always been fearless.

"About anything," he finished.

Her lips pressed together. "Have you ever danced with me?"

He gaped at her. "What?"

"Have you ever danced with me?" she repeated, her voice edging toward impatience.

"Yes?" The word was drawn out, a question.

"No," she said, "you haven't."

"That can't be possible," he said. Of course he'd danced with her. He'd known her all of her life.

She crossed her arms.

"You can't dance?" he asked.

She shot him a look of pure irritation. "Of course I can dance."

He was going to kill her.

"I'm not very good," she continued, "but I'm good enough, I suppose. That's not the point."

George was fairly certain they had reached the point where there *was* no point.

“The point is,” Billie went on, “you have never danced with me because I don’t *go* to dances.”

“Perhaps you should.”

She scowled mightily. “I don’t glide when I walk, and I don’t know how to flirt, and the last time I tried to use a fan I poked someone in the eye.” She crossed her arms. “I certainly don’t know how to make a gentleman feel clever and strong and better than me.”

He chuckled. “I’m fairly certain the Duchess of Westborough is a lady.”

“George!”

He drew back, surprised. She was truly upset. “Forgive me,” he said, and he watched her carefully, warily even. She looked hesitant, picking nervously at the folds of her skirt. Her brow was knit not into a frown but into a rueful wrinkle. He had never seen her like this.

He did not know this girl.

“I don’t do well in polite company,” Billie said in a low voice. “I don’t—I’m not good at it.”

George knew better than to make another joke, but he did not know what sort of words she needed. How did one comfort a whirlwind? Reassure the girl who did everything well and then did it all backwards for fun? “You do perfectly well when you dine at Crake,” he said, even though he knew this wasn’t what she was talking about.

“That doesn’t count,” she said impatiently.

“When you’re in the village . . .”

“Really? You’re going to compare the villagers to a *duchess*? Besides, I’ve known the villagers all my life. They know *me*.”

He cleared his throat. “Billie, you are the most confident, competent woman I know.”

“I drive you mad,” she said plainly.

“True,” he agreed, although that madness had been taking on a disturbingly different hue lately. “But,” he continued, trying to get his words in the proper order, “you are a Bridgerton. The daughter of a viscount. There is no reason why you cannot hold your head high in any room in the land.”

She let out a dismissive snort. “You don’t understand.”

“Then make me.” To his great surprise, he realized that he meant it.

She didn’t answer right away. She wasn’t even looking at him. She was

still leaning on the table, and her eyes seemed locked on her hands. She glanced up, briefly, and it occurred to him that she was trying to determine if he was sincere.

He was outraged, and then he wasn't. He wasn't used to having his sincerity questioned, but then again, this was Billie. They had a long history of needling one another, of searching for the perfect weak spot, tiny and undefended.

But it was changing. It *had* changed, just over this past week. He didn't know why; neither of *them* had changed.

His respect for her was no longer so grudging. Oh, he still thought she was beyond headstrong and reckless in the extreme, but underneath all that, her heart was true.

He supposed he'd always known that. He'd just been too busy being aggravated by her to notice.

"Billie?" He spoke softly, his voice a gentle prod.

She looked up, one corner of her mouth twisting forlornly. "It's not a case of holding my head high."

He made sure to keep any hint of impatience out of his voice when he asked, "Then what is the problem?"

She looked at him for a long moment, lips pressed together, before saying, "Did you know that I was presented at court?"

"I thought you didn't have a Season."

"I didn't"—Billie cleared her throat—"after that."

He winced. "What happened?"

She did not quite look at him when she said, "I may have set someone's dress on fire."

He nearly lost his footing. "*You set someone's dress on fire?*"

She waited with exaggerated patience, as if she'd been through this conversation before and knew exactly how long it was going to take to get through it.

He stared at her, dumbfounded. "You set someone's dress on fire."

"It wasn't on purpose," she snipped.

"Well," he said, impressed despite himself, "I suppose if anyone was going to—"

"Don't say it," she warned.

"How did I not hear of this?" he wondered.

"It was a very small fire," she said, somewhat primly.

“But still . . .”

“Really?” she demanded. “I set someone’s dress on fire, and your biggest question is how you missed the gossip?”

“I apologize,” he said immediately, but then he could not help but ask (somewhat gingerly), “Are you inviting me to inquire *how* you set this dress on fire?”

“No,” she said irritably, “and it’s not why I brought it up.”

His first inclination was to tease her further, but then she sighed, and the sound was so tired and disconsolate that his mirth slid away. “Billie,” he said, his voice as gentle as it was sympathetic, “you can’t—”

But she did not let him finish. “I don’t fit the mold, George.”

No, she didn’t. And hadn’t he been thinking the same thing just a few days earlier? If Billie had gone to London for a Season with his sister it would have been an unmitigated disaster. All the things that made her wonderful and strong would have been her downfall in the rarefied world of the *ton*.

They would have used her for target practice.

They weren’t *all* cruel, the lords and ladies of high society. But the ones who were . . . their words were their weapons, and they wielded them like bayonets.

“Why are you telling me this?” he suddenly asked.

Her lips parted, and a flash of pain shot through her eyes.

“I mean, why me?” he said quickly, lest she think he didn’t care enough to listen. “Why not Andrew?”

She didn’t say anything. Not right away. And then— “I don’t know. I don’t . . . Andrew and I don’t talk about such things.”

“Mary will be here soon,” he said helpfully.

“For the love of God, George,” she nearly spat, “if you don’t want to talk to me, you can just say so.”

“No,” he said, grabbing her wrist before she could whirl away. “That’s not what I meant. I’m happy to talk with you,” he assured her. “I’m happy to listen. I just thought you’d rather have someone who . . .”

She stared at him, waiting. But he could not bring himself to say the words that had been on the tip of his tongue.

Someone who cares.

Because it was hurtful. And it was petty. And most of all, it wasn’t true.

He did care.

He cared . . . quite a lot.

“I will . . .” The word trailed off, lost in his turbulent thoughts, and all he could do was watch her. Watch her watching him as he tried to remember how to speak his mother tongue, as he tried to figure out which words were right, which words were reassuring. Because she looked sad. And she looked anxious. And he hated that.

“If you wish,” he said, slowly enough to allow him to pick over his thoughts as he spoke, “I will watch out for you.”

She eyed him cautiously. “What do you mean?”

“Make sure you . . .” He made an air motion with his hands, not that either one of them knew what it meant. “That you’re . . . well.”

“That I’m well?” she echoed.

“I don’t know,” he said, frustrated with his inability to put together a complete thought, much less translate it into actual sentences. “Just that if you need a friend, I will be there.”

Her lips parted, and he saw movement in her throat, all her words trapped there, all her emotions in check.

“Thank you,” she said. “That’s . . .”

“Don’t say it’s kind of me,” he ordered.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not kindness. It’s . . . I don’t know what it is,” he said helplessly. “But it’s not kindness.”

Her lips quivered into a smile. A mischievous smile. “Very well,” she said. “You’re not kind.”

“Never.”

“May I call you selfish?”

“That would be going too far.”

“Conceited?”

He took a step in her direction. “You’re pushing your luck, Billie.”

“Arrogant.” She ran around the table, laughing as she put it between them. “Come now, George. You cannot deny arrogant.”

Something devilish rose up within him. Something devilish and hot. “What do I get to call you?”

“Brilliant?”

He moved closer. “How about maddening?”

“Ah, but that’s in the eye of the beholder.”

“Reckless,” he said.

She feinted left when he feinted right. “It’s not recklessness if you know what you’re doing.”

“You fell onto a *roof*,” he reminded her.

She grinned wickedly. “I thought you said I jumped.”

He growled her name and lunged, chasing her as she shrieked, “I was trying to save the cat! I was being noble!”

“I’ll show you noble . . .”

She yelped and jumped back.

Straight into the house of cards.

It did not fall gracefully.

Neither did Billie, to tell the truth. When the dust had settled, she was sitting squarely on the table, the wreckage of Andrew’s masterpiece scattered around like a Chinese firecracker had been lit beneath it.

She looked up and said in a very small voice, “I don’t suppose the two of us can put it back together.”

Mutely, he shook his head.

She swallowed. “I think I might have reinjured my ankle.”

“Badly?”

“No.”

“In that case,” he told her, “I’d advise you to lead with *that* when Andrew returns.”

And of course that was when he walked through the door.

“I hurt my ankle,” Billie all but yelled. “It really hurts.”

George had to turn away. It was the only way to keep from laughing.

Andrew just stared. “Again,” he finally said. “You did it again.”

“It was a very nice house,” she said weakly.

“I suppose it’s a talent,” Andrew said.

“Oh, indeed,” Billie said brightly. “You’re brilliant at it.”

“No, I meant you.”

“Oh.” She swallowed—her pride, most likely—and stretched out a smile. “Well, yes. There’s no point in doing something if you’re not going to do it well, wouldn’t you agree?”

Andrew said nothing. George had the urge to clap his hands in front of his face. Just to make sure he wasn’t sleepwalking.

“I’m truly sorry,” Billie said. “I’ll make it up to you.” She pushed herself off the table and limped her way upright. “Although I don’t really know how.”

“It was my fault,” George said suddenly.
She turned to him. “You don’t need to take the blame.”
He held up his hands in supplication. “I was chasing you.”
That snapped Andrew out of his daze. “You were chasing her?”
Damn. He had not thought that one through. “Not in so many words,”
George said.

Andrew turned to Billie. “He was chasing you?”
She didn’t blush, but her expression turned most sheepish. “I might have
been somewhat provoking . . .”

“Provoking?” George said with a snort. “You?”
“It’s really the cat’s fault,” she returned. “I would never have fallen if my
ankle wasn’t so weak.” She frowned thoughtfully. “I may blame everything
on that mangy beast from now on.”

“What is happening here?” Andrew asked, his face turning slowly from
Billie to George and back again. “Why aren’t you killing each other?”

“The small matter of the gallows,” George murmured.
“Not to mention your mother would be very displeased,” Billie added.
Andrew just stared at them, his mouth slack. “I’m going home,” he finally
said.

Billie giggled.
And George . . . his breath caught. Because he’d heard Billie giggle
before. A thousand times he’d heard her giggle. But this time was different. It
sounded exactly the same, but when the light laugh reached his ears . . .

It was the loveliest sound he’d ever heard.
And quite possibly the most terrifying. Because he had a feeling he knew
what it meant. And if there was one person in this world he was *not* going to
fall in love with, it was Billie Bridgerton.

Chapter 11

Billie wasn't exactly certain what she'd done to her ankle when she crashed into Andrew's house of cards, but it felt only a little bit worse than before, so on the last day before the house party she decided that she was well enough to ride, as long as she did so sidesaddle.

She really didn't have any choice. Honestly, if she didn't get out to the west fields to monitor the progress of the barley crops, she had no idea who would. But dismounting was difficult, which meant she'd had to take a groom with her. Which neither of them enjoyed. The last thing the groom wanted was to inspect barley, and the last thing Billie wanted was to be watched by a groom while she inspected barley.

Her mare was in bad spirits as well, just to round out the cranky triumvirate. It had been a long time since Billie had sat in a sidesaddle, and Argo didn't like it one bit.

Neither did Billie. She had not forgotten how much she hated riding sidesaddle, but she *had* forgotten how much it hurt the next day when one was out of practice. With every step her right hip and thigh groaned with pain. Factor in her ankle, which was still twinging like mad, and it was a wonder she wasn't lurching around the house like a drunken sailor.

Or maybe she was. The servants gave her very odd looks when she made her way down the next morning to break her fast.

She supposed it was for the best that she was too sore to get back in the saddle. Her mother had made it explicitly clear that Billie was to remain at Aubrey Hall throughout the day. There were four Bridgertons currently in residence, she said, and there would be four Bridgertons standing in the drive to greet each and every guest.

And so Billie stood between her mother and Georgiana at one o'clock, when the Duchess of Westborough arrived in her grand coach and four, accompanied by her daughters (one engaged, one not) and niece.

Billie stood between her mother and Georgiana at half two, when Henry Maynard drove up in his racy little curricule with his good friend Sir Reginald McVie.

And she stood between her mother and Georgiana at twenty minutes past three, when Felix and Mary arrived with their neighbors Edward and Niall Berbrooke, who were both of good family and, it just so happened, of marriageable age.

“Finally,” Lord Bridgerton grumbled, stretching a crick from his neck as they waited in their neat little row for Felix and Mary’s carriage to come to a halt, “someone I know.”

“You know the Berbrookes?” Georgiana asked, leaning forward to speak to him past her sister and mother.

“I know Felix and Mary,” he replied. He looked at his wife. “When do the Rokesbys arrive?”

“An hour before supper,” she said without turning her head. The carriage had come to a stop, and, consummate hostess that she was, her eyes were on the door, awaiting her guests.

“Remind me why they’re sleeping over?” he asked.

“Because it will be infinitely more festive.”

Lord Bridgerton frowned, but he very wisely chose not to question her further.

Billie, however, showed no such restraint. “If it were me,” she said, tugging on the sleeve of her printed cotton dress, “I would want to sleep in my own bed.”

“It’s not you,” her mother replied tartly, “and stop fidgeting.”

“I can’t help it. It’s itchy.”

“I think it looks lovely on you,” Georgiana said.

“Thank you,” Billie said, momentarily nonplussed. “I’m not so sure about the front.” She looked down. The bodice draped in a crisscross fashion, rather like a shawl. She’d never worn anything quite like it, although her mother assured her it had been in style for several years.

Was she revealing too much décolletage? She reached for the pin that secured the linen near her waist. It looked like she could adjust it with a little

“Stop it,” her mother hissed.

Billie sighed.

The carriage finally came to a complete stop, and Felix alighted first,

holding out his hand to assist his wife. Mary Maynard (née Rokesby) wore a chintz traveling jacket and shawl that even Billie could tell was the height of fashion. It looked absolutely perfect on her, Billie realized. Mary looked happy and jaunty from her light brown curls right down to the tips of her elegantly shod feet.

“Mary!” Lady Bridgerton gushed, striding forward with outstretched arms. “You are blooming!”

Georgiana elbowed Billie. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

Billie gave her a lopsided grimace and a shrug—code universal for *I-haven’t-a-clue*. Was Mary pregnant? And if so, why on earth did her mother know this before she did?

Georgiana leaned slightly in, whispering out the corner of her mouth. “She doesn’t *look*—”

“Well, if she *is*,” Billie cut in, whispering out the corner of *her* mouth, “she can’t be very far along.”

“Billie!” Mary exclaimed, hurrying over to greet her good friend with a hug.

Billie leaned forward, speaking in a low voice. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

Mary didn’t even pretend to misunderstand. “I don’t know how your mother knows,” she said.

“Did you inform *your* mother?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there’s your answer.”

Mary laughed, her Rokesby-blue eyes crinkling just the way George’s did when he—

Billie blinked. Just one moment . . . What the devil was *that* about? Since when did George have the right to plague her thoughts? Perhaps they were getting on somewhat better than they had done in the past, but still, he was not a welcome distraction.

Mary, she reminded herself. She was talking to Mary. Or rather, Mary was talking to her.

“It is so good to see you,” Mary was saying. She clasped both of Billie’s hands in her own.

Billie felt something warm and tingly behind her eyes. She’d known she was missing Mary, but she hadn’t realized how very *much* until now. “I agree,” she said, working hard to keep the choke of emotion out of her voice.

It wouldn't do to turn into a watering pot in the front drive.

It wouldn't do to turn into a watering pot, period. Goodness, her mother would probably send for the *physician* before the first tear reached her chin. Billie Bridgerton was *not* a crier.

She did not cry. What could be the use of it?

She swallowed, and somehow this reclaimed her equilibrium enough to smile at Mary and say, "Letters just aren't the same."

Mary rolled her eyes. "Especially with *you* as a correspondent."

"What?" Billie's mouth fell open. "That's not true. I am a brilliant letter-writer."

"When you write," Mary retorted.

"I send you a letter every two—"

"Every three."

"—every three weeks," Billie finished, keeping her voice filled with enough outrage to masque the fact that she had changed her story. "Without fail."

"You really should come to visit," Mary said.

"You know I can't," Billie replied. Mary had been inviting her for a visit for over a year, but it was so difficult for Billie to get away. There was always something that needed to be done around the estate. And truly, didn't it make more sense for Mary to come to Kent, where she already knew everyone?

"You *can*," Mary insisted, "you just won't."

"Perhaps in the winter," Billie said, "when there isn't as much to do in the fields."

Mary's brows rose doubtfully.

"I would have visited last winter," Billie insisted, "but there was no point. You had already decided to come home for Christmas."

Mary's dubious expression did not alter in the least, and she gave Billie's hand one final squeeze before turning to Georgiana. "My goodness," she said, "I think you've grown three inches since I last saw you."

"Unlikely," Georgiana replied with a smile. "You were just here in December."

Mary glanced from sister to sister. "I think you're going to be taller than Billie."

"Stop saying that," Billie ordered.

"But it's true." Mary grinned, fully enjoying Billie's scowl. "We are *all*

going to be taller than you.” She turned back toward her husband, who was introducing the Berbrooke brothers to Lord and Lady Bridgerton. “Darling,” she called out, “don’t you think Georgiana has grown tremendously since we last saw her?”

Billie bit back a smile as she watched a flash of utter incomprehension cross Felix’s face before he carefully schooled his features into indulgent affection.

“I have no idea,” he said, “but if you say it, it must be true.”

“I hate when he does that,” Mary said to Billie.

Billie didn’t bother to hide her smile that time.

“Billie,” Felix said as he stepped forward to greet them. “And Georgiana. It is so good to see you both again.”

Billie bobbed a curtsy.

“Allow me to introduce Mr. Niall Berbrooke and Mr. Edward Berbrooke,” Felix continued, motioning to the two sandy-haired gentlemen at his side. “They live just a few miles away from us in Sussex. Niall, Ned, this is Miss Sybilla Bridgerton and Miss Georgiana Bridgerton, childhood friends of Mary’s.”

“Miss Bridgerton,” one of the Berbrookes said, bowing over her hand. “Miss Georgiana.”

The second Berbrooke repeated his brother’s felicitations, then straightened and gave a somewhat eager smile. He reminded her of a puppy, Billie decided, with nothing but endless good cheer.

“Have my parents arrived?” Mary asked.

“Not yet,” Lady Bridgerton told her. “We expect them just before dinner. Your mother preferred to dress at home.”

“And my brothers?”

“Coming with your parents.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Mary said with a bit of grumble, “but you would think Andrew could have ridden ahead to say hello. I haven’t seen him for ages.”

“He’s not riding much right now,” Billie said offhandedly. “His arm, you know.”

“That must be driving him mad.”

“I think it would do, were he not so proficient at milking the injury for all it’s worth.”

Mary laughed and linked her arm through Billie’s. “Let us go inside and

catch up. Oh, you're limping!"

"A silly accident," Billie said with a wave of her hand. "It's nearly healed."

"Well, you must have loads to tell me."

"Actually, I don't," Billie said as they ascended the portico stairs. "Nothing has changed around here. Not really."

Mary gave her a curious look. "Nothing?"

"Other than Andrew being home, it's all just as it ever was." Billie shrugged, wondering if she ought to be disappointed in all the sameness. She supposed she had been spending a little more time with George, but that hardly counted as an event.

"Your mother's not trying to marry you off to the new vicar?" Mary teased.

"We don't have a new vicar, and I believe she's trying to marry me off to Felix's brother." She tipped her head. "Or one of the Berbrookes."

"Henry is practically engaged," Mary said authoritatively, "and you do *not* want to marry one of the Berbrookes. Trust me."

Billie gave her a sideways glance. "Do tell."

"Stop that," Mary admonished. "It's nothing salacious. Or even interesting. They're lovely, both of them, but they're dull as sticks."

"Here, let's go up to my room," Billie said, steering them toward the main staircase. "And you know," she added, mostly to be contrary, "some sticks are actually quite pointy."

"Not the Berbrookes."

"Why did you offer to bring them, then?"

"Your mother begged! She sent me a three-page letter."

"My mother?" Billie echoed.

"Yes. With an addendum from mine."

Billie winced. The collective might of the Ladies Rokesby and Bridgerton was not easily ignored.

"She needed more gentlemen," Mary continued. "I don't think she was anticipating that the Duchess of Westborough would bring both of her daughters *and* her niece. And anyway, Niall and Ned are both very good-natured. They will make lovely husbands for someone." She gave Billie a pointed look. "But not for you."

Billie decided there was no point taking affront. "You don't see me marrying someone good-natured?"

“I don’t see you marrying someone who can barely read his name.”

“Oh, come now.”

“Fine. I exaggerate. But this is important.” Mary stopped in the middle of the upstairs hall, forcing Billie to a halt beside her. “You know I know you better than anyone.”

Billie waited while Mary fixed her with a serious stare. Mary liked to dispense advice. Billie didn’t ordinarily like to receive it, but it had been so long since she’d had the company of her closest friend. Just this once she could be patient. Placid, even.

“Billie, listen to me,” Mary said with an odd urgency. “You cannot treat your future so flippantly. Eventually you are going to have to choose a husband, and you will go mad if you do not marry a man of at least equal intelligence to yourself.”

“That presupposes that I marry anyone.” Or, Billie did not add, that she might actually have a *choice* of husbands.

Mary drew back. “Don’t say such a thing! Of course you will get married. You need only to find the right gentleman.”

Billie rolled her eyes. Mary had long since succumbed to that sickness that seemed to afflict all recently married individuals: the fever to see everyone else blissful and wed. “I’ll probably just marry Andrew,” Billie said with a shrug. “Or Edward.”

Mary stared at her.

“What?” Billie finally asked.

“If you can say it like *that*,” Mary said with hot disbelief, “like you don’t care *which* Rokesby you meet at the altar, you have no business marrying either one of them.”

“Well, I *don’t* care. I love them both.”

“As *brothers*. Goodness, if you’re going to take that view of it, you might as well marry George.”

Billie stopped short. “Don’t be daft.”

She, marry George? It was ludicrous.

“Honestly, Mary,” she said with a stern little hiss to her voice. “That’s not even something to joke about.”

“You said that one Rokesby brother would be as good as another.”

“No, *you* said that. I said *either* Edward or Andrew would do.” Really, she did not understand why Mary was so upset. Marriage to either brother would have the same effect. Billie would become a Rokesby, and she and

Mary would be sisters in truth. Billie thought it sounded rather lovely.

Mary clapped her hand to her forehead and groaned. “You are so unromantic.”

“I don’t necessarily see that as a flaw.”

“No,” Mary grumbled, “you wouldn’t.”

She’d meant it as criticism, but Billie just laughed. “Some of us need to view the world with practicality and sense.”

“But not at the price of your happiness.”

For the longest moment, Billie said nothing. She felt her head tipping slightly to the side, her eyes narrowing with thought as she watched Mary’s face. Mary wanted what was best for her; she understood that. But Mary didn’t know. How could she know?

“Who are you,” Billie asked softly, “to decide what constitutes another person’s happiness?” She made sure to keep her words gentle, her tone without edge. She did not want Mary to feel attacked by the question; she did not *mean* the question as such. But she did want Mary to think about this, to stop for one moment and try to understand that despite their deep friendship, they were fundamentally different people.

Mary looked up with stricken eyes. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t,” Billie assured her. Mary had always longed for love and marriage. She’d pined for Felix since the moment she’d first met him—at the age of twelve! When Billie was twelve all she’d been concerned about was the litter of puppies in the barn and whether she could climb the old oak tree faster than Andrew.

Truth be told, she was still concerned about this. It would be a massive blow if he could make it to the top branch before she could. Not that they’d be conducting a test anytime soon, what with his arm and her ankle. But still, these things were *important*.

Not that Mary would ever see them as such.

“I’m sorry,” Mary said, but her smile was a little too tight. “I’ve no call to be so grave when I’ve only just arrived.”

Billie almost asked her if that meant she had plans for later in the visit. But she didn’t.

Such restraint. When had she developed such maturity?

“Why are you smiling?” Mary asked.

“What? I’m not smiling.”

“Oh, you are.”

And because Mary was her best friend, even when she was trying to tell her how to live her life, Billie laughed and linked their arms back together. “If you must know,” she said, “I was congratulating myself on not making a smart comment at you.”

“Such restraint,” Mary said, echoing Billie’s thoughts precisely.

“I know. It’s so unlike me.” Billie tipped her head toward the end of the hall. “Can we continue on to my bedroom? My foot hurts.”

“Of course. How did you injure it?”

Billie smiled wryly as she resumed walking. “You’re never going to believe who ended up being my hero . . .”

Chapter 12

At dinner that night, it became quickly apparent to George that one side of the table was the “fun” side.

He was not seated on that side.

To his left was Lady Frederica Fortescue-Endicott, who spoke incessantly of her new fiancé, the Earl of Northwick. To his right was Lady Frederica’s younger sister, Lady Alexandra.

Who also spoke incessantly about the Earl of Northwick.

George was not quite sure what to make of this. For Lady Alexandra’s sake, he hoped Northwick had a brother.

Billie was seated directly across from George, not that he could see her over the elaborate fruited epergne that graced the center of table. But he could hear her laughter, rich and deep, inevitably followed by Andrew’s guffaw and then some asinine *bon mot* delivered by the absurdly handsome Sir Reginald McVie.

Sir *Reggie*, as he had instructed everyone to call him.

George disliked him intensely.

Never mind that they had been introduced only one hour earlier; sometimes an hour was all it took. In this case, a minute had been enough. Sir Reggie had sauntered up to George and Billie, who were enjoying a private laugh about something entirely inconsequential (but nonetheless private), and then he’d flashed a smile that was positively blinding.

The man’s teeth were so straight they might have been laid into place with a yardstick. Really, who had teeth like that? It was unnatural.

Then the lout had taken Billie’s hand and kissed it like some French count, proclaiming her a beauty beyond the sea, sand, stars, and skies (in French, no less, despite the loss of alliteration).

It was beyond ridiculous; George had been sure that Billie would burst out laughing. But no, she blushed.

She blushed!

And then she had batted her eyelashes. It was quite possibly the least Billie Bridgerton–like thing he’d ever seen.

All for a set of freakishly straight teeth. And she didn’t even speak French!

Of *course* they had been seated next to each other at dinner. Lady Bridgerton had eyes like an eagle when it came to the marriage prospects of her eldest daughter; George did not doubt she had noticed Sir Reggie flirting with Billie within seconds of the first pearly white grin. If Billie hadn’t been seated next to him earlier that day, she would be by the dinner gong.

With Andrew on Billie’s other side, there was no stopping her. Laughter rang like church bells as *that* side of the table ate, drank, and made merry.

George’s side continued to extoll the many virtues of the Earl of Northwick.

The many, many virtues.

By the time the soup was removed, George was ready to put the man forth for a sainthood. To hear the Ladies Frederica and Alexandra tell it, nothing less would do him justice. The two ladies were regaling him with some nonsense involving Northwick and a parasol he had held for the both of them on a particularly rainy day, and George was just about to comment that it all sounded very crowded, when yet another peal of laughter rang out from the other side of the table.

George glowered, not that Billie could see him. She wouldn’t have seen him even if they didn’t have that damned fruit bowl between them. She was far too busy being the life of the party. The girl was a veritable shining star. Honestly, he wouldn’t have been surprised if she was *literally* sparkling.

And he’d offered to watch out for her.

Please. She was doing quite well on her own.

“What do you suppose they are talking about?” Lady Alexandra queried after a particularly loud burst of merriment.

“Teeth,” George muttered.

“What did you say?”

He turned with a bland smile. “I have no idea.”

“They seem to be enjoying themselves a great deal,” Lady Frederica said with a thoughtful frown.

George shrugged.

“Northie is such a wonderful conversationalist,” she said.

“Is he?” George murmured, stabbing a piece of roasted beef.

“Oh, yes. Surely you know him?”

George nodded absently. Lord Northwick was a few years his senior, but they had crossed paths at both Eton and Cambridge. George couldn’t remember much about him other than his shock of violently blond hair.

“Then you know,” Lady Frederica said with an adoring smile, “he’s perfectly droll.”

“Perfectly,” George echoed.

Lady Alexandra leaned forward. “Are you talking about Lord Northwick?”

“Er, yes,” George replied.

“He is so delightful at a house party,” Lady Alexandra concurred. “I wonder why you did not invite him.”

“Strictly speaking,” George reminded her, “I did not draw up the guest list.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I’d quite forgotten that you are not a member of the family. You seem so at home at Aubrey Hall.”

“The Bridgertons and Rokesbys have long been amiable neighbors,” he told her.

“Miss Sybilla is practically his sister,” Lady Frederica said, leaning forward to keep herself in the conversation.

Billie? His sister? George frowned. That wasn’t right. “I wouldn’t say . . .” he began.

But Lady Alexandra was already talking again. “Lady Mary said as much earlier this evening. She told *the* most amusing tales. I do so adore your sister.”

George had a mouthful of food, so he nodded and hoped she’d take that as a thank-you.

Lady Alexandra leaned forward. “Lady Mary said the lot of you ran wild together as children. It sounded dreadfully exciting.”

“I was a bit older,” he said. “I rarely—”

“—and then it *ran off!*” Andrew chortled from across the table, loudly enough to put a (thankful) halt to George’s conversation with the two Fortescue-Endicott ladies.

Lady Frederica peered at them through the fruit display. “What do you think they are talking about?” she inquired.

“Lord Northwick,” George said firmly.

Her entire face lit up. “Really?”

“But Mr. Rokesby said ‘it,’” Lady Alexandra pointed out. “Surely he would not refer to Northie as an it.”

“I’m sure you misheard,” George lied. “My brother very much admires Lord Northwick.”

“He does?” She leaned forward, far enough to attract her sister’s attention. “Frederica, did you hear that? Lord Kennard said that his brother admires Lord Northwick.”

Lady Frederica blushed prettily.

George wanted to plant his face in his potatoes.

“. . . ungrateful feline!” Billie’s voice wafted over the asparagus terrine. More laughter ensued, followed by: “I was furious!”

George sighed. He never thought he would yearn for Billie Bridgerton, but her smile was bright, her laughter infectious, and he was quite sure that if he had to endure another moment seated between the Ladies Frederica and Alexandra his brain was going to start washing out his ears.

Billie must have caught him moping, because she moved just a bit to the side. “We’re talking about the cat,” she said.

“Yes, I’d gathered.”

She smiled—a rather encouraging and pleasant smile that had the effect of making him feel rather discouraged.

And unpleasant.

“Do you know what she meant?” Lady Alexandra asked. “I believe she said something about a cat.”

“Northie adores cats,” Lady Frederica said.

“I can’t stand them myself,” George said with a renewed sense of affability. The statement wasn’t precisely true, but one couldn’t discount the pleasure to be found in being contrary.

Lady Frederica blinked with surprise. “Everybody likes cats.”

“Not me!”

Both Fortescue-Endicott sisters stared at him in shock. George supposed he couldn’t blame them; his tone had been downright gleeful. But as he was finally starting to enjoy himself, he decided he didn’t care. “I prefer dogs,” he said.

“Well, of course everyone likes dogs,” Lady Frederica said. But she sounded hesitant.

“And badgers,” George said cheerfully, popping a bit of bread into his

mouth.

“Badgers,” she repeated.

“And moles.” He grinned. She was now regarding him with visible unease. George congratulated himself on a job well done. A few more minutes of this, and she would surely think him insane.

He couldn’t recall the last time he’d had so much fun at a formal dinner.

He looked over at Billie, suddenly eager to tell her about his conversation. It was exactly the sort of thing she’d find amusing. They would have such a good laugh over it.

But she was busy with Sir Reginald, who was now gazing at her as if she were a rare creature.

Which she was, George thought violently. She just wasn’t *his* rare creature.

George had a sudden urge to leap across the table and rearrange Sir Reggie’s perfect teeth into something far more abstract.

For the love of God, who was born with teeth like that? The man’s parents had clearly sold their souls to the devil.

“Oh, Lord Kennard,” Lady Alexandra said, “do you plan to observe the ladies’ archery tournament tomorrow?”

“I wasn’t aware there was one,” he replied.

“Oh yes. Frederica and I both plan to take part. We’ve practiced extensively.”

“With Lord Northwick?” he could not help but ask.

“Of course not,” she said. “Why on earth would you think that?”

He shrugged helplessly. Dear God, how much longer would this meal last?

She laid her hand on his arm. “I do hope you will come to watch.”

He glanced down at her hand. It looked so *very* wrong on his sleeve. But he had a feeling she misinterpreted his gesture, because if anything her fingers tightened. He couldn’t help but wonder what had happened to Lord Northwick. God help him if he’d replaced the earl in her affections.

George wanted to shake her off, but there was that damned gentlemanly nature of his, so instead he gave a tight smile and said, “I will of a certain come to watch.”

Lady Frederica leaned forward and beamed. “Lord Northwick very much enjoys observing archery, too.”

“Of course he does,” George said under his breath.

“Did you say something?” Lady Alexandra asked.

“Merely that Miss Bridgerton is a very accomplished archer,” he said. It was the truth, even if that hadn’t been what he’d said. He looked over at Billie, intending to motion to her with his head, but she was already staring at him with a ferocious expression.

He leaned to the right to see her better.

Her mouth tightened.

He cocked his head.

She rolled her eyes and turned back to Sir Reginald.

George blinked. What the hell had that been about?

And honestly, why did he care?

Billie was having a marvelous time. Truly, she wasn’t quite certain just what she’d been so nervous about. Andrew was always an amusing dinner companion, and Sir Reggie was so kind and handsome; he’d put her right at ease even if he had started speaking in French when they had been introduced.

She hadn’t understood a word of it, but she’d figured it must be complimentary, so she’d nodded and smiled, and even blinked a few times the way she’d seen other ladies do when they were trying to act particularly feminine.

No one could say she wasn’t trying her best.

The one fly in the proverbial ointment was George. Or rather George’s predicament. She felt desperately sorry for him.

Lady Alexandra had seemed like a perfectly pleasant sort of lady when they had been introduced in the drive, but the moment she arrived in the drawing room for pre-dinner drinks, the little shrew had latched on to George like a barnacle.

Billie was appalled. She knew the man was rich and handsome and going to be an earl, but did the grasping little wench need to be quite so obvious about it?

Poor George. Was this what he’d had to contend with every time he went to London? Perhaps she ought to have had more compassion for him. At the very least she should have taken a peek into the dining room before the guests filed in to check on the seating arrangement. She could have saved him from a full evening of Lady Alexandra Four-handed-Endicott.

Blergh. She could come up with something better than that.

Formidable . . . For-heaven's-sake . . . For-the-last-time . . .

Fine. She couldn't come up with something better. But really, the woman might as well have had four hands with the way she kept clutching on to George in the drawing room.

At dinner she was even worse. It was difficult to see George across the table with her mother's monstrous fruit epergne blocking the way, but she had a clear view of Lady Alexandra, and it had to be said—the lady was displaying a highly impractical expanse of bosom.

Billie wouldn't have been surprised if she had an entire tea service hiding down there.

And then. And then! She'd put her hand on George's forearm like she *owned* it. Even Billie wouldn't have dared such a familiar gesture in such a formal setting. She leaned in her chair, trying to get a look at George's face. He could not be happy about this.

"Are you all right?"

She turned. Andrew was regarding her with an expression that hovered somewhere between suspicion and concern.

"I'm fine," she said in a clipped voice. "Why?"

"You're about to fall in my lap."

She lurched upright. "Don't be absurd."

"Has Sir Reginald broken wind?" Andrew murmured.

"Andrew!"

He gave her an unrepentant smirk. "It was either that or you've developed a new fondness for me."

She glared at him.

"I do love you, Billie," he drawled, "but not that way."

She rolled her eyes because . . . well, because. Andrew was a wretch. He had always been a wretch. And she didn't love him that way, either.

But he didn't have to be quite so mean-spirited about it.

"What do you think of Lady Alexandra?" she whispered.

"Which one is she?"

"The one who is crawling over your brother," she said impatiently.

"Oh, that one." Andrew sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

"He looks very unhappy."

Andrew tipped his head as he regarded his brother. Unlike Billie, he did not have a gargantuan fruit display to contend with. "I don't know," he mused. "He doesn't look like he minds."

“Are you blind?” Billie hissed.

“Not that I’m aware.”

“He— Oh, never mind. You’re of no use.”

Billie leaned again, this time toward Sir Reggie. He was talking with the woman on his left, so hopefully he wouldn’t notice.

Lady Alexandra’s hand was *still* on George’s arm.

Billie’s jaw clenched. He could not be happy about this. George was a very private person. She looked up, trying to catch a glimpse of his face, but he was saying something to Lady Alexandra, something perfectly pleasant and polite.

He didn’t look the least bit perturbed.

She fumed.

And then he looked up. He must have caught her looking at him because he leaned to his right just far enough to catch her eye.

His brows rose.

She flicked her gaze toward the ceiling and turned back to Sir Reggie, even though he was still speaking to the duchess’s niece.

She waited for a moment, but he seemed in no rush to return his attention to her, so she picked up her fork and knife and cut her meat into ever-tinier pieces.

Maybe George *liked* Lady Alexandra. Maybe he’d court her, and maybe they’d get married and have a flock of little Rokesby babies, all blue-eyed and plump-cheeked.

If that was what George wanted, that was what he should do.

But why did it seem so very wrong? And why did it hurt so much just to think about it?

Chapter 13

By one o'clock the following afternoon, George was remembering why he disliked house parties. Or rather, he was remembering *that* he disliked house parties.

Or maybe he just disliked *this* house party. Between the Northwick-besotted Fortescue-Endicott girls, Lord Reggie of the snow white teeth, and Ned Berbrooke, who had accidentally spilled port all over George's boots the previous night, he was ready to *crawl* back to Crake House.

It was only three miles away. He could do it.

He'd skipped the midday meal—the only way to avoid Lady Alexandra, who seemed to have decided he was the next best thing to Northwick—and now he was in a very bad mood. He was hungry and he was tired, twin demons guaranteed to reduce a grown man's disposition to that of a querulous three-year-old.

The previous night's sleep had been . . .

Unsatisfying.

Yes, that seemed the most appropriate word. Desperately inadequate, but appropriate.

The Bridgertons had put all of the Rokesbys in the family wing, and George had sat in the cushioned chair by his fireplace, listening to the regular, ordinary sounds of a family ending the day—the maids attending the ladies, doors opening and closing . . .

It should have been of no consequence. They were all the same noises one heard at Crake. But somehow, here at Aubrey Hall it felt too intimate, almost as if he were eavesdropping.

With every soft and sleepy sound, his imagination took flight. He knew he couldn't hear Billie moving about; her bedroom was across the hall and three doors down. But it *felt* like he heard her. In the silence of the night he sensed her feet lightly padding across her carpet. He felt the whisper of her

breath as she blew out a candle. And when she settled into her bed, he was sure he could hear the rustling of her sheets.

She'd said she fell asleep immediately—but what then? Was she a restless sleeper? Did she wriggle about, kicking the covers, pushing the sheets to the bottom of the bed with her feet?

Or did she lie still, sweetly on her side with her hands tucked under her cheek?

He'd wager she was a squirmer; this was Billie, after all. She'd spent her entire childhood in constant motion. Why would she sleep any other way? And if she shared a bed with someone . . .

His brandy nightcap turned into three, but when he'd finally laid his head against his pillow, it had taken him hours to fall asleep. And then when he did, he'd dreamed of her.

And the dream . . . oh, the dream.

He shuddered, the memory washing over him anew. If he'd ever thought of Billie as a sister . . .

He certainly didn't now.

It had started in the library, in the moonlit dark, and he didn't know what she'd been wearing—just that it wasn't like anything he'd ever seen her in before. It had to have been a nightgown . . . white and diaphanous. With every breeze it molded to her body, revealing perfectly lush curves designed to fit his hands.

Never mind that they were in the library, and there was no logical reason for a breeze. It was his dream, and it was breezy, and then it didn't matter anyway because when he took her hand and pulled her hard against him they were suddenly in his bedroom. Not the one here at Aubrey Hall but back at Crake, with his mahogany four-poster bed, the mattress large and square, with room for all sorts of reckless abandon.

She didn't say a word, which he had to admit was very unlike her, but then again, it *was* a dream. When she smiled, though, it was pure Billie—wide and free—and when he laid her on the bed, her eyes met his, and it was as if she had been born for that moment.

As if *he* had been born for that moment.

His hands opened the folds of her gown, and she arched beneath him, her perfect breasts thrusting toward him like an offering.

It was mad. It was madness. He shouldn't know what her breasts looked like. He shouldn't even be able to imagine it.

But he did, and in his dream, he worshipped them. He cupped them, squeezed them, pushed them together until that intoxicatingly feminine valley formed between them. Then he bent down and took her nipple between his teeth, teasing and tempting until she moaned with delight.

But it didn't end there. He slid his hands to the junction of her legs and her hips and he pushed her thighs open, his thumbs coming torturously close to her center.

And then he stroked . . . closer . . . closer . . . until he could sense the wet heat of her, and he knew that their joining was inevitable. She would be his, and it would be glorious. His clothes melted away, and he positioned himself at her opening . . .

And woke up.

Bloody goddamn bleeding *bollocks*.

He woke up.

Life was spectacularly unfair.

The following morning was the ladies' archery competition, and if George had felt a bit of irony while watching, surely he could be forgiven. There was Billie with a stiff, pointy thing, and there was he, *still* with a stiff, pointy thing, and it had to be said: only one of them was having any fun.

It had taken a full hour of very icy thoughts before he was able to move from his carefully cross-legged position in the chairs that had been set up at the edge of the field. Every other gentleman had got up at some point to inspect the targets, but not George. He'd smiled, and he'd laughed, and he made up some sort of nonsense about enjoying the sun. Which was ridiculous, because the one spot of blue in the sky was about the size of his thumbnail.

Desperate for a moment of his own company, he made for the library immediately after the tournament. No one in the party struck him as much of a reader; surely he could find some peace and quiet.

Which he did, for all of ten minutes before Billie and Andrew came squabbling through the door.

"George!" Billie exclaimed, limping in his direction. She looked glowingly well-rested.

She never had difficulty falling asleep, George thought irritably. *She* probably dreamed of roses and rainbows.

"Just the person I'd hoped to find," she said with a smile.

"Words to strike terror in his heart," Andrew drawled.

So true, George thought, although not for the reasons Andrew supposed.

“Stop.” Billie scowled at him before turning back to George. “We need you to settle a point.”

“If it’s who can climb a tree faster, it’s Billie,” George said without missing a beat. “If it’s who can shoot with more accuracy, it’s Andrew.”

“It’s neither,” Billie said with a light frown. “It’s got to do with Pall Mall.”

“Then God help us all,” George muttered, getting up and heading for the door. He’d played Pall Mall with his brother and Billie; it was a vicious, bloodthirsty sport involving wooden balls, heavy mallets, and the constant risk of grievous head injury. Definitely not something for Lady Bridgerton’s gentle house party.

“Andrew accused me of cheating,” Billie said.

“When?” George asked, honestly perplexed. As far as he knew, the entire morning had been taken up by the ladies’ archery tournament. (Billie had won, not that anyone named Rokesby or Bridgerton was surprised.)

“Last April,” Billie said.

“And you’re arguing about it now?”

“It’s the principle of the matter,” Andrew said.

George looked at Billie. “Did you cheat?”

“Of course not! I don’t need to cheat to beat Andrew. Edward maybe,” she allowed with a flick of her eyes, “but not Andrew.”

“Uncalled for, Billie,” Andrew scolded.

“But true,” she returned.

“I’m leaving,” George said. Neither was listening, but it seemed only polite to announce his departure. Besides, he wasn’t sure it was a good idea for him to be in the same room as Billie just then. His pulse had already begun a slow, inexorable acceleration and he knew he didn’t want to be near her when it reached its crescendo.

This way lies ruin, his mind was screaming. Miraculously, his legs didn’t put up any resistance, and he made it all the way to the door before Billie said, “Oh, don’t go. It’s just about to get interesting.”

He managed a small but exhausted smile as he turned around. “With you it’s always about to get interesting.”

“Do you think so?” she asked delightedly.

Andrew gave her a look of pure disbelief. “That wasn’t a compliment, Billie.”

Billie looked at George.

“I have no idea what it was,” he admitted.

Billie just chuckled, then jerked her head toward Andrew. “I’m calling him out.”

George knew better—oh, he definitely knew better—but he couldn’t stop himself from turning the rest of the way around to gape at her.

“You’re calling me out?” Andrew repeated.

“Mallets at dawn,” she said with flair. Then she shrugged. “Or this afternoon. I’d rather avoid getting up early, wouldn’t you?”

Andrew raised one brow. “You’d challenge a one-armed man to a game of Pall Mall?”

“I’d challenge *you*.”

He leaned in, blue eyes glittering. “I’ll still beat you, you know.”

“George!” Billie yelled.

Damn it. He’d almost escaped. “Yes?” he murmured, poking his head back through the doorway.

“We need you.”

“No you don’t. You need a nanny. You can barely walk.”

“I can walk perfectly well.” She limped a few steps. “See? I can’t even feel it.”

George looked at Andrew, not that he expected him to exhibit anything remotely approaching sense.

“I have a broken arm,” Andrew said, which George supposed was meant to serve as an explanation. Or an excuse.

“You’re idiots. The both of you.”

“Idiots who need more players,” Billie said. “It doesn’t work with only two.”

Technically that was true. The Pall Mall set was meant to be played with six, although anything over three would do in a pinch. But George had played this scene before; the rest of them were bit players to Andrew and Billie’s tragic, vicious leads. For the two of them, the game was less about winning than it was making sure the other didn’t. George was expected merely to move his ball along in their fray.

“You still don’t have enough players,” George said.

“Georgiana!” Billie yelled.

“Georgiana?” Andrew echoed. “You know your mother doesn’t let her play.”

“For the love of heaven, she hasn’t been ill for years. It’s time we stopped coddling her.”

Georgiana came skidding around the corner. “Stop bellowing, Billie. You’re going to give Mama a palpitation, and then *I’ll* have to be the one to deal with her.”

“We’re playing Pall Mall,” Billie told her.

“Oh. That’s nice. I’ll—” Georgiana’s words tumbled to a halt, and her blue eyes went wide. “Wait, I get to play, too?”

“Of course,” Billie said, almost dismissively. “You’re a Bridgerton.”

“Oh, brilliant!” Georgiana practically leapt into the air. “Can I be orange? No, green. I wish to be green.”

“Anything you want,” Andrew said.

Georgiana turned to George. “Are you playing, as well?”

“I suppose I must.”

“Don’t sound so resigned,” Billie said. “You’ll have a splendid time of it. You know you will.”

“We still need more players,” Andrew said.

“Perhaps Sir Reggie?” Georgiana asked.

“No!” came George’s instant reply.

Three heads swiveled in his direction.

In retrospect, he might have been a bit forceful in his objection.

“He doesn’t strike me as the sort of gentleman to enjoy such a rough-and-tumble game,” George said with a haphazard shrug. He glanced down at his fingernails since he couldn’t possibly look anyone in the eye when he said, “His teeth, you know.”

“His teeth?” Billie echoed.

George didn’t need to see her face to know that she was staring at him as if she were afraid he’d lost his mind.

“I suppose he does have a very elegant smile,” Billie said, apparently prepared to concede the point. “And I suppose we did knock out one of Edward’s teeth that one summer.” She looked over at Andrew. “Do you remember? I think he was six.”

“Precisely,” George said, although in truth he did not recollect the incident. It must have been a milk tooth; Edward was no Sir Reginald McVie, but as far as George knew, his brother’s smile was fully populated.

“We can’t ask Mary,” Billie went on. “She spent the entire morning hunched over a chamber pot.”

“I really didn’t need to know that,” Andrew said.

Billie ignored him. “And besides, Felix would never permit it.”

“Then ask Felix,” George suggested.

“That would be unfair to Mary.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Who cares?”

Billie crossed her arms. “If she can’t play, he shouldn’t, either.”

“Lady Frederica went to the village with her mother and cousin,” Georgiana said. “But I saw Lady Alexandra in the drawing room. She didn’t seem to be doing anything important.”

George was not keen to spend the afternoon listening to more tales of Lord Northwick, but after his vehement refusal of Sir Reginald, he did not think he could reasonably lodge another objection. “Lady Alexandra would make a fine addition to the game,” he said diplomatically. “Provided, of course, that she wishes to play.”

“Oh, she’ll play,” Billie said ominously.

Georgiana looked perplexed.

Billie looked at her sister but jerked her head in George’s direction. “Tell her that Lord Kennard will be among the players. She’ll be here with bells on her toes.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Billie,” George muttered.

Billie let out a self-righteous huff. “She was talking to you all night!”

“She was sitting next to me,” George retorted. “She could hardly have done otherwise.”

“Not true. Felix’s brother was on her left. He’s a perfectly acceptable conversationalist. She could have spoken with him about any number of things.”

Andrew stepped between them. “Are the two of you going to snipe like jealous lovers or are we going to play?”

Billie glared.

George glared.

Andrew looked quite pleased with himself.

“You’re an idiot,” Billie said to him before turning back to Georgiana. “I suppose it will have to be Lady Alexandra. Get her and whomever else you can find. A gentleman if at all possible so we’ve equal numbers.”

Georgiana nodded. “But not Sir Reginald?”

“George is too worried about his teeth.”

Andrew made a choking sound.

Which came to a halt when George elbowed him in the ribs.

“Shall I meet you here?” Georgiana asked.

Billie thought for a moment, then said, “No, it will be quicker if we meet you on the west lawn.” She turned back to George and Andrew. “I’ll see to getting the set pulled out.”

She and Georgiana exited the room, leaving George alone with his younger brother.

“His teeth, eh?” Andrew murmured.

George glowered at him.

Andrew leaned in, just far enough to be annoying. “I’d wager he has very good oral hygiene.”

“Shut up.”

Andrew laughed, then leaned in with what was clearly meant to be an expression of concern. “You’ve got a little something . . .” He motioned to his teeth.

George rolled his eyes and shoved past him.

Andrew hopped to attention, caught up, and then overtook him, tossing a grin over his shoulder as he loped down the hall. “Ladies do love a dazzling smile.”

He was going to kill his brother, George decided as he followed him outside. And he was going to use a mallet.

Chapter 14

Ten minutes later George, Andrew, and Billie were standing on the lawn, watching as a footman plodded toward them, dragging the Pall Mall set behind them.

“I love Pall Mall,” Billie announced, rubbing her hands together in the brisk afternoon air. “This is a brilliant idea.”

“It was your idea,” George pointed out.

“Of course it was,” she said merrily. “Oh, look, here comes Georgiana.”

George shaded his eyes as he peered across the lawn. Sure enough, she was leading Lady Alexandra in their direction. And, if he wasn’t mistaken, one of the Berbrooke brothers.

“Thank you, William,” Billie said as the footman brought the set into place.

He nodded. “Milady.”

“Wait a moment,” Andrew said. “Didn’t we break one of the mallets last year?”

“Father commissioned a new set,” Billie informed him.

“Same colors?”

She shook her head. “We’re not having red this time around.”

George turned to look at her. “Why not?”

“Well,” she stalled, looking slightly sheepish, “we’ve had very bad luck with red. The balls keep ending up in the lake.”

“And you think a different color might rectify the problem?”

“No,” she said, “but I’m hoping yellow will be easier to spot beneath the surface.”

A few moments later, Georgiana and her little band of players arrived on the scene. George took an instinctive step toward Billie, but he was too slow. Lady Alexandra had already taken hold of his sleeve.

“Lord Kennard,” she said. “What a delight it will be to play Pall Mall.

Thank you for inviting me.”

“It was Miss Georgiana, actually,” he said.

She smiled knowingly. “At your behest, I’m sure.”

Billie looked as if she might gag.

“And Lieutenant Rokesby,” Lady Alexandra continued, her hand a tight little claw on George’s arm even as she turned to Andrew. “We hardly had a chance to speak last night.”

Andrew bowed with all due chivalry.

“Are you acquainted with Lord Northwick?” she asked.

George desperately tried to catch his brother’s eye. This was not an avenue of conversation any of them wished to pursue.

Luckily for all, the footman had just pulled the cover off the Pall Mall set, and Billie was taking efficient charge.

“Here we are,” she said, pulling one of the mallets from its position. “Andrew already promised Georgiana the green, so let’s see, Mr. Berbrooke will take blue, Lady Alexandra can have pink, I’ll be yellow, Lieutenant Rokesby will be purple, and Lord Kennard will be black.”

“Can’t I be purple?” Lady Alexandra asked.

Billie looked at her as if she’d asked to have the Magna Carta revised.

“I like purple,” Lady Alexandra said coolly.

Billie’s back stiffened. “Take it up with Lieutenant Rokesby. It makes no difference to me.”

Andrew gave Billie a curious look, then offered his mallet to Lady Alexandra with a gallant bow. “As the lady wishes . . .”

Lady Alexandra nodded graciously.

“Very well,” Billie said with a sniff, “Georgiana is green, Mr. Berbrooke is blue, Lieutenant Rokesby is pink, I’m yellow, Lord Kennard is black, and Lady Alexandra is”—she gave her the side eye—“purple.”

George was coming to realize that Billie *really* did not like Lady Alexandra.

“I’ve never played this before,” Mr. Berbrooke said. He swung his mallet a few times, narrowly missing George’s leg. “It looks like jolly good fun.”

“Right,” Billie said briskly. “The rules are quite simple. The first person to hit his ball through all the wickets in the correct order wins.”

Lady Alexandra looked at the collection of wickets currently hooked onto the set. “How will we know the correct order?”

“Just ask me,” Billie said. “Or Lieutenant Rokesby. We’ve done this a

million times.”

“Which one of you usually wins?” Mr. Berbrooke asked.

“Me,” they both said.

“Neither,” George said firmly. “They rarely manage to finish a game. You’d all do well to watch your feet. This may turn vicious.”

“I can’t wait,” Georgiana said, practically thrumming with excitement. She turned to Lady Alexandra. “You’ve also got to hit the pole at the end. Billie didn’t mention that.”

“She likes to leave out some of the rules,” Andrew said. “So she can penalize you later if you’re winning.”

“That is not true!” Billie protested. “At least half the times I’ve beaten you I’ve done so without cheating.”

“Should you ever play Pall Mall again,” George advised Lady Alexandra, “I would ask for a full recitation of the rules and regulations. Nothing you learn here will be the least bit applicable.”

“I *have* played before, you know,” Lady Alexandra said. “Lord Northwick has a set.”

Georgiana turned to her with a puzzled expression. “I thought Lord Northwick was engaged to your sister.”

“He is,” Lady Alexandra replied.

“Oh. I thought . . .” Georgiana paused, her mouth open for a second or two before she finally settled on, “You speak of him so often.”

“He has no sisters of his own,” Lady Alexandra said crisply. “Naturally, we have become quite devoted.”

“I have a sister,” Mr. Berbrooke piped up.

This was met with a beat of silence, and then Georgiana said, “That’s wonderful.”

“Nellie,” he confirmed. “Short for Eleanor. She’s very tall.”

No one seemed quite to know what to say to that.

“Well then,” Andrew said, breaking the now decidedly awkward moment. “It’s time to set the wickets out.”

“Can’t the footman do it?” Lady Alexandra inquired.

Billie and Andrew both turned on her as if she’d gone mad.

George took pity, stepping forward to murmur, “They can be somewhat particular about the placement.”

Lady Alexandra’s chin rose an inch. “Lord Northwick always says the wickets should be laid out in the shape of a cross.”

“Lord Northwick’s not here,” Billie snapped.

Lady Alexandra gasped.

“Well, he’s not,” Billie protested, looking to the rest of the group for affirmation.

George narrowed his eyes, the visual translation of an elbow in the ribs, and Billie must have realized that she had crossed a line—an absurd line, but a line nonetheless. She was the hostess, and she needed to behave as such.

It was fascinating to watch, though. Billie was a born competitor, and she had never been known for an abundance of patience. And she certainly was not inclined to acknowledge Lady Alexandra’s suggestion. Still, she straightened her shoulders and fixed an almost pleasant smile on her face as she turned back to her guest.

“I think you will like it this way,” she said primly. “And if you don’t, you can tell Lord Northwick all about it, and then you will know for certain that his layout is superior.”

George snorted.

Billie ignored him.

“The wickets,” Andrew reminded everyone.

“George and I will do it,” Billie said, grabbing them from Andrew’s proffered hand.

George looked at her with some indulgence. “Oh we will, will we?”

“Lord Kennard,” she said through clenched teeth, “will you be so kind as to help me set out the wickets?”

He glanced down at her injured ankle. “What, you mean because you cannot walk?”

She gave him an over-sweet smile. “Because I delight in your company.”

He almost laughed.

“Andrew can’t do it,” she went on, “and no one else knows where they go.”

“If we played in the shape of a cross,” Lady Alexandra said to Mr. Berbrooke, “any one of us could set the wickets out.”

Mr. Berbrooke nodded.

“We would start at the nave,” Lady Alexandra instructed, “then move on to the transept and then the altar.”

Mr. Berbrooke looked down at his mallet and frowned. “Doesn’t seem like a very churchy game.”

“It could be,” Lady Alexandra replied.

“But we don’t want it to be,” Billie said sharply.

George grabbed her arm. “The wickets,” he said, pulling her away before the two ladies came to blows.

“I really don’t like that woman,” she grumbled once they were out of earshot.

“Really?” George murmured. “I would never have known.”

“Just help me with the wickets,” she said, turning toward a large oak at the edge of the clearing. “Follow me.”

He watched her for a few steps. She was still limping, but it was different somehow. More awkward. “Did you hurt yourself again?”

“Hmmm? Oh, that.” She let out an irritated snort. “It was the sidesaddle.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She shrugged. “I can’t put my bad foot in a stirrup. So I had to ride sidesaddle.”

“And you needed to ride because . . .”

She looked at him as if he were an idiot. Which he was fairly certain he was not.

“Billie,” he said, grabbing her by the wrist so they were both yanked to a halt, “what was so important that you had to ride with an injured ankle?”

“The barley,” she said plainly.

He must have misheard. “What?”

“Someone had to make sure it was being planted properly,” she said, deftly pulling her hand free.

He was going to kill her. Or rather he *would*, except that she would probably end up doing it herself first. He took a breath, then asked, as patiently as he could, “Isn’t that the job of your steward?”

Her brows pulled together. “I don’t know what you think I do all day when I’m not flitting away at house parties, but I am an extremely busy person.” Something changed in her expression; something George could not quite name, and then she said, “I am a useful person.”

“I can’t imagine anyone would think otherwise,” George said, although he had a feeling he’d thought otherwise, and not too long ago.

“What the devil are you two doing over there?” Andrew bellowed.

“I am going to massacre him,” Billie seethed.

“The wickets,” George said. “Just tell me where you want them.”

Billie separated one from the bunch and held it out. “Over there. Under the tree. But over the root. Make sure you put it over the root. Otherwise it

will be too easy.”

George very nearly saluted her.

When he returned from his task, she was already a ways down the field, jamming another wicket into place. She'd left the rest in a pile, so he leaned down and scooped them up.

She looked up as she secured the wicket. “What have you against Sir Reginald?”

George gritted his teeth. He should have known he wouldn't get off so easily. “Nothing,” he lied. “I simply did not think he would enjoy the game.”

She stood. “You can't know that.”

“He spent the entire archery competition lounging on a lawn chair and complaining of the heat.”

“*You* didn't get up.”

“I was enjoying the sun.” It hadn't been sunny, but he wasn't about to tell her the real reason he'd been stuck in his chair.

“Very well,” Billie acceded, “Sir Reggie is probably not the best candidate for Pall Mall. But I still maintain that we could have done better than Lady Alexandra.”

“I agree.”

“She—” She blinked. “You do?”

“Of course. I had to spend all last night talking with her, as you so eloquently pointed out.”

Billie looked about ready to throw her arms up in frustration. “Then why didn't you say something when Georgiana suggested her?”

“She's not evil, merely annoying.”

Billie muttered something under her breath.

George could not stem the amused smile that spread across his face. “You really don't like her, do you?”

“I really don't.”

He chuckled.

“Stop that.”

“Laughing, you mean?”

She jammed a wicket into the ground. “You're just as bad as I am. One would think Sir Reggie had committed treason with the way you were carrying on.”

Carrying on? George planted his hands on his hips. “That's entirely different.”

She glanced up from her work. "How is that?"

"He is a buffoon."

Billie snorted out a laugh. It was not particularly feminine, but on her it was charming. She leaned toward him, her expression pure dare. "I think you're jealous."

George felt his stomach flip. Surely she didn't realize . . . *No*. These thoughts he'd been having about her . . . temporary madness. Brought on by proximity. That had to be it. He'd spent more time with her in the past week than he had in years. "Don't be ridiculous," he said scornfully.

"I don't know," Billie teased. "All the ladies are flocking to his side. You said yourself he has a handsome smile."

"I *said*," George bit out before realizing he didn't remember precisely what he'd said. Luckily for him, Billie had already interrupted him.

"The only lady who hasn't fallen under his spell is the illustrious Lady Alexandra." She tossed him a look over her shoulder. "Probably because she's so busy trying to gain *your* favor."

"Are *you* jealous?" he countered.

"Please," she scoffed, moving on to the next spot.

He followed, one step behind. "You didn't say no . . ."

"*No*," she said with great emphasis. "Of course I'm not jealous. I think she's touched in the head quite honestly."

"Because she's trying to gain my favor?" he could not help but ask.

She held her hand out for another wicket. "Of course not. That's probably the most sensible thing she's ever done."

He paused. "Why does that sound like an insult?"

"It's not," Billie assured him. "I would never be so ambiguous."

"No, that's true," he murmured. "You insult with pure transparency."

She rolled her eyes before returning to the topic of Lady Alexandra. "I was talking about her obsession with Lord Northwick. He's engaged to her sister, for heaven's sake."

"Ah, that."

"Ah, that," she mimicked, shoving another wicket into the ground. "*What* is wrong with her?"

George was saved from answering by Andrew, who was bellowing their names again, along with a rather vehement exhortation to hurry along.

Billie snorted. "I can't believe he thinks he can beat me with a broken arm."

“You do realize that if you win—”

“When I win.”

“*Should* you win, you will look the worst sort of champion, taking advantage of the weakness of others.”

She looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. “I can barely walk myself.”

“You, Miss Bridgerton, have a convenient grasp on reality.”

She grinned. “Convenient for me, yes.”

He shook his head, smiling despite himself.

“Now then,” she said, lowering her voice even though no one was within earshot, “you’re on my team, are you not?”

George narrowed his eyes. “Since when are there teams?”

“Since today.” She leaned closer. “We must *crush* Andrew.”

“You’re beginning to frighten me, Billie.”

“Don’t be silly, you’re just as competitive as I am.”

“Do you know, I don’t think I am.”

“Of course you are. You just show it differently.”

He thought she might elucidate, but of course she did not.

“You don’t want Andrew to win, do you?” she asked.

“I’m not certain how much I care.”

She drew back.

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. She looked so affronted. “No, of course I don’t want him to win,” he said. “He’s my brother. But at the same time, I’m not sure I feel the need to resort to espionage to ensure the outcome.”

She stared at him with heavy, disappointed eyes.

“Oh, fine,” he gave in. “Who’s on Andrew’s team, then?”

She brightened up immediately. “No one. That’s the beauty of it. He won’t know that we’ve formed an alliance.”

“There is no way this ends well,” he said, sending the words out to the world at large.

He was fairly certain the world was not listening.

Billie set the last wicket into place. “This one’s evil,” she told him. “Overshoot and you’re in the rosebushes.”

“I shall take that under advisement.”

“Do.” She smiled, and his breath caught. No one smiled like Billie. No one ever had. He’d known this for years and yet . . . it was only now . . .

He indulged in a mental curse. This had to be the most inconvenient attraction in the history of man. *Billie Bridgerton*, for God’s sake. She was

everything he'd never wanted in a woman. She was headstrong, stupidly reckless, and if she'd ever had a mysterious, feminine moment in her life, he'd never seen it.

And yet . . .

He swallowed.

He wanted her. He wanted her like he'd never wanted anything in his life. He wanted her smile, and he wanted it exclusively. He wanted her in his arms, beneath his body . . . because somehow he knew that in his bed, she would be everything mysterious and feminine.

He also knew that every single one of these delightful activities required that he marry her, which was so patently ludicrous that—

“Oh, for God's sake,” Billie muttered.

George snapped back to attention.

“Andrew's coming over,” she said. “Hold your horses!” she bellowed. “I swear,” she said to George, “he is so impatient.”

“Said the—”

“*Don't* call me a kettle.” She started marching back to the beginning of the course. As best as she could; she really did look ridiculous with her two-part limp.

He waited for a moment, grinning at her back. “Are you sure you don't want the black mallet?”

“I hate you!” she called.

He couldn't help but smile. It was quite the merriest declaration of hate he'd ever heard.

“I hate you, too,” he murmured.

But he didn't mean it, either.

Chapter 15

Billie was humming quite happily by the time she reached the beginning of the Pall Mall course. She was in a remarkably cheerful mood, all things considered. Andrew was still being abominably impatient, and Lady Alexandra was still the most awful person in the history of the world, but none of that seemed to matter.

She peeked over her shoulder at George. He'd been following her the whole way, trading insults with a wolfish smile.

"What are you so happy about?" Andrew demanded.

She smiled enigmatically. Let him stew for a bit. Besides, she wasn't sure *why* she was so happy. She just was.

"Who plays first?" Lady Alexandra asked.

Billie opened her mouth to reply, but Andrew beat her to it.

"We usually play youngest to oldest," he said, "but it does seem somewhat rude to inquire . . ."

"I am certainly first, then," Georgiana announced, plopping the green ball down near the starting stick. "No question about it."

"I should think I am second," Lady Alexandra said, sending a pitying glance over at Billie.

Billie ignored her. "Mr. Berbrooke, might we inquire as to your age?"

"What? Oh, I'm twenty-five." He smiled broadly. He did that a lot. "Quarter of a century, you know."

"Very well, then," Billie said, "the order of play shall be Georgiana, Lady Alexandra . . . *we assume*, Andrew, me, Mr. Berbrooke, and George."

"Don't you mean Lord Kennard?" Lady Alexandra asked.

"No, I'm quite sure I mean George," Billie snipped. Good God but that woman grated on her.

"I rather like playing with the black ball," George said, smoothly changing the subject. But Billie had been watching him; she couldn't be

positive, but she *thought* she'd seen him hiding a smile.

Good.

"It's a very manly color," Lady Alexandra confirmed.

Billie nearly gagged.

"It's the color of death," Andrew said, rolling his eyes.

"The Mallet of Death," George said thoughtfully. He swung it back and forth a few times, like a macabre pendulum. "It has quite a ring to it."

Andrew snorted.

"You laugh," George dared, "but you know you want it."

Billie rang out with laughter that only grew in volume when Andrew leveled a peevish glare in her direction. "Oh, come now, Andrew, you know it's the truth," she said.

Georgiana looked up from her position at the starting pole. "Who would want the Mallet of Peonies and Petunias when one could have the Mallet of Death?" she put in, tipping her head toward Andrew's pink equipment.

Billie smiled approvingly. When had her sister got so witty?

"My peonies and petunias shall triumph," Andrew said with a wiggle of his brows. "Just you watch."

"Your peonies and petunias are missing a vital petal," Billie countered, motioning toward his injured arm.

"I don't think I know what we're talking about," Mr. Berbrooke admitted.

"It's just silly fun," Georgiana told him as she readied for her first swing. "Billie and Andrew love to tease one another. They always have." She gave her ball a whack, and it shot through the two starting wickets. It didn't go much farther but she didn't seem to mind.

Lady Alexandra stepped up, setting her ball into place. "Lieutenant Rokesby plays after me, yes?" she confirmed. She glanced up at Billie with a deceptively placid expression. "I did not realize that you were older than he is, Miss Bridgerton."

"I am older than a great many people," Billie said coolly.

Lady Alexandra sniffed and slammed her mallet against her ball, sending it hurtling across the lawn.

"Well done!" Mr. Berbrooke cheered. "I say, you *have* played this before."

Lady Alexandra smiled modestly. "As I mentioned, Lord Northwick has a set."

"And he plays in the shape of a holy cross," Billie said under her breath.

George elbowed her.

“My turn,” Andrew announced.

“Petunias ahoy!” Billie said jauntily.

Beside her she heard George chuckle. It was ridiculously satisfying, making him laugh.

Andrew ignored her completely. He dropped the pink ball, then nudged it into place with his foot.

“I still don’t understand how you’re going to play with a broken arm,” Georgiana said.

“Watch and learn, my dear girl,” he murmured. And then, after several practice swings—one of which included a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree rotation—he whacked his ball rather impressively through the starting wickets and across the lawn.

“Almost as far as Lady Alexandra,” Georgiana said admiringly.

“I do have a broken arm,” he demurred.

Billie walked to the starting spot and set down her ball. “How did that happen again?” she asked innocently.

“Shark attack,” he said without missing a beat.

“No!” Lady Alexandra gasped.

“A shark?” Mr. Berbrooke said. “Isn’t that one of those toothy fish things?”

“Extremely toothy,” Andrew confirmed.

“I shouldn’t like to come across one myself,” Mr. Berbrooke said.

“Has Lord Northwick ever been bitten by a shark?” Billie asked sweetly.

George made a choking sound.

Lady Alexandra’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t say that he has.”

“Pity.” Billie smacked her mallet against her ball with thundering force. It went flying across the lawn, well past the others.

“Well done!” Mr. Berbrooke again exclaimed. “Jolly good at this, you are, Miss Bridgerton.”

It was impossible to remain unmoved in the face of his relentless good cheer. Billie offered him a friendly smile as she said, “I’ve played quite a bit over the years.”

“She often cheats,” Andrew said in passing.

“Only with you.”

“I suppose I’d better have a go,” Mr. Berbrooke said, crouching down to set the blue ball next to the starting pole.

George took a cautionary step back.

Mr. Berbrooke frowned down at the ball, testing out his mallet a few times before finally swinging. The ball went flying, but unfortunately so did one of the wickets.

“Oh! Terribly sorry,” he said.

“It’s no trouble,” Georgiana said. “We can put it back into place.”

The course was reset, and George took his turn. His black ball ended up somewhere between Lady Alexandra and Billie.

“Mallet of Death indeed,” Andrew mocked.

“It’s a strategic sort of assassination,” George replied with an enigmatic smile. “I’m taking the longitudinal view.”

“My turn!” Georgiana called out. She didn’t have far to walk to reach her ball. This time she hit it much harder, and it went sailing across the field toward the next wicket, stopping about five yards short of its destination.

“Well done!” Mr. Berbrooke exclaimed.

Georgiana beamed. “Thank you. I do believe I might be getting the hang of this.”

“By the end of the game you shall be trouncing us all,” he pronounced.

Lady Alexandra was already in place near the purple ball. She took nearly a minute to adjust her aim, then gave it a careful tap. The ball rolled forward, stopping directly in front of the wicket.

Billie made a noise deep in her throat. Lady Alexandra was actually quite skilled.

“Did you just growl?” George asked.

She nearly jumped. She hadn’t realized he was so close. He was standing almost right behind her, and she could not see him unless she turned her head away from the play.

But she could feel him. He might not be touching her, but he was so close . . . Her skin tingled, and she could feel her heart beating, low and insistent in her chest.

“I have to ask,” he said, his voice intoxicatingly close to her ear, “how exactly are we meant to work as a team?”

“I’m not sure,” Billie admitted, watching Andrew take his turn. “I expect that it will become obvious as we go along.”

“Your turn, Billie!” Andrew yelled.

“Excuse me,” Billie said to George, suddenly eager to put some space between them. She felt almost light-headed when he was standing so close.

“What are you going to do, Billie?” Georgiana asked as she approached the ball.

Billie frowned. She wasn’t far from the wicket, but Lady Alexandra’s purple ball was squarely in her way.

“A difficult shot,” Andrew said.

“Shut up.”

“You could use blunt force.” He looked up at the crowd. “Her usual *modus operandi*.” His voice dropped to a confidential undertone. “In Pall Mall and in life.”

Billie briefly considered giving up the game right then and there and slamming the ball toward his feet.

“Wouldn’t that put Lady Alexandra through the wicket?” Georgiana asked.

Andrew shrugged as if to say—*C’est la vie*.

Billie focused on her ball.

“Or she could be patient,” Andrew continued, “and queue up for the wicket after Lady Alexandra. But we all know that’s not like her.”

Billie made a noise. This time it was definitely a growl.

“A third option—”

“Andrew!” she ground out.

He grinned.

Billie lined up her mallet. There was no way to get through the wicket without knocking Lady Alexandra through, but if she edged it on the side . . .

She let fly.

Billie’s yellow ball careened toward the wicket and smacked the purple one left of center. They all watched as Lady Alexandra’s ball rolled to the right, settling into position at such an angle that she couldn’t possibly hope to make it through the wicket on the next turn.

Billie’s ball now sat almost precisely where Lady Alexandra’s had been.

“You did that on purpose!” Lady Alexandra accused.

“Of course I did.” Billie looked at her disparagingly. Honestly, what had she expected? “That’s how one plays.”

“That’s not how *I* play.”

“Well, we’re not on a cross,” Billie snapped, losing patience. Gad, the woman was awful.

Someone made a choking sound.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Lady Alexandra demanded.

“I think,” Mr. Berbrooke said thoughtfully, “that she means that she would play more piously if the game were a religious endeavor. Which I don’t think it is.”

Billie gave him an approving glance. Maybe he was cleverer than he seemed.

“Lord Kennard,” Lady Alexandra said, turning to George. “Surely you do not approve of such underhanded tactics.”

George gave a shrug. “It’s how they play, I’m afraid.”

“But not how *you* play,” Lady Alexandra persisted.

Billie gave him a stare, waiting for his answer.

He did not disappoint. “It’s how I play when I play with them.”

Lady Alexandra drew back with a huff.

“Don’t worry,” Georgiana said, jumping into the breach. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

“It’s not in my nature,” Lady Alexandra sniffed.

“It’s in everyone’s nature,” Andrew barked. “Whose turn is it?”

Mr. Berbrooke gave a jump. “Oh, mine I think.” He walked back to his ball. “Am I allowed to aim for Miss Bridgerton?”

“Absolutely,” Andrew replied, “but you might want to—”

Mr. Berbrooke whacked his ball without waiting for the rest of Andrew’s instructions, which surely would have been *not* to hit her ball dead-on, which was exactly what he did.

The yellow ball went through the wicket and beyond, making it an additional three feet before coming to a stop. The blue ball also rolled through the wicket, but, having transferred its force to the yellow ball, it came to a stop only directly on the other side.

“Well done, Mr. Berbrooke!” Billie cheered.

He turned to her with a wide smile. “Thank you!”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Lady Alexandra snapped. “She doesn’t mean it. She’s only happy you knocked *her* through the wicket.”

“I take everything back,” Billie murmured to George. “Forget Andrew. It’s *her* we must crush.”

Mr. Berbrooke appealed to the rest of the crowd. “Miss Bridgerton would have gone through on the next turn, anyway, wouldn’t she?”

“I would,” Billie confirmed. “You really didn’t set me too far ahead, I promise.”

“And you got yourself through the wicket,” Georgiana added. “That puts

you in second place.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Mr. Berbrooke said, looking inordinately pleased with this development.

“*And*,” Billie added with great flair, “look how you’re blocking everyone else. Well done, you.”

Lady Alexandra let out a loud huff. “Whose turn is it?”

“Mine, I believe,” George said smoothly.

Billie smiled to herself. She loved the way he said so much with nothing but a polite murmur. Lady Alexandra would hear a gentleman making a casual comment, but Billie knew him better. She knew him better than that pompous duke’s daughter ever would.

She heard his smile. He was amused by the entire exchange, even if he was too well-bred to show it.

She heard his salute. Billie had won this round; he was congratulating her.

And she heard his gentle scolding, a warning of sorts. He was cautioning her not to carry this too far.

Which she probably would. He knew her every bit as well as she knew him.

“Take your turn, George,” Andrew said.

Billie watched as George stepped forward and set up his play. He squinted as he aimed. It was kind of adorable.

What a thought. George Rokesby, adorable? It was just the most ridiculous thing.

She let out a little chuckle, just as George hit his ball. It was a good shot, landing him directly in front of the wicket.

“Oh, my goodness,” Georgiana said, blinking at the field. “Now we’ll never get through.”

She was right. The black and blue balls were mere inches apart, flanking both sides of the wicket. Anyone who attempted the wicket would just add to the jam.

George stepped back toward Billie, clearing the way for the next few players. He leaned toward her, his mouth drawing close to her ear. “Were you laughing at me?” he murmured.

“Just a little bit,” she replied, watching Georgiana trying to figure out her shot.

“Why?”

Her lips parted before she realized she couldn't possibly give him an honest reply. She turned to look at him, and again he was closer than she'd expected, closer than he ought to have dared.

She was suddenly *aware*.

Of his breath, warm across her skin.

Of his eyes, so blue and so magnetically fastened upon her own.

Of his lips, fine, full, and carrying a hint of a smile.

Of *him*. Simply of him.

She whispered his name.

He cocked his head to the side in question, and she realized she had no idea why she'd beckoned, just that there was something so right about standing here with him, and when he looked at her like that, like he thought she was remarkable, she *felt* remarkable.

She felt beautiful.

She knew it couldn't be true, because he'd never thought of her that way. And she didn't want him to.

Or did she?

She gasped.

"Something wrong?" he murmured.

She shook her head. *Everything* was wrong.

"Billie?"

She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to kiss *George*. She'd reached the age of three-and-twenty without wanting to even so much as flirt with a gentleman and now she wanted *George Rokesby*?

Oh, this was wrong. This was very, very wrong. This was panic-inducing, world-flipping, heart-stopping wrong.

"Billie, is something wrong?"

She snapped to attention, then remembered to breathe. "Nothing," she said, rather too brightly. "Nothing at all."

But what would he do? How would he react if she marched up to him, grabbed him by the back of his head, and dragged his mouth down to hers?

He'd tell her she was raving mad, that's what he'd do. To say nothing of the four other Pall Mall players not twenty yards away.

But what if no one else were here? What if the rest of the world fell away, and there was no one to witness her insanity? Would she do it?

And would he kiss her back?

"Billie? *Billie*?"

She turned, dazed, toward the sound of his voice.

“Billie, what is wrong with you?”

She blinked, bringing his face into focus. He looked concerned. She almost laughed. He ought to be concerned.

“Billie . . .”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “Really. It’s . . . ah . . . are you warm?” She fanned herself with her hand. “I’m very warm.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. It wasn’t the least bit warm.

“I think it’s my turn!” she blurted.

She had no idea if it was her turn.

“No,” George said, “Andrew’s still going. I daresay Lady Alexandra is in for trouble.”

“Is she,” she murmured, her thoughts still on her imaginary kiss.

“Damn it, Billie, now I know something is wrong.” He scowled. “I thought you wanted to crush her.”

“I do,” she said, slowly regaining possession of her brain. Dear heavens, she could not let herself get so discomfited. George wasn’t stupid. If she descended into idiocy every time he looked at her he was going to realize that something was amiss. And if he realized that she might possibly be just a little bit *infatuated* . . .

No. He could never know.

“Your turn, Billie!” Andrew bellowed.

“Right,” she said. “Right, right, right.” She looked over at George without actually looking at him. “Excuse me.” She hurried over to her ball, gave the field a cursory examination, and whacked it toward the next wicket.

“I do believe you’ve overshot,” Lady Alexandra said, sidling up next to her.

Billie forced a smile, trying to look enigmatic.

“Watch out!” someone yelled.

She jumped back just before the blue ball slammed into her toes. Lady Alexandra was equally nimble, and they both watched as Mr. Berbrooke’s ball settled a few feet away from the wicket.

“I suppose it would serve us both right if that idiot won the game,” Lady Alexandra said.

Billie stared at her in surprise. It was one thing to trade insults with her; she could certainly give as good as she got. But to disparage Mr. Berbrooke, who was quite possibly the most genial man she’d ever met . . .

Honestly, the woman was a monster.

Billie glanced back up the course. The purple ball was still firmly fixed behind the first wicket. "It's almost your turn," she said sweetly.

Lady Alexandra narrowed her eyes and made a surprisingly unpleasant sound before stalking off.

"What did you say to her?" George asked a moment later. He'd just taken his turn and was presently well-situated to take the second wicket.

"She is a terrible person," Billie muttered.

"Not what I asked," George said, glancing back at the lady in question, "but probably answer enough."

"She— Oh, never mind." Billie gave her head a shake. "She's not worth my breath."

"Certainly not," George agreed.

Billie's heart did a flip at the compliment, and she turned. "George, have you—" She frowned, cocking her head to the side. "Is that Felix coming toward us?"

George shaded his eyes as he peered in the direction she was pointing. "I believe so, yes."

"He's moving very quickly. I hope nothing is amiss."

They watched as Felix approached Andrew, who was closer than they were to the house. They spoke for a few moments and then Andrew took off at a full sprint.

"Something's wrong," George said. Mallet still in hand, he started walking toward Felix, picking up speed with every step.

Billie hurried after him as best she could, half-limping, half-hopping, the rest of their Pall Mall equipment forgotten on the lawn. Frustrated with her lack of speed, she hiked up her skirts and just ran, pain be damned. She caught up with George moments after he reached Felix.

"There was a messenger," Felix was saying.

George's eyes searched his face. "Edward?"

Billie's hand flew to her mouth. *Not Edward. Oh, please, not Edward.*

Felix nodded grimly. "He's gone missing."

Chapter 16

George was already halfway to Aubrey Hall before he realized that Billie was scurrying alongside him, forced to run just to keep up with his long, swift stride.

Running. She was running.

On her ankle.

He stopped short. “What are you—”

But then it occurred to him, without even pausing for thought. This was Billie. Of course she was going to run on her injured ankle. She was headstrong. She was reckless.

She *cared*.

He did not say another word. He simply scooped her into his arms and continued on toward the house, his pace only fractionally slower than before.

“You didn’t have to carry me,” she said.

He heard the pain in her voice. “Yes,” he said. “I did.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, her words melting into his shirt.

But he couldn’t respond. He was beyond words now, at least beyond meaningless platitudes. He didn’t need to say anything for Billie to know that he’d heard her. She would understand. She would know that his head was somewhere else, somewhere far beyond *please* and *you’re welcome*.

“They’re in the private drawing room,” Felix said when they reached the house. George could only assume that *they* meant the rest of his family. And maybe the Bridgertons, as well.

They were family, too, he realized. They’d always been family.

When he reached the drawing room, the sight that awaited him was one to make any grown man blanch. His mother was on the sofa, sobbing in Lady Bridgerton’s arms. Andrew looked to be in shock. And his father . . .

His father was crying.

Lord Manston stood removed from the rest of the group, not quite facing

them but not turned entirely away. His arms were sticks at his sides, and his eyes were squeezed tightly shut, as if that might possibly halt the slow trickle of tears down his cheeks. As if maybe, if he could not see the world around him, then none of this would have happened.

George had never seen his father cry. He had not imagined it even possible. He tried not to stare, but the sight was so stunning, so soul-altering, that he could not quite look away.

His father was The Earl of Manston, solid and stern. Since George was a child he had led the Rokesby family with a firm but fair hand. He was a pillar; he was strength. He was unquestionably in charge. He treated his children with scrupulous fairness, which occasionally meant that no one was satisfied with his judgments, but he was always obeyed.

In his father George saw what it meant to lead a family. And in his father's tears, he saw his own future.

Soon, it would be time for George to lead.

"Dear heavens," Lady Bridgerton exclaimed, finally noticing them in the doorway. "What happened to Billie?"

George just stared for a moment. He'd forgotten he was holding her. "Here," he said, setting Billie down near her mother. He looked around the room. He didn't know to whom he should apply for information. Where was the messenger? Was he even still here?

"George," he heard Felix say. He looked up and saw his friend holding out a sheet of paper. Wordlessly, he took it.

To the Earl of Manston,

I regret to inform you that Captain the Hon. Edward Rokesby went missing on 22 March 1779 in Connecticut Colony. We are making every effort to recover him safely.

God bless and Godspeed,

Brigadier General Geo. Garth

"Missing," George said, looking helplessly around the room. "What does that even mean?"

No one had an answer.

George stared down at the paper in his hands, his eyes taking in every last loop of the script. The message was spectacular in its lack of information. Why was Edward in Connecticut Colony? The last they'd heard he was in

New York Town, boarded at a loyalist tavern while keeping an eye on General Washington's troops across the Hudson River.

"If he's missing . . ." he said, thinking out loud. "They have to know."

"Know what?" Billie asked. She was looking up at him from her position on the sofa, probably the only person close enough to hear his words.

He shook his head, still trying to make sense of it. From the (admittedly sparse) wording of the missive, it seemed that the army was certain that Edward was still alive. Which meant that the general had at least some idea where he was.

If that were the case, why didn't he just say so?

George raked his fingers through his hair, the ball of his hand rubbing hard against his forehead. "How can a decorated soldier go missing?" he asked, turning back to the rest of the room. "Was he kidnapped? Is that what they are trying to tell us?"

"I'm not sure they know," Felix said quietly.

"Oh, they bloody well know," George nearly spat. "They just don't want —"

But Andrew cut him off. "It's not like here," he said, his voice hollow and dull.

George shot him an irritated glance. "I know, but what—"

"It's not like here," Andrew said again, this time with rising anger. "The villages are far apart. The farms don't even border each other. There are giant swaths of land that nobody owns."

Everyone stared at him.

George stepped closer, trying to block his mother's view of Andrew's tortured face. "This is not the time," he said in a harsh whisper. His brother might be in shock, but so were they all. It was time for Andrew to grow up and bloody well take hold of his emotions before he shattered what little composure remained in the room.

But Andrew's tongue remained loose and indiscreet. "It would be easy to go missing there."

"You haven't been there," George snapped.

"I've heard."

"You've *heard*."

"Stop," someone said. "Stop it now."

The two men were now nearly nose to nose.

"There are men on my ship who fought in the colonies," Andrew bit off.

“Oh, and *that’s* going to help us recover Edward,” George practically spat.

“I know more about it than you do.”

George nearly flinched. He hated this. He hated this so much. The impotence. The worthlessness. He’d been outside playing bloody Pall Mall and his brother was missing in some godforsaken colonial wilderness.

“I am still your older brother,” he hissed, “and I will be head of this family—”

“Well, you’re not now.”

He might as well have been. George cast a fleeting glance at his father, who had not said a word.

“Oh, that was subtle,” Andrew jeered.

“Shut up. Just shut—”

“Stop!” Hands came between them and forcibly pushed them apart, and when George finally looked down he realized they belonged to Billie.

“This isn’t helping,” she said, practically shoving Andrew into a chair.

George blinked, trying to regain his equilibrium. He didn’t know why he was yelling at Andrew. He looked at Billie, still standing between them like a tiny warrior. “You shouldn’t be on that foot,” he said.

Her mouth fell open. “*That’s* what you want to say?”

“You’ve probably reinjured it.”

She stared at him. George knew he sounded a fool, but her ankle was the one bloody thing he actually could do something about.

“You should sit down,” she said softly.

He shook his head. He didn’t want to sit down. He wanted to act, to *do* something, anything that might bring his brother safely home. But he was tied here, he’d always been tied here, to this land, to these people.

“I can go,” Andrew choked out.

They all turned to look at him. He was still in the chair that Billie had forced him into. He looked terrible. Thunderstruck. Andrew looked, George had a feeling, rather like he himself felt.

But with one massive difference. Andrew at least believed that he could help.

“Go where?” someone finally asked.

“To the colonies.” Andrew looked up, the bleak desperation in his face slowly giving way to hard determination. “I will ask to be assigned to a different ship. There’s probably one leaving in the next month.”

“No,” Lady Manston cried. She sounded like a wounded animal. She sounded like nothing George had ever heard.

Andrew rose to his feet. “Mother—”

“No,” she said again, this time with fortitude as she pulled herself from Lady Bridgerton’s comforting arms. “I will not permit it. I won’t lose another son.”

Andrew stood stiffly, looking more like a soldier than George had ever seen him. “It’s no more dangerous than serving where I do now.”

George closed his eyes. *Wrong thing to say, Andrew.*

“You can’t,” Lady Manston said, struggling to her feet. “You can’t.”

Her voice began to break again, and George silently cursed Andrew for his lack of tact. He stepped forward. “Mother . . .”

“He can’t,” she choked out, her tortured eyes coming to rest on George’s face. “You must tell him . . . he can’t.”

George pulled his mother into his arms, meeting Andrew’s eyes over her head before murmuring, “We can discuss it later.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I think you should lie down.”

“We should go home,” Lord Manston said.

They all turned. It was the first he had spoken since the terrible message had been delivered.

“We need to be at home,” he said.

It was Billie who sprang into action. “Of course,” she said, going quickly to his side. “You will be more comfortable there.” She looked over at George. “The last thing you need is this house party.”

George nearly groaned. He’d forgot all about the other guests. The thought of having to actually converse with any of them was excruciating. There would be questions, and condolences, never mind that none of them knew the first thing about Edward.

God, it was all so insignificant. This. The party. Everything but the people in this room.

He looked at Billie. She was still watching him, concern evident in every line of her face. “Has anyone told Mary?” she asked.

“I will do so now,” Felix said. “We will join you at Crake, if that suits. I’m sure she will wish to be with her family. We have no need to go back to Sussex immediately.”

“What will we do?” Lady Manston said in a lost voice.

George looked to his father. It was his right to decide.

But the earl looked lost. He'd said they should go home; apparently that was all he could manage.

George turned back to the rest of the room and took a breath. "We will take a moment," he said firmly. "We will pause to collect ourselves and decide how best to proceed."

Andrew opened his mouth to speak, but George had had enough. With a hard stare, he added, "Time is of the essence, but we are too far removed from the military theater for one day to make a difference."

"He's right," Billie said.

Several pairs of eyes turned to her in surprise, George's included.

"None of us is in a state to make a proper decision just now." She turned to George. "Go home. Be with your family. I will call tomorrow to see how I may help."

"But what can you do?" Lady Bridgerton asked.

Billie looked at her with quiet, steely grace. "Anything that is required."

George swallowed, surprised by the rush of emotion behind his eyes. His brother was missing; his father was shattered, and *now* he thought he might cry?

He ought to tell her that they did not need help, that her offer was appreciated but unnecessary.

That was the polite thing to do. It was what he would have said, to anyone else.

But to Billie he said, "Thank you."

Billie drove herself to Crake House the following day, taking a simple one-horse buggy. She wasn't sure how her mother had managed it, but the house party had been cut short by several days, and everyone had either left or was planning to do so by the following morning.

It had taken her a ridiculous amount of time to decide what to wear. Breeches were most certainly out. Despite what her mother thought, Billie did know how and when to dress appropriately, and she would never don her work clothes for a social call.

But this was no ordinary social call. Bright colors would not do. But she could not wear black. Or lavender or gray or anything that even hinted of mourning. Edward was *not* dead, she told herself fiercely.

In the end she settled on a comfortable day dress she'd got the year

before. Her mother had picked out the pattern—a springlike floral with greens and pinks and oranges set against cream muslin—but Billie had loved it from the first. It made her think of a garden on a cloudy day, which somehow seemed exactly right for calling upon the Rokesbys.

Crake was quiet when she arrived. It felt wrong. It was an enormous house; like Aubrey Hall, one could theoretically go days without seeing another member of the family. But even so, it always seemed vibrant, alive. Some Rokesby or another was always about, ever happy, ever busy.

Crake House was huge, but it was a home.

Right now, however, it felt subdued. Even the servants, who normally worked with diligence and discretion, were quieter than usual. No one smiled, no one spoke.

It was almost heartbreaking.

Billie was directed to the sitting room, but before she exited the hall George appeared, obviously having been alerted to her arrival.

“Billie,” he said, bowing his head in greeting. “It is good to see you.”

Her first impulse was to ask if there had been any news, but of course there would not be. There would be no swift rider, down from London with a report. Edward was far too far away. It would likely be months before they learned his fate.

“How is your mother?” she asked.

He smiled sadly. “As well as can be expected.”

Billie nodded, following him into the sitting room. “And your father?”

George paused, but he did not turn to face her. “He sits in his study and stares out the window.”

Billie swallowed, her heart breaking at George’s bleak posture. She did not need to see his face to know his pain. He loved Edward, just as she did. Just as they all did.

“He is useless,” George said.

Billie’s lips parted in surprise at such harsh words, but then she realized that George had not meant them as scorn.

“He is incapacitated,” he clarified. “The grief . . .”

“I don’t think any of us knows how we will react to a crisis until we are forced into one.”

He turned, one corner of his mouth tipping up. “When did you grow so wise?”

“It isn’t wisdom to repeat platitudes.”

“It is wisdom to know which ones bear repeating.”

To her great surprise, Billie felt a bubble of humor rising within. “You are determined to compliment me.”

“It’s the only bloody bright spot in the day,” George muttered.

It was the sort of comment that would normally make her heart leap, but like the rest of them, she was too blunted by pain and worry. Edward was missing, and George was hurting—

She took a breath. This wasn’t about George. George was *fine*. He was here, right in front of her, healthy and hale.

No, this wasn’t about George.

It couldn’t be about George.

Except . . . lately it seemed as if everything was about George. She thought about him constantly, and heaven above, was it just the day before that they’d been playing Pall Mall and she’d practically *kissed* him?

She’d wanted to. Dear God, she’d wanted to, and if he’d shown any interest—and if there hadn’t been four other people milling about with Pall Mall mallets—she’d have done it. She’d never kissed anyone before, but when had that ever stopped her? She’d jumped her first fence when she was six. She’d never so much as jumped a shrub before that, but she’d taken one look at that five-foot fence and known that she had to take it. So she’d just hopped on her mare, and she’d done it. Because she’d wanted to.

And also because Edward had dared her. But she wouldn’t have tried it if she hadn’t thought she could do it.

And known she would love it.

She’d known even then that she wasn’t like other girls. She didn’t want to play the pianoforte or pick at her sewing. She wanted to be outside, to fly through the air on the back of her horse, sunlight dancing across her skin as her heart skipped and raced with the wind.

She wanted to soar.

She still did.

If she kissed George . . . if he kissed her . . . would it feel the same way?

She trailed her fingers along the back of the sofa, trying to fill the moment with idle movement. But then she made the mistake of looking up . . .

He was staring at her, his eyes fierce and curious and something else, too, something she could not precisely name.

But whatever it was . . . she felt it. Her heart leapt, and her breath

quicken, and she realized it was just like when she raced on her mare. Breathless and giddy and determined and wild . . . It was all there within her, bursting to get free.

All because he'd looked at her.

Dear God, if he actually *kissed* her she might fall apart.

She tapped nervous fingers on the edge of the sofa, then gestured stupidly to a chair. "I should sit."

"If you wish."

But her feet wouldn't move. "I seem not to know what to do with myself," she admitted.

"Join the club," he muttered.

"Oh, George . . ."

"Do you want a drink?" he asked suddenly.

"Now?" It was barely past eleven.

His shrug bordered on insolence. Billie could only wonder at how much he'd already had.

But he didn't head for the brandy decanter. Instead he stood by the window, staring out over the garden. It had started to rain; a light misty drizzle that made the air thick and gray.

She waited for several moments, but he did not turn around. His hands were clasped behind his back—the classic stance of a gentleman. But it wasn't quite right. There was a certain harshness to his pose, a tension in his shoulders that she wasn't used to seeing there.

He was brittle. Bleak.

"What will you do?" she finally forced herself to ask. She did not think she could bear the silence for another moment.

His posture changed, a slight movement in his neck maybe, and then he turned his head to the side. But not far enough to actually look at her. Instead she was treated to his profile as he said, "Go to London, I suppose."

"To London?" she echoed.

He snorted. "There's not much else I can do."

"You don't want to go to the Colonies to look for him?"

"Of course I want to go to the Colonies," he snapped, whirling around to face her. "But that's not what I *do*."

Billie's lips parted, but the only sound was her pulse, racing wildly through her veins. His outburst was unexpected. Unprecedented.

She had seen George lose his temper before. She could hardly have

grown up alongside his younger brothers and *not* have done so. But she had never seen *this*.

There was no missing the contempt in his voice, nor the fact that it was directed entirely within.

“George,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm and reasonable, “if you want to—”

He stepped forward, his eyes hard and furious. “Don’t tell me I can do what I want because if you believe that, you’re just as naïve as the rest of them.”

“I wasn’t going to—” But it was just as well that he cut her off with a mocking snort, because that was exactly what she had been about to say, and it was only now that she realized how ludicrous it would have been. He couldn’t take off and go to the Colonies; they all knew that.

He would never be as free as his brothers. The order of their birth had ensured that. George would inherit the title, the house, the land. Most of the money. But with privilege came responsibility. He was tied to this place. It was in his blood, the same way Aubrey Hall was in hers.

She wanted to ask him if he minded. If given the chance, would he trade places with Andrew or Edward?

“What will you do in London?” she said instead. Because she could never have asked him what she really wanted to know. Not while Edward’s fate was uncertain.

He shrugged, although not so much with his shoulders as his head and eyes. “Speak to people. Make inquiries.” He laughed bitterly. “I’m very good at speaking to people and making inquiries.”

“You know how to get things done,” she agreed.

“I know how to get other people to do things,” he said derisively.

She pressed her lips together before she could utter something inane like, “That’s an important skill.” But it *was* an important skill, even if she’d never demonstrated it herself. She never left anything to her father’s steward; he was surely the most overpaid clerk in the land. She acted first and thought later; she always had. And she could not bear to let someone else perform a task when she could do it better herself.

And she could almost always do it better herself.

“I need a drink,” George suddenly muttered. Billie didn’t dare point out again that it was still rather early for spirits.

He walked over to the side table and poured himself a brandy from the

decanter. He took a sip. A long one. "Do you want one?"

Billie shook her head.

"Surprising," George muttered.

There was something hard in his voice. Something almost nasty. She felt her spine grow rigid. "I beg your pardon?"

But George only laughed, his brows arching into a mocking salute. "Oh, come now, Billie. You live to shock. I can hardly believe you wouldn't take a brandy when offered."

She gritted her teeth, reminding herself that George was not himself at the moment. "It's not even noon."

He shrugged and kicked back the rest of his brandy.

"You shouldn't be drinking."

"*You* shouldn't be telling me what to do."

She held herself still, stiff even, allowing the long pause to express her disapproval. Finally, because she needed to be as brittle as he, she gave him a cool stare, and said, "Lady Alexandra sends her regards."

He gave her a look of disbelief.

"She leaves today."

"How kind of you to convey her salutations."

She felt a cutting retort rising through her throat, but at the last minute she blurted, "No! This is ridiculous. I'm not going to stand here and speak in rhymes. I came to help."

"You can't help," he bit off.

"Certainly not when you're like this," she retorted.

He slammed his glass down and stalked toward her. "What did you just say?" he demanded. His eyes were wild and furious, and she almost took a step back.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"I'm not drunk," he said in a dangerous voice. "This . . . *that*," he corrected, waving an arm back toward the glass he'd left on the sideboard, "was my first and only drink of the day."

Billie had a feeling she was supposed to apologize, but she couldn't make herself do it.

"I'd like to be drunk," he said, moving closer with the silent grace of a large cat.

"You don't mean that."

"Don't I?" He laughed stridently. "Drunk, I might not remember that my

brother is lost in some godforsaken wilderness where the locals are not predisposed to favor anyone in a red coat.”

“George,” she tried to say, but he would not be deterred.

“Drunk,” he said again, the word punching harshly through the air, “I might not have noticed that my mother has spent the entire morning weeping in her bed. But best of all”—his hands came down heavily on a side table, and he looked at her with fury-laden despair—“if I were drunk, I might somehow forget that I am at the mercy of the rest of the goddamn world. If Edward is found—”

“When he’s found,” Billie cut in fiercely.

“Either way, it won’t be because of me.”

“What do you *want* to do?” she asked quietly. Because she had a feeling he didn’t know. He said he wanted to go to the Colonies, but she wasn’t sure she believed him. She didn’t think he’d even allowed himself to think about what he wanted to do. He was so stuck on his restrictions that he could not think clearly about what was truly in his heart.

“What do I *want* to do?” he echoed. He looked . . . not surprised, exactly, but maybe a little dumbfounded. “I want . . . I want . . .” He blinked, then brought his eyes to hers. “I want you.”

The breath left her body.

“I want you,” he repeated, and it was as if the entire room shifted. The dazed look left his eyes, replaced by something fierce.

Predatory.

Billie could not speak. She could only watch as he came ever closer, the air between them heating to a simmering pitch.

“You don’t want to do this,” she said.

“Oh, I do. I really do.”

But he didn’t. She knew that he didn’t, and she could feel her heart breaking because she *did*. She wanted him to kiss her like she was the only woman he could ever dream of kissing, like he’d die if he didn’t touch his lips to hers.

She wanted him to kiss her and *mean* it.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” she said, edging back a step.

“Is that what you think?” he murmured.

“You’ve been drinking.”

“Just enough to make this perfect.”

She blinked. She didn’t have a clue what that meant.

“Come now, Billie,” he mocked. “Why so hesitant? That’s not like you.”

“This isn’t like *you*,” she countered.

“You have no idea.” He came even closer, his eyes glittering with something she was terrified to define. He reached out and touched her arm, just one finger to her flesh, but it was enough to make her tremble. “When have you ever backed down from a dare?”

Her stomach was flipping and her heart was pounding, but still her shoulders fell into a stiff, straight line. “Never,” she declared, staring him straight in the eye.

He smiled, and his gaze grew hot. “That’s my girl,” he murmured.

“I’m not—”

“You will be,” he growled, and before she could utter another word, his mouth captured hers in a searing kiss.

Chapter 17

He was kissing her.

It was the very definition of madness.

He was kissing *Billie Bridgerton*, the last woman in the world he should ever dream of wanting, but by God, when she'd glared up at him, and her chin had trembled and jutted out, all he could see were her lips and all he could smell was her scent.

And all he could feel was the heat of her skin beneath his fingers, and he wanted more. More of *that*.

More of her.

His other hand came around her with stunning speed, and he wasn't thinking, he *couldn't* be thinking. He just pulled her up against him, hard, and then he was kissing her.

He wanted to devour her.

He wanted to own her.

He wanted to fold her into his arms and hold her tight and kiss her until she finally saw sense, until she stopped doing crazy things and stopped taking crazy risks, and started behaving the way a woman ought while still being *her* and—

He couldn't think. His thoughts were jumbled, torn to bits by the sheer heat of the moment.

More . . . his mind was begging. *More* was the only thing that made any sense to him. More of this. More of Billie.

He captured her face in his hands, holding her still. But she wasn't still. Her lips were moving beneath his, kissing him back with the sort of fervor that was exactly Billie. She rode hard and she played hard and by God she kissed the same way, like he was her triumph and she was going to glory in it.

It was all so mad, so completely wrong and yet so deliciously perfect. It

was every sensation in the world, wrapped into one woman, and he could not get enough. In that moment, in that room, he could never get enough.

His palm moved to her shoulder, then to her back, pulling her closer until his hips pressed hard against her belly. She was small, and she was strong, but she curved in all the best places.

George was no monk. He had kissed women before, women who knew how to kiss him back. But he had never wanted anyone as much as he wanted Billie. He had never wanted anything as much as this kiss.

This kiss . . . and all that could come after.

“Billie,” he groaned. “Billie.”

She made a sound. It might have been his name. And somehow that was what it took.

Good God. Reason came slamming back into him. His brain woke and his sanity returned, and he stumbled back, the electricity that had sparked so hot between them now jolting him away.

What the hell had just happened?

He breathed. No, he *tried* to breathe. It was an entirely different thing.

She had asked him what he wanted.

And he’d answered. He wanted *her*. He hadn’t even had to think about it.

Clearly, he *hadn’t* thought about it, because if he had, he wouldn’t have done it.

He raked a hand through his hair. Then another. Then he just gave up and squeezed both, pulling on his scalp until he let out a growl of pain.

“You kissed me,” she said, and he had just enough presence of mind not to say that she’d kissed him back. Because he’d started it. He had started it, and they both knew that she never would have done so.

He shook his head, tiny unthinking movements that did nothing to clear his mind. “I’m sorry,” he said stiffly. “That wasn’t—I mean—”

He swore. This was apparently the extent of his coherency.

“You kissed me,” she said again, and this time she sounded suspicious. “Why did—”

“I don’t know,” he bit off. He swore again, raking his hand through his hair as he turned away from her. Bloody hell. Bloody, bloody—

He swallowed. “That was a mistake,” he said.

“What?”

It was just one word. Not nearly enough for him to decipher her tone. Which was probably for the best. He turned around, forcing himself to look at

her while at the same time not allowing himself to see.

He didn't want to see her reaction. He didn't want to know what she thought of him. "That was a mistake," he said, because it was what he had to say. "Do you understand me?"

Her eyes narrowed. Her face grew hard. "Perfectly."

"For God's sake, Billie, don't take bloody offense—"

"Don't take offense? Don't take offense? You—" She stopped herself, shot a furtive glance at the open door, and lowered her voice to a furious hiss. "I did not start this."

"I am well aware."

"What were you thinking?"

"Obviously, I wasn't," he practically spat.

Her eyes widened, flashing with pain, and then she turned, hugging her arms to her body.

And George finally knew the true meaning of remorse. He let out an unsteady breath, raking his hand through his hair. "I apologize," he said, for the second time in as many minutes. "I will marry you, of course."

"*What?*" She whirled around. "No."

George stiffened. It was like someone had taken an iron rod and shoved it right up his spine. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't be daft, George. You don't want to marry me."

It was true, but he was not stupid enough to say so out loud.

"And you know I don't want to marry you."

"As you are making increasingly clear."

"You only kissed me because you're upset."

This was *not* true, but he kept his mouth shut on this point as well.

"So I accept your apology." Her chin rose. "And we will never speak of this again."

"Agreed."

They stood there for a moment, frozen in their painfully awkward tableau. He ought to be jumping for joy. Any other young lady would be screaming for the trees. Or for her father. And the vicar. And a special license woven into the shape of a noose.

But not Billie. No, Billie just looked at him with an almost preternatural haughtiness and said, "I hope *you* will accept *my* apology."

"Your—" *What?* His jaw dropped. What the devil did she have to apologize for? Or was she merely trying to get the upper hand? She'd always

known how to unsettle him.

“It’s not as if I can pretend that I didn’t return the . . . ah . . .” She swallowed, and he took some pleasure in the fact that she blushed before she finished the statement. “The . . . ah . . .”

He took quite a bit of pleasure in the fact that she couldn’t finish the statement at all.

“You liked it,” he said with a slow smile. It was colossally unwise to goad her at such a moment, but he could not help himself.

She shifted her weight. “Everyone has to have a first kiss.”

“Then I am honored,” he said with a courtly bow.

Her lips parted in surprise, maybe even consternation. Good. He’d turned the tables.

“I was not expecting it to be you, of course,” she said.

He stifled his irritation and instead murmured, “Perhaps you were hoping for someone else?”

She gave a jerky little shrug. “No one in particular.”

He chose not to analyze the burst of pleasure that rushed through him at that statement.

“I suppose I always thought it would be one of your brothers,” she continued. “Andrew, maybe—”

“*Not* Andrew,” he bit off.

“No, probably not,” she agreed, her head tilting to the side as she considered it. “But it used to seem plausible.”

He stared at her with mounting irritation. While she was not wholly *unaffected* by the situation, she was certainly not *as* affected as he thought she should have been.

“It wouldn’t have been the same,” he heard himself say.

She blinked. “I beg your pardon.”

“If you had kissed someone else.” He stepped toward her, unable to ignore the way his blood buzzed with anticipation. “It would not have been the same.”

“Well . . .” She looked flustered, delightfully so. “I would expect not,” she finally said. “I mean . . . different people . . .”

“Very different,” he agreed.

Her mouth opened, and several seconds passed before words emerged. “I’m not sure to whom you’re comparing yourself.”

“Anyone.” He moved even closer. “Everyone.”

“George?” Her eyes were huge, but she wasn’t saying no.

“Do you want me to kiss you again?” he asked.

“Of course not.” But she said it too quickly.

“Are you sure of that?”

She swallowed. “It would be a very bad idea.”

“Very much so,” he said softly.

“So we . . . shouldn’t?”

He touched her cheek, and this time he whispered it. “Do you want me to kiss you again?”

She moved . . . a little. He couldn’t tell whether she was shaking her head *yes* or *no*. He had a feeling she didn’t know, either.

“Billie?” he murmured, coming close enough so that his breath whispered across her skin.

Her breath hitched, and she said, “I said I wouldn’t marry you.”

“You did.”

“Well, I said you didn’t *have* to marry me.”

He nodded.

“That would still be true.”

“If I kissed you again?”

She nodded.

“So this means nothing?”

“No . . .”

Something warm and lovely unfurled in his chest. This could never mean nothing. And she knew it.

“It just means . . .” She swallowed, her lips trembling as they pressed together. “. . . that there are no consequences.”

He brushed his lips against her cheek. “No consequences,” he softly repeated.

“None.”

“I could kiss you again . . .” His hand stole around to the small of her back, but he exerted only the barest of pressure. She could step away at any moment. She could remove herself from his embrace, cross the room, and leave. He needed her to know this. *He* needed to know that she knew this. There would be no recriminations, no telling herself that she had been swept away by his passion.

If she was swept away by passion, it would be her own.

His lips touched her ear. “I could kiss you again,” he repeated.

She gave a little nod. A tiny nod. But he felt it. “Again,” she whispered. His teeth found her earlobe, gently nipping. “And again.”

“I think—”

“What do you think?” He smiled against her skin. He couldn’t quite believe how utterly delightful this was. He’d known kisses of passion, of raw, primal hunger and overwhelming lust. This was all that, but there was something more.

Something joyful.

“I think . . .” She swallowed. “I think you *should* kiss me again.” She looked up, her eyes remarkably clear. “And I think you should shut the door.”

George had never moved so fast in his life. He had half a mind to shove a chair under the door handle just to keep the damned thing closed.

“This still doesn’t mean nothing,” she said as his arms wrapped around her.

“Absolutely not.”

“But no consequences.”

“None.”

“You don’t have to marry me.”

“I don’t have to, no.”

But he could. The thought flicked across his mind with warm surprise. He *could* marry her. There was no reason why not.

His sanity, perhaps. But he had a feeling he’d lost that the first moment his lips had touched hers.

She stood on her tiptoes, tilting her face to his. “If you’re my first kiss,” she said, her lips curving with subtle mischief, “then you might as well be my second.”

“Maybe your third,” he said, capturing her mouth with his.

“It’s important to know,” she said, getting just those four words out between kisses.

“To know?” His mouth moved to her neck, causing her to arch provocatively in his arms.

She nodded, gasping as one of his hands moved along her rib cage. “How to kiss,” she clarified. “It’s a skill.”

He felt himself smile. “And you like to be skilled.”

“I do.”

He kissed her neck, then her collarbone, giving thanks to the current bodice styles, round and deep, baring creamy skin from her shoulders to the

top swell of her breasts. "I predict great things for you."

Her only response was a gasp of surprise. About what, he wasn't quite sure—perhaps his tongue, flicking out along the sensitive skin peeking out from the lacy edge of her dress. Or maybe it was his teeth, nipping gently along the side of her neck.

He didn't dare tumble her onto the chaise; he did not trust himself that far. But he did nudge her until she was leaning against the sofa, lifting her the scant few inches required to set her atop the back.

And God love her, but Billie knew instinctively what to do. Her legs parted, and when he rucked up her skirts, she wrapped herself around him. Maybe it was just for balance, but as he pressed himself against her, he didn't care. Her skirt was still in the way, as were his breeches, but he *felt* her. He was hard, exquisitely so, and he pressed against her, his body knowing where it wanted to go. She was a country girl; she had to know what this meant, but she was lost in the same passion, and she pulled him closer, her legs tightening around his hips.

Dear God, at this rate he was going to spend himself like a green boy.

He took a breath. "It's too much," he gasped, forcing himself to pull away.

"No," was all she said, but her hands moved to his head, allowing him to kiss her even as he put a little distance between their bodies.

And so he kissed her. He kissed her endlessly. He kissed her carefully, skirting the edge of his own desire, all too aware how close he was to the brink of reason.

And he kissed her tenderly, because this was Billie, and somehow he knew that no one ever thought to be tender with her.

"George," she said.

He lifted his lips from hers, just a bit, just a breath. "Hmmm."

"We have to . . . we have to stop."

"Mmmm," he agreed. But he didn't stop. He could have done; he had a grip on his passion now. But he didn't want to.

"George," she said again. "I hear people."

He drew back. Listened.

Swore.

"Open the door," Billie hissed.

He did. With alacrity. Nothing sparked suspicion like a closed door. He looked at her. "You might . . ." He cleared his throat and made a motion near

his head. "You might want to . . ."

He was no expert on ladies' coiffures, but he was fairly certain her hair did not look as it should.

Billie blanched and frantically smoothed her hair, her nimble fingers tugging on pins and then jamming them back into place. "Better?"

He grimaced. There was a spot behind her right ear where a chestnut lock looked as if it was sprouting from her head.

They heard a voice from the hall. "George?"

His mother. Good God.

"George!"

"In the drawing room, Mother," he called back, heading to the doorway. He could stall her in the hall for a few seconds at least. He turned back to Billie, sharing one last urgent glance. She took her hands from her hair and held them out, as if to say, "Well?"

It would have to do.

"Mother," he said, stepping into the hall. "You're up."

She offered her cheek, which he dutifully kissed. "I can't stay in my room forever."

"No, although surely you are allowed time to—"

"Grieve?" she interrupted. "I refuse to grieve. Not until we receive more definite news."

"I was going to say 'rest,'" he told her.

"I've done that."

Well done, Lady Manston, he thought. Funny how his mother still managed to surprise him with her resilience.

"I was thinking," his mother began, walking past him into the drawing room. "Oh, hello, Billie, I did not realize you were here."

"Lady Manston." Billie bobbed a curtsy. "I was hoping I might be of some assistance."

"That is very kind of you. I'm not sure what can be done, but your company is always appreciated." Lady Manston's head tilted to the side. "Is it very windy out?"

"What?" Billie's hand flew self-consciously to her hair. "Oh. Yes, a bit. I forgot my bonnet."

They all looked at the bonnet she'd left on a table.

"What I meant to say was that I forgot to put it on," Billie said with a nervous chuckle that George dearly hoped his mother did not detect. "Or

rather, truthfully, I didn't forget. The air was so very fine."

"I won't tell your mother," Lady Manston said with an indulgent smile.

Billie nodded her thanks, and then an awkward silence fell over the room. Or maybe it wasn't awkward at all. Maybe George only thought it was awkward, because he knew what Billie was thinking, and he knew what *he* was thinking, and it seemed impossible somehow that his mother could be thinking of anything else.

But apparently she was, because she looked at him with a smile he knew was forced, and asked, "Have you given further thought to going to London?"

"Some," he replied. "I know a few people at the War Office."

"George was thinking of traveling to London to make inquiries," his mother said to Billie.

"Yes, he'd told me. It's an excellent idea."

Lady Manston gave a tiny nod and turned back to George. "Your father knows people as well, but . . ."

"I can go," George said swiftly, saving his mother the pain of having to describe her husband's current state of incapacitation.

"You probably know the same people," Billie said.

George glanced over. "Just so."

"I believe I will go with you," his mother said.

"Mother, no, you should stay home," George immediately said. "Father will need you, and it will be easier for me to do what needs to be done on my own."

"Don't be silly. Your father doesn't need anything but news of his son, and I can't do anything to further that cause from here."

"And you will in London?"

"Probably not," she admitted, "but at least there is a chance."

"I'm not going to be able to accomplish anything if I'm worried about you."

His mother raised one perfectly arched brow. "Then don't worry."

He gritted his teeth. There was no arguing with her when she was like this, and the truth was, he wasn't even sure *why* he didn't want his mother to come with him. Just this strange, niggling feeling that some things were best done alone.

"It will all work out," Billie said, trying to smooth over the tension between mother and son. George shot her a look of gratitude, but he didn't

think she saw it. She was more like her own mother than anyone gave her credit for, he realized. She was a peacemaker, in her own inimitable way.

He watched as she took one of his mother's hands in hers. "I know that Edward will come home to us," she said with a light squeeze.

A warm, almost homey sense of pride swirled through him. And he could have sworn he could feel her, giving his hand a squeeze as well.

"You're such a dear, Billie," his mother said. "You and Edward were always so close."

"My best friend," Billie said. "Well, besides Mary, of course."

George crossed his arms. "Don't forget Andrew."

She glanced over at him with a frown.

Lady Manston leaned forward and kissed Billie on the cheek. "What I wouldn't give to see you and Edward together one more time."

"And you shall," Billie said firmly. "He will be home—if not soon, then at least eventually." She gave an excellent approximation of a reassuring smile. "We will be together again. I know it."

"We will *all* be together again," George said peevishly.

Billie gave him another frown, this one considerably more remonstrative.

"I keep seeing his face," his mother said. "Every time I close my eyes."

"I do, too," Billie admitted.

George saw red. He'd just bloody kissed her—and he was fairly certain her eyes had been closed.

"George?" his mother inquired.

"What?" he bit off.

"You made a noise."

"I cleared my throat," he lied. Had Billie been thinking of Edward when she kissed him? No, she wouldn't do that. Or would she? How would he know? And could he blame her? If she had been thinking of Edward, it wasn't anything she'd done on purpose.

Which somehow made it even worse.

He watched as Billie spoke quietly with his mother. Was she in love with Edward? No, she couldn't be. Because if she *was*, Edward would never have been so foolish as to not return the affection. And if that were the case, they'd be married by now.

Besides, Billie had said she had not been kissed. And Billie didn't lie.

Edward was a gentleman—maybe even more of one than George, after the events of today—but if he was in love with Billie, there was no way he'd

have left for America without kissing her.

“George?”

He looked up. His mother was regarding him with some concern. “You don’t look well,” she said.

“I don’t feel well,” he said curtly.

His mother drew back ever so slightly, the only indication of her surprise. “I don’t imagine any of us does,” she said.

“I wish I could go to London,” Billie said.

George snapped to attention. “Are you joking?” Good God, that would be a disaster. If he was worried about his *mother* being a distraction . . .

She drew back, visibly offended. “Why would I be joking?”

“You hate London.”

“I’ve only been the once,” she said stiffly.

“What?” Lady Manston exclaimed. “How is that possible? I know you didn’t have a Season, but it’s barely even a full day’s ride.”

Billie cleared her throat. “There was some hesitation on the part of my mother after what happened at my presentation at court.”

Lady Manston cringed a little, then made a full recovery with a brightly declared: “Well, that settles it, then. We cannot live in the past.”

George regarded his mother with a slow dose of dread. “Settles what, exactly?”

“Billie must go to London.”

Chapter 18

And so it was that less than one week later Billie found herself stripped down to her unmentionables with two seamstresses jabbering on in French while they jabbed *her* with pins and needles.

“I could have used one of my gowns from home,” she told Lady Manston for what was probably the fifth time.

Lady Manston did not even look up from the book of fashion plates she was perusing. “No, you couldn’t.”

Billie sighed as she stared out at the richly brocaded fabrics that draped the walls of the fancy dress shop that had become her second home here in London. It was very exclusive, she’d been told; the discreet sign hanging above the door said merely *Mme. Delacroix, tailoress*, but Lady Manston referred to the petite French dynamo as Crossy, and Billie had been told to do the same.

Normally, Lady Manston said, Crossy and her girls would come to *them*, but they hadn’t much time to get Billie properly fitted and kitted, and in this instance it seemed more efficient to visit the shop.

Billie had tried to protest. She wasn’t coming to London for a Season. It wasn’t even the right time of year. Well, it would be soon, but it wasn’t yet. And they absolutely had not traveled to London to attend parties and balls. Truth be told, Billie wasn’t entirely certain why she was there. She had been utterly shocked when Lady Manston made her announcement, and it must have shown on her face.

“You just said you wished to go,” Lady Manston had said, “and I will confess I am not being entirely unselfish. *I* wish to go, and I require a companion.”

George had protested, which, under the circumstances, Billie had found sensible *and* insulting, but his mother was unstoppable.

“I can’t bring Mary,” she said firmly. “She’s far too ill, and I doubt Felix

would permit it in any case.” At that she had looked over to Billie. “He’s very protective.”

“Quite so,” Billie had mumbled . . . rather stupidly, in her opinion. But she couldn’t think of anything else to say. Honestly, she never felt less sure of herself than in the face of an indomitable society matron, even one she’d known since birth. Most of the time Lady Manston was her beloved neighbor, but every now and then the Leader of Society shone through, issuing orders and directing people, and generally just being an expert on everything. Billie had no idea how to assert herself. It was the same way with her own mother.

But then George had jettisoned *sensible* and gone completely over to *insulting*.

“Forgive me, Billie,” he’d said (while looking at his mother), “but she would be a distraction.”

“A welcome one,” Lady Manston said.

“Not to *me*.”

“George Rokesby!” His mother was instantly incensed. “You apologize this minute.”

“She knows what I meant,” he said.

At that, Billie could not keep her mouth shut. “I do?”

George turned back to Billie with an expression of vague irritation. And clear condescension. “You don’t really want to go to London.”

“Edward was my friend, too,” she said.

“There is no ‘was’ about it,” George snapped.

She wanted to smack him. He was deliberately misunderstanding her. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, George, you know what I meant.”

“I do?” he mocked.

“What on earth is going on here?” Lady Manston had exploded. “I know the two of you have never been close, but there is no call for this sort of behavior. Good God, one would think the both of you were three years old.”

And that was that. Both Billie and George were shamed into silence, and Lady Manston went off to pen a note to Lady Bridgerton, explaining that Billie had graciously agreed to accompany her to town.

Naturally, Lady Bridgerton had thought this a splendid idea.

Billie had thought she’d spend her days taking in the sights, perhaps attending the theater, but the day after their arrival, Lady Manston had received an invitation to a ball being given by a dear, dear friend, and much to Billie’s surprise, she had decided to accept.

“Are you certain you’re up to it?” Billie had asked. (At that point she had not thought that she was going to be roped in to attending as well, so it had to be said, her motives were purely altruistic.)

“My son is not dead,” Lady Manston said, surprising Billie with her bluntness. “I am not going to act as if he is.”

“Well, no, of course not, but—”

“Besides,” Lady Manston said, giving no indication that she had heard Billie speak, “Ghislaine is a dear, dear friend, and it would be impolite to decline.”

Billie had frowned, looking down at the sizable stack of invitations that had mysteriously appeared in the delicately scalloped porcelain dish resting atop Lady Manston’s writing table. “How does she even know you’re here in London?”

Lady Manston shrugged as she perused the rest of her invitations. “I expect she heard it from George.”

Billie smiled tightly. George had reached London two days before the ladies. He’d ridden the whole way on horseback, lucky dog. Since her arrival, however, she’d seen him precisely three times. Once at supper, once at breakfast, and once in the drawing room when he came in for a brandy while she was reading a book.

He’d been perfectly polite, if a little distant. She supposed this could be forgiven; as far as she could tell he was busy trying to obtain news of Edward, and she certainly did not want to distract him from his objective. Still she had not thought that “no consequences” would mean “Oh, I’m sorry, is that you on the sofa?”

She didn’t think that he had been unaffected by their kiss. She didn’t have much—oh, very well, *any*—experience with men, but she knew George, and she knew that he had wanted her every bit as much as she wanted him.

And she had. Oh, how she had.

She still did.

Every time she closed her eyes she saw his face, and the crazy thing was, it wasn’t the kiss she relived endlessly in her mind. It was the moment right before it, when her heart beat like a hummingbird and her breath ached to mingle with his. The kiss had been magical, but the moment before, the split second when she knew . . .

She’d been transformed.

He had awakened something inside of her she had not even known

existed, something wild and selfish. And she wanted more.

Problem was, she had no idea how to get it. If ever there were a time to develop feminine wiles, this was probably it. But she was entirely out of her element here in London. She knew how to act back in Kent. Maybe she wasn't her mother's ideal version of womanhood, but when she was at home, at Aubrey or Crake, she knew who she was. If she said something strange or did something out of the ordinary it didn't matter, because she was Billie Bridgerton, and everyone knew what that meant.

She knew what it meant.

But here, in this formal town home, with its unfamiliar servants and pursed-lipped matrons coming to call, she was adrift. She second-guessed every word.

And now Lady Manston wanted to attend a ball?

"Ghislaine's daughter is eighteen, I believe," Lady Manston mused, flipping over the invitation and glancing at the back. "Maybe nineteen. Certainly of an age to marry."

Billie held her tongue.

"A lovely girl. So pretty and genteel." Lady Manston looked up with a wide, devious smile. "Shall I insist that George be my escort? It's high time he started looking for a wife."

"I'm sure he will be delighted," Billie said diplomatically. But in her head she was already painting Ghislaine's beautiful daughter with horns and a pitchfork.

"And you shall attend as well."

Billie looked up, alarmed. "Oh, I don't think—"

"We'll have to get you a dress."

"It's really not—"

"And shoes, I would imagine."

"But, Lady Manston, I—"

"I wonder if we can get away without a wig. They can be difficult to manage if you're not used to wearing them."

"I really don't like wearing wigs," Billie said.

"Then you won't have to," Lady Manston declared, and it was only then that Billie realized just how deftly she'd been manipulated.

That had been two days earlier. Two days and five fittings. Six, counting this one.

"Billie, hold your breath for a moment," Lady Manston called out.

Billie squinted over at her. “What?” It was bloody difficult to focus on anything other than the two seamstresses currently yanking her about. She’d heard that most dressmakers faked their French accents so as to seem more sophisticated, but these two seemed to be genuine. Billie couldn’t understand a word they were saying.

“She doesn’t speak French,” Lady Manston said to Crossy. “I’m not sure what her mother was thinking.” She glanced back up at Billie. “Your breath, darling. They need to tighten your corset.”

Billie looked at Crossy’s two assistants, waiting patiently behind her, corset laces in hand. “It requires two people?”

“It’s a very good corset,” Lady Manston said.

“Ze best,” Crossy confirmed.

Billie sighed.

“No, *in*,” Lady Manston directed. “Breathe *in*.”

Billie obeyed, sucking in her stomach so that the two seamstresses could do some sort of choreographed crossways yank that resulted in Billie’s spine curving in an entirely new manner. Her hips jutted forward, and her head seemed remarkably far back on her neck. She wasn’t quite certain how she was meant to walk like this.

“This isn’t terribly comfortable,” she called out.

“No.” Lady Manston sounded unconcerned. “It won’t be.”

One of the ladies said something in French and then pushed Billie’s shoulders forward and her stomach back. “*Meilleur?*” she asked.

Billie cocked her head to the side, then twisted her spine a bit each way. It *was* better. Yet another aspect of genteel femininity she’d had no idea how to navigate: corset wearing. Or rather, “good” corset wearing. Apparently the ones she’d been wearing were far too permissive.

“Thank you,” she said to the seamstress, then cleared her throat. “Er, *merci*.”

“For you, ze corset should not be too uncomfortable,” Crossy said, coming over to inspect her handiwork. “Your stomach is lovely and flat. The problem we have is your breasts.”

Billie looked up in alarm. “My—”

“Very little meat to them,” Crossy said, shaking her head sadly.

It was embarrassing enough to have one’s breasts discussed like chicken wings, but then Crossy actually *grabbed* her. She looked over at Lady Manston. “We need to push them up more, don’t you think?”

She then demonstrated. Billie wanted to die on the spot.

“Hmmm?” Lady Manston’s face screwed up as she considered the placement of Billie’s breasts. “Oh yes, I think you’re right. They look much better up there.”

“I’m sure it’s not necessary . . .” Billie began, but then she gave up. She had no power here.

Crossy said something in rapid-fire French to her assistants, and before Billie knew what was happening, she’d been unlaced and relaced, and when she looked down, her bosom was most definitely not where it had been just a few moments earlier.

“Much better,” Crossy declared.

“Goodness,” Billie murmured. If she nodded she could actually touch her chin to her chest.

“He won’t be able to resist you,” Crossy said, leaning in with a confidential wink.

“Who?”

“There’s always a who,” Crossy said with a chuckle.

Billie tried not to think of George. But she wasn’t successful. Like it or not, he was her *who*.

While Billie was trying not to think of George, he was trying not to think of fish. Kippers, to be precise.

He’d spent the better part of the week at the War Office, trying to gain information about Edward. This had involved several meals with Lord Arbuthnot, who, before he had developed gout, had been a decorated general in His Majesty’s army. The gout was a bloody nuisance (was the first thing he’d said) but it did mean he was back on English soil, where a man could have a proper breakfast every day.

Lord Arbuthnot was apparently still making up for his years of improper breakfasts, because when George joined him for supper, the table had been laid with what was normally morning fare. Eggs three ways, bacon, toast. And kippers. Lots and lots of kippers.

All things considered, Lord Arbuthnot put away a lot of kippers.

George had met the old soldier only once before, but Arbuthnot had attended Eton with George’s father, and George with Arbuthnot’s son, and if there was a more effective connection to press in the pursuit of truth, George couldn’t imagine what it was.

“Well, I’ve been asking,” Arbuthnot said, slicing up a piece of ham with the vigor of a red-faced man who’d rather be outside, “and I can’t get much about your brother.”

“Surely someone must know where he is.”

“Connecticut Colony. That’s as precise as it gets.”

George clenched his fingers into a fist beneath the table. “He’s not supposed to *be* in Connecticut Colony.”

Arbuthnot chewed his food, then looked at George with a shrewd expression. “You’ve never been a soldier, have you?”

“Much to my regret.”

Arbuthnot nodded, George’s reply clearly meeting with his approval. “Soldiers are rarely where they’re supposed to be,” he said. “At least not ones like your brother.”

George pressed his lips together, working to maintain an even expression. “I’m afraid I don’t catch your meaning.”

Arbuthnot sat back, tapping his steepled fingers as he regarded George with a thoughtful, eye-narrowed gaze. “Your brother is hardly an enlisted man, Lord Kennard.”

“Surely a captain must still follow orders.”

“And go where he’s told?” Arbuthnot said. “Of course. But that doesn’t mean he ends up where he’s ‘supposed’ to be.”

George took a moment to absorb this, then said incredulously, “Are you trying to tell me that Edward is a spy?”

It was unfathomable. Espionage was a dirty business. Men like Edward wore their red coats with pride.

Arbuthnot shook his head. “No. At least I don’t think so. Damned unsavory, spying is. Your brother wouldn’t have to do it.”

He wouldn’t do it, George thought. Period.

“It’d make no sense, at any rate,” Arbuthnot said briskly. “Do you really think your brother could pass himself off as anything but a proper English gentleman? I hardly think a rebel is going to believe that the son of an earl is going to sympathize with their cause.”

Arbuthnot wiped his mouth with his napkin and reached for the kippers. “I think your brother is a scout.”

“A scout,” George repeated.

Arbuthnot nodded, then offered the dish. “More?”

George shook his head and tried not to grimace. “No, thank you.”

Arbuthnot gave a little grunt and slid the rest of the fish onto his plate. "God, I love kippers," he sighed. "You can't get them in the Caribbean. Not like this."

"A scout," George said again, trying to get the conversation back on topic. "Why do you think this?"

"Well, no one has told me as much, and to be quite frank, I don't know that anyone here has the entire story, but putting together the bits and pieces . . . it seems to fit." Arbuthnot popped a kipper in his mouth and chewed. "I'm not a betting man, but if I were, I'd say that your brother had been sent afield to get the lay of the land. There hasn't been much action in Connecticut, not since that thing with Whatshisname Arnold in Ridgefield back in seventy-seven."

George was not familiar with Whatshisname Arnold, nor did he have a clue where Ridgefield was.

There are some damned good ports on that coast," Arbuthnot continued, getting back to the serious business of cutting his meat. "I wouldn't be surprised if the rebels were putting them to use. And I wouldn't be surprised if Captain Rokesby had been sent out to investigate." He looked up, his bushy brows dipping toward his eyes as his forehead wrinkled. "Does your brother have any mapmaking skills?"

"Not that I'm aware."

Arbuthnot shrugged. "Doesn't mean anything if he doesn't, I suppose. They might not be looking for anything so precise."

"But then what happened?" George pressed.

The old general shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know, m'dear boy. And I'd be lying if I said I'd found anyone who did."

George hadn't expected answers, not really, but still, it was disappointing.

"It's a damned long way to the Colonies, son," Lord Arbuthnot said in a surprisingly gentle voice. "News is never as swift as we'd like."

George accepted this with a slow nod. He was going to have to pursue some other avenue of investigation, although for the life of him, he did not know what that might be.

"By the way," Arbuthnot added, almost too casually, "you wouldn't happen to be planning to attend Lady Wintour's ball tomorrow night, would you?"

"I am," George confirmed. He didn't want to, but his mother had spun some convoluted story that had ended in his absolutely *having* to attend. And

frankly, he hadn't the heart to disappoint her. Not while she was so worried about Edward.

And then there was Billie. She'd been roped into attending as well. He'd seen the look of panic on her face when his mother had dragged her from her breakfast to visit the *modiste*. A London ball was quite possibly Billie Bridgerton's personal hell, and there was no way he could abandon her when she needed him most.

"Are you acquainted with Robert Tallywhite?" Lord Arbuthnot inquired.

"A bit." Tallywhite was a couple of years ahead of him at Eton. Quiet fellow, George recalled. Sandy hair and a high forehead. Bookish.

"He is Lady Wintour's nephew and will most certainly be in attendance. You would be doing a great service to this office if you would pass along a message."

George raised his eyebrows in question.

"Is that a yes?" Lord Arbuthnot said in a dry voice.

George tipped his head in affirmation.

"Tell him . . . pease porridge pudding."

"Pease porridge pudding," George repeated dubiously.

Arbuthnot broke off a piece of his toast and dipped it into his egg yolk. "He'll understand."

"What does it mean?"

"Do you need to know?" Arbuthnot countered.

George sat back, regarding Arbuthnot with a level stare. "I do, rather."

Lord Arbuthnot let out a bark of laughter. "And that, my dear boy, is why you would make a terrible soldier. You've got to follow orders without question."

"Not if one is in command."

"Too true," Arbuthnot said with a smile. But he still did not explain the message. Instead he regarded George with a level stare and asked, "Can we rely on you?"

It was the War Office, George thought. If he was passing along messages, at least he'd know he was doing it for the right people.

At least he'd know he was doing *something*.

He looked Arbuthnot in the eye and said, "You may."

Chapter 19

Manston House was quiet when George returned later that evening. The hall was lit with two candelabras, but the rest of the rooms seemed to have been shut down for the night. He frowned. It wasn't that late; surely someone ought to be about.

"Ah, Temperley," George said when the butler stepped forward to take his hat and coat, "has my mother gone out for the evening?"

"Lady Manston had her dinner sent up to her room on a tray, my lord," Temperley said.

"And Miss Bridgerton?"

"I believe she did the same."

"Oh." George shouldn't have been disappointed. After all, he'd spent the better part of the past few days avoiding both of the aforementioned ladies. Now they seemed to have done his work for him.

"Shall I have your dinner sent up as well, my lord?"

George thought for a moment, then said, "Why not?" It seemed he wasn't to have company that night regardless, and he hadn't eaten much of Lord Arbuthnot's repast.

It had to have been the kippers. Honestly, the smell had put him off the entire meal.

"Will you have a brandy in the drawing room first?" Temperley inquired.

"No, I'll go straight up, I think. It's been a long day."

Temperley nodded in that butlerish way of his. "For us all, my lord."

George regarded him with a wry expression. "Has my mother been working you to the bone, Temperley?"

"Not at all," the butler replied, the barest hint of a smile cracking through his somber mien. "I speak of the ladies. If I may be so bold as to offer my observation, they seemed rather tired when they returned this afternoon. Miss Bridgerton especially."

“I’m afraid my mother has been working *her* to the bone,” George said with a half-smile.

“Just so, my lord. Lady Manston is never as happy as when she has a young lady to marry off.”

George froze, then covered his lapse by devoting an inordinate amount of attention to the removal of his gloves. “That would seem somewhat ambitious, given that Miss Bridgerton does not plan to remain in town for the Season.”

Temperley cleared his throat. “A great many parcels have arrived.”

Which was his way of saying that every item required for a young lady to successfully navigate the London marriage mart had been purchased and delivered.

“I’m sure Miss Bridgerton will meet with every success,” George said evenly.

“She is a very lively young lady,” Temperley agreed.

George smiled tightly as he took his leave. It was difficult to imagine how Temperley had come to the conclusion that Billie was lively. The few times George had crossed her path at Manston House she had been uncharacteristically subdued.

He supposed he should have made more of an effort, taken her out for an ice or some such, but he’d been too busy hunting down information at the War Office. It felt so bloody good to *do* something for a change, even if the results were disappointing.

He took a step toward the stairs, then paused and turned back. Temperley had not moved.

“I always thought my mother hoped for a match between Miss Bridgerton and Edward,” George said casually.

“She has not seen fit to confide in me,” Temperley said.

“No, of course not,” George said. He gave his head a little shake. How the mighty had fallen. He’d been reduced to dangling for gossip from the butler. “Good night, Temperley.”

He made it to the stairs, his foot perched on the first step, when the butler called out, “They do speak of him.”

George turned around.

Temperley cleared his throat. “I do not think it a breach of confidence to tell you that they speak of him at breakfast.”

“No,” George said. “Not at all.”

There was a long beat of silence.

“We are keeping Master Edward in our prayers,” Temperley finally said. “We all miss him.”

It was true. Although what did it say about George that he missed Edward more now that he was missing than he ever had when he’d merely been an ocean away?

He walked slowly up the stairs. Manston House was much smaller than Crake, with all eight bedchambers clustered on one floor. Billie had been put in the second-best guest bedroom, which George thought was ludicrous, but his mother always insisted upon keeping the best guest bedroom free. *You never know who might unexpectedly visit*, she always said.

Has the King dropped by? he always parried. This generally earned him a scowl. And a smile. His mother was a good sport that way, even if the best room had gone empty these past twenty years.

He paused in the middle of the hall, not quite in front of Billie’s door but closer to it than any other room. There was just enough of a crack under the door to show a faint flicker of candlelight. He wondered what she was doing in there. It really was much too early to go to sleep.

He missed her.

It came to him in a startling flash. He missed her. He was here, in the same house, sleeping just three doors down, and he missed her.

It was his own fault. He knew he’d been avoiding her. But what was he to do? He had kissed Billie, kissed her until he was nearly past the edge of reason, and now he was expected to make polite conversation with her at the breakfast table? In front of his *mother*?

George would never be as sophisticated as that.

He ought to marry her. He rather thought he’d like to, as mad as that might have seemed just a month earlier. He’d been quite warming to the idea back at Crake. Billie had said “You don’t have to marry me,” and all he could think was—

But I could.

He’d had just a moment with the idea. No time to think or analyze, only time to feel.

And it had felt lovely. Warm.

Like springtime.

But then his mother had arrived on the scene and started going on about how adorable Billie and Edward were together and what a perfect match they

made and he couldn't remember what else but it was nauseatingly sweet and according to Temperley went very well over breakfast with toast and orange marmalade.

Toast and marmalade. He shook his head. He was an idiot.

And he had fallen in love with Billie Bridgerton.

There it was. Plain as day. He almost laughed. He *would* have laughed, if the joke weren't on him.

If he'd fallen in love with someone else—someone new, whose presence did not fill such a wealth of his memories—would it have been so clear? With Billie the emotion was such an about-face, such a complete departure from a lifetime of comparing her to a pebble in his shoe. He couldn't help but see it, shining in his mind like bright starry promise.

Was she in love with Edward? Maybe. His mother seemed to think so. She had not said as much, of course, but his mother had a remarkable talent for making sure her opinions were precisely known without ever actually stating them explicitly.

Still, it had been enough to render him insanely jealous.

In love with Billie. It was just the maddest thing.

He let out a long, pent-up breath and started walking again toward his room. He had to pass by her door, past that tantalizing flicker of light. He slowed, because he couldn't not.

And then the door opened.

"George?" Billie's face peered out. She was still in her day clothes but her hair was down, draped over her shoulder in a long, thick braid. "I thought I heard someone," she explained.

He managed a close-lipped smile as he bowed. "As you see."

"I was having supper," she said, motioning back into the room. "Your mother was tired." She gave a sheepish smile. "I was tired. I'm not very good at shopping. I had no idea it would involve quite so much standing still."

"Standing still is always more tiring than walking."

"Yes!" she said, quite animatedly. "I've always said that."

George started to speak, but then a memory sparked through his mind. It was when he'd been carrying her, after that debacle with the cat on the roof. He'd been trying to describe that odd feeling of when one's leg goes weak and bends for no reason.

Billie had understood perfectly.

The irony was that his leg hadn't gone weak. He'd been making it up to

cover for something. He didn't even remember what.

But he remembered the moment. He remembered that she'd understood.

Mostly he'd remembered how she'd looked at him, with a little smile that said that she was happy to *be* understood.

He looked up. She was watching him with an expression of faint expectation. It was his turn to speak, he remembered. And since he couldn't very well say what he was thinking, he went for the obvious.

"You're still dressed," he said.

She glanced down briefly at her frock. It was the one she'd been wearing when he kissed her. Flowers. It suited her. She should always be in flowers.

"I thought I might go back down after I finish eating," she said. "Perhaps find something to read in the library."

He nodded.

"My mother always says that once you're in your dressing gown, you're in your room for the night."

He smiled. "Does she?"

"She says a great many things, actually. I'm sure I've forgotten whatever it is that I didn't ignore."

George stood like a statue, knowing he should bid her goodnight, but somehow unable to form the words. The moment was too intimate, too perfectly candlelit and lovely.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

"Yes. Well, no." He thought of the kippers. "Not exactly."

Her brows rose. "*That* sounds intriguing."

"Hardly. I'm having a tray sent to my room, actually. I've always hated dining alone downstairs."

"I'm the same," she agreed. She stood for a moment, then said, "It's ham pie. Very good."

"Excellent." He cleared his throat. "Well, I . . . ought to go. Good night, Billie."

He turned. He didn't want to turn.

"George, wait!"

He hated that he was holding his breath.

"George, this is madness."

He turned back. She was still standing in the entrance to her room, one hand resting lightly on the edge of the door. Her face was so expressive. Had it always been so?

Yes, he thought. She'd never been one to hide her feelings beneath a mask of indifference. It was one of the things he'd found so annoying about her when they were growing up. She simply refused to be ignored.

But that was then. And this was . . .

Something else entirely.

"Madness?" he echoed. He wasn't sure what she meant. He didn't want to make assumptions.

Her lips trembled into a tentative smile. "Surely we can be friends."

Friends?

"I mean, I know . . ."

"That I kissed you?" he supplied.

She gasped, then practically hissed, "I wasn't going to say it quite so bluntly. For heaven's sake, George, your mother is still awake." And while she was frantically peering down the hall, George threw over a lifetime of gentlemanly behavior and stepped into her bedroom.

"George!"

"Apparently one *can* whisper and scream at the same time," he mused.

"You can't be in here," she said.

He grinned as she closed the door. "I didn't think you wished to conduct this sort of conversation in the hall."

The look she gave him was sarcasm in its purest form. "I believe there are two drawing rooms and a library downstairs."

"And look what happened last time we were in a drawing room together."

Her face flushed instantly. But Billie was a trouper, and after a moment of what appeared to be gnashing her teeth and telling herself to calm down, she asked, "Have you learned anything of Edward?"

Like that, his jaunty mood deflated. "Nothing of substance."

"But something?" she asked hopefully.

He didn't want to talk about Edward. For so many reasons. But Billie deserved a reply, so he said, "Just the suppositions of a retired general."

"I'm sorry. That must be terribly frustrating. I wish there was something I could do to help." She leaned on the edge of her bed and looked over at him with an earnest frown. "It's so *hard* to do nothing. I hate it."

He closed his eyes. Breathed out through his nose. Once again, they were in perfect agreement.

"Sometimes I think I should have been born a boy."

"No." His response was immediate and emphatic.

She let out a little laugh. “That’s very kind of you. I suppose you have to say that after, well, you know . . .”

He knew. But not nearly enough.

“I would love to own Aubrey,” she said wistfully. “I know every corner. I can name every crop in every field, and every name of every tenant, and half of their birthdays, too.”

He looked at her in wonderment. She was so much more than he’d ever allowed himself to see.

“I would have been an excellent Viscount Bridgerton.”

“Your brother will learn his way,” George said gently. He sat down in the chair by the desk. She wasn’t sitting down, but she wasn’t exactly standing, either, and as he was alone with her behind a closed door, he rather thought *this* would not be the critical breach of propriety.

“Oh, I know he will,” Billie said. “Edmund is very clever, actually, when he’s not being annoying.”

“He’s fifteen. He can’t help being annoying.”

She gave him a look. “If I recall correctly, you were already a god among men by the time you were his age.”

He lifted a lazy brow. There were so many droll rejoinders to such a statement, but he decided to let them all pass and simply enjoy the easy camaraderie of the moment.

“How do you bear it?” she asked.

“Bear what?”

“This.” She raised her hands in a gesture of defeat. “The helplessness.”

He sat up a little straighter, blinking her into focus.

“You do feel it, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure I catch your meaning,” he murmured. But he had a feeling he did.

“I know you wish you could have taken a commission. I see it in your face every time your brothers talk about it.”

Was he that obvious? He’d hoped not. But at the same time . . .

“George?”

He looked up.

“You’d gone very silent,” she said.

“I was just thinking . . .”

She smiled indulgently, allowing him to think aloud.

“I *don’t* wish I’d taken a commission.”

She drew back, her surprise evident in the way her chin tucked into her neck.

“My place is here,” he said.

Her eyes lit with something that might have been pride. “You sound as if you’re only just realizing it.”

“No,” he mused. “I’ve always known that.”

“You hadn’t accepted it?” she prodded.

He chuckled wryly. “No, I had definitely accepted it. I just think I hadn’t let myself . . .” He looked up, straight into her lovely brown eyes, and paused for a moment as he realized what he wanted to say. “I hadn’t let myself *like* it.”

“And now you do?”

His nod was quick and firm. “I do. If I don’t—” He stopped, corrected himself. “If *we* don’t care for the land and its people, what are Edward and Andrew even fighting for?”

“If they are going to risk their lives for King and Country,” she said softly, “we should make it a *good* King and Country.”

Their eyes met, and Billie smiled. Just a little. And they didn’t speak. Because they didn’t need to. Until finally she said, “They’re going to be up with your food soon,” she said.

He quirked a brow. “Are you trying to be rid of me?”

“I’m trying to protect my reputation,” she retorted. “And yours.”

“If you recall, I did ask you to marry me.”

“No, you didn’t,” she scoffed. “You said, ‘Of course I’ll marry you,’”—this she said in a remarkable impression of a distempered crone—“which is not the same thing at all.”

He eyed her thoughtfully. “I could get down on one knee.”

“Stop teasing me, George. It’s very unkind of you.” Her voice wobbled, and he felt something tight, squeezing in his chest. His lips parted, but she pushed herself off the edge of her bed and walked over to her window, crossing her arms as she stared out into the night.

“It’s not something you joke about,” she said, but her words were oddly formed, round and wide, almost as if they were coming from somewhere deep in her throat.

He came quickly to his feet. “Billie, I’m sorry. You must know I would never—”

“You should go.”

He paused.

“You should go,” she said, more forcefully this time. “They’ll be here with your dinner at any moment.”

It was a dismissal, clear and sensible. It was a kindness, really. She was stopping him from making a fool of himself. If she wanted him to propose, wouldn’t she have taken the bait he’d so casually dangled?

“As you wish,” he said, executing a polite bow even though she was not facing him. He saw her nod, and then he left the room.

Oh, dear God, what had she done?

He could have proposed to her. Right then and there. *George*.

And she had *stopped* him. Stopped him because—bloody hell, she didn’t know why. Hadn’t she spent the entire day in a blue haze, wondering why he was avoiding her and how she might get him to kiss her again?

Wouldn’t marriage ensure future kisses? Wasn’t it *precisely* what she needed to achieve her (admittedly unladylike) goals?

But he’d been sitting there, sprawled out in the desk chair like he owned the place (which she supposed he did, or rather, would), and she couldn’t tell if he meant it. Was he teasing her? Having a spot of fun? George had never been cruel; he wouldn’t purposefully hurt her feelings, but if he thought *she* regarded the whole thing as a joke, then he might feel permitted to treat it as such . . .

It was what Andrew would have done. Not that Andrew would ever have kissed her, or that she’d have wanted him to, but if for some reason they’d been joking about marriage, absolutely he’d have said something ridiculous about getting down on one knee.

But with George . . . she just hadn’t known if he’d *meant* it. And then what if she’d said yes? What if she’d said that she’d *love* for him to get down on one knee and pledge his eternal devotion . . .

And then found out he was joking?

Her face flamed just thinking of it.

She didn’t think he would tease about such a thing. But then again, this was George. He was the eldest son of the Earl of Manston, the noble and honorable Lord Kennard. If he were going to propose to a lady, he would never do it slapdash. He’d have the ring, and he’d have the poetic words, and he certainly wouldn’t leave it up to her to decide if he ought to do it on bended knee.

Which meant he couldn't have meant it, right? George would never be so unsure of himself.

She flopped on her bed, pressing both hands against her chest, trying to quell her racing heart. She used to hate that about George—his unshakable confidence. When they were children he always knew better than the rest of them. About everything. It had been the *most* annoying thing, even if now she realized that at five years their senior, he probably *had* known better about everything. There was no way the rest of them were going to catch up until they reached adulthood.

And now . . . now she loved his quiet confidence. He was never brash, never boastful. He was just . . . George.

And she loved him.

She loved him, and—*OH DEAR GOD, SHE HAD JUST STOPPED HIM FROM ASKING HER TO MARRY HIM.*

What had she done?

And more importantly, how could she undo it?

Chapter 20

George was always the first in his family to come down to breakfast, but when he stepped into the informal dining room the following morning, his mother was already at the table, sipping a cup of tea.

There was no way this was a coincidence.

“George,” she said immediately upon seeing him, “we must speak.”

“Mother,” he murmured, stepping over to the sideboard to fix his plate. Whatever it was she was het up over, he was not in the mood. He was tired and he was cranky. He might have only *almost* proposed marriage the night before, but he had most definitely been rejected.

It was not the stuff dreams were made of. Nor a good night’s sleep.

“As you know,” she said, jumping right into it, “tonight is Lady Wintour’s ball.”

He spooned some coddled eggs onto his plate. “I assure you it has not slipped my mind.”

Her lips tightened, but she did not take him to task for his sarcasm. Instead she waited with heavy patience until he joined her at the table.

“It is about Billie,” she said.

Of course it was.

“I am very concerned about her.”

So was he, but he doubted it was for the same reasons. He pasted a bland smile on his face. “What is the problem?”

“She is going to need all the help she can get tonight.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he scoffed, but he knew what she meant. Billie was not meant for London. She was a country girl, through and through.

“She lacks confidence, George. The vultures will see this instantly.”

“Do you ever wonder why we choose to socialize with these vultures?” he mused.

“Because half of them are really doves.”

“Doves?” He stared at her in disbelief.

She waved a hand. “Perhaps carrier pigeons. But that is not the point.”

“I would never be so lucky.”

She gave him just enough of a look to make it clear that while she had heard this, she was graciously choosing to ignore it. “Her success is in your hands.”

He knew he would regret encouraging her to expand upon this point, but he could not stop himself from saying, “I beg your pardon?”

“You know as well as I do that the surest way to ensure a debutante’s success is for an eligible gentleman—such as yourself—to pay her attention.”

For some reason, this irritated him greatly. “Since when is Billie a debutante?”

His mother stared at him as if he were an idiot. “Why else do you think I brought her to London?”

“I believe you said you wished for her company?” he countered.

His mother waved that away as the nonsense she clearly saw it to be. “The girl needed some polish.”

No, George thought, *she didn’t*. He jabbed his fork into his sausage with far too much force. “She’s perfectly fine the way she is.”

“That is very gracious of you, George,” she replied, inspecting her muffin before deciding to add an additional dab of butter, “but I assure you, no lady wishes to be ‘perfectly fine.’”

He fixed a patient expression on his face. “Your point, Mother?”

“Merely that I need you to do your part this evening. You *must* dance with her.”

She made it sound as if he thought it a chore. “Of course I’ll dance with her.” It would be awkward as hell, all things considered, but even so, he could not help but look forward to it. He’d been longing to dance with Billie since that morning back at Aubrey Hall when she’d looked up at him, planted her hands on her hips, and demanded, “Have you ever danced with me?”

At the time, he couldn’t believe that he’d never done so. After all those years as neighbors, how could he not have danced with her?

But now he couldn’t believe that he’d ever thought he *had*. If he had danced with Billie, music washing over them as he placed his hand on her hip . . . it was not something he could forget.

And he wanted it. He wanted to take her hand in his and dance her down the line, to step and dip, and feel her innate grace. But more than that, he

wanted *her* to feel it. He wanted her to know that she was every bit as womanly and elegant as the rest, that she was perfect in his eyes, not just “perfectly fine,” and if he could only—

“George!”

He looked up.

“Kindly pay attention,” his mother said.

“My apologies,” he murmured. He had no idea how long he’d been lost in his own thoughts, although generally speaking, with his mother even a second or two of woolgathering was not to be tolerated.

“I was saying,” she said somewhat peevishly, “that you must dance with Billie twice.”

“Consider it done.”

Her eyes narrowed; she was clearly suspicious at the ease at which she was getting her way. “You must also be sure to allow at least ninety minutes to elapse between dances.”

He rolled his eyes and did not bother to hide it. “As you wish.”

Lady Manston stirred a bit of sugar into her tea. “You must appear attentive.”

“But not too attentive?”

“Don’t mock me,” she warned.

He set down his fork. “Mother, I assure you that I am every bit as eager for Billie’s happiness as you are.”

This seemed to appease her somewhat. “Very well,” she said, “I am pleased that we are in agreement. I wish to arrive at the ball at half past nine. This will give us the opportunity to make a proper entrance, but it will still be early enough that it won’t be so difficult to make introductions. It gets so loud at these things.”

George nodded his agreement.

“I think we should depart at nine—there will surely be a line of carriages outside of Wintour House and you know how long *that* takes—so if you could be ready by three-quarters past eight—”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry,” George interrupted, thinking of the ridiculous message he was meant to pass along to Robert Tallywhite. “I cannot accompany you. I’ll need to make my own way to the ball.”

“Don’t be absurd,” she said dismissively. “We need you to escort us.”

“I wish I could,” he said quite honestly. He would have liked nothing better than for Billie to make her entrance on his arm, but he’d already given

a great deal of thought to this evening's schedule, and he had determined that it was imperative that he arrive on his own. If he came with the ladies, he would have to practically abandon them at the door. And heaven knew *that* would never happen without a full interrogation from his mother.

No, better to get there earlier so that he could find Tallywhite and take care of the whole thing before they even arrived.

"What can possibly be more important than accompanying Billie and me?" his mother demanded.

"I have a previous engagement," he replied, lifting his own cup of tea to his lips. "It cannot be avoided."

His mother's lips pressed into a firm line. "I am most displeased."

"I am sorry to disappoint."

She began stirring her tea with increasing vigor. "I could be completely wrong about this, you know. She could be an instant success. We could be surrounded by gentlemen from the moment we arrive."

"Your tone seems to imply that you think that would be a bad thing," George said.

"Of course not. But you won't be there to see it."

In truth, it was the last thing George wanted to see. Billie, surrounded by a pack of gentlemen astute enough to realize what a treasure she was? It was the stuff of nightmares.

And a moot point, as it happened. "Actually," he told his mother, "I will likely arrive at Wintour House before you do."

"Well, then I see no reason you cannot circle back 'round from your errand and pick us up on the way."

He fought the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Mother, it won't work. Please leave it at that and know that I will see you at the ball, where I shall dance such attendance upon Billie that the gentlemen of London will be waiting in line just to fall at her feet."

"Good morning."

They both turned to see Billie standing in the doorway. George stood to greet her. He wasn't sure how much she had heard, beyond his obvious sarcasm, and he very much feared she would take it the wrong way.

"It is very kind of you to agree to attend to me tonight," she said, her tone so sweet and pleasant that he could not quite gauge its sincerity. She walked over to the sideboard and picked up a plate. "I do hope it will not be too much of a chore."

Ah, and *there* she was.

“On the contrary,” he replied. “I am very much looking forward to being your escort.”

“But not so much that you will actually accompany us in the carriage,” his mother muttered.

“Stop,” he said.

Billie turned around, her eyes darting from Rokesby to Rokesby with unconcealed curiosity.

“I regret to inform you that I have an unbreakable commitment this evening,” he told her, “which means I will not be able to drive to Wintour House with you. But I will see you there. And I hope you will save me two dances.”

“Of course,” she murmured. But then again, she could hardly say anything else.

“Since you cannot escort us this evening . . .” Lady Manston began.

George nearly threw down his napkin.

“. . . perhaps you may assist us in some other way.”

“Please,” he said, “inform me how I may be of service.”

Billie made a sound that might have been a snort. He wasn’t sure. But it was certainly in her nature to find amusement in his rapidly dwindling patience with his mother.

“You know all of the young gentlemen better than I do,” Lady Manston continued. “Are there any we should avoid?”

All of them, George wanted to say.

“And are there any we should particularly look out for? That Billie may plan to set her cap for?”

“That I may—*what?*”

Billie must truly have been startled, George thought. She dropped three slices of bacon on the floor.

“Set your cap, darling,” Lady Manston said. “It’s an expression. Surely you’ve heard it.”

“Of course I’ve heard it,” Billie said, hurrying over to take her place at the table. “I don’t, however, see how it applies to me. I did not come to London to look for a husband.”

“You must always be looking for a husband, Billie,” Lady Manston said, then turned right back to George. “What about Ashbourne’s son? Not the oldest, of course. He’s already married, and as delightful as you are”—this,

she said over her shoulder to the still-aghast Billie—"I don't think you could snag the heir to a dukedom."

"I'm fairly certain I don't want to," Billie said.

"Very practical of you, my dear. It's quite a lot of pomp."

"So says the wife of an earl," George remarked.

"It's not at all the same thing," his mother said. "And you didn't answer my question. What about Ashbourne's son?"

"No."

"No?" his mother echoed. "No, as in you don't have an opinion?"

"No, as in no. He is not for Billie."

Who, George could not help but note, was watching the mother-son exchange with an odd mix of curiosity and alarm.

"Any particular reason?" Lady Manston asked.

"He gambles," George lied. Well, maybe it wasn't a lie. All gentlemen gambled. He had no idea if the one in question did so to excess.

"What about the Billington heir? I think he—"

"Also no."

His mother regarded him with an impassive expression.

"He's too young," George said, hoping it was true.

"He is?" She frowned. "I suppose he might be. I can't remember precisely."

"I don't suppose *I* have any say in the matter," Billie put in.

"Of course you do," Lady Manston said, patting her hand. "Just not yet."

Billie's lips parted, but she appeared not to know what to say.

"How could you," Lady Manston continued, "when you don't know anyone but us?"

Billie put a piece of bacon in her mouth and began to chew with impressive force. George suspected this was to stop herself from saying something she'd regret.

"Don't worry, my dear," Lady Manston said.

George took a sip of his tea. "She doesn't look worried to me."

Billie shot him a grateful look.

His mother ignored him completely. "You will get to know everyone soon enough, Billie. And then you can decide with whom you wish to pursue an acquaintance."

"I don't know that I plan to be here long enough to form opinions one way or another," Billie said, her voice—in George's opinion—remarkably

even and calm.

“Nonsense,” Lady Manston said. “Just leave everything to me.”

“You’re not her mother,” George said quietly.

To which his mother raised her brows and said, “I could be.”

To which both George and Billie stared at her in openmouthed shock.

“Oh, come now, you two,” Lady Manston said, “surely it can be no surprise that I have long hoped for an alliance between the Rokesbys and Bridgertons.”

“Alliance?” Billie echoed, and all George could think was that it was a terrible, clinical word, one that could never encompass all that he had come to feel for her.

“Match, marriage, whatever you wish to call it,” Lady Manston said. “We are the dearest of friends. Of course I should like to be family.”

“If it makes any difference,” Billie said quietly, “I already think of you as family.”

“Oh, I know that, dear. I feel the same way. I’ve just always thought it would be wonderful to make it official. But no matter. There is always Georgiana.”

Billie cleared her throat. “She’s very young yet.”

Lady Manston smiled devilishly. “So is Nicholas.”

The look on Billie’s face came so close to horror George almost laughed. He probably would have done if he hadn’t been fairly certain his own face held the same expression.

“I see that I have shocked you,” his mother said. “But any mother will tell you—it’s never too early to plan for the future.”

“I would not recommend mentioning this to Nicholas,” George murmured.

“Or Georgiana, I’m sure,” his mother said, pouring herself yet another cup of tea. “Would you like a cup, Billie?”

“Ehrm . . . yes, thank you.”

“Oh, and that’s another thing,” Lady Manston said as she put a splash of milk in Billie’s teacup. “We need to stop calling you Billie.”

Billie blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

In went the tea, and then Lady Manston held the cup out and said, “Starting today we will use your given name. Sybilla.”

Billie’s mouth hung open for a brief—but noticeable—moment before she said, “That’s what my mother calls me when she’s cross.”

“Then we shall begin a new, happier tradition.”

“Is this really necessary?” George asked.

“I know it will be difficult to remember,” Lady Manston said, finally setting the cup down near Billie’s plate, “but I think it’s for the best. As a name, Billie is so, well . . . I don’t know that I would call it mannish, but I don’t think it accurately represents how we wish to portray you.”

“It accurately represents who she *is*,” George practically growled.

“Goodness. I had no idea you would feel so strongly about this,” his mother said, peering over at him with a flawlessly innocent expression. “But of course, it’s not up to you.”

“I would prefer to be called Billie,” Billie said.

“I’m not sure it’s up to you, either, dear.”

George’s fork came down heavily on his plate. “Who the devil is it up to, then?”

His mother regarded him as if he had asked *just* the stupidest question. “Me.”

“You,” he said.

“I know how these things work. I’ve done this before, you know.”

“Didn’t Mary find her husband in Kent?” George reminded her.

“Only after she gained her polish in London.”

Good God. His mother had gone mad. It was the only explanation. She could be tenacious, and she could be exacting when it came to society and etiquette, but never had she managed to weave the two together with such complete irrationality.

“Surely it doesn’t matter,” Billie said. “Won’t most everyone be calling me Miss Bridgerton, anyway?”

“Of course,” Lady Manston conceded, “but they will hear us speaking with you. It’s not as if they won’t *know* your Christian name.”

“This is the most asinine conversation,” George grumbled.

His mother just flicked him A Look. “Sybilla,” she said, turning to Billie, “I know you did not come to London with the intention of looking for a husband, but surely you see the convenience of it now that you’re here. You’ll never find so many eligible gentlemen in one place in Kent.”

“I don’t know,” Billie murmured over her tea, “it’s chock-full when all of the Rokesbys are home.”

George looked up sharply just as his mother burst out in a trill of laughter. “Too true, Billie,” she said with a warm smile (apparently forgetting that she

meant to call her Sybilla), “but alas, I have only the one home right now.”

“Two,” George said incredulously. Apparently if one never went away, one wasn’t counted as being home.

His mother’s brows rose. “I was speaking of you, George.”

Well, now he felt like a fool.

He stood. “I will call Billie what she wishes to be called. And I will see you at Wintour House as promised, when the ball is underway. If you will excuse me, I have much to attend to.”

He didn’t actually, but he didn’t think he could listen to another word of his mother’s on the topic of Billie’s debut.

The sooner they all got this wretched day over with the better.

Billie watched him walk away, and she wasn’t going to say anything, honestly she wasn’t, but even as she dipped her spoon into her porridge, she heard herself call out, “Wait!”

George paused at the door.

“Just a quick word,” she said, hastily setting down her napkin. She had no idea what that quick word might be, but something was there inside of her, and it obviously needed to get out. She turned back to Lady Manston. “Pray excuse me. I’ll be but a moment.”

George stepped out of the small dining room and into the hall to afford them a spot of privacy.

Billie cleared her throat. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

Good question. She wasn’t sorry. “Actually,” she said, “it’s thank you.”

“You’re thanking me,” he said softly.

“For standing up for me,” she said. “Calling me Billie.”

His mouth curved into a wry half-smile. “I don’t think I could call you Sybilla if I tried.”

She returned the expression in kind. “I’m not sure I would answer if it came from any voice other than my mother’s.”

He studied her face for a moment, then said, “Don’t let my mother turn you into someone you’re not.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s possible at this late stage. I’m far too set in my ways.”

“At the grand age of three-and-twenty?”

“It’s a very grand age when you’re an unmarried female,” she retorted.

Maybe she shouldn't have said it; there were too many not-quite marriage proposals in their history. (*One*, Billie thought, was too many. Two practically marked her as a freak of nature.)

But she didn't regret saying it. She couldn't regret it. Not if she wanted to turn one of those almost-proposals into something real.

And she did. She'd been up half the night—well, twenty minutes at least—berating herself for her practically ensuring that he would not ask her to marry him. If she'd had a hair shirt (and any inclination for useless gestures), she'd have donned it.

George's brow furrowed, and of course her mind whipped into triple-speed. Was he wondering why she'd made a comment about her near-spinster status? Trying to decide how to respond? Debating her sanity?

"She did help me pick out a lovely gown for this evening," she blurted out.

"My mother?"

Billie nodded, then summoned a mischievous smile. "Although I did bring a pair of my breeches to town just in case I needed to shock her."

He let out a bark of laughter. "Did you really?"

"No," she admitted, her heart suddenly lighter now that he'd laughed, "but just the fact that I pondered it means something, don't you think?"

"Absolutely." He looked down at her, his eyes so blue in the morning light, and his humor was replaced by something more serious. "Please allow me to apologize for my mother. I don't know what's come over her."

"I think perhaps she feels"—Billie frowned for a moment, choosing the best word—"guilty."

"Guilty?" George's face betrayed his surprise. "Whatever for?"

"That neither of your brothers ever offered for me." Another thing she probably should not have said. But as it happened, Billie *did* think that Lady Manston felt this way.

And when George's expression slid from curiosity to something that might have been jealousy . . . well, Billie could not help but feel a little pleased.

"So I think she's trying to make it up to me," she said gamely. "It's not as if I was waiting for one of them to ask me, but I think she thinks I was, so now she wants to introduce me—"

"Enough," George practically barked.

"I beg your pardon?"

He cleared his throat. "Enough," he said in a much more evenly tempered voice. "It's ridiculous."

"That your mother feels this way?"

"That she thinks introducing you to a pack of useless fops is a sensible idea."

Billie took a moment to enjoy this statement, then said, "She means well."

George scoffed audibly at this.

"She does," Billie insisted, unable to suppress a smile. "She just wants what she thinks is best for me."

"What *she* thinks."

"Well, yes. There's no convincing her otherwise. It's a Rokesby trait, I'm afraid."

"You may have just insulted me."

"No," she said, maintaining an impressively straight face.

"I'll let it pass."

"Very kind of you, sir."

He rolled his eyes at her impertinence, and once again, Billie felt more at ease. Perhaps this wasn't how the more refined ladies flirted, but it was all she knew how to do.

And it seemed to be working. Of *that* she was certain.

Maybe she did have a touch of feminine intuition after all.

Chapter 21

Later that night At the Wintour Ball

Ninety minutes in, and still he had not seen Tallywhite.

George tugged at his cravat, which he was certain his valet had tied far more tightly than usual. There was nothing out of the ordinary about Lady Wintour's Spring Soirée; in fact, he'd have gone so far as to say that it was so ordinary as to be dull, but he could not shake the odd, prickly sensation that kept crawling up his neck. Everywhere he turned, it felt like someone was looking at him strangely, watching him with far more curiosity than his appearance should warrant.

Clearly, it was all in his imagination, which led to a most salient point—that clearly, he was not cut out for this sort of thing.

He'd timed his arrival carefully. Too early, and he would draw unwanted attention. Like most single men of his age, he usually spent a few hours at his club before fulfilling his social obligations. If he showed up at the ball on the dot of eight, it would look strange. (And he would have to spend the next two hours making conversation with his nearly deaf great-aunt, who was as legendary for her punctuality as she was for her fragrant breath.)

But he didn't want to follow his usual schedule, either, which involved arriving well after the party was underway. It would be too difficult to spot Tallywhite in such a crush, or worse, he could miss him altogether.

So after careful consideration, he stepped into the Wintour ballroom approximately one hour after the designated starting time. It was still unfashionably early, but there were enough people milling about for George to remain unobtrusive.

Not for the first time, he wondered if perhaps he was overthinking this whole thing. It seemed an awful lot of mental preparation for the task of

uttering a line from a nursery rhyme.

A quick check of the time told him that it was nearly ten, which meant that if Billie had not already arrived, she would do so soon. His mother had been aiming for nine-thirty, but he'd heard numerous grumblings about the lengthy line of carriages queued up outside Wintour House. Billie and his mother were almost certainly stuck in the Manston coach and four, waiting for their turn to alight.

He didn't have much time if he wanted to get this taken care of before they arrived.

His expression carefully bored, he continued to move about the room, murmuring the appropriate greetings as he brushed past acquaintances. A footman was circulating with glasses of punch, so he took one, barely moistening his lips as he peered out at the ballroom over the rim of the glass. He did not see Tallywhite, but he did see—damn it, was that Lord Arbuthnot?

Why the hell was he asking George to deliver a message when he could bloody well have done it himself?

But maybe there were reasons why Arbuthnot could not be seen with Tallywhite. Maybe there was someone *else* here, someone who could not be permitted to know that the two men were working together. Or maybe Tallywhite was the one in the dark. Maybe he didn't know that Arbuthnot was the one with the message.

Or . . .

Maybe Tallywhite *did* know that Arbuthnot was his contact, and the whole thing was a plan to test George so that they could use him for future endeavors. Maybe George had just accidentally embarked upon a career in espionage.

He looked down at the punch in his hand. Maybe he needed . . . No, he *definitely* needed something with a higher degree of alcohol.

"What is this rot?" he muttered, setting the glass back down.

And then he saw her.

He stopped breathing. "Billie?"

She was a vision. Her gown was of the deepest crimson, the color an unexpectedly vibrant choice for an unmarried miss, but on Billie it was perfection. Her skin was like milk, her eyes sparkled, and her lips . . . He knew she did not color them—Billie would never have patience for that sort of thing—but somehow they looked richer, as if they'd absorbed some of the ruby brilliance of her gown.

He had kissed those lips. He had tasted her and adored her, and he wanted to worship her in ways she'd likely never dreamed possible.

It was odd, though; he had not heard her being announced. He was too far from the entrance, or maybe he had simply been too enmeshed in his own thoughts. But there she was, standing next to his mother, so beautiful, so radiant that he could not see anyone else.

Suddenly the rest of the world seemed like such a chore. He didn't want to be here at this dance, with people he didn't want to talk to and messages he didn't particularly wish to deliver. He didn't want to dance with young ladies he didn't know, and he didn't want to make polite conversation with people he did. He just wanted Billie, and he wanted her all to himself.

He forgot about Tallywhite. He forgot about pease, porridge, *and* pudding, and he stalked across the room with such single-minded purpose that the crowds seemed to melt from his path.

And somehow, amazingly, the rest of the world had not yet noticed her. She was so beautiful, so uncommonly alive and *real* in this room full of waxen dolls. She would not go undiscovered for long.

But not yet. Soon he would have to fight the throngs of eager young gentlemen, but for now, she was still his alone.

She was nervous, though. It wasn't obvious; he was sure he was the only one who could tell. With Billie, you had to *know* her. She was standing proud, back straight and head high, but her eyes were flitting about, glancing through the crowd.

Looking for him?

He stepped forward.

"George!" she said delightedly. "Er, I mean, Lord Kennard. How lovely and"—she gave him a hidden smile—"unsurprising to see you."

"Miss Bridgerton," he murmured, bowing over her hand.

"George," his mother said, nodding her head in greeting.

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Mother."

"Doesn't Billie look beautiful?"

He nodded slowly, unable to take his eyes from her. "Yes," he said, "she looks . . . beautiful." But it wasn't the right word. It was far too prosaic. Beauty wasn't the fierce intelligence that gave her eyes depth, and it wasn't the wit behind her smile. She was beautiful, but she wasn't *only* beautiful, and that was why he loved her.

"I hope that you have saved your first dance for me," he said.

Billie looked over at his mother for confirmation.

“Yes, you may dance your first with George,” she said with an indulgent smile.

“There are so many rules,” Billie said sheepishly. “I couldn’t remember if for some reason I was meant to save you for later.”

“Have you been here long?” Lady Manston asked.

“An hour or so,” George replied. “My errand took less time than I’d anticipated.”

“It was an errand?” she said. “I thought it was a meeting.”

If George hadn’t been so entranced with Billie, he might have had the wherewithal to muster irritation at this. His mother was clearly fishing for information, or at the very least, attempting to scold him retroactively. But he just couldn’t bring himself to care. Not when Billie was looking up at him with shining eyes.

“You really do look beautiful,” he said.

“Thank you.” She smiled awkwardly, and his gaze fell to her hands, which were nervously riffling against the folds of her skirt. “You look very handsome as well.”

Beside them, Lady Manston was beaming.

“Would you care to dance?” he blurted.

“Now?” She smiled adorably. “Is there music?”

There wasn’t. It was some testament to how foolish in love he’d become that he did not even feel embarrassed. “Perhaps a turn about the room,” he suggested. “The musicians will begin again shortly.”

Billie looked to Lady Manston, who gave her approval with a wave. “Go,” she said, “but stay well within sight.”

George was jolted out of his dreamy haze for long enough to shoot his mother an icy look. “I would not dream of doing anything to compromise her reputation.”

“Of course not,” she said airily. “I want to make sure she’s *seen*. There are many eligible gentlemen here tonight. More than I expected.”

George grabbed Billie’s arm.

“I saw the Billington heir,” Lady Manston continued, “and you know, I *don’t* think he’s too young.”

George gave her a look of mild disdain. “I don’t think she wants to be Billie Billington, Mother.”

Billie choked down a laugh. “Oh, my, I hadn’t even thought.”

“Good.”

“She’s Sybilla now, anyway,” his mother said, demonstrating her talent for hearing only what she wished to. “And Sybilla Billington has rather a nice ring to it.”

George looked at Billie and said, “It doesn’t.”

She pressed her lips together, looking highly amused.

“His surname is Wycombe,” Lady Manston said. “Just so you know.”

George rolled his eyes. His mother was a menace. He held out his arm. “Shall we, Billie?”

Billie nodded and turned so they were facing in the same direction.

“If you see Ashbourne’s son . . .”

But George had already led Billie away.

“I don’t know what Ashbourne’s son looks like,” Billie said. “Do you?”

“Bit of a paunch,” George lied.

“Oh.” Billie frowned. “I can’t imagine why she’d think of him for me, then. She knows I’m very active.”

George made a murmuring noise that was meant to convey his agreement and continued his slow promenade along the perimeter of the ballroom, enjoying the proprietary sensation of her hand on his arm.

“There was quite a line of carriages to get in,” Billie said. “I told your mother we should just get out and walk, since the weather is so fine, but she was having none of it.”

George chuckled. Only Billie would make such a suggestion.

“Honestly,” she grumbled, “you would have thought I’d asked if we could stop off and see the King for a cup of tea on the way.”

“Well, seeing as the palace is quite across town . . .” George teased.

She elbowed him in the ribs. But lightly, so no one would see.

“I am glad you did not wear a wig,” he said to her. Her hair had been styled elaborately, as was the fashion, but it was her own, and only lightly powdered. He liked that the rich chestnut color shone through; it was Billie without artifice, and if there was one thing that defined her, it was that she *had* no artifice.

He wanted her to enjoy her time in London, but he did not want her to be changed by it.

“Dreadfully unfashionable, I know,” she said, touching the long lock of hair that had been left to drape over her shoulder, “but I managed to convince your mother that there was a good chance I would step too close to a scone

and set myself on fire.”

George turned sharply.

“Given my history being presented at court,” she said, “it was not as unreasonable as it sounds.”

He tried not to laugh. He really did.

“Oh, please do,” she said. “It has taken me this long to be able to make a joke of it. We might as well be amused.”

“What did happen?” he asked. “Or don’t I want to know?”

“Oh, you want to know,” she said with an impertinent sideways look. “Trust me. You definitely want to know.”

He waited.

“But you won’t find out now,” she declared. “A woman must have her secrets, or so your mother keeps telling me.”

“Somehow I don’t think setting fire to the Court of St. James was the sort of secret she had in mind.”

“Considering how fervently she wishes me to be seen as a young lady of grace and refinement, I think it might be exactly what she had in mind.” She glanced over at him with an arch expression. “Lady Alexandra Fortescue-Endicott would never accidentally set someone on fire.”

“No, if she did it, I imagine it would be purposeful.”

Billie snorted back a laugh. “George Rokesby, that’s a terrible thing to say. And probably not true.”

“You don’t think so?”

“Much as it pains me to admit it, no. She’s not that evil. Or clever.”

He paused for a moment, then asked, “It *was* an accident, wasn’t it?”

She gave him a look.

“Of course it was,” he said, but he didn’t sound nearly as certain as he ought.

“Kennard!”

At the sound of his name, George looked reluctantly away from Billie. Two university friends of his—Sir John Willingham and Freddie Coventry—were making their way through the crowd. They were both perfectly pleasant, utterly respectable, and exactly the sort of gentlemen his mother would wish him to introduce to Billie.

George found that *he* rather wished to hit one of them. It didn’t matter which. Either would do, so long as he could aim for the face.

“Kennard,” Sir John said, approaching with a grin. “It’s been an age. I

wouldn't have thought you'd be in town yet."

"Family business," George said noncommittally.

Sir John and Freddie both nodded and said something along the lines of *just so*, and then they both looked over at Billie with clear expectation.

George forced a smile and turned to Billie. "May I present Sir John Willingham and Mr. Frederick Coventry." There were murmurs all around, and then he said, "Gentlemen, this is Miss Sybilla Bridgerton of Aubrey Hall in Kent."

"Kent, you say," Freddie exclaimed. "Are you neighbors, then?"

"We are indeed," Billie said prettily. "I have known Lord Kennard all of my life."

George fought a scowl. He knew she could not use his Christian name in such a milieu, but it still grated to be referred to so formally.

"You are a lucky man indeed," Freddie said, "to have such loveliness so close to home."

George stole a glance at Billie to see if she was as appalled by the sugary compliment as he was, but she was still smiling placidly, looking for all the world like a sweet-tempered, gentle debutante.

He snorted. Sweet-tempered and gentle? Billie? If they only knew.

"Did you say something?" she asked.

He matched her smile with one of his own, equally bland. "Just that I am indeed lucky."

Her brows rose. "How odd that I might have missed a sentence of such length."

He gave her a sideways look.

Which she returned with a secret smile.

He felt something settle within himself. All was right with the world again. Or at least all was right with this moment. The world was a bloody mess, but right here, right now, Billie was smiling secretly . . .

And he was content.

"May I claim a dance, Miss Bridgerton?" Sir John asked Billie.

"And me as well," Freddie immediately put in.

"Of course," she said, again so prettily that George wanted to gag. She didn't sound like herself.

"She has already promised her first to me," he cut in. "And the supper set."

Billie regarded him with some surprise, since she had not promised him

the supper set, but she did not contradict.

“Nevertheless,” Freddie said with smooth amusement, “there are more than two dances at a ball.”

“I should be delighted to dance with both of you,” Billie said. She looked about the room as if in search of something. “I don’t believe there are dance cards this evening . . .”

“We can survive well enough without them,” Freddie said. “All we must remember is that when you are done with Kennard here, you will dance with me.”

Billie gave a friendly smile and a regal nod.

“And then you’re on to Sir John,” Freddie noted. “But I’ll warn you, he’s an atrocious dancer. You’ll want to watch your toes.”

Billie laughed at that, full and throaty, and once again she became so incandescently beautiful that George was half-tempted to throw a blanket over her, just to stop anyone else from wanting her.

He should not begrudge her this moment in the sun. He knew that. She deserved to be adored and fêted, to have her much-deserved moment as the belle of the ball. But by God, when she smiled at Sir John or Freddie, it looked as if she actually meant it.

Who smiled like that without actually meaning it? Did she have any idea what a smile like that could lead to? The two gentlemen were going to think she was interested. George had a sudden vision of bouquets filling the front hall of Manston House, of young gentlemen queuing up for the privilege of kissing her hand.

“Is something wrong?” Billie asked quietly. Sir John and Freddie had been distracted by another acquaintance and had turned slightly away, so her words were for George alone.

“Of course not,” he said, but his voice was somewhat more clipped than usual.

Her brow pleated with concern. “Are you certain? You—”

“I’m fine,” he snapped.

Her brows rose. “Clearly.”

He scowled.

“If you don’t want to dance with me . . .” she began.

“*That’s* what you think this is?”

“So there *is* something!” Her expression was so triumphant; she really ought to have had a Pall Mall mallet in her hand to complete the look.

“For the love of God, Billie,” he muttered, “it’s not a competition.”

“I don’t even know what *it* is.”

“You shouldn’t be smiling like that at other gentlemen,” he said in a hushed voice.

“*What?*” She drew back, and he wasn’t sure if it was out of disbelief or outrage.

“It will give them the wrong impression.”

“I thought the whole purpose was for me to attract gentlemen,” she practically hissed.

Outrage, then. And quite a lot of it.

George had just enough presence of mind not to blurt out the spectacularly inane, “Yes, but not *too* much attention.” Instead he warned, “Do not be surprised if they come calling tomorrow.”

“Again, isn’t that the point?”

George had no answer, because there *was* no answer. He was being an idiot, that much was clear to both of them.

Good God, how had the conversation deteriorated to *this*?

“Billie, look,” he said, “I simply—”

He frowned. Arbuthnot was making his way over.

“You simply . . .” Billie prompted.

He shook his head, and she was smart enough to know that the motion had nothing to do with her. She followed his gaze over toward Arbuthnot, but the older gentleman had stopped to talk with someone else.

“Who are you looking at?” she asked.

He turned back and fixed his full attention on her. “No one.”

She rolled her eyes at the obvious lie.

“Kennard,” Freddie Coventry said, returning to their sides as Sir John wandered off, “I do believe the orchestra is retaking their positions. You had best lead Miss Bridgerton to the dance floor or I shall have to accuse you of shady dealings.” He leaned toward Billie and said with faux confidentiality, “It will not do for him to claim your first dance and then keep you here among the wallflowers.”

She laughed, but only a little, and to George’s ears it did not sound quite true. “He would never do that,” she said, “if for no other reason than his mother would have his head.”

“Oh-ho!” Freddie chortled. “So *that’s* how it is.”

George smiled tightly. He wanted to throttle Billie for emasculating him

so efficiently in front of his friends, but he was still very much aware of Arbuthnot, just a few feet away, presumably angling for a moment alone.

Freddie's voice dropped to a murmuring tease. "I don't think he's going to dance with you."

Billie looked over at George, and when his eyes met hers, he felt like he'd found his entire world. He bowed and held out his arm, because bloody hell, he'd been waiting for this moment for what felt like years.

But of course that was when Arbuthnot finally arrived. "Kennard," he said, his genial greeting exactly what one might expect from a man to the son of a friend. "Good to see you here. What brings you to town?"

"A dance with Miss Bridgerton," Freddie drawled, "but he doesn't seem quite able to lead her to the floor."

Arbuthnot chuckled. "Oh, I'm sure he's not as incapable as that."

George couldn't decide which of them he wanted to kill first.

"Perhaps I should dance with *you*," Billie said to Freddie.

Forget the gentlemen. He'd kill Billie first. What the hell was she thinking? This was forward, even for her. Ladies did not ask gentlemen to dance, especially when their acquaintance was of five minutes' duration.

"A lady who speaks her mind," Freddie said. "How perfectly refreshing. I see why Lord Kennard speaks so highly of you."

"He speaks of me?"

"Not to him," George bit off.

"Well, he should," Freddie said with a flirtatious waggle of his brows. "You would certainly be a more interesting topic than our last conversation, which I believe was about oatmeal."

George was fairly certain this was not true, but there seemed no way to protest without seeming childish.

"Ah, but I find oats fascinating," Billie said, and George almost laughed, because he was the only one who knew that she wasn't joking. Her father's recent successes at harvest were a testament to that.

"A truly singular female," Freddie applauded.

The orchestra began to make the groaning noises that always preceded the actual music, and Billie glanced over at George, waiting for him to repeat his bow and lead her into the dance.

But before he could do so, he heard Lord Arbuthnot clear his throat. George knew what he had to do.

"I give her over to you, Coventry," he said with a bit of a bow. "Since

you are so eager for her company.”

He tried not to meet Billie’s eyes, but he couldn’t quite manage it, and when his gaze passed over her face, he saw that she was shocked. And angry.

And hurt.

“Her next shall be yours,” Freddie said with good cheer, and George’s heart twisted just a bit as he watched him lead her off to dance.

“I am sorry to deprive you of the company of the lovely Miss Bridgerton,” Lord Arbuthnot said after a moment, “but I am sure there was more purpose to your time in town than a dance.”

There was no one else in their small circle of conversation now that Billie had trotted off with Freddie Coventry, but Arbuthnot clearly wished for circumspection, so George said, “This and that. Family business.”

“Isn’t that always the case?” He tilted his head toward George. “It’s damned exhausting, it is, being the head of the family.”

George thought of his father. “I am most fortunate that this particular privilege is not yet mine.”

“True, true.” Arbuthnot took a large swallow of the drink he was holding, a drink that looked considerably more substantial than the ridiculous punch George had been served earlier that evening. “But you will be soon enough, and we can’t pick our families, can we?”

George wondered if Arbuthnot was employing double-speak. If so, it was another indication that he was not cut out for a life of mysterious messages and secret meetings. He decided to take Arbuthnot’s words at face value and said, “If we could, I daresay I would have picked my own.”

“Well, *that’s* a lucky man for you.”

“I think so.”

“And how fares your evening? Successful?”

“I suppose it depends on how one measures success.”

“Is that so?” Arbuthnot said, sounding slightly irritated.

George felt no sympathy. *He* was the one who had started this layered conversation. He could damn well let George have a little fun with it, too. He looked Arbuthnot in the eye and said, “Alas, we come to these events in search of something, do we not?”

“You are rather philosophical for a Tuesday.”

“Normally I save my great thinking for Monday nights and Thursday afternoons,” George snapped.

Lord Arbuthnot looked at him with sharp surprise.

“I haven’t found what I’m looking for,” George said. Good God, the double-speak was giving him vertigo.

Arbuthnot’s eyes narrowed. “Are you certain?”

“As I can be. It’s rather a crush in here.”

“That is most disappointing.”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps you should dance with Lady Weatherby,” Lord Arbuthnot said softly.

George turned sharply. “I beg your pardon?”

“Have you been introduced? I assure you she is a woman without equal.”

“We have met,” George confirmed. He’d known Sally Weatherby back when she was Sally Sandwick, the older sister of one of his friends. She had married and buried a husband in the intervening years and only recently had moved from full mourning to half. Luckily for her, she wore lavender quite well.

“Weatherby was a good man,” Arbuthnot said.

“I did not know him,” George said. He’d been quite a bit older, and Sally was his second wife.

“I worked with him from time to time,” Arbuthnot said. “A good man. A very good man.”

“It has been years since I spoke with Lady Weatherby,” George said. “I don’t know if I’ll have anything to say to her.”

“Oh, I imagine you’ll think of something.”

“I imagine I will.”

“Ah, I see my wife over there,” Lord Arbuthnot said. “She’s doing that thing with her head that either means she needs my assistance or she’s about to die.”

“You must go to her, then,” George said. “Clearly.”

“I suppose she’ll need my assistance either way,” Arbuthnot said with a shrug. “Godspeed to you, son. I hope your evening proves fruitful.”

George watched as Lord Arbuthnot made his way across the room, then turned to carry out his mission.

It seemed it was time to dance with Sally Weatherby.

Chapter 22

Mr. Coventry was an accomplished dancer, but Billie could give him no more than a fraction of her attention as he led her through the intricate steps of a cotillion. George had finished talking with the older gentleman, and now he was bowing before a lady of such staggering beauty it was a wonder all the people around her didn't need to shade their eyes from her miraculous glow.

Something seething and green churned within her, and the evening, once so magical, soured.

Billie knew that she shouldn't have asked Mr. Coventry to dance. Lady Manston would have had an apoplexy if she'd been there. She probably still would, once the gossip reached her. And it would. Billie might have avoided London for years, but she knew enough to realize that this would be all over the ballroom within minutes.

And all over town by the next morning.

She would be branded as overly forward. They would say she was chasing Mr. Coventry, that she was desperate for reasons no one quite knew, but she must have a wicked secret because why else would she throw over centuries of convention and ask a gentleman to dance?

And then someone would remember that unfortunate incident at court a few years earlier. Dreadful thing, really, they'd all cluck. Miss Philomena Wren's dress had caught on *fire* of all things, and by the time anyone knew what was happening, there was a pile of young ladies moored helplessly on the floor, unable to move against the awkward weight of their wide-hipped skirts. Wasn't Miss Bridgerton there? Hadn't she been on *top* of Miss Wren?

Billie had to clench her jaw just to keep from growling. If she had been on top of Philomena Wren, it had only been to put *out* the fire, but no one would ever mention that.

That Billie had also been the cause of the fire was still a closely held secret, thank heavens. But honestly, how could a lady be expected to *move* in

full court dress? Court protocol demanded gowns with panniers far wider than anything women wore in day-to-day life. Billie normally had a wonderful sense of where her body stood in space—she was the least clumsy person she knew. But who wouldn't have had difficulty maneuvering in a contraption that had her hips jutting out nearly three feet in either direction? And more to the point, what idiot had thought it a good idea to leave a lit candle in a room populated with misshapen ladies?

The edge of her dress had been so far from her actual body that Billie hadn't even felt it when she'd knocked into the candle. Miss Wren hadn't felt it, either, when her dress began to smolder. And she never did, Billie thought with satisfaction, because *she'd* been sensible enough to leap atop the other girl, smothering the flame before it reached her skin.

And yet when all was said and done, no one seemed to recall that Billie had saved Miss Wren from death and disfigurement. No, her mother was so horrified by the entire situation that they'd abandoned their plans for Billie's London Season. Which, Billie had tried to remind herself, was what she'd wanted all along. She'd been fighting against a Season for years.

But she hadn't wanted to win her point because her parents were *ashamed* of her.

With a sigh, she forced her attention back to the cotillion she was apparently dancing with Mr. Coventry. She couldn't recall doing so, but she seemed to have taken the correct steps and not trod on any toes. Luckily she had not had to make too much conversation; it was the sort of dance that separated a lady from her partner as often as it brought them together.

"Lady Weatherby," Mr. Coventry said when he was near enough to speak.

Billie looked up with sharp surprise; she was quite certain Mr. Coventry knew her name. "I beg your pardon?"

They stepped apart, and then back together. "The woman Lord Kennard is dancing with," Mr. Coventry said. "Weatherby's widow."

"She's a widow?"

"Recently so," Mr. Coventry confirmed. "Just out of blacks."

Billie clenched her teeth, trying to keep her expression pleasant. The beautiful widow was very young, probably not more than five years Billie's senior. She was exquisitely dressed in what Billie now knew was the latest style, and her complexion was that perfect alabaster Billie could never achieve without arsenic cream.

If the sun had ever touched Lady Weatherby's perfect cheeks, Billie would eat her hat.

"She'll need to remarry," Mr. Coventry said. "Didn't give old Weatherby an heir, so she's living off the largesse of the new Lord Weatherby. Or more to the point . . ."

Again, the cotillion pulled them apart, and Billie nearly screamed with frustration. Why did people think it was a good idea to conduct important conversations while dancing? Did no one care about the timely impartation of information?

She stepped forward, back into Mr. Coventry's conversational sphere, and said, "More to the point . . . ?"

He smiled knowingly. "She must rely on the good graces of the new Lord Weatherby's wife."

"I am sure she will enjoy Lord Kennard's company," Billie said diplomatically. It wasn't going to fool Mr. Coventry; he knew perfectly well that Billie was jealous to the teeth. But she had to at least *try* to put on a show of indifference.

"I shouldn't worry," Mr. Coventry said.

"Worry?"

Once again, Billie had to wait for her answer. She stepped daintily around another lady, all the while cursing the cotillion. Wasn't there a new dance on the Continent that kept a lady and gentleman together for the entire song? It was being decried as scandalous, but honestly, could no one else see how very sensible it was?

"Kennard was not pleased to relinquish you to my care," Mr. Coventry said when he could. "If he has asked Lady Weatherby to dance, it is nothing more than tit for tat."

But that was not George's way. His humor might be sly, but his behavior never was. He would not ask one lady to dance for no purpose other than to make another jealous. He might have felt some pique, he might be furious with Billie for embarrassing him in front of his friends, but if he was dancing with Lady Weatherby, it was because he wanted to.

Billie felt suddenly sick. She shouldn't have tried to manipulate the situation earlier by saucily saying that she ought to dance with Mr. Coventry. But she had been so frustrated. The evening had all been going so well. When she had first seen George, resplendent in his evening clothes, she'd almost stopped breathing. She'd tried to tell herself that he was the same man she

knew in Kent, wearing the same coat and shoes, but here in London, among the people who ran the country and quite possibly the world, he looked different.

He belonged.

There was an air of gravity around him, of quiet confidence and utter assurance of his place. He had this entire life that she knew nothing about, one with parties and balls and meetings at White's. Eventually he would take his seat in parliament, and she would still be the reckless Billie Bridgerton. Except that in a few years *reckless* would give way to *eccentric*. And after that it was all downhill to crazy.

No, she thought firmly. That was not what was going to happen. George liked her. He might even love her a little. She'd seen it in his eyes, and she'd felt it in his kiss. Lady Weatherby could never—

Billie's eyes widened. Where was Lady Weatherby?

And more to the point, where was George?

Five hours later George finally tiptoed through the front door of Manston House, tired, frustrated, and above all, ready to throttle Lord Arbuthnot.

When the general had asked him to deliver a message, George had thought—*How simple this will be*. He was already planning to attend the Wintour Ball, and Robert Tallywhite was precisely the sort of person with whom he might have an idle conversation. All in all, it would be ten minutes from his day, and he would be able to lay his head down that night knowing that he had done something for King and Country.

He had *not* anticipated that his evening would involve following Sally Weatherby to The Swan With No Neck, a somewhat unsavory pub halfway across town. It was there that he had finally found Robert Tallywhite, who appeared to be amusing himself by tossing darts at a tricorn hat pinned rather gruesomely to a wall.

Blindfolded.

George had delivered his message, the contents of which had not seemed to surprise Tallywhite in the least, but when he had attempted to take his leave, he had been compelled to stay for a pint of ale. And by compelled he actually meant *compelled*, as in shoved into a chair by two exceedingly large men, one of whom sported the most vivid black eye George had ever seen.

Such a bruise indicated a remarkable tolerance for pain, and George feared that this might correspond with a remarkable ability to *deliver* pain. So

when old Violet Eye told him to sit down and drink up, George did as he was told.

He then spent the next two hours having a breathtakingly convoluted and inane conversation with Tallywhite and his henchmen. (Sally had disappeared immediately upon delivering him to the unfortunate neckless Swan.) They discussed the weather and the rules of cricket and relative merits of Trinity College versus Trinity Hall at Cambridge. They had then moved on to the health benefits of salt water, the difficulty of obtaining proper ice in summer, and whether the high cost of pineapples would affect the popularity of oranges and lemons.

By one in the morning, George suspected that Robert Tallywhite was not entirely sane, and by two he was certain of it. At three, he finally managed to take his leave, but not before “accidentally” taking an elbow to the ribs from one of Tallywhite’s large friends. There was also a scrape on his left cheekbone, the provenance of which George could not quite recall.

Worst of all, he thought as he trudged up the stairs at Manston House, he had abandoned Billie. He knew this night had been important to her. Hell, it had been important to *him*. God only knew what she thought of his behavior.

“George.”

He stumbled in surprise as he entered his room. Billie was standing dead center in her dressing gown.

Her dressing gown.

It was only loosely belted, and he could see the fine peach silk of her nightdress peeking out from underneath. It looked very thin, almost sheer. A man could run his hands over such silk and feel the heat of skin burning through. A man might think he had the right to do so, with her standing a mere six feet from his bed.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Her lips tightened at the corners. She was angry. In fact, he might go so far as to say she was breathtakingly furious. “I’ve been waiting for you,” she said.

“That much I’d surmised,” he said, tugging at his cravat. If it bothered her that he was disrobing in front of her, that was her own problem, he decided. She was the one who had taken up residence in his bedroom.

“What happened to you?” she demanded. “One moment you were foisting me off on poor Mr. Coventry—”

“I wouldn’t pity him too much,” George griped. “He did get my dance.”

“You *gave* him your dance.”

George kept working at his neckcloth, finally freeing it with one final yank. “I did not see that I had much choice,” he said, tossing the now limp strip of linen on a chair.

“What do you mean by that?”

He paused, glad that he happened to be facing away from her. He had been thinking of Lord Arbuthnot, but of course Billie did not know—and could not know—of their dealings. “I could hardly do otherwise,” he said, his eyes fixed on a random spot on the wall, “given that you’d asked him to dance.”

“I did not precisely *ask* him.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Splitting hairs, Billie.”

“Very well,” she said, crossing her arms, “but I don’t see that *I* had much choice, either. The music was starting and you were just *standing* there.”

There was nothing to be gained by pointing out that he had been about to lead her to the dance floor when Lord Arbuthnot had arrived, so he held his tongue. They stared at each other for a long, heavy moment.

“You should not be here,” George finally said. He sat down to pull off his boots.

“I didn’t know where else to go.”

He watched her intently, fiercely. What did she *mean* by that?

“I was worried about you,” she said.

“I can take care of myself.”

“So can I,” she countered.

He nodded his *touché*, then turned his attention to his cuffs, pushing back the fine Belgian lace so that his fingers could work the buttons through their loops.

“What happened tonight?” he heard her say.

He closed his eyes, well aware that she could not see his expression. It was the only reason he allowed himself a weary sigh. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“The beginning will do.”

He looked over at her, unable to stop the wry smile that flitted across his lips. How very like her that statement was. But he just shook his head and said in a tired voice, “Not tonight.”

She crossed her arms.

“For the love of God, Billie, I’m exhausted.”

“I don’t care.”

That took him off guard, and for a moment he could only stare, blinking like some idiot owl.

“Where were you?” she demanded.

And because the truth was always best when possible, he told her, “At a pub.”

Her head jerked back with surprise, but her voice was cool when she said, “You smell like it.”

That earned her a grim chuckle. “I do, don’t I?”

“Why were you at a pub? What could you possibly have been doing that was more important than—” She stopped herself with a horrified gasp, clasping her hand to her mouth.

He could not answer her, so he said nothing. There was nothing in the world that was more important than she was. But there *were* things more important than dancing with her, no matter how much he wished it were otherwise.

His brother was missing. Maybe tonight’s absurd errand had nothing to do with Edward. Hell, George was certain it did not. How could it? Edward was lost in the wilds of Connecticut, and he was here in London, reciting nursery rhymes with a madman.

But he had been asked by his government to carry out this task, and more importantly, he had given his word that it would be done.

George would feel no compunction in refusing Lord Arbuthnot should he come with another fool’s errand. He had not the temperament to follow orders blindly. But he had agreed this time, and he had followed through.

The silence in the room grew thick, and then Billie, who had turned away from him, hugging her arms to her body, said in a very small voice, “I should go to bed.”

“Are you crying?” he asked, coming quickly to his feet.

“No,” came her too-quick reply.

He could not bear it. He took a step forward without even realizing it. “Don’t cry,” he said.

“I’m not crying!” she choked out.

“No,” he said gently. “Of course you’re not.”

She dragged the back of her hand inelegantly across her nose. “I don’t cry,” she protested, “and I certainly don’t cry because of you.”

“Billie,” he said, and before he knew it, she was in his arms. He held her

against his heart, and he stroked her back while her tears dropped one by one from her eyes.

She cried delicately, which seemed somehow unexpected. Billie had never done anything by half measure, and if she were going to cry, he would have thought she'd have done so with great big sobs.

And that was when he realized—she had been speaking true. She *didn't* cry. He had known her for twenty-three years, and he had never seen her shed a tear. Even when she'd hurt her ankle and had had to climb down that ladder on her own, she had not cried. For a moment she'd looked as if she might, but then she had steeled her shoulders, and swallowed her pain, and got on with it.

But she was crying now.

He had made her cry.

"I am so sorry," he murmured into her hair. He didn't know what he could have done differently, but that didn't seem to matter. She was crying, and every snuffle held the sound of his own heart breaking.

"Please don't cry," he said, because he didn't know what else to say. "It will be all right. I promise, everything will be all right."

He felt her nod against his chest, a tiny little movement, but one that somehow was enough to tell him that she had turned a corner. "You see," he said, touching her chin and smiling when she finally raised her eyes to his, "I told you, it's all right."

She took a shaky breath. "I was worried about you."

"You were worried?" He hadn't meant to sound pleased, but he couldn't help it.

"And angry," she continued.

"I know."

"You left," she said baldly.

"I know." He wasn't going to make excuses. She deserved better.

"Why?" she asked him. And when he did not reply she stepped out of his embrace and said it again. "Why did you leave?"

"I can't tell you," he said regretfully.

"Were you with *her*?"

He did not pretend to misunderstand. "Only briefly."

There was but one three-pronged candelabra in the room, but there was light enough for George to see the pain flash across Billie's face. She swallowed, the motion trembling through her throat.

But the way she was standing, with her arms wrapped protectively around her waist . . . she might as well have donned a suit of armor.

“I will not lie to you,” he said quietly. “I may not be able to answer your questions, but I will tell you no falsehoods.” He stepped forward, his eyes boring into hers as he made his vow. “Do you understand? I will *never* lie to you.”

She nodded, and he saw something change in her face. Her eyes grew softer, more concerned. “You’re hurt,” she said.

“Not very much.”

“But still . . .” She reached toward his face, her hand stopping an inch short of its destination. “Did someone hit you?”

He shook his head. He’d probably acquired the abrasion when he’d been persuaded to have a pint with Tallywhite. “I don’t remember, honestly,” he told her. “It was a very strange evening.”

Her lips parted, and he could tell she wanted to question him further, but instead she said, very softly, “You never danced with me.”

His eyes met hers. “I regret that.”

“I’d wanted . . . I’d hoped . . .” Her lips pressed together as she swallowed, and he realized he was holding his breath, waiting for her to continue. “I don’t think . . .”

Whatever it was, she could not bring herself to say it, and he realized that he needed to be as brave as she was.

“It was agony,” he whispered.

She looked up, startled.

He took her hand and kissed her palm. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to tell Freddie Coventry to go ahead and dance with you? What it felt like to watch him take your hand and whisper in your ear like he had a right to be near you?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I know it exactly.”

And then, in that moment, it all became clear. There was only one thing he could do.

He did the only thing he *could* do.

He kissed her.

Chapter 23

Billie wasn't stupid. She had known, when she decided to wait for George in his bedroom, that this might happen. But it wasn't *why* she had done it. It wasn't why she had crept so silently into his room, turning the door handle with practiced ease so it slipped through the locking mechanism without a click. It wasn't why she'd sat in his chair, listening for sounds of his return, and it wasn't why she had stared at his bed the whole time, achingly aware that this was where he slept, where his body lay at his most vulnerable, where, should he take a wife, they would make love.

No, she told herself, she had come to his room because she needed to know where he'd gone, why he'd left her at Wintour House. And she was worried. She knew she would not sleep until he was home.

But she'd known this might happen.

And now that it was happening . . .

She could finally admit that she'd wanted it all along.

He pulled her against him, and she made no show of surprise, no feigned outrage. They were too honest with each other; they always had been, and she threw her arms around him, kissing him back with every fevered breath.

It was like the first time he'd kissed her, but it was so much *more*. His hands were everywhere, and her dressing gown was thin, the material far more silky and fine than her day dress. When he cupped her bottom, she felt every finger, squeezing her with a desperation that made her heart sing.

He wasn't treating her like a china doll. He was treating her like a woman, and she loved it.

His body pressed against hers, length to length, she felt his arousal, hard and insistent. *She* had done this to him. Her. Billie Bridgerton. She was driving George Rokesby wild with desire, and it was thrilling. And it made her bold.

She wanted to nibble at his ear, lick the salt from his skin. She wanted to

listen to the way his breath quickened when she arched her body against his, and wanted to know the exact shape of his mouth, not by sight but by feel.

She wanted all of him, and she wanted him in every possible way.

“George,” she moaned, loving the sound of his name on her lips. She said it again, and then again, using it to punctuate every kiss. How had she ever thought that this man was stiff and unyielding? The way he was kissing her was heat personified. It was as if he wanted to devour her, consume her.

Possess her.

And Billie, who had never much liked letting anyone take charge, found she rather wanted him to succeed.

“You are so. Unbelievably. Beautiful,” he said, not quite managing to say it like a proper sentence. His mouth was far too busy with other pursuits to string the words together smoothly. “Your dress tonight . . . I can’t believe you wore red.”

She looked up at him, unable to halt the playful smile that spread across her lips. “I don’t think white suits me.” *And after tonight*, she thought naughtily, *it never will*.

“You looked like a goddess,” he rasped. And then he stilled, just a little, and pulled back. “But do you know,” he said, his eyes burning with wicked intent. “I think I still like you best in breeches.”

“George!” She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Shhhh . . .” he warned, nipping at her earlobe.

“It’s hard to be quiet.”

He gazed down at her like a pirate. “I know how to silence you.”

“Oh, yes, pl—” But she couldn’t finish the sentence, not when he was kissing her again, even more fiercely than before. She felt his fingers at her waist, sliding under the silky sash that held her dressing gown against her body. It came undone and then slipped entirely to the floor, the silky material shivering across her skin as it fell.

Goose bumps rose on her arms as they were bared to the night air, but she felt no chill, only awareness as he reached out reverently to stroke her, slowly, from shoulder to wrist.

“You have a freckle,” he murmured. “Right”—he leaned down and dropped a light kiss near the inside of her elbow—“here.”

“You’ve seen it before,” she said softly. It wasn’t in an immodest spot; she had plenty of frocks with short sleeves.

He chuckled. “But I’ve never given it its proper due.”

“Really.”

“Mmm-hmm.” He lifted her arm, twisting it just a bit so that he could pretend to be studying her freckle. “It is clearly the most delightful beauty mark in all of England.”

A marvelous sense of warmth and contentment melted through her. Even as her body burned for his, she could not stop herself from encouraging his teasing conversation. “Only England?”

“Well, I haven’t traveled very extensively abroad . . .”

“Oh, really?”

“And you know . . .” His voice dropped to a husky growl. “There may be other freckles right here in this room. You could have one here.” He dipped a finger under the bodice of her nightgown, then moved his other hand to her hip. “Or here.”

“I might,” she agreed.

“The back of your knee,” he said, the words hot against her ear. “You could have one there.”

She nodded. She wasn’t sure she was still capable of speech.

“One of your toes,” he suggested. “Or your back.”

“You should probably check,” she managed to get out.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, and she suddenly realized just how much he was holding his passion in check. Where she was joyously setting herself free, he was waging a fierce battle against his own desire. And she knew—somehow she knew—that a lesser man would not have had the strength to treat her with such tenderness.

“Make me yours,” she said. She had already given herself permission to let go. Now she was giving it to him, too.

She felt his muscles contract, and for a moment he looked as if he were in pain. “I shouldn’t . . .”

“You should.”

His fingers tightened against her skin. “I won’t be able to stop.”

“I don’t want you to.”

He drew back, his breath coming in shaky gasps as he put a few inches between their faces. His hands were at her cheeks, holding her absolutely still, and his eyes burned into hers.

“You *will* marry me,” he commanded.

She nodded, her only thought to give her agreement as fast as she could.

“Say it,” he said savagely. “Say the words.”

“I will,” she whispered. “I will marry you. I promise.”

For about a second he stood frozen, and then before Billie could even think to whisper his name, he’d picked her up and practically thrown her onto the bed.

“You are mine,” he growled.

She edged up onto her elbows and stared up at him as he stalked closer, his hands first tugging his shirt from his breeches and then moving to pull it over his head entirely. Her breath caught as his body was revealed. He was beautiful, as odd as that seemed to say about a man. Beautiful, and perfectly made. She knew he did not spend his days thatching roofs and plowing fields, but he must do some sort of regular physical activity because there was no softness to his form. He was lean and defined, and as the candlelight danced across his skin, she could see the muscles flex beneath.

She scooted up into a sitting position and reached out, her fingers itching to touch him, to see if his skin was as smooth and hot as it looked, but he was just beyond her grasp, watching her with hungry eyes.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered. He stepped closer, but before she could touch him he took her hand and brought it to his lips. “When I saw you tonight I think my heart stopped beating.”

“And is it now?” she whispered.

He took her hand and laid it over his heart. She could feel it pounding beneath his skin, almost hear it reverberating through her own body. He was so strong, and so solid, and so wonderfully male.

“Do you know what I wanted to do?” he murmured.

She shook her head, too entranced by the low heat of his voice to make a noise of her own.

“I wanted to turn you around and push you right back through the door before anyone else saw you. I didn’t want to share you.” He traced her lips with his finger. “I still don’t.”

Heat flared within her, and she suddenly felt more daring, more womanly. “I don’t want to share you, either.”

He smiled slowly, and his fingers trailed down the length of her neck, across the delicate hollow of her collarbone, resting only when he reached the ribbon that tightened the neckline of her nightgown. Without ever taking his eyes from hers, he gave one of the strands a tug, sliding it slowly from the knot, its corresponding loop getting smaller and smaller until it finally popped through, and she was undone.

Billie watched his fingers, mesmerized, as they whispered across her skin, the edge of the now loosened bodice catching between his thumb and forefinger. The silk slipped from her shoulder, then slowly slid down her arm. She was so close to being revealed to him, but she could feel no modesty, summon no fear. All she had was passion, and the unrelenting need to follow it through.

She looked up, and so did he, almost as if they'd planned it. He caught her eyes with a questioning gaze, and she nodded, knowing exactly what he was asking. He drew a breath, its ragged sound speaking of desire, and then he nudged her nightdress over the rise of her breasts before allowing gravity to do the rest. The pale peach silk pooled luxuriously around her waist, but Billie didn't notice. George was staring at her with a reverence that took her breath away.

With a trembling hand, he reached out and cupped her breast, her nipple grazing lightly against his palm. Sensation shot through her, and she gasped, wondering how such a touch could make her abdomen clench. She felt hungry, but not for food, and the secret place between her legs tightened with what she could only assume was desire.

Was this how it was supposed to feel? As if she were incomplete without him?

She watched his hand as he caressed her. It was so big, so powerful, and so thrillingly male against her pale skin. He moved slowly, a stark contrast to the feverish kissing of just a few minutes earlier. He made her feel like a priceless work of art, and he was studying every curve.

She caught her bottom lip beneath her teeth, a little moan of pleasure slipping through her lips as his hand drew slowly away, teasing her skin until their only connection was his fingertips at her nipple.

"You like that," he said.

She nodded.

Their eyes met. "You'll like this even better," he growled, and then, as she gasped in surprise, he leaned down and took her into his mouth. His tongue rolled across her, and she felt herself tighten into a hard little bud—the sort she normally only felt in the chill of winter.

But she was the farthest thing from cold.

His touch was electric. Her entire body tightened, arching until she had to plant her hands on the bed behind her just to keep from falling over.

"George!" she practically squealed, and once again he shushed her.

“You never learn, do you?” he murmured against her skin.

“You’re the one who’s making me scream.”

“That wasn’t a scream,” he said with a cocky smile.

She eyed him with alarm. “I didn’t mean it as a dare.”

He laughed aloud—although more quietly than she’d done—at that. “Merely planning for the future, when volume is not an issue.”

“George, there are servants!”

“Who work for me.”

“George!”

“When we are married,” he said, lacing his fingers through hers, “we shall make as much or as little noise as we wish.”

Billie felt her face go crimson.

He dropped a teasing kiss on her cheek. “Did I make you blush?”

“You know you did,” she grumbled.

He looked down at her with a cocky smile. “I probably shouldn’t take quite so much pride in that.”

“But you do.”

He brought her hand to his lips. “I do.”

She lifted her gaze to his face, finding that despite the urgency in her body, she was content to take a moment just to look at him. She caressed his cheek, tickling her fingertips with the light growth of his beard. She traced his eyebrow, marveling at how such a straight, firm line could arch so imperiously when he wished. And she touched his lips, which were so improbably soft. How many times had she watched his mouth when he was speaking, never knowing that those lips could bring such pleasure?

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice a husky smile.

Her lashes swept up as her eyes met his, and it was only when she spoke that she knew the answer. “Memorizing you.”

George’s breath caught, and then he was kissing her again, the levity of the moment giving way once again to desire. His mouth moved to her neck, teasing along the side, trailing fire in its wake. She felt herself descending, lying back against the bed, and then suddenly he was on top of her, skin to heated skin. Her nightgown slid past her legs, and then it was off completely. She was nude beneath him, without a stitch, and yet somehow it didn’t feel awkward. This was George, and she trusted him.

This was George, and she loved him.

She felt his hands move to the fastening of his breeches, and then he

swore under his breath as he was forced to roll off her in order to (in his words) “get the bloody things off.” She couldn’t help but chuckle at his profanity; he seemed to be having a much rougher time of it than she imagined was usual.

“You’re laughing?” he asked, his brows rising into a daring arch.

“You should be glad I was already out of my gown,” she told him. “Thirty-six cloth-covered buttons down the back.”

He gave her a fearsome look. “It would not have survived.”

As Billie laughed, one of George’s buttons finally went flying, and his clothing fell to the floor.

Billie’s jaw dropped.

George’s smile was almost feral as he climbed back onto the bed, and she had a feeling he was taking her amazement as a compliment.

Which she supposed it was. With a healthy dose of alarm.

“George,” she said cautiously, “I know that this *will* work, because, goodness, it *has* worked for centuries, but I have to say, this does not look comfortable.” She swallowed. “For me.”

He kissed the corner of her mouth. “Trust me.”

“I do,” she assured him. “I just don’t trust *that*.” She thought of what she had seen in the stables over the years. None of the mares ever seemed to be having a good time.

He laughed as his body slid over hers. “Trust me,” he said again. “We just need to be sure you’re ready.”

Billie was not sure what *that* meant, but she was having a difficult time even thinking about it because he was doing very distracting things with his fingers. “You’ve done this before,” she said.

“A few times,” he murmured, “but this is different.”

She looked at him, letting her eyes ask her question.

“It just is,” he said. He kissed her again as his hand squeezed its way up the length of her thigh. “You’re so strong,” he said softly. “I love that about you.”

Billie took a shaky breath. His hand was at the top of her leg now, spanning the whole width of it, and his thumb was very near to her center.

“Trust me,” he whispered.

“You keep saying that.”

His forehead rested against hers, and she had a feeling he was trying not to laugh. “I keep meaning it.” He kissed his way back down her neck.

“Relax.”

Billie wasn't sure how *that* was possible, but then, just before he took her nipple in his mouth again, he said, “Stop thinking,” and that was an order she had no trouble following.

It was the same as before. When he teased her this way she lost her mind. Her body took over, and she forgot whatever it was she'd thought she feared. Her legs parted, and he settled between them, and then *oh God*, he was touching her. He was touching her and it felt so wicked and so divine, and it just made her want more.

It made her hungry in a way she'd never been before. She wanted to draw him closer; she wanted to devour him. She grabbed his shoulders, pulling him down. “George,” she gasped, “I want—”

“What do you want?” he murmured, sliding a finger within her.

She nearly bucked off the bed. “I want—I want—I just *want*.”

“So do I,” he growled, and then he was opening her with his fingers, spreading her lips, and she felt him pressing at her entrance.

“I'm told it will hurt,” he said regretfully, “but not for long.”

She nodded, and she must have tensed up, because he once again crooned, “Relax.”

And somehow she did. Slowly he pushed inside. The pressure was stranger than it was great, and even when she felt a light stab of pain, that was overshadowed by her need to keep him close, then closer.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded again.

“Thank God,” he groaned, and he moved forward, entering her more deeply.

But she knew he was holding back.

He was gritting his teeth and holding hard, and she would swear he looked like he was in pain. But at the same time he was moaning her name as if she were a goddess, and the things he was doing to her—with his member and his fingers, with his lips and his words—were stoking a fire that consumed her.

“George,” she gasped, when the tightness within seemed to grab her from the inside out. “*Please*.”

His movements grew more frenzied, and she pushed back, the need to

move against him too overwhelming to ignore. “Billie,” he groaned. “My God, what you do to me.”

And then, just when she was certain she could take no more, the strangest thing happened. She grew stiff, and she shook, and then the moment she realized she could no longer so much as draw a breath, she shattered.

It was indescribable. It was perfect.

George’s movements grew more frenzied, and then he buried his face in the crook of her neck, muffling his hoarse cry against her skin as he plunged forward one last time within her.

“I’m home,” he said against her skin, and she realized it was the truth.

“I’m home, too.”

Chapter 24

When George went down to breakfast the following morning, he was not surprised to learn that Billie was still abed.

She had not, he thought with some satisfaction, had a restful evening.

They had made love three times, and already he could not help but wonder if his seed was taking root within her. It was odd, but he'd never given much thought to having children before. He'd known he must, of course. He would one day inherit Manston and Crake, and he had a sacred duty to provide the earldom with an heir.

But even with all that, he had never *imagined* his children. He had never pictured himself holding a child in his arms, watching him learn to read and write, or teaching him to ride and hunt.

Or teaching *her* to ride and hunt. With Billie as their mother, his daughters would surely insist upon learning all the same skills as their brothers. And while he'd spent his childhood thoroughly annoyed by Billie's insistence upon keeping up with the boys, when it came to his daughters . . .

If they wanted to hunt and fish and shoot a pistol like a marksman . . .

They would hit the bull's-eye every time.

Although he might draw the line at jumping hedges at the age of six. Surely even Billie would now accept that that had been absurd.

Billie would be the *best* mother, he thought as he walked down the hall to the small dining room. Her children would not be trotted out once a day for her inspection. She would love them the way her own mother loved her, and she would laugh and tease and teach and scold, and they would be happy.

They would *all* be happy.

George grinned. He was already happy. And it was only going to get better.

His mother was already at the breakfast table when he entered the room, glancing at a recently ironed newspaper as she buttered her toast.

“Good morning, George.”

He leaned down and kissed her proffered cheek. “Mother.”

She looked at him over the rim of her teacup, one of her elegant brows set into a perfect arch. “You seem in an exceptional mood this morning.”

He gave her a questioning glance.

“You were smiling when you entered the room,” she explained.

“Oh.” He shrugged, trying to quell the bubbles of joy that had had him nearly hopping down the stairs. “Can’t explain, I’m afraid.”

Which was the truth. He certainly couldn’t explain it to *her*.

She regarded him for a moment. “I don’t suppose it would have something to do with your untimely departure last evening.”

George paused briefly in the act of spooning eggs onto his plate. He had forgotten that his mother would surely require an explanation for his disappearance. His presence at the Wintour Ball was the one thing she’d asked of him . . .

“Your presence at the Wintour Ball was the one thing I asked of you,” she said, her voice sharpening with each word.

“I beg your forgiveness, Mother,” he said. He was in far too good a mood to spoil it by quibbling. “It won’t happen again.”

“It is not *my* forgiveness you must obtain.”

“Nevertheless,” he said, “I would like to have it.”

“Well,” she said, momentarily flustered by his unexpected contrition, “it is up to Billie. I insist that you apologize to her.”

“Already done,” George said unthinkingly.

She looked up sharply. “*When?*”

Damn.

He took a breath, then returned to fixing his plate. “I saw her last night.”

“Last night?”

He shrugged, feigning disinterest. “She was up when I came in.”

“And when, pray tell, did you come in?”

“I’m not entirely certain,” George said, subtracting a few hours. “Midnight?”

“We did not get home until one.”

“Then it must have been later,” he said equably. It was amazing what an excellent mood could do for one’s patience. “I was not paying attention.”

“Why was Billie up and about?”

He plopped four pieces of bacon onto his plate and sat down. “That I do

not know.”

Lady Manston’s mouth clamped into a frown. “I do not like this, George. She must take more care for her reputation.”

“I’m sure it’s fine, Mother.”

“At the very least,” she continued, “*you* should know better.”

Time to tread carefully. “I beg your pardon?”

“The instant you saw her, you should have gone to your room.”

“I thought it behooved me to use the time to apologize.”

“Hmmp.” His mother did not have a ready response to that. “Still.”

George smiled blandly and got down to the work of cutting his meat. A few moments later he heard footsteps coming toward them, but they sounded far too heavy to be Billie’s.

Indeed, when a body filled the doorway a moment later, it belonged to the butler. “Lord Arbuthnot is here to see you, Lord Kennard.”

“This time in the morning?” Lady Manston said with surprise.

George set his napkin down with a tight-jawed frown. He had anticipated that he would need to speak with Arbuthnot about the events of the previous night, but *now*?

George knew just enough about Lord Arbuthnot’s dealings to know that they were inherently flavored with secrets and danger. It was unacceptable that he would bring his business to Manston House, and George would have no compunction telling him so.

“He is a friend of Father’s,” George said as he stood. “I will see what he needs.”

“Shall I accompany you?”

“No, no. I’m sure that will be unnecessary.”

George made his way to the drawing room, his mood growing blacker with every step. Arbuthnot’s appearance this morning could mean only one of two things. First, that something had gone wrong after George had departed the Swan the night before and now he was in danger. Or worse, held responsible.

The more likely possibility, George thought grimly, was that Arbuthnot wanted something from him. Another message relayed, probably.

“Kennard!” Lord Arbuthnot said jovially. “Excellent work last night.”

“Why are you here?” George demanded.

Arbuthnot blinked at his bluntness. “I needed to speak with you. Is that not why a gentleman usually calls upon another?”

“This is my home,” George hissed.

“Are you saying I am not welcome?”

“Not if you wish to discuss the events of last night. This is not the time or the place.”

“Ah. Well, I don’t, actually. Nothing to discuss. It all came off brilliantly.”

This was not how George would have described it. He crossed his arms, and stared Arbuthnot down, waiting for him to state his intentions.

The general cleared his throat. “I’ve come to thank you,” he said. “And to request your help with another matter.”

“No,” George said. He did not need to hear anything more.

Arbuthnot chuckled. “You haven’t even—”

“No,” George said again, his fury cutting his words like glass. “Do you have any idea what I ended up doing last night?”

“I do, as it happens.”

“You— What?” This was unexpected. When the hell had Arbuthnot learned of the farce at The Swan With No Neck?

“It was a test, m’boy.” Arbuthnot slapped him on the shoulder. “You passed with flying colors.”

“A test,” George repeated, and if Arbuthnot knew him better, he’d have realized that the utter lack of inflection in George’s voice was not a good sign.

But Arbuthnot didn’t know him very well, and so he was chuckling as he said, “You don’t think we’d trust just anyone with sensitive information.”

“I think you’d trust me,” George growled.

“No,” Arbuthnot said with an odd, owlish solemnity. “Not even you. Besides,” he added, his mien perking back up, “‘Pease, porridge, and pudding’? A bit of credit, if you will. We’ve more creativity than *that*.”

George sucked in his lips as he pondered his next action. Tossing Arbuthnot out on his ear was tempting, but so was a well-thrown punch to the jaw.

“All in the past now,” Arbuthnot said. “Now we need you to deliver a package.”

“I think it’s time you left,” George said.

Arbuthnot drew back in surprise. “It’s essential.”

“So was pease, porridge, and pudding,” George reminded him.

“Yes, yes,” the general said condescendingly, “you have every right to

feel abused, but now that we know we can trust you, we need your help.”

George crossed his arms.

“Do it for your brother, Kennard.”

“Don’t you dare bring him into this,” George hissed.

“It’s a little late to be so high and mighty,” Arbuthnot shot back, his friendly demeanor beginning to slip. “Do not forget that you were the one who came to me.”

“And you could have declined my request for help.”

“How do you think we go about defeating the enemy?” Arbuthnot demanded. “Do you think it’s all shiny uniforms and marching in formation? The real war is won behind the scenes, and if you’re too much of a coward —”

In an instant, George had him pinned against the wall. “Do not,” he spat, “make the mistake of thinking you can shame me into becoming your errand boy.” His hand tightened on the older man’s shoulder, and then abruptly, he let go.

“I thought you wished to do your part for your country,” Arbuthnot said, tugging on the hem of his jacket to smooth it out.

George nearly bit his tongue, stopping himself from making an untempered retort. He almost said something about how he had spent three years wishing he was with his brothers, serving with his rifle and sword, prepared to give his life for the good of England.

He almost said that it had made him feel useless, ashamed that he was somehow judged to be more valuable than his brothers by virtue of his birth.

But then he thought of Billie, and of Crake and Aubrey Hall, and all the people there who depended upon them. He thought of the harvest, and of the village, and of his sister, who would soon bring the first of a new generation into this world.

And he remembered what Billie had said, just two nights earlier.

He looked Lord Arbuthnot in the eye and said, “If my brothers are going to risk their lives for King and Country, then by God, I am going to make sure it’s a *good* King and Country. And that does not include carrying messages I do not know the meaning of to people I do not trust.”

Arbuthnot regarded him soberly. “Do you not trust me?”

“I am furious that you came to my home.”

“I am a friend of your father’s, Lord Kennard. My presence here is hardly suspect. And that wasn’t what I asked you. Do you not trust me?”

“Do you know, Lord Arbuthnot, I don’t think it matters.”

And it didn’t. George had no doubt that Arbuthnot had fought—and continued to fight, in his own way—for his country. For all that George was furious that he’d been subjected to the War Office’s version of an initiation rite, he knew that if Arbuthnot asked him to do something, it would be a legitimate request.

But he also knew—*now*, at last, he knew—that he was not the right man for the job. He would have made a fine soldier. But he was a better steward of the land. And with Billie by his side, he would be excellent.

He would be getting married soon. Very soon, if he had anything to do with it. He had no business running around like some sort of spy, risking his life without fully knowing why.

“I will serve in my own way,” he said to Arbuthnot.

Arbuthnot sighed, his mouth twisting with resignation. “Very well. I thank you for your assistance last night. I do realize that it disrupted your evening.”

George thought that he might have finally got through to him, but then Arbuthnot said, “I have just one more request, Lord Kennard.”

“No,” George tried to say.

“Hear me out,” Arbuthnot interrupted. “I swear to you, I would not ask if the situation were not so critical. I have a packet that needs to go to a posting inn in Kent. On the coast. Not far from your home, I should think.”

“Stop,” George began.

“No, please, allow me to finish. If you do this, I promise I shall not bother you again. I will be honest, there is some danger involved. There are men who know it is coming, and they will wish to stop it. But these are documents of vital importance.” And then Arbuthnot went in for the kill. “It could even save your brother.”

Arbuthnot was good, George would give him that. He did not believe for a second that this Kent-bound packet had anything to do with Edward, and he still almost blurted his assent the moment the general had stopped talking.

“I’m not your man,” he said quietly.

That should have been the end of it.

It *would* have been the end of it, but then the door slammed open and there, standing in the doorway, eyes shining with reckless purpose, was Billie.

Billie had not meant to eavesdrop. She had been on her way down to breakfast, her hair perhaps too hastily pinned due to her eagerness to see George again, when she'd heard his voice in the drawing room. She'd assumed he was with his mother—who else would be at Manston House this time in the morning?—but then she heard the voice of another gentleman, and he was saying something about the night before.

The night that George had said he could not tell her about.

She shouldn't have listened, but honestly, what woman could have pulled herself away? And then the man asked George to deliver a package, and he said it might help *Edward*?

She could not stop herself. All she could think was—*This is Edward*. Her dearest childhood friend. If she was prepared to fall out of a tree to save an ungrateful cat, she could certainly take a package to some inn on the coast. How difficult could it be? And if it was dangerous, if it was something that required discretion, surely she was an excellent decoy. No one would expect a woman to be making the delivery.

She didn't think. She didn't need to think. She just ran into the room and declared, "I'll do it!"

George didn't think. He didn't need to think. "The hell you will," he roared.

Billie froze for a moment, clearly not expecting this sort of reaction. Then she girded her shoulders and hurried in. "George," she said entreatingly, "we're talking about Edward. How can we not do everything—"

He grabbed her by the arm and yanked her aside. "You do not have all of the facts," he hissed.

"I don't need all the facts."

"You never do," he muttered.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "I can do this," she insisted.

Good God, she was going to be the death of him. "I'm sure you can, but you won't."

"But—"

"I forbid it."

Billie drew back. "You *forbid*—"

That was the moment Arbuthnot sidled over. "I don't think we were properly introduced last night," he said with an avuncular smile. "I am Lord Arbuthnot. I—"

"Get out of my house," George bit off.

“George!” Billie exclaimed, her face betraying her shock at his rudeness.

Arbuthnot turned to him with a thoughtful expression. “The lady appears to be quite resourceful. I think we could—”

“*Get out!*”

“George?” Now his *mother* appeared in the doorway. “What is all the yelling about? Oh, I’m sorry, Lord Arbuthnot. I did not see you there.”

“Lady Manston.” He bowed properly. “Forgive my early visit. I had business with your son.”

“He was just leaving,” George said, tightening his grip on Billie’s arm when she started to squirm.

“Let me go,” she ground out. “I might be able to help.”

“Or you might not.”

“Stop it,” she hissed, now pulling furiously. “You cannot order me about.”

“I assure you I can,” he shot back, his eyes burning down into hers. He was going to be her husband, for God’s sake. Did that not count for anything?

“But I want to help,” she said, lowering her voice as she turned her back on the rest of the room.

“So do I, but this is not the way.”

“It may be the *only* way.”

For a moment he could do nothing but close his eyes. Was this a taste of the rest of his life as Billie Bridgerton’s husband? Was he destined to live in terror, wondering what sort of danger she’d thrown herself into *that* day?

Was it worth it?

“George?” she whispered. She sounded uneasy. Had she seen something in his expression? A sign of doubt?

He touched her cheek, and he looked into her eyes.

He saw his whole world there.

“I love you,” he said.

Someone gasped. It might have been his mother.

“I cannot live without you,” he said, “and in fact, I refuse to do so. So no, you will not be going on some ill-advised mission to the coast to hand off a potentially dangerous package to people you don’t know. Because if anything happened to you . . .” His voice broke, but he didn’t care. “If anything happened to you, it would *kill* me. And I’d like to think you love me too much to let that happen.”

Billie stared at him in wonder, her softly parted lips trembling as she

blinked back tears. “You love me?” she whispered.

He nearly rolled his eyes. “Of course I do.”

“You never said.”

“I must have done.”

“You didn’t. I would have remembered.”

“I would remember, too,” he said softly, “if you’d ever said it to me.”

“I love you,” she said immediately. “I do. I love you so much. I—”

“Thank *God*,” Lady Manston exclaimed.

George and Billie both turned. He didn’t know about Billie, but he’d quite forgotten they had an audience.

“Do you know how *hard* I’ve been working toward this? My *word*, I thought I was going to have to beat you with a stick.”

“You planned this?” George asked in disbelief.

She turned to Billie. “Sybilla? Really? When have I ever called you Sybilla?”

George looked over at Billie. She couldn’t seem to stop blinking.

“I have waited a long time to call you daughter,” Lady Manston said, tucking a lock of Billie’s hair behind her ear.

Billie frowned, her head moving from side to side as she tried to puzzle it all out. “But I always thought . . . you wanted Edward. Or Andrew.”

Lady Manston shook her head with a smile. “It was always George, my dear. In my mind, at least.” She looked over at her son with a considerably more focused expression. “You *have* asked her to marry you, I hope.”

“I might have demanded it,” he admitted.

“Even better.”

George suddenly straightened, glancing about the room. “What happened to Lord Arbuthnot?”

“He excused himself when the two of you started declaring your love,” his mother said.

Well, George thought. Maybe the old man had more discretion than he’d thought.

“Why was he here, anyway?” Lady Manston asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” George said. Then he looked at his fiancée.

“It doesn’t matter,” she agreed.

“Well,” Lady Manston declared with a beaming smile, “I can hardly wait to tell everyone. The Billingtons are hosting a ball next week and—”

“Can we just go home?” Billie interrupted.

“But you had such a wonderful time last night,” Lady Manston replied. She looked over at George. “She danced every dance. Everyone loved her.”

He smiled indulgently. “I am not surprised in the least.”

She turned back to Billie. “We can make the announcement at the Billington ball. It will be a triumph.”

Billie reached over and squeezed George’s hand. “It already is.”

“Are you sure?” he asked her. She had been so apprehensive about making her London debut. He would like nothing more than to go home to Kent, but Billie deserved to revel in her success.

“I am,” she said. “It was a heady thing. And it’s lovely to know that when I have to attend such functions that I can do it well and have a good time. But it’s not what I love. I would rather be home.”

“In breeches?” he teased.

“Only if I’m out in the fields.” She looked over at Lady Manston. “A future countess must behave with some propriety.”

Lady Manston chuckled at that. “You will be an excellent countess, although not too soon, I hope.”

“Not for years and years,” Billie said warmly.

“And you,” Lady Manston said, looking at George with watery eyes, “my son. You look happier than I have seen you in a very long time.”

“I am,” he said. “I only wish . . .”

“You can say his name,” his mother said softly.

“I know.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “Edward is going to have to resign himself to missing the wedding, because I’m not waiting for him to get home.”

“No, I expect you ought not,” Lady Manston said, in just the right tone to make Billie blush ferociously.

“We will find him, though,” George said. He was still holding Billie’s hand, so he brought it to his lips and kissed his vow to her skin. “I promise.”

“I suppose we’re off to Kent, then,” his mother said. “We could even leave today if that is your wish.”

“Oh, that would be brilliant!” Billie exclaimed. “Do you think my mother will be surprised?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“What?” Billie’s mouth fell open. “But I hated him!”

“No, you didn’t,” George said.

She gave him a look. “You vexed me immensely.”

“You were like a boulder in my shoe.”

“Well, you—”

“Is this a competition?” Lady Manston asked in disbelief.

George looked at Billie, and when she smiled, it filled his soul. “No,” he said softly, drawing her into his arms, “we’re a team.”

Billie looked up at him with such love it nearly stole his breath. “Mother,” he said, never taking his eyes off his fiancée, “you might want to leave the room now.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m going to kiss her now.”

His mother let out a little shriek. “You can’t do that.”

“I’m fairly certain I can.”

“George, you’re not married yet!”

He studied Billie’s lips with the hot gaze of a connoisseur. “All the more reason to hurry things up,” he murmured.

“Billie,” his mother said firmly, transferring her attention to what she clearly considered to be the weaker link, “let’s go.”

But Billie just shook her head. “I’m sorry, but it’s as he says. We’re a team.”

And then, because she was Billie Bridgerton and she’d never minded taking charge, she sank her fingers into his hair and pulled his mouth down to hers.

And because he was George Rokesby, and he was going to love her for the rest of his days, he kissed her right back.

Epilogue

*Several months later
Crake House*

“The results are final,” Billie said, adding up the last column with a flourish. “I win.”

George glanced up at her from his position on their bed—a large, lovely, four-posted piece that Billie had re-dressed in green a few weeks into their marriage. He was reading a book; Billie hadn’t caught the title. He always read before they went to bed. She loved that about him. He was such a creature of habit. Another reason they were a perfect match.

“What is it this time?” he murmured.

She knew he was being indulgent, but she was so pleased by the numbers in front of her that she decided she didn’t care. “The barley harvest,” she said. “Aubrey Hall outdid Crake by a factor of . . . hold on one moment . . .” She chewed on her lower lip as she worked out another computation. “One point one!”

“Such a triumph.”

She pursed her lips, trying for an unamused expression.

“Did you factor in Aubrey’s greater barley acreage?”

“Of course!” She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, George.”

His lips curved ever so slightly. “Might I remind you that you live at Crake?”

Billie felt herself smile in return.

“And that your name is Billie Rokesby now?”

“I’ll always be a Bridgerton at heart. Well,” she added, not liking George’s frown, “a Bridgerton *and* a Rokesby.”

He sighed. Just a little. “I don’t suppose you’ve any plans to turn your formidable skills to the running of Crake.”

Not for the first time Billie felt a rush of gratitude that George had not objected when she'd told him that she wanted to continue her work at Aubrey Hall. He was an uncommon man, her husband. He understood her. Sometimes she thought he might be the only person who did.

"My father still needs me," she said. "At least until Edmund is ready to take over."

George rose from the bed and walked over. "Your father's steward would be thrilled to finally earn his wages."

She glanced up. "I'm better than he is."

"Well, *that* goes without saying."

She batted him on the arm, then sighed when he leaned down and kissed her neck. "I should thank you," she said.

His lips stilled, and she felt him smile against her skin. "For what?"

"Everything, really. But mostly for being you."

"Then you're most welcome, Lady Kennard."

"I'll try to cut back a little," she said. George was right. She probably didn't need to do *quite* so much at Aubrey Hall. And the way they were going, she'd be pregnant sooner rather than later. She was going to have to learn to let go of her life at Aubrey, or at least loosen her grip.

She pulled back so that she could look at his face. "You wouldn't mind if I took a more active role here at Crake? With the lands, not just the house?"

"Of course not! We'd be lucky to—" He stopped, his words interrupted by a knock at the door. "Enter!"

The door opened to reveal a visibly agitated footman. "A messenger, my lord," he said.

Billie blinked in surprise. "This time of night?"

The footman held out a folded missive. "It's addressed to Lord Manston, but he's—"

"In London," George finished for him. "I'll take it."

"He said it was urgent," the footman said. "Otherwise, I'd never give over your father's private correspondence."

"It's all right, Thomas," Billie said gently. "If it's urgent, it's more important that it is attended to quickly than it is to deliver it to Lord Manston."

George slid a finger under the wax but did not break the seal. "Does the messenger wait for a reply?"

"No, sir. But I directed him belowstairs for a hot meal."

“Very good, Thomas. That will be all.”

The footman left, and Billie fought the urge to go to her husband’s side to read over his shoulder. Whatever was in the missive, he’d tell her soon enough.

She watched as his eyes scanned left to right, quickly reading the words. About four lines down his lips parted and he looked up. Her heart stopped, and she knew what he was going to say even before the words left his lips.

“*Edward’s alive . . .*”

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

**THE
GIRL WITH THE
MAKE-BELIEVE
HUSBAND**

A BRIDGERTON PREQUEL

—••—
JULIA QUINN

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THE GIRL WITH THE MAKE-BELIEVE HUSBAND

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Dedication

*For Nana Vaz de Castro, who created a movement.
It's probably a good thing I can't get Bob's Ovomaltine shakes in the
States.*

And also for Paul.

*There's got to be some irony in the fact that I wrote about a make-be
husband while you were gone for three months climbing Mount Evere
that mountain is real. And so are you. And so are we.*

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Epilogue

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Chapter 1

Manhattan Island
June 1779

His head hurt.

Correction, his head *really* hurt.

It was hard to tell, though, just what sort of pain it was. He *might* have been shot through the head with a musket ball. That seemed plausible, his current location in New York (or was it Connecticut?) and his current occupation as a captain in His Majesty's Army.

There was a war going on, in case one hadn't noticed.

But this particular pounding—the one that felt more like someone was bashing his skull with a cannon (not a *cannonball*, mind you, but an actual cannon)—seemed to indicate that he had been attacked with a blunter instrument than a bullet.

An anvil, perhaps. Dropped from a second-story window.

But if one cared to look on the bright side, a pain such as this did seem to indicate that he wasn't dead, which was also a plausible fate, given all the same facts that had led him to believe he might have been shot.

That war he'd mentioned . . . people did die.

With alarming regularity.

So he wasn't dead. That was good. But he also wasn't sure where he was precisely. The obvious next step would be to open his eyes, but his eyes were translucent enough for him to realize that it was the middle of the night and while he did like to look on the metaphorical bright side, he was fairly certain that the literal one would prove blinding.

So he kept his eyes closed.

But he listened.

He wasn't alone. He couldn't make out any actual conversation, but

buzz of words and activity filtered through the air. People were moving about, setting objects on tables, maybe pulling a chair across the floor.

Someone was moaning in pain.

Most of the voices were male, but there was at least one lady nearby who was close enough that he could hear her breathing. She made little noises as she went about her business, which he soon realized included tucking blankets around him and touching his forehead with the back of her hand.

He liked these little noises, the tiny little *mmms* and sighs she probably had no idea she was making. And she smelled nice, a bit like lemons, a bit like

And a bit like hard work.

He knew that smell. He'd worn it himself, albeit usually only briefly before it turned into a full-fledged stink.

On her, though, it was more than pleasant. Perhaps a little earthy. And he wondered who she was, to be tending to him so diligently.

ve
given
ent

"How is he today?"

Edward held himself still. This male voice was new, and he wasn't sure he wanted anyone to know he was awake yet.

as
tual

Although he wasn't sure *why* he felt this hesitancy.

"The same," came the woman's reply.

"I am concerned. If he doesn't wake up soon . . ."

"I know," the woman said. There was a touch of irritation in her voice which Edward found curious.

em to
the

"Have you been able to get him to take broth?"

"Just a few spoonfuls. I was afraid he would choke if I attempted anything more than that."

The man made a vague noise of approval. "Remind me how long he has been like this?"

was,
lids
day,
irly

"A week, sir. Four days before I arrived, and three since."

A week. Edward thought about this. A week meant it must be . . . May or April?

No, maybe it was only February. And this was probably New York, or Connecticut.

But that still didn't explain why his head hurt so bloody much. Clearly he'd been in some sort of an accident. Or had he been attacked?

a low

"There has been no change at all?" the man asked, even though the lady had just said as much.

g But she must have had far more patience than Edward, because she
in a quiet, clear voice, “No, sir. None.”

The man made a noise that wasn’t quite a grunt. Edward found it
r. She impossible to interpret.

ses as “Er . . .” The woman cleared her throat. “Have you any news of my
brother?”

nd. Her brother? Who was her brother?

bly had “I am afraid not, Mrs. Rokesby.”

like *Mrs. Rokesby?*

“It has been nearly three months,” she said quietly.

Mrs. Rokesby? Edward really wanted them to get back to that point.
r until was only one Rokesby in North America as far as he knew, and that w
So if she was Mrs. Rokesby . . .

nd he “I think,” the male voice said, “that your energies would be better sp
tending to your husband.”

Husband?

sure he “I assure you,” she said, and there was that touch of irritation again,
have been caring for him most faithfully.”

Husband? They were calling him her *husband*? Was he married? He
couldn’t be married. How could he be married and not remember it?

Who was this woman?

ce, Edward’s heart began to pound. What the devil was happening to hi

“Did he just make a noise?” the man asked.

“I . . . I don’t think so.”

y more She moved then, quickly. Hands touched him, his cheek, then his ch
and even through her obvious concern, there was something soothing i
has motions, something undeniably right.

“Edward?” she asked, taking his hand. She stroked it several times,
fingers brushing lightly over his skin. “Can you hear me?”

arch? He ought to respond. She was worried. What kind of gentleman did
to relieve a lady’s distress?

not “I fear he may be lost to us,” the man said, with far less gentleness t
Edward thought appropriate.

rly “He still breathes,” the woman said in a steely voice.

The man said nothing, but his expression must have been one of pity
lady because she said it again, more loudly this time.

“He still breathes.”

replied “Mrs. Rokesby . . .”

Edward felt her hand tighten around his. Then she placed her other hand on her fingers resting lightly on his knuckles. It was the smallest sort of embrace, but Edward felt it down to his soul.

“He still breathes, Colonel,” she said with quiet resolve. “And while I does, I will be here. I may not be able to help Thomas, but—”

Thomas. Thomas Harcourt. *That* was the connection. This must be his sister. Cecilia. He knew her well.

Or not. He’d never actually met the lady, but he *felt* like he knew her. He wrote to her brother with a diligence that was unmatched in the regime. There Thomas received twice as much mail as Edward, and Edward had four as he. siblings to Thomas’s one.

Cecilia Harcourt. What on earth was she doing in North America? She was supposed to be in Derbyshire, in that little town Thomas had been so close to. leave. The one with the hot springs. Matlock. No, Matlock Bath.

Edward had never been, but he thought it sounded charming. Not that “that I Thomas described it, of course; he liked the bustle of city life and could wait to take a commission and depart his village. But Cecilia was different. her letters, the small Derbyshire town came alive, and Edward almost felt as if he would recognize her neighbors if he ever went to visit.

She was witty. Lord, she was witty. Thomas used to laugh so much at his missives that Edward finally made him read them out loud.

Then one day, when Thomas was penning his response, Edward interrupted so many times that Thomas finally shoved out his chair and stood forth his quill.

“You write to her,” he’d said.

So he did.

Not on his own, of course. Edward could never have written to her directly. It would have been the worst sort of impropriety, and he would not act have insulted her in such a manner. But he took to scribbling a few lines at the end of Thomas’s letters, and whenever she replied, she had a few lines for him.

Thomas carried a miniature of her, and even though he said it was several years old, Edward had found himself staring at it, studying the small profile of the young woman, wondering if her hair really was that remarkable color, or if she really did smile that way, lips closed and mysterious.

Somehow he thought not. She did not strike him as a woman with secrets.

Her smile would be sunny and free. Edward had even thought he'd like to meet her once this godforsaken war was over. He'd never said anything to Thomas, though.

That would have been strange.

Now Cecilia was here. In the colonies. Which made absolutely no sense but then again, what did? Edward's head was injured, and Thomas seemed to be missing, and . . .

Edward thought hard.

. . . and he seemed to have married Cecilia Harcourt.

He opened his eyes and tried to focus on the green-eyed woman peering down at him.

"Cecilia?"

he was

Cecilia had had three days to imagine what Edward Rokesby might say when he finally woke up. She'd come up with several possibilities, the most likely of which was: "Who the hell are you?"

It would not have been a silly question.

Because no matter what Colonel Stubbs thought—no matter what even he felt that at this rather poorly outfitted military hospital thought, her name was Cecilia Rokesby, it was Cecilia Harcourt, and she most definitely was married to the rather handsome dark-haired man lying in the bed at her side.

As for how the misunderstanding had come about . . .

It might have been something to do with her declaring that she was his wife in front of his commanding officer, two soldiers, and a clerk.

It had seemed a good idea at the time.

She'd not come to New York lightly. She was well aware of the dangers of traveling to the war-torn colonies, to say nothing of the voyage across the temperamental North Atlantic. But her father had died, and then she'd received word that Thomas was injured, and then her wretched cousin had come sniffing around Marswell . . .

She couldn't remain in Derbyshire.

And yet she'd had nowhere to go.

So in what was probably the only rash decision of her life, she'd packed up her house, buried the silver in the back garden, and booked passage from Liverpool to New York. When she arrived, however, Thomas was nowhere to be found.

She'd located his regiment, but no one had answers for her, and when

She persisted with her questions, she was dismissed by the military brass like a pesky little fly. She'd been ignored, patronized, and probably lied to. She'd used up nearly all her funds, was getting by on one meal a day, and was living in a boardinghouse room directly next to a woman who might or might not have been a prostitute.

(That she was having relations was a certainty; the only question was whether she was being paid for them. And Cecilia had to say, she rather hoped she was, because whatever that woman was doing, it sounded like a awful lot of work.)

But then, after nearly a week of getting nowhere, Cecilia overheard a soldier telling another that a man had been brought to hospital a few days earlier. He'd had a blow to the head and was unconscious. His name was Rokesby.

Edward Rokesby. It had to be.

Cecilia had never actually laid eyes on the man, but he was her brother's closest friend, and she *felt* like she knew him. She knew, for example, that he was from Kent, that he was the second son of the Earl of Manston, and that he had a younger brother in the navy and another at Eton. His sister was not married, but she had no children, and the thing he missed most of all from home was his cook's gooseberry fool.

His older brother was called George, and she had been surprised when Edward had admitted that he did not envy him his position as heir. With earldom came an appalling lack of freedom, he'd once written, and he'd said that his place was in the army, fighting for King and Country.

Cecilia supposed that an outsider might have been shocked at the level of intimacy in their correspondence, but she'd learned that war made the philosophers of men. And maybe it was for that reason that Edward Rokesby had begun adding little notes of his own at the end of Thomas's letters. There was something comforting about sharing one's thoughts with a stranger. It was easy to be brave with someone one would never face at a dining table or in a drawing room.

Or at least this was Cecilia's hypothesis. Maybe he was writing all these things to his family and friends back in Kent. She'd heard from her brother that he was "practically engaged" to his neighbor. Surely Edward was penning letters to her, too.

And it wasn't as if Edward was *actually* writing to Cecilia. It had started with little snippets from Thomas: *Edward says such-and-such* or *I am*

ke a *compelled by Captain Rokesby to point out . . .*

he'd The first few had been terribly amusing, and Cecilia, stuck at Marsw
s with mounting bills and a disinterested father, had welcomed the unex
t might smile his words brought to her face. So she replied in kind, adding littl
and pieces to her own missives: *Please tell Captain Rokesby . . .* and la
s *cannot help but think that Captain Rokesby would enjoy . . .*

er Then one day she saw that her brother's latest missive included a
ke an paragraph written by another hand. It was a short greeting, containing
more than a description of wildflowers, but it was from Edward. He'd
one it

ays
as

*Devotedly,
Capt. Edward Rokesby*

er's Devotedly.

that he *Devotedly.*

l that A silly smile had erupted across her face, and then she'd felt the ver
is fool. She was mooning over a man she'd never even met.

om A man she probably never *would* meet.

en But she couldn't help it. It didn't matter if the summer sun was shini
h an brightly across the lakes—with her brother gone, life in Derbyshire alv
knew seemed so gray. Her days rolled from one to the next, with almost no
variation. She took care of the house, checked the budget, and tended t
father, not that he ever noticed. There was the occasional local assemb
vel of over half the men her age had bought commissions or enlisted, and the
floor always contained twice the number of ladies as gentlemen.

okesby So when the son of an earl wrote to her of wildflowers . . .

to her. Her heart did a little flip.

Honestly, it was the closest she'd got to a flirtation in years.

cross a But when she had made the decision to travel to New York, it had b
brother, and not Edward Rokesby, that she had been thinking about. W
he that messenger had arrived with news from Thomas's commanding
ier officer . . .

ard was It had been the worst day of her life.

orted The letter had been addressed to her father, of course. Cecilia had th
the messenger and made sure he was given something to eat, never onc
mentioning that Walter Harcourt had died unexpectedly three days ear

She'd taken the folded envelope to her room, closed and locked the door, then stared at it for a long, shaky minute before summoning the courage to slide her finger under the wax seal.

Her first emotion had been one of relief. She'd been so sure it was going to tell her that Thomas was dead, that there was no one left in the world she truly loved. An injury seemed almost a blessing at that point.

But then Cousin Horace had arrived.

Cecilia hadn't been surprised that he had shown up for her father's funeral. It was what one did, after all, even if one didn't enjoy particularly close friendships with one's relations. But then Horace had *stayed*. And by *staying* he was annoying. He did not speak so much as pontificate, and Cecilia could not take two steps without him sidling up behind her, expressing his deep concern for her well-being.

Worse, he kept making comments about Thomas, and how dangerous it was for a soldier in the colonies. Wouldn't they all be so relieved when he returned to his rightful place as owner of Marswell.

The unspoken message being, of course, that if he didn't return, Horace would inherit it all.

Bloody, stupid entail. Cecilia knew she was supposed to honor her forebearers, but by God, if she could go back in time and find her great-grandfather, she would wring his neck. He'd bought the land and built the house, and in his delusions of dynastic grandeur he'd imposed a strict entail on Marswell that went from father to son, and if not that, any male cousin would do. Never mind that Cecilia had lived there her entire life, that she knew every nook and cranny, that the servants trusted and respected her. If Thomas died, Cousin Horace would swoop in from Lancashire and take it all away.

Cecilia had tried to keep him in the dark about Thomas's injury, but she knew like that was impossible to keep under wraps. Some well-meaning neighbor must have said something, because Horace didn't wait even a full day after the funeral before declaring that as Cecilia's closest male relative, he must assume responsibility for her welfare.

Clearly, he said, they must marry.

No, Cecilia had thought in shocked silence. *No, they really must not*

"You must face facts," he said, taking a step toward her. "You are allowed to remain indefinitely at Marswell without a chaperone."

"I shall go to my great-aunt," she said.

"Sophie?" he said dismissively. "She's hardly capable."

or, and “My other great-aunt. Dorcas.”

je to His eyes narrowed. “I am not familiar with an aunt Dorcas.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Cecilia said. “She’s my mother’s aunt.”

oing to “And where does she live?”

he Considering that she was wholly a figment of Cecilia’s imagination, nowhere, but her mother’s mother had been Scottish, so Cecilia said, “Edinburgh.”

uneral. “You would leave your home?”

e If it meant avoiding marriage to Horace, yes.

God, he “I will make you see reason,” Horace growled, and then before she l

uldn’t what he was about, he kissed her.

worry Cecilia drew one breath after he released her, and then she slapped h

Horace slapped her back, and a week later, Cecilia left for New Yor

is it The journey had taken five weeks—more than enough time for Ceci

1 he second- and third-guess her decision. But she truly did not know what

she could have done. She wasn’t sure why Horace was so dead-set on

ace marrying her when he had a good chance of inheriting Marswell anyw.

could only speculate that he was having financial troubles and needed

someplace to live. If he married Cecilia he could move in right away a

t-great-cross his fingers that Thomas would never come home.

the Cecilia knew that marriage to her cousin was the sensible choice. If

entail. Thomas did die, she would be able to remain at her beloved childhood

ild do. She could pass it along to her children.

very But oh dear God, those children would also be Horace’s children, ar

s died, thought of lying with that man . . . Nay, the thought of *living* with that

man . . .

news She couldn’t do it. Marswell wasn’t worth it.

ghbor Still, her situation was tenuous. Horace couldn’t actually force her to

after accept his suit, but he could make her life very uncomfortable, and he

nust right about one thing—she couldn’t remain at Marswell indefinitely w

chaperone. She was of age—barely, at twenty-two—and her friends an

neighbors would give her some leeway given her circumstances, but a

woman on her own was an invitation for gossip. If Cecilia had a care f

lone. reputation, she was going to have to leave.

The irony was enough to make her want to scream. She was preserv

good name by taking off by herself across an ocean. All she had to do

make sure no one in Derbyshire knew about it.

But Thomas was her older brother, her protector, her closest friend. To him she would make a journey that even she knew was reckless, possibly fruitless. Men died of infection far more often than they did of battlefield injury. She knew her brother might be gone by the time she reached New York.

She just hadn't expected him to be *literally* gone.

It was during this maelstrom of frustration and helplessness that she remembered Edward's injury. Driven by a burning need to help *someone*, she had marched herself to the hospital. If she could not tend to her brother, by some way she would tend to her brother's best friend. This voyage to the New World would not be for nothing.

The hospital turned out to be a church that had been taken over by the British Army, which was strange enough, but when she asked to see Edward, she was told in no uncertain terms that she was not welcome. Captain Rokesby was an officer, a rather sharp-nosed sentry informed her. He was the son of an earl, and far too important for visitors of the plebian variety.

Cecilia was still trying to figure out what the devil he meant by *that* when he looked down his nose and told her that the only people allowed to see Edward and Captain Rokesby would be military personnel and family.

At which point Cecilia blurted out, "I am his wife!"

And once *that* had come out of her mouth, there was really no backing home away from it.

In retrospect, it was amazing she'd got away with it. She'd probably already been thrown out on her ear if not for the presence of Edward's commanding officer. Colonel Stubbs was not the most affable of men, but he knew of Edward and Thomas's friendship, and he had not been surprised to hear that Edward had married his friend's sister.

Before Cecilia even had a chance to think, she was spinning a tale of courtship in letters, and a proxy marriage on a ship.

Astoundingly, everyone believed her.

She could not regret her lies, however. There was no denying that Edward had improved under her care. She'd sponged his forehead when he'd gotten feverish, and she'd shifted his weight as best she could to prevent bedsore. It was true that she'd seen more of his body than was appropriate for an unmarried lady, but surely the rules of society must be suspended in war.

And no one would know.

No one would know. This, she repeated to herself on an almost hourly

For basis. She was five thousand miles from Derbyshire. Everyone she knew only thought she'd gone off to visit her maiden aunt. Furthermore, the Harcourt did not move in the same circles as the Rokesbys. She supposed that Edward might be considered a person of interest among society gossips, but she certainly wasn't, and it seemed impossible that tales of the Earl of Mar's second son might reach her tiny village of Matlock Bath.

heard As for what she would do when he finally woke up . . .

Well, in all honesty, she'd never quite figured that out. But as it happened, God, it didn't matter. She'd run through a hundred different scenarios in her world but not one of them had involved him *recognizing* her.

"Cecilia?" he said. He was blinking up at her, and she was momentarily stunned, mesmerized by how blue his eyes were.

Edward, She ought to have known that.

Then she realized how ridiculous she was being. She had no reason to know the color of his eyes.

But still. Somehow . . .

when It seemed like something she should have known.

Edward "You're awake," she said dumbly. She tried to say more, but the words twisted in her throat. She fought simply to breathe, overcome with emotion she had not even realized she felt. With a shaking hand, she leaned down and touched his forehead. Why, she did not know; he had not had a fever for nearly two days. But she was overwhelmed by a need to touch him, to have with her hands what she saw with her eyes.

Edward He was awake.

Edward He was *alive*.

Edward "Give him room," Colonel Stubbs ordered. "Go fetch the doctor."

"You fetch the doctor," Cecilia snapped, finally regaining some of her sense. "I'm his wife—"

Her voice caught. She couldn't utter the lie. Not in front of Edward.

Edward But Colonel Stubbs inferred what she did not actually say, and after muttering something unsavory under his breath, he stalked off in search of a doctor.

Edward "Cecilia?" Edward said again. "What are you doing here?"

"I'll explain everything in a moment," she said in a rushed whisper. The colonel would be back soon, and she'd rather not make her explanation an audience. Still, she couldn't have him giving her away, so she added, "now, just—"

“Where am I?” he interrupted.

She grabbed an extra blanket. He needed another pillow, but these were short supply, so a blanket would have to do. Helping him to sit up a little straighter, she tucked it behind him as she said, “You’re in hospital.”

He looked dubiously around the room. The architecture was clearly ecclesiastical. “With a stained glass window?”

“It’s a church. Well, it *was* a church. It’s a hospital now.”

“But where?” he asked, a little too urgently.

Her hands stilled. Something wasn’t right. She turned her head, just enough for her eyes to meet his. “We are in New York Town.”

He frowned. “I thought I was . . .”

She waited, but he did not finish his thought. “You thought you were what?” she asked.

He stared vacantly for a moment, then said, “I don’t know. I was . . .” words trailed off, and his face twisted. It almost looked as if it hurt him to think so hard.

“I was supposed to go to Connecticut,” he finally said.

Cecilia slowly straightened. “You did go to Connecticut.”

His lips parted. “I did?”

“Yes. You were there for over a month.”

“What?” Something flashed in his eyes. Cecilia thought it might be fear.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked.

He began to blink far more rapidly than was normal. “Over a month say?”

“That’s what they told me. I only just arrived.”

“Over a month,” he said again. He started shaking his head. “How could that . . .”

“You must not overtax yourself,” Cecilia said, reaching out to take his hand in hers again. It seemed to calm him. It certainly calmed her.

“I don’t remember . . . I was in Connecticut?” He looked up sharply and his grip on her hand grew uncomfortably tight. “How did I come to be in New York?”

She gave a helpless shrug. She didn’t have the answers he sought. “I don’t know. I was looking for Thomas, and I heard you were here. You were near Kip’s Bay, bleeding from your head.”

“You were looking for Thomas,” he echoed, and she could practically see the wheels of his mind spinning frantically behind his eyes. “Why were

looking for Thomas?”

ere in “I’d got word he was injured, but now he’s missing, and—”

tle Edward’s breathing grew labored. “When were we married?”

Cecilia’s lips parted. She tried to answer, she really did, but she couldn’t manage to stammer a few useless pronouns. Did he actually think they were married? He’d never even *seen* her before this day.

“I don’t remember,” he said.

Cecilia chose her words carefully. “You don’t remember what?”

He looked up at her with haunted eyes. “I don’t know.”

Cecilia knew she should try to comfort him, but she could only stare. His eyes were hollow, and his skin, already pallid from his illness, seemed almost gray. He gripped the bed as if it were a lifeboat, and she had the insane urge to do the same. The room was spinning around them, shrinking into a tight little tunnel.

.” His She could barely breathe.

And he looked like he might shatter.

She forced her eyes to meet his, and she asked the only question that remained.

“Do you remember anything?”

fear.

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And he looked like he might shatter.

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“Do you remember anything?”

Chapter 2

The barracks here at Hampton Court Palace are tolerable, more than tolerable, I suppose, although nothing to the comforts home. The officers are housed two to a two-room apartment, so I have a bit of privacy. I have been assigned to live with another lieutenant, a fellow named Rokesby. He is the son of an earl, if you can believe that . . .

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA

Edward fought to breathe. His heart felt as if it were trying to claw its way out of his chest, and all he could think was that he had to get off this cell. He had to figure out what was going on. He had to—

“Stop,” Cecilia cried, throwing herself on him in an effort to keep him down. “You must calm yourself.”

“Let me up,” he argued, although some tiny rational part of his mind was trying to remind him that he didn’t know where to go.

“Please,” she begged, transferring her weight to her grip on each of his wrists. “Take a moment, catch your breath.”

He looked up at her, chest heaving. “What is happening?”

She swallowed and glanced about. “I think we should wait for the doctor. But he was far too agitated to listen. “What day is this?” he demanded. She blinked, as if taken off guard. “Friday.”

“The *date*,” he bit off.

She didn’t answer right away. When she did, her words were slow, cautious. “It is the twenty-fifth day of June.”

Edward’s heart started pounding anew. “What?”

“If you will only wait for—”

“It cannot be.” Edward shoved himself into a more upright position.

are wrong.”

She shook her head slowly. “I’m not wrong.”

“No. No.” He looked frantically about the room. “Colonel!” he yelled. “Doctor! Anyone!”

“Edward, stop!” she cried, moving to block him when he flung his leg over the side of the bed. “Please, wait for the doctor to see you!”

“You there!” he ordered, pointing a shaky arm toward a dark-skinned man sweeping the floor. “What day is it?”

The man looked to Cecilia with wide eyes, silently asking for guidance.

“What day is it?” Edward said again. “The month. Tell me the month.”

Again, the man’s eyes flicked to Cecilia’s, but he answered, “It is June. End of the month.”

“No,” Edward said, falling back to the bed. “No.”

He closed his eyes, trying to force his thoughts through the pounding in his skull. There had to be a way to fix this. If he just concentrated hard enough, he could focus on the last thing he could remember . . .

He snapped his eyes back open and looked straight at Cecilia. “I don’t remember you.”

Her throat worked, and Edward knew he should be ashamed of himself for bringing her so close to tears. She was a lady. She was his *wife*. But surely she would forgive him. He had to know . . . he had to understand what was happening.

“You said my name,” she whispered, “when you woke up.”

“I know who you are,” he said. “I just don’t know *you*.”

Her face trembled as she rose to her feet, and she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear before clasping her hands together. She was nervous, though much was easy to see. And then the most disjointed thought popped in her head—she didn’t look very much like that miniature portrait of her brother carried about. Her mouth was wide and full, nothing like that sweet, mysterious smile in her portrait. And her hair wasn’t golden either, at least not the heavenly shade rendered by the painter. It was more of a dark blond. Rich like Thomas’s, actually, although not quite as shot through with brass.

He supposed she didn’t spend as much time in the sun.

“You are Cecilia Harcourt, aren’t you?” he asked. Because it had just occurred to him—she had never actually confirmed this fact.

She nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“You’re here, in New York.” He stared at her, searching her face.

“Why?”

He saw her eyes flick toward the other side of the room, even as she shook her head a little. “It’s complicated.”

“But we’re married.” He wasn’t sure whether he’d said it as a statement or a question.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted it to be a statement or a question.

She sat warily on the bed. Edward didn’t blame her for her hesitance. She’d been thrashing about like a trapped animal. She must be quite strong to have been able to subdue him.

Or else he’d become quite weak.

Cecilia swallowed, looking very much as if she were steeling herself for something difficult. “I need to tell you—”

“*What is going on?*”

She jerked back, and they both looked over at Colonel Stubbs, who’d been stalking across the chapel with the doctor in tow.

“Why are the blankets on the floor?” the colonel demanded.

Cecilia rose once again to her feet, moving aside so that the doctor could take her place at Edward’s side. “He was struggling,” she said. “He’s a little confused.”

“I’m not confused,” Edward snapped.

The doctor looked at her. Edward wanted to grab him by the throat. Why was he looking at Cecilia? *He* was the patient.

“He seems to be missing . . .” Cecilia caught her lip between her teeth, her eyes flitting back and forth between Edward and the doctor. She didn’t know what to say. Edward couldn’t blame her.

“Mrs. Rokesby?” the doctor prodded.

There it was again. *Mrs. Rokesby*. He was married. How the hell was she married?

“Well,” she said helplessly, trying to find the correct words for an impossible situation. “I think he doesn’t remember, ehm . . .”

“Spit it out, woman,” Colonel Stubbs barked.

Edward was half out of the bed before he realized what he was about to say. “Your *tone*, Colonel,” he growled.

“No, no,” Cecilia said quickly. “It’s all right. He means no disrespect. We’re all frustrated.”

Edward snorted and would have rolled his eyes except she chose that moment to lay a gentle hand on his shoulder. His shirt was thin, almost

threadbare, and he could feel the soft ridges and contours of her fingers settling against him with cool, quiet strength.

It calmed him. His temper did not magically evaporate, but he was able to take a long, even breath—just enough to keep himself from going for the colonel's throat.

"He was not sure of the date," Cecilia said, her voice gaining in certainty. He'd "I believe he thought it was . . ." She looked over at Edward.

"Not June," he said sharply.

The doctor frowned and took Edward's wrist, nodding as he counted pulse. When he was through he looked first into one of Edward's eyes, then the other.

"My eyes are fine," Edward muttered.

"What is the last thing you remember, Captain Rokesby?" the doctor asked.

Edward opened his mouth, fully intending to answer the question, but his mind stretched before him like an endless expanse of gray misty air. He could see the ocean, the steel blue water unnaturally calm. Not a ripple, not a thought or memory.

He grabbed the bedsheets in frustration. How the hell was he supposed to recover his memory if he wasn't even sure what he *did* remember?

"Try, Rokesby," Colonel Stubbs said gruffly.

"I *am* trying," Edward snapped. Did they think he was an idiot? That he didn't care? They had no idea what was going on in his head, what it felt like to have a huge blank space where memories ought to be.

"I don't know," he finally said. He needed to get ahold of himself. He was a soldier; he had been trained to be calm in the face of danger. "I think maybe . . . I was supposed to go to Connecticut Colony."

"You did go to Connecticut Colony," Colonel Stubbs said. "Do you remember?"

Edward shook his head. He tried . . . he wanted to . . . but there was nothing. Just the vague idea that someone had asked him to go.

"It was an important journey," the colonel pressed. "There is much we need you to tell us."

"Well, that's not likely now, is it?" Edward said bitterly.

"Please, you must not put such pressure on him," Cecilia intervened. "He's only just woken up."

"Your concern does you credit," Colonel Stubbs said, "but these are

s matters of vital military importance, and they cannot be put aside for a
aching head.” He glanced over at a nearby soldier and jerked his head
ble to the door. “Escort Mrs. Rokesby outside. She may return once we finish
he questioning the captain.”

Oh no. *That* was not happening. “My wife will remain by my side,”
itude. Edward bit off.

“She cannot be party to such sensitive information.”

“That’s hardly an issue, since I have nothing to tell you.”

l his Cecilia stepped between the colonel and the bed. “You must give him
and to regain his memory.”

“Mrs. Rokesby is correct,” the doctor said. “Cases such as this are rare
it is very likely he will regain most, if not all, of his memories.”

r “When?” Colonel Stubbs demanded.

“I cannot say. In the meantime, we must afford him all the peace and
ut his that is possible under such difficult circumstances.”

e was “No,” Edward said, because peace and quiet was the last thing he ne
wave. This had to be like everything else in his life. If you wanted to excel, you
worked hard, you trained, you practiced.

sed to You didn’t lie in bed, hoping for a bit of peace and quiet.

He looked over at Cecilia. She knew him. He might not remember her
face, but they had exchanged letters for over a year. *She knew him*. She
t he that he could not lie about and do nothing.

elt like “Cecilia,” he said, “surely you must understand.”

“I think the doctor must be correct,” she said quietly. “If you would
le was rest . . .”

. . . But Edward was already shaking his head. They were wrong, all of it
They didn’t—

Goddamn it.

A searing pain shot through his skull.

we “What is wrong?” Cecilia cried. Edward’s last sight before squeezin
eyes shut was her looking frantically toward the doctor. “What is happ
to him?”

“My head,” Edward gasped. He must have shaken it too quickly. It felt
if his brain were slamming into his skull.

. “He’s “Are you remembering something?” Colonel Stubbs asked.

“No, you bloody—” Edward cut himself off before he called him
something unforgivable. “It just *hurts*.”

n “That’s enough,” Cecilia declared. “I will not permit you to question toward any further.”

1 “You will not *permit* me?” Colonel Stubbs countered. “I am his commanding officer.”

 It was a pity that Edward could not bring himself to open his eyes, but he would really have liked to have seen the colonel’s face when Cecilia said, “You are not *my* commanding officer.”

 “If I might intervene,” the doctor said.

m time Edward heard someone step aside, and then he felt the mattress dip as the doctor sat beside him.

are, but “Can you open your eyes?”

 Edward shook his head, slowly this time. It felt as if the only way to stop the pain was to keep his eyes tightly closed.

d quiet “It can be like this with a head injury,” the doctor said gently. “They take time to heal, and are often very painful in the process. I’m afraid it’s no help to rush things.”

ou “I understand,” Edward said. He did not like it, but he understood.

er “That’s more than we physicians can claim,” the doctor replied. His voice was a bit quieter, as if he’d turned to speak to someone else. “There is much we do not know about injuries to the brain. In fact, I’d wager what we do know far outweighs that which we do.”

 Edward did not find this reassuring.

only “Your wife has cared for you most diligently,” the doctor said, patting Edward’s arm. “I recommend that she continue to do so, if possible out of hospital.”

them. “Out of hospital?” Cecilia echoed.

 Edward still hadn’t opened his eyes, but he heard a note of panic in the doctor’s voice.

g his “He is no longer feverish,” the doctor said to her, “and the wound on his head is healing well. I see no sign of infection.”

ening Edward touched his head and winced.

 “I wouldn’t do that,” the doctor said.

felt as Edward finally pried his eyes open and looked down at his fingers. He half expected to see blood.

 “I can’t remove him from hospital,” Cecilia said.

 “You will be just fine,” the doctor said reassuringly. “He cannot hope for better care than from his wife.”

1 him “No,” she said, “you don’t understand. I have no place to take him.”

“Where are you staying now?” Edward asked. He was suddenly rem
that she was his wife, and he was responsible for her well-being and sa

“I’ve rented a room. It’s not far. But there is only the one bed.”

ecause For the first time since he’d woken up, Edward felt the beginnings o
a said, smile.

“The one small bed,” she clarified. “It hardly fits me. Your feet will
over the side.” And then, when no one said anything fast enough to sta
as the her palpable unease, she added, “It is a boardinghouse for women. He
not be allowed.”

Edward turned to Colonel Stubbs with rising disbelief. “My wife ha
fight staying in a boardinghouse?”

“We didn’t know she was here,” the colonel replied.

7 can “You’ve obviously known for three days.”

t does “She was already situated . . .”

A hard, cold fury began to rise within him. Edward knew the nature
women’s boardinghouses in New York Town. It didn’t matter if he cou
voice recall the wedding, Cecilia was his *wife*.

And the army let her stay in such questionable lodgings?

don’t Edward had been raised a gentleman—a *Rokesby*—and there were s
insults that could not be borne. He forgot the pain in his skull, forgot e
that he’d lost his bloody memory. All he knew was that his wife, the w
ng he was sworn to cherish and protect, had been badly neglected by the v
t of band of brothers to whom he had devoted the last three years.

His voice was diamond hard when he said, “You will find her altern
lodgings.”

her Stubbs’s brows rose. They both knew who was the colonel and who
merely the captain.

1 his But Edward was undeterred. He had spent most of his military caree
playing down his noble lineage, but in this, he had no such reservation

“This woman,” he said, “is the Honorable Mrs. Edward Rokesby.”

He’d Colonel Stubbs opened his mouth to speak, but Edward would not a
“She is my wife and the daughter-in-law of the Earl of Manston,” he
continued, his voice icing over with generations of aristocratic breedin
does not belong in a boardinghouse.”

oe for Cecilia, obviously uncomfortable, tried to intervene. “I have been pe
well,” she said quickly. “I assure you.”

"I am not assured," Edward responded, never taking his eyes off Colonel Stubbs.

"We will find her more suitable lodgings," Colonel Stubbs said grudgingly.

"Tonight," Edward clarified.

The look on the colonel's face said clearly that he found this to be an unreasonable request, but after a tense moment of silence he said, "We've put her in the Devil's Head."

Edward nodded. The Devil's Head Inn catered primarily to British officers and was considered the finest establishment of its kind in New York. This wasn't saying much, but short of installing Cecilia in a private home Edward couldn't think of anyplace better. New York was desperately overcrowded, and it seemed that half the army's resources went to find places for its men to sleep. The Devil's Head would not have been suitable for a lady traveling alone, but as the wife of an officer, Cecilia would be and respected.

"Montby leaves tomorrow," Colonel Stubbs said. "His room is big enough for you both."

"Move him in with another officer," Edward ordered. "She needs a room tonight."

"Tomorrow will be fine," Cecilia said.

Edward ignored her. "*Tonight.*"

Colonel Stubbs nodded. "I'll speak to Montby."

Edward gave another curt nod. He knew Captain Montby. He, like all officers, would give up his room in a heartbeat if it meant the safety of a gentlewoman.

"In the meantime," the doctor said, "he must remain calm and sedate." He turned to Cecilia. "He must not be upset in any way."

"It is difficult to imagine being more upset than I am right now," Edward said.

The doctor smiled. "It is a very good sign that you retain your sense of humor."

Edward decided not to point out that he had not been making a joke.

"We shall have you out of here by tomorrow," Colonel Stubbs said.

He turned to Cecilia. "In the meantime, fill him in on all he has missed. Perhaps it will jog his memory."

"An excellent idea," the doctor said. "I am sure your husband will w

Colonel Stubbs know how you came to be here in New York, Mrs. Rokesby.”

Cecilia tried to smile. “Of course, sir.”

“And remember, do not upset him.” The doctor tipped an indulgent nod toward Edward and added, “Further.”

Colonel Stubbs spoke briefly to Cecilia about her move to the Devil’s Head, and then the two men departed, leaving Edward once again alone with his wife. Well, alone as one could be in a church full of sick soldiers.

He looked at Cecilia, standing awkwardly near his bed.

His wife. Bloody hell.

He still didn’t understand how it had come to pass, but it must be true. Colonel Stubbs seemed to believe it, and he’d always been a by-the-book man. Plus, this was Cecilia Harcourt, sister of his closest friend. If he was going to find himself married to a woman he didn’t think he’d actually want, he supposed she would be the one.

Still, it seemed like the sort of thing he’d remember.

“When were we wed?” he asked.

She was staring off toward the far end of the transept. He wasn’t sure she was listening.

“Cecilia?”

“A few months ago,” she said, turning back around to face him. “You should sleep.”

“I’m not tired.”

“No?” She gave a wobbly smile as she settled into the chair next to his bed. “I’m exhausted.”

“I am sorry,” he said instantly. He felt like he should rise. Give her his hand.

Be a gentleman.

“I did not think,” he said.

“You have not had much opportunity to do so,” she said in a dry voice.

His lips parted with surprise, and then he thought—*there* was the Cecilia Harcourt he knew so well. Or thought he knew so well. Truth be told, he could not recall ever having seen her face. But she sounded just like her letters, and he had held her words close to his heart during the worst of the war.

Sometimes he wondered if it was strange that he had looked forward to her letters to Thomas more than he did the ones coming to him from his own family.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I have a most inappropriate sense of humor.”
“I like it,” he said.

glance She looked over at him, and he thought he saw something a little green
in her eyes.

’s Such an interesting color, they were. A seafoam green so pale she would
e with surely have been called fey in another era. Which seemed somehow wonderful
she was as down-to-earth and reliable as any person he’d ever met.

Or thought he’d met.

ie. She touched her cheek self-consciously. “Have I something on my face?”
“Just looking at you,” he said.

ok sort “There is not much to see.”

ie was This made him smile. “I must disagree.”

met, She flushed, and he realized he was flirting with his wife. Strange.
And yet possibly the least strange thing of the day.
“I wish I remembered . . .” he began.

She looked at him.

ie if she He wished he remembered meeting her for the first time. He wished
remembered their wedding.

He wished he remembered kissing her.

ou “Edward?” she said softly.

“Everything,” he said, the word coming out with a little more edge than
he’d intended. “I wish I remembered everything.”

his “I’m sure you will.” She smiled tightly, but there was something wrong
about it. It didn’t reach her eyes, and then he realized that *she* hadn’t met
his eyes. He wondered what she wasn’t telling him. Had someone told her
about his condition than she had shared with him? He didn’t know who
could have done so; she had not left his side since he’d awakened.

“You look like Thomas,” he said abruptly.

ce. “Do you think so?” She gave him a puzzled look. “No one else seen
ecilia Well, except for the hair.” She touched it then, probably without even
he realizing she’d done so. It had been pulled back into an inexpertly pinned
er bun, and the bits that had fallen out hung limply against her cheek. He
f the wondered how long it was, how it might look against her back.

“I favor our mother,” she said. “Or so I’ve been told. I never knew how
l to her Thomas is more like our father.”

vn Edward shook his head. “It’s not in the features. It is your expression.”
“I beg your pardon?”

r.” “Yes, right there!” He grinned, feeling a bit more alive than he had j
moment earlier. “You make the same expressions. When you said, ‘I b
ateful your pardon,’ you tilted your head exactly the same way he does.”

She quirked a smile. “Does he beg your pardon so very often?”

ould “Not nearly as much as he should.”

rong; She burst out laughing at that. “Oh, thank you,” she said, wiping her
“I haven’t laughed since . . .” She shook her head. “I can’t remember v

He reached out and took her hand. “You haven’t had much to laugh
ace?” about,” he said quietly.

Her throat worked as she nodded, and for one awful moment Edward
thought she might cry. But still, he knew he could not remain silent. “\
happened to Thomas?” he asked.

She took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. “I received word that h
been injured and was recuperating in New York Town. I was concerne
well, you can see for yourself,” she said, waving a hand toward the res
room. “There are not enough people to nurse the wounded soldiers. I d
he want my brother to be alone.”

Edward considered this. “I am surprised your father allowed you to
the trip.”

“My father has died.”

han Bloody hell. “I am sorry,” he said. “It seems my tact has departed al
with my memory.” Although in truth, he could not have known. Her di
ong was pink, and she showed no signs of mourning.

et his She caught him eyeing the dusty rose fabric of her sleeve. “I know,”
more said with a sheepish pout to her lower lip. “I should be in blacks. But I
en they had the one dress, and it was wool bombazine. I should roast like a chi
I wore it here.”

“Our uniforms are rather uncomfortable in the summer months,” Ed
is to. agreed.

“Indeed. Thomas had said as much in his letters. It was because of h
ied descriptions of the summer temperatures that I knew not to bring it.”

“I am sure you are more fetching in pink,” Edward said.

She blinked at the compliment. He could not blame her. The sheer
ier. ordinariness of it seemed oddly out of place considering their location
hospital.

ns.” In a church.

In the middle of a war.

ust a Add in his lost memory and found wife, and truly, he did not see how
eg life might get any more bizarre.

“Thank you,” Cecilia said, before clearing her throat and continuing
“But you asked about my father. You are correct. He would not have
permitted me to travel to New York. He was not the most conscientious
parents, but even he would have put his foot down. Although . . .” She
when.” a little choke of uncomfortable laughter. “I’m not sure how quickly he
have noticed my absence.”

“I assure you, anyone would notice your absence.”

d She gave him a sideways sort of look. “You haven’t met my father.
What long as the house is—excuse me, *was*—running smoothly, he wouldn’t
noticed a thing.”

ie had Edward nodded slowly. Thomas had not said a lot about Walter Har
d— but what he had seemed to confirm Cecilia’s description. He’d compla
t of the more than once that their father was too content to let Cecilia molder a
id not his unpaid housekeeper. She needed to find someone to marry, Thoma
said. She needed to leave Marswell and make a life of her own.

make Had Thomas been playing matchmaker? Edward hadn’t thought so a
time.

“Was it an accident?” Edward asked.

ong “No, but it was a surprise. He was napping in his study.” She gave a
ress little shrug. “He didn’t wake up.”

“His heart?”

’ she “The doctor said there was no way to know for certain. It doesn’t m
only though, really, does it?” She looked over at him with an achingly wise
cken if expression, and Edward could have sworn he *felt* it. There was someth
about her eyes, the color, the clarity. When they met his, he felt as if th
ward breath was sucked from his body.

Would it always be like this?

is Was this why he’d married her?

“You look tired,” she said, adding before he could interrupt, “I know
said you’re not, but you *look* it.”

in a But he didn’t want to sleep. He couldn’t bear the thought of allowin
mind to slip back into unconsciousness. He’d lost too much time alread
needed it back. Every moment. Every memory.

“You didn’t say what happened to Thomas,” he reminded her.

A wave of worry washed over her face. “I don’t know,” she said wit

w his choke in her voice. “No one seems to know where he is.”
“How is that possible?”
with She gave a helpless shrug.
“You spoke to Colonel Stubbs?”
s of “Of course.”
let out “General Garth?”
would “They would not permit me to see him.”
“What?” This was not to be borne. “As my wife—”
“I did not tell them I was your wife.”
As He stared at her. “Why the hell not?”
t have “I don’t know.” She jumped up from her seat, hugging her arms to h
body. “I think I was just—well, I was there as Thomas’s sister.”
court, “But surely when you gave your name.”
ined She caught her lower lip between her teeth before saying, “I don’t th
way as anyone made the connection.”
s had “General Garth did not realize that Mrs. Edward Rokesby was my w
“Well, I told you I didn’t see him.” She moved back to his side, bus
at the herself with tucking his blankets around him. “You’re getting too upse
can talk about this tomorrow.”
“We *will* talk about this tomorrow,” he growled.
sad “Or the next day.”
His eyes met hers.
“Depending on your health.”
atter, “Cecilia—”
“I will brook no argument,” she cut in. “I may not be able to do anyt
ing for my brother just now, but I can help you. And if that means forcing
ie hold your bloody horses . . .”
He stared at her, drinking her in. Her jaw was set, and she had one fi
slightly forward, as if ready to charge. He could almost imagine her
brandishing a sword, waving it above her head with a battle cry.
v you She was Joan of Arc. She was Boudicca. She was every woman who
ever fought to protect her family.
g his “My fierce warrior,” he murmured.
ly. He She gave him a look.
He didn’t apologize.
“I should go,” she said abruptly. “Colonel Stubbs is sending someor
h a collect me this evening. I need to pack my things.”

He wasn't sure how many things she'd managed to collect since arriving in North America, but Edward knew better than to get between a woman and her traveling trunk.

"You will be all right without me?"

He nodded.

This made her frown. "You wouldn't tell me if you thought otherwise would you?"

He gave her a quirk of a smile. "Of course not."

This made her roll her eyes. "I will be back in the morning."

"I look forward to it."

And he did. He couldn't remember the last time he looked forward to something more.

Of course, he couldn't remember anything.

But still.

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Chapter 3

The son of an earl? La-di-da, how you have come up in the world, my brother. I hope he is not unbearable about it.

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS*

Several hours later, as Cecilia followed the cheerful young lieutenant who had been dispatched to escort her to the Devil's Head, she wondered whether her heart might finally stop pounding. Dear heavens, how many lies had she told this afternoon? She had tried to keep her answers as close to the truth as possible, both to ease her conscience and because she had no idea how to keep track of it all.

She should have told Edward the truth. She'd been about to, honestly, when Colonel Stubbs had returned with the doctor. There was no way she was going to make her confession with *that* audience. She would have been booted from the hospital for certain, and Edward still needed her.

She still needed him.

She was alone in a very strange land. She was almost out of funds. And now that her reason for holding herself together had woken up, she could finally admit to herself—she was scared out of her mind.

If Edward repudiated her she'd be soon in the streets. She'd have no money but to go back to England, and she couldn't do that, not without discovering what had happened to her brother. She had sacrificed so much to make this journey. It had taken every ounce of her courage. She could not give up now.

But how could she continue to lie to him? Edward Rokesby was a good man. He did not deserve to be taken advantage of in such a brazen manner. Furthermore, he was Thomas's closest friend. The two men had met when they had first entered the army, and as officers in the same regiment, they had been sent over to North America at the same time. As far as Cecilia knew,

they had served together ever since.

She knew that Edward felt kindly toward her. If she told him the truth surely he'd understand why she'd lied. He would want to help her. Would he?

But all this was neither here nor there. Or at the very least it could be put off until the following day. The Devil's Head was just down the street, with it the promise of a warm bed and a filling meal. Surely she deserved much.

Goal for today: Don't feel guilty. At least not for eating a proper meal.
ld, "Almost there," the lieutenant said with a smile.

Cecilia gave him a nod. New York was such a strange place. According to the woman who'd run her boardinghouse, there were more than twenty thousand people crowded into what was not a very large area at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Cecilia wasn't sure what the population had been before the war, but she'd been told that numbers had surged once the British had taken over the city as their headquarters. Scarlet-clad soldiers were everywhere, and every available building had been pressed into service to house them. Supporters of the Continental Congress had long since fled elsewhere to but they had been replaced and more by a rush of Loyalist refugees who fled neighboring colonies in search of British protection.

But the strangest sight—to Cecilia, at least—were the Negroes. She had never seen people with such dark skin before, and she'd been startled to find many of them there were in the bustling port town.

"Escaped slaves," the lieutenant said, following Cecilia's gaze to the skinned man coming out of the blacksmith's shop across the street.

And "I beg your pardon?"

"They've been coming up here by the hundreds," the lieutenant said with a shrug. "General Clinton freed them all last month, but no one in Patriot choice territories is obeying the order, so their slaves have been running away." He frowned. "Not sure we've got room for them, to be honest. But you can't blame a man for wanting to be free."

"No," Cecilia murmured, glancing back over her shoulder. When she turned back to the lieutenant, he was already at the entrance to the Devil's Head Inn.

"Here we are," he said, holding the door for her.

"Thank you." She stepped in and then out of his way so that he might locate the innkeeper. Clutching her meager valise in front of her, Cecilia

in the main room of the inn and public house. It looked very much like
th, British counterparts—dimly lit, a bit too crowded, and with sticky bits
ouldn't floor that Cecilia chose to believe were ale. A buxom young woman m
e put swiftly between the tables, deftly setting down mugs with one hand as
and cleared dishes with the other. Behind the bar a man with a bushy musta
red that fiddled with the tap on a barrel, cursing when it seemed to jam up.
It would have felt like home had not almost every seat been filled w
scarlet-clad soldiers.

There were a few ladies among their ranks, and from their clothing a
demeanor Cecilia assumed they were respectable. Officers' wives, may
ling to She'd heard that some women had accompanied their husbands to the
World. She supposed she was one of them now, for at least one more c
ithern "Miss Harcourt!"

Startled, Cecilia turned toward a table in the middle of the room. On
the soldiers—a man of middling years with thinning brown hair—was
to his feet. "Miss Harcourt," he repeated. "It is a surprise to see you he
Her lips parted. She knew this man. She *detested* this man. He was t
t town, person she'd sought out in her quest to find Thomas, and he'd been the
io'd condescending and unhelpful of the bunch.

"Major Wilkins," she said, bobbing a polite curtsy even as her mind
had whirring with unease. More lies. She needed to come up with more lies
y how quickly.

"Are you well?" he asked in his customary brusque voice.
"I am." She glanced over at the lieutenant, who was now conferring
another soldier. "Thank you for asking."

"I had assumed you would be planning your return to England."
She gave him a little smile and a shrug in lieu of a reply. Truly, she
wish to speak with him. And she had never given him any indication th
to us." planned to leave New York.

"Mrs. Rokesby! Ah, there you are."
Saved by the young lieutenant, Cecilia thought gratefully. He was m
his way back to her side, a large brass key in his hand.

"I spoke to the innkeeper," he said, "and to—"
"Mrs. Rokesby?" Major Wilkins interjected.
The lieutenant snapped to attention when he saw the major. "Sir," he
Wilkins brushed him off. "Did he call you Mrs. Rokesby?"
"Is that not your name?" the lieutenant asked.

its Cecilia fought against the fist that seemed to be closing around her h
on the “I—”

oved The major turned back to her with a frown. “I thought you to be
she unmarried.”

ache “I was,” she blurted out. “I mean—” Damn it, that wasn’t going to h
water. She couldn’t have got herself married in the last three days. “I v
ith Some time ago. I was unmarried. We all were. I mean, if one is marrie
one once was un—”

and She didn’t even bother to finish. Good God, she sounded the worst s
ybe? ninny. She was giving women everywhere a bad name.

New “Mrs. Rokesby is married to Captain Rokesby,” the lieutenant said
lay. helpfully.

ie of Major Wilkins turned to her with a thunderous expression. “Captain
Edward Rokesby?”

rising Cecilia nodded. As far as she knew, there was no other Captain Rok
re.” but as she was already tripping over her falsehoods, she deemed it best
he first try to score a point with a snide comment.

e most “Why the h—” He cleared his throat. “I beg your pardon. Why did y
say so?”

was Cecilia recalled her conversation with Edward. *Stick to the same lies*
s, and reminded herself. “I was inquiring about my brother,” she explained. “
seemed the more important relationship.”

with The major looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. Cecilia knew very
what he was thinking. Edward Rokesby was the son of an earl. She’d h
be an idiot not to press *that* connection.

did not There was a heavy beat of silence while the major blinked his expre
back into something approaching respectful, then he cleared his throat
at she said, “I was very glad to hear that your husband had returned to New Y
His brows drew together with some suspicion. “He was missing for soi
time, was he not?”

aking The implication being: Why hadn’t she been searching for her *husb*
Cecilia injected a bit of steel into her spine. “I was already aware of
safe return when I came to you about Thomas.” It wasn’t true, but he d
need to know that.

e said. “I see.” He had the grace to look at least a little ashamed. “I beg you
pardon.”

Cecilia gave him a regal nod, the sort, she thought, that might be em

heart. by a countess. Or a countess's daughter-in-law.

Major Wilkins cleared his throat, then said, "I will make further inquiry about your brother's whereabouts."

"Further?" Cecilia echoed. She had not been under the impression that I had made *any* inquiries thus far.

was. He flushed. "Will your husband be out of hospital soon?"

and now, "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, you say?"

sort of "Yes," she said slowly, just barely resisting the urge to add, "As I just said."

"And will you be staying here at the Devil's Head?"

"Captain and Mrs. Rokesby are taking over Captain Montby's room," the lieutenant supplied helpfully.

"Ah, good of him. Good man, good man."

esby, "I do hope we are not inconveniencing him," Cecilia said. She glanced toward the tables, wondering if the displaced Captain Montby was seated there. "I should like to thank him if possible."

you not "He's happy to do it," Major Wilkins declared, even though there was no way he could have known this for certain.

is, she "Well," Cecilia said, trying not to gaze longingly at the stairs she ascended. It led up to her bedchamber. "It was very nice to see you, but I have had a long day."

well "Of course," the major said. He bowed crisply. "I shall report back to you tomorrow."

"Report . . . back?"

ssion "With news of your brother. Or if not that, then at least an account of our inquiries."

ork." "Thank you," Cecilia said, startled by his newfound solicitude.

me Major Wilkins turned to the lieutenant. "What time do you expect Captain Rokesby tomorrow?"

and? Really? He was asking the *lieutenant*? "Sometime in the afternoon," Cecilia said sharply, even though she had no idea what time she planned to fetch him. She waited for Major Wilkins to turn to her before adding, "The lieutenant is unlikely to have special knowledge of the matter."

ir "She's quite right," the lieutenant said cheerfully. "My orders were to escort Mrs. Rokesby to her new accommodations. Tomorrow I'm back in the employ of Haarlem."

Cecilia gave Major Wilkins a bland smile.

“Of course,” the major said gruffly. “Forgive me, Mrs. Rokesby.”

“Think nothing of it,” Cecilia said. Much as she’d like to box the major’s ears, she knew she could not afford to alienate him. She was not certain he could do a precise job, but he seemed to be in charge of keeping track of the soldiers currently billeted nearby.

“Will you and Captain Rokesby be here at half five?” he asked.

She looked him squarely in the eye. “If you are coming with news of my brother, then yes, we will most definitely be here.”

“Very well. Good evening, ma’am.” He executed a sharp bow of his head and then said to her escort, “Lieutenant.”

Major Wilkins returned to his table, leaving Cecilia with the lieutenant who let out a little *oh* before saying, “I almost forgot. Your key.”

“Thank you,” Cecilia said, taking it from him. She turned it over in her hand.

“Room twelve,” the lieutenant said.

“Yes,” Cecilia said, glancing down at the large “12” etched into the door. “I will see myself up.”

The lieutenant gave a grateful nod; he was young and clearly uncomfortable with the idea of escorting a lady to her bedchamber, even a very young and unmarried one such as she.

Married. Dear God. How was she going to extricate herself from this web of lies? And perhaps more importantly, *when*? It wouldn’t be tomorrow. She might have claimed to be Edward’s wife so that she could remain by his side and nurse him to health, but it was clear—appallingly so—that the wife of Captain Rokesby held far more sway with Major Wilkins than the hurried Miss Harcourt.

Cecilia knew that she owed it to Edward to end this farce as soon as possible, but her brother’s fate hung in the balance.

She would tell him the truth. Obviously.

Eventually.

She just couldn’t do it tomorrow. Tomorrow she had to be Mrs. Rokesby.

And after that . . .

Cecilia sighed as she slipped the key into the lock of her room and turned it. She feared she was going to have to be Mrs. Rokesby until she found her brother.

“Forgive me,” she whispered.

It would have to be enough.

Edward had every intention of being upright, in uniform, and ready to go when Cecilia arrived at the hospital the following day. Instead he was lying on his back, wearing the same shirt he'd been in for he-truly-did-not-know-how-long, sleeping so soundly Cecilia apparently thought he'd slipped back into a coma.

"Edward?" he heard, her voice whispering at the edges of his consciousness. "Edward?"

He mumbled something. Or maybe he grumbled it. He wasn't sure what the difference was. Attitude, probably.

"Oh, thank God," she whispered, and he sensed, rather than heard, her settle back into the chair next to his bed.

He should probably wake up.

Maybe he would open his eyes and the whole world would be restored to him. It would be June, and it would make sense that it was June. He was married, and that would make sense too, especially if he remembered what it felt like to kiss her.

Because he'd really like to kiss her. It was all he'd thought about the day before. Or at least most. Half, at least. He was as randy as the next man, especially now that he was married to Cecilia Harcourt, but he also had a working sense of smell, and what he really wanted was to take a bath.

God help him, he stank.

He lay still for a few minutes, his mind resting serenely behind his closed eyelids. There was something rather pleasant about unmoving reflection; he didn't have to do anything but think. He could not recall the last time he had enjoyed such a luxury.

And yes, he was well aware that he could not recall anything of the last three or so months. He was still quite certain he had not spent it sifting peacefully through his own thoughts, listening to the muffled sounds of his wife beside him. He was reminded of those moments the day before, the day right before he'd opened his eyes. He'd heard her breathing then, too. It sounded different, though, now that he knew who she was. It sounded the same, but it was different.

It was strange, really. He would never have believed that he'd one day be content to lie in bed and listen to a woman breathe. She emitted more sounds than he would have liked, though. She was tired. Maybe worried. Prob-

both.

He should tell her he was awake. It was past time.

depart But then he heard her murmur, "What am I to do with you?"

in bed, Honestly, he couldn't resist. He opened his eyes. "With me?"

ing, and She shrieked, jumping so far out of her chair it was a wonder she didn't
a the ceiling.

Edward started to laugh. Big belly laughs that hurt his ribs and squeezed
his lungs, and even as Cecilia glared at him, her hand over her obvious
racing heart, he laughed and laughed.

what And just like before, he knew that this was not something he'd done
very long while.

er "You're awake," his wife accused.

"I wasn't," he said, "but then someone started whispering my name.

"That was *ages* ago."

ed to He shrugged, unrepentant.

ould be "You look better today," she said.

what it He lifted his brows.

"A little less . . . gray."

the night He decided to be grateful no one had offered him a looking glass. "I

l, to shave," he said, rubbing his chin. How many days' growth was this?

l a least two weeks. Probably closer to three. He frowned.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Does anyone know how long I was unconscious?"

losed She shook her head. "I don't think so. No one knows how long you were
n. He unconscious before you were found, but I can't imagine it was very long.

ie'd They said the wound on your head was fresh."

last He winced. *Fresh* was the sort of word one liked when applied to
strawberries, not skulls.

"So probably not more than eight days," she concluded. "Why?"

f his "My beard," he said. "It has been far more than a week since I last
re ones shaved."

It was She stared at him for a moment. "I'm not sure what that means," she
, but it finally said.

"Nor I," he admitted. "But it's worth taking note of it."

ay be "Have you a valet?"

ighs He gave her a look.

ably "Don't look at me that way. I know very well that many officers travel

with a manservant.”

“I do not.”

A moment passed, then Cecilia said, “You must be very hungry. I got some broth into you, but that’s all.”

Edward placed a hand on his midsection. His hipbones were definitely more prominent than they’d been since childhood. “I seem to have lost weight.”

“Did you eat after I left yesterday?”

“Not much. I was famished, but then I started to feel ill.”

She nodded, glancing down at her hands before saying, “I did not have the opportunity to tell you yesterday, but I took the liberty of writing to your family.”

His family. Holy God above. He had not even thought of them.

His eyes met hers.

“They had been informed that you had gone missing,” she explained. “General Garth wrote to them several months ago.”

Edward put a hand to his face, covering his eyes. He could only imagine how his mother. She would not have taken it well.

“I wrote that you had been injured, but I did not go into detail,” she said. “I thought it most important that they know you had been found.”

“Found,” Edward echoed. The word was apt. He had not been returned to his family nor had he escaped. Instead he had been found near Kip’s Bay. The details of how he only knew how he’d got there.

“When did you arrive in New York?” he asked abruptly. Better to ask questions about what he did not know than to agonize over what he did not remember.

“Almost a fortnight ago,” she said.

“You came looking for me?”

“No,” she admitted. “I didn’t—that is to say, I would not be so foolish to cross an ocean to look for a man who was missing.”

“And yet you are here.”

“Thomas was injured,” she reminded him. “He needed me.”

“So you came for your brother,” he said.

She regarded him with a frank, open stare, as if she was wondering if his question was an interrogation. “I was led to believe I would find him in hospital.”

“As opposed to me.”

Her lower lip caught between her teeth. “Well, yes. I did not—that is

say, I did not know you were missing.”

“General Garth did not write to *you*?”

ot a bit She shook her head. “I don’t believe he had been made aware of the marriage.”

ely “So . . . wait.” He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. He felt
: some twitchy, but something didn’t make sense. The timeline was off. “Did
marry here? No, we couldn’t have done. Not if I was missing.”

“It—it was a proxy marriage.” Her face flushed, and she looked alm
embarrassed to admit it.

ive the “I married you by proxy?” he asked, dumbfounded.

ur “Thomas wanted it,” she mumbled.

“Is that even legal?”

Her eyes grew very wide, and he instantly felt like a heel. This wom
cared for him for three days while he was in a coma, and here he was
l. implying that they might not even be married. She did not deserve such
disrespect. “Forget I asked,” he said quickly. “We can sort all that out

gine She nodded gratefully, then yawned.

“Did you rest yesterday?” he asked.

said. “I Her lips curved into the tiniest—and the tiredest—of smiles. “I belie
is my line.”

ied, He returned the wry expression. “From what I understand, I have do
vil nothing *but* rest these past few days.”

She tilted her head, a silent *touché*.

sk “You did not answer my question,” he reminded her. “Did you rest?”

l not “Some. I rather think I’m out of practice. And it was a strange room
lock of hair fell from her coiffure, and she frowned before tucking it b
behind her ear. “I always find it difficult to sleep the first night in new
surroundings.”

sh to “I’d wager you have not slept well in weeks, then.”

At that she smiled. “Actually, I slept very well on the ship. The rock
motion agreed with me.”

“I’m jealous. I spent most of my crossing puking up my guts.”

She smothered a laugh. “I’m sorry.”

if this “Just be grateful you weren’t there. I would not have seemed such a
l.” matrimonial catch.” He considered this. “Then again, I’m no prize righ
now.”

s to “Oh, don’t be—”

“Unwashed, unshaved . . .”

“Edward . . .”

“Malodorous.” He waited. “I notice you do not contradict me there.”

“You do have a certain, ah, *fragrance*.”

very “And do not forget that I am missing a small corner of my mind.”

we She instantly stiffened. “You should not say such things.”

His tone was light but his eyes were straight and direct on hers as he

lost “If I don’t find something to mock in this, I shall have to cry.”

She went very still.

“Figuratively,” he said, taking pity on her. “You needn’t worry. I sh
break down in tears.”

“If you did,” she said haltingly, “I shouldn’t think the less of you. I—
an had would—”

“Care for me? Tend to my wounds? Dry the salty rivers of my tears?”

h Her lips parted, but he did not think she was shocked, merely people
later.” did not realize you were such a devotee of sarcasm,” she said.

He shrugged. “I’m not sure I am.”

She went a bit straight as she considered this, her brow puckering up
ve that three lines formed in the center of her forehead. She did not move for s
seconds, and only when a little whoosh of air crossed her lips did he re
ne she had been holding her breath. It came out with a bit of her voice, res
in a pensive noise.

“You seem to be analyzing me,” he said.

” She did not deny it. “It is very interesting,” she said, “what you do a
.” A not recall.”

ack “It is difficult for me to view it as an academic pursuit,” he said with
rancor, “but by all means, you should do so. Any breakthroughs will b
appreciated.”

She shifted in her seat. “Have you remembered anything new?”

ing “Since yesterday?”

She nodded.

“No. At least I don’t think so. It’s difficult to tell when I don’t reme
what I don’t remember. I’m not even certain where the memory gap be

it “I’m told you left for Connecticut in early March.” Her head tilted to
side, and that mischievous lock of hair fell out of place again. “Do you
remember that?”

He thought about this for a moment. “No,” he said. “I vaguely recall

told to go, or rather that I was going to be told to go . . .” He scrubbed the heel of his hand against one of his eyes. What did that even *mean*? He looked up at Cecilia. “I don’t know why, though.”

“It will come back to you eventually,” she said. “The doctor said that the head is concussed, the brain needs time to recover.”

He frowned.

She said, “Before you woke up,” she clarified.

“Ah.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, and then, with an awkward glance toward his injury, she asked, “Does it hurt?”

“Like the very devil.”

—I She moved to stand. “I can get you laudanum.”

“No,” he said quickly. “Thank you. I would rather keep a clear head than a headache.”

Then he realized what a ridiculous statement that was, all things considered. “I

“Or at least clear enough to recall the events of the last day.”

Her lips twitched.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Laugh.”

“I really shouldn’t.” But she did. Just a little.

And the sound was lovely.

Then she yawned.

“Sleep,” he urged.

“Oh, I couldn’t. I just got here.”

“I won’t tell.”

She gave him a look. “Who would you tell?”

“Fair point,” he conceded. “But still, you obviously need to sleep.”

“I can sleep tonight.” She wiggled a little in her chair, trying to get a

little more comfortable. “I’m just going to rest my eyes for a moment.”

He snickered.

“Don’t mock me,” she warned.

“Or you’ll what? You’d never even see me coming.”

She opened one eye. “I have outstanding reflexes.”

Edward chuckled at that, watching as she returned to her expressionless

“repose.” She yawned again, this time not even trying to cover it.

Was that what it meant to be married? That one could yawn with

impunity? If so, Edward supposed that the institution had much to

recommend it.

He watched her as she “rested her eyes.” She really was lovely. Tho

the had said his sister was pretty, but in that offhand, brotherly sort of way looked saw what Edward supposed he saw in his own sister Mary: a nice face all the pieces in the right spots. Thomas would never have noticed, for it when example, that Cecilia's eyelashes were a few shades darker than her ha that when her eyes were closed, they formed two delicate arcs, almost slivers of a waxing moon.

Her lips were full, although not in that rosebud way the poets seeme for. When she slept, they didn't quite touch, and he could imagine the notion whisper of her breath passing between them.

"Do you think you will be able to leave for the Devil's Head this afternoon?" she asked.

"I thought you were asleep."

." "I told you, I'm just resting my eyes."

lered. In this she was not lying. She did not so much as lift a lash as she sp

"I should do," he said. "The doctor wishes to see me once more bef go. I trust the room is acceptable?"

She nodded, eyes still closed. "You might find it small."

"But you don't?"

"I don't require grand surroundings."

"Neither do I."

She opened her eyes. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to imply that you di

"I have spent many a night sleeping rough. Any room with a bed wi luxury. Well, except this one, I suppose," he said, looking about the makeshift ward. The church pews had been moved against the walls, a men were lying in a motley collection of cots and beds. A few were on floor.

"It's depressing," she said quietly.

He nodded. He should be grateful. He was whole of limb and body. perhaps, but he would heal. Some of the other men in the room were n lucky.

But still, he wanted out.

of "I *am* hungry," he suddenly declared.

She looked up, and he found he rather enjoyed the startled look in h amazing eyes.

"If the doctor wishes to see me, he can bl—" Edward cleared his thr "He can find me at the Devil's Head."

mas "Are you sure?" She gave him a concerned look. "I shouldn't want—

. He He cut her off by pointing toward a pile of fabric—scarlet and tan—
with nearby pew. “I think that’s my uniform over there. Would you be so ki
to fetch it?”

ir, or “But the doctor—”

like “Or I’ll do it myself, and I’m warning you, I’m bare-arsed under thi
shirt.”

d wild Her cheeks burned scarlet—not quite as deep a hue as his coat, but
impressively close—and suddenly it occurred to him:

A proxy marriage.

Him: Several months in Connecticut.

Her: Two weeks in New York.

No wonder he had not recognized her face. He’d never seen her bef

Their marriage?

oke. It had never been consummated.

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No wonder he had not recognized her face. He’d never seen her before.

Their marriage?

It had never been consummated.

Chapter 4

Lieutenant Rokesby isn't unbearable at all. In fact, he's quite decent fellow. I think you'd like him. He is from Kent and practically engaged to his neighbor.

I showed him your miniature. He said you were very pretty.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA

Edward had insisted upon dressing himself, so Cecilia took this time to go outside to find them something to eat. She had spent the better part of her life in this neighborhood and knew every shop and storefront on the street. The most economical option—and thus her usual choice—was currant buns from Mr. Mather's cart. They were tolerably tasty, although she suspected the low price was made possible by the inclusion of no more than three currants per bun.

Mr. Lowell, a bit farther down the street, sold actual Chelsea buns, with spiraled dough and cinnamon spice. Cecilia had never counted their currants; she'd eaten only one, bought day-old, and she'd devoured it far too quickly to do anything but moan with pleasure at the sticky-sweet sugar glaze as it dissolved on her tongue.

But around the corner—that was where one found the shop of Mr. Rooijackers, the Dutch baker. Cecilia had gone in only once; that was because she had taken to see that (a) she could not afford his treats and (b) if she could, she'd be fat as a house in no time.

If there was ever a time for extravagance, though, surely this was the time, with Edward having awakened and in goodish health. Cecilia had two shillings in her pocket, enough for a fine treat, and she no longer had to worry about paying for her boardinghouse room. She supposed she should be saving pennies—the Lord only knew where she'd find herself in the weeks to

—but she could not bring herself to scrimp. Not today.

She pushed open the door, smiling at the tinkle of the bell above, and sighing with delight at the heavenly smells wafting toward her from the kitchen in the back.

“May I help you?” asked the ginger-haired woman standing behind the counter. She was perhaps a few years older than Cecilia and spoke with a very slight accent, one Cecilia would not have been able to place had she already known that the proprietors hailed from Holland.

“Yes, thank you, I’ll have a round bread loaf, please,” Cecilia said, motioning toward a row of three sitting plump and pretty on the shelf, mottled golden crust that looked different from anything she’d seen back home. “Are they all the same price?”

The woman cocked her head to the side. “They were, but now that you mention it, the one on the right does look a bit small. You can have it for a ha’penny less.”

Cecilia was already calculating where she might go to purchase butter and cheese to eat with the bread, but then she just had to ask, “What is that delicious smell?”

The woman beamed. “*Speculaas*. Freshly baked. Have you never tried one?”

Cecilia shook her head. She was so hungry. She’d finally had a proper meal the night before, but it had only seemed to remind her belly how she had been mistreating it. And while the steak and kidney pie at the Head had been good, Cecilia was positively salivating at the thought of something sweet.

“I broke one taking them off the tray,” the woman said. “You can have it for free.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t—”

The woman waved this off. “You’ve never had one. I can’t charge you all it trying.”

“Actually, you could,” Cecilia said with a smile, “but I’ll not argue with you further.”

“I haven’t seen you in the shop before.” The woman said this over her shoulder as she scooted into the kitchen.

“I came in once,” Cecilia said, declining to mention that she had not bought a purchase. “Last week. There was an older gentleman here.”

“My father,” the woman confirmed.

“Then you are Miss Rooley—ehrm, Roojak—” Good heavens, how could she then pronounce it?

“Roojakkers,” the woman said with a grin as she came back through the doorway. “But actually I’m Mrs. Leverett.”

“Thank heavens,” Cecilia said with a relieved smile. “I know you just have your name, but I don’t think I could reproduce it.”

“I have often told my husband it is why I married him,” Mrs. Leverett joked.

Cecilia laughed until she realized that she too was holding on to a habit for his name. In her case, however, it was so that Major Wilkins would check bloody job.

“Dutch is not an easy language,” Mrs. Leverett said, “but if you plan to stay in New York Town for some time, you might find it worthwhile to learn a few phrases.”

“I don’t know how long I will be here,” Cecilia said honestly. Hopefully not too long. She just wanted to find her brother.

And make sure Edward regained his strength. She couldn’t possibly do that until she was assured of his welfare.

“Your English is excellent,” she said to the baker.

“I was born here. My parents too, but we speak Dutch in the home. Here”—she held out two pieces of flat, caramel-brown biscuit—“try it.”

Cecilia thanked her again, fitting the pieces together into their original oblong shape before lifting the smaller one to her mouth and taking a bite.

“Oh my goodness! This is divine.”

“You like it, then?” Mrs. Leverett’s eyes went wide with delight.

“How could I not?” It tasted of cardamom and clove and slightly burnt sugar. It was completely foreign and yet somehow made her homesick. Perhaps it was the mere act of sharing a biscuit over conversation. Cecilia had been too busy to realize that she had also been lonely.

“Some of the officers say they are too thin and crumbly,” Mrs. Leverett said.

“They are mad,” Cecilia replied through her somewhat full mouth.

“Although I must say, these would be excellent with tea.”

“Not easy to come by, I’m afraid.”

“No,” Cecilia said regretfully. She’d known enough to bring some with her, but she had not packed nearly enough, and she’d run out two-thirds of the way across the Atlantic. By the final week she was reusing her leave

did one cutting her rations in half for each pot.

“I should not complain,” Mrs. Leverett said. “We are still able to get on and that is far more important for a bakery.”

Cecilia nodded, taking a nibble of the second half of her biscuit. She needed to make this one last a little longer.

“The officers have tea,” Mrs. Leverett continued. “Not a lot, but more than anyone else.”

Edward was an officer. Cecilia did not wish to take advantage of his wealth, but if he could procure some tea . . .

She thought she might offer up a very small portion of her soul for a cup.

“You did not say your name,” Mrs. Leverett said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m quite in a fog today. I am Miss Har—I’m sorry, Mrs. Rokesby.”

The other woman smiled knowingly. “Newly married?”

“Quite.” How *quite*, Cecilia could not possibly explain. “My husband she tried not to stumble over the word—“is an officer. A captain.”

“I had suspected as much,” Mrs. Leverett remarked. “No other reason you’d be here in New York Town in the middle of a war.”

“It’s strange,” Cecilia mused. “It doesn’t feel like a war. If I didn’t see wounded soldiers . . .” She stopped, reconsidering her words. She might be witness to actual fighting in this British outpost, but signs of struggle and deprivation were everywhere. The harbor was filled with prison ships, indeed, when Cecilia’s ship had sailed in, she had been warned to stay as they passed.

The smell, she’d heard, was too much to bear.

“I beg your pardon,” she said to the other woman. “I spoke most carefully. There is much more to war than the front of a battlefield.”

Mrs. Leverett smiled, but it was a sad smile. Tired. “There is no need to apologize. It has been relatively quiet here for two years. Pray God it remains so.”

“Indeed,” Cecilia murmured. She glanced out the window—why, she wasn’t sure. “I suppose I must go soon. But first, please do wrap up a half dozen *speculaas*.” She frowned, doing a little arithmetic in her head. She had just enough money in her pocket. “No, make that a dozen.”

“A full dozen?” Mrs. Leverett gave her a cheeky grin. “I hope you find the biscuits and tea.”

“I hope so too. I’m celebrating. My husband”—there was that word
t sugar, —“is leaving hospital today.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I did not realize. But I assume this means he is
recovered.”

“Almost.” Cecilia thought of Edward, still so thin and pale. She had
re than even seen him out of bed yet. “He still needs time to rest and regain his
strength.”

“How lucky he is to have his wife at his side.”

Cecilia nodded, but her throat felt tight. She wished she could say it
a good because the *speculaas* had made her thirsty, but she was fairly certain i
her own conscience.

“You know,” Mrs. Leverett said, “there is much to enjoy here in Ne
ry. York, even with the war so close. The upper crust still hosts parties. I c
attend, of course, but I see the ladies in their finery from time to time.”

“Really?” Cecilia’s brows rose.

id”— “Oh yes. And I believe there will be a performance of *Macbeth* next
at the John Street Theatre.”

m “You’re joking.”

Mrs. Leverett held up a hand. “On my father’s ovens, I swear it.”

ee the Cecilia could not help but laugh at that. “Perhaps I shall try to attend
at not been some time since I went to the theater.”

le and “I cannot vouch for the quality of the production,” Mrs. Leverett sai
and believe that most of the roles are being played by British officers.”

below Cecilia tried to imagine Colonel Stubbs or Major Wilkins treading tl
boards. It was not a pretty image.

lously. “My sister went when they did *Othello*,” Mrs. Leverett continued. “
said the scenery was very prettily painted.”

If that wasn’t damning with faint praise, Cecilia didn’t know what w
d to But beggars couldn’t be choosers, and truly, she didn’t often get to see
emains Shakespeare in Derbyshire. Maybe she would try to go.

If Edward was up to it.

ie If they were still “married.”

alf Cecilia sighed.

he had “Did you say something?”

Cecilia shook her head, but it must have been a rhetorical question b
ind thatMrs. Leverett was already wrapping the *speculaas* in a cloth. “I’m afra
haven’t paper,” the baker said with an apologetic expression. “Like tea

again in short supply.”

“It means I shall have to come back to return your cloth,” Cecilia said when she realized how happy that made her—just the thought of sharing a greeting with a woman her own age—she said, “I’m Cecilia.”

not “Beatrix,” said the other woman.

s “I’m very glad to have met you,” Cecilia said. “And thank you for—wait. How do I say *thank you* in Dutch?”

Beatrix smiled broadly. “*Dank u.*”

was Cecilia blinked in surprise. “Really? That’s it?”

it was “You picked an easy one,” Beatrix said with a shrug. “If you wanted to learn *please . . .*”

w “Oh, don’t tell me,” Cecilia said, knowing that she would, regardless.

do not “*Alstublieft,*” Beatrix said with a grin. “And don’t say it sounds like a sneeze.”

Cecilia chuckled. “I’ll stick to *dank u.* At least for now.”

week “Go on,” Beatrix said. “Get back to your husband.”

That word again. Cecilia smiled her farewell, but it felt hollow. What would Beatrix Leverett think if she knew Cecilia was nothing but a fraud?

She got out of the store before her tears could prick their way out of her eyes. It has eyes.

d. “I “I hope you have a sweet tooth, because I bought—oh.”

re Edward looked up. His wife had returned with a small cloth bundle and a determined smile.

She Not determined enough, though. It wobbled and fell when she saw him sitting with slumped shoulders at the end of his bed.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

was. Not really. He’d managed to dress himself, but that was only because he placed his uniform on the bed before she left. Honestly, he didn’t know he would have been able to make it across the room on his own. He’d known he was weak, but he had not realized just how much until he had swung himself over the side of his cot and tried to stand.

He was pathetic.

“I’m fine,” he muttered.

because “Of course,” she murmured unconvincingly. “I . . . ah . . . Would you like a biscuit?”

ly, it is He watched her slim hands as she unwrapped her bundle.

“*Speculaas*,” he said, recognizing them instantly.

id. And “You’ve had them before? Oh, of course you have. I forget, you’ve
ng a here for years.”

“Not years,” he said, taking one of the thin biscuits. “I was in
-no, Massachusetts for nearly a year. Then Rhode Island.” He took a bite. C
they were good. He looked up. “And apparently Connecticut too, not t
remember it.”

Cecilia sat on the end of the bed. Well, more like a perch. She had th
look of someone who didn’t want to get too comfortable. “Did the Dut
l to settle all over the colonies?”

“Just here.” He finished off the biscuit and reached for another. “It h
s. been New Amsterdam for over a century, but most of the Dutch stayed
a the island traded ownership.” He frowned. Actually, he had no idea if
had stayed, but walking around town, it felt like they had. Dutch influe
was all over the island, from the distinctive zigzag façades on the build
the *speculaas* biscuits and crunch bread at the bakery.

at “I learned how to say *thank you*,” she said.

ud? He felt himself smile. “Very ambitious of you.”

her She gave him a look. “I take it you know the phrase, then.”

He took another biscuit. “*Dank u*.”

“You’re quite welcome,” she said with a little flick of her eyes, “but
perhaps you should slow down. I don’t think it’s a good idea to eat too
and a at once.”

“Probably not,” he agreed, but he ate it, anyway.

um She waited patiently while he finished, then she waited patiently wh
sat on the edge of the cot, trying to summon his strength.

She was a patient woman, his wife. She’d have to be, sitting three da
e she’d his boring bedside. Not much to do with an unconscious husband.

v if he He thought about her journey across the Atlantic. To get word of he
own he brother and then decide to go help him, all the time knowing it would t
is legs months . . .

That too bore the hallmark of a patient individual.

He wondered if she sometimes wanted to scream in frustration.

u care She was going to have to be patient for a bit longer, he thought grim
legs were like jelly. He could barely walk. Hell, even just standing was
chore, and as for making their marriage legal in every way . . .

That was going to have to wait.

More was the pity.

been Although it did occur to him that they could still get out of this union they so chose. Annulment on account of nonconsummation was a tricky maneuver, but then again, so was a proxy marriage. If he did not want God, married, he was fairly certain he did not have to be.

hat I “Edward?”

at Her voice tickled at the edge of his mind, but he was too lost in his thoughts to respond. *Did* he wish to be married to her? If not, he damn ch couldn’t accompany her to the Devil’s Head. He might not possess the strength to take her properly to bed, but if they shared a room, even for wasn’t night, she would be thoroughly compromised.

l when “Edward?”

most He turned, slowly, forcing himself to focus. She was looking at him with concern, but even that could not cloud the startling clarity of her eyes.

ings to She laid a hand over his. “Are you certain you are well enough to leave today? Should I find the doctor?”

He searched her face. “Do you want to be married to me?”

“What?” Something close to alarm raced over her features. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to be married to me,” he said carefully. “We have not consummated the marriage.”

much Her lips parted, and oddly enough, he could see that she was not breathing. “I thought you didn’t remember,” she whispered.

ile he “I don’t have to remember. It’s simple logic. I was in Connecticut when you arrived. We had never been in a room together before you came to hospital.”

ays at She swallowed, and his eyes fell to her throat, to the delicate arc of her pulse quivering under her skin.

r God, he wanted to kiss her.

ake “What do you want, Cecilia?”

Say you want me.

The thought burst through his brain. He did not want her to leave him; he could barely stand on his own. It would be weeks before he’d regain even ly. His half his strength. He needed her.

s a And he wanted her.

But most of all, he wanted her to want him.

Cecilia did not speak for several seconds. Her hand left his, and she

hugged her arms to her body. She seemed to be looking at a soldier on
n if other side of the church as she asked, "Are you offering to release me?"

y legal "If that is what you want."

to be Slowly, her eyes met his. "What do *you* want?"

"That is not the question."

"I rather think it is."

"I am a gentleman," he said stiffly. "I will bow to your wishes in thi
ed well matter."

"I . . ." She caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I . . . don't want
: one feel trapped."

"I don't feel trapped."

"You don't?" She sounded honestly surprised.

with He shrugged. "I have to marry eventually."

If she found this unromantic, it did not show on her face.

ave "I obviously agreed to the marriage," he said. He loved Thomas Har
like a brother, but Edward could not imagine what might have made hi
consent to a marriage he did not want. If he was married to Cecilia, he
damned well wanted to be.

He looked closely at her.

not Her gaze slipped to the floor.

athing. Was she assessing her options? Trying to decide if she truly wished
the wife of a man whose brain was not whole? He might remain this w
the rest of his life. For all they knew the damage went deeper than his
hen memory. What if he awakened one day and could no longer speak? Or
the properly? She might find herself being forced to care for him as she w
child.

it, to It could happen. There was no way to know.

"What do you want, Cecilia?" he asked, aware that a note of impatie
had entered his voice.

"I . . ." She swallowed, and when she spoke again, her voice was a l
more certain. "I think we should go to the Devil's Head. This is not a
n. He conversation I wish to have here."

ven "Nothing is going to change in the next half hour."

"Nevertheless, you could do with a meal not made of flour and suga
a bath. And a shave." She stood, but not so fast that he missed the pink
of her cheeks. "I shall offer you privacy for the latter two."

"Very generous of you."

the She did not comment upon his dry tone. Instead she reached for his
” which lay draped like a slash of scarlet across the foot of his bed. She l
out. “We have a meeting this afternoon. With Major Wilkins.”

“Why?”

“He brings news of Thomas. Or at least I hope he does. I saw him at
inn last night. He said he would make inquiries.”

s “He has not already done so?”

She looked slightly uncomfortable as she said, “I took your advice a
t you to informed him of our marriage.”

Ah. Now it became clear. She needed him too. Edward forced a smi
around his gritted teeth. It was not the first time a lady had found his n
the most attractive thing about him. At least this lady had unselfish mo

She held out his coat. With some effort, he stood and allowed her to
him don it.

court “You’ll be warm,” she warned him.

m “It is, as you say, June.”

had “Not like June in Derbyshire,” she muttered.

He permitted himself a smile at that. The summer air in the colonies
unpleasant solid quality to it. Rather like fog, if one heated it to the
temperature of one’s body.

to be He looked toward the door, took a breath. “I . . . I will need help.”

ay for “We all need help,” she said quietly. She took his arm, and then slo
without a word, they made their way out to the street, where a carriage
move awaited to take them the short distance to the Devil’s Head.

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: flush

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"You'll be warm," she warned him.

"It is, as you say, June."

"Not like June in Derbyshire," she muttered.

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Chapter 5

You showed him my miniature? How terribly embarrassing Thomas, whatever were you thinking? Of course he must call it pretty. He could hardly do otherwise. You are my brother. He can very well comment on my freakishly large nose.

—FROM CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS

One hour later, Cecilia was seated in the front room of the Devil's Head, methodically finishing her lunch while Edward perused a recent copy of the *Royal Gazette*. She had also started her meal with a newspaper in her hand, but she had been so startled by the paragraph advertising the sale of “Cotton Negro Man, a good Cook and not a Seasick,” that she'd put it down and instead set her eyes on her plate of pork and potatoes.

Edward, on the other hand, read the newsheet from front to back, and then, after asking the innkeeper to locate an issue from the previous week, he repeated the process with that. He hadn't bothered to explain, but it was to Cecilia that he was trying to fill the gaps in his memory. She wasn't sure that it would help; she rather doubted he was going to find clues about his time in Connecticut in a public newspaper. But it certainly wouldn't hurt anyway, he seemed like the sort of man who would want to keep abreast of the news of the day. He was like Thomas that way. Her brother never excused himself from the breakfast table without finishing the entire *London Times*. It was several days old by the time it reached them in Matlock but that never seemed to bother him. Better to be delayed in the news than ignorant altogether, he'd often said, and besides, there was nothing she could do about it.

Change what you can, he'd once told her, *and accept what you can't*. She wondered what Thomas would think of her recent behavior. She had a

he would have placed his injury and subsequent disappearance firmly in the “accept what you can’t” category.

She let out a little snort. It was a bit too late for that now.

“Did you say something?” Edward asked.

She shook her head. “Just thinking of Thomas,” she said, since she was actively trying *not* to lie whenever possible.

“We will find him,” Edward said. “Or we’ll get news. One way or another.”

ig.
ne
n’t
Cecilia swallowed, trying to push down the lump in her throat as she gave him a grateful nod. She was not alone in this anymore. She was still scared and anxious, and full of self-doubt, but she wasn’t alone.

It was staggering what a difference that made.

Edward started to say something more, but they were interrupted by a young woman who had brought their food earlier. Like everyone in New York, Cecilia thought, she looked tired and overworked.

id,
of the
and,
one
d
And hot. Honestly, Cecilia didn’t know how people lived through the summers. The air at home was never this thick with moisture unless it was actually raining.

She’d heard the winters were equally extreme. She prayed she was in New York here when the first snow fell. One of the soldiers in hospital had told her the ground froze through like a rock, and the wind was enough to nip years off.

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Bath,
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t. She
feeling
back in the hospital.

“Sir,” the young lady said with a quick curtsy, “your bath is ready.”

“You need it even more now,” Cecilia said, motioning to his ink-smudged fingers. It went without saying that no one at the Devil’s Head had the time or inclination to seal the ink with a hot iron.

“It does make one long for the comforts of home,” he murmured, glancing idly at his fingertips.

She arched a brow. “Really? This is what you miss most? A well-irc newspaper?”

He shot her a bit of a look, but she rather thought he liked when she looked at him. He was not the sort of man who would wish to be treated like an idiot with people tiptoeing around him and watching their words. Still, when she laid down the newspaper and glanced toward the exit, Cecilia stopped herself from asking if he would like assistance up the stairs and instead stood silent. She silently held out her arm. She had seen what it cost him to ask for her help feeling back in the hospital.

in the Some things were best done without words.
 She was grateful, actually, that he'd ignored her in favor of the *Gaze*
 throughout their meal. She was still unnerved by his offer to release her
was she counted herself fortunate that her knees hadn't buckled beneath her
 had been just standing there with a pile of Dutch biscuits and all of a sudden
 he offered to set her free.
 As if *he* had been the one to trap *her*.
e gave She should have done it. She tried to lie to herself and say that she would
ared, have done it except . . .
 The expression on his face.
 He'd not moved a muscle. But it wasn't as if he'd frozen. He was just
the still.
w She'd thought he might have been holding his breath.
 She'd thought he might not even have realized he was holding his breath.
ese He did not want her to go.
was Cecilia did not know why she was so certain of this; there was no reason
 for her to know his expressions, to be able to interpret the emotions he
not still and tight behind his sapphire eyes. She'd only truly known him—face-
er that —for one day.
our She couldn't imagine why he wanted her to stay, save for the fact that
 he needed a nursemaid and she was convenient, but he seemed to want to
 marry her.
udged The irony just grew and grew.
time But, she reminded herself, she could not risk revealing the truth before
 their meeting with Major Wilkins. She had a feeling that Captain Edward
ancing Rokesby was a paragon of honesty, and she did not know if he would, or
 even could, bring himself to lie to his military superior. He might feel
med bound to inform him that while he did wish to aid Miss Cecilia Harcourt
 in her search for her brother, he was not, as a point of fact, her husband.
teased Cecilia could not even imagine the outcome of *that* conversation.
invalid, No, if she confessed her duplicity to Edward, it would have to be after
n he set saw the major.
elf She told herself this was acceptable.
and She told herself lots of things.
help And then she tried not to think about it.
 "The treads on the stairs are narrow," she said to Edward as they

approached the stairs, “and the risers are steep.”

He grunted his thanks for the warning, and with her hand supporting her from arm, they made their way up. She could not imagine what this did to his prospect, be so dependent on others. She had never seen him in full health, but he was tall, probably almost a full six feet, and his shoulders looked as if they would be broad and strong when he had a bit more muscle on his bones.

This was not a man used to needing help up a flight of stairs.

“We’re just down the hall,” she said, tipping her head to the left where they would reach their floor. “Number twelve.”

He nodded, and when they approached their door, she let go of his arm and handed him the key. It was not much, but it was something he could do for her, and she knew it would make him feel a little better, even if he did not realize why.

But then, in the last second before he slid the key into place, he said, “This is your last chance.”

“I—I beg your pardon?”

The key turned in the lock, the click echoing loudly in the hall.

“If you wish to annul our union,” he said in a voice that did not waver, “you must tell me now.”

Cecilia tried to say something, truly she did, but her heart was slammed toward her throat, and her fingers and toes almost felt as if they were frozen with nerves. She did not think she had ever been so startled. Or panicked.

“I will say this only once,” Edward said, his steadiness a clear contrast to the pandemonium erupting inside her. “Once you enter the room, our marriage is final.”

Nervous laughter bubbled through her throat. “Don’t be silly. You’re hardly going to ravish me this afternoon.” Then it occurred to her that she might have just insulted his manhood. “Er, at least not before your battle.”

“You know as well as I that it does not matter *when* I take you to bed,” he said, his eyes burning down on hers. “Once we enter that room together as a married couple, you will be compromised.”

“You can’t compromise your wife,” she tried to joke.

He swore, the single word emerging in a low, frustrated growl. The blasphemy was utterly out of character, and enough to startle Cecilia into taking a step back.

“This is nothing to make light of,” he said. Again, he seemed to be holding himself scrupulously still, but this time he was betrayed by the pulse beating

furiously in his throat. "I am offering you the opportunity to leave."

g his She felt her head shaking. "But why?"

im, to He looked up and down the hall before hissing, "Because I'm blood
e was damaged."

would It would have been a shout if they were not in so public a place, of t
Cecilia was sure. The intensity of his voice would be seared on her min
an eternity.

en they And it broke her heart.

rm and You are—" "No, Edward," she tried to reassure him. "You must not think that w

o for "I am missing a piece of my mind," he cut in.

not "No. No." It was all she could seem to say.

He grabbed her shoulders, his fingers biting her skin. "You need to
, "This understand this, Cecilia. I am not whole."

She shook her head. She wanted to tell him that he was perfect, and
she was a fraud. And that she was so so sorry for taking advantage of h
condition.

er, She would never be able to make this up to him.

He let go of her abruptly. "I am not the man you married."

ning "I'm probably not the woman you married either," she mumbled.

izzing He stared at her. He stared at her for so long that her skin began to ti
ed. "But I think . . ." she whispered, only just figuring it out as the words l

ast to lips. "I think you might need me."

"Jesus God, Cecilia, you have no idea."

And then, right in the middle of the corridor, he hauled her into his a
e and kissed her.

she
1." He hadn't planned to do it. For Christ's sake, he'd been *trying* to do th
d," he thing. But she'd been staring up at him with those seafoam eyes, and w
r, as a she'd whispered that he needed her . . .

The only thing that could have made him harder was if she'd said *sh*
needed *him*.

He had no strength. He'd lost at least a stone and could not even ma
1to the stairs on his own, but by God he could kiss his wife.

"Edward," she gasped.

He tugged her through the door. "We're staying married."

olding
eating "Oh God."

He had no idea what she meant by that, but he didn't think he cared.

The room was small, with a bed that took up nearly half the floor, so it wasn't difficult for him to find his way to the edge of the mattress and pulling her along with him.

“Edward, I—”

“Shhh,” he commanded, taking her face in his hands. “I want to look at you.”

“Why?”

He smiled. “Because you're mine.”

Her lips parted into a delectable oval, and he took that as a sign from heaven and kissed her again. She did not respond at first, but she did not push away. Rather, he had the sense that she was holding herself very still, holding her very breath, waiting to see if the moment was real.

And then, just when he thought he must pull himself away, he felt that tiny movement of her lips, the sound of her voice through his skin as she made a small moan.

“Cecilia,” he whispered. He did not know what he had done these last months, but he had a feeling it had not been something to be proud of. It had not been pure, and lovely, and everything he saw when he looked in her eyes.

When he kissed her, he tasted the promise of redemption.

He brushed his mouth over hers, softly, like a whisper. But it wasn't enough, and when she let out a little mewl of desire, he nipped her, his teeth scraping gently along the soft skin of her inner lip.

He wanted to do this all afternoon. Just lie next to her on the bed and worship her like the goddess she was. It would be just a kiss; he was hardly capable of anything more. But it would be an endless kiss—soft, slow, deep, each caress melting into the next.

It was so strange—desire without urgency. He decided he liked it—like this now. When he was strong, when he once again felt like himself, he would make love to her with every piece of his soul, and he knew enough of himself—and of her—that the experience would take him to the edge.

And then push him right over.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured, and then, because it seemed so important that she knew he saw the beauty she held within, he said, “and you're good.”

She stiffened. It was the tiniest motion, but his every sense was so attuned to her he would have known it if she had breathed differently.

“We must stop,” she said, and although he heard regret in her voice, not hear a lack of resolve.

He sighed. He wanted her. He felt it inside like a growing plume, but could not make love to her in this state—unwashed, exhausted. She desired far more, and frankly, so did he.

“Your water will grow cold,” she said.

He glanced over at the tub. It was not large, but it would do, and he hoped that the steam rising from the surface would not last long.

“I should go downstairs,” she said, awkwardly coming to her feet. The dress she was wearing was a soft, dusty pink, and her hand seemed to fall into it as she clutched at the skirts, twisting the material between her fingers.

She looked utterly mortified, and he could not help but find it adorable.

“You should not feel embarrassed,” he reminded her. “I am your husband—

“Not yet,” she mumbled. “Not that way.”

He felt a smile rising inside.

“I really should go,” she said without actually taking a step.

The smile spread into a fully fledged grin. “Do not leave on my account. I had believed in medieval times, bathing one’s husband was considered an extremely important wifely duty.”

At that she rolled her eyes, and a warm happiness began to roll out of her mouth to him. She was amusing when she was embarrassed, but he liked it better when she was holding her own against him.

“I could drown, you know,” he said.

“Oh please.”

“I could. I’m very tired. What if I fell asleep in the tub?”

She paused, and for a few seconds he thought she might actually believe him. “You’re not going to fall asleep in the tub,” she finally said.

He gave a dramatic sigh, as if to say—*You never know*, but he took her and said, “Come back in ten minutes.”

“Only ten?”

“Is that a comment on my general level of filth?”

“Yes,” she said quite plainly.

He laughed aloud. “You are very entertaining, did you know that, Count Rokesby?”

She rolled her eyes again, handing him the towel that had been left folded neatly at the end of the bed.

He feigned a sigh. “I would say it was why I married you, but we both

he did know that isn't true."

She turned to look at him, her face oddly without expression. "What do you say?"

He shrugged as he pulled off his coat. "I obviously don't remember married you."

"Oh. I thought you meant . . ."

He regarded her with raised brows.

"Never mind."

"No, tell me."

But her face had already gone quite red. "I thought perhaps you were referring to . . ."

He waited. She didn't finish. "The kiss?" he supplied.

He had not thought her skin could reach an even deeper hue, but it did take the two steps that lay between them and touched her chin with just enough pressure to raise her gaze to his.

"If I had kissed you before our wedding," he said softly, "there would be no doubt right now as to the permanence of our marriage."

Her brow wrinkled in adorable confusion.

He brushed his lips against hers and then said against her cheek, "If you had known what it meant to kiss you, I should not have allowed the army to take you away."

"You're just saying that," she said, her words a mumble near his ear.

He drew back with an amused smile.

"You would not refuse a direct order," she said.

"From you? Never."

"Stop," she said, batting him playfully away. "You know that's not what I meant."

He took her hand and dropped a courtly kiss on her knuckles. Damn, he wasn't feeling ridiculously romantic. "I assure you, Mrs. Rokesby, I will find time for a wedding night."

"You need to take your bath."

"Ouch."

"Unless you like cold water."

He was beginning to think he might *need* cold water. "Point taken. I might add one more thing to the conversation . . ."

"Why do I think I will be blushing like a fiend a few seconds from now?"

"You're already blushing," he took great joy in telling her, "and I will be blushing in a few seconds."

merely going to say—”

“I’ll be downstairs!” she called, making a dash for the door.

Edward smiled from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, even though all that was left for him to look at was the inside of his bedroom door.

“I was merely going to say,” he said aloud, his happiness coloring every word warm and pink, “that it would have been spectacular.”

It will be spectacular, he thought as he stripped off the rest of his clothes and lowered himself into the tub.

Soon, if he had anything to do with it.

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Soon, if he had anything to do with it.

Chapter 6

What the devil are you talking about? You don't have a freakish large nose.

—FROM *THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA*

Edward had said he needed ten minutes, but Cecilia waited a solid two five before venturing back to room twelve. She had been planning to run downstairs for half an hour, but then she started thinking—he was still terribly weak. What if he was having difficulty getting out of the tub?

The water would be cold by now. He could be catching a chill. He deserved his privacy, and she certainly wanted to give it to him, but no expense of his health.

It was true that she had seen him in a most improper state when she was caring for him back in hospital, but she'd not seen *all* of him. She'd learned to be very creative with the bedsheet. She'd draped it this way and that always managing to preserve his dignity.

And her modesty.

All of New York might think her a married woman, but she was still much an innocent, even if one kiss from Captain Edward Rokesby had left her breathless.

Breathless?

Brainless.

It really ought to be illegal for a man to have eyes that color. Somewhere between aquamarine and sapphire, they could mesmerize a girl with a look. And yes, her eyes had been closed when he was kissing her, but that moment a little when all she could picture was that last moment before his lips touched hers, when she'd thought she might drown in the deep blue of his gaze.

Cecilia had always liked her own eyes, taking pride in the pale green

that set her apart from the crowd. But Edward . . .

He was a beautiful man, there was no getting around that.

But he also might be freezing to death, she thought. Or rather, freezing until he was chilled, and heaven knew that could kill him.

She headed up the stairs.

“Edward?” she called out, knocking softly on the door. Then she thought why was she being quiet?

She knocked harder. “Edward?”

No response.

ily A little frisson of apprehension skidded up her arm, and she grabbed the door handle and turned.

She said his name again as the door swung open, and she stepped in and averted. When he did not reply to that, she finally turned toward the tub.

nty- “You did fall asleep!” The words popped right out of her mouth before she could occur to her that she might not wish to wake him up in such a violent manner.

“Gah!” Edward came awake with a yelp and a splash, water flying through the air as Cecilia dashed across the room for no reason she could figure.

But she couldn’t just stand there in front of him. He was *naked*.

t at the “You said you wouldn’t fall asleep,” she accused, her back firmly to the bathtub.

was “No, *you* said I wouldn’t fall asleep,” he countered.

arned He was right, drat it all.

“Well,” she said, in that tone that clearly said she hadn’t a clue how to conduct herself. “I expect your water has gone cold.”

There was a beat of silence, followed by “It’s tolerable.”

l very She shifted her weight from foot to foot, then gave up and crossed her legs tightly over her chest. She wasn’t angry; rather, she didn’t seem to know what to do with her body. “I shouldn’t want you to catch a chill,” she said to her feet.

“No.”

where No? That was all he was going to say? *No?*

glance. “Er, Cecilia?”

attered She made a little sound of acknowledgment.

uched “Do you think you might close the door?”

. “*OhmygoodnessI’m* sorry.” She ran back across the room—which was a terribly graceful endeavor given the close confines—and slammed the

shut with considerably more effort than was warranted.

ng “Are you still here?” Edward asked. Cecilia belatedly realized that h could not see her. His back was mostly to the door, and the tub was far small for him to comfortably twist around.

ught— “Er, yes?” It came out like a question. She had no idea why. There was a short pause, during which he was probably pondering h best reply to such a ridiculous response. In the end, however, he just as “Do you think you might hand me the towel?”

l the “Oh. Yes. Of course.” Fastidiously keeping her back to the tub, she over to the bed and grabbed the towel. From there she only had to reac arm back to hand it to him.

, eyes He took it, then said, “I do not say this to embarrass you—”

b. Which meant she was going to be mortified.

ore it “—and I do appreciate your efforts to preserve my modesty, but did gorous not see, ah, *me* when you were caring for me earlier this week?”

hrough “Not like this,” she mumbled.

a. Again, a little pause, and this time she could picture his brow comin together in a furrow as he considered her answer.

o the “I kept you covered with the sheet,” she finally said.

“At all times?”

“I was highly motivated.”

He let out a chuckle at that.

to “I think I’ll go back downstairs,” she said, edging her way back to tl door. “I had only wanted to make sure you weren’t catching a chill.”

“In June?”

“You’ve been ill,” she said primly.

er arms He sighed. “I still am.”

w Cecilia pressed her lips together, summoning her courage. He was ri aid to and his health was more important than her tender sensibilities. She too breath. “Do you need assistance getting out of the tub?”

“No,” he said quietly. “At least I hope not.”

“Perhaps I should stay.” She moved a little closer to the door. “Just you get out. In case you need me.”

She hoped he didn’t. It was not a large towel.

as not A moment later she heard a heave of exertion, followed by the soun water sloshing against the side of the tub.

ie door “Are you—”

"I'm fine," he bit off.

ie "I'm sorry." She shouldn't have asked. He was proud. But she had b
' too nursing him for days; it was difficult to stop, even if she was desperate
trying to keep her eyes to herself.

"It's not your fault."

ow to She nodded, even though she had no idea if he was looking at her.

sked, "You can turn around now."

"Are you sure?"

edged "I'm covered," he said, sounding perhaps just a bit fed up with her
h her prudishness.

"Thank you." She turned around. Slowly, though. She wasn't sure h
defined *covered*.

you He was on the bed, propped up against the pillows with the blankets
over his lap. His chest was bare. It was no more than she'd seen when
sponged down his fever in hospital, but it seemed very different when
eyes were open and alert.

g "You look better," she said. It was true. He'd washed his hair, and h
had a healthier glow.

He gave a tired smile, and touched his beard. "I did not shave."

"That's all right," she assured him. "There is no rush."

"I don't think I'll feel properly clean until I do."

ie "Oh. Well . . ." Cecilia knew she should offer to shave him. It was c
the one task she could perform for him that would make the greatest
difference to his comfort, but it was such an intimate gesture. The only
she had ever shaved was her father. He'd not had a valet, and when his
had grown arthritic she had taken over the task.

"You don't have to," Edward said.

ight, "No, no, I can do it." She was being silly and missish. She'd crossec
ok a Atlantic Ocean by herself. She'd stood toe-to-toe with Colonel Zachary
Stubbs of His Majesty's Army and lied to his face in order to save a m
life. Surely she could shave that man's beard.

while "I should probably inquire if you have ever shaved a man before," E
murmured.

d of She stifled a smile as she glanced around the room for the razor and
"It does seem like a prudent question before allowing me to take a knif
your throat."

He chuckled. "There is a small leather box in my trunk. You will fin

you need there.”

een ly Right. His trunk. Edward’s belongings had been kept safe for him w was missing; Colonel Stubbs had arranged to have them sent over to th Devil’s Head earlier that day.

Cecilia peered into the trunk, at the neatly folded clothing, the books papers. It seemed terribly intimate to be going through his belongings. did a man bring with him to a strange land? She supposed it should not such an odd question to her. After all, she had also packed for a voyage across the ocean. But unlike Edward, she had never intended to stay lo She had brought only the barest of essentials; memories of home had n been a priority. In fact, the sole memento she had packed was a miniat her brother, and that was only because she thought it might help to loc pulled once she reached North America.

she’d his She huffed to herself. She had thought she might need help finding Thomas within a hospital. Little did she know she’d be searching an er colony.

is skin “Do you see it?” Edward asked.

“Ehrm, no,” she murmured, setting aside a soft white linen shirt. It v well-worn and had clearly been washed many times, but she knew eno stitchery to see that it had been exceedingly well-made. Thomas had n such fine shirts. Had his held up as well as Edward’s? She tried to pict learily brother mending his clothes and failed miserably. She had always done things for him. She’d complained, but she’d done it.

r man What she wouldn’t give to do such things again.

; hands “Cecilia?”

“I’m sorry.” She spied the corner of a leather box and wrapped her h around it. “My mind was wandering.”

l the “Somewhere interesting, I hope.”

y She turned to face him. “I was thinking of my brother.”

an’s Edward’s face grew solemn. “Of course. I’m sorry.”

Edward “I should have liked to have helped him pack his trunk,” she said. Sl glanced over her shoulder at Edward. He did not reply, but he gave a li nod, the sort that said he understood.

brush. “He did not come home before he left for North America,” Cecilia fe to continued. “I don’t know that he had anyone to help him.” She looked “Did you?”

id what “My mother,” Edward confirmed. “She insisted. But I was able to m

visit home before I sailed. Crake House is not far from the coast. The journey is under two hours on a swift mount.”

Cecilia nodded sadly. Edward and Thomas’s regiment had departed New World from the bustling port of Chatham, in Kent. It had been much farther from Derbyshire for Thomas to consider a trip home.

“Thomas came home with me a few times,” Edward said.

“He did?” Cecilia was surprised by how happy this made her. Thomas’s accounts of his barracks were somewhat grim. She was glad that he’d had the chance to spend some time in a proper home, with a proper family. She glanced over at Edward and with a little smile and a shake of her head said, “He never mentioned it.”

“And here I thought the two of you told each other everything.”

“Not everything,” Cecilia said, mostly to herself. She certainly had written to Thomas about how much she enjoyed hearing from Edward in his letters to her. If she had had the chance to sit with her brother, to talk to him face-to-face, would she have told him that she was a little bit in love with his best friend?

She thought not. Some things were private, even from one’s favorite brother.

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. Thomas always liked that he was her favorite brother, to which she always replied that he was her *only* brother. And then their father, who’d never really had much of a sense of humor, would grumble that he’d heard this before, and honestly, could the two of them work this out?

“What are you thinking about?” Edward asked.

“Sorry. Thomas again.” She scrunched up one side of her mouth. “Don’t look sad?”

“No. Rather happy, actually.”

“Oh.” She blinked a few times. “I suppose I was.”

Edward nodded toward the open trunk. “You said you would have liked to help him pack?”

She thought for a moment, her eyes growing wistful. “I think so. It would have been nice to have been able to picture him with his things.”

Edward nodded.

“Not necessary, of course,” she said briskly, turning so that he would see her blinking back her tears. “But it would have been nice.”

“I didn’t really need my mother’s help,” Edward said quietly.

ourney Cecilia turned slowly to look at him, staring at the face that had become dear to her in such a short time. She did not know what his mother looked for the like, but somehow she could still picture the scene: Edward, tall and sturdy and capable, feigning a touch of incompetence so that his mother could get over him.

as's She met his eyes with solemn respect. "You are a good man, Edward Rokesby."

had the For a moment he looked almost surprised by the compliment, and then he blushed, although it was mostly obscured by his beard. She dipped her head to hide her smile. He'd not be able to hide behind his whiskers for long.

"She's my mother," Edward mumbled.

not Cecilia flipped open one of the buckles on the shaving kit. "Like I said, you're not a good man."

in his He blushed again. She couldn't see it—she'd already turned away—so she would have sworn that she could feel it, rippling through the still air in the room.

She loved that he blushed.

She loved that she'd caused it.

Still smiling to herself, she looked back down at the trunk, trailing her fingers along its edge. Like all his things, it was well-made, of fine wrought iron, with Edward's initials formed by a pattern of nails at the top. "What sense does the G for?"

couldn't "G?"

"Your initials. *EGR*."

"Ah. George."

Did I She nodded. "Of course."

"Why do you say *of course*?"

She glanced over at him. "What else would it be?"

He rolled his eyes. "Gregory. Geoffrey."

liked to "No," she said with the beginnings of a sly smile.

"*Gawain*."

would She rolled her eyes. "Please. You're a George."

"My brother is a George," he corrected.

"So are you, apparently."

did not He shrugged. "It's a family name." He watched as she opened the leather bag and took out his straight razor. "What is yours?"

"My middle name? *Esmerelda*."

ome so His eyes widened. “Really?”

ked She laughed. “No. Not really. I’m hardly so exotic. It’s Anne. After
rong mother.”

l fuss “Cecilia Anne. It’s lovely.”

d Her cheeks grew warm, which struck her as bizarre, given how man
other, far more blush-worthy things had happened to her that day.

“How did you shave while you were in Connecticut?” she asked. Hi
en he straight razor had obviously been packed away with the rest of his
chin to belongings. He had not had it with him when he’d reappeared in Kip’s

He blinked a few times. “I don’t know.”

aid, a “Oh, I’m so sorry.” What an idiot she was. Of course he did not kno

“But,” he said, in a clear attempt to put a halt to her embarrassment,
own two razors. The one in your hand is from my grandfather. The oth
-but purchased right before I left. I generally take that one when I am travel
ir of rough.” He frowned. “I wonder what happened to it.”

“I don’t recall seeing it with your things at the hospital.”

“Did I *have* things at the hospital?”

er She frowned. “Now that you ask, no. Just the clothes on your back, I
told. And whatever was in your pockets. I wasn’t there when you were
od and brought in.”

hat is “Well.” He scratched his chin. “I suppose that is why I don’t take m
razor.”

“It’s very fine,” Cecilia murmured. The handle was ivory, beautifull
carved and warm in her hand. The blade, the finest Sheffield steel.

“I’m named for him,” Edward said. “My grandfather. His initials are
handle. It’s why he gave it to me.”

Cecilia looked down. Sure enough, *EGR* had been etched delicately
tip of the ivory. “My father’s razor was similar,” she said, moving ove
washbasin. It was empty, so she dipped it in the tub. “The handle isn’t
but the steel is the same.”

“You are a connoisseur of steel blades?”

She gave him an arch look. “Are you afraid?”

“I think I should be.”

ather She chuckled. “Anyone living so close to Sheffield knows their stee
Several of the men in the village have left in the last few years to go w
the crucible furnaces.”

“Not a pleasant occupation, I should think.”

“No.” Cecilia thought of her neighbors—her former neighbors, she supposed. They were all young men, mostly the sons of tenant farmers none of them looked young after a year or two at the furnaces. “I’m told pay is considerably better than working in the fields,” she said. “I certainly hope that’s true.”

He nodded as she added a little soap to a dish and worked it into a lather with the brush she’d found alongside the razor. She brought it over to the bedside and frowned.

Bay. “What?”

“Your beard is quite long.”

w. “I’m not as scruffy as that.”

“I do “It’s longer than my father’s ever was.”

er was “Is that where you honed your skills?”

ling “Every day for the last few years of his life.” She tilted her head to the side, like an artist examining her canvas. “It would be best if we could first.”

“Alas, I have no shears.”

I’m Cecilia had a sudden vision of the gardener going after his face with hedge trimmers and had to stifle a snort of laughter.

“What?” Edward demanded.

y good “Oh, you don’t want to know.” She picked up the brush. “Let’s give it a go.”

y Edward lifted his chin, allowing her to coat the left side of his face with soapy lather. It wasn’t as thick as she’d want, but it would do. She worked it in carefully, using one hand to stretch his skin while the other scraped the lather down from cheek to chin. With each pass she rinsed the blade in the water at the bedside watching as the water grew thick with his whiskers.

r to the “You have quite a lot of red in your beard,” she observed. “Does one as fine, your parents have red hair?”

He started to shake his head.

“Don’t move!”

He looked at her sideways. “Don’t ask me questions.”

“Touché.”

l. “My mother’s hair is blond,” Edward said the next time she rinsed the razor. “My father’s is brown. Same as mine. Or rather, it used to be. He’s going gray. Or silver, as he prefers to call it.” He frowned, and his eyes clouded with something that looked an awful lot like regret. “I imagine

have quite a bit more when I see him again.”

. But “Gray hair?” she asked, keeping her voice carefully light.

ld the “Indeed.” He tipped his chin up as she went to work on his throat. “
inly you again for writing to them.”

ther “Of course. I only wish there was some way to get word to them fas
is She’d managed to get the letter to the Rokesbys out on the very next sh
still, it would be at least three weeks before it reached England. And th
another five before they might expect a response.

They fell into silence as Cecilia continued her work. She was findin
much more difficult to do a proper job than when she’d shaved her fat
Edward’s whiskers had to be at least a half inch long—much different
the single day’s growth she was used to.

he To say nothing of the fact that this was Edward. And he had just kis
her.

trim it And she’d liked it. Very much.

the When she leaned toward him, the air seemed to change around her,
swirling with awareness. It was almost electric, stealing her breath and
prickling at her skin. And then when she finally did draw air, it was as
was breathing in *him*. He smelled delicious, which made no sense, sinc
smelled like soap. And man.

this a And heat.

with the delicious. But nothing seemed to make sense when she was standing th
ked close to Edward Rokesby. He addled her brain, and her lungs felt tight
e blade light . . . or something.

ashtub, Honestly, it was a miracle she was able to keep her hand steady.

e of “Can you turn your head just a bit?” she asked. “I need to get that sp
your ear.”

He complied, and she leaned even closer. She needed to angle the ra
just so to avoid nicking him. She was so close now she could see her b
ruffling his hair. It would be so easy just to sigh, to let herself melt into
to feel her body against his.

“Cecilia?”

he She heard his voice, but she couldn’t seem to do anything about it. S
e’s almost suspended, as if the air was thick enough to hold her in place. A
s then, as if her brain had needed an extra moment to get through to the
e he’ll her body, she pulled herself back, blinking away what she could only a

was the fog of desire.

“Sorry,” she said, the word seeming to come more from her throat than her lips. “Lost in my thoughts.”

It wasn’t a lie.

“It need not be perfect,” he said, his voice strained. “As long as you can get the bulk of it off, I can do a closer shave tomorrow.”

“Of course,” she answered, taking an unsteady step back. “I . . . ah . . . will take much less time. And you’re tired.”

“Right,” he agreed.

“You’ll want . . . ehm . . .” She blinked a few times. His bare torso was the most distracting. “Do you want to don a shirt?”

“Perhaps after we finish. So it doesn’t get wet.”

“Of course,” she said. Again. She looked down at his chest. A small amount of lather clung to the light sprinkling of hair, just above his nipple. She reached out to wipe it away, but the moment she touched his skin, his hand wrapped around her wrist.

“No,” he said.

It was a warning.

He wanted her.

Maybe even more than she wanted him.

She licked her lips, which had gone unaccountably dry.

“Don’t do that,” he choked out.

Her eyes flew to his, and she was electrified, gripped by the intensity of his piercing blue gaze. She felt it in her chest, a pounding, pulsing thing, a moment she could not speak. His hand was hot against her skin, his touch unexpectedly tender.

“I can’t leave you like this,” she said.

He stared at her, uncomprehending. Or maybe like he thought he must have misheard.

She motioned to his beard, full on the right side, completely absent on the left. “You look rather half-baked.”

He touched his chin, right at the spot where whiskers met skin, and let out a little puff of amusement.

“You look ridiculous,” she said.

He stroked one side of his face, then the other.

Cecilia held up the razor and brush. “Perhaps I should finish.”

His right brow rose into a perfect arch. “You don’t think I should m

with Major Wilkins like this?"

can her "I think I might pay good money to see that." She scooted around to the other side of the bed, relieved that the tension seemed to have been broken. "If I had money."

get the Edward moved across the mattress so that he was closer to the edge, held still while she soaped him up. "You are short of funds?" he asked.

. . that Cecilia paused, wondering just how much she should tell him. She said: "This has proven a more expensive journey than I had anticipated."

"Such is true for most journeys, I imagine."

was "So I'm told." She rinsed the razor in the tub. "This is the first I've ventured more than twenty miles out of Derbyshire."

"Really?"

blob "Don't move," she admonished. She'd had the blade right at his throat when he'd startled.

and "Sorry, but really? The first time?"

She shrugged, rinsing the blade again. "Where would I have gone?"

"London?"

"No reason to go." The Harcourts were respectable, to be sure, but hardly the sort to send a daughter to the capital for a Season. Plus, her father had visited cities. He made a fuss when he had to go to Sheffield. The one time he had been forced to attend to business in Manchester, he'd complained for days. "No one to take me either," Cecilia added.

y of his "I will take you."

nd for Her hand stilled. He thought they were married. Of course he'd think she might someday take her to London.

"That is, if you wish," he added, misunderstanding her hesitation.

She forced a smile. "That would be lovely."

ist "We'll go to the theater," he said with a yawn. "Or maybe the opera. Do you like the opera?"

on the Suddenly she was desperate to end the conversation. Her mind was filled with visions of a future that included the both of them, a future where her name really was Rokesby, and she lived in a darling house in Kent with little children, all with their father's arrestingly blue eyes.

It was a lovely future. It just wasn't hers.

"Cecilia?"

"We're all done," she said, a little too loudly.

et "Already?" His brow furrowed into a quizzical vee as he touched his

cheek. "You did this side much faster than the other."

the She shrugged. "Easier as I went along, I suppose." She hadn't done
ken. as careful a job on the right side, but it wasn't noticeable unless one got
up next to him. And at any rate, he'd said he was going to do it again
then tomorrow.

"I should let you rest. You're tired, and we have that meeting later."
ettled "You don't have to leave."

' She did. For her own sake. "I'll bother you," she said.

"Not if I'm sleeping." He yawned again, then smiled, and Cecilia was
nearly thrown back by the force of his beauty.

"What?" he asked. He touched his face. "Did you miss a spot?"

"You look different clean-shaven," she said. Or did she whisper it?

at He gave her a loopy smile. "More handsome, I trust."

Much more. She wouldn't have thought that possible.

"I should go. We'll need someone to take care of the water and—"

"Stay," he said simply. "I like having you here."

ardly that he could not hear the sound of her heart breaking.
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Much more. She wouldn’t have thought that possible.

“I should go. We’ll need someone to take care of the water and—”

“Stay,” he said simply. “I like having you here.”

And as Cecilia gingerly sat on the far side of the bed, it seemed impossible that he could not hear the sound of her heart breaking.

Chapter 7

Oh for heaven's sake, I know I don't have a freakishly large nose was merely making a point. You cannot expect honesty from Mr Rokesby when the subject of conversation is your sister. He must be complimentary. I think it is an unwritten dictum among men, is not it?

What does Lieutenant Rokesby look like?

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS*

When they went downstairs at half five that evening, Major Wilkins was already waiting for them in the dining room, seated near the wall with a glass of ale and a plate of bread and cheese. Edward gave him a crisp shoulder when he stood to greet them. He'd not served alongside Wilkins, but their paths had crossed often enough. The major served as a sort of administrator for the British garrison in New York and was certainly the correct place to begin in any search for a missing soldier.

Edward had always found him somewhat pompous, but with that characteristic rigid adherence to rules and order, which he supposed was a necessary trait of a military administrator. And truth be told, *he* wouldn't have wanted the man's job.

Cecilia wasted no time once they were seated. "Have you any news of your brother?"

Major Wilkins gave her what even Edward could recognize as a condescending look, then said, "It is a large theater of war, my dear. We cannot expect to find one man so quickly." He motioned to the plate at the center of the table. "Cheese?"

Cecilia was momentarily flummoxed by the change of subject, but she seemed to regain her purpose quickly. "This is the army," she protested.

British Army. Are we not the most advanced, the most well-organized in the world?"

"Of course, but—"

"How could we lose a man?"

Edward laid a gentle hand on her arm. "The chaos of war can test even the most well-run of militaries. I myself went missing for months."

"But he wasn't missing when he went missing!" she cried.

Wilkins chortled with amusement at her malapropism, and Edward merely groaned at his insensitivity.

*Mr. I
be
it* "Oh, now that's a good one," the major said, cutting off a thick slice of cheddar. "Wasn't missing when he went missing. Heh heh. The colonel loves that one."

"I misspoke," Cecilia said tightly.

Edward watched her carefully. He'd thought to intervene on her behalf, but she seemed to be in good control of the situation. Or if not the situation, at least of herself.

*as
a mug
ler bow* "What I meant," she continued, her eyes icing over in a way that obviously had frightened Major Wilkins, "was that Thomas was here in New York City in a hospital. And then he wasn't. It's not as if he was on a battlefield or of a mug scouting behind enemy lines."

*er bow
eir
rator
e to* Scouting behind enemy lines. Edward frowned as the words rolled around between his ears. Was that what he'd been doing in Connecticut? It seemed like the most likely scenario. But why? He didn't recall ever having done something like that before.

*me a
trait in
ie* "Well, that's just the thing," Major Wilkins said. "I can find no record of your brother having been in hospital."

ie "What?" Cecilia's head jerked as she looked to Edward and then back to the major. "That's impossible."

*of my
e* Wilkins shrugged unapologetically. "I had my man go through the records. The name and rank of every soldier who is brought to hospital is recorded in a ledger. We make note of the date of arrival and the date of, ehm, departure."

*le
: the* "Departure?" Cecilia echoed.

he "Or death." Wilkins had the grace to look at least a little uncomfortable upon raising this possibility. "Regardless, we could not find record of your brother."

d. "The "But he was injured," Cecilia protested. "We received notice." She turned

force back to Edward, visibly agitated. “My father received a letter from General Garth. He wrote that Thomas had been injured, but that it wasn’t a mortal wound and he was recovering in hospital. Is there another hospital?”

Edward looked to Major Wilkins.

When the “Not on this part of the island.”

“Not on *this part*?” Cecilia said, leaping onto his choice of words.

“There is something of an infirmary up in Haarlem,” Wilkins answered nearly with the sort of sigh that said he wished he hadn’t brought it up. “I would call it a hospital.” He glanced over at Edward with a meaningful look in his eye. “Wouldn’t want to stay there myself, if you know what I mean.”

Edward will Cecilia blanched.

“For God’s sake,” Edward snapped, “you’re talking about the lady’s brother.”

Edward half, but The major turned to Cecilia with a contrite expression. “My apologies, ma’am.”

Edward ght to She nodded, a tense little motion made heartbreaking by the convulsions of a swallow in her throat.

Edward ork. In “The infirmary in Haarlem is rudimentary at best,” Major Wilkins said to Cecilia. “Your brother is an officer. He would not have been brought to this place.”

Edward round “But if it was the closest facility . . .”

Edward emed “His wound was not life-threatening. He would have been moved.”

Edward o Edward did not like the idea of enlisted men being forced to convalesce in subpar conditions merely on account of their rank, but there were only a few beds in the hospital here at the southern end of Manhattan Island. “There aren’t many beds in the hospital here at the southern end of Manhattan Island,” he said to Cecilia. The army would always move the officers first.

Edward ck “Perhaps Thomas would have had reason to refuse a transfer,” Cecilia suggested. “If he was with his men he might not have wished to leave them.” Edward records. “This would have been months ago,” Edward said, hating that he had to pierce her hopes this way. “Even if he had stayed to be with his men, since he would have moved down here by now.”

Edward “Oh, of a certain,” Major Wilkins said matter-of-factly. “There’s sin way he’d be up in Haarlem.”

Edward ble “You can hardly even call it a town,” Edward said to Cecilia. “There’s your Morris Mansion, but beyond that, it’s more of a collection of abandoned colonial camps.”

Edward urned “But don’t we have men there?”

neral
rtal “Merely to keep it from falling back into enemy hands,” Major Wilk
said. “Good farmland up there too. We’ve got some crops almost ready
harvest.”

“We?” Edward could not help but inquire.

“The Haarlem farmers are loyal to the king,” the major said firmly.

Edward wasn’t so sure about that, but this hardly seemed the time fo
red discussion on the local political leanings.

ouldn’t “We went through six months of records at the hospital,” Major Wil
n his said, bringing the conversation back to its purpose. He reached out to f
himself another piece of bread and cheese, scowling when the cheddar
crumbled on the knife. “We could not find any mention of your brothe
; Honestly, it’s as if he never existed.”

Edward fought a groan. By God, the man had no tact.

es, “But you will continue to make inquiries?” Cecilia asked.

ive “Of course, of course.” The major looked to Edward. “It is the least
do.”

“The very least,” Edward muttered.

aid to Major Wilkins drew back. “I beg your pardon?”

o such “Why did you not give my wife this information when you spoke to
last week?” Edward asked.

The major went still, his food mere inches from his mouth. “I didn’t
she was your wife.”

isce in Edward could have cheerfully strangled him. “How does that make
so difference?”

l. “He’s Major Wilkins just stared.

st. “She was still Captain Harcourt’s sister. She deserved your respect a
ia consideration regardless of her marital status.”

them.” “We are not used to fielding questions from family members,” the m
d to said in a stiff voice.

urely Edward had about six different replies to that, but he decided there v
nothing to be gained in further antagonizing the major. Instead he turn
nply no Cecilia. “Do you have that letter from General Garth with you?”

’s the “Of course.” She reached into her skirt pocket. “I carry it with me at
times.”

ed Edward took it from her slender hand and unfolded the paper. He re
silently, then held it out toward Major Wilkins.

“What?” Cecilia asked. “What is wrong?”

kins The major's bushy brows came together, and he didn't look up from
y for letter as he said, "This doesn't sound like General Garth."

"What do you mean?" Cecilia turned frantically toward Edward. "What does he mean?"

or a "There's something wrong with it," Edward said. "I can't put my finger
it."

"But why would someone send me such a thing?"

kins "I don't know." He pressed his fingers to his temple, which had begun
ix ache.

Cecilia caught the motion immediately. "Are you all right?"

r. "I'm fine."

"Because we can—"

I can "We are here about Thomas," he said sharply. "Not me." He took a
He could get through this meeting. He might have to go right back to bed
when they were through, he might even take that dose of laudanum she
been threatening him with, but he could make it through one goddamn
meeting with Major Wilkins.

He was not so damaged as that.

her He looked up to realize that both Cecilia and the major were watching
with expressions of wary concern.

know "I trust your injury does not bother you overmuch," Wilkins said gruffly.

a "It hurts like the devil," Edward said through gritted teeth, "but I'm
so I'm trying to be grateful for that."

Cecilia looked at him with sharp surprise. He supposed he could not
her. He was not normally so caustic.

nd Wilkins cleared his throat. "Right, well. Regardless, I was most relieved
to hear of your safe return."

major Edward sighed. "My apologies," he said. "My temper grows short when
my head hurts more than normal."

was Cecilia leaned in and said in a quiet voice, "Shall I take you back
ed to upstairs?"

all "It is not necessary," Edward muttered. His breath caught as the pain
in his temple intensified. "Not yet, anyway." He looked back over at Wilkins
who was frowning as he reread the letter from the general.

ad it "What is it?" Edward asked.

The major scratched his chin. "Why would Garth . . . ?" He shook his
head. "Never mind."

the “No,” Cecilia said quickly. “Tell me.”

Major Wilkins hesitated, as if he was trying to figure out the best way to express his thoughts. “I find this an odd collection of information,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Cecilia asked.

“It’s not what one would normally write in a letter to a soldier’s family,” the major said. He looked to Edward for confirmation.

“I suppose,” Edward replied, still rubbing his temple. It wasn’t doing good, but he couldn’t seem to stop. “I’ve not written such a missive myself.”

“But you said something was wrong with the letter,” Cecilia reminded him.

“Nothing so specific,” Edward told her. “It just feels off. I know General Garth. I can’t put my finger on why, but it doesn’t sound like something he would write.”

“I *have* written such missives,” Major Wilkins said. “Many of them.”

“And . . . ?” Cecilia prodded.

He took a long breath. “And I would never write that a man was injured, but it was not life-threatening. There is no way to know that. It takes a long time for word to get home. Anything could happen in that time.”

While Cecilia nodded, the major went on. “I have seen far more men succumb to infection than to the trauma of their original wounds. I lost my leg last month because of a blister.” He looked to Edward with an expression of disbelief. “A blister.”

Edward shot a quick glance at Cecilia. She was holding herself still, a very model of upright British stoicism. But her eyes were haunted, and he had the awful sensation that if he touched her—just one finger to her arm, she would shatter.

And yet he was desperate to hold her. He wanted to hold her so tightly that she could not break apart. To hold her so long that her worries and fears melted from her body and seeped into his own.

He wanted to absorb her pain.

He wanted to be her strength.

He would be, he vowed. He would recover. He would heal. He would be the husband she deserved.

The husband he deserved to be.

“It was on his foot,” the major was saying, oblivious to Cecilia’s disapproval. “His stockings must have rubbed him the wrong way. He’d been marching through swamp. It’s impossible to keep your feet dry, you know.”

Cecilia, to her great credit, managed a sympathetic nod.

Major Wilkins put his hand on his mug of ale, but he did not pick it up. Finally he seemed to sag a little, as if the memory still had the ability to puncture his heart. “The cursed thing must have broken open because within a day it was infected and within a week he was dead.”

Cecilia swallowed. “I’m very sorry for your loss.” She looked down at her hands, clasped together on the table, and Edward had the distinct sensation that she was trying to keep them from trembling. As if the only way to keep herself from doing so was to keep her eyes on her fingers, watching them for signs of weakness. She was so strong, his wife. He wondered if she realized it.

The major blinked as if surprised by her condolences. “Thank you,” he said awkwardly. “It was . . . Well, it was a loss.”

“They all are,” Edward said in a quiet voice, and for a moment he and the major, with whom he had so little in common, were brothers in arms.

Several seconds passed before anyone spoke. Finally Major Wilkins cleared his throat and said, “May I keep this?” He held up the letter from the month General Garth.

Cecilia barely moved, but Edward saw the turmoil she held tightly behind her pale green eyes. Her chin drew back—just the tiniest hint of movement—and her lower lip trembled before she caught it between her teeth. The only connection from the general was her only connection to her brother, and she was clearly loath to part with it.

“Let him take it,” he said to her when she looked to him for guidance. Wilkins could be a boor, but he was a good soldier, and he needed the letter—he was going to get any further in their search for Thomas.

“I will treat it with great care,” Wilkins assured her. He tucked the letter into his tunic, missive in an inside coat pocket and patted it. “I give you my word.”

“Thank you,” Cecilia said. “I apologize if I seem ungrateful. I do appreciate your help.”

A most gracious sentiment, Edward thought, especially considering the major’s complete lack of cooperation up to this point.

“Right, well. I’ll be on my way.” Major Wilkins stood, giving Cecilia a polite bow of his head before turning to Edward. “I do hope your injury improves.”

Edward acknowledged this with a nod. “You will forgive me if I do rise.” He felt rather queasy all of a sudden, and he had a horrendous premonition that he might empty the contents of his belly if he tried to

“Of course, of course,” the major said in his usual gruff manner. “Tell me nothing of it.”

“Wait!” Cecilia called out, scrambling to her feet as Wilkins turned to leave.

He tilted his head toward her. “Ma’am?”

“Will you take me to Haarlem tomorrow?”

“What?” Sour stomach be damned, Edward hauled himself upright from the table.

“I would like to visit that infirmary,” Cecilia said to the major.

“I will take you,” Edward cut in.

“I don’t think you are in any condition—”

“I will take you.”

Wilkins looked from Edward to Cecilia and back with only slightly concealed amusement before offering her a little shrug. “I cannot countermand a husband’s wishes.”

“But I need to go,” Cecilia protested. “Thomas could be—”

“We have already determined that it is highly unlikely that he is in Haarlem,” Edward said. He clutched the edge of the table, hoping that wasn’t being too obvious about it. A touch of vertigo had descended upon him with his sudden rise to his feet.

“But he could have been there,” Cecilia said. “And if that’s the case, someone will remember him.”

“I will take you,” Edward said again. Haarlem was only about ten miles away, but ever since the British had lost (and then regained) the territory in 1776, it had felt like more of a wild outpost than the former Dutch village was. It was no place for a lady alone, and while he did not doubt Major Wilkins’s ability to watch over Cecilia, he could not help but think that his duty as her husband to see to her safety.

“If you will allow me to take my leave,” Major Wilkins said, bowing to Cecilia.

She gave a curt nod. Edward was fairly certain, however, that her ire was not directed at the major. Indeed, the moment Wilkins departed, she turned to Edward and, with jutted chin, said, “I must go to that infirmary.”

“And you will go.” He lowered himself back into his seat. “Just not tomorrow.”

“But—”

“Nothing will change in a day,” he cut in, far too exhausted to argue with her on this matter. “Wilkins is making inquiries. He will gain far more

rink information from General Garth's attaché than we will from a journey island."

to "Surely it would be better if we pursued both avenues of inquiry," she sitting back down beside him.

"I do not argue with you on that point," he said. He closed his eyes l fighting the wave of fatigue that had fallen over him like a blanket. Wi for that. sigh, he continued, "Nothing will be lost if we wait a day or two. I pro

"How can you promise?"

God, she was like a dog with a bone. Edward would admire her tena he weren't so goddamned ill. "Fine," he snapped. "I can't promise. For know the Continental Army could arrive tomorrow and we will all die we get the chance to investigate the infirmary. But I can promise that g everything I know—which admittedly isn't much, but it's more than y —a few days will not make a difference."

She stared at him in shock. It occurred to him that perhaps he ought have married a woman with such extraordinary eyes. Because when sh he stared, it took every ounce of his fortitude not to squirm in his seat.

pon If he were a metaphysical man, he'd think she could see straight to h soul.

"Major Wilkins could have taken me," she said with soft defiance.

He fought the urge to groan. "Do you really wish to spend the day w files Major Wilkins?"

ry in "Of course not, but—"

age it "What if you are forced to spend the night? Did you consider that r possibility?"

t it was "I made it across the Atlantic on my own, Edward. I'm sure I can to night in Harlem."

g again "But you shouldn't have to," he ground out. "You married me, Ceci God's sake, let me protect you."

e was "But you can't."

ned to Edward reeled in his seat. Her words had been soft, but if she had pu back her fist and slammed it into his neck she could not have landed a punch.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant."

with "No, I don't think you do."

His temper, which had been simmering at the surface, started to spit

up the sizzle. "You're right," he said in a harsh voice. "I don't know. Do you
why? Because I don't know *you*. I'm married to you, or so I'm told—" he
he said, She flinched.

"—and while I can imagine all sorts of reasons why such a union would
briefly, have come to pass, I can't remember a single one of them."

th a She said nothing, made no movement save for a tiny tremble passing
mise." her lips.

"You *are* my wife, aren't you?" he asked, but his tone was so unkind
city if he rescinded the question immediately. "Forgive me," he muttered. "This
r all I uncalled for."

before She regarded him for a few more seconds, her face revealing nothing
given her thoughts. But she was pale, unsettlingly so as she said, "I think you
ou do should rest."

"I know I should rest," he said irritably. "Do you think I don't feel
not to going on in my head? It's as if someone is taking a hammer to my skull
e From the inside out."

She reached across the table and placed her hand atop his.

is "I don't feel well," he said. Four little words, yet so hard for a man to
But still, he felt so much better for having done so.

No, not better. Relieved. Which he supposed was a form of better.

with "You are doing remarkably well," she said. "You must not forget that
has been only a day since you woke up."

He eyed her with a narrowed stare. "Don't say that Rome wasn't built
day."

"I would never," she promised, and he could hear the smile in her voice.

lerate a "I felt better this afternoon," he said. His voice was small, almost
to his ears.

lia. For "Better? Or improved?"

"Improved," he admitted. "Although when I kissed you . . ."

He smiled. When he kissed her, he'd almost felt whole.

illed Cecilia stood and gently took his arm. "Let's go upstairs."

better He did not have the energy to argue.

"I shall have supper brought to the room," she said as they made their
to the stairs.

"Not much," he said. "My stomach . . . I don't know what I could keep
down."

and She looked at him intently. Probably measuring how green his skin had

know become.

’ “Broth,” she said. “You must have something. Otherwise you will not regain your strength.”

ould He nodded. Broth sounded possible.

“Perhaps some laudanum,” she said quietly.

g over “A small amount.”

“Very small, I promise.”

d that When they arrived at the top of the stairs, he reached into his coat pocket and took out the key. Wordlessly, he handed it to her and leaned against the wall while she unlocked the door.

g of “I’ll help you with your boots,” she said, and he saw that she had leaned inside and sat him down on the bed without him even realizing it.

1 “I would remind you that you should not overexert yourself,” she said. She pulled off one boot, “but I am aware that your exertions today were not ideal.”

ll. Thomas.”

“And for you,” he said.

o say. Her hands stilled, but only for a moment. He might not have noticed that she weren’t so exquisitely aware of her touch.

at it “Thank you,” she said. She reached behind his heel and gripped his boot, giving it a sharp tug before sliding it off. Edward crawled under the blankets while she meticulously put them in the corner. “I’ll prepare the laudanum,” she said.

ilt in a He closed his eyes. He wasn’t sleepy, but his head felt better when his eyes were closed.

oice. “I wonder if you should have remained in hospital for another day.” His childlike voice was closer now, and he heard her shaking liquid in a bottle.

“No,” he said. “I would rather be here with you.”

Again, she stilled. He didn’t need to see her to know it.

ir way “The hospital was unbearable,” he said. “Some of the men . . .” He could not know how much to tell her, how much she already knew. Had she spent the night by his side while he was unconscious? Did she know what it meant to try to sleep while across the room, a man moaned in agony, crying out for his mother?

æp “I agree with you,” she said, nudging him to scoot into a more upright position. “This is a much more pleasant place to recuperate. But the doctor would be at the hospital.”

had “Do you think so?” he said with a hint of a smile. “I’d wager he’s

ever downstairs having a pint. Or maybe over at the Fraunces. Better ale than think.”

“Speaking of drinks,” Cecilia said, her voice a delightful blend of nonsense and good humor, “here is your laudanum.”

“Considerably more potent than a pint,” Edward said, opening his eyes. It wasn’t so bright any longer; Cecilia had pulled the curtains shut.

ocket She held the cup to his lips, but he gave her a little shake and said, “do it myself.”

st the “It’s a very small dose,” she promised.

“The doctor gave you instructions?”

l him “Yes, and I have some experience with the medicine. My father sometimes had migraines.”

id as “I did not realize,” he murmured.

e for “They were not frequent.”

He drank the drug, wincing at the bitter taste of it.

“It’s foul, I know,” she said, but she did not sound especially sympathetic.

l it if he “You’d think the alcohol would make it tolerable.”

other She smiled a little at that. “I think the only thing that makes it tolerable is the promise of relief.”

he He rubbed his temple. “It hurts, Cecilia.”

ie “I know.”

“I just want to feel like myself again.”

his eyes Her lips quivered. “We all want that.”

Her He yawned, even though logically it was still too soon for the opiate to have taken effect. “You still need to tell me,” he said, sliding back down under the covers.

“Tell you what?”

lidn’t “Hmmm”—he made a funny little high-pitched noise as he thought about that—“everything.”

at the “Everything, eh? That might be a touch ambitious.”

int to “We have time.”

for his “We do?” Now she sounded amused.

ht He nodded, and he realized that the drug must have taken hold because he had the oddest feeling—he was too tired to yawn. But he was still able to get a few words out.

“We’re married,” he said. “We have the rest of our lives.”

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Chapter 8

Edward Rokesby looks like a man, that's what he looks like. Real Cecilia, you should know better than to ask me to describe another man. His hair is brown. What more can I say?

Furthermore, if you must know, I show your miniature to everyone. I know I am not as frequently sentimental as you might like, but I do love you, dear sister, and I am proud to call you mine. Also, you are a far more prolific letter writer than any other of the men here enjoy, and I do enjoy basking in their jealousy.

Edward, in particular, suffers from the green-eyed monster whenever the mail is brought forth. He has three brothers and one sister, and in terms of correspondence, you outdo all of them put together.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA

Three hours later, Cecilia was still haunted by his words.

We're married.

We have the rest of our lives.

Sitting at the small table tucked into the corner of their room at the I Head Inn, she let her forehead drop into her hands. She had to tell him the truth. She had to tell him everything.

But how?

And more to the immediate point, when?

She'd told herself that she had to wait until after their meeting with Wilkins. Well, that had happened, but now Edward seemed to have taken the turn for the worse. She could not upset him now. He still needed her.

Oh, stop lying to yourself, she almost said aloud. He didn't need her. He might be making his recovery more pleasant, and maybe even more sp

but if she were to suddenly disappear from his life, he would be just fine. He'd needed her while he was unconscious. Now that he was awake, she was not nearly so essential.

She looked over at him, sleeping peacefully in the bed. His dark hair had fallen forward over his brow. He needed a trim, but she found she liked it messy and untamed. It gave him a slightly rakish air, which was delightful at odds with his upright character. His unruly locks reminded her that even an honorable man still had a wicked and wry sense of humor, that he too could fall prey to frustration and anger.

ly, He was not perfect.

ier He was *real*.

And somehow this made her feel even worse.

to *I will make this up to you*, she vowed.

ght She would earn his forgiveness.

re. But it was becoming more and more difficult to imagine how that might be possible. Edward's ironclad sense of honor—the very thing that had convinced her that she could not reveal her lie before they met with Mr. Wilkins—meant that she was caught in a new dilemma.

ter In his eyes, he had compromised her.

ne They might not be sharing a bed, but they were sharing a bedroom. If Edward learned that she was not actually his wife, he would insist upon marrying her. He was above all a gentleman, and his gentleman's honor would never allow him to do otherwise.

ut And while Cecilia could not stop herself from dreaming—just a little about a life as Mrs. Edward Rokesby, how could she live with herself if she trapped him into marriage in truth?

He would resent her. No, he would hate her.

Devil's No, he wouldn't hate her, but he would never forgive her.

the She sighed. He was never going to forgive her, regardless.

"Cecilia?"

She startled. "You're awake."

Edward gave her a sleepy smile. "Barely."

Major Cecilia stood and crossed the short distance to the bed. Edward had been asleep fully clothed, but about an hour into his nap she'd thought he looked uncomfortable and had removed his cravat. It was a testament to the power of laudanum that he'd barely stirred when she'd done so.

eedy, "How are you feeling?" she asked.

ne. He frowned, and Cecilia thought it a good sign that he had to think a
she it. “Better,” he said, then corrected himself with a little twist of his lips
“Improved.”

r had “Are you hungry?”

d it He had to think about that one too. “Yes, although I’m not sure if fo
itfully would sit well in my stomach.”

his “Try some broth,” she said. She stood and picked up the small tureen
could fetched from the kitchen ten minutes earlier. “It’s still warm.”

He pushed himself up into a sitting position. “Did I sleep long?”

“About three hours. The laudanum worked quickly.”

“Three hours,” he murmured, sounding surprised. His brow furrowe
blinked a few times.

“Are you trying to decide if your head still hurts?” Cecilia asked wit
smile.

ight be “No,” he answered plainly. “It definitely still hurts.”

ajor “Oh.” She wasn’t really sure what to say to that, so she just added, “
sorry.”

“It’s different, though.”

She set the tureen on the table next to the bed and sat beside him.

Once “Different?”

n “Less piercing, I think. More of a dull ache.”

r “Surely that must be an improvement.”

He touched his temple lightly and murmured, “I think so.”

e bit— “Do you need assistance?” Cecilia asked, motioning to the soup.

if she He gave her a hint of a smile. “I can manage, although a spoon might
helpful.”

“Oh!” She jumped to her feet. “I’m so sorry. Do you know, I think t
forgot to give me one.”

“No matter. I can just drink it.” He raised the tureen to his lips and t
sip.

“Good?” Cecilia asked when he let out a satisfied sigh.

“Quite. Thank you for getting it.”

fallen She waited for him to take a few more sips, then said, “You really d
oked better than you did at the meeting with Major Wilkins.” Then it occur
her that he might think she was trying to talk him into taking her to Ha
sooner rather than later, so she added, “Not well enough to head north
tomorrow, though.”

about He seemed to find that amusing. “Maybe the next day.”

i. “Probably not then, either,” she admitted. She let out a breath. “I have time to reflect upon our meeting with Major Wilkins. He said that he would make inquiries at the Haarlem infirmary. I still wish to visit myself, but not now, that is enough.” She swallowed, and she wasn’t sure which of the two she was trying to reassure when she said, “I will be patient.”

od What other choice did she have?

 He set the soup on the table and took her hand. “I want to find Thomas as much as you do.”

d as he “I know.” Cecilia looked down at their entwined fingers. It was odd as well they seemed to fit together. His hands were large and square, his skin tanned and rough from work. And hers—well, they were no longer so soft and delicate, but she took pride in her newfound calluses. They seemed to show that she was capable, that she could take control of her own destiny. Strength in her hands, strength she had not known she possessed.

h a “We will find him,” Edward said.

 She looked up. “We might not.”

 His eyes, almost navy blue in the fading light, settled on hers.

 “I must be realistic,” she said.

 “Realistic, yes,” he said, “but not fatalistic.”

 “No.” She managed a little smile. “I’m not that.”

 Not yet, anyway.

 They did not speak for a few moments, and the silence, which began something companionable, grew heavy and awkward as Cecilia realized Edward was trying to figure out the best way to broach an uncomfortable topic. Finally, after clearing his throat several times, he said, “I would like to know more about our marriage.”

hey Her heart stopped. She’d known this was coming, but still, for a brief moment she could not breathe.

ook a “I do not question your word,” he said. “You are Thomas’s sister, and I hope you will not judge me as too forward if I tell you that I have long known that I know you from your letters to him.”

o look She had to look away.

ed to “But I would like to know how it all came about.”

arlem Cecilia swallowed. She’d had several days to come up with a story, but thinking about a lie wasn’t the same as saying it out loud. “It was Thomas’s wish,” she told him. This much was true, or at least she assumed it was

Surely her brother would want to see his dearest friend marry his sister
ve had was worried about me,” she added.

would “Because of your father’s death?”

t for “He does not know of that,” Cecilia answered honestly. “But I know
em she he has long been concerned about my future.”

“He had said as much to me,” Edward confirmed.

She looked up in surprise. “He did?”

as as “Forgive me. I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, but Thomas had
intimated that your father was less concerned with your future than he
how with his present.”

skin Cecilia swallowed. Her father had been a good man, but also a
white fundamentally selfish one. Still, she’d loved him. And she’d known th
l to say loved her to the best of his ability. “I brought comfort to my father’s li
ie saw said, picking her words as if walking through a field of flowers. There
been good times too, and these were what she wished to gather into a
bouquet. “And he gave me purpose.”

Edward had been watching her closely as she spoke, and when she c
a look in his eyes she saw something she thought was pride. Mixed for
certain with skepticism. He saw through her words, but he admired her
saying them.

“Anyway,” she said, trying to lighten her tone, “Thomas knew that r
father was ailing.”

1 as Edward’s head tipped to the side. “I thought you said it was sudden.

ed that “It was,” she said hastily. “I mean, I think it’s often like that. Very s
ole and then quite quick.”

like to He didn’t say anything.

“Or maybe it’s not,” she said. Dear God, she sounded like an idiot, b
f couldn’t seem to shut her mouth. “I haven’t much experience with the
None, actually, except for my father.”

nd I “Nor I,” Edward said. “Not with natural death, at least.”

felt Cecilia looked at him. His eyes had gone dark.

“I do not count the battlefield as natural,” he said quietly.

“No, of course not.” Cecilia didn’t even want to think about what he
seen. The death of a young man in his prime was far different than the
but passing of a man her father’s age.

nas’s Edward took another sip of his soup, and Cecilia took this to be a sig
s. that she should continue with her tale. “Then my cousin asked for my l

“He she said.

“I take it from your tone that this was not a welcome proposal.”

Her mouth grew tight. “No.”

“Your father did not rebuff him? Wait”—Edward’s hand rose a few inches, his forefinger flexed the way one did before raising a point in a conversation—“was this before or after he died?”

“Before,” Cecilia replied. Her heart sank an inch. This was where the trouble began. Horace had not become a menace until after her father had died. Thomas had never known that he had begun to pressure Cecilia to marry.

“Of course. It would have to have been because . . .” Edward frowned, pulling his hand from hers and rubbing his chin. “Maybe it’s my head that he’d be slowing me down, but I can’t keep the timeline straight. I might need your help,” she wrote this down for me.”

“Of course,” Cecilia said, but her guilt beat inside her like a drum. She could not believe she was letting him think *he* was the reason the story was so difficult to follow. She tried for a smile, but she wasn’t sure she managed more than a twitch of her lips. “I can hardly believe it either.”

“I’m sorry?”

She should have known she would have to explain that comment. “Just I can’t quite believe I’m here. In New York.”

“With me.”

She looked at him, at this honorable and generous man she did not doubt.”

“With you.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. Cecilia’s heart melted a little even as her conscience sobbed. Why did this man have to be so bloody kind?

She took a breath. “Marswell is entailed, and Horace will inherit if anything out she something should happen to Thomas.”

“Is that why he proposed?”

She gave him a look. “You don’t think he was overwhelmed by my charm and beauty?”

“No, that would be why *I* proposed.” Edward started to grin, but it quickly fell to a grimace. “I did propose, didn’t I?”

“Sort of. Ah . . .” She felt her face burn. “It was more of, ah . . .” She landed upon the only possible answer. “Actually, Thomas took care of most of the arrangements.”

Edward did not appear happy with this turn of events.

“It could hardly have happened any other way,” Cecilia pointed out.

“Where was the ceremony?”

She’d thought of that one. “On the ship,” she said.

“Really?” He looked frankly baffled by the whole thing. “Then how inches, I . . . ?”

sation “I’m not sure,” Cecilia said.

“But if you were on the ship, *when* did I . . . ?”

e lies “Just before you left for Connecticut,” Cecilia lied.

l, and “I went through the ceremony three months before you did?”

ry him. “They don’t have to take place at the same time,” Cecilia said, aware, she was digging herself in ever deeper. She had more excuses prepared

ed, the vicar in her village refused to perform a proxy marriage, or that she

you to not wanted to say her vows until it became absolutely necessary so that

Edward might withdraw from the marriage if he changed his mind. But

he before she could bring herself to utter another falsehood, she realized that

was so was stroking her finger, right where a ring ought to be.

ged “You don’t even have a ring,” he said.

“I don’t need one,” she said quickly.

His brow drew into a firm line. “You need one.”

ust that “It can wait, though.”

Then, with a movement so sudden she wouldn’t have thought him capable

of it in his current condition, he pushed himself upright and touched her

reserve. “Kiss me,” he said.

“What?” she practically yelped.

little, “Kiss me.”

r nice? “You’re mad.”

“It’s possible,” he said agreeably, “but I think any man would be quite
to want to kiss you.”

“Any man,” she echoed, still trying to make sense of the moment.

natural “Perhaps not.” He pretended to consider this. “I think I might be the
jealous sort. So it would probably be quite foolish on their part.”

uickly She shook her head. Then rolled her eyes. Then did both. “You need
rest.”

e leapt “A kiss first.”

f the “*Edward.*”

He mocked her tone to perfection. “*Cecilia.*”

Her mouth fell open. “Are you making puppy eyes at me?”

“Is it working?”

Yes.

“No.”

did He hmphed. “You’re not a very accomplished liar, are you?”

Oh, he had no idea.

“Finish your broth,” she ordered, trying—and failing—to sound stern.

“Do you mean to imply I don’t have the strength to kiss you?”

“Oh my goodness, you’re insufferable!”

One of his brows rose into a perfectly arrogant arch. “Because I’ll have that you know I take that as a dare.”

l—that She pressed her lips together in a futile attempt to hold back a smile.

had “What has got into you?”

t He shrugged. “Happiness.”

t Just one word, and it knocked the breath right out of her. Underneath

hat he honorable exterior, Edward Rokesby had a streak of playfulness a mile

She supposed she shouldn’t have been so surprised. She’d seen hints of his letters.

All he’d needed to unlock it was a spot of joy.

“Kiss me,” he said again.

“You need to rest.”

apable “I just napped for three hours. I’m ridiculously awake now.”

er chin. “One kiss,” she heard herself saying, even as her mind was warning to do it.

“Just one,” he agreed, then added, “I’m lying, of course.”

“I’m not sure it counts as a lie if you confess to it in the same breath.”

He tapped his cheek, reminding her.

ite sane Cecilia caught her lower lip between her teeth. Surely one kiss would hurt. And on the cheek, even. She leaned in.

He moved his head. Her lips touched his.

“You tricked me!”

His hand came to the back of her head. “Did I?”

l to “You know you did.”

“Did you realize,” he murmured, his breath hot and seductive against the corner of her mouth, “that when you speak against my lips it feels like a kiss?”

She nearly groaned. She did not have the strength to resist him. Not that he was like this—funny and endearing and so obviously delighted to have woken up to find himself married to her.

And now his lips were moving against hers, brushing slowly back and forth in a kiss that should have seemed chaste. But there was nothing innocent in the way her body arched toward his, eager for more. She'd half in love with this man before they'd even met, and now her body recognized what her mind did not wish to admit—she wanted him, desperately, and in every way.

If he were not ill, if he were not still so weak, heaven only knew what would happen. Because she was not sure she would have the strength to keep them from consummating a marriage that did not even exist.

"You are the best medicine," Edward murmured against her skin.

"Don't discount the laudanum," she tried to joke. She needed to lighten the moment.

"I don't," he said, pulling back just far enough to look into her eyes. "Thank you for insisting that I take it. I do think it was a help."

"You're welcome," Cecilia said a little hesitantly. The change of topic was somewhat disorienting.

He stroked her cheek. "It's part of the reason I said that you are the best medicine. I spoke with the people at the hospital, you know. Yesterday you left."

She shook her head. She wasn't sure where he was going with this.

"They told me how well you cared for me. They told me that you insisted upon a higher standard of care than I might have received otherwise."

"Of—of course," she stammered. This had nothing to do with her behavior toward her wife. She would have done this regardless.

"One of them even said he did not think I would have awakened if not for you."

"I'm sure that's not true," she said, because she could not take credit for that. And she could not let him think he owed her for it.

"It's funny," he murmured. "I can't recall thinking very much about getting married. I certainly don't recall thinking about *being* married. I think I like it."

Tears began to pool in Cecilia's eyes. He reached out and brushed them away.

"Don't cry," he whispered.

"I'm not," she said, even though she was.

He smiled indulgently. "I think this might be the first time I've kissed a girl and made her cry."

nd “Georgie Porgie,” she whispered, grateful for the distraction.
This seemed to amuse him. “It is my middle name.”

been She drew back, needing to put a little distance between them. But his hand slipped from her cheek to her shoulder and then down her arm to her hand. He would not let go, and she knew that deep in her heart, she did not want him to.

at “It’s getting late,” he said.

o stop She glanced toward the window. She’d long since pulled the curtain but she could see around the edges that the day had fallen past dusk and now somewhere close to night.

iten the “Will you sleep tonight?” he said.
She knew what he was asking. Would she sleep in this bed?
“You need not feel uncomfortable,” he said. “Much as I wish it were otherwise, I am not in any condition to make love to you.”

ic was Her face burned. She couldn’t help it. “I thought you said you were tired,” she mumbled.

best “I’m not. But you are.”

7, after He was right. She was exhausted. She would have slept when he did except that she’d felt she needed to watch over him. He’d looked so awful when she’d put him to bed earlier that evening. Worse, almost, than when he’d been in hospital.
If something happened to him, after all that had transpired . . .

ing his She could not bear to consider it.
“Have you eaten?” he asked.

ot for She nodded. She’d had a light meal when she’d gone down to get the broth.

t for “Good. We do not want the nurse to become the patient. I assure you would not be nearly so proficient in the role as you are.” His face grew serious. “You must rest.”

3ut I She knew this. She just didn’t see how it was possible.
“I’m sure you still wish for modesty,” he said, his own face taking on a slightly discomfited hue. Cecilia felt a little better knowing that he too was aware of the irregularity in their current situation.

rem “I give you my word that I will turn the other way,” he said.
She just stared at him.

ed a “While you change into your bedclothes,” he explained.
“Oh, of course.” God, she was an idiot.

“I’ll even pull the covers over my head.”

She rose to shaky feet. “That won’t be necessary.”

s hand
and. There was a pregnant pause, and then he said in a voice turned ever
hoarse, “It might.”

vant
Cecilia let out a little gasp of surprise at his admission, then rushed to
the wardrobe where she’d unpacked her meager supply of clothing. She
brought one nightgown, a serviceable dress of white cotton devoid of l
s shut, frills. Not the sort of thing a lady might tuck into her trousseau trunk.

d was “I’ll just go over to the corner,” she said.

“I’m already under the covers.”

Indeed he was. While she’d been fetching her nightgown, he’d slid c
until he was supine and had pulled the blanket over his face.

e She would have laughed if she were not so utterly mortified herself.

r’t With quick and efficient motions, Cecilia stripped off her clothing a
jammed herself into her nightgown. It covered her from head to toe, ju
much as any of her day frocks, and certainly more than an evening gov
would, but still, she felt indecently exposed.

l,
vful She normally gave her hair fifty strokes with a brush before bed, but
hen she braided it into a sleeping plait. As for her teeth . . . She looked dow
the toothbrush and powder she’d brought with her from England, then
over at the bed. Edward had not moved.

“I’ll skip my teeth for tonight,” she said. Maybe it would make him
likely to want to kiss her the following morning.

e She set the toothbrush back in the wardrobe and hurried over to the
of the bed. Carefully, so as to disturb as little of the bedclothes as poss
u, I she lifted the blanket and crawled in.

r “You can open your eyes now,” she said.

He uncovered his face. “You’re very far away,” he said.

n a Cecilia pulled her right leg, which was half hanging off the side, bac
saw the bed. “I think it’s best,” she said. She leaned over and blew out the c
allowing darkness to wash over the room.

It didn’t make her any less aware of the man lying next to her.

“Good night, Cecilia,” he said.

“Good night.” She shifted her position, rolling awkwardly onto her s
with her back to him. This was how she generally slept, on her right si
her hands tucked under her cheek like a prayer. But it didn’t feel comf

tonight, and it certainly didn't feel natural.

She'd never fall asleep. Never.

so And yet, somehow, she did.

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tonight, and it certainly didn't feel natural.
She'd never fall asleep. Never.
And yet, somehow, she did.

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Chapter 9

Do offer my greetings to Lieutenant Rokesby and assure him that his siblings do not write as often as I, it can only be because they lead far more exciting lives. Derbyshire is nothing but dull this time of year. Oh, what am I saying? Derbyshire is always nothing but dull. It is a good thing, then, that I prefer an uneventful life.

—FROM CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS

Edward woke slowly the following morning, his mind reluctant to pull out of what was an exceedingly delightful dream. He was in a bed, which was noteworthy in itself—he was fairly sure he had not slept in a proper bed in months. And he was warm. Toasty and lovely, but not too hot, the way it got during these oppressive New York summers.

Funny how nothing seemed to be actually happening in this dream; it was all about the feel of it. The cloudlike comfort of it all. Even his own body seemed eager to bask in the happy sensations. He'd woken up stiff, as he often did, but without the accompanying frustration of knowing nothing could come of it. Because in his dream he was curled up against a very delightful bottom, warm and plump, with a tantalizing little cleft that cradled him in a cozy, feminine embrace.

His hand stole down to cup one of her cheeks.

He sighed. Perfection.

He'd always liked women, liked the soft curves of their bodies, the way their skin lay pale and tender against his. He'd never been a rogue, nor had he been indiscriminate. Years ago his father had pulled him aside and put a healthy fear of God and pox in him. And so while Edward had visited brothels and had his friends, he'd never partaken of the goods. It was far safer, and in his opinion probably a great deal more pleasurable, to lie with a woman or

actually knew. Discreet widows, mostly. The occasional opera singer.

But discreet widows and opera singers were not thick on the ground American colonies, and it had been a long time since he'd found himself blissfully entwined with a set of female limbs.

He did love the feel of a warm woman next to him. Under him.

Surrounding him.

He drew her closer, this perfect lady of his dreams, and then . . .

He woke up.

For real.

t if
Christ.

ey
ne
ut
This was no dreamlike mystery woman in his arms, it was Cecilia, a nightgown had ridden up in the night to reveal her very bare, very delicate backside.

He was still mostly dressed, having fallen asleep twice in his clothing. His cock was protesting its confines mightily, and he really couldn't be pressed up as it was against Cecilia's bottom.

itself
ich was
d in
r one
Surely no man had ever found himself in such an exquisitely frustrating situation. She was his *wife*. Surely he had every right to draw her close and roll her over and begin kissing her until she was insensible with desire. He'd start at her mouth, then he'd move down the elegant length of her throat to the hollow of her collarbone.

it was
dy
he
g
r
From there it would be an easy slide to her breasts, which he still hadn't seen but was quite certain were perfectly sized and shaped for his hands. He wasn't sure how he knew this, except that everything else about her hands had proved perfect, so why not this?

radled
And he had a feeling that at some point during the night before, he'd cradled one of those breasts in his hand. His soul seemed to remember even if his mind did not.

way
had he
the
with
s
1e
But he had promised her that he would not take advantage of this fortuitous proximity. He had promised himself that he would give her a proper wedding night, not something fumbled and rushed with a man operating at only half strength and stamina.

When he made love to her, she would have all the romance she desired. So now he needed to figure out how to extricate himself without waking her. Even though every masculine fiber of his being disagreed.

Some fibers disagreeing more than others.

First things first, he told himself. *Move the hand.*

He groaned. He really didn't want to move his hand.

But then Cecilia made a little noise like she might be waking up, and seemed to jolt him out of his inaction. With a slow and careful motion, pulled his hand away, letting his palm rest on his hip.

She mumbled something in her sleep, something that sounded remarkable like "salmon mushie," then let out a sigh as she nestled into the pillow.

Disaster averted. Edward let himself breathe again.

Now he needed to get his arm out from underneath her. No easy task seemed to be using his hand as some sort of childlike lovey, pressing it against her cheek like a favorite blanket or stuffed doll.

He gave it a little tug. She didn't budge.

He pulled with a bit more force, only to freeze when she let out a sleepy irritation and burrowed harder against his hand.

Sleepy irritation. Who knew there even was such a thing?

Very well, he told himself, it was time to get serious. With an awkward shifting of his weight, he pressed his entire arm down into the mattress creating enough of a depression for him to slide his limb out from underneath, without disturbing her position.

Unentangled at last. Edward started backing away, inch by inch by inch. He'd scratch that, he didn't make it past the first two inches. It turned out that had not been the one to cross the bed in the night, it had been Cecilia. She apparently did not do things in half measures, because he was teetering right at the edge of the mattress.

There was nothing for it. He was going to have to get up and greet the

The day? He glanced toward the window. The dawn was probably not like it. Unsurprising, he supposed, since they'd fallen asleep relatively the night before.

With one final look at Cecilia to make sure she was still sleeping soundly, Edward swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. He didn't feel weak as the day before, which made sense. He might have eaten nothing half the previous night, but he'd managed a proper meal when they'd arrived at the Devil's Head. It was remarkable what a bit of meat and potatoes could do for a man.

His head felt somewhat better too, although some inner sense was warning him not to make any sudden, jerky movements. Which certainly ruled out a ten-mile ride up to Haarlem, but at least Cecilia had acquiesced on that. He honestly didn't think they would find news of Thomas up at the no-

outpost, but he would take her there as soon as he was able. And in the meantime, they would continue their investigation here.

He would not rest until they learned what had happened to Thomas. Edward owed this much to his friend.

And now to Cecilia, as well.

Still moving slowly, he crossed the short distance to the window and pulled the curtains back a few inches. The sun was rising over the New World, painting the sky with wide streaks of orange and pink. He thought about his family back in England. The day would have already started there. Would they be eating their midday meal? Was the weather warm enough for a ride through the extensive grounds of Crake House? Or was spring still clinging to England, tickling the air with its chill and wind?

He missed his home, missed the deep greens of the lawns and hedge cool mist of the morning. He missed his mother's rosebushes, even though he'd never liked the cloying scent of them. Had he been homesick before, hadn't thought so, although maybe this ache had risen within him during the months that had gone missing from his memory.

Or perhaps it was something new. He had a wife now, and God willing, children would follow. He'd never thought to have a family here in the colonies. He'd always pictured himself back in Kent, settling into a plot of his own, not too far from the rest of the Rokesbys.

Not that he'd ever pictured a specific woman in these hazy imaginings. He'd never courted anyone seriously, although everyone seemed to think he'd eventually marry his neighbor, Billie Bridgerton. He'd never bothered to disabuse people of this notion, and neither had Billie, but they would be a disaster as husband and wife. They were far too much like siblings to even think of marrying.

He chuckled, thinking of her. They'd run wild as children, he and Billie along with his brother Andrew and sister Mary. It was a wonder they'd reached adulthood in good health. He'd dislocated a shoulder and had a first tooth knocked out before his eighth birthday. Andrew was always getting some scrape or another. Only Mary had been immune to the constant injuries, although that was almost certainly less due to chance than to her superhuman warning sensibility.

And George, of course. George had never tested their mother's patience with breaks and bruises. But then again, he was several years older than the rest. He'd had far more important things to do than scamper about with

younger siblings.

Would Cecilia like his family? He rather thought she would, and he they would like her. He hoped she would not miss Derbyshire overmuch; it didn't sound as if she had much left to tie her there, anyway. Thomas expressed no great affection for their village; Edward would not be sure if he remained in the army and rented Marswell out now that he was the owner.

Of course they had to find him first.

Privately, Edward was not optimistic. He had been putting on a brave face for Cecilia, but there was too much about Thomas's disappearance that made no sense for this tale to have a happy ending.

But then again, his own tale was filled with the improbable and bizarre: the lost memory, a found wife. Who was to say that Thomas would not be lucky?

The warm hues of the sky were beginning to melt away, and Edward caught the curtain drop. He ought to get dressed—or rather *redressed*—before Cecilia woke up. He probably wouldn't bother with new breeches, but a shirt was in order. His trunk had been set near the wardrobe, so he moved quietly across the room and opened it, pleased to see that his belongings appeared intact. He'd brought mostly clothing and equipment, but there were a few personal items mixed within. A slim volume of poetry he'd always enjoyed, a funny little wooden rabbit he and Andrew had carved when they were young.

He smiled to himself, suddenly wanting to see it again. They'd each decided to carve half, and the result had been the most misshapen, lopsided rodent ever to grace this earth. Billie had declared that if rabbits actually looked like that, they would have been predators if only because all the animals would faint with shock.

"Then," she announced with the great drama she always employed, "go in for the kill with their vicious little teeth . . ."

It was at that point that Edward's mother stumbled onto the conversation, and put a halt to it, declaring that rabbits were "God's gentle creatures, and Billie should—

It was at *that* point that Edward had thrust the wooden rabbit in front of his mother's face, resulting in a shriek of such magnitude and pitch that the children were imitating it for weeks.

No one got it right, though. Not even Mary, and she could scream. (

so many brothers, she'd learned young.)

Edward dug down through his things, past the shirts and breeches, patches, but stockings he'd learned to mend himself. He felt around for the uneven sides of the rabbit, but his hand brushed first against a small bundle of paper, wrapped neatly with a piece of twine.

Letters. He'd saved all of the letters he'd received from home, not that the stack was anything compared to Thomas's. But this small pile represented everyone who was dear to him—his mother, with her tall, elegant script; his father, who never wrote much, but somehow managed to convey what he meant anyway. There was just one letter from Andrew. Edward supposed he could be forgiven; his younger brother was in the navy, and as hard as it could be for mail to reach Edward in New York, it had to be even harder for it to come from wherever Andrew was posted.

With a nostalgic smile he continued riffling through the pile. Billie was a terrible correspondent, but she'd managed a few notes. His sister Mary wrote much better, and she had included a few scribblings from their youngest brother Nicholas, whom Edward was ashamed to say he barely knew. The age difference was great, and with such busy lives, they never seemed to meet in the same place at the same time.

But it was at the bottom of the pile, hidden between two letters from his mother, where Edward found the most treasured piece of his collection: a letter from Cecilia.

She had never written to him directly; they both knew that would have been highly improper. But she included a note to him at the bottom of every letter of her letters to her brother, and Edward had come to look forward to the little embedded missives with a longing so deep he would never have admitted it.

Thomas would say, "Ah, a letter has arrived from my sister," and Edward would nod, "they'd wouldn't even look up as he replied, "Oh, that's very nice, I hope she's well."

But inside his heart beat a little harder, his lungs felt a little tighter, and his stomach growled. Thomas idly skimmed through Cecilia's words, Edward watched him do the same, the corner of his eye, trying not to scream, "Just read the bloody bit that she wrote me!"

No, it really would not have done to confess just how much he looked forward to Cecilia's letters.

And then one day, while Thomas was out, and Edward was resting in the room they shared, he found himself thinking of her. There was nothing

abnormal about this. He thought about his best friend's sister far more than he would be expected given that they had never actually met. But it had been more than a month since her last letter—an uncommonly lengthy break in communication; tied to Edward was beginning to worry about her, even though he knew that the delay was almost certainly the fault of ocean winds and currents. The transatlantic post was far from dependable.

But as he lay on his bed, he realized that he could not remember precisely what she'd written in that last letter, and for some reason it became imperative that he do so. Had she described the village busybody as overbearing or overwrought? He could not recall, and it was important that he changed the meaning, and—

Before he knew it, he was in Thomas's things, fishing out Cecilia's letters just so he could reread the four sentences she had included for him.

It did not occur to him until he was done just how gravely he'd abused his friend's privacy.

That he was pathetic, he had realized all along.

Once he started he couldn't stop. Edward found himself sneaking peeks at Cecilia's letters whenever Thomas was away. It was his guilty, stealthy secret, and when he had learned that he was being sent to Connecticut, he had filched two of her stationery sheets for himself, carefully taking only the one where the final sheet of paper was almost entirely directed to him. Thomas would lose very little of his sister's words, and Edward would gain . . .

Well, he thought he would gain a little bit of sanity, to be frank. Maybe some hope.

In the end, he'd taken only one of her letters with him to Connecticut, opting to leave the other safely in his trunk. This seemed to have been a prudent plan. According to the people at the hospital, he had not had any papers or property when he'd been found at Kip's Bay. Heaven only knows where Cecilia's letter was now. At the bottom of a lake, probably, or nestled as kindling for a fire. Edward hoped it had been found by an enterprising fisherman, torn apart to cushion a nest.

Cecilia would probably like that, he thought.

He did too. It almost took the sting out of the loss.

He'd thought he'd kept it safe, always in his coat pocket. It was strange that—

Edward froze. This was the most he'd remembered since he'd awakened. Nothing of what he'd done or said, just that he'd carried a letter from his

than in his coat pocket.

een Or had she even been his wife then? When was the date of their marriage—and He'd asked her about it the day before, but they'd veered off the topic, he then—honestly, it was his own fault—he'd demanded that she kiss him

If he hadn't got any answers, he had only himself to blame.

This letter, however—the one in his hands—was the one that was most dear to him. It was the first time she'd written expressly to him. There had been nothing terribly personal; it was as if she'd instinctively known that what he needed most was normalcy. She'd filled her page with the usual. It made delightful by her wry perspective.

Edward peeked over his shoulder to make sure that Cecilia was still sleeping, then he carefully unfolded the letter.

ed his *Dear Captain Rokesby,*

Your description of the wildflowers in the colonies has made me long for spring, which is losing its fierce battle with winter here in Derbyshire. No, I lie. The battle is not fierce. Winter has crushed spring like a bug. We do not even have the pleasure of a fresh, powdery snow. Whatever precipitation we have gleaned has long since melted into a dirty, unpleasant slush, and I fear I have ruined two shoes this season. Not two pair, mind you, two shoes. The left of my slippers and the right of my boots. My frugal soul wants me to cobble together a pair from what remains, but I fear I am too vain for the resulting fashion, not to mention far too poor of balance. The heel of my boot is an inch higher than that of my slippers, and I am quite sure I shall trip over everything, fall down the stairs, and perhaps crash a window. Ask Thomas about the time I stumbled over the rug in our drawing room. 'Twas a sad cascade of maladies that followed.

Do keep yourself safe and Thomas as well, and I will beseech of him to do the same. I shall think of you often and keep you in my prayers.

nge *Your friend,
Cecilia Harcourt*

ened. Edward stared at the elegant script for several seconds after he'd read his wife the words, his forefinger lightly tracing the swirls of her name. *Your fr*

she'd written. Indeed, that was what she had been, even before he'd known her.

and His friend.

1. And now his wife.

ost Behind him, he heard the unmistakable sounds of Cecilia waking up hastily refolded the letter, tucking it back into the pile from his family.

had "Edward?" he heard her say. Her voice was still thick and sleepy, as if at any moment she might slide into an unexpected yawn.

ndane, "Good morning," he said, turning around.

"What were you reading?"

His hand tapped against his thigh. "Just a letter from home."

"Oh." She was quiet for a moment, then softly said, "You must miss family dreadfully."

"I . . . yes," he said. And in that single moment he felt like a green boy again, faced with the beautiful girl across the room, the one no one had courage to speak to. It was ridiculous, utterly mad. He was a grown man there had not been a woman who frightened him into silence for over a decade. But he felt as if he'd been caught red-handed.

If she found out that he'd stolen her letters . . .

He was mortified just thinking about it.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, no, of course not." He shoved the entire pile of letters back into trunk. "Just . . . you know . . . thinking of home."

or She nodded as she pushed herself upright, tucking the bedclothes pr
el around her.

1. "I haven't seen them in—ow!" Edward let out a stream of invective big toe slammed into the side of his trunk. He'd been so eager to hide the evidence of his lovesick foolishness that he had not been paying attention where he was going.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sounding frankly surprised by his reaction.

Edward swore again, then immediately begged her pardon. It had been long since he'd been in the presence of a lady. His manners were rusty.

"Do not apologize," she said. "There is nothing so awful as a stubborn man only wish I could say the same when I stub mine."

"Billie does," he said.

"Who?"

d all
iend,

"Oh, sorry. Billie Bridgerton. My neighbor." She was still in his thoughts.

own it seemed. Probably because he'd been looking through those letters from home.

"Oh yes. You've mentioned her."

He "Have I?" he asked absently. He and Billie were the best of friends—they'd grown up together. A bigger tomboy had never walked this earth though, and he wasn't sure he'd even realized she was a girl until he was eight.

He chuckled at the memory.

Cecilia looked away.

"I can't imagine why I would have written to you about her," Edward

"You didn't," she explained. "Thomas did."

your "Thomas?" That seemed odd.

She gave an unconcerned shrug. "You must have talked to him about

oy "I suppose." He reached back into the trunk to pull out a clean shirt. l the why he'd opened the bloody thing in the first place. "If you'll excuse me, and said before whipping his shirt over his head and pulling on the fresh one

"Oh!" Cecilia exclaimed. "You have a scar."

He glanced back at her over his shoulder. "What?"

"There is a scar on your back. I never noticed it before." She frowned. "I suppose I wouldn't have done. While I was caring for you I never . . . I never mind." A moment passed and then she asked, "How did you get

o his He reached around and pointed toward his left scapula. "This one?"

"Yes."

imly "I fell out of a tree."

"Recently?"

as his He gave her a look. Honestly. "I was nine."

he This seemed to interest her, and she shifted position, sitting cross-legged on the floor under the covers. "What happened?"

"I fell out of a tree."

action. She groaned. "Surely there is more to the story than that."

en so "Not really," he said with a shrug. "For about two years I lied and said my brother pushed me, but in truth I just lost my balance. I hit a branch on my head and my foot. I fell way down. Tore right through my shirt."

She chuckled at that. "You must have been the bane of your mother's existence."

thoughts, "My mother and whoever was doing the mending. Although I imagine the shirt was irredeemable."

om “Better a shirt than an arm or a leg.”
 “Oh, we ruined those as well.”
 “Good heavens!”

–truly, He grinned at her. “Billie broke both of her arms.”
h, Cecilia’s eyes bugged out. “At the same time?”
as “Thankfully not, but Andrew and I had great fun imagining what it v
 have been like if she had. When she broke the second one, we tied the
 one up in a sling, just to see how she managed.”
 “And she let you?”

rd said. “Let us? She was the one who suggested it.”
 “She sounds most singular,” Cecilia said politely.
 “Billie?” He shook his head. “There’s no one else like her, that is fo
it her.” certain.”

It was Cecilia looked down at the bed, picking idly at the covers. She seem
ne,” he be making some sort of pattern in her mind. “What is she doing now?”
ie. asked.

 “I have no idea,” he said regretfully. It pained him that he was so cu
 from his family. He’d had no news of them in over four months. And t
d. “I likely thought he was dead.

Well, “I’m sorry,” Cecilia said. “I shouldn’t have asked. I didn’t think.”
it?” “It’s all right,” he replied. It certainly wasn’t her fault. “Although I c
 wonder—might I have received correspondence during my absence? It
 likely that my family would have written to me before receiving notice
 I’d gone missing.”

 “I don’t know. We can certainly inquire.”

 Edward saw to his cuffs, fastening first the left and then right.

gged “Did they write to you often?” She smiled, but it looked forced. Or i
she was just tired.

 “My family?”

 She nodded. “And your friends.”

aid my “None so often as you wrote to Thomas,” he said ruefully. “I was fo
the jealous of that. We all were.”

 “Really?” Her smile lit her eyes this time.

’s “Really,” he confirmed. “Thomas received more mail than I did, and
were his only correspondent.”

ne that “ That can’t be true.”
 “I assure you it is. Well, perhaps not if I count my mother,” he admi

“But that hardly seems fair.”

She laughed at that. “What do you mean?”

“Mothers *have* to write to their sons, don’t you think? But siblings and friends . . . well, they hardly need be so diligent.”

“Our father never wrote to Thomas,” Cecilia said. “Sometimes he asked me to pass along his greetings, but that is all.” She didn’t sound upset or even resigned. Edward had a sudden recollection of his friend, idly whittling a stick at one of their shared camps. Thomas often spouted aphorisms, and one of his favorites had been: “Change what you can and accept what you can’t.”

That seemed to sum up Thomas’s sister quite well.

He looked over at her, studying her for a moment. She was a woman of remarkable strength and grace. He wondered if she realized that.

He went back to fussing with his cuffs, even though they were fully fastened and straight. The urge to keep looking at her was too strong. It would embarrass her, or more likely, himself. But he wanted to watch her. He wanted to *learn* her. He wanted all of her secrets and desires, and he wanted her mundane stories, the little bits of her past that had fit into her like pieces of a puzzle.

How odd it was to want to *know* another person, inside and out. He did not recall ever wanting to do so before.

“I told you about my childhood,” he said. He reached into his trunk for a fresh cravat and got to work tying it. “Tell me about yours.”

“What do you wish to know?” she asked. She sounded vaguely surprised, perhaps a little amused.

“Did you play outside a great deal?”

“I did not break any arms, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It wasn’t, but I’m relieved to hear it.”

“We can’t all be Billies,” she quipped.

He felt his chin draw back and he turned to her, certain he’d misheard. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” she said, giving her head a little shake that said it wasn’t what she was talking about. “I was being silly. And no, I did not play outside a great deal. Not like you, at least. I much preferred to sit inside and read.”

“Poetry? Prose?”

“Anything I could get my hands on. Thomas liked to call me a bookworm.”

“More of a book dragon, I should think.”

She laughed. “Why would you say that?”

nd “You are far too fierce to be a lowly worm.”

Her eyes flicked up to the ceiling and she looked vaguely embarrassed. And perhaps a little proud as well. “I am quite sure you are the only person by this, who has ever judged me to be fierce.”

“You crossed an ocean to save your brother. That seems the very definition of fierceness to me.”

nd “Perhaps.” But the spark had left her voice.

He regarded her curiously. “Why so somber all of a sudden?”

1 of “Just that . . .” She thought for a moment and sighed. “When I made Liverpool—that was where I sailed from—I don’t know that it was my brother for Thomas that spurred me into action.”

He Edward walked to the bed and sat down on the edge, offering his silent support.

her. He “I think . . . I think it was desperation.” She tipped her face toward him. He knew he would be forever haunted by the look in her eyes. It was not pieces sorrow, nor was it fear. It was something much worse—resignation, as she’d looked within herself and found something hollow. “I felt very afraid she admitted. “And scared. I don’t know if . . .”

for a She did not finish her sentence right away. Edward held still, allowing a silence to be his encouragement.

riser, “I don’t know if I would have come if I had not felt so alone,” she finished. “I’d like to think that I was thinking only of Thomas, and how he needed my help, but I wonder if *I* needed to leave even more.”

“There is no shame in that.”

She looked up. “Isn’t there?”

rd. “No,” he said fervently, taking hold of both her hands. “You are brave, you have a true and beautiful heart. There is no shame in having fears and worries.”

But her eyes would not meet his.

worth deal. “And you are not alone,” he vowed. “I promise. You will never be a deal. He waited for her to say something, to acknowledge the depth of his statement, but she did not. He could see that she was working to regain composure. Her breathing slowly took on a more regular tenor, and she delicately pulled one of her hands from his to wipe away the moisture that clung to her lashes.

Then she said, "I would like to get dressed."

It was clearly a request for him to leave.

"Of course," he said, trying to ignore the pang of disappointment that bounced against his heart.

She gave a little nod and murmured her gratitude as he stood and watched her go through the door.

"Edward," she called out.

He turned, a ridiculous flare of hope rising within him.

"Your boots," she reminded him.

He looked down. He was still in his socked feet. He gave a curt nod, not that that would camouflage the deep flush racing up his neck—and he grabbed his boots before heading out into the hall.

He could put on the damned things on the stairs.

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Chapter 10

An uneventful life sounds marvelous just now. Our date of departure looms, and I do not look forward to the crossing. Do you know that it will take at least five weeks to reach North America? I'm told the journey is shorter coming home—the wind blows predominantly west to east and thus pushes the ships along. This is small comfort, though. We are not given an anticipated date of return.

Edward bids me to say hello and not to tell you that he is a miserable sailor.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA

By the time Cecilia found Edward in the main dining room of the Devil's Head, he was eating breakfast. And wearing his boots.

“Oh, do not rise,” she said, when he pushed his chair back to stand. “Please.”

He went still for the barest of moments, then gave a nod. It cost him a great deal to realize, to forsake his manners as a gentleman. But he was ill. Mendicant ill. Surely he had the right to conserve his energy wherever possible.

And she had a duty to make sure that he did. It was her debt to pay. He might not realize that she owed it, but she did. She was taking advantage of his good nature and his good name. The very least she could do was to preserve his good health.

She sat across from him, pleased to see that he seemed to be eating more than he had the day before. She was convinced that his lingering weakness was due less to his head injury than it was to his not having eaten for a

Goal for today: Make sure that Edward ate properly.

Certainly easier than the previous day's goal, which was to stop lying

much.

“Are you enjoying your meal?” she asked politely. She did not know well enough to know his moods, but he’d left their room in a strange way without even having put on his boots. Granted, she’d told him she wished to get dressed—which she supposed implied that she hoped for privacy—surely that had not been an unreasonable request.

He folded the newspaper he’d been perusing, pushed a plate of baked eggs toward her, and said, “It’s quite good, thank you.”

“Is there tea?” Cecilia asked hopefully.

“Not this morning, I’m afraid. But”—he tilted his head toward a pie paper near his plate—“we did receive an invitation.”

It took Cecilia a few moments to understand what should have been a simple statement. “An invitation?” she echoed. “To what?”

And more to the point, from whom? As far as she was aware, the only people who knew she and Edward were married were a few army officers, a doctor, and the man who swept the floor in the church-hospital.

Or rather, they were the only people who *thought* they knew.

She tried to feign a smile. Her web was growing more tangled by the moment.

“Are you unwell?” Edward asked.

“No,” she said, her voice emerging too suddenly from her throat. “I’m not. Why do you ask?”

“You have a very odd expression on your face,” he explained.

She cleared her throat. “Just hungry, I expect.” Dear heavens, she was a terrible liar.

“It is from Governor Tryon,” Edward said, sliding the invitation across the table. “He is hosting a ball.”

“A ball. Now?” Cecilia shook her head in wonder. The lady at the ball had said that there was still a bustling social scene in New York, but it seemed bizarre, what with battles being fought so close by.

“His daughter turns eighteen. I’m told he refused to allow the occasion to go unmarked.”

Cecilia picked up the vellum—good heavens, where did one get vellum in New York?—and finally took the time to read the words. Sure enough, Captain the Honorable and Mrs. Rokesby had been invited to a celebration for three days’ time.

She said the first thing that came into her mind: “I have nothing to w

Edward shrugged. "We'll find something."

She rolled her eyes. He was *such* a man. "In three days?"

"There is no shortage of seamstresses in need of coin."

"Which I don't have."

He looked up at her as if a small chunk of her brain had just flown out of her ear. "But I do. And hence, so do you."

There was no way Cecilia could argue with that, no matter how much it made her feel inside, so instead she mumbled, "You'd think they might have given us more notice."

Edward's head tipped thoughtfully to the side. "I imagine the invitation went out some time ago. I've only recently come back from the mission."

"Of course," she said hastily. Oh dear heavens, what was she to do about *this*? She could not go to a ball hosted by the Royal Governor of New York if she had told herself that the only reason she could get away with this cover story was because no one would ever know.

She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. No one but the governor's wife, and every other leading Loyalist in the city.

Who might eventually return to England.
Where they might see Edward's family.
And ask them about his bride.

Good God.

"What is it?" Edward asked.

She looked up.

"You're frowning."

"Am I?" She was frankly surprised she had not burst into hysterical laughter.

He gave no reply in the affirmative, but his overly patient expression said quite clearly: *Yes, you are.*

Cecilia traced the elegant script of the invitation with her finger. "You don't find it surprising that I am included on the invitation?"

One of his hands flipped over in a what-on-earth-are-you-talking-about motion. "You are my wife."

"Yes, but how would the governor know?"

Edward cut a small piece of his slab of bacon. "I expect he's known you for some time."

She stared at him blankly.

He stared right back. "Is there any reason I wouldn't have told him you were my wife?"

married?”

“You know the governor?” she said, really wishing her voice had not squeaked on the third-to-last syllable.

He popped his bacon into his mouth and chewed before answering, “Your mother is friends with his wife.”

“Your mother,” she repeated dumbly.

“I believe they made their bows in London together,” he said. He frowned for a moment. “She was an extraordinary heiress.”

“Your mother?”

“Mrs. Tryon.”

“Oh.”

“My mother as well, actually, but nothing so close to Aunt Margaret York. Cecilia froze. “Aunt . . . Margaret?”

He made a little wave with his hand, as if *that* would reassure her. “I’m your godmother.”

Cecilia realized that she had been holding a serving spoon full of egg for several seconds. Her wrist wobbled, and the yellow lump plopped onto her plate.

“The governor’s wife is your godmother?” she eked out.

He nodded. “My sister’s as well. She’s not really our aunt, but we’ve called her that for as long as I can remember.”

Cecilia’s head bobbed in something resembling a nod, and although she realized that her lips were somewhat ajar, she could not seem to close them.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, clueless man that he was.

She took a moment to piece a sentence together. “You did not think me that your godmother is married to the Royal Governor of New York?”

“It did not really come up in conversation.”

“Good God.” Cecilia sank back into her chair. That tangled web of lies was growing more wretchedly complex by the second. And if there was anything she was certain of, she could not go to that ball and meet Edward’s godmother. A godmother knew things. She would know, for example, if Edward had been “almost” engaged, and not to Cecilia.

She might even know the fiancée. And she would certainly want to know why Edward had forfeited an alliance with the Bridgerton family to marry nobody like Cecilia.

“The governor,” Cecilia repeated, just barely resisting the urge to let her head fall in her hands.

“He’s just a man,” Edward said unhelpfully.

“Says the son of an earl.”

“What a snob you are,” he said with a good-natured chuckle.

“My She drew back in affront. She was not perfect, and these days she was even honest, but she was not a snob. “What do you mean by that?”

“Holding his position against him,” he said with a continued grin.

owned “I’m *not*. Good heavens, no. It’s quite the opposite. I’m holding my position against *me*.”

He reached for more food. “Don’t be silly.”

“I’m a nobody.”

“That,” Edward said firmly, “is categorically untrue.”

.” “Edward . . .”

“You’re my wife.”

She is *That* was categorically untrue. Cecilia had to slap a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. Or crying.

gs aloft Or both.

onto “Even if we were not married, you would be a cherished guest at the festivities.”

e “As the governor would have no knowledge of my existence, I would *be* invited to the festivities.”

she “I expect he would know who you are. He’s fiendishly good with names and I’m sure at some point Thomas mentioned that he had a sister.”

them. Cecilia nearly choked on her eggs. “Thomas knows the governor?”

to tell “Of course,” Cecilia said. Because . . . of course.

k?” She had to put a stop to this. It was spiraling out of control. It was . . . was . . .

ners? It “Actually,” Edward mused, “he might be of help.”

is one “I beg your pardon?”

l’s “I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.” He looked up, his brow coming together over his blue, blue eyes. “We should apply to Governor Tryon for help in locating Thomas.”

that know “Do you think he will know anything?”

arry a “Almost assuredly not, but he knows how to apply pressure on the common people.”

t her Cecilia swallowed, trying to hold back tears of frustration. There it was again. That simple, inescapable truth. When it came to the search for h

brother, all that really mattered was that one knew the correct people.

Her unease must have shown on her face, because Edward reached out and gave her hand a reassuring pat. "You should not feel uncomfortable," he told her. "You are a gentleman's daughter and now the daughter-in-law of the Earl of Manston. You have every right to attend that ball."

"It's not that," Cecilia said, although it was, a little. She had no experience hobnobbing with high-ranking officials. Then again, she had no experience hobnobbing with sons of earls either, but she seemed to be fake-married to one.

"Can you dance?" Edward asked.

"Of course I can dance," she practically snapped.

"Then you'll be fine."

She stared at him. "You have no clue, do you?"

He sat back in his chair, his left cheek bulging out as he pressed his hand against the inside of it. He did that a fair bit, she realized. She wasn't quite sure yet what it meant.

"There are a lot of things about which I have no clue," he said in a voice that was far too patient to ever be mistaken for benign. "The events of the last three months, for example. How I came to have a lump the size of a roe egg on my head. How I came to be married to *you*."

Cecilia stopped breathing.

"But what I *do* know," he went on, "is that it will give me great pleasure to buy you a pretty gown and attend a frivolous entertainment with you on my arm." He leaned forward, his eyes glittering with a strange, indecipherable ferocity. "It will be blessedly, inoffensively normal. Do you have any idea how much I crave the blessed, the inoffensive, and the normal?"

Cecilia didn't say a word.

"I thought not," he murmured. "So let's buy you a dress, shall we?"

She nodded. What else could she do?

How

As it turned out, it was not so easy to have an evening gown made for a woman in three days. One seamstress actually wept when she heard the amount of money Edward was willing to spend. She couldn't do it, she tearfully told him. Not without forty more pairs of hands.

"Will you take her measurements?" Edward asked.

"To what purpose?" an exasperated Cecilia demanded.

"Humor me," he said, and then he deposited her back at the Devil's

while he paid a call upon his godmother. She had always enjoyed pretty
out and things, for both herself and her daughter, and Edward was quite certain
he told she could be persuaded to share.

the The governor and Mrs. Tryon lived with their daughter in a rented house
the edge of the town and had done—with the exception of a visit back
experience England—since the governor’s mansion had burned to the ground in 1
ence Edward had not been in New York at the time, but he’d heard all about
d to from his mother, who had heard all about it from Margaret Tryon. The
lost everything they owned, and had very nearly lost their daughter too
Margaret—generally called May to differentiate from her mother—had
survived only due to the quick thinking of her governess, who had thrown
from a second-story window into a snowbank.

Edward took a deep breath as the butler admitted him into the hall. His
tongue would have to keep his wits about him. Margaret Tryon was nobody’s
quite and there was no point even trying to pretend he was in hale and hearty
health. Indeed, the first words out of her mouth upon his entry into her
office room were:

the last “You look terrible.”

bin’s “Candid as always, Aunt Margaret,” he said.

She gave him her signature one-shoulder shrug—a throwback from
days among the French, she’d always told him, although he wasn’t sur
sure to when, exactly, she’d been among the French—then presented her cheek
in my kiss, which he dutifully gave.

able She drew back, assessing him with shrewd eyes. “I would be remiss
idea your godmother if I did not point out that your pallor is gray, your eyes
hollow, and you’ve lost at least a stone.”

He took a moment to digest this, then said, “You look lovely.”

This made her smile. “You always were a charming boy.”

Edward declined to point out that he was well into his third decade
He was fairly certain that godmothers were legally permitted to refer to
charges as boys and girls until they toddled off into the grave.

a Margaret rang for tea, then leveled a frank stare in his direction and
e “I am terribly cross with you.”
d

He quirked a brow as he took a seat across from her.

“I have been waiting for you to visit. You returned to New York over
week ago, did you not?”

Head “I spent the first eight or so days unconscious,” he said mildly.

y
i that realized.”

“I would imagine it is responsible for my terrible appearance, as you
ome at termed it.”

to She regarded him for a long moment, then said, “When I next write
773. mama, I shall not offer a detailed description of your countenance. Or
t it not an accurate one.”

y’d “I appreciate that,” Edward said honestly.

. Little “Well,” Margaret said. She tapped her fingers against the arm of her
l something she often did when she was uncomfortable with her own dis
own her of emotion. “How do you feel?”

“Better than yesterday.” Which he supposed was something for which
he be grateful.

fool, His godmother, however, was not satisfied with this answer. “That c
/ mean anything.”

sitting Edward considered the current state of his health. The dull ache in h
had become so constant that he could almost ignore it. Far more troubl
was his lack of stamina. He’d had to pause for what felt like a full min
after climbing the half flight of stairs to his godmother’s front door. It
her even just to catch his breath. He’d needed time just to muster the energ
e make his legs work. And the trip to the dressmaker with Cecilia had le
k for a utterly wrecked. He’d paid the carriage driver double to take the (very)
way from the Devil’s Head to the Tryons’ home, just so he could close
as eyes and not move a muscle for the duration.

s are But Aunt Margaret didn’t need to know any of this. He gave her a li
smile and said, “I’m walking unassisted, so that’s an improvement.”

Her brows rose.

“I’m still exhausted,” he admitted, “and my head hurts. But I’m imp
of life. and I’m alive, so I’m trying not to complain.”

o their She nodded slowly. “Very stoic of you. I approve.”

But before he could do so much as nod an acknowledgment, she cha
said, “Ithe subject by saying, “You did not tell me you’d got married.”

“I told very few people.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Define very few.”

er a “Well, about that . . .” Edward exhaled as he tried to figure out how
explain his current situation to one of the few people in North America
had known him before his arrival on the continent. Also the only perso

ad not knew his mother, which was probably a far more pertinent fact.

1 so Margaret Tryon waited with ten seconds of overt patience, then said it.”

Edward cracked a smile at that. His godmother was well-known for to your frank speech. “I seem to have lost a bit of my memory.”

at least Her lips parted, and she actually leaned forward. Edward would have congratulated himself on having cracked her unflappable veneer if his injury weren’t the unfortunate cause of the fissure.

chair, “Fascinating,” she said, eyes shining with what could only be described as academic interest. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Well, no, I beg your pardon, of course I’ve heard of it. But it’s always been one of those tales in which someone knows someone else who thought they heard that another person once said they met someone . . . You know what I mean.”

could Edward stared at her for a moment and made the only possible reply “Indeed.”

is head “How much have you forgotten?”

esome “About three or four months, to the best of my calculations. It’s difficult to say. He said with a shrug, “because I cannot quite pinpoint the last thing I remember.”

ly to Margaret sat back. “Fascinating,” she said again.

ft him “Less so when it’s one’s own memory that has flown the coop.”

) long “I’m sure. Forgive me. But you must confess, if this were someone else’s memory, you would be fascinated.”

ght Edward wasn’t so sure about that, but he well believed that she did. His godmother had always been interested in the scholarly and the scientific. At the point that others often criticized her as having an unfeminine mind. Predictably, Aunt Margaret had taken that as a compliment.

roving, “Tell me,” she said, her voice softening slightly. “What can I do to help?”
“About my memory? Nothing, I’m afraid. About my wife? She needs a new dress.”

inged “For the ball? Of course she does. She can have one of mine. Or Margaret added. “You’ll have to get it altered, of course, but you’ve blurted it out to pay for that.”

best to was hoping you might offer.”

1 who Margaret waved her hand. “It’s nothing. But tell me, do I know this person?”

n who “No, but I believe you’ve met her brother, Thomas Harcourt.”

“I don’t recall the name,” she said with a frown.

“Spit” “He would have come to dinner with me. Late last year, I think.”

her “Your friend with the blondish hair? Oh, right. Pleasant enough fellow
Convinced you to marry his sister, did he?”

e “So I’m told.”

own Edward regretted his words the moment they left his mouth. Aunt
Margaret was on them like a bloodhound.

bed as “So you’re *told*? What the devil does that mean?”

ur “Forget I said anything,” Edward said. She would not, of course, but
had to try.

es— “You will explain yourself right now, Edward Rokesby, or I swear I
son write to your mother and make you sound *worse*.”

Edward scrubbed at his forehead. This was all he needed. Margaret
never go through with that threat; she had far too much love for his mother
worry her needlessly. But nor would she let him out of her house until
answered her questions to her satisfaction. And given his current lack of
energy, if it came down to a physical altercation, she would probably win.

icult,” He sighed. “Do you recall those months I mentioned? The ones I do
quite remember?”

“Are you telling me you don’t remember marrying her?”

Edward opened his mouth, but then it just hung there. He couldn’t quite
bring himself to reply.

else, “Good God, my boy, were there any witnesses?”

His Again, he had no answer.

ic, to “Are you sure you’re even married to her?”

For this, he was resolute. “Yes.”

She threw her arms in the air, a most out-of-character display of
exasperation. “How?”

elp?” “Because I know her.”

ls a “Do you?”

y’s,” Edward’s fingers bit into the edge of his chair. Something hot and angry
slithered through his veins, and it was a struggle to keep his voice clipped
rough even. “What do you imply, Aunt?”

hat I “Have you seen a document? Have you consummated the marriage?”

girl?” “That is hardly your business.”

“You are my business, and you have been since the day I stood next
mother in Canterbury Cathedral and promised to guide you through your

Christian life. Or did you forget that?"

"I confess my memory of that day is indistinct."

ow. "Edward!"

If she had lost patience with him, then he was surely coming close to the same with her. But he kept his voice carefully regulated when he said, "I must beg of you not to call into question my wife's honor and honesty."

Margaret's eyes narrowed. "What has she done? She seduced you, didn't she? You're under her spell."

t he "Stop," Edward bit off, rising unsteadily to his feet. "Damn it," he growled as he grabbed the edge of the table for balance.

shall "Dear God, you're worse than I thought," Margaret said. She hurried to the side and practically shoved him back in the chair. "That's it. You're stuck with me."

other to For a moment Edward was tempted to agree. They would certainly be more comfortable here than at the Devil's Head. But at least at the inn he had privacy. They might be surrounded by strangers, but they were strangers who didn't much care what they did. Here at the Tryons' house, his every move—and more critically, Cecilia's—would be scrutinized, dissected, and then sent home to his mother in a weekly report.

No, he did not wish to move in with his godmother.

uite "I am quite comfortable in my current lodgings," he said to her. "I do appreciate your invitation."

Margaret scowled, clearly displeased with his behavior. "Will you please tell me to ask you one question?"

He nodded.

"How do you know?"

He waited for her to elucidate, and when she did not, he said, "How do you know what?"

"How do you know that she tells you the truth?"

He did not even have to think about it. "Because I know *her*."

ngry And he did. He may have only known her face for a few days, but he had known her heart for far longer. He did not doubt her. He could never deny her.

"My God," Margaret breathed. "You love her."

Edward said nothing. He could not contradict her.

to your "Very well," she said with a sigh. "Can you make it up the stairs?"

ur He stared at her. What on earth was she talking about?

“You still need a dress, don’t you? I don’t know the first thing about
will suit the new Mrs. Rokesby, and I’d rather not order the maids to e
the wardrobes into my sitting room.”

o doing “Ah, yes, of course. And yes, I can make it up the stairs.”

aid, “I Still, he was grateful for the bannister.

.”

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“You still need a dress, don’t you? I don’t know the first thing about what will suit the new Mrs. Rokesby, and I’d rather not order the maids to empty the wardrobes into my sitting room.”

“Ah, yes, of course. And yes, I can make it up the stairs.”
Still, he was grateful for the bannister.

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Chapter 11

Poor Lieu Captain Rokesby! I hope the crossing was not dreadful as you feared. At least your recent promotion will be some comfort. How proud I am that you were both made captains

We are all well here in the village. I attended the local assembly three nights ago, and per usual there were two ladies for every gentleman. I danced but twice. And the second time was with the vicar, so I do not think that counts.

Your poor sister shall be a spinster!

Ha, but do not worry. I am perfectly content. Or at the very least imperfectly content. Is that such a thing? I think it should be.

—FROM CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS

And so it was that on the afternoon of the governor's ball, Edward laid a large box upon the bed that he shared—but did not truly share—with his wife.

“Did you buy something?” she asked.

“Open it and see.”

She gave him a slightly suspicious look as she perched on the edge of the mattress. “What is it?”

“Am I not allowed to bestow a present upon my wife?”

Cecilia looked down at the box, wrapped rather festively with a wide ribbon, and then back up at him. “I wasn't expecting a gift,” she said.

“All the more reason to give you one.” He nudged the box a couple inches closer. “Open it.”

Her slim hands went to the ribbon, tugging the knot loose before lifting the lid of the box.

She gasped.

He grinned. It was a *good* gasp.

“Do you like it?” he asked, even though it was plain that she did.

Lips still parted with shock, she reached out to touch the whisper-soft that lay nestled in the dressmaker’s box. It was the color of a shallow sea, a hair too blue to match her eyes. But when Edward had seen it in May Tryon’s wardrobe, he had known it was the right gown to take to the seamstress for alterations.

He wasn’t sure if May Tryon yet knew that she’d made a gift of her gown; she’d not been home when her mother had thrown open her wardrobe doors. Edward made a mental note to thank her for her generosity before he had a chance to discover it by accident. And besides, if he knew the Tryon May would be wearing something new, spectacular, and wildly expensive, she would not begrudge Cecilia her remade dress.

“Where did you get it?” Cecilia asked.

“I have my secrets.”

Amazingly, she did not pursue the question. Instead she pulled the gown from the box, rising to her feet so that she could hold it in front of her. “You shall have no looking glass,” she said, still sounding rather dazed.

“You shall have to trust my eyes, then,” he said. “You are radiant.”

In truth, Edward did not know much of ladies’ fashion. Aunt Margaret warned him that his chosen gown was not quite *au courant*, but to him it seemed as fine as anything he had ever beheld in a London ballroom.

But then again, it had been several years since he had *seen* a London ballroom, and he rather suspected that for Margaret Tryon, fashion was measured in months, not years.

“It’s got two parts,” he said helpfully. “The, ehm, inside and the outside.”

“Petticoat and robe,” Cecilia whispered. “And a stomacher. Three parts, actually.”

He cleared his throat. “Of course.”

She touched a reverent hand to the silver embroidery, which ran in stripes up and down the length of the skirt. “I know that I should say it’s too fine,” she murmured.

“Absolutely you should not say that.”

“I’ve never owned anything so beautiful.”

That, Edward thought, was a tragedy of epic proportions, but he sensed that saying so might be laying it on a bit too thick.

She looked up, her eyes snapping to his with an abruptness that sign

sudden clarity of thought. “I thought we weren’t going to the governor ball.”

ft silk “Why would you think that?”

ea, just Her lips came together in a fetching purse. “Because I had nothing to wear.”

He smiled, because she so clearly realized the absurdity of her words they passed over her lips.

silk She sighed. “I must be terribly vain.”

’drobe “Because you like pretty things?” He leaned down, settling his mouth dangerously close to her ear. “What does that say about me, then? That you want to see pretty things on you?”

ive. Or off her. Dear God, when he’d watched the dressmaker package the gown into its box, he could not help but keep a close eye on the fastenings. This would not be the night that he finally made love to his wife, of that he was sadly certain. He was still too weak, and far too vain to risk doing his own job of it.

“We But he wanted her all the same. And he vowed that one day he would take this dress from her body, unwrapping her like his present. He would lay down on the bed, part her legs, and . . .

ret had “Edward?”

it He blinked. When she came into focus, she looked somewhat concerned.

1 “You’ve gone a bit red,” she said. She touched his forehead with the tip of her hand. “Have you a fever?”

s “It’s been warm today,” he lied. “Don’t you think?”

“No, not really.”

t.” “You’re not wearing a woolen coat.” He unbuttoned his scarlet jacket and shrugged it off. “I’m sure I’ll feel better if I sit down next to the window.”

She watched him curiously, still holding the pale green dress in front of her. When he was settled in the chair, she asked, “Don’t you want to open the window?”

wirls Without a word, he leaned over and pushed it open.

ine,” “Are you sure you’re all right?”

sed “Fine,” he assured her. He felt like a fool. He probably looked like a fool too, but it was worth it to see her face when she looked at the pale green gown.

aled a “It really is beautiful,” she said, gazing down at it with an expression that was almost . . .

's Rueful?
 No, that could not be right.
 "Is something wrong?" he asked.

o "No," she said absently, her attention still on the gown. "No." She b
 then looked him square in the face. "No, of course not. I just . . . Ehrm
 s as to . . ."

He watched her for a moment, wondering what on earth could be
 responsible for her abrupt change of countenance. "Cecilia?"

th "I need to get something," she said. But it sounded more like an
 t I like announcement.

"All right," he said slowly.

ne She grabbed her reticule and hurried to the door, pausing with her fi
 ings. on the handle. "I'll only be a moment. Or a few moments. But not long
 at he "I will be here when you return," he said.

a bad She gave him a little nod, cast a longing glance at the gown that now
 on the bed, and dashed from the room.

d peel Edward stared at the door for a moment, trying to make sense of wh
 y her just happened. His father had always told him that women were a myst
 Maybe Cecilia thought she had to buy him a gift since he'd got one for
 Silly girl. She should know better.

med. Still, he could not help but wonder what she'd pick out.

e back He got up from his chair, adjusted the window so it wasn't quite so
 open, and settled down atop the bed. He didn't mean to fall asleep, but
 he did . . .

He had a silly smile on his face.

et and
 w." *Oh please oh please oh please.*

t of Cecilia hurried down the street, praying with every ounce of her sou
 pen the the fruit cart was still at the corner of Broad Street and Pearl, where sh
 seen it that morning.

She'd thought the matter of the governor's ball had been settled two
 ago when they'd not been able to find a seamstress who could fashion
 i fool in time. If she didn't have a dress, she couldn't go. It was as simple as
 n Then the blasted man had to go and find her the most beautiful gown
 history of gowns, and dear God she wanted to weep at the injustice of
 n that because she *really* wanted to wear that dress.

But she couldn't go to the governor's ball. She flat-out simply could

There would be too many people. There was no way she could contain to its current small circle if she was actually presented to New York so

Cecilia bit her lip. There was only one thing she could do that would linked, guarantee she would not have to attend the governor's ball. It would be , I needawful, but she was desperate.

So desperate she was willing to eat a strawberry.

She knew what would happen. It wouldn't be pretty. First her skin would go blotchy. So blotchy that the port master would likely call for a pox quarantine if he saw her. And it would itch like the devil. She still had scars on her arms from the last time she'd accidentally eaten a strawberry. She'd scratched until she bled. She couldn't help herself.

Then her stomach would revolt. And as she'd eaten a full meal right Edward had arrived with the dress, the revolt would be of epic proportions."

For about twenty-four hours she'd be misery personified. A swollen vomituous mess. And then she'd be fine. Maybe a little woozy for a few but she'd recover. But if Edward had ever thought her attractive . . .

Well. She'd cure him of that.

She hurried around the corner onto Pearl Street, her eyes searching the length of the street. The fruit cart was still there.

Oh, thank God. Cecilia practically ran the last few yards, skidding to a stop in front of Mr. Hopchurch's cart.

Goal for today: Poison herself.

Good God.

"A fine afternoon to you," he said. Cecilia decided her eyes must not look as crazed as she felt, because he did not back away in fear. "What do I get you?"

She looked over his wares. It was nearing the end of his sales day, so he didn't have much. A few skinny courgettes, several ears of the sweet corn that grew so well here. And over in the corner, the biggest, fattest, most hideously red strawberry she'd ever seen. She wondered at its presence so late in the day. Had all his other customers sensed what she already had? That the speckled, pocked-up, inverted red pyramid was nothing but a bomb of misery and despair?

She swallowed. She could do this. "That's a very large strawberry," she said, eyeing it with queasy distaste. Her stomach heaved just at the thought of it.

"I know!" Mr. Hopchurch said with great excitement. "Have you ever

her lie one so grand? My wife was right proud of it.”

ciety. “I’ll take it, please,” Cecilia said, practically choking on the words.

l “You can’t take just one,” Mr. Hopchurch said. “I sell them by the h
e dozen.”

That might explain why he had not sold it. She gave him a pathetic r
“Six, then.”

ould He reached out and took hold of the big one by its leafy green crown
you have a basket?”

two She looked down at her hands. What an idiot she was. She hadn’t th

rry. “Never mind,” she said. She didn’t need six. Not with one the size of
Colossus. “I’ll pay you for six,” she told him, “but I only need the one.

before Mr. Hopchurch looked at her as if she were right crazy, but he was f
ions. sensible to argue. He took her money and dropped the giant berry into
, itchy, hands. “Fresh from the garden. Be sure to come back and tell me how
7 days, like it.”

Cecilia was quite certain he would not like it if she did, but she nodd
nonetheless, thanking him before making her way to a quiet spot aroun
he corner.

Dear God, now she had to eat it.

o a halt She wondered if this was how Shakespeare’s Juliet felt, right before
took her wicked brew. The body rebelled against ingesting something
to be poisonous. And her body knew quite well that this strawberry wa
two shades short of hemlock.

t have Leaning against a building for support, she lifted the red berry and h
at can near her face. And then, against the protests of her stomach, her nose, a
honestly, every last part of her body, she took a bite.

o he
orn By seven that night, Cecilia wanted to die.

it Edward knew this because she said quite clearly: “I want to die.”

e here, “No, you don’t,” he said with more pragmatism than he felt. Logical
knew? knew that she would be fine, that this was probably a case of bad fish a
little supper—although he’d eaten what she’d eaten, and he was fine.

she she had left was some pinkish-yellowish bile. Even worse, her skin wa
ught of beginning to rise with thick red welts.

“I think we should get a doctor,” he said.

er seen “No,” she moaned. “Don’t go.”

He shook his head. "You're too ill."

alf She grabbed his hand with enough strength to startle him. "I don't n
doctor."

"Yes," he said, "you do."

nod. "No." She shook her head, then moaned.

"What?"

1. "Do She closed her eyes and lay very still. "It made me dizzy," she whis
"Can't shake my head."

ought. Now she had vertigo? "Cecilia, I really think—"

"It was something I ate," she cut in weakly. "I'm quite sure."

." He frowned. He'd thought the same, but she was getting worse by th
ar too second. "Did you have the fish at supper?"

her "Aaaahhh!" She threw her arm over her eyes, even though as far he
you tell they were still closed. "Don't say that word!"

"Fish?"

led "Stop!"

id the "What?"

"Don't mention food," she mumbled.

she He thought about this. Maybe it *was* something she ate. He watched
it knew her arms at her sides in two perfect sticks. She was lying utterly still atop the bedclo
is just frock she'd had on earlier, although he supposed they were going to ha
get it cleaned. He didn't think she'd got any bile on it, but she'd been
eld it sweating rather viciously. Come to think of it, he should probably loos
and stays or unfasten her buttons or something to make her more comfortal

"Cecilia?"

She did not move.

"Cecilia?"

"I'm not dead," she told him.

lly, he "No," he said, trying not to smile. "I can see that you're not."

at "I'm just lying very still," she said.

mes all And she was doing an admirable job of it. He could barely see her li
move.

s "If I lie very still," she continued, her voice coming out slightly sing
"it almost feels like I'm not going to . . ."

"Vomit?" he supplied.

"I was going to say die," she said. "I'm fairly certain I'm still going

vomit.”

eed a He had the chamber pot next to her in a flash.

“Not right now,” she went on, reaching blindly out to push it away. soon.”

“When I least expect it?”

pered. “No.” She let out a tired exhale. “More likely when *I* least expect it. He tried not to laugh. He sort of succeeded, but he had a feeling she heard him snort. He wasn’t nearly as worried about her as he’d been ju few minutes before. If she maintained her sense of humor, she was pro going to be fine. He wasn’t sure how he knew this, but he’d seen enou; bouts of food poisoning to decide that she was probably right; she’d ea something that had not agreed with her.

could The welts were concerning, though. He was rather glad they did not looking glass. She would not like what she saw.

Gingerly, he sat on the side of the bed, reaching out so that he could her forehead. But when the mattress dipped, Cecilia let out an unholy g One of her arms swung blindly through the air, connecting with his thi

“Ow!”

for a “Sorry.”

thes, “No, you’re not,” he said with a smile.

nk “Please don’t rock the bed.”

ive to He pried her fingers from his leg. “I thought you didn’t get seasick.” “I don’t.”

en her “If that’s the case, I think you now know how the rest of us feel.”

ble. “I was perfectly happy not knowing.”

“Yes,” he murmured affectionately, “I expect you were.”

She opened one eyelid. “Why does it sound as if you’re enjoying thi

“Oh, I’m certainly not enjoying this. But I have come to agree with ; that you’ve a nasty case of food poisoning. So while I have the utmost sympathy and concern, I am no longer overtly worried for your health.

ps She grunted. Aside from the retching, it was possibly the least ladyli noise he’d heard from her lips.

He found it delightful.

;songy, “Edward?”

“Yes?”

She swallowed. “Do I have spots on my face?”

to “I’m afraid so.”

“They itch.”
“Try not to scratch them,” he said.
“But I know.”
He smiled. It was the most gloriously mundane conversation.
“Shall I get you a cool cloth?”
” “That would be very nice, thank you.”
'd He got up, moving carefully so that the mattress did not shift overm
ist a from the loss of his weight. He found a cloth near the basin, and he dip
bably in the water.
gh “You seem stronger today,” he heard Cecilia say.
iten “I think I am.” He wrung out the cloth and made his way back to her
Strange how that worked. He felt the strongest when he could take care
have a her.
touch “I’m sorry,” she said.
groan. “For what?”
gh. She sighed as he placed the cloth against her forehead. “I know you
wanted to go to your godmother’s party this evening.”
“There will be other parties. Besides, as eager as I am to show you c
would have been exhausting. And then I would have had to watch you
with other men.”
, She looked up at him. “Do you like to dance?”
“Sometimes.”
“Only sometimes?”
He touched her nose. “It depends on my partner.”
She smiled, and for a fleeting moment he thought he saw a tinge of :
in her face. But it was gone so quickly he couldn’t be sure, and when s
s?” spoke, her eyes were tired but clear. “I expect it’s like that with many t
you in life.”
” He touched her cheek, suddenly so grateful for this moment. So grat
ike for *her*. “I expect so,” he murmured.
He looked down. She was already asleep.

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Chapter 12

I am not even able to put my pen to paper without Edward coming over to assure me that had he been at the assembly, he would have been delighted to dance with you. Oh, now he is cross. I think I might have embarrassed him.

Your brother is a menace.

He commandeered my pen! I shall forgive him if only because we have been trapped in this tent for days. It has not stopped raining since 1753, I am convinced.

My dear Miss Harcourt, pray forgive your brother. I fear the humidity has addled his brain. The rain is unrelenting, but it has brought the gift of wildflowers, quite unlike anything I have ever seen. The field is a carpet of lavender and white, and I cannot help but think you would like it very much.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT (AND EDWARD ROKESBY) TO CECILIA HARCOURT

Cecilia was soon back to her old self, save for a few scabs on her legs she had not been able to keep from scratching. She resumed her search for Thomas, and Edward often accompanied her. He'd found that mild exercise improved his strength, so when the weather wasn't too overbearingly hot, he tucked her arm in the crook of his elbow, and they walked about town, running errands and asking questions.

And falling in love.

She was, at least. She refused to allow herself to wonder if he felt the same way, although it was more than obvious that he enjoyed her company.

And that he wanted her.

He had taken to kissing her good night. And good morning. And sometimes good afternoon. And with each touch, each shared glance, she herself slipping further into a falsehood of her own creation.

But oh, how she wished it were true.

She could be happy with this man. She could be his wife and bear his children, and it would be a *wonderful* life . . .

Except that it was all a lie. And when it fell apart, she wasn't going to be able to escape by swallowing a strawberry.

Goal for today: Stop falling in love.

Never had one of her little goals felt less attainable. And more destined for heartbreak.

There were already small signs that Edward's memory was returning. The morning as he was pulling on his uniform, he turned to Cecilia and said, "I haven't done this for a while."

Cecilia, who had been reading the book of poetry he'd brought with him from home, looked up. "Done what?"

He was silent for a moment before he answered, and he frowned, as if his words were still working out his thoughts. "Put on my uniform."

Cecilia used a ribbon to mark her place and closed the book. "You do this every morning."

"No, before that." He paused and blinked a few times before saying, "I didn't wear a uniform in Connecticut."

She swallowed, trying to set aside her unease. "Are you sure?"

He looked down at himself, smoothing his right hand over the scarlet stripe that marked him as a soldier in His Majesty's Army. "Where did this come from?"

It took her a moment to realize what he was asking. "Your coat? It was hanging in the church."

"But I wasn't wearing it when I was brought in."

This, Cecilia was startled to realize, was a statement, not a question. "I don't know," she said. "I don't think so. I did not think to ask."

"I couldn't have been," Edward decided. "It was far too clean."

"Perhaps someone laundered it for you?"

He shook his head in the negative. "We should ask Colonel Stubbs."

"Of course," Cecilia demurred.

He did not say anything, but Cecilia knew this meant that his mind was whirring double-time, trying to find the outline of a puzzle that was still

missing too many pieces. He stared sightlessly at the window, his hand
he felt tapping against his leg, and Cecilia could only wait until he seemed to
suddenly come alert, turning sharply toward her to say, "I remembered
something else."

is "What?"

"Yesterday, when we were walking along Broad Street. A cat brushed
to be against me."

Cecilia did not speak. If there had been a cat, she hadn't noticed.

"It did that thing cats do," Edward continued, "rubbing its face against
my leg, and I remembered. There was a cat."

"In Connecticut?"

g. One "Yes. I don't know why, but I think . . . I think it kept me company."

d, "I "A cat," she repeated.

He nodded. "It probably doesn't mean anything, but . . ." His voice faded
him off, and his eyes lost their focus again.

"It means you are remembering," Cecilia said softly.

if he It took a moment for him to shake off his faraway expression. "Yes.

"At least it is a happy cat memory," she offered.

lo that He looked at her quizzically.

"You could have remembered that you'd been bitten. Or scratched."
, "I moved off the bed and stood. "Instead you know that an animal kept your
company when you were alone."

Her voice caught, and he took a step toward her.

it wool "It comforts me," she admitted.

ome "That I was not alone?"

She nodded.

was in "I've always liked cats," he said, almost absently.

"Even more so now, I should imagine."

He looked at her with a half smile. "Let us make a summation of what
"I remember. I didn't wear a uniform." He ticked this off on his hand. "There
was a cat."

"Yesterday you said you'd been in a boat," Cecilia reminded him. That
had been out near the river, and the salty tang in the air had jogged loose
' spark of memory. He'd been in a boat, he told her. Not a ship, but something
smaller, something not meant to go far from shore.

was "Although," Cecilia said, giving the matter more thought than she'd
ll the day before, "you'd have to have been in a boat, wouldn't you? How

l would you have got to Manhattan? There's no bridge to this part of the island. And I don't think you swam."

l "True," he murmured.

Cecilia watched him for a moment, then could not help but giggle.

"What is it?" he asked.

ed up "You get this look," she said. "Every time you try to remember something."

st my "Oh really?" He made a look like he was trying to be sardonic, but s knew he was teasing.

"Yes, you go a bit like this—" She drew her brows together and let l eyes go blank. She had a feeling she was not getting it quite right, and a more prickly man might think she was poking fun at him.

He stared at her. "You look unhinged."

trailed "I believe you mean *you* look unhinged." She waved one of her hand her face. "I am your mirror."

He burst out laughing, then reached out and tugged her toward him. "fairly certain I have never seen anything so delightful in the mirror."

Cecilia felt herself smiling, even as warning bells went off in her mi was so easy to be happy with him, so easy to be herself. But this wasn't She life. And she wasn't his wife. It was a role she'd borrowed, and eventu ou she'd have to give it back.

But no matter how hard she tried to keep herself from growing too comfortable in her role as Mrs. Rokesby, it was impossible to resist his He pulled her closer, and then closer still, until his nose rested on hers.

"Have I told you," he said, his voice warmed with joy, "how very ha am that you were at my side when I awakened?"

Her lips parted, and she tried to speak, but every word sat uncomfor her throat. He had not said this, as a matter of fact, at least not so expli at I She shook her head, unable to take her eyes from his, drowning in the here warmth of his bright blue gaze.

"If I had known," he continued, "I'm sure I would have told you not hey come. In fact I am quite sure I would have forbidden it." His mouth tw se a into that wry spot halfway between a grimace and a smile. "Not, I ima ething that that would have swayed you."

"I was not your wife when I boarded the ship," she said quietly. The done died a little when she realized this might be the most honest statement v else would utter all day.

“No,” Edward said, “I suppose you were not.” He cocked his head to the side, and his brow drew together the way she’d been teasing him about his eyes stayed sharp. “Now what?” he asked, when he saw how she was studying him.

“Nothing, just that you were *almost* making the same expression as I. Your brow was the same, but your eyes didn’t glaze over.”

“You make me sound so appealing.”

She laughed. “No, it’s interesting. I think—” She paused, trying to figure out just what she was thinking. “You weren’t trying to remember something from your time, were you?”

He shook his head. “Just pondering the great questions of life.”

“Oh stop. What were you really thinking about?”

“Actually, I was thinking that we need to look into the laws of proxy marriages. We ought to know the exact date of the union, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I am not.” She tried to say yes. She couldn’t quite manage it.

Edward tugged on his cuffs, smoothing out his sleeves so that his coat was smooth on his body. “You went second, so I imagine it was whenever you got the captain to perform your side of the ceremony.”

Cecilia gave a tiny nod—all she could manage with the boulder in her throat.

But Edward did not seem to notice her distress, or if he did, he must not have thought she was just being emotional over the memory of her wedding because he dropped a quick kiss on her lips, straightened, and said, “Thank you. I greet the day, I suppose. I’m meeting with Colonel Stubbs downstairs in a few minutes, and I can’t be late.”

“You’re meeting with Colonel Stubbs, and you did not tell me?”

His nose wrinkled. “Did I not? An oversight, I’m sure.”

Cecilia did not doubt him in this. Edward did not keep secrets from her. He was remarkably open, all things considered, and when he asked for her opinion, he actually listened to her response. She supposed that to some degree he did not have much choice; with such a large hole in his margin, he *had* to rely on her judgment.

Except . . . she could not imagine many other men doing the same. She had always been proud of the fact that her father had left the running of the estate in her hands, but in her heart she knew that he had not done so because she thought her especially capable. He just didn’t want to bother with it himself.

o the “Do you wish to join me?” Edward asked.

t, but “For your meeting with the colonel?” Cecilia’s brows rose. “I cannot
as imagine he will wish to have me there.”

before. mood.” “All the more reason for you to come. I learn far more when he’s in

“In that case, how can I refuse?”

Edward opened the door and stepped aside, waiting for her to precede
figure into the hall.

ig this “It does seem odd that he’s not more forthcoming,” Cecilia said. “Surely
he wants you to recover your memory.”

7 “I don’t think he’s trying to be secretive,” Edward said. He took her
1 they descended the stairs, but unlike the week prior, it was to be a gentle
and not because he needed her physical support. It was remarkable how
he had improved in just a few short days. His head still pained him, and
course there was the memory gap, but his skin had lost the grayish pall
had been so worrying, and if he was not ready for a fifty-mile march, he
at least able to go about his day without needing to take a rest.

at lay Cecilia thought he sometimes still looked tired, but Edward just told
you she was acting like a wife.

er He smiled when he said this, though.

“I think,” Edward said, still on the topic of Colonel Stubbs, “that it is
have job to keep secrets.”

, “But surely not from you.”

ime to “Perhaps,” Edward said with a small shrug. “But consider this: He did
in a know where I was or what I did these last few months. It is almost certain
not in the interest of the British Army to entrust me with secrets just yet.”

“That’s preposterous!”

“I appreciate your unwavering support,” he said, giving her a wry smile.
her. He they reached the ground floor, “but Colonel Stubbs must be assured of
loyalties before revealing his hand.”

e Cecilia was not sold. “I cannot believe he would dare to doubt you,”
tory he muttered. Edward’s honor and honesty were so clearly intrinsic to his nature.
She did not understand how anyone could not see this.

she’d Colonel Stubbs was standing by the door when they entered the dining
house room, his face skewed into its usual scowl. “Rokesby,” he said upon seeing
he’d them, followed by: “Your wife is here too.”

nsf. “She was hungry,” Edward said.

“Of course,” the colonel replied, but his nostrils flared with irritation. Cecilia saw his jaw clench as he led them to a nearby table.

“They make a fine breakfast here,” Cecilia said sweetly.

The colonel stared at her for a moment, then grunted something that have been a response before turning back to Edward.

“Do you bring any news?” Edward asked.

“Do you?”

“I am afraid not, but Cecilia has been most helpful in my quest to re my memory. We have traversed the town many times, searching for cl

Cecilia pasted a placid smile on her face.

Which Colonel Stubbs ignored. “I don’t see how you think to find c here in New York. It’s the time in Connecticut that needs to be examin

“About that,” Edward said mildly, “I was wondering—did I have a uniform?”

“What?” The colonel’s voice was curt and distracted, and he was pa irritated by the abrupt change of subject.

“I had the strangest recollection this morning. It’s probably not even relevant, but as I was donning my coat, it occurred to me that I had not so in quite a long time.”

The colonel just stared at him. “I don’t follow.”

“The coat at the hospital . . . This one, as a matter of fact,” Edward s brushing his hand along his sleeve. “Where did it come from? It’s obvi mine, but I don’t think I had it with me.”

“I held it for you,” Stubbs said gruffly. “Wouldn’t do to be labeled a ainly lobsterback in Connecticut.”

“Are they not loyal to the crown?” Cecilia inquired.

“Rebels are everywhere,” Stubbs said, shooting her an irritated look are sprinkled like salt, and the very devil to excise.”

“Excise?” Cecilia echoed. It was a disturbing choice of words. She h been in New York very long, but even she was able to discern that the political landscape was more complicated than the newspapers at home would have her believe. She was, and always would be, a proud British subject, but she could not help but see that the colonists had some legit grievances.

But before she could say anything further (not that she was intendin she felt Edward’s hand on her leg under the table, its heavy weight cau her not to speak.

1, and “I beg your pardon,” Cecilia murmured, casting her eyes obediently her lap. “I was not familiar with the term.”

It *hurt* to utter such a lie, but there was clearly some benefit in having the colonel think her somewhat less than brilliant. And the last thing she wanted was for him to think that *she* was not loyal to the crown.

“Might I inquire, then,” Edward asked, moving the conversation forward with smooth agility, “if my lack of a uniform in Connecticut means that you see me there as a spy?”

“I wouldn’t say *that*,” the colonel huffed.

“What *would* you say?” Cecilia asked, biting her tongue when Edward’s hand tightened on her thigh again. But it was difficult to keep her mouth shut. The colonel was so aggravating, dropping bits of information here and there, never quite telling Edward what he needed to know.

“I beg your pardon,” she mumbled. Edward had turned to her with a glance, once again warning her not to interfere. She had to stop antagonizing Colonel Stubbs, and not just for Edward’s sake. The colonel knew the way things were done well, and though he had not proved helpful in her search thus far, he might be of some use in the future.

“*Spying* is such an unsavory word,” Colonel Stubbs said, nodding in response to her apology. “Certainly nothing to discuss in front of a lady.”

“A scout, then,” Edward suggested. “Would that be a more accurate description?”

Stubbs grunted in the affirmative.

Edward’s lips pressed into a firm line that was oddly difficult to interpret. He did not look angry, at least not as angry as Cecilia was feeling. Rather, she had the impression that he was sifting through information in his mind, placing it in neat little piles for future reference. He had a very orderly way of looking at the world—a trait that must have made his memory deficit tolerable, if not difficult to bear.

“I realize,” Edward said, steepling his hands in a contemplative motion. “that you are in an extremely delicate position. But if you truly wish for me to remember the events of the last few months, you will need to help me recall them.” He leaned forward. “We are on the same side.”

“I have never doubted your loyalty,” the colonel said.

Edward nodded graciously.

“But nor can I feed you the information I wish to hear.”

“Are you saying you *know* what Edward was doing?” Cecilia cut in.

toward “Cecilia,” Edward said, his voice a soft warning.

Which she ignored. “If you know what he was doing, you must tell me,” she insisted. “It’s cruel of you not to. It could help him regain his memory.”

“Cecilia,” Edward said again, this time with bite.

But she could not keep silent. Ignoring Edward’s warning, she locked eyes with Colonel Stubbs and said, “Surely if you want him to remember what happened in Connecticut, you will tell him everything *you* know.”

The colonel met her stare with his own. “That is all very well and good, Mrs. Rokesby, but have you considered that anything I say could influence your husband’s recollections? I cannot afford to color his memories with information of my own that may or may not be accurate.”

“I—” Some of the fight left Cecilia as she realized the colonel had a point. But still, wasn’t Edward’s peace of mind worth something?

Stern lines formed at the corners of Edward’s mouth. “Allow me to apologize for my wife,” he said.

“No,” Cecilia said. “I will apologize for myself. I am sorry. It is difficult for me to see the situation from your point of view.”

“You want your husband to get well,” Colonel Stubbs said with surprising gentleness.

“I do,” she said fervently. “Even—”

Her heart stopped. Even if it meant her own downfall? She was living on a house of cards, and the moment Edward regained his memory, it was all over. She almost laughed at the bitter irony of it. She’d been arguing nonstop with the colonel, fighting for the one thing that would break her heart.

But she couldn’t help it. She wanted him to get well. She wanted it more than anything. More than—

Her heart stopped. More than finding Thomas?

No. That could not be. Maybe she was just as bad as Colonel Stubbs, withholding facts that could help Edward get his memory back. But Thomas was her brother. Edward would understand.

Or so she kept telling herself.

“Cecilia?”

She heard Edward’s voice, coming to her as if through a long tunnel.

“Darling?” He took her hand, then started to rub it. “Are you all right? Your hands are like ice.”

Slowly she came back to the present, blinking as she took in Edward’s worried face.

“You sounded like you were choking,” he said.

him,” She looked at the colonel, who was also regarding her with worry. “
sorry.” sorry,” she said, realizing that the choking sound must have been a sob
don’t know what came over me.”

ed eyes “It’s quite all right,” Colonel Stubbs said, much to Cecilia’s—and by
hat looks of it, Edward’s—surprise. “You are his wife. It is as God intended
you should put his welfare above all else.”

ood, Cecilia allowed a moment to pass, then asked, “Are you married, Co
ence Stubbs?”

ith “I was,” he said simply, and it was easy to know from his expression
he meant.

point. “I’m sorry,” she murmured.

The normally stoic colonel swallowed, and his eyes flashed with pain
was many years ago,” he said, “but I think of her every day.”

icult Impulsively, Cecilia reached out and covered his hand with hers. “I
she knows,” she said.

The colonel gave a jerky nod, then made some sort of huff and puff
rising noise as he regained his composure. Cecilia took her hand away; their
moment of connection had passed, and anything longer would have been
awkward.

ig in a “I must be going,” Colonel Stubbs said. He looked at Edward. “I hope
ill over know that I do pray for the return of your memory. And not only because
p with may possess information that could be crucial to our cause. I do not know
what it is like to be missing entire months, but I cannot imagine it sits
nore within one’s soul.”

Edward acknowledged this with a nod, and then they both stood.

“For what it’s worth, Captain Rokesby,” the colonel continued, “you
sent to Connecticut to gather information about their ports.”

omas Edward’s brow pulled together. “My cartographical skills are
unremarkable.”

“I don’t think anyone was looking for maps, although that would certainly
be useful.”

.. “Colonel?” Cecilia said, coming to her feet. When he turned to look
it? she asked, “Was Edward meant to investigate something specific? Or was
more of a general fact-gathering excursion?”

l’s “I’m afraid I cannot say.”

So it was something specific. That certainly made more sense.

“Thank you,” she said politely, and she bobbed into a curtsy.

I’m He tipped his hat. “Ma’am, Captain Rokesby.”

o. “I Cecilia watched as Stubbs turned to go, but before he took a step he
back. “Have you any news of your brother, Mrs. Rokesby?”

y the “No,” she said. “Major Wilkins has been most helpful, though. He h
ed that man inspect the records at the hospital for me.”

“And?”

olonel “Nothing, I’m afraid. There was no mention of him.”

The colonel nodded slowly. “If anyone would know how to find him
n what would be Wilkins.”

“We go to Haarlem soon,” Cecilia said.

“Haarlem?” Stubbs looked over at Edward. “Why?”

n. “It “The infirmary,” Edward said. “We know that Thomas was injured.
possible he was brought there.”

m sure “But surely he wouldn’t stay.”

“Someone might know of him,” Cecilia said. “It’s worth looking into
of a “Of course.” Colonel Stubbs nodded again, both at her and at Edward.
wish you good luck with it.”

en Cecilia watched him go, turning to Edward the moment the colonel
to say, “I’m sorry.”

pe you His brows rose.

ise you “I shouldn’t have spoken. It was your place to question him, not mine.”

ow “Do not be concerned,” Edward said. “I was displeased at first, but you
well managed to turn the situation around. I had not realized he was a widow.”

“I do not know what made me inquire,” Cecilia confessed.

Edward gave her a smile and took her hand, patting it reassuringly. “
n were let us sit back down and eat. As you said, they do a fine breakfast here.”

Cecilia allowed him to lead her back to the table. She felt strangely
unmoored. Food would help, she hoped. She’d always been the sort who
needed a proper breakfast to face the day.

rtainly “I must say, though,” Edward mused as he took his seat across from
rather liked having such a staunch champion.”

at her Cecilia looked up sharply at that. *Champion* seemed such an undesired
was it compliment.

“I don’t think you realize just how strong you are,” he said.

She swallowed. “Thank you.”

“Shall we go to Haarlem today?”

“Today?” She snapped to attention. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve been feeling much better. I think I’m up to a journey to the top turned island.”

“Only if you’re certain . . .”

ad his “I’ll arrange for a carriage after breakfast.” He signaled to the innke that they were ready for food, then turned back to her. “Let’s turn our attention to Thomas this morning. Quite honestly, I’m ready to take a l from my own sleuthing. At least for today.”

1, it “Thank you,” she said. “I don’t expect that we will learn anything, b could not live with myself if we did not at least try.”

It’s “I agree. We should—ah! Bacon.” Edward’s entire face lit up when innkeeper set a plate of toast and bacon in the center of the table. It wa longer hot, but that made little difference in the face of his now ferocic appetite.

o.” “Honestly,” Edward said, crunching a piece with a decided lack of t manners, “is this not the finest thing you’ve ever tasted?”

d. “I “The finest?” she asked doubtfully.

exited He waved this off. “It’s bacon. How can anything in the world seem when one is eating bacon?”

“An interesting philosophy.”

ie.” He gave her a cheeky grin. “It’s working for me right now.”

you truly equaled happiness, who was she to argue?

wer.” “You know,” she said with a partially full mouth. (If he could disper with proper table manners, then by heaven, so could she.) “This actual “Come, very good bacon.”

.” “But you feel better, don’t you?”

shaky, Cecilia stopped chewing, tilted her head to the side, and considered no “You’re right,” she had to admit.

Again with the impertinent smile. “I generally am.”

her, “I But as they cheerfully munched through their breakfast, she knew it the bacon that was making her happy, it was the man across the table.

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Chapter 13

I normally wait to receive a letter from you before writing my own, but as it has been several weeks since we last heard from you, Edward insists that we take the initiative and begin a missive. There is little to say, though. It is astonishing how much time I spend sitting about doing nothing. Or marching. But I assume you do not wish for a pageful of contemplations on the art and science of marching.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA

Haarlem was exactly what Edward had expected.

The infirmary was just as rudimentary as Major Wilkins had warned, but thankfully most of the beds were vacant. As it was, Cecilia had been very horrified at the conditions.

It had taken some time to find the man in charge, and then more than a little wheedling to convince him to go through the records, but as Wilkins had predicted, there was no mention of Thomas Harcourt. Cecilia had wondered if perhaps some of the patients had not been logged in, and she couldn't really blame her for asking—the general level of cleanliness could inspire confidence in the infirmary's organization.

But if there was one thing the British Army never seemed to muck up was record-keeping. The list of patients was just about the only thing in the infirmary that was spotless. Each page in the register was organized in precise rows, and each name was accompanied by rank, date of arrival and type of departure, and a brief description of the injury or illness. As a result, they now knew that Private Roger Gunnerly of Cornwall had recovered from an abscess on his left thigh, and Private Henry Withers of Manchester had perished of a gunshot wound to the abdomen.

But of Thomas Harcourt, nothing.

It was a very long day. The roads from New York Town to Haarlem terrible and the carriage they'd procured wasn't much better, but after hearty supper at the Fraunces Tavern, they were both feeling restored. day had been considerably less humid than the one before, and by evening there was a light breeze carrying the salty tang of the sea, so they took long way back to the Devil's Head, walking slowly through the empty streets at the bottom of Manhattan Island. Cecilia had her hand tucked crook of Edward's elbow, and even though they maintained a proper distance from one another, every step seemed to bring them closer.

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If they were not so far from home, if they were not in the middle of it would have been a perfect evening.

They walked in silence along the water, watching the seagulls dive for fish, and then Cecilia said, "I wish—"

But she didn't finish.

"You wish for what?" Edward asked.

It took her a moment to speak, and when she did, it was with a slow shake of her head. "I wish I knew when to give up."

l, but
isibly

He knew what he was supposed to do. If he were playing a role on the stage or starring in a heroic novel, he would tell her that they must never give up, that their hearts must remain true and strong, and they must search for Thomas until every last lead was exhausted.

n a
ins

But he wasn't going to lie to her, and he wasn't going to offer false hope, and so he just said, "I don't know."

As if by silent agreement, they came to a gentle stop and stood side by side, staring out over the water in the fading light of the day.

Edward
lid not

Cecilia was the first to speak. "You think he's dead, don't you?"

"I think . . ." He didn't want to say it, hadn't even wanted to think it, but he thought he is probably dead, yes."

up, it
n the

She nodded, with eyes that were filled with more resignation than sorrow. Edward wondered why that was somehow even more heartbreaking.

"I wonder if it would be easier," she said, "knowing for sure."

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"I don't know. The loss of hope versus the certainty of truth. It's not an easy judgment to make."

max of

"No." She thought about this for a long moment, never taking her eyes from the horizon. Finally, just when Edward thought she must have given up on the conversation, she said, "I think I would rather know."

He nodded even though she wasn't looking at him. "I think I agree."

She turned then. "You only think? You are not certain?"

"No."

"Nor I."

"It has been a disappointing day," he murmured.

"No," she surprised him by saying. "To be disappointed one has to have expected a different outcome."

He looked over at her. He didn't need to ask the question out loud.

"I knew it was unlikely we'd find word of Thomas," she said. "But to try, didn't we?"

He took her hand in his. "We had to try," he agreed. And then something occurred to him. "My head did not hurt today," he said.

Her eyes lit up with joy. "Did it not? That is wonderful. You should have said something."

He scratched his neck absently. "I'm not sure I even realized it until now."

"That is just wonderful," she said. "I'm so happy. I—" She rose onto her tiptoes and laid an impulsive kiss on his cheek. "I'm very happy," she said again. "I don't like seeing you in pain."

He brought her hand to his lips. "I could not bear it if our roles were ever reversed." It was true. The thought of her in pain was like an icy fist around his heart.

She let out a little chuckle. "You made a fine nurse when I was ill last week."

"Yes, but I'd rather not do it again, so do stay healthy, yes?"

She looked down, in an expression that almost seemed shy, and then she shivered.

"Cold?" he asked.

"A little."

"We should go home."

"Home, is it?"

He chuckled at that. "I confess I never thought to live in a place named Devil's Manor."

"Can you imagine," she said, her face starting to light up with a mischievous smile, "a house back in England named Devil's Manor?"

"Lucifer House?"

"Satan's Abbey."

They both dissolved into laughter at that, and Cecilia even glanced up at him.

the sky.

“Watching out for thunderbolts?”

“Either that or a plague of locusts.”

Edward took her arm and nudged her back on the path toward the in
They weren’t far, a few minutes’ walk at most. “We are both relatively
ave people,” he said, leaning in as if imparting a juicy piece of gossip. “I th
are safe from biblical intervention.”

“One can only hope.”

we had “I could probably withstand the locusts,” he mused, “but I cannot be
responsible for my behavior if the river turns to blood.”

thing She snorted out a laugh at that, then countered with “I myself would
avoid boils.”

have “And lice.” He shuddered. “Nasty little bastards, if you pardon my
language.”

now.” She looked over at him. “You’ve had lice?”

o her “Every soldier has had lice,” he told her. “It’s an occupational hazar
said She looked faintly repulsed.

He leaned in with a cheeky expression. “I’m quite clean now.”

ound week.”
“I should hope so. I’ve been sharing a room with you for more than
week.”

st “Speaking of which . . .” he murmured. Neither of them had been pa
much attention, but their feet had found their way back to the Devil’s I

“Home again,” she quipped.

He held the door for her. “Indeed.”

1 she The crowd in the main room seemed more raucous than usual, so he
a hand at the small of her back and gently steered her along the perime
the stairs. He knew he could not hope to find better accommodations tl
this, but still, it was no place for a lady to take up permanent residence
they had been in England, he would never—

ied for apply.
He shook off the thought. They weren’t in England. Normal rules di

Normal. He couldn’t even remember what the word meant. There w
lump on his head that had swallowed three months of his memory, his
friend had disappeared so completely that the army hadn’t even notice
was missing, and at some point in the not-so-distant past he’d married
woman by proxy.

ip at A proxy marriage. Good Lord, his parents would be aghast. And tru

so was he. Edward was not like his devil-may-care younger brother Arthur, flouting rules simply for the fun of it. When it came to the important things in life, he did them properly. He wasn't even certain a proxy marriage would be considered legal back in England.

Which brought him to another point. Something wasn't quite right about this entire situation. Edward wasn't sure what Thomas had said or done to induce him into marriage with Cecilia, but he had a feeling there was more to it than she had told him. There was likely more to it than she knew her father held, but the truth would never be known unless Edward regained his memories. Or they found Thomas.

At this point, Edward wasn't certain which was less likely.
"Edward?"

He blinked, focusing his gaze on Cecilia. She was standing next to the door to their room, a faintly amused smile on her face.

"You had that look again," she said. "Not the remembering one, the thinking terribly hard one."

This did not surprise him. "Thinking terribly hard about almost nothing," he lied, pulling out the key to their room. He did not want to reveal his suspicions to her, not just yet. Edward did not doubt Thomas's reasons for arranging this marriage—his friend was a good man and certainly wanted what was best for his sister—but if she had been persuaded to marry him under false pretenses she would be furious.

Maybe Edward should be trying harder to ferret out the truth, but honestly he had bigger issues to deal with just now, and when it came right down to it, he *liked* being married to Cecilia.

Why on earth would he upset the happy balance they'd achieved?

Unless . . .

There was one reason he'd rock that boat.

He wanted to make love to his wife.

It was time. It *had* to be time. His desire . . . His need . . . They had been threatening to explode from within since the moment he'd seen her.

Maybe it was because he had figured out who she was from her conversation with Colonel Stubbs. Maybe it was because even from his hospital bed he could sense her concern and devotion, but when he opened his eyes and saw her for the first time, her green eyes filled first with worry, then with surprise, he'd felt an incredible rush of lightness, as if the veil of fate, around him was whispering in his ear.

ndrew, *Her.*
ings in *She's the one.*
ould be And weak as he was, he'd wanted her.
 But now . . .
bout He might not have regained his full strength, but he was definitely s
e to enough.
nore to He looked over at her. She was still smiling, watching him as if she
self, delicious little secret, or maybe as if she thought *he* did. Either way, sh
ry. looked terribly amused as she cocked her head to the side and asked, “
 you going to unlock the door?”
 He turned the key in the lock.
 “Still thinking very hard about nothing?” she teased as he opened th
he doorfor her.
 No.
 He wondered if she was aware of the delicate dance they played eve
evening when it was time for bed. Her nervous swallow, his stolen gl
ing,” Her quick grab of their one book, his studious attention to the lint that
or more often had not—gathered on his scarlet coat. Every night Cecil
; for about her business, filling the room with nervous chatter, never quite a
ted until he crawled into the opposite side of the bed and bid her good nigh
im They both knew what his words really meant.
 Not tonight.
nestly, *Not yet.*
n to it, Did she realize that he too was waiting for a signal? A look, a touch
anything to let him know that she was ready.
 Because he was ready. He was more than ready. And he thought . . .
maybe . . . she was too.
 She just didn't know it yet.
 When they entered their small room, Cecilia scurried over to the bas
been the table, which she'd requested the inn fill with water each evening. “
 just going to wash my face,” she said, as if he did not know what she v
doing when she splashed herself with the water, as if she had not done
s same thing every evening.
ned As she performed her ablutions, his hands went to the buttons on his
worry, unfastening each before sitting on the edge of the bed to remove his bc
ry air “I thought supper was quite delicious this evening,” Cecilia said, tos
the quickest of glances over her shoulder before reaching into the warc

for her hairbrush.

“I agree,” he replied. This was part of their duet, steps in the intricate choreography that led to them entering the bed on opposite sides and then ended with him pretending he did not wake up each morning with her strong arms. She was checking to see if he was behaving differently, assessing expression, his movements.

He did not need her to tell him this to know that it was true.

Her eyes were like glass, pale green and luminous, and she hadn’t a Are of hiding her emotions. He could not imagine her ever keeping a secret. Surely it would show on her face, on those full lips that she never quite seemed to keep still. Even when she was quiet there were hints of motion e door her expression. Her brow would draw down, or her lips would part, just enough for a breath to pass through. He did not know if everyone else this in her. He supposed at first glance she might seem serene. But if you ry the time to look at her, to see beyond the oval face and even features that nce. been captured in that second-rate miniature Edward had studied so many had— times . . . that was when you saw it. The tiny bits of motion, dancing in ia went to her thoughts.

Sometimes he wondered if he could watch her forever without being t ease it. bored.

“Edward?”

He blinked. She was seated at the small vanity, regarding him with curiosity.

“You were staring,” she said. She had taken her hair down. It was not . . . as long as he’d thought it might be, back when pieces were falling from pins that day at the hospital. He’d watched her brush it every night, her silently counting the strokes. It was almost mesmerizing how the texture shine seemed to change as she pulled the brush through the strands.

“Edward?”

Again, she’d caught him drifting off. “Sorry,” he said. “My mind keeps I’m was wandering.”

“I’m sure you’re very tired.”

He tried not to read too much into her pronouncement.

“I’m tired,” she said.

There were so many levels to that simple, two-word sentence. The simplest: *It was a very long day. I’m tired.*

But he knew there was more to it than that. Cecilia was always careful

make sure that he was not overtaxing himself, so there was certainly a
e *If I'm tired, then you must be too.*

Then there was the truth. The simplest, most basic core of it all: *If I
in his I'm tired . . . If you think I'm not up to it . . .*

g his "May I?" he murmured, reaching for the brush.

"What?" Her pulse fluttered in her throat. "Oh, there is no need. I am
almost done."

prayer "Just a bit more than half."

t. Confusion painted a wrinkle onto her brow. "I'm sorry?"

e "You've done twenty-eight strokes. You normally do fifty."

ion in Her lips parted with surprise. He could not tear his eyes from them.

st wide "You know how many times I brush my hair each evening?"

saw He gave a little shrug, even as his body tightened at the sight of her
ou tookmoistening a dry spot just to the left of the center of her upper lip. "You
at had creature of habit," he said. "And I'm observant."

ny She set down the hairbrush, as if cutting off her routine might some
1 time change who she was. "I did not realize I was so predictable."

in his hand. "Consistent."

"Con—"

"And before you ask," he interrupted gently, "that is a compliment."

"You don't need to brush my hair."

"Of course I do. You shaved my beard, if you recall. It's the very lea
ot quite can do."

n their "Yes, but I don't—"

r lips "Shhh . . ." he admonished, and then he took the brush and drew it th
re and her already shining and untangled locks.

"Edward, I—"

eps "Twenty-nine," he said before she could complete yet another prote
"Thirty."

He could pinpoint the moment she finally surrendered. Her steel-bac
posture softened, and a soft breath—not quite a sigh—crossed her lips.

To himself he counted *thirty-two, thirty-three, and thirty-four*. "It's
isn't it?"

"Mmmm."

ful to He smiled. *Thirty-five, thirty-six*. He wondered if she'd notice if he
past fifty.

bit of: "Does anyone ever take care of you?" he asked.
She yawned. "That's a silly question."
tell you "I don't think it is. Everyone deserves to be cared for. Some, I imagine
more than others."
n "Thomas does," she finally answered. "Or did. It's been so long since
saw him."
I will, Edward vowed.
"You took great care of me when I was ill," he said.
She turned, just enough so that he could see her puzzled expression.
course."
"Not everyone would have done so," he pointed out.
"I am your . . ."
tongue But she did not finish the sentence.
u're a *Forty-two, forty-three.*
"You are *almost* my wife," he said softly.
ow He could see only the edge of her face, not even a true profile. But he
knew that she had stopped breathing. He felt the instant she went still.
brush "Forty-eight," he murmured. "Forty-nine."
Her hand came over his, held it in place. Was she trying to prolong that
moment? Freeze time so that she did not have to face their inevitable march
' toward intimacy?
ast I She wanted him. He knew that she did. It was there in the soft moan
He felt her desire when her lips moved against his, artless and curious.
He took her hand, still resting atop his, and brought it to his mouth.
hrough "Fifty," he whispered.
She didn't move.
st. On soft, silent feet he made his way around to her side, transferring
fingers from one hand to the other so that he could set the hairbrush back
the small vanity. Again, he brought her fingers to his lips, but this time
eked gave her a gentle tug, urging her to her feet.
"You are so beautiful," he whispered, but the words seemed insufficient
nice, She was so much more than her lovely face, and he wanted to tell her that
but he was not a poet, and he did not know how, especially with the air
between them growing hot and thick with desire.
went He touched her cheek, marveling at the soft silk of her skin beneath
callused fingers. She was looking up at him, her eyes wide, and he could

ine, that she was intensely nervous, far more than he would have expected, how close they had become in the past week. But he'd never been with a virgin; maybe they were all like this.

“This isn't our first kiss,” he reminded her, brushing his mouth gently against hers.

Still, she did not move, but he would swear he could hear her heart pounding. Or maybe he was hearing it *through* her, from her hand to his. From her heart to his.

“Of Was he falling in love with her? He could not imagine what else could make him feel like this, as if his days did not truly begin until he saw her smile.

He *was* falling in love with her. He'd already been halfway there before they had even met, and maybe he'd never remember the events that had led him to this moment, but he would remember *this*. This kiss. This touch.

This night.

ie “Don't be afraid,” he murmured, kissing her again, this time teasing her lips with his tongue.

he “I'm not afraid,” she said, in a voice that was somehow just strange to give him pause. He touched her chin, tipped her face up to his, and searched her eyes for something he could not even define.

It would be so much easier if he knew what he was looking for.

s he “Has someone”—he didn't want to say it—“hurt you?”

nade. She stared at him, uncomprehending, until the moment he took a breath to explain further.

“No,” she said suddenly, understanding his meaning just in time to show him an explanation. “No,” she said again. “I promise.”

her The relief Edward felt hit him like something solid. If someone had raped her, raped her . . . It would not matter to him that she was not a virgin, he would have to spend the rest of his life bringing the cur to justice.

he His heart—nay, his soul—would not allow otherwise.

ient. “I will be gentle,” he promised, his hand lightly tracing the line of her throat to the bare skin at her collarbone. She had not changed from her dress to her nightgown, and so while the fabric was tighter, with meddled buttons and laces, it nevertheless revealed a wider swath of skin, from the curve of her shoulder to the gentle swell of her breasts.

his He kissed her there, right where the lace edging of her bodice met her skin, and she gasped, her body instinctively arching toward him.

given “Edward, I—”
i a He kissed her again, closer to the shadow between her breasts.
 “I don’t know if—”
ly And then at the other side, each kiss a soft benediction, a mere hint of
 passion he was holding tightly in check.
 His fingers found the fastenings at the back of her dress, and he brought
is. mouth back to hers as he slowly set her body free. He’d thought to distract
 her with kisses, but he was the one made stupid by desire, because once his
ild lips parted beneath his, he was utterly consumed.
ier And so was she. What started as something playful quickly burned hot
 until they were both drinking of the other like this might be their only
fore of union. Edward had no idea how he got her dress off without tearing
d led probably the last shred of his rational mind recognized that she had only
i. frocks here in New York, and they needed to keep both of them in working
 order.
her She was wearing a light chemise, knotted loosely at the front, and his
 fingers trembled as they grasped one end of the tie. He pulled it slowly
enough watching as the corresponding loop grew smaller and smaller until it finally
slid through the knot.
 He edged the chemise from her shoulder, his breath quickening as each
inch of her peach-pale skin was exposed.
 “It goes the other way,” she said.
path to “What?” Her voice had been soft; he wasn’t sure he’d got her meaning.
 “The chemise,” she said, her eyes not quite meeting his. “It goes over
save head.”
 His hand went still, and he felt a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.
hurt He’d been trying to be so gentle, so gentlemanly, and here she was offering
but he directions for her disrobement.
 She was delightful. No, she was magnificent, and he could not imagine
er how he’d ever thought his life had been complete before this moment.
day She looked up, her head tilting to the side as she said, “What is it?”
lesome He just shook his head.
the “You’re smiling,” she accused.
 “I am.”
er skin, Now she was smiling too. “Why?”
 “Because you’re perfect.”
 “Edward, no, I—”

She was still shaking her head when he pulled her into his arms. The was mere steps away, but she was his wife, and he was finally going to love to her, and by God he was going to sweep her off her feet and carry her there.

He kissed her again and again, his hands roaming over her body, first through the chemise, and then daring their way underneath the hem. Slowly, everything he'd dreamed, responsive and warm. Then he felt her ankle hooking around his leg, drawing him closer, and it was like the entire world had burst into sunshine. This was no longer him seducing her. She wanted him too. She wanted to pull him closer, to feel him against her, and Edward's heart sang with equal parts joy and satisfaction.

He pulled back, sitting up far enough so that he could tug his shirt only two inches over his head.

"You look different," she said, watching him with passion-glazed eyes. His brows rose.

"The last time I saw you"—she reached up, touched his chest with the tips of her fingers—"was the day you left hospital."

He supposed it was true. She had always turned her back when he was changing his clothes. And he had always watched her, wondering what she was thinking, if she wanted to turn around and take a peek.

"Better, I hope," he murmured.

She gave a little eye roll at that, which he supposed he deserved. He had not yet put on all of the weight he had lost, but he was certainly more firm when he ran his hands over his arms, he could feel his muscles re-forming, slowly clawing their way back to strength.

But he was strong enough for this. He was definitely strong enough for this.

"I didn't think men were supposed to be so beautiful," Cecilia said.

He planted his hands on either side of her shoulders, bracing himself. He could loom over her as he warned, "If you make me blush I shall have to exert my husbandly authority over you."

"Your husbandly authority? What does that entail?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "But I'm fairly certain you promised to be a good wife."

If he hadn't been so focused on her face, he might not have seen the twitch in her jaw. Or the awkward swallow that made a trail down her throat. He almost teased her about it. There was not a woman of his acquaintance at least not one he liked and respected—who actually meant it when she

bed promised to obey her husband.

make He wondered if she'd crossed her fingers when she'd said the words
ry her ship. Or maybe she'd found some way out of saying them altogether, t
vixen. And now she was too embarrassed to admit it.

st "I never expected you to obey me," he murmured, smiling as he wen
ne was for another kiss. "Merely to agree with me in all things."

She shoved him in the shoulder, but all he could do was laugh. Even
world he rolled onto his side and pulled her close, he could not stop the silent
ted that shook through his body and into hers.

ward's Had he ever laughed in bed with a woman? Who knew it would be s
delightful.

ver his "You do make me happy," he said, and then he finally took her advi
pulled the chemise from her body, her arms rising up as he slid it over
res. head.

His breath caught. She was nude now, and although the sheets cover
he tips lower body, her breasts were bare to him. She was the most beautiful t
he'd ever seen, but there was more to it than that. It wasn't just that the
as of her made him dizzy with desire. Or that he was quite certain he had
t she been so hard with need as he was at that moment.

It was *more*. It was deeper.

It was divine.

had He touched one of her breasts, grazing the pretty pink nipple with hi
it, and forefinger. She gasped, and he could not help but let out a growl of ma
ing, pride. He loved that he could make her want him, want *this*. He loved
knowing that she was almost certainly growing wet between her legs, t
for body was coming alive, and *he* was doing it.

"So pretty," he murmured, adjusting their bodies so that she was onc
again on her back, and he was straddling her. But with her chemise goi
f so he position took on a far more erotic air. Her breasts flattened a bit with g
to but the nipples, pink as roses, jutted proudly upward, practically beggi
his touch.

"I could look at you all day," he said.

obey." Her breath quickened.

little "Or maybe not," he said, leaning down to give her right nipple one l
throat. lick. "I don't think I could look and not touch."

nice— "Edward," she gasped.

ie "Or kiss." He moved to the other breast, drawing the tip into his mo

She arched beneath him, a soft shriek escaping her lips as he continued on the sweet torture.

“I can nibble, too,” he murmured, going back to the other side, this time using his teeth.

“Oh my God,” she moaned. “What are you doing? I feel it . . .”

He chuckled. “I hope you feel it.”

“No, I feel it . . .”

He waited for a few seconds, and then, his words laced with wicked mirth he said, “You feel it somewhere else?”

She nodded.

Someday, after they’d made love a hundred times, he’d make her succeed where she felt it. He’d make her say the words that would make his already hard cock turn into something built with steel. But for now, he would be the naughty one. He would use every weapon in his arsenal to make sure that when he finally entered her she was desperate with need.

She would know what it meant to be adored. She would know what it meant to be worshipped. Because he had already realized that his greatest pleasure lay with her finding hers.

He squeezed her breast, his hand molding it into a tiny mountain as he leaned down to place his lips by her ear. “I wonder where you feel it,” he said, grazing her with his teeth. He rolled over onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow as his hand slid from her breast to her hip. “Could it be here?”

Her breath grew louder. “Or maybe”—he slid across her belly, tickling her navel with his fingers—“here?”

Still, she quivered beneath his touch.

“I don’t think that’s the spot,” he said, idly drawing circles on her skin. “I think you were speaking of somewhere a little lower.”

She made a sound. It might have been his name.

He flattened his palm against her abdomen, and with purposeful slowness inched his way down until his fingers met the soft thatch of hair that guarded her womanhood. He felt her grow very still, as if she wasn’t sure what to do and he could only smile as he listened to the frenzied rasps of air over her lips.

Tenderly he parted her, his fingers flicking over her nub until some of the rigidity left her body, and she fell more fully open to him. “Do you like it?” he whispered, even though he knew she did. But when she nodded he

ied his like king of the world. The mere act of pleasuring her seemed to be en
make his heart swell with pride.

ime He continued to tease her, drawing her closer and closer to her peak,
though his own body was crying out for satisfaction. He had not intend
see to her completion first, but once he touched her, felt her body singi
beneath his fingers, he knew what he had to do. He wanted her to fall a
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hat Her eyes opened. “But—”

it He brought a finger to her lips. “Don’t interrupt me.” She was a clever
she obviously knew what happened between a man and a woman, and
rest knew that something much larger than his fingers was meant to find its
inside of her. But clearly no one had told her about all the delicious thi
he bent that could happen along the way.

, “Have you heard of *la petite mort*?” he asked her.

elf up Her eyes clouded with confusion as she shook her head. “The little c
ere?”

“It’s what the French call it. A metaphor, I assure you. I have always
thought it more an affirmation of life.” He leaned down and drew her r
nger into his mouth. “Or perhaps a reason for living.”

And then, with all the wicked promise he felt in his soul, he looked i
her through his lashes and murmured, “Shall I show you?”

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like king of the world. The mere act of pleasuring her seemed to be enough to make his heart swell with pride.

He continued to tease her, drawing her closer and closer to her peak, even though his own body was crying out for satisfaction. He had not intended to see to her completion first, but once he touched her, felt her body singing beneath his fingers, he knew what he had to do. He wanted her to fall apart, to utterly shatter and think there was no greater pleasure.

And then he wanted to show her that there was.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, but he thought the question might be rhetorical. Her eyes were closed, and her head was thrown back, and as her body arched, thrusting those perfect breasts to the sky, he thought he’d never seen anything so lovely and erotic.

“I’m making love to you,” he said.

Her eyes opened. “But—”

He brought a finger to her lips. “Don’t interrupt me.” She was a clever girl; she obviously knew what happened between a man and a woman, and she knew that something much larger than his fingers was meant to find its way inside of her. But clearly no one had told her about all the delicious things that could happen along the way.

“Have you heard of *la petite mort*?” he asked her.

Her eyes clouded with confusion as she shook her head. “The little death?”

“It’s what the French call it. A metaphor, I assure you. I have always thought it more an affirmation of life.” He leaned down and drew her nipple into his mouth. “Or perhaps a reason for living.”

And then, with all the wicked promise he felt in his soul, he looked up at her through his lashes and murmured, “Shall I show you?”

Chapter 14

I miss the days when you were in London and we could write back and forth like a conversation. I suppose we are now at the mercy of the tides. Our letters must cross each other on the ocean. Mrs. Pentwhistle said she thought it was a charming thought, that the little hands had little hands and were waving at each other across the water. I think Mrs. Pentwhistle drank too much of Reverend Pentwhistle's Communion wine.

Please tell Captain Rokesby that the little purple flower pressed arrived in perfect condition. Isn't it remarkable that such a little sprig is strong enough to journey from Massachusetts to Derbyshire? I am sure I will never have the opportunity to thank him in person for it. Please do assure him that I will treasure it always. It is so very special to have a small piece of your world.

—FROM CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS

The little death.

Surely the French had been onto something when they came up with that phrase. Because the tightness that was coiling in Cecilia's body . . . the pulsing, inexorable need for something she did not even understand . . . felt like it was leading toward something she could not possibly survive.

"Edward," she gasped. "I can't . . ."

"You can," he assured her, but it was not his words that sank into her. It was his voice, pressed up against her skin as his wicked lips made lazy, desperate discovery of her breasts.

He had touched her—kissed her—in places she herself had not dared explore. She was bewitched. No, she was awakened. She'd lived twenty years in this body and was only just now learning its purpose.

“Relax,” Edward whispered.

Was he mad? There was nothing relaxing about this, nothing that made her want to relax. She wanted to grab and claw and yes, scream as she fought her way to the edge.

Except she did not know what that edge was, or what might be on the other side.

“Please,” she begged, and it didn’t even seem to matter that she had no idea what she was begging for. Because he did. Dear God, she hoped he would. If he didn’t, she was going to kill him.

With his mouth and his fingers, he brought her to the peak of desire. Then, when her hips rose up, silently begging him for more, he dipped his finger inside of her and flicked his tongue across her breast.

She came apart.

She cried his name as her hips lifted from the bed. Every muscle clenched in unison. It was like a symphony made of only one taut note. Then, as if her body had grown tight as a board, she finally drew breath and collapsed onto the mattress.

Edward withdrew his finger and lay on his side next to her, propped up on his elbow. When she found the energy to open her eyes, she saw that he was smiling like a cat in cream.

“What was that?” she said, her words more breath than voice.

He brushed a damp tendril of hair from her forehead, then leaned forward to kiss her brow. “*La petite mort*,” he murmured.

“Oh.” There was a world of wonder in that single syllable. “That’s your thought.”

This seemed to amuse him, but in that lovely way that made Cecilia smile with pleasure. She was making him smile. She was making him *happy*. Surely when she reached her final reckoning that would count for something.

But they had not yet consummated the marriage.

She closed her eyes. She had to stop thinking that way. There was no marriage. This was not a consummation, it was—

“What’s wrong?”

She looked up. Edward was staring down at her, his eyes so bright a blue, even in the fading light of evening.

“Cecilia?” He did not sound concerned, exactly, but he knew something had changed.

“I’m just . . .” She fought for something to say, something she could

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that would actually be true. And so she said, “. . . overwhelmed.”

He smiled, just a little, but it was enough to change the shape of her face forever. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

She nodded as best as she could. It was a good thing, at least right now. For next week, or next month, when her life would surely fall apart . . .

She would deal with that when she had to.

His knuckles brushed her cheek in a tender caress, and still, he stared at her like he could read her soul. “What are you thinking, I wonder.”

What was she thinking? That she wanted him. That she loved him. That even though she knew this was wrong, it *felt* like they were married, and she just wanted it to be real, if only for this one night.

“Kiss me,” she said, because she needed to take control of the moment. She needed to be *in* this moment, not floating off into the future, into a place where Edward’s smile was no longer hers.

“A little bossy all of a sudden,” he teased.

But she was having none of it. “Kiss me,” she said again, wrapping her hands behind his head. “Now.”

She pulled him down, and when their lips met, her hunger exploded. She kissed him like he was her very air, her food and water. She kissed him everything she felt inside, everything she could never tell him. It was a declaration and an apology; it was a woman clutching at bliss while she waited for the chance.

And he returned it all with equal passion.

She would never know what came over her, how her hands seemed to know what to do, pulling him close, reaching for the fastening of the belt he still had not taken off.

She let out a cry of frustration when he pulled away from her, hopping from the bed to tear off the offending garment. But she did not take her eyes off him, and God above, he was beautiful. Beautiful and very, very large enough to make her eyes widen with apprehension.

He must have seen her expression because he chuckled, and when he got back on the bed, his expression was somewhere between roguish and fond. “It’ll fit,” he said, his voice husky against her ear.

His hand slid down her body to the cleft between her legs, and it was then that she realized how very hot and wet she’d gotten. Hot and wet and needy. Had he pleased her on purpose? To make her ready for him?

If so, it had worked, because she felt an overwhelming hunger for him.

need to take him within her, to join her body to his and never let go.

heart She felt him press up against her, just the very tip of him, and her breasts caught.

ow. As “I’ll be gentle,” he promised.

“I’m not sure I want you to be.”

A shudder ran through his body, and when she looked up, his jaw would clench tightly as he fought for control. “Don’t say things like that,” he managed to get out.

That She arched against him, trying to somehow get even closer. “But it’s not that bad,” she said.

and she He moved forward, and she felt herself opening to him.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked.

ent. “No,” she said, “but it feels very . . . strange.”

world “Strange good or strange bad?”

She blinked a few times, trying to make sense of what she was feeling. “Just strange.”

one of “I’m not so sure I like that answer,” he murmured. His hands reached behind her, pulling her open wider, and she gasped as another inch of his

. She manhood pressed forward. “I don’t want this to be strange.” His lips fell against her ear. “I think we’re going to need to do this *very* often.”

He sounded different, almost untamed, and something very feminine about her began to sparkle. *She* had made him this way. This man—this big, powerful man—was losing control, and it was all for a need of *her*.

She had never felt so strong.

to The sensations weren’t like the ones from before, though. When he had been using just his hands and his lips, he had whipped her into a storm of

ng desire and then sent her soaring with pleasure. But now it was more than she

r eyes had to get used to him, accommodate his size. It didn’t hurt, but it was lovely as before. At least not for her.

ge, But for Edward . . . Everything she had been feeling before, every last

e got clench of need she saw on his face. He was loving this. And that was enough for her.

eral. But not, apparently, for him, because he frowned and stopped moving. She looked up at him with questioning eyes.

s only “This will not do,” he said, dropping a kiss on her nose.

and “Am I not pleasing you?” She’d thought she was, but maybe not.

im, a “If you pleased me any more I might perish,” he said with a wry expression. “That’s not the problem. I am not pleasing you.”

“You did. You know you did.” She blushed when she said this, but she could not bear for him to think she was not enjoying herself.

“You do not think you can be pleased twice?”

Cecilia felt her eyes grow very wide.

Edward’s hand slipped between their bodies and found the most sensitive spot of her womanhood.

“Oh!” She’d felt him moving there, but still, the sensation was so intense she could not help but let out a cry of surprise.

“That’s more like it,” he murmured.

And then it all began to build again. The pressure, the need . . . it was so great she did not notice how he was stretching her with each stroke. Every time she thought there could not possibly be more of him, he pulled back and then plunged forward, reaching even further into her soul.

She had not known she could be so close to another human being. She had not known she could be so close and want even more.

She arched her back, her hands clutching at his shoulders as his body finally came fully flush against hers.

“My God,” he breathed, “it’s like I’ve come home.” He looked down at her, and she thought she saw the slightest sheen of moisture in his eyes. Inside his mouth captured hers in a torrid, passionate kiss.

And then he began to move.

It began as slow, steady strokes, creating an exquisite friction inside her. But then his breath jerked into gasps, and whatever rhythm he’d begun into a frenzy. She felt it growing within her too, that race toward the precipice, but she was nowhere as lost as Edward was, at least not before he adjusted his position and sucked one of her nipples into his mouth.

She cried out at the shock of it, at the impossible connection between her breast and her womb. But she felt it there . . . dear God above, when his fingers began to tease the other nipple, she felt it between her legs and her body began to quiver and clench.

“Yes!” Edward growled. “My God, yes, squeeze me.” He grabbed her breast, harder than she’d have ever thought she’d like, but she loved it, and with a sudden piercing jolt she came apart again.

“Oh God,” Edward was grunting. “Oh God oh God oh God.” His movements grew almost crazed, and he was pounding forward, and then he seemed to go almost still, caught in one last thrust before moaning her name and collapsing atop her.

she “Cecilia,” he said again, his voice barely a whisper. “Cecilia.”
 “I’m right here.” She stroked his back, her fingertips making lazy circles across the indentation of his spine.

sitive “Cecilia.” And then again. “Cecilia.”
 She liked that he couldn’t seem to say anything besides her name. He knew, she wasn’t thinking much beyond his.

tense “I’m crushing you,” he mumbled.
 He was, but she didn’t mind. She liked the weight of him.
 He rolled off her, but not all the way, leaving himself draped partly over her. “I never want to stop touching you,” he said. He sounded incredibly drowsy.

ck and She turned to look at him. His eyes were closed, and if he had not fallen asleep, he would very soon. Already his breath had begun to even out, he had eyelashes—so thick and dark—lay lazily against his cheeks.

y She’d never watched him fall asleep, she realized. She had shared a bed with him for a week, but every night she’d crawled into her side and turned her back. She would listen to his breathing, practically holding her own breath in an effort to keep still and quiet. And she told herself that she would listen, and then she would know when he fell asleep, but every time she somehow drifted off before that happened.

of her. so, when she opened her eyes and yawned her way into the day.

ped So this was a treat. He was not a restless sleeper, but his mouth moved a little, almost as if he were whispering a prayer. She yearned to reach out and touch his cheek, but she didn’t want to wake him. His recent display of strength and stamina notwithstanding, he was not fully restored to health, he needed his rest.

s So she watched him and she waited. Waited for the guilt she knew would eventually wrap itself around her heart. She wanted to lie to herself and tell herself that he had seduced her beyond reason, but she knew that was not true. In fact, she had been swept away by passion, but she could have stopped him at any point. All she had to do was open her mouth and confess her sins.

and With her fist to her mouth, she stifled a grim laugh. If she’d told Edward the truth he would have been off her like a shot. He would have been furious and then he would have probably hauled her off to a priest and married her on the spot. That was just the sort of man he was.

 But she couldn’t let him do that. He was practically engaged to that

back home, the one he'd told her about—Billie Bridgerton. She knew how very fond of her. He always smiled when he talked about her. Always. What if they really *were* engaged? What if he'd promised himself to her and forgotten about it along with everything else in the last few months?

What if he loved her? He could have forgotten about that, too.

But even with all the guilt now coursing through her veins, she couldn't bring herself to regret this. Someday all she would have left of this marriage would be memories, and she was damned if she did not make those memories as brilliant as she could.

And if there was a child . . .

Her hand went to her womb, where even now his seed could be taking root. If there was a child . . .

No. That was unlikely. Her friend Eliza had been married a full year when she got pregnant. And the vicar's wife even longer. Still, Cecilia knew well enough to know that she could not continue to tempt fate. Maybe she could carefully tell Edward that she feared getting pregnant so far from home. It would be a lie to say that she did not relish the idea of an ocean journey while she was pregnant with child.

Or with a child. Good Lord, the journey had been awful enough on her own. She had not been seasick, but it had been dull, and at times frighteningly so.

To do that with an infant?

She shuddered. It would be hell.

"What's wrong?"

She twisted at the sound of Edward's voice. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was." He yawned. "Or almost." One of his legs was still pinning her down, so he moved it, then drew her up against him, her back to his front. "You were upset," he said.

"Don't be silly."

He kissed the back of her head. "Something was bothering you. I could tell. Yes, tell."

"While you were asleep?"

"Almost asleep," he reminded her. "Are you sore?"

"I don't know," she said quite honestly.

"I should get you a cloth." He let go of her and slid from the bed. Cecilia twisted her neck so that she could watch him as he crossed the room to the basin of water. How could he be so unselfconscious in his nakedness?

Was that a male thing?

he was “Here we are,” he said, returning to her side. He’d dampened the cloth with tender motions he cleaned her.

had It was too much. She almost cried.

When he was done, he set the cloth aside and resumed his position near her, propping himself up on one elbow as he used his free hand to fiddle with her hair. “Tell me what is bothering you,” he murmured.

She swallowed, summoning her courage. “I don’t want to become pregnant,” she said.

He went still, and Cecilia was glad for the dim light in the room. She wasn’t sure she wanted to see whatever emotion had flashed through his eyes.

“It might be too late for that,” he said.

“I know. I just—”

“You don’t want to be a mother?”

“No!” she exclaimed, surprising herself with the force of her reply.

Because she did. The thought of bearing his child . . . It nearly made her weep with the want of it. “I don’t want to become pregnant *here*,” she

“in North America. I know there are doctors and midwives, but eventually I want to go home. And I don’t want to make that crossing with a baby.”

“No,” he said, his brow pulling into a thoughtful frown. “Of course not.”

“I don’t want to do it while I’m pregnant either,” she said. “What if something should happen?”

“Things happen everywhere, Cecilia.”

“I know. But I just think I would feel more comfortable at home. In England.”

None of this was a lie. It just wasn’t the whole truth.

He continued to stroke her hair, the motion soft and soothing. “You’re distraught,” he murmured.

She didn’t know what to say.

“You needn’t be so upset,” he told her. “As I said, it might be too late, but there are precautions we can take.”

“There are?” Her heart made a delighted skip before she remembered she had far greater problems than this.

He smiled, then touched her chin, tipping her face up toward his. “Cecilia, I would show you now, but I think you need some rest. Sleep,” he said. “The details will all seem clearer in the morning.”

Was it It wouldn’t. But she slept, anyway.

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Chapter 15

A thousand apologies. I have not written in over a month, but truth there was little to write about. Everything is boredom battle, and I do not wish to write about either. We arrived Newport yesterday, though, and after a good meal and a bath, I c feeling more like myself.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT TO HIS SISTER CECILIA

Dear Miss Harcourt,

Thank you for your kind note. The weather has begun to take chill again, and by the time you receive this, I suspect we will glad for our woolen coats. Newport is more of a town than we ha seen in some time, and we are both enjoying its comforts. Thom and I have been given rooms in a private home, but our men ha been billeted in houses of worship, half in a church and half in synagogue. Several of our men were fearful that they would smote by God for sleeping in an unholy house. I do not see how it more unholy than the tavern they visited the night before. But it not my job to provide religious counsel. Speaking of which, I hope your Mrs. Pentwhistle has not been back in the wi Although I must confess, I did enjoy your story about the “psa that went horribly awry.”

And because I know you will ask, I have never visited synagogue before; it looks rather like a church, to be frank.

—FROM EDWARD ROKESBY TO CECILIA HARCOURT, ENCLOSED
WITHIN THE LETTER FROM HER BROTHER

As usual, Edward woke before Cecilia the following morning. She did stir as he eased himself from the bed, attesting to her exceptional fatigue.

He smiled. He was happy to take credit for her fatigue.

She'd be hungry, too. She generally ate her biggest meal of the day for breakfast, and though the Devil's Head always had eggs due to the chickens they kept in the back, Edward thought a treat might be in order. Something sweet. Chelsea buns, maybe. Or *speculaas*.

Or both. Why not both?

After dressing, he jotted a quick note and left it on the table, informing that he would be back soon. It wasn't far to the two bakeries. He could be there and back in under an hour if he did not run into anyone he knew.

Rooijackers was closer, so he walked there first, smiling to himself. A bell jangled over his head, alerting the proprietor to his presence. It was Mr. Rooijackers tending to the shop, though, but his red-haired daughter, one Cecilia said she had befriended. Edward recalled meeting her himself back before he'd gone to Connecticut. He and Thomas had both preferred the Dutch bakery to the English one around the corner.

Edward felt his smile grow wistful. Thomas had quite the sweet tooth. Much like his sister.

"Good morning, sir," the lady called out. She wiped her floury hands on her apron as she came out from the back room.

"Ma'am," Edward said with a small bow of his chin. He wished he could remember her name. But at least this time, he came by his lapse honest. Whatever her name was, it wasn't hiding out in the blackened portion of his memory. He'd always been bad with names.

"How nice to see you again, sir," the lady said. "You haven't been in here very long time."

"Months," he confirmed. "I've been out of town."

She nodded, giving him a jaunty smile as she said, "Makes it hard for us to have regular customers, what with the army sending you here, there, and everywhere."

"Just to Connecticut," he said.

She chuckled at that. "And how is your friend?"

"My friend?" Edward echoed, even though he knew very well that she must be talking about Thomas. Still, it was disquieting. No one asked about him anymore, or if they did, it was with hushed, somber voices.

"I haven't seen him in some time, actually," Edward said.

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not “That’s a shame.” She cocked her head to the side in a friendly gesture.
ie. “For the both of us. He was one of my best customers. He had quite the
of sweets.”

at “His sister as well,” Edward murmured.

ckens She looked at him curiously.

hing “I married his sister,” he explained, wondering why he was telling her.
Probably just because it made him happy to say it. He’d married Cecilia
Well. He’d *really* married her now.

ng her Mr. Rooijakkers’s daughter went still for a moment, her gingery eyes
be drawing together before she said, “I’m so sorry, I’m afraid I can’t recall
name . . .”

as the “Captain Edward Rokesby, ma’am. And yes, you’ve met my new wife
sn’t Cecilia.”

er, the “Of course. I’m sorry, I did not put it together when she said her name
self, earlier. She looks rather like her brother, doesn’t she? Not in the features
red the much but—”

 “The expressions, yes,” Edward finished for her.

h. She grinned. “You must want *speculaas*, then.”

 “Indeed. A dozen, if you will.”

s on “We have probably never been introduced,” she said as she bent down
to retrieve a platter of biscuits from a low shelf. “I am Mrs. Beatrix Leverett.”

ould “Cecilia has spoken most fondly of you.” He waited patiently as Mr.
ly. Leverett counted out the biscuits. He was rather looking forward to Cecilia’s
of his reaction when he brought her breakfast in bed. Well, biscuits in bed, well,
might be even better.

n in a Except for the crumbs. That might present a problem.

 “Is Mrs. Rokesby’s brother still in Connecticut?”

 Edward’s lovely imaginings came to a halt. “I beg your pardon?”

or us to “Mrs. Rokesby’s brother,” she repeated, looking up from her task. “I
ad thought he went with you to Connecticut.”

 Edward went very still. “You know about that?”

 “Should I not?”

he “Thomas was with me in Connecticut,” he said. His voice was soft,
as if he were testing out the statement, trying it on like a new coat.

about Did it fit?

 “Wasn’t he?” Mrs. Leverett asked.

 “I . . .” Hell, what was he to say? He didn’t particularly wish to share

are. details of his condition with a near stranger, but if she had information
e love Thomas . . .

“I have been having difficulty remembering a few things,” he finally
He touched his scalp, just under the brim of his hat. The bump was mu
smaller now, but the skin was still tender. “I was hit on the head.”

er this. “Oh, I’m so sorry.” Her eyes filled with compassion. “That must be
ia. terribly frustrating.”

“Yes,” he said, but his injury was not what he wished to discuss. He
brows at her directly, eyes set squarely on hers. “You were telling me about C
ll your Harcourt.”

Her shoulders rose in a tiny shrug. “I don’t really know anything. Ju
ife. the both of you went to Connecticut several months ago. You came in
before you left. For provisions.”

ne “Provisions,” Edward echoed.

es so “You bought bread,” she said with a little chuckle. “Your friend has
sweet tooth. I told him—”

“—that the *speculaas* would not travel well,” he finished for her.

“Yes,” she said. “They crumble too easily.”

“They did,” Edward said softly. “Every last one of them.”

vn to And then it all came flooding back.
rett.”

s. “Stubbs!”

ilia’s The colonel looked up from his desk, visibly startled by Edward’s fu
hich bark.

“Captain Rokesby. What on earth is the matter?”

I What was the matter? What was the *matter*? Edward fought to keep
fury under control. He’d stormed out of the Dutch bakery without his
purchases, practically ran through the streets of New York to get here,
Colonel Stubbs’s office at the building currently being used as British
headquarters. His hands were fisted, his blood was pounding through h
brain like he’d been in battle, and by God, the only thing that was keep
him from assaulting his superior officer was the threat of a court-marti

almost “You knew,” Edward said, his voice shaking with rage. “You knew
Thomas Harcourt.”

Stubbs stood slowly, and his skin flushed red under his whiskers. “T
what, precisely, do you refer?”

e the “He went to Connecticut with me. Why the hell didn’t you say so?”

about “I told you,” Stubbs said in a stiff voice, “I could not take the risk of influencing your memories.”

7 said. “That’s shite and you know it,” Edward spat. “Tell me the truth.”

ch “It is the truth,” Stubbs hissed, stalking around Edward to slam the c his office shut. “Do you think I liked lying to your wife?”

“My wife,” Edward repeated. He had remembered *that*, too. He would say that his memory was completely restored, but it was mostly all the looked he was fully certain that he had not participated in a proxy wedding Captain ceremony. Nor had Thomas ever asked him to.

Edward couldn’t imagine what had led Cecilia to such a deception, but st that could only deal with one cocked-up disaster at a time. His eyes landed just Stubbs’s with barely contained fury. “You have ten seconds to explain why you lied about Thomas Harcourt.”

a “For the love of God, Rokesby,” the colonel said, raking his hand th his thinning hair, “I’m not a monster. The last thing I wanted was to gi false hope.”

Edward froze. “*False hope?*”

Stubbs stared at him. “You don’t know.” It wasn’t quite a question.

“I believe we have already ascertained that there is a lot I don’t know Edward said, his voice clipped with tightly wound emotion. “So please enlighten me.”

irious “Captain Harcourt is dead,” the colonel said. He shook his head, and honest sorrow said, “He took a shot to the gut. I’m sorry.”

“What?” Edward stumbled back, his legs somehow finding a chair f to sink into. “How? When?”

his “Back in March,” Stubbs said. He crossed the room and yanked ope cabinet, pulling out a decanter of brandy. “It wasn’t even a week after left. He sent word to meet him up at New Rochelle.”

Edward watched the colonel’s unsteady hands as he sloshed amber l his into two glasses. “Who went?”

ing “Just me.”

al. “You went alone,” Edward said, his tone making it clear that he four about difficult to believe.

Stubbs held forth a glass. “It was what had to be done.”

o Edward exhaled as memories—strangely fresh and stale at the same—unrolled through his mind. He and Thomas had gone to Connecticut together, entrusted with the task of assessing the viability of a naval att

the waterfront. The command had come from Governor Tryon himself chosen Edward, he'd said, because he needed someone he could trust implicitly. Edward had chosen Thomas for the very same reason.

But the two of them had traveled together for only a few days before Thomas had headed back to New York with the information they'd gathered about Norwalk. Edward had continued east, toward New Haven.

And that was the last he'd seen of him.

Edward took the glass of brandy and downed it in a single shot.

Stubbs did the same, then said, "I take it this means you have recovered your memory."

Edward gave him a sharp nod. The colonel would want to question him immediately, he knew that, but he would say nothing until he got some answers about Thomas. "Why did you have General Garth send a letter through my family that he was only wounded?"

"He *was* only wounded when we sent that," the colonel replied. "He was shot twice, several days apart."

"What?" Edward tried to make sense of this. "What the hell happened?"

Stubbs groaned and seemed to deflate as he leaned against his desk. "I couldn't bring him back here. Not when I wasn't sure of his loyalties."

"Thomas Harcourt was no traitor," Edward spat.

"There was no way to know that for certain," Stubbs shot back. "What the hell was I supposed to think? I got up to New Rochelle, just as he'd said, and then before he can say anything other than my name people start shouting at me."

"At him," Edward corrected. After all, Thomas was the one who'd been shot.

Stubbs downed his brandy—his second glass by now—and went back for another. "I don't know who the hell they were shooting at. For all I know, Thomas was the target and they missed. You know most of the colonials are an untrained rabble. Half can't hit the side of the wall."

Edward took a moment to absorb this. He knew in his bones that Thomas was no traitor, but he could see how Colonel Stubbs—who did not know Thomas well—could have had doubts.

"Captain Harcourt was hit in the shoulder," Stubbs said grimly. "The bullet went clean through. It wasn't that hard to get the bleeding stopped, but it was in a lot of pain."

Edward closed his eyes and took a breath, but it didn't steady him. If

. He'd seen far too many men with gunshot wounds.

"I took him to Dobbs Ferry," Stubbs continued. "We have a small one near the river. It's not quite behind enemy lines, but close."

Edward knew Dobbs Ferry well. The British had used it as a rendezvous point ever since the Battle of White Plains nearly three years earlier. "What happened then?" he asked.

Colonel Stubbs looked at him with a flat expression. "I returned here." "You left him there," Edward said disgustedly. "What sort of man left a wounded soldier in the middle of the wilderness?"

"He was not alone. I had three men guarding him."

"You held him as a prisoner?"

"It was for his own safety as much as anything else. I didn't know if they were keeping him from escaping, or keeping the rebels from killing him." Stubbs eyed Edward with increasing impatience. "For God's sake, Robert, I am not the enemy here."

Edward held his tongue.

"He could not have made the trip back to New York in any case," Stubbs said with a shake of his head. "He was in far too much pain."

"You could have stayed."

"No, I could not," Stubbs retorted. "I had to return to headquarters. I didn't expect. No one even knew I'd slipped away. Believe me, as soon as I was notified, up with an excuse I went back to fetch him. It was only two days." He swallowed, and for the first time since Edward's arrival, he actually went pale. "But when I got there, they were dead."

"They?"

"Harcourt, the three men holding him. All of them."

Edward looked at the glass in his hand. He'd forgotten he was holding it. He watched his hand as he set it down, almost as if this might somehow stop the shaking of his fingers. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know." Stubbs closed his eyes, his face replete with agonized memory as he whispered, "They'd all been shot."

A bile rose up in Edward's stomach. "Was it an execution?"

"No." Stubbs shook his head. "There had been a fight."

"Even Thomas? Wasn't he under guard?"

"We had not bound him. It was clear that he had been fighting too, even with his injury. But . . ." Stubbs swallowed. Turned away.

"But what?"

“It was impossible to tell which side he’d been fighting for.”

utpost “You knew him better than that,” Edward said in a low voice.

“Did I? Did you?”

vous “Yes, goddamn it, I did!” The words erupted from him in a roar, and
What time Edward shot to his feet.

“Well, I didn’t,” Stubbs returned. “And it’s my bloody job to be sus
e.” of everyone.” He grabbed his forehead, his thumb and middle finger pr
t a hard into his temples. “I’m just so sick of it all.”

Edward took a step back. He’d never seen the colonel like this. He v
sure he’d ever seen anyone like this.

“Do you know what it does to a man?” Stubbs asked, his voice only
we louder than a whisper. “To trust no one?”

n.” Edward did not speak. He was still so angry, so full of rage and fury
esby, He no longer knew where to direct it. Not at Stubbs, though. He took th
brandy glass from the colonel’s trembling hand and walked over to the
decanter, where he poured them each another. He did not care if it was
Stubbs eight in the morning. Neither of them needed a clear head.

He suspected neither of them wanted a clear head.

“What happened to the bodies?” Edward asked in a low voice.

l was “I buried them.”

I came “All of them?”

The colonel closed his eyes. “It was not a pleasant day.”

ent “Have you any witnesses?”

Stubbs looked up sharply. “You do not trust me?”

“Forgive me,” Edward said, because he did trust Stubbs. In this . . . i
everything, he supposed. He did not know how the man had kept this t
ng it. himself. It must have burned a hole in his gut.

w stem “I got help for the graves,” Stubbs said. He sounded exhausted. He
sounded spent. “I will give you the names of the men who aided me if
ed require.”

Edward looked at him for a long moment before answering, “I do not
then he gave his head a little shake, almost as if he were trying to jostle
thoughts into place. “Why did you send that letter?”

Stubbs blinked. “What letter?”

ven “The one from General Garth. Saying that Thomas had been injured
assume he did so at your request.”

“It was true when we sent it,” the colonel answered. “I’d wanted to r

his family with all due haste. There was a ship leaving the harbor the next day after I left him in Dobbs Ferry. When I think about it now . . .” He raked his hand through his thinning hair, and his body seemed to deflate as he said,

“I was so pleased I’d managed to dispatch it so quickly.”

“You never thought to correct your error and send another?”

“There were too many unanswered questions.”

“To notify his family?” Edward asked in disbelief.

“I planned to send a letter once we had answers,” Stubbs said stiffly. “I certainly didn’t think his sister would cross the Atlantic for him. Although I don’t know, maybe she came for you.”

Not likely.

Stubbs walked over to his desk and opened a drawer. “I have his ring,” he said. Edward watched as he carefully removed a box, opened that, and then pulled out a signet ring.

Stubbs held it out. “I thought his family would want this.”

Edward stared at the gold circle that was dropped into his palm. Truett told him he didn’t recognize it. He’d never looked closely at Thomas’s signet ring. But he knew that Cecilia would know it.

It would break her heart.

Stubbs cleared his throat. “What will you tell your wife?”

His wife. There was that word again. Goddamn it. She wasn’t his wife. He didn’t know what she was, but she wasn’t his wife.

“Rokesby?”

He looked up. There would be time to make sense of Cecilia’s dishonor later. For now, he would search his soul for a little kindness and allow himself to grieve for her brother before confronting her with her lies.

Edward took a breath and looked the colonel squarely in the eye as he said, “I will tell her that her brother died a hero. I will tell her that you regret you so you were unable to tell her the truth when she first asked due to the secret nature of his extraordinarily important work.” He took a step toward the colonel, and then another. “I will tell her that you plan to speak with her directly, to apologize for the pain you have wrought upon her, and to personally give to her any and all posthumous honors he received.”

“There were no—”

“Make them up,” Edward snapped.

The colonel’s eyes held his for several seconds before he said, “I will notify the arrangements for a medal.”

morning Edward nodded his assent and headed for the door.
ed his But the colonel's voice stopped him. "Are you sure you wish to lie t
ghed. Edward turned slowly around. "I beg your pardon?"
"I don't feel like I know much anymore," Stubbs said with a sigh, "I
know marriage. You don't want to start it off with a lie."
"Really."
The colonel looked at him with an odd speculation. "Is there someth
. "I you're not telling me, Captain Rokesby?"
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Chapter 16

I have not heard from you in so long. I try not to worry, but it is difficult.

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS*

When Edward did not return by nine, Cecilia grew curious.

When he did not return by half past, her curiosity gave way to concern.

And at ten, when the bells of the nearby church tolled far too loud, she picked up his note again, just to make sure she had not misread it the first time.

Gone to fetch breakfast. I shall return before you awaken.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. It was hard to see how one could misread that.

She began to wonder if he was stuck downstairs, waylaid by a fellow officer. It happened all the time. Everyone seemed to know him, and no one wished to congratulate him on his recent safe return. Soldiers could be a garrulous lot, especially when they were bored. And everyone seemed that way these days, although most were quick to point out that it was preferable to fighting.

So Cecilia headed down to the front room of the Devil's Head, fully prepared to extricate Edward from an unwanted conversation. She'd remind him of their "very important appointment," and then maybe they'd go upstairs . . .

But he wasn't in the front room. Nor the rear.

I shall return before you awaken.

Clearly something was amiss. Edward always woke up before she did.

she was no slugabed. He knew that. She was always dressed and ready for breakfast by half eight.

She had half a mind to go out looking for him, but she just *knew* that if he did, he'd return five minutes after she left, and he'd go out looking for her and they'd spend the whole morning not quite crossing paths.

So she waited.

"You're off to a late start this morning," the innkeeper said when he saw her standing about indecisively. "Nothing to eat for you?"

is "No, thank you. My husband's getting—" She frowned. "Have you seen Captain Rokesby this morning?"

"Not for several hours, ma'am. Bid me good morning and then head out. He looked right happy, he did." The innkeeper gave her a lopsided grin as he wiped out a tankard. "He was whistling."

ern. he irst It said something of Cecilia's level of distraction that she couldn't even manage a tinge of embarrassment over that. She glanced toward the street-facing window, not that one could make out anything other than a few shapes through the warped glass. "I expected him back some time ago," she said, almost to herself.

The innkeeper shrugged. "He'll be back soon, you'll see. In the meantime, are you sure you don't need anything?"

"Quite, but thank you. I—"

ne The front door made its customary groan as someone pushed it open. Cecilia whirled around, certain that it must be Edward.

Except it wasn't.

v lost a bored e to "Captain Montby," she said with a small curtsy, recognizing the young officer who had given up his room for her the previous week. He'd gone away for a few days and then come back and was now bunking with another soldier. She had thanked him several times for his generosity, but he always insisted that it was his honor and duty as a gentleman. And anyway, his room at the Devil's Head was better than most British soldiers got for sleeping quarters.

mind back "Mrs. Rokesby," he returned in greeting. He bowed his chin, then faced her with a smile. "A fine morning to you. Are you off to join your husband?" Cecilia snapped to attention. "Do you know where he is?"

id, but Captain Montby made a somewhat directionless nod over his shoulder. "I just saw him over at the Fraunces Tavern."

"What?"

for She must have sounded shrill because Captain Montby drew back a
or so before saying, “Er, yes. I only spied him across the room, but I w
t if she fairly certain it was he.”

her, “At the Fraunces? You’re sure?”

“I believe so,” the captain said, his words taking on the wary tone of
who does not wish to get involved in a domestic dispute.

saw “Was he with someone?”

“Not when I saw him.”

seen Cecilia’s lips pressed into a firm line as she headed for the door, pau
only to thank Captain Montby for his help. She couldn’t imagine what
led out. Edward was doing over at the Fraunces. Even if he’d gone there to fet
s he breakfast (which made absolutely no sense, since they served the exact
fare as the Devil’s Head), surely he’d be back by now.

ven With an extremely cold meal.

reet- And he was alone. Which meant that—well, frankly she didn’t know
blobby that meant.

” she She wasn’t *angry* with him, she told herself. He had every right to g
where he pleased. It was just that he’d said he was coming back. If she
n time, known that he wasn’t, she might have made other plans.

Just what those other plans might be, since she was stuck on a stran
continent where she knew almost no one, she wasn’t sure. But that was
t, and point.

The Fraunces was not far from the Devil’s Head—all the local taver
were relatively close together—so it took only about five minutes in th
ing rapidly brightening sun for Cecilia to reach her destination.

ne She pulled open the heavy wooden door and stepped inside, her eye
n other taking a moment to adjust to the dim and smoky light of the tavern. A
lways blinks cleared her vision, and sure enough, there was Edward sitting at
lf a on the far side of the room.

Alone.

Some of the fire that had been fueling her steps slid out of her, and s
llowed paused, taking in the scene. Something wasn’t right.

band?” His posture was off. He was slouching in his chair—which he never
public, no matter how tired he was—and his hand—the one she could
ler. “I from her vantage point—was bent almost into a claw. If his nails were
neatly trimmed, he would have left gouge marks in the wood of the tab

An empty glass sat in front of him.

She took a hesitant step forward. Had he been drinking? It certainly like it, although again, this would be highly out of character. It wasn't noon.

Cecilia's heart slowed . . . then pounded, and the air around her grew and heavy with dread.

There were two things that could render Edward so altered. Two things that could make him forget that he'd promised to return to the room they shared at the Devil's Head.

Either he'd regained his memory . . .
Or Thomas was dead.

Edward hadn't meant to get drunk.

He'd left Colonel Stubbs's office in a fury, but by the time he exited the street, it was gone, replaced by . . . nothing.

He was empty.
Numb.

Thomas was dead. Cecilia was a liar.
And he was a damned fool.

He stood there, stock-still and staring sightlessly into space in front of the building that housed the headquarters of so many of the top British officers. He didn't know where to go. Not back to the Devil's Head; he was not to face her.

God above, he didn't even want to think about that right now. Maybe *maybe* she'd had a good reason for lying to him, but he just . . . He just drew in a long choke of breath.

She'd had so many opportunities to tell him the truth, so many moments when she could have broken the quiet with a soft mention of his name. She could have told him she'd lied, and she could have told him why, and hell, he would probably have forgiven her because he was so damned in love with her he would have pulled the moon from the sky to make her happy.

He'd *thought* she was his wife.

He thought he'd pledged to honor and protect her.

Instead, he was the worst sort of reprobate, a true beau-nasty. It mattered not that he'd thought they were married. He'd still slept with an unmarried virgin. Worse, she was the sister of his closest friend.

He'd have to marry her now, of course. Maybe that had been her plan along. Except that this was *Cecilia*, and he thought he knew her. Before

looked even met her he thought he knew her.

even He swiped his hand across his brow, his fingers and thumbs settling
place at the indentations of his temples. His head hurt. He squeezed ha
v thick against the pain, but it did nothing. Because when he finally managed t
Cecilia out of his mind, all that was left was her brother.

ngs Thomas was dead, and he couldn't stop thinking about it, about how
ey one would ever know exactly what had happened, about how he'd die
among strangers, under suspicion of treason. He couldn't stop thinking
how his friend had taken a shot to the gut. It was a terrible death . . . sl
agonizingly painful.

And he couldn't stop thinking about how he would have to lie to Ce
Tell her it was something less gruesome. Something quick and painles

l to the Heroic.

The irony was not lost on him. It was his turn to lie to her.

But he knew that it was his responsibility to inform her of Thomas's
No matter how angry he was with her—and truth be told, he didn't kno
what he felt just then—Thomas had been his closest friend. Even if Ed
had never met Cecilia Harcourt, he would have traveled to Derbyshire
of the deliver her brother's ring into her hands.

icers. But he wasn't ready to see her yet. He wasn't ready to see anything
ready than the bottom of another glass of brandy. Or wine. Or even just wate
long as he was having it alone.

e . . . So he went to the Fraunces Tavern, where he'd be far less likely to s
t . . . friend than at the Devil's Head. They didn't do a brisk business in the
morning. A man could sit with his back to the room and if he was luck
ents wouldn't have to say a word for hours.

She When he got there, the barkeep took one look at him and silently ha
bloody him a drink. Edward wasn't even sure what it was. Something homema
n love maybe illegal, definitely strong.

py. He had another.

And he sat there in the back corner all morning long. Every now and
someone would come and replace his glass. At some point a maid set a
tered of crusty bread in front of him, presumably to soak up the spirits. He tr
ried bite. It sank in his stomach like a rock.

He went back to his drink.

in all But try as he might, he could not seem to intoxicate himself to the p
e he'd oblivion. He could not even make himself forget. It didn't seem to mat

how many times his glass was refilled. He'd close his eyes in a long, h
into blink, thinking that this time everything would go black or even just gr
rd maybe Thomas would still be dead, but he at least wouldn't be thinkin
to push that. Cecilia would still be a liar, but he wouldn't be thinking about tha
either.

r no But it didn't work. He could never be that lucky.

l Then *she* arrived.

g about He didn't even need to look up to know it was she when the front do
ow, opened and a bright slash of light fell across the room. He felt it in the
the dank, saturnine knowledge that this was the worst day of his life. A
cilia. wasn't going to get any better.

s. He looked up.

She was standing by the door, close enough to a window so that the
sunlight touched upon her hair like a halo.

; death. It figured she'd look like an angel.

ow He'd thought she was *his* angel.

ward She didn't move for several seconds. He knew he should stand, but l
just to thought the alcohol might finally be catching up with him, and he didn
trust his balance.

other Or his judgment. If he stood, he might walk to her. And if he walke
r, so her, he might take her in his arms.

He'd regret that. Later today, when he was thinking more clearly, he
see a regret it.

She took a wary step toward him, and then another. He saw her lips
y, he his name, but he heard nothing. Whether it was because she made no n
he just didn't want to hear, he'd never know, but he could see in her ey
nded she knew something was wrong.

ade, He reached into his pocket.

"What happened?" She was closer now. He had no choice but to hea
He pulled out the ring and set it on the table.

l then Her eyes followed his motions, and at first she did not seem to gras
i slice significance. Then she reached out with one trembling hand and took t
ied a within her fingers, bringing it to her face for a closer inspection.

"No," she whispered.

He remained silent.

oint of "No. No. This can't be his. It's not so unique. This could belong to
ter anyone." She set the ring back on the table as if it had burned her skin.

heavy “That’s not his. Tell me that’s not his.”

“ay, and “I’m sorry,” Edward said.

g about Cecilia kept shaking her head. “No,” she said again, except this time
it, sounded like a wounded animal.

“It’s his, Cecilia,” Edward said. He did not move to comfort her. He
have. He *would* have, if he did not feel so dead inside himself.

“Where did you get it?”

or “Colonel Stubbs.” Edward paused, trying to figure out just what he
air, in to say. Or not. “He asked me to apologize. And offer his condolences.”

nd it She stared at the ring, and then, as if a tiny pin had been jabbed into
she looked up suddenly and asked, “Why would he apologize?”

It figured she would ask. She was clever. It was one of the things he
filtered best about her. He should have known she would immediately latch on
part of his statement that did not quite fit.

Edward cleared his throat. “He wished to apologize for not telling you
sooner. He couldn’t. Thomas was involved in something very important

he Something . . . secret.”

’t quite She clutched the back of the chair next to him, then gave up all pretense
strength and sat. “So he knew, all this time?”

l to Edward nodded. “It happened in March.”

He heard her gasp—a tiny sound, but filled with shock. “He sat with
e would she said in a bewildered whisper. “In the church, when you were still
unconscious. He sat with me for hours one of the days. How could he
form that? He knew I was looking for Thomas. He knew . . .” She brought her
oise or hand to her mouth as her breath started coming in heavier gasps. “How
res that he be so cruel?”

Edward didn’t say anything.

Something in Cecilia’s eyes sharpened, and the pale green of her iris
ar her. took on a metallic edge. “Did you know?”

“No.” He gave her a flat, direct stare. “How could I?”

o the “Of course,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.” She sat there for a moment
he ring hopeless statue of baffled grief. Edward could only wonder at her thought
every now and then she seemed to blink more rapidly, or her lips would
as if she might be forming words.

Finally, he could take no more. “Cecilia?”

She turned slowly, her brows drawing together as she asked, “Was I
given a burial? A proper one?”

“Yes,” he said. “Colonel Stubbs said he saw to it himself.”

“Could I visit—”

“No,” he said firmly. “He was buried in Dobbs Ferry. Do you know that is?”

She nodded.

“Then you know it’s far too dangerous for you to visit. Far too dangerous for *me* to visit unless I’m ordered to do so by the army.”

She nodded again, but this time with less resolve.

“Cecilia . . .” he warned. God above, he could not even contemplate chasing after her into enemy territory. That area of Westchester was a no-man’s-land. It was why he’d been so surprised when Colonel Stubbs said he’d gone alone to meet with Thomas. “Promise me,” Edward growled, his fingers biting into the edge of the table. “Promise me you won’t go.”

She looked at him with an expression that was almost puzzled. “Of course not. I’m not a—” She pressed her lips together, swallowing whatever she thought to say in favor of: “That’s not the sort of thing I would do.”

Edward gave a curt nod. It was all he could manage until he got his sense of breathing back under control.

“I imagine there is no headstone,” she said after a few moments had passed. “How could there be?”

It was a rhetorical question, but the pain in her voice made him answer anyway. “Colonel Stubbs said he left a cairn.”

It was a lie, but it would give her comfort to think that her brother’s grave had been marked, if only with a small pile of stones.

He picked up his empty glass, fiddling it around in his fingers. There were a few drops left in the slightly rounded bottom, and he watched as they rolled this way and that, always following the same dampened path. How hard would he have to tilt the glass to force a new rivulet? And could he do the same with his life? Could he just tilt things hard enough to change the outcome? What if he threw it all upside down? What then?

But even with all this going on inside, his expression did not change; he could feel the stasis on his face, a steady evenness, devoid of emotion. He had to do what he had to do. One crack, and God only knew what was going to be pouring out.

“You should take the ring,” he said.

She gave a little nod and picked it up, blinking back tears as she looked down at it. Edward knew what she’d see. The Harcourts had no coat of

that he knew of, so the flat plane of Thomas's ring bore only the letter elegantly scripted with one flourishing swirl at the base.

where But then Cecilia turned it over and looked inside. Edward straightened a bit, curious now. He had not known to look for an inscription. Maybe it wasn't Thomas's ring. Maybe Colonel Stubbs had lied. Maybe—

erous An agonized sob burst from Cecilia's lips, the sound so sudden and that she almost looked surprised that it had come from her. Her hand flew to a fist around the ring, and she seemed to crumple right there in front of laying her head on her forearm as she cried.

sort of God help him, he reached out and took her hand.

is had Whatever she had done, for whatever reason, he could not confront her about it now.

course "I knew . . ." she said, gasping for breath. "I knew he was probably a liar. But my head and my heart . . . They weren't in the same place." She looked up, her eyes luminous in her tear-streaked face. "Do you know what I realized he'd

He didn't trust himself to do anything but nod. He wasn't sure his heart would ever be in the same place again.

Edward picked up the ring, wondering about the inscription. He turned it so that the inside caught a bit of the light.

ver,

THOMAS HORATIO

grave "All of the men in my family have the same ring," Cecilia said. "The given names are engraved on the inside so that they can tell them apart.

e were "Horatio," Edward murmured. "I never knew."

rolled "My father's grandfather was called Horace," she said. She seemed to be calming down. Ordinary conversation could do that for a person. "But my mother hated the name. And now—" She let out a choked laugh, followed by an inelegant swipe of her face with the back of her hand. Edward would have offered her a handkerchief if he'd had one. But he'd rushed out that morning so eager to surprise her with treats. He hadn't thought he'd be gone above twenty minutes.

ome "My cousin is named Horace," she said, almost—but not quite—rolling her eyes. "The one who wanted to marry me."

ked Edward looked down at his fingers and realized he'd been rolling the ring around between them. He set it down.

f arms "I hate him," she said, with enough intensity to compel him to look at

His eyes were burning. He wouldn't have thought the pale hue could contain heat, but then he remembered that when fire burned hot, the color of it faded a cold.

"I hate him so much," she went on. "If it hadn't been for him, I would have—" She drew in a loud, sudden snuffle. From the looks of her, she harshly felt it coming on.

"You wouldn't have what?" Edward asked softly.

She didn't answer right away. Finally, she swallowed and said, "I probably wouldn't have come here."

"And you wouldn't have married me."

He looked up, caught her gaze directly. If she was going to come clear now would be the time. According to her story, she had not taken part in half of the proxy marriage until she was on the ship.

"If you had not sailed to New York," Edward continued, "when would you mean?" "I don't know," she admitted.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"So maybe it was for the best." He wondered if she could hear what he heard in his own voice. It was a little too low, a little too smooth.

He was baiting her. He could not help it.

She gave him an odd look.

"If Cousin Horace had not harassed you," Edward continued, "we would not be wed. Although I suppose . . ." He let his words trail off deliberately waiting until she had to prod him to continue.

"You suppose . . ."

"I suppose I would think we were married," he said. "After all, I went through with the proxy ceremony months ago. Think of it, all this time I could have been a single man and not realized it."

He looked up, briefly. *Say something.*

She didn't.

Edward picked up his glass and tossed back the last dregs, not that there was really much of anything there.

"What happens now?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Did he have any things? Beyond the ring?"

Edward thought back to that last day before he and Thomas had left Connecticut. They had not known how long they would be gone, so the colonel had made arrangements to store their things. "Colonel Stubbs s

in such have his effects,” he said. “I will have them brought to you.”

turned “Thank you.”

“He had a miniature of you,” Edward blurted out.

ldn’t “I beg your pardon?”

hadn’t “A miniature. He always had it. I mean, no, he didn’t carry it with him all times or anything like that, but when we moved he always made sure it was with him.”

robably Her lips trembled with the hint of a smile. “I have one of them as well. Didn’t I show it to you?”

Edward shook his head.

ean, “Oh. I’m sorry. I should have done.” She slumped a bit, looking utterly and forlorn. “They were painted at the same time. I think I was sixteen

“Yes, you look younger in it.”

ld you For a moment she looked confused, then she blinked several times and said, “You’ve seen it. Of course. Thomas said that he’d showed it to you.”

Edward nodded.

he “Once or twice,” he lied. There was no need for her to know how many hours he’d spent staring at her image, wondering if she could possibly be as kind and funny as she was in her letters.

ould my hair too bright. And I never smile like that.”

tely, No, she didn’t. But to say so would be to admit he knew the painting better than “once or twice” would imply.

nt Cecilia reached out and took the ring. She held it in both hands, pinching it between her thumbs and forefingers.

, I She stared at it. For such a long time, she stared at it. “Do you want to go back to the inn?” she finally asked.

But she didn’t look up.

here And because Edward did not trust himself to be alone with her, he said, “I need to be by myself right now.”

“Of course.” She said it too quickly, and she lurched to her feet. The chair disappeared into her fist. “I do too.”

It was a lie. They both knew it.

for “I’m going back now,” she said, motioning needlessly to the door. “I would like to lie down.”

e He nodded. “If you do not mind, I will stay here.”

should She gestured faintly toward his empty glass. “Maybe you shouldn’t

His brows rose, daring her to finish that statement.

“Never mind.”

Smart girl.

She took a step away, then paused. “Do you—”

im at *This was it.* She was going to tell him. She was going to explain it al
re it it would be fine, and he would not hate himself and he would not hate
and . . .

l. He did not realize that he’d started to rise until his legs hit the table.
“What?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

erly lost “Tell me.”

.” She gave him an odd look, then said, “I was just going to ask if you
me to get you something at the bakery. But I don’t think I wish to see a
nd right now, so . . . Well, I’d rather just go straight back to the inn.”

ou.” The bakery.

any Edward fell back into his seat, and then before he could contain him
harsh, angry laugh burst forth from his throat.

be as Cecilia’s eyes went very wide. “I can still go, if you wish. If you’re
hungry, I can—”

ade “No,” he cut her off. “Go home.”

“Home,” she echoed.

g far He felt one corner of his mouth squeezing into a humorless smile. “
Abbey.”

hed She nodded, her lips trembling as if they weren’t sure if they were
supposed to smile in return. “Home,” she echoed. She looked to the do
to go then back at him. “Right.”

But she hesitated. Her eyes flicked to his, waiting for something. He
for something.

aid, “I He gave nothing. He had nothing to give.

So she left.

ring And Edward had another drink.

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I think

. . .”

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Chapter 17

We have finally arrived in New York! And not a moment too soon. We traveled via ship from Rhode Island, and once again Edward proved himself a ghastly sailor. I have told him it is only fair; he is appallingly good at everything else he does.

Ah, he glares at me now. I have the bad habit of saying my worst aloud as I write them, and he does not appreciate my descriptive language. But do not fret. He is also appallingly good-natured, and he does not hold a grudge.

But he glares! He glares!

I might kill your brother.

—FROM THOMAS HARCOURT (AND EDWARD ROKESBY) TO CECILIA HARCOURT

Cecilia walked back to the Devil's Head in a daze.

Thomas was dead.

He was *dead*.

She'd thought she'd prepared herself for this. As the weeks had passed without a word, she had known that the chances of Thomas being found were growing slim. And yet, now . . . with the proof of his signet ring in his pocket . . .

She was wrecked.

She could not even visit his grave. Edward had said that it was too far outside of Manhattan, too close to General Washington and his colonial forces.

A braver woman might go. A more reckless spirit might toss her hair, stamp her foot and insist that she must lay flowers at her brother's final resting place.

Billie Bridgerton would do it.

Cecilia closed her eyes for a moment and cursed under her breath. She tried to stop thinking about bloody Billie Bridgerton. It was becoming an obsession.

But who could blame her? Edward talked about her *all the time*.

Very well, maybe not all the time, but more than twice. More than . . . Well, enough that Cecilia felt she knew quite enough about Lord Bridgerton's eldest daughter, thank you very much. Edward probably couldn't realize it but she came up in almost every story he told of growing up in Kent. Billie Bridgerton managed her father's lands. She hunted with the hounds. And when Cecilia had asked Edward what she looked like, he'd replied, "She's actually rather pretty. Not that I noticed for so many years. I don't think I even realized she was a girl until I was eight."

And Cecilia's reply?

"Oh."

Paragon of everything articulate and insightful she was. *That* was her eloquent response. But Cecilia could hardly tell him that after all of his descriptions of the amazing, superhuman Billie *I-Can-Ride-a-Horse-Backwards* Bridgerton, she'd pictured her as a six-foot Amazon with large hands, a mannish neck, and crooked teeth.

Not that the crooked teeth were in any way relevant to Edward's descriptions, but Cecilia had long since accepted that a little portion of her heart was petty and vengeful, and, blast it all, she *wanted* to imagine Billie Bridgerton with crooked teeth.

And a mannish neck.

But no, Billie Bridgerton was pretty, and Billie Bridgerton was strong. If Billie Bridgerton's brother had died, *she* would have traveled into enemy lands to make sure his grave had a proper marker.

But not Cecilia. Whatever courage she possessed had been all used up when she'd stepped on the *Lady Miranda* and watched England disappear over the eastern horizon. And if there was one thing she'd learned about herself over the past few months, it was that she was not the sort of woman to venture into a nonmetaphorical foreign territory unless someone's very life hung in the balance.

All there was to do now was . . .

Go home.

She didn't belong here in New York, that much she knew. And she couldn't

belong to Edward, either. Nor he to her. There was only one thing that he had truly bind them together . . .

She went still, and her hand went to the flat plane of her belly, just a womb.

She *could* be with child. It was unlikely, but it was possible.

. . . And suddenly it felt real. She knew she probably wasn't pregnant, but her heart seemed to recognize this new person—a miraculous miniature of Edward, and maybe of her, too, but in her imagination the baby was all white with a dusting of dark hair, and eyes so blue they rivaled the sky.

ie men. “Miss?”

d, Cecilia looked up and blinked, only then realizing that she had come n't stop in the middle of the street. An older woman in a starched white blouse was looking at her with a kind, concerned expression.

“Are you all right, miss?”

r Cecilia nodded as she lurched into motion. “I beg your pardon,” she s tales moving to the side of the street. Her mind was foggish, and she couldn't focus properly on the Good Samaritan in front of her. “I just . . . I had bad news.”

a The woman looked down to where Cecilia's hand rested on her abdomen. Her ringless hand. When she met Cecilia's eyes again, her own were filled with a hideous blend of compassion and pity.

her “I have to go,” Cecilia blurted out, and she practically ran the rest of illie way back to the Devil's Head and up the stairs to her room. She threw herself onto the bed, and this time when she cried, her tears were equal parts frustration and grief.

ig, and That woman had thought that Cecilia was pregnant. Unmarried and remy pregnant. She'd looked at Cecilia's bare finger and made a judgment, a God, there had to be some sort of irony there.

ip Edward had wanted to get her a ring. A ring for a marriage that didn't ear exist.

ut Cecilia laughed. Right there in the middle of her tears, in the middle man to bed, she laughed.

7 life It was an awful sound.

If she was pregnant, at least the baby's father thought they were married. Everyone did.

Except for that woman on the street.

didn't In an instant Cecilia had gone from a young lady in need of kindness

might fallen harlot who would soon be relegated to the fringes of society.

She supposed that was an awful lot to read into a stranger's expression. She knew how the world worked. If she was pregnant, her life would be ruined. She would never be accepted in polite society. If her friends back home wished to remain in contact, they would have to do so clandestinely lest their own good names be tarnished.

There had been a girl in Matlock a few years earlier who had found herself with child. Her name was Verity Markham, and Cecilia had only known her a little. Not much more than her name, really. No one knew who the father was, but it mattered not. As soon as word of Verity's condition got out to a neighbor, Cecilia's father had forbidden her to make contact. Cecilia had been stunned by his vehemence; her father never followed local gossip. But this, apparently, was an exception.

She had not defied his order. It had never occurred to her even to question it. But now she had to wonder—if Verity had been a friend, or even just something slightly more than an acquaintance—would Cecilia have been brave enough to disobey her father? She'd like to think she would, but she knew in her heart Verity would have had to have been a very close friend indeed for her to have done so. It wasn't that Cecilia was unkind; she just wouldn't have thought to behave differently.

Society had its dictates for a reason, or at least she'd always thought so. Perhaps it was more correct to say that she'd never really thought about the dictates of society. She'd simply followed them.

But now, faced with the specter of *being* that fallen girl . . .

She wished she had been kinder. She wished she had gone to Verity Markham's house and held her hand in friendship. She wished she had had a public show of support. Verity had long since left the village; her parents told everyone she was living with her great-aunt in Cornwall, but there wasn't a soul in Matlock who believed it. Cecilia had no idea where Verity had gone, or even if she'd been allowed to keep her child.

A sob burst from Cecilia's throat, so surprising and harsh that she had to block her mouth with her fist just to hold it in. She could bear this—*maybe* if she were the only one affected. But there would be a child. *Her* child. Cecilia did not know what it was to be a mother. She barely even knew what it was to have one. But she knew one thing: She could not subject her child to the stigma of illegitimacy if it was within her power to do otherwise.

She had already stolen so much from Edward—his trust, his very name

She could not steal his child, too. It would be the ultimate cruelty. He would not be a good father. Nay, he would be a *great* father. And he would love her more than any other man in the world.

But if there was a child . . . he must be told.

She made herself a vow. If she was pregnant, she would stay. She would tell Edward everything, and she would accept the consequences for the rest of her life.

But if she was not pregnant—and if her courses followed their usual schedule she would know within a week—then she would leave. Edward deserved to have his life back, the one he had planned for, not the one thrust upon him.

She would tell him everything, but she'd do it in a letter.

If this made her a coward, so be it. She doubted even Billie Bridgerton would be brave enough to deliver such news face-to-face.

It took several hours, but eventually Edward felt in sufficient control of himself to return to the Devil's Head.

To Cecilia.

Who wasn't his wife.

He'd long since stopped drinking, so he was sober, or nearly so. He had plenty of time to tell himself that he wasn't going to think about her tonight. Today was about Thomas. It had to be. If Edward's life was going to fall apart in a single day, he was damn well going to deal with his disasters one at a time.

He wasn't going to stew over what Cecilia had done or what she had said, and he definitely wasn't going to devote his energy to what she *hadn't* done.

He wasn't going to think about that. He *wasn't* thinking about it.

He wasn't.

He wanted to scream at her. He wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake her and then beg her to tell him why.

He wanted to wash his hands of her forever.

He wanted to bind her to him for eternity.

He wanted to bloody not *think* about this today.

Today he was going to mourn his friend. And he was going to help a woman who wasn't his wife mourn her brother. Because that was the kind of man he was.

Damn it.

would He reached room twelve, took a breath, and wrapped his fingers around
being door handle.

ould Maybe he couldn't bring himself to comfort Cecilia the way he ought
: sake at least he could give her the gift of a few days before he questioned her
friend, but they weren't brothers, and Edward knew his grief could not
possibly compare to Cecilia's. But he could imagine. If something hap
to Andrew . . . or Mary . . . or even George or Nicholas to whom he wa
nearly so close . . .

she'd He'd be decimated.

Besides, he had a lot to figure out. Cecilia wasn't going anywhere; r
but foolishness lay in the path of rash decisions.

on He opened the door, blinking against the sunlight that streamed out i
dim hall. *Every time*, he thought stupidly. Every time he opened this da
door he was surprised by the sunlight.

f "You're back," Cecilia said. She was sitting on the bed, propped up
the headboard with her legs stretched in front of her. She was still wea
her blue frock, which he supposed made sense, since it wasn't even ye
for dinner.

'd had He'd have to leave the room when she decided to change into that n
day. white cotton nightgown of hers. Surely she'd prefer privacy to disrobe

all Since she wasn't really his wife.

; one at There had been no proxy wedding ceremony. He had signed no paper
Cecilia was the sister of a dear friend and nothing more.

l said, But what did she have to gain by claiming that she was his wife? It i
said. no sense. She couldn't have known that he would lose his memory. Sh
tell the world she was married to an unconscious man, but she had to h
been aware that when he woke up her lies would be exposed.

and Unless she'd been taking a gamble . . . betting her future on the likel
that he *wouldn't* wake up. If he died while all the world thought they w
married . . .

It wasn't such a bad thing to be a Rokesby wife.

he His parents would have welcomed her when she returned to England
kind of knew of his friendship with Thomas. Hell, they'd met Thomas. Had hi
Christmas supper, even. They would have no reason to doubt Cecilia's
if she showed up claiming to have married their son.

But all of that was so calculating. It wasn't like her to be that way.

und the Was it?

He shut the door behind him, giving her a small nod before sitting down at their one chair so that he could remove his boots.

er “Do you need help?” she asked.

a dear “No,” he said, then looked down before he could see her swallow. That was what she did at times like these, when she wasn’t sure what she wanted to say. He used to love watching her, the delicate line of her throat, the graceful curve of her shoulder. Her lips pressed together when she swallowed—not quite like a kiss, but close enough that he always wanted to lean forward and transform it into one.

othing He didn’t want to watch this tonight.

“I—”

into the He looked up sharply at the sound of her voice. “What is it?”

anned But she just shook her head. “Never mind.”

He held her gaze, and he was glad that the light had gone flat with the approach of nightfall. If it was too dark to see her eyes, he couldn’t lose himself in them. He could pretend they weren’t the color of a shallow sea—when the light was still tinged with the orange stripes of dawn—of the unfurled leaf of spring.

unnish He worked off his boots, then rose to place them neatly in the space of his trunk. The room was heavy with silence, and he could feel Cecilia watching him as he went about his usual movements. Normally, he would be chatting with her, asking idle questions about her afternoon, or, if they spent the day together, commenting about what they’d seen and done.

nade might recall something that had amused her, and he would laugh, and then when he turned away to hang his coat in the wardrobe, he’d wonder about the odd tingle that fluttered through his body.

ave But he’d only wonder for a moment. Because it was obvious what it was.
lihood Happiness.

ere Love.

Thank God he’d never told her.

“I—”

l. They He looked up. There she was again, starting a sentence with a halting pronoun. “What is it, Cecilia?”

word She blinked at his tone. He had not been unkind, but he had been brutal. “I don’t know what to do with Thomas’s ring,” she said quietly.

Ah. So that was what she’d been about to say. He shrugged. “You can’t

put it on a chain, wear it as a necklace.”

own in She fingered the threadbare blanket beneath her. “I suppose.”

“You could save it for your children.”

Your children, he realized he’d said. Not *our* children.

hat Had she noticed the slip of his tongue? He didn’t think so. Her expression had not changed. She still looked pale, and numb, and exactly how one would expect a woman who’d just been informed of a beloved brother’s death to look.

Whatever Cecilia had lied about, it had not included her devotion to Thomas. That he knew was true.

All of a sudden he felt like the worst kind of heel. She was grieving, *hurt*.

He wanted to hate her. And maybe he would in time. But for now, he could do nothing but try to absorb her pain.

ie With a soul-weary sigh, he walked over to the bed and sat beside her. “I’m sorry,” he said, putting his arm around her shoulders.

sea, or Her body did not soften right away. She was stiff with grief and probably the first with confusion, too. He had not been playing the part of a loving husband and Lord knew, that was what he’d been until his meeting with Colonel Stubbs that morning.

ould be He tried to think of what might have happened if the news of Thomas’s death had not been accompanied by the revelation of Cecilia’s deception. What would he have done? How would he have reacted?

She He would have put his own grief aside.

hen, He would have comforted her, soothed her.

out the He would have held her until she slept, until all her tears were gone, then he would have laid a whispered kiss on her brow before pulling the blankets over her.

“How can I help you?” he asked roughly. It took everything in him to speak the words, and at the same time, it was the only thing he knew how to do.

“I don’t know.” Her voice was muffled; she’d turned her face into the crook of his shoulder. “Can you just . . . stay here? Sit next to me?”

g He nodded. He could do that. It hurt somewhere deep in his heart, but he could do that.

isque. They sat that way for hours. Edward had a tray brought up for supper, but neither of them ate. He left the room so she could change for bed, and she would turn to face the wall when he did the same.

It was as if their single night of passion had never happened.
All the fire, all the wonder . . . it was gone.

Suddenly he thought about how much he hated opening the door to the
room, how he never seemed to be prepared for the burst of light.

What a fool he'd been. What a damned fool.

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Chapter 18

This letter is for both of you. I am so glad you have each other. The world is a kinder place when one's burdens can be shared.

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO THOMAS HARCOURT AND EDWARD ROKESBY*

The next morning, Edward woke first.

He always woke first, but he'd never been quite so grateful for it before. It was past dawn, although not much, based on the hint of light filtering in around the curtains. Outside the window, New York was already coming to life, but the sounds of daily living were still intermittent and muted. A door creaked by, a rooster crowed. Every now and then, someone let out a soft greeting.

It was enough to pass through the thick walls of the inn, but not enough to wake a sound sleeper like Cecilia.

For most of his life Edward had used his sparsely populated morning to get up and attack the day. He had always found it remarkable how much more one could achieve without so many other people around.

But more recently—or more specifically, in the brief time since Cecilia entered his life—he found himself taking advantage of the early morning quiet to settle into his thoughts. It helped that the bed was so comfortable and warm.

And that Cecilia was there.

She gravitated to him in the night, and he loved taking a few minutes to enjoy her soft presence before sliding quietly out of bed to do his chores. Sometimes it was her arm, thrown over his chest and shoulders. Sometimes it was her foot, tucked curiously under his calf.

But he always left the bed before she awakened. He wasn't entirely

why. Maybe it had been because he wasn't prepared for her to see just how much he adored the closeness. Maybe he wasn't willing to admit just how much peace he found in these stolen moments.

And then there had been the day before, when he'd been so eager to get out and buy her some treats at the bakery.

That had worked out well.

This morning, though, he was the one with the wandering limbs. She curled up against him, her face burrowed near his chest. His arm held her in place, close enough so that he could feel her breath against his skin.

he He'd been stroking her hair in his sleep.

His hand stilled when he realized what he'd been doing, but he didn't pull away from her. He couldn't bring himself to. If he lay perfectly still, he could almost imagine that the day before had not happened. If he did not open his eyes, he could pretend that Thomas was alive. And his marriage to Cecilia . . . It was real. She belonged here in his arms, the delicate scent of her hair tickling his nose. If he rolled her over and took comfort in her back, it would be more than his right, it would be a blessing and a sacrament.

Instead, he was the man who'd seduced an innocent gentlewoman.

And she was the woman who'd made him that way.

wagon He wanted to hate her. Sometimes he thought he did. Most of the time, he wasn't sure.

ugh to Next to him, Cecilia began to stir. "Edward?" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

Was it a lie if he pretended to be asleep? Probably. But in the lexicon of recent falsehoods, it was pretty damned small.

ch He didn't make a conscious decision to feign slumber. It was nothing he was calculating as that. But when her whispered words blew softly across his face, something resentful woke up inside of him, and he didn't want to answer.

ng He just didn't.

ole. And then, after she made a sound of mild surprise and scooted herself into a more upright position, he started to feel an odd sense of power. She thought he was asleep.

s to She thought he was something he wasn't.

hes. It was the same thing she'd done to him, albeit on a much smaller scale. Sometimes she had withheld the truth, and in doing so, she had possessed all the power.

And maybe he was feeling vengeful. Maybe he was feeling wronged. But there was nothing particularly noble about his reaction, but he liked the

how one over on her, just as she had done to him.

low “What am I going to do?” he heard her murmur. She rolled onto her
facing away from him. But her body remained close.

hop And he still wanted her.

What would happen if he didn't tell her he'd regained his memory?
Eventually he'd have to reveal the truth, but there was no reason he ha
e was so immediately. Most of what he remembered had nothing to do with h
ier in anyway. There was the journey to Connecticut, made on horseback in
1. miserable cold rain. The heart-stopping moment when a farmer by the
of McClellan had caught him skulking around the Norwalk waterfront.
not pull Edward had reached for his weapon, but when two more men emerged
e could the shadows—McClellan's sons, as it happened—he quickly realized t
n his futility of resistance. He'd been marched at gunpoint and pitchfork to t
McClellans' barn, where he'd been tied up and held for weeks.

it of That was where he'd found the cat—the one he'd told Cecilia he th
body ithe remembered. The bedraggled little mop had been his only compani
about twenty-three hours of each day. The poor thing had been forced
listen to Edward's complete life history.

Multiple times.

ne he But the cat must have enjoyed Edward's storytelling prowess, becau
rewarded him with a multitude of dead birds and mice. Edward tried to
rou appreciate the gifts in the spirit they were given, and he always waited
the little fur ball wasn't watching before he kicked the dead animals to
n of the barn door.

That Farmer McClellan stepped on no fewer than six mangled roder
g so an added bonus. He'd proved oddly squeamish for a man who worked
his ear, animals all day, and indeed, his yelps and shrieks every time the tiny b
er her. crunched under his boots were some of Edward's few sources of
entertainment.

lf into But McClellan didn't bother to check on him in the barn very often.
hought Indeed, Edward never did figure out what he'd thought to do with him.
Ransom, probably. McClellan and his sons didn't seem overly devoted
Washington's cause. And they certainly weren't Loyalists.

ale. War could make mercenaries of men, especially those who were gre
ower. begin with.

l. In the end it had been McClellan's wife who had let Edward go. Not
ulling because of any great charm on Edward's part, although he had gone ou

way to be courtly and polite to the females of the family. No, Mrs. Mc side, told him she was sick and tired of sharing her family's food. She'd bor children and not a one had bothered to die in infancy. It was too many mouths to feed.

Edward had not pointed out that not a whole lot of food had gone in d to do mouth during his stay. Not when she was loosening the ropes that bou er, ankles.

a "Wait until dark before you go," she'd warned him. "And head east. name boys will all be in town."

. She didn't tell him why they were all heading to the village center, a . from didn't ask. He'd done as she'd instructed, and he'd gone east, even tho he was the exact opposite direction he needed to go. Traveling on foot and he night, the journey had taken a week. He'd crossed the sound to the Lor Island and made it all the way to Williamsburg without incident. And ight then . . .

on for Edward frowned until he remembered he was still feigning sleep. Bu to Cecilia didn't notice; she was still facing away from him.

What *had* happened in Williamsburg? That was where his memory v still hazy. He'd traded his coat to a fisherman for passage across the riv use it'd He'd got into the boat . . .

) The fisherman must have clobbered him over the head. To what end until Edward wasn't sure. He'd had nothing worth stealing.

ward Not even a coat.

He supposed he should be grateful he'd been left on the shores of K its was Bay. The fisherman could have easily slid him over the edge of the din with and into a watery grave. No one would have ever known what had hap ones to him.

He wondered how long his family would have waited to declare him . Then he berated himself for being so morbid. He was alive. He ought happy.

. He would be, he decided. But probably not this morning. He'd earne l to right.

"Edward?"

edy to Damn. His face must have been echoing the twisting journey of his thoughts. He opened his eyes.

t "Good morning," Cecilia said. But there was something slightly cau it of hisabout her tone. It wasn't shyness, or at least he didn't think so. He supj

Clellan it might stand to reason that she'd feel self-conscious and awkward none the less they had slept together. By all rights she should have felt self-conscious and awkward the morning before. She probably would have done if he had before she woke up.

to his "You were still asleep," she said. She smiled, although just a little. "and his never wake up after I do."

He gave a little shrug. "I was tired."

The "I expect so," she said softly. She looked down, and then away, and she sighed and said, "I should get up."

and he "Why?"

ugh it Her eyes made a few startled blinks, then she said, "I have things to

d by "Do you?"

ig "I—" She swallowed. "I must. I can't . . . not."

But what did she have to do if she wasn't searching for Thomas? He the only reason she'd come to New York.

it Edward waited, and it cut his heart to watch her face begin to crump she realized that all the things she'd been doing, all the errands and tasks they'd all been for the purpose of finding her brother.

was And now that purpose was gone.

ver. But, Edward reminded himself, she had also spent a great deal of time caring for him. Whatever her misdeeds, she had nursed him faithfully, hospital and out.

He probably owed her his life.

ip's He couldn't hate her. He wanted to, though.

ghy Cecilia's brow puckered. "Are you all right?"

pened "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. You had a funny expression."

1 dead. He didn't doubt it.

it to be Once it became obvious that he wasn't going to comment, Cecilia let a little sigh. It seemed to deflate her. "I should still get up. Even though I had that nothing to do."

Not nothing, he thought.

They were in bed. There were lots of things to do in bed.

"I can keep you busy," he murmured.

"What?"

tious But before she could get out more than a single word, he leaned over posed kissed her.

w that He hadn't thought about it. In fact, if he *had* stopped to think, he wo
is and have certainly told himself not to do it. That way lay madness, surely,
n't left right then it felt like the only thing he still possessed was his sanity.

You He kissed her because in that moment every instinct he possessed w
crying for it. Some primitive part of him still thought she was his wife,
he had every right to touch her this way.

then She'd told him they were married. She'd told him he'd said his vow
Edward had attended enough wedding ceremonies to know the
solemnization of marriage by heart. He knew what he would have said
With my body I thee worship.

do." He wanted to worship her.

He wanted to worship her so damned much.

His hand wrapped around the back of her head, pulling her against h
e was holding her in place.

But she didn't struggle. She didn't try to escape. Instead, her arms c
le as around him, and she kissed him back. She *knew* they weren't married,
ks— thought angrily, but she returned his passion with equal fervor. Her lip
eager, and she moaned with desire as her back arched, pressing her bo
more tightly against his.

ne The spark that had been lit within him raged out of control. He rolle
both in beneath him, and his lips moved roughly along her neck, down to the
neckline of that awful nightgown.

He wanted to bite the damned thing off.

"Edward!" she gasped, and all he could think was that she was *his*. S
said so, and who was he to deny it?

He wanted her under his dominion, in his thrall.

He shoved the hem of her nightgown up, growling with satisfaction
parted her legs for him. He might be a brute, but as his mouth found he
t out a breast through the thin cotton of her nightgown, her fingers were diggi
I have his shoulders hard enough to leave bruises. And the noises she was
making . . .

They were the noises of a woman who wanted more.

"Please," she begged.

"What do you want?" He looked up. Smiled like the devil.

She looked at him in confusion. "You know."

r and His head moved in a slow shake. "You have to say it." He was wear
smalls, but when he ground himself against her, he knew she could fee

uld hard length of his desire. “Say it,” he demanded.

and Her face colored, and he knew it wasn’t just from the passion. “I wa
you,” she cried. “You know it. You know it.”

as “Well, then,” he drawled. “You shall have me.”

that He yanked the nightgown over her head, leaving her bare in the mor
light. For a moment he forgot all that had happened. His rage . . . his
s. urgency . . . it seemed to melt in the face of her beauty. He could only
upon her, drinking in her perfection.

. “You are so lovely,” he whispered. His kisses turned soft—still des
but without the anger that had been fueling him before. He tasted her s
the salty-sweet essence of her as he traveled down her shoulder, along
planes of her chest.

im, He wanted all of her. He wanted to lose himself.

ame No, he wanted *her* to do so. He wanted to bring her to the excruciat
brink of pleasure, and then he wanted to send her over the edge.

he He wanted her to forget her very name.

s were He skimmed his palm along the tip of her breast, delighting as it pet
ly even with desire, but he did not stop there. His lips traveled to her ribs, to h
belly, to the gentle jut of her hipbone.

d her “Edward?”

He ignored her. He knew what he was doing. He knew she’d like it.
And he knew he’d die if he didn’t taste her.

She gasped his name again, this time with urgency. “What are you d
she had “Shhh . . .” he crooned, using his big hands to spread her legs wider.
squirmed, settling herself closer to his face. Her body seemed to know
wanted, even if her mind was in a quandary.

as she “You can’t look at me there,” she gasped.

er He kissed her just below her navel, just because he knew it would sh
ng into her. “You’re beautiful.”

“Not there!”

“I disagree.” He ran his fingers through her soft thatch of hair, skim
closer to her womanhood, parting her to his intimate gaze. Then he ble
softly on her tender skin.

She let out a soft shriek of pleasure.

He let one of his fingers draw a lazy circle on her skin. “Do you like

ing his “I don’t know.”

l the “Let me try one more thing,” he murmured, “then you can decide.”

“I don’t—*oh . . .*”

nt He smiled. Right up against her. Right where he’d licked her. “Do you want it?” he asked again.

And she whispered, “Yes.”

ning He licked her again, this time with a broad, hungry stroke, his body humming with satisfaction as her hips bucked off the mattress. “You hold still,” he purred, knowing he was tormenting her. “If you want to be gazed at properly.”

perate, “I can’t,” she gasped.

kin, “I think you can.” But just to be helpful, he moved his hands to the crease between her torso and her legs, where he could increase the pressure and make her firm.

ng Then he kissed her. He kissed her like he kissed her mouth, hard and deep. He drank her in, and he gloried in the shivers and shakes of her body beneath him. She was drunk on desire.

She was drunk on him. And he loved it.

bled “Do you want this?” he murmured, lifting his head so that he could see her face.

And also so that he could torture her. Just a little.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes! Don’t stop.”

He let his fingers take the place of his mouth, tickling her while he spoke maddening words. “How much do you want it?”

loing?” She didn’t answer, but she didn’t have to. He could see the confusion on her face.

what it “How much, Cecilia?” he asked. He kissed her again, but only briefly enough to flick her nub with his tongue.

“So much!” she practically screamed.

lock That was more like it.

He went back to work, worshipping her with his mouth.

He worshipped her so damned much.

ming He kissed her until she fell apart beneath him, her body rising from the bed with almost enough force to push him away. She grabbed his head with frantic fingers, clamped her legs around him like a vise.

w “Do you want it?” She held him there until she was through with him, and he loved every moment. When she finally went limp, he moved above her, propping himself up on his elbows as he gazed down upon her. Her eyes were closed, and she shivered in the morning air.

“Are you cold?” he whispered. She made a tiny nod, and he covered her like sweat-sheened body with his own.

Her head lolled back at the contact, as if the weight of him had been final pleasure before oblivion. He kissed along the taut column of her neck down to the indentation of her collarbone. She tasted like desire.

eed to *Her* desire.
do this His, too.

He reached between them to unfasten his undergarments. It seemed sacrilege to have anything between them, even a thin layer of linen. Within mere seconds it joined her nightgown on the side of the bed, and he settled himself and held down into the warm cradle of her body.

He poised at her entrance, held himself there, and then pressed forward deep. until he was home.

He forgot everything. Nothing existed except this moment, in this bed he moved without thought, acted with nothing but instinct. She moved to a steady rhythm, her hips meeting his with each thrust. The pleasure built inside her sharp and deep it could almost be pain, and then suddenly she flinched with panic in her eyes she said, “Wait!”

He jerked back, and something like fear raced through his heart. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, but we have to stop. I—I can’t be pregnant.”

He stared at her, trying to make sense of her words.

“Remember?” She swallowed miserably. “We talked about it.”

He remembered. It had meant something completely different before, only though. She’d said she didn’t want to be pregnant on the journey back to England. And she didn’t want to have a baby in New York.

What she’d really meant was she *couldn’t* have a baby. Couldn’t allow herself to have one. Not without a marriage license.

For a moment he thought about denying her plea. He could finish in her, try to create a new life.

That would make this marriage real.

But then she whispered, “Please.”

He pulled out. It went against every instinct in his body, but he did it. He rolled onto his side, away from her, and focused all of his energy on himself remembering how to breathe.

“Edward?” She touched his shoulder.

He shook her off. “I need—I need a moment.”

l her “Yes, of course.” She edged away from him, her nervous movement rocking the mattress until he heard her feet land on the floor.

the “Is . . . Is there something I can do?” she asked hesitantly. Her eyes
neck, his manhood, still jutting ruthlessly out from his body. “To help?”

He thought about that.

“Edward?”

a Her breath whispered through the silence, and he was amazed that h
hear her over the pounding of his own heart.

ithin “I’m sorry,” she said.

ack “Don’t apologize,” he snapped. He didn’t want to hear it. He rolled
back and took a deep breath. He was still hard as a rock. He’d been so
ard to spilling inside of her, and now . . .

He swore.

ed. He “Maybe I should go,” she said hastily.

his “That would probably be a wise idea.” His tone was not gentle, but i
e, so the best he could manage. He might have to finish himself with his har
, and he was quite certain this would not suit her tender sensibilities.

He couldn’t believe he still cared about her tender sensibilities.

id I She dressed quickly and shot out of the room like a bolt, but by then
urgency of his situation had diminished, and there seemed no point in t
it.” to see to himself.

Honestly, it would have felt pathetic.

e, He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, leaning his ell
to on his knees and his chin in his hands. His entire life, he’d known wha
to He wasn’t perfect, not by any means. But the path between right and w
had always been clearly defined.

ow He put his country before family.

His family before self.

side of And where had that got him? In love with a mirage.

Married to a ghost.

No, *not* married. He needed to remember that. He was not married to
Cecilia Harcourt. What had just happened . . .

t. He She was right about one thing. It couldn’t happen again. At least not
mply they wed for real.

He *would* marry her. He had to, or so he told himself. He didn’t
particularly wish to examine the corner of his heart that *wanted* to mar
It was the same corner that had been so desperately glad to *be* married

s That little corner of his heart . . . It was gullible, far too trusting. He
have particular faith in its judgment, especially when another little voice
fell on telling him to wait, take his time.

Let her squirm for a few days.

A frustrated shout tore from his throat, and he jammed his fingers in
hair, pulling hard. This was not his finest hour.

e could With another groan, he heaved himself up and off the bed, stalking
to the wardrobe to fetch his clothing. Unlike Cecilia, he *did* have things
today.

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His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten in nearly a day.
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o

: until

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to her.

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For today, at least.

Chapter 19

We are finally seeing the first signs of spring, and I am thankful. Please give Captain Rokesby one of these crocuses. I hope I pressed them correctly. I thought you both would enjoy a small piece of England.

—FROM CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS

Later that morning, Cecilia took a walk down to the harbor. Edward had told her at breakfast that he was meeting with Colonel Stubbs, and he did not know how long he would be busy. She'd been left to her own devices, possibly for the entire day. She'd gone back up to their room with the intention of finishing the book of poems she'd been plodding through the past week, but after only a few minutes it was clear that she needed to get outside.

The room felt too tight, the walls too close, and every time she tried to focus on the typeset words on the page, her eyes filled with tears.

She was raw.

For so many reasons.

And so she decided a walk was in order. The fresh air would do her good and she'd be far less likely to spontaneously burst into tears if there were no witnesses.

Goal for today: Don't cry in public.

It seemed manageable.

The weather was very fine, not too hot, with a light breeze coming off the water. The air smelled of salt and seaweed, which was a pleasant surprise considering how often the wind carried on it the stench of the prison ship that moored just a little ways off the coast.

Cecilia had been in New York long enough to have learned a little

something about the patterns of the port. Ships arrived almost daily, but rarely did they carry civilian travelers. Most were merchant vessels, bringing in much-needed supplies for the British Army. A few of these had been chartered to carry paying passengers; that was how Cecilia had made it across from Liverpool. The *Lady Miranda*'s main purpose had been to bring foodstuffs and armaments for the soldiers stationed in New York. But she had also borne fourteen passengers. Needless to say, Cecilia had gotten to know them quite well on the five-week voyage. They'd had little in common except that they were all making a dangerous voyage across a temperate ocean into an embattled coastal area of a landmass at war.

ul.

I

all

In other words, they were all plumb crazy.

It almost made her smile. She still couldn't quite believe she'd had the gumption to make the crossing. She'd been fueled by desperation, to boot, and she hadn't had many other options, but still . . .

She was proud of herself. For that, at least.

There were several ships in the harbor that day, including one that Cecilia had heard belonged to the same fleet as the *Lady Miranda*. The *Rhiannon* was called, and it had journeyed to New York from Cork, in Ireland. The wife of one of the officers who took his supper at the Devil's Head had been in on it. Cecilia had not met her personally, but her arrival in town had been the source of much gossip and good cheer. With all the gossip that rang through the dining room each night, it would have been impossible not to have heard of it.

She wandered closer to the docks, using the tall mast of the *Rhiannon* as her North Star. She knew the way, of course, but it felt almost whimsical to be led there using her primitive navigation. How long had the *Rhiannon* been in New York? Not yet a week, if she recalled correctly, which meant that she would probably remain at dock for at least a few more days before heading back across the ocean. The holds needed to be unloaded and then loaded with new cargo. To say nothing of the sailors, who surely deserved time on land after a long voyage.

As Cecilia reached the harbor, the world seemed to open up like a spring flower. Bright midday light poured forth, unhindered by the three- and four-story buildings that had been blocking the sun. There was something about the water that made the earth seem endless, even if the docks weren't cut off from the open ocean. It was easy to see Brooklyn in the distance, and Cecilia could see how quickly a ship could navigate through the bay and out to the Atlantic.

it very It was really rather pretty, she thought, even if the tableau was far to
ing different from home to ever etch itself permanently on her heart. But si
n fitted liked it all the same, especially the way the water whipped up into foar
om crested waves, then slapped the retaining wall like an impatient nanny.
tuffs The ocean was gray here, but out over the horizon it would darken to
o deep, fathomless blue. Some days—the turbulent ones—it had even lo
/ most green.

ion Another little fact she'd never have known if she had not ventured fi
mental her safe little home in Derbyshire. She was glad she'd come. Truly, sh
She would be leaving with a broken heart—for more reasons than one—
would be worth it. She was a better person—no, she was a *stronger* pe
he A better person would not have lied for so long.

e sure, Still, it was a good thing she'd come. For herself, and maybe even fo
Edward. His fever had risen dangerously high two days before he wok
She'd remained by his side throughout the night, placing cooling cloth
ecilia his skin. She would never know if she'd actually saved his life, but if s
ion, it then this all would have been worth it.

he She had to hold on to that notion. It would keep her company for the
l sailed her life.

been It was then that she realized she was already thinking in terms of lea
g She glanced down to her waist. She could be pregnant; she'd not yet h
t to proof otherwise. But it was unlikely, and she knew she had to prepare l
for the logistics of travel.

n as Hence her trip to the harbor. She had not consciously considered wh
cal to feet were leading her to the water, but now, as she watched two
n been longshoremen loading crates into the hold of the *Rhiannon*, it was quit
at it obvious that she was there to make inquiries.

ding As for what she'd do once she was home . . . She supposed she'd ha
ed with plenty of time in her ship's cabin to figure that out.

dry “Good sir!” she called out to the man who was directing the cargo. “
do you leave?”

oring His bushy brows rose at her question, then he cocked his head toward
four- ship and said, “You mean the *Rhiannon*?”

bout “Yes. Do you head back to Britain?” She knew that many ships deto
quite at the West Indies, although she thought they usually did so on the way to
a knew America.

itic. “To Ireland,” he confirmed. “Cork. We leave Friday evening, if the

o weather holds.”

he “Friday,” she murmured in response. It was only a few days away. “
n- you carry passengers?” she asked, even though she knew that they had
so for the westward voyage.

o a “We do,” he said with a brusque nod. “Are you looking for a spot?”
oked “I might be.”

This seemed to amuse him. “You *might* be? Shouldn’t you know by
rom Cecilia did not dignify this with an answer. Instead she employed a
e was. stare—the sort she’d once thought befitting of the wife of the son of ar
—but it and waited until the man jerked his head toward another fellow farther
rson. embankment. “Ask Timmins. He’ll know if we have space.”

“Thank you,” Cecilia said, and she made her way to a pair of men w
or were standing close to the bow of the ship. One had his hands on his hi
e up. while the other gestured toward the anchor. Their stances did not indic
s on their conversation was urgent, so as Cecilia approached, she called out
he had, “Your pardon, sirs. Is one of you Mr. Timmins?”

The one who’d been pointing toward the anchor doffed his hat. “I ar
e rest of ma’am. How may I help you?”

“The gentleman over there”—she motioned back to where the cargo
iving. being loaded—“mentioned that you might have room for another passe

ad “Man or woman?” he asked.

herself “Woman.” She swallowed. “Me.”

He nodded. Cecilia decided she liked him. His eyes were honest.

y her “We’ve room for one woman,” he told her. “It would be in a shared

e “Of course,” she said. She doubted she could afford a private cabin,
anyway. Even a shared one was going to be a stretch, but she’d been ca
to keep enough funds to pay for her passage home. It had been difficul
ve had almost nothing to live on before Edward woke up. She’d never bee
hungry in all her life, but she’d kept herself to one meal per day.

‘When “Might I know the cost, sir?” she asked.

He told her, and her heart sank. Or maybe it soared. Because the fare
d the almost one and one half times what she’d paid to come to New York. A
that was more than she had saved. She didn’t know why it was more
ured to expensive to sail east than west. Probably the ships charged more simp
o North because they could. The people of New York were loyal to the crown;
imagined that passengers tended to be more desperate to leave New Yo
than to arrive.

But it didn't matter, because she didn't have enough.

Do "Do you want to purchase passage?" Mr. Timmins asked.

done "Ehrm, no," she said. "Not yet, anyway."

But maybe on the next ship. If she siphoned off a bit of money every Edward gave her some for shopping . . .

She sighed. She was already a liar. She might as well be a thief, too. now?"

cool Thomas's trunk was heavy, so Edward had made arrangements to have
1 earl—transported to the Devil's Head by wagon. He knew there were plenty
up the people in the front room to help him get it up the stairs.

When he reached room twelve, though, he saw that Cecilia was not
ho He was not entirely surprised; she hadn't said anything about going out
ips breakfast, but he couldn't imagine that she'd want to hole herself up in
ate that room all day. Still, it felt rather anticlimactic, sitting here in the room
, her brother's trunk. She was the reason he'd gone to get it, after all. He
n, imagined something of a heroic return, brandishing Thomas's trunk like
hard-won prize.

Instead, he sat on the bed, staring at the damned thing taking up half
o was available floor space.

anger?" Edward had already seen the contents. Back at the army office, Colc
Stubbs had thrown open the lid before Edward could even stop to think
they were invading someone's privacy.

"We need to make sure everything is there," Stubbs had said. "Do y
cabin."know what he kept in it?"

"Some," Edward said, even though he was better acquainted with
areful Thomas's trunk than he had any right to be. He'd hunted through it on
t; she'd many occasions, searching out Cecilia's letters so that he could reread
en so words.

Sometimes he didn't even do that. Sometimes he'd just stared at her
handwriting.

e was Sometimes that was all he'd needed.

And God, he was such a fool.

A fool? Much worse.

ly Because when Stubbs had opened the trunk and asked Edward to ins
Cecilia the contents, the first thing his eyes fell upon was the miniature of Cec
ork The one he now realized didn't look like her. Or maybe it did, if one d
really *know* her. It did not capture the life in her smile, or the extraordi

color of her eyes.

He wasn't sure a paint existed that could capture that color.

The colonel had returned to his desk, and when Edward looked up, it was clear that his attention was on the documents before him and not the trunk across the room.

Edward slid the miniature into his pocket.

And that was where it remained, even when Cecilia returned from her walk. In the pocket of his coat, which hung neatly in the wardrobe.

So now Edward was a fool and a thief. And while he felt like an ass, he couldn't bring himself to regret his actions.

"You got Thomas's trunk," Cecilia softly exclaimed when she entered the room. Her hair was a little mussed from the wind, and he was momentarily mesmerized by a thin tendril that fell over her cheek. It curled into a soft blond wave, holding far more curl than it did when her hair was fully combed.

How nice to defy gravity.

And what an odd, nonsensical thought.

He rose from the bed, clearing his throat as he pulled himself to attention. "Colonel Stubbs was able to retrieve it quickly."

She moved toward the trunk with a strange hesitancy. She reached out and paused before her hand touched the latch. "Did you look?"

"I did," he said with a nod. "Colonel Stubbs asked me to make sure everything was all in order."

"And was it?"

How did he answer such a question? If it had been all in order, it was now, not with the miniature in his pocket.

"As far as I could tell," he finally told her.

She swallowed, the gesture nervous and sad and wistful all at once.

He wanted to hold her. He almost did; he stepped forward before he realized what he was doing, then he stopped.

He could not forget what she had done.

No, he could not *allow* himself to forget.

It wasn't the same thing.

And yet when he watched her, standing in front of her dead brother's portrait with hopelessly sad eyes, he reached out and took her hand.

"You should open it," he said. "I think it will help."

She nodded gratefully and slid her fingers from his so that she could lift the lid with both hands. "His clothes," she murmured, touching the white

shirt that lay neatly folded at the top. "What should I do with them?"

Edward didn't know.

"They won't fit you," she mused. "He wasn't as broad in the shoulders. And yours are more finely tailored, anyway."

"I'm sure we can find someone in need," Edward said.

"Yes. That's a good idea. He would like that." Then she let out a little laugh, shaking her head as she brushed that rebellious bit of hair from her eyes. "What am I saying? He wouldn't have cared."

Edward blinked in surprise.

"I love my—" She cleared her throat. "I *loved* my brother, but he didn't give much thought to the plight of the poor. He did not think ill of them. I hastened to add. "I just don't think he thought of them at all."

Edward nodded, mostly because he didn't know how else to respond. He was probably guilty of the same sin of indifference. Most men were.

"But it will make *me* feel better to find a home for his shirts," Cecilia said firmly.

"He would like that," Edward said, then clarified, "Making you happy."

She gave him a wry almost-smile, then turned back to the trunk. "I know. But we'll have to find someone to take his uniform, as well. Someone will do it." She ran her hand along Thomas's coat, her slim fingers pale against the scarlet wool. "When I was in hospital with you, there were other soldiers. I . . ." She looked down, almost as if paying her respects. "I sometimes helped. Not as much as I should have done, I'm sure, but I didn't want to leave you unattended."

Edward started to thank her, but before he could, she'd straightened her shoulders and was continuing in a brisker voice. "I saw their uniforms. Several were beyond repair. So, surely, someone will need it."

Her words held a hint of a question, so Edward nodded. Soldiers were expected to keep their uniforms in perfect condition, no easy feat considering the amount of time they were traipsing through the muddy countryside. And being shot at.

Bullet holes were a nuisance to mend, but bayonet wounds were the absolute devil. In skin as well as fabric, he supposed, but he focused on the fabric, since it was the only way to hold on to one's sanity.

It was kind of her to give Thomas's uniform to another soldier. Many families wanted it back, a tangible symbol of heroism and duty.

Edward swallowed and stepped back, suddenly needing to put a little

between them. He did not understand her. And he hated that he could not maintain his rage. It had been only a day. Just over twenty-four hours since his memory had returned in a rush of color and light and words and places, none of which had included Cecilia Harcourt.

She wasn't his wife. And he should be angry. He had a right to be angry. But his questions—the ones beating a relentless tattoo in his mind—couldn't ask them now. Not when she was lovingly unpacking her brother's trunk. Not when she turned her face away, trying to hide the swi-
hand at her tears.

She set Thomas's coat to the side, then delved deeper. "Do you think you saved my letters?"

"I know he did."

She glanced up briefly. "Oh, of course. You've been through the trunk already."

It wasn't how he knew, but she didn't need to know that.

Edward leaned against the edge of the bed and watched as she continued her exploration of Thomas's belongings. At some point she had dropped her knees for easier access, and now she was going through it all with a need on her face that he'd never thought to see again.

Or maybe it was that he'd never thought he'd want to see it so bloody badly.

He was still in love with her.

Against all better judgment, against his own damned sanity, he was still in love with her.

He sighed.

She looked up. "Is something wrong?"

Yes.

"No."

But she'd turned back to the trunk before he answered the question.

He wondered . . . if she had not, if she had been looking at his face . . .

Would she have seen the truth in his eyes?

He almost sighed again.

She made a curious *hmmm*, and he found himself leaning forward to get a better look at what she was doing. "What is it?" he asked.

She frowned as she delved her hands into the neatly folded shirts and breeches. "I don't see the miniature."

Edward's lips parted, but he did not speak. He meant to. He'd thought

not was about to, but he could not put voice to words.

since He wanted that damned painting. Call him a tyrant, call him a thief.
aces— wanted it for himself.

“Perhaps he took it with him to Connecticut,” Cecilia said. “I suppose
angry. there is something nice about that.”

“You were always in his thoughts,” Edward said.

her’s She looked up. “It’s very sweet of you to say.”

ier “It’s the truth. He talked about you so much I felt that I knew you.”

Something in her eyes turned warm, even as they took on a faraway

nk he “Isn’t that funny,” she said softly. “I felt the same way about you.”

He wondered if he should tell her now that he’d got back his memor
was the right thing to do; by everything that made him a gentleman, he
nk this to be true.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, neatly puncturing his thoughts. She hopped to
feet. “I nearly forgot. I never showed you my miniature of Thomas, did

ued There was no need for Edward to respond; she’d already started rifli
ed to through her one and only satchel. It was large, but still, Edward was ar
a smile she’d made the voyage to New York with so few belongings.

“Here it is,” she said, pulling out the small cameo. She peered down
ly with a wistful smile, then held it out. “What do you think?”

“I can tell it’s the same artist,” he said without thinking.

Her chin drew back with some surprise. “You remember the other o
still in well?”

“Thomas liked to show it to people.” It wasn’t a lie; Thomas did like
show the miniature of Cecilia to his friends. But that wasn’t why Edwa
remembered it so well.

“Did he?” Her eyes lit with happiness. “That’s very . . . I don’t know
it is. Sweet, I suppose. It’s nice to know he missed me.”

He Edward nodded, not that she was looking at him. She’d returned to h
task, carefully examining her brother’s effects. Edward felt very odd an
awkward, very much a spectator.

He didn’t like it.

o get a “Hmmm, what’s this?” she murmured.

He leaned forward for a better look.

d She pulled out a little purse, and twisted around to face Edward. “W
he have kept money in his trunk?”

ht he Edward had no idea. “Open it and see.”

He She did, and to her obvious surprise several gold coins tipped out. “Goodness,” she exclaimed, looking down at the windfall in her palm.

se It wasn’t much, at least not to Edward, but he remembered how pressed funds she’d been when he had woken up. She’d tried to hide the extent of poverty, but she wasn’t—or at least he hadn’t thought she was—an accomplished liar. She’d let slip little details, like how she’d been eating one meal per day. And he knew of the boardinghouse from which she’d rented a room; it was barely one step above sleeping on the street. He look. shuddered to think what would have become of her if she had not found in hospital.

y. It Maybe they’d saved each other.

he knew Cecilia was strangely quiet, still staring down at the gold in her hand as if it were something mysterious.

her Perplexing.

l I?” “It’s yours,” he said, figuring she was trying to decide what to do with

ng She nodded absently, gazing at the coins with the most peculiar expression

nazed “Put it with the rest of your money,” he suggested. He knew she had little. She kept it carefully tucked away in her coin purse. He’d seen her counting it twice, and both times she’d looked up with a sheepish expression at it when she saw that he was watching her.

ne that “Yes, of course,” she murmured, and she rose awkwardly to her feet and opened the wardrobe and reached into her bag. He presumed she’d pulled out the coin purse, but he couldn’t really see what she was doing with her hand e to him.

ard “Are you all right?” he asked.

v what “Yes,” she said, perhaps a touch more suddenly than he would have expected. “I just . . .” She turned partway back around. “I did not think Thomas would have money in his trunk. It means I have . . .”

ner Edward waited, but she did not finish the sentence. “It means you have nd what?” he finally prodded.

She blinked at him, and an odd beat of silence passed before she answered. “It’s nothing. I just have more than I thought I did.”

That seemed to Edward the very definition of obvious.

“I think . . .”

ould He waited, but her words trailed off as she turned and looked at the trunk. A few shirts lay on the floor next to it, and Thomas’s red coat was draped over the side, but other than that, she’d left everything in place.

Oh my “I’m tired,” she said abruptly. “I think . . . Would you mind if I lie d
He stood. “Of course not.”

sed for She looked down, but he caught a glimpse of unbearable sadness on
of her face as she brushed past him and curled up on the bed, drawing her kn
until she curved away from him like a sickle.

ng only He stared at her shoulders. He didn’t know why, except that they we
d obviously tight with sorrow. She wasn’t crying, or at least he didn’t thi
was, but her breathing was hitched, as if it took some effort to keep her
d him under regulation.

He reached out a hand, even though he was too far away to touch he
he couldn’t stop himself. It was instinct. His heart beat, his lungs drew
l as if and if this woman was in pain, he reached out to comfort her.

But he didn’t take the final step. His hand fell back against his side,
stood like a statue, helpless against his own tumult.

ith it. From the moment he saw her, he’d wanted to protect her. Even whe
ression. was so weak he could barely walk unassisted, he’d wanted to be her st

l a But now, when she finally needed him, he was terrified.

r Because if he allowed himself to be strong for her, to shoulder her b
ession the way he so desperately needed to do, he would lose himself comple
Whatever thread still hung inside him, keeping him from loving her
: She completely, it would snap.

led out And his heartbreak would be complete.

back to He whispered her name, softly, almost daring her to hear him.

“I think I should be alone,” she said, never once turning to face him.

“No, you shouldn’t,” he said roughly, and he laid himself down behi
holding her tight.

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wered.

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“I’m tired,” she said abruptly. “I think . . . Would you mind if I lie down?”
He stood. “Of course not.”

She looked down, but he caught a glimpse of unbearable sadness on her face as she brushed past him and curled up on the bed, drawing her knees up until she curved away from him like a sickle.

He stared at her shoulders. He didn’t know why, except that they were so obviously tight with sorrow. She wasn’t crying, or at least he didn’t think she was, but her breathing was hitched, as if it took some effort to keep herself under regulation.

He reached out a hand, even though he was too far away to touch her. But he couldn’t stop himself. It was instinct. His heart beat, his lungs drew breath, and if this woman was in pain, he reached out to comfort her.

But he didn’t take the final step. His hand fell back against his side, and he stood like a statue, helpless against his own tumult.

From the moment he saw her, he’d wanted to protect her. Even when he was so weak he could barely walk unassisted, he’d wanted to be her strength. But now, when she finally needed him, he was terrified.

Because if he allowed himself to be strong for her, to shoulder her burden the way he so desperately needed to do, he would lose himself completely. Whatever thread still hung inside him, keeping him from loving her completely, it would snap.

And his heartbreak would be complete.

He whispered her name, softly, almost daring her to hear him.

“I think I should be alone,” she said, never once turning to face him.

“No, you shouldn’t,” he said roughly, and he laid himself down behind her, holding her tight.

Chapter 20

Father has been especially irritable lately. But then, so have I. The month of March is always cold and damp, but it's been worse than usual this year. He takes a nap each afternoon. I think I might be the same.

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS (LETTER NEVER RECEIVED)*

Two days later, Cecilia bled.

She'd known it was coming. Her courses were always preceded by a day of lethargy, a bit of cramping in her belly, and a feeling like she'd eaten too much salt.

And yet she'd told herself that maybe she was misreading the signs. She felt tired because she *was* tired. She wasn't sleeping well. How was she to rest properly with Edward on the other side of the bed?

As for the cramping, they'd been serving pie all week at the Devil's Den. They'd told her there were no strawberries in the filling, but could she trust the sixteen-year-old barmaid who couldn't keep her eyes off the blue-clad soldiers? There could have been a strawberry in that pie. Even a single seed could explain Cecilia's discomfort.

And as for the salt, she had no earthly clue. She was near the ocean, but she was breathing the stuff in.

But then she bled. And as she carefully washed out her rags, she tried to examine the spark of pain in her chest that came with the realization that she was not with child.

She was relieved. Surely she was relieved. A child would have meant she would have to trap Edward into marriage. And while a very large part of her would always dream of a cottage in Kent with adorable blue-eyed

children, she was coming to realize that this dream had even less of a reality than she'd thought.

It was hard to imagine that a fake marriage could have a honeymoon period, but nothing had been the same since they had received word of Thomas's death. Cecilia was not an idiot; she knew that they were both grieving, but she did not understand how that alone might account for an intractably awkward chasm that had cracked the world beneath them.

he
an
do
The thing about Edward was, it had all seemed so *easy*. As if she'd been waiting all of her life to understand who she really was, and then, when he opened his eyes—no, it was later, with their first real conversation—she *knew*. It was bizarre, since her entire time with him had been built upon a lie, but she'd felt more honestly herself in his company than at any other time in her life.

It wasn't the sort of thing one even realized right away. Maybe not until Thomas was gone.

And it *was* gone. Even when he'd tried to comfort her after she'd unpacked Thomas's trunk, something had been off. She had been unable to relax her arms, probably because she knew that this too was a lie. He'd thought she was upset about her brother, but what had really pierced her heart was the realization that she now had enough money for a ticket on the *Rhiannon*.

And now that she knew she wasn't pregnant . . .

Maybe
s she
Head.
really
rightly
ingle
It was Friday. And with the sky a carpet of unending blue, which meant the *Rhiannon* would be sailing away that evening.

She walked over to the window and balanced her hip on the ledge. There was a slight breeze to the air, a blessed addition to the humidity that had settled over the region. She watched the leaves ruffling in the trees. They weren't many of them; this part of New York was fairly well built up. She really liked the way one side of the leaves was darker than the other, like she was watching the colors flip back and forth, dark to light, green to green.

It was Friday. And with the sky a carpet of unending blue, which meant the *Rhiannon* would be sailing away that evening.

Maybe
She should be on it.

She had no business remaining in New York. Her brother was dead, buried up in the woods of Westchester. She couldn't go visit the grave. It was too safe, and anyway, according to Colonel Stubbs there was no proper memorial nothing with Thomas's name and age, nothing proclaiming him a beloved brother or dutiful son.

part of
She thought back to that awful day when she'd received the letter from General Garth. Which had turned out to be from Colonel Stubbs, actually

asis in that mattered little. She had just lost her father, and in the moments before she opened the missive, she'd been so terrified. She remembered exactly what she had been thinking—that if Thomas was dead, there would be no one left in the world whom she loved.

Now Thomas *was* dead. And there was no one else in the world she allowed to love.

Edward would eventually regain his memory. She was certain of that. Already the bits and pieces were beginning to sift themselves out. And she knew he did . . .

It was better if she told him the truth before he discovered it himself. He had a life back in England, one that did not include her. He had a family who adored him and a girl he was supposed to marry. A girl who, like him, was an aristocrat through and through. And when he remembered the inimitable Billie Bridgerton—he'd remember why they made such a match.

Cecilia pushed herself away from the window ledge, grabbing her coat and purse before she headed out the door. If she was leaving tonight, she had a great deal to do, and all of it needed to be done before Edward returned to the army headquarters.

First and foremost, she needed to purchase her passage. Then she needed to pack, not that that would take very long. And finally, she needed to write Edward a letter.

She needed to let him know that he was free.

She would leave, and he could get on with his life, the one he was meant to lead. The one he *wanted* to lead. He might not realize this yet, but he would, and she didn't want to be anywhere near him when that happened. There were only so many ways a heart could break. Seeing his face when he realized he belonged with someone else?

That might do her in entirely.

She checked the pocket watch Edward kept on the table to serve as a time-keeper. She still had time. He'd gone out earlier that morning—a meeting with Colonel Stubbs, he'd said, one that would last all day. But she needed to get ready for moving.

This was good, she told herself as she hurried down the stairs. This was the right. She'd found the money, and she wasn't pregnant. Clearly they were meant to be.

Goal for today: Believe in fate.

fore But when she reached the front room of the inn, she heard her name
ly out in urgent tones.

no one “Mrs. Rokesby!”

was She turned. Fate, it seemed, looked an awful lot like the innkeeper a
Devil’s Head.

it. He’d come out from behind his counter and was walking toward her
strained expression. Behind him was a finely attired woman.

when The innkeeper stepped to the side. “This great lady was hoping to see
Captain Rokesby.”

. Cecilia tilted to the side to better see the woman, who was still some
a obscured behind the innkeeper’s portly form. “May I help you, ma’am
io, like said with a polite curtsy. “I am Captain Rokesby’s wife.”

her— Strange how easily the lie still slipped from her tongue.

a good “Yes,” the woman said briskly, motioning for the innkeeper to be go

The innkeeper quickly complied.

oin “I am Mrs. Tryon,” the lady said. “Captain Rokesby’s godmother.”

ad a When Cecilia was twelve years old, she’d been forced to play the pa
l from Mary in her church’s Nativity play. This had required her to stand in fr
all her friends and neighbors and recite no fewer than twenty lines of p
eded all of which had been religiously drummed into her by the vicar’s wife
write when the time came to open her mouth and announce that she was not
married and didn’t understand how she could be with child, she froze.

mouth opened, but her throat closed, and it didn’t matter how many tin
eant to poor Mrs. Pentwhistle hissed the lines at her from offstage. Cecilia jus
ould, couldn’t seem to move the words from her ears to her head to her mou

re That was the memory that blazed through Cecilia’s head as she stare
the face of the estimable Margaret Tryon, wife of the Royal Governor
York, and godmother to the man Cecilia was pretending to be married

This was much worse.

heir “Mrs. Tryon,” Cecilia finally managed to squeak out. She curtsied. (
ig with deep.)

to get “You must be Cecilia,” Mrs. Tryon said.

was “I am. I . . . ah . . .” Cecilia looked helplessly around at the tables of
half-filled dining room. This was not her home, and thus she was not tl
eren’t hostess here, but it seemed like she ought to offer to entertain. Finally,
pasted as bright a smile as she could manage on her face and said, “Wo
you like to sit down?”

, called Mrs. Tryon's expression flicked from distaste to resignation, and with a little jerk of her head, she motioned for Cecilia to join her at a table at the side of the room.

At the "I came to see Edward," Mrs. Tryon said once they were settled.

"Yes," Cecilia replied carefully. "That is what the innkeeper said."

With a "He was ill," Mrs. Tryon stated.

"He was. Although not so much ill as injured."

"And has he regained his memory?"

"No."

What Mrs. Tryon's eyes narrowed. "You are not taking advantage of him, are you?" she

"No!" Cecilia exclaimed, because she wasn't. Or rather, she wouldn't soon. And because the thought of taking advantage of Edward's generosity and honor burned like a poker in her heart.

"My godson is very dear to me."

"He is dear to me, too," Cecilia said softly.

Part of "Yes, I imagine he is."

Front of Cecilia had no idea how to interpret that.

Rose, Mrs. Tryon began to remove her gloves with military precision, pausing only to say, "Were you aware that he had an arrangement with a young man in Kent?"

Her Cecilia swallowed. "Do you mean Miss Bridgerton?"

ness Mrs. Tryon looked up, and a grudging flash of admiration—possibly tinged with Cecilia's honesty—passed through her eyes. "Yes," she said. "It was not a formal engagement, but it was expected."

And into "I am aware of that," Cecilia said. Best to be honest.

of New "It would have been a splendid match," Mrs. Tryon went on, her voice becoming almost conversational. But only almost. There was a hint of standoffishness to her words, a vaguely bored note of warning, as if to say, *Extra have control, and I shall not relinquish it.*

Cecilia believed her.

the "The Bridgertons and the Rokesbys have been friends and neighbors for generations," Mrs. Tryon went on. "Edward's mother has told me on numerous occasions that it was her dearest wish that their families be united."

she Cecilia held her tongue. There wasn't a thing she could say to that that wouldn't cast her in a bad light.

Mrs. Tryon finished with her second glove, and let out a little sound

th a really a sigh, more of an I-am-regrettably-changing-the-subject sort of
the far “But alas,” she said, “it is not to be.”

Cecilia waited for an impossibly long moment, but Mrs. Tryon did r
more. Finally, Cecilia forced herself to ask, “Was there anything in pa
I might help you with?”

“No.”

More silence. Mrs. Tryon, she realized, wielded it like a weapon.

“I . . .” Cecilia motioned helplessly toward the door. There was som
about this woman that left her utterly inept. “I have errands,” she finall

are “As do I.” Mrs. Tryon’s words were crisp, and so were her motions
she rose to her feet.

’t be Cecilia followed her to the door, but before she could bid her farewe
osity Mrs. Tryon said, “Cecilia—I may call you Cecilia, may I not?”

Cecilia squinted as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. “Of course.”

“Since fate has brought us together this afternoon, I feel it my duty a
husband’s godmother to impart some advice.”

Their eyes met.

“Do not hurt him.” The words were simple, and starkly given.

sing “I would never want to,” Cecilia said. It was the truth.

; lady “No, I don’t suppose you would. But you must always remember th
was once destined for someone else.”

It was a cruel statement, but it was not cruelly meant. Cecilia wasn’t
/ for why she was so certain of this. Perhaps it was the thin veil of moisture
ot a Mrs. Tryon’s eyes, perhaps it was nothing more than instinct.

Maybe it was just her imagination.

It was a reminder, though. She was doing the right thing.

ice

say—I It was midafternoon before Edward finished up with his meetings at th
British Army headquarters. Governor Tryon himself had wanted a cor
recounting of Edward’s time in Connecticut, and the written account h
submitted just one day prior for Colonel Stubbs had not been deemed
s for sufficient. So he’d sat with the governor and told him everything he’d
many said three times before. He supposed there was some usefulness to it, s
Tryon hoped to lead a series of raids on the Connecticut coast in just a
1at short weeks.

—not The big surprise, however, occurred right when Edward was leaving
Colonel Stubbs intercepted him at the door and handed him a letter, wi

noise. on good paper, folded into an envelope, and sealed with wax.

“It’s from Captain Harcourt,” Stubbs said gruffly. “He left it with me in case he did not return.”

Edward stared down at the envelope. “For me?” he asked dumbly.

“I asked him if he wanted us to send something to his father, but he said no. It doesn’t matter, anyway, I suppose, since the father predeceased the son.” Stubbs let out a tired, frowning sigh, and one of his hands came up to scratch his head. “Actually, I don’t know which of them passed on first, but it hardly makes a difference.”

“No,” Edward agreed, still looking down at his name on the front of the envelope, written in Thomas’s slightly untidy script. Men wrote such letters all the time, but usually for their families.

“If you want some privacy to read it, you can use the office across the hall,” Stubbs offered. “Greene is out for the day, and so is Montby, so you should not be bothered.”

“Thank you,” Edward said reflexively. He did want privacy to read his friend’s letter. It was not every day one received messages from the dead, and he had no idea how he might react.

Stubbs escorted him to a small office, even going so far as to open the window to alleviate the heavy, stuffy air. He said something as he departed and shut the door, but Edward didn’t notice. He just stared down at the envelope, taking a deep breath before finally sliding his fingers under the wax seal to open it.

Dear Edward,

If you are reading this, I am surely dead. It is strange, really, to write these words. I have never believed in ghosts, but right now the notion is a comfort. I think I should like to come back and haunt you. You deserve it after that episode in Rhode Island with Herr Farmer and the eggs.

Edward smiled as he remembered. It had been a long, boring day, and a quest for an omelet had ended with their getting pelted by eggs from a farmer screaming at them in German. It should have been a damned tragedy—they hadn’t had a meal in days that wasn’t bland and boring—but Edward couldn’t remember a time he’d laughed so hard. It had taken Thomas a

day to get the yolk out of his coat, and Edward had been picking bits of
e in from his hair all night.

*But I shall have the last laugh, because I am going to be
said wretchedly maudlin and sentimental, and maybe I will even force you
he to shed a tear over me. That would make me laugh, you know. You've
up to always been such a stoic. It was only your sense of humor that made
t, but it you bearable.*

*But bearable you were, and I wish to thank you for the gift of true
the friendship. It was something you bestowed without thinking,
letters something that simply came from within. I am not ashamed to say that
I spend half my life in the colonies terrified out of my skull. It is far
re too easy to die here. I cannot express the comfort it gave me to know
you that I always had your support.*

Edward sucked in a breath of air, and it was only then that he realized
his close he was to tears. He could have written the exact same words to Tom
ad, and It was what had made the war bearable. Friendship, and the knowledge
he there was at least one other person who valued your life as much as his
arted

*And now I must impose upon that friendship one last time. Please
have a care for Cecilia. She will be alone now. Our father hardly
counts. Write to her, if you will. Tell her what happened to me so that
leath the only word she receives is not from the army. And should you have
the opportunity, go visit her. See that she is well. Perhaps you could
introduce her to your sister. I think Cecilia would like that. I know
that I will rest easier knowing that she might have the opportunity to
meet new people and find a life outside of Matlock Bath. Once our
father passes, there will be nothing for her there. Our cousin will take
ownership of Marswell, and he has always been an oily sort. I should
never want Cecilia to be dependent on his generosity and goodwill.*

Nor Edward. Cecilia had told him all about Horace. Oily was an apt
id their fat modifier.

*I know this is a great deal to ask of you. Derbyshire isn't quite the
agedy end of the earth—I believe we both know that's right here in New
Edward York—but I am sure that once you return to England, the last thing
full*

f shell *you will wish to do is travel north to the midlands.*

No, but he wouldn't have to. Wouldn't Thomas be surprised to know Cecilia was just a quarter mile away, in room twelve at the Devil's Head? It was truly a remarkable thing she'd done, crossing an ocean to find her brother. Somehow Edward thought that even Thomas wouldn't have imagined her capable of it.

So this is farewell. And thank you. There is no one I would trust more than your sister's welfare to more than you. And perhaps you will not mind the task so very much. I know you used to read her letters when I was gone. Honestly, did you think I wouldn't notice?

Edward laughed. He couldn't believe Thomas had known all along.

I bequeath to you the miniature I have of her. I think she'd want you to have it. I know that I do.

Godspeed, my friend.

his own.

*Yours most truly,
Thomas Harcourt*

Edward stared down at the letter for so long his vision blurred. Thomas had never let on that he knew of Edward's infatuation with his sister. It was almost mortifying to think of it. But clearly he'd been amused by it. Amused and maybe . . .

Hopeful?

Had Thomas been a matchmaker at heart? It had certainly sounded that way in his letter. If he'd wanted Edward to marry Cecilia . . .

Could Thomas have written to her about it? She'd said that he had made the arrangements for the marriage. What if . . .

Edward felt the blood drain from his face. What if Cecilia really *did* they were married? What if she hadn't been lying at all?

Edward searched the letter frantically, looking in vain for a date. What if Thomas written this? Could he have told Cecilia to make arrangements for a proxy ceremony but then died before asking Edward to do the same?

He stood. He had to get back to the inn. He knew this was farfetched but it would explain so much. And it was well past time that he told her that

memory had returned. He needed to stop stewing in his misery and simply ask her what was going on.

v that
ad. It He didn't run to the Devil's Head, but it was a damned fast walk.

"Cecilia!"

ly
? Edward pushed open the door to their room with more force than was necessary. But by the time he'd reached the upper floor of the inn, his feet were rushing so fast and so hard he was practically jumping out of his shoes. His head was full of questions, and his heart was full of passion, and at that point he'd decided he didn't care what she'd done. If she had tricked him, she must have had a reason. He knew her. He *knew* her. She was as good a person as had ever walked on this earth, and maybe she hadn't said those words, but he knew she loved him.

Almost as much as he loved her.

"Cecilia?"

He said her name again even though it was obvious she wasn't there. Damn it. Now he was going to have to sit on his hands and wait. She could be anywhere. She frequently went out and about, running errands and taking walks. There had been less of this since her search for her brother had begun, but still, she didn't like to stay cooped up all day.

Maybe she'd left a note. She sometimes did.

nas
t was
mused, His eyes swept over the room, moving more slowly along the flat planes of the tables. There it was. A thrice-folded piece of paper tucked partway under the empty washbasin so it wouldn't blow away.

Cecilia always did like to leave the window open.

hat Edward unfolded the paper, and for a split second he was confused by the sheer number of words on the page, far more than was needed to let him know when she'd be back.

made Then he started to read.

think *Dear Edward,*

men had
s for a *I am a coward, a terrible one, for I know I should say these words to you in person. But I cannot. I do not think I could make it through the speech, and also, I do not think I will have the time.*

l, but it
his *I have so much to confess to you, I hardly know where to start. I suppose it must be with the most salient fact. We are not married.*

ply

I did not mean to carry out such a falsehood. I promise you, it began for the most unselfish of reasons. When I heard you were in hospital, I knew that I must go and care for you, but I was turned away, told that due to your rank and position, only family members would be allowed to see you. I am not sure what came over me—I do not think I was so impulsive, but then again, I did throw caution to the wind and come to New York. I was so angry. I wanted only to help. And before I knew it, I shouted that I was your wife. To this day I am not sure why anyone believed me.

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I told myself that I would reveal the truth when you awakened. But then everything went wrong. No, not wrong, just strange. You woke up and had no memory. Even odder, you seemed to know who I was. I still do not understand how you recognized me. When you regain your memory—and I know you will, you must have faith—you will know that we had never met. Not in person. I know that Thomas showed you his miniature of me, but truly, it is not a good likeness. There is no reason you should have recognized me when you opened your eyes.

!.

ould be

ing

ended,

I did not want to tell you the truth in front of the doctor and Colonel Stubbs. I did not think they would allow me to stay, and I felt you still needed my care. Then later that night, something became very clear. The army was far more eager to aid Mrs. Rokesby in the search for her brother than it was for Miss Harcourt.

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I used you. I used your name. For that I apologize. But I will confess that while I shall carry my guilt to the end of my days, I cannot regret my actions. I needed to find Thomas. He was all I had left.

oy the

m

But now he is gone, and so is my reason for being in New York. As we are not married, I think it is appropriate and best that I return to Derbyshire. I will not marry Horace; nothing shall sink me that I can assure you. I buried the silver in the garden before I left; it was my mother's and thus not part of the entail. I shall find a buyer. You need not worry for my welfare.

s

Edward, you are such a gentleman—the most honorable man I have ever known. If I remain in New York, you will insist that you have compromised me, that you must marry me. But I cannot ask that of you. None of this was your fault. You thought we were wed, and

*you behaved as a husband would. You should not be punished for my
trickery. You have a life waiting for you back in England, one that
does not include me.*

*All I ask is that you not speak of this time. When the day shall come
that I might marry, I will tell my intended what happened here. I
could not live with myself if I did not. But until then, I think it best if
the world continues to see me simply as*

y,

it

*Your friend,
Cecilia Harcourt*

*. I Postscript—You need not worry about lasting repercussions from our
time together.*

Edward stood in the center of the room, utterly frozen. What the bloody
hell was that? What did she mean by—

l

He scrambled to find the part of the letter he was looking for. There
She did not think she would have the time to tell him in person.

lt

The blood drained from his face.

The *Rhiannon*. It was in the harbor. It was leaving that eve.

Cecilia had booked passage on it. He was certain of it.

He checked the pocket watch he'd left out on the table to serve as the
clock. He had time. Not a lot, but enough.

It would have to be enough. His whole world depended on it.

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It would have to be enough. His whole world depended on it.

Chapter 21

I have not heard from you in so long, Thomas. I know I should not worry, that there are dozens of ways for your letters to be delayed but I cannot help myself. Did you know that I mark a calendar to keep track of our correspondence? A week for my letter to be put on a ship, five weeks to cross the Atlantic, another week to reach you. Then a week for your letter to be put on a ship, three weeks to cross the Atlantic (see? I was listening when you told me it is fast to journey east), then a week for it to reach me. That is three months to receive an answer to a simple question!

But then again, maybe there are no simple questions. Or if there are, they lack simple answers.

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS (LETTER NEVER RECEIVED)*

The *Rhiannon* was remarkably similar to the *Lady Miranda*, and Cecilia had no difficulty locating her cabin. When she'd purchased her ticket a few days earlier, she'd been told that she would be sharing her cabin with a Miss Alethea Finch, who had been serving as a governess to a prominent New York family and was now returning home. It was not uncommon for two strangers to share accommodations on such journeys. Cecilia had done the same the way over; she'd got on quite well with her fellow traveler and had been sorry to say good-bye when they had docked in New York.

Cecilia wondered if Miss Finch was Irish, or like her, simply eager to get on the first ship back to the British Isles and did not mind having to make a stop before reaching England. Cecilia herself wasn't sure how she was to get home from Cork, but that hurdle seemed tiny compared with the greater challenge of getting herself across the Atlantic. There would be no

be ships sailing from Cork to Liverpool, or if not that, she could travel Dublin and sail from there.

She'd got herself from Derbyshire to New York, for heaven's sake. She could do that, she could do anything. She was strong. She was powerful.

She was crying.

Damn it, she needed to stop crying.

She paused in the narrow corridor outside her cabin to take a breath. At least she wasn't sobbing. She could still comport herself without attracting too much attention. But every time she thought she had hold of her emotions, her lungs seemed to lurch, and she drew in an unexpected breath, but it sounded like a choke, and then her eyes got all prickly, and then—

not
ed,
to
out
ch
to
ter
ee

Stop. She needed to stop thinking about it.

Goal for today: Don't cry in public.

She sighed. She wanted a new goal.

Time to move on. With a fortifying breath, she brushed her hand over her eyes and pushed down on the handle to the door of her cabin.

It was locked.

re

Cecilia blinked, momentarily nonplussed. Then she knocked, remembering that her cabinmate had arrived before she had. It was prudent for a woman alone to lock her door. She would have done the same.

ia had
7 hours

She waited a moment, then knocked again, and finally the door opened only partway. A thin woman of middling years peered out. She filled the narrow opening, so Cecilia could not see much of the cabin behind her. There appeared to be two bunks, one up and one down, and a trunk was on the floor. On the lone table, a lantern had been lit. Clearly Miss Finch had been unpacking. "May I help you?" Miss Finch asked.

s
ew

Cecilia affixed a friendly expression to her face and said, "I believe I'm sharing this cabin."

tal
so on

Miss Finch regarded her with a pinched mien, then said, "You are mistaken."

been
o get

Well. That was unexpected. Cecilia looked back at the door, which was propped open against Miss Finch's hip. A dull brass "8" had been nailed to the wood.

ake a

"Cabin eight," Cecilia said. "You must be Miss Finch. We are to be going bunkmates." It was difficult to muster the energy to be sociable, but she must try, so she bobbed a polite curtsy and said, "I am Miss Cecilia Harcourt. How do you do?"

up to The older woman's lips flattened. "I was led to believe I would not be sharing this stateroom."

If she Cecilia glanced first at one bunk, then at the other. It was clearly a room for two. "Did you reserve a cabin for yourself?" she asked. She had heard that people sometimes did so, despite having to pay double.

 "I was *told* that I had no cabinmate."

At Which was not the answer to the question Cecilia had asked. But even though her own mood was rattling between black and blue, she held her emotions, temper in check. She was going to have to share an extremely small cabin with this woman for at least three weeks. So she summoned her best approximation of a smile and said, "I only booked passage this afternoon."

 Miss Finch drew back with obvious disapproval. "What sort of woman books passage across the Atlantic on the day of departure?"

er her Cecilia's jaw tightened. "My sort of woman, I suppose. My plans changed rather abruptly, and I was fortunate enough to find a ship departing immediately."

ing Miss Finch sniffed. Cecilia wasn't sure how to interpret this, aside from the obvious fact that it was not complimentary. But Miss Finch finally stepped back, allowing Cecilia entry into the tiny cabin.

nan "As you can see," Miss Finch said, "I have unpacked my belongings in the bottom berth."

most of "I am more than happy to sleep on top."

her. Miss Finch sniffed again, a little louder. "If you get seasick, you will be open to exit the room. I will not have the smell in here."

ch had Cecilia felt her resolve toward politeness slipping away. "Agreed. Just as long as you do the same."

we are "I hope you do not snore."

 "If I do, no one has told me of it."

 Miss Finch opened her mouth, but Cecilia cut her off with "I'm sure I will tell me if I do."

was Miss Finch opened her mouth again, but Cecilia added, "And I will be open to you for it. It does seem the sort of thing one ought to know about oneself. Would you not agree?"

 Miss Finch drew back. "You are most impertinent."

e knew "And you are standing in my way." The room was very small, and Cecilia had not fully entered; it was nearly impossible to do so while the other woman had her trunk open on the floor.

“It is my room,” Miss Finch said.

“It is *our* room,” Cecilia nearly growled, “and I would appreciate it if you would move your trunk so that I might enter.”

“Well!” Miss Finch slammed her trunk shut and shoved it under her bunk. “I don’t know where you will put your trunk, but don’t think you can take up the middle of the floor if I cannot.”

Cecilia didn’t have a trunk, just her large traveling bag, but there seemed to be little reason to make a point of that.

“Is that all you have?”

Especially since Miss Finch seemed eager to make the point for her.

Cecilia tried to draw a calming breath. “As I said, I had to leave most of my things suddenly. There was no time to pack a proper trunk.”

Miss Finch stared down her bony nose and made another one of those sniffing sounds. Cecilia resolved to spend as much time as possible on the deck.

There was a small table nailed to the foot of the bed, with enough space underneath for Cecilia’s bag. She removed the few things she thought she might wish to have in her bunk and then edged past Miss Finch so that she could climb up and see where she would be sleeping.

“Don’t step on my bed getting up to your bunk.”

Cecilia paused, counted in her head to three, then said, “I shall restrict my movements to the ladder.”

“I am going to complain to the captain about you.”

“By all means,” Cecilia said with a grandiose wave of her arm. She stepped her way up another rung and took a peek. Her bunk was neat and tidy, even if she didn’t have much headroom, at least she wouldn’t have to look at Miss Finch.

“Are you a harlot?”

Cecilia whirled around, nearly losing her footing on the ladder. “What do you just ask?”

“Are you a harlot?” Miss Finch repeated, punctuating each word with a dramatic pause. “I can think of no other reason—”

“No, I am not a harlot,” Cecilia snapped, well aware that the odious woman would most likely disagree if she knew the events of the past night.

“Because I won’t share a room with a whore.”

Cecilia lost it. She simply lost it. She’d held her composure through the death of her brother, through the revelation that Colonel Stubbs had lied to her the face of her grief and worry. She’d even managed not to fall apart w

leaving the only man she would ever love, and now she was putting a l
if you ocean between them, and he was going to hate her, and this awful wret
woman was calling her a *whore*?

bed. “I She jumped off the ladder, strode to Miss Finch, and grabbed her by
e up collar.

emed “I don’t know what sort of poison you ingested this morning,” she s
“but I have had enough. I paid good money for my half of this cabin, a
return I expect a modicum of civility and good breeding.”

st “Good breeding! From a woman who does not even possess a trunk’
“What the devil does that mean?”

se Miss Finch threw up her arms and screeched like a banshee. “And n
invoke the name of Satan!”

deck. Oh. Dear. God. Cecilia had entered hell. She was sure of it. Maybe t
was her punishment for lying to Edward. Three weeks . . . maybe even
ace month with this shrew.

she “I refuse to share a cabin with you!” Miss Finch cried.

she “I assure you I would like nothing more than to grant your wish, but
A knock sounded on the door.

ct my “I hope that’s the captain,” Miss Finch said. “He probably heard you
screaming.”

made Cecilia gave her a disgusted look. “Why on earth would the captain
here?” They lacked a porthole, but she could tell from the movement o
ship that they had already left the dock. Surely the captain had better th
and do than arbitrate a catfight.

ook at The crisp rap of knuckles on wood was replaced by the pound of a f
followed by a bellow of “Open the door!”

iat did It was a voice Cecilia knew quite well.

th a She went pale. Truly, she felt the blood leave her face. Her mouth w
slack with shock as she turned toward the pulsing flat of the door.

th a “Open the damn door, Cecilia!”

month. Miss Finch gasped and whirled to face her. “That’s not the captain.”
“No . . .”

the “Who is it? Do you know who it is? He could be here to attack us. C
God, oh dear heavens . . .” Miss Finch moved with surprising agility as
leapt behind Cecilia, using her as a human shield for whatever monster
d in thought was going to come barreling through the door.

hile “He’s not going to attack us,” Cecilia said in a dazed voice. She kne

bloody should do something—shake off Miss Finch, open the door—but she was
frozen, trying to make sense of what was clearly an impossibility.

Edward was here. On the ship. On the ship that had *left the harbor*.

“Oh my God,” she gasped.

“Oh, *now* you’re worried,” Miss Finch snapped.

The ship was moving. It was *moving*. Cecilia had watched the crew
unwrap the thick ropes from the moorings as she made her way across
deck. She’d felt them push away from the dock, recognized the familiar
and sway as they set out across the bay and into the Atlantic.

Edward was on the ship. And as he was hardly likely to swim back to
shore, that meant he had deserted his post, and—

More pounding, louder this time.

“Open this door right now or I swear I will break it down!”

Miss Finch whimpered something about her virtue.

And Cecilia finally whispered Edward’s name.

“You know him?” Miss Finch accused.

“Yes, he’s my . . .” What was he? Not her husband.

“Well, then open the door.” Miss Finch gave her a hard shove, catching
Cecilia sufficiently off guard to send her tumbling against the far wall.
“I won’t have a man in here. You take him out and do your . . . your . . .” Her fingers made disgusted piano-like motions
in front of her. “Your *business*,” she finally finished. “Do it elsewhere.”

“Cecilia!” Edward bellowed.

“He’s going to break the door!” Miss Finch shrieked. “Hurry!”

“I’m hurrying!” The cabin was only eight feet across—hardly enough
hurry to make a difference—but Cecilia made her way to the door and
pressed her fingers on the deadbolt lock.

And she froze.

“What are you waiting for?” Miss Finch demanded.

“I don’t know,” Cecilia whispered.

Edward was here. He’d followed her. What did that *mean*?

“*CECILIA!*”

She opened the door, and for one blessed moment, time stopped. She
was in the sight of him standing across the threshold, his fisted hand still raised
to pound against the door. He wore no hat, and his hair was badly mussed
and ruffled.

He looked . . . wild.

was “You’re wearing your uniform,” she said stupidly.
“You,” he said, jabbing his finger toward her, “are in so much trouble.”
Miss Finch let out a gleeful gasp. “Are you going to arrest her?”
Edward wrenched his gaze away from Cecilia for just long enough to
an incredulous “What?”
“Are you going to arrest her?” Miss Finch scurried up until she was
the behind Cecilia. “I think she’s a—”
r pitch Cecilia elbowed her in the ribs. For her own good. There was no telling
how Edward would react if Miss Finch called her a whore in front of her.
o Edward flicked an impatient look at Miss Finch. “Who is that?” he
demanded.
“Who are *you*?” Miss Finch shot back.
Edward jerked his head toward Cecilia. “Her husband.”
Cecilia tried to contradict. “No, you’re—”
“I will be,” he growled.
“This is highly irregular,” Miss Finch said with a sniff.
Cecilia whirled around. “Will you kindly step back?” she hissed.
ing “Well!” Miss Finch said with a huff. She made a great show of the t
“But mincing steps it took to reach her bunk.
m out Edward tipped his head toward the older lady. “Your friend?”
ms in “No,” Cecilia said emphatically.
“Certainly not,” Miss Finch said.
Cecilia shot her an irritated look before turning back to Edward. “Did
you get my letter?”
gh for “Of course I got your letter. Why the hell else would I be here?”
nd put “I didn’t say which ship—”
“It wasn’t that difficult to figure it out.”
“But you—your commission—” Cecilia fought for words. He was a
officer in His Majesty’s Army. He couldn’t just leave. He’d be court-
martialled. Dear God, could he hang? They didn’t hang officers for desertion,
did they? And certainly not those from families like the Rokesbys.
“I had enough time to settle matters with Colonel Stubbs,” Edward said
e drank a curt tone. “*Just.*”
ised to “I—I don’t know what to say.”
l and His hand wrapped around her upper arm. “Tell me one thing,” he said
very low voice.
She stopped breathing.

le.” And then he looked over her shoulder at Miss Finch, who was following the proceedings with *avid* interest. “Would you mind granting us some privacy?” he ground out.

o snap “This is my cabin,” she said. “If you wish for privacy, you’ll have to go elsewhere.”

just “Oh for the love of God,” Cecilia burst out, whirling around to face the hateful woman, “can you find enough kindness in your stony heart to grant me a moment with—” She swallowed, her throat closing on her words. “With him,” she finally finished, jerking her head toward Edward.

“Are you married?” Miss Finch asked primly.

“No,” Cecilia replied, but this did not hold much traction given that Edward said, “Yes,” at the exact same time.

Miss Finch turned her beady gaze from one to the other. Her lips pressed together, and her brows rose into two unattractive arches. “I’m going to see the captain,” she announced.

“Do,” Edward said, practically shoving her out the door.

Miss Finch shrieked as she stumbled into the hall, but if she had any more to say, it was cut off when Edward slammed the door in her face. And locked it.

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And locked it.

Chapter 22

I am coming to find you.

—FROM *CECILIA HARCOURT TO HER BROTHER THOMAS (LETTER NEVER SENT)*

Edward was not in a good mood.

A man generally required more than three hours to uproot his life and decamp to another continent. As it was, he'd barely had time to pack his trunk and secure authorization to leave New York.

By the time he made it to the docks, the crew of the *Rhiannon* was preparing for departure. Edward had to practically leap across the water to board the ship, and he would have been forcibly removed had he not shown the colonel's hastily written order in the face of the captain's second in command, securing himself a berth.

Or maybe just a spot on the deck. The captain's man said he wasn't sure they had a spare hammock.

No matter. Edward didn't need much room. All he had were the clothes on his back, a few pounds in his pockets . . .

And a big black hole where his patience used to be.

So when the door to Cecilia's cabin opened . . .

One might have thought he'd have been relieved to see her. One might have thought, given the depth of his feelings, given the panic that had propelled him all afternoon, he would have sagged with relief at the sight of those beautiful seafoam eyes, staring up at him with astonishment.

But no.

It was all he could do not to throttle her.

"Why are you here?" she whispered, once he'd finally got the damn Miss Finch out of the room.

For a moment he could only stare. “You’re not seriously asking me
“I—”

“You left me.”

She shook her head. “I set you free.”

He snorted at that. “You’ve had me locked up for over a year.”

“What?” Her response was more motion than sound, but Edward did
feel like explaining. He turned away, his breath ragged as he raked his
through his hair. Bloody hell, he wasn’t even wearing his hat. How had
happened? Had he forgotten to put it on? Had it flown off as he ran for
ship?

The godforsaken woman had him tied in knots. He wasn’t even sure
trunk had made it aboard. For all he knew he’d just embarked on a mo-
voyage without a change of undergarments.

“Edward?” Her voice came from behind him, small and hesitant.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked.

id
is
“What?”

He turned around and said it again, with even more precision. “Are.
Pregnant.”

r to
“No!” She shook her head in an almost frantic motion. “I told you I
wasn’t.”

oved
“I didn’t know if—” He stopped. Cut himself off.

l
“You didn’t know what?”

even
hes on
He didn’t know if he could trust her. That was what he’d been about
Except it wasn’t true. He did trust her. On this, at least. No, on this,
especially. And his initial instinct—the one goading him to question her
—that was nothing but a devil on his shoulder, wanting to lash out. To
wound.

ght
Because she’d *hurt* him. Not because she’d lied—he supposed he could
understand how all that had happened. But she had not had faith. She had
trusted him. How could she have thought that running away was the right
thing to do? How could she have thought he didn’t *care*?

ght of
“I am not with child,” she said in a voice so low with urgency it was
almost a whisper. “I promise you. I would not lie about such a thing.”

“No?” His devil, apparently, refused to give up its voice.

“I promise,” she said again. “I would not do that to you.”

able
“But you would do *this*?”

“This?” she echoed.

that.” He stepped toward her, still seething. “You left me. Without a word.
“I wrote you a letter!”

“Before you fled the *continent*.”

“But I—”

“*You ran away.*”

ln’t “No!” she cried. “No, I didn’t. I—”

hand “You are on a boat,” he exploded. “That is the very definition of run
d that away.”

the “I did it for you!”

Her voice was so loud, so full of keening sorrow that he was momen-
tarily silenced. She looked almost brittle, her arms sticklike at her sides, her
fingers pressed into desperate little fists.

“I did it for you,” she said again, softer this time.

He shook his head. “Then you should have damn well consulted me
if it was what I wanted.”

“If I stayed,” she said, with the slow and heavy cadence of one who
You. desperately trying to make the other understand, “you would have insisted
upon marrying me.”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think this was what I wanted?” she practically shouted. “Do
think I *liked* sneaking away while you were gone? I was sparing you from
having to do the right thing!”

to say. “Listen to yourself,” he bit off. “Sparing me from having to do the r-
thing? How could you even think I would want to do anything else? Do
er word know me at all?”

“Edward, I—”

“If it’s the right thing,” he snapped, “then I should be doing it.”

ould “Edward, please, you must believe me. When you recover your mem-
ory you will understand—”

ght “I got my memory back days ago,” he cut in.

She froze.

He was not such a noble man that he did not experience a small pang
of satisfaction at that.

“*What?*” she finally said.

“I got my—”

“You didn’t tell me?” Her voice was calm, dangerously so.

“We had just found out about Thomas.”

.”

“You didn’t *tell* me?”

“You were grieving—”

She smacked him on the shoulder. “How could you keep that from r

“I was angry!” he roared. “Didn’t I have the right to keep something *you?*”

ming

She stumbled back, hugging her arms to her body. Her anguish was palpable, but he couldn’t stop himself from advancing, jabbing his fore hard against her collarbone. “I was so bloody furious with you I could see straight. But speaking of doing the right thing, I thought it would b kinder if I waited to confront you until after you’d had a few days to g for your brother.”

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hands

to see

was
sted

Her eyes grew large, and her lips trembled, and her posture—someh tense and slack at the same time—brought to Edward’s mind a deer he almost shot years ago, while hunting with his father. One of them had on a twig, and the animal’s large ears had perked and turned. It didn’t though. It stood there for what felt like an eternity, and Edward had ha most bizarre sense that it was contemplating its existence.

o you
om

He had not taken the shot. He had not been able to bring himself to c
And now . . .

The devil on his shoulder slunk away.

“You should have stayed,” he said quietly. “You should have told m truth.”

ight
o you

“I was scared.”

He was dumbfounded. “Of me?”

“No!” She looked down, but he heard her whisper, “Of myself.”

But before he could ask her what she meant, she swallowed tremulo and said, “You don’t have to marry me.”

nory,

He couldn’t believe she was still thinking *that* was possible. “Oh, I c don’t I?”

“I won’t hold you to it,” she half babbled. “There’s nothing to hold y to.”

g of

“Isn’t there?” He took a step toward her, because it was long past tir eliminated the distance between them, but he stopped in place when he realized what he saw in her eyes.

Sorrow.

She looked so unbearably sad, and it *wrecked* him.

“You love someone else,” she whispered.

Wait . . . *What?*

It took him a moment to realize he hadn't said it aloud. Had she gone home?" "What are you talking about?"

"Billie Bridgerton. You're supposed to marry her. I don't think you remember, but—"

"I'm not in love with Billie," he interrupted. He ran his hand through his hair, then turned to face the wall as he let out a shout of frustration. God hardly God, was *that* what this was all about? His neighbor back home?

And then Cecilia said—she *actually* said, "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," he retorted. "I'm certainly not going to marry

"No, I think you are," she said. "I don't think you've recovered your memory, but you said as much in your letters. Or at least Thomas did, would then your godmother—"

"What?" He whirled around. "When did you speak to Aunt Margaret

"Just today. But I—"

"Did she seek you out?" Because by God, if his godmother had insulted Cecilia in any way . . .

"No. It was entirely by chance. She'd come to see you, and I happened to be leaving to purchase my ticket—"

He growled.

She backed up a step. Or rather she tried. She'd clearly forgotten that she was already up against the edge of the bunk.

"I thought it would be rude not to sit with her," she said. "Although to say, it was very awkward to play the hostess in a public house."

Edward went still for a moment, then to his amazement he felt his lips crackling into a smile. "God, I would have loved to have seen that."

Cecilia gave him a bit of a sideways glance. "It is much more amusing in retrospect."

"I'm sure."

"She's terrifying."

"She is."

"My godmother was a dotty old woman in the parish," Cecilia muttered.

"She knit me socks every year for my birthday."

He considered this. "I am quite certain Margaret Tryon has never knitted a pair of socks in her life."

A little grumbling sound formed in Cecilia's throat before she said, "I probably be ridiculously competent at it if she tried."

Edward nodded, his smile by now reaching his eyes. "Probably." He gave her a little nudge so that she sat on the bunk, and then he sat beside her. "I know I'm going to marry you," he said. "I can't believe you thought I'd do otherwise."

"Of course I thought you'd insist upon marrying me," she replied. "That's why I left. So you wouldn't *have* to."

"That's the most ridiculous—"

She placed her hand on his shoulder to silence him. "You would never have taken me to bed if you thought we weren't married."

He did not contradict her.

She shook her head sadly. "You slept with me under false pretenses."

He tried not to laugh, he really did, but within seconds the bed was shaking with his mirth.

"Are you laughing?" she asked.

He nodded, clutching his middle as her question set off another wave of glee. "Slept with me under false pretenses," he chortled.

Cecilia frowned disgruntledly. "Well, you did."

"Perhaps, but who cares?" He gave her a friendly nudge with his elbow. "We're getting married."

"But Billie—"

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "For the last time, I don't want to marry Billie. I want to marry *you*."

"But—"

"I love you, you little fool. I've been in love with you for years."

Maybe he was a little too full of himself, but he would swear he heard his heart skip a beat. "But you didn't know me," she whispered.

"I knew you," he said. He took her hand and brought it to his lips. "I know you better than—" He paused for a moment, needing the time to collect his emotions. "Do you have any idea how many times I read your letters?"

She shook her head.

"Every letter . . . my God, Cecilia, you have no idea what they mean to me. They weren't even written to me—"

"They were," she said softly.

He went still, but his eyes held hers, silently asking her what she meant.

"Every time I wrote to Thomas I was thinking of you. I—" She swallowed. "She'd and although the light was too dim to see her blush, somehow he knew her face had gone pink. "I scolded myself every time."

He touched her cheek. “Why are you smiling?”

“You’re not. I—well, maybe I am, but it’s because I’m embarrassed. I feel silly, pining over a man I’d never met.”

“No sillier than I,” he said. He reached into the pocket of his coat. “That’s a confession.”

Cecilia watched as he unfurled his fingers. A miniature—*her* miniature—lay in his palm. She gasped, and her eyes flew to his. “But . . . how?”

“I stole it,” he said plainly, “when Colonel Stubbs asked me to inspect Thomas’s trunk.” He’d tell her later that Thomas had wanted him to have it. It didn’t really matter, anyway; he hadn’t known this when he’d slipped it into his pocket.

Her eyes went from the tiny painting to his face and back again.

Edward touched her chin, raising her eyes to his. “I’ve never stolen anything before, you know.”

“No,” she said in an amazed murmur, “I can’t imagine you would.”

“But this—” He pressed the miniature into her palm. “This I could not live without.”

“It’s just a portrait.”

“Of the woman I love.”

“You love me,” she whispered, and he wondered how many times he would have to say it for her to believe him. “You *love* me.”

“Madly,” he admitted.

She looked down at the painting in her hand. “It doesn’t look like me,” she said.

“I know,” he said, reaching a shaky hand out. He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, his large palm coming to rest against her cheek. “You’re much more beautiful,” he whispered.

“I lied to you.”

“I don’t care.”

“I think you do.”

“Did you do so with intent to hurt me?”

“No, of course not. I only—”

“Did you wish to defraud—”

“No!”

He shrugged. “As I said, I don’t care.”

For a second it seemed she might stop protesting. But then her lips parted again, and she took a little breath, and Edward knew it was time to put

to this nonsense.

felt so So he kissed her.

But not for terribly long. Much as he wanted to ravish her, there were other, more important matters at hand. “You could say it back, you know,” he told her.

sure— She smiled. No, she beamed. “I love you too.”

Just like that, all of the pieces of his heart settled into place. “Will you marry me? For real?”

ive it. She nodded. Then she nodded again, faster this time. “Yes,” she said.
d it “Yes, oh yes!”

And because Edward was a man of action, he stood, grabbed her hand, and hauled her to her feet. “It’s a good thing we’re on a ship.”

She made an inarticulate noise of confusion but was immediately drawn out by an unfortunately familiar shriek.

“Your friend?” Edward said, with an amused arch of his brow.

ot do “Not my friend,” Cecilia replied immediately.

“They’re in there,” came the grating voice of Miss Finch. “Cabin eight.”

A crisp knock sounded on the door, followed by a deep male voice. “Is Captain Wolverton. Is aught amiss?”

e Edward opened the door. “My apologies, sir.”

The captain’s face lit with delighted recognition. “Captain Rokesby! I exclaimed. “I did not realize you were sailing with us.”

e,” she Miss Finch gaped. “You know him?”

“We were at Eton together,” the captain said.

er hair “Of course you were,” Cecilia heard herself murmur.

re so “He was attacking her,” Miss Finch said, jolting her finger in Cecilia’s direction.

“Captain Rokesby?” the captain said, with palpable disbelief.

“Well, he almost attacked me,” she sniffed.

“Oh please,” Cecilia scoffed.

“It’s good to see you, Kenneth,” Edward said, reaching out and enveloping the captain’s hand in a hearty shake. “Might I impose upon you for a marriage ceremony?”

Captain Wolverton grinned. “Now?”

“As soon as you’re able.”

parted “Is that even legal?” Cecilia asked.

a stop He gave her a look. “Now you’re quibbling?”

“It’s legal as long as you’re on my ship,” Captain Wolverton said. “That, I’d recommend redoing it on dry land.”

“Miss Finch can be our witness,” Cecilia said, her lips pressed together, her blatant attempt not to laugh.

“Why, well . . .” Miss Finch blinked about seven times in the space of a second. “I suppose I would be honored.”

“We’ll get the navigator to be the second witness,” Captain Wolverton said. “He loves this sort of thing.” Then he eyed Edward with a decidedly fraternal expression. “You’ll take my cabin, of course,” he said. “I can be elsewhere.”

Edward thanked him—profusely—and they all filed out of the cabin heading up to the deck, which, the captain insisted, was a much more spacious backdrop for a wedding.

But when they stood beneath the mast, with all the crew gathered to celebrate with them, Edward turned to the captain and said, “One question before we get started . . .”

Captain Wolverton, clearly amused, motioned to him to continue.

“This . . .” “May I kiss the bride *first*?”

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But when they stood beneath the mast, with all the crew gathered to celebrate with them, Edward turned to the captain and said, “One question before we get started . . .”

Captain Wolverton, clearly amused, motioned to him to continue.

“May I kiss the bride *first*?”

Epilogue

Cecilia Rokesby was nervous.

Correction, she was *really* nervous.

In approximately five minutes, she was going to meet her husband's family.

His very aristocratic family.

Who did not know he'd married her.

And it was most definitely legal now. It turned out the Bishop of Co Ross did a brisk business in special licenses—theirs was not the first shipboard marriage needing a more legally binding ceremony. The bishop had a stack of licenses ready to be filled out, and they were married on spot, with Captain Wolverton and the local curate as witnesses.

After that, she and Edward had decided to proceed straight to Kent. Her family would be desperate to see him, and she had no one left in Derbyshire. There would be time enough to return to Marswell and gather her personal belongings before ceding the house to Horace. Her cousin couldn't do anything without confirmation of Thomas's death, and since Cecilia and Edward were the only people in England who could presently make such confirmation . . .

Horace would have to learn the fine art of patience.

But now they were here, coming up the drive at Crake House, the ancestral home of the Rokesbys. Edward had described it to her in great detail, and she knew it would be large, but when they rounded the corner, she could not but gasp.

Edward squeezed her hand.

"It's huge!" she said.

He smiled distractedly, his attention fully on his home, which loomed larger through the window with each rotation of the carriage wheels.

He was nervous too, Cecilia realized. She could see it in the constant tapping of his hand against his thigh, in the little flash of white every time

caught his lower lip with his teeth.

Her big, strong, capable man was nervous.

It made her love him even more.

The carriage came to a halt, and Edward hopped down before anyone could come to assist them. Once he had Cecilia safely on the ground beside him, he tucked her hand in his arm, and led her toward the house.

“I’m surprised no one has come out yet,” he murmured.

“Maybe no one was watching the drive?”

Edward shook his head. “There is always—”

The door swung open, and a footman stepped out.

“Sir?” the footman said, and Cecilia realized he must be new, because she had no idea who Edward was.

“Is the family at home?” Edward asked.

“Yes, sir. Who may I say is calling?”

rk and “Edward. Tell them Edward is home.”

hop The footman’s eyes widened. Clearly he’d been employed long enough to know what *that* meant, and he practically ran back into the house. Cecilia stifled a grin. She was still nervous. Correction, she was still *very* nervous but there was something almost fun about this, something made her slightly giddy.

His “Should we wait inside?” she asked.

onal He nodded, and they entered the grand foyer. It was empty, devoid of even a single servant until—

id “Edward!”

ch a It was a shriek, a loud feminine shriek, exactly the sound one might expect from someone so happy she might burst into tears at any moment.

ancestral “Edward Edward Edward! Oh my God I can’t believe it’s really you!” Cecilia’s brows rose as a dark-haired woman virtually *flew* down the stairs. She took the last half dozen steps in a single leap, and it was only then that Cecilia saw that she was wearing men’s breeches.

nd she “Edward!” With one last cry, the woman hurled herself into Edward’s arms, hugging him with enough intensity and love to bring tears to Cecilia’s eyes.

ot help “Oh, Edward,” she said again, touching his cheeks as if she needed to be reassured that it was really he, “we’ve been in such despair.”

id “Billie?” Edward said.

t Billie? Billie Bridgerton? Cecilia’s heart sank. Oh dear God. This was the

going to be awful. She probably still thought Edward was going to marry her. He'd said they had no formal understanding, that Billie didn't want to marry him any more than he did her, but Cecilia suspected that that was the only male in him talking. How could any woman not want to marry him, especially one who'd been told since birth that he was hers?

"It's so good to see you," Edward said with a brotherly kiss on her cheek. "but what are you doing here?"

At that Billie laughed. It was a watery, through-her-tears sort of laugh. Her joy was there in every note. "You don't know," she said. "Of course you don't know."

"I don't know what?"

And then another voice entered the conversation. A male one.

"I married her."

Edward whirled around. "George?"

His brother. It had to be. His hair wasn't quite the same shade of brown, but those eyes, those incandescently blue eyes . . . He had to be a Rokesby.

"You married Billie?" Edward still looked . . . quite honestly, *shocked*, really wasn't quite strong enough a word.

"I did." George looked right proud of it too, although Cecilia had less than a moment to gauge his expression before he enveloped Edward in a hug.

"But . . . but . . ."

Cecilia watched with interest. It was impossible not to smile. There was a story here. And she couldn't help but be a little bit relieved that Billie Bridgerton was clearly in love with someone else.

"But you hate each other," Edward protested.

"Not nearly so much as we love each other," Billie said.

"Good God. You and Billie?" Edward looked from one to the other. "Back again. "Are you certain?"

"I recall the ceremony quite distinctly," George said with dry humor. He tipped his head toward Cecilia. "Are you going to introduce us?"

Edward took her arm and drew her close. "My wife," he said with obvious pride. "Cecilia Rokesby."

"Formerly Harcourt?" Billie asked. "You were the one who wrote to Cecilia. Oh, *thank you*. Thank you!"

She threw her arms around Cecilia and hugged her so tightly that Cecilia could hear every catch in her voice as she said, "Thank you again and . . . You have no idea how much that meant to us."

rry her. “Mother and Father are in the village,” George said. “They should b
marry within the hour.”

btuse Edward smiled broadly. “Excellent. And the rest?”

“Nicholas is at school,” Billie said, “and of course Mary has her own
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Andrew. The third brother. Edward had told Cecilia that he was in tl
gh, but navy.

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described as awkward resignation.

“Shall you tell him or shall I?” Billie said.

George took a breath. “Well, now *that* is quite a story . . .”

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE OTHER MISS BRIDGERTON

A BRIDGERTON PREQUEL



JULIA QUINN

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THE OTHER MISS BRIDGERTON

A BRIDGERTON PREQUEL



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Dedication

For Emily.

*When I say I couldn't have done it without you,
I mean it literally.*

And also for Paul.

*Just tell me again—
Which way is the wind?*

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Chapter 1

Early summer 1786

For a young woman who had grown up on an island, in Somerset to be precise, Poppy Bridgerton had spent remarkably little time at the coast.

She was not unfamiliar with water. There was a lake near her family home, and Poppy's parents had insisted that all their children learn to swim. Or perhaps more accurately, they had insisted that all their sons learn to swim. Poppy, the sole daughter of the bunch, took umbrage at the notion she would be the only Bridgerton to die in a shipwreck and said as much to her parents—in precisely those words—just before she marched along with her four brothers to the water's edge and hurled herself in.

She'd learned faster than three out of four of her brothers (it wasn't fair to compare her to the eldest; of *course* he'd catch on more quickly), and that day she was, in her opinion, the strongest swimmer in the family. That might have been achieved this goal as much out of spite as natural ability was irrelevant. It was *important* to learn how to swim. She would have done so even if her parents hadn't originally told her to wait patiently on the grass. Probably.

But there would be no swimming today. This was the ocean, or at least a channel, and the chilly, bitter water was nothing like the placid lake at home. Poppy might be contrary, but she wasn't stupid. And alone as she was, she had nothing to prove.

Besides, she was having far too good a time exploring the beach. The give of the sand beneath her feet, the tang of the saltwater air—they were exotic to her as if she'd been dropped into Africa.

Well, maybe not, Poppy thought as she nibbled on a piece of the very familiar-tasting English cheese she'd brought along on her hike. But still, it was new, and it was a change, and that had to count for something.

Especially now, with the rest of her life the same as it ever was.

It was nearly July, and Poppy's second London Season—complimented by her aristocratic aunt, Lady Bridgerton—had recently drawn to a close. She had found herself ending the Season much as she'd begun it—unmarried and unattached.

And a little bored.

She supposed she could have remained in London for the last dregs of the social whirl, hoping that she might actually meet someone she hadn't met before (unlikely). She could have accepted her aunt's invitation to rustle up in Kent, on the off chance that she might actually *like* one of the unmarried gentlemen who just happened to be invited for dinner (even less likely). Of course this would have required that she grit her teeth and attempt to keep her tongue when Aunt Alexandra wanted to know what was wrong with her latest offering (the least likely of all).

Her choices had been dull and duller, but thankfully she'd been saved by her dear childhood friend Elizabeth, who had moved to Charmouth several years earlier with her husband, the affable and bookish George Armitage.

George, however, had been called to Northumberland for some urgent family matter, the details of which Poppy had never quite got straight, so Elizabeth had been left alone at her seaside house, six and a half months pregnant with a child. Bored and confined, she'd invited Poppy to come for an extended stay, and Poppy had happily accepted. It would be like old times for the two friends.

Poppy popped another bite of cheese into her mouth. Well, except for the massive size of Elizabeth's belly. That was new.

It meant Elizabeth couldn't accompany her on her daily jaunts to the beach, but that was no matter. Poppy knew her reputation had never included the word *shy*, but conversational nature notwithstanding, she rather enjoyed her own company. And after months and months of making small talk in London, it felt rather nice to clear her head with the sharp sea air.

She'd been trying to take a different route each day, and she had been delighted to discover a small network of caves about halfway between Charmouth and Lyme Regis, tucked away where the foamy waves lapped the shore. Most filled with water when the tide was in, but after surveying the landscape, Poppy was convinced that there had to exist a few that remained dry, and she was determined to find one.

Just because of the challenge, of course. Not because she had any ne-

perpetually dry cave in Charmouth, Dorset, England.

Great Britain, Europe, the world.

Poppy One really had to take one's challenges where one could, given that
ed and was in Charmouth, Dorset, England, and that seemed a decidedly small
corner of the world, indeed.

Finishing the last bites of her lunch, she squinted up toward the rock
of the sun was to her back, but the day was bright enough to make her wish for
net parasol, or, at the very least, a large shady tree. It was gorgeously warm
icate in and she'd left her redingote back at the house. Even her fichu, which she
ed worn to protect her skin, was starting to get itchy and hot across her chest
) . But But she wasn't going to turn back now. She'd not come this far before
to hold in fact had only made it to this point after convincing Elizabeth's plum
h the maid, who'd been drafted as her chaperone/companion, to remain behind
town.

ed by "Think of it as an additional afternoon off," Poppy had said with a warm
veral smile.

ge. "I don't know." Mary's expression was doubtful. "Mrs. Armitage was
nt quite clear that—"

and "Mrs. Armitage hasn't had a clear thought since finding herself with
is with child," Poppy cut in, sending Elizabeth a silent apology. "It's like that
d visit, women, I'm told," she added, trying to get the maid's mind off the subject
) hand, namely, Poppy's chaperonage, or lack thereof.

"Well, that's certainly true," Mary said, tilting her head slightly to the
or the "When my brother's wife had her boys, I never could get a sensible word
of her."

re shore, "That's it exactly!" Poppy exclaimed. "Elizabeth knows that I will be
the perfectly fine on my own. I'm no spring miss, after all. Hopelessly on
d her shelf, they say."

London, As Mary attempted to assure her that that was most certainly not the
Poppy added, "I'm only going for an easy little stroll by the shore. You
en that. You came with me yesterday."

oped the "And the day before that," Mary said with a sigh, clearly not relishing
prospect of another afternoon of exertion.

the "And the day before that as well," Poppy pointed out. "And what, all
ained before that?"

Mary nodded glumly.

ed of a Poppy didn't smile. She was far too good for that. But success was c

right around the corner.

Literally.

she “Here,” she said, steering the maid toward a cozy tea shop, “why do
l sit down and have a rest? Heaven knows you deserve it. I’ve quite run
ragged, haven’t I?”

s. The “You’ve been nothing but kind, Miss Bridgerton,” Mary said quickl

or a “Kind and exhausting,” Poppy said, patting Mary’s hand as she open
n too, tearoom door. “You work so hard. You deserve a few minutes for you

he’d And so, once Poppy had paid for a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits,
rest. made her escape—two of the aforementioned biscuits in her pocket—
re, and now she was wonderfully, blessedly on her own.

ipish If only there were ladies’ shoes that were suitable for climbing across
nd in rocks. Her little boots were quite the most practical made for women, b
they didn’t compare in durability with the sort that sat in her brothers’
winning wardrobes. She took great care to watch her steps, lest she turn an ankle
as heaven only knew how long it would take for someone to come after h

t She whistled as she walked, enjoying the opportunity to engage in s
for all uncouth behavior (wouldn’t her mama be horrified at the sound!), and
ject at decided to compound the transgression by switching to a tune whose w
were not suitable for female ears.

ie side. “*Oh, the barmaid went down to the oh-oh-oh-ocean,*” she sang happ
ord out “*with an eye toward getting her—* What’s this?”

ie She stopped, peering at a strange formation in the rocks off to her ri
cave. It had to be. And far enough from the water’s edge that it would
flood in high tide.

the “Me secret hideaway, mateys,” she said, winking to herself as she s
direction. It did seem the perfect spot for a pirate, well off the beaten t
case, opening obscured by three large boulders. Truly, it was a wonder she’c
I know spotted it.

Poppy squeezed between the boulders, idly noting that one of them
ig the as large as she’d originally supposed, then made her way into the mout
the cave. *Should’ve brought a lantern,* she thought, waiting for her eye
l week adjust to the darkness, although Elizabeth certainly would have wanted
know the reason for *that*. Hard to explain why one might need a lantern
walking on a beach at half noon.

clearly Poppy took a few baby steps in, nudging her shoes carefully across t

ground, searching out rough spots with her feet since she couldn't possibly see them with her eyes. It was difficult to tell for sure, but the cave wasn't you deep, stretching out far beyond the light at the opening. She moved for you emboldened by the thrill of discovery, edging slowly toward the back . . . slowly . . . slowly . . . until . . .

y. "Ow!" she yelped, wincing as her hand connected with something q
ned the hard and wooden.

self." "Ow," she said again, rubbing the sore spot with her other hand. "O
she'd ow. That was . . ."

nd Her words trailed off. Whatever she'd smacked her hand into, it was
natural outcropping of the cave. In fact, it felt rather like the splintery c
s of a rough wooden crate.

out With tentative movements, she reached her hand back out until it
connected—more gently this time—with a flat wooden panel. No doubt
e. This it, it was definitely a crate.

lf, Poppy let out a little giggle of glee. What had she found? Pirates' bc
er. Smugglers' loot? The cave smelled musty, and it felt unused, so whate
uch this was, it had probably been there for ages.

then "Prepare for treasure." She laughed, saluting herself in the darkness.
ords quick check confirmed that the crate was far too heavy for her to lift, s
ran her fingers along the edge, trying to determine how she might get i
ily, Drat. It was nailed shut. She'd have to come back, although she had nc
how she'd explain away her need for a lantern *and* a crowbar.

ght. A Although . . .

r't She cocked her head to the side. If there was a crate—two, actually,
stacked atop the other—in this section of the cave, who knew what mi
witched farther back?

ack, its She edged into the gloom, her arms stretched gingerly in front of he
l even Nothing yet. Nothing . . . nothing . . .

"Careful there!"

wasn't Poppy froze.

th of "The captain'll kill you if you drop it."

s to Poppy stopped breathing, relief washing over her when she realized
l to the rough male voice was not directed toward her.

n while Relief that was instantly replaced with terror. Slowly, she brought h
back to her body until she'd enveloped herself in a tight hug.

the She was not alone.

sibly Using excruciatingly careful movements, she edged as far behind the
med as she could manage. It was dark, and she was quiet, and whoever was
ward, ought not to see her unless—

... “Will you light the damn lantern?”

 Unless they had a lantern.

uite A flame blazed to life, illuminating the back portion of the cave. Poppy
brow furrowed. Had the men come in from behind her? And if so, how
w ow they entered? Where did the cave go?

in’t a “We don’t have much time,” one of the men said. “Hurry up and help
corner find what we need.”

 “What about the rest?”

 “It’ll be safe until we get back. It’s the last time, anyway.”

 The other man laughed. “So the captain says.”

ot about “He means it this time.”

 “He’ll never quit.”

oty? “Well, if he doesn’t, I will.” Poppy heard a pained grunt of exertion,
ver followed by “I’m getting too old for this.”

. A “Did you move the boulder in front of the opening?” the first man asked,
o she exhaling as he set something down on the ground.

t open. So that was why she’d had to squeeze in, Poppy realized. She should
o idea wondered how such a large crate had fit through the small space.

 “Yesterday,” came the reply. “With Billy.”

 “That scrawny mite?”

 “Mmph. I think he’s thirteen now.”

one “Never say it!”

ght be Good God, Poppy thought, she was trapped in a cave with smugglers
r. maybe even pirates!—and they were chattering away like two old ladies.

 “What else do we need?” came the lower of the two voices.

 “Captain says he won’t leave without a crate of the brandy.”

 Poppy felt the blood leave her body. *A crate?*

 The other man laughed. “To sell or to drink?”

 “Both, I expect.”

that Another chuckle. “He’d best be sharing, then.”

er arms Poppy looked around frantically. Enough of the lantern’s light had fallen
 in her direction that she could see her immediate surroundings. Where
 hell was she going to hide? There was a little indentation in the cave wall
 she could press herself into, but the men would have to be blind to mis

the crates here Still, it was better than her current spot. Poppy scrambled back, curling herself into the tiniest ball she could manage, thanking her maker that she had not worn her bright yellow frock that morning, simultaneously sending her first true prayer in months.

Poppy's
she had
help me
*Please please please.
I'll be a better person.
I'll listen to my mother.
I'll even listen in church.
Please please . . .*

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

Poppy slowly tipped her face toward the man looming above her.

"Forsaken," she muttered.

"Who are you?" the man demanded, shoving the lantern closer to her.

"Who are you?" Poppy shot back, before the relative lack of wisdom of such a retort sank in.

asked,
"Green!" the man hollered.

Poppy blinked.

and have
"Green!"

"What?" grumbled the other man—apparently named Green.

"There's a girl!"

"What?"

"Here. There's a girl."

Green came running over. "Who the hell is this?" he demanded.

s—
"I don't know," the other man said impatiently. "She didn't say."

as.
Green bent down, jamming his weathered face close to Poppy's. "Who are you?"

Poppy said nothing. She didn't often hold her tongue, but now seemed an intelligent time to start.

"Who are you?" he repeated, this time groaning with the words.

"No one," Poppy answered, finding a little courage in the fact that he seemed more tired than angry. "I was just out for a walk. I won't bother you."

filtered
the
all that
s her.
I'll just go. No one will ever know—"

"I'll know," Green said.

"And so will I, for that matter," the other one said, scratching his head.

"I won't say a word," Poppy assured them. "I don't even know what you're talking about."

ing she'd ; up her was in her best interests to add to the conversation. It was difficult to g their ages; both had that weather-beaten look one got after spending to time in the sun and wind. They were dressed simply, in rough work sh trousers, tucked into those tall boots men liked to wear when they knev they'd be getting their feet wet.

“Damn!” Green bit off again. “The day only needed this.”

“What should we do with her?” the other man said.

“I don’t know. We can’t leave her here.”

The two men fell silent, staring at her as if she were the world’s larg burden, just waiting to launch itself onto their shoulders.

“The captain’ll kill us,” Green finally sighed.

“It’s not our fault.”

r face. “I suppose we should ask him what to do with her,” Green said.

1 of “I don’t know where he is,” the other one replied. “Do you?”

Green shook his head. “He’s not on the ship?”

“No. He said he’d meet us on deck an hour before we sail. Had som of businesslike thing to take care of.”

“Damn.”

It was more *damns* than Poppy had ever heard in one sitting, but the seemed little to be gained in pointing that out.

Green sighed, closing his eyes in what could only be described as ar expression of abject misery. “We have no choice,” he said. “We’ll hav take her.”

“What?” the other man asked.

’ho’re “*What?*” Poppy screeched.

ed an “Good God,” Green grumbled, rubbing his ears. “Did that squall cor from your *mouth*?” He let out a long-suffering sigh. “I’m too old for th

“We can’t take her!” the other man protested.

“Listen to him,” Poppy said. “He’s obviously very intelligent.”

e Green’s friend stood up a little straighter and beamed. “The name’s r you. Brown,” he said, nodding politely at her.

“Er, pleased to meet you,” Poppy said, wondering if she ought to ex her hand.

ad. “Do you think I *want* to take her?” Green said. “Bad luck having a v t—” on a ship, and especially *this* one.”

Poppy's lips parted at the insult. "Well," she said, only to be cut off
either it Brown, who asked, "What's wrong with this one? She said I was intell
guess "Which only goes to show that *she* ain't. And besides, she talks."
o much "So do you," Poppy shot back.
irts and "See?" Green said.
N "She's not so bad," Brown said.
"You just said you didn't want her on the boat!"
"Well, I don't, but—"
"There is nothing worse than a talky female," Green grumbled.
"There are many things that are worse," Poppy said, "and you're qu
est fortunate if you've never experienced them."
Green looked at her for a long moment. Just looked at her. Then he
groaned, "The captain's gonna kill us."
"Not if you don't take me with you," Poppy hastened to say. "He'll
know."
"He'll know," Green said ominously. "He always knows."
Poppy chewed on her lower lip, assessing her options. She doubted
e sort could outrun them, and Green was blocking her path to the entrance, in
event. She supposed she could cry and hope that her tears might appea
softer sides of their natures, but that presumed that they *had* softer side
re She looked at Green and smiled hesitantly, testing the waters.
Green ignored her and turned to his friend. "What time—" He stopp
1 Brown was gone. "Brown!" he yelled. "Where the hell'd you go?"
e to Brown's head popped up from behind a stack of trunks. "Just getting
rope."
Rope? Poppy's throat went dry.
"Good," Green grunted.
ne "You do not want to tie me up," Poppy said, her throat apparently st
is." enough for words.
"No, that I don't," he said, "but I have to do it, anyway, so let's mak
easy for the both of us, eh?"
"Surely you don't think I will allow you to take me without a strugg
"I'd been hoping."
tend "Well, you can keep hoping, sir, because I—"
"Brown!" Green hollered.
voman With enough force that Poppy actually shut her mouth.
"Got the rope!" came the answer.

by “Good. Get the other stuff as well.”
igent.” “What other stuff?” Brown asked.
“Yes,” Poppy said nervously. “What other stuff?”
“The other stuff,” Green said impatiently. “You know what I mean.
cloth.”
“Oh, the other stuff,” Brown said. “Righto.”
“What other stuff?” Poppy demanded.
“You don’t want to know,” Green told her.
“I assure you I do,” Poppy said, just as she was beginning to think th
ite maybe she didn’t.
“You said you were going to struggle,” he explained.
“Yes, but what does that have to do—”
“Remember when I said I was too old for this?”
never She nodded.
“Well, ‘this’ includes a struggle.”
Brown reemerged, clutching a green bottle that looked vaguely med
she “Here y’go,” he said, handing it to Green.
1 any “Not that I couldn’t manage you,” Green explained, popping the cor
l to the why? Why make it harder than I have to?”
:s. Poppy had no answer. She stared at the bottle. “Are you going to ma
drink that?” she whispered. It smelled foul.
ed. Green shook his head. “You got a cloth?” he asked Brown.
“Sorry.”
g some Green let out another tired groan and eyed the linen fichu she’d usec
in the bodice of her dress. “We’ll have to use your handkerchief,” he s
Poppy. “Hold still.”
“What are you doing?” she cried out, jerking backward as he yanke
ill wet fichu free.
“I’m sorry,” he said, and strangely enough, it sounded as if he mean
e it “Don’t do this,” Poppy gasped, scrambling as far away from him as
could.
le?” But it wasn’t very far, given that her back was to the cave wall, and
looked on in horror, he poured a liberal amount of the noxious liquid o
whisper-thin linen of her fichu. It became quickly saturated, and sever
drops fell through, disappearing into the damp ground.
“You’re going to have to hold her,” Green said to Brown.
“No,” Poppy said, as Brown’s arms came around her. “No.”

“Sorry,” Brown said, and it sounded as if he meant it too.

Green scrunched the fichu into a ball and placed it over her mouth. I gagged, gasping against the onslaught of foul fumes.

And a And then the world slipped away.

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“Sorry,” Brown said, and it sounded as if he meant it too.

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And then the world slipped away.

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Chapter 2

Andrew Rokesby strode along the decks of the *Infinity*, giving the ship last inspection before they set sail at precisely four that afternoon. Everything appeared to be in order, from bow to stern, and except for Brown and Green every man was accounted for and well-prepared for the voyage that lay ahead of them.

“Pinsley!” Andrew called out, tilting his head up toward the young man tending to the rigging.

“Yes, sir!” Pinsley called down. “What is it, sir?”

“Have you seen Brown and Green? I sent them out to the cave earlier today for some supplies.”

“Supplies, sir?” Pinsley said with a cheeky grin. Everyone knew what Andrew had *really* sent out Brown and Green.

“One little tilt of the wheel, and you’ll be hanging by your fingertips,” Andrew warned.

“They’re below, sir,” Pinsley said with a grin. “Saw ’em head down a quarter hour ago.”

“Below?” Andrew echoed, shaking his head. Brown and Green had to do; there was no reason they should be below.

Pinsley shrugged, or at least Andrew thought he did. It was difficult with the sun in his eyes.

“They was carrying a sack,” Pinsley said.

“A sack?” Andrew echoed. He’d sent them for a crate of brandy. Every man had his indulgences, and his were women in port and French brandy. He had one glass every night, following his supper. Kept life civilized at least as civilized as he wanted it.

“Looked real heavy-like,” Pinsley added.

“Brandy in a sack,” Andrew muttered. “*Madre de Dios*, it’ll be nothing but shards and fumes by now.” He glanced up at Pinsley, who was at work

lashing the ropes, and then turned to the narrow staircase that led below

It was his policy to have a brief word with each member of his crew matter how high or low, before the *Infinity* took to sea. It ensured that he knew his role in the mission at hand, and the men appreciated the show of respect. His crew was small but fiercely loyal. Each would have laid down his life for him, Andrew knew that. But that was because they knew that the captain was prepared to do the same.

Andrew was unquestionably in command, and there wasn't a man aboard who would dare counter one of his orders, but then again, there wasn't

one
anything

“Sir!”

Green,
ahead

Andrew looked behind him. It was Green, who'd obviously come up the other staircase.

nan

“Ah, there you are,” Andrew said, motioning for him to follow. Green was the most senior member of his crew, having joined one day earlier than Brown. The pair had been bickering like old women ever since.

er

“Sir!” Green said again, running along the deck to catch up with him

y

“Talk as we walk,” Andrew said, turning his back to him as he strode toward the staircase that led to his cabin. “I need to secure some things in my cabin.”

is,”

“But sir, I need to tell you—”

a

“And what the hell happened with my brandy?” Andrew asked, taking steps two at a time. “Pinsley said you came aboard with a sack. A sack of brandy?”

work

“Right,” Green said, making a strange sound.

Andrew turned around. “Are you quite all right?”

to tell

Green gulped. “The thing is—”

“Did you just gulp?”

“No, sir, I—”

ery

Andrew turned away, getting back to business. “You should see Flannery about that throat. He's got some kind of concoction to cure it. Tastes like devil, but it works, I can attest to that.”

ized, or

“Sir,” Green said, following him down the hall.

“Brown's aboard?” Andrew asked, grasping the handle to his door.

ing but

“Yes, sir, but sir—”

“Good, then we'll be ready to sail right on schedule.”

is

“Sir!” Green practically cried out, wedging himself between Andrew

the door.
 “What *is it*, Green?” Andrew asked with forced patience.
 Green opened his mouth, but whatever it was he wanted to say, he c
 lacked the words to do so.
 Andrew placed both his hands under Green’s arms, lifted him up, an
 him aside.
 “Before you go in there . . .” Green said in a strangled voice.
 Andrew pushed open the door.
 And found a woman lying on his bed, bound, gagged, and looking a
 she’d shoot flames from her eyes were it anatomically possible.
 Andrew stared at her for a full second, idly taking in her thick chest
 and bright green eyes. He let his gaze wander down to the rest of her—
 was a woman, after all—and smiled.
 “A present?” he murmured. “For me?”
 If she got out of this alive, Poppy decided, she was going to *kill* every
 man on the ship.
 Starting with Green.
 No, Brown.
 No, definitely Green. Brown might have let her go if she’d had a cha
 talk him into it, but Green deserved nothing less than a permanent pox
 house.
 And that of his every last descendant.
 Hmmph. That assumed the odious man could find a woman willing
 procreate with him, which Poppy sincerely doubted was possible. In fa
 thought rather viciously, it was going to be physically *impossible* by th
 she got through with him. Four brothers taught a woman a great deal a
 how to fight dirty, and if she ever managed to get her ankles unbound,
 was going to plant her knee right in his—
Click.
 She looked up. Someone was coming in.
 “Before you go in there . . .” she heard a familiar voice say.
 The door swung open, revealing not Green, and not Brown, but a ma
 least a dozen years younger, and so blindingly handsome that Poppy w
 quite certain her mouth would have dropped open if she hadn’t been g
 His hair was a rich warm brown, sun-streaked with gold and pulled
 devilish queue at the back of his neck. His face was quite simply perfe

full, finely molded lips that tipped up at the corners, leaving him with an expression of permanent mischief. And his eyes were blue, so vividly so she could discern their color from across the room.

Those eyes traveled the length of her, from head to toe, and then back again. It was quite the most intimate perusal Poppy had ever been subjected to, and, damn it all, she felt herself blush.

“A present?” he murmured, his lips curving ever so slightly. “For me?”
“Mmmph grrmph shmmph!” Poppy grunted, struggling against her bindings.

“Er, this is what I was trying to tell you about,” Green said, sliding into the hairroom beside the mysterious stranger.

“This?” the other man murmured, his voice silky smooth.

“Her,” Green amended, the single syllable hanging heavy in the air, as if she were Bloody Mary crossed with Medusa.

Poppy glared at him and growled.

“My, my,” the younger man said, quirking a brow. “I scarcely know how to say. Not in my usual fashion, but fetching nonetheless.”

Poppy watched him warily as he came farther into the cabin. He’d uttered barely a handful of words, but it was enough to know that he was no low sailor. He spoke like an aristocrat, and he moved like one too. She knew his sort. She’d spent the last two years trying (but not really trying) to get him to marry her.

The man turned to Green. “Any particular reason she’s lying on my back?”

“She found the cave, Captain.”

“Was she looking for the cave?”

“Don’t know, sir. I didn’t ask. I think it was an accident.”

The captain regarded her with an unsettlingly even expression before turning back to Green and asking, “What do you propose we do with her?”

“I don’t know, Captain. We couldn’t just leave her there. It was still part of our haul from the last voyage. If we let her go, she’d’ve just told someone about it.”

“Or taken it for herself,” the captain said thoughtfully.

Poppy grunted at the insult. As if she were unprincipled enough to risk her life stealing.

The captain looked at her with an arched brow. “She seems to have a strong opinion about that,” he said.

“She has a great many opinions,” Green said darkly.

an "Is that so?"

so that "We took her gag off while we were waiting for you," Green explained. "Had to put it back on after a minute. Less, really."

ick "That bad, eh?"

ected Green nodded. "Got me in the back of the head with her hands too." Poppy grunted with satisfaction.

e?" The captain turned back to her, looking almost impressed. "Should've bound her hands in back," he said.

nto the rubbing his head. "I wasn't going to untie her long enough to redo it," Green muttered.

The captain nodded thoughtfully.

as if "We didn't have time to unload the cave," Green continued. "And because no one's ever found it before. It's valuable even without anything in it. knows what we might need to hide there."

The captain shrugged. "It's worthless now," he said, crossing his arms. "Unless, of course, we kill her."

what Poppy gasped, the sound audible even over the gag.

attered "Oh, don't worry," he said, rather offhandedly. "We've never killed anyone who didn't need killing, and never a woman. Although," he admitted, idly rubbing his chin, "there have been one or two . . ." He looked up, one to blinding her with a smile. "Well, never you mind."

bed?" "Actually, sir," Green said, stepping forward.

"Hmm?"

"There was that one in Spain. Málaga?"

The captain looked at him blankly until his memory was jogged. "One. Well, that doesn't count. I'm not even sure she was female."

e Poppy's eyes widened. Who *were* these people?

er?" And then, just when she thought the two of them might sit down for full of leisurely drink, the captain snapped open his pocket watch with precise one almost military, movements and said, "We're to sail in less than two hours. Do we even know who she is?"

esort to Green shook his head. "She wouldn't say."

"Where's Brown? Does he know?"

an "No, sir," came the answer from Brown himself, standing in the doorway.

"Oh, there you are," the captain said. "Green and I were just discussing this unexpected development."

"I'm sorry, sir."

“It’s not your fault,” the captain said. “You did the right thing. But you have to ascertain her identity. She’s finely dressed,” he added, motioning to Poppy’s blue walking dress. “Someone will be missing her.”

He stepped toward the bed, reaching for her gag, but both Green and Brown leapt forward, Green grabbing his arm and Brown actually wed his body between the captain and the bed.

“You do not want to do that,” Green said ominously.

“I beg you, sir,” Brown pleaded, “do not remove the gag.”

The captain stopped for a moment and looked from man to man. “We pray tell, is she going to do?”

Green and Brown said nothing, but they both backed up, almost to the sides, wall.

“Good God,” the captain said impatiently. “Two grown men.”

And then he removed the gag.

“You!” Poppy burst out, practically spitting at Green.

Green blanched.

“And you,” she growled at Brown. “And you!” she finished, glaring at the captain.

The captain quirked a brow. “And now that you’ve demonstrated your extensive vocabulary—”

“I am going to kill each and every one of you,” she hissed. “How dare you tie me up and leave me here for hours—”

“It was thirty minutes,” Brown protested.

“It felt like hours,” she railed, “and if you think I’m going to sit here and accept this type of abuse from a pack of idiot pirates—”

She coughed uncontrollably. The bloody captain had shoved the gag in.

“Right,” the captain said. “I understand perfectly now.”

Poppy bit his finger.

“That,” he said smoothly, “was a mistake.”

Poppy glared at him.

“Oh, and by the by,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “we prefer the term *privateer*.”

She growled, grinding her teeth around the gag.

“I’ll remove that,” he said, “if you promise to behave.”

She hated him. Oh, how she hated him. It had taken less than five minutes but already she was certain she’d never hate anyone with quite the same

ve do intensity, with the same fervor, with—
ng to “Very well,” he said, shrugging. “We set sail precisely at four, if you interested.”

l And then he just turned and walked to the door. Poppy grunted. She
ging choice.

“Can you behave?” he asked, his voice annoyingly silky and warm.
She nodded, but her eyes were mutinous.

He walked back to the bed. “Promise?” he asked mockingly.

hat, Her chin jerked in a furious approximation of a nod.

He leaned down and gingerly removed the gag.

he “Water,” she gasped, hating that she was begging.

“Happy to oblige,” he said, pouring her a glass from the pitcher on l
table. He held it to her lips while she drank, since her hands were still t
“Who are you?” he asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Not just now, but it may,” he said, “when we return.”

at the “You can’t take me!” she protested.

“It’s either that or kill you,” he said.

ur Her mouth fell open. “Well, you can’t do that either.”

“I don’t suppose you have a gun hidden in your dress,” he said, lean
re you one shoulder against the wall as he crossed his arms.

Her lips parted with surprise, and then she quickly covered her react
and said, “Maybe.”

and He laughed, drat the man.

“I’ll give you money,” she said quickly. Surely he could be bought.

g back was a pirate, for heaven’s sake. Wasn’t he?

He lifted a brow. “I don’t suppose you’ve a purse of gold hidden in
dress.”

She scowled at his sarcasm. “Of course not. But I can get you some.

“You want us to ransom you?” he asked, smiling.

“No! Of course not. But if you release me—”

r the “No one’s releasing you,” he interrupted, “so just stop your—”

“I’m sure if you think about it—” she cut in.

“I’ve thought all I need to—”

“—you’ll see that it—”

inutes, “We are not letting you—”

ie “—really isn’t such a good idea to—”

u're "I said we're not letting you—"
"—hold me hostage. I'm sure to get in the way and—"
"Can you be quiet?"
had no "—I eat a lot too, and—"
"Does she ever shut up?" the captain asked, turning to his men by the Green and Brown shook their heads.
"—I'll surely be an inconvenience," Poppy finished.
There was a moment of silence, which the captain seemed to savor. "make a rather fine argument for killing you," he finally said.
"Not at all," she quickly put in. "It was an argument to let me go, if I must know."
his "Clearly, I must," he muttered. Then he sighed, the tired sound his first sign of weakness, and said, "Who *are* you?"
tied. "I want to know what you plan to do with me before I give up my identity," Poppy said.
He motioned lazily to her bindings. "You're not really in a position to make demands now, are you?"
ing "What are you going to do with me?" she repeated. It was probably to remain so headstrong, but if he was going to kill her, he was going to hurt her, and her display of temper wasn't going to tip the scales either way.
ion He sat on the edge of the bed, his nearness disconcerting. "I will hurt you," he said, "since despite your waspy tongue, you're here through my fault of your own."
He "No fault," she muttered.
that "You never learn, do you?" he asked. "And here I was going to be nice to you."
"I'm sorry," she said quickly.
"Not terribly sincere, but I'll allow it," he said. "And much as it pains me to inform you, you will be our guest aboard the *Infinity* for the next two weeks, until we complete our voyage."
"No!" Poppy cried out, the horrified sound escaping her lips before she could press her bound hands to her mouth.
"I'm afraid so," he said grimly. "You know where our cave is, and I will leave you behind. Once we return, we'll clear it out and let you go."
"Why don't you clear it out now?"
"I can't," he said simply.
"You mean you won't."

“No, I mean I can’t,” he repeated. “And you’re starting to annoy me
“You can’t take me with you,” Poppy said, hearing her voice crack.
God, she wanted to cry. She could hear it in her voice, feel it in the bur
sensation behind her eyes. She wanted to cry like she hadn’t cried in y
ie door. and if she didn’t get ahold of herself, she was going to lose her control
here in front of this man—this awful man who held her very fate in his

“Look,” he said, “I do sympathize with your plight.”
“You Poppy shot him a look that said she didn’t believe him for a second.
“I do,” he said gently. “I know how it feels to be backed into a corne
you isn’t fun. Especially for someone like you.”

Poppy swallowed, unsure if his words were compliment or insult.
irst “But the truth is,” he continued, “this ship must depart this afternoon
wind and tides are favorable, and we must make good time. You shoul
thank your maker we’re not the killing sort.”

“Where are we going?” she whispered.
to He paused, obviously considering her question.

“I’m going to know when we get there,” she said impatiently.
foolish “True enough,” he said, his small smile almost a salute. “We sail for
o kill Portugal.”

Poppy felt her eyes bug out. “Portugal?” she echoed, her throat strar
nor over the word. “Portugal? Will it really be two weeks?”

ittle He shrugged. “If we’re lucky.”
“Two weeks,” she whispered. “Two weeks.” Her family would be fi
She’d be ruined. Two weeks. A whole fortnight.

ice to “You have to let me write a letter,” she said urgently.
“I beg your pardon?”

“A letter,” she repeated, struggling to sit up. “You must allow me to
is me one.”

o “And what, pray tell, do you plan to include in such a missive?”

“I’ve been visiting a friend,” Poppy said quickly, “and if I don’t retu
she evening, she will call out the alarm. My entire family will descend on t
district.” She bored her eyes into his. “Trust me when I tell you that yo
can’t not wish for this to happen.”

His gaze did not leave hers. “Your name, my lady.”

“My family—”

“Your name,” he said again.

Poppy pursed her lips, then said, “You may call me Miss Bridgerton

.” And he blanched. He *blanched*. He hid it well, but she saw the blood from his face, and for the first time in the interview, she felt a little rising triumph. Not that she was about to go free, but still, it was her first victory, tiny one, to be sure, but a victory nonetheless.

“I see you’ve heard of my family,” she said sweetly.
He muttered something under his breath that she was quite certain would not hold up in polite circles.

Slowly, and with what looked to be great control, he stood up. “Green barked.

“Yes, sir!” the older man said, jumping to attention.

“Kindly fetch *Miss Bridgerton* some writing materials,” he said, her words sounding like a dread poison on his lips.

“Yes, sir,” Green said, hurrying out the door, Brown hot on his heels.
The captain turned to her with resolute eyes. “You will write precisely what I direct you to write,” he said.

“Begging your pardon,” Poppy said, “but if I did that, then my friend would know immediately that there was a problem. *You* wouldn’t sour *me*,” she explained.

“Your friend will know there is a problem when you don’t return this evening.”

“Of course, but I can write something that will assuage her,” Poppy returned, “and at the very least, ensure that she doesn’t notify the authorities.”

He ground his teeth together, then said, “It will not be sealed without approval.”

“Of course,” she said primly.

He glared at her, his eyes somehow hot and cold and so so blue.

“I’ll need my hands untied,” Poppy said, lifting her wrists in his direction.
He crossed the room. “I’m waiting until Green returns.”

Poppy decided not to argue any further. He appeared about as moving as a glacier.

“Which branch?” he said suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“To which branch of the family do you belong?” His voice was sharp, each word enunciated with military precision.

It was on the tip of her tongue to make an insolent retort, but it was not from the captain’s expression that this would be most unwise. “Somerset,” she said quietly. “My uncle is the viscount. They are in Kent.”

l drain His jaw clenched, and the seconds ticked by in silence until Green fi
h of reappeared with paper, a quill, and a small pot of ink. Poppy sat patien
tory. A while the captain untied her hands, her breath sucking over her lips at t
pain as the blood returned to her fingers.

ould taking her by surprise.

“Habit,” he said. “Not heartfelt.”

en!” he “It was difficult to imagine that it might be,” she returned.

He made no response, merely held out his hand as she swung her leg
the side of the bed.

name “Am I to hop to the table?” she asked. Her ankles were still bound.

s. he was about, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the dining t
ly And dropped her most unceremoniously into a chair. “Write,” he ord

d Poppy took the quill between her fingers and dipped it gingerly in th
id like chewing on her lip as she tried to figure out what to say. What sort of v
would possibly convince Elizabeth not to summon the authorities—an
family—while Poppy disappeared for two weeks?

is

Dearest Elizabeth, I know you will be worried . . .

orities.” “What is taking so long?” the captain snapped.

it my Poppy looked up at him and lifted her brows before replying. “If you
know, this is the first time I’ve had the occasion to write a letter explai
without, of course, actually explaining—my having been kidnapped.”

“Don’t use the word *kidnapped*,” he said sharply.

action. “Indeed,” she replied, shooting him a sarcastic glare. “Which accou
the delay. I’m forced to use three words where a reasonable person wo
ble on only one.”

“A skill one would think you’ve long since mastered.”

“Nevertheless,” she said, trying to speak over him, “it tends to comp
the message.”

p, each “Write,” he directed. “And say you’ll be gone a month.”

“A month?” she gasped.

clear “I hope to God not,” he muttered, “but this way, when we get you b
set,” fortnight, it will be cause for celebration.”

Poppy was not quite certain, but she thought he muttered under his t

inally “My celebration.”

tly She decided to let it pass. It was the least of his insults thus far, and
he had work to do. She took a deep breath and continued with:

ology . . . *but I assure you that I am well. I shall be gone for a month, and
must beg you to keep my disappearance to yourself. Please do not
alert my family or the authorities, as the former will only worry and
the latter will spread the tale so far and wide that my reputation will
be forever ruined.*

gs over I know this is a great deal to ask of you, and I know that you will
have a thousand questions for me upon my return, but I implore you
Elizabeth—please trust me and all shall be explained soon.

a what

able.

dered.

ie ink,

ords

d her

Your sister in spirit,

Poppy

“Poppy, eh?” the captain said. “I wouldn’t have guessed it.”

Poppy ignored him.

“Pandora, perhaps, or Pauline. Or even Prudence, if only for the iron

“Poppy is a perfectly acceptable name,” she snapped.

His eyes held hers in an uncomfortably intimate gaze. “Lovely, ever
murmured.

u must She swallowed nervously, noticing that Green had departed, leaving
ning—quite alone with the captain. “I signed it ‘sister in spirit’ so that she wo
know I wasn’t coerced. It is how we have always signed our letters.”

He nodded, taking the missive from her fingers.

ats for “Oh, wait!” she blurted, taking it back. “I need to add a postscript.”

uld use “Do you now?”

“Her maid,” Poppy explained. “She was my chaperone for the aftern
and—”

licate “There was another person at the cave?” he questioned sharply.

“No, of course not,” Poppy retorted. “I managed to be rid of her in
Charmouth.”

“Of course you did.”

ack in a His tone was such that she was compelled to shoot him a slitty side-
glance. “She was not of sufficient physical constitution to accompany

breath, she said with exaggerated patience. “I left her at a tea shop. Trust me,

were both happier that way.”

she “And yet you ended up kidnapped and on your way to Portugal.”
Score one for him. Damn it.

I “At any rate,” she continued, “Mary could be trouble, but only if Eli
doesn’t get to her before she realizes something is wrong. If Elizabeth
her not to say anything, she won’t. She’s fiendishly loyal. Mary, that is
Elizabeth too, but that’s different.”

l He rubbed one hand over his brow, hard, as if he was having trouble
following her.

“Just let me write the addendum,” she said, and she hastily added:

,
*Postscript: Please assure Mary that I am well. Tell her I came up
one of my cousins and decided to join him for an outing. She must n
talk indiscreetly. Bribe her if you must. I shall repay you.*

“Your cousins?” he murmured.

“I have many,” she said, angling for an ominous tone.

Other than a slight lift of his brow, he gave no reaction. Poppy held
ly—” now-finished missive, and he took it, giving the words one last glance
folding it neatly in half.

l,” he The motion was crisp, and horribly final. Poppy exhaled, because it
either that or cry. She waited for him to go—surely he would take his l
her now, but he just stood there looking thoughtful, until he said, “Your na
uld very unusual. How did you come by it?”

“It’s not so unusual,” she muttered.

He leaned toward her, and she could not seem to look away as his ey
crinkled merrily. “You’re no Rose or Daisy.”

Poppy didn’t intend to respond, but then she heard herself say, “It ha
noon,” nothing to do with flowers.”

“Really?”

“It came from my brother. He was four, I suppose. My mother let hi
touch her belly while she was carrying me, and he said it felt like I was
popping about.”

He smiled, and it made him even more impossibly handsome. “I ima
eyed he’s never let you hear the end of that.”

me,” And that broke the spell. “He died,” Poppy said, looking away. “Fiv
we ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Habit or heartfelt?” she asked waspishly, quite before she had a chance to think about her words. Or her tone.

Elizabeth “Heartfelt,” he said quietly.

She said nothing, just looked down at the table, trying to make sense of it. Well, this strange reality she’d been thrust into. Pirates who apologized? Out who spoke as finely as any duke? Who *were* these people?

“Where shall I have this delivered?” the captain asked, holding up his letter.

“Briar House,” Poppy said. “It’s near—”

“My men will know where to find it,” he cut in.

Poppy watched as he walked to the door. “Sir!” she suddenly called out. “Er, Captain,” she amended, furious with herself for offering him the name of a *sir*.

He lifted one brow in silent question.

“Your name, Captain.” And she was delighted that she managed to say it as a statement, not a question.

“Of course,” he said, sweeping into a courtly bow. “Captain Andrew James, at your service. Welcome aboard the *Infinity*.”

“No ‘We’re delighted to have you’?” Poppy asked.

He laughed as he placed his hand on the doorknob. “That remains to be seen.”

He poked his head out the door and barked out someone’s name, and Poppy watched his back as he gave instructions—and the letter—to one of his men. She thought he might then depart, but instead he shut the door and leaned against it, regarding her with a resigned expression.

“Table or bed?” he asked.

Elizabeth “What?”

So she said it. “What?”

“Table”—he nodded at her before jerking his head toward the corner of the room. “Bed.”

This could not be good. Poppy tried to think quickly, to figure out in a second both his intentions and her possible responses. But all she said to him was

Elizabeth “Ehrm . . .”

“Bed it is,” he said crisply.

Poppy let out a shriek as he scooped her up again and tossed her onto the bed.

“It will be better for us both if you don’t struggle,” he warned her.
Her eyes grew wide with terror.

“Oh, for the love of—” He bit off his statement before he blasphemed
went on to utter something far worse. He took a moment to compose himself
then said, “I’m not going to defile you, Miss Bridgerton. You have my
word.”

She said nothing.
“Your hand,” he said.

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she lifted her hand
nonetheless.

“The other one,” he said sharply, then grabbed her left hand—the one
which she wrote, despite her governess’s best attempts to force her to
respect—and pulled it against the bed rail. Before she could count to five, he
pressed her to the long slat of wood.

They both looked at her free hand.
“You could try,” he said, “but you won’t get it undone.” And then he
smiled, damn the man. “No one ties knots like a sailor.”

“In that case, could you untie my ankles?”
“Not until we’re well at sea, Miss Bridgerton.”
“It’s not as if I can swim,” she lied.

“Shall we toss you in the water to test the truth of that statement?” he
asked. “Rather like setting a witch afire. If she burns, she’s innocent.”

Poppy ground her teeth together. “If I drown—”
“Then you’re trustworthy,” he finished, smiling broadly. “Shall we
go?”

“Get out,” she said tightly.
He let out a bark of laughter. “I’ll see you when we’re well at sea, my
liar.”

And then, before she had the chance to even think about throwing
something at him, he was gone.

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They both looked at her free hand.

“You could try,” he said, “but you won’t get it undone.” And then he smiled, damn the man. “No one ties knots like a sailor.”

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“Shall we toss you in the water to test the truth of that statement?” he asked. “Rather like setting a witch afire. If she burns, she’s innocent.”

Poppy ground her teeth together. “If I drown—”

“Then you’re trustworthy,” he finished, smiling broadly. “Shall we give it a go?”

“Get out,” she said tightly.

He let out a bark of laughter. “I’ll see you when we’re well at sea, my little liar.”

And then, before she had the chance to even think about throwing something at him, he was gone.

Chapter 3

“Bridgerton,” Andrew ground out as he strode furiously across the *Infinity* foredeck. “Bridgerton!” Of all the women in all the world, the one who stumbled into his cave—which, he might add, had gone undetected for three years—had to be a *Bridgerton*.

It would have only been worse if she’d been a bloody Rokesby.

Thank God he’d never used his family surname aboard the ship; his crew knew him only as Andrew James. Which wasn’t technically untrue—his full given name was Andrew James Edwin Rokesby. It had seemed prudent not to advertise his aristocratic identity when he took command of the *Infinity*, and he’d never been so glad of it before now. If the girl in his cabin was a Bridgerton, she’d know who the Rokesbys were, and that would be a cascade of misery all around.

“Bridgerton,” he practically groaned, earning him a curious look from some of his deckhands. It was impossible to overstate just how well Andrew knew the Bridgertons, at least the portion of the family that resided in Aubrey in Kent, just a short distance from his own ancestral home. Lord and Lady Bridgerton were practically a second set of parents to him, and they had become family in truth seven years earlier when their eldest daughter, Anne, had married Andrew’s older brother George.

Frankly, Andrew was surprised that he and Poppy Bridgerton had never met. Lord Bridgerton had several younger brothers, and as far as Andrew knew, they’d all had children. There had to be dozens of Bridgerton cottages scattered about the English countryside. He vaguely recalled Billie telling him about family in Somerset, but if they’d ever visited, it had not been to Andrew’s home to meet them.

And now one of them was on his ship.

Andrew swore under his breath. If Poppy Bridgerton discovered his identity, there would be hell to pay. Only thirteen people knew that An

James was actually Andrew Rokesby, third son of the Earl of Manston those thirteen, nine were members of his immediate family.

And of those nine, zero knew the real reason for the deception.

It had all started seven years earlier, when Andrew had been sent home from the navy to recuperate after he'd fractured his arm. He had been ordered to return to his post aboard the HMS *Titania*—he'd worked hard for his promotion to first lieutenant, damn it—but the king's Privy Council had other ideas.

In their infinite wisdom, the members of the council had decided the best place for a naval officer was a tiny landlocked principality in central Europe. Andrew was told—and this was a direct quote—to be “charming and to make sure that Wachtenberg-Molstein's Princess Amalia Augustine Maria Theresa Josephine was delivered to London in one virginal piece, a full potential bride for the Prince of Wales.

That she'd fallen overboard during the channel crossing was not Andrew's fault. That she'd been rescued, however, was, and when she had then declared that she'd marry none but the man who'd saved her, Andrew found himself at the center of a diplomatic disaster. The final leg of the journey had involved nothing less than a runaway coach, the disgruntled resignation of two sub-members of the council, and an overturned chamber pot. (Cue Andrew, not the princess, although you'd think it had been the latter for the way she'd carried on.)

It had been his sister-in-law's favorite story to tell at dinner parties for years. And Andrew had never even told her about the ferret.

In the end, the princess didn't marry Andrew or the Prince of Wales because the Privy Council had been so impressed with Andrew's unflappable demeanor that they decided he could serve his country better out of uniform than in. But not officially. Never officially. When the secretaries of state summoned him for a joint interview, they clarified that when they said *diplomatic* they had meant *conversational*. They didn't want Andrew to negotiate treaties, they wanted him to talk to people. He was young, he was handsome, he was charming.

People loved him.

Andrew knew this, of course. He'd always made friends easily, and that rare gift of being able to talk almost anyone into almost anything. He had felt strange to be ordered to do something so intangible. And so he

He had to resign his naval commission, of course. His parents were

. Of dumbfounded. Three years later, when he took command of a ship and the life of a privateer, they had been disappointed in the extreme.

Privateering was not a noble profession. If an aristocratic gentleman wished to take to the seas, he wore a uniform and swore allegiance to King and Country. He did not command a ship of potentially disreputable sails and smuggle goods for his own financial gain.

Andrew told his parents that this was why he sailed under an assumed name. He knew that they disapproved of his choices, and he did not want to bring dishonor to the family. What his parents didn't know—since he never allowed to tell them—was that he wasn't just a merchant ship captain. He'd never been *just* a merchant ship captain. He'd assumed command of the *Infinity* at His Majesty's explicit request.

This had happened in 1782, when the government was reorganized, the Northern and Southern Departments were transformed into the Home and Foreign Offices. With foreign affairs finally consolidated into one department, the new foreign secretary had begun to look for innovative ways to pursue diplomacy and protect British interests. He had summoned Andrew to London almost immediately upon assuming his office.

When Charles James Fox—the first foreign secretary and former leader of the House of Commons—asked a man to serve his country, that man did not say no. Even if it meant deceiving his own family.

Andrew did not perform the crown's bidding on every voyage—there simply weren't enough tasks for that, and it would have looked odd if he were in port twiddling his thumbs until someone at the Foreign Office asked him to be a courier some papers to Spain or collect a diplomat in Brussels. Most of the time he was exactly what his crew thought he was—an ordinary sea captain in uniform with mostly legal cargo.

But not this time. The current foreign secretary had entrusted a pack of papers to his care, and he'd been tasked with delivering them to the British envoy in Portugal. Andrew wasn't sure what it was all about; he was rarely told the contents of the documents he carried. He suspected it had something to do with the ongoing negotiations with Spain over the settlements on the Mosquito Coast. It didn't matter, really. All that mattered was that he'd been told to get the papers to Lisbon as soon as possible, and that meant he had to leave now, when the winds and tides were favorable. He certainly did not have time to clear out the cave that Poppy Bridgerton had discovered. He did not have the manpower to leave three people behind—the number in

began take to distribute the goods and guard the girl until the job was done.

If it had just been about profits, he would have abandoned the cargo taken the financial loss. But the cave was also used as a drop point, and hidden in one of the crates was a letter to the prime minister that Andrew just brought back from an envoy in Spain. Someone from London was pick it up in two days' time. It was vital that the cave remained undisturbed at least until then.

So he was stuck with Poppy Bridgerton.

“Sir!”

Andrew turned to see Brown heading his way.

“I delivered the letter, sir,” the seaman said.

“Good,” Andrew grunted. “Did anyone see you?”

Brown shook his head. “I had Pinsley hand it to a housemaid. No one knows him hereabouts. And I made him wear that black wig you keep aboard.”

“Good.”

“Didn't want to leave it on the steps,” Brown added. “Didn't think you want to chance it not getting read.”

“No, of course not,” Andrew said. “You did the right thing.”

Brown nodded his thanks. “Pinsley says the maid says she'll give it lady of the house straightaway.”

Andrew nodded sharply. He could only hope that all went according plan. There would still be hell to pay when Miss Bridgerton was returned to him two weeks' time, but he might be able to retain at least a semblance of control over the situation if her friend kept quiet. And if her friend did keep her mouth shut, and no one ever learned that Poppy had gone missing, Andrew just might avoid having to marry the chit.

Oh yes. He was well aware that this was a very real possibility. He was a gentleman, and he'd compromised a lady, however inadvertently. But he was also pragmatic. And as there was at least a remote chance that she'd emerge from her ordeal with her reputation intact, it seemed best that she not be apprised of his true identity.

At least this was what he was telling himself.

It was time to depart, so Andrew found his place at the wheel, his back stiffening with a rush of excitement as they lifted anchor and the *Infinite* Nor wind-filled sails propelled them forward. One would think the sensation would grow old, that so many voyages at sea would have left him imm

the thrill of the wind and the speed and the spray of the sea as they raced and across the waves.

But it was still exhilarating, every time. His blood surged, and his lungs had filled with the tangy salt air, and he knew that at this moment in time, he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Which was ironic, he supposed, as he wasn't in an actual place, but he was moving swiftly across the water. Did that mean he was meant to be in motion? Would he live his days on the water? *Should* he live his days on the water?

Or was it time to go home?

Andrew gave his head a shake. This was no time to grow maudlin. Philosophy was for the idle, and he had work to do.

He scanned the sky as he steered the *Infinity* past the town of Lyme and into the English Channel. It was a perfect day for sailing, crisp and clear and with a hearty wind. If the weather held as such, they could reach Port Phillip in five days.

"Please, God," Andrew said, with the sheepish expression of one who didn't often make divine entreaties. But if ever there was a time for prayer, this was most definitely it. He was confident that he could manage Poppy Bridgerton, but still, he'd rather have her off his hands as soon as possible. As it was, her presence meant the eventual end of his career. At some point she would learn his true name; given how close he was to her cousins, it seemed impossible that she wouldn't.

"Sir?"

Andrew nodded, acknowledging Billy Suggs, at thirteen the youngest crew member on the ship.

"Sir, Pinsley says there's a woman on the ship," Billy said. "Is that true?"

"It is."

There was a pause, and then Billy said, "Sir? Isn't that devilish bad for you, sir? To have a woman aboard, sir?"

Andrew fought the urge to close his eyes and sigh. This was exactly what he was worried about. Sailors were a notoriously superstitious lot. "No, Billy, but foolish talk, Billy," he said. "You won't even know she's here."

Billy looked dubious, but he headed back to the galley.

"Hell," Andrew said, despite the fact that there was no one close enough to hear, "if I'm lucky, I won't even know she's here."

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Chapter 4

By the time Poppy heard the door to the captain's cabin open, she was ferociously bad mood.

One to which she rather thought she was entitled. Being bound hand and foot tended to lower the spirits. Well, one hand and two feet. She supposed Captain James had shown some degree of kindness when he'd left her hand free. Not that it had served her any use. He had not exaggerated when he'd boasted about the quality of sailors' knots. It had taken but a minute for her to conclude that she had no hope of wriggling the rope loose. She supposed a feistier female might have persisted, but Poppy was not for raw skin or broken nails, and it was quite clear that that was all she'd do if she kept working at the knot.

"I'm hungry," she said, without bothering to look and see who had opened the cabin.

"Thought you might be," came the captain's voice. A warm, crusty roll of bread landed on the bed next to her shoulder. It smelled heavenly.

"Brought you butter too," the captain said.

Poppy thought about turning to face him, but she'd long since realized any change in position involved a rather undignified amount of grunting and twisting. So she just said, "Shall I fill your bed with crumbs?"

"There are so many interesting rejoinders to such a statement," he said, but she could hear the lazy smile in his voice, "but I will refrain."

Score one for him, *again*. Damn it.

"If you'd like," he said mildly, "I'll free you from your bindings."

That was enough to make her twist her head. "We're well out to sea now, then?"

He stepped forward, holding a knife. "Far enough that one would have been far less clever than you to attempt an escape."

She wrinkled her nose. "Compliment?"

“Absolutely,” he said, his smile positively lethal.

“I assume you plan to use that knife on my bindings.”

He nodded, slicing her free. “Not that the alternatives aren’t temptin

Her eyes flew to his face.

“I jest,” he said, almost rotely.

Poppy was not amused.

The captain just shrugged, tugging the rope out from under her ankle

“My life would be far simpler if you were not here, Miss Bridgerton.”

“You could have left me in Charmouth,” she reminded him.

in a “No,” he said, “I couldn’t have done.”

She picked up the roll and took a bite of unladylike proportions.

l and “You *are* hungry,” he murmured.

osed She shot him a look that told him what she thought of his overly ob
right statement.

when He tossed another roll in her direction. She caught it one-handed and
ite for managed not to smile.

“Well done, Miss Bridgerton,” he said.

id of “I have four brothers,” she said with a shrug.

achieve “Do you now?” he asked mildly.

She glanced up briefly from her food. “We’re fiendishly competitive

entered He pulled a chair out from his surprisingly elegant dining table, then
roll resting one ankle on the opposite knee with lazy grace. “All good at ga

She leveled her gaze onto his. She could be every bit as nonchalant :
And if she couldn’t, she’d die trying. “Some better than others,” she sa
then finished up the first roll.

ed that He laughed. “Meaning you’re the best?”

ig and She lifted a brow. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

aid, and “I like to win.”

“Most people do.”

She fully intended to respond with a cuttingly witty rejoinder, but he
her to the punch with “You, I imagine, however, like to win more than

She pursed her lips. “Compliment?”

ve to He shook his head, his lips still curved into a vexing little smile. “No
time.”

“Because you’re afraid I’m going to best you?”

“Because I’m afraid you’re going to make my life a living hell.”

g.” Poppy’s lips parted in surprise. That was not what she’d expected him to say. She regarded the second roll, then took a bite. “Some would say,” she said once she’d finished chewing, “that such language isn’t appropriate in the presence of a lady.”

es.” “We’re hardly in a drawing room,” he returned, “and besides, I thought you said you had four brothers. Surely they’ve managed to blister your cheeks once or twice.”

They had, of course, and Poppy wasn’t so high in the instep that she fainted at the occasional curse. She’d scolded the captain mainly just to annoy him, and she rather suspected he knew that.

Which annoyed *her*.

rious” She decided to change the subject. “I believe you said you’d brought butter.”

l” He motioned gallantly to a small ramekin, resting atop the dining table. “Surely you don’t want me to toss *this*,” he said, “your superior catching skills notwithstanding.”

Poppy rose and walked to the table. She was a bit wobbly, but she could tell if it was from the motion of the sea or the blood returning to her face.

2.” “Sit,” he said, the word more of a request than an order.

1 sat, She hesitated, his politeness far more disconcerting than incivility might have been.

imes?” “I won’t bite,” he added, leaning back.

as he. She pulled out the chair.

id, “Unless, of course, you want me to,” he murmured.

“Captain James!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Miss Bridgerton, you’re made of sterner stuff than *that*.”

“I don’t get your meaning,” she ground out.

His lips quirked. Not that they’d ever really stopped quirking; the occasional man always looked as if he was up to something. “If you were truly my match,” he said, his voice lightly taunting, “you’d not be the least put off by my wordplay.”

ot this” She sat down and reached for the butter. “I don’t generally jest about matters relating to my life or virtue, Captain James.”

“A wise rule,” he said, leaning back, “but I certainly need not feel constrained by it.”

She picked up the butter knife and regarded it thoughtfully.

m to “Not nearly sharp enough to do me damage,” the captain said with a
she “No.” Poppy sighed, dipping it into the butter. “Pity that.” She slath
e in the her roll and took a bite. “Do you plan to keep me on bread and water?”
 “Of course not,” he said. “I am not so ungentlemanly as that. Supper
ght to arrive in”—he checked his pocket watch—“five minutes.”
ears She watched him for a moment. He didn’t look like he was going
 anywhere. “Do you plan to eat here with me?” she asked.
would “I don’t plan to starve.”
nnoy “You can’t go eat with . . . with . . .” She waved her hand about som
ineffectually, not really knowing what she was motioning to.
 “My men?” he finished for her. “No. We’re a more liberal ship than
t but it’s hardly a democracy. I am the captain. I eat here.”
 “Alone?”
ole. His smile was slow and wicked. “Unless I have company.”
ng She sucked in her upper lip, refusing to entertain him by rising to hi
 “Are you enjoying your roll?” he asked felicitously.
ouldn’t “It’s delicious.”
et. “Hunger can make anything taste good,” he remarked.
 “Nonetheless,” she said honestly, “it’s rather tasty.”
ight “I shall convey your compliments to the chef.”
 “You have a chef aboard?” she asked, surprised.
 He shrugged. “He fancies himself French. I’ve always suspected he
born in Leeds.”
 “There’s nothing wrong with Leeds,” Poppy said.
 “Not unless you’re a French chef.”
ff than A tiny laugh crossed her lips, taking her completely by surprise.
 “There now, Miss Bridgerton,” the captain said as she finished the s
roll, “that wasn’t so hard, was it?”
lious “Chewing, you mean?” she asked innocently. “I’ve always been rat
y good at that. At least since I grew teeth.”
off by “Sharp ones, I’m sure.”
 She smiled. Slowly. “Positively wolfish.”
t “Not the most appealing of images, and I’m sure you knew I was rel
to our conversation.” He tilted his head to the side, which somehow m
small smile more lopsided—and more devastating. “It’s not so terribly
difficult to laugh in my company.”
 “The more pertinent question would be— Why do you wish me to?”

l smile. “Laugh, you mean?”

ered She nodded.

’ He leaned forward. “It’s a long voyage to Portugal, Miss Bridgerton
r is due heart, men are lazy creatures. I’m forced to have you aboard, in my ver
cabin even, for at least two weeks. It will require far less energy on my
you’re not spitting mad the entire time.”

Poppy managed a half smile that was every bit a match with his. “I a
you, Captain James, I never spit.”

ewhat He laughed aloud. “Touché, Miss Bridgerton.”

Poppy sat quietly for a moment. She’d finished both rolls, but suppe
most, not yet arrived, leaving her without anything with which to occupy her
made the silence awkward, and she hated that she was staring at her ha
avoid staring at him.

It was *hard* to look at him. It wasn’t that he was so handsome, altho
s bait. that was certainly true. And while Poppy was usually comfortable in m
social gatherings, she was the first to admit that there were some peopl
were simply *too* beautiful. One almost had to look away, else risk turni
tongue-tied and stupid.

But that wasn’t why Captain James made her feel so inept. She was
enough, but she was used to being around people who were more attra
than she was. London was full of ladies and gentlemen who spent hour
was hours on their appearance. Poppy could barely sit still long enough for
maid to dress her hair.

The problem with Captain James wasn’t his beauty, it was his intelli
More specifically, he had too much of it.

Poppy could see it in his eyes. She’d spent most of her life being the
econd cleverest person in the room. It wasn’t braggadocio, it was fact. But sh
wasn’t so sure she had this man beat.

er She stood abruptly and walked to the windows, gazing out over the
sea. She hadn’t had the chance to explore the cabin, not really. Her tim
the bed had been spent tied up and staring at the ceiling. And when she
writing the letter to Elizabeth, she’d been far too focused on the task—
ferring keeping up with the clever captain—to truly examine her surroundings

ade his “These are very fine windows,” she said. The glass was of obvious c
perhaps a little weather-beaten, but not warped or wavy.

’ “Thank you.”

She nodded, even though she wasn’t looking at him. “Are all captain

cabins this commodious?”

“I can’t say I’ve done a thorough study on the subject, but of the ones I’ve been in, yes. Military ships, especially.”

She turned. “You’ve been aboard a military ship?”

He glanced to the side—not even for a full second—but it was enough to let Poppy know that he’d not meant to let such a detail slip.

“I’d wager you were in the navy,” she said.

“Would you now?”

“Either that or you were there as a prisoner, and strange as it seems to me, this, since you *did* kidnap me, that doesn’t seem likely.”

“Because of my high moral fiber?”

“Because you’re too clever to get caught.”

He laughed at that. “I shall take that as the highest of compliments, Miss Bridgerton. Mostly because I know how grudgingly it was given.”

“It would be foolish of me to underestimate your intelligence.”

“Indeed it would, and if you will permit me to pay you a compliment, it would be equally foolish for me to underestimate you.”

A little thrill ran through Poppy’s chest. Men so rarely acknowledge a woman’s intelligence in a woman. And the fact that it was *he* . . .

. . . had nothing to do with it, she told herself firmly. She walked over to the desk, set against the far wall. Like the table, it was a finely crafted piece of furniture. In fact everything about the cabin spoke of wealth and privilege. The books squeezed tightly on the shelf were those of an educated man. she was fairly certain the carpet was imported from the Orient.

Or maybe he’d gone to the Orient and brought it back himself. Still, the quality.

She had always thought ship cabins would be tiny and cramped, but this one was quite spacious. Nothing compared to her bedchamber at home, of course, but still, she could take ten paces between the two walls, and she always had a lengthy stride.

“Do you get seasick, Miss Bridgerton?” Captain James asked.

She turned sharply, surprised that she had not yet considered this. “I don’t know.”

This seemed to amuse him. “How do you feel right now?”

“Fine,” she said, the word drawn out long as she paused to take stock of her insides. Nothing was churning, nothing was queasy. “Almost normal, I suppose.”

He gave a slow nod. "That's a good sign. I've seen men reduced to
as I've invalids even here in the calm waters of the channel."

"This is calm?" Poppy asked. They might not be pitching and rolling,
the floor was definitely unsteady beneath her feet. Nothing like the tim
gh to she'd been rowed out on a lake.

"Relatively," he replied. "You'll know rough waters once we reach
Atlantic."

"We're not—" She cut herself off. Of course they were not yet in th
to say Atlantic. She knew her geography. She just had never had reason to pu
 firsthand use before.

She schooled her features back into what she hoped was a composed
expression. "I have never been to sea," she said stiffly. "I expect we w
Miss learn how I fare."

He opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment a knock sounded
door, and whatever he might have said was supplanted by "That will b
it, it supper."

Poppy scooted out of the way as a towheaded boy of perhaps ten or
d carried in a tray with covered dishes and a carafe of what looked to be
wine.

"Thank you, Billy," the captain said.

"Sir," Billy grunted, setting the heavily laden tray on the table.

Poppy smiled at the boy—there was no need to be rude to everyone-
vilege. he was clearly trying to avoid looking her way.

"Thank you," she said, perhaps a little too loudly.

it was Billy flushed and gave a jerky nod.

"This is Miss Poppy," the captain said, laying a hand on Billy's sho
this before he could flee. "Aside from me, you will be the only person allo
, of this cabin to tend to her. Do you understand?"

ne'd "Yes, sir," Billy said, still not looking at her. He seemed downright
miserable. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No, that will be all. You may return in three quarters of an hour to
don't the tray."

Billy nodded and practically sprinted from the room.

"He's at that age," the captain said with a wry lift of his brows, "wh
k of there is nothing so scary as an attractive female."

ial, I "It's nice to know I scare someone," Poppy half muttered.

The captain let out a bark of laughter. "Oh, you need not worry on tl

score. Brown and Green are thoroughly terrified.”

g, but
ies She held her breath as she waited for his answer. She wasn’t sure w
foolish devil had compelled her to ask such a question, but now that sh
her skin prickled with anticipation.

the He took his time in answering, but Poppy didn’t think it was with th
to draw out her unease. His expression grew thoughtful as he lifted the
the main dish. “Rabbit in wine,” he murmured, “and no, *you* don’t scar
e He looked up, his eyes meeting hers in a startling blaze of azure.

it it to She waited for him to elaborate, but he did not, instead ladling the fi
l stew into their bowls.

ill soon “What does scare you?” she finally asked.

at the He chewed. Swallowed. “Well, I don’t much like spiders.”
e His answer was so unexpected she gave a little snort. “Does anyone’
“Must be someone, I imagine,” he said with a one-shouldered shrug

twelve “Don’t people study such things at university? Naturalists and the like’
red “But if you were a naturalist, wouldn’t you rather study something s
and fluffy?”

He glanced down at his bowl. “Like a rabbit?”
She tried not to smile. “Point taken.”

—but “I’ll be honest,” he said, uncovering a small serving dish filled with
parsleyed potatoes. “I don’t think either of us had a point.”

This time, she couldn’t help it. She did smile. But she also rolled her
“See,” he said, “I’m not so dreadful.”

“Neither am I,” she shot back.

lder He sighed.

wed in “What does that mean?” she asked, instantly suspicious.

“What?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You sighed.”

“Am I not allowed to?”

clear “*Captain James.*”

“Very well,” he said, sighing again, and for the first time his face lo
almost weary. “I was not dissembling. You don’t scare me. But I’ll tell
en what does.”

He paused, and she wondered if it was for dramatic effect or simply
might consider his words.

nat “I am petrified,” he said with slow deliberation, “by everything you

represent.”

For a moment, Poppy could do nothing but stare. “What does that mean?” she asked, and she didn’t think she sounded defensive. She didn’t think she had, *was* defensive. But she was curious. After a statement like that, how could she be otherwise?

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table as his hands formed a steeple. “You, Miss Bridgerton, are a lady of gentle birth. I suspect you’re already aware that I have some experience with this particular species.”

She nodded. It was clear that Captain James had been born a gentleman. He was right there in everything he did, everything he said. She saw it in the way he moved and spoke, and she wondered if a person could ever truly throw off the customs with which he was raised.

She wondered if the captain had wanted to.

“Simply put, Miss Bridgerton,” he continued, “creatures such as you have no place on a ship.”

Poppy gave him an arch look. “I believe I have already concurred on that point.”

“So you did. But much to our joint dismay, there are forces at work that precluded my being able to redeposit you ashore.”

“Forces such as what?”

He gave her a practiced smile. “Nothing you need worry your pretty face about.”

This time she was *quite* sure he was trying to rankle her. But his condescending statement didn’t bother her nearly so much as the fact that he’d known it would.

She did not like being so easily read.

She especially did not like that he was the one to do so.

So she smiled prettily and thanked him when he spooned potatoes onto her plate. And when she caught him regarding her with a curious expression, she wasn’t quite sure what to make of her nonreaction, she allowed herself some small satisfaction. But just a tiny bit, because frankly, she didn’t think she would be able to keep it off her face if she allowed herself to truly revel in her triumph.

She did not want to think about what it meant that *this* was what now passed for a triumph.

“Wine?” the captain inquired.

“Please.”

He filled her glass, and it was all very civilized. They ate in silence, and she swallowed the last bite of his food and remarked, "It's a comfortable bed when one is not tied up, of course."

Her head shot up. "I beg your pardon?"
"My bed," he said, with a little motion in its direction. "It's very comfortable. There is a rail—you pull it up and it clicks into place. It keeps one from falling out in bad weather."

Poppy felt her eyes widen with alarm as she turned toward his berth, the way larger than she might expect for a sailing vessel, but *surely* it did not fit. He couldn't possibly imagine they would . . . No, he would never. But he wouldn't be sleeping there. He'd said that he was giving her his room.

"Relax," he said. "The bed is yours."
"Thank you," she said.
"I'll be on the floor."

She gasped audibly. "In here?"
"Where else do you propose I lay my head?"
It took a few tries before she managed to get out "Somewhere else?"
He shrugged. "No room."

Her head shook from side to side, the motion tiny and quick, as if she might be able to jostle his words right out of the cabin. "That can't be!"
"There's always the deck," he said, "but I've been told I'm a restless sleeper. I could roll right overboard."

"Please," she begged, "be serious."
His eyes met hers, and once again she was reminded that he was something more than a devil-may-care rogue. There was nothing amusing in his gaze and nothing amused. "I am serious," he said.

"My reputation—"
"Won't change either way. If it's discovered you're gone, your reputation will be in tatters regardless of where I sleep. If it's not discovered you're gone, no one will be the wiser."

"Your men will know."
"My men know *me*," he said in a voice that brooked no dissent. "If I tell them you are an honorable lady, and that I sleep at the door to protect you, that is what they will believe."

Poppy brought her hand to her mouth, a nervous gesture she indulged in for only the greatest moments of apprehension. Or at least this was the

and told herself; she probably did it all the time.

captain “I can see you do not believe me,” the captain said.

ed. “I will be honest,” she said. “I do not know what to believe.”

He regarded her for a long moment. “Fair enough,” he said, and soon it felt like a compliment. He stood then, and walked to the door. “I will summon Billy to clear the dishes. The poor boy is beside himself, I’m sure. I assured him he wouldn’t even know you were here, and now he’s required to carry all your meals.”

. It was “He had to be assured that he would not see me? Am I really such a gorgon?”

he Captain James smiled, but not with humor. “Any woman is a gorgon on this ship. Very bad luck.”

“Do *you* believe that?” Surely he didn’t. He couldn’t.

“I believe it was very bad luck that you came across my cave.”

“But—”

’ “No,” he interrupted with sharp authority. “I do not believe that women are inherently bad luck, on a ship or anywhere. But my men do, and I must take that into consideration. Now then, I’ve work to do. I’ll be gone at least a few hours. That should give you time enough to prepare yourself for bed.”

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“But—”

“No,” he interrupted with sharp authority. “I do not believe that women are inherently bad luck, on a ship or anywhere. But my men do, and I must take that into consideration. Now then, I’ve work to do. I’ll be gone at least three hours. That should give you time enough to prepare yourself for bed.”

Poppy’s mouth went slack as she watched him reach for the door handle, and he was halfway out before she yelled, “Wait!”

Chapter 5

Andrew allowed himself a long exhale before he turned around. Miss Bridgerton was standing near the bed, a nervous expression on her face.

No, not nervous. Ill-at-ease was probably a more accurate descriptor. She clearly had something she wished to say.

But she wasn't saying it, which should have been cause for alarm.

"Yes?" he finally prompted.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He had enough experience with women to know *that* wasn't true. "Are you certain?"

She nodded.

Very well. If she insisted. He acknowledged her evasion with a dip of his chin and turned back to the door.

"I just—"

Damn. He'd come so close. He turned again, the very model of patience.

"I don't have anything to wear," she said in a small voice.

He fought the urge to close his eyes, even for just one weary moment. He hadn't thought her so frivolous. Surely she did not see the need for fancy frocks on the voyage to Portugal.

Then she added, "In which to sleep, and, well, for the days too."

"What's wrong with what you're wearing?" he asked, flicking a hand toward her blue confection. The bodice was made of some sort of large patterned lace, and the skirt was thankfully plain, with no hoops or bustle that might make shipboard life even more difficult for her.

He thought the dress looked quite nice on her. In fact, he'd entertained thoughts of peeling it from her body before he'd discovered her identity.

"There is nothing wrong with it," she replied, "but I can't wear it for weeks straight."

"My men generally wear the same clothes for the duration." *He didn't*

his men did.

“Nevertheless,” she said, looking very much as if she was trying not to cringe, “I don’t think my dress is going to be practical on deck.”

Finally. A problem with an easy solution. “You won’t be on deck,” he said to her.

“Ever?”

“It’s not safe,” he said simply.

“I’ll suffocate in here.” She waved her arm about, looking less like she was motioning to the cabin and more like she was slightly deranged.

“Don’t be silly,” he said, wincing inwardly at his dismissive tone. She wouldn’t suffocate, but she *would* be miserable. He could already tell that. She Poppy Bridgerton was not a person who did well with boredom.

But he couldn’t have her wandering the length and breadth of the ship. It was a distraction his men could well do without, and furthermore, she knew nothing of safety at sea. Not to mention how superstitious sailors were. Women being bad luck on a ship. Half his men would likely be crossing themselves every time they saw her.

On the other side of the cabin, Miss Bridgerton was still visibly distressed. And stammering. “But—but—”

He moved back toward the door. “I am sorry, Miss Bridgerton, but that’s the way it must be. It is for your own safety.”

“But for a fortnight? Not to see the sun for an entire fortnight?”

He quirked a brow. “You were just complimenting me on my fine windows.”

“It is not the same, and you know it.”

He did, and he sympathized. Truly, he did. He couldn’t imagine being forced to remain in a ship’s cabin for two weeks, even one as well-appointed as his.

“Captain James,” she said, after what sounded like a fortifying breath. “I am asking you as a gentleman.”

“That is where you are in error.”

“Do not dissemble, Captain. You may wish to hide it, or perhaps you may wish to hide *from* it, but you were born a gentleman. You have already as much as confessed to it.”

He crossed his arms. “On this ship, I am no gentleman.”

She crossed hers. “I don’t believe you.”

And then something inside him snapped. Just snapped. Since the moment

he'd first seen her, tied up and gagged on his bed, he'd spent every minute to his time dealing either with *her* or with the myriad problems her presence wrought—and was about to wreak—on a very delicate mission.

he told “For the love of Christ, woman,” he half exploded, “have you no sense? Her mouth opened, but he didn't allow her an answer.

“Do you have any concept of your perilous situation? No? Well, allow me to explain. You have been kidnapped. You are trapped on a ship on which you are the only female, and half the men out there”—he waved his arm almost violently toward the door—“think your very presence means that a typhoon is on its way.”

hat “A typhoon?” she echoed.

“There *are* no typhoons in this region,” he ground out. “Which should give you some indication of how much they *don't* want you aboard. So in my humble opinion, not that you're likely to heed it, *you* should start speaking about this with a bit more circumspection.”

g “I did not ask to be here!” she shouted.

ressed. “I am well aware,” he shot back. “For the record—*again*—I am not pleased to be hosting you.”

hat is Her lips pressed together, and for one terrifying moment he thought he might cry. “Please,” she said. “Please do not force me to remain in this room for the duration of the voyage. I beg of you.”

He sighed. Damn her. It was so much easier to dismiss her concerns when they were yelling at each other. “Miss Bridgerton,” he said, trying to keep his voice even, “it is my duty as a gentleman to ensure your safety. Even if it means your discomfort.”

ng He half expected her to say, “So you *are* a gentleman.” But she surprised him with restraint, and after a heavy beat of silence, she said, “I will see you later this evening, then.”

h, “I He gave a curt nod.

“You will be three hours, you said?” Her voice was formal, almost businesslike, and it made him oddly uncomfortable, almost because it didn't sound like *her*.

uch as Which was patently ridiculous. He didn't know Poppy Bridgerton. He hadn't even been aware of her existence until this very afternoon, at least in a specific sense. She'd been one of many vague and hazy Bridgerton cousins, utterly nameless, and to him, irrelevant.

oment So he should not know when she sounded unlike herself.

And he should not care that she did.
“I will be ready,” she said, with a touch of haughty pride that still was quite right.
But it wasn’t entirely wrong either.
“I bid you good evening, Miss Bridgerton,” he said. He gave a brief farewell and exited the cabin. Bloody hell. He needed a drink. Or maybe a good sleep.
He glanced back at his door, now closed and locked behind him. He was on the floor tonight. A good sleep was highly unlikely.
A drink it was, then. And not a moment too soon.

Miss Bridgerton was still fully clothed when Andrew returned three and a half hours later, but she’d removed the pins from her hair, and it now lay across her shoulder in a sleeping plait. She was sitting upright on his bed, blankets pulled over her lap. A pillow was wedged between her back and the wall behind her.

His pillow.

Andrew noticed that the curtains were still open, so he crossed the deck and drew them shut. His cabin was port, and he did not think she would mind the blazing eastern sun in the morning. They were not far past the solstices; sunrise was blindingly early this time of year.

“Are you ready for bed?” he asked. The most mundane of questions, yet he found it remarkable that he had been able to utter it in such a normal tone of voice.

Miss Bridgerton glanced up from the book she was reading. “As you see.”

“You won’t be too uncomfortable in your dress?” he asked.

She turned slowly to look at him. “I see no alternative.”

Andrew had some experience removing such frocks from women; he knew she had to have some sort of shift underneath it that would be far more comfortable for sleeping.

But far too revealing for either of their comfort.

Not that he had *any* intention of bedding her. God help him if he even so much as kissed the girl. But she was rather attractive, objectively speaking. Her eyes were a gorgeous shade of green, somewhere between leaf and emerald, and she had the Bridgerton hair, thick and lustrous, with the color of walnuts. Her mien would never be placid enough for conventional sta-

of beauty, but he'd never liked expressionless females. Hell, he'd never liked expressionless males either, and Lord knew he'd met enough of those when he was out in society. Andrew had never understood why it was so fashionable to appear bored.

Disinterested equaled disinteresting.

He considered that. An excellent new catchphrase. He'd use it on his family the next time he went home. They'd likely roll their eyes, but they'd have to. It was what family did.

God, he missed them. He had eleven nieces and nephews now, and he hadn't even met the most recent two. Of the five Rokesby siblings, only one and his younger brother, Nicholas, were still unwed. The other three were blissfully happy and reproducing like rabbits.

Not with each other, of course. With their spouses. He winced, even though he alone was privy to his convoluted thoughts. He was so tired. It had been a hell of a day, and it was about to get worse. He had no idea how long he'd expected to get any sleep tonight. Between his spot on the floor and the simple presence of *her* in the room . . .

She was impossible to ignore. Maybe it would have been better if she had been frightened and meek. There would have been tears, but at least when she was out of his sight, she'd have been out of his mind.

He walked over to a built-in set of drawers. His nightshirt was there, and were his tooth powder and brush. Billy usually left a small basin of water on the table, but clearly the boy had been too terrified of Miss Bridgerton to enter the room again. He picked up the toothbrush and regarded it, sighing at the lack of necessary liquid.

"I didn't brush my teeth either."

He smiled. So she *had* been watching him. She'd been trying a little hard to appear absorbed in her book, but he'd been almost certain that she would give up the ruse the moment his back was turned. "We shall both have a foul of breath in the morning," he said.

"A charming prediction."

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I don't plan to kiss anyone. Do you?" She was too smart to take such obvious bait, so he popped his toothbrush into his mouth and gave himself a powderless cleaning. It was better than nothing.

"I don't suppose you have an extra on board," she said. "A toothbrush would mean."

r liked “I’m afraid not, but you’re welcome to use your forefinger and some
when powder.”

She sighed but nodded, and he found himself oddly pleased that she
unfussy. “There will be water in the morning,” he told her. “There is u
some at night, but I believe you have frightened Billy away.”

s “He did come to remove the dishes.”

ney sort “Well, there is that.” He didn’t tell her that he’d had to grab the boy
collar and shove him in the right direction. But better Billy than anyon
ne on the ship. Brown or Green would have been acceptable—Andrew ha
y he known both of them long enough to know that they’d not imperil her s
ere but he doubted either one of them wanted anything to do with her.

Andrew reached into his drawer for his nightshirt, then stopped. Blo
hell, he was going to have to sleep in his clothing too. He couldn’t und
. It had unless he did so after snuffing out the lanterns, and there was somethin
/ he felt undignified about wearing his nightshirt while she remained fully
e clothed.

“Are you ready for sleep?” he asked.

ie’d “I’d been hoping to read for a bit longer. I trust you don’t mind that
hen sheborrowed a few of your books.”

“Not at all. You’ll go mad without something to occupy your time.”

, as “How positively liberal of you.”

ter on He rolled his eyes but didn’t bother to rejoin. “The light of one lante
to won’t matter. Just make sure you don’t fall asleep with it burning.”

ring at “Of course not.”

He felt the need to reiterate the point. “Aboard a ship there is no gre
disaster than fire.”

too “I understand,” she said.

she He had half expected her to respond with a bristly “I *said* I would do
h be the lantern.” That she had not . . .

He was bizarrely pleased.

“I thank you for your good sense,” he said. He noticed that she had
o you?” pulled up the rail for the bed, so he walked over to take care of it.

rush “Captain James!” she exclaimed, and she frantically pressed herself
ian the back wall.

sh, I “Have no fear for your virtue,” he said in a tired voice. “I was merel
intending to do *this*.” He yanked up the rail and clicked it into place. It
solid piece of wood, meant to keep the occupant of the bed *in* bed whe

e of my weather was rough.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It was . . . instinct, I suppose. I am on edge.”
was so He felt his brow draw down. That wasn’t a rote apology. Her tone had usually been too full, too . . . something. He turned back to look at her. She had moved from the corner, and she looked so small—not in size but in expression, if that made any sense.

by his Not that anything had made sense today.

e else In a quiet voice, she said, “I am aware that you would not attack me

id That she might think she needed to apologize, or even worse, *reassu*
afety—in some way . . . it made him ill. “I would never harm a woman,” he sa

ody believe you.”
ress “I—” Her lips parted, and her eyes grew unfocused with thought. “I

ress Something inside him grew fierce. “I would never harm *you*.”

ig that “You already have,” she whispered.

Their eyes met.

“I fear my reputation will not be so fortunate,” she said.

I shall cross that bridge when we come to it.”
He cursed himself for having nothing but platitudes, but still he said

“And yet I cannot stop thinking about it.”

His chest squeezed. Christ, it felt like someone had taken his heart in
:rn fist. He turned away—cowardly, he knew, but he didn’t have the word
respond to her quiet statement, and he suspected he never would. His v
was rough as he said, “I’d best get my bed ready.”

ater He pulled some extra blankets from the wardrobe and laid them on t
necessary, given the sturdy lock and his unquestionable command over
men. The carpet wasn’t much of a cushion, but it was better than the pl
ouse wood of the floor. He blew out one lantern, and then another, until all t
remained was the one by the bed, illuminating the book that lay open c
Bridgerton’s lap.

not “You should take the pillow,” she said. “I don’t need it.”

“No.” He sighed. This was his penance, he supposed. He hadn’t war
againstkidnap her, but he could not escape the bitter truth: this wretched situa
was far worse for her than it was for him. He didn’t bother looking at h
y he shook his head. “You keep—”

was a The pillow hit him mid-chest.

n the He smiled wryly. She was stubborn even in her generosity. “Thank y

he said, and he lay down on his back, the least uncomfortable position such a hard surface.

ad He heard her rustling about, and then the room went dark.

d not “I thought you were going to read,” he said.

“I changed my mind.”

It was just as well. In the dark, it would be easier to forget her presence.

Except it wasn't. She fell asleep first, and then he was alone in the night, listening to her move as she slept, hearing her voice in each quiet breath. It occurred to him—he'd never spent a night with a woman, not an entire night. He'd never listened to a woman sleep, never even imagined the intimacy of it.

It was oddly compelling, lying there and waiting for each soft noise through the air. He could not bring himself to close his eyes, which made no sense. Even if the cabin were lit, he would not be able to see her, tucked behind the bed rail as she was. He did not feel he needed to remain alert; he could not stop himself from remaining aware.

, “We What had she said earlier? She was on edge.

He knew exactly what she'd meant.

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It was oddly compelling, lying there and waiting for each soft noise to rise through the air. He could not bring himself to close his eyes, which made no sense. Even if the cabin were lit, he would not be able to see her, tucked away behind the bed rail as she was. He did not feel he needed to remain alert, but he could not stop himself from remaining aware.

What had she said earlier? She was on edge.

He knew exactly what she'd meant.

Chapter 6

When Poppy opened her eyes the following morning, Captain James was already gone. She chewed on her lower lip as she took in the sight of his bedroll on the other side of the cabin. He couldn't have had a good night's sleep. She'd given him the pillow, but other than that, he'd had only the carpet to cushion him.

But *no*. She was not going to feel guilty over his discomfort. He was about his regular business. *She* was the one who quite possibly had an audience of people searching for her, fearing that her body might wash up on the beach. And her family—dear heavens, she could not begin to imagine the distress if Elizabeth had gone ahead and alerted them to Poppy's disappearance.

Her parents had already lost one child, and it had nearly killed them. They thought Poppy had met with an ill fate . . .

"*Please, Elizabeth,*" she whispered. Her friend would be frantic with worry, but if she kept quiet, at least she'd be the only one.

"He's a monster," Poppy said aloud, even though she knew it wasn't. She hated Captain James for any number of reasons, and she did not blame him when he told her that he'd had no choice but to take her to Portugal because honestly, how was that even possible? But the captain was treating her with far more care than she imagined most men of his profession would, and she knew—because it was impossible not to know—that he was a gentleman, and a man of honor.

What the devil he was doing on a pirate ship, she couldn't imagine.

She noticed that a small basin of water had been set on the table, and she had a brief queasy moment at the thought of Billy entering the cabin while she slept.

She took some comfort in the fact that he'd probably felt worse.

She decided not to feel guilty about that either.

It took her a few tries to get the bed rail down, and once she had her the floor she raised and lowered it several times until she understood how it worked. It was very cleverly made, and she wished she could see the inner workings—hinges and springs and whatnot. One of her brothers had fallen out of bed quite frequently as a child; a contraption such as this would have been brilliant.

She set the rail into its down position, then moved to the basin so she could splash some water on her face. She might as well greet the day, such as it was. The cabin was dim, with only a thin stripe of light filtering in at the edge of the curtain's edge. A glance at the clock told her it was already half eight, and she took care with her balance—the captain had been correct; the sea was now that they were well into the Atlantic—and wobbled over to the window to draw back the heavy fabric.

“Oh!”

The sound escaped her lips without conscious thought. She wasn't sure what she'd expected to see—well, to be honest, she'd expected exactly what she did see, which was the ocean, stretching out for miles and miles until it kissed the blue edge of the horizon. But even so, she had not been prepared for the sheer beauty of it, the enormity, the immensity of it all.

Or how very small it would make her feel.

But it was gorgeous. No, it was more than that. It was tremendous, and she could almost be glad for the circumstances that had brought her here to this point.

She leaned her forehead against the cool glass. For ten minutes she stood there, watching the play of the waves, the way they formed frothy tips and white-capped meringues. Every now and then a bird flew into view, and she wondered how far they were from land, and how far a bird could fly before it needed to rest itself down. And surely some birds could fly farther than others—what made them able to do that? The weight? The wingspan?

There were so many things she did not know, and so many things she hadn't known to ponder, and now she was stuck here in this cabin instead of up on deck where she might have a grander view of the world.

“They can't be *that* superstitious,” she muttered, pushing herself back from the window. Honestly, it was ridiculous that the sailors clung to such nonsense in this day and age. Her eyes fell on the tooth powder the captain had left out for her. She hadn't used it yet. It would serve those sailors right if she ignored it and then went above deck and breathed on everyone.

She rubbed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Good heavens,

feet on morning mouth was appalling.

She cleaned her teeth, deciding that she enjoyed the minty flavor of the captain's powder, then plopped down in a chair by the window with the book she'd started the night before. It was a treatise on navigation, and truth be told, she didn't understand half of it, but it was clear that it had not been written for novices.

She'd managed a few more pages when a knock sounded at the door.

"Billy," she said, because it must be he. She stood as he let himself in.

He was as red-faced as ever, carrying a tray with her breakfast.

"Good morning," she said, determined to get him to speak to her. "Could you bring me that tea?"

"Yes, miss," he stammered.

"How heavenly. I hadn't thought—well, in truth I *hadn't* thought."

Billy turned to her with a perplexed expression. Well, not exactly. He looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but in her company, but now he looked confused about his chances for escape.

"I had not given any thought to whether there would be tea," she explained. "But if I *had* considered it, I'm not sure I would have thought I'd be so lucky."

Billy seemed not to know what to make of her meandering statements, but he put the tray down and got to work setting her a place at the table. "I know, captain insists on it. Says it keeps us civilized. That and brandy."

"How fortunate for us all."

Billy made a noise that could have been a chuckle if he would allow himself to relax. "He doesn't share the brandy. But he's free with the tea."

Poppy blinked at the sheer number of words that had just emerged from the boy's mouth. "Well, it's still fortunate," she said. "I am very fond of tea."

Billy nodded. "You're a proper lady."

Poppy smiled wistfully. He really was a sweet boy. "How old are you, Billy?"

He looked up with surprise. "Thirteen, miss."

"Oh. I'd thought you younger." Then she could have kicked herself; she'd never liked to be mistaken for little children.

But Billy just shrugged. "I know. Everyone thinks I'm not even twelve. My dad says he didn't grow until he was almost sixteen."

"Well then, I'm sure you shall have a spurt soon," Poppy said encouragingly. "I'm not likely to see you again after this voyage, but I'll

I would expect you to grow as tall as the captain.”

the He smiled at this. “You’re not so bad, miss.”

e book “Thank you.” It was a bit ridiculous how pleased she felt by his
be compliment.

n “Never met a proper lady before.” He shuffled from foot to foot. “Do
think you’d be so nice t’ me.”

l. “I try to be nice to everyone.” She frowned. “Except perhaps the cap
in. Billy’s mouth fell open, and he looked as if he didn’t know if he should
laugh or gasp.

Oh, is “Don’t worry,” she assured him. “I jest.”

Well, a little.

“The captain is the best of men,” Billy said fervently. “I promise you
You’ll not meet finer. I know I said he doesn’t share his brandy, but he
le still right good in all other ways, an’ I don’t like brandy, anyway.”

also “I’m sure you’re correct,” she said with what she called her drawing
smile. It was the one she used when she did not mean to be *insincere*.
she was not quite being honest either. “I’m just a bit vexed that I’m here.”

ht I’d “You’re not the only one.” Billy clapped a hand to his mouth. “I’m
miss!”

t, and But Poppy was already laughing. “No, don’t apologize. It was very
The amusing. And from what I’ve heard, true.”

Billy scrunched up his face in sympathy. “It’s not normal to have a
board, Miss Poppy. I’ve heard fearsome tales of disaster.”

“Disaster brought about by the presence of a woman?”

ea.” Billy nodded, perhaps a little too vigorously. “But I don’t believe it.
rom the anymore. The captain told me it weren’t true. An’ he doesn’t lie.”

ea.” “Ever?”

“Never.” Billy said this so firmly Poppy thought he might salute.

ou, “Well,” Poppy said briskly, “thank you for bringing breakfast. I am
hungry.”

“Yes, miss. If y’ want, just leave the tray outside the door. Then I will
boys have to bother you when I collect it.”

lve. Poppy couldn’t bring herself to tell him that their conversations were
to be the high point of her day, so instead she said, “It won’t be a bother
besides, I don’t think I’m permitted to open the door.”

Billy frowned. “Not even open it?”

f I did, Poppy shrugged and held her hands out as if to say, *Who knows?* “T

captain and I did not discuss the particulars of my confinement.”

“Seems a bit unreasonable,” Billy said, scratching his head. “The captain is not usually like that.”

Poppy shrugged again, this time tipping her head to the side in an *I-didn't know-what-to-tell-you* expression.

“Well,” Billy said with a little bow, “I hope you enjoy your breakfast. I think Cook gave you bacon.”

“Thank you again, Billy. I—” She cut herself off when he opened his mouth. “Oh, one thing!”

He paused. “Yes, miss?”

“Can I peek out?”

“Beg pardon?”

It was ludicrous that she even had to ask. “Can I peek outside the door? I haven't even seen the corridor.”

“How'd you get here?”

“I was in a sack.”

Billy's face went slack. “But you're a proper lady!”

“Not all the time, apparently,” she muttered, and she dashed over to the open door to stick out her head.

“Not much to see,” Billy said regretfully.

But she still found it interesting. It was obviously the nicest part of the ship, or at least Poppy assumed it was. The hallway was not lit, but a small patch of sunlight shone down the stairwell, and she could see that the walls were oiled and polished. There were three other doors, all on the side of the corridor, and each had a well-made brass handle. “Who sleep in the other cabins?” she asked.

“That one's for the navigator,” Billy said with a jerk of his head. “His name is Mr. Carroway. He doesn't say much, 'cept when he's navigating.”

“And the others?”

“That one's for Mr. Jenkins. He's second in command. And the other one”—Billy pointed to the door farthest away—“Brown and Green share.”

“Really?” Poppy would have thought they'd be down below with the rest of the sailors.

Billy nodded. “They've been with the captain the longest. He said he'd reward loyalty.”

“My goodness,” Poppy said, craning her neck even though there was nothing to see. “How positively revolutionary of him.”

“He’s a good man,” Billy said. “The best.”

Captain’s Poppy supposed it spoke well of Captain James that he inspired such devotion, but honestly, the gushing was getting to be a bit much.

don’t- “I’ll come back for the tray in an hour, miss,” Billy said, and with a dash dashed away and up the stairs.

st. I To freedom.

Poppy gazed longingly at the patch of sunlight. If the light reached the door, the stairwell, didn’t that mean one could see the sky from the bottom of the stairs? Surely it wouldn’t hurt if she took a quick peek. No one would mind. According to Billy, only five men had any business in this area of the ship, and they were all presumably at their stations.

Gingerly, she pulled the door almost closed so that it was resting carefully against its frame. She tiptoed her way to the staircase, feeling foolish but aware that this was probably the most excitement she’d have all day. When she reached the end of the corridor, she pressed her back against the wall, mostly because it felt like some subterfuge was in order. And then she stood up and angled her body toward the stairs, deciding that even a stripe of the sky would be a victory.

Just a little farther, and then—

he The ship pitched to the side, sending her tumbling to the floor. Poppy rubbed her hip as she hauled herself back upright, muttering, “Of all the

mall She froze.

wooden The door . . .

other The door she’d so carefully rested in place against the frame . . .

steps in The lurch of the ship had pulled it shut.

is Poppy gasped and ran back to the cabin, but when she pressed down on the door handle, it moved barely a quarter inch before informing her that she was locked out.

er No no *no*. This couldn’t be happening. She leaned against the door and sank down until she was on her haunches. Billy had said he’d be back in an hour for the tray. She’d just wait here, and no one would be the wiser.

re it.” Then she thought about the tea. It would be stone cold and black as coffee by the time she got to it.

the likes Somehow that seemed the worst tragedy of all.

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Chapter 7

It was a strange combination of exhaustion, irritation, and guilt that prodded Andrew to hand the wheel to Mr. Jenkins and head below to check on Miss Bridgerton. The exhaustion was obvious; he couldn't have got more than three hours' sleep the night before. The irritation was with himself. He'd been in a foul mood all morning, barking orders and snapping at his men, none of whom deserved his temper.

The guilt . . . well, *that* was what had put him in a bad mood in the first place. He *knew* it was in Miss Bridgerton's best interest to remain sequestered in the cabin, but he kept seeing her pained face when she pleaded with him to allow her on deck the night before. She had been honestly distressed, and it ate at his gut because he knew that if he were in her position, he would feel the exact same way.

This unexpected sympathy left him incensed. He had no cause to feel remorse over locking her in the cabin; it wasn't *his* fault she'd gone into that damn cave. And maybe it wasn't *her* fault that the foreign secretary had ordered him to take a diplomatic pouch to Lisbon, but that was beside the point. She would be safest in his cabin. His decision was right and sensible, and as captain, his command must be unquestioned.

But every time he tried to get on with the work of the day, Poppy Bridgerton's sad, trembling face filtered through his mind. He started to write an entry in the ship's log, but his quill hovered over the paper for so long that a fat drop of ink slid from the nib and stained the page. Thinking that perhaps hard manual labor might be what he needed, he decided he might as well go aloft, and so he left the bridge and headed on deck to climb the rigging.

Once there, however, he seemed to forget why he'd come. He just stood there, hand on the ratline, his thoughts alternating between Miss Bridgerton and his cursed inability to *stop* thinking about Miss Bridgerton. Finally he let out a stream of invective so vulgar that one of his men actually went by

eyed and backed carefully away.

He'd managed to offend the sensibilities of a hardened sailor. Under other circumstances, he'd have taken pride in that.

Eventually he gave in to the guilt and decided to see how she was getting on. Bored out of her skull, he imagined. He'd seen the book she was reading the night before. *Advanced Methods of Maritime Navigation*. He himself read it occasionally—whenever he was having difficulty falling asleep. It never failed to knock him out in under ten minutes.

He'd found something much better—a novel he'd read a few months earlier and lent to Mr. Jenkins. His sister had liked it. She'd been the one to prompt Miss Bridgerton to give it to him, actually, so he thought it might be to Miss Bridgerton's advantage. Down the stairs he went, imagining how grateful she'd be. Instead—
“What the devil?”

Miss Bridgerton was sitting on the floor with her legs outstretched, her back against the door to his cabin. In the corridor, very clearly *not* where she was supposed to be.

“It was an accident,” she said immediately.

“Get up,” he snapped.

She did, moving quickly out of his way as he jammed his key into the door. “I didn't mean to do it,” she protested, yelping when he grabbed her and hauled her into the cabin. “I just took a peek into the hall when Bil was in there—”

“Oh, so now you've dragged him into this?”

“No! I would never.” Her manner suddenly shifted to something more contemplative. “He's really quite sweet.”

“*What?*”

“Sorry. My point was, I would never take advantage of his good nature. He's just a boy.”

He didn't know why he believed her, but he did. This did not, however, make him one jot less furious.

“I just wanted to see what it looked like outside the door,” she said.

She arrived in a *sack*, if you recall. And then the ship moved—well, it was not a lurch, really, quite violent, and I was thrown against the opposite wall.

“And the door closed,” he said dubiously.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, obviously not comprehending his tone. “That's exactly what happened. And I didn't even get to drink my tea!”

He stared at her. Tea? Really?

any “I almost cried,” she confessed. “I haven’t yet, you know, despite
everything, and you have no idea how lucky you are that I’m not a cry-
etting of female. But when I was out there, and I realized my tea was going c
ading almost cried.”

elf read She was so earnest that it was difficult to sustain an appropriate leve
ever anger, but Andrew was determined to try. “You disobeyed me,” he said
curt voice. “I specifically told you not to leave the room.”

s “But the ship moved!”

ne to “As *they do*,” he ground out. “Perhaps you’ve noticed the ocean?”

taste. Her lips pressed together at his sarcasm. “I am unfamiliar with ships
said through clenched teeth. “I did not expect such a jolt.”

He leaned in menacingly and spoke with the same frosty tone. “You
shouldn’t have been hanging out the door.”

er “Well, then I’m *sorry* for that,” she ground out, in what had to be the
re she gracious apology he’d ever heard.

But strangely, he thought it was sincere.

“Don’t let it happen again,” he said sharply. But he spared her the in-
of having to respond by turning away and moving to his desk. He show
re lock. novel onto his shelf, not wanting her to think that he’d come down bec
wrist he was trying to make her detention more pleasant. This was a ship, an
ly left behavior could not be rewarded. She had disobeyed his explicit instruc
if one of his men had done the same, he’d have been put on rat-catchin
for a week. Or been flogged, depending on the severity of the transgres

re He wasn’t sure Miss Bridgerton had learned her lesson—probably n
knowing her—but he rather thought he’d said all there was to say on th
matter. So instead he pretended to look for something on his desk. He
ure. only keep up such a ruse for so long, though, and she was just standing
staring at him, so he said, perhaps a bit more harshly than was necessa
ver, “Eat your breakfast.”

And then—God above, he would swear it was like his mother was in
“I very cabin, yanking on his ear and telling him to mind his manners—h
more himself clear his throat, and he added, “Please.”
wall.”

Poppy’s jaw dropped. Captain James changed topics with enough spee
:’s make her dizzy. “I—all right.”

She watched him for a moment, then walked carefully—why, she di

know; it just seemed like she ought to be extra quiet—back to the table
lifted the lid to the dish after she sat down. Eggs, bacon, and toast. Stomach
ing sortcold, all of it.

old, I But beggars couldn't be choosers, and technically it was her fault that
she'd been locked out, so she ate quietly and without complaint. The eggs
l of were less than appetizing, but the toast and bacon held up reasonably well
d in a their lower temperatures.

She supposed she should be glad she hadn't been served porridge.

The captain's desk was on the far side of the cabin, so she had a perfect
view of his back as he rummaged about. "Where is that navigation book
;," she finally asked.

She took a moment to chew and swallow. "The one I was reading last
night?"

"Yes."

at least "It's still on the bed. Do you need it?"

"For Mr. Carroway," he said brusquely. "The navigator."

"Yes, I know," she said as she rose to her feet and walked over to the
dignity "Billy told me about him. Your second in command is Mr. Jenkins, is that
ed the correct?"

ause "Indeed."

id bad "I suppose it is beneficial to know the names of the officers even if I
tions; unlikely ever to interact with them."

g duty His jaw stiffened. "You do like to make that point, don't you?"

ssion. "It is one of my few pleasures," she murmured.

ot, He rolled his eyes but didn't otherwise reply, so she retrieved the
ie navigation guide from the bed and handed it to him. "One would hope
could Carroway already possesses the skills outlined within."

; there The captain made no sign of amusement. "I can assure you he possesses
ry, the necessary skills."

And then there it was again. That phenomenally foolish little devil on
n that shoulder, urging her to prove that she was every bit as clever as he. She
e heard curved her lips and murmured, "Do *you* possess the necessary skills?"

Her regret was instant.

He, on the other hand, seemed to relish the question. His smile was
d to and vaguely patronizing, and the air between them grew hot.

He leaned forward, and for a moment she thought he was going to reach
d not out and touch her. Instead she found herself awkwardly tucking a lock

She behind her ear, as if her raised arm could even pretend to offer protection from him.

“Oh, Miss Bridgerton,” he purred, “do you really want to pursue that of questioning?”

Stupid, stupid girl. What had she been thinking? This was not a game she was qualified to play, especially not with him. Captain James was not like anyone of her acquaintance. He had the comportment and speech of a gentleman, and in so many ways he *was* a gentleman, but he took such obvious pleasure in poking at the boundaries of polite behavior. Granted, she had found herself in a situation for which there *were* no rules of polite behavior, but somehow she thought that if she met him in a ballroom, she should behave in almost exactly the same manner.

Some people broke rules.

Others merely wished to.

Poppy wasn't sure to which category she belonged. Maybe neither. For some reason, that depressed her.

“How old are you, Miss Bridgerton?” the captain inquired.

Poppy was immediately on her guard. “Why do you ask?”

He did not answer her question, of course. He just kept watching her with that heavy-lidded stare. “Humor me.”

“Very well,” she said, when she could not think of a reason she ought to reveal her age. “I am two and twenty.”

“Old enough to be married, then.”

There was an insult in there somewhere, even if she wasn't quite sure what it was. “I am not married because I do not wish to be,” she said with clipped formality.

He was still standing too close, and she was uncomfortably near the door, so she tried to put a halt to the conversation by stepping around him. She went to the window, but he followed her pace for pace.

His voice held equal parts arrogance and amusement when he asked, “do not wish to be married or you do not wish to be married to any of the gentlemen who have asked for your hand?”

She kept her gaze firmly on the azure view. “I do not see how that is relevant to your business.”

“I ask,” he murmured, moving slightly closer, “if only to ascertain your skills.”

She drew back, looking at him despite all of her best intentions. “I b

on your pardon?"

"In the art of *flirting*, Miss Bridgerton." He placed a hand over his heart.
t line "Goodness, you jump to conclusions."

ie she She fought to keep her teeth from grinding into powder. "I am not, as
like have so deftly demonstrated, up to your standards in that realm."

"I shall take that as a compliment, even though I'm fairly certain it v
meant as such." He stepped away then, giving her his back as he wand
over to his desk.

ed, she But Poppy had not even managed to exhale before he abruptly turne
around and remarked, "But surely you agree that flirting is an art, and
he'd science."

She had no idea what they were talking about anymore. "I will agree
such thing."

"You think it a science, then?"

For "No!" she almost yelled. He was baiting her, and they both knew it,
she hated that he was winning this twisted competition between them.
she knew she had to remain calm, so she took a moment to compose her
Several moments, actually. And one very deep breath. Finally, with wh
r with felt was admirable gravity, she tipped her chin up by an inch and said,
don't think it's either, and it's certainly not an appropriate conversati
ht not between two unmarried individuals."

"Hmmm." He made a show of considering this. "I rather think two
unmarried individuals are precisely the sort of people who ought to be
re what such a conversation."

ipped That was it. She was *done*.

If he wanted to talk, he could do so until his eyes bled, but she was t
bed, so with this conversation. She returned to her breakfast, buttering her toast
moved such fervor that the knife poked through and jabbed her hand. "Ow," s
muttered, more at the surprise than the pain. It was just a butter knife, t
, "You to break her skin.

ie men "Are you hurt?"

She took an angry bite of toast. "Don't talk to me."

; any of "Well, that's rather difficult, seeing as how we're sharing a cabin."

Her hands came down on the table with startling force and she jerke
our herself to her feet. "Are you *trying* to torture me?"

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I rather think I am."

eg She felt her mouth grow slack, and for a moment she could do nothi

stare at him. "Why?"

heart. He shrugged. "You annoy me."

"Well, you annoy me too," she shot right back.

is you And then he laughed. He laughed as if he couldn't help it, as if it were the only possible reaction to her words. "Oh come now, Miss Bridgerton," he said when he caught her watching him as if he'd gone mad, "even you can't admit we've hit a new low." He chuckled some more, then added, "I feel like I've been tossed back into a childhood spat with one of my siblings."

d She felt herself thawing, but only a little bit.

not a He offered her a conspiratorial grin. "I have the most astonishing urge to pull your hair and say, 'You annoy me more.'"

to no She pressed her lips together, because she didn't want to say what she was dying to say, which was "You annoy me even *more*."

He looked at her.

and She looked at him.

But Eyes went narrow on both sides.

erself. "You know you want to say it," he goaded.

at she "I'm not talking to you."

"I "You just did."

n "Are you *three*?"

"I believe we have already concluded that we are both acting like children."

having "Fine. You annoy me even more. You annoy me more than all of my brothers put together. You annoy me like a wart annoys the bottom of my foot, like rain annoys a garden party, like misquoted Shakespeare annoys every soul!"

it with He looked at her with renewed respect. "Well," he murmured, "nothing can come of nothing."

too dull She glared at him.

"What? That was perfectly quoted. *King Lear*, I believe." He cocked his head to the side. "Also, do you have warts?"

She threw up her arms. "Oh my God."

d "Because if you do, it would be only polite to inform me. They're highly contagious, you know."

ng but "I'm going to kill you," she said, her statement more of an incredulous conclusion than a rant. "By the end of this voyage, I will have strangled you. I am quite certain of it."

He reached down and swiped a piece of her bacon. "It's harder than think, strangling a man."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Dare I inquire how you know such re the thing?"

He tapped his chest and said, "Privateer," as if that were explanation enough. "One often ends up in unsavory locales. Not that *I've* strangled as if anyone, mind you, but I've seen it attempted."

He spoke so offhandedly, as if he were discussing village gossip or an impending change of the weather. Poppy couldn't decide if she was annoyed or fascinated. This had to be somewhere on the list of Things One Ought to Bring Up at Breakfast, but still . . .

She couldn't resist. "I know I shouldn't ask but—"

"I intervened," he said, taking the lid off the tea and peeking inside. He glanced up, the blue of his eyes glinting devilishly through his lashes. "It was your question, I assume."

It was unsettling how easily he deduced her thoughts, but surely any sound mind would have had the same question. "It was," she confirmed. "I assure you I don't want to know the details."

"Please, Miss Bridgerton. You know that you do." He rested his hip against the edge of the table and leaned roguishly toward her. "But I shall tell you the story. You'll have to beg for it later."

Poppy shook her head, refusing to be trapped into another juvenile exchange. At this rate they'd be stuck in an endless loop of *will-not, will-one's* until they reached Portugal. Besides, she'd seen enough of his skill with *double entendre* not to make a fuss over any statement containing the word *beg*.

"Is that a pelican?" he asked, his arm reaching out even as he looked toward the window.

She slapped his hand. "Not the bacon."

So he took her last triangle of toast. "It was worth a try."

"Captain James," she asked, "how many siblings do you have?"

"Four." He bit off one corner of the toast. "Three brothers and one sister. Why do you ask?"

She cast a cynical glance at the purloined toast, bitten down into a small off-kilter rhombus. "I knew you had to have several."

He grinned. "Aren't you perceptive?"

"I'd wager you're not the oldest."

you “Well, that much is obvious. If I were the heir, I’d not be out here on water, would I?”

ia Not the heir . . . “Interesting,” she murmured.
“What?”

1 “You referred to your brother as the heir. One has to come from a sp
d sort of background to do that.”

an “Not necessarily,” he said, but she knew he was trying to cover his t
He’d let slip another detail of his background, which meant she now ki
palled two things about him: he had served in the navy, and his family were l
ght Not members of the landed gentry.

He had not confirmed either detail, of course, but she had faith in he
conclusions.

He “Regardless . . .” she said, deciding not to pursue it further for now.
“That to tuck the tidbit away for future use. “You don’t act like the oldest.”

He nodded in a most courtly manner, acknowledging her point.
one of “But I’d also wager you’re”—she touched a finger to her mouth as s
d, “but pondered this—“not the *youngest*.”

He seemed to find this amusing. “But . . . ?”

“The second to youngest. Most definitely.”

ian’t “Why, Miss Bridgerton, you are correct. May I ask how you came to
conclusion?”

“You’re not spoiled,” she said with an assessing eye, “so I wouldn’t
ill-too you the youngest.”

h “You don’t find me spoiled? I’m touched.”

word She rolled her eyes. “But as you’ve so ably just demonstrated, you’r
highly irritating. Enough so to be the second youngest.”

l “Highly irritating?” He let out a bark of laughter. “From you I take t
the highest of compliments.”

She nodded graciously. “Please do, if it gives you comfort.”

He leaned toward her, his voice growing husky. “I am always in nee
comfort,” he murmured.

ister. Poppy’s cheeks caught fire. Score another one for him, damn it.

lightly must have taken pity on her, because he popped the last bite of toast in
mouth and said, “And now I must ask where you fall in your own fami
order.”

“Right in the middle,” she replied, relieved to have returned to the p

n the topic. "Two brothers on one side, and two on the other."

"No sisters?"

She shook her head.

"Well, that explains a lot."

pecific She rolled her eyes. Again.

racks. He looked mildly disappointed that she did not ask him to elaborate, knowing him, he probably assumed she'd beg for that story later too. "on my way, then," he said. "The ship won't steer itself."

new "But surely Mr. Jenkins or Mr. Carroway can do so."

ikely "Indeed they can," he allowed. "But I do like to keep an eye on things; rarely spend much time in my cabin during the day."

"Why *did* you come down?"

Better He looked at her blankly for a moment, then said, "Oh yes, the book picked it up, made a little emphasizing motion with it in the air, and said "Must give this to Mr. Carroway."

he "I would tell you to give him my regards, but of course I do not know him."

He gave her a wry half smile. "Your greatest pleasure."

"For now, at least."

o your He acknowledged her quip with an approving nod. "Well done, Miss Bridgerton."

think Out the door he went, leaving her alone with her breakfast and her thoughts, which unfortunately consisted of one part pleasure at his compliment and twelve parts annoyance with herself for feeling that way

e She supposed she'd better get used to such inner conflict. She had a feeling it would be with her the rest of the voyage.

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Chapter 8

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Poppy found a novel she hadn't noticed on the shelf the night before and gave it a try, moving—as bored and dictated—from the bed to a chair, to a different chair, and then back to bed. When the sky began to dim, she went to the windows, but they might have been facing east, because the sky went from blue to dark blue to black without even a speck of orange or pink.

There might have been a moment of indigo in there somewhere, but it was probably just wishful thinking.

It stood to reason, though, that if she was facing east on the way to Portugal, she'd be facing west on the way back. She consoled herself with the knowledge that there would be sunsets galore as she voyaged home. She supposed she could rouse herself early to watch the sun rise, but she knew her habits well enough to know *that* was not going to happen.

Billy's timid knock sounded at the door, and even though Poppy knew she had a key, she got up to greet him. It seemed only polite, as she assumed he was carrying a heavy tray.

"Good evening, miss," he said when he saw her.

Poppy moved aside to let him pass. "Come in. Dinner smells delicious."

"Chicken in sauce, miss. I had some earlier. 'Twas good, it was."

"What kind of sauce?"

Billy set the tray on the table and frowned. "I don't right know. It's not a brown, I think."

"Brown sauce," she said with a friendly smile. "It is one of my favorites."

Billy grinned back, and she suspected he'd be calling whatever this was *Chicken in Brown Sauce* for the rest of his life.

"Will the captain be dining here tonight?" she asked.

"I don't know, miss. I brought enough food for two, but he's very busy above deck."

“Busy? I hope nothing is wrong.”

“Oh no,” he said reassuringly. “He’s always got a lot to do. We just thought you’d be getting hungry.”

“We?”

“Me an’ Brown an’ Green,” Billy said. He took an empty plate from tray and began to set her a place. “We’ve been talking about you.”

“Do I want to know what you’ve been saying?”

“Well, *I’ve* had only nice things.”

Poppy winced. “Brown and Green and I did not get off to the best of beginnings.”

“Well, *you* can’t be blamed for being angry,” Billy said loyally.

“That’s very ki—”

“And *they* was just doing their jobs.”

Poppy decided not to push the issue. “So they were.”

“The captain said they’re allowed to come see you. If I’m busy, that Billy gave her a sympathetic look. “He said no one else, though. But he it in an awful strange way.”

“What do you mean?”

“He said—” Billy made a scrunched-up grimace. “I’m probably going this wrong. He speaks right fancy sometimes.”

“What did he say, Billy?”

“He said . . .” Billy paused again, his head bobbing up and down as he mouthed the words before actually saying them. “He said ’twould be his greatest pleasure if you did not have occasion t’meet any of the other n

Poppy clapped a hand over her mouth, but she couldn’t quite stifle her bubble of laughter.

“I think it might mean he fancies you,” Billy said.

“Oh no,” she said with great alacrity. “I assure you it does not.”

Billy shrugged. “He’s never talked about any other lady before.”

“Quite possibly because I’m the only one who has ever had cause to be aboard,” Poppy replied, with no great lack of irony.

“Well, that’s true,” Billy confirmed, “at least as far as I know.” He went back to setting her place, then did the same for the captain. “In case he comes for supper. That is t’say he *will* come and dine. He has to eat, and he always takes his meal in his cabin. It just might not be at the same time you do.” Poppy stepped back, then motioned to the covered dish at the center of the table. “It’s one of his favorite meals. Chicken in brown sauce. He loves it.”

Poppy stifled a smile. "I'm sure it will be delicious."

"I'll come back for the tray at— Well, no I won't," Billy said with a "I don't know when I'll come back for the tray, seeing as how I don't know when the captain will be eating." He thought for a moment. "Don't worry, I'll figure out something."

"I have every faith in your powers of deduction," Poppy said gamely. "I don't know what that means," Billy said with great enthusiasm, "but I think it's good."

"It's very good," Poppy said with a laugh. "I promise."

He gave her a friendly nod and let himself out. Poppy just smiled and shook her head. She could hardly believe he was the same boy who wouldn't even look at her the day before. She considered it a personal victory that she'd got him to speak to her. A rather fortunate personal victory considering that Billy was now her only friend on the ship.

"Be glad you *have* a friend," she admonished herself. This could be said. That was what she had been telling herself all afternoon. Back in England, her entire life might already have fallen apart—she wouldn't know for sure until she returned—but for now she was in good health, unmolested, and getting on well. She took the lid off the serving dish and took a whiff of her supper—she was fed remarkably well.

"Chicken in brown sauce," she murmured. It was as good a description as any. She put a piece on her plate, along with a serving of an unfamiliar dish, then set the lids back in place so that the food would remain warm. Captain James.

Not like her eggs. Or her tea.

That wasn't his fault, she reminded herself. There was a preposterous number of other things that *were* his fault, but she could not blame him for her breakfast.

She ate in silence, staring out the window at the fathomless sea. The moon must have been a moon, because she could see its ethereal reflection on the waves, but it didn't do much to illuminate the night. The sky was inky and endless, with stars peeking through like pinpricks. The heavens felt so far away, so different from at home. Or maybe it wasn't different from home at all, and it was just that right now she felt so very much more alone.

How different this voyage might have been under more auspicious circumstances. She tried to imagine taking to the sea with her family. It would never happen, of course; neither of her parents cared for travel.

Poppy imagined it all the same—standing on deck with her brothers, frowning, laughing as the wind and the waves set them off-balance. Would any of them know how to be seasick? Richard, most likely. There were any number of times when he'd thrown up more than the other four put together.

Poppy chuckled to herself. What a thing to think about. If she were to tell her mother she'd say as much to her mother, if only to hear her shriek. Anne Bridgerton did have a sense of humor, but it did not extend to bodily fluids. Poppy, on the other hand, had been far too influenced by her brothers to be so fussy.

Roger had been the worst. And of course, the best. He was her fiercest protector, but he'd had far too much mischief and humor to ever be stern. He was clever too, as clever as she was, but he was the oldest, and his extraordinary amount of experience and education made it impossible for the others to keep up with him. For example, he would never just leave a toad in his brother's bed. That would have been far too pedestrian.

No, when Roger turned to amphibians, he made sure they fell from the ceiling, or at least from the ceiling, and onto Richard's head. Poppy still wasn't sure how he'd managed that with such accuracy.

Then there was what he called his crown jewel. He spent six months secretly tutoring Poppy in false vocabulary, and she dutifully complied by writing such things in her primer as:

TINTON, NOUN. THE DELICIOUS CRUST MADE BY BURNING SUGAR ON A PUDDING.

and
for

FIMPLE, ADVERB. ALMOST, NEARLY.

re
n the
dark
t huge
nt at

He declared his life complete the day she approached their mother and asked, "Is the apple cream fimple out of the blackbox? You know how I chime when it gets a tinton."

t
But

Her mother had fainted on the spot. Her father, upon learning the extent of Roger's preparation, mused that he was not sure he could bring himself to mete out punishment for such a well-thought-out plan. He'd even opined that perhaps such diligence ought to be rewarded. Indeed, Roger might have received that new épée he'd been coveting had not Mrs. Bridgerton overheard. With strength no one knew she possessed, she smacked her

husband on the back of his head and demanded, "Have you *heard* your daughter? She's talking to the maids about plumwort and farfar!"

"She's especially fond of plumwort," Roger said with a smirk.

Mr. Bridgerton turned to him with a sigh-crossed groan. "You realize that I *have* to punish you?"

Poppy was never quite certain just what punishment her father had chosen but she did recall that Roger smelled remarkably like the chicken coop several weeks, and, proving that punishment occasionally did fit its crime, her mother had required him to write, "I will not farfar my sister," one thousand times in *his* primer.

But he'd only had to do so nine hundred times. Poppy had sneaked in to help him, taking the quill and doing a hundred lines for him.

He was her favorite brother. She would have done anything for him.

She wished she still could. Even now, after five years, it was so hard to believe he was gone.

With a sigh, and then another and another, she wandered aimlessly about the cabin. Captain James had not told her what time he normally took dinner, but after the clock struck seven, then eight, then nine, she decided there was no point in saving the pudding. Poppy took the larger of the two slices of pie, then pulled a chair up close to the window so she could gaze as she ate.

"My compliments to the chef," she murmured, casting an eye back toward where the other piece of pie sat on the table. "If he's not back by . . ."

Ten, she decided. If the captain didn't return by ten, she'd eat his pie. It was only fair.

In the meantime, she'd take very small bites. She might be able to make it last until—

She looked down at her empty plate. Never mind. She'd never been able to make her sweets last. Richard had been just the opposite, savoring each bite until the very end, at which point he moaned with pleasure, not because the pudding was especially delicious (although it was; their cook had had a particular talent for baking), but rather to torture his less patient sibling. Poppy had swiped one of his biscuits once, as much out of irritation as hunger, and when he'd noticed he'd walloped her.

Then her father had walloped him.

It had been worth it. Even when her mother had taken her aside for a lecture on ladylike behavior, it had been worth it. The only thing that v

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have made it better was if Poppy had got to do some walloping herself
“Wallop,” she said aloud. She liked that word. It sounded rather like
meaning. Onomatopoeia. Another word she liked.

Strangely, *it* didn’t sound like its meaning. An onomatopoeia ought
one of those crawly things with fuzzy legs, not a literary device.

She looked down at the dish in her hand. “Plate,” she said. No, it did
sound anything like what it was. “Bowl?”

Dear God, she was talking to crockery.
Had she *ever* been so bored?

She was on a *ship*, for heaven’s sake. Heading to exotic climes. She
not to feel as if her brain was desiccating. She ought to feel—

Well, what she ought to feel was terror, but she’d already done that,
didn’t she now deserve a little excitement? Surely she’d earned it.

“Yes, I have,” she said firmly.

“Have you?” came the amused voice of Captain James.

Poppy shrieked with surprise and jumped nearly a foot in the air. It
wonder she didn’t drop her dessert plate. “How did you enter so quietly?”
demanded.

Although honestly, it did sound more like an accusation.

The captain just shrugged. “Have you eaten?” he asked.

“Yes,” Poppy said, still waiting for her pulse to return to normal. She
waved her hand to the table. “I saved some for you. I don’t know if it
still be warm.”

“Likely not,” he said, heading straight for the table. He didn’t sound
concerned. “Ah . . .” He sighed appreciatively. “Chicken in brown sauce
favorite.”

Poppy’s head whipped around.

He gave her a queer look. “Is something amiss?”

“Chicken in brown sauce? That’s what you actually call it?”

“What else would you call it?”

Poppy’s mouth opened, and it hung that way for about two seconds
long. Finally she made a steadying motion with her hands and said, “N
mind.”

The captain shrugged, indifferent to the meanderings of her conversa
and he dug into his food with the speed of a man who had put in a hard
work.

“Chicken in brown sauce,” Poppy said to herself. “Who could have

known?"

The captain paused with his fork halfway between plate and mouth. "Do you have a problem with the food?"

"No," she said. "No. It's—" She shook her head. "It's nothing. I have been talking to myself all day."

He took a bite and nodded. "As opposed to all those people you'll never have occasion to meet?"

She pressed her lips together, trying—and probably failing—to look thoughtful. "Now you're just taking all my fun away."

He grinned unrepentantly.

"I can see you are troubled by the thought."

"Miss Bridgerton, you *always* trouble me."

She allowed herself a lofty tip of her chin. "Then I can count this as a day's work."

The captain took a long sip of his wine, then covered up a belch with his hand. "You do that."

Poppy tapped her hand against her thigh, trying not to look as if she had nothing to do but watch him eat (when of course they both knew she had nothing to do but watch him eat). She felt ridiculously awkward, so she turned back to the window and pretended to look out. She supposed she was actually *was* looking out, but the vista hadn't changed for the last two weeks, so really, it was more of a staring at the glass sort of thing. "You're quite late," she finally said.

His voice came from behind her, warm, rich, and terribly provoking. "Do you miss me?"

"Of course not." She turned around, trying to maintain a disinterested expression. "But I was curious."

He smiled, and it was a devastating thing. Poppy could easily imagine dozens of ladies swooning in its wake. "You're always curious, aren't you?" he murmured.

She was instantly suspicious. "You're not saying that as if it were an insult?"

"It's not an insult," he said plainly. "If more people were curious, we'd be far more advanced as a species."

She took a step toward him without realizing it. "What do you mean?"

His head tipped thoughtfully to the side. "Hard to say. But I like to think we'd be traveling the world in flying machines by now."

Well, that was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. So she pl
"Do herself right down across from him and said, "That's the most ridiculo
thing I've ever heard."

He chuckled. "Clearly you're not curious *enough*."

"I'll have you know—" Poppy frowned as a contraption with wings,
wheels, and maybe some fire shot through her imagination. It was enoi
distract her from her initial response, which had been to defend herself

She'd grown up with four brothers. Defending herself was always h
initial response.

"Do you think it's possible?" she asked. She leaned forward, arms c
on the table in front of her. "Flying machines?"

"I don't see why not. Birds do it."

"Birds have wings."

He shrugged. "We can build wings."

"Then why haven't we done so?"

"Men have tried."

She blinked. "They have?"

He nodded.

People had built wings and tried to fly and she didn't *know*? The inj
was astounding. "No one tells me anything," she grumbled.

He barked out a laugh. "I have difficulty believing that to be true."

Her eyes narrowed for what had to have been the tenth time in their
conversation. "Why?"

"Your aforementioned curiosity."

"Just because I *ask* doesn't mean people tell me things."

He cocked his head to the side. "Did you *ask* anyone about men buil
wings?"

"Of course not."

"Then you can't complain."

"Because I didn't *know* to ask," she protested, jumping right in over
words. "One needs a certain base of knowledge before one can ask sen
questions."

"True," Captain James murmured.

"And it goes without saying," Poppy continued, only somewhat mol
by his easy agreement, "that I have not been given the opportunity to s
physics."

"Do you want to?"

inked “Study physics?”
us He made a courtly gesture with his hand.
“That’s not the point,” she said.
“Well, it is, actually, as pertains to aerodynamics.”
“My point exactly!” She jabbed her finger toward him with enough
ugh to suddenness that he blinked. “I didn’t even know that was a word.”
“It’s self-explanatory,” he said. “One doesn’t need—”
er “That’s not the point.”
“Again with the points,” he said, sounding almost impressed.
rossed She scowled. “I can deduce the meaning once you *say* it. That’s not
She bit her tongue.
“Point?” he offered helpfully.
She gave him a look. “Women ought to be allowed an equal education
she said primly. “For those who want it.”
“You’ll get no objection from me,” the captain said, reaching for his
“Awfully small piece,” he muttered.
“It’s very good, though,” she told him.
“It always is.” He took a bite. “Your slice was larger?”
ustice “Of course.”
He gave her a vaguely approving nod, as if he’d expected no less, and
Poppy sat quietly as he finished his pie.
“Do you always dine so late?” she asked, once he had sat back in his
He glanced up, almost as if he’d forgotten her presence. “Not always
“What were you doing?”
He seemed slightly amused by the question. “Other than captaining
lding ship?”
“I was hoping you might tell me what captaining a ship *entails*.”
“I will,” he surprised her by saying. “Just not tonight.” He yawned and
stretched, and there was something astonishingly intimate about the mo-
his No gentleman of her acquaintance would *ever* have done such a thing in
sible presence—aside from her family, of course.
“Forgive me,” he murmured, blinking as if he’d only just remembered
he no longer had sole free rein of his quarters.
lified She swallowed. “I think I’ll get ready for bed.”
tudy He nodded. He suddenly looked exhausted, and Poppy was struck by
most inconvenient burst of compassion. “Was it a particularly tiring day
she heard herself ask.

“A bit.”

“Was it because of me?”

He cracked a wry smile. “I’m afraid I can’t blame everything on you Bridgerton.”

“Much as you would like to?”

“If you can conspire a way to take responsibility for a torn topgallan vexing wind, and three cases of putrid stomach, I would be much oblig

Almost apologetically, she said, “I’m afraid the wind requires a supernatural talent I do not possess.”

the—” “As opposed to the torn sail and the putrid stomachs?”

“I could manage those, given a bit of time to plan.” She made a vague sarcastic motion with her hand. “And access to the deck.”

on,” “Alas, I am too cruel.”

She leaned her elbow on the table, her chin resting thoughtfully in her hand. “And yet I don’t think it is your nature.”

“To be cruel?”

She nodded.

He smiled, but just a little, as if he were too tired to make a proper g

“It has been but a day, and yet you already know me too well, Miss Bridgerton.”

“Somehow I think I have barely scratched the surface.”

He regarded her curiously. “You almost sound as if you wish to.”

s.” Their voices had softened, the hard edges of the conversation worn off by fatigue. And maybe respect.

the Poppy stood, unsettled by the thought. She did not respect Captain J She could not. And she certainly shouldn’t *like* him, no matter how lik he could be.

nd She was tired. Her defenses were low. “It’s late,” she said.

otion. “Indeed,” he replied, and she heard him rise from his chair as she moved in her way over to the basin of water Billy had brought sometime between her entrée and dessert. She needed to clean her face and teeth, and brush her ed that She did so every night, and she was determined to maintain her routine no matter how odd it felt to be performing her ablutions in front of a man

And yet it was strangely *less* odd than it should have been.

y the *Needs must*, she told herself as she retrieved the tooth powder. That y?” all. If she was getting used to his presence, it was because she *had* to. She was a practical woman, not given to hysterics. She prided herself on th

she had to brush her teeth in front of a man she'd only just met, she certainly wasn't going to cry over it.

1, Miss She glanced over her shoulder, sure that the captain somehow knew she was thinking about him, but he seemed to be immersed in his own task riffling through some papers on his desk.

it sail, a With a resigned exhale, Poppy looked down at her finger and sprinkled some of the minty powder on it. She wondered if she should switch hands with each brushing. All this tooth powder might irritate her skin.

ely She took care of her teeth, splashed some water on her face, and, after making sure the captain was not watching, pulled the pins from her hair and ran her fingers through it, doing her best approximation of the boar-bristle hairbrush she used at home. Once she'd fashioned a sleeping plait, there was nothing left to do except get into bed.

er She turned, taking a step toward the bunk, but then there he was, so much closer than she'd expected.

"Oh!" she yelped. "I'm sorry, I—"

o of it. "No, it's my fault entirely. I didn't think you were going to turn and step on my foot." She stepped left.

He stepped right.

They both made awkward noises.

"Sorry," he grunted.

He stepped left.

down She stepped right.

ames. "Shall we dance?" he joked, and she would have made a similar riposte but the ship swept up and then down on a wave, sending her stumbling to the side, saved only by two warm hands at her waist.

"Now we really are—" She looked up, and it was such a mistake.

"Dancing," she whispered.

ade her They did not move, did not even speak. Poppy was not sure if they even breathed. His eyes held hers, and they were so bright, so astonishingly blue, that Poppy felt herself being drawn forward, pulled in. She didn't move an inch, but still, she felt it, the pull.

ian. "Do you like to dance?" he asked.

She nodded. "When there is music."

was "You don't hear it?"

She "I *can't* hear it." She wondered if he knew that she really meant she couldn't. Because it was there, and she felt it on her skin—the soft music of

certainly wind and the waves. If she were anyone else—no, if *he* were anyone else, this would be a moment made of romance and breathless anticipation.

she In another lifetime, another world, he might lean down.

s, She might look up.

They might kiss.

led It would be daring. Scandalous. How funny to think that if she were
nds in London, she could be ruined by a single kiss. It seemed so trivial now compared with, oh, being kidnapped by pirates.

er And yet as she stared into the captain's eyes, it didn't seem trivial at

ir and She lurched back, aghast at the direction of her thoughts, but his hands
stle were still there, large and warm on her hips, holding her, if not in place
re was at least steady.

Safe.

somehow "The water," he said in a rough voice. "It's choppy tonight."

It wasn't, but she appreciated the lie.

—"I'm steady now," she said, setting her hand on the table to reassure
—” Or maybe herself.

He released her and took a polite step back. "I beg your pardon," he
"I am not usually so clumsy."

Another lie. Another kindness. He hadn't been clumsy. To the contrary, she had been the one to stumble. She should have repaid his generosity
her own by saying so, but all she could manage was "I'm done with the
powder."

oste, It took him a moment longer than she would have expected to respond
; to the when he did, it was with a distracted "Of course." He took a step, and at
time she made sure to wait a half second so that she could see his direction
and step out of his way.

"Thank you," he added.

even It was all very awkward. Which, Poppy thought, was how it ought to
blue, "I'll just get into bed now," she said.

e, not He was busy with his teeth, but he turned his back to give her privacy.
Why, she wasn't sure, as they both knew she would be sleeping in her
clothes. Still, it was a considerate gesture, and yet another indication of
status as a gentleman.

"I'm in," she called out.

must He finished with his teeth and turned back around. "I'll have the lantern
the off shortly."

lse— “Thank you.” She pulled the covers up to her chin so that she could
the sash of her dress without him seeing. She was going to burn this fr
when she got back home. She might have an identical one made up, be
she did rather like the fabric, but this one . . .

To the fire pit.

back She rolled onto her side and faced the wall, affording him the same
w, he’d given her. She could hear his every move, though, setting up his
sleeping area, pulling off his boots.

all. “Oh, the pillow!” she suddenly remembered. She grabbed it from be
ids her head and lobbed it over her shoulder. “Here you are!”

e, then She heard a soft thunk, and then a soft grunt.

“Impeccable aim,” he murmured.

“Did I hit you?”

“Square on.”

Poppy smiled. “Face?”

him. “You should be so lucky.”

“I couldn’t see,” she demurred.

said. “Shoulder,” he told her, snuffing the last of the lanterns. “Now be qu
and go to sleep.”

ary; Amazingly, she did.

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“Thank you.” She pulled the covers up to her chin so that she could loosen the sash of her dress without him seeing. She was going to burn this frock when she got back home. She might have an identical one made up, because she did rather like the fabric, but this one . . .

To the fire pit.

She rolled onto her side and faced the wall, affording him the same privacy he’d given her. She could hear his every move, though, setting up his sleeping area, pulling off his boots.

“Oh, the pillow!” she suddenly remembered. She grabbed it from beneath her head and lobbed it over her shoulder. “Here you are!”

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“You should be so lucky.”

“I couldn’t see,” she demurred.

“Shoulder,” he told her, snuffing the last of the lanterns. “Now be quiet and go to sleep.”

Amazingly, she did.

Chapter 9

The problem, Andrew realized as he turned the ship the following morning just enough to keep the sails flush with wind, was that Poppy Bridgerton wasn't awful.

If she'd been awful, he could have shut the cabin door and forgotten her.

If she'd been awful, he might have even taken some vaguely undignified pleasure in her predicament.

But she wasn't awful. She was a bloody miserable nuisance—or rather, her presence was—but she wasn't awful.

And that made all of this so much more complicated.

The girl's safety was surely worth the price of her boredom, but something that didn't make him feel any better about having sequestered her in the cabin, with nothing but a few books and an ocean view to keep her company.

Andrew had been up and about for several hours already; he rarely slept past sunrise. Billy would have brought her breakfast by now, so that was something. The boy wasn't the most sparkling of conversationalists, but that he'd got over his terror of their female guest, surely he could provide a few moments of diversion.

At least she wouldn't have to eat a cold breakfast. Miss Bridgerton wouldn't make that mistake again.

She wasn't the kind to ever make the same mistake twice.

Still, he should check on her. It was only polite. She was his guest.

In a way.

Regardless, he was certainly responsible for her. And that included her mental well-being along with the physical. Besides, he'd thought of something that might alleviate the monotony. He didn't know why it had occurred to him earlier—probably because he'd still been so aghast at her unexpected predicament.

He had a wooden puzzle, modeled after the dissected maps that had become all the rage in London. But his was considerably more intricate; he had taken him several hours to put together when he'd given it a go. It was a lot of work, but it would help her fill her time.

She'd love it. He knew this with a certainty he couldn't explain, except that he'd loved it, and he and Miss Bridgerton seemed to have the same sort of analytical, problem-solving mind. He rather suspected they'd have been good friends if she hadn't put national secrets at risk when she trespassed on his cave.

Or if he hadn't kidnapped her. That too.

"Jenkins, take the wheel," he called out, ignoring the speculative look on his second's face. Andrew had given over far more of his wheel time than was usual. But there was no law saying that a captain had to spend a prescribed amount of time in—

"Oh for the love of God," he muttered. He didn't need to explain himself to anyone, much less himself.

Jenkins, thankfully, assumed command without comment, and Andrew took the steps two at a time down to the main deck, and then triple-paced down to his cabin.

He gave a sharp rap before inserting his key into the lock, letting himself in before Miss Bridgerton had a chance to call out a greeting.

She was seated at the table, her chestnut hair pinned somewhat haphazardly on her head. The scant remains of her breakfast—three bread rolls and a bit of toast—sat on the tray in front of her.

"You don't like strawberries?" he asked, plucking the largest of the strawberries off her plate.

She glanced up from the book she was reading. "They make me ill."

"Interesting." He took a bite. "My sister-in-law is the same. I've not had them, but Edward—that's my brother—says it's a sight to behold."

She marked her place in the book—a slim guide to Lisbon, he noted it was very practical of her even if he had no plans to let her so much as touch a toe on Portuguese soil—then set it down. "I imagine it's a sight one wishes not to behold."

"Indeed." He shuddered. "I believe the word *gruesome* was used, and my brother is not given to hyperbole."

"Unlike you?"

He laid a hand over his heart. "I exaggerate only when absolutely

necessary.”

e. It “Your brother sounds delightful.”

wasn’t “He’s married,” Andrew immediately retorted.

“This makes him less delightful?” She seemed to find this terribly apt that amusing, which should have irritated him, but instead he felt . . . awkward of Green?

n jolly It had been a long time since his glib tongue had failed him so.

sed in Thankfully, however, Miss Bridgerton did not seem to require a response. Instead she pushed her plate in his direction. “Have the rest if you wish.”

Andrew accepted her offering and ate one whole, leaving only the green leafy cap in his fingers. Setting it down on her plate, he rested his hip against the side of the table and asked, “Are *you* gruesome?”

ibed She let out a surprised laugh. “Right this minute?”

He tipped his head, a small salute to her riposte.

nsel “No,” she said, a touch of humor making her voice delightfully warm. “I get rather itchy, though, and somewhat short of breath. Two things I’d avoid, frankly, while confined in a cabin.”

ew “I’ll tell the cook,” Andrew said, finishing off the last berry. “He can tell you something else.”

nsel in “Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

He regarded her for a moment, then said, “Alarmingly civil, aren’t you?”

“Alarming that we find it so alarming,” she returned.

rries “There is much to dissect in that comment,” he said, pushing off from the edge of the table, “but alas, I haven’t the time.”

three “And yet you spared some for me,” she remarked. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

’ “A pleasure, is it?” he murmured, heading over to his wardrobe. He had seen her reply before adding, “No? It will be.”

“What are you talking about?”

; rather He enjoyed her befuddled tone, but he didn’t bother with further conversation as he dug through his belongings. It had been some time since he’d brought out the puzzle, and it was wedged at the back of the wardrobe behind a broken kaleidoscope and a pair of socks. The wooden pieces were stored in a velvet pouch, purple with a gold drawstring. All in all, quite nice.

He set it down on the table. “I thought you might enjoy this.”

She looked at the velvet pouch and then at him, her brows arched in question.

“It’s a dissected map,” he told her.

“A what?”

“Have you never seen one?”

She shook her head, so he opened the pouch and let the pieces spill out onto the wooden tabletop. “They were very popular about ten years ago,” he explained. “A cartographer by the name of Spilsbury fixed a map onto a wooden board and then cut the countries and seas at their borders. He thought it would help to teach geography. I believe the first few went to the royal family.”

“Oh, I know what you’re talking about,” she exclaimed. “But the only one I’ve seen had nowhere near so many pieces.”

“Yes, this one is unique. I had it commissioned myself.” He took a small piece and held it diagonally to her and spread out a few of the pieces, flipping them over so the map side was up. “Most of the dissected maps are cut along borders, national boundaries, rivers, coasts—that sort of thing. I already know a little about geography, but I rather like to put things together, so I asked if mine could instead be cut into many random small shapes.”

Her lips parted with wonder, and she picked up one of the pieces. “/ then you have to fit them together,” she said almost reverently. “That’s brilliant! How many pieces are there?”

“Five hundred.”

“Never say it!”

“Give or take,” Andrew admitted modestly. “I haven’t counted them.”

“I’ll count them,” Miss Bridgerton said. “It’s not as if I don’t have time to do this.”

She didn’t seem to have said it as a complaint, so he turned a few more pieces over and said, “The best way to get started is to look for—”

“No, don’t tell me!” she cut in. “I want to figure it out for myself.” She picked up a piece and squinted at it.

“The writing is small,” he said.

“My eyes are young.” She looked up, aforementioned eyes glinting with delight. “It says *IC*. Not terribly helpful. But it’s blue, so it could be the Baltic. Or the Atlantic.”

“Or the Pacific.”

She looked surprised. “How big is the map?”

“The known world,” he told her, a little surprised by the boastful voice. He was proud of the puzzle; as far as he knew, no other map had

dissected into quite as many pieces. But that wasn't why he'd been bra and it wasn't because she was so obviously happy for the first time sin met her. It was—

out Dear God, he'd wanted to impress her.

o," he He jolted to his feet. "I have to get back."

a "Yes, fine," she said distractedly, far more interested in the puzzle th hought anything he had to say. "I'll be here, as you know."

al He watched her as he walked to the door. She didn't glance at him e once. He *should* be glad that she had not noticed his abrupt change in es I've disposition. "Billy will bring you something to eat this afternoon," he s

eat "That will be nice." She picked up another piece and examined it, ta sip of tea before setting it down to study another.

so that He tapped the handle of the door. "Do you have any preferences?"

s— "Hmmm?"

ny "For food. Do you have any preferences? Other than the strawberrie ould course."

And She looked up and blinked, as if she was surprised he was still there not terribly fond of asparagus, if that's what you're asking."

; "You're unlikely to encounter that on board," he said. "We do try to fruits and vegetables, but never anything that expensive."

She shrugged and turned back to the puzzle. "I'm sure anything will fine."

1." "Good." He cleared his throat. "I'm pleased you're getting on so we he realize it is not an ideal situation."

"Mmm-hmm."

ore He cocked his head to the side, watching her as she started flipping j over so the map side faced her. "It's really too bad I don't have anothe she of those puzzles," he said.

"Hmmm."

"I'll be going, then."

with "Hmm-mmm." This one came out with an up-and-down lilt, as if sh e saying good-bye.

"Well," he said gruffly. "Good-bye."

She lifted a hand in farewell, even as her attention remained fixed on wooden pieces. "Bye!"

s in his Andrew stepped out of the cabin and into the corridor, making sure l been door closed and locked behind him. She could get out, of course. It wo

gging, have been irresponsible of him to have left her there without a means to
ce he'd evacuate. The *Infinity* had never had a problem, but one had to be careful
sea.

He unlocked the door and barged back in. "You do know you have a

This got her attention. "I beg your pardon?"

nan "A key. Right over there in the top drawer. It's highly unlikely, but if
were an emergency, you would be able to leave the cabin."

ven "You wouldn't come get me?"

said. "Well, I would try . . ." He suddenly felt most awkward. It was not a
pleasant—or a familiar—sensation. "Or I could send someone. But it's
king a important that you have the ability to evacuate if necessary."

"So what you're saying," she said, "is that you are trusting me not to
the cabin."

s, of He had not quite thought of it that way, but— "Yes," he replied. "I s
I am."

"That is good to know."

. "I'm He stared at her. What the devil did that mean?

keep speed. "Thank you for the puzzle," she said, changing the topic with unsett
of you." "I'm not sure if I actually said as much. It really was most thoug
of you."

be "It was nothing," he said, and his head and shoulder did a little twitch
cheeks felt warm too.

ll. I She smiled—a lovely, warm thing that thoroughly reached her eyes,
started to think that their color was more moss than leaf, although it mi
just be the light coming through the windows . . .

pieces "Didn't you say you were needed?" she reminded him.

r one He blinked. "Yes, of course." He gave his head a little shake. "I was
thinking for a moment."

She smiled again, this time with a vague air of amusement. Or maybe
impatience. She clearly wished to be rid of him.

e were "I'll take my leave, then." He made a quick bow with his head and r
toward the door.

"Oh, wait!" she called.

n the He turned around. But not eagerly. Not eagerly at all. "Yes?"

the removing the tray? I'll need more room for the puzzle, wouldn't you th

uld "The tray," he echoed dully. She wanted him to carry her tray. He w

o captain of his own bloody ship.

ful at “I would very much appreciate it.”

He took the tray. “Until this evening, Miss Bridgerton.”

a key?” Until this evening. Absolutely. He would not be going back to check her before then. Certainly not.

if there

Poppy was just about a quarter of the way through the puzzle when she a single sharp rap on the door, followed by the sound of the key turning in the lock.

“Captain James!” she said with some surprise. As usual, he looked ridiculously handsome. What was it with men and windblown hair? And unlike this morning, his shirt was open at the neck. She didn’t mind, really, but out of politeness, she averted her eyes and turned her attention back to the puzzle piece in her hand. She thought it might belong in Canada. Or maybe Japan.

“Did you think I was Billy?” he asked.

“No, he would never knock with such authority. But you said you’d be back until evening.”

He cleared his throat and motioned toward the far wall. “I need to retrieve something from my wardrobe.”

h. His “A cravat, perhaps,” she murmured. She’d only ever seen her brother in such a state of undress. But her brothers had not looked like *this*. Or if she had, she’d hardly cared.

ight The captain, on the other hand—well, she had already admitted to herself that he was good-looking. As long as she did not admit it to *him*, she had nothing to worry about.

just He touched his throat, and she suspected he’d forgotten that he’d removed his neckpiece. “We often dispense with formalities on board.”

oe “Is it very warm today?”

“When one is in the sun.”

novel That was probably how his hair had come to be so liberally streaked with gold. She’d wager that it had not been so lustrous when he was living in London round in England.

Lustrous? She gave herself a mental shake. Adjectives such as that had no business in her head while she was stuck on this ship. It was fanciful and silly. . . .

as the True, dash it all. Weren’t pirates meant to be filthy and coarse? Captain

James looked like he might take tea with the queen.

Provided he wore a cravat.

She watched as he rummaged about in his wardrobe. (His back was and thus she had no reason not to stare.) After a few moments, he pulled something out, but he tucked it into his pocket before she could see what was.

She turned back to the puzzle just as he turned around.

“How is it coming along?” he asked.

“Very well, thank you,” she said, relieved that he had not caught her watching him. “I started with all of the edge pieces.” She gazed down at her work. She was rather proud of the rectangular frame she’d created.

His voice came from right behind her. “Always a sound plan.”

She startled. She hadn’t realized he was so close. “Ehrm . . . I’ve been trying to sort the rest of the pieces by color. It’s difficult, though. Most are very pale, and . . .”

Why was he so warm? He wasn’t even touching her, and yet she could feel the heat radiating from his body. She dared not turn around, but how could she be so close to him?

She cleared her throat. “I’m finding it difficult to tell the difference between pink and this shade.” She held up a piece that obviously contained both water and land. One corner was light blue, and the rest was somewhat slightly peachy.

“This one is definitely pink,” he said near her ear, and then he leaned forward, his arm stretching past her as he reached for a triangular piece at the back of the array. The linen of his shirt whispered against the back of her head, and for a moment she could not remember how to breathe.

She could not remember if she *knew* how to breathe.

He set the piece into her pink pile and drew his arm back, lightly grazing her shoulder.

Her skin tingled.

It was the heat. It had to be. The sun had finally traveled high enough that it was no longer streaming through the windows, but the cabin had spent the entire morning to warm up. She’d been so engrossed in the puzzle that she hadn’t really noticed it. But now she had that prickly feeling one gets when one needed a cool drink. And much the way she could never ignore hiccupps when her mother said, “Just forget about them, and they’ll go away,” she could not stop being so aware of the sensation.

And of him, scandalously close.

The captain reached for another piece, this one lavender, but it was f
to her than the other one had been, and when she turned, she saw that his head
ed right next to hers. If he turned . . . If she turned . . .

at it It would be a kiss.

“Stop!” she cried out.

He straightened. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” she said, utterly mortified by her outburst. “No. *No.*” She tried
to make the last *no* sound droll, but she had a feeling she had not succeed
at her She cleared her throat, giving herself an extra few seconds to compose
before she spoke again, and when she did, her hands were spread out li
starfish on the table to steady her. “It is simply that I wish to complete
en my own. I don’t want any help.”

are He’d moved out from behind her, and when she looked at his face she
relieved to see that there was nothing roguish or teasing or even *knowi*
ld feel his expression. Instead, he almost looked sheepish.

lose “Sorry,” he said. “I love things like this.”

“It’s—it’s all right,” she said, hating the stammer in her voice. “Just
more.”

ined He stepped away, and she thought he was headed for the door, but
hing suddenly he stopped and turned around, resting his hands on the back of
chair across from her. “Why are you being so agreeable?”

d She blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

at the “You’re remarkably amiable today.” His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t
er *quite* look suspicious.

“As opposed to . . .”

izing His head tilted to the side, as if he hadn’t considered this. “When you
arrived, I suppose.”

“You mean in a *sack*?”

He waved that off. “Is it the puzzle?”

h so “Well . . .” Poppy paused, unsure of how to answer his question. What
l had she being agreeable? The maddening man was holding her against her
that not that she could do anything about it, here on the open ocean. Perhaps
ot would behave differently if she was at an inn or a house—someplace f
ore which she could reasonably envision escape. But here on the ship there
away,” nothing to be gained from being contrary. Not when she had to spend a
fortnight in his company.

She looked over at the captain, hoping that she'd stalled long enough for him to have moved on, but no, he was still staring at her with bright blue eyes and a look of expectation, awaiting her answer.

"I suppose," she said carefully, "it's simply because I have no good alternative. I can't go anywhere. I certainly can't escape, and I have to be an idiot to think I'd fare better on my own in Portugal than under your protection. So like it or not, I'm stuck with you."

He nodded slowly. "As I am with you."

"Oh," she added with particular emphasis, "and I *don't* like it."

His chin drew back, adding to the air of puzzlement that marked his expression.

"I said 'like it or not,'" she explained. "I want to make it clear that I mean it. Like it, I mean."

"So noted," he remarked.

"But," she added, coming to her feet, "you have treated me with a surprising measure of respect, so I am endeavoring to do the same."

One of his brows arched. "Just a small measure?"

She met this expression with her own. "You still sleep in this room, do you? . . . no not?"

"For your protection," he reminded her.

"The door locks."

"I'm *not* sleeping below."

"As I have yet to see an inch of the ship other than this cabin and the corridor outside, I could not say if the berths below would be appropriate."

He smiled condescendingly. "Trust me when I tell you that even if you have free rein of the *Infinity*, you would not be permitted anywhere near the sailors' quarters."

She tipped her head toward the door. "I counted three other cabins on this deck."

"So you did. They are very small."

"But large enough for two men, I would think. Don't Brown and Green share?"

"Neither Brown nor Green is the captain of this ship."

"So what you're actually saying is that it is your pride that is too large for you to share a cabin."

"I'm sharing one with *you*."

"A decision I still cannot comprehend." She snorted. "You do realize that if we were anywhere else, you'd have to marry me."

h for This made him grin, and it was a lethal, devilish thing. He leaned to
ue her. “Why, Miss Bridgerton, are you asking for my hand?”
 “No!” she practically howled. “You’re twisting my words.”
reason “I know,” he said, almost sympathetically. “You make it so easy.”
’d She scowled. “I take back everything I said about your being a gentl
with Still, he kept smiling. The wretched man found this *amusing*. Or mo
the point, he found *her* amusing, which was considerably worse.
 “As it happens,” he said, “I have decided to sleep in my navigator’s
tonight. There are indeed two berths there.”
face. “You just said—”
don’t. He held up a hand. “A wise man never argues when he’s getting his
The same goes for women, I should think.”
 He was right, damn it. Still . . . “What brought on this change of hea
nall she asked suspiciously.
 “Oh, let’s see . . . My sore neck, my aching back, and the fact that I
fell asleep at the wheel this morning.”
do you “Really?”
 “No, not really,” he retorted. Then he might have groaned. “But I w
to.”
 Poppy tried to appear contrite. She really did. But there was somethi
delicious about the thought of him falling asleep while on duty, and sh
hadn’t been able to keep *all* the glee from her voice.
e Schadenfreude, meet Poppy Bridgerton.
ate.” “I have taken measure of the crew’s mood,” Captain James said, “ar
rou did confident that you will remain unbothered.”
ar the She nodded demurely. She had won. She had won! But she knew m
n this she knew she had to let him think the victory was his. So she gave him
pretty smile and said, “Thank you.”
 He crossed his arms. “You will, of course, keep the door locked.”
een “As you wish.”
 “And you must understand that this is still my cabin, and I will be in
out during the day.”
ge to “All of your things are here,” she murmured agreeably, although she
have ruined it when she added, “See how agreeable I am?”

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Chapter 10

Agreeable, indeed. The chit was up to something. Although what, Andrew could not envisage. He'd believed her when she said she wasn't plotting an escape. She was far too intelligent for that. He supposed she might try something when they were back on British soil, but certainly not before.

But when they *were* back on British soil . . . well, he wanted to be right with her then, didn't he?

"Is something wrong?" he heard her ask. "You look very skeptical all of a sudden."

He looked over at her. Brown hair, green eyes, blue dress . . . everything was the same. And yet *he* felt different.

But it wasn't because of *her*, he told himself. True, her presence had made this voyage into one like no other, but she was not the reason for his uneasiness. He'd been feeling not quite right for several months now.

Something inside of him had jolted out of place. He felt off-center.

Restless.

It was a sensation that he usually took to mean it was time to set sail. He wasn't a soul that was meant to remain too long in one place. This was a basic fact of his existence, as much a part of him as his cheeky humor, his blue eyes, or his fascination with all things mechanical. It was why he'd begged his parents to allow him to withdraw from Eton in his final year to join the navy. It was why they'd let him, even though he knew they would rather he'd finished his studies.

They didn't even try to suggest that he go on to Cambridge, despite the fact that Andrew had always had a passion for engineering and architecture. He could have probably used some tutelage.

He could never have made it through three years at university. Not the least. He could barely sit still. Lectures and seminars would have been absolute torture.

But it was a different sort of restlessness that had recently taken root in his chest. A need for change, yes, but not *constant* change. He saw that change again, the one that had been lurking for so long at the back of his mind, now altered a little each time he thought of it . . . a trellis here, new stone wall there . . . And of course he was never quite sure how large it ought to be. He wanted to live by himself? Have a family?

It couldn't be too small, he decided. Even if he never had a family of his own, he'd want plenty of room for his nieces and nephews. Children needed room to run wild, to explore. His own childhood had been magnificent. Rokesby and Bridgerton children had formed their own little tribe, and they had the entirety of two estates to roam. They'd fished and climbed, and they had created all sorts of sketches of the imagination with princes and knights, pirates and kings. And of course Joan of Arc and Queen Elizabeth, because Billie Bridgerton had refused to be cast as a damsel in distress.

When it rained, they played games and built houses out of cards, and Andrew supposed there had to have been lessons in there at some point, even those had been made enjoyable by his parents' expert picks for tutoring. They had understood that learning could be fun, that there was nothing gained by a slavish devotion to discipline, at least not with children whose ages remained in the single digits.

His parents were remarkably wise people. How ironic and, he supposed, logical that none of their children would truly realize this until they took to adulthood.

He really needed to get back to see his family. It had been much too long. "Captain James?"

Miss Bridgerton was standing next to him now; he had not even realized she'd got up from the table.

"Captain James?" she said again. "Are you all right?"

"Sorry." He gave himself a mental shake. "I was just thinking . . ." \nHonestly, there was no reason not to tell her the truth. "I was thinking about my family."

"Ah yes, your brother," she said, her eyes crinkling with something approaching mischief. "The one who does not exaggerate. Married to a gruesome hater of strawberries."

And just like that, she made him laugh. "I assure you, she's hardly gruesome. You'd like her, actually. She—"

He stopped. He'd been about to tell her how Cecilia had crossed an

to look for her wounded brother, how she had feigned marriage to a man who had lost his memory so that she might continue to nurse him through his injuries. Cecilia had not thought herself particularly daring or headstrong, but she still didn't—and she often said that she'd be happy never to travel more than fifty miles from her home again. But when she needed it—when Cecilia had needed it—she had found her strength.

But he could not reveal more information about his family. He should even have mentioned Edward's name, but honestly, what family *didn't* include an Edward in a recent branch of their tree? If he started talking about Cecilia and Nicholas and Mary, however . . . That combination of names was considerably more distinctive. And with the aforementioned George mentioned to Poppy's cousin Billie . . .

"Do you miss them?" Miss Bridgerton asked.

"My family? Of course. All the time."

"And yet you've chosen a life at sea."

He shrugged. "I also like the sea."

She considered this for a moment, then said, "I don't really miss missing you."

He looked at her with frank astonishment.

"I mean, of course I *miss* them. But I wasn't meant to be with my family right now, anyway."

"Ah yes," he recalled. "You were visiting your friend in Charmouth in Dorset, near Armitage."

She blinked in surprise. "You remember her name?"

"I have to return you to her, don't I?"

Her mouth opened, but then he saw her expression and realized—

"For the love of Christ, woman, you didn't think I was just going to drop you at the docks, did you?"

Her lip caught between her teeth. "Well . . ."

"What sort of man do you think I am?" He stalked away, furious at his assessment of her. "Bloody hell, woman, you're the one who keeps insisting I'm a gentleman. How could you think I would not see you safely to your friend's doorstep?"

"You did kidnap me," she pointed out, almost politely.

"That again," he ground out.

Her eyes widened, and she made a sound that clearly translated to: *Do not just say that.*

He planted his hands on his hips. "We have already established that

an who no choice.”

is To that she responded with a one-shouldered shrug. “So you say.”
ng— He supposed she had a point there, but it wasn’t as if he could explain
more himself to her. His own parents didn’t even know that he had spent the
others seven years in secret service to the crown.

Still, he wasn’t going to rise to her bait and get into another argument
ldn’t about how and why she’d come to be on the *Infinity*. “Regardless,” he
t have his tone pointedly firm, “you will not be left at the docks like some un-
George cargo. I’m not yet certain *how* we will see you home, but we will, you
my assurance.”

arried He stared her down, waiting for her response.

Which she gave.

“Technically,” she said, with the careful expression of one who is pinning
through needles, “I *am* unwanted cargo.”

It took him a moment to digest this. “*That* is the point you wish to address.”
“Well, I’m certainly not going to argue that you *shouldn’t* return me
ne.” to Briar House. Although you might wish to be careful.” Her brows rose
calling to mind the many times Andrew’s sister—and his sister-in-law

mily *other* sister-in-law—doled out unnecessary advice.

“Elizabeth is not so willing as I to bend rules,” Miss Bridgerton said
. Mrs. may very well have summoned the authorities.”

Not to mention the entire Bridgerton family, he thought grimly.

She walked back over to the table. “It would probably be unwise of
approach the house.”

He almost smiled. “Are you worried I might be arrested?”

drop She snorted. “I have every faith you’ll escape the law.”

He wasn’t sure it was a compliment. But he also wasn’t sure that it was
And he definitely wasn’t sure which he would rather it be.

her He cleared his throat. “I should be getting back. There is much that
sisting requires my attention.”

our She nodded absently, inspecting several puzzle pieces. “I would imagine
so. I’m surprised you have remained in the cabin as long as you have.”

Not as surprised as he was.

“You should know that I still intend to take my evening meal here,”
/ou did with a nod to the table, “although it does appear that you’ve quite taken
with the puzzle.”

I had She smiled without regret. “I’m afraid I cannot apologize for that.”

“Nor would I expect you to.” He looked down, saw a piece that was the Orkney Islands, and set it into place.

in She swatted his hand. “Stop it! You’ve done this before!”

last “I know, but I can’t help that I’m better at it than you are.”

at Her scowl was so marvelous he had to do it again. “Did you open the windows?” he asked innocently.

said, She twisted in her seat. “They open?”

wanted He grabbed another piece and set it into place. “No.” He grinned when he turned back around to glare at him. “Sorry. Can’t help myself.”

“Obviously not,” she grumbled.

“It was Norway,” he said helpfully.

cking “I can see that.” And then, in what had to be an admission so grudgingly deserved applause, she added, “Now.”

rgue?” “I’ve never been,” he said in his most conversational tone. Which was to say, his usual timbre.

safely “To Norway?” She tried to fit a piece into the southernmost tip of Asia, “Nor I.”

and his He smiled at that, since they both knew she had never set foot outside England. At least not on dry land. “It won’t fit,” he said, all helpfully. “She “You’ve got South America there.”

you to Miss Bridgerton frowned at the puzzle piece in her hand. It was shaped like a rhombus, with a green triangle of land jutting out from one of the sides. The rest was pale blue water. “Are you sure?” she asked. She squinted at the tiny writing. “There’s an *H* and an *O*. I thought it must be the Cape of Good Hope.”

“Or Cape Horn,” he said.

wasn’t. “Well, that’s confusing,” she said with some irritation. She set it back down on the table with a snap. “You’d think they could have come up with names that didn’t sound *exactly* the same.”

He grinned at that. He had to.

gine She pressed the tip of her forefinger on one of the pieces, sliding it aimlessly in a figure eight. And then she shocked him utterly by saying, “I lied earlier.”

he said He turned. Softly, he said, “Tell me.”

n over It took her a moment to speak, and when she did, her voice was so soft a way he’d not heard before. “I do miss my family. Not the way I think you do. I’m—I’m not away from them as frequently as you are, or for the same

clearly duration. But I miss my brother. The one who died. I miss him all the t

She allowed him to see her face for only a second before turning away even if he had not seen the grief in her eyes, he would have known it by the bleak stance of her shoulders, the way some of the life seemed to have been leeched from her limbs.

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” he said.

She nodded, her throat working as she looked down at the puzzle piece when she focusing on nothing. “He was my favorite.”

“What was his name?”

She looked at him, and in her eyes he saw a tiny flash of gratitude that he asked.

“Roger,” she said. “His name was Roger.”

Andrew thought about his own siblings. He didn’t have a favorite, or at least he didn’t think he did. But even though his were all living, Andrew could more keenly imagine her pain than one might think. His brother Edward used to be an army officer, and he had gone missing in Africa during the war. Andrew had believed that he’d perished. He had not said much to anyone; his mother in particular would have blistered his ears so much as hinted at the fact that he had lost hope.

In his heart, though, Andrew had begun to mourn.

He’d believed his brother dead for almost a year, and he would have been short to offer words of empathy to Poppy, but he could not. The story of Captain Edward Rokesby’s return from the dead was too well-known. And so when Andrew just sat beside her and said again, “I’m sorry.”

She acknowledged this with a jerky nod. But then, after only a few moments, her mouth tightened resolutely. She tapped her fingers several times on the table, then reached out to grab the puzzle piece she’d received with had in her hand.

“I have to say,” she told him, in a voice that made it clear she was changing the subject, “it doesn’t much look like a horn.”

Andrew took the piece from her fingers with a smile. “I believe it is for Hoorn.”

“For who?”

He chuckled. “Hoorn. It is a city in the Netherlands.”

This did not seem to impress her. “Hmmp. Well, I’ve not been *there* either.”

He leaned toward her, just enough for his shoulder to make a conspiratorial

ime.” bump against hers. “Nor I.”

ay, but “That is surprising,” she said, glancing ever so slightly in his direction.
y the “I’d assumed you’d been everywhere. Except Norway, apparently.”

“Alas, no. My business keeps me on familiar routes.” It was true. Mr. Andrew’s time was spent ferrying documents to the same three or four countries. Spain and Portugal, most of all.

eces, “How do you spell it?” she suddenly asked.

“Hoorn? *H-O-O-R-N*. Why?”

“Just wondering if there is a city of Good *H-O-O-P-E* out there that he’d somewhere.”

He laughed at that. “If so, I should like to visit.”

r at She was not, however, done with her queries. “Do you know which named first?”

w “Of the capes? I think it was Good Hope. If I recall correctly, the name was bestowed upon it by a Portuguese king.”

ca, “Portuguese, you say? It’s settled then. We’ll stop in Good Hoopewood as way back from Lisbon.” Her eyes lit with merriment. “Do you think Mr. if he’d Carroway knows the way?”

“If he’s read that bloody awful navigation guide he will.”

She laughed gaily at that, and it was a marvelous sound, rich with humor and joy. It was the sort of sound Andrew wasn’t used to hearing while at sea. The sailors had their jokes, but they were coarse, masculine things nothing so clever as Poppy Bridgerton’s bon mots.

Poppy. The name really did suit her. What a shame it would have been if she’d turned out drab and pinched.

al “Good HUUUUPE,” she chortled, adopting an accent he was quite sure didn’t exist anywhere but inside this cabin. “GUUUUUUUUD HUUUUUUPE.”

“Stop,” he said. “I can’t bear it.”

“GUUD HUUUUUUUUUUUUUPE,” she practically sang. “The most hopeful in Portugal.”

named “Honestly, your accent might be the most frightful thing I have ever heard.”

She turned with mock outrage. “You don’t think I sound like a Dutchwoman?”

e “Not even a little bit.”

She let out a mock huff. “Well, that is disappointing. I was trying so hard.”

ratorial “That much was clear.”

She jabbed him with her elbow, then motioned with her head toward the puzzle pieces. "I don't suppose you see the Cape of Good Hope among these mess."

He glanced sideways at her. "I thought you didn't want help."

"I don't want *unsolicited* help," she clarified.

"I'm afraid I only like to offer help when it is not wanted."

"So you *don't* see it."

He grinned unrepentantly. "Not at all."

She laughed again, her head falling back with her mirth. Andrew was transfixed. He'd thought she was pretty, but in that moment she became something much more. *Pretty* was a dull, static thing, and Poppy Bridge could never be that.

"Oh my goodness," she said, wiping her eyes. "If you'd told me when you arrived that I'd be laughing . . ."

"I certainly wouldn't have believed you."

"Yes, well . . ." Her words trailed off, and he could see the moment her thoughts forced her back to propriety. Her expression grew shuttered, and like that, the magic was gone. "I would still rather be at home."

"I know," he said, and he had the most intense urge to cover her hands with his.

But he didn't.

She spoke haltingly, her words coming out in small batches, and though she lifted her eyes to his, she did not hold them there for long before she turned her gaze toward a spot somewhere past his shoulder. "I don't want you to think . . . that just because I might occasionally laugh . . . or even appreciate your company . . ."

"I know," he said. She didn't need to finish the sentence.

He didn't want her to finish the sentence.

But she did anyway. "You shouldn't think that I forgive you."

He knew that too, but as blows went, it was still spectacularly well aimed and surprisingly deep.

He stood. "I should go."

She didn't say anything until he reached the door. Her good manners had probably got the best of her, though, because before he could leave she said, "Thank you again. For the puzzle."

"You're most welcome. I hope you enjoy it."

"I will. I . . ." She swallowed. "I am."

l the He bowed, a crisp, regimented dip of his chin that offered every resp
g this had to give.

 And then he got the hell out of the cabin.

Andrew was already on deck before he took a moment to pause and tal
breath. He hadn't meant to leave so suddenly, but Miss Bridgerton had
under his skin, and—

Oh bloody hell, who did he think he was kidding? He hadn't even b
planning to go down to his cabin until evening, but for some idiotic rea
he'd wanted to see how she was getting on with the puzzle, and then h
to make up an excuse for his being there.

He didn't even know *what* he'd grabbed from his wardrobe. He reac
into his pocket and pulled out . . .

 A pair of his smalls.

 Good God.

He briefly considered tossing them over the side. The last thing he n
was one of his men coming across him holding his undergarments like
sort of demented laundress.

But he could not bring himself to dispose of a perfectly good piece c
clothing just because *she* . . .

 No, because *he* . . .

It was certainly not because *they* . . .

He balled up the linen and shoved it in his pocket.

This, he thought. *This* was the curse his men kept yammering about.
woman on board wasn't going to cause lightning to strike the mast or t
on a plague of rats and locusts. Instead, he would go mad. By the time
reached Portugal he'd have lost half his mind, and by the time they ma
back to England he'd be a stark, raving lunatic.

Stark. Raving—

“Something wrong, Captain?”

Andrew looked up, not even wanting to imagine what expression he
made so that one of his men felt emboldened to inquire such a thing. A
newish young sailor named John Wilson was just a few feet away, wat
him with either curiosity or concern, Andrew couldn't tell which.

 “Nothing,” Andrew said sharply.

Wilson's already ruddy cheeks took on more color and he gave a jer
nod. “Course. M'pologies for asking.”

ject he Bloody hell, now Andrew felt the worst sort of heel. “Er, what duty you today?” he asked, hoping the show of interest would take the sting out of his previous tone. Besides, the inquiry was not out of character. It was entirely normal that he might ask this upon coming across one of his men

ke a When he didn’t have a pair of his own smalls stuffed in his pocket.

l got Because he couldn’t admit he’d wanted to see a girl.

God in heaven, this voyage could not be over soon enough.

een “Been aloft,” Wilson said, with a nod toward the rigging. “Checking
ason ropes.”

e’d had Andrew cleared his throat. “All in order?”

“Yes, sir. Only one in need of repair, and it wasn’t nothing serious.”

hed “Excellent.” Andrew cleared his throat. “Well. I won’t be keeping you

“It’s no trouble, sir. My shift just ended. I was just heading below. I’ll
turn for a hammock.”

eeded Andrew gave a nod. Like many similar ships, the hammocks were sl
some The men did not all sleep at the same time; they could not. The bridge
never be left unattended, and a skeletal portion of the crew was required
work through the night. The wind did not stop when the sun went down

of The sleeping quarters were already crowded. It would have been a wonder
if space to have provided enough hammocks for every sailor to have his own.
Andrew wasn’t sure what sort of rotation the men had worked out to sleep in
them. He’d seen it done in different ways on different ships. But regarding
he had not been joking when he told Poppy he refused to sleep below.
done his time in the hammocks, back when he’d first entered the navy.

A He was captain of the *Infinity*. He’d earned the right not to sleep in someone
oring they other man’s sweaty ropes.

de it But Mr. Carroway’s spare berth would have to do for the rest of the
voyage. Andrew was no stranger to discomfort, but why sleep on the floor
when there was a perfectly good bed across the hall? Maybe not as nice
bed, but as *his* bed was currently occupied by Poppy Bridgerton . . .

’d His bed.

Poppy Bridgerton.

ching Something clenched within him. Something suspiciously close to lust.
“No,” he said aloud. “No.”

“Captain?”

ky Bloody hell, Wilson had still been in earshot.

“Nothing!” Andrew snapped, this time not caring if he scared the pirates.

have of the man with his tone.

Wilson scurried away, and Andrew was left alone.

With a terrible sense of foreboding.

And a pair of underwear in his pocket.

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With a terrible sense of foreboding.

And a pair of underwear in his pocket.

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Chapter 11

The next few days passed without incident. Poppy finished the puzzle, apart, and then put it together again. It wasn't nearly as satisfying the second time, but it was a better pastime than her other options, which, since she had already finished reading the bookshelf's sole work of fiction, consisted of such gems as *Engineering Methods of the Ancient Ottomans* and *Agrarian Masterpieces of Kent*.

Why a ship captain needed a guide to agrarian masterpieces, she could not imagine, but she did get a few moments of pleasure from the section on Aubrey Hall, the country estate where her father had grown up, and where her cousins still lived.

Poppy had visited Aubrey Hall several times, although not recently. When her family gathered with their aristocratic cousins, they were more likely to do so in London. It made sense, Poppy supposed. Lord and Lady Bridgerton of Kent maintained a magnificent residence in the capital, which meant that Mr. and Mrs. Bridgerton of Somerset did not have to. The current viscount, her father's older brother, was a generous man, and he would not hear of his siblings and their families staying anywhere else. Fortunately, he had plenty of room. Bridgerton House was a grand, stately manse with a sizable ballroom and over a dozen bedchambers, right in the heart of Mayfair.

It was where Poppy had lived during both of her London Seasons. Her parents had remained in the country; neither was particularly fond of city life. It was probably why they had happily accepted Lady Bridgerton's offer to supervise Poppy's presentation and debut. That and the fact that Aunt Alexandra was a viscountess, and thus a powerful sponsor for a young woman looking for marriage.

Although apparently not powerful enough, as Poppy had gone through two London Seasons without finding a spouse. That wasn't Aunt Alexandra's fault, though. Poppy *had* received a proposal, and while the gentleman had not

and looks, he'd possessed a moralizing side that Poppy feared would strengthen and grow mean with age. Even Aunt Alexandra, who was to see her charge well-settled, had agreed with her on this.

Several other gentlemen had also expressed interest, but Poppy had encouraged them. (Aunt Alexandra had not been nearly so agreeable about *this*.) But Poppy had held firm. She was going to have to spend the rest of her life in the company of her future husband, whoever he turned out to be. It was not too much to hope for someone who was interesting to talk to? Someone who could make her laugh?

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The people she'd met in London seemed to talk only about one another and while Poppy was not wholly averse to gossip (honestly, it was a lie, he said he was) surely there was more to life than discussions of horse racing and gambling debt, and whether a certain young lady's nose was too large.

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n
ere

Poppy had learned not to ask the questions that so frequently popped into her head. It turned out that the young ladies her aunt had selected as suitable companions were not interested in why some animals had whiskers and some didn't. And when Poppy had wondered aloud if everyone saw the same sky, three separate gentlemen had looked at her as if she were having some sort of madness attack, right in front of their eyes.

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One had even backed nervously away. But honestly, Poppy could not imagine why *everyone* did not think as she did. This. She had never been inside anyone else's mind. Maybe what she thought was blue was what they thought was orange.

There was no way to prove it wasn't. But Poppy didn't want to live out her life as a spinster. And so she'd resigned herself to another Season in London the following year, provided Aunt Alexandra was willing to sponsor her again.

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ity life.
r to

But all that had changed. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it *might* change. Who knew what the state of her reputation would be when the *Infinity* returned to England? There was still the chance that she might slip back into Briar House with no one (except Elizabeth Armitage) to help her and Poppy held on to that possibility, but it was a slim hope, indeed.

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Perhaps she should count herself lucky that she seemed to have landed among the world's only band of scrupulous pirates. Or privateers, or traders, or whatever they wished to call themselves. She supposed she was lucky that her situation could have been far worse. She could have been beaten. She could have been violated.

She could be dead.

ager to But she wasn't going to be grateful. She refused to feel *gratitude* for men who had most probably ruined her life forever.

not The hardest part—for now, at least—was the uncertainty. This was about case of *Will I enjoy the opera tonight, or will I find it tedious?* It was V t of her *life continue on as normal, or will I forevermore be an outcast to socie*

. Was The strangest thing was, she had a sense she would feel differently i one *knew* that Elizabeth had managed to keep her disappearance quiet. If sl *knew* that no one would ever point to her and say, “There’s the wicked her, girl who ran off with pirates.” (Because they would say that; it was far ar who delicious than the truth, and in matters of reputation the woman was al es, to blame.) If Poppy could be certain that she’d regain precisely the san she had left behind . . .

d into She might think she was enjoying herself.

itable Oh, she was still bitter that she was stuck in this cabin and had not h d some much as a breath of fresh air in nearly a week. She *really* would have l e blue have explored the rest of the ship. Poppy doubted she would have the some occasion to take such a voyage again, and she’d always been curious a the way things worked. A sailing ship was full of such puzzles: How d men hoist the sails, for example? Did it take more than one? More than about How was the food stored, and had anyone done a review to determine ough thought could be done in a more hygienic manner? How was the work distribut and who made the schedule?

l She’d asked the captain dozens of questions, and to his credit, he’d d ed that she didn’t have to eat it. She now knew that the sun rose and fell n quickly near the equator and that a massive ocean wave was called a ts y that and no, Captain James had never experienced one, but he’d met somec when who had, and the description still gave him nightmares.

ght Poppy loved to ask him about the sailors on the *Infinity*, and he told e wiser, that they hailed from twelve different countries, including two from the Ethiopian Empire. (Which she could now locate easily on a map.) Cap

led James had tried to describe them to her, explaining that their features v aders, quite different from the men he’d met from the western side of the con ky; her but Poppy was much more interested in their customs than how they lc

could She wanted to talk with these men who had grown up on a different continent, to ask them about their lives and their families, and how to

pronounce their names (because she was fairly certain Captain James was doing it right). She was never going to have an opportunity like this again. London was a cosmopolitan city, and during her two Seasons in the capital, Poppy had seen many people of different races and cultures. But she had never been allowed to speak to any of them.

Then again, until this week, it had never occurred to her that she might wish to. Which made her feel . . . odd. Odd and uncomfortable.

It wasn't the nicest of feelings, and it made her wonder what else she had never noticed. She had always thought herself open-minded and curious, but she was coming to realize how impossibly small her world had been.

But instead of Ethiopia, she got to learn more about Kent. (*Engineering Methods of the Ancient Ottomans* turned out to be far more about engineering than it was about the Ottomans and was thus not only *not* exotic, but also completely indecipherable.)

And so Poppy was examining the illustrations of the Aubrey Hall oriel window after dinner—for perhaps the dozenth time—when Captain James came alerting her as usual with one sharp rap before entering.

“Good evening,” she said, glancing up from the chair she'd dragged over to the windows. The view didn't change, but it was beautiful, and she'd become devoted to it.

The captain didn't look as tired as he had the last few nights. He'd said that all of the sailors had got over their putrid stomachs and were back on duty, maybe that was it. She imagined everyone would have to work harder if three men were out sick.

“Good evening,” he said in polite return. He headed straight for the table, lifted the lid off one of the dishes, and inhaled deeply. “Beef stew. Thank you, Lord.”

Poppy couldn't help but chuckle. “Your favorite?”

“It's one of Monsieur LaBaker's specialties,” the captain confirmed.

“Your cook's name is LaBaker? Truly?”

Captain James sat down and dug into his meal, taking two very happy bites before saying, “I told you he was from Leeds. I think he just put a *La* in front of his name and called it French.”

“How very enterprising.”

The captain glanced at her over his shoulder. “He can call himself a Frenchman if he wishes as long as he keeps cooking for me.”

Poppy being Poppy, she immediately began to wonder what Mr. Lal

wasn't *couldn't* call himself and still have a job cooking for him.

ain. Captain, probably. It was difficult to imagine Captain James tolerati
pital, *that*.

ad "What are you grinning about?" he asked.

ght Poppy shook her head. It was just the sort of meandering thought th
no point in trying to explain.

He turned his chair so that he could see her without twisting in his s
e'd Then he sat back with that effortless masculine grace of his, long legs
is, but stretched out as a devilish smile played across his lips. "Are you plottin
against me?"

ing "Always," she confirmed.

neering This made him grin—truly, and Poppy had to remind herself she dic
lso care if she made him smile.

"I've yet to meet with success, though," she said with a sigh.

angery "Somehow I doubt that."

e in, She shrugged, watching as he went back to his supper. After three b
stew, half a roll, and a sip of wine, she asked, "Do your men eat the sai
over meals you do?"

d "Of course." He looked somewhat offended she'd asked. "It's serve
plainly, but I'll not give them substandard fare."

aid that "A hungry man cannot work hard?" she murmured. She had heard it
luty, so and she was sure it was true—she herself was worthless when she was
when hungry—but it did feel a somewhat self-serving statement, as if a man
was only worth the labor he might provide to his betters.

table, The captain's eyes narrowed, and for a moment it felt as if he were j
nk her. And perhaps not favorably.

"A hungry man quickly loses his spirit," he said in a quiet voice.

. "I agree," Poppy swiftly responded. She felt no need to impress this
if anything, it ought to be the other way around—but it did not sit well
think that he thought badly of her.

oy bites Which was nonsense. She shouldn't care.

n front But apparently she did, because she added, "I did not mean to say th
think a man's potential for hard work is the only reason to feed him we

"No?" he murmured.

potato "No," she said firmly, because his tone had been *too* mild, and she f
meant he did not believe her. "I agree with you that a hungry man lose
Baker spirit. But many men don't care about the spirits of those they consider

beneath them.”

ng His voice was sharp and perfectly enunciated when he said, “I am not one of those men.”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t think you were.”

ere was “There are many reasons to feed one’s men well,” he said, “not the least of which is the fact that they are human.”

eat. Poppy nodded, mesmerized by the quiet ferocity of his voice.

ng “But there is more,” he continued. “A ship is not the same as a mill, a workshop or a farm. If we do not work together, if we do not trust one another, we will all die. It is as simple as that.”

l not “Is that not the reason why discipline and order are so essential in the navy?”

He gave a sharp nod. “There must be a chain of command, and ultimately there must be one man in charge. Otherwise it will be anarchy.”

“Mutiny.”

ites of “Indeed.” He used the side of his fork to cut a potato, but then he seemed to forget that he’d done so. His eyes narrowed, and the fingers of his right hand drummed along the table.

d more He did that when he was thinking. Poppy wondered if he realized that. Probably not. People rarely recognized their own mannerisms.

is said, “However,” he said so suddenly that she actually jerked to attention. “It is not the navy, and I cannot invoke King and Crown to foster loyalty. Men don’t want men who will work hard, they must know that they are respected, and that they will be rewarded.”

udging “With good food?” she asked dubiously.

This seemed to amuse him. “I was thinking more about a small share of the profits, but yes, good food helps too. I don’t want to lead a ship of misbegotten men—souls. There’s no pleasure in that.”

to “For you *or* the souls,” she quipped.

He tipped his fork at her in salute. “Exactly. Treat men well, and the navy will treat you well, in return.”

at I “Is that why you have treated me well?”

all.” “Is that what you think?” He leaned forward, a warm, lazy smile on his face. “That I’ve treated you well?”

heard it Poppy forced herself not to react to his expression. He had a way of looking at her as if she were the only human being in the world. It was intense, and thrilling, and she’d had to learn how to steel herself against it.

especially since she knew she could not possibly be its sole recipient.

ot one “Have you treated me well?” she echoed. “Aside from the actual fact of kidnapping, yes, I suppose you have done. I cannot say that I have been mistreated. Bored out of my skull, perhaps, but not mistreated.”

east of “There’s an irony there,” he remarked. “Here you are on what will probably be the biggest adventure of your life, and you are bored.”

or a “How kind of you to point that out,” she said dryly, “but as it happens, an exact thought has already entered my mind. Twice.”

er, we “Twice?”

“An hour,” she ground out. “Twice a bloody hour. At least.”

e “Miss Bridgerton, I did not know you cursed.”

“It’s a relatively new habit.”

ately He smiled, all white teeth and mischief. “Formed in the past week?”

“You are so astute, Captain James.”

“If I might be permitted to pay you a compliment . . .”

emed She inclined her head graciously; it seemed expected.

ee “Of all my conversational sparring partners, you rank easily in the top five.”

is. She quirked a brow. “There are four other people in this world who vex you as vexing as I do?”

, “this “I know,” he said with a woeful shake of his head. “It’s hard to believe

If I But”—at this he raised his fork, complete with carrot speared to the end

, and —“the counterpart to that is there are four people in the world who vex you as much as you do.”

She considered that for a moment. “I find that reassuring.”

e in the “Do you?”

erable “Once I’m back home, never to see you again . . .” She clasped her hands over her heart and sighed dramatically, as if preparing herself for her first soliloquy. “It will warm my heart to know that somewhere in this big, wide world, *someone* is irritating you.”

his He stared at her for a moment, stunned into silence, and then he burst into laughter. “Oh, Miss Bridgerton,” he said, getting the words out when he was able, “you have risen to the number one spot.”

She looked over at him with a tipped-up chin and a clever smile. “I intend to excel in all of my endeavors.”

st it, Captain James lifted his glass. “I do not doubt that for a moment.” Frankly, he drank, seemingly in her honor, then added, “And I have no doubt that you

succeed.”

t of the She thanked him with a regal nod.

n He took another long drink, then held the glass in front of him, watching the dark red liquid as he swirled it about. “I will confess,” he said, “that all of my egalitarian views, I don’t share my wine.”

“You did with me.”

ns, that “Yes, well, *you* are a special case.”

“Aren’t I just,” Poppy grumbled.

“I might even have shared my brandy,” he continued, “if I had any.” questioning look he added, “*That* was what Brown and Green were supposed to get at the cave.”

“And instead you got me.”

Poppy wasn’t positive, but she thought he muttered, “God help us both.” She snorted. She couldn’t help it.

“Watch your manners,” he said without any bite whatsoever. “I could do you grog.”

op “What *is* grog?” She’d heard Billy talking about it. He seemed to like it.

The captain tore off a piece of his roll and popped it into his mouth.

find “Mostly just watered-down rum.”

“Mostly?”

eve. “I try not to think about what else might be in there. I had enough of it when I—”

κ me as He stopped.

“When you what?” Poppy asked. He did that sometimes—started to say something, then cut himself off.

He set down his fork. “Nothing.”

ands And that was what he always said when she probed his silences.

inal But Poppy kept asking. It wasn’t as if she had anything better to do.

cruel Captain James stood and walked to the window, hands on his hips and gazed at the indistinguishable horizon. “There’s no moon tonight.”

st into “I had wondered.” She’d been sitting by the window for hours, and she had not seen one drop of moonlight flickering along the waves. It made for a slightly different seascape than the previous evenings.

do try “It means the stars will be staggeringly brilliant.”

“How nice of you to let me know,” she muttered.

le She was fairly certain he’d heard her, but he did not react. Instead he asked, without turning around, “What time is it?”

you

Poppy shook her head. Was he so lazy that he could not twist his neck to look at the clock? “It is half ten.” *Your Highness*.

“Hmm.” It was a rather short *hmm*, one that said he accepted her words as true and was now pondering a related issue.

How she knew how to interpret his grunts, she did not know, but she would have bet real money that she was correct.

“Most of the men will be below by now,” he said. He turned back to her, leaning against the spot where the wall met the windows. “They work in shifts. They each get eight hours for sleep, but more than half take it at a nap proposed from nine to five.”

It was interesting—she liked these sorts of details—but she could not imagine why he was telling her this now.

“I think,” he said with a slow, deliberate tilt of his lips, “that if I were to take you up to see the stars, it would not cause such a large commotion.”

Poppy went very still. “What did you just say?”

He looked at her, something in his expression hinting at a smile.

And something hinting at something more.

“You heard me,” he said.

“You need to say it,” she whispered. “You have to say the words.”

He took a small step back, just enough so that he could offer her a courteous bow.

“My dear Miss Bridgerton,” he murmured, “would you like to join me on the deck?”

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And something hinting at something more.

“You heard me,” he said.

“You need to say it,” she whispered. “You have to say the words.”

He took a small step back, just enough so that he could offer her a courtly bow.

“My dear Miss Bridgerton,” he murmured, “would you like to join me on deck?”

Chapter 12

Poppy set down her book, never once taking her eyes from the captain. She had the strangest notion that if she did, if she broke that contact for a moment, his suggestion would pop in the air like a soap bubble.

She made the tiniest of nods.

“Take my hand,” he said, reaching out.

And even though everything within her that was sensible and true screamed that she ought not touch this man, she ought not let her skin so much as brush against his . . .

She did.

He was still for a moment, looking down between them as if he could quite believe she’d done it. His fingers curled slowly around hers, and their hands were truly clasped, he brushed his thumb against the tender skin of her wrist.

She felt it everywhere.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s go above.”

She nodded dumbly, trying to make sense of the strange sensation that was unfurling within her. She felt light, as if at any moment her heels would lift from the floor, leaving her tiptoed and ungrounded. Her blood seemed to pulse beneath her skin, and she tingled . . . not where he touched her—her hands were warm and secure in his—but everywhere else.

Every spot of her.

She wanted . . .

Something.

Maybe she wanted everything.

Or maybe she knew what she wanted and was afraid to even think it.

“Miss Bridgerton?” he murmured.

She looked up. How long had she been staring at their hands?

“Are you ready?”

“Do I need a shawl?” she asked. (Then realized the irrelevance of her question and blinked.) “I don’t have a shawl. But do I need one?”

“No,” he said, his voice warm with amusement. “It’s quite mild. The breeze is light.”

“I do need shoes, though,” she said, pulling her hand from his. She paused for a moment forgetting where her short black boots even were. She hadn’t bothered to put them on since she’d arrived. When would she have needed to?

“In the wardrobe,” the captain said. “At the bottom.”

“Oh yes, of course.” How silly of her. She knew that. He’d put them on her second day, after he’d tripped on them three times.

She grabbed her boots and sat down to lace them up. She’d sworn to herself—just this evening!—that she would not feel gratitude to any of the men on the ship, no matter how kind they were, but she could not seem to quell the traitorous urge inside her to throw her arms around him and *thank you thank you* until . . .

Well, maybe just twice. Any more would be ridiculous.

But the point was—

She paused. She had no point. Or if she did, she no longer knew what it was.

He did that to her sometimes. Jumbled her thoughts, tangled her words. She, who prided herself on her gift of conversation, her ready supply of wit and irony, was rendered without speech. Or at least without intelligent speech, which she rather thought was worse.

He turned her into someone she didn’t know—but only sometimes, and that was the most baffling part. Sometimes she was precisely the Poppy Bridgerton she knew herself to be, quick with a rejoinder, mind sharp. Then other times—when he’d turn to her with a heavy-lidded blue stare, maybe when he walked too close and she felt the air around her grow warm from his skin—she lost her breath. She lost her sense.

She lost herself.

And right now? He had disarmed her with a kindness, that was all. If she knew that she was desperate to leave the cabin. Maybe he was even just doing this to butter her up for some future injustice he would commit. He once said that his life would be easier if she wasn’t spitting mad?

She’d told him she never spit. *That* was Poppy Bridgerton. Not this scatterbrained peahen who couldn’t find her own shoes.

er “Is something wrong with your laces?” he asked.

Poppy realized she’d stopped tying her laces halfway through her le
e “No,” she blurted, “just lost the thread of my thought.” She finished up
quickly and stood. “There. I’m ready.”

Paused, And she was. Somehow, with her sturdy shoes on her feet, she had
id not regained her balance. She gave a little jump.

ded “Your boots look very practical,” the captain said, looking at her wi
combination of amusement and curiosity.

“Not as practical as yours,” she said, with an eye toward what were
i there custom-made tall boots. Such well-crafted footwear did not come chea
fact, all of the captain’s attire was exquisitely made. Privateering must
more lucrative than she’d imagined. Either that or Captain James came
the a *lot* of money.

to But that didn’t seem realistic. He was certainly wellborn, but Poppy
ush doubted his family was rich. If they were, why on earth would he have
into trade? And *such* a trade. There was nothing respectable about his
profession. She could not even imagine her parents’ reaction if one of
brothers had done the same.

at it Her mother would have died of shame. Not literally, of course, but s
would have declared her death by shame often enough that Poppy wou
rds. have feared her *own* demise by repetitive aural torture.

f wit And yet, Poppy could not see anything within the captain that warra
such disappointment. True, she did not know the nature or extent of hi
business dealings, but she saw the way he treated his men—or at least
which and Brown and Green. She saw the way he treated her, and she could r
but think of all the so-called gentlemen of London—the ones she was
supposed to adore and admire and want to marry. She thought of all th
But cutting remarks, the cruelty and unkindness they displayed toward the
, or and women who worked for them.
warm

Not all of them, but enough to make her question the strictures and
standards that declared one man a gentleman and the other a rogue.

le “Miss Bridgerton?”

st The captain’s voice wiggled its way into her thoughts, and she blink
Hadn’t trying to remember what she’d been talking about.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded eagerly, took a step, and then grinned so suddenly it too
by surprise. “I haven’t worn shoes for days.”

ft boot. “You will certainly need them on deck,” he said. “Shall we be off?”
“Please.”

) He tipped his head toward the door. “After you.”

After they exited the cabin, she followed him up the short flight of stairs to the deck. They emerged into a covered area, and he took her hand again to guide her forward.

th a But Poppy was not so easily led. “What is this?” she asked, just stepping into the open air. She tugged her hand free and touched what looked like a thick bundle of ropes—something she might have tried to climb when she was a child.

surely of ropes—something she might have tried to climb when she was a child. In p. In Actually, she’d try to climb it now, except that it didn’t look like it was meant for such a thing.

be She turned back to Captain James, and he said, “Rope.”

: from She smacked his shoulder, and not lightly. He wore a cheeky grin on his face, making it clear he’d said that to needle her.

gone “It’s called a shroud,” he said, smiling at her impatience.

her She touched the ropes, marveling at the strength and thickness of the fibers. “A shroud?” she asked. “Not *the* shroud?”

he “Very astute,” he said. “It is one of many. They are part of the standing rigging, used to support the mast from side to side.”

ld Yet another nautical term she did not know. “Standing rigging?”

nted “As opposed to the running rigging,” he told her. “The standing rigging refers to the ropes that do not generally move. The ropes that *do* move—rather, the ones we move in order to control the sails—are called the running rigging.”

Billy not help “I see,” she murmured, although in truth she did not. She had seen only one small portion of the ship, and already there were so many unfamiliar mechanisms and gadgets. Even the items she thought she knew well—for example—were being used differently than she was used to. She could not imagine how long it took to truly master the art of sailing.

Or was it the science of sailing? She didn’t know.

ed, Poppy walked on, a few steps ahead of the captain, craning her neck to look up the length of one of the masts. It was amazingly tall, stabbing the night so majestically she almost thought it could pierce the sky.

k her “This has to be why the Greeks and Romans devised such fanciful temples for the gods,” she murmured. “I can almost imagine the mast breaking through the heavens.”

She looked over at the captain. He was watching her intently, his eyes

attention on her words, her face. But this time she did not feel self-conscious. She didn't feel awkward or embarrassed. Or reminded that in games of flirtation, she could not compete with this man.

Instead she felt almost buoyed. Maybe it was the ocean, or the salt breeze on her skin. She should have felt tiny under the vast starry sky, but instead she was invincible.

Jubilant.

More herself than she had ever been.

"Imagine the mast rips a hole in the sky," she said, waving her hand toward the dark night above. "And then out fall the stars." She looked at Captain James. "If I lived in ancient times, with no notion of astronomical distance, I might have devised such a myth. Surely a god could create one so tall that it touches the sky."

"A clever theory for the birth of the stars," he mused, "although it does make me wonder how they came to be spread out so evenly."

Poppy stood beside him, and together they gazed upward. The stars make an even pattern, of course, but they were scattered to every corner of the sky.

"I don't know," Poppy said thoughtfully. She kept her eyes on the stars, taking in the vastness of it all. Then she bumped him with her elbow. "I can't have to come up with that part of the story. I can't do all the work."

"Or," he said dryly, "I can sail the ship."

She could do nothing but grin in return. "Or you can sail the ship."

He motioned toward the bow, urging her forward, but instead she pressed her palm against the mast and swung around, like a ribbon on a maypole. When she was nearly back to her starting point, she peeked over at him and asked, "Is it made from a single piece of wood?"

"This one is. Actually, all of ours are. But we are not such a large vessel. Many of the navy's ships have masts constructed from several pieces of wood. Come," he said, urging her forward. "This is not even our tallest mast."

"No?" She looked ahead, eyes wide. "No, of course it isn't. That would have to be one of the center ones." She skipped forward, but he was far ahead and by the time she'd reached the tallest mast, he had to turn around to reach her hand.

"Here," he said, "come with me. I promised you the stars."

She laughed, although not because it was funny. Just because she felt

scious. “So you did,” she said, and once again, she placed her hand in his. But
f gone only two steps before she saw yet another interesting object. “Oh
what’s that?”

reeze The captain didn’t even bother to look. “I’ll tell you later.”

thead Poppy grinned at his impatience and let him pull her forward, past y
another mast (the mizzenmast, he’d told her without breaking his stride
They went up a short set of stairs, and then forward *still*.

“The view is best up this way,” he told her.

Her face was already tipped to the heavens, even as she stumbled al
back at behind him. “It’s not the same everywhere?”

y or “It *feels* best on the beakhead.”

a boat “On the *what*?”

“Just come with me,” he said, tugging her hand.

oes She laughed again, and it felt *marvelous*. “Why is part of your ship n
after a chicken?”

did not “Why are you named after a flower?” he countered.

er of She considered that for a moment. “Touché.”

ars, “The beakhead is the foremost part of the deck,” he explained as he
her along. “Slightly lower in elevation. It’s where the men stand when
‘You’ll work the sails of the bowsprit.’”

Beakhead? Bowsprit? “Now you’re just making things up,” she teas

“Life at sea has a language all its own.”

essed “Let’s see, I’ll call *that*”—she didn’t actually point to anything—“a
winchknob. And that over there shall be a mucklebump.”

le. He paused for just long enough to give her an admiring glance. “It’s
n and bad name for it.”

As Poppy hadn’t been referring to anything in particular, she had no
essel. what *it* he was talking about, but she nevertheless asked, “Which one?
of winchknob or the mucklebump?”

t “The winchknob, of course,” he said with a perfectly straight face.

ould She chuckled and let him tug her forward. “You would certainly kno
better than I.”

ster, “I shall treasure that statement. I’m not likely to hear it again.”

offer “Certainly not!” But she said it with a grin, her cheeks nearly hurtin
the joy of it. “I’m very good at making up words, you know. It runs in
family.”

lt joy. His brow crinkled with good humor and curiosity. “I can’t even beg

they'd imagine what you mean by that."

She told him about her brother, about tinton and farfars, and sneaking into Roger's room to write lines and help him complete his punishment, even though she was the one he'd wronged.

And the captain laughed. He laughed like he couldn't imagine anything better, with such joy that it almost felt to Poppy as if he'd been there, as if he'd seen the whole thing and was now remembering it with merriment rather than hearing it for the first time.

Had she told anyone about Roger's antics before? She must have done so only in good-natured complaint. But not recently, probably not since he had passed.

"I think your brother and I would have been good friends," the captain said once he'd caught his breath.

"Yes," Poppy said, electrically aware that Roger had been her favorite brother, and Captain James might have been his finest friend. "I think you would have liked him a great deal. I think he would have liked you."

"Even though I kidnapped his sister?"

It should have stopped the conversation, ground it to parched, inside dust. But somehow it didn't, and before Poppy gave it a second thought she said, "Well, he'd make you marry me."

She looked at him.

He looked at her.

And then, with astonishing nonchalance, she added, "But then he'd have been satisfied. He wasn't the sort to hold a grudge."

The captain's fingers tightened around hers. "Are you?"

"I don't know," Poppy said. "I've never been wronged quite so dear."

She hadn't said it to wound him, and she took no satisfaction when he winced. But it was the truth, and this was a moment that deserved no lie.

"I wish it had not happened," he said.

"I know."

His eyes pressed into hers. "I wish you would believe me when I tell you I had no choice."

"I . . ." Poppy swallowed. *Did* she believe him? She had come to know the world over the past few days, perhaps not like someone she'd known for years, but certainly more than she'd known any of the gentlemen who'd courted her in London. More, even, than the man who'd asked her to marry him.

She did not think Andrew James was a liar, and she did not think he

the sort of man who would allow someone to be hurt in the pursuit of long into expediency and profit.

en “I believe that you believe you had no choice,” she finally said.

He was silent for a moment, then said, “That is something, I suppose.”

ing She gave him a helpless shrug. “I cannot understand what you will risk if I am right.”

it rather His nod was one of resignation, but he said no more on the subject.

he motioned with his arm, urging her a few more steps forward. “Careful, if you fall, it will be a long way down.”

e’d Poppy looked to her toes. The deck came to an abrupt halt in front of her, its elevation dropping by several feet.

ain said The captain hopped down. “The beakhead, my lady,” he said with a wave to the triangular deck that formed the pointy front of the *Infinity*.

ite reached up and placed his hands on her hips to help her down.

you But when she was steady, he didn’t let go.

“This is as far forward as one can stand on deck,” he told her.

She pointed to a spot a few feet ahead. “What about—”

ous “As one can stand *safely* on deck,” he amended. He adjusted their positions so that he was standing behind her. “Now close your eyes.”

“But then I can’t see the stars.”

“You can open them later.”

have She tilted her head to the left, right, and back again, as if to say, *Oh, well*, but she closed her eyes.

“Now tilt your head up. Not all the way, just a bit.”

ly.” She did, and maybe it was that motion, or maybe it was just because she closed her eyes, but she felt instantly off-balance, as if something far greater than the ocean had stolen her equilibrium.

ess. The captain’s hands tightened on her hips. “What do you feel?” he asked, his lips coming close to her ear.

“The wind.”

l you I “What else?”

She swallowed. Licked her lips. “The salt in the air.”

ow him “What else?”

rs, but “The motion, the speed.”

her in He moved his mouth closer. “What else?”

And then she said the one thing that had been true from the beginning.

was “*You.*”

his own

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Chapter 13

Andrew wasn't sure what devil had convinced him to bring Poppy up to the deck.

Perhaps it was simply that he couldn't think of a compelling reason.

The sea was calm. The stars were out.

Most of the crew were below.

When he'd come down for supper and had seen her sitting by the window, he'd somehow known that she had been in that position for hours, staring at the sea and the sky, and never understanding how it felt to be truly a part of either.

It seemed a crime.

When he had reached out to her, and she placed her hand in his . . .

It was a benediction.

Now, as they stood at the very front of the ship, the wind riffling its hair and spray through their hair, he felt renewed.

He felt *new*.

The world turned endlessly on its axis—this he understood. So why did he feel as if it had just turned *more*? As if it had taken a greater rotation, and the direction had reversed. The salt air was crisper, the stars uncannily sharp against their inky canvas. And the feel of her—the gentle curve of her hip, the radiant heat of her body . . .

It was as if he had never touched a woman before.

It was strange how content he was simply to gaze upon her face. Poppy watched the sky, and he watched her, and it was perfect.

No. Not perfect. Perfect was complete. Perfect was *done*.

This wasn't perfect. He didn't want it to be.

And yet he felt perfectly wonderful.

You, she'd said, when he'd asked what she felt.

His fingers slid forward, perhaps an inch, just enough so that his ste

grip became something closer to an embrace. Just enough to pull her a
him, if he dared.

You, she'd said.

He wanted more.

You.

He was not a romantic man, or at least he hadn't thought so. But the
moment had become a poem, the wind whispering its lines as the water
and fell in mysterious meter.

And if the world beneath his feet had become a sonnet, then *she* was
sublime.

Had she become his muse? Surely not. Poppy Bridgerton was vexing,
exasperating, and far too clever for his peace of mind. She was an
inconvenience wrapped in an impending disaster, and yet when he thought
of her—which was all the time, damn it—he smiled.

Sometimes he grinned.

He told himself that she was a thorn in his side, that she was worse than
that—the equivalent of a damn stab wound—but it was hard to maintain his
own lies when all he wanted at the end of the day was to sit down with
supper and a glass of wine and see what he could do to make her flirt with
him.

Maybe *that* was why he'd finally brought her above deck.

He'd just wanted to see her smile.

And in that pursuit, in that mission . . .

His success had been absolute.

She had not stopped smiling, not from the first moment he'd pulled
through the doorway and out of the cabin. She had smiled so hard and
that it might as well have been a laugh.

He had made her happy, and that had made him happy.

And *that* should have been terrifying.

"How many stars do you think there are?" she asked.

He looked down at her. She'd opened her eyes and was now gazing
the heavens with such intensity that for a brief moment he thought she
was intending to count.

"A million?" he said. "A billion? Surely more than our eyes can see."

She let out a little noise, something like a hum, if a hum could be created
with a sigh and then colored with a smile. "It's so big."

"The sky?"

gainst She nodded. "How can something be so unfathomable? I can't even fathom how unfathomable it is."

"Isn't that the definition of the word?"

She kicked him lightly with her heel. "Don't be a spoilsport."

"You would have said the same thing, and you know it."

r rose "Not here," she said in a voice that was almost dreamy. "And not no of my sarcasm has been suspended."

This he did not believe for a second. "Really."

; the She sighed. "I know it can't always be this lovely and wonderful on but will you lie to me, just this once, and tell me so?"

g, He couldn't resist. "What makes you think I haven't lied to you before She poked him with her elbow.

ught of "It is always this lovely and wonderful on deck," he parroted. "The never turbulent, and the skies are always clear."

han "And your men always comport themselves with propriety and discretion?"

in his "Of course." He adjusted his pressure on her hips, turning her just a the left. "Do you see that?" he asked, nodding toward a hole in the deck ahead of them.

with "See what?" She turned her head to peer up at him, and he motioned this time making sure she could follow his gaze.

"That round opening, right there," he said. "It's a privy."

"What?"

her "Well, we call it the head," he clarified. "I told you we had our own language on board."

so well She jerked a little, although not enough to dislodge her from his grasp. "Right here? A privy? Out in the open?"

"There's one on the other side too."

She gasped, and Andrew was brought back to all the times he'd tortured his sister with things creepy, crawly, and repulsive.

up at It was just as good now as it had been then.

might He brought his lips a little closer to Poppy's ear. "You didn't think you have lovely and wonderful chamber pots in our cabins, did you?"

." He was very glad that he'd tilted to the side so he could see her face crossed because her lips bent and stretched in a marvelous expression of hygienic horror before she finally said, "You're telling me you just squat down and situate yourself over—"

“I don’t,” he interrupted, “but the men do. It’s an ingenious design, and the hull of the ship curves inward, of course, so the waste just drops straight down into the ocean. Well, unless there’s a particularly strong wind, but then—”

“Stop!” she squealed. “It’s disgusting.”

“But you’re always so full of questions,” he said with all innocence. “I thought you wanted to know how the ship worked.”

“I do, but—”

“I assure you, such matters are most critical to the successful running of a ship. No one ever wants to talk about the unglamorous. It’s a common downfall of would-be architects and engineers, I tell you. It’s all very nice and good to design the elegant bits, but it’s the things you can’t see in the sea that make it truly great.”

“I can see *that*,” she muttered with a nod toward the head.

He fought a chuckle. “A compromise, if you will. In this case, the men traded a bit of their dignity for a far cleaner ship. Believe me, it gets rather little toenough on board during a long voyage.”

She made a little frown—the kind that was accompanied by a tilt of the head when people decided they approved of something. Still, she said, “I again, can’t believe I am having this conversation.”

“Likewise.”

“*You* brought it up.”

“So I did.” He frowned, trying to remember why. “Oh, right. It was because you had commented on the delicate manners of my men.”

“*This* was your way of refuting my claim?”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

She frowned. “But you said *you*—”

“I used to,” he admitted. “Not on the *Infinity*, but on other ships, where I wasn’t in command.”

She gave a little shudder.

“The King of France sits on the chamber pot in front of his entire court.” Andrew said cheerfully.

“He does not!”

“He does, I swear. Or at least the last one did.”

She shook her head. “The *French*.”

Andrew burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

really. “You are, as you know.”

straight She tried to scowl, but it didn’t work. She was clearly too proud of h
it even Andrew thought she looked delightful.

“I suppose you’ve been to France,” she said.

“I have,” he confirmed.

“I “All over, or just to Paris?”

“And the ports.”

“Of course.” Her eyes flicked sheepishly to the side. “You can’t sail
g of a of this size all the way to Paris.”

“Not generally, no. We can go as far as Rouen. Sometimes we do,
well sometimes we dock at the coast. In Le Havre, usually.”

a Poppy was quiet for a moment, long enough for the wind to pull a w
lock of her hair from behind her ear. It tickled Andrew’s skin, almost r
him sneeze.

ien “What will you do when you’ve done everything?” she finally asked
k voice was more serious now, thoughtful and curious.

the He thought that a most interesting question, one he could not imagin
“I anyone else asking of him. “Is that possible?” he wondered. “To do
everything?”

Her brow drew down as she thought about that, and even though An
knew the lines that formed were due to thought and not worry, he had
hardest time keeping his fingers from smoothing them out.

“I think it might be possible to do *enough*,” she finally said.

“Enough?” he murmured.

“So that nothing feels new anymore.”

Her words echoed his own recent thoughts so closely it nearly pulled
breath from his body. It wasn’t that his work was no longer exciting, o
en I he never got to do anything new. It was more that he was starting to fe
ready to go home. To be with the people he loved.

With the people who loved him.

urt,” “I don’t know,” he said, because her question deserved honesty, eve
didn’t have a proper answer. “I don’t think I’ve reached that point yet,
said. “Although . . .”

“Although?”

He might be getting close.

But he didn’t say that. He let himself lean forward, just far enough s
he could imagine setting his chin on the top of her head. He fought the

to move his hands forward, to wrap them around her and pull her against himself. He wanted to hold her in place, just the two of them against the wind.

“I should like to go to Ethiopia,” she said suddenly.

“Really?”

Poppy Bridgerton was more adventurous than most, but this surprised her.

“No,” she admitted. “But I like to *think* that I’d like to go there.”

“You’d like to . . .” He blinked. “What?”

“I’ve had a great deal of time to myself lately,” she said. “There is little else to do besides imagine things.”

Andrew generally thought himself an intelligent man, but he was having the *damndest* time following her. “So you imagine going to Ethiopia?”

“Not really. I don’t know enough to imagine it properly. I can’t imagine what little I’ve heard is accurate. In England people speak of Africa as one big happy place—”

“Happy?” It wasn’t the word he’d have used.

“You know what I mean. People speak of it as if it’s one place, like Spain, when in actuality it’s *huge*.”

He thought of the dissected map, of how much fun she’d had while putting it together. “So says the map,” he murmured.

She nodded her agreement, then befuddled him completely when she said, “I imagine being the sort of person who would *want* to go to Ethiopia.”

“There’s a difference?”

“I think so. Perhaps what I mean is that I’d like to be the *type* of person who wants to do such things. I think someone like that would be brilliant at parties, don’t you?”

Andrew was dubious. “So you’re saying your goal is to be brilliant at parties.”

“No, of course not. My current goal is to avoid such gatherings at all costs. That’s why I was in Charmouth, if you must know.”

“I suppose I must,” he murmured, mostly because there didn’t seem to be any other appropriate response.

She gave him a look that was half peeved and half indulgent before she said, “What I’m trying to say is that if I went to a ball and met someone who had been to Ethiopia on purpose—”

“*On purpose?*”

“I don’t think it counts if one goes under *duress*.”

Andrew turned her around. He needed to see her face. It was far too

ist him. difficult to follow the conversation otherwise.

He studied her, looking for what, he did not know. Signs of mischief or madness? “I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about,” he finally admitted.

ed him. She laughed, and it was a glorious thing. “I’m sorry, I’m not being too clear. But that’s your own fault for leaving me to my own devices for so long. I’ve had far too much time to do nothing but think.”

ittle “And this has led you to sweeping conclusions about social discourse and the Ethiopian Empire?”

ving “It has.” She said it quite grandly, stepping back as if that might bring her stage. Not that there was anyone else to listen; they’d passed only two crewmembers on the way to the beakhead, and both men had wisely made themselves scarce.

It wasn’t often they saw their captain hand-in-hand with a lady, even if it was just so he could pull her along behind him.

France But Poppy’s step back meant that he had to release his hold on her hand, which was a damn shame.

putting When she was confident of his attention, she made her pronouncement. “There are two types of people in this world.”

e said, “Are you sure about that?”

” “For the purposes of this conversation, yes. There are people who will visit Ethiopia, and people who don’t.”

son Andrew fought very hard to maintain an even expression. He failed.

nt at “You laugh,” she said, “but it’s true.”

“I’m sure it must be.”

at “Just listen to me. Some of us have an adventurous, wandering soul, and some of us don’t.”

l costs. “And you think a person has to want to travel to the east of Africa to get there? Or does he have a thirst for adventure?”

any “No, of course not, but as an indicator—”

“You, Miss Bridgerton, have an adventurous soul.”

She drew back with a pleased smile. “Do you think so?”

He swept his arm through the air, motioning to the sea and the sky, to a small spot at the bow of a cleverly crafted pile of wood that could somehow carry them from one land to another, across liquid depths no man could withstand on his own.

“It doesn’t count if it’s under duress,” she reminded him.

Enough. He planted his hands on her shoulders. “There are two types of people in this world,” he told her. “The ones who would curl up in a ball and sob their way through this sort of unexpected voyage, and—”

“Those who wouldn’t?” she interrupted.

He shook his head, and he felt the tiniest of smiles tugging at his lips. He touched her cheek. “I was going to say *you*.”

“So it’s me against the world?”

“No,” he said, and something began to tumble inside him. He was weightless, and it was like the time he’d fallen from a tree, except there was nothing below, just an empty expanse of space and *her*.

“No,” he said again. “I think I’m on your side.”

Her eyes grew wide, and although it was clearly too dark to make out the color of her irises, it still somehow *felt* as if he could see it, the dark making way to flecks of something paler. Younger, like new shoots in the grass.

Something light and luminous began to rise within him. That heady, feeling of infatuation, of flirtation and desire.

No, not desire. Or not *just* desire.

Anticipation.

The moment *before*. When you could feel the beat of your heart in the corner of your body, when every breath felt as if it reached all the way to your toes. When nothing could quite compare to the perfect curve of a woman’s lips.

“If I kissed you,” he whispered, “would you let me?”

Her eyes grew soft, with something like amusement.

and *Amusement?*

“If you kissed me,” she replied, “I would not have the opportunity to prove you or not let you. It would be done.”

Trust this one to split hairs. He would not allow her to get out of the question so cleanly.

“If I leaned toward you, like this . . .” He followed his words with a hand and the space between their faces grew smaller. “And if my eyes dropped to your mouth, in what we all know is a universal signal that one is pondering a kiss, what would you do?”

She licked her lips. He doubted she even realized that she’d done so. “Not sure,” she whispered.

“But it’s happening right now. I’ve leaned in.” He reached out, brus-

s of skin. "I'm touching your cheek."
all and She turned almost imperceptibly into his hand.
Andrew felt his voice grow husky, even before he formed words. "It
longer what would you do but what *will* you do."
s as he He moved even closer, so close that his eyes could no longer focus on
her face. So close that he could feel the light touch of her breath on his lips.
But still not a kiss.
"What will you do, Poppy?"
e was And then she leaned. She swayed. Just a little, but that was all it took
for her lips to brush softly against his.
It was the lightest of kisses.
it the It shot through his heart.
loss His fingers landed on her shoulders, and some very small corner of his
he mind realized it wasn't to pull her close, but rather to keep himself from
doing so. Because if he did . . .
fizzy And heaven knew he wanted to.
Dear God, he wanted so much. So much of *her*.
He wanted the length of her body against his. He wanted the curve of her
back beneath his hand, the heat of her as he nudged his leg between her
very He wanted to press himself against her, so that she would feel his desire
down that she would *know* it, and she would know what she had done to him
f a He wanted all that, and then he wanted more, which was why he drew
unsteady breath and stepped back.
To continue would be heaven.
To continue would be madness.
He turned away, needing a moment to catch his breath. That kiss . . .
o let lasted less than a second, but he was undone.
"I'm sorry," he said, his voice rough and scratchy in his throat.
She blinked several times. "You are?"
He looked back at her. Her fingers were lightly touching her lips, and
otions, looked dazed, as if she wasn't quite sure what had just happened.
oed to *Welcome to the club.*
ering a "I shouldn't have done that," he said, because it seemed slightly kinder
than saying it shouldn't have happened. Although he wasn't sure why.
"I'm "It's . . ." Her brow wrinkled, and she looked as if she was thinking
hard about something. Either that or she couldn't figure out what she
hed herbe thinking about.

“Poppy?”

Her eyes flicked back to his, as if something inside her had woken up. “All right,” she said.

“All right?” he echoed. That sounded . . . tepid.

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “I kissed *you*.”

“Please,” he said patiently, “we both know—”

“I kissed you.” She said it firmly, between her teeth. “You dared me

“I—” But he said no more. Was it the truth? *Had* he dared her? Or had he just been making sure she had wanted it too? Because even just one kiss could ruin her.

It may well have ruined him.

“That’s what happened,” she said. “That’s what happened, and I don’t regret it.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Weren’t we just discussing the irony of my being bored while on the adventure of my life? You are many things, Captain James, but you are boring.”

His mouth might have gone slack. “Thank you?”

“But we will never speak of it again.”

“If that is your wish.” It wasn’t *his* wish, but it should be.

She regarded him with an oddly penetrating expression. “It has to be what you think?”

He had no idea *what* he thought any longer, but he wasn’t going to tell that. “I bow to your judgment, Miss Bridgerton.”

She gave a little snort, as if she didn’t believe that for a second. He had supposed he deserved it; he was usually employing some degree of irony when he said such things.

“Very well,” he said. “We shall pretend it never happened.”

She opened her mouth as if she might argue—and in fact he was quite certain she wanted to argue; he’d seen that expression on her face enough times to know what it meant. But in the end she didn’t say anything. She snapped her mouth shut and nodded her agreement.

That seemed to be the end of the conversation, so Andrew just stared at the horizon, barely discernible in the moonless night. They’d made good time; barring an unexpected change in the weather, they’d be in Lisbon by morning. Which meant that he needed to get some sleep. He had to be on the ship and into town first thing.

“I’m afraid I need to take you back down below,” he said to Poppy.
p. “It’s She could not hide her disappointment, but at the same time, it was
she’d been expecting this. “Very well,” she said with a sigh.

He held out his hand.

She shook her head. “I can manage.”

“At least allow me to help you up from the beakhead.”

to.” She did, but the moment she was on the main deck, she pulled her h
ad he from his grasp. He let her lead the way back, and soon enough, they w
ss . . . it his cabin door.

“I just need to gather a few things before I go to Mr. Carroway’s cat
said.

it “Of course.” She stepped to the side as they entered, and it was all v
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Rather like nothing had happened.

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“I just need to gather a few things before I go to Mr. Carroway’s cabin,” he said.

“Of course.” She stepped to the side as they entered, and it was all very polite, and strangely not awkward.

Rather like nothing had happened.

Which was how they wanted it.

Wasn’t it?

Chapter 14

Poppy awakened the following morning with the strangest feeling. It was almost vertigo, and she grasped the bed rail for several seconds before realizing—

They were not moving.

They were not moving!

She leapt out of the bunk and rushed to the window, inexplicably stumbling on the stillness. With an excited breath, she pulled back the curtains to reveal . . .

Docks.

Of course.

She wasn't sure why it hadn't occurred to her that she would not be able to see the proper center of Lisbon from her ship's window. The docks in London weren't anywhere near the sights of the capital.

Still, it was something to look at that wasn't the endless water of the Atlantic, and Poppy took it all in eagerly. She could see only a small sliver of what was surely a large canvas, but even so, the scene before her was filled with life and activity. The men—and they were all men; she did not see a woman among them—moved about with strength and efficiency, carrying crates, pulling on ropes, performing all manner of tasks, the purpose of which Poppy could not deduce.

And how strange and different the men were . . . and at the same time so different at all. They were performing all the same tasks she assumed dockworkers did, jostling and laughing and arguing in the manner of men and yet even if she had not been aware that she was in Portugal, she would have known that these men were not English.

It was not their looks, although it was true that many had darker hair and skin than most of Poppy's countrymen. It was more in their movement and gestures. When they spoke, she could tell just by looking at them that they

words were of a different language. The men's mouths moved differently. They used different muscles. They made different expressions.

It was fascinating, and she wondered if she would have noticed it if the sounds of their voices had not been brought to such a low volume by the doors and windows between them. If she could hear them—really *hear* the sounds of the Portuguese language—would her eyes have found the changes in their faces?

There was so much to think about. So much to see.

And she was stuck in this cabin.

As she Captain James had made it clear that she would not be permitted to disembark in Lisbon. He'd said it was too dangerous, he wasn't there to act as a guide, he had business to conduct, this wasn't a pleasure voyage.

He was just full of reasons.

Then again, he had also told her that under no circumstances would she be allowed on deck.

And last night he had changed his mind.

Poppy leaned her forehead on the window, the glass cool and soothing against her skin. As she'd lain in bed the night before, reliving every moment spent up under the stars, she'd allowed herself to hope that *maybe* he would be able to come and take her into town.

Something had changed the night before, and she wasn't thinking of a kiss.

Well, no, she was *certainly* thinking about the kiss. She might have declared that they should never speak of it again, but she'd been aghast when the captain had suggested that they pretend it never happened. She'd already told him so, was going to say in no uncertain terms that it was exactly the sort of thing a person should take care to remember, if only to make sure it was never repeated.

That had seemed petty, though, and maybe even mean, so then she had said that it was her first kiss, and a girl only got one of those, and he wouldn't if he thought she was going to pretend it never happened.

But that was exactly the sort of thing he'd misunderstand. She didn't want him to think she was lying in bed thinking about him, even if she was.

For now.

It wasn't as if she had plans to lie in bed and think about him for the rest of her life. She would be back in England in less than a week, and then she would never see him again. If Elizabeth kept her mouth shut, Poppy's life would

tly. continue as normal, which meant that eventually she would marry some gentleman her family approved of, and she'd lie in bed and think about the for the rest of her life.

ne wall And if Elizabeth *didn't* keep her mouth shut, and Poppy's social standing drew down to zero, she'd have far bigger problems keeping her awake near the devastatingly handsome Captain Andrew James.

Poppy glanced over at the clock to check the time, and as if on cue, Billy knocked on her door. She did not need to hear his voice to know it was Billy and the captain were the only two people who ever came to see her; their knocks were as different as chalk and cheese.

o serve "Come in!" she called, because unlike the captain, Billy always waited for her permission to enter. Her hair was still in its sleeping braid, but she'd given up caring about that. And since she slept in her clothes, it wasn't she be anyone would ever see her improperly dressed.

"I brought breakfast, miss," he said, carrying his usual tray. "It's not fancy. Just some toast, tea, an' apples. Most of the men will be going a ng to eat."

moment "Will they?" Poppy murmured, her envious eyes wandering back to relent window.

Billy nodded as he set down the tray. "They have to finish up on board; the course, an' they can't all leave the ship at once, but the captain makes sure everyone has a chance to stretch his legs."

"Everyone, eh?"

t when Billy missed her undertone and sailed on. "Oh yes, though it's a right almost confusing place if you don't know what's what. It's not just the language the sort though it's good to know a few words. *Sim* for *yes*, *no* for *no*."

wasn't "Well, that's handy," Poppy remarked.

almost cheeky grin. "*No* seems to be *no* in just about every place we go," Billy said with as mad Poppy took her usual seat at the table, then adjusted it to give the best view of the port. "In German it's *nein*."

t want "Is it?" Billy scratched his head. "I've not been there. They don't have a coast, I think."

Poppy poured herself a cup of tea. "Hamburg," she said absently.

rest of "Eh?"

ie'd She looked up. "They speak German in Hamburg. It's a busy port city on the Baltic Sea. I would show it to you on the map, but I've already

the nice disassembled it.”

to him Billy nodded; he’d seen her working on the dissected map earlier in week. “Maybe I should give it a try,” he said. “Be useful to know something more of geography. I can read, y’know,” he said proudly. “An’ I can do better than half the men on the ship.”

Billy “That’s wonderful,” Poppy said. Maybe they could work on the puzzle the voyage back. It would be her third time, but it would be great fun to do it with his company. She would have to petition Captain James to release Billy from his duties, and some of his duties, but if she explained that it was for the boy’s education,

He would say yes to that. She was sure of it.

to her “Tell me more about Lisbon,” she said with an encouraging smile. “I’d like to hear everything.”

as if “Oh, it’s a lively city, miss. Y’can’t really tell from here.” He plopped down in the chair across from her and motioned toward the window. “I can see just the waterfront. We’re moored in real close this time, so you’ve got a right good view, but it’s not the city. The city is grand.”

the “Grand?” Poppy murmured. She took a careful sip of her tea. It was a little too hot.

and, of “Oh yes, and a real different sort of place. Nothing like home, not that there’s anything *wrong* with home. It’s just—it’s nice to see things that are different.”

it “I’m sure,” Poppy murmured, bringing her teacup to her lips to mask whatever sarcastic tone she’d not been able to keep from her words.

age, “Everything looks different,” Billy continued. “Well, most everything’s different. The food isn’t the same. Takes some getting used to, but it’s good, the food here. I’ve been here six times now, so I know my way around.”

Poppy managed a small smile.

to a Billy paused, finally noticing her expression. “I could, ah . . . Well, I could ask if we could bring you something. They make a nice rice pudding, but it’s not so easy to carry. An’ there’s these little bready things that sometimes come rolled in sugar.” His eyes actually rolled back in his head as he relived his culinary ecstasy. “I could bring you one of those, if you’d like.”

“From the looks of you,” Poppy said, “I think I might want more than one.”

to you Billy laughed. “They won’t be as good as when they’re fresh hot, but you’ll still like ’em. An’ the cook will be getting provisions, so he might make something that’s a little Portuguesey.”

“This is all very kind of you, Billy.”

the He gave her a sympathetic smile. “The captain’s not a bad man for r
ething you stay on board. It wouldn’t be safe for you to go out on your own.
o sums Wouldn’t be safe even if we were docked back in London. The ladies l
near the water . . .” He blushed, powerfully, and his voice lowered as h
zle on “Not all of them are ladies, if you get what I mean.”

o have Poppy decided not to inquire further about *that*. “What do you think
om happen if I went ashore with Captain James?” she asked. “Surely Lisb
ion . . . not such a dangerous city that he could not protect me.”

I want “Well . . .” Billy pondered this for a moment, his mouth pursing on
side as he thought. “I suppose he could just take you through the docks
and over to the nicer bits.”

ed Poppy’s mood brightened considerably. “Brilliant! I—”

This is “But he’s not here.”

t a Well, damn. “Not here?”

Billy shook his head. “Was the first one off the ship. Had some sort
still a business. He usually does.”

“Do you know when he will be back?”

at “Hard to tell,” Billy said with a shrug. “It usually depends on what l
t are carrying.”

“Carrying?” Poppy echoed.

k “Sometimes it’s a package, sometimes just papers. And of course,
sometimes nothing at all.”

ig, and Sometimes nothing at all? Poppy found this interesting, although she
food. couldn’t say why. Probably just because she had nothing better to won
about. She’d already been through just about every permutation of her
to England (ninety percent involved her ruin; the other ten percent requ
I could spectacular and unlikely combination of good luck).

hough So, yes. She *was* going to wonder why the captain sometimes carrie
packages and sometimes carried papers. She was going to do her damr
read as to think only about things of this sort until she got home and had to de
want.” far more serious issues.

m “Does he often carry papers?” she asked.

it Billy stood and pushed his chair back into place. “Sometimes. Don’t
ht really. He doesn’t tell any of us what his business is that’s not the ship
business.”

“He has business that’s not the ship’s business?”

He shrugged. “He has friends here. Has to. He’s been so many times making Poppy knew that Billy had been on the *Infinity* for only nine months told her that the second time he brought her breakfast. If he had been to here Lisbon six times already, Poppy could only imagine how often Captain ie said, had visited over the years. According to Billy (because just about every she knew was according to Billy), he’d been captaining the ship since would It seemed like an awful lot of trips to Portugal, but then again, what on is know about privateering? Maybe it made sense to stick with a dependable loyal network of traders.

one And just like that, she was thinking like a criminal. Good heavens.

is area Poppy sipped her tea, which had finally cooled to an acceptable temperature. “Have a good time in town,” she said. “I assume you’re going.”
“Oh yes. Soon, actually. One of the men said he’d take me with him”
Billy looked at her with a sheepish expression. “The captain doesn’t let me go by myself either.”

of The captain, Poppy was coming to realize, had a softer heart than he wanted others to realize. It was difficult to imagine another ship captain worrying over the welfare of a thirteen-year-old boy.

ie’s Not that she had experience with any other ship captains, but still.

“I’d best be going,” Billy said. “I’ve got to finish my duties before I get ashore, and I don’t think Mr. Brown will wait if he’s ready before I am.”

Poppy nodded and bid him farewell. She made quick work of breakfast there were only so many ways to bite a pattern into a toast triangle—then she took her tea to the window to watch the show.

der It was rather like going to the theater. Not any theater she’d had occasion to attend, but she was determined to enjoy it all the same. At first she tried to take in the entire panorama, but there was too much happening at once so she decided to follow the path of just one man, watching as he went about his tasks.

simplest “I shall call you José,” she announced. It was the name of a recent knight, surely it was appropriate to the region. “José Goodhope. You shall have children, four dogs, and a rabbit.”

She frowned. He’d probably eat that rabbit. Best not get too attached to it, she thought. “Are you married, Mr. Goodhope? Or widowed?” She watched her mystery man as he lifted a crate from a wagon and carried it toward a stable.
“Widowed,” she said decisively. “Much more dramatic.”

Shakespeare would be proud. It was a play, after all.

3.” “And your poor motherless children. You must work so hard to feed
; he’d My goodness, they’re hungry.”

o She thought about that.

1 James “But not hungry enough to eat the rabbit,” she said firmly. This was
ything story, and she wanted to save the rabbit. It was white and fluffy and
1782. thoroughly nonexistent, but that was the beauty of writing one’s own t
did she She could do whatever she wanted.

ble, She’d always wanted to be an evil overlord.

Or a nice one. She had no real preference. Just so long as she was in
charge.

José set down his crate and returned to the wagon, wiping his brow
oing.” his sleeve. He picked up another crate, this one heavier than the first if
.” posture was any indication. After he set that one down, he stood straight
t me rolled his neck a few times.

Poppy did the same. There was something about watching someone
: that made her need to do it too.

n When she was once again facing forward, she saw that José had twice
call out to someone over his shoulder. Then he reached down to the hem
his shirt . . .

can go *And took it off.*

.” Poppy leaned forward. Now *this* was interesting.

fast— Did dockworkers routinely perform their duties shirtless? Was this a
ien Portuguese custom? It was certainly warmer here than it was in London
then again, she’d never been to the London docks. Maybe the men ran
asion all the time with their chests bare as day.

ried to And if that was the case, why had no one told her?

, so “Oh, José,” she murmured, setting down her teacup. “It’s a very hot
out his isn’t it?”

This seemed reason enough to stand and move closer to the window
ing, so Maybe she needed to reengineer her plot. Did she really want José to be
e three widower? Wouldn’t it make more sense to make him a never-married
bachelor?

l to it. With no children. Maybe a dog. And the rabbit could stay.

ship. It was so lovely and fluffy. Who wouldn’t want to keep it in the stor
“Are you courting anyone, José?” She caught her lower lip between
teeth as she watched his muscles flex with exertion. First it was his arm
he reached down to grip the crate, but then once he reached the ship sh

l them. good view of his back.

She had no idea a man's back could be so interesting. She'd seen her brothers shirtless, but not recently, and none of them had looked as sculpted as José.

"Sculpted," she said aloud. Another word she thought sounded a bit meaning. But only if one was working in a soft medium. She squeezed her hands in the air as if molding clay. *Sculpting*. It sounded like the motion of scooping and mashing.

She shook her head. She was getting entirely off topic, and José was *there* on the dock. What were those muscles called? The ones on a man's chest that made it so . . .

Her hands wiggled in the air, still sculpting.

So . . . defined.

Poppy had taken drawing classes, of course; all young ladies did. Her stretch instructor had talked about the muscles of the body, but he'd never mentioned the ones on a man's chest. What were they called?

She glanced at Captain James's bookshelf. Somehow she doubted she could find the answer in *Agrarian Masterpieces of Kent*.

Poppy moved closer to the window. She didn't think anyone would be able to see her from the dock. It was much brighter outside than in.

"How old are you?" she wondered. José was taking a break now, sitting atop one of the crates he'd just moved. He didn't look very much older than she was. Certainly not more than thirty. And he had all his hair. It was around darker than the captain's, of course—but just as thick. It would probably have that soft, springy quality.

She'd touched the captain's hair a few days earlier when the ocean had taken a dip and set her off-balance. She'd lurched forward and grabbed the first thing she could, which turned out to be the captain's head.

It was entirely accidental, of course.

José's hair had a similar wave. Poppy decided she liked it. If the breeze was just so, it would fall rakishly over his forehead. There had been a gentleman like that in London, and all the ladies had swooned. There was something about a mussed man, one of Poppy's acquaintances had said. It meant he was so very *vigorous*. Poppy had thought she was talking her nonsense, but now, looking at José, vigor was taking on an entirely new meaning.

She had a feeling José was *most* vigorous.

He was handsome, her José. Nothing on the captain, of course, but r
every man could be as beautiful as Andrew James.

“But José,” she said aloud, “I think you come close.”

“Close to what?”

Poppy jumped nearly a foot, almost knocking her teacup off the tabl
Captain James was standing by the door, watching her with arched eye
and an amused expression.

“You didn’t knock!” she accused.

“I did,” he said plainly. “And who’s José?”

Poppy just stared at him like an idiot, which was probably not a bad
since she doubted she could have managed anything that was either
intelligent or nonincriminating. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t heard
knock.

Or the door opening.

Or closing.

She cleared her throat and bid him good morning. It seemed the best
course of action.

But Captain James was undeterred. “What are you watching that has
be able so entranced?”

“Nothing!” she said, far too loudly. “I mean, just the docks, of cours
sure it’s not interesting to *you*, but it’s the first thing I’ve had a chance
at that’s not just water.”

He took off his tricorn hat. “Did you miss me?”

“Of course not.”

He acknowledged this with a slightly sardonic nod, then ambled ove
join her at the window. Poppy found herself trying not to squirm as he
his head to the side and perused the scene.

“It looks like an ordinary day loading cargo,” he said.

Poppy resisted the urge to babble some sort of agreement and instea
made a few meaningless noises and nodded.

Outside, José had gone back to work, but thankfully Captain James
was looking elsewhere. He motioned with his hand toward a nearby ship ar
d. It “The *Marabella*’s off to South America tomorrow.”

“Really? That sounds exciting.”

“It’s a longer voyage than I’ve ever made.”

“I imagine so,” Poppy responded, trying to keep her attention from
wandering back to José, who was still laboring without a shirt.

ot “I don’t think I’d want to do it,” the captain said, his tone thoughtful
 “You could see Cape Horn,” Poppy pointed out.

 He shrugged. “Hardly anyone goes that far south. The *Marabella* is heading for Salvador.”

e. “Salvador?” Poppy echoed. José was walking right toward her.

brows “In Brazil,” the captain confirmed.

 Poppy tried to remember if Salvador had been marked on the dissec map, but out of the corner of her eye she saw José stretching again, and

 “Why, Miss Bridgerton,” the captain drawled, “are you ogling a nak thing, man?”

 “He’s not naked,” Poppy retorted.

him In retrospect, it would have been far wiser to have denied the *other* p the question.

 Captain James smiled. Broadly. “So you *are* ogling him.”

 “I’m not ogling anyone.”

t “He does look like a fine specimen of man,” the captain said, strokin chin.

s you “Stop.”

 “Very muscular.”

e. I’m Poppy’s face began to burn. “*Stop.*”

to look “Now I understand,” the captain said with unmistakable delight. “Th José!”

 “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Poppy mumbled.

 “You chose well, Miss Bridgerton. He seems a hard worker.”

r to Poppy wanted to die.

tilted He patted her shoulder. “Very industrious, your José.”

 “How could I possibly know his name?”

d just The captain positively snorted with laughter. “I’d wager you’ve alre given him a name, a family history, and a tragic backstory.”

was Poppy was surprised her mouth didn’t fall open. How did this man k her so well after less than a week at sea?

id said, Captain James leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms in a n satisfied manner. There was something supremely masculine about hin regarded her, and just like that, poor José was back to having three chi and a rabbit.

 “Why are you watching me like that?” Poppy said suspiciously.

 “Oh, this is the most entertaining thing I’ve seen all day.”

l. "It's only half nine," she muttered.

"My dear Miss Bridgerton," he continued, "if you wanted to see a man without a shirt, I would have been happy to oblige you."

Her eyes grew very narrow. "You are a monster."

"But a lovable one."

"How does your family put up with you?"

ted And there was that lethal smile again. "Haven't you realized I'm en-
d— charming?"

ed "Hmmpf."

"Ask anyone."

She gave him a look. "I would, except the only person I've spoken to part of week is Billy."

"And me," he pointed out cheerfully.

"You're hardly an unbiased source." Neither was Billy, for that matter.

The captain chuckled again as he finally left her side, crossing the ca- rig his his desk. "Oh, Miss Bridgerton," he said. "I fervently wish we had not crossed paths in this manner, but if I had to have an inadvertent captive board, I'm very glad it's you."

Poppy could only stare. "Thank you?"

"It's a compliment," he assured her as he went about his business at desk. He used a key to open the top drawer, removed something from his pocket, and slid it inside, then shut the drawer again. He locked it, of course. He always locked it.

As Poppy watched him, she finally realized that he was dressed somewhat more formally than normal. He'd donned a waistcoat, for one, and his cravat appeared to have been polished. His cravat too was tied with uncharacteristic precision.

ady "Billy said you left quite early this morning," she said.

know "Indeed I did. Just after sunrise. It enabled me to conduct my business rather quickly."

lost Poppy's mind went to the locked top drawer. "And what business was that?"

n as he "Come now, Miss Bridgerton, you know better than to ask questions of children not answer."

ldren "Perhaps I hope to catch you in a weak moment."

"I believe I already caught *you* in a weak moment this morning."

She blinked.

“Have you forgotten José so quickly? Ah, the inconstancy of women!”
Poppy rolled her eyes to show him what she thought of *that*.

He put his hand over his heart. “*O, swear not by the moon, th’ incon-
stant moon, That monthly changes in her circled orb, Lest that thy love prove
likewise variable.*”

Shakespeare? Really?

“*Romeo and Juliet*,” he said, as if she wouldn’t have recognized it. “I
was not in the least bit misquoted.”

Oh, he had no idea who he was up against. She lifted her chin a notch.
“*Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, Men were deceivers ever; One foot on
the sea, and one on shore, To one thing constant never.*”

He acknowledged her parry with a nod, then said, “I never claimed there
were any *more* constant. *And* I think you’re making much ado about
nothing.”

Poppy was impressed despite herself.

“I know,” he said, correctly interpreting her expression. “I’m ridiculous
but good at this.”

She quirked a brow. “As am I.”

“I have no doubt.”

Their eyes remained locked in silent battle until the captain said, “I
can think of another Shakespeare line about inconstancy, can you?”

“Not a one,” she admitted.

They both stood there, trying not to laugh. Finally, the captain gave
up. “Oh, Miss Bridgerton”—he drew out the moment by stalking across the
room and stopping in front of her with a cat-in-cream smile—“I think you were
very pleased today.”

Her suspicions went on every possible alert. “What do you mean?”

“The weather is especially fine.”

“Yes, I’d gathered as much.” She gave him a patently false smile.

“Through the window.”

“But you can’t tell everything through the window. You can see the
sun, but you can’t feel breeze, you can’t be sure of the temperature.”

Poppy decided to humor him. “Is there a breeze today?”

“Indeed there is.”

“And the temperature?”

“As you can tell from José’s lack of attire, it’s quite pleasantly warm.”

Poppy made a growling sound. Really, he needed to let this go.

1.” “Might I offer advice?” he murmured, leaning in just enough to make
air tingle between them.

stant “As long as you won’t be offended if I don’t take it.”

e “Sheathe your sarcasm, if only for this afternoon. We are friends of
aren’t we?”

‘And It required a magnificent display of fortitude, but she managed to say
a sort.”

h. “Well then, Miss Bridgerton, as your friend—of a sort—I was wondering
if you might like to join me in Lisbon today.”

ot in She froze. “What?”

He smiled. “Shall I repeat myself?”

nen “But you told me—”

“I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Does it matter?”

ously Actually, she rather thought it did, but not enough to quibble when she
finally getting off the ship.

“I want to see everything,” she said as she sat down to pull on her boots.

“That is patently impossible.”

can’t She glanced up, but only for a second. She wanted to get her boots laced
quickly as she could. “Everything that’s possible, then.”

in. “Everything that’s possible.” His mouth curved into a hint of a smile
promise.”

ie room

ill be

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sun, I

e.”

1.”

“Might I offer advice?” he murmured, leaning in just enough to make the air tingle between them.

“As long as you won’t be offended if I don’t take it.”

“Sheathe your sarcasm, if only for this afternoon. We are friends of a sort, aren’t we?”

It required a magnificent display of fortitude, but she managed to say, “Of a sort.”

“Well then, Miss Bridgerton, as your friend—of a sort—I was wondering if you might like to join me in Lisbon today.”

She froze. “What?”

He smiled. “Shall I repeat myself?”

“But you told me—”

“I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Does it matter?”

Actually, she rather thought it did, but not enough to quibble when she was finally getting off the ship.

“I want to see everything,” she said as she sat down to pull on her boots.

“That is patently impossible.”

She glanced up, but only for a second. She wanted to get her boots laced as quickly as she could. “Everything that’s possible, then.”

“Everything that’s possible.” His mouth curved into a hint of a smile. “I promise.”

Chapter 15

“Don’t turn around,” Andrew whispered in Poppy’s ear, “but José is watching you.”

For this he was rewarded with an elbow in his ribs. Which prompted to add, “He hasn’t put his shirt back on.”

“Pffft!” Poppy did a thing with her eyes that was more a flick than a All in all, it was an impressive display of *I hardly care*, but he knew be

“It does beg the question,” Andrew mused. “Why?”

He waited. It took her a moment but she took the bait.

“What do you mean, why?”

“Why hasn’t he put his shirt back on? It’s not *that* hot.”

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard her growl. And not with appreciation.

“Do you know what I think?” he asked.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“I’m glad you asked,” he said brightly. Then he leaned toward her, l just a few inches from her ear. “*I think he knows you’re watching him.*

She made an exasperated motion with her free hand, as if to point ou she was clearly focused on the road ahead. “I’m not watching him.”

“Well, you’re not *now*.”

“I wasn’t before.”

“Come now, Miss Bridgerton, you could hardly *not* look at a half-dr man. Frankly, I’d think less of you if you didn’t.”

This time she did roll her eyes.

“You can’t really blame him,” he went on, steering her through the waterfront area toward a spot where hackney drivers liked to wait to ta customers. “It’s not often such a finely dressed lady disembarks a tradi vessel.”

Poppy looked down at her dress with a grimace. “It’s hardly fine any

longer.”

“You look lovely,” he said. It wasn’t a lie. *She* looked lovely, even if her dress no longer did. It had held up fairly well, all things considered, but it had not been made to be worn all day and all night for a week. The blue fabric was now spectacularly wrinkled, and, since Poppy never wore shoes in the cabin, a dull layer of dust ringed the hem. There was also an oily spot on the side of the skirt he thought might have once been butter, but if she had noticed it yet, he certainly wasn’t going to point it out.

“Is José really looking at me?” She was taking his don’t-look-now very seriously; all of this was said out of the corner of her mouth. She didn’t turn her head enough to look at Andrew.

l him So naturally he said, “*Everyone* is looking at you.”

She stumbled. “Are you serious?”

. roll. “As scurvy,” he said cheerfully.

atter. This seemed to give her pause. “Did you really just say ‘serious as scurvy’?”

“There’s not a whole lot more serious on a ship than scurvy. Exhaustion, tooth pain . . . and that’s just on the inside. Eventually the gums start receding, then the teeth fall out.” He tilted his head toward her as if to confide. “I’m assuming they haven’t already done so. Unfortunately, seamen aren’t generally known for their dental hygiene.”

Poppy’s mouth whorled in thought. “Hmmm.”

A surprisingly mild response. He countered with “Hmmm?”

his lips Because he was witty and articulate that way.

.” But really, he’d spent a ridiculous amount of time dangling all means of disgusting things (both literal and not) in front of the women of his fan club. Tales of bloody gums and rotten teeth usually merited more of a reaction.

it that “Have you had scurvy?” she asked.

ressed He grinned, showing his teeth. He had them all, which was no mean feat. He was a sailor; he had frequented his fair share of dockside taverns. Couldn’t do that without getting punched in the face a few times.

Poppy, however, was unimpressed with his toothsome display. “That doesn’t mean you haven’t had it. I’m sure not everyone loses his teeth.

ke on “True,” he replied, “but mine is a rather fetching smile, don’t you think?”

ing He grinned again, better to make the point.

“*Captain James.*”

y “How beleaguered you sound,” he teased, “but to answer your question”

no, I have not had scurvy. But it would be surprising if I had. I've never undertaken an exceptionally long voyage."

"Scurvy is more common on longer trips?"

"Very much so. The *Infinity* generally keeps to European waters, and almost never see it."

She thought about that for a moment. "What sort of journey would count as exceptionally long?"

"India could take a good four months. Parts of South America the same." Poppy shuddered. "That sounds awful."

"I agree." Andrew frequently thanked his maker (or more often his lord) that he'd never been asked to carry out a mission outside Europe. He loved the sea, but he *adored* the moment of stepping onto dry land. And while he regularly marveled over just how much of the world was covered with water, he was very much aware that he had never experienced the true infinity of the ocean.

Ironic, really, that that was the name of his vessel.

"Ships often make stops along the way," he told Poppy, "but not always. I've heard of one recent voyage to India that took twenty-three weeks."

She gasped. "Without a single stop?"

"That's what I'm told. At any rate, I insist upon fruit on every voyage, even short ones such as this."

"Fruit?"

"It seems to keep the disease at bay."

"Why?"

"I have no idea," he admitted. "I'm not sure anyone does, to be honest. I'll not argue with results."

"Fruit," she murmured. "How fascinating. I wonder how they figure it out."

"Simple observation, I should think."

She nodded absently, the way she did when she was lost in thought.

He enjoyed watching her; sometimes he would swear that he could almost see her thinking.

Andrew had never given much thought to the fact that women were not permitted a higher education, but it was a crime that Poppy Bridgerton had not been able to go to university. Her curiosity was endless. She asked questions about everything, and he had no doubt that she kept all the answers stored neatly away for later use.

er Or for further examination. He often caught her just *thinking*. Poppy as sharp a conversationalist as anyone, but she spent a great deal of time pondering great and deep questions.

d we Or at least he assumed they were great and deep questions. It was just likely she'd been plotting his demise.

qualify "Why are you smiling?" she asked suspiciously.

"Because I don't have scurvy?" he quipped.

me." She elbowed him. She did *that* a lot too.

king) "If you must know, I was reflecting upon the fact that you seemed to thought, which led me to wonder just what it was you were thinking about. Which in turn led me to wonder if you were plotting my demise."

oved "Oh, I haven't done that for days," she said blithely.

le he "I do improve upon association."

water, She snorted.

y of the "I'll take that as an agreement," he said. "But if I might ask, what were you thinking so deeply about?"

ways. I "Scurvy," she said.

"Still?"

ge, She shrugged. "There's a lot to think about. Do any of your books mention it? I could read about it on the way back. It would be far more interesting than Ottoman engineering."

Personally, Andrew found Ottoman engineering fascinating, but he was well aware that few shared this particular passion. "I don't think so," he said, "but now that you mention it, I probably should acquire a medical text. There was no doctor on board the *Infinity*; it was far too small a vessel for that. A guide to diseases would be helpful the next time someone fell ill."

d it "Can one buy English-language books in Lisbon?" she asked.

"If so, I doubt you'd find something so specific."

She made a gesture that seemed to say, *It was worth a try*, and then she was quiet, her thoughtful frown once again making twin furrows between her almost brows.

Thinking again. Or still. Andrew smiled. If he leaned toward her, would he not hear the wheels and gears of her mind spinning away?

had "I wonder . . ." she said slowly.

He waited. She did not finish the thought. "You wonder . . ." he finally answers urged.

She blinked, as if she'd forgotten that he might be listening to her. "

er was the problem must be one of two kinds: either the body is lacking in some
ie of nutrient—presumably something one doesn't get on a long voyage but
exists in fruit—or the disease is spread from one man to another, and there
st as something in fruit that acts as a cure.”

“Actually,” he told her, “the fruit seems to act as both a prevention and a
cure.”

“Really?” She looked almost disappointed. “That’s too bad. I mean, of
course it’s *good* that it does both, but from an investigative standpoint,
it would be much easier to figure out why if it was just one or the other.”

“Not necessarily. If it’s a case of the body not getting a certain nutrient
out. is within the fruit, that would account for it being both the prevention and a
cure.”

“Of course!” Her whole face lit up. “You’re brilliant!”

“Alas, I have finally convinced you.”

ere you She didn’t even notice his quip. “I wonder what it is *in* the fruit, though.
And is it all fruit? What about vegetables? Would a juice made of fruit
trick?”

“I would think so. Some ships put lemons in the grog.”

ention That seemed to interest her. “Does it make it taste any better?”

ng “Not really.” He chuckled as he turned them onto the road. Up ahead
could see several hackneys, and he mentioned that he planned to hire a carriage.

was “We cannot walk?” Poppy inquired. “It is such a fine day, and I am
e said, happy to be out of doors.”

.” “It’s not too far to walk,” he admitted, “but some of the areas on the
for are somewhat unsavory.”

ll. Her eyes narrowed as she considered this. “*Somewhat unsavory or*”-
paused here—“unsavory?”

“Is there a difference?”

she “Quite a bit, I would imagine.”

een her Trust her to split such hairs. “Very well,” he conceded, “it is only
somewhat unsavory.” He’d thought to save time by hiring a carriage, but
ould he Poppy was right. It was far too fine a day to be confined in a dusty carriage,
even if only for ten minutes.

They headed toward the Baixa, which he explained to her was what
lly Portuguese called the central neighborhood. There wasn’t a whole lot of
interest along the way, but Poppy was fascinated by everything.

I think “Billy told me to try the food,” she said. “Especially the sweets. The

ne kindsome sort of fried doughy treat he was especially fond of.”

out “*Malasadas*,” Andrew confirmed. “They’re divine.”

here is “Divine?” she teased. “I had not pegged you for a man to speak of fi
such spiritual terms.”

nd a “As it happens, *malasadas* are customary before Easter, although I’m
really sure why. Probably something to do with Catholic Lent. We sho
of able to find you one, though.”

it Sure enough, on the next corner they saw a man standing before a v
, hot oil, a large bowl of dough on the table behind him.

ent that “Your *malasada* awaits,” Andrew said, waving his arm in a courtly
nd the horizontal arc.

Poppy looked positively giddy as she approached the vendor, who
immediately launched into a sales pitch in rapid Portuguese.

ugh. to Andrew with those widened eyes that said, *Help me*.

do the He stepped forward. “*Dois malasadas, por favor.*”

“*Só dois?*” The vendor looked scandalized. He placed a theatrical ha
over his heart and resumed his testimonial, this time indicating with hi
fingers the size of the *malasadas*.

d he “What’s he saying?” Poppy asked.

me. “He’s speaking too quickly for me,” Andrew admitted, “but I’m fair
so certain he’s trying to convince us that the *malasadas* are too small for
eat only one each.”

way “*Pequeno*,” the man said earnestly. “*Muito pequeno.*”

“*Quatro*,” Andrew said, holding up four fingers.

—she The man sighed dramatically and returned the gesture with six finge
“*Seis.*”

“I can eat three,” Poppy chirped. “I could probably eat six.”

Andrew gave her a look. “You don’t even know how big they are.”

“I could still eat six.”

ut He held his hands up in a gesture of defeat. “*Seis*,” he said to the str
riage, vendor. He turned to Poppy. “Do you want yours rolled in sugar?”

She drew back, clearly aghast at the question. “Of course.”

the “Sorry,” he said, not bothering to hide his amusement. “That was a s
of question.”

“Really.”

re was It was hard not to laugh, but Andrew managed to contain his mirth t

smile, watching Poppy as she watched the Portuguese man scoop chun
dough from the bowl, then expertly roll them into identically sized sph
ood in One by one—but still quite quickly—he dropped them into the oil, mo
for Andrew and Poppy to step back, away from the splatter.

n not “The dough is very yellow,” Poppy said, rising to her tiptoes as she
uld be in the bowl. “He must use a great many eggs.”

at of Andrew shrugged. He had no idea what went into *malasadas*. He jus
he liked to eat them.

“Do you know how to say *egg* in Portuguese?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“I thought you needed to understand the language for your business

For once he didn’t think she was fishing for information about his w
don’t actually need to know much,” he said. “And eggs rarely enter the
rned conversation.”

“It smells so good,” Poppy said with an almost sensual sigh. “How l
does he need to cook them?”

nd “I would think not much longer,” Andrew said, trying to ignore the l
s bolt of electricity her groan had lit within him.

“Ooooooh . . . I can’t wait.” She was nearly jumping with excitement
rocking on her feet, rising to her toes and then back down again.

ly “One would think we didn’t feed you on the *Infinity*.”

us to “You don’t feed me *these*.” Poppy arched her neck to peer into the v
think they’re almost done.”

Sure enough, the street vendor picked up a long pair of tongs and ex
the first *malasada*. It glistened golden brown as he held it up and asked
rs. Andrew, “*Açúcar?*”

Poppy would likely stage a full-force revolt if he refused the sugar, s
Andrew said, “*Sim, por favor.*”

The vendor dropped the *malasada* in a bowl of spiced sugar and the
repeated his actions until all six had been removed from the oil. Using
eet tongs, he rolled them around in the sugar bowl until they were coated v
the sweet powder.

As Andrew reached into his pocket for a few coins, he glanced over
stupid Poppy, who was still practically vibrating with anticipation. Her hands
up near her chest, her fingers rubbing against her thumbs as if she was
to keep herself from reaching out and grabbing a treat.

o a “Go ahead,” he said, unable to suppress the amusement in his voice.

ks of one.”

eres. “They won’t be too hot?”

tioning “There’s only one way to find out.”

With a giddy grin she reached out and plucked one of the *malasadas* peered the bowl. She brought it to her lips and took a tiny, careful bite. “Not too hot,” she announced, then took a real bite.

st knew “Oh,” she gasped.

“Like it?”

“Oh.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

here.” “Ohhhhh.”

ork. “I Andrew suddenly felt the need to adjust his cravat. And maybe his breeches. Dear God, he’d been with women who’d climaxed with less passion.

ong “All right!” he said, a little too brightly. “We need to be off.” He had the street vendor what was surely too many coins, then grabbed the rest little *malasadas* out of the sugar and gave Poppy a little shove toward town.

“We don’t want to be late,” he said.

it, “For what?”

He handed her two *malasadas*. “I said I was going to show you everything possible, didn’t I? If I’m to keep my promise, we need to get going.”

rat. “I She shrugged and smiled agreeably, then ate another one. “I could not live here,” she said, eyeing her final ball of dough with something attracted approaching wistfulness. “I would eat fourteen of these every day and I as a house.”

“Fourteen?”

so “Or more.” She licked the sugar from her fingers. “Probably more.”

Andrew’s lips parted as he watched her tongue dart out for the sugar n was mesmerized, nearly paralyzed by the urge to kiss the sugar from his the himself. He couldn’t let himself move, not even an inch, or he’d . . .

with He didn’t know *what* he’d do. Something he shouldn’t. Not here. Not her.

at But she looked so goddamn beautiful out here in the sunshine.

were No, not beautiful. Radiant. Whatever it was that had him so transfixed trying came from the inside. She was so happy, so full of joy and delight, she seemed to glow with it, pulling in everyone within her orbit.

“Take It was impossible to be near her and not feel the same joy.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, still grinning.

“You have crumbs on your face,” he lied.

But he quickly realized what a foolish idea that had been, because she immediately brought her hand to her face and said, “Where? Here?”

“Er, no, over . . . ah . . .” He made a vague motion that would tell her absolutely nothing.

“Here?” she asked dubiously, touching a spot near her ear.

“Yes,” he said, with perhaps a little more enthusiasm than was warranted. But he wasn’t lying this time; the act of trying to locate the nonexistent crumbs had actually deposited a few of them on her skin.

Poppy brushed them away. “All better?”

No.

“Yes,” he said. He wasn’t sure he was going to feel all better unless he hauled her around the corner and kissed her.

Which was *not* going to happen.

Or so he kept telling himself.

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Chapter 16

Poppy was in heaven.

Or it might have been Lisbon.

To hell with it, she decided. Tomorrow heaven could go back to being whatever it really was, with angels on high and whatnot. For today, it was Lisbon, Portugal, and no one could convince her otherwise.

She still could not quite believe that Captain James had changed his mind and taken her ashore with him. It was almost enough to make her rethink her pledge against gratitude.

Almost.

Or . . .

She looked around, at the blue sky and the magnificent ruined castle on the hill, and the little grains of sugar and cinnamon that were stuck under her fingernails.

Maybe she could rethink her vow for just one day.

For today—for as long as heaven had been transformed into a city in Portugal—Poppy Bridgerton would feel grateful to Captain James for having taken her there.

Tomorrow she could go back to trying not to think about what might have happened to her at home.

That reminded her . . . She had no idea how long he planned to remain in Lisbon. “Do we sail tomorrow?” she asked him. “Have you completed your business?”

“I have. Normally we would remain in Lisbon for a few days, but given our current situation”—the captain accompanied this with a wry nod in the direction of the sea—“I think it is best that we return as quickly as possible, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Poppy said, and she meant it. Every day she was gone from Lisbon, she thought about the probability that Elizabeth would report her disappearance. That

would spend the rest of her life under a cloud of scandal.

But she could not help but think how much she would enjoy another Lisbon. She was having a marvelous time, and she did not think it was because she had finally escaped the (admittedly comfortable) confines of the cabin.

There was so much more to it. As she walked through the lively streets of the Portuguese capital, it occurred to her that this wasn't just the first time she had been to a foreign land, it was the first time she had traveled to a place that was so wholly unfamiliar.

Which wasn't the same thing at all.

Poppy had been to a number of locations within England, but even in the most remote towns were new, they had never felt as if they were unknown. Her ears heard the same language she herself had always spoken; her eyes saw the same shops and churches she could find in her own home village. Anything that was new to her was still easily understood.

But today it was as if someone had taken her world and twisted it like a rotating tray on a table, depositing her into a place where nothing was as she knew it.

She could not read the signs—well, she could *read* them, of course; Portuguese used mostly the same alphabet as the English—but she rarely could figure out what they meant.

It was strange—and thrilling—to listen to the chatter of another language and to realize that hundreds of people were having ordinary conversations, but she hadn't a clue as to the meaning. She thought of all the times she'd overheard the chatter of passersby as she and her aunt had walked through London (the only place she'd ever been that was more crowded than Lisbon). She never meant to eavesdrop, but it was impossible not to hear bits and pieces: two women discussing the price of wool, a child begging for a penny.

Now she could only guess, based on the facial expressions and the tone of voice. A man and a woman were arguing across the street—nothing too vehement, but to Poppy's mind, they were husband and wife, and the woman was cross with her husband for coming home so late the night before.

From the man's sheepish expression, Poppy did not think he had a good excuse.

Up ahead, at the door to a fashionable milliner's establishment, two well-dressed ladies were speaking with great animation. They were clearly well-to-do. Poppy to their right stood an older lady with an expression of utmost boredom.

surely she was one of their chaperones.

At first Poppy thought the ladies might be discussing the hats they had only purchased, but she quickly revised her theory. Their eyes were flashing with too much excitement; the blonde in particular looked almost as if she had burst with joy.

She was in love. Poppy was sure of it. They were talking about a handsome gentleman, she decided, and whether he was about to propose marriage. From the excited giggles, Poppy predicted that he was.

The people and the language weren't all that was foreign. The city was so vivid in a way that London never could be. Maybe it was the crystal clarity of the sky, or the bright red roofs of the buildings.

Or maybe it was the four *malasadas* she'd eaten just an hour earlier. Poppy was entranced.

Captain James was proving to be a most charming and informative gentleman. He did not complain when she stopped to peer in every shop window, or when she insisted upon going inside a church to gaze upon each and every stained glass window. In fact, he seemed to take joy in her delight.

"Oh, look at these," she said, for what she knew had to have been the time in the last five minutes. At every shop or stall she'd found something worth pointing out.

This time it was a bolt of fine, pale linen, exquisitely embroidered at the hem. It could be used for a dress, Poppy thought, with the intricate cut of the hem, or maybe for a tablecloth, although she'd be terrified someone would spill wine on it. She'd never seen needlework of this particular sort before, and she had spent more than her fair share of time in the most expensive shops in London.

"You should buy it," the captain said.

She gave him a doubtful look. "I don't have any money, and furthermore how on earth would I explain its existence when I return home?"

He shrugged. "You could say you got it in Cornwall."

"Cornwall?" Where had *that* idea come from? And furthermore—"I can't even make such things in Cornwall?"

"I have no idea. But that's the beauty of it. I doubt anyone else does either."

Poppy shook her head. "I can't very well go around saying I went to Cornwall for two weeks. That's almost as improbable as Portugal."

"Almost?" he echoed, not *quite* mocking her.

“It would be equally difficult to explain,” she said.

ad just He did not look convinced.

g with “You have no idea what awaits me back in England,” she told him.

night Honestly, she was a little put off by his flippancy.

“You don’t know what awaits you either,” he said. And although he correct, and his words were not unkind or argumentative, she thought t statement belied a lack of understanding of her predicament.

No, that wasn’t it. He understood her predicament perfectly. What h was not appreciate was how difficult it was for her to blindly await her fate arity of Maybe he was the kind of person who could wait until he had all of information before making plans, but she was not. If it meant she had t come up with a dozen ideas for every one she actually carried out, so b

To wit:

guide. She had considered the (wonderful) possibility that Elizabeth hadn’t or anyone Poppy had gone missing.

very She had considered the possibility that Elizabeth had told Poppy’s fa but no one else.

e tenth But what if Elizabeth’s husband had returned home early?

ing What if Elizabeth’s maid promised Elizabeth she would keep quiet b then said something to her sister?

t the What if the maid didn’t have a sister? What if she was alone in the v work at except for her dearest childhood friend and frequent correspondent wh e happened to live in London and worked for the Duchess of Wyndham?

style Poppy had only met the duchess once, and she did not think the grea elegant had liked her very much. Certainly not enough to keep *that* sort of new quiet.

more, But what if the Duchess of Wyndham had gambling debts that she d want her husband to know about? Poppy had never heard rumors to thi effect, but it was certainly *possible*. And if the duchess did have gambled debts, her thoughts might turn to blackmail over profit.

Do they These were the questions that—well, no, they did not keep Poppy up night. In truth, she was sleeping quite well; the ocean seemed to rock h a cradle. But she stewed about these questions all day long. She stared ocean and stewed and stewed and stewed.

) But she did not want to argue, not today at least, so she did her best sound combative when she said, “It is true that I do not know what aw me. It could be that every single thing that could have gone right *has* g

right. And wouldn't that be splendid? But that hasn't stopped me from imagining every possible outcome, then trying to devise a plan to deal each."

He looked at her with a frank, penetrating stare. "Tell me," he said.

was She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

he "Tell me one of your plans."

"Now?"

e did He shrugged, as if to say, *Why not?*

. Her lips parted with surprise as she glanced around the shop. It seemed his unlikely spot for so delicate a conversation.

o "No one can understand us," he said. "And even if someone could, you don't know anyone here."

ie it. "Later," she said. She was glad that he had asked, but she certainly wasn't prepared to discuss her future in the middle of a Portuguese fabric shop.

o told prepared to discuss her future in the middle of a Portuguese fabric shop was almost amused that he had suggested it. It was such a *man* thing to do.

amily "At supper," he said. "I shall remind you."

She nodded her agreement. "Will we be taking our supper back on the ship?"

out "I would not do that to you," he said gamely. "This is your one day in Lisbon. We will go to a tavern I like to frequent. I think you will like it there then"—he motioned to the bolt of fabric—"shall I buy this for you?"

world Under normal circumstances Poppy would not consider accepting such a gift from a gentleman. But although these were not normal circumstances, she still had to refuse. "I can't," she said regretfully. "But I shall try to remember the details. I might be able to learn this type of stitching."

o ? she still had to refuse. "I can't," she said regretfully. "But I shall try to remember the details. I might be able to learn this type of stitching."

it lady "You embroider?" He sounded surprised. She didn't know why; most women did some sort of needlework.

rs "Not *this* well," she told him, lightly brushing her fingers over the elaborate parade of stitches. "But I enjoy it. I find it soothing. It clears my mind."

is Now he *looked* surprised. "Forgive me if I have difficulty believing that your mind is ever clear."

ling "Well, if that wasn't just the oddest statement. If it had been said in a different tone of voice, Poppy might have taken it as an insult. "What do you mean by that?"

o at "You're *always* thinking."

ier like "Isn't that what it means to be human?"

at the "You're different," he said, and strangely, she rather liked that he felt

not to

aits

one

way.

with “Do you have anything like that?” she asked. “Something you can do with your hands so that your mind can become quiet?”

He looked at her with a curiously intense stare, and she wasn’t sure she understood what she’d meant.

“The sort of thing you can do and still carry on a conversation if necessary but it . . . settles you.” She gave a helpless little shrug. “I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“No, I understand,” he said. He hesitated for a moment, or maybe he was simply choosing his words with care. But then he reached out and touched the drawn-thread embroidery she had just been admiring.

“I like to build houses out of playing cards,” he said.

She was momentarily struck speechless. “I beg your pardon?”

“Have you never made a house of cards? You use regular playing cards and then you set the first two into a *T*-shape.” He demonstrated with his hands, as if he were holding actual cards. “Then you bring in a third, and make an *H*. There’s really no other way to start. Well, I suppose you could try building in triangles, but that’s very advanced. I would not recommend it.”

Poppy just stared at him. She wouldn’t have thought he would take something so seriously.

She wouldn’t have thought that *anyone* would take such a thing so seriously. But she found it rather charming that he did.

“Once you have that stable,” he continued, “you can build to your heart’s content.” He paused. “Or until one of your brothers comes and knocks the whole thing down.”

Poppy chuckled; she could well imagine a similar scene in her own household. “I don’t think I’ve ever done that,” she said. “It never even occurred to me that one could build with playing cards.”

“You need more than one deck,” he said with authority. “If you wish to make things interesting.”

“Alas, my life has been nothing but interesting lately.”

He gave a laugh at that. “Maybe I can find a deck or two here in Lisbon and show you tomorrow.”

“On the *ship*?”

“Oh, right.” Sheepishly, he pressed his lips together. “That’s not going to work.”

They wandered out of the shop and back out into the bustling streets of Baixa. It was truly a lovely area, but then something occurred to Poppy she turned to the captain and asked, “Why does this part of the city look new?”

“Ah.” He stopped walking and turned to her with an almost professorial air. “There was an earthquake here about thirty years ago. It was devastating. Much of the old city was destroyed.”

Poppy immediately glanced this way and that, as if she could possibly see signs of the earthquake thirty years after the fact.

“This area was completely rebuilt,” the captain said.

“How grand these avenues are,” Poppy murmured, gazing down toward the waterfront. “So straight.” She wasn’t sure there was a street so straight and long in all of England.

“The new city was laid out on a grid.” He swept his arm in a wide horizontal arc. “See how much light it allows. The air quality is improved too, because it does not get trapped in stagnant pockets.”

Poppy had not noticed it before, but there was indeed a lovely, fresh tickling at her skin. She tried to remember ever experiencing such a thing in London. She could not.

“It’s remarkable,” she said, craning her neck to peer up and down the street. There was something about the collection of buildings that was harmonious. Each was *almost* exactly the same, four or five stories tall with an arched arcade on the ground floor. The windows were uniform—of the same size on each level of every building, and they all measured the exact same distance apart.

It should have created a dull monotony, but it did not. Not at all. Each building had its own character, with tiny differences that gave the street life and joy. Some buildings were painted, some not. One was even covered with flowers. Most had balconies on the first story above the shops, but a few had flat façades, and then a few more sported balconies on every window up to the top. And they were not all of the same width. The grander buildings measured six or eight windows across, but many others had just three.

And yet still, for all the differences, they *fit*. As if they could not possibly have been built anywhere else.

“It’s beautiful. So very modern.” She looked over at Captain James. He was watching her with a curious intensity, as if he truly cared what she thought about the architecture. Which was preposterous. Because why

of the he? This wasn't his home; he'd had nothing to do with the designs.

And yet, with his eyes on hers, so brilliantly blue and inquisitive, it felt almost imperative that she share her thoughts. "What I find most interesting she said, looking back down the street for a moment, "is that there is no single element that is unfamiliar. The windows, the arches . . . They are neoclassical style, are they not?"

He nodded, and she continued. "But when it is all put together in this it makes something entirely new. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it."

"I agree," he said. "It's truly original. I try to visit this area every time in Lisbon. It's not always possible. Sometimes I never make it past the And the old city also has its charms. But this . . ." He waved his arm once again, as if putting modernity on display. "This is the future."

Suddenly Poppy could not imagine why he'd chosen to be a sailor. He had never been so animated when talking about the sea. He had not seemed unhappy, and in fact she suspected there were many aspects of life as a breeze captain that he loved. But this—these buildings, this architecture—this ing in his true passion.

She wondered if he realized this himself.

"But this is not even the most remarkable thing," he said suddenly. "come." He grabbed her hand and pulled her along the pavement, and when he glanced back to look at her, she saw that his eyes were even more lit with excitement. She couldn't imagine what new detail had him so aglow, but he led her inside one of the elegant new buildings.

"Look," he said. "Is it not amazing?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," she said carefully. They were some sort of governmental building, stylish and new, but not otherwise exceptional.

"No, you can't see it," he said, even as he motioned to . . . a wall? A doorway?

"You just told me to look," she said to him.

He grinned. "Sorry. It's what is within the walls that is revolutionary is built over a Pombaline cage."

She blinked. "A Pomba-what?"

He "A Pombaline cage. It's—well, it doesn't matter what it's called. It's entirely new type of construction meant to make buildings safer in would earthquakes. You start with a wooden cage—"

“A cage?”

seemed “Not like in a prison,” he said, chuckling at her reaction. “Think of it as interesting,” as a framework. A three-dimensional lattice, if you will. It’s built into stone walls, and then covered with other material. So if the earth shakes, it helps to distribute the force.”

“Force?”

“Of the earthquake. If you can spread it out”—he made a motion with his hands rather like Moses parting the Red Sea—“it’s less likely to cause damage.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” She frowned, trying to envision the concept in her head.

But the captain clearly wanted to make sure she understood. “Think this way. If I pull your hair—”

She jumped back. “What?”

“No, bear with me, I promise there’s a physics lesson in this, and did you recently bemoan your lack of study in the field?”

She rolled her eyes. Trust him to remember that. “Very well. Get on with it, then.”

“Right. It’s all about the distribution of force. If I pull just a small lock of your hair, it will hurt quite a bit.”

He reached up and pinched a lock between his fingers. It wasn’t hard, but what with her inexperienced work pinning it up.

“Wait, are you *actually* going to pull my hair?”

“Not any harder than your brothers likely did.”

She thought back to her childhood. “That does not reassure me.”

The captain’s face came a little closer to hers. “I will not hurt you, Pippin. I promise.”

She swallowed, and she wasn’t sure whether it was the earnest look in his eyes or the fact that it was the first time he had used her given name, but she believed him. “Carry on.”

He gave a little tug, not so that she felt pain, but just enough that she knew what she would have done, if he had yanked harder.

“Now,” he said, “imagine that I grabbed a whole hunk of your hair.” His hand curved and made a claw shape in the air, as if approximating the shape of hair she was meant to imagine.

“Oh no.” There was no way her coiffure could survive that.

“I won’t do it, don’t worry,” he said, displaying his first ounce of

sensibility all afternoon. “But imagine that I did. It wouldn’t hurt.”

He was right. It wouldn’t.

“That’s because the force would be spread across a larger area of your scalp. Therefore, each affected spot receives less of the tug. And consequently, less pain.”

“So what you’re also saying is that if you wished to cause equal pain you would need to pull much harder if you had a larger amount of hair in your hand.”

“Exactly! Well done.”

It was ridiculous how pleased she was by his compliment, especially she was the one who now had an errant lock of hair jutting out from the top of her head.

“Now,” he continued, oblivious to her attempts to subtly pin her hair into place, “you can’t just erect any wooden framework and expect it to hold. I beg your pardon, I suppose anything would be better than nothing, but if you apply the laws of physics, you can create a structure that is incredibly strong.”

Poppy could only stare as he went on about St. Andrew’s crosses and their braces and trusses and someone named Fibonacci who she thought was probably dead, but the captain was so involved in his explanation, Poppy didn’t know what to do, couldn’t bring herself to interrupt and ask.

As she watched him—and the truth was, she was doing far more work than listening; he’d lost her when he started talking about geometry’s golden ratio—she realized that he had become a different person, right in front of her eyes. His entire bearing changed. She’d seen him as the captain, standing with complete confidence and authority, and she’d seen him as the rogue with lanky limbs and smooth motions.

But now his arms moved through the air as if drawing pictures and pictures and he practically hopped in place as he illustrated his invisible canvas with equations in the air. Poppy hadn’t the slightest idea what he was talking about. Honestly, she couldn’t follow a word.

But he was magnificent to watch.

He wasn’t the captain, and he wasn’t the rogue. He was just Andrew James. His name was his given name, wasn’t it? He’d told it to her that first day. “Captain Andrew James, at your service,” he’d said, or something similar. And she hadn’t thought of it since, not thought of him as anything but Captain James “the captain.”

“Do you see?” he asked, and she realized it was actually important that she did.

ur “I—no,” she admitted, “but I lack the imagination to picture such things in my head. If I saw it on paper, I think I might understand it.”

“Of course,” he said, looking almost glum.

1 you “I think it’s very interesting,” she said hastily. “Revolutionary, even our said no one has done such a thing before. Think of how many lives might be saved.”

7 since “It will work, too,” he told her. “There has not been another earthquake since the same force, but if God forbid there was, these buildings would stand on the side engineers tested it.”

r back “How could they possibly do that?” It wasn’t as if they could snap their fingers and summon an earthquake.

o work. “Soldiers.” Andrew’s eyes widened with excitement. “They brought it if hundreds and had them stamp about.”

bly Poppy thought her mouth might have fallen open. “You’re joking.”

“Not even a little bit.”

d “They had the soldiers stamp about, and that shook the ground well s to approximate an earthquake?”

py “Enough for them to call the design a success.”

tching solution, none at all, and then to solve it in such a sideways fashion. To golden that is true genius.”

t of her “And that’s not all,” he said, taking her back outside and onto the wide pedestrian street. “Look at the façades. You might think them plain—”

ue, all “I don’t,” Poppy cut in eagerly. “I find them quite elegant.”

“I do too,” he said, and he seemed quite pleased with her statement.

plans, what I was going to say is that most of these buildings, or rather, most of each of these buildings were put together elsewhere.”

and talking Poppy looked at one of the buildings and then back at Andrew. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

7. That He gestured to a nearby façade. “Most of the pieces of the buildings are put together at another site, one with a great deal more room, where in stonemasons and carpenters could all work on one type of thing at a time. There is great economy—both of time and of money—in doing, for example, all of the window frames at once.”

Poppy peered up and down the street, trying to imagine some vast future

o him filled with unconnected walls and window frames. “And then they bro
of the pieces here? On carts?”

ings in “I imagine so. More likely by barge.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It’s not often done. They call it pre-fabrication.”

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speaking Portuguese, and—

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things.”

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“Isn’t it just.” She sighed. “I really should have walked the other wa
down the beach.”

He nodded in slow agreement, but then surprised her utterly by sayi
enough “And yet right now—just this afternoon, mind you—I’m rather glad yo
didn’t.”

It was all Poppy could think about for the rest of the afternoon.

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filled with unconnected walls and window frames. “And then they brought all of the pieces here? On carts?”

“I imagine so. More likely by barge.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It’s not often done. They call it pre-fabrication.”

“It’s fascinating.” Poppy shook her head in slow wonder, taking it all in—the architecture, the fact that she was actually in Lisbon and people were speaking Portuguese, and—

“What?” she asked. Andrew was looking at her in the strangest fashion.

“It is nothing,” he said softly. “Not really. It’s just that most people don’t find this interesting.”

“I do,” she said with a shrug. “But then again, I’m curious about most things.”

“It’s what got you into this mess,” he said wryly.

“Isn’t it just.” She sighed. “I really should have walked the other way down the beach.”

He nodded in slow agreement, but then surprised her utterly by saying, “And yet right now—just this afternoon, mind you—I’m rather glad you didn’t.”

It was all Poppy could think about for the rest of the afternoon.

Chapter 17

Andrew took Poppy to a small tavern near the port. He'd eaten there countless times, as had most of his crew, and while he would never take a lady to a comparable establishment in England, the rules did not seem to apply in the same way here in Portugal.

Plus, the tavernkeeper's wife was a superb cook, and he could think of a better place to take Poppy for true Portuguese cuisine.

"This will not be quite what you're used to," he warned as he reached to open the door.

Her eyes lit up. "Good."

"The patrons can be a bit uncouth."

"My sensibilities are not so tender."

Andrew opened the door with flair. "Then by all means, let us go forward." They were greeted immediately.

"Captain!" Senhor Farias, the middle-aged owner of the establishment, came bustling over. He had learned some English over the years, and he spoke it far better than Andrew did Portuguese. "Is so good to see you. I was told that your ship is here and I wonder where you are."

Andrew grinned. It was always a joy to be greeted like an old friend. "Senhor Farias, it is my pleasure entirely. Tell me, how fares your family?"

"Very good, very good. My Maria is now married, you know. I will be—how do you call it—not father, but . . ." He rapidly snapped his fingers in the air, his preferred motion whenever he was trying to think of something Andrew had seen him do it many times.

"Avô, avô," he said. "Not father, but—"

"Grandfather?"

"Yes! That's it."

"Congratulations, my friend! Senhora Farias must be very pleased."

"*Sim!* Yes, she is very happy. She loves the little babies. But who is

Senhor Farias finally noticed Poppy standing just a little behind and to side of Andrew. He took her hand and kissed it. “Is this your wife? Have you been married? *Parabéns*, Captain! Congratulations!”

Andrew stole a glance at Poppy. She was blushing furiously, but she did not seem to be truly embarrassed.

“She is my cousin,” Andrew said, since that seemed the safest lie. If other men had not already come to Taberna da Torre for a meal, they would have and would surely impart the news that the *Infinity* had been sailing with a woman on board. “She is a guest on our voyage.”

“Then she is a guest in my *taberna*,” Senhor Farias said, leading her to the table. “I will bring only our best food.”

“Are you telling me that some of your food is not the best?” Andrew teased.

“No,” Senhor Farias said with conviction. “My wife cooks nothing but the best. So I will bring your cousin everything.”

Poppy opened her mouth and for a moment looked as if she might retort but instead she said, “That would be *wonderful*.”

Senhor Farias planted his hands on his hips. “Does the captain not feed you?”

“The food on the *Infinity* is very good,” Poppy said, allowing Senhor Farias to link his arm in hers. “But I have never tried Portuguese food—except for *malasadas*—and I am very curious.”

“She is a very curious lady,” Andrew called, trailing after them.

Poppy shot him a look. “That can be interpreted in several ways.”

“They’re all accurate.”

She did a funny thing with her mouth that was clearly the equivalent of rolling her eyes, and then happily went with Senhor Farias to his best table. “Sit, sit,” he urged. He looked from her to Andrew and back. “I will bring you wine.”

“He’s lovely!” Poppy gushed as soon as they sat down.

“I thought you would like him.”

“Are all the Portuguese so friendly?”

“Many, but none so much as he.”

“And he’s going to be a grandfather!” Poppy clasped her hands together and smiled enough to light the room. “It makes me so happy and I don’t know him.”

“My mother often says that it is the mark of a truly good person if she

the happy for those she has never met.”

ve you She frowned. “That’s odd. My aunt says the same thing.”

Andrew bit the inside of his cheek. Damn it, of course Lady Bridger
e did said the same thing. She and his mother were the closest of friends. “It
common phrase,” he said. This was probably a lie, but maybe not. For
his knew, all the ladies in his mother’s set said the same thing.

soon, “Really? I’ve never heard anyone else say it, but then again, my circ
h a acquaintances is not so broad.” And then, alleviating any worry he mig
have had that she’d found his comment suspicious, she leaned forward
to a an eager expression and said, “I can’t wait to see what Senhor Farias b
I’m so hungry.”

As am I. Two *malasadas* do not a meal make.”

She wagged a finger in his direction. “It was your choice to let me h
oad. It one of yours.”

“Three would not have done either. And apparently,” he said, waggi
efuse, finger right back at her, “nor does four.”

She only laughed, smiling at Senhor Farias when he came to pour w
eed When the tavernkeeper left, she leaned forward with gleaming eyes an
“I want to try everything.”

Andrew lifted his glass. “To everything,” he said.

—well, She smiled as if it were the most charming toast she’d ever heard. “
everything.”

Andrew sat back, watching her with a strange sense of pride. It had l
long time since he’d shown someone the sights of a city—any city. Mo
his business—whether for the government or not—was conducted on h
t of own. And when he did venture into town with men from his ship, it wa
able. the same. They were friends, but they were not equals, and that would
bring stand between them.

But with Poppy every moment had been a delight. And he was begin
to think that perhaps her presence on the *Infinity* would not be as much
disaster as he’d feared.

He’d known at the start that he might have to marry this girl, but he
starting to wonder if this really was such a burden. Where was he goin
ther, find someone else who found Pombaline cages interesting? Who could
even every one of his dry statements and twist it, turn it upside down, and tc
back with even greater wit?

ne is She was a clever one, his Poppy.

And she'd kissed him. She'd kissed him with the tiniest, most fleeting touch of the lips he'd ever felt. Yet somehow it was *more*.

Poppy Bridgerton had kissed him, and it was monumental.

He felt it in his blood, he felt it across his skin. And when he finally sleep later that night, it had burned through his dreams. He woke up aching and hard, nothing like his usual morning erection. He couldn't even do anything about it, since he was bunked in his navigator's cabin.

Carroway was a solid chap, but every friendship had its limit.

Come to think of it, every friendship had *this* limit. Or if it didn't, it well should.

"What are you thinking about?" Poppy asked.

There was no way he was going to tell her the truth, so he said, "I was wondering if we ought to bring a meal to José. He was working with special vigor this morning."

She gave him an exasperated look. "You're terrible."

"You keep saying so, but you've yet to convince me."

"I can hardly believe I'm the first to try," she said with a snort.

"Oh, certainly not. My family has long since given up the attempt to a sense of propriety in my soul."

She looked at him shrewdly. "That's an awful lot of words to say that I behave very badly."

"Indeed it is. And probably why I get away with it so well." He leaned toward her with a wicked smile. "Silver tongue and all that."

"All that indeed."

He chuckled at her waspy tone. "Did I tell you that I hold the record for most times getting sent down from Eton?"

"You went to Eton?"

"I did," he confirmed, and it occurred to him that he didn't much care he'd revealed such a distinguishing fact about his background.

She stared at him for a moment, her eyes shining almost emerald with curiosity. "Who *are* you?"

It wasn't the first time she'd uttered the question. It wasn't even the first time she'd done so in that same incredulous voice. But it *was* the first time his response was something more than a flashed grin or condescending chuckle.

It was the first time the answer had to be teased out of his heart.

"It's an odd thing," he said, and he could hear in his voice that the w

ing were coming from some untapped corner of his spirit, “but I think you
me as well as anyone now.”

She went still, and when she looked at him, it was with an astonishing
found direct gaze. “I don’t know you at all.”

hing “Is that what you think?” he murmured. She didn’t know his true name
and she didn’t know his history, or that he’d grown up alongside her cousin
in Kent. She didn’t know that he was the son of an earl, or that he worked
clandestinely for the crown.

damn She didn’t know any of these details, but she knew *him*. He had the
terrifying feeling that she might be the first person who ever had.

as But then he realized that it wasn’t terrifying at all, that he thought it
uch be terrifying, but in reality it was . . .

Rather nice.

His family had always viewed him as something of a jokester, and he
supposed he had done little to convince them otherwise. He *had* been sent
down from Eton on multiple occasions—never for academic failings, though.
He had been far too restless a boy to earn top marks, that was true, but
instill acquitted himself tolerably well in his studies.

at you His transgressions had always been of the behavioral variety. A prank
intended for a friend that somehow ended on the doorstep of a tutor. A
intended for a tutor that somehow ended on the doorstep of the head of
ed school. Inappropriate laughter in the dining hall. Inappropriate laughter in
church. Inappropriate laughter, frankly, just about everywhere.

So if his family saw him as silly, or at the very least unserious, he
for the supposed they had cause.

But that wasn’t *all* he was. He did important things. Important things
no one knew about, but that couldn’t be helped.

re that It didn’t bother him.

Well, it didn’t bother him much.

th her He looked across the table at Poppy, marveling that all of this had flashed
through his mind in under a second.

first “Do you think you know *me*?” she asked.

time “I do.” He didn’t even need to think about it.

She let out a snort. “That’s preposterous.”

“I know you like puzzles,” he said.

“Everyone likes—”

ords “No they don’t,” he cut in. “Not like you and me.”

know His vehemence seemed to surprise her.
ngly “I also know,” he said, “that if you set yourself a task, you cannot re
you have completed it.” At her nonplussed expression he added, “Again
everyone is that way. Even among those of us who like puzzles.”
me, “You’re the same,” she said, a touch defensively.
ousins “I’m aware.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me.”
ked Her chin rose a notch. “Nor me.”
He couldn’t help but be amused by her attitude. “I’m not accusing y
most something nefarious. To my mind, it’s a compliment.”
“Oh.” She blushed a little, and it was really rather entertaining the w
should seemed to fidget within herself, as if she couldn’t quite absorb the prai
“What else do you think you know about me?” she asked.
He felt himself smile. “Fishing for compliments?”
e “Hardly,” she scoffed. “I have no reason to expect that your answers
sent be uniformly flattering.”
hough. “Very well.” He thought for a moment. “I know that you don’t like t
he’d your intelligence.”
“When have you ever known me to do so?”
lk “Precisely,” he said. “But you haven’t had to. I know enough of soc
prank know that you’re under far different strictures in London than on the
i *Infinity*.”
r in “I should say I’m under no strictures,” she said pertly, “except for th
that confines me to one cabin.”
“Says the lady dining in a Lisbon café.”
“Touché,” she admitted, and he thought she might be biting back a s
s that He leaned toward her, just a bit. “I know that you can’t speak French
you don’t get seasick, and that you miss your brother Roger with all yo
heart.”
She looked up, her eyes somber.
ashed “I know that you adored him even though he tortured you as all goo
brothers do, and I know that he loved you back far more fiercely than y
ever knew.”
“You can’t know that,” she whispered.
“Of course I can.” He tipped his head, quirked a brow. “I’m a brothe
Her lips parted, but she seemed not to know what to say.
“I know you’re loyal,” he said.
“How could you know that?”

He shrugged. "I just do."

st until "But you—"

in, not "—have spent much of the last week in your company. I do not need to witness a display of loyalty to know that it is a characteristic you possess."

She blinked several times, her lashes sweeping up and down over unfocused eyes. She seemed to be staring at a spot on the far wall, but it was clear that everything she saw was inside her own head. Finally, just when he was about to give her a verbal nudge, she straightened and brought her attention to his.

ray she "I know about you," she said.

se. He did not point out that she had just said that she didn't know him. He was far too curious to hear what she had to say.

But before he could ask, Senhor Farias arrived at the table with a plate of cod fritters.

s will "Bolinhos de bacalhau!" he announced. "But you must wait. They are much too hot."

to hide Poppy peered at them. "Goodness, they are still sizzling."

Senhor Farias was halfway back to the kitchen, and he didn't even turn around as he snapped his fingers over his head and called out, "Too hot!"

Poppy grinned, and Andrew knew that he ought to allow their conversation to turn to the glorious meal ahead of them, but she had been about to say something important, and he could not let it go.

ie one "You said you know me," he reminded her.

"Hmm?" She reached out and gingerly touched a fritter.

mile. "Too hot!" Senhor Farias yelled.

h, that Poppy snapped to attention, her head whipping back and forth as she looked for the tavernkeeper. "How did he see that?" she marveled. "He's even here."

our "Poppy."

d older "Do you think they're ready?"

you He said it again: "Poppy."

She finally looked up, smiling pleasantly as she met his gaze.

"Before Senhor Farias arrived with the fritters," he said. "You said you know me."

er too." "Oh yes, that's right. I did."

He made a rolling motion with his hand, his usual visualization of "Well." "Very well." She straightened, almost as if she were a schoolteacher.

preparing to deliver a lesson. “I know that you are not as hard-edged as you would like others to believe.”

l to “You think so?”

ss.” She gave him an arch look. “Billy told me that you will not permit him to go out and about in Lisbon by himself.”

it was “He’s a *child*.”

en he “Who has left home and is living on a *ship*,” she retorted. “Do most men in his position face similar restrictions?”

gaze “No,” Andrew admitted, “but he doesn’t speak the language. And he is very small for his age.”

at all. Her smile was lopsided but triumphant. “And you care about him.”

ate of Andrew tugged at his cravat. It was ridiculous to feel embarrassed by a thing. He was only protecting a small boy. Everyone should aspire to that behavior.

re “You also treat your men very well,” she said.

“That’s just good business. We talked about that.”

urn She laughed. Right in his face. “Please. You said quite specifically that the main reason to feed one’s men well is not because it is good business, but rather because they are human.”

rsation “You remember that, eh?” he muttered.

ay “I remember everything.”

re This, he did not doubt for a second. But he was oddly uncomfortable with her praise—for this sort of thing, at least. Which was utter bollocks. He was only doing right by his crew. But men were taught to take pride in their strength and power, not in their good works, and he wasn’t quite sure how to simply say thank you.

e’s not “I think they’re ready,” he said, nodding toward the fritters.

Poppy, who had been so eager to try them she’d nearly burned her fingers, just shrugged.

“You don’t want to eat?” He knew that she did. She was just trying to make some convoluted, completely unimportant point.

He motioned again to the food on the table. “We’re wasting time.”

ou “Is that what you think?” she murmured, and her tone was so precise, the same as his had been when he’d uttered the same words a few minutes earlier, it could not have been coincidence. Not from her.

ell? He reached out and stabbed a fritter with his fork.

; “Are we not meant to use our fingers?”

s you “Just being careful in case they’re—”
 “Not too hot!” Senhor Farias called out.
 Andrew looked up and grinned. “Fingers it is.”

im to Poppy took one and bit into it, drawing back in surprise as she tasted
 thought it would be sweet!”
 He laughed, only then realizing that neither he nor Senhor Farias had
boys her—in English—what they were. “Salted cod,” he told her. “It is a hu
 favorite here, and it is said that the Portuguese have as many recipes us
e’s as days of the year. This is one of the most common preparations.”
 “It’s a bit like—” Poppy smacked her lips a few times, half a fritter
 pinched daintily between her fingers. “Never mind, I’m not exactly sur
y such it’s like. But— Oh, look!” She waved her free hand toward the door. “
o such is Billy!”
 She smiled and beckoned him over.
 “Miss Poppy! The captain let you out!” Billy’s eyes went wide with
 when he realized he’d blurted this out in front of his employer. “Beggi
hat the your pardon, sir. I didn’t— That is to say . . .”

but Billy swallowed, his small Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “I’ve
 telling her you’re not so bad, sir. In fact, I told her you’re the best of m
 promise.”

 Andrew looked over at Poppy, raising one eyebrow and then the oth
e with an exaggerated attempt to pretend that he was judging Billy’s statemer
e was “What do you say, Miss Bridgerton? Is Master Suggs telling the truth?
r “Is that your surname?” Poppy asked the boy. “I don’t think I ever k
ow to it.”

 Billy nodded nervously, and Andrew decided to take pity on him. “I
 no need to apologize, Billy. I did indeed ‘let her out.’”

inger, Poppy leaned forward with a conspiratorial air. “And you can rest as
 he’s going to ‘put me back in’ for the voyage home.”

to Billy’s chin drew back, and his eyes went comically wide.
 “It’s a joke, Billy,” Poppy said. “Well, it’s not a joke, I suppose, sin
 true, but I was joking *about* it.”

ely the “Ehrm . . .” Billy looked to Andrew for help, but he only shrugged. I
 that the boy learn early that women could be deuced hard to follow in
 conversation.

 “Did you come here alone?” Poppy asked. “I was just praising Capt
 James for his requirement that you be accompanied by an adult.”

Billy shook his head with vehemence. “Brown brought me on his way to town. Said he’d come to collect me in a bit.”

Poppy looked perplexed. “You wished to spend time by yourself here, didn’t you?”
“I did.”
“Senhor Farias lets me feed his cat,” Billy explained with a grin. “His name is Whiskers. Well, that’s what I call him. He’s got a name in Portuguese, but I can’t pronounce it. He’s awful friendly, though. Lets me rub his belly and everything.”

As Billy dashed out the side door, Andrew turned to Poppy and said, “He comes here every time we’re in Lisbon. Spends hours with that creature. Still, he really is a little boy at heart,” she murmured. “I forget sometimes what I suspect he’s had to grow up faster than I did.”

There Andrew nodded in agreement. When he was Billy’s age, he was still running wild with his siblings and neighbors. His biggest concern was how cold the lake would be if his brother pushed him in.

horror “Don’t you have a cat on the ship?” Poppy asked.

ng He looked up, about to explain that the ship’s cat was a wretched, unpleasant beast, when a sudden movement to his left caught his attention. He glanced discreetly over his shoulder, but all he saw was Senhor Farias. I Except . . .

That was odd.

er in The jovial tavernkeeper was standing still. Too still.

it. Senhor Farias never stood still. He greeted customers, he poured wine. “He never stood still. Certainly not as he now was: shoulders pressed stiffly against the wall, eyes twitching back and forth.

Something was not right.

There is “Poppy,” he said in a quiet voice, “we need to go.”

“What? No. I haven’t finished—”

assured He kicked her under the table. “Now.”

Her eyes went wide, and she gave a tiny nod.

Andrew made eye contact with Senhor Farias. Andrew then looked toward the door, signaling his intention to leave. Senhor Farias flicked his eyes toward the rough-looking trio of men by the far window, signaling the source of the problem.

Best “I will see you next time I am in Lisbon, yes?”
ain “I will see you next time I am in Lisbon, yes?”

He hauled Poppy to her feet as Senhor Farias nodded and said, “Sim”

ay into with perhaps a little too much enthusiasm.

“Thank you, senhor,” Poppy said as she hurried to match Andrew’s
re?” Senhor Farias smiled tightly, and they almost made it. They really d
is when they were just a few feet from the door, Poppy suddenly jerked h
hand free of Andrew’s and exclaimed, “Oh, but Billy!”

me Andrew lunged forward to grab her hand again, but she was already
hurrying toward the side door. “Poppy,” he called out, taking care not
, “He sound panicked. “We can get him later.”

e.” She shook her head, clearly unwilling to leave the young boy in a pl
es— I danger. She said something—probably about Billy being right outside;
Andrew couldn’t hear clearly—and poked her head out the back.

l Damn it all. Billy was far safer where he was. Whatever—or whome
how these men wanted, it wasn’t a thirteen-year-old boy from Portsmouth.
that didn’t mean he was safe. If Billy got in their way, they would cut l
down without a moment’s thought.

Andrew stalked after Poppy. They could leave out the back. It woul
ion. longer to reach the relative safety of the busy street, but it would have
ias.

“Oh!” he heard Poppy exclaim. “Pardon me.”

But her voice was off, and when Andrew reached the door, his blood
cold. Two more men stood in the alley. One had his hand on Billy’s sh
The other had his hand on Poppy.

ae, but For the rest of his days, Andrew would remember that moment as if
ffly unfolded in quarter time. Yet even though every moment felt impossib
slowed down, he could not recall actually *thinking*. Words, language .
were gone, replaced by a world washed red with rage.

He lunged forward, and Poppy was knocked to the side as he wrapp
hands around the brigand’s throat. But within seconds, he was surroun
and he only managed to get in two kicks before he found himself pinne
against the tavern wall, each arm immobilized by members of the roug
to the looking gang he’d spotted inside the tavern.

a He looked urgently about, trying to assess the situation. It was clear
he the three men he’d seen earlier were but a few of a larger group. Andre
could not be sure how many there were in total. He counted four in the
” he but from the noises coming through the open doorway, there were at le
and. that many inside as well.

The four men exchanged words in Portuguese too rapid for Andrew
, *sim*,” follow, and then the one who’d had his hand wrapped tightly around P

arm adjusted his position and hauled her back against him, his beefy arm making a pointed elbow around her throat.

id. But “Get your hands off her,” Andrew roared, but the foul cretin only laughed and Poppy let out a strangled cry as she was pulled even more tightly against his chest.

to “You son of a—” But Andrew’s growl was choked off when he was slammed back against the stone wall of the tavern.

ace of The man holding Poppy laughed anew, and he wrapped a lock of hair around his finger before tickling the underside of her chin.

He would be the first to die.

Andrew had no idea how he would do it, but as God was his witness—ever—was going to disembowel him.

But “Let her go!”

him Billy. Dear God, he’d forgotten about the boy. And apparently everyone else had as well, because no one was restraining him when he ran forward and kicked Poppy’s captor in the shin.

to do. “Billy, no!” Andrew yelled, because anyone could see that he did not have a chance.

and ran But the thirteen-year-old urchin from the wrong side of Portsmouth had the heart of a gentleman, and he would not allow his lady’s honor to be besmirched.

it had “Let her go!” Billy screamed again. And then—*Holy Mother of God*—they were going to kill him for this—he sank his teeth into the large man’s arm.

ly . . . they The howl of pain that ensued was enough to curdle blood, and whether it was revenge or reaction, Andrew would never know, but the man’s fist came down on Billy’s head like a cudgel.

ded, The boy dropped like a stone.

ed “Billy!” Poppy cried.

h- And then, as Andrew watched in horrified awe, Poppy went *mad*.

that “You brute!” she snarled, and she delivered a double blow—first she stamped her foot onto her captor’s instep, then jabbing her pointy elbow into his side.

ew The foot did nothing, but the elbow stunned him enough to let her go. In the alley, Poppy dropped to the ground, cradling Billy’s head as she tried to rouse him.

ast “He’s a child!” she hissed.

to “*Ele me mordeu!*” The man who’d been holding her shoved his injured arm in her face.

Poppy’s Poppy looked up from Billy just long enough to snap, “Well, that’s just what I needed!”

m own bloody fault.”

The other brigands were laughing, which did nothing to soothe his t
ughed, and he let out a stream of curses.

against Funny how Andrew could understand *that*.

“Billy,” Poppy said, smoothing the boy’s hair from his face. “Please
up. Can you answer me?”

Billy did not move.

r hair “I hope that bite becomes infected,” Poppy said in a malevolent gro
hope your arm turns black and falls off. I hope your bollocks turn gree

“Poppy!” Andrew barked. He didn’t think any of these men spoke E
; he but if they did, *bollocks* was likely the first word they’d learned.

“Do any of you speak English?” he asked. “*Inglês?*”

They grunted their *nos*, and one of the men poked his head back into
/one tavern and yelled something. A few moments later, one of the men An
ard had first seen in the tavern led Senhor Farias into the alley.

With a knife to his throat.

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The other brigands were laughing, which did nothing to soothe his temper, and he let out a stream of curses.

Funny how Andrew could understand *that*.

“Billy,” Poppy said, smoothing the boy’s hair from his face. “Please wake up. Can you answer me?”

Billy did not move.

“I hope that bite becomes infected,” Poppy said in a malevolent growl. “I hope your arm turns black and falls off. I hope your bollocks turn gree—”

“Poppy!” Andrew barked. He didn’t think any of these men spoke English, but if they did, *bollocks* was likely the first word they’d learned.

“Do any of you speak English?” he asked. “*Inglês?*”

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With a knife to his throat.

Chapter 18

“Billy?” Poppy murmured, lightly stroking his cheek. “Billy, please wake up.”

But the boy didn’t stir. He didn’t look ill, or pale, or any of those things Poppy thought would come from such a fierce blow to the head. He looked almost peaceful, as if his sleep was natural, and all he needed was a little nudge and reminder that it was time to open his eyes.

Water, she thought. Maybe some water splashed on his face would help. She knew the word for *water*. She’d learned it earlier that day.

“*Água*,” she begged, looking from man to man among the bandits. “*Por favor* for the boy.”

But her mangled sentence went unheard. A commotion broke out in the tavern—shouting, followed by the crash of broken wood and overturned tables. The man who had hit Billy rushed to the open doorway and disappeared inside.

There was more talk between the bandits, their voices quick and shattering, utterly incomprehensible to Poppy’s English ears.

She felt so bloody helpless. Earlier in the day it had all been so charming, the music of the Portuguese language swirling about her ears. It had been a game to wonder what they were saying, a marvel to consider just how different the world really was.

Now she just felt illiterate. And lost. She might as well be an infant that she could tell what was happening around her.

She turned toward Andrew, not that he was likely to understand the chatter much better than she could. She’d spent the entire day with him and had some idea of how much Portuguese he knew.

More than most, but far from fluent.

“Andrew.” She whispered his name, but she didn’t think he heard her. The two largest bandits had him pinned tightly against the wall, and just the

of it caused Poppy's throat to constrict. One of them had an elbow pressed hard into Andrew's belly; the other held his jaw in a viselike grip. Both used the full weight of their bodies to keep him in place.

Andrew. This time she only thought his name. She couldn't have gotten his attention, anyway. He was staring at the doorway, his face locked in an expression that was almost devoid of emotion.

Devoid. Another word she thought sounded like its meaning.

Devoid. She despised it.

ake It was a word that should never be used to describe Captain Andrew James. He was full. He was replete. He was *alive*.

She thought he might be more alive than anyone she'd ever met.

ngs And . . .

oked And . . .

tle She blinked, bringing her vision into focus. Andrew was still looking at her, but it didn't seem to matter any longer. She did not need to see his eyes; she knew they held more blue than the ocean. She did not need to hear his voice; she knew it would wash across her with the warmth of the sun.

Agua What he'd said earlier in the day—he was right. She *knew* him.

Andrew James did not merely exist. He *lived*.

side And he made her want to be the same way.

urned The realization took her breath away. She'd thought she was quick and adventurous and full of wit, and maybe she was, but when she was with Andrew, she was *more*. More of all that, and more of everything else, and more of things she'd not even known she might want.

rp and It was not that he'd changed her; all of the seeds were already there.

ming— But with him, she grew.

en a "Poppy." Andrew's voice. Low, and tight with warning. The noises emanating from the tavern had changed. Footsteps. Someone was coming toward them.

for all "Senhor Farias," Poppy whispered. The tavernkeeper emerged first, propelled stiffly forward by a man who held his upper body immobile and one beefy arm wrapped tightly around his chest.

fast And a knife at his throat.

rs; she A third man hopped down the steps behind them—the leader of the group, Poppy thought. He said a few words in a chilling tone of voice, and then the Senhor Farias said, "Do not fight them, Captain! They are many, and they have many weapons."

ssed “What do they want?” Andrew asked.

n used “Money. They say they want money. They see you are English, that
are rich.”

t his Poppy’s eyes darted from man to man, even as her hand kept stroking
1 Billy’s cheek. Why would these men think they were rich? Well-to-do,
certainly; it was obvious they were not laborers. But there was no way
could know that she was related to a wealthy viscount, that she had a father
who would pay a king’s ransom for her safe return.

 Not that her parents could afford such a ransom. But her uncle . . . he
would pay.

If he knew she’d been kidnapped.

 But he did not know she was in Lisbon. No one did. Not a soul who
ever mattered to her knew where she was. Funny how she’d never quite
g away thought of it that way before.

ee his Funny.

o hear Maybe tragic.

in. Probably not both.

 She looked back down at Billy. He mattered to her now, she realized
so did Andrew. But if she disappeared into the dark side of Lisbon, so
they, and her family would never know her fate.

nd “I have some coin in my coat,” Andrew said, his voice slow and
h deliberately even. He nodded toward his chest. “If they reach into my left
and pocket, they will find it.”

 Senhor Farias translated, but Poppy did not need to understand Portuguese
to know what the gang’s leader thought of Andrew’s suggestion. His reaction
was sharp, his expression malevolent.

 And Senhor Farias blanched with fear.

ing “He says it is not enough,” the tavernkeeper said. “I ask how he knows
not enough, and he says he knows who you are. He knows you captain
Infinity. You have goods and cargo that don’t fit in a pocket.”

with A muscle worked in Andrew’s face, and Poppy could see how hard
working to remain in control of his temper when he said, “Tell them that
they let us go, they will be amply compensated.”

bunch, Senhor Farias’s mouth trembled as the man holding him pressed the
on more firmly to his throat. “I do not know that word, *amplycomp*—”

hey “I will pay them,” Andrew said sharply, grunting as he took an elbow
the gut. “If they let us go, I will pay them.”

you Senhor Farias translated, and Poppy's blood ran cold when the leader
threw back his head and laughed. Once he'd wiped his eyes, he said a
words, and Senhor Farias turned back to Andrew.

ing "He says he will take you. He will get more that way."
, "Only if he releases—"

they The leader cut him off with a few barked words.
amily Senhor Farias swallowed convulsively.
 "What did he say?" Andrew demanded.

e The tavernkeeper's voice shook down to a whisper. "He says . . . he
takes the lady."

 A look came over Andrew that was positively feral. "Over my dead-
had "No!" Poppy cried.

e Andrew's eyes did not stray from the leader of the gang as he said, "
out of this, Poppy."

 "I'm already in it," she shot back. "And a fat lot of good you'll do n
anything has to be done over your dead body."

 Andrew looked down at her with a glare.

l, and She returned the expression.
would "Captain?" Senhor Farias's voice choked with terror, and when Pop
looked at him she saw a tiny trail of blood slipping down his neck.

 Andrew's response was absolute. "She. Goes. Free."

oreast "Captain, I do not think they will agree to—"

 "*Basta!*" The leader of the gang whipped a gun from his pocket and
iguese pointed it at Billy's head.

eply "No!" Poppy threw herself over the boy. She didn't want to die—*pl
God, please*—she didn't want to die. But she could not let them shoot l
He had wanted only to protect her. And he was so small.

ws it is He just wanted to play with the cat.

 The leader snorted with disgust, spat a few words toward Senhor Fa
and stalked away.

he was "What did he say?" Poppy whispered.

at if Senhor Farias's lips trembled, and he shook his head.

 "Do you know them?" Poppy asked.

knife He nodded. "I must pay them every month. For protection."
 "From whom?"

w to A bitter sound choked its way out of the tavernkeeper's throat. "Fro
them. We all must do it. Everyone in my—*how do you say it*—the stre

er near my house.”

few “Neighborhood?”

“Yes. Neighborhood. We all pay. But they never do this before. The hurt people, but not people like you.”

Somehow Poppy did not find that reassuring. Then again, she didn’t Senhor Farias had meant it to be.

“Senhor.”

also They all turned to Andrew, still held immobile by the wall, his chin into an awkward position by the man pinching his jaw.

But his voice was sure when he said, “What did he say?”

—” Senhor Farias looked to Poppy and then back to Andrew. “He says t take all three.” The tavernkeeper’s lips trembled. “You, the lady, and t ‘Stay boy.”

Poppy gasped. “What? No! Billy—”

ie if “They take all three,” Senhor Farias said, cutting her off before she finish her objection. “Or they shoot two. Two of you . . . and me.”

py The world went silent. Maybe people were still talking, maybe the s of the nearby street continued as usual. But Poppy heard nothing. The between her ears felt thick, as if she’d dunked herself underwater and p were speaking above.

Slowly, she rose to her feet. She looked to Andrew. She didn’t say anything. She simply didn’t think she needed to.

He gave a single grim nod. He understood.

ease Fear was a strange beast. When Poppy was a child, she and her brotl had often played *What if?* and *How would you?*

Billy. *What if you were being chased by a boar?*

How would you react if someone pointed a gun at your head?

Didn’t all children play these games? Didn’t all adults?

rias, She remembered one time with all four of her brothers—somehow t game had metamorphosed into *What if Poppy were being chased by a* and *How would Poppy react if someone pointed a gun at her head?*

She’d countered with a pert: *Which one of you would come to my aid* she’d been swiftly informed that this was not within the parameters of game. After settling on the gun conundrum, Richard and Reginald had decided she’d scream. This wasn’t entirely unexpected; Poppy didn’t c scream, but it had to be said—when she did, she was *damn* good at it.

m ets Ronald had said that he thought she’d faint. When she pointed out th

she'd never fainted in her life, he pointed out that she'd never had a gu her head.

y have Which Poppy had to concede was relevant, even if she did not agree his conclusion.

think The game had dissolved shortly thereafter; Richard sniffed the air, d that he smelled Cook's apple tarts, and that was that. Later, though, Po had asked Roger why he hadn't offered an opinion.

tipped "I don't know, Pops," he'd said with an uncharacteristically serious expression. "I hardly know how I would react in such a situation. I dor think we really *can* know until it happens."

hey It was happening now.

he And fear was indeed a strange beast, because whatever Poppy had th she might do, however she'd thought she might react when her life wa danger, it wasn't *this*.

could It was almost as if she wasn't there.

She was numb.

ounds Detached.

space Her movements were slow and careful, but nothing felt deliberate. S people not thinking *I will move slowly, I don't want to startle anyone*.

She just did it. And she waited patiently for the bandits to do what tl would.

hers Andrew was subdued first, his hands pulled roughly behind his body bound with rope. "Do not hurt her," he warned, just as a coarse burlap was lowered over his head.

As Poppy watched, dread slid through her body like a wraith. There something about being blinded—about *him* being blinded—that was terrifying. If he couldn't see her, he couldn't help her, and, dear heaven did not want to face this on her own.

he She opened her mouth, but she didn't know what to say, and at any boar? she did not seem able to make a sound, at least not until one of the mer grabbed her roughly by the wrist. His fingers pressed into her skin with d?, but enough bite that she let out a little yelp.

the "Poppy?" Andrew struggled against his bindings. "What did they—

both His captor spat out a few words and slammed him into the wall.

ften "I'm fine!" Poppy yelled. "I'm fine. I promise. I was only surprised. She looked at the man holding Andrew. "Please don't hurt him."

at He stared back as if she were an idiot. Which she probably was. She

n to he couldn't understand her.

But still, she had to try.

with "The boy," she said, directing her entreaty to the one with the kinder
"Please be gentle."

declared "Suavemente," Senhor Farias said.

Poppy "Suavemente," Poppy repeated, even though the man who was now
covering Billy's head had surely heard Senhor Farias himself. "Please.

Poppy swallowed as she watched him tie the unconscious boy's hands
together. "Must they do this?" she entreated Senhor Farias. "They have
a captain, and they have me. He's just a boy."

Senhor Farias looked at her with a pained expression.

thought "He probably won't remember any of this," Poppy said.

s in Senhor Farias let out a shaky exhale and said something to the man
ground with Billy. Poppy's eyes darted back and forth as the two men
in urgent tones. Finally, Senhor Farias turned to her and said, "He says
the boy is too much trouble. They will leave him with me."

Poppy almost smiled. She almost laughed, she was so relieved.

he was "But you must not fight them," the tavernkeeper warned. "You must
not give them trouble. You too, Captain," he said. "You must not make trouble
for them when they take you away or they will send someone back and—"

He made a cutting motion across his throat.

and Poppy recoiled. She looked up at Andrew, who could not see, and realized
she had to translate the gesture. She swallowed, forced herself to say the
words. "They will kill him. They will slit Billy's throat if we make trouble

was "And they will set him free if we don't?" Andrew said from beneath
the burlap sack.

1, she "Sim."

rate, Yes. One of a handful of Portuguese words Poppy now understood. "I
will cooperate," she said.

1 The tavernkeeper's sad nod was the last thing Poppy saw before a sack
roughly pulled down over her head too.

She froze. She hadn't expected it to be so instantly dark.

" Or hot.

She tried to breathe.

" The air around her face turned thick. She exhaled, and the heated air
bounced back onto her mouth and nose. She tried to draw breath, but she
knew couldn't—no, she could, and she thought she *did*, but nothing was reac

her lungs.

No one was holding her throat. Why wasn't she getting air?
st face. She could hear herself breathing, could feel the rapid rise and fall of chest, but it wasn't *working*. She was dizzy, disoriented. Unable to see own feet, she suddenly wasn't sure how to stand.

She needed to hold on to something.

” “Poppy?” she heard Andrew call out. “Poppy, are you with me?”

ds He sounded very far away.

e the “*Poppy!*”

“I need to hold his hand,” she gasped. And then when no one did and she screamed it. “Let me hold his hand!”

There was a rush of movement around her, a crisp cadence of voices on the of them belonging to Senhor Farias. And then, miraculously, she felt h spoke being placed between Andrew's hands.

the It was awkward. His hands were bound behind his back. She could t link her fingers with his.

But it was a lifeline.

t not “You're all right, Poppy,” he said. “I promise.”

uble “I can't breathe.”

“You can.”

“I'm not.”

realized “Clearly, you are.” There was gentle humor in his voice, almost eno pierce her panic. He squeezed her fingers. “I need you to be strong.”

uble.” “I'm not strong.”

the “You're the strongest person I know.”

“I'm not. I'm really not.” She didn't know why she sounded like she begging.

“I will He squeezed again, and she heard him chuckle. “This isn't even you time being abducted.”

ack was “It's not the same,” she snapped. She twisted her head around to wh thought she might be facing him. “Honestly, Captain. That's the false equivalence imaginable.”

“And you say you're not strong,” he murmured.

“You—” She stopped. Felt his fingers curl around hers.

“Poppy?”

he It took her a moment to realize what he'd done.

thing “Are you breathing now?”

She nodded, then remembered he couldn't see her and said, "I am."
then: "Thank you."

her "We will make it through this," he said.

her "Do you really think so?"

He paused for a moment too long before saying yes.

But at least Poppy was breathing.

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She nodded, then remembered he couldn't see her and said, "I am." And then: "Thank you."

"We will make it through this," he said.

"Do you really think so?"

He paused for a moment too long before saying yes.

But at least Poppy was breathing.

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Chapter 19

Andrew had no idea where they were.

Back at the tavern, he and Poppy had been loaded unceremoniously into a wagon. They'd traveled well over an hour, but with a hood over his head and a heavy blanket thrown over both of them—he could hardly have had any sense of the journey.

The only thing of which he was certain was that they had gained elevation. But that was hardly a distinguishing fact. They'd started at sea level; they could hardly have gone any direction *but* up.

They were moved inside a building, then up a steep flight of stairs, and then to a room at the rear. A door shut and a lock turned, and then someone grabbed Andrew's hood from the back and pulled it over and off his head at an angle ensuring that the burlap scraped roughly across his skin. He'd presumed himself to be blinded by sunlight, but the air was murky and dim. The room contained but one window, and it was covered by exterior wooden shutters closed tightly and presumably nailed shut.

He turned just in time to see one of the men take hold of Poppy's hood and pull it off. She took a massive gulp of air the moment it was lifted, but although she looked a bit shaky, she appeared unharmed. It had been hot and sticky under that blanket, and after her reaction to the burlap hood, he'd been terrified that she would have another breathing attack. He'd tried to talk to her in the wagon—that seemed to have helped before—but he was rewarded with a slap to the head from the man who was riding along with them in the back. It hadn't hurt—the blanket had absorbed a great deal of the impact, but if it was meant as a warning, it had worked. Andrew kept his mouth shut and didn't try anything.

He'd had no other choice.

Which was galling.

It had brought to mind the time when—it must have been the first or

second day after Poppy had come aboard the *Infinity*—he had asked her if she was being so agreeable. She had replied that she had no good reason to be agreeable. She couldn't very well escape while they were at sea.

At the time he'd thought her eminently sensible. He still did, he supposed.

But now he realized how colossally he'd missed the point. How important she must have felt, to be forced into meekly accepting her fate. There was nothing satisfying about choosing one's best option when all of the options were terrible.

He could not have left her in England—not with such strict orders to take the diplomatic pouch to Portugal *and* keep the cave's location a secret from the prime minister's emissary got there for the documents he'd brought from Spain. Truly, he'd had no choice but to take Poppy with them on the journey.

But he could have been more understanding. More . . . compassionate. More something. He could have been more something.

Maybe more honest. She did not even know his true name.

He looked over at her, trying to speak with his eyes since he dared not make a sound. She seemed to understand; her own eyes opened wide and her lips pinched up at the corners. The two men who had brought them into the house still stood by the door, speaking to each other in rapid Portuguese. As the men talked, Andrew took stock of their surroundings. They were in a bedchamber—nothing large or luxurious, but as best as he could tell, a clean and simple room. The decor was a step or two above what one might find in a posting inn; whoever lived here had a small measure of wealth.

Andrew caught a few words from the conversation—*money, man, woman*. He thought one of them might have said *seven*, although he wasn't sure that might be in relation to. And maybe it wasn't that at all. It was entirely possible that the only reason he'd recognized *man, woman, and money* was because he'd been expecting to hear them.

Tomorrow.

Stupid.

Home.

He thought he heard these words too.

Abruptly, the men turned toward them, and one of them flicked his hand in their direction as he barked out an order.

He wanted them to move. Andrew nudged Poppy with his shoulder, and they edged backward until the backs of their legs hit the bed.

Poppy looked at him with wide, apprehensive eyes, and he gave his

er why tiny shake. No questions. Not yet.

on not The men grew animated as they spoke, and then Andrew saw the glint of a knife.

posed. He didn't think.

otent He didn't have *time* to think. He just leapt, trying to cover her body with his own. Except that with his hands bound, he was clumsy and off-balance. Poppy let out a grunt as she stumbled back onto the bed, and Andrew fell on the floor, feeling the veriest fool.

o ferry The man with the knife strode over and actually rolled his eyes as he grabbed Poppy's wrists and sliced through her bindings.

t from He looked down at Andrew. "*Idiota.*"

ourney. And then he left, taking his friend with him.

te? Andrew closed his eyes. He needed a moment. Surely he deserved a moment to pretend he wasn't lying on a floor with his hands bound behind his back somewhere in the vicinity of Lisbon.

ot yet He tasted blood. He must have bitten his tongue.

nd her "Captain?"

o the He sighed.

ie. "Captain?"

vere in She sounded a little panicked the second time, so he forced himself to open his eyes. Poppy was standing over him, her brow knit with worry.

"I'm fine," he said flatly.

She reached down to help him to his feet. "I can try to untie you."

oman. He shook his head. Whoever had bound his wrists had done so with the same worthy of the most seasoned of sailors.

rely There was irony there.

was Sod it.

"They should have retied them in front of your body," Poppy said, and she was back upright.

"Or," he said in a brittle voice, "they should have not kidnapped us."

"Well . . . yes." She laughed nervously.

"How are you?" he asked. It should have been the first thing he'd asked, and it should have been the first thing he'd *thought*, not some rot about feeling sorry for himself and wanting to keep his eyes closed.

and "I . . ." It seemed to take her some time to choose her answer. "I am right," she finally decided. "I'm not sure what happened to me when they put that sack over my head. I have never experienced anything like it. When

were in the cart, I spent half the time trying to remember to breathe and the other half trying to remember *how* to breathe.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he wasn’t even sure what he was apologizing for. His list of transgressions was grotesquely long.

But Poppy did not seem to have heard the thickness in his voice. “It’s a little strange,” she went on. “It happened so fast. I could not breathe. And you tell me to think I *was* breathing. But I didn’t *know* that I was. I know—I’m not kidding in any sense.”

“Such things rarely do.” He cleared his throat. “I have seen it before happen to you. One of my men cannot take more than a step into the

“The cave?” she echoed, blinking with surprise. “I had no trouble with the cave.”

He shrugged, since his tied-up hands precluded him from making any of his usual gesticulations. “I would imagine it’s different for everyone. For example, he can sit happily for days with a bag over his head.”

Poppy’s lips parted as she considered that. “I suppose you’re right. It’s a little silly to expect logic in something so entirely illogical.”

He nodded slowly and sat down on the bed. He was exhausted. Now the immediate danger was gone—all the knives and guns (and the people holding the knives and guns) were on the other side of a door—it was just that the energy had just drained from his body.

Or poured. Draining sounded slow. This had been instant. One moment he was poised and ready to fight, and the next he had nothing.

For a moment Poppy looked as if she might sit beside him, but then she turned and awkwardly hugged her arms to her body. “It was very helpful,” she said haltingly. “When you spoke to me. It calmed me down. Thank you.”

“Do not thank me,” he said roughly. He did not want her gratitude. In fact, he could not bear it.

If they got out of this room alive, if he was the one to make that happen, *then* she could say thank you. But until then, he was just the man who would get her killed.

“Do you know where we are?” she finally asked.

“No.”

“I—” She swallowed, then looked toward the blocked window. “How do you think we were in the cart? An hour? We are probably rather far from town by now.”

“Or they retraced their path six times and we’re right around the corner.”

and the from the tavern.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you really think so?”

ng for. “No,” he admitted, “not right around the corner. But we might be much closer than the length of our journey would indicate.”

was so Poppy went to the window and pressed her ear to the glass.

et, I “Can you hear anything?”

making She gave a nod—a tiny one, meant to shush him as much as it did to agreement. “I can’t make much out,” she said, “but it’s not silent. Whether. What we are, it’s not isolated.”

to cave.” Andrew made his way to her side and leaned his ear against the window. Facing each other, they listened. She was right. It wasn’t quiet outside. It was . . . life. Things were happening.

ty of It was just about the least specific descriptor he could have imagined for all I—*things were happening*—and yet it said so much.

it’s “I think we’re still in the city,” he said slowly. “Or at least not very far out.”

7 that Poppy made a murmuring sound of agreement and pressed herself more firmly against the glass. “Some of those voices are female,” she said.

ple Andrew raised a brow. “Somehow I don’t think our captors have a separate female division of their gang.”

as if “Which means they must have brought us to a very ordinary part of the town. Or near the town.”

“That is very good news. The less remote we are, the better.”

she “The greater the chance someone will be able to find us?”

ful,” “The greater the chance we might escape.” At her questioning look, he added, “It’s much easier to hide in a city.”

He She nodded, then pushed herself off the window and took a few steps toward the center of the room. “I think I will sit down.”

pen, “That’s a good idea.”

might She moved toward the bed, then stopped and turned around. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“I don’t suppose you have a knife hidden in your dress,” he muttered.

“Nor a gun,” she said, her eyes telling him that she remembered him well long saying almost the same thing on the day she’d arrived on the *Infinity*. “I’m out of purse of gold. Alas.”

“Alas,” he agreed.

ner Damn it.

Two hours later

uch

There was nothing to do but stare at the door.

Someone had come for Andrew a few minutes earlier. He'd been ha
pushed, half pulled out the door, and she'd not seen him since. Poppy l
o signal heard anything either, which she thought was a good sign. Gunshots w
rever definition loud, and if they tried to injure him in some other way—sure
would make noise.

dow. Wouldn't it?

. There She'd searched the room for something she might use as a weapon, l
only movable objects of heft were the chairs.

l "Needs must," she muttered, and she pulled one close to the door. If
had to, she could heave it into the air and bring it down upon someone
far head. It might even knock someone unconscious.

Hopefully not Andrew.

more She wasn't sure how long she stood there, waiting and listening. Ten
minutes? Twenty? Certainly not thirty. She'd never been good at estim
ecret the passage of time.

And then finally—

town. Footsteps. She gripped the top rail of the chair. She had no idea how
know whether to attack or not. If she heard Andrew's voice? If she did
hear his voice?

he She was just going to have to wait until the door opened. See who w
in.

The noises drew closer.

s She picked up the chair. Held it over her head.

A key turned in the lock.

She held her breath.

e The door swung open.

And Andrew stumbled in.

d. Poppy caught herself mid-swing, halting the downward motion of th
i just before it crashed onto his head.

'Nor a "Aaaaaa!"

He yelled.

She yelled.

They both yelled, and then so did someone in the hallway, presumat

tell them to shut the hell up.

“Get that away from my head,” Andrew shouted, bringing his hands to his face in defense.

“They untied you!” Poppy exclaimed. He’d been pushed into the room with enough force to land him on the floor, and she’d not immediately noticed that he’d been freed.

“The chair,” he ground out.

“Oh, sorry.” The bottom of one of the legs was but an inch from his feet. She hastily set it down behind her. “Are you all right?” she asked. “What happened? Are you all right?”

He nodded. “Let me just get up.”

“Oh yes, I’m sorry.” She helped him to his feet. “Wh—” She bit her tongue. She’d been about to ask him what happened again.

“They brought in someone who speaks English,” he said once he’d gotten himself off.

“And?”

“And he pretended to be my friend. Said he was appalled at our treating me and insisted my hands be untied.”

Poppy wondered why his tone was so close to a sneer. “That’s . . . genuine? Isn’t it?”

“Probably not. It’s a well-known tactic when taking prisoners. One doesn’t act kindly. Tries to gain your trust.”

“Oh.” Poppy considered this. “Still, it’s better that than everyone treating you badly, isn’t it?”

His head cocked to the side in a considering manner. “I suppose. Most other methods of interrogation involve a great deal of blood, so yes, this is preferable.”

She pressed her lips together but did not chide him for such a flip comment. “Did they tell you what they want? I mean, I know they want money, but did they tell you how much?”

“More than I can easily amass.”

Poppy’s lips parted. She didn’t know why, but it had not occurred to her that they might not be able to meet a ransom demand. “I have money,” she said haltingly.

“In Portugal?” His answer was sarcastic, almost derisive.

“Of course not. But if we told them—”

“Don’t be naïve.”

She felt her teeth press together. "I'm just trying to help."
up in "I know." He raked his hand through his hair. "I know."
om Poppy watched him carefully. His second "I know" had been louder
the first, more emphatic.
Angry, even.
She waited a moment, then asked, "Are you going to tell me what
happened?"
eye. "I was trying to."
at She shook her head. "I wasn't asking what happened. I was asking if
you're going to tell me. Because if you're not, if you're going to leave
out because you think it's for my own good, I'd like to know."
He stared at her as if she'd started speaking German. Or Chinese. "V
the devil are you talking about?"
dusted "You keep secrets," she said simply.
"I've known you a week. Of course I keep secrets."
"I'm not scolding you for it. I just want to know."
tment, "For God's sake, Poppy."
"For God's sake, Captain," she returned, letting her voice turn sings
ood? He gave her a look of supreme annoyance. "Really? That's what we
doing?"
person "What else can I do? You won't tell me anything."
"I was *trying* to," he ground out. "You won't stop harping about my
ating keeping secrets."
"I have never harped in my life. And I never said you shouldn't keep
ost secrets! I just want to know if you *are*."
is is She waited for his retort, because surely he had one—that's what the
But instead he just made a sound—something strange and unfamiliar a
ripped from the very heart of him. It was a growl but it wasn't, and wh
it Poppy watched with fascinated trepidation, he turned roughly away.
He planted his hands against the wall above his head, almost groaning
he pressed forward. There was something wild in him, something Poppy
her should have found frightening.
' she She should.
But she didn't.
Her hand tingled. As if she should touch him. As if she might die if
didn't.
Her whole body felt strange. Needy. And though she might be an in

she knew this was desire. Inappropriate and ill-timed, but still there, unraveling within her like a needy beast.

than She took a step back. It was self-preservation.

It didn't help.

What did it mean that she felt this way now, when he was at his most uncivilized?

f Back on the ship she'd felt hints of awareness. She'd wondered for long parts what would have happened if she'd swayed closer when they'd kissed deck. She'd dreamed about his skin, the wicked little patch of it that was revealed when he left off his cravat.

What It wasn't just his neckpiece. He rolled up his sleeves too, and she was mesmerized by his arms—the play of muscles beneath his skin. Most of the men she knew didn't work. They rode, they fenced, they walked the perimeter of their property, but they didn't *work*. It made her wonder at the strength of him, what those arms could do that hers could not.

ong. And she was always aware of his heat. There was a cushion of air around his body that was always a few degrees warmer than the rest. It made her 're want to move closer, and then closer still, to see if it grew hot when she was just a whisper away.

She knew such thoughts were scandalous. Wicked, even. But all of that. No, *none* of that had brought her to such a quivering point as this.

o She watched as he took a long breath, his body taut, as if he were protesting some invisible restraint. His hands had become claws, only his fingertips pressing into the wall above his head.

ey *did*. "Captain James?" she whispered. She wasn't sure if he heard her. He was close enough—the room was far too small for even the softest murmur to go unnoticed. But whatever was going on in his head—it was loud. It was primal, and it was primal, and it had left him on the edge of something very frightening.

"Capt—"

ig as He took a step back. Closed his eyes as he took a breath. And then, with a composure that was far too even and restrained, he turned to her.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

Poppy didn't know what to say.

"Where were we?"

she She had no idea.

nocent, loon. "Right," he continued, as if she weren't goggling at him like a specious fool. "I might have convinced them to let you bring the ransom note to me."

Infinity.”

Her mouth fell open. Why hadn't he said that *first*?

He raked his hand through his hair and strode to the other side of the
It was only a few steps, but he seemed rather like a caged cat. “It was t
st I could do,” he said.

“But—” Poppy fought for words. All she came up with was: “Me?”

ours “It would be a show of good faith.”

on “I was not aware that they had good faith.”

as “And proof of life,” he added in a more brittle tone.

is “Proof of— Oh,” she said, suddenly understanding the term. “That’s
of the terrible phrase.”

He rolled his eyes at her naïveté. “The man I talked with has to cons
someone else. We won't have their answer until tomorrow morning.”

t the Poppy looked toward the window. Earlier, there had been a narrow s
of light between the wooden shutters.

ound “Night has fallen,” Andrew confirmed.

ier “One would think such men would prefer to work under the cover o
e was darkness.”

Again, he rolled his eyes. And again, there was no levity in it, nothin
hat— say that they were in this together. “I have little insight into the workin
their minds,” he said.

Poppy held her tongue for a few seconds, but that was all she could
the manage. “Why are you being so mean?”

A look of impatient incomprehension swept over his face. “I beg yo
e was pardon?”

to go “I'm just saying that you could be a little kinder.”

loud, “Wh—” He shook his head, apparently unable to complete the word

erce. “You have done nothing but growl and snap since you got back.”

He gaped as if he could not believe the cheek of her. “We are being
with captive by God-knows-who and you're complaining that I'm not being
kind?”

“No, of course not. Well, yes, I am. Every time I try to make a sugg
—”

“You have no experience in such things,” he cut in. “Why should I l
you?”

hless “Because I'm not stupid, and the worst that could come of listening
to the is that you'll disagree with what I have to say.”

Andrew pinched the bridge of his nose. “Poppy,” he said, the word a
much of a growl as it was a sigh. “I cannot—”

room. “Wait,” she interrupted. She thought back to what he’d just said. “Do
he best mean to say that you *do* have some experience in such things?”

“Some,” he admitted.

“What does *that* mean?”

“It means this is not the first time I have had to deal with unsavory
characters,” he retorted.

“Is it the first time you’ve been kidnapped?”

“Yes.”

“The first time you’ve been tied up?”

He hesitated.

She gasped. “*Captain Ja—*”

“In this manner,” he said quickly. And with great volume and emph.
if he needed to cut off her query about as much as he needed, for exam
air.

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“Don’t ask that question.”

It was possibly the first time she had seen him *truly* blush, which she
have been enough to make her want to force him to answer. But given
circumstances, she decided to let it pass. For the most part.

She gave him a shrewd look. “Can I ask you that question later?”

“Please don’t.”

“Are you sure?”

There was a noise people sometimes made—it was halfway between
laugh and a cry but it just ended up sounding like irony.

Andrew made that noise, right before saying, “Not even a little bit.”

Poppy took a step back. It seemed wise. After a few moments of wa
held silence, she asked, “What do we do tonight?”

He looked almost relieved she asked, even if his tone was blunt. “I’r
going to inspect the room more carefully now that my hands are untied
don’t anticipate finding a means to escape.”

“So we just wait?”

He gave a grim nod. “I counted at least six men downstairs, plus two
across the hall. I don’t like doing nothing, but I’m even less fond of su

That sound he had made earlier—the one with the laughing and the
and the horrible irony . . .

as She made it too.

o you

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l, but I

o
icide.”
crying

She made it too.

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Chapter 20

Several hours later—after Andrew and Poppy had eaten the bread and the kidnappers had tossed at them, after a comprehensive inspection of room yielded absolutely nothing, after a long stretch of silence eased t into a tacit truce—Andrew sat down. He put his back to the wall, stretc his legs out long in front of him, and sighed.

“You don’t want the chair?” Poppy asked. She was on the bed. She’ opened her mouth to protest when he had told her to take it a few minu earlier, but he’d held up his hand and given her such a stare of *Do not* that she did not say a word.

He shook his head. “Somehow it looks less comfortable than this.”

She looked at the chair, then back at him. “I can see that.”

He smiled wryly.

“The bed isn’t— Well, it’s not uncomfortable, but it’s not, well, an excellent bed.”

At this, he actually laughed. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“It’s not a lie, exactly. It’s all in how you phrase it.”

He snorted. “Said every politician in London.”

This made her smile, which brought him such an absurd amount of j he could only ascribe it to the fact that making someone smile under su circumstances could be treated as nothing short of a triumph.

“Here,” she said, grabbing her pillow, “you should have it.”

He did not try to catch it; there was something much more pleasing letting it sail through the air and clip him on the shoulder. “Just like ol times,” he murmured.

“How I wish.”

He looked up at her. She was sitting cross-legged, her knees bumpin the sides of her blue skirt until the frock formed something of a triangl tried to remember the last time he’d sat in such a position. He didn’t th

he'd ever seen her do it either.

It made perfect sense. No one sat that way in public. It was for home unguarded moments.

"I'm sorry," he said. The words came slowly, not because he was reluctant to say them, but rather because he felt them more keenly than he expected. "For being so short of temper earlier."

She went still, her lips parting as she absorbed the sudden change of mood. "It's all right," she said.

"It's not."

cheese "It is. This is . . ." She looked up toward the ceiling, shaking her head as if she looked like she couldn't quite believe her predicament. "Anyone would think I'm short of temper. It's probably a small miracle *I* haven't strangled *you*."

the He smiled. "It's not easy, you know, to strangle a man."

mem Her head fell to her chest as she laughed. When she looked up she said, "I've learned that recently."

hed "Really. Where would a gently bred woman such as yourself learn something like that?"

d "Well." She leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin in her hands. "I've never fallen in with a band of pirates."

ites His gasp was worthy of the stage. "Never say it."

argue She responded in kind, with wide eyes, breathless drama, and a hunched heart. "I think I might be ruined."

And because something inside him felt like it was falling back into place, he gave her a crooked smile and said, "Not yet."

oy that A week earlier such a quip would have offended her sensibilities, but at the time she didn't even try to pretend. She just rolled her eyes and shook her head and said, "It's a pity I don't have another pillow to throw at you."

ich "Indeed." He made a show of glancing at the floor around him. "I would like to be living in luxury."

about "Did you ever have pillow fights with your siblings?"

d He'd been adjusting the pillow she'd thrown at him behind his back. "This, he paused. "You have to ask?"

She giggled. "I know. Stupid question."

"Did you?" he asked.

ig out "Oh, of course."

e. He He looked at her.

ink "What?" she asked.

“I was waiting for you to tell me that you always won.”

2. For “To my desperate shame, *that* would be a falsehood.”

luctant that Poppy Bridgerton did not win?”

ted. “Poppy *Louise* Bridgerton,” she said officiously. “If you’re going to you should do it correctly.”

topic. “My apologies. Poppy *Louise*. But tell me, who emerged victorious?”

“My two older brothers, of course. Mostly Richard. Roger said I was worth the effort.”

id. She “Too easy for him to beat you?”

d be “He was a full head taller,” she protested. “It could never have been fight.”

“Good of him to bow out, then.”

aid, She pressed her lips together peevishly. “He was hardly so gallant. If he had more interesting ways to torture me.”

uch a “Oh yes.” Andrew grinned. “He was the one who taught you a new language, didn’t he?”

ve “A new language, indeed. You’d better watch out or I’ll farfar you.”

He snorted right into a laugh. “I wish I’d known your brother. I would have worshipped at his feet.”

l to her “I wish that too,” she said with a sad smile, and he knew that what she really meant was that she wished Roger were still alive, still able to make new friends and, yes, devise new ways to torture his little sister.

place, “How did he die?” he asked. She’d never told him that, and until now it felt too intrusive to ask.

her “Infection.” She said it so plainly, as if everything tragic had long since been wrung out of the word and the only thing left was resignation.

ould “I’m sorry.” He’d seen more than one man succumb to infection. It seemed to start so simply. A scrape, a wound . . . His brother knew a man who’d worn an ill-fitting pair of boots and then died of a purulent blister, but at

“He was bitten by a dog,” Poppy said. “It wasn’t even a very bad bite, mean, I’ve been bitten by a dog before, haven’t you?”

He nodded, even though he hadn’t.

“It didn’t heal properly. It looked like it was going to. It was completely fine for a few days, maybe just a little red. Swollen. And then . . .” She swallowed and looked to the side.

“You don’t have to finish,” he said softly.

But she wanted to. He could see it in her face.

“He had a fever,” she continued. “It came on overnight. He went to bed and he seemed fine. I was the one who brought him a mug of hot cider and he knew.”

She hugged her arms to her body, closing her eyes while she drew a breath. “He was so hot. It was unnatural. His skin was like paper. And the worst part was, it wasn’t even fast. It took five days. Do you know how long five days can be?”

It was one day less than her time aboard the *Infinity*. Which suddenly didn’t seem like very much time at all.

“Sometimes he was insensible,” she said, “but sometimes he wasn’t, he knew—he *knew* he was going to die.”

“Did he tell you that?”

She shook her head. “He would never. He kept saying, ‘I’ll be fine, stop looking so worried.’”

“He called you Pops?” Andrew tried not to smile, but there was something irresistibly charming about it.

“He did. But only sometimes.” She said that in a way that made him think this had not occurred to her before. She cocked her head to the side, her eyes tipping up and to the left as if she might find her memories there. “It was when he was serious, but he was perhaps trying to sound as if he wasn’t.”

She looked over at Andrew, and he was relieved to see that some of the bleakness had left her face. “He was rarely serious,” she said. “Or at least that’s what he wanted people to think. He was very observant, and I think people were less guarded around him because they thought he was a scapegrace.”

“I have some experience with that particular dichotomy,” he said in a steady voice.

“I would imagine you do.”

“What happened next?” he asked.

“He died,” she said with a tiny helpless shrug. “To the very end, he pretended it wasn’t going to happen, but he never could lie about important things.”

Whereas Andrew had *only* lied about important things. But he was trying so hard not to think about that right then.

Poppy let out a sad little puff of a laugh. “The morning before he passed he even boasted that he was going to massacre me in the egg roll at the

May fair, but I could see it in his eyes. He knew he would not live.”

bed, “Massacre?” Andrew echoed. He liked this particular choice of words,
so I She gave a watery smile. “It would never have been enough just to tell
me.”

long “No, I expect not.”

the She nodded slowly. “I knew he was lying. He knew I knew it too. A
very long wondered . . . Why? Why would he cling to his story when he knew he
wasn’t fooling me?”

y “Perhaps he thought he was doing you a kindness.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

, and She did not seem to have more to say on the subject, so Andrew went
to fussing with his pillow. It was both flat *and* lumpy, and it was impossible
to get into the right position. He tried mushing it, pushing it, folding it
Pops. Nothing worked.

“You look very uncomfortable,” Poppy said.

nothing He didn’t bother glancing up from his efforts. “I’m fine.”

“Are you going to lie to me like Roger did?”

I think That got his attention. “Why would you say such a thing?”

my eyes “Just come over and sit on the bed,” she said in an exasperated voice
as not as if either of us will sleep tonight, and if I have to watch another night
’t.” of your fidgeting I’m going to go mad.”

the “I wasn’t—”

ast “You were.”

ink They held each other’s stare for a moment or two, narrow-eyed and
browed.

She won.

a dry “Fine.” He got up. “I’ll sit on the other side.” He moved round to the
side of the bed and sat near the edge. She was right. It wasn’t a particularly
excellent bed. Still, it was a far cry better than the floor.

“Do you think it’s strange,” she asked once he was settled, “that we’ve
tried to having such an ordinary conversation?”

ment He glanced at her sideways. “Bickering about where to sit?”

“Well, yes, and talking about childhood pranks, and my brother’s part
rying I suppose that’s rather sad, but it’s certainly ordinary. It’s not as if we’ve
having great philosophical discussions about the meaning of—”

ssed, “Life?” he supplied.

next She shrugged.

He turned so that he could see her without twisting his neck. “Do you want to spend the evening having great philosophical discussions?”

“Not really, but don’t you think it seems as if we should? Given our precarious situation?”

He leaned back against the headboard and allowed just enough time to give his next words the air of an announcement. “When I was in school they made us read this book.”

She turned with her whole body, so curious was she at his abrupt change of subject.

“It was awful,” he told her.

“What was it?”

He thought for a moment. “I don’t even remember. That’s how bad it was.”

“Why did they make you read it?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Someone once said it was important.”

“Who gets to decide such things?” she wondered.

“Which books are important? I have no idea, but in this case, they made a grave mistake. I tell you, every word was torture.”

“It’s so boring. So you read it, then? The whole book?”

“I did. I hated every moment of it, but I read the blasted thing because I knew we would be quizzed upon it, and I did not wish to disappoint my father.” He turned and looked at her with a dry expression. “That’s a bad reason to read a book, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.”

“A person should read a book because it speaks to something in his soul. Andrew said this with a passion that belied the fact that he’d never actually thought about this before. At least not in this way. “Because it fills a thirst for knowledge that is *his*, not that of some man in a tower two hundred years ago.”

She regarded him for a moment, then said, “Why are we talking about this exactly?”

“Because we shouldn’t have to talk about whether the universe can torment a man’s soul if we don’t want to.”

“I do not,” she said with wide eyes. “I truly do not.”

“Good.” He settled back into his position and they sat in silence for a moment. It was all rather peaceful and banal until she said—

“We might die.”

u want “What?” Everything snapped—his voice, his head as he whipped around to face her. “Don’t talk that way.”

“I’m not saying we *will* die. But we could. Don’t lie to me and deny

“We’re worth too much,” Andrew told her. “They won’t kill us.”

to pass But did the men realize the prize they’d captured? Thus far, everything pointed to a normal (if there was such a thing) kidnapping. It was not inconceivable the Portuguese gang had seen two obviously well-to-do men of foreign origin and figured that someone would be willing to pay a ransom for them.

But on the other hand, it was possible that someone had uncovered a leak in the government. If that was the case, and the men holding them were politically motivated, then Andrew became a different sort of prize.

(And God only knew *which* politics might motivate them; there were fringe groups the world over who detested the British.)

Captain Andrew James was not entirely unknown in Lisbon. He had been introduced to Robert Walpole—the British envoy—just that morning. He had not made a special effort; he’d long since learned that on his secret missions, it was most effective to hide in plain sight. He put on his finest clothes, walked and talked like an aristocrat, and strolled right up to Mr. Walpole’s home.

“They won’t kill us,” he said again. But he wasn’t sure he meant it.

loody “I don’t know if that’s true,” Poppy said.

Andrew blinked. “What?”

“What you said. About our being too valuable. We’re only valuable if they know we’re valuable.”

ually “They know I have a ship in the harbor.”

irst for But then again, if they knew he carried secrets for the crown, they might see more value in his elimination than any riches he might bring.

“We really won’t know anything until morning, will we?” she asked

ut this, He sighed. “It’s not likely. But as I told you, I think I may have convinced them to let you go.”

fit into She nodded.

“Do *not* insist upon staying with me,” he added.

“I would never,” Poppy said.

a bit. It Andrew paused. “You wouldn’t?”

“Of course not. How can I help you from within this prison? If I leave, I might be able to do something to get you out.”

ound to “Precisely.” Andrew was pleased by her swift grasp of the situation, yet at the same time slightly pricked that she was quite so eager to dep
it.” Still, if he did manage to get her out, she would *not* be returning to r

him. He had connections in Lisbon who could get her back to England
ing needed only to deliver her to them.

Or as the case would likely be, she needed to deliver herself.

He thought of all the causes he’d thought were worth dying for. Not
for of them meant a thing compared to the life of this woman.

Was this love? Could it be? All he knew was that he could no longer
his role conceive of a future without her.

e She was laughter.

She was joy.

e And she might die because he’d been too bloody selfish to leave her
ship.

l met He’d known it was safer to keep her on board. He’d *known* it, and st
brought her ashore.

rts of He’d wanted to see her smile. No, it was far more selfish than that. I
er wanted to be her hero. He’d wanted her to look at him with worship in
r. eyes, to think the sun rose and set on his face.

He closed his eyes. He had to make this up to her. He had to *protect*

She wasn’t his to protect, and now she might never be, but he would
her safe.

Even if it was the last thing he did.

if they

Andrew was not sure how long they sat in silence, resting side by side
head of the bed. Every now and then he thought Poppy might say some
ight —she would make one of those small but sharp and sudden moves, as
were about to speak. Finally, just when he thought they’d settled into t
l. stillness of the night, she spoke.

vinced “Last night . . . I don’t think I told you, but it was my first kiss.”

He went still. He’d assumed as much, but it had seemed rude to ask,
especially since she’d declared they would never speak of it again.

“Captain—”

“Andrew,” he cut in. If indeed this was their last night, he was damr
going to spend it with someone who called him by his name.

ve, I “Andrew,” she repeated, and it felt like she was trying it out on her t
“It suits you.”

and It seemed an odd thing to say. “You knew that was my name,” he pointed out.

rescue “I know. But it’s different to say it.”

; he He wasn’t sure he understood what she meant by that. He wasn’t sure he knew either. But it was important. Somehow they both knew that.

“You were talking about the kiss,” he said quietly.

a one She nodded, and he could see tension in her throat as she swallowed. She was nervous; of course she was. He himself was terrified. This was not the first time he’d found himself in a dangerous situation. It was not even the first time he’d thought he might die.

But it was the first time he thought he might take an innocent soul with him.

on the “It was my first kiss,” she said, “and it was lovely. But I know there’s more.”

ill he’d “More?” he echoed. He cast a wary look at her.

“Not *more* more. I know a bit of that.”

He’d “You know a bit of . . . what?”

her “Not *know* know.”

“Dear God,” he said under his breath.

her. “I know what happens between a husband and wife,” she said, almost as if she wished to reassure him.

He could only stare. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but are you trying to tell me that you *know* know?”

at the “Of course not!” She flushed; even in the dim light of their candle he could see that.

ething “Surely you can see my confusion.”

if she “Honestly,” she muttered, and he could not tell if she was embarrassed or chagrined.

He let out a breath. Surely this was the end of the conversation. He’d led a saintly life, but he’d done nothing to deserve *this*.

But no. Poppy pressed her lips together, and in an uncharacteristically officious voice said, “My cousin told me.”

He cleared his throat. “Your cousin told you.”

well She gave him an exasperated look. “Why do you keep repeating everything I say?”

ongue. Because he had a feeling he was going stark, raving—

“It’s probably a sign of how much I do not wish to have this conversation.”

ointed he said instead.

She ignored this. “My cousin Billie is married, and—”

He fought the urge to howl with bitter, inappropriate laughter. He knew she was Billie Bridgerton—Billie Rokesby now. She was his sister-in-law and his oldest friends.

“Billie is a woman,” Poppy said, obviously misinterpreting the horror on Andrew’s face. “It’s a very unusual nickname, I know. But it suits her. The given name is Sybilla.”

“Of course it is,” he muttered.

She looked at him with a queer expression. Or rather, she looked at him as if *he* had a queer expression. Which he undoubtedly did. He felt a little to be honest. She was talking about Billie, and if there had ever been a chance for him to tell her who he really was, this was it.

And yet he couldn’t do it.

Or maybe he could.

Would it make her safer? Could the knowledge of his true identity somehow give her a tool that would help her get home? Or was the opposite true? Perhaps she was better left in the dark.

“Andrew. Andrew!”

He blinked.

“You’re not listening to me. This is important.”

Everything was important now. Every moment.

“My apologies,” he said. “My thoughts are racing.”

“As are mine!”

He took a moment to compose himself. It didn’t work. He took a breath, then another, then adopted a bland expression and looked her in the eyes. “How can I help you?” he said.

His resolute affability seemed to take her off guard. But only for a moment.

And then Andrew saw his downfall unfold on her face.

Was it possible that he’d once thought that he loved to watch her this way, as if she were an idiot, clearly.

Her lips parted and then pursed. Her gaze flitted up and to the right, as if she were so often her habit. She turned her head—not a tilt but a turn—to the side.

He’d seen her do all these things. He’d thought them enchanting. But as she turned back to look at him, her dark eyelashes sweeping up until they met his, green gaze met his, he knew that his life was about to be forever altered.

“Kiss me,” she said.

He froze.

“Please,” she added, as if *that* were the reason he had made no response of know there is more to a kiss.”

Her words hung in the air. It was like one of those awkward moments when all conversation stops, and one person is talking too loudly, and then everyone hears a shout.

Except Poppy had not been shouting.

“Isn’t there?” she asked.

He didn’t move. He couldn’t even bring himself to nod.

“If I’m going to die, I’d like to have a proper kiss.”

“Poppy,” he finally managed to say. “I—”

She looked at him expectantly, and God help him, his gaze dropped to his lips.

The universal signal.

He wanted to kiss her so bad.

But he said, “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Of course it isn’t. But I want to do it anyway.”

So did he. But he wasn’t going to.

One of them was insane. He was sure of it. He just didn’t know which.

“Do you not *want* to kiss me?” she asked.

He nearly burst out in laughter at that. Not want to kiss her? At that moment he wanted it more than he wanted to *breathe*.

“I want— Bloody hell, Poppy, I want—” He swore, again, and the vehemence of it seemed to turn his head. He looked past his shoulder, to the hardwood floor. His words, when he found them, felt ripped from his soul. “I’ve already wronged you in so many ways.”

“Oh, *now* you’re trying to be a gentleman.”

“Yes,” he practically barked. “Yes, I am. And my *God*, you’re making it difficult.”

She smiled.

“Don’t,” he warned.

“It’s just a kiss,” she said.

“That’s your tactic now?” He mimicked her tone. “*It’s just a kiss.*”

She deflated. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I’ve never tried to convince a man to kiss me before.”

Andrew closed his eyes and groaned. This need he felt for her—it had

simmering for days, a low, steady flame he knew how to control.

Until now.

onse. “I He might be able to withstand her if they were back on the ship. Or
ts flicker of the candlelight didn’t send such tantalizing shadows dancing
then her chest.

He could stay firm if they weren’t sitting on a *bed*, for God’s sake, i
had not turned to him with those perfect lips and endless green eyes an
asked him to *kiss* her.

That slow burn . . . the one so quiet and constant he’d almost gotten
it . . .

It wasn’t quiet anymore.

to her won’t be able to stop.”

“Of course you will,” she said, almost brightly.

He could only stare. Was she trying to *reassure* him?

“You’re a gentleman,” she said, as if that were enough explanation f

“You will stop the moment I ask you to.”

He let out a rough, humorless laugh. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know.”

ch. It took a moment for him to realize that his head was shaking in dist
“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he said hoarsely. Hell, he wasn
he knew what he was saying either. He barely knew what he was *think*
right now.

down But she was undeterred. “I know exactly what I’m saying, and I kno
n his you.”

“Poppy . . .”

“Earlier today you said that I know you as well as anyone. I’m tellin
I know that you will stop the moment I ask you to.”

ng it And then, before he could formulate a reply, she said, “You will pro
stop *before* I ask you to.”

“*Christ*,” he burst out, practically jumping off the bed. “You have no
No bloody idea. Do you know anything of what it means to be a man?”

“I might die,” she whispered.

“That’s no reason to barter away your innocence.”

o She climbed down from the bed and stood in front of him. “All I wa
kiss.”

ad been He grabbed her. Pulled her close. “It won’t be just a kiss, Poppy. It c

never be just a kiss between us.”

And then—God help him—she whispered, “I know.”

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never be just a kiss between us.”

And then—God help him—she whispered, “I know.”

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Chapter 21

Poppy did not close her eyes.

She could not miss this moment. She would not. And indeed, she saw exactly when Andrew gave in, the very second he realized he could not deny her.

Or himself.

But if she saw that moment, she did not see the next. He moved so quickly he literally stole her breath. One instant she was watching passion sparkle flare in his eyes, and the next his mouth was on hers, fierce and hungry.

Relentless.

It was a kiss that made the other one—under the stars, on the deck of *Infinity*—seem a different species.

If her first kiss had been magic, this one was a beast. Poppy felt enveloped, overwhelmed, almost overtaken.

He kissed her like a man possessed, maybe even like a man with nothing to lose.

His mouth was demanding, almost unforgiving, and whatever part of her that still retained sanity wondered if he was punishing her for having pushed him too far.

It should have scared her. His passion, finally unleashed, was a primal, dangerous thing.

But she felt dangerous too.

Reckless.

She felt *amazing*.

So she kissed him back. She had no idea what she was doing, but it was like instinct. All she knew was that she wanted more. More of his touch, more of his heat. More of *him*.

And so when his tongue swooped into her mouth and explored, she was the same with her own. When he nipped at her bottom lip, she nipped at his.

And when his hands slid down her back and cupped her bottom, hers did the same.

He drew back, almost smiling. “Are you copying me?”

“Shouldn’t I?”

He squeezed, lightly.

So did she.

He brought one of his hands to her hair, winding a thick lock around his fist.

She sank both of her hands in his unruly mane, pulling him down for another kiss.

“You always were a quick study,” he murmured against her lips.

She chuckled, loving the way it felt to laugh right into his skin. “You know that as if you’ve known me longer than a week.”

“Is that all it’s been?” He twisted them around until Poppy’s back was against the bed. “I think I’ve known you forever.”

His words rang inside her, unlocking something she’d been afraid to examine. It did feel as if she’d known him forever, as if there were things she could say to him that she could not share with anyone else.

If she asked a silly question he might laugh, but only because he focused on her curiosity, not because he thought her a curiosity herself.

He had secrets, of that she was certain, but she *knew* him. She knew the man within.

“How did you do that?” he murmured.

Poppy wasn’t sure what he was asking, but she didn’t care. She brought her arms back up to his neck, the motion causing her hips to tilt forward, pressing against his powerful thighs.

“Poppy,” he moaned. “My God, Poppy.”

“Andrew,” she whispered. She’d used his name so infrequently. It felt like a caress on her lips.

“I love your hair,” he said, using it to tug her face toward his. “Every time it was torture, watching you taking it down and braiding it.”

“But I tried to do that when you weren’t watching.”

“*Tried*,” he emphasized. “I’m a sneaky bastard. I couldn’t decide how I liked it best. Down, so I could watch the play of light on every strand.” He dropped the lock in his hand, letting it bounce against her back—“or you could imagine taking the pins out myself.”

“What about the braid?”

lid the “Oh, I loved that too. You have no idea how much I wanted to pull i
“So you could dip it in a pot of ink?” she teased, remembering how
brothers had liked to do that to her.

l his “Now that would be a crime,” he murmured. “Didn’t I just tell you I
to watch all the colors?” He ran his fingers through her hair. Poppy cou
imagine what he found so interesting, but he clearly loved it, and God
her, it made her feel beautiful.

r “At first,” he said, bringing the ends to his lips for a kiss, “I wanted
it because you were so . . . bloody . . . annoying.”

“And now?”

u say He pulled her more tightly against him. “Now you vex me in a diffe
way.”

as to Poppy felt her body arch, instinctively seeking his heat. He was hard
strong—every bit of him—and she felt the evidence of his desire press
insistently against her belly.

) She knew something of the mechanics of intercourse. As Andrew lil
igs she tease, she was curious about everything. When her cousin Billie told h
little bit of what to expect when she married, Poppy had been confused
nd joy enough that she asked for more details. Honestly, it had not made muc
the first time Billie had explained it.

the But then, with a lot less embarrassment than Poppy would have prec
Billie had explained that the male member changed when it became an
It lengthened, it grew harder. And then when it was done, it went back
ight normal.

d, Poppy had thought this most peculiar. Imagine if some part of *her* m
when she felt passion or desire. She’d laughed at the thought of her ear
suddenly developing points or her hair springing up into curls. Billie h
elt like laughed too, but it had been a different kind of laughter—not unkind, j
different. She told Poppy that some things could not be explained, only
y night experienced.

w I Poppy had been dubious, but now it almost made sense. She felt so
different on the inside that it was impossible to believe she might be
—he physically unchanged. Her breasts felt heavy, and yes, bigger. Her nipi
p, so I had rucked into tight peaks, much like when the temperature dropped,
when his hand had skimmed across the material of her bodice, not ever
touching her skin, it had sent jolts of electricity to her very core.

That had not happened the last time she’d been cold.

t.” She felt hungry . . . hungry at her core. She wanted to wrap her legs
her him and pull him close. She wanted to feel that hardness pressed against
She needed contact. She needed pressure.

I love She needed him.

ouldn't As if he'd read her mind, his hands dipped past her bottom to the top
help her thighs, and he hoisted her up, only to then tumble her down upon the
He was above her in under a second, moving like a cat, predatory and
to yank His eyes devoured her.

rent “Poppy,” he groaned, and her heart soared at the sound of her name
lips. It didn't seem to matter that he'd said it before; it felt different now
the two simple syllables had become part of the very structure of his ki

l, and The weight of him pressed her into the mattress, and even though he
ing the one who had her pinned, she felt powerful. It was thrilling to think
she had brought him to this point. That she was the reason this unflappable
man was nearly out of control.

ked to And that power . . . it did something to her. It made her bold. It made
er a hungry.

l It made her crave his touch, his strength.

h sense She wanted to be as audacious as he was, to reach out and take what
wanted. But she didn't know—couldn't have known—where to start.

licted, She wanted to learn.

oused. She brought her eyes to his. “I want to touch you.”

to “Do it,” he commanded.

He'd long since disposed of his cravat, and so she reached out and touched
rotated the warm skin of his neck, trailing her fingers along the tightly corded
s muscles that ran down to his shoulder.

ad He shuddered.

ust “Do you like that?” she whispered.

7 He moaned. “So much.”

She caught her lip between her teeth, fascinated by his reaction. When
fingers dipped under the edge of his shirt, his body jerked. She started
away, but his hand immediately came to cover hers.

ples Their eyes met. *Don't go*, his seemed say.

and Slowly, he lifted his hand, and she resumed her lazy exploration, drawing
n circles and scribbles on his skin. She could have done this all night, might
even have tried to, but he let out a hoarse groan and pulled himself back.

He sat upright, straddling her as he yanked his shirt up and over his

around Poppy stopped breathing.
st her. He was beautiful.
He had the body of a man who used it, a man who worked, and worked hard. His muscles were exquisitely sculpted under his skin, and she could help but wonder what movement had built each one.
os of “What are you thinking?” he whispered.
he bed. She looked up, only then realizing that she’d been staring at him.
sleek. “I was wondering how you got *this*.” She laid her hand over his bicep, marveling over the way the hard curve of his muscle filled her palm.
on his He sucked in his breath. “Jesus, Poppy.”
w, as if “What sort of movement builds each muscle?” She moved her hand to his upper arm. It flexed beneath her fingers, the bulge of it sliding and changing shape under his skin.
isses. Their eyes met again. *Keep going*, his seemed to say.
: was She drew lightly downward, over his elbow to the softer skin of his arm. “How does one get this sort of muscle?” she wondered, sliding her hand to the muscle just below his elbow. “Lifting a crate?”
that “Gripping the wheel.”
able She looked up. He’d sounded breathless.
e her She’d made him sound that way. Again, she felt power.
: she She *was* power.
She looked down, mesmerized by the contrast between his skin and his. He’d spent hours in the sun, and his skin had been burnished to a golden glow. The texture too told of time spent out of doors—in the wind, in the water, was rough, and calloused. And beautiful.
ouched upper arm, his long fingers nearly encircling it. “And this.”
She looked down, mesmerized by the contrast between his skin and his. He’d spent hours in the sun, and his skin had been burnished to a golden glow. The texture too told of time spent out of doors—in the wind, in the water, was rough, and calloused. And beautiful.
en her “I like your hands,” she said abruptly, taking one between both of her hands.
to pull “My hands?” He smiled, and his eyes crinkled at the corners.
“They’re perfect,” she said. “Large and square.”
“Square?” He sounded amused, but in the best possible way.
“And *capable*.” She brought his hand to her chest, placed it over her heart.
rawing “They make me feel safe.”
ght He drew a shaky breath, and his touch seemed to grow heavier on her back.
k. His palm rotated, inching down her torso until his hand lay over her breast.
head. He squeezed gently, and she moaned with surprised pleasure.

His eyes caught hers. “Are you asking me to stop?”

No.

ked “Not yet,” she whispered.

uld not She’d loosened her dress earlier, trying to make herself more comfortable and now, when he curled his finger under the edge of the bodice, the fabric slid easily over her shoulders.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

ist, “So are—”

“Shhhh.” He put a finger to her lips. “Do not contradict me. If I want to call you beautiful, I will do so without interruption.”

to his “But—”

nging “Shush.”

“I—”

inner His mouth found hers again, hungry and mischievous, nibbling at the edge of her lips as he murmured, “There are many ways to silence you, but this is the most pleasant as this.”

Poppy had only wanted to say that he was beautiful too, but as he kissed his way down to the edge of her gown, it no longer seemed so imperative. And when she felt the fabric slide ever further down her body, almost to her breasts, she could do nothing but arch her back to ease the way.

He looked up, his eyes hot but clear. “Do you want me to stop?”

No.

er “Not yet,” she whispered.

And then his lips found her, closing over the peak of her breast in a way more intimate than she could ever have dreamed. She gasped his name and arched off the bed, barely able to comprehend the electricity he seemed to spark within her.

He kissed and touched and stroked, and Poppy was helpless against his onslaught. He knew exactly where to kiss, exactly how to touch—firmly and gently, with his teeth. Everything he did brought pleasure—but it was an agonizing pleasure, because she needed more.

Something was building inside her.

“What are you doing to me?” she gasped.

He went still. Looked up. “Do you want me to stop?”

er skin. *No.*

east. “Not yet,” she whispered.

And then his hand moved between her legs, touching her more intimately

than she had ever done herself.

She was wet, unnaturally so—or so she thought. She nearly scooted from under him, so embarrassed was she by the flood of moisture between her legs. But then he groaned and said, “You’re so wet for me. So ready for me.”

And she realized that maybe it wasn’t so unnatural. Maybe it was what every body was supposed to do.

His fingers slid inside, and she gasped again. She knew this was what she would eventually join with her, but still, it was a surprise. She felt stretched and tickled, and it was downright bizarre that someone might be able to reach her from the inside. Bizarre, and yet still . . . right.

“Do you like that?” he whispered.

She nodded. “I think so.”

His fingers went still, but he did not pull them away. “You’re not sure?”

“It’s just very strange,” she admitted. He rested his forehead against hers, and though she could not see his expression at such close distance, she felt him smile. “That could be interpreted in many ways,” he said.

“No, I . . . I like it. I just . . .” She could not remember the last time she had been so inarticulate. But if she’d ever had cause, this was it. “It just feels like it is all moving forward and I don’t know where. Or how.”

He smiled again. She felt it.

“I know where,” he said.

His words seemed to reach inside her body, arousing her from the inside out.

“And I know how.” His lips found her ear. “Do you trust me?”

He should have known by now that she did, but she still was grateful for what he asked. So she nodded, and then when she wasn’t sure he saw, she said, “Yes.”

He kissed her once, lightly on the mouth, and then his fingers began to move again. It was everything, and it wasn’t enough, and when she gasped, he only seemed to redouble his efforts, bringing her closer . . .

And closer . . .

“Andrew?” She sounded panicked. She hadn’t meant to sound panicked. But she didn’t know what was happening. Her body was no longer her own.

“Just let go,” he murmured.

“But—”

“Let go, Poppy.”

She did.

Something inside her clenched and then burst open, and she had no idea what had just happened to her, but she rose off the bed with enough poppy to lift him with her.

She could not speak.

She did not breathe.

She was suspended . . . transformed.

Then she collapsed.

She still could not speak, but at least now she was breathing. It took a moment for her eyes to focus, but when they did, she saw Andrew gaze down at her, smiling like a cat in cream.

He looked very proud of himself.

"I saw stars," she said.

This made him chuckle.

"Actual stars. On the insides of my eyelids, but still." She closed her eyes again. "They're gone now."

His chuckle grew, and he flopped down onto the bed beside her, shaking the mattress with his mirth.

Poppy lay boneless. She had no words to describe what had just happened although if she thought about it, *I saw stars* came pretty close.

"Not bad for a first kiss," Andrew said.

"Second kiss," she murmured.

It made him laugh. She loved to make him laugh.

She turned to look at him. His beautiful chest was illuminated by the candlelight, and he was watching her with a tenderness that made her feel like something more.

She wanted time.

She wanted more time right now, but mostly she wanted a guarantee for tomorrow.

She reached out to touch his shoulder, and he sucked in his breath at the contact.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, confused.

"No, I'm just . . . a little . . ." He adjusted his position. "Uncomfortable."

Poppy frowned at the cryptic words, until—

She swallowed awkwardly. How selfish she was. "You didn't . . ."

She couldn't finish the sentence. He would know what she meant.

"It's all right," he said.

She wasn't sure that it was, though. If this was their final night on earth, shouldn't he get to experience the same pleasure that she had?

"You . . ." She had no idea how to say this, wasn't even sure if she should. "Maybe I—"

"Poppy."

There was something in his voice. She went silent.

"There is a chance that you will reach safety and I won't," he said.

"Don't say that," she whispered, tugging her dress back over her shoulders. She sat up. This was the sort of conversation for which one ought to be sitting upright. "We are *both* going to escape."

Or neither, she thought. But she would not give voice to that. Not now.

"I'm sure that's true," he said in a tone that she knew was meant to reassure. "But I'll not leave you with an illegitimate child."

Poppy swallowed and nodded, wondering why she felt so hollow when he had done exactly what she'd asked of him. He'd shown far more sense and restraint than she had. Just as she'd predicted, he had stopped *before* she had asked him to. He had known, even when she did not, that if he had pressed forward, she would not have refused him.

She would have welcomed it and borne the consequences.

She could no longer deny the truth exploding in her heart. She loved him. And even now, knowing that she might indeed reach safety without him, some very impractical corner of her heart wanted to take a piece of him for herself.

Her hand went to her abdomen, to the spot where there was most assuredly *not* a child.

"It turns out you were right about me," Andrew said. His lips curved into a tiny smile, but he sounded sad. Sad and ironic.

Regretful.

"I am a gentleman," he said. "And I will not compromise you if I cannot give you the protection of my name."

Poppy James. She could be Poppy James.

It was strange to her ears, and yet somehow lovely.

Maybe not impossible.

But not likely.

"Poppy, listen to me," Andrew said, his voice taking on a new, sudden urgency. "I'm going to give you an address. You must memorize it."

Poppy nodded. She could do that.

arth, "It is the home of the British envoy."
"The Brit—"

neant "Please," he said, holding up a hand. "Let me finish. His name is Mr. Walpole. You must go alone and tell him I sent you."
She stared at him in disbelief. "You know the British envoy?"
He nodded once, curtly.
Her lips parted, and the silence between them stretched taut. "You're a ship's captain, are you?"

His eyes met hers. "Not just, no."
She had a hundred questions. And a thousand theories. She was not angry—or if she was, whether she even had a right to be. After all, why would he have told her about his secret life? She'd come aboard a ship as a prisoner. He'd had no reason to trust her until recently.

But still, it pricked.
She waited, holding her tongue for a moment or two, hoping he would elaborate. But he did not.

When she finally spoke, her words felt stiff. "What else should I tell you?"
"Everything that has happened since we docked," he said. "Tell him precisely what happened at the Taberna da Torre. To me, to you, to Selma, to Farias and Billy. Everyone."

She nodded.
He got out of bed and pulled on his shirt. "You must also tell him what you are."
"What? No! I don't want anyone to know who—"

"Your name carries weight," he said sharply. "If ever there was a time when you must use it, it is now."
She got down from the bed; it felt awkward to be so indolent while he paced about the room. "Won't it be enough that I'm a gentlewoman?"

"Probably. But the Bridgerton name will lend greater urgency to the matter."
She acquiesced. "Very well." It could end in disaster for her, but if it meant Andrew had a greater chance of rescue, she would tell the British envoy what she was.

"Good," Andrew said briskly. "Now listen, there is one more thing you must say."
She looked at him expectantly.
"You must say that you long for blue skies."

“Blue skies?” Poppy gave a dubious frown. “Why?”

Andrew’s eyes bore down on hers. “What will you say to him?”

“Is it some sort of code? It must be a code.”

He closed the distance between them and his hands landed heavily on her shoulders, forcing her to look up at him. “What will you say to him?” he repeated.

“Stop! Fine. I’ll say that I long for blue skies.”

He nodded, slowly, and with something that almost looked like relief.

“But what does it mean?” she asked.

He didn’t say anything.

“Andrew, you can’t expect me to deliver a message when I don’t know what it means.”

He started tucking his shirt into his breeches. “I do it all the time.”

“What?”

He shot her a glance over his shoulder. “Do you think I know what was in the packet of papers I gave to the British envoy yesterday?”

Her mouth fell open. “That’s what you—”

“Do you think I ever know?” He started pulling on his boots, and Poppy could only stare. How could he act as if all of this was *normal*?

“How often do you do this?” she asked.

“Often enough.”

“And you’re not curious?”

He’d been tying his cravat, his fingers expertly looping and tucking fabric. But at this he went still. “My job—no, my duty—is to transport documents and carry messages. Why do you think I could not delay my departure for Portugal? It wasn’t about *me*. It was never about me.”

He had to deliver a message. He was working for the government. Poppy’s brain was spinning. Everything was starting to make sense.

“This is how I serve my country,” he said. “It is what you must do, and so will you.”

“You’re telling me that I am somehow doing a service to the crown by telling a man I’ve never met that I long for blue skies?”

He looked her straight in the eye. “Yes.”

“I . . .” She looked down. She was wringing her hands. She hadn’t realized it.

“Poppy?”

She let out a long breath. “I will do as you ask. But I must warn you

don't think I will be able to lead him back. I'm sure I will be blindfolded again when they take me back to the ship."

"You won't need to. When you are released you'll be given some secret message from the men holding us. Give it to Mr. Walpole. He will know what to do from there."

"And then what will I do?"

"Keep yourself safe."

Poppy felt her jaw clamp into a rigid vise. It was not in her nature to be idle by when she could be helpful, but in such a situation, she had to wonder—*could* she be helpful? Or would she just get in the way?

"Do not do something stupid, Poppy," he warned. "As God is my witness—"

"I can barely fire a rifle," she said testily. "I'm not going to come swarming back with delusions of saving you myself."

He smiled a bit at that.

"What?"

"I'm just imagining you swishing. I'm not sure what it is."

She glared at him.

"Listen to me." He took her hand. "I appreciate your concern more than I could ever say. And without you—without your going to see the envoy, the situation would be very bleak. But you must not do more than that."

"I know," she mumbled. "I would be in the way."

He did not contradict her. She had kind of hoped he would.

"Poppy," he said, his voice urgent, "I—"

They both froze at the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs. Their eyes were coming back, earlier than they'd expected.

Poppy's eyes widened. Andrew dropped her hand and took a step back. His demeanor changed as if his every muscle had been put on alert. His eyes darted to the door, then to Poppy, then did a quick sweep of the room before landing on his half boots, on their sides by the table where she'd kicked them off hours before. He scooped them up and handed them to her. "Put them on."

She did. Quickly.

The footsteps drew close, followed by the sound of a key being inserted and turned into the lock.

Poppy turned to Andrew. She was terrified. More than she'd been throughout the entire ordeal.

"I will get out of here," he vowed, even as the doorknob made an ominous

ed turn. "And I will find you."

And then all Poppy could do was pray.

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In the end, it was simple. Terrifying, but simple. Minutes after the band came back, Poppy was blindfolded and returned to the *Infinity*. The journey took no more than a quarter of an hour; it seemed Andrew had been right about their circuitous route the day before.

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It was still dark when she reached the ship, but the deck was already teeming with sailors, more than Poppy would have expected so early in the morning. But this was no ordinary morning. Their captain had been taken prisoner, and they had to be ready for anything.

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The first person she saw was Green, which was fortunate, since he was one of only three people on board she actually knew. He and Brown insisted on escorting her to the address Andrew had provided, and after a quick check with Billy, who was still groggy but otherwise recuperating, Poppy headed out into the city.

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"D'you think they're watching us?" Brown asked, his bushy brows drawing down as he flicked his eyes from one side of the street to the other. The sun had only just come up, the pinkish light casting a mysterious glow over the city.

"Probably," Poppy said. "Captain James told them that I would need to meet with someone to secure the funds. So they're not expecting me to remain on board."

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"I don't like it," Brown muttered.

Neither did Poppy, but she didn't see how she had a choice.

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"This is what the captain told her to do," Green said. "If he told her to do this, then he must've had a reason."

"He indicated that the gentleman I'm going to see would be able to help me," Poppy said.

Green looked at Brown with one eyebrow raised and an expression on his face that clearly said, *See?*

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"I don't like it," Brown said again.

"I didn't say I *did*," Green returned.

"Well, you sounded like—"

"None of us like it," Poppy snapped.

They both looked at her.

ninous

She planted her hands on her hips. "Am I wrong?"

“Er, no,” one of them mumbled, while the other said, “No, no, not w
at all.”

“Should we take a funny route?” Green asked. “Take ’em round in c
and whatnot?”

“Maybe,” Poppy said. “I don’t know. It’s probably just as important
we deliver the message quickly.” She thought of Andrew, of the men s
holding him, all of them with guns, knives, and unpleasant dispositions:
“Straight there,” she decided. “As quickly as we can.”

A quarter of an hour later, Poppy was standing in front of a gray sto
building in a quietly elegant section of the city. “This is it,” she said. S
already made it clear to Brown and Green that they could not accompa
was one inside.

“Good-bye, then,” she said after thanking them once again for their
assistance. She took a breath. She could do this.

“Er, Miss Poppy!” Brown called out.

She paused halfway up the steps, and turned.

“Good luck,” he said. “If anyone can save him, it’s you.”

She blinked, startled by the unexpected compliment.

“You’re tough,” he said. “Er, in a good way.”

“Mr. Farias told us what you did for Billy,” Green said. “It’s . . . ehr
You . . .”

Brown let out an exasperated snort. “He means thank you.”

Green nodded. “God will surely look kindly on you. It was a proper
thing you did.”

“And we’re sorry about the sack,” Brown added. “And the, er . . .” H
motioned toward his mouth. “The stuff. You know, that we used to . . .

She gave him a wry smile. “Render me unconscious?”

His already ruddy cheeks turned a bright red as he mumbled, “Yes, t
help,”

“It is already forgotten,” she said. Which wasn’t *exactly* the truth, bu
on his considering everything that had happened after, it hardly seemed of
consequence. “Now, go.” She shooed them away. “You can’t be seen
loitering on the streets when I knock.”

They stepped reluctantly away, and then Poppy was truly on her ow
door was opened mere seconds after she brought the knocker down on
brass plate, and she was immediately taken to wait in a small but comf
drawing room. After a few minutes, a gentleman entered.

She stood at once. “Mr. Walpole?”

rong He regarded her with some aloofness. "I am he."
ircles "My name is Poppy Bridgerton. I was told to come see you by Capt
that Andrew James."
till He did not react at her mention of either name—hers or Andrew's—
s. fact seemed almost bored as he walked over to the sideboard to pour a
ne of brandy.
he had Poppy did not remark upon the earliness of the hour. If he thought h
ny her "No, thank you," she said impatiently. "It's really most important th
"So you spoke with Captain James," he said, his voice pleasantly bla
"Yes," she said. "He needs your help."
She told him everything. There was nothing in his demeanor that
encouraged such frankness, but Andrew had told her to trust him.
And she trusted Andrew.
At the end of the tale, she handed Mr. Walpole the note she'd been g
by the bandits. "It's written in Portuguese," she said.
His brows rose. "You opened it?"
"No one told me not to." At Mr. Walpole's censorious look, she mu
m . . . "It's not as if it was sealed."
Mr. Walpole's mouth tightened, but he said no more on the subject.
good watched as he read the missive, his eyes moving from left to right six t
before reaching the end.
"Will you be able to help him?" she asked.
He He refolded the note, creasing it much more sharply than before.
." "Mr. Walpole?" She wasn't sure how much more of this she could t
The man was all but ignoring her. Then she remembered Andrew's mc
that." urgent directive.
it She cleared her throat. "I was told to tell you that I long for blue ski
The envoy's head snapped up. "That's what he said?"
Poppy nodded.
"That's what he said *exactly*?"
n. The "Yes. He made me repeat it."
its Mr. Walpole swore under his breath. Poppy blinked with surprise. H
ortable not seemed the type. Then he looked up as if a thought had just occur
him. "And you said your name is Bridgerton?"
"Have you even been listening to me?"

“You are related to the viscount?”

ain “He is my uncle.”

Mr. Walpole swore again, this time not even trying to muffle it. Poppy and in watched him warily as he muttered to himself, seemingly trying to work out a problem in his head.

Finally, just when she was about to say something, he strode to the door and wrenched it open, and yelled, “Martin!”

The butler appeared immediately.

“Escort Miss Bridgerton to the yellow bedroom. Lock the door. Under the circumstances is she to leave.”

and. “What?” Poppy wasn’t sure what she’d expected the British envoy to do but it wasn’t this.

Mr. Walpole gave her a quick glance before heading out the door. “In your own good, Miss Bridgerton.”

given arm. “No! You can’t— Stop that!” she snarled when the butler took hold of her arm.

He sighed. “I really don’t want to hurt you, miss.”

She shot him a belligerent look. “But you will?”

attered, “If I have to.”

Poppy closed her eyes in defeat. She was exhausted. She hadn’t the strength to fight him, and even if she had, he outweighed her by at least six stone.

imes “It’s a nice room, miss,” the butler said. “You’ll be comfortable there.”

“All my prisons are comfortable,” Poppy muttered.

But they were prisons, nonetheless.

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Chapter 22

A few weeks later

It was strange, Poppy thought, how so much could change in a month.

And yet nothing changed at all.

She was changed. She was not the same person who had attended so in London and explored caves on the Dorset coast. She would never be girl again.

But to the rest of the world, she was the same as she ever was. She v Miss Poppy Bridgerton, niece to the influential viscount and viscounte was a well-bred young lady, not the biggest matrimonial catch (it was l uncle with the title, after all, not her father, plus she'd never had a mas dowry), but still, a good prospect for any young man looking to make l mark.

No one knew that she'd gone off to Portugal.

No one knew she'd been kidnapped by pirates.

Or by a gang of Portuguese bandits.

Or, for that matter, by the British envoy to Portugal.

No one knew that she'd met a dashing sea captain who should have an architect, or that he'd probably saved her life, and she might have sacrificed his.

Bloody British government. Mr. Walpole had made it clear that she keep her mouth shut when she returned to England. Indiscreet question could hamper his efforts to rescue Captain James, he'd told her. Poppy asked how that was possible, given that Captain James was in Portugal she would be in England.

Mr. Walpole found nothing to celebrate in her curiosity. In fact he h to her, "I find nothing to celebrate in your curiosity."

To which Poppy had replied, "What does that even *mean*?"

“Just keep your mouth shut,” he had ordered her. “Hundreds of lives depend upon it.”

Poppy rather suspected this was an exaggeration, possibly even an o lie. But she could not take that chance.

Because *Andrew’s* life might depend upon it.

When Poppy had knocked on Mr. Walpole’s door, she had never dre that she would be shuttled out of Portugal before learning of Andrew’s But the envoy had wasted no time returning her to England. He’d got h onto a ship the very next day, and five days after that she was deposite Royal Dockyards in Chatham with a purse holding enough money to h carriage to take her to Lord and Lady Bridgerton’s home in Kent. She supposed she could have gone all the way home, but it was only a two-journey to Aubrey Hall, and Poppy was certainly not equipped to make unchaperoned overnight stop at an inn on the road to Somerset.

It should have been amusing that she was worried about *that* when s spent six days as the only female on a ship to Lisbon.

And then a night alone with Captain James.

Andrew. Surely he was now Andrew to her.

If he was even still alive.

It had taken a few days and more than a few lies for Poppy to sort o the details—or rather, the lack of details—regarding her two-week abs but her cousins now thought she’d been with Elizabeth, Elizabeth thou she’d been with her cousins, and to her parents she’d sent a breezily ambiguous letter informing them that she’d accepted Aunt Alexandra’s invitation after all and would be in Kent for an unspecified amount of t

And if anyone doubted any of that, they weren’t asking. At least not

Her cousins were blessedly tactful, but eventually their curiosity wo win out. After all, Poppy had arrived—

Unexpectedly.

With no luggage.

And wearing a wrinkled, ill-fitting frock.

All things considered, Poppy supposed she should be grateful it had well as it had. Her blue dress had been beyond repair by the time she r Mr. Walpole; a housemaid had to be sent out to purchase something re made to replace it. It was nothing Poppy would have picked out for her but it was clean, which was a whole lot more than Poppy could have sa herself at that moment.

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“Oh, there you are!”

Poppy looked up to see her cousin Georgiana on the far side of the gate. Georgie was only one year younger than Poppy, but she had somehow managed to avoid a Season in London. Aunt Alexandra had said it was Georgie’s delicate health, but aside from a pale complexion, Poppy had never seen anything particularly sickly about her.

Case in point: Georgie was presently striding across the lawn at a fine clip, beaming as she approached. Poppy sighed. The last thing she wanted at the moment was to sit and have a conversation with someone so obviously cheerful.

Or any conversation, really.

“How long have you been out here?” Georgie asked once she’d sat down on Poppy’s side.

Poppy shrugged. “Not long. Twenty minutes, perhaps. Maybe a little longer than that.”

“We have been invited to Crake for dinner this evening.”

Poppy nodded absently. Crake House was the home of the Earl of Manston. It was just a mile or so away. Her cousin—Georgie’s older sister, Billie—lived there. She had married the earl’s heir.

“Lady Manston has returned from her trip to London,” Georgie explained. “And she’s brought Nicholas.”

Poppy nodded some more, just to show she was listening. Nicholas was the youngest Rokesby son. Poppy didn’t think she’d ever met him. She had never met any of the Rokesby sons, actually, except for Billie’s husband, George. She thought there were four of them. Or maybe five.

She didn’t really wish to go out to dinner, even if it would be nice to see Billie. Supper on a tray in her room sounded so much easier. And besides,

“I haven’t anything to wear,” she told Georgie.

Georgie’s blue eyes narrowed. Poppy had woven a compelling tale (she had said so herself) to explain her lack of luggage upon her arrival, but she had a feeling Georgie found the whole story *most* suspicious.

Georgiana Bridgerton was a lot shrewder than her family seemed to give her credit for. Poppy could easily imagine her sitting in her room, throwing mental darts at Poppy’s story, just to find the holes.

It wasn’t that Georgie was malicious. She was just curious.

A malady with which Poppy was well-acquainted.

“Don’t you think your trunk should have arrived by now?” Georgie

“I do,” Poppy said with wide-eyed earnestness. “I’m shocked, in fact, that she took mine. It hasn’t.”

“Maybe you should have taken the other lady’s trunk.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. I don’t think she took mine on purpose. And never anyway”—Poppy leaned in with a bit of a smirk—“her taste in clothing is abysmal.”

Georgie eyed her skeptically.

“It’s better this way,” Poppy said blithely. “The coaching company would find her and make the switch.”

She had no idea if the coaching company would behave with such likelihood, but she was likely they would tell her it was her own fault for not noticing that someone had taken her trunk. But Poppy didn’t have to convince the coaching company, just her cousins.

“Lucky for me we’re of a size,” she said to Georgie. In actuality Poppy was an inch taller, but as long as they did not socialize, she could get away without adding lace to the hems of Georgie’s gowns.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Poppy asked.

“Of course not. I just think it’s strange.”

“Oh, it is. It absolutely is.”

Georgie’s face took on a thoughtful expression. “You don’t feel somewhat . . . rootless?”

“Rootless?” It was probably an innocent question, but Poppy was so tired and so just plain exhausted of trying to keep her stories straight. And it was like Georgie to wax philosophical, at least not with Poppy.

“I don’t know,” Georgie mused. “Not that *things* should be the measure of a person, but I can’t help but think it must be disorienting to be separated from one’s belongings.”

“Yes,” Poppy said slowly. “It is.” And yet, what she wouldn’t give to go back aboard the *Infinity*, where she’d had nothing but the clothes on her back and Andrew. For a brief moment, she’d had him too.

“Poppy?” Georgie asked with some alarm. “Are you crying?”

“Of course not,” Poppy sniffled.

“It’s all right if you are.”

“I know.” Poppy turned to brush away something on her cheek that was *not* moisture. “But it doesn’t matter because I’m not.”

“Ehrm . . .” Georgie seemed not to know what to do when confronted with a crying female. And why would she, Poppy thought. Her only sister was

t, that indomitable Billie Rokesby, who once rode a horse *backward*, for heaven's sake. Poppy was fairly certain Billie had never cried a day in her life.

As for Poppy, she wasn't sure when she'd shed a tear. She had been proud of herself for not crying when she'd been hauled aboard the *Infinite*. At first, she supposed it was just because she was so bloody angry—the rage blotted out everything else. After that, it was more because she refused to make such a show of weakness in front of Andrew.

She'd wagged her finger and told him he should thank his lucky stars that she wasn't a crying sort of female. Now she almost laughed at that. Besides, all she wanted to do was cry.

And yet somehow the tears never came.

She felt as if everything inside her had been scooped out and left somewhere far, far behind. Maybe Portugal, maybe the Atlantic, thrown overboard on the miserable journey home. All she knew was that here, in England, she was numb.

"Hollow," she whispered.

Beside her, Georgie turned. "Did you say something?"

"No," Poppy said, because how could she explain it? If she told Georgie what she was feeling, she'd have to tell her *why*.

Georgie didn't believe her; *that* was easy enough to see. But Georgie didn't press, and instead she said, "Well, if you ever decide that you are tired, crying, I am happy to . . . do . . . whatever it is you need."

Poppy smiled at her cousin's awkward attempt at solace. She reached out and squeezed Georgie's hand. "Thank you."

Georgie nodded, recognizing that Poppy didn't wish to talk about it, at least not yet. She glanced up at the sky, shading her eyes even though it was mostly obscured by clouds. "You should probably come in soon. I don't think it's going to rain."

"I like the fresh air," Poppy said. She'd been stuck in her cabin on the way back to England too. Mr. Walpole had been in too much of a rush to find an English-speaking chaperone, so she had traveled with the same Portuguese housemaid who had picked out her dress. And her sister, since the housemaid couldn't very well travel back to Lisbon on her own.

Regardless, both girls refused to step foot outside their cabin. Which Poppy was shut in too. Mr. Walpole had assured her that the captain could be trusted with her safety and virtue, but after all that had happened, she had wanted to risk it.

ven's The food hadn't been as good as on the *Infinity* either.

 And she didn't know what had happened to Andrew. Mr. Walpole had
so her she *wouldn't* know either. "You will be well on your way back to
nity. At England, Miss Bridgerton. He will not follow for some time, I imagine
age had If ever. He did not include that in the sentence, but it had hung heav
l to the air.

 "But even then," she'd pressed, "for my peace of mind. Will you seri
s that word? James is a very common surname. It would be impossible for m
cause find out on my own . . ."

 She'd trailed off at his look of disdain.

 "Miss Bridgerton. Do you really think that his surname is truly Jame
her blank look, he'd continued, "This is in service to your king. You ha
n already been told never to breathe a word of this. For you to go searchi
in a man who does not exist would draw what I am sure is unwanted atten
these weeks that will undoubtedly be questionable in your calendar."

 As set-downs went, it was blistering, but when he'd delivered his ne
sentence, all energy for retort washed out of her.

orgie "It is unlikely you will ever see Captain James again."

 "But—"

e Mr. Walpole silenced her with a mere gesture. "Whether we extricat
e or not, it will be in the interest of national security that he not go looki
you. And whether you are inept at following orders is irrelevant, Miss
d out Bridgerton, because I assure you he is not."

 She had not believed it. No, she had not *wanted* to believe it. Andrew
at said he would escape. He said he would find her.

the sun But she wasn't that hard to find. So either he was dead—which she c
think hardly bear to contemplate—or everything Mr. Walpole had said was t
and she would never see him again.

ne way He followed orders. She knew that he did—it was why he'd taken h
nd her Portugal instead of clearing out the cave and leaving her in Charmouth
uguese was why he did not read the messages he carried.

semaid It was why he would not come for her even if he wanted to.

 And why she had no idea whom she was so angry with—him, for se
1 meanther away even though she knew it was the right thing to do; Mr. Walpo
ould be making it so painfully clear that she would never see Andrew again; or
hadn't herself.

 Because she felt so damn helpless.

“Were you outside last night?” Georgie asked.

ad told Poppy turned lethargically toward her cousin. “Just looking at the stars.”

“I thought I saw someone from my window. I had not realized you were a student of astronomy.”

ily in “I’m not. I just like looking at the stars.” They hadn’t been as brilliant out at sea, though. Or maybe it was just that the sky seemed to hold more power and sway when one stood on the deck of a ship, face tipped to the heavens.

Andrew’s hands had been on her hips. She had felt the heat of his body and the strength of it.

es?” At But she hadn’t understood.

ave So much. There was so much she hadn’t understood.

ing for And now . . . It was laughable, really. Here she was, lamenting her transition to younger, innocent self as if she were such a lady of experience. She still knew nothing. Almost nothing.

xt “Well, I’m going to go in,” Georgie said as she rose to her feet. “I won’t have enough time to dress for dinner. Are you coming?”

Poppy started to say no; dinner wasn’t for several more hours, and she had no great need to fuss over her appearance. But Georgie was right—it did feel as if it might rain. And as hopeless and numb as she felt right then, she had no wish to catch her death in a downpour.

“I’ll come with you,” she said.

“Wonderful!” Georgie linked her arm through Poppy’s, and they began their stroll back to the house.

Dinner with the neighbors was a good idea, Poppy decided. She didn’t want to go, but what she wanted lately hadn’t seemed to make her feel any better. She’d have to put on a good front, pretend she was happy and content, and the same Poppy she’d always been. Maybe if she tried hard enough, she’d start to believe it.

It She turned to Georgie as they walked past the gazebo. “Who did you think was coming to dinner?”

nding Andrew was exhausted.

ole, for It had taken almost two weeks for Robert Walpole to extricate him from the house on the hill. During that time he’d been mostly ignored, but he hadn’t slept well. Nor had he been given much to eat.

He did not know how long it would take for him to regain his full strength.

but recuperation would have to wait.

ars.” He needed to find Poppy.

vere a His original plan had been to bypass his home in Kent and head straight to Dorset, where he assumed she had returned to the home of Elizabeth Armitage. If Poppy had already gone home, it was an easy journey from Kent to Somerset.

re But the *Infinity* had been ordered back to England without him, and the ship in Lisbon was sailing to Dorset. The quickest journey would be to Marbury, which was close enough to Crake House that it would be foolish not to go there first. He could reach Poppy much faster on a mount from the Royal stables than he could in a carriage hired at the port.

And as eager as he was to find her, the notion of a bath and a fresh change of clothing had obvious appeal.

ll It had started to rain by the time he was dropped off at the end of the road to Crake, so he was somewhat damp and squishy when he let himself in through the front door. He had not a clue who might be home. His mother never stayed in London this far into summer, but she'd been known to come here about the countryside visiting friends. His older brothers were probably still in London—George lived at Crake with Billie and their three children, and Edward had just a few miles away with his brood.

No one was in the entry when he walked in, so he set his wet hat on a table and took a moment to take in his surroundings. It seemed almost surreal to be here, in his home, after such a tumultuous few weeks. There had been moments that he'd feared were his last, and even after his rescue, he'd never been able to enjoy any of life's luxuries. The bandits had not, in fact, turned out to be politically motivated, but they were part of a larger syndicate powerful enough that Robert Walpole had advised Andrew to keep his head down until he departed Lisbon.

And never return. Walpole was clear about that. Captain Andrew Jarriss might be an important courier for the crown, but he could no longer count on royal aid and protection on the Iberian Peninsula.

It was time to go home, but more than that, it was time to *stay* home.
“Andrew!”

rom He grinned. He'd know that voice anywhere. “Billie,” he said warmly, enveloping his sister-in-law in a hug. She wouldn't care if he got her wet.
e had “How are you?”

rength, “How am I? How are you? We've seen neither hide nor hair of you in

months.” She gave him a cautioning glance. “Your mother is displeas
Andrew winced.

ight to “You *should* be afraid,” she said.

m there “You don’t think the joy of my unexpected arrival will soften her tem
correspondence.”

no one “There were extenuating circumstances.”

gate, “I’m not the one you need to convince,” Billie said with a shake of h
stop head. “I hope you’re not planning to leave anytime soon.”

kesby “I *was* going to go tonight—”

“*What?*”

change “I’d already decided otherwise,” he told her. “I’ll wait until morning
don’t relish riding in the rain.”

e drive “Would you like my advice?”

n “Is there any way I can prevent you from giving it?”

her “Of course not.”

gad “Then I would be delighted.”

y home She rolled her eyes at his sarcasm. “Don’t tell your mother you were
rd was thinking of leaving this evening. In fact, I’d avoid mentioning your mo
departure if at all possible.”

a table “You know it will be the third thing she asks.”

al to be “After ‘How are you?’ and ‘Why haven’t you written?’”

several He nodded.

not She shrugged. “I wish you luck, then.”

urned “You are a cruel woman, Billie Rokesby.”

, “You would never have escaped before dinner in any case. Nicholas
head down from London. Everyone is coming to dine.”

mes wasn’t a complete loss. He might be able to get some information abou
unt on Poppy. Her whereabouts, for example.

Or if she’d been ensnared in a scandal.

. He’d have to figure out the best way to get them to talk about her. A
anyone knew, he did not even know she existed.

ly, “Is everything all right, Andrew?”

ret. He blinked, startled by Billie’s query. She’d placed her hand on his
and was watching him with an expression of curiosity. Or maybe conc

in “Of course,” he said. “Why?”

d.” “I don’t know. You just seem different, that’s all.”

“Thinner,” he confirmed.

She did not look convinced, but she did not press him further. “Well mper?” said briskly, “your mother is at the vicarage. She was up in London for days, but she returned yesterday.”

“Is Nicholas home?” Andrew asked. It had been far too long since he seen his younger brother.

er “Not at this precise moment, no. He and George went off for a ride v your father. But they should all be back soon. Dinner is at seven, so the won’t be much longer.”

Speaking of which . . .

}, I “I should clean up before dinner,” Andrew said.

“Go on up to your room,” Billie said. “I’ll see about having a bath d

“I am not certain I can adequately express how heavenly that sounds

“Go,” Billie said with a smile. “I will see you at dinner.”

A good meal, a good sleep, Andrew thought as he headed upstairs. I exactly what he needed before heading out in the morning for a good v

e *His good woman.*

orning His Poppy.

“Darling, are you sure you’re feeling well enough for dinner?”

Poppy turned to Lady Bridgerton, grateful that the dim lighting in th carriage prevented the older woman from seeing just how wan her smi “I’m well, Aunt,” she said. “Just tired.”

is “I cannot imagine why. We have done nothing requiring any great exertions recently, have we?”

ay “Poppy took a walk today,” Georgie said. “A really, really long one.

it Poppy looked at her cousin with surprise. Georgie knew quite well t Poppy had not taken a long walk that day. She’d barely made it to the of the garden.

s far as “I did not realize that,” Lady Bridgerton said. “I do hope you were n caught out in the rain.”

arm “No, I was most fortunate,” Poppy said. It had begun to rain about a after she and Georgie returned to Aubrey Hall. Just a sprinkle at first, b had been growing in intensity ever since. The smack of the drops again carriage was almost too loud for conversation.

ern. “Helen will have footmen waiting with umbrellas,” Lady Bridgerton

assured her. "We will not get very wet going from carriage to house."

"Will Edmund and Violet be there?" Georgie asked.

"I'm not sure," her mother replied. "Violet is getting very near to the end of her confinement. I imagine it depends on how she feels."

"I'm sure she's fine," Georgie said. "She loves being pregnant."

"Have they thought of a name?" Poppy asked. Her cousin Edmund had married quite young—he was barely nineteen at his wedding. But he and his bride were wildly happy by all accounts and currently expecting their second child. They lived close to Aubrey Hall, in a charming manor house given to them as a wedding gift from Edmund's parents.

"Benedict if it's a boy," Lady Bridgerton said. "Beatrice for a girl."

"How very Shakespearean," Poppy murmured. Benedick and Beatrice were the lovers from *Much Ado About Nothing*. She'd quoted Balthasar's song from that very play when she and Andrew had had their battle of Shakespearean quotes.

It was ridiculous how much fun that had been.

"Benedict," Georgie said. "Not Benedick."

"Sigh no more," Poppy murmured. "Sigh no more."

Georgie gave her a sideways glance. "Men were deceivers ever?"

"Not all men," came a grumble from the opposite corner.

Poppy jerked with surprise. She'd quite forgotten Lord Bridgerton was there.

"I thought you were sleeping," Lady Bridgerton said, patting her husband on the knee.

"I was," he said with a *hmmph*. "I'd like to be still."

"Were we so very loud, Uncle?" Poppy inquired. "I'm sorry that we woke you."

"It's just the rain," he said, waving away her apology. "Makes my joints ache. Was that Shakespeare you were reciting?"

"From *Much Ado About Nothing*," Poppy said.

"Well . . ." He rolled his hand in the air, urging her on. "Have at it."

"You want me to recite it?"

He looked at Georgie. "Do you know it?"

"Not in its entirety," she admitted.

"Then yes," he said, turning back to Poppy. "I want you to recite it."

"Very well." She swallowed, trying to melt the lump that had started to form in her throat.

“Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, Men were deceivers ever; One sea—” Her voice caught. Choked.

end What had happened to him? Would she ever know?

“Poppy?” Her aunt leaned forward, concerned.

Poppy stared into space.

ad “Poppy?”

nd his She lurched back to attention. “Sorry. I was just, er . . . remembering
second something.” She cleared her throat. “*One foot in sea, and one on shore
en to one thing constant never.*”

“Men are flighty creatures,” Lady Bridgerton said.

“Not all men,” her husband said.

ce “Darling, *no*,” she said. “Just no.”

r’s “*Then sigh not so, but let them go*,” Poppy continued, barely hearing
the conversation around her. “*And be you blithe and bonny, Converting all
sounds of woe . . .*”

Would Shakespeare always make her think of Andrew? Would ever
make her think of him?

“*Into Hey nonny, nonny*,” Georgie finished for her. She gave Poppy
queer look before turning to her father. “I knew that part.”

He yawned and closed his eyes.

was “He always falls asleep in carriages,” Georgie said.

“It’s a skill,” Lord Bridgerton said.

sband “Well, it’s a skill that shall have no reward this evening,” Lady Brid
said. “We’ve arrived.”

Lord Bridgerton sighed audibly, and the rest of them gathered their
woke and bags and whatnot, preparing to alight.

As Lady Bridgerton had predicted, they were led inside under the co
oints umbrellas, but the wind had picked up, and they all got a bit wet on the
in.

“Thank you, Wheelock,” Lady Bridgerton said to the butler as he to
cloak. “It is so very dreary tonight.”

“Indeed, my lady.” He handed the cloak to a footman and moved to
Georgie and Poppy. “We shall dry these as best we can during dinner.”

“Is the family in the drawing room?”

’ “They are, my lady.”

l to “Wonderful. No need to take us in. I know the way.”

Poppy shrugged her arms from her cloak and followed her aunt and

foot in to the drawing room.

“Have you ever been here before?” Georgie asked.

“I don’t think so. I haven’t really spent that much time in Kent.” It was true. Poppy saw her cousins in London far more than she did in the country.

“You will adore Lady Manston,” Georgie assured her. “She is like a second mother to me. To all of us. Dining here is always informal. It’s like family.”

3

; To

“*Informal* is a relative term,” Poppy murmured. Back on the *Infinity* hadn’t worn shoes for a week. Tonight she had dressed just as grandly would for any meal out in society. The pink dress she’d borrowed from Georgie was a hair too short, but it wasn’t very noticeable. And the color seemed to suit her.

3 the

l your

othing

a

She was trying to get on with her life. She really was.

The hard part was that there was nothing she could do. She did not know where Andrew was from, who his family was. It certainly did not help that the surname he used was James—surely one of the most common in all England.

How many common surnames were also common Christian names? Thomas, Adam, Charles . . . They all seemed to be male names. Even Andrew could be a surname. Hadn’t she met someone before with that name? In London, perhaps . . .

“Poppy!”

gerton

She looked up. How was she in the drawing room already? Her cousin Billie was regarding her with amusement.

gloves

“Sorry,” Poppy mumbled. “Just woolgathering.”

over of

2 way

“I dare not ask what you were thinking about. It is always the strangest thing.” But Billie said this with the greatest affection. She took Poppy’s hands and leaned in for a double-cheeked kiss. “I’m so glad you’re here. You’ll get to meet George’s brother.”

ok her

“Yes,” Poppy murmured. She hoped they weren’t trying to match her to Nicholas. She was sure he was perfectly amiable, but the last thing she wanted right now was a flirtation. And wasn’t he quite young? Just a year older than she was.

help

,

“He’s not down yet,” Billie said. “He was quite travel-worn when he arrived.”

From London? How difficult was it to travel from London?

uncle

“Let me get you a glass of sherry. I’m sure you need it. The weather

frightful. You'd hardly know it's summer."

Poppy accepted the glass and took a sip, wondering who the young gentleman across the room was if not Nicholas. He looked the correct entry. and he and Georgiana were laughing like old friends.

But Billie had said he had not come down yet.

Odd. Poppy gave a mental shrug. She wasn't curious enough to ask, just took a few steps farther into the room, smiling politely as she watched she Manston enter the drawing room through a doorway in the far wall.

as she "Alexandra!" Lady Manston called out, hurrying over to embrace Lady Bridgerton. "You will never guess who arrived this afternoon."

lor Georgie appeared at her side and tugged her sleeve. "Come over and see Nicholas."

Nicholas? Poppy frowned. Then who—

know "Andrew!" Lady Bridgerton cried.

that *Andrew*. Poppy looked away from the gathering, horrified by the moment pooling in her eyes. Another common name, just like James. Why could the bloody man have been named Marmaduke? Or Nimrod?

James, *Enough*. She had to get through the evening. With renewed determination she turned back to the room, her eyes finding her aunt, who was now a name? the room, embracing someone.

Someone with brown hair, sun-streaked with gold.

Pulled back in a tidy queue.

sin Dear God, he looked just like—

Andrew.

She didn't feel her glass of sherry slip through her fingers, didn't even know she'd dropped it until Billie, standing next to her, cried out, "Oh, she caught it, splashing them both from face to hem."

But before she could say anything, even *think* anything other than his name, Billie deftly spun her around and started moving them both toward another door Poppy hadn't realized was literally right behind them.

"We'll get you cleaned up," Billie was saying. "Oh my goodness, it's your eyelashes!"

"Billie!" someone called from across the room. "What are you—"

Billie swiped her sleeve across her face and poked her head back out into the drawing room. "Please do go in to dinner, we will follow presently, no, I insist."

And then she turned back to survey Poppy briefly before summoning

maid for some water and a rag. "We'll get this righted in just a moment
everything will be back as it was."

age, *Back as it was.*

Poppy almost started to laugh.

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Lady

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maid for some water and a rag. “We’ll get this righted in just a moment and everything will be back as it was.”

Back as it was.

Poppy almost started to laugh.

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Chapter 23

Five minutes later, Andrew was seated in his usual spot at the table in the family's formal dining room. He wasn't sure he had ever been quite so to be home . . . *or* so eager to leave.

It had been glorious to wash in an actual full-sized bathtub, and he was very much looking forward to a proper meal, but his head—and his heels—were already one foot on the road toward Poppy.

“George!” his mother exclaimed. “We are waiting for your wife. She should be here presently.”

Andrew looked across the table with a bit of a smirk. His older brother held a half-eaten dinner roll in his hand.

“You're as hungry as I am,” George said to him. “You just haven't time to go ahead with it.”

“And defy *her*?” Andrew returned, with a tip of his head toward the mother. “Never.”

“It's why he's my favorite,” Lady Manston said to the table at large. “This evening, at least.”

“Feel free to demote me tomorrow,” Andrew said cheerfully. He was sure she would, once she realized he'd left home again, but there was no time to inform her of his plans just yet.

George took a sip of his wine. “Billie could be three minutes or thirty. I told us not to wait.”

Lady Manston did not look convinced, but any further objection was waved off at the pass by Lord Manston, who picked up *his* roll and said, “I'm starving. I say we eat. Billie will understand.”

And thus the soup was served.

Oyster bisque. Andrew's favorite. He barely resisted the urge to pick up the bowl and slurp the whole thing down.

“This is delicious,” Lady Bridgerton said to Lady Manston. “Is it a r

recipe?"

"I don't think so. It might have a touch more salt, but other than that Andrew paid no attention as he savored each spoonful. After the last he actually closed his eyes in appreciation and sighed.

"Sorry to be delayed," he heard Billie call out. "I'm so glad you did wait."

Andrew heard all of the chairs move as the gentlemen stood. He opened his eyes, glancing down to catch his napkin as he too rose to his feet. *A* had entered the room, after all.

his And then time seemed to slow. Billie swished into the room, saying
happy something over her shoulder to another woman, who was looking down
fiddling with something on her dress.

was And yet as she moved, as the light hit her hair . . .

art— As she *breathed* . . .

He knew.

e said It was Poppy.

It made no sense, but then—of course it made sense. These were her
er had cousins. And if Poppy had also been put on a boat to Kent instead of
Dorset . . .

he guts But it made no difference why . . . She was *here*.

He had half a mind to leap over the table just to get to her faster.

ir But she had not seen him yet.

Or he didn't think she had. She seemed to be examining a floral

. "For arrangement in the far corner of the room.

She certainly wasn't looking anywhere near the table.

s quite Even as she walked *to* the table, she wasn't looking anywhere near i

to need *She knew he was there*.

y. She elation, and that gravest fear of all men: female fury.

He stared at her like a starving man, a huge, stupid smile battling the
s cut requisite bland countenance required by manners.

He had a feeling the huge, stupid smile was winning.

But she wasn't going to be able to avoid him all night. There were o
two empty seats at the table: one to his left, and one directly across. An
k up was fairly certain Billie planned to take the one across.

ew "Poppy and I decided the sherry was so tasty we ought to incorporat
into our wardrobe." She swept her hand across her midsection as if to s

Just like so.

...” “Will I be forgiven if I do not follow suit?” Georgiana teased, and
t drop, everyone laughed at that.

Except Poppy, who was staring ferociously at a spot on the wall beh
not Billie.

And Andrew, who could not stop staring at Poppy.

ned And Nicholas, who Andrew suddenly realized was also watching Po
A lady with rather a lot of interest.

That was going to have to be nipped in the bud. It would not do for l
brother to be ogling his wife.

n, Because, *oh yes*, he was going to marry this woman. This amazing, l
clever, and beautiful woman was going to be his wife.

Though first she’d need to look at him.

Actually, first she’d need to be formally introduced to him.

“Poppy,” Billie said, stopping by Nicholas’s chair, “may I present
George’s youngest brother, Mr. Nicholas Rokesby? He is recently gra
from Cambridge. Nicholas, this is Miss Poppy Bridgerton of Somerset
cousin.”

Nicholas took Poppy’s hand and brushed his lips across the back.

Andrew gritted his teeth. *Turn to me, damn it. To me.*

“And this,” Billie said, “is yet another of George’s brothers, Captain
Andrew Rokesby. He returned only just today from a voyage at sea. To
Billie’s brow furrowed. “Spain?”

“Portugal,” Andrew said, never taking his eyes from Poppy’s face.

“Portugal. Yes, of course. It must be lovely there this time of year.”

t. “It is,” Andrew said.

Finally, Poppy looked up.

f, “Miss Bridgerton,” he murmured. He pressed his lips to the back of
hand and held it longer than propriety allowed.

e Her breathing was shallow; he could see it. But he could not tell wh
in her eyes.

Anger?

nly Yearning?

nd he Both?

“Captain,” she said quietly.

e it “Andrew,” he insisted as he released her hand.

say, “Andrew,” she said, unable to rip her gaze from his.

“Andrew!” his mother exclaimed.

Because it was far too soon for him to ask a lady to use his given name. They all knew that.

and “Do allow Miss Bridgerton to take her seat,” his mother added. Her was studiously mild, signaling clearly that she had *many* questions.

Poppy He didn’t care. Poppy had just sat down right next to him. The world become a very bright place indeed.

“You almost missed the soup, Miss Bridgerton,” Nicholas said.

his “I—” Her voice cracked. She was clearly flustered. Andrew lost the to suppress his grin. But then he looked up and saw Lady Bridgerton look brave, very intently at Poppy, and his mother looking even more intently at him.

Oh yes, there would be questions.

“It’s very good,” Nicholas said, sending an awkward glance around the table. He clearly did not know what to make of the strange atmosphere. “Oyster bisque.”

plated A bowl was set down before Poppy. She stared at it as if looking away. My might cause her ruin.

“I love the soup,” Andrew said to her.

He saw her swallow. Still, she stared down at her bowl.

He fixed his gaze on her face, willing her to look up as he said, “I *truly* love it.”

o . . .” “Andrew,” admonished Billie, sitting across from him, “she hasn’t even had the chance to try it.”

Poppy didn’t move. He could see the tension in her shoulders. Everyone was watching her by now, and he knew he shouldn’t have put her at the center of attention, but he did not know what else to do.

her Slowly, she picked up her spoon and dipped it into the oyster bisque. “Do you like it?” Nicholas asked, once she’d taken a very small sip. She nodded, a tiny, jerky motion. “It’s very good. Thank you.”

at was Andrew could no longer restrain himself. Under the table he reached and took her hand.

She did not pull away.

Softly, he asked, “Do you think you might want more?”

Her neck seemed to go rigid, as if it was taking every ounce of her strength to hold herself steady. And then she seemed to snap. Her chair lurched backward as she ripped her hand from his.

“I really really love the soup,” she cried out. “But I also hate it so *much*!”

And she ran from the room.

me.

Poppy had no idea where she was going. She'd never been to Crake Hill but weren't all these grand homes *somewhat* the same? There would be a long row of public rooms and if she just kept running through them she'd had up . . .

Somewhere.

She didn't even know *why* she was running. She only knew that she couldn't remain in that dining room for one second longer, with everyone looking at her, and Andrew saying how much he loved the soup, and then she knew he wasn't talking about soup, and it was all just too much.

He was alive.

He was alive and—*goddamn it*—he was a Rokesby. How could he have kept that from her?

And now—and now—

Had she just told him that she loved him?

Had she just said it in front of his family and hers?

Either that, or the entire county of Kent would soon think she'd gone raving mad.

Which was also possible.

To wit: she was running blindly through the home of the Earl of Marston when she could not see a thing for the tears streaming down her face, and she just wailed something about soup.

She was never eating soup again. Never.

She skidded around a corner into what looked like a smaller drawing room and paused briefly to catch her breath. The rain was still coming down now, and it beat against the window in a furious tattoo.

It beat against the whole house. Zeus or Thor or whatever god was in charge this miserable day *hated* her.

"Poppy!"

She jumped. It was Andrew.

"Poppy!" he bellowed.

She looked frantically around the room. She wasn't ready to see him.

"Poppy!"

He was getting closer. She heard a stumble, then a crash, followed by "Bloody hell."

She almost laughed. She might have smiled a little.

She was still crying, though.

“Pop—”

ouse, Lightning streaked through the sky, and for a split second the entire
e a was illuminated. *There* was the door!

e’d end Poppy ran toward it, flinching when thunder cracked the night open.
heavens, that was loud.

“There you are,” Andrew growled from the opposite doorway. “Jesus
Christ, Poppy, would you hold still?”

one She paused with her hand at the door. “Are you limping?”

ney “I think I broke my mother’s favorite vase.”

She swallowed. “So it’s not from . . . Portugal?”

ave “No, it’s from chasing you through the bloody dark. What the hell w
you thinking?”

“I thought you were dead!” she cried.

He looked at her. “I’m not.”

“Well, I see that now.”

They stood there for several moments, watching each other from ac
e stark, room. Not warily, just . . . with care.

“How did you get free?” she asked. She had so many questions, but
seemed the most important.

nston, “Mr. Walpole arranged it. It took almost a fortnight, though. And th
e had needed several days in Lisbon to settle my affairs.”

“Senhor Farias?”

“He is well. His daughter had the baby. A boy.”

g room “Oh, that’s lovely. He must be so pleased.”

, hard Andrew nodded, but his eyes stayed on hers in a way that reminded
that they had other things to discuss.

n “What did everybody say?” she asked. “In the dining room.”

“Well, I think they’ve figured out that we know each other.”

A horrified laugh welled up in her throat. She looked over at the doc
one both she and Andrew had entered through. “Are they coming after

“Not yet,” he said. “George has it minded.”

1. “George?”

y I left the room. I think he knew what I meant.”

“Brothers,” she said with a nod.

Another bolt of lightning shot through the air, and Poppy braced her

the thunder. "My aunt is going to kill me," she said.

"No." Andrew waited through the boom. "But she's going to have room questions."

"Questions." Another hysterical bubble of laughter jumped within her. "Good dear God."

"Poppy."

What was she going to say to her family? What was he going to say

"Poppy."

She looked at him.

"I'm going to start walking toward you," he said.

Her lips parted. She wasn't sure why he was saying this so explicitly here why it made her so nervous.

"Because," he said, once he'd halved the distance between them, "if I kiss you right now, I think . . . I might . . ."

"Die?" she whispered.

He nodded solemnly, and then he took her face in his hands, and he pressed her against his. He kissed her so long and so thoroughly she forgot everything, even the thunder and the lightning, which flashed and crashed around them. He kissed her until they were both breathless—literally—and they pulled apart, gasping as if they didn't know which they needed more—air or each other.

"I love you, you stupid man," she mumbled, swiping her arm across her face to mop up the tears and the sweat and God knew what else.

He stared at her, dumbfounded. "What did you say?"

"I said I love you, you stupid man, but I'm just so . . . bloody . . . *anxious* right now."

her "With me?"

"With everyone."

"But mostly with me?"

"With—" *What?* Her mouth fell open. "Do you *want* it to be mostly with me?"

us?" "I'm just trying to figure out what I'm up against."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

He reached out and took her hand, twining their fingers one by one. "I did say that you love me."

"Against my better judgment, I assure you." But when she looked down at their hands, she realized she didn't want him to let go. *She* didn't want to let herself forgo.

And sure enough, his fingers seemed to tighten around hers. “Saying against your better judgment? Or actually falling in love?”

er. “Both. I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. It’s just— I thought you were dead.”

“I know,” he said solemnly. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t know what that feels like.”

to his? “I do,” he said. “A little. I did not know if you’d reached Mr. Walpole safely until I was rescued nearly two weeks later.”

Poppy went still. It had never occurred to her that he might have gone through the same anguish that she had. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Or God, I’m sorry. I’m so selfish.”

“No,” he said, and his voice shook just a little as he brought her hand to his mouth for a kiss. “No. You’re not. I’ve known you were safe since I spoke with Walpole. I was on my way to find you. I was going to leave in the morning. I thought you were in Dorset. Or maybe Somerset.”

kissed “No, I was here,” she said, even though it was obvious.

en the He nodded, and his eyes glistened as he said, “I love you, Poppy.”

kissed She wiped her nose inelegantly with the back of her hand. “I know.”

rasping A surprised smile touched his face. “You do?”

her like this?” “You’d have to, wouldn’t you? To have run after me? To argue with

“I had no trouble arguing with you before I fell in love.”

gry “Well, that’s just you,” she muttered. “You’re very argumentative.”

He leaned his forehead on hers. “Poppy Louise Bridgerton, will you marry me?”

She tried to speak. She tried to nod, but she didn’t quite seem to have control over herself, and anyway, right at that moment they heard the sound of people coming their way.

with Lots of people.

“Wait,” Andrew said. “Don’t answer yet. Come with me.”

Anywhere, she thought as he took her hand. *Anywhere*.

“You They did not get far. Even Andrew had to admit that there could be no debauchery with his mother, his father, two of his brothers, two of her own at cousins, and her aunt and uncle all bearing down on them.

to let As Andrew had predicted, there were questions. The interrogation had taken over two hours, and by the end of it, he and Poppy had told their

It was families everything.

Almost everything.

In the initial commotion, though, Andrew had managed to pull Lord Bridgerton aside to assure him that he fully intended to marry Poppy.

But he did not want his proposal to take place in a crowded drawing room. Or worse, immediately following an angry demand from her relatives.

They agreed that Andrew would call upon her the following morning, as it turned out, the Bridgertons couldn't leave that night. The thunderstorm took a violent turn, and it was not deemed safe for them to make even a short journey home.

Which was how Andrew came to be standing outside the door to Poppy's bedroom a few hours past midnight.

He couldn't sleep. And neither, he suspected, could she.

The door opened before he could knock.

"I heard you outside," she whispered.

"Impossible." He had been moving with great stealth, well aware that this was not the only bedroom on this hall.

"I might have been listening for you," she admitted.

He grinned as he stepped inside. "You're very resourceful."

She was wearing a white nightgown—whose, he did not know—and her hair had been twisted into a sleeping plait.

He reached out for the end.

"Are you going to pull my hair?" she murmured.

"Maybe." He gave it a tiny tug, just enough to urge her forward by half a step. "Or," he said, his voice growing low and husky with need, "I might finally indulge myself."

She looked at the tip of her braid, and then up at him, her eyes bright with amusement.

He started to unwind the three sections, slowly, savoring the silky strands that played across his fingers until the whole length of it spilled across his shoulders.

She was so beautiful. The entire time he was back in Lisbon, in that godforsaken room waiting for rescue, he'd thought of her. He'd closed his eyes and pictured her face—her impish smile, the way her eyes seemed to glow green just before the sun went down.

But his imagination was nothing next to the real thing.

"I love you," he said. "I love you so much."

“I love you too,” she whispered, and it sang through his heart.
They kissed, and they laughed, and the rain beat steadily against the window. It seemed fitting somehow, but not because it was stormy. It was because here, inside this room, they were warm and safe.
room. And together.
“I have a question,” he said, after they’d tumbled onto her bed.
g, but “Oh?”
storm “Can we agree that I’ve thoroughly ruined you?”
the “I don’t know if I’d call it ruined,” she said with faux thoughtfulness.
ppy’s “That would seem to imply I’m upset about the outcome.”
He rolled his hand in the air, palm down to palm up. “Nevertheless .
“And not to put too fine a point on it, but the only people who have idea that something untoward occurred are your family and mine. Sure would not breathe a word of hurtful gossip.”
“True, but we mustn’t forget Mr. Walpole.”
at hers “Hmmm. He’s a problem.”
“A huge problem.”
“But then again,” she said, clearly enjoying the conversation, “he’s bullish on national security. I don’t think he would ever acknowledge I met me.”
l her “So you don’t want to invite him to the wedding.”
“The wedding?” She gave him a sly glance. “I don’t recall accepting proposal.”
half a He leaned in. Wolfishly. “I did ruin you.”
ght “I believe we were still debating that.”
“It’s settled fact,” he said firmly. “More to the point, we need to decide what to do about *now*.”
t with “Now?”
rands He nipped at her bottom lip. “I very much wish to make love to you.
her “You do?” Her voice came out a bit like a squeak. He thought it delightful.
“I do,” he confirmed. “And while I do understand that it is not quite rigueur to anticipate our vows in such a thorough manner—”
his “A *thorough* manner?” she repeated. But she was smiling. She was
l extra definitely smiling.
“When I make love to you,” he said, “I hope to do it very thoroughly.
She caught her lip between her teeth. It made him want to bite her.
Good Lord, she was practically turning him feral.

He crawled over her, grinning as she giggled.

“Quiet,” he whispered. “Your reputation . . .”

“Oh, I think that ship has sailed.”

“Bad pun, Miss Bridgerton. Very bad pun.”

“Time and tide wait for no man.”

He drew back an inch. “I’m not sure how that’s relevant.”

“It was all I could think of,” she admitted. “And you know, you never
me answer your question.”

s. “I didn’t?”

She shook her head.

. . .” “And which question is that?”

any “You’ll have to ask it again, Captain.”

ly they “Very well. Will—”

He kissed her nose.

“You.”

Her left cheek.

“Marry.”

quite Her right cheek.

aving “Me?”

Her mouth. Her beautiful, perfect mouth.

But just a light kiss. Swift. She still needed to answer.

; a She smiled, and it was glorious. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He wasn’t sure there were words for such a moment, even among two
glib as they. So he kissed her instead. He kissed her mouth, worshipping
in all the ways he’d dreamed of these last few weeks. He kissed her cheek,
her neck, the perfect hollow above her collarbone.

ide “I love you, Poppy Bridgerton,” he murmured. “More than I could even
imagine. More than I can even conceive.”

.” But not, he thought, more than he could show her. He slid her nightgown
ightful. from her body, and his own dressing robe somehow melted away. For the
de first time, they were skin to skin.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, gazing at her as they kneeled in front of
other. He wanted to kiss her everywhere, to taste the salt of her skin, the
creamy essence between her thighs. He wanted to swirl his tongue around
y.” tight pink buds of her breasts. She’d liked that, he remembered, but what if he
nibbled? What if he tugged?

“Lie down,” he ordered.

She gave him an amused, questioning look.

His lips found her ear in a hungry growl. "I have plans for you."

He felt her pulse leap, and she started to lower herself down. When the bottom touched the bedsheets, he scooted her legs out from under her, leaving her breathlessly on her back.

"You were too slow," he said with a wolfish smile. She didn't say anything, just watched him with a glazed passion, her breasts rising and falling with each breath.

"I hardly know where to start," he murmured.

She licked her lips.

"But I think . . ." He trailed his finger down her body, from her shoulder to her hip. "I'll start . . ." He moved inward, then lower. "Here."

Both of his hands moved to her hips, his thumbs pressing against the skin of her inner thighs. He slid her open, and then he lowered his head to the most intimate of kisses.

"Andrew!" she gasped.

He smiled as he licked. He loved making her gasp.

She tasted like heaven, like sweet wine and tangy nectar, and he couldn't resist sliding a finger inside her, glorying in the way she instinctively tightened around him.

She was close. He could take her over the edge with one single grazing teeth, but he was selfish, and when she came, he wanted to be inside her.

She moaned with frustration when he drew back, but he quickly repositioned his mouth with his cock. He nudged at her opening, his body shuddering with desire as her legs wrapped around his. "Do you want me to stop?" he whispered.

Their eyes met.

"Never," she said.

And so he pushed forward, finding a home in her warmth, wondering how he had lived twenty-nine years on this earth without making love to this woman. He slipped into a rhythm, each stroke bringing him closer to the edge, but he held back, straining against his own release until she found it.

"Andrew," she gasped, arching beneath him.

He leaned down, rolled his tongue across her breast.

She whimpered. She moaned.

He turned his attention to the other one, this time giving it a little suction. She let out a keening cry, high-pitched but quiet, and her body tightened.

beneath him.

Around him.

her It was his undoing. He pumped forward once, then again. And then he exploded within her, losing himself in her scent, her essence.

In *her*. He lost himself in *her*, but somehow, in that moment, he found home.

d Several minutes later, when he'd finally caught his breath and was leaning his back beside her, he reached down between their bodies to hold her

"I saw stars," he said, still amazed.

He *heard* her smile. "On the insides of your eyelids?"

older to "I think I saw them on the insides of yours."

She laughed, and the bed shook.

and soft And then, far sooner than he would have anticipated, they shook the bed for again.

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In *her*. He lost himself in *her*, but somehow, in that moment, he found his home.

Several minutes later, when he'd finally caught his breath and was lying on his back beside her, he reached down between their bodies to hold her hand.

"I saw stars," he said, still amazed.

He *heard* her smile. "On the insides of your eyelids?"

"I think I saw them on the insides of yours."

She laughed, and the bed shook.

And then, far sooner than he would have anticipated, they shook the bed again.

Epilogue

Nine months later

Andrew had thought that he wanted a girl, but as he held his newborn in his arms, he could only think that this amazing miraculous creature was perfect in every way.

There would be plenty of time to make more babies.

“Ten fingers,” he told Poppy, who was resting with her eyes closed in bed. “Ten toes.”

“You counted?” she murmured.

“You didn’t?”

She opened one eye. “I was busy.”

He chuckled as he touched his son’s tiny little nose. “Your mother is tired.”

“I think he looks like you,” Poppy said.

“Well, he’s certainly handsome.”

She rolled her eyes. Even with her eyes closed he could see that she loved them.

Andrew turned his attention back to the baby. “He’s very clever.”

“Of course he is.”

He looked over at her. “Open your eyes, Pops.”

She did, with a look of surprise at the nickname. He’d never used it before.

“I think we should name him Roger,” he said.

Poppy’s eyes grew round and wet, and her lips trembled before she said, “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Roger William,” Andrew decided.

“William?”

“Billy would like that, don’t you think?”

Poppy smiled widely. Billy had come to live at Crake several months earlier. They’d found him a position in the stables, although it was

understood that he was to be given time off every day to attend school. He was doing very well, although the stablemaster had complained about a large number of cats now taking up residence.

Andrew and Poppy were also living at Crake, although not for much longer. The house that Andrew had been building in his mind for so many years was almost a reality. Another month, maybe two, and they would be able to move in. There was a large, sunny nursery, a library just waiting to be filled with books, and even a small greenhouse, where Andrew planned to cultivate some of the seeds he'd collected on his many travels.

"I will have to take you outside when it's warmer," Andrew said to Roger as he walked him around the room. "I shall show you the stars."

"They won't look the same as they do from the *Infinity*," Poppy said.

"I know. We will make do." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I can tell him how the ancient gods built a ship so tall and so strong that the sky split the sky and all the stars fell out like diamonds."

This earned him a smile. "Oh, you'll tell him that, will you?"

"It's the best explanation I've ever heard." He walked over to the baby, settling Roger in his mother's arms before stretching out next to both of them. "Certainly the most romantic."

Poppy smiled, and he smiled, and even though he had been told by many women that newborns did not smile, he liked to think that Roger did, too.

"Do you think we'll ever see the *Infinity* again?" Poppy asked.

"Probably not. But maybe a different ship."

She turned to look at him. "Are you feeling restless?"

"No." He didn't even have to think about it. "Everything I need is right here."

Her elbow jabbed gently into his side. "That's far too pat an answer, Roger. You know it."

"I take back everything I've ever said about you being romantic," he said. "Even that bit about the stars."

She gave him a look as if to say, *I'm waiting*.

"I have found," he said thoughtfully, "that I rather like building things."

"Our new home?"

He looked down at Roger. "And our family."

Poppy smiled, and she and the baby drifted off to sleep. Andrew sat there with them for a long while, marveling at his good fortune. Everything he needed was really *was* right here.

. He "It wasn't too pat an answer," he murmured. Then he waited; he wo
the put it past his wife to say, even in her sleep, "Yes, it was."

But she didn't, and he eased himself off the bed and walked over to
i French doors that led out to a small Juliet balcony. It was close to midn
any and perhaps a little too cold to be going out in stocking feet, but Andre
l be a strange pull toward the inky night.

g to be It was overcast, though, and not a single star twinkled above. Until .

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rest. The wind must have cleared a small hole in the clouds.

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l softly.spot. And then . . .

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another, and then another. Three stars in all, but the first, he decided, w
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But she didn’t, and he eased himself off the bed and walked over to the French doors that led out to a small Juliet balcony. It was close to midnight and perhaps a little too cold to be going out in stocking feet, but Andrew felt a strange pull toward the inky night.

It was overcast, though, and not a single star twinkled above. Until . . .

He squinted up at the sky. There was a patch that was much darker than the rest. The wind must have cleared a small hole in the clouds.

“*En garde,*” he murmured, and with his imaginary épée, he jousting with the heavens. He laughed as he lunged forward, aiming straight for that one spot. And then . . .

He went still. Was that a star?

It twinkled merrily, and as Andrew stared up in wonder, it was joined by another, and then another. Three stars in all, but the first, he decided, was his favorite. It was a fighter.

He didn’t really *need* a lucky star.

But maybe . . .

He glanced back through the window, where Poppy and Roger dozed peacefully in the bed.

Maybe he’d had one all along.

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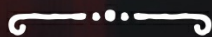
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And also for Paul.

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you.*

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Epilogue

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Chapter 1

*Kent, England
1791*

At least no one had died.

Beyond that, Nicholas Rokesby had not a clue why he'd been summoned home to Kent.

If someone had died, he reasoned, his father would have said as much in the message he'd dispatched to Nicholas in Edinburgh. He'd sent it by rider, so it was obviously a matter of some urgency, but if someone had surely Lord Manston would have written more than:

*Please return to Crake with all possible haste. It is critical that your mother and I speak with you as soon as possible.
My regrets for interrupting your studies.*

*Your loving father,
Manston*

Nicholas glanced up at the familiar canopy of trees as he embarked on the final leg of his journey. He'd already traveled from Edinburgh to London by mail coach, London to Maidstone by stagecoach, and was now completing the last fifteen miles on horseback.

The rain had finally stopped—thank the good Lord—but his mount was kicking up a bloody ridiculous amount of mud, and between that and the pollen, Nicholas had a feeling that by the time he made it home to Crake he would look like he had impetigo.

Crake. Less than a mile to go.

Hot bath, warm meal, and then he'd find out just what had his father summoned such a lather.

It had better be something serious. Not death, of course, but if he found that he'd been called across two countries merely because one of his brothers was getting an award from the king, he was going to take someone's brother's arm off.

He knew how to do it too. All of the medical students were required to observe surgeries when the opportunity arose. It was not Nicholas's favorite part of the program; he much preferred the more cerebral aspects of medicine—assessing symptoms and solving the ever-changing puzzles that led to a diagnosis. But in this day and age it was important to know how to amputate a limb. It was often the doctor's only defense against infection. What could not be cured could be stopped in its tracks.

Better to cure, though.

No, better to prevent. Stop problems before they started.

ioned
th in
swift
d died,

Nicholas gave a mental eye-roll as Crake finally came into view. He was feeling that whatever problem had brought him down to Kent on this rainy spring day, it was well underway.

Also, his brothers weren't getting awards from the king. They were supposed to be gentlemen, all three of them, but *really*.

He slowed his horse to a trot as they rounded the final corner of the courtyard. The trees slipped from his peripheral vision and suddenly there was his castle—stately and solid, all two-and-a-half centuries of it rising from the earth like a limestone goddess. Nicholas had always marveled at how such a large and ornate building could be so well hidden until the final moment of approach. He supposed there was something poetic about it, that he could continue to be surprised by something that had always been a part of him.

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His mother's roses were in full bloom, red and pink and riotous, just the way they all liked them, and as Nicholas drew close, he felt their scent waft through the damp air, drifting lightly over his clothes and under his nose. He'd never been particularly fond of the smell of roses—he preferred his flowers simple and fuss-free—but when everything came together in moments like this: the roses and the mist, the damp of the earth . . .

It was home.

It didn't seem to matter that he hadn't meant to be here, at least not for another few weeks. This was home, and he was home, and it set him at ease even as his brain pricked with unease, wondering what manner of disaster had called him back.

in
The staff must have been alerted to his impending arrival because a

and out was waiting in the drive to see to his mount, and Wheelock had the do
rothers before Nicholas even took the front step.

loody “Mr. Nicholas,” the butler said. “Your father would like to see you
immediately.”

to Nicholas motioned to his mud-spattered attire. “Surely he will want
vorite —”

edicine “He did say immediately, sir.” Wheelock’s chin dipped, almost
to a imperceptibly, just enough to indicate the back of the house. “He is wi
putate mother in the gold-and-green.”

ould Nicholas felt his brow draw down in confusion. His family was less
than most, especially when they were here in the country, but a greatc
streaked with mud was never acceptable attire in his mother’s favorite
drawing room.

had a “I’ll take that,” Wheelock said, reaching for the coat. The man alway
ainy been a freakishly good mind reader.

Nicholas glanced down at his boots.

stand- “I would just go,” Wheelock said.

Good God, maybe someone *had* died.

drive. “Do you know what this is about?” he asked, turning so that Wheelc
s home,could take the coat from his shoulders.

like a “It is not for me to say.”

and Nicholas glanced back over his shoulder. “So you do know.”

oach. “*Sir.*” Wheelock looked pained.

ally be “I would have been down in less than a month.”

Wheelock avoided Nicholas’s gaze as he made a show of brushing c
the bits of mud off the coat. “I believe time is of some essence.”

in the Nicholas rubbed his eye. Good God, he was tired. “Do you enjoy be
er cryptic?”

ess “Not particularly.”

ses Which was an utter lie. Wheelock loved the special brand of
understatement that was available only to butlers who were very secur
their positions. But Nicholas could tell that Wheelock was not finding
for anything to love in this particular conversation.

t peace, “I’m sorry,” Nicholas said. “It is badly done of me to put you in suc
ster position. No need to announce me. I’ll take my muddy boots and find
parents.”

groom “Gold-and-green,” Wheelock reminded him.

or open “Of course,” Nicholas murmured. As if he’d forget.

The entrance to the gold-and-green drawing room was at the end of the hall, and Nicholas had spent enough time making that short journey to know that his parents had to have heard him enter the house. The floors were made of marble, always polished to perfection. Stockinged feet slid like skates and shoes clicked with enough volume to percuss a small orchestra.

But when he reached the open doorway and peered inside, neither of his parents were so much as glancing in his direction. His father was by the window, staring out over the verdant lawn, and his mother was curled in her formal favorite spot on the mint green sofa.

She’d always said the left side was more comfortable than the right. In fact, five of her children had tested this hypothesis, scooting from one side to the other, and no one had managed to reach the same conclusion. To be fair, no one had reached *any* verifiable conclusion. Mary had declared that both sides felt the same, Edward pointed out that the only way to be truly comfortable was to put one’s feet up, which was not generally permitted, and Andrew hopped back and forth so many times he’d busted the seam on one of the cushions. George had declared the entire exercise ridiculous, but not bothering to make his own perfunctory test, and as for Nicholas . . .

He had been but five during this family experiment. But he’d sat himself down in every spot before rising back to his feet and declaring, “Well, I can’t prove her wrong.”

That seemed to cover a lot of life, he’d come to realize.

Proving something right wasn’t the same as proving the opposite wrong. And if the left side of the sofa made his mother happy, who was he to be otherwise?

He hesitated for a moment in the doorway, waiting for one of his parents to notice his presence. They didn’t, so he stepped inside, pausing at the edge of the rug. He’d already left a trail of mud in the hall.

He cleared his throat, and finally they both turned.

His mother spoke first. “Nicholas,” she said, stretching her arm in his direction. “Thank God you’re here.”

He looked warily from parent to parent. “Is something wrong?”

It was the stupidest of questions. Of course something was wrong. Everyone was wearing black, so . . .

“Sit down,” his father said, motioning to the sofa.

Nicholas took a seat next to his mother, taking her hand in his. It seemed

the right thing to do. But she surprised him by tugging it away and rising on her feet.

“I will leave the two of you to your discussion,” she said. She laid her hand on Nicholas’s shoulder, signaling that he did not need to rise. “It will be easier if I am not here.”

What the devil? There was a problem that needed sorting and his mother was not just *not* taking charge, she was voluntarily exiting the scene?

This was not normal.

“Thank you for coming down so quickly,” she murmured, bending to kiss him on the cheek. “It comforts me more than I could ever say.” She looked

All back at her husband. “I will be at my writing desk, should you need me to the to . . .”

She seemed not to know what to say. Nicholas had never seen her so uncomposed.

“Should you need me,” she finally finished.

Nicholas watched as his mother departed, silent and likely slack-jawed until she shut the door behind her. He turned back to his father. “*What* are you going on?”

His father sighed, and a long, heavy moment passed before he said, “There has been an incident.”

His father always had been a master of polite understatement.

“You should have a drink.”

“*Sir.*” Nicholas didn’t want a drink. He wanted an explanation. But his father was his father, so he took the drink.

“It concerns Georgiana.”

“Bridgerton?” Nicholas asked in disbelief, as if there was another incident in Georgiana to whom his father could possibly be referring.

Lord Manston nodded grimly. “You haven’t heard, then.”

“I’ve been in Edinburgh,” Nicholas reminded him.

His father took a sip of his brandy. A rather larger sip than was normal, even early in the morning. Or any time of the day, for that matter. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“Respectfully, sir, I would ask you to be less opaque.”

“There was an incident.”

“Still opaque,” Nicholas muttered.

If his father heard him—and to be honest, Nicholas rather thought he had—he made no reaction. Instead he cleared his throat and said, “She was

ng to kidnapped.”

“What?” Nicholas sprang to his feet, his own glass of brandy sliding
er handhis fingers to the priceless carpet below. “You didn’t think to *begin* the
e conversation with that? Good God, has anyone—”

“Calm yourself,” his father said sharply. “She has been recovered. S
other safe.”

“Was she . . .”

“She was not violated.”

o kiss Nicholas felt something unfamiliar slide through his veins. Relief, h
oked supposed, but something else along with it. Something acrid and sour.

e He’d met women who’d been forced into sexual congress against th
will. It did things to them. To their bodies, which he thought he might
understand a little, and then to their souls, which he knew he could not
understand at all.

This feeling inside . . . it was sharper than relief. It had teeth, and it c
red with a slow thrum of rage.

is Georgiana Bridgerton was like a sister to him. No, not quite a sister.
exactly. But her brother Edmund *was* like a brother to him, closer than
“There own, to be honest.

Lord and Lady Manston had thought they were finished having child
when Nicholas happened along. He was a full eight years younger than
next closest sibling; by the time he was old enough to do more than tot
about in nappies, they were all off at school.

But Edmund Bridgerton had been around, just a few miles away at *A*
Hall. They were almost precisely the same age, born just two months a
They’d been inseparable.

“What happened?” Nicholas asked his father.

“Bloody fortune hunter went after her,” his father bit off. “Nithercot
son.”

nal this “Freddie Oakes?” Nicholas said, with no small amount of surprise. *F*
at’s a gone to school together. For a few years, at least. Freddie hadn’t finish
was popular, personable, and insanely good at cricket, but it turned out
the only thing worse than failing one’s exams was cheating on them, a
been booted from Eton at the age of sixteen.

“That’s right,” Lord Manston murmured. “You know him.”

e had “Not well. We were never friends.”

s “No?”

“Never *not* friends,” Nicholas clarified. “Everyone got on with Fred Oakes.”

Lord Manston gave him a sharp look. “You defend him?”

“No,” Nicholas said quickly, although without any facts, he had no idea what had truly happened. Still, it was difficult to imagine a scenario that involved Georgiana being at fault. “I’m just saying that he was always popular. He wasn’t *mean*, but you didn’t really want to cross him.”

“So he was a bully.”

“No.” Nicholas rubbed his eyes. Damn, he was tired. And it was nearly impossible to explain the intricacies of school social hierarchy to someone who hadn’t been there. “Just . . . I don’t know. As I said, we weren’t really friends. He was . . . shallow, I suppose.”

His father gave him a curious look.

“Or maybe he wasn’t. I honestly could not say. I never really spoke to him about anything more than what was for breakfast or who was going home for half term.” Nicholas thought for a moment, sifting through his memories of school. “He played a lot of cricket.”

“You played cricket.”

“Not well.”

It was a sign of his father’s distress that he did not immediately leap to correct him on this. In the Earl of Manston’s mind, all four of his sons had been made in his image—splendid athletes who dominated the sporting life of Eton College.

Aubrey was only twenty-five percent wrong.

Nicholas was not an incompetent athlete. To the contrary, he was a fine fencer, and he could outshoot any of his brothers with either rifle or pistol. But put him on a field with a ball (of any sort) and a few other men and he was hopeless. There was a skill to knowing where one was in a crowd. Maybe it was an instinct. Regardless, he did not have it. Cricket, the Field Game, the Wall Game . . .

He was terrible at them all. All of his worst memories of school took place on the playing fields. That sense of being watched and found wanting. And he’d only thing worse was waiting while teams were chosen. It did not take long to figure out who could kick a ball or throw a googly.

And who could not.

He supposed it was the same in academics. He’d only been at Eton a few months before everyone knew he was the one with the perfect marks in

die sciences. Even Freddie Oakes had come to him for help from time to time. Nicholas knelt to finally retrieve the glass tumbler he'd dropped. He regarded it for a few seconds, trying to decide if the moment required a nod of the head or a softening around the edges.

idea at Probably something in between.

very He looked at his father. "Perhaps you had better tell me what has happened," he said, crossing the room to refill his glass. He could decide if he wanted to drink it.

ir "Very well." His father set his own glass down with a heavy clunk. He was not sure when they met, but Oakes had made his intentions clear. He was courting her. Your mother seemed to think that he was likely to propose to her.

ally Nicholas could not imagine why his mother thought she could read the mind of Freddie Oakes of all people, but this was clearly not the time to do this out.

with g "I don't know if Georgiana would have said yes," Lord Manston continued. "Oakes gambles too much—we all know that—but he'll eventually have the barony, and Georgie's not getting any younger."

is At twenty-six, Georgie was precisely one year younger than Nicholas. He was well aware that women did not age at the same rate as men, at least not as pertained to the customs and mores of English marriage.

to had "Anyway," his father continued, "Lady Bridgerton and your mother went up in London—shopping, I suppose; I didn't ask—and Georgiana went with them."

g fields "But not for the Season," Nicholas murmured. As far as he knew, Georgiana had never had a proper London Season. She'd said she hadn't wanted to go. He'd never inquired further. A Season in London sounded as appealing as a visit to him as having his teeth pulled, so who was he to question her?

Or "Just a visit," his father confirmed. "I'm sure they went to some evening at another. But nothing official. Season's almost over, anyway. But Oakes called several times, and he took Georgiana out."

place . . . the Nicholas splashed a bit of brandy into his glass and turned back around to face his father. "With Lady Bridgerton's permission?"

boys Lord Manston nodded grimly and took a long swallow of his drink. It was all as it should be. Her maid accompanied them. They went to a bookshop. "That sounds like Georgie."

a few 1 the His father nodded. "Oakes snatched her on the way out. Or rather, he took her off with her. She got into the carriage willingly, because why shouldn't she?"

me. “What about the maid?”

“Oakes pushed her to the pavement before she could get into the car.”

a clear “My God, is she all right?” If she hit her head, it could be quite serious.

Lord Manston blinked, and it occurred to Nicholas that his father probably hadn’t considered the question of the maid’s health. “She’s probably fine if you haven’t heard anything,” Nicholas said.

de later His father was silent for a moment, then said, “She is home now.”

“Georgie?”

“I’m His father nodded. “She was in his custody for only a day, but the damage was done.”

ie.” “I thought you said she wasn’t—”

the His father slammed his glass onto the side table. “She doesn’t have time to point been violated for her reputation to be destroyed. Good God, boy, use your head. It doesn’t matter what he did or didn’t do to her. She’s ruined. And everyone knows it.” He looked up at Nicholas with a withering expression. “Except, apparently, you.”

There was an insult there somewhere, but Nicholas decided to let it pass, but “I was in Edinburgh, sir,” he said, voice tight. “I did not know that anything had transpired.”

east “I know. I’m sorry. This is very distressing.” Lord Manston raked his fingers were through his hair. “She is my goddaughter, you know.”

t with “I do.”

“I swore an oath to protect her. In church.”

eorgie As his father wasn’t a particularly religious man, Nicholas wasn’t certain one. why the location of the vow held such importance, but he nodded all the same. He brought his glass to his lips but did not drink, instead using the tumbler to partially obscure his own expression as he watched his father.

nt or He had never seen him quite like this. He was not sure what to make of it.

s “I cannot see her ruined,” his father said firmly. “We cannot see her ruined.”

nd to Nicholas held his breath. Later he realized his lungs knew what his life did not. His life was about to take a drastic turn.

“It was “There is only one thing to be done,” his father said. “You must marry her.”

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Chapter 2

Quite a few things looped through Nicholas's mind upon his father's announcement.

What did you just say?

Are you mad?

You must be mad.

Yes, I'm sure you're mad.

Wait, did I hear that correctly?

All culminating in: *ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR BLOODY MIND?*

What he said, however, was, "I beg your pardon?"

"You must marry her," his father said again.

Proving that A) Nicholas had not misheard him and B) his father was indeed out of his bloody mind.

Nicholas downed his brandy in one gulp. "I can't marry Georgiana," said.

"Why not?"

"Because—Because—" There were so many reasons Nicholas could possibly coalesce them into a single statement.

His father raised a brow. "Are you married to someone else?"

"Of course not!"

"Have you *promised* to marry someone else?"

"For the love of God, Father—"

"Then I see no reason you cannot do your duty."

"It is not my duty!" Nicholas exploded.

His father stared at him, hard, and he felt like a child again, scolded some minor infraction.

But this was not minor. This was marriage. And while marrying Georgiana Bridgerton might—*might*—be the right and honorable thing to do, it certainly was not his *duty*.

“Father,” he tried again, “I am not in a position to marry.”

“Of course you are. You are twenty-seven years old, of sound mind, good health.”

“I live in a rented room in Edinburgh. I don’t even have a valet.”

His father waved a hand. “Easily remedied. We can get you a house new part of town. Your brother knows several of the architects involved in the planning. It will be an excellent investment.”

For a moment Nicholas could only stare. His father was talking about property investments?

“You may consider it a wedding gift.”

Nicholas brought his hand to his forehead, using his thumb and middle finger to press into his temples. He needed to focus. Think. His father was still talking, going on about integrity and duty and ninety-nine-year leases and Nicholas’s brain hurt.

“Do you have any idea what is involved in the study of medicine?” he asked, his eyes closed behind his hand. “I don’t have time for a wife.”

“She doesn’t need your time. She needs your name.”

Nicholas moved his hand. Looked at his father. “You’re serious.”

His father gave him a look as if to say, *Haven’t you been listening?*

is “I can’t marry someone with the express intention of ignoring her.”

’ he “I hope that does not prove to be the case,” his father responded. “I am merely trying to point out that your cooperation in this matter does not to adversely impact your life at this crucial juncture.”

l not “That was an awful lot of words to tell me, in effect, to be a bad husband.”

“No, it was an awful lot of words to tell you, in effect, to be a young woman’s hero.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “After which I can go and be a bad husband.”

“If that is your wish,” his father said quietly.

for Nicholas wasn’t sure how long he stared at his father in disbelief. It was only when he realized he was slowly shaking his head that he forced himself to turn away. He walked to the window, using it as an excuse to set his attention elsewhere. He did not want to look at his father right now. He did not want to think about him, or his mad proposition.

Georgiana “No, it wasn’t a proposition, was it? It was an order. His father had no choice.”

certainly He’d said, “You *must* marry her.”

It was not the same.

“You can leave her in Kent,” his father said after whatever he must have deemed an appropriately considerate stretch of silence. “She doesn’t need to accompany you to Edinburgh. In fact, she probably doesn’t want to accompany you to Edinburgh. I don’t think she’s ever been.”

Nicholas turned around.

“It would be up to you, of course,” his father said. “You’re the one making the sacrifice.”

“It is so odd to think that this is how you mean to convince me,” Nicholas said.

But it was clear they were having two separate conversations, because his father then said, “It’s only marriage.”

At that, Nicholas full-on snorted. “Say that to Mother and then come back and say it again.”

His father’s expression grew peevish. “This is Georgiana we’re talking about. Why are you so resistant?”

“Oh, I don’t know . . . Perhaps because you summoned me away from my studies, across two countries, and then when I arrived, you did not suggest that I might have the means to solve a difficult situation. You did not consider how I felt about the idea of marriage. You sat me down and ordered me to marry a woman who is practically my sister.”

“But she is *not* your sister.”

Nicholas turned away. “Stop,” he said. “Please just stop.”

“Your mother agrees that it’s the best solution.”

“Oh my God.” They were ganging up on him.

“It is the only solution.”

“A moment,” Nicholas muttered. He pressed his fingers to his temples again. His head was starting to pound. “I just need a moment.”

“We don’t have—”

“For the love of God, could you be quiet for one bloody second so I can think?”

His father’s eyes widened, and he took a step back.

Nicholas looked down at his hands. They were shaking. He’d never spoken to his father in such a manner. He wouldn’t have thought it possible. “I need a drink,” he muttered. A proper one this time. He strode back to the sideboard and filled his glass, nearly to the brim.

“The entire journey down from Scotland I wondered,” Nicholas muttered, “what on earth could be the reason for such a mysterious yet blatantly

have unignorable summons. Had someone died, I wondered.”

eed to “I would never—”

“No,” Nicholas interrupted. He did not desire his father’s comment. This was *his* speech, his sarcasm, and by God he was going to get through in his own good time.

naking “No,” he said again. “No one could have died. My father would never compose such a cryptic note for that. But what else could it be? What could Nicholas possibly have led him to call me down at such an astoundingly inconvenient time?”

se his Lord Manston opened his mouth, but Nicholas quelled him with another hard stare.

back “Although *inconvenient* doesn’t really quite cover it. Did you know missing my exams?” Nicholas paused, but not for long enough to indicate that the question was anything but rhetorical. “My professors agreed to administer them when I return, but of course I had to admit to them that I didn’t know *when* I would return.” He took a long drink of his brandy. *gest that’s an awkward conversation.*”

isk me Nicholas looked over at his father, almost daring him to interrupt. “I think they wanted to grant the delay,” he continued, “but this is one of those cases where being the son of an earl does come in handy. Not to make friends, of course. Because no one really likes the fellow who pulls rank to get out of exams. Even if that fellow has every intention of taking those exams at a later, although as I may have already mentioned, unspecified date.”

les “I have already apologized for pulling you away from your studies,” Manston said in a tight voice.

“Yes,” Nicholas said blandly, “in your highly detailed letter.”

can His father stared at him for a moment, then said, “Are you finished with your petulance?”

“For the time being.” Nicholas took a sip of his drink, then reconsidered. He still had one last thing to say. “I will tell you, though, of all the scenarios I need spoken that played through my mind on the journey home, I never dreamed that I would arrive to find my father had all but promised my hand in marriage.”

leboard “Your hand in marriage,” his father repeated with a slightly uncomfortable huff. “You make yourself sound like a girl.”

sed, “I rather feel like one right now, and I have to tell you, I don’t like it.” He shook his head. “I have new respect for all of them, putting up with us

them what to do.”

Lord Manston snorted. “If you think I have ever managed to tell your mother or sister what to do, you are sadly mistaken.”

Nicholas set down his glass. He’d had enough. It wasn’t even noon. “Why are you doing so with me?”

“Because I have no other choice,” his father shot back. “Georgiana is the only one who could help you.”

“You would sacrifice your son for the benefit of your goddaughter.”

“That’s not at all what I’m doing, and you know it.”

It felt like it, though. It felt like his father was choosing a favorite child and it was not Nicholas.

It was not even a Rokesby.

But even Nicholas had to admit that the lives of the Rokesbys and the Bridgertons were thoroughly entwined. They had been neighbors for centuries, but it had been this current generation that had truly cemented the bond. The lords and ladies were the closest of friends, and each had been entrusted with a godchild in the other family.

The whole thing had been made even more official when the oldest Rokesby son married the oldest Bridgerton daughter. And then the third Rokesby son had married a Bridgerton cousin.

Honestly, give someone a ball of yarn and the family tree and one could make quite an incestuous cat’s cradle out of the whole thing.

“I need to think about this,” Nicholas said, because it was clearly the only thing he could say at the moment that would put a temporary halt to his father’s pressure.

“Of course,” his father said. “I do understand that this comes as a surprise.”

To put it mildly.

“But time is of the essence. You’ll need to make your decision by tomorrow.”

“*Tomorrow?*”

His father had the grace to sound at least a little bit regretful when he said,

“It can’t be helped.”

“I have traveled for nearly two weeks, through at least six torrential downpours, cut short my studies, and been all but ordered to marry my neighbor, and you cannot even give me the courtesy of a few days’ time to think about it?”

“This isn’t about you. It’s about Georgie.”

ir “How is this not about me?” Nicholas all but roared.

“You won’t even know you’re married.”

“Then “Are you bloody gone in the head?” Nicholas was quite sure he’d ne
spoken to his father in such a way; he’d never have dared to. But he co
needs believe the words coming forth from his father’s mouth.

His father had to have gone mad. It was one thing to suggest he mar
Georgiana Bridgerton; there was a quixotic sort of logic to it. But to su
that the act was meaningless . . . that Nicholas could carry on as if he h
uild, taken her hand in marriage . . .

Did he know his son at all?

“I can’t talk to you right now,” Nicholas said. He stalked to the door
suddenly glad he’d never removed his muddy boots.

“Nicholas . . .”

ed the “No. Just, no.” He laid one hand against the frame of the door, pausi
en take a steadying breath. He did not trust himself to look back at his fat
he said, “Your concern for your goddaughter is commendable, and I m
might have listened to you had you framed your wishes as a request.”

d “You are angry. I understand.”

ould — “I don’t think you do. Your utter disdain for the feelings of your ow

“False,” his father snapped. “I assure you that your best interests hav
e only never been far from the forefront of my mind. If I have not made that c
s is because I am worried for Georgiana, not for you.”

Nicholas swallowed. Every muscle in his body felt ready to snap.

“I have had a great deal longer to become accustomed to the idea,” h
father said quietly. “Time does make a difference.”

Nicholas turned around to face him. “Is this what you would hope fo
A loveless, sexless marriage?”

“Of course not. But you already have affection. And Georgiana is a
girl. I have every confidence that in time the two of you will find that y
e said, very well suited.”

“Your other children married for love,” Nicholas said quietly. “All f
them.”

“I had hoped for the same for you.” His father smiled, but it was a s
ie to wistful thing. “I would not rule it out.”

“I’m not going to fall in love with Georgiana. My God, if I were, do

think it would have happened by now?"

His father gave him an amused smile. Not mocking, just amused.

But Nicholas wasn't having it. "I can't even imagine kissing her," he

never "You don't have to kiss her. You just have to marry her."

would not Nicholas's mouth fell open. "You did not just say that to me."

ry "Very few marriages begin with passion," Lord Manston said, suddenly friendly, fatherly advice. "Your mother and I—"

uggest "I do *not* want to hear about you and Mother."

had not "Don't be a prude," his father said with a snort.

It was at that moment Nicholas wondered if he were, in fact, dreaming the entire conversation. Because he could not conceive of any other scenario

that involved his father sharing any sort of intimate details about his mother.

"You're going to be a physician," his father said dryly. "Surely you know that your mother and I could not have produced five children—"

ing to "Stop!" Nicholas practically howled. "My God, I don't want to hear about her, but that."

ight—I His father chuckled. He chuckled!

"I will think about it," Nicholas finally said, not bothering to mask the sullen tone of his voice. "But I cannot give you an answer tomorrow."

n son "You must."

"For the love of God, are you listening to me?"

ve "We don't have time for me to listen to you. Georgiana's life is ruined.

clear, it They were talking in circles. It was like they were out on the lawn, taking the same path until the grass was worn down to dirt. But Nicholas was weary by this point to try to break free of the circuit, so he just asked, "this is going to change if I take a few days to think about it?"

his "If you don't marry her," Lord Manston said, "her parents need to find someone for me?"

fine Which led to a *terrible* thought. "Have you discussed this with Lord Lady Bridgerton?"

you're His father hesitated a moment before saying, "I have not."

"You would not lie to me about this . . ."

our of "You dare to question my honor?"

"Your honor, no. Your judgment, I no longer have any idea."

ad, His father swallowed uncomfortably. "I would have suggested it, but I don't want to raise their hopes in the event you refused."

n't you Nicholas eyed him skeptically. "You did not give the impression that

refusal was an option.”

“We both know I can’t force you to marry the girl.”
e said. “You’ll just be profoundly disappointed in me if I don’t.”

His father said nothing.

“That’s answer enough, I suppose,” Nicholas muttered. He sank bac
only all a chair, exhausted. What the hell was he going to do?

His father must have realized that he’d had enough, because he clea
throat a few times, then said, “Why don’t I get your mother?”

“Why?”

ng this Nicholas hadn’t meant to sound quite so truculent, but really, what v
io that mother going to do?

r. “She has a way of setting me at ease when I’m troubled. Perhaps she
know do the same for you.”

“Fine,” Nicholas grunted. He was too tired to argue any longer.

about But before Lord Manston could leave the room, the door opened, an
Manston stepped quietly inside. “Is it settled?”

“He’s going to think about it,” her husband replied.

he “You did not need to leave the room,” Nicholas said.

“I thought it would be easier if I was not here.”

“It was going to be difficult either way.”

“I suppose that is true.” She laid her hand on his shoulder and gave i
ed.” little squeeze. “For what it is worth, I am sorry that you have been put
readingthis position.”

too Nicholas gave her the closest thing he could manage to a smile.

‘And She cleared her throat. It was an awkward sound. “I also wanted to i
you that we are having dinner at Aubrey Hall tonight.”

nd “You have got to be joking,” Nicholas said. Aubrey Hall was the ho
the Bridgerton family. He could only assume that *all* the Bridgertons w
and be in attendance.

His mother gave him a regretful smile. “I’m afraid not, my son. It ha
planned for some time, and I did mention to Lady Bridgerton that you
be home.”

Nicholas groaned. Why would his mother do such a thing?

“She’s terribly eager to hear about your studies. Everyone is. But yo
t I did tired. It’s your choice.”

“So I don’t have to go?”

it His mother smiled sweetly. “Everyone will be there.”

“Right,” Nicholas said, in a voice just one shade shy of bitterness. “I really, no choice at all.”

Sounded just like the rest of his life.

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“Right,” Nicholas said, in a voice just one shade shy of bitterness. “So really, no choice at all.”

Sounded just like the rest of his life.

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Chapter 3

Georgiana Bridgerton had lost many things in her life—a leather-bound notebook she'd been particularly fond of, the key to her sister Billie's jewelry box, two left shoes—but this was the first time she'd lost her reputation.

It was proving far more difficult to replace than the notebook.

Or the shoes.

She'd taken a hammer to the jewelry box, and while no one had been pleased with the ensuing carnage, Billie's emerald bracelet had been successfully recovered.

And never lent out again, but Georgie deserved no less.

But reputations . . .

Those were slippery, fickle things, resistant to repair and repatriation; it didn't matter if one had absolutely NOTHING TO DO with the aforementioned loss. Society was not kind to females who broke the rules.

It wasn't kind to females, full stop.

Georgie sent a stare down the length of her bed to her three cats, Judyth, Blanche, and Cat-Head. "It's not fair," she said.

Judyth placed one silvery-gray paw on Georgie's ankle, as sympathetic a gesture as one could expect from the most aloof of the three felines.

"It wasn't my fault."

This wasn't the first time she'd said those four words, in that order.

"I never said I would marry him."

Or those.

Blanche yawned.

"I *know*," Georgie responded. "I didn't even *break* the rules. I never broke the rules."

It was true. She didn't. Which was probably why Freddie Oakes thought she would be so easy to break them for her.

She supposed she'd encouraged him—not to *kidnap* her, mind you,

she'd behaved as any proper young lady might when shown interest by eligible young gentleman. She hadn't discouraged him, at any rate. They danced once at Lady Manston's soiree and then twice at the local assembly room, and when Georgie had gone to London with her mother, he'd called upon her quite properly at Bridgerton House.

There had been nothing—*nothing*—in his behavior to suggest that he was an amoral, bankrupt cad.

So when he'd suggested an outing to Pemberton's bookshop, she'd accepted with delight. She loved bookshops, and everyone knew the best ones were in London.

She'd dressed exactly as an unmarried lady might for such an excursion, and when Freddie had arrived in his family's carriage, she'd joined him with a smile on her face and her maid Marian at her side.

Ladies didn't get into closed carriages with gentlemen without a chaperone. And Georgie never broke that sort of rule.

From the bookshop they'd walked to the Pot and Pineapple for tea and cakes, which were delicious, and again everything that was acceptable and expected in a young lady's behavior and agenda.

Georgie really wanted to make this clear, not that anyone was listening, and aside from her cats. She had done nothing wrong.

Nothing. Wrong.

When it was time to depart, Freddie was all graciousness and solicitude, carefully handing her up into the carriage before climbing in himself. Then the Oakeses' groom was right there to offer the same courtesy to Marian, but then Freddie slammed the door in both of their faces, pounded his fist against the ceiling, and they'd taken off like a shot, right down Berkeley Street.

They'd almost run over a dog.

Marian had been hysterical. So had the Oakeses's groom, for that matter. He'd not been in on the scheme and had feared both immediate termination of his position *and* eternal damnation.

The groom hadn't been sacked, and neither had Marian. The Oakeses and the Bridgertons both knew who was to blame for the scandal and were merciful enough not to take it out on the servants.

But the rest of society . . . Oh *ho*, they'd had a grand time with the news. And the consensus was, Georgiana Bridgerton had got nothing more than she deserved.

Uppity spinster.

7 an *Ugly hag.*
ey'd *She should thank him. It's not as if she had anyone else lined up to c*
nbly *for her.*

lled It was all false, of course. She wasn't an uppity spinster *or* an ugly h
and as it happened, she *had* had a proposal of marriage, but when she'
e was chosen not to accept it she'd also chosen not to embarrass the man by
advertising the fact.

est She was nice that way. Or at least she tried to be.
She probably *was* a spinster, though. Georgie wasn't certain what ag
marked the line between dewy-fresh and long-in-the-tooth, but at six-a
sion, twenty, she'd likely crossed it.

n with But she'd done so by choice. She hadn't wanted a London Season. S
wasn't shy, or at least she didn't think so, but the thought of those crow
day-in-and-night-out, was exhausting. Tales of her older sister's time i
London had done nothing to convince her otherwise. (Billie had *literal*
nd someone on fire, though not on purpose.)

and It was true that Billie had gone on to marry the future Earl of Manst
that had nothing to do with her truncated disaster of a Season. George
ing Rokesby lived just three miles away, and they'd known each other all t
lives. If Billie could find a husband without leaving the southeast of Ei
surely Georgie could, too.

ude, It had not been difficult to convince her parents to let her skip a trad
The London debut. Georgie had been a sickly sort of child, always coughin
out short of breath. She'd grown out of it, mostly, but her mother still fuss
against Georgie *might* have used that to her advantage once or twice. And it w
t. as if she'd lied. The choked and polluted London air could not possibly
good for her lungs. For anyone's lungs.

atter. But now half of London thought she'd skipped the Season because s
ation thought herself above it and the other half because she clearly had som
of hideous defect her parents were trying to hide from society.

s and Heaven forfend that a lady might decide not to go to London becaus
liberal *didn't want to go to London.*

ews. "I'm thinking in italics," Georgie said aloud. That could not possibly
ian she entirely sane. She reached toward her feet and scooped up Blanche. "A
ruined?" she asked the mostly black cat. "Of course I am, but what doe
mean?"

Blanche shrugged.

Or it could have just been the way Georgie was holding her. “Sorry,”
muttered, setting her back down. But she put a little pressure on the cat
back, nudging her into prime snuggling position. Blanche took the hint
and curled up next to her, purring as Georgie scratched the back of her neck.

What was she going to do?

“It’s never the *man*’s fault,” she said out loud.

Freddie Oakes wasn’t holed up in his bedroom, trying not to hear his
mother sobbing over his misfortune.

“They’re probably fêting him at his club. *Well done, you,*” Georgie said
out in the overblown accents of the English elite. Which was to say, *he*
accent, but it was easy to make it sound like something grotesque.

“*Making off with the Bridgerton chit,*” she mimicked. “*That’s forward
thinking of you. She’s got four hundred thousand a year, I’ve heard.*”

She didn’t.

Have four hundred thousand a year, that was. No one did. But exaggeration
made the story better, and if anyone had a right to embellish it was she.

“*Didja tup her? Do the deed? Poke her good?*”

Dear God, if her mother could hear her now.

And what would Freddie say to such a question? Would he lie? Would it
matter? Even if he said they hadn’t had intercourse—

And they hadn’t. Georgie’s knee to his ballocks had more than made up
for the loss of that.

But even if he told the truth and admitted that they had not slept in the
same bed, it did not matter. She’d been alone in a carriage with him for
hours, then alone in a room with him for another three before she’d managed
to metaphorically dismember him. She could possess the world’s most
maidenhead and she’d still be deemed deflowered.

“My hymen could be three feet thick and no one would think me a virgin.”

She looked over at the cats. “Am I right, ladies?”

Blanche licked her paw.

Judyth ignored her.

And Cat-Head . . . Well, Cat-Head was a boy. Georgie supposed the
orange tabby wouldn’t understand, anyway.

But all the indignation in the world could not stop Georgie’s imagination
from running back to the clubs of London, where the future leaders of
the nation were undoubtedly still gossiping about her downfall.

It was horrible, and awful, and she kept telling herself that maybe that

” she weren’t talking about her, that maybe they’d moved on to things that r
t’s mattered, like the revolution in France, or the state of agriculture in the
: and You know, things they *should* be bothering with, since half of them we
k. going to be taking up seats in the House of Lords at some point.

But they weren’t. Georgie knew they weren’t. They were writing he
in that damned betting book, setting the odds that she’d be Mrs. Oakes
s end of the month. And she knew enough of callow young men to know
they were writing ditties and laughing uproariously.

snipped *Georgiana Oakes, princess of the pokes.*

r God, that was awful. And probably accurate. It was exactly the sort
thing they’d say.

ird *Little Miss Bridgerton, isn’t she a . . . a . . .*

Nothing rhymed with Bridgerton. Georgie supposed she should be g
for that.

geration *She’ll have to marry you now, oh ho ho.*

. Georgie’s eyes narrowed. “Like. Hell.”

“Georgiana?”

ld it Georgie tipped her ear toward the door. Her mother was coming dov
hall. Wonderful.

“Georgiana?”

e sure “I’m in my room, Mama.”

“Well, I know that, but—” Her mother knocked.

he Georgie wondered what would happen if she did not respond with th
r ten expected, *Come in.*

imaged Another knock. “Georgiana?”

intact Georgie sighed. “Come in.”

She really wasn’t that contrary. Or maybe she just didn’t have the er
irgin.” Lady Bridgerton entered, shutting the door carefully behind her. She
looked lovely, as she always did, her eyes made especially blue by the
cornflower silk shawl draped over her shoulders.

old Georgie loved her mother, she really did, but sometimes she wished
wasn’t quite so effortlessly elegant.

“Who were you talking to?” her mother asked.

ation “Myself.”

the “Oh.” This did not seem to be the answer her mother was looking fo
although in truth Georgie could not imagine what would have been pre
ey —that she was in deep discussion with the cats?

really Her mother managed a small smile. “How are you feeling?”
north. Surely her mother did not want an honest answer to that question. Ge
re waited a moment, then said, “I’m not really certain how to answer that
“Of course.” Lady Bridgerton sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. Ge
r name noticed that her eyes were a little puffy. She swallowed. It had been ne
by the month, and still, her mother was crying every day.
/ that She hated that she was responsible for this.
It wasn’t her fault, but she was responsible. Somehow. She didn’t re
feel like working out the details.
of Georgie picked up Judyth and held her out. “Want a cat?”
Lady Bridgerton blinked, then took her. “Yes, please.”
Georgie stroked Blanche, and her mother stroked Judyth. “It helps,”
grateful Georgie said.
Her mother nodded absently. “It does.”
Georgie cleared her throat. “Was there something in particular you v
to tell me?”
“Oh. Yes. We are expecting guests for dinner.”
vn the Georgie avoided a groan. Just. “Really?”
“Please don’t take that tone.”
“What sort of tone does one take at a moment like this?”
Her mother set Judyth down. “Georgiana, I understand that this is a
difficult situation, but we must forge on.”
ie “Can’t I forge on tomorrow?”
“Darling.” Her mother took her hand. “It’s just family.”
“I’m not hungry.”
“What does that matter?”
iergy. Georgie stared at her mother. “Is that not what the partaking of a me
about?”
Lady Bridgerton’s lips tightened, and under any other circumstances
Georgie would have awarded her mother points for not rolling her eyes
she “Everyone is coming to dinner, Georgiana. It would look very odd i
weren’t there.”
“Define everyone.”
“Everyone who cares about you.”
r, “Anyone who cares about me will understand why I am not hungry.
ferable Ruination, Mother. It’s quite the appetite suppressant.”
“Georgiana, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” Georgie demanded. “Make light of it? It’s all I *can* do.”

“Well, I can’t.”

“You don’t have to. But you have to let me do it. Because if I don’t go to cry.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Cry? No. I refuse.” Besides, she already had cried. All it had done was make her eyes hurt.

“It can make one feel better.”

“It didn’t make me feel better,” Georgie retorted. “Right now all I do is sit on my bed and say hateful things about Freddie Oakes.”

“I support your hateful musings, but eventually we will have to take action.”

“Not this afternoon,” Georgie muttered.

Lady Bridgerton shook her head. “I’m going to have a word with his mother.”

“What will that accomplish?”

“I don’t know,” Lady Bridgerton admitted. “But someone should tell you what a terrible person her child is.”

“She either already knows or she won’t believe you. Either way, all she is going to do is advise you to make me marry him.”

That was the rub. Georgie *could* make all of her problems go away. All she had to do was marry the man who’d destroyed her life.

“We certainly won’t force you to marry Mr. Oakes,” Lady Bridgerton said. But there was a wistful hint left unspoken—that if Georgie decided she wanted to marry him, they wouldn’t stand in her way.

“I suppose everyone is just waiting to see if I turn up pregnant,” Georgie said.

“Georgiana!”

“Oh, please, Mama. You know that’s what everyone is wondering.”

“I’m not.”

“Because I *told* you I didn’t lie with him. And you believe me. But I’ll do what I else will.”

“I assure you that is not true.”

Georgie gave her mother a long stare. They’d had this conversation already, and they both knew the truth, even if Lady Bridgerton was loathe to say it out loud. It did not matter what Georgie said. Society would assume Freddie Oakes had had his way with her.

o.” And how could she prove them wrong? She couldn’t. Either she showed
in nine months with a baby and everyone congratulated themselves on
I’m right about that Bridgerton chit, or she kept her svelte figure and they said
that it didn’t prove a thing. Lots of women didn’t get pregnant on the first
try. She was still soiled goods, baby or no.

was “Well.” Her mother stood, clearly deciding that the conversation was
more than she could bear. Frankly, Georgie couldn’t blame her. “Dinner is in
half an hour.”

want to “Do I have to go?”

“Yes. Your brother is coming, as is Violet, and I believe they are bringing
the boys to spend the night in the nursery.”

“Can’t I go eat with them?” Georgie asked, only half jesting. At least
Anthony and Benedict didn’t realize she was a pariah. Up in the nursery
was still jolly Aunt Georgie.

Her mother gave her a steely look, indicating that she heard the command
and was choosing to ignore it. “Lord and Lady Manston are coming as
well as George and Billie. And I believe Nicholas is down, too.”

l her “Nicholas? Isn’t he meant to be in Edinburgh?”

she’s Lady Bridgerton gave a delicate shrug. “All I know is what Helen told
me. He came down early.”

All she “That’s very odd. The term ends next month. I should think he would
have exams.”

on said. Her mother looked at her curiously.

she *did* “I pay attention to details,” Georgie said. Honestly, didn’t her mother
know this about her by now?

Georgie “Regardless,” Lady Bridgerton said, setting her hand on the doorknob.
“You cannot cry off now. He’s come all this way.”

“Not to see me.”

“Georgiana Bridgerton, you cannot molder in your room.”

“I wasn’t planning to. Toasted cheese with the boys sounds marvelous.”

no one “We’ll build a fort. And I’ll bring the cats.”

“You can’t bring the cats. They make the baby sneeze.”

“Very well, I won’t bring the cats.” Georgie smiled magnanimously.
“We *will* build a fort. Nicholas can join us if he wants. He’d probably prefer
to dinner with you lot.”

ith to “Don’t be ridiculous.”

me “I’m not, Mama. I’m really not.”

wed up “You are an adult, and you are having dinner with the adults, and th
being final.”

all said Georgie stared at her mother.

irst try. Her mother stared back.

Georgie gave in. Or maybe she gave up. “Fine.”

s more “Good.” Her mother pulled the door open. “This will be good for yo

1 two You’ll see.” She started to exit, but then Georgie stopped her.

“Mama?”

Lady Bridgerton turned around.

inging Georgie realized she didn’t know why she’d called out. Somehow, c
all the ways her mother had been driving her absolutely batty—she jus
st hadn’t been ready to let her go.

y she “Do you think . . .”

Georgie went quiet. What did she want to know? What would help?

ment Anything?

well, Her mother waited, quiet. Patient.

When Georgie finally did speak, her voice was small. Not weak, but
And tired. “Do you think that somewhere there is a society where men
ld me. do things like this to women?”

Her mother went still, which to Georgie seemed odd, because it was
d have if she’d been moving before. But somehow the stillness spread. From l
body to her eyes to her very soul.

er “I don’t know,” her mother said. “I hope so. Or at least I hope there
be.”

“But not now,” Georgie said. They both knew it was the truth. “Not

ob, “No,” her mother said. “Not yet.” She turned to go, then paused to l
back over her shoulder. “You will come to dinner?”

It was a request, not an order, and Georgie felt an unfamiliar prick o
behind her eyes. Not the tears—those were familiar. She’d cried a lifet
us. worth of tears in the past few weeks. Tears of sorrow, of frustration, of

But this was the first time in a long time she’d felt gratitude. It was
amazing how nice it felt to be asked rather than told. To have someone
. “But recognize the fact that she was a human being and deserved the right to
fer it her own choices, even if it was about something as trivial as dinner.

“I’ll be there,” she told her mother.

She might even enjoy herself.

She picked up one of the cats as her mother left the room. Who was

at is kidding? She wasn't going to enjoy herself. But she supposed she coul

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kidding? She wasn't going to enjoy herself. But she supposed she could try.

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Chapter 4

Georgie was trying to decide just how long she could put off heading downstairs after dressing for dinner when what sounded like a small herd of lead-footed foxes ran past her room.

She grinned. For real. Her nephews were here.

She bounded off her bed and pulled open the door just as her sister-in-law walked by. Violet immediately pivoted and bustled into the room, baby in her arms. “Georgie!” she exclaimed. “It is so *good* to see you. How are you? Tell me everything. What can I do?”

“I—Well . . .” Where to start?

“Here. Hold the baby, would you?” Violet thrust Colin forward, and Georgie had no choice but to take him.

He immediately began to scream.

“I think he’s hungry,” Georgie said.

“He’s *always* hungry. Honestly, I don’t know what to do with him. I ate half of my meat pasty yesterday.”

Georgie sent a horrified look at her little nephew. “Does he even have teeth?”

“No,” Violet replied. “He just gummed the whole thing down.”

“You little monster,” Georgie said affectionately. Colin gurgled, clearly judging this to be a compliment.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t been over,” Violet said. “Colin was ill, nothing serious, but he was coughing, and it was just a terrible sound, hoarse and barky. I didn’t want to leave him.”

“It’s all right, Violet,” Georgie assured her. “Your children must come first.”

“Also, your mother said you wanted to be alone.”

“She wasn’t wrong.”

“Four weeks of being alone is enough, though, I think. Don’t you?”

“We’ll find out tonight.”

Violet smirked at that. “Has everyone else arrived? What am I saying I don’t even know who is coming.”

“Billie and George. Lord and Lady Manston. Andrew and Poppy, perhaps?”

“No, they’re visiting her family in Somerset. One of her brothers just married.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized.”

Violet shrugged. “I don’t know which one. She has so many of them I can’t imagine having such a big family.”

As if on cue, Anthony and Benedict ran past the doorway, their nurses in hot pursuit.

“Three does seem to be a handful,” Georgie said.

Violet flopped down in a chair. “You have no idea.”

Georgie smiled. She knew Violet wouldn’t trade motherhood for anything. Honestly, she wouldn’t be surprised if she and Edmund decided to extend their family beyond their current three boys. Her sister-in-law was always harried but always happy. It lifted Georgie’s spirits to see her, even as it occurred to her that this was something she was now unlikely to have in her own life.

Freddie Oakes had seen to that.

“I’m trying to decide who he looks like,” Georgie said, bobbing baby Colin in her arms. He didn’t have much hair yet, but it looked like it was coming in darker than Violet’s dark blond locks.

“Edmund. They all look like Edmund.”

“No, I don’t think so. I think all three are a combination of both of you.”

“You’re very kind, but I know the truth.” Violet sighed dramatically but a vessel for the Bridgerton family.”

Georgie laughed out loud. “Honestly, I think they mostly look like each other.”

“They do, don’t they?” Violet smiled to herself. “A matched set. I don’t know why that makes me so happy.”

“Me too.” Georgie held Colin out a few inches for a better look at his face. “Look at those cheeks,” she said. “And his eyes. I think his eyes are going to be green.”

“The color of gluttony,” Violet muttered.

“Not envy?”

“That, too.” She shuddered. “He never stops eating.”

g? I Georgie grinned and kissed Colin’s nose. “Is it too much to ask for you to favor your Aunt Georgie and come out a little bit gingery? Just I could use another redhead in the family.”

it got “Lone wolf that you are,” Violet quipped. “I thought redheads were supposed to have tempers.”

“Alas, no. I am a model of serenity.”

1. I Violet pointed a finger in Georgie’s direction. “Mark my words, Georgetown. Someday you’re going to explode, and when you do, I don’t want to be anywhere nearby.”

e in “Not even to watch?”

“Only if it’s not directed at me.”

Georgie looked back at the baby. “Do you think your mother could make me that angry? No? I don’t think so, either.”

othing. Colin burped and pitched forward, almost causing Georgie to lose her balance. By the time she had a firm grip on him again he was gnawing on her shoulder. “I really think he’s hungry,” she said to Violet.

it “Eh.” Violet waved a hand.

n her “I can’t believe you,” Georgie said with a laugh. “When Anthony was a baby you fussed over him like he was made of porcelain.”

“I didn’t know any better. They’re really quite sturdy.”

y Georgie smiled at her little nephew. “Well, I think you’re adorable,” she told him. He grinned back.

“He smiled at me!” Georgie exclaimed.

“Yes, he’s quite charming when he wants to be.”

ou.” “I didn’t know babies could smile at this age.”

“I’m “Anthony didn’t. Benedict . . .” Violet frowned. “I don’t remember. How does this make me a terrible mother?”

ach “You could never be a terrible mother.”

on’t “You’re too kind, and I do love you for it.” Violet stretched out her hand but when Georgie walked over she realized her sister-in-law wasn’t reaching for the baby. Instead she took Georgie’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze on her face. “You were born with a sister,” Violet said, “but I wasn’t. I hope you know that’s what you are to me now.”

“Don’t.” Georgie sniffled. “You’re going to make me cry, and I’ve cried far too much of that already.”

“If it makes you feel better, you don’t look as if you’ve been crying.”

“You didn’t see me last week.” Georgie tipped her head toward the door. She thought she heard voices. “It sounds as though people are a little? We should go down soon.”

Violet stood and took Colin from her. “Edmund told me a little of what happened,” she said as she led the way to the nursery. “I have never seen so angry. I thought he would call Mr. Oakes out.”

“Edmund would never be so stupid,” Georgie said.

“You’re his sister,” Violet said, “and your honor has been impugned. I don’t want to tell you that.”

“It was something considerably more profane.”

“That sounds more like my brother,” Georgie said with a roll of her eyes. “And he needs to learn that I can fight my own battles. In fact, I did.”

Violet’s eyes lit with glee. “What did you do?”

Georgie gathered her skirts just high enough to show Violet the exact motion she’d used to knee Freddie Oakes in the buttocks.

“And you say you don’t have a temper,” Violet said. “Good for you. I don’t want to see you cry? Please tell me he cried.”

He did, but not half so much as Georgie had the following day, when she realized that the only way to save her reputation was to marry the man who abducted her.

“What happened next?” Violet asked.

Georgie followed her into the nursery. “I tied him up.”

“Brava,” Violet said admiringly. She handed Colin off to the nurse, poked her head back out into the hall. “Anthony! Benedict! Now!” The door barely missing a beat, she pulled Georgie aside. “Then what happened? I was feeling particularly bloodthirsty.”

“I climbed out the window.”

“Resourceful.”

Georgie gave a modest nod although in truth she was insanely proud of herself for having escaped.

“But couldn’t you have just gone out the door?”

“We were on the ground floor, so it wasn’t quite as awful as it might have been. And there were some rough-looking men in the inn. I didn’t want to go back through the front room by myself.”

“Good thinking,” Violet said approvingly. “Were you terrified? I would have been terrified.”

“I was,” Georgie admitted. “I didn’t even know where we were. All

open was that we were heading north—he'd told me we were bound for Gre
riving. Green—and that we'd been traveling for hours and hours."

"Edmund said you were in Bedfordshire?"

hat "Biggleswade," Georgie confirmed.

en him "Biggles-what?"

"It's a village on the Great North Road. There are quite a few coach
inns there." Georgie stretched her mouth into a flat, self-effacing line.
l." know this now."

Violet considered this. "I don't suppose you ever had cause to travel
before."

eyes. "I don't suppose I did."

"But wait . . . Edmund said you were saved by Lady Danbury of all
people?"

et "She was at the same inn. Heading north, but she turned around to tra
back to London." Georgie could not even begin to describe the relief si

. Did felt upon seeing Lady Danbury's familiar face outside the inn. Lady D
leader of the *ton*, and Georgie wasn't sure she'd ever exchanged two w

n she with her, but she'd practically thrown herself at her, begging her to int
who'd "I don't know what I would have done without her," Georgie said. C

truthfully, she didn't want to think about what might have happened w
her.

"She terrifies me," Violet said.

then "She terrifies everyone."

en, "But surely *she's* not the reason everyone found out," Violet remark

? I'm "She would never spread such gossip."

"No," Georgie said bitterly. "Mr. Oakes took care of that. He told al
friends when he returned to London—minus the part about my, er,
unmanning him."

l of "And tying him up."

"No, not that part, either."

Violet let out an appropriately sympathetic snort of disgust.

t have "But even if he hadn't," Georgie continued, "there was such a comm
t to go in Berkeley Square when he pushed Marian out of the carriage. From v

understand, the gossip was all over town by nightfall."

ould Violet ground her teeth together. "It makes me so angry I can't even
you. I have never struck another human being, you know, at least not c

I knew purpose, but if I saw that—that *bastard*—"

tna The nurse gasped.
 “I would blacken his eye,” Violet said.
 “Do you know,” Georgie said slowly, “I believe you would.”
 Violet poked her head out the door again. “Anthony! Benedict!” She
ing looked over at the nurse, who was still recovering from Violet’s
 uncharacteristically coarse language. “Do you happen to know where t
“I gone off to?”
 The nurse shook her head.
l north Violet let out a sigh. “I’m sorry to leave you like this, but we’ve got
 down to dinner.”
 “We can ask one of the footmen to hunt them down,” Georgie assur
nurse. “They know all the boys’ favorite hiding places.”
 “I can’t possibly be paying that nurse enough,” Violet said once they
ake me in the hall. She smoothed her dress, a royal blue round gown that
he’d complemented her eyes. “Do I look presentable?”
was a “You look beautiful.”
ords Violet pulled her chin toward her chest as she tried to examine her
ercede. shoulders. “Are you sure? The baby spit up in the carriage. I was wear
Or morecloak, but . . .”
ithout “You look perfect,” Georgie said. “I promise. And even if you didn’
 one would care.”
 Violet smiled gratefully. “I think I asked you already, but has everyo
else arrived?”
ed. “I think so?” Georgie said. She wasn’t certain. She’d heard at least c
carriage in the drive, but she hadn’t looked out the window. It could ha
l of his held two people or five. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. Nicholas is coming.”
 “Nicholas? Why? He’s not supposed to be here. He is in the middle
examinations.”
 “He’s obviously not in the middle of his examinations because he’s
Kent. Mama told me this afternoon.”
 “That’s very odd. I hope nothing is wrong. Edmund received a letter
otion him just last week, no, maybe a little before that, but still, he didn’t me
what I anything.”
 Georgie shrugged as she followed Violet down the stairs. “I only kn
tell what Mama told me. And as far as I can tell, she only knows what his
on told her.”
 “Pack of gossips, we are.”

“We are *not*,” Georgie said emphatically. “We are people who love care about each other and are therefore logically interested in comings goings. It is not at all the same as a pack of gossips.”

“Sorry,” Violet said with a wince. “There really ought to be a more word for people who love and care about each other and are therefore hey’ve logically interested in the comings and goings.”

“Family?” Georgie suggested.

Violet let out a loud bark of laughter just as they entered the drawing to go Edmund handed her the glass of sherry he’d already poured for her wit amused smile. “What’s so funny?”

ed the “You,” she said. “Everyone in this room, actually.”

He turned to Georgie.

y were “She’s right,” Georgie said.

“I may need to head back over to the less feminine side of the room, Edmund joked.

“Oh, please,” Violet returned, linking her arm with his. “Don’t act a haven’t the numbers at home. It’s four against one.”

ing a He kissed her hand. “You’re easily worth *five* of us.”

Violet looked over at Georgie. “I’m not sure that was a compliment.

t, no “I would take it as such, regardless of his intentions.”

one “Good evening to you, too, sister,” Edmund said, offering Georgie h usual mischievous smile.

Georgie returned the gesture with a quick kiss on his cheek. “I take one back,” she said to Violet. “Disregarding his intentions presupposes that ive *had* intentions. Most of the time when he speaks, the words just spew like of his like . . .” She rolled her hands in front of her face in a rough approxima a verbal tumbleweed.

“You are evil,” Edmund said approvingly.

here in “I learned from the best.”

“Yes, you did, didn’t you?”

from “Has Nicholas arrived?” Violet asked. “Georgie mentioned he would ntion coming. Do you know why he’s home?”

Edmund shook his head. “Billie and George are here, but they said t ow Lord and Lady Manston and Nicholas are coming separately.”

mother George Rokesby was the heir to the earldom, and he and Billie also Crake with their three children. Lord Manston often said that Billie wa finest thing to happen to the Rokesby family since they’d gained their

and 1672. She was passionate about farming and land management, and Cr
and agricultural output had nearly doubled in the decade since she'd married
George.

benign Billie was quite a bit older than Georgiana, though, and while they'd
been terribly close, that seemed to be changing as Georgie moved further into
adulthood. The nine-year age gap that had been so daunting when Georgie
was sixteen was not such a huge thing at twenty-six.

g room. "I should go greet Billie," Georgie said, leaving Edmund and Violet
h an make their usual dove eyes at each other. It was hard sometimes to be
them. They were so much in love. Georgie had never met two people who
obviously made for each other.

She loved them both, she really did, but tonight they were a reminder of
the things she would never have.

"No husband. (Not unless she agreed to marry Freddie Oakes, and *that*
wasn't going to happen.)

s if you No children. (One needed a husband for those.)

No everything else that followed.

But she did have more than most people. She had a loving family, and
"never had to worry where her next meal might come from, and she supposed
if she gave herself enough time to ponder it, she'd find some sort of new
purpose in life.

Her mother was right. She couldn't molder in her room forever. She
that probably *was* justified in taking a few more weeks of feeling sorry for
t he herself, but after that she would have to move on.

forth "Georgie, darling," Billie said when Georgie reached her side. "How
ation of you holding up?"

Georgie shrugged. "Eh."

"Is Mama driving you mad?"

"Just a little bit."

Billie sighed. She'd visited several times since the scandal had broken
d be often just to distract their mother so that she would not smother Georgie
her concern. "She means well."

hat "I know. That's what makes it bearable. And occasionally even nice
Billie took her hand and squeezed it. "Have you heard anything from
lived at Oakes?"

s the "No," Georgie said with some alarm. "Why, have you heard something

title in "Not really. Just little rumblings that he might still be trying to press

ake's suit."

ed "That's not new news." Georgie's mouth flattened into a grim line. She received a letter from Freddie Oakes the day after she'd returned home from Kent. It had been full of drippings and drivel, and she could hear his sinner's voice in his words of undying love and devotion. The way he told it, he had been overcome with the need to make her his.

Rubbish. All of it. If he'd wanted to make her his, he should have been well asked.

around "We shall do our best to distract you this evening," Billie said. "The nothing like the banded multitudes of Rokesbys and Bridgertons to make you laugh." She considered that. "Or cry. But tonight, I think laugh."

er of all "Speaking of multitudes, do you know why Nicholas is home?"

Billie shook her head. "I saw him only briefly. He looked rather grim at

"Oh, dear. I hope nothing is wrong."

"If that's the case, I'm sure he'll tell us when he's ready."

"How unlike you to be so patient."
"It can't be anything too serious," Billie said. "I can't imagine there's any trouble at school—he's always been so clever. But why else would he be posed down?"

ow Georgie shrugged. She hadn't seen Nicholas very often in the last few years. But given that a family was indeed a group of people who loved and cared about each other (and were therefore logically interested in coming and goings), she generally knew what he was up to.

"I think they've arrived," Billie said, looking over her shoulder toward the door that led out to the hall.

"The Earl and Countess of Manston," Thamesly announced, as if they didn't all know who was expected, "and Mr. Nicholas Rokesby."

This bit of formality was followed by Edmund's more jovial greeting. "Rokes!" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing in Kent?"

en, Nicholas laughed and made the sort of noise that revealed nothing. (She thought it remarkable that this seemed to satisfy Edmund, but the two of them began to chat as if nothing was amiss.)

." "Did you see that?" she asked her sister.

n Mr. "See what?"

ing?" "He just completely avoided the question, and Edmund didn't even notice."

his "Oh, he noticed," Billie said. "He's just pretending not to."

“Why?”
 She’d Billie shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t care.”
 : to “Of course he cares. Nicholas is his closest friend.”
 narmy “Then he’ll ask him later. Really, Georgie, why are you so curious?”
 e’d “Why aren’t you?”
 oody “Probably because I know I’ll find out soon enough. It’s not as if so
 oody has died.”
 re is “Of course not,” Georgie murmured, because what else could she sa
 ke one Sometimes she truly did not understand her sister.
 n.” “I’m getting a glass of sherry,” Billie said. “Can I get you one?”
 “No, thank you. I’m going to say hello to Nicholas.”
 Billie gave her a look. “Don’t interrogate him.”
 “I won’t!”
 But Billie clearly didn’t believe her. She pressed her lips together and
 wagged her finger as she departed. It was rather like getting scolded for
 something one hadn’t yet done. Georgie scowled in return—since there
 is nothing like an older sister to bring out one’s inherent immaturity—an
 be course that was when she found herself face-to-face with—
 “Nicholas!” she exclaimed.
 w Although really, *exclaimed* might be too optimistic a verb. The sound
 and came out of her mouth did not sound fully human.
 ngs “Georgiana,” he said, giving her a polite bow. But the look he gave
 was somewhat wary.
 ard the “I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “You surprised me.”
 ey “My apologies. I did not mean to.”
 g. “No, of course not. Why would you?”
 He did not have an answer to that. And, to quote herself, why would
 was a stupid question.
 “I’m sorry,” she said. “Let us begin again. It is lovely to see you.”
 Georgie “And you.”
 men If this wasn’t the most awkward conversation they had ever shared,
 didn’t know what was. Georgie did not know what to make of it. She
 never have called Nicholas Rokesby a confidant, but he was certainly a
 friend, and she’d never had difficulty chatting with him before.
 “You look well,” he said.
 He looked tired. Exceedingly so. His eyes were the same blue shade
 of his brothers, but the purple shadows beneath seemed to be draining

of their usual sparkle.

But she couldn't very well say this to him after not having seen him nearly a year, so instead she thanked him politely for the compliment. "Thank you. It's been a . . ." Oh, for heaven's sake, he had to have heard what had happened to her. "It's been an eventful few weeks," she finally said. "Yes, I, er . . ." He cleared his throat. "I imagine so."

There was another awkward pause, and then another, which made her wonder if two awkward pauses in a row was really just one *long* awkward pause.

But what if one broke them up with a nonverbal motion such as shuffling one's feet? Did that ensure they were two separate pauses? Because she had definitely shuffled her feet.

She was doing it again, as a matter of fact.

Aaaaand now it was officially the longest pause in the history of long pauses.

"Ehrm . . ."

"Ahh . . ."

"Do you like Scotland?" she blurted out.

"I do." He looked relieved that she'd asked such a benign question. "I'm sure you'd like it. It's a beautiful country, but it can be quite cold, of course, although not so much this time of year."

"It is far to the north."

"Yes."

She waited for him to ask her a question, because surely she could not be expected to take care of *all* the boring questions, but he just stood there with a queasy expression on his face, and every so often he'd dart a glance at his parents.

That was odd.

Lord and Lady Manston were talking with her parents, which was normal. Except that half the time she could swear Lord Manston was sneaking glances in their direction. And when he wasn't, Lady Manston was.

Honestly, the entire exchange was downright bizarre.

She decided to make one last attempt at polite conversation and gave Nicholas her best sunny smile. "Did I hear that you arrived only this morning?"

"Indeed."

"We are very lucky you decided to come to dinner, then."

His brows rose, just a tiny bit.

Georgie dropped her voice to something closer to a murmur. “Or would you be correct to assume that you had no choice?”

“Er, none whatsoever.” He quirked a wry smile, and Georgie had a feeling that this was his first authentic expression of the evening.

“I sympathize utterly,” she replied. “I begged Mama to let me have that cheese with Anthony and Benedict in the nursery.”

“Are they getting toasted cheese?” He sounded undeniably jealous.

“They *always* get toasted cheese,” Georgie replied. “Why don’t we get it, that’s what I’d like to know. Because you know it’s what we all want.”

He scratched his jaw. “I am quite fond of your cook’s famous rack of lamb . . .”

She leaned in. “But it would be better with a side of toasted cheese.”

He smiled. There, that was better, Georgie decided. Maybe she’d imagined the odd way he’d been looking at her.

Toasted cheese fixed everything. She’d been saying it for years.

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Chapter 5

As it turned out, toasted cheese did not fix everything.

Georgie knew this now because her mother, in a rare display of whim over decorum, had requested that it be served alongside the soup, and everyone was happily munching away, commenting on what a lovely, comforting surprise this was, and why didn't they always have toasted with dinner?

It should have been delightful.

It *would* have been delightful, except . . .

Georgie stole a glance to her right.

He was looking at her again.

Georgie wasn't sure what was more aggravating—that Nicholas Rolfe kept looking at her with a strange expression or that she kept *noticing* that he was looking at her with a strange expression.

Because this was *Nicholas*.

Rokesby.

If ever existed a gentleman who should not make her feel awkward out of place, it was he.

But he kept stealing sidelong glances, and while Georgie's experience with gentlemen was limited, she could tell these weren't *admiring* sorts of sidelong glances.

Freddie Oakes had given her plenty of those. Insincere ones, but still

But Nicholas . . . He was looking at her differently. Almost like he was assessing her.

Inspecting her.

It was disconcerting in the extreme.

"Are you enjoying the soup?" she blurted out.

"What?"

"The soup," she said. She tried to sound sweet and accommodating,

from the look on his face, she'd clearly failed. "How is it?"

"Er . . ." He looked down at his bowl with a perplexed expression. "I supposed she couldn't blame him considering her query had come out like a barked command than anything else."

"It's delicious," he finally said. "Are . . . you enjoying it?"

His voice rose more than was normal on the final word, as if the question itself was a question.

Georgie could only imagine what he was thinking. *Should he talk to her? Had she gone a little bit feral?*

She wondered what he'd do if she bared her teeth.

msy Had he been told of her downfall? He must have been; she could not
10W imagine that his parents would have not told him. And Lord and Lady
Manston had to know; she couldn't imagine that her parents wouldn't tell
cheese told *them*.

So he knew. He had to. And he was judging her.

Was this what her life had come to? Being judged by Nicholas Rokefort? *Goddamn* this made her angry.

"Georgie, are you all right?"

She looked up. Violet was staring at her from across the table with a
kesby vaguely alarmed expression.

that he "I'm fine," Georgie said in a clipped voice. "Splendid."

"Well, we know that's not true," Edmund said.

Violet elbowed him. Hard.

"What?" Edmund grunted. "She's my sister."

and out "Which means you should be more careful of her feelings," Violet hissed.

"I'm fine," Georgie ground out.

ce with "Splendid," Lord Bridgerton said, having obviously missed the first
the conversation. He turned to his wife. "The soup is delicious, darling."

"Isn't it?" Lady Bridgerton gushed. "Cook tells me it's a new recipe."

l. "It's the toasted cheese," Edmund said, still chewing. "It makes the
was taste better."

"Whatever you do, *don't* say that to Cook," his mother replied. "And the
toasted cheese was Georgie's idea."

"Well done," Edmund said with a wink.

"If you must know, I wanted it in the nursery with your children," she said
to him.

but "And who could blame you, delightful little terrors that they are."

“Stop,” Violet said. “They’re perfect.”

Georgie “She forgets so quickly,” Edmund murmured.

more “They take after *you*,” Lord Bridgerton said to his son. “It’s no more you deserve.”

stion “To have a child just like me? I know, you’ve been saying as much : years.”

“They are delightfully perfect little terrors,” Violet said.

her? While that conversation spiraled into something both adorable and nauseating, Georgiana turned back to Nicholas. For once he wasn’t staring at her, or pretending not to be staring at her. But he did look, well . . . odd.

t “Are you all right?” she asked. Because maybe this wasn’t about her. Maybe he was ill.

have He winced. Or not a wince, because he didn’t actually make a sound. He did one of those things where the corners of his mouth twitched to twitch without actually forming a smile. “I’m fine,” he said. “It was a long journey.”

sbby? “Of course.”

t She said it politely, but she knew he was lying. Not about being tired. That was clearly the truth. But whatever it was that had him acting so strange wasn’t a lack of sleep.

Frankly, she was starting to find this entire dinner tedious. If she could see a happy expression on her face and keep up her end of the conversation, couldn’t he? The only thing that had changed since the last time they’d talked to each other was her social ruin.

Surely he did not condemn her for that?

missed. Not Nicholas.

half of It was as if the entire world had been set to a ten-degree slant, and he was the only person to notice.

.” At first glance, everything seemed normal. Everything *was* normal.

.” Nicholas knew that.

But it didn’t feel right.

d the Seated around the table were the people Nicholas knew best in the world—the people with whom he had always felt the most at ease. His parents, his older brother George and his wife Billie, Edmund and Violet, Lord and Lady Bridgerton, even Georgiana.

ie said And yet he could not tamp down the sensation that everything was *not* right. Or if not wrong, then at least a little bit not right.

A little bit not right.

Coming from a man of science, it was the most ridiculous statement more than imaginable.

But there it was. Everything was off. And he did not know how to fix it. All around him the Rokesbys and Bridgertons were acting with complete normality. Georgiana was seated to his left, which was perfectly normal; he couldn't begin to count the number of times he'd sat next to Georgiana Bridgerton at a dining table. But every time he looked at her—

Which was to say far more often than he normally looked at her. Which was also to say that every glance was abnormally quick because he was painfully aware that he was looking at her far too often. Which was to say *bloody hell*, he felt awkward.

“Nicholas?”
He couldn't stop thinking that—
“Nicholas?”

He blinked. Georgie was talking to him. “Sorry,” he grunted.
“Are you sure you're feeling well?” she asked. “You look—”
Strange?
Mad?

Strangely mad?
“Have you slept?” she asked.
Madly strange it was, then.

“You must be terribly tired,” she said, and he could not help but wonder what was in his eyes to make her say that, since he had not managed to respond to either of her queries.

She cocked her head to the side, but he noticed that her eyes took on a different expression. She was no longer looking at him in that oddly penetrating manner, thank God.

“How long does it take to travel to Kent from Edinburgh?” she asked.
“It depends on how you do it,” he told her, grateful for a fact-based question. “Ten days this time, but I took the mail coach from Edinburgh to London.”

“That sounds uncomfortable.”
“It is.”

It was. But not as uncomfortable as he was right now, conversing with a lady he had a feeling he was going to end up marrying, despite his very large number of reservations.

“That sounds uncomfortable.”
“It is.”

It was. But not as uncomfortable as he was right now, conversing with a lady he had a feeling he was going to end up marrying, despite his very large number of reservations.

“I was surprised to hear you would be joining us this evening,” she said. “Actually, I am surprised you are here at all. Weren’t you meant to come down next month?”

“Yes, but”—Nicholas felt his cheeks grow warm—“Father had some business to attend to.”

She stared at him with an open, curious expression.

“That he needed me for,” he added.

“Of course,” she murmured. But she didn’t look the least bit put off by his words. If she was blushing, it was with such delicacy that he could not see it in the candlelight.

It occurred to Nicholas that he’d forgotten to ask his father one very important question: Had anyone told *Georgiana* that he’d been summoned from Scotland to marry her?

“I hope whatever he called you down for was worth it,” she said breathlessly. “If I were studying something as interesting as medicine I wouldn’t wish to be disrupted for an annoying family triviality.”

No, then. She didn’t know.

“What do you like best about it?” Georgie asked, dipping her spoon into her much-discussed soup. “Studying medicine, I mean. I think it sounds fascinating.”

“It is.” He thought for a moment about how to answer her question. “Studying medicine is always something new. It is never the same thing.”

Her eyes lit with interest. “I watched Anthony get a wound stitched last month. It was splendidly gruesome.”

“Is it healing well? No infection?”

“I believe so,” she replied. “I saw him before dinner and he seemed perfectly healthy to me. Violet would surely have said something if there had been a complication.”

“I would be happy to take a look at it after dinner.”

“He’ll be asleep, I’m sure. Violet insists upon an early bedtime.”

“Tomorrow, then.” It was good to talk about medicine, to remind himself that there existed an area of his life where people looked up to him. What he could say something and have it assumed that he knew what he was talking about.

In Edinburgh he was his own man.

He was still learning, of course. Nicholas was not so conceited to think that the breadth of his knowledge exceeded that which was left to learn. He

said. doubted he'd ever know more than what was left to learn. It was part of
ne he so enjoyed the pursuit.

e He looked past Georgie toward the head of the table. Violet was chat-
ing with Billie, but Edmund's attention was not hard to catch. "How is An-
drew?"

He looked to Georgie.

"Hand," she supplied.

by his "Hand," Nicholas repeated. "Georgie said he needed stitches?"

detect "All healed," Edmund said with a grin. "Or at least I assume so. He
took a punch at Benedict yesterday and it didn't seem to bother him to
crucial fist."

"Nor when you grabbed said fist to put a halt to the altercation," Vic-
tor said with the sort of smile exclusive to mothers of boys.

ezily. "I'll give it a look tomorrow if you like," Nicholas said. "There can
sh to obvious signs of infection."

"I'm fairly certain he's healthier than a horse," Edmund said, "but be-
cause he means."

into "It's so lovely to have a doctor in the family," Violet said to no one
ls particular. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"It would have been helpful back when Billie was small," Lady Bric-
kley said. "She broke both her arms, you know."

last "Not at the same time," Billie said, with just enough amused bore-
doom to remind everyone that this was not a new exchange.

"Have you set any bones?" Georgie asked him.

"A few times," Nicholas said. "We are all required to learn. But it's
like reading philosophy where one can open a book and study. We can
rarely learn about breaking bones just so we can learn to set them."

"That *would* be splendidly gruesome," Georgie murmured. Her eyes
narrowed, and Nicholas allowed himself a moment just to watch her throb.
He'd long suspected she had a devious streak.

mself "What?" she said.

here he "I beg your pardon?"

lking "You're looking at me."

"You're sitting next to me. Where else am I to look?"

"Yes, but you were—" Her lips pressed together. "Never mind."

ink that He felt himself smile, but waited until after the footmen had remove
: the soup bowls before saying, "You were trying to figure out how to break

if why bone, weren't you?"

Georgie's eyes lit with surprise. "How did you—"

itting "Oh, please, it was obvious."

thony's "What are the two of you talking about?" Nicholas's mother trilled.

He gave her a look. He knew that tone. He'd heard it employed with older siblings. And Georgie's older siblings.

His mother was playing matchmaker, but she was also trying to avoid the *appearance* of playing matchmaker. Trying, but failing, because she was too curious to hold her tongue when she thought she saw something happen. Because what if she could intervene and make things better?

He knew his mother. He knew his mother well.

let "We're talking about how to break bones," Georgie said plainly.

Nicholas didn't bother to hide his grin.

be less "Oh." His mother looked disappointed. And perhaps a bit queasy.

"I recommend falling from a tree," Billie said. "Twice if you can manage it."

"But not at the same time," her mother said.

in Billie turned to her with some exasperation. "How would one fall from trees at the same time?"

lgerton "If it can be done, I have every confidence that you will be the one to figure out how."

m to "Such faith in your eldest daughter," Billie said in a dry voice. "It is positively uplifting."

not Conversation slowed when the next course was served—rack of lamb with mint jelly, herbed potatoes and French beans with butter, and duck terrine with *courgettes*.

Georgie turned to Nicholas with a look of pure camaraderie. "Toasts to cheese *and* rack of lamb. We are outdoing ourselves tonight."

ink. Nicholas nearly groaned with pleasure at the first bite. "I can't remember the last time I had such a good meal."

"Is Scottish food so very dreadful?"

"The Scottish food in my rooming house is."

"Oh," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Did you think I traveled with a chef?"

d the "No, of course not. I thought—well, to be honest, I don't think I did about it."

a He shrugged. He would have been surprised if she had.

She cut her meat slowly, then used her knife to add a bit of jelly. But she had a faraway look in her eyes and did not bring the food to her mouth. "I can't stop thinking about it," she said.

His own fork paused about two inches above his plate. "My gustatory deprivations?"

"No, of course not. That's just poor planning on your part. I'm still sitting on the broken bones."

"Why does this not surprise me?"

"As you said, one can't just open a book in the pursuit of medical information.

"We do, actually, for much of it."

"Yes, but there must come a point when practical knowledge is required. As you also said, you can't go around breaking people's arms. You have to wait for it to happen."

"True, but there is rarely a shortage of ill and injured patients."

She seemed somewhat impatient with this explanation. "But what if you are not ill or injured in the way you *need*?"

"Will I regret it later if I ask what you mean by that?"

She waved off his (mostly) rhetorical question, and said, "It's such an interesting ethical dilemma."

"You've lost me."

"What if you *could* break someone's bones?"

"Georg—"

She cut him off. "For the pursuit of knowledge. What if you offered me money in return?"

"Pay someone to have his bones broken?"

She nodded.

"That's inhumane."

"Is it?"

"Certainly unethical."

"Only if you do not have their consent."

"You can't ask someone permission to break their arm."

"Can't you?" She cocked her head to the side. "Consider this example. Imagine that I am a widow. I don't have very much money. In fact, I have almost none. And I have three children to support."

"Your life has turned very grim indeed," Nicholas murmured.

"I'm trying to make a point," she said, visibly peeved.

"My apologies."

t she . “I She waited a beat, presumably to be sure he wasn’t going to interrupt again, then said, “If a doctor offered me enough money to break my arm then set it, I would do it.”

rial Nicholas shook his head. “That’s madness.”

stuck “Is it? I’m a penniless widow with three hungry children. It sounds terrible as if my only other option is prostitution. Frankly, I’d rather have my arm broken.” She frowned. “Although it would make it more difficult to care for my children.”

quiry.” Nicholas set down his fork. “Prostitution is *not* your only other option.”

ired. “What are you talking about *now*?” his mother asked. She looked very concerned, and Nicholas suspected she’d heard the part of the conversation that included the word *prostitution*.

ve to “Still on the broken bones!” Georgie said with a sunny smile.

they Which slid right into a steely stare when she turned back to him. “It’s not for you to say that prostitution is not my only option. *You* have an education.”

“So do you.”

m She snorted. “From my governess. It does not compare, and frankly insulted that you’d even imply that it did.” She stabbed a potato with enough force that Nicholas winced in sympathy.

“I beg your pardon,” he said politely.

She waved this off, leaving him to wonder if she found this, too, to be mostly rhetorical.

to “It doesn’t matter, anyway,” she said, “because we are talking about hypothetical me, not real me. Hypothetical me does not have the support of a loving and wealthy family.”

“All right then.” He could play along. “Hypothetical you has three children. Are they old enough to work?”

“Not old enough to earn a decent wage. Unless I send them into the mines, and frankly, that seems worse for their health than a broken bone.”

“What *are* you talking about?” Edmund asked.

le. Nicholas ignored him. “Wait, so are you now saying you want me to break your children’s bones?”

ave “Of course not. Not if you can break mine instead.”

“This is precisely my point. You would never allow me to do such a thing if you were not being paid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Just desperate.”

Something flashed in her eyes, something pained. Wounded.

“*Hypothetical* you is desperate,” he said softly.

She swallowed. “It isn’t pleasant to be without choices.”

“No.” He brought his napkin to his lips. He needed a moment. He was sure what they were talking about any longer, or even if they were talking about the same thing.

“This is why you cannot pay someone to do something like this,” he said quietly. “Consent can be coerced. *Hypothetical* you says she agrees to her arm broken in exchange for money to feed her children. But is that consent if your only other choice is the sale of your body?”

“Some would say that it’s the sale of my body either way.”

“Touché,” he admitted.

“I understand your point,” Georgie said. “I even agree with it a little. There are some things in life that ought not be for sale. But on the other hand, it is easy for me to condemn a decision I would not make, but is it fair?”

“Are you still talking about broken bones?” Violet asked. “Because you look very serious.”

“Our conversation has taken a turn for the philosophical,” Georgie told her.

“And the morbid,” Nicholas added.

“We can’t have that.” Violet nudged her husband. “They need more than that, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely.” Edmund nodded to a footman, who immediately refilled their glasses.

Not that there was much to refill, Nicholas noted. He and Georgie were both staggeringly sober.

“I am not sure,” he said slowly, and in a tone only Georgie could hear. “We have the right to condemn people for the decisions they make if we ourselves are never forced with a similar choice.”

“Exactly.”

He was quiet for a moment. “This *has* taken a turn for the philosophical.”

“And are we in agreement?”

“Only in that there is probably no answer.”

She nodded.

“Now the two of you look like you’re going to *cry*,” Violet protested.

Georgiana recovered first. “Philosophy does that to me.”

“I concur,” Edmund said. “My least favorite subject by far.”

“You always did well in it, though,” Nicholas said.

Edmund grinned. “That’s because I can talk my way out of almost anything.”

Everyone rolled their eyes at that. It was the absolute truth.

“I think baby Colin takes after you in that way,” Georgie said.

“He’s four months old,” Edmund said with a laugh. “He can’t even s

“There’s something in the way he looks at me,” Georgie said. “Marl
have words. That boy is going to be a charmer.”

“If he doesn’t explode first,” Violet said. “I swear, all that baby does
It is unnatural.”

“What are you talking about *now*?” Lady Manston asked, clearly
exasperated by a seating arrangement that kept leaving her just barely
There earshot.

“Exploding babies,” Georgie said.

Nicholas nearly spit his food across the table.

“Oh.” His mother placed a hand over her heart. “Oh my.”

He started to laugh.

“One baby specifically,” Georgie said, elegantly flipping her wrist v
old her, perfect sardonic punctuation. “We would never talk about exploding b
in the *general* sense.”

Nicholas started to laugh so hard it hurt.

And Georgie . . . Oh, she was in fine form. She didn’t even crack a s
led as she leaned ever so slightly in his direction and murmured, “That wo
tasteless.”

His laughter turned silent, the kind that shook the room.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” his mother said.

Which nearly made him fall out of his chair.

“Do you need to excuse yourself,” Georgie said behind her hand. “E
I know when *I* laugh that hard . . .”

“I’m fine,” he gasped. In fact, he was better than fine. His ribs were
ical.” and it felt *good*.

Georgie turned to answer a question her sister had asked her—presu
something about why Nicholas was acting like a loon. He took the mo
catch his breath and also to think about what had just happened.

He’d forgotten, for a moment, why he was here.

He’d forgotten that his father had summoned him home, all but orde
him to marry a girl he’d known all his life and never shown a whit of

romantic interest in.

To be fair, she'd never displayed a whit in his direction, either.

But that hadn't mattered. Not while he was laughing so hard he probably *should* have taken Georgie's advice and excused himself. Now all he could think was—*this wasn't bad at all*.

“Maybe he *could* marry her. It might not be love, but if this was what a marriage with Georgie would be like, it was a damn sight better than most people could expect.”

She laughed at something Billie had said, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. She was looking at her sister, but she was still enough in profile for him to see the shape of it, the fullness and curve of her lower lip.

What would it be like to kiss her?

He had not kissed many women. He'd usually chosen to study while his contemporaries caroused, and the one man—Edmund—with whom he had ever had a drink and made foolish decisions had married young. No temptations of wild oats there.

Then he'd started his medical studies, and if ever there was a hard lesson on why a man should keep himself in check, that was it. He'd told Georgie that there was rarely a shortage of illness, and that was true. He'd seen enough syphilis to curdle his brain.

He'd seen how syphilis curdled other men's brains.

So no, he did not have a wide range of sexual experience.

But he had thought about it.

He'd imagined all the foolish decisions he could have made, the things he might have done if he'd met the right woman. Usually the women in his fantasies were nameless, maybe even faceless, but sometimes they were real. A finely dressed lady he'd passed on the street. The woman serving ale at a public house.

But never, *never* Georgiana Bridgerton.

Until now.

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Chapter 6

Crake House, later that night

By any standard, Nicholas's first non-platonic thoughts about Georgiana Bridgerton were disconcerting.

Almost to the point of bewilderment.

She was certainly pretty—he'd never have said otherwise if asked—he'd also never really looked at her beyond her just being . . . her.

She was Georgiana Bridgerton, and she had blue eyes like her mother and gingerly hair like no one else in her family. And that was the extent of what he'd noticed.

Wait. No. Her teeth were straight. He supposed he'd noticed that. She was of average height. He hadn't *really* noticed that, but if someone had asked him how tall she was, he could have made a reasonably decent estimate.

But then they had joked about exploding babies and she'd done that little twist with her hand. His gaze had fixed inexplicably on her wrist.

Her *wrist*.

He had been laughing, and looking at her, and she'd done that thing—she'd flipped her hand, a curve, a flip, a sweeping gesture—whatever it was that women did with their hands. It was an innocent enough move, clearly executed with no coy forethought, simply done to punctuate her dry humor.

Simple, innocent.

And if his father had not suggested they marry, Nicholas was sure he would never have looked at the inside of Georgie's wrist, much less *noticed* it.

But then he'd moved his gaze from her wrist to her face.

And he'd thought about kissing her.

Georgie.

Georgie.

He couldn't kiss Georgie. It would be like kissing his sister.

"Sister? No," he said to the nighttime air. He was sitting by his open bedchamber window, staring up at stars he could not see.

It was a cloudy night. The air was turbulent.

Georgie was not his sister. Of that he was certain. The rest of it, though,

Thinking about exploding babies felt a whole lot safer than thinking about turning Georgie's wrist. Or to be more precise, thinking about laughing about the ludicrousness of exploding babies felt safer than thinking about turning Georgie's wrist upward and pressing his lips to it.

Could he kiss her? He twisted one of his own hands palm up—or rather fist up; he wasn't feeling terribly relaxed—and stared down at the inside of his own wrist.

Yes. Of course he *could*. But did he want to?

He looked into the night. Could he spend day after day and year after year with her? At her table, in her bed? Nothing in the stillness of the night assured him that this was anything but an impossible question, and yet he felt the acuteness of time. Not of the seconds ticking but the hours, the days that led to her more permanent ruin.

He could not tarry much longer. His father spoke of Georgie's ghastly schedule, of the husband she needed to find if he did not step forward in that position. But Nicholas, too, had a calendar he must keep. Even if he set off for Scotland the very next day, he'd have been away nearly a month. A month of classes, of missed exams. By his estimation, he could stay in London only a few days more—maybe a week—before he would fall too hopelessly behind to make up the material.

He needed to make a decision.

He looked at his bed. He could not picture her there.

Not yet, the night seemed to whisper.

Her profile and lips and her wrist—it all flashed in his brain. But when he tried to hold on to them, to keep these images still and in focus, it was like the laughter he felt.

With his gaze still on the bed he couldn't picture her in the murmur of the night. "I just don't know."

A breeze cooled his skin and he shivered.

Yes, you do.

He stood, giving his back to the night. It was time for bed.

Remarkably, he slept.

By morning he had accepted his fate.

Which sounded a lot more dramatic than it actually was. But given the events of the past twenty-four hours, he rather thought he'd earned a touch of self-serving hyperbole.

He'd borrowed his brother's valet for a good shave, made himself eat a hearty breakfast, and sent a footman to the stables with a request to ready the horse. He would go to Aubrey Hall, find Georgiana, and ask her to be his wife.

It wasn't his fault that Georgie had found herself in such dire straits. It wasn't her fault, either, and he honestly wasn't sure he could look at his face in the mirror knowing he'd abandoned her to an uncertain future.

It was actually rather simple: He had the means to make things right and could save her. Wasn't that what he'd devoted his life to? Saving people. Surely such benevolence ought to start at home. Or in this case, at the stately home three miles down the road.

When he reached Aubrey Hall, however, he was informed by one of the footmen that Georgiana was not in; she had taken her nephews out for a walk. Anthony and Benedict Bridgerton did not strike Nicholas as the most romantic of props for a proposal of marriage, but then again, this would be a particularly romantic proposal.

He could try, he supposed, but she'd see through that in a heartbeat. He knew he didn't love her. And her circumstances being what they were, he couldn't know exactly why he was proposing.

No one seemed to know exactly where Georgie and the boys had gone to, but the lake seemed the most obvious spot. The bank was wide and slightly sloped, perfect for an adult who wished to sit comfortably on a blanket while keeping an eye on two boys running about like berserker knights. The gentle incline also meant it was almost impossible to fall in.

Or if not impossible, then at least highly unlikely. Nothing was impossible when young children were determined to get wet, but if one wanted to actually dunk one's head beneath the surface, it required some forethought.

You had to climb a tree, Nicholas recalled. Climb a tree and crawl out along a horizontal limb until you were far enough out and then—*Plop!*—that was how you did it.

But hopefully Anthony and Benedict had not figured this out yet.

He headed across the lawn, taking his time as he pondered his immediate task. Should he just come out and ask her? Should he give some sort of

in? Talk about how they'd known each other for so long, they'd always been friends, et cetera, et cetera.

Frankly, he thought that sounded like rubbish, and he suspected George would, too, but it did seem like a man ought to say *something* before he blurted out, "Will you marry me?"

He supposed he'd have to figure it out as he went along. It wasn't his job to do so; he'd always been the sort of student who studied twice as much as he needed to. But there was no preparation for this examination. There was only a question, and an answer, and the answer wasn't even his to give.

Nicholas kicked a pebble along the well-worn path that led to the lake. He made his way up the slope. He wasn't sure where he'd look next if Georgie wasn't there, but sure enough, when he reached the crest of the hill, he saw the three of them by the water's edge.

By all appearances, they'd settled in for a long spell in the breezy morning sunshine. Georgie sat on a dark blue blanket next to a hamper of food and what appeared to be a sketchbook. The two boys squealed and chased each other back and forth along the narrow strip of dirt that separated the walkway and the grass. It was a charming scene.

"Georgie!" he called out as he approached.

She turned and smiled. "Oh, Nicholas. Good morning. What brings you this way?"

"I came to see you, actually."

"Me?" She looked a little surprised, but honestly more amused than anything else. "Poor you."

"Poor me?"

She motioned to the boys with her hand and the hamper with her head. "There have got to be more exciting ways to spend your morning."

"Oh, I don't know. My other option involves my mother, her embroidery, and six different colors of thread."

"Six you say?"

"Almost a rainbow."

One side of her mouth made a wry curve. "I tell you this in all honesty, Nicholas. I have never felt so valued."

He choked out a laugh as he sat down beside her, stretching his legs straight and long in front of him. It was remarkable how at ease he felt that he'd made up his mind to marry her. All of the angst and awkwardness of the previous night was gone, replaced with what had always been the

s been the familiarity and ease of lifelong friendship.

“Were you sketching?” he asked.

Georgie “Jabbing blindly with pencil at paper is more like it,” she said. “I’m lurking terrible artist.”

There were several loose sheets of paper tucked under the sketchbook. Nicholas sifted through these, stopping on one of a bird in a tree. It was drawn in pencil, but somehow Nicholas could tell that it was a red-breasted nuthatch and not just from the shape of it. “I like this one,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Benedict drew that.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

She gave a wave, clearly unperturbed by her own lack of talent.

“It’s really quite good.” Nicholas gave it a closer inspection. “How close is he?”

“Just five.”

Nicholas felt his eyebrows rise. “That’s . . . remarkable.”

“I know. The boy has talent, although I think right now he’s much more interested in torturing his brother.”

Nicholas watched the two boys for a moment. Anthony was holding Benedict upside down by his ankles.

“Or trying to avoid being tortured,” Georgie said.

“If that’s the case, he’s not doing a very good job of it.”

“No,” Georgie agreed. “Alas, the plight of the younger sibling.”

“We would both know, wouldn’t we?”

She nodded in absent agreement, keeping her eyes on her nephews, presumably to make sure they weren’t about to kill each other. “Actually,” she began.

He waited a moment, then prompted, “Actually . . . ?”

She looked over at him with a wry smile. “We’re both a little like orphans, aren’t we?”

“Onlys?”

“You’ve how many years between you and Andrew? Eight? Nine? I never actually bother with you when you were growing up? Pay you any attention?”

Nicholas thought about that. Most of the time his older siblings had simply ignored him. Or more likely, simply forgotten his existence. “Not really.”

“If you asked him,” Georgie went on, “I’d wager he’d say he felt more like a youngest child than a middle one.” She turned, looking at Nicholas and

shoulder. "Which makes *you* an only."

a She had a point, but he hardly saw how it applied to her. She was on younger than Edmund and one year older than Hugo, a middle child if ever seen one. "And how does this work for you?" he asked.

ok, and "Oh, I'm entirely different," she said with an offhand wave. "It was s done because I was always so sick. No one ever treated me like a sibling."

obin, "That's not true."

"Oh, please. My mother was convinced I would die if she let me pla outside."

"That seems a little extreme."

old is "Well, yes, I agree, but that's what she thought, and there was hardly way to convince her otherwise. I mean, I suppose I could go outside and die, but that doesn't prove much." She shaded her eyes and frowned. "close to the water, Benedict!"

Benedict pouted, but he stepped back.

more "Speaking of going outside and not dying," Nicholas murmured.

"He can swim," Georgie said, "but I'm not sure how well."

Nicholas thought back to his childhood, back to all the times he and Edmund had swum in this lake. Georgie had never joined them. Not or Come to think of it, he couldn't recall ever seeing her out of doors. No childhood, at least. She was always inside, propped up on a sofa with a or sitting on the floor setting up a tableau with her dolls.

"How do you feel now?" he asked. She did not look unhealthy. Her was fine, and she did not seem to lack energy.

lly . . ." She shrugged. "I've mostly grown out of it."

llys, "Were you really that ill?" Nicholas asked. Because in all honesty h couldn't recall the details. It seemed odd now, given his choice of prof but he remembered almost nothing about Georgie's being sick as a chi except that she was. "You used to have trouble breathing, right?"

Did he She nodded. "But not all the time. Most of the time I was fine. But y sometimes . . ." She turned, looking at him more squarely. "Have you had difficulty catching your breath?"

"Of course."

y, no." to me."

ore like "And now?"

ver her "I can't remember the last time it happened. Several years, at least."

“Did you ever see a doctor about it?”

ie year She gave him a look. “What sort of question is that? You know my
he’d I saw so many doctors we could have opened up a medical school here
Kent.”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “That would have made my studies
considerably more convenient.”

y “Indeed,” she said with a laugh. “I’m surprised your parents let you
to Edinburgh. It’s so far away.”

y a “It’s not up to them to let me or not let me,” he replied, bristling at t
remark. “And at any rate, I’m sure it seemed positively local after Edw
and went missing in the Colonies.”

id not Nicholas had been at Eton when his brother had served in the army,
Not so a lieutenant and then as a captain in the 52nd Regiment. He had been n
and presumed dead for many months before finally returning home.

“True,” Georgie said. “I suppose that is a convenience of having old
siblings. They do ease the way.”

He frowned.

nce. “Oh, not for me,” she said. “Stop breathing just once in front of you
t in parents and it doesn’t matter if your sister broke both her arms and
i book, three years straight.”

color Nicholas leaned in. He’d heard the story many times but never with
satisfactory detail. “Did Billie *really* set someone on fire?”

Georgie laughed with delight. “Oh, Nicholas, I adore that *that’s* what
want to know more about.”

e “It might be the only thing that could have drawn my attention away
ession, the part about your not breathing.”

ld, “Well, you *are* a doctor. One would hope you’d find the part about
breathing interesting.”

ever “Almost a doctor,” he corrected. “I won’t be finished for another ye
Fourteen months, actually.”

Georgie acknowledged this with a nod, then said, “I’m *told* she didn
on purpose, but witnesses are few.”

appen “Suspicious indeed.”

She chuckled at that. “Actually, I believe her account. It happened ju
before she was presented to the queen. Have you seen the sort of dress
ladies must wear to be presented? Hoops out to here.” She stretched he

out as far as it went. “Farther, actually. You can’t reach the end of you
mother. You can’t walk through doorways without turning sideways, and even
in it’s a close thing. It’s ludicrous.”

“What did she do, knock over a candelabra?”

Georgie nodded. “But the girl she set on fire was also wearing a cou
dress. The candle fell onto the other girl’s hoop, which was so far from
go off body that she did not immediately realize she’d been set aflame.”

“Dear God.”

he “Oh, how I *wish* I’d seen it.”

ward off “Rather bloodthirsty, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” she muttered.

first as While Nicholas was pondering what that might mean, she flopped o
nissing back and said, “Keep an eye on them, would you?”

“Are you planning to take a nap?” he asked, somewhat amused.

ler “No,” she said contentedly. “Just enjoying the sun on my face. Don’
my mother. She fears freckles. Says I’m more likely to get them becau
my hair.”

r Her hair did mark her as a bit of a changeling in the Bridgerton clan
Everyone else he’d met—cousins included—had brown hair, generally
ie for somewhere between chestnut and dark. But Georgie was most definite
redhead. Not that bright orange that stuck out like a beacon, but rather
something soft and delicate. People called it strawberry blond, but Nic
had never liked that term. It didn’t seem at all accurate, and as he stole
it you glance at her basking in the sun, he marveled at how the light seemed t
reflect off each individual strand.

r from She sighed contentedly. “Have they killed each other?”

not to be doing. “Not yet.”

ar. “Good. It got quiet there for a moment.” Her expression turned susp
even as she lay there with her eyes closed. “Too quiet.”

“They’re just running back and forth,” Nicholas said. “I’m trying to
’t do it out if it’s a game, and if so, if it has rules.”

“There are definitely rules,” Georgie said. “Benedict tried to explain
I’m not sure he was speaking English.”

1st “I bet I could figure it out.”

es She opened one eye to give him a dubious look.

r arm “I was a seven-year-old boy once, you know.”

r skirts. “Obviously.”

then “Get up,” he said, nudging her again. “Watch Anthony. See how he’s picking up a rock?”

rt Georgie sat up instantly. “Anthony Bridgerton, do not throw that at your brother!” she yelled.

her Anthony ground to a halt, planting indignant hands on his hips. “I was going to!”

“Oh, he was going to,” Georgie said.

“I don’t think he was,” Nicholas said thoughtfully. “See, look. He’s making a pile over there.”

Georgie frowned as she craned her neck. “So he is. What’s he building into her cairn?”

“Nothing so organized, I assure you. But . . . Watch Benedict now. I’m trying to get the rocks from Anthony’s pile—”

’t tell “Oh, that’s not going to happen,” Georgie cut in. “Anthony has six inches of snow on him. And that boy is strong.”

“He’ll have to be sneaky,” Nicholas agreed.

. They watched as Benedict charged his older brother with all the finesse of a wild boar.

ly a Georgie chuckled. “Although brute force is always an option.”

“Always an option,” Nicholas agreed.

holas Anthony charged back.

a “But not a wise one,” Georgie said.

o “No.”

She frowned as they watched the boys go down in a tangle of limbs. “How are we concerned?”

posed “It does look as if it might end badly.”

“But will there be blood? That’s really all I need to know.”

icious, Nicholas took a more assessing look. The boys were making an astonishing amount of noise, but mostly they were rolling around like a figure of puppies. “Not above the skin.”

She shot him a look. “What does *that* mean?”

it, but “That’s all a bruise is, you know. Bleeding under the skin.”

“Huh.” She sounded vaguely intrigued. “I suppose that’s right. I had never really thought about it.”

“Well, there you go. We call it an ecchymosis.”

“You can’t just call it a bruise?”

“Of course not. Then anyone would think they can be a doctor.”

's He grinned when she batted him on the shoulder, then said, “But to your question the way you intended it, I don't *think* there will be blood they may yet surprise me.”

asn't Benedict made a sound that was not quite a shriek. But it was close. close.

“Would blood really be that surprising?” Georgie asked.

Anthony growled, and Nicholas began to reassess. “In what quantities

ing, a “Quantities that would either worry their parents or reveal me to be monitor of small children.”

“Is this an either/or?”

She shoved him with her elbow.

He's He grinned. “Sorry, no. I don't think so. Based upon my copious experience as a former seven-year-old boy.”

nches “It's odd how you say that,” she mused, turning away from him to open the hamper.

“What do you mean?”

isse of “ ‘My copious experience as a former seven-year-old boy,’ ” she mimicked. “Such a dry tone you used there. As if you *didn't* have copious experience.”

“Well, it *was* a long time ago.”

She shook her head and pulled out a wedge of cheese. “Frankly, I'm amazed any of you reached adulthood.”

“Are was your sister who broke two arms.”

She laughed at that, and they sat in companionable silence, taking turns breaking off chunks of cheese. “I have bread, too,” Georgie told him. She peered into the hamper. “And jam.”

“Strawberry?”

wet “Raspberry.”

He sniffed disdainfully. “Then I'm not interested.”

She gave him a look, then sputtered with laughter. “What does that mean?”

ln't He grinned again, rather enjoying the feel of it on his face. “I have no idea.”

He was comfortable with her. He could make the sort of stupid comments that were only a little bit funny and made no sense. The kind one made one didn't have to weigh every word and worry about judgment or score.

That's how it had always been with Georgie—well, except for the n answer before. And even that had turned out fine in the end.

l, but There were worse fates than marrying one's friend.

Very to He propped himself into a more upright position, pushing slightly p
to peer into the hamper. "I'd love some jam. Whatever the flavor."

"Bread?" she asked.

"We're not savages."

es?" She raised a brow. "Speak for yourself."

a bad "You eat jam straight from the jar?"

"You don't?"

He gave her a sideways glance. "Raspberry or strawberry?"

She threw a chunk of cheese at him.

He laughed and popped it in his mouth. "Fine, yes, I admit it. I've e
jam straight from the jar. But I used a spoon."

pen the "So proper, you are. Next you'll be telling me you've never drunk w
straight from a bottle."

"I haven't."

ous "Oh, there's no way," she scoffed. "I've seen you and Edmund after
night out at the tavern."

"Where we drank from mugs and glasses," he said pointedly. "Gad,
Georgie, do you know what an entire bottle of whiskey would do to a r

l She shook her head. "I've never had whiskey."

aid, it "How can that be?" he asked. It would be highly unusual for a well-
lady such as Georgiana to drink whiskey on a regular basis, but surely
somewhere along the way she'd had a sip.

irns Georgie started spreading jam on a slice of bread. "Well, I don't live
she Scotland, for one thing."

"I suppose that would make it difficult. Your father doesn't drink it?"

She shook her head. "Not that I'm aware."

Nicholas shrugged. Whiskey was so ubiquitous in Edinburgh he'd
forgotten that people didn't drink much of it in England, especially thi
mean?" south.

io Georgie handed him a slice of bread and got to work preparing one t
herself. "Here you go."

ments "Aunt Georgie!"

when They both looked up. Anthony was sidling over, one hand behind hi

rn. "Aunt Georgie, do you like worms?"

ight “I adore them!” She looked over at Nicholas. “I hate them.” And the
at the boys: “The more the better!”

ast her Anthony conferred with his younger brother. They both looked
disappointed.

“Clever girl,” Nicholas said.

“At least more clever than a seven-year-old.”

They watched as the two boys surreptitiously dropped a few worms
ground. “Lofty goals,” Nicholas murmured.

She munched her bread and jam. “You do know how to flatter a lady.”

“Right,” he said, clearing his throat. It seemed as good an opening as
“Speaking of which . . .”

She gave him an amused glance. “Speaking of flattering me?”

aten “No.” Good God. This was not going well and he hadn’t even starte
Her eyes turned to mischief. “So you *don’t* want to flatter me.”

hiskey “No. Georgie . . .”

“My apologies. I couldn’t resist.” She set her bread carefully down on
napkin. “What was it you needed?”

‘a What was it he *needed*? He needed to go back to Edinburgh and rest
life. But instead he was here, about to propose a marriage of—he assured
convenience.

nan?” Not *his* convenience.

Not hers, either. Not really. Nothing about her life had been conveni
bred lately.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I wanted to talk to you, actually. It’s why I ca
out here this morning.”

in “Not for the worms?” she asked cheekily.

” This, more than anything, cemented his belief that she had no idea w
was afoot.

He cleared his throat.

“Tea?”

s far “What?”

for She picked up a flask he had not noticed. “Would you like some tea
cold by now, but it will take care of your throat.”

“No. Thank you. It’s not that.”

She shrugged and took a sip. “I swear by it.”

s back. “Right. Georgie. I really do need to ask you something.”

She blinked, regarding him with an expectant expression.

on back “When I came down from Edinburgh it was, as I told you, because r
father wished to consult with me about something. But—”

“Oh, sorry, hold on one moment,” she said before turning toward th
and yelling, “Anthony, stop that this minute!”

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“I have no bloody idea,” he muttered.

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“No,” he said. “That’s not true. I do know what I meant to say.”

But he didn’t say it.

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“When I came down from Edinburgh it was, as I told you, because my father wished to consult with me about something. But—”

“Oh, sorry, hold on one moment,” she said before turning toward the lake and yelling, “Anthony, stop that this minute!”

Anthony, who was sitting rather cheerfully on his brother’s head, said, “Do I have to?”

“Yes!” Georgie looked for a moment as if she might get up to enforce her will, but Anthony finally rolled off his brother and went back to poking holes in the dirt with a stick.

Georgie rolled her eyes before returning her attention to Nicholas. “Sorry. You were saying . . .”

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Her expression was somewhere between perplexed and amused.

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“Will you marry me?”

Chapter 7

“I’m sorry,” Georgiana said slowly. “I thought you just asked me to marry you.”

Nicholas’s mouth moved in an odd manner, as if he didn’t quite understand what she’d said. “I did.”

She blinked. “That’s not funny, Nicholas.”

“It wasn’t meant to be funny. It was meant to be a proposal of marriage.”

She stared at him. He didn’t *look* as if he’d been struck by a temporary bout of insanity. “But *why?*”

Now he was looking at her as if *she* had been the one struck by a temporary bout of insanity. “Why do you think?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Most of the time marriage is proposed because two human beings have fallen in love with one another, but since we both know *that* isn’t true . . .”

Nicholas let out an impatient snort. “First of all, you know damn well that most of the time the two human beings are not in love, and—”

“*This* human being would like to be,” she snapped.

“So would *this* human being,” he snapped right back, “but alas, we can’t always get what we want.”

Georgie felt herself nod. It was all beginning to make sense. “So,” she said, “you’re asking out of pity.”

“Friendship.”

“Pity,” she corrected. Because that’s what it was. That’s all it could be. A man didn’t abandon his studies and travel for ten days just to make a kind gesture to a friend.

He didn’t love her. They both knew that.

And then she realized. “Oh my God,” she said with a horrified gasp. “That’s why you came down from Scotland. It was because of me.”

He did not meet her eyes.

“How did you even know what had happened to me?” she asked. How gossip reached Scotland? How far would she need to travel to escape in North America? Brazil?

“My father,” Nicholas said.

“Your father?” she choked out. “Your father told you? What, in a letter? The Earl of Manston has nothing better to put in a letter to his youngest than the tale of my *ruin*?”

“Georgie, it wasn’t like that. I didn’t even know the details until yesterday.”

“So then what did he say?”

But she knew. She knew before Nicholas could reply, and then it became clear that he wasn’t going to reply. Because he was embarrassed. And that made her furious because he had no right to feel embarrassed. He didn’t even dare to blush and look at his feet when he had rained such complete mortification down on her. If he was going to do this to her, then damn him he had to do it like a stoic and watch.

She couldn’t stay still any longer. She jumped to her feet and began pacing back and forth, hugging her arms to her body. Tight . . . so tightly, as if she could hold her emotions inside with brute force.

“Oh no oh no oh no oh no,” she said to herself. Was this what her life was going to come to? Men were being begged to marry her?

Or bribed? Was Nicholas being *bribed* to ask for her hand? Had her father’s offer been doubled to sweeten the pot?

Her parents—they had promised they wouldn’t force her to marry Freddie Oakes, but they’d also made it clear they didn’t want her to choose the path of a spinster.

Had *they* asked Lord Manston to call Nicholas down from school? If *everyone* knew? Were they all plotting behind her back?

“Georgie, stop.” Nicholas grasped her arm, but she shook him off, casting a quick glance toward the lake to make sure Anthony and Benedict were still watching.

“It wasn’t even your idea, was it?” she whispered hotly. “Your father summoned you.”

He looked away. The aggravating little weasel, he couldn’t even meet her eyes.

“He asked you to ask me,” Georgie said with growing horror. Her hands covered her face. It had been bad enough that Freddie Oakes had tried

id the her off to Gretna Green, but this—this—
t? It was the pity. That was what she could not bear.
She had not done anything wrong.
She should not be pitied. She should be admired. A man had kidnap
tter? her. Kidnapped her! And she'd got away.
it son Why wasn't that something to celebrate?
There should be parties in her honor. A gala parade. Look at the bra
intrepid Georgiana Bridgerton! She fought for her freedom and won!
When *men* did that entire countries were created.
"Georgie," Nicholas said, and his voice was awful. Condescending a
came superior and all those things men were when they thought they were de
that with a hysterical female.
't get "Georgie," he said again, and she realized that actually his voice wa
cation any of those things. But she didn't care. Nicholas Rokesby had known
o take entire life. He didn't want to marry her. He felt *sorry* for her.
Then she nearly choked on her thoughts. Because she knew Lord M
pacing He was her godfather, her own father's closest friend. And she'd seen
f she with his sons often enough to know exactly how the conversation must
gone.
fe had He had not *asked* Nicholas to marry her.
She forced herself to look at him. "Your father ordered you to marry
dowry didn't he?"
"No," he said, but she could tell he was lying. He'd never been a go
reddie She couldn't imagine why his father thought he could fake his way thr
life of proposal of marriage.
Honestly, he was the *worst*.
did "He can't order me to marry you," Nicholas said somewhat stiffly. "
grown man."
asting She scoffed. "Some grown man. Your father sent for you and you ca
ren't trotting down like a good little boy."
"Stop it," he snapped.
r "Don't pretend any of this is your idea. You are doing nothing but y
father's bidding."
et her "I am doing you a favor!"
Georgie gasped.
ands "I didn't mean it that way," Nicholas said quickly.
to haul "Oh, I know how you meant it."

“Georgie—”

“Consider this a refusal,” she said, each word a little snip of fury.

ped statement of disbelief.

“Of course I’m saying no. How can you possibly think I would accept an offer?”

ve and “Because it would be the reasonable thing to do.”

“*Because it would be the reasonable thing to do,*” she scoffed. “Were you laughing at me?”

and He grabbed her arm. “You know that we weren’t.”

ealing “I can’t believe this,” she ground out, yanking herself from his grasp. “You understand— No, you couldn’t possibly understand what it feels like to be so utterly without choices.”

her his “You think not?”

anston. no choice? Being ordered to marry me? At least you get to feel good about yourself.”

t have “I feel splendid right now, let me tell you.”

7 me, “You get to call yourself a hero, saving poor little ruined Georgiana Bridgerton. Whereas I—I get to decide between the man who ruined me and a man who pities me.”

“I don’t pity you.”

od liar. “But you don’t love me.”

ough a He looked ready to tear his hair out. “Do you want me to?”

“No!”

‘I’m a help.”

ame She crossed her arms. “I am not a charity. I don’t want to be your good works.”

“Do you think I wanted to sacrifice my life for you?”

Oh, that stung.

our “I didn’t mean it that way,” Nicholas said quickly.

Her brows rose. “That’s the second time you’ve had to make that statement in the past few minutes.”

He cursed under his breath, and she was shallow enough that she took pleasure in his discomfort.

“I hereby release you from all obligation,” she said in her most annoyed

supercilious voice. "You asked. I said no. You have done your duty."

"It is not my duty," he bit off. "It is my choice."

a "Even better. That means you will respect *my* choice. To say no."

He took a breath. "You are not thinking clearly."

pt such "I'm not *thinking clearly*?" God help a man who told a woman she v
thinking clearly. Freddie Oakes had said the same thing in the carriage
heading north to Gretna Green. If Georgie heard it one more time, she
e you sure she could answer to the consequences.

"Keep your voice down," Nicholas hissed. He jerked his head toward
Anthony and Benedict, who had halted their games and were now look
o. "Do their way.

ike to "Did you find more worms?" Georgie called out. She had no idea he
managed to sound so cheerful. She didn't sound so cheerful when she
cheerful.

aving "No," Anthony said, but he looked suspicious. "They're not fun if th
bout don't bother anyone."

"Right, well, carry on then." She smiled so broadly her cheeks hurt.

"You're going to injure yourself," Nicholas muttered.

"Shut up and smile so they stop looking at us."

ie and "You look deranged."

"I feel deranged," she practically hissed. "Which should worry *you*."

He held up his hands and took a step back, a motion so patronizing s
nearly went for his throat.

"Aunt Georgie, why do you look like you're going to strike Uncle
Nicholas?"

; to Georgie froze, only then realizing she'd made a fist. "I'm not going
strike anyone," she said to Benedict, who was regarding her with undis
ood curiosity. "And he's not your uncle."

"He's not?" Benedict looked from Nicholas to Georgie and back ag
opened his mouth, closed it, and then turned back to Georgie, this time
slightly suspicious expression. "Are you sure?"

Georgie planted one of her hands on her chest. This had to be some
atementelaborate practical joke. Even Shakespeare could not have conceived o
a farce.

ok "Papa says we should call him Uncle Nicholas," Benedict said, his l
nose wrinkling. "I know Mummy told us we're to mind you this morni
yingly I can't go against my father."

“Of course not,” Georgie said.

Meanwhile, Nicholas was standing off to the side, doing a terrible job of hiding his amusement.

“You must do as your father says,” she said to Benedict.

He nodded. “I think Uncle Nicholas should be my uncle.”

Georgie wanted to scream. Even the children were conspiring against her. “Uncle George is Uncle Nicholas’s brother,” Benedict explained, “so it only makes sense that he’s our uncle too.”

“Uncle George is your uncle because he is married to Aunt Billie,” Benedict explained. “And Aunt Billie is your aunt because she is your father’s older sister.”

Benedict stared up at her with huge, unblinking eyes. “I know.”

“A person isn’t your uncle just because his brother is.”

Benedict considered this for about half a second. “But a person *can* be your uncle if his brother is.”

“It’s like squares and rectangles,” Anthony interjected, with all the authority of an oldest child. “All squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares.”

Benedict scratched his head. “What about circles?”

“What *about* circles?” Anthony countered.

Benedict looked up. “Aunt Georgie?”

She shook her head. *This*, she could not handle right now. No one should have to deal with an unwanted marriage proposal *and* geometry in the morning.

“You don’t know anything about circles,” Anthony said.

Benedict crossed his arms. “Yes, I do.”

“If you did, you wouldn’t have asked about them, because they have *nothing* to do with—”

“Boys, stop,” Georgie ordered. “Now.”

“He does this all the time,” Benedict protested. “He thinks because I’m bigger than me—”

“I am bigger than you.”

“Not forever you’re not.”

“Says who?”

“Says me!”

“Stop!” Georgie yelled.

“I hate you,” Benedict seethed.

Anthony stuck out his tongue. “I hate you more.”

ob at “Boys, stop this at once,” Nicholas said sternly.
God above, if they listened to Nicholas when they wouldn’t listen to Georgie was going to scream.

“He started it!” Benedict whined.

st her. “I did not! You asked about circles!”

o it “Because I wanted to know about them!”

“Enough!” Nicholas put his hand on Benedict’s shoulder, but the litt yanked himself away.

ather’s And Georgie’s faith in the universe was restored. Nicholas wasn’t h any success at managing them, either.

Benedict stamped his foot. “Anthony Bridgerton, I hate you the *mos* And then he drew back his fist.

be Georgie leapt forward. “Do not hit your brother!”

But Benedict had no intention of hitting his brother. Instead, his litt swung through the air, releasing a heretofore unnoticed patty of pure angles lakefront mud.

It would have hit Anthony in the face if Georgie had not tried to inte

Anthony gasped with pure schadenfreude as it slopped down on Ge shoulder. “Oh, Benedict,” he breathed. “You are going to be in *so muc trouble.*”

ould “Benedict!” Nicholas said sternly.

same “I didn’t mean to!” Benedict cried. “I was aiming for Anthony.”

Nicholas took him by the upper arm, pulling him a step back for a scolding. “That does not make it any better.”

And then Georgie—honestly, she could not say what came over her. would never know what mad devil plucked her hand from her side. It v like she’d been attacked by malevolent marionette strings.

She scooped the mud from her shoulder and let fly.

ie’s Right into Nicholas’s neck.

“I was aiming for Benedict,” she said sweetly.

Then she made the mistake of looking at the boys. They were staring with identical expressions—eyes wide, mouths wider—and then Bene said in almost reverent tones, “Aunt Georgie, you are going to be in so trouble.”

Nicholas—damn him—swooped in to save the day. “Boys,” he said deceptive calm, “I think your aunt isn’t feeling well.”

Georgie would have snapped, "I'm fine," except that she wasn't fine she wanted this to be over more than she wanted to prove him wrong.

her, "Run along home," Nicholas said to the boys. "We will be right behind you."

"Is Benedict in trouble?" Anthony asked hopefully.

"No one is in trouble."

"Is Aunt Georgie in trouble?"

the boy "Home," Nicholas said sharply.

They took one look at his face and started to run.

aving Georgie gritted her teeth. "I'm sorry about the mud."

"No you're not."

t." "You're right. I'm not."

His brows rose. "That was a refreshingly quick capitulation."

"I'm not a good liar."

e hand "Neither am I," he said with a shrug.

"Yes, I know."

Then his mouth started to twitch, and by God, that was the final straw.

arvene. "Don't laugh," she practically growled.

Georgie's "I'm not."

h Her eyes narrowed.

Nicholas looked like he might throw his hands in the air. "I'm not! I mean, I find no humor here."

"I think you should—"

"Although I *am* flattered that Edmund has granted me uncle status."

He wanted to laugh. She was sure of it.

. She "Stop looking so self-righteous," Nicholas said testily. "We're both covered in mud."

was She gave him one long stare and then marched away.

"Georgie, stop!" He caught up instantly. "We are not finished."

"I am," she ground out. She was *done*. "You can tell your father," she said each syllable more clipped than the last, "that you have done your duty."

g at her asked me to marry you. And then you can tell him that I said no."

dict "You're not thinking."

much "Don't you *dare*." She stepped forward, jabbing her finger toward him. She poked it through the air, and then she poked him right in the chest.

with "Don't you ever tell me I don't know my own mind. Do you hear me?"

"That's not what I meant."

e, and “Again! Do you hear yourself? If you have to say ‘that’s not what I
ind three times in a single conversation, perhaps you should consider the in
of your words.”

“Inclarity?” he repeated.

Now he was correcting her grammar? Georgie wanted to scream. “I
you should go,” she said, trying for a hushed tone. The boys weren’t th
ahead of them on the path.

“At least let me—”

She thrust one of her arms out, vaguely in the direction of Crake. “C
Nicholas crossed his arms and looked her hard and square in the eye
She drew back. “What?”

“No,” he said again. “I’m not going to go. Not until I am convinced
you have actually heard what I’ve had to say.”

“Will. You. Marry. Me,” she said, ticking the words off on her finge
heard you quite clearly.”

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse, Georgiana. It does not become you.”

w. She stepped forward. “When did you become so condescending?”

He stepped forward. “When did *you* become so short-sighted and fu
pride?”

At this point they were nearly nose to nose, and Georgie was seethir
Believe gentleman would accept a lady’s refusal with grace.”

He countered with, “A lady would consider the proposal before reje
out of hand.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“I am not asking you to marry me because I pity you,” he said in a
furiously tight voice. “I am asking because I have known you for as lo
have known my own memory. I *like* you, Georgiana. You are a good p
and you do not deserve to spend the rest of your life in isolation becau
the misguided actions of a jackass.”

ie said, Her comeback died in her throat. Because now *she* felt like a jackass

r and A jackass who had no idea what to say.

She swallowed, hating that the lump in her throat tasted like tears. H
that he didn’t understand why she was so angry. And hating that he wa
actually a good person and he *still* didn’t understand.

im. But most of all, she hated that she’d fallen into this awful position w
someone could make a kind gesture, born of nothing but care and good
intentions, and all she wanted to do was scream.

meant' "Thank you, Nicholas," she said, picking through her words with ca
clarity cadence. "It was very thoughtful of you to ask."

"Thoughtful," he repeated, and she got the feeling that he was startled
the milkish, nondescript word.

think "The answer is still no," she said. "You don't need to save me."

at far He bristled. "That's not what I'm doing."

"Isn't it?"

He stared at her for a moment before capitulating. "Yes, fine, I suppose!"
is, but it's *you*, Georgie."

l. "No." "Me?"

"You must know I wouldn't do it for anyone else."

that Her heart pricked. She wanted to cry. She wanted to cry *so hard* and
didn't know why. Or maybe it was that there were simply too many re
rs. "I and the prospect of sifting through them made her want to cry the hard
all.

She shook her head. "Did it ever occur to you that I don't want to spend
the rest of my life feeling grateful?"

ll of "Don't be ridiculous. It wouldn't be like that."

"You can't know that."

ig. "A He didn't quite roll his eyes, but she could tell he wanted to. "You can't
know the opposite," he said.

cting it She took a steadying breath. "I can't be your sacrifice."

"That's absurd."

"*Don't be ridiculous. That's absurd.*" Her voice turned to steel. "Kiss
do me the honor of not disparaging my every word."

ng as I He gaped at her. "You know—"

erson, Georgie waited, breath held, as he turned on his heel and took a step
se of from her. Every line of his body was rigid with frustration—or maybe
even as he whirled back around. "Forget I said anything," he said hotly

s. "Forget I tried to be a friend. Forget you're in a difficult spot. Forget I
give you a way out."

lating He started to walk away, but she could not bear to see him leave in such
is temper, so she called out, "Don't be like that, Nicholas. It's not about you."

here soft. He turned around. "What did you just say?" he asked, his voice chill

l She blinked with confusion. "I said it's not about you," she repeated
And then he just laughed. He laughed so uproariously that Georgie

reful couldn't think of a thing to say. She just stood there like an idiot, wondering what on earth had led to this moment.

ed by "Do you know," he said, wiping his eyes, "that is exactly what my father said."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

ose it "No. Neither did he." He stopped and bowed; they had reached the spot where the path broke in two. One way to the house, the other to the stable where she presumed he had left his mount. "I bid you good day."

Good day, indeed.

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Good day, indeed.

Chapter 8

Well, that went well.

Funny how it had never occurred to Nicholas that she might say no.

“It’s a relief,” he said to himself as he handed his mount over to the grooms at Crake’s stables. “I didn’t want to marry her anyway.”

“I’ve done my duty,” he announced to the empty lawn as he marched to the house. “I asked, she refused. There is nothing more to be done.”

And finally, when he yanked open Crake’s massive front door and stepped into the hall, he muttered, “It was a cock-up of an idea, anyway. Good what was I thinking? *Georgiana Bridgerton.*”

“Sir?”

It was Wheelock, materializing from thin air, as was his habit. Nicholas nearly jumped a foot.

“My apologies if I surprised you, sir.”

Nicholas could not begin to count the number of times Wheelock had uttered this exact sentence. It was approximately equal to the number of times he had not meant it. Wheelock loved to sneak up on Rokesbys.

“I went out for a ride,” Nicholas said. It wasn’t a lie. He *had* gone for a ride. To Aubrey Hall, where he’d asked a woman to marry him, been hit on the neck with a pile of mud, and been turned down, although not strictly according to that order.

Wheelock eyed Nicholas’s muddy sleeve, the one he’d used to wipe his neck.

“What?” Nicholas snapped. He’d regret it later, talking to Wheelock with such incivility, but he could not manage anything else just now.

Wheelock paused before replying, for the exact amount of time needed to make it clear that one of them was the epitome of serenity and calm and the other one was not. “I merely wished to inquire if I should call for refreshment,” he said.

“Yes,” Nicholas said. “No.” Gad, he didn’t want to see anyone. But hungry. “Yes, but have it sent to my room.”

“As you wish, sir, but might I add—”

“Not now, Wheelock.”

“You will want to be aware that—”

“A bath,” Nicholas announced. “I’m going upstairs, taking a bath, h
drink, and going to bed.”

“At half eleven in the morning?”

“Is that what time it is?”

“Indeed, sir.”

Nicholas bowed with a flourish. “Then I bid you farewell.”

Wheelock looked at him as if he’d gone mad. Hell, he probably had.

But Nicholas made it only three steps before Wheelock called out ag
d over “Master Nicholas!”

Nicholas groaned. “Sir” he might have been able to ignore. “Master
tamped Nicholas” threw him right back into childhood, when Wheelock’s wor
God, law. He turned slowly around. “Yes, Mr. Wheelock?”

“Your father is waiting in his study.”

“My father is always waiting in his study.”

olas “A most astute observation, sir, but this time he is waiting for you.”

Nicholas groaned again, this time with purposeful volume.

“Shall I divert your refreshments to Lord Manston’s study, then?”

d Wheelock asked.

of times “No. To my room, please. I won’t be there long enough to eat.”

Wheelock looked dubious, but he nodded.

or a “You’re going to send them to my father’s study, aren’t you?” Nich
lit in asked.

ly in “To both locations, sir.”

Nicholas should have seen that coming. “Good God, you’re impress

his Wheelock nodded graciously. “I do my best, sir.”

Nicholas shook his head. “If butlers ruled the world . . .”

with “We can only dream of such a utopia.”

Nicholas smiled, despite his hideous mood, and took himself to his f
essary study. The door was open, so he gave the wall a little knock and went i

and “Ah,” Lord Manston said, looking up from his desk. “You’re back.”

“As you can see.”

His father’s brow wrinkled as he tipped his head toward Nicholas’s

he was shoulder. "What happened to you?"

As Nicholas had no intention of telling the truth he merely said, "It's muddy."

His father glanced toward the window. It looked as if it might rain, but they both knew it had been dry all morning. "I see," he murmured.

"I was down by the lake," Nicholas said.

His father nodded, fixing a placid smile to his face.

Nicholas let out an exhale and waited. He knew why he was here. *Two, one . . .*

"Did you ask her?"

There it was.

"Not yet," he lied. He wasn't sure why. Probably because he felt like a fool. A rejected fool.

"Isn't that why you went to Aubrey Hall?"

"She was minding Anthony and Benedict. It was hardly an ideal moment was

"No, I suppose not." Lord Manston chuckled. "Edmund wasn't joking when he called them right little terrors. Were they running her ragged?"

"Not really. She seemed to have them well in hand."

Lord Manston's eyes moved pointedly to the mud.

"It was an accident," Nicholas said. He certainly wasn't about to tell his father that Georgiana had thrown it.

His father gave a little shrug. "These things happen."

"Indeed they do." Nicholas wondered how long they could keep up this utterly inconsequential conversation.

"She'll be a good mother."

"She probably will," Nicholas replied. For some other man's children his

She'd said no.

ive."

No.

That was all there was to it. He could go back to Scotland tomorrow

least as soon as he told his father that Georgie had rejected his proposal

But first, a bath. "If that is all, sir—"

father's "My man is back from London with the special license," his father said

inside. Nicholas nearly groaned. "How expedient."

"The archbishop owed me a favor."

"The archbishop owes you a favor," Nicholas repeated. It was not of

one heard those words said in that order.

“Owed,” his father corrected. “We are even now.”

s
Nicholas could not imagine a series of events that had led to the
Archbishop of Canterbury owing his father a favor. “I hope you have not
out wasted your indulgence.”

His father gave him a look. “You yourself told me you need to get back to
Edinburgh. Do you really want to wait for three weeks of banns?”

three,
Nicholas took a breath. “Has it occurred to you that she might not agree?”
“Don’t be daft. Georgiana is a sensible girl. She knows how the world
works.”

“I thought *I* knew how the world worked,” Nicholas muttered.

“What was that?”

e a
Nicholas shook his head. “Nothing.”

And then to himself: “Absolutely nothing at all.”

ment.” It took Georgie precisely one hour to realize that she was being an idiot.

ng
Two hours after that, she decided she had to do something about it.

”
She was sitting in the drawing room with her mother, as was her habit
afternoons. Her mother was working on her embroidery. Georgie was
the same, which was *not* her habit most afternoons. She always had her
l his basket at her side; she had to give the impression that she was at least
thinking of attacking the embroidery, but she usually ended up staring at the
window or reading a book.

such an
Today, however, she’d been inspired to work on her stitches. *Needle
needle down. Needle up, needle down.*

n. Not
Nothing fancy or floral, just a neat, straight line of stitches. Needle up,
needle down. She felt almost mechanical. It was oddly satisfying.

. Or at
Her conversation with Nicholas at dinner the night before had reminded
her how impressed she’d been by the doctor’s work on Anthony’s hand.
Her stitches had been as even and tidy as any she’d ever seen in an embroidery
hoop. And on a howling, squirming child to boot.

l.
She wondered how much training it took to reach that level of proficiency.
Needle up, needle down.

aid.
Georgie frowned. Would her work be good enough to stitch a wound?
Probably not. Her line was straight and even, but fabric was not skin. If
they were stitching an actual wound, she wouldn’t be able to reach underneath
often she could with muslin stretched across an embroidery hoop.

“My goodness, Georgiana,” her mother said. “I have never seen you

focused on your embroidery. What are you working on?"

Georgie had no choice but to show her the row of stitches, neat and
not and forming nothing more interesting than a straight line.

Her mother looked perplexed, but Georgie did not think she was feigning
ack to interest when she asked, "Er, what is that meant to be?"

"Nothing," Georgie admitted. "I thought I would challenge myself to
cept?" how many identical stitches I could do in a row."

"Oh. Well, that seems an admirable goal. One must master the basic
ld before moving on to the more creative aspects of needlework."

Georgie tried to peer over at her mother's hoop. "What are you working
on?"

"Just a few flowers." Lady Bridgerton held her work up. Just a few
indeed. It was nothing short of a masterpiece. Pink peonies, purple iris
delicate white somethings—all interwoven with leaves of every possible
t. shade of green.

It was clear where Benedict got his artistic talent.

That is gorgeous," Georgie said.

Her mother flushed with pleasure. "Thank you, dear. I spent several
doing designing it on paper before working on the fabric. I used to try to be more
r spontaneous, but I've realized I must plan things out."

"You get a lot of joy out of your needlework, don't you?"

"I do. I really do."

Something in her mother's tone piqued Georgie's curiosity. "You sound
p up, almost surprised."

"Not surprised . . ." Lady Bridgerton's brow furrowed and a faraway
ip, settled onto her face, the sort one got when one was deep in one's own
work.

"I suppose I never really thought about it," she said, "but there is great
ided satisfaction to be had in creation."

"Creation?"

"And completion. And the knowledge that one is responsible for both
iciency. Georgie looked down at the neat row of stitches marching across her
embroidery hoop. She'd used blue thread, for no reason other than the
d? that it was in her basket near the top of the pile, but now she found she
f she liked it. It was soothing.

And endless. Blue was the ocean, the sky. And the thread that, if she
ath, as loosened the fabric from the hoop, could go on forever.

All she had to do was remove the boundaries.

tidy She loved Aubrey Hall. She really did. And she loved her family, to the walls here had been closing in on her for years, so slowly she had r even realized it.

gning Nicholas had offered her a choice. Maybe it wasn't the right choice; she had been foolish to dismiss his offer out of hand. She'd chosen pri o see reason, and she hadn't even given him a chance to explain himself.

s Yes, it stung that the only reason he'd proposed was that his father h called him down from Scotland to do so, but maybe . . .

Maybe . . .

king Maybe there was more?

Or maybe not, but maybe there *could* be?

flowers And even if there wasn't, even if she wasn't destined to find love an es, passion and hearts and flowers and whatever else it was that cupids and le cherubs sang of on high . . .

Maybe it would still be worth it.

So how did one go about un-rejecting a marriage proposal?

Georgie stood up. "I'm going to Crake."

days Her mother regarded her with palpable surprise. "Now?"

nore "Yes." Now that she'd made her decision Georgie was determined t her way. "I'm going to take a cart."

"Really? A cart?"

"It's faster than walking."

und "Are you in a rush?"

"No."

7 look Yes. What if Nicholas left for Scotland this afternoon? Highly unlike mind. things considered, but possible. And wouldn't she feel like a fool?

Her mother turned to the window and frowned. "It looks like rain, d don't think you should go."

th." What she really meant was—*You shouldn't go out in the rain becau could catch a chill, stop breathing, and die.*

r Georgie gave her mother a reassuring smile. "It has been over a year fact I had an episode, Mama. I really do think I've grown out of them."

liked Her mother did not reply, and Georgie half-expected her to order a steaming bowl of oversteeped tea for Georgie to hover over with a hea linen over her head. It had been a common ritual in Georgie's youth— mother no doubt was sure had saved her life many times over.

"Mama?" Georgie prompted, after the silence stretched into the awk

o. But Her mother let out a sigh. “I would not recommend that anyone go c
ot this weather,” she said. “At least not in what I think the weather is goin
be in a few minutes.”

but As if on cue, a fat raindrop hit the windowpane.

de over Both Bridgerton ladies went still, staring out the window, waiting fo
another drop to fall.

lad Nothing.

“False alarm,” Georgie said brightly.

“Look at that sky,” Lady Bridgerton countered. “It grows more omin
the second. Mark my words, if you go to Crake right now, you’re eithe
to catch your death on the way over or be stranded there overnight.”

d “Or catch my death on the way home,” Georgie quipped.

d “What a thing to joke about.”

Splat.

Another raindrop.

They both looked out the window again. “I suppose you could take a
carriage,” Lady Bridgerton said with a sigh.

Splat. Splatsplatsplat.

o be on The rain started to pelt the house, the initial fat droplets giving way
sharp little needles.

“Are you sure you want to go *now*?” Lady Bridgerton asked. Georgie
nodded.

“I’m not even sure Billie’s home this afternoon,” her mother said. “
said something about barley fields and well, honestly, I don’t know wh
ely, all wasn’t really listening. But I got the impression she had a lot to do.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Georgie said, not bothering to correct her mo
ear. I assumption that she intended to visit her sister.

Ping!

se you Lady Bridgerton turned to the window. “Is that *hail*?”

“Good God,” Georgie muttered. The minute she decided to take acti
r since universe just went all in against her. She wouldn’t be surprised if it sta
snow.

In May.

vy Georgie walked over to the window and looked out. “Maybe I’ll wa
one herbit,” she said, chewing on her lower lip. “In case the weather improves

But it didn’t.

ward. It hailed for an hour.

out in
ing to

Then it rained.

r

Then it stopped, but by then it was dark. If Georgie was a more intrepid sort of female, or maybe just a more foolish one, she might have told her family that she was taking the carriage (they would never have allowed her to drive herself in a cart on dark muddy roads).

But that would have invited far too many questions, both at home and at Crake, where her nocturnal arrival would have been most unorthodox.

“Tomorrow,” she said to herself. Tomorrow she would head over to Crake. Tomorrow she would tell Nicholas that she’d been a fool, and while she was going wasn’t quite ready to say yes, would it be all right if she didn’t say no?

She took her dinner in her room, plotted out what she might say to Nicholas when she next saw him, and eventually crawled into bed.

Where she’d thought she’d stay until morning.

She thought wrong.

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She thought wrong.

Chapter 9

Georgie sat up suddenly in bed, muddled and groggy. She had no idea what time it was, or why she had woken up, but her heart was pounding, and her pulse was racing, and—

Tap.

Instinctively, she shrank back against the head of her bed. She was so disoriented to identify the sound.

Tap.

Was it one of her cats?

Taptaptap.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. That last noise was different. Like a bunch of little taps all at once. Or rather, almost all at once. And definitely wasn't a cat.

Taptaptaptap.

There it was again, coming from . . . her window?

That was impossible. Maybe a bird? But why would a bird tap repeatedly in one spot? It made no sense. It had to be a human, except it *couldn't* be a human. She was too high up. There was a ledge, and she supposed it was wide enough for a person to stand on, but the only way to get there was up the massive oak her father always complained grew too close to the house. But even so, you'd have to crawl out on a branch.

A branch she didn't think would support a person's weight all the way down to the house.

Even her sister Billie, who had been known to take phenomenally stupid risks in the pursuit of treetops, had never attempted that one.

Plus, it had only stopped raining a few hours earlier. The tree would be wet and slippery.

"Oh, for the love of heaven," Georgie said. She hopped down from her bed. It had to be an animal. An extremely intelligent animal or an extremely

foolish human.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Or pebbles. Someone was throwing pebbles at her window.

For a second she thought—*Nicholas*. But Nicholas would never be so stupid. Plus, why would he sneak?

And again. Nicholas was not stupid. It was one of the things she liked about him.

She approached the window slowly, although for the life of her, she didn't know why. If someone was throwing pebbles, it meant he couldn't get his own. Still, she grabbed a candlestick for good measure, pushed the curtains aside, and peered out. But it was too dark to see, so she tucked the candlestick under her arm and then used both her hands to wrench the window up.

"Who's out there?" she whispered.

"It's me."

She froze. She knew that voice.

"I've come for you, Georgiana."

Bloody hell. It was Freddie Oakes.

Judyth, who had jumped on silent paws up to the windowsill, immediately hissed.

It was a cloudy night, but there was enough light coming from the lantern on the house that she could see him in the tree, perched on the long branch right where it met the trunk.

Georgie tried to shout her whisper. "What in the name of God are you doing here?"

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, and perhaps you noticed I didn't write back." Georgie grabbed the candlestick out from under her arm and jabbed it angrily in his direction.

"You need to go away."

"I won't leave without you."

"He's mad," she said to herself. "He is stark, raving—"

"Mad for you," he finished. He smiled, and all she could think was—*a waste of straight white teeth*. By any measure, Freddie Oakes was a handsome young gentleman. The problem was, he knew it.

"I love you, Georgiana Bridgerton," he said, smiling that too-confident smile again. "I want you to be my wife."

Georgie groaned. She didn't believe that for a second. And she didn't

that he believed it, either.

Freddie Oakes wasn't in love with her. He just wanted her to think that was so that she'd let him marry her. Did he really think she was that g

so Had he had such previous success with the ladies that he thought she'd for such obvious bunk?

ed best "Is that your cat?" he asked.

"One of them," Georgie replied, pulling Judyth back. The silver gray didn't was hissing loudly now, her little paws pinwheeling through the air. "S in on very good judge of character."

Freddie seemed not to get the insult. "Did you get my second letter? l the asked.

"What? No." She plunked Judyth down on the floor. "And you should be writing to me."

"I memorized it," he said. "In case I arrived before it did."

Dear God.

"Freddie," she said, "you need to go before someone sees you."

"*My dearest Georgiana,*" he intoned.

"Stop! Now." She twisted her head to look up at the sky. "I think it's liately to rain again. It's not safe in that tree."

"You *do* care about me."

interns "No, I was simply stating that it's not safe in that tree," she retorted.

inch "Although heaven knows why I bother. Only a fool would climb it in that weather, and I could certainly do with fewer fools in my life."

ou "You wound me to the quick, Miss Bridgerton."

She groaned.

"That wasn't in the letter," he explained.

d the "I don't care what was in the letter!"

n. "You will when I finish reciting it," he said.

Georgie rolled her eyes. God save her.

"Here is what I wrote." He cleared his throat in that way people did a grand speech. "*It distresses me more than I can say that I have not heard —what back from you.*"

"Stop," she begged.

ent But he sailed on, as she knew he would. "*I bared my heart to you in letter. I wrote words of love and devotion and heard only silence. I can believe that you never received my letter, for surely you are too gentle- 't thinkhearted and lovely to wound me with silence.*"

He looked up expectantly.

“I already told you I got the first letter,” Georgie said.

This deflated him. But only momentarily. “Well,” he said, in the sort of tone one uses when deciding to ignore logic and fact, “I also wrote: *I am sorry if I frightened you with my ardor. You must know it is because I love you so desperately. I have never felt this for another lady.*”

Georgie let her forehead fall into one of her hands. “Stop, Freddie. Just stop. You’re embarrassing both of us. But mostly you.”

“I am not embarrassed,” he said, placing a dramatic hand over his head. The motion caused him to sway, and Georgie gasped, convinced he was going down. But he must have had a better grip on the tree than she’d realized, because he remained solidly in his perch, legs wrapped around a long branch that stretched toward her window.

“For the love of heaven, Freddie, you need to get back down before you kill yourself.”

“I’m not getting out of this tree until you agree to marry me.”

“Then you should consider building a nest, because that is never going to happen.”

“Why are you being so bloody stubborn?”

“Because I don’t want to marry you!” Georgie jerked to the side as if she were Judyth, and then Blanche hopped up onto the windowsill. “Honestly, Freddie, can’t you find someone else to marry?”

“I want *you*.”

“Oh, please. We both know you don’t really love me.”

“Of course I—”

“*Freddie.*”

Judyth hissed. Blanche followed suit, but Blanche always did whatever Judyth did. At that point Cat-Head jumped up, and now there were three hostile cats in a row, all glaring at Freddie.

“Fine.” His mouth came together in a hard line, and his entire demeanor changed. “I don’t love you. I don’t love anyone. But I do need to get married. And you’re the best woman for the job.”

“One would think the best woman for the job would be a woman who actually *wants* the job.”

“I don’t have the luxury of finding that woman,” he retorted. “I need to get married now.”

“How far in debt *are* you?”

“Quite,” he said. “You’re the perfect combination of dowry and tolerability.”

t of “This is how you think to convince me?”

m “I *tried* to go about it the nice way,” he said.

love “Kidnapping?”

ust He waved dismissively, causing Georgie to once again gasp for his s
But he did not slip. She recalled that someone had once told her Freddie
a natural athlete, that he’d ruled the cricket fields at Eton. Thank God f
eart. because she had a feeling it was the only reason he hadn’t yet tumbled
is ground.

d the “I did everything properly,” he said. “I danced with you. I took you
bookshop.”

you “From which you kidnapped me.”

He shrugged. “My creditors advanced my calendar considerably. No
please, if you would. You haven’t a choice. Surely you must know that
reputation is in tatters.”

ng to “Thanks to you!”

“Then let me make it up to you. Once we’re married, it will all go aw
You will have the protection of my name.”

irst “I don’t want the protection of your name,” Georgie seethed.

reddie, “You will be Mrs. Oakes,” he said, and Georgie honestly couldn’t te
was willfully ignoring her or too caught up in his own greatness to not
she’d spoken.

He leaned toward her. “When my father passes you will be Lady
Nithercott.”

“I’d rather remain Miss Bridgerton.”

ver “Miss Bridgerton is a spinster.” He started scooting down the branch
e don’t want to be a spinster.”

“Stop it, Freddie!” Georgie eyed him with growing panic. Surely he
think the branch would hold him all the way to her window.

married. “I’m coming in.”

“You are not.”

io “Accept your fate, Georgiana.”

“I will scream,” she warned.

l to get He actually laughed at her, the cretin. “If you were going to scream,
would have done so by now.”

“The only reason I haven’t is because my brother is here tonight, an

will disembowel you if he finds you anywhere near me.”

“So you do care.”

Dear God, this man was stupid. “About my brother,” she hissed. “I wish to see him jailed for murder. And I don’t need another scandal. You already ruined my life.”

safety. “So let me fix it.”

ie was “Your plan all along, I assume.”

for that, He shrugged again as he nudged himself forward a few inches. “You to the going to do better.”

“Freddie, don’t! It won’t support your weight.”

to a “Toss me a rope.”

“I don’t have a rope! Why would you think I had a rope in my bedroom? And for the love of God, back up.”

ow He didn’t listen.

t. Your “Do not come closer,” Georgie warned. She was starting to worry that maybe the branch *would* hold his weight. It wasn’t bowing nearly as much as she would have thought.

way. “You *will* marry me,” he growled.

“Would it be easier if I just *gave* you money?”

He paused. “You would do that?”

ill if he “No!” She picked up the closest object she could put her hands on—ice that—and hurled it at him.

“Ow!” It clipped him on the shoulder. “Stop that!”

She threw another book.

“What the hell are you doing?”

1. “Defending my honor,” she ground out. She tried to lean forward, but cats were in the way. Without taking her eyes off Freddie she picked them one by one and tossed them down. “If you have any care to your well-being, didn’t she warned him, “you’ll remember what happened last time you tried to convince me to marry you.”

“Don’t be a—Jesus Christ!”

She knobbed him on the head with an inkpot.

“I’ve got another right here,” she growled. “I write a lot of letters.”

His face curled into something unpleasant. “I’m beginning to think you not worth the trouble.”

d he “So I’ve been *telling* you,” she hissed. She hurled the second inkpot but as he moved to dodge it, Cat-Head (who had never been the bright

her three cats) hopped back up onto the sill, let out an unholy *scraw*, and launched himself out the window.

“Cat-Head!” Georgie lunged forward, trying to get hold of him, but you’ve was on Freddie’s face before she even had her arms out the window.

“Get it off me!” Freddie shrieked.

“Cat-Head! Cat-Head, come back!” Georgie hissed, trying to keep his voice down. The other bedrooms were around the corner, so with any luck, no one would have heard Freddie’s cry of distress.

Freddie clawed at the cat, trying to dislodge it, but Cat-Head held firm, wrapped around Freddie’s head like half of a furry octopus.

Half of a furry octopus with claws.

“You bloody—” Freddie’s words disintegrated into a furious grunt as he seized the cat by its midsection.

“Don’t you dare throw my cat!” Georgie warned.

But Freddie already had him by the belly. Cat-Head let out a mighty wail, and Freddie tossed him away.

It did not go well for Freddie.

Cat-Head fared splendidly. After a terrifying moment when he seemed to be suspended in mid-air, fur sticking out in every direction, he got his paws into a clump of leaves hanging down from another branch and then swung himself to safety.

Freddie, on the other hand, lost his balance completely. He let out a cry of distress as he clawed for purchase, but it was to no avail. He slid from the branch and fell, bumping against several lower branches as he tumbled to the ground.

“Oh my God.” Georgie’s words came out in a tiny horrified squeak as she leaned out the window. “Oh my God.” Was he dead? Had she killed his cat? Had her cat killed him?

She ran out of her room, grabbing a lantern from a table in the hall.

“OhmyGodOhmyGodOhmyGod . . .” All the way down the stairs, skidding through the hall and out the front door in her bare feet. “Oh my God.”

He was at the base of the tree, lying very still. His head was bleeding, and already one of his eyes appeared to be swelling shut.

“Mr. Oakes?” she asked hesitantly, inching toward him. “Freddie?”

He moaned.

Oh thank God. He wasn’t dead.

nd She leaned in a little closer, nudging his hip with her toe. “Mr. Oake
you hear me?”

the cat “Bitch.”

So, that was a yes.

“Are you hurt?”

er He gave her a malevolent stare. A one-eyed malevolent stare, which
luck no somehow worse.

“Er, *where* are you hurt?” she amended.

m, “Everywhere, you bloody moron.”

is he “You know,” she said, “considering this is entirely your own fault, a
the only one here with the ability to summon help, you might think abo
being a little more polite.”

She held the lantern closer. There was a lot of blood on his head, alt
in the dark it was difficult to say how much of it might have been from
inkpot. But that wasn’t the worst of it. His left arm was twisted at an an
that wasn’t just unnatural, it was positively inhuman.

She winced. “I think you broke your arm.”

ied to His reply was a string of vile curses, all of them directed at her.

claws “Miss Georgiana? Miss Georgiana!”

ung It was Thamesly, hurrying down the front steps in his dressing gown
Georgie wasn’t surprised that the butler would be the first to arrive on
scene. He had always had freakishly good hearing.

m the “Miss Georgiana, what has happened?”

l to the “There has been an accident,” she said, wondering if she should ave
eyes. She didn’t think she’d ever seen Thamesly in anything less than t
as she uniform. “Mr. Oakes was injured.”

m? His eyes widened. “Did you say Mr. Oakes?”

“I did.”

Thamesly looked down at the man on the ground. “He appears to ha
broken his arm.”

ly Georgie nodded.

“It looks quite painful.”

g, and “It is, you bloody idiot,” Freddie snapped from the ground, “and if y
don’t—”

Thamesly took a small step forward and stepped on Freddie’s hand.
rather late to seek medical attention,” he said to Georgie. “I hate to bot
doctor when the injuries are so clearly not life threatening.”

s, can Georgie's eyes welled with tears. She had never loved the family but much as she did right at that moment.

"He appears to have cut his face, as well," Thamesly said. He glanced down, and then back up. "That'll leave a scar."

"Not if he gets it stitched properly," Georgie said.

was "Middle of the night," Thamesly said with a patently false sigh of relief. "Alas."

Georgie had to cover her mouth to choke down a nervous laugh. She reached out and took the butler by the arm, pulling him away from (and I'm of) Freddie. "I adore you for this," she whispered, "but I do think we need to get him help. If he dies . . ."

"He won't die."

though "But if he does, it will be on my conscience."

the "Surely you don't take responsibility for this idiot climbing the—"
angle Thamesly looked up. "I assume he fell from the tree."

Georgie nodded. "He was trying to get into my room."

Thamesly's nostrils flared ominously. "I will kill him myself."

It was almost funny, delivered as it was in Thamesly's signature monotone. Almost.

1. "You will do nothing of the sort," Georgie whispered urgently. "His
the is a baron. I might be able to get away with injuring him, but you most assuredly will not."

"He does not deserve your care, Miss Georgiana."

rt her "No, but you do." Georgie looked up at him. She would not go so far
full say that Thamesly had been a second father to her, but he had been a compassionate presence in her life for as long as she could remember, she cared for him deeply.

ve "I will lose no sleep over him." Georgie flicked her head toward Freddie who was still seething on the ground. "But if you were punished because you did not see to his injuries properly, I would never forgive myself."

Thamesly's pale blue eyes turned watery.

rou "We need to get him help," Georgie said, "and then we need to get him out of here."

Thamesly nodded. "I will summon your parents."

"It's
her a "No!" Georgie clutched his arm with surprising urgency. "It will be fine if no one knows he was here."

"He should pay for what he's done."

“I agree, but we both know I’m the one who will pay. There is no way we’ll be able to keep it quiet if anyone else becomes involved.” George twisted her mouth into a frown, looking quickly to the house and then toward the stables. “Can you hitch a cart?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Can you hitch a cart?” she repeated.

“Of course,” he replied. He sniffed, clearly offended that she’d questioned his skills.

“I’m going to run inside to get shoes and a coat and something we need for bandages. You get a cart hitched and we’ll take him somewhere out of the way.”

“And then what?”

“And then we . . .” She thought, grimacing as she kicked a toe through the grass. “And then we . . .”

What was she going to do?

“My lady?”

She raised her head. There was really only one thing they could do.

“And then we get Nicholas.”

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“And then we get Nicholas.”

Chapter 10

“Sir.”

Nicholas batted away whatever insect was buzzing in his ear and rolled over.

“Sir! Sir!”

He came awake with a giant indrawn breath, shaking as he sat up straight. He never had woken well when his sleep was interrupted.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

... was what he thought he said. The reality was probably a great deal more garbled. He blinked his eyes open. Wheelock was standing next to the bed, holding a candle.

“Wheelock? What the devil?”

“You’re needed,” Wheelock whispered. “Thamesly was here.”

If sleep was still fogging his brain, it was gone in an instant. “Thamesly? Why? What? Is someone hurt?”

“I was not able to obtain all the details,” Wheelock said. “But I thought you should know that he asked that I wake you and only you.”

“What the hell?” Nicholas mumbled to himself.

Wheelock held out a piece of paper. “He left this for you.”

“He’s no longer here?”

“No. He departed immediately. He said he could not leave Miss Georgiana alone for much longer.”

“Georgiana!” Nicholas flew out of bed, stumbling to the wardrobe for his clothes. Wheelock was already there, holding out a shirt, but Nicholas took the paper to read Thamesly’s message first.

“What does he say?” Wheelock asked.

Nicholas read the few short sentences by the light of Wheelock’s candle. “Not much. Just that he and Georgiana need my help and I’m to go to the Millston farmhouse.”

“I believe that’s the one—”

“—where Billie sprained her ankle all those years ago, yes. I believe still in disrepair, is it not?”

“It is being used for storage, but no one lives there.”

Nicholas yanked on his clothing with fear-fueled haste. “Did Thame you *anything*? Is it Georgiana? Is she ill? Has she been injured?”

Wheelock shook his head. “I don’t think so, no. He said that someone was in need of medical attention.”

led “Someone else? Who the devil would be out with her at—” Nicholas looked up toward the clock, but it was too dark to make out the face. “the hell time is it?”

“Half two, sir.”

raight. Nicholas swore under his breath. Something was very wrong.

“Your boots, sir.” Wheelock held them up. “May I suggest you don outside, so as to make less noise?”

al Nicholas nodded, in both agreement and admiration. “You do think everything, don’t you?”

to his “It is my job to do so, sir.”

They slipped out of the room on stockinged feet, moving silently do grand staircase. Nicholas rarely walked through Crake this late at night the Rokesbys tended to turn in early in the country. It wasn’t like Lonc esly? where myriad engagements and entertainments could keep one busy un wee hours of the morning.

ght The house was different in the dark. Moonlight whispered through the great hall, casting pale stripes and shadows that slid along the floor and the walls. Absolute quiet reigned, but the air was oddly expectant, almost as if it were holding its breath, waiting for something—or someone—to p the silence.

orgiana Nicholas wasn’t sure if he liked it.

or his At the bottom of the stairs, Wheelock stopped him with a hand to his “Wait for me outside, sir,” he whispered. “I will be there in under a mi wanted

Nicholas wanted to argue that they had no time to lose, but Wheelock dashed off before he could form words, and Nicholas wasn’t about to r waking the house by calling after him. Instead he made his way outside ndle. pausing on the front steps to finally pull on his boots. A moment later t the old butler reappeared, his own shoes in hand.

“I am coming with you,” Wheelock said.

“You are?” Nicholas hadn’t expected this.
Wheelock drew back, deeply affronted. “Sir.”
“Can you ride?” Nicholas asked.
“Of course I can.”
Nicholas gave him an approving nod. “Then let’s go.”

About ten minutes later they approached the old farmhouse, and Nicholas saw a light—presumably from a lantern—glowing from around the side. “This way, I think,” he said to Wheelock, who, it had to be said, was a surprisingly proficient horseman.

They slowed their mounts, made their way around the corner, and Nicholas saw what looked to be three people near the old stone wall that ringed the property. Georgie and Thamesly were both crouching down, tending to a third person who was lying prone, unidentifiable from a distance.

“Georgiana!” he called in a shouted whisper. She looked up, relief evident in her posture.

“I’ll see to the mounts,” Wheelock said as they hopped down from their saddles.

Nicholas handed him the reins and hurried over.

“Georgiana,” he said again. “What is going on? Are you all—” He looked down. “Bloody hell.”

He pulled her aside. “Is that Freddie Oakes?”

Georgie nodded. “He broke his arm.”

Oakes looked ready to spit. “The little b—”

Thamesly stepped on Oakes’s leg. “What did we say about proper language in the presence of a lady?”

“Well done, Thamesly,” Nicholas murmured.

“He also cut his head,” Georgie said. “I’ve slowed the bleeding, but it doesn’t seem to stop it entirely.” She lifted a bandage she’d been holding against his forehead, near his hairline.

“Bring the light in,” Nicholas said.

Thamesly brought the lantern closer. It was hard to tell with the drier ooze oozing blood, but Oakes appeared to have a not-too-serious laceration on his temple. The rest of his face was fairly well scraped up but not actively bleeding.

“It seems like he’s lost quite a lot of blood,” Georgie said. “It’s been an hour since it happened.”

“It almost certainly looks worse than it is,” Nicholas assured her. “The scalp is heavily vascularized. It always bleeds more than other parts of the body.”

“Thank goodness,” she said.

He looked up. “You are concerned for him?”

“I don’t want him to *die*.”

Nicholas did a quick assessment. He would not be able to make a precise judgment without a full examination, but for now, it looked as if Freddie Oakes was going to be just fine.

“He won’t die,” Nicholas told Georgie. “More’s the pity. Although I took a closer look, waving Thamesly closer with the lantern. “I’m a little confused by the discoloration of his blood.”

“Oh, that’s ink,” Georgie said. “I threw an inkpot at him. You can see it on his shirt, too.”

“Zooks!” Oakes suddenly exclaimed. “Is that you, Rokesby?”

“Indeed,” Nicholas replied, his voice tight. He could not recall if Georgie knew that he and Freddie Oakes had attended Eton at the same time, so he looked over at her and said, “We went to school together.”

“Best mates,” Freddie said with one of his signature grins.

“We were not best mates,” Nicholas said.

But Freddie was having none of that. “Oh, the times we had.”

Nicholas shook his head. “We had no times. None whatsoever.”

“Aw, don’t be a studge.”

“Studge?” Georgie echoed.

Nicholas shrugged. He had no idea what it meant. “Hold still,” he said to Freddie. “I need to look at your arm.”

“Haven’t seen you in a good few years,” Freddie went on. “What’s it been . . . six? Eight?”

Nicholas ignored him.

“Ten?”

“Hold still,” Nicholas bit off. “Do you want me to treat your injuries or not?”

“Ye-es,” Freddie said, drawing the word out into two hesitant syllables. “Although I should probably say I don’t have a rat’s idea what you’re talking about here.”

“I live nearby,” Nicholas said.

Georgie poked her head in. “He’s studying to be a doctor.”

he "Oh!" Oakes's countenance brightened instantly. "Should have said
the He looked back over at Georgie. "We're best mates."

"We are not best mates," Nicholas snapped. He looked over at Geor
"He was kicked out for cheating."

"Asked to leave," Freddie corrected.

Georgie looked at Nicholas. "Isn't that the same thing?"

oper Nicholas shrugged. "Having never been asked to leave an education
lie institution, I wouldn't know."

"It wasn't my fault," Freddie said. "Winchie gave me the wrong ans
. . ." Hethe stupid arse."

tle Nicholas rolled his eyes. God save him from idiots.

"But we *are* mates, right?" Freddie used his uninjured arm to give
æ it on Nicholas a jolly slap on the shoulder. "Come round London some time
take you to the club. Introduce you. I know all the people."

Georgie Nicholas gave him a sharp look. "I don't want to be your mate, and
I don't want to be introduced to any of the people. I will, however, set your ar
) he you shut the hell up." He looked over at Georgie. "My pardon."

She gave him a wide-eyed little shake of her head. If anything, she l
fascinated by the exchange. "No pardon is necessary."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" he asked quietly.

"Later," she said. "After we tend to his injuries."

Nicholas carefully palpated Oakes's injured arm.

"Gah!"

"Sorry," Nicholas said automatically.

lid to "Can I help?" Georgie asked.

"I don't want her touching me," Freddie said.

it "You were going to *marry* me," Georgie said in disbelief.

"Entirely different," Oakes grunted. "You didn't want to hurt me the

"Oh, I've always wanted to hurt you."

Nicholas choked a little at that. "Do you really want to help?" he ask
s or her.

"I do. I really do." Her entire face lit up. "It's like kismet. We were
les. talking about it."

doing "You were talking about my broken arm?" Freddie asked.

"Not *your* broken arm," Georgie said. She gave him a testy look. "F
heaven's sake, Freddie, be reasonable."

"You threw me out of a tree!"

so.” Nicholas glanced over at Georgie, impressed. “You threw him out of the tree?”

Georgie. “I wish.”

“I believe a cat was involved,” Thamesly said, holding the lantern close. “Ah.” Nicholas took another look at Freddie’s face. “That explains the scratches.”

al “Some of them,” Freddie said sullenly. “The rest were from the tree.”

wers, “Did the cat bite you?” Nicholas asked. Ironically, of all Freddie’s injuries, a cat bite could prove the most dangerous.

“No. Damned sharp claws, though.”

“He was scared,” Georgie said.

“He should be shot,” Freddie spat.

“I’ll Thamesly stepped on his leg again.

I don’t “I wouldn’t speak ill of Miss Bridgerton’s cat,” Nicholas recommended. “In fact, I’m going to ask that you not speak at all, unless it is to answer a direct question issued by me.”

m if Freddie’s mouth formed a flat line, but he nodded.

ooked “Good. Now don’t move. I’m going to cut your shirt off you.”

Nicholas had brought a small medical kit home with him from Edinburgh—he never traveled without it—and he’d grabbed it before leaving Craighall. He pulled out a small pair of scissors—hardly ideal for cutting through linen, but they would have to do. He could probably rip the fabric faster once he made the initial cut, but he didn’t want to jostle Oakes’s arm any more than he had to.

“I can do that,” Georgie said.

He looked at her.

“His shirt. I can cut it off. That way you can tend to his face while I’m doing it.”

en.” “Good idea.” Nicholas handed her the scissors.

ked Georgie grinned and got to work.

“It would go faster with proper shears,” Nicholas said.

just “I’ve got it,” she assured him, and indeed she did.

or Nicholas turned his attention back to Oakes’s forehead. The main wound was definitely needed cleaning. He took out the small flask of whiskey he kept in his medical kit and sloshed some on a handkerchief.

“This will—”

“Sting, I know,” Freddie said grimly.

f a Nicholas gave him a vaguely approving nod. It was possibly the most sensible thing he'd said all night.

loser. Freddie flinched while Nicholas cleaned the blood from his face, but was to be expected. Nicholas had never seen someone not flinch when he presented with whiskey on an open wound. At his side, Georgiana was working diligently on the shirt, making tiny cuts with the tiny scissors, moving in a perfectly (and unnecessarily) straight line.

injuries, "Almost done," she said.

Nicholas could hear the smile in her voice.

"I'm not sure this needs stitches," he said to Freddie, peering more closely at the wound, "but you're probably not going to want to show your face to the club anytime soon," he said.

"That bad?" Freddie asked.

ded. "It's more the ink. It doesn't come off as easily as the blood."

or a "He does look diseased," Thamesly said.

"And you're sure the cat didn't bite you, lick you, anything like that?" Nicholas asked.

"Is it dangerous to be licked by a cat?" Georgie inquired.

burgh "Only if it's in an open wound."

ake. He "Thank goodness," she said. "I'd be dead in a week."

en, but Freddie muttered something under his breath. Nicholas could not fully make out the words, but it was enough for him to splash a little extra whiskey into the wound.

"You were saying about the cat?" Nicholas murmured.

Freddie glared up at him. "I am quite sure it did not bite, lick, spit, or scratch."

'm "Done!" Georgie announced, expertly cutting Freddie off as she made her final snip with a flourish. She looked over at Nicholas. "Now what do you do?"

"If you would avert your eyes," Thamesly said. He motioned wanly toward Freddie's now bare chest.

"I can't treat him if I can't see him," Georgie said.

"Mr. Rokesby is here to treat him."

ound "And I am his assistant." She gave Nicholas a rather fierce look. "I am not your assistant, am I not?"

"Absolutely," he said. And he meant it. She was doing a brilliant job. "We'll need something to act as a splint." Nicholas looked up at the two butlers. Thamesly was holding the lantern, so he directed his request to

st Wheelock. “Could you find a stick or something about yea-long?”

t that Wheelock squinted as he took in the measurement Nicholas indicate

still his hands. “Right away, sir.”

 Nicholas turned back to his patient but spoke to Georgiana. “We need

 set the bone before we splint it.”

 “*And how do we do that?*”

 “Move closer to his head,” Nicholas directed. “I need you to hold his

 arm. Firmly. It is vital that you keep him immobile. I’ll pull on the lower

 end of his arm to create traction. That will separate the ends of the bone so

 they can fit them back into the proper alignment.”

e at the She nodded. “I can do it.”

 “Could one of them”—Freddie flicked his head toward the butlers—

 “my shoulder?”

 “*It’s Miss Bridgerton or no one,*” Nicholas said sharply. “Your choice.

 Freddie hesitated a moment too long, so Nicholas said, “*It’s a two-p*

erson job.”

 It wasn’t, strictly speaking, but it was certainly easier with two people

 than one.

 “Fine,” Freddie ground out. “Do your worst.”

 “I should think you’d want our best,” Georgie quipped. She shot Nicholas

 an adorable little smile, and he realized—*She’s enjoying this.*

 No, she was *really* enjoying it.

 He smiled back.

 “Are you ready?” he asked her.

 She nodded.

 He looked down at Freddie. “It’s going to hurt.”

 “*It already does.*”

 “*It’s going to hurt worse. Do you want something to bite down on?*”

 “*Don’t need it,*” Freddie scoffed.

 Nicholas brought his face closer to that of his patient. “*Are you sure*

 “*I . . . think so?*” Freddie was starting to look concerned.

 Nicholas turned back to Georgie. “Are you ready?”

 She nodded eagerly.

 “On the count of three. One, two—”

 Oakes let out a bloodcurdling scream.

 “*We didn’t even do anything yet,*” Nicholas said in disgust.

 “*It hurts.*”

“Stop being such a baby,” Georgie said.

“If I didn’t know better,” Freddie said, “I’d think you were enjoying
Georgie leaned in close, baring her teeth. “Oh, I *am*,” she said. “I am
definitely enjoying this.”

“Bloodthirsty—”

“*Don’t* say it,” Nicholas warned.

“If it makes you feel better,” Georgie said to Freddie, “my enjoyment
is primarily of an academic nature. It has very little to do with you.”

“Speak for yourself, Miss Georgiana,” came the voice of Thamesly.
enjoying Mr. Oakes’s pain and distress immensely.”

Wheelock’s head popped into view. “As am I.”

“The merry band of butlers,” Freddie muttered.

“Quite,” Wheelock said. “In fact, I would go so far to say that I am
merry as I have ever been.”

“Not such a difficult achievement,” Nicholas was compelled to point
“You are not generally known for your merry countenance.”

Wheelock smiled, so broadly that Nicholas nearly flinched from the
of it. “Good God,” he said, “I didn’t know you had so many teeth.”

“All thirty-two, sir,” Wheelock said, tapping against an incisor with
knuckle. “One does not need to attend medical school to understand the
importance of good oral hygiene.”

“Can we get back to it?” Freddie asked, all piss and petulance.

“We haven’t even started,” Nicholas said. “You screamed last time
we could do anything.”

“Fine. I’ll take something to bite down on.”

Everyone paused and looked about.

“I have a stick,” Wheelock said. He held up a medium-sized twig. “I
the liberty of collecting it when I was looking for a splint. Which I also
have.” He held up a medium-thick stick, a few inches shorter than Oak
ulna. Nicholas nodded approvingly. It would be perfect.

Freddie jerked his head to indicate that he wanted the twig. Wheelock
brought it to his mouth pointy-end first.

“Wheelock,” Nicholas scolded.

Wheelock sighed and made a great show of turning the twig the proper
way. Oakes took it between his teeth and grunted for Nicholas to continue.

“Ready, Georgie?”

She nodded.

“One . . . Two . . . *Three.*”

“This.” There was a wrenching groan on the part of Freddie, but Nicholas got the bone into place on the first try. “Excellent,” he said to himself, checking the limb to be sure. “Splint?”

Wheelock handed him the stick.

“Can one of you rip his shirt in two? We’ll use one part for the stick and the other to fashion a sling.”

“I can cut it,” Georgie said.

“I am.” “It’ll be quicker this way,” Nicholas told her. “I would have just torn it before, but I was concerned about jostling the break.”

“Oh. Good. I would hate to think all my work was for nothing. Or worse”—she paused to make a snip in the edge of the fabric to make it to rip—“that you were just giving me something to do for the sake of giving me something to do.”

“Not at all. You were indispensable.”

She beamed, and for a moment Nicholas stopped breathing. It was the sight of night, pitch black save for the lantern and the moon.

And her smile.

When Georgiana Bridgerton smiled like that, he wanted to reach into the sky and grab down the sun, just to hand it to her on a platter.

If only to prove that it did not compare.

“Nicholas?”

What was happening to him?

“Nicholas?”

This was Georgie, whom he’d never thought to marry. Georgie, whom he did think to marry her, had said no.

Georgie, who—

“*Sir!*”

He blinked. Wheelock was glaring at him.

“Miss Bridgerton has called your name at least twice,” the butler said.

“Sorry,” Nicholas mumbled. “I was just . . . thinking . . .” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. What is it?”

“The splint,” Georgie said, holding up a piece of Freddie’s shirt.

“Right. Of course.” Nicholas took it from her and looked down, both surprised and relieved to have something medical upon which to focus.

He wrapped the arm, using the cloth to hold the makeshift stick in place. “You’ll want to see a doctor as soon as possible,” he said to Freddie. “

be able to get you sorted with a proper splint.”

ot the “You don’t think Mr. Oakes will wish to use a branch for the duration
ig the his convalescence?” Georgie teased.

“It would work if it had to,” Nicholas said with half a smile. “But he
more comfortable with something other than needs-must medicine.”

and “Well, I’m impressed,” Georgie said, watching Nicholas as he fashi
sling for Freddie’s arm. “Anyone can set an arm in the comfort of their
home.”

n it “Anyone?” Nicholas murmured.

“Anyone with a little training,” she amended. “It takes talent to do it
dead of night with nothing but a stick and a lantern.”

easier “And whiskey,” Nicholas said, holding up the flask in salute.

giving “I thought that was for his face.”

He took a swig. “And to salute a job well done.”

“In that case . . .” She held out her hand.

he dead “That’s right,” he said. “You’ve never had it.”

“Mr. Rokesby,” Thamesly said with palpable disapproval. “Surely y
not offering spirits to Miss Bridgerton.”

o the Nicholas looked up at the butler. “We’re outside in the dead of night
tending to a man without a shirt, and *that’s* what you object to?”

Thamesly stared at him for a long beat and then snatched the flask ri
of his hand. “As long as I have a drink first,” he muttered. He popped c
back, then handed it to Georgie. “Miss.”

“Thank you, Thamesly,” she said, her eyes darting back and forth be
, when the butler and Nicholas as if to say—*Did that really just happen?*

She took a dainty sip before handing the flask back to Nicholas. “Th
vile.”

“You get used to it.”

“Some for me?” Freddie asked.

d. “No,” everyone said in unison.

his “Buggers,” Freddie said sullenly.

“Language, Mr. Oakes,” Thamesly said.

“Please don’t step on me again,” Freddie moaned.

n eager “Keep your mouth shut and we have a deal.”

Nicholas caught Georgie’s eye, and they both stifled a laugh.

lace. “If I might interrupt,” Wheelock said, “we do need to decide what to
He’ll with him. Much as I’d like to leave him to the wolves, we cannot simp

abandon him.”

“There are wolves?” Freddie asked.

“You’re speaking, Mr. Oakes,” Thamesly warned.

“There aren’t wolves,” Georgie said, somewhat impatiently. “Good heavens.”

“One of us is going to need to see him home,” Nicholas said. “Or at to a coaching inn. I assume he can take care of himself from there.” He turned to Freddie. “It goes without saying that you will never breathe a word of this to anyone.”

“If you do,” Georgie put in, “I’ll tell everyone you were felled by a housecat.”

Freddie looked ready to snarl, but Thamesly nudged him with his toe before he could speak.

“Load him into the cart,” Thamesly said. “I’ll take him to the Frog and Swan.”

“Are you sure?” Georgie asked. “It’s a two-hour drive at least. The London Duck is much closer.”

“Best if he’s out of the area,” Thamesly said. “Plus, he’ll be on the road. It will be easier for him to hire transport to London.”

Georgie nodded. “If you take the cart, though, how will I . . .” She let it drop and went right outover at Nicholas.

“I will see you home,” he said. “Wheelock can ride with us, if it makes more comfortable.”

“It will make *me* more comfortable,” Thamesly said.

“For heaven’s sake, Thamesly,” Georgie said. “Are you worried for my reputation? Because if it’s for me, surely you know that Mr. Roper is as honorable a man as you will ever meet. And if it is for my reputation, my God, what is left to ruin?”

Thamesly regarded her for a long moment, then stepped on Freddie’s foot again.

“Bloody hell! I didn’t say a word!”

“That one,” Thamesly said, “was just for fun.”

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Chapter 11

“A word, Mr. Wheelock?” Georgie placed her hand on the butler’s arm before he could go to help Nicholas and Thamesly load Freddie Oakes the cart.

“Of course, Miss Bridgerton. What is it?”

She gave her head a little tick, motioning to the side. “In private, if you don’t mind.” She didn’t think that Nicholas could hear her, but better to be safe than sorry.

Wheelock nodded his assent, and they moved a few steps away.

“Ehrm . . .” *How to start? What to say?* She settled on: “I have an unusual request.”

Wheelock said nothing, but his brows rose, signaling that she should continue.

Georgie cleared her throat. This was far more difficult than it should have been. Or maybe it was exactly as difficult as it should be. She’d made a mistake this afternoon, and no one had ever said that fixing one’s mistakes was supposed to be easy.

“You might be aware that Mr. Rokesby has asked me to marry him,” she said.

“I was not aware,” Wheelock replied, his face betraying no emotion. “I am not surprised.”

“Right, well . . .” She cleared her throat again, trying to decide how to continue. She couldn’t very well tell Wheelock that she had rejected his proposal. He loved Nicholas like a son. In fact, she’d always suspected that the youngest Rokesby was his favorite of the brood.

“I didn’t give him an answer,” she fibbed. Not the correct answer, at all.

Again, Wheelock’s brows rose. This time, Georgie thought, because she judged her to be either insane or a fool for not having accepted Nicholas’s proposal immediately.

“I should like to have the opportunity to speak with him about it this evening,” she said.

“It cannot wait until morning?”

She shook her head, hoping he would not press for further clarification.

“May I assume that you do not plan to disappoint him?”

“You may,” Georgie said quietly.

Wheelock gave a slow, considering nod. “It would be difficult for you to find the right moment if I accompany you to Aubrey Hall.”

“That was my thought.”

1 “But you don’t want Mr. Thamesly to be aware of the lapse of propriety
onto

“That was also my thought.”

Wheelock’s lips pursed. “I try to live by a certain set of rules and standards, and this, Miss Bridgerton, goes against almost all of them.”

7ou “Only almost?” she said hopefully.

o be “Indeed,” he said, quite clearly against his better judgment. He sighed. “It was overdramatized and obviously for her benefit. I shall devise some
of nonsense once Mr. Thamesly has departed with the cart. You shall have
unusual your moment alone with Mr. Rokesby.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wheelock.”

l He stared down his nose at her. “Do not make me regret my decision
Bridgerton.”

l have “I would never,” Georgie vowed.

a big True to his word, once Thamesly rolled away with a disgruntled Freddie
akes Oakes sitting next to him in the seat of the cart, Wheelock “noticed” that
his mount was favoring his right foreleg.

” she Nicholas looked over from where he was checking his own mount’s
saddle. “Are you certain? She seemed unhampered on the way over.”

, “but I “I thought I—” Wheelock pointed. “There. Did you see that?”

best to but Georgie didn’t see a thing, and she was quite certain Nicholas didn’t
ie but Wheelock gave them no opportunity to contribute further to the
l that conversation. “I will have to walk her back,” he said. “We risk injury,
otherwise. I don’t think she can take my weight.”

t least. “No, of course not,” Nicholas murmured. But he looked slightly con-
: he since the original plan was for all three of them to ride to Aubrey Hall
off Georgie. “I suppose we can all walk to Aubrey Hall, but . . .”

as “We don’t have time,” Wheelock said with a shake of his head. “It’s
already too close to sunrise. The servants will be rising soon.”

“I trust you,” Georgie said to Nicholas. It seemed like the right time chime in. “And honestly, it’s not like we’ve never been alone together. His blue eyes met hers. “Are you sure?”

“Are you going to attack and ravish me?”

“Of course not!”

“Then I’m sure.”

“Jesus, Georgie,” Nicholas said under his breath.

“Don’t *you* scold me for language.” She let out a little huff. “After everything that’s happened tonight, surely I’m entitled.”

“Of this night,” Wheelock pronounced, “we shall never speak.”

“Thank you, Wheelock,” Nicholas said. “Truly.”

“It was my honor, sir. Now if you will excuse me, I must start back. best if I’m at Crake before the household rouses.”

“Move as swiftly as is safe,” Nicholas directed.

“Oh, but Wheelock? Could you give me a leg up before you go?” G ne sort asked.

Nicholas gave her a look. “I can help you.”

“We’ve only the one horse,” she explained. “I assume you’ll be in fi Won’t it be easier if you mount first?”

He muttered something she could not quite make out, but he must h agreed with her because he swung himself up onto his horse.

“It must be nice to be so tall,” Georgie grumbled. As if men didn’t a have the advantage in, well, *everything*, they didn’t need blocks just to at his into a saddle.

Or the hands of a helpful butler. Poor Wheelock seemed somewhat chagrined to be performing such a menial task, but as in all things, he l difficulty hoisting her up into the saddle.

“Can he do everything?” Georgie asked with no sarcasm whatsoever.

Nicholas chuckled. “As far as I can tell.”

It was at that moment that Georgie realized just how risqué a positio she’d put herself into. She could not recall the last time she’d ridden as and it was positively scandalous how far she had to hike up her nightsh afflicted be able to spread her legs widely enough.

“Let me just adjust my dressing gown,” she mumbled. It was split ir front, and so she was able to tuck it around her legs. Somewhat.

“Are you comfortable?” Nicholas asked.

“Yes,” she lied.

to .” Because she wasn’t comfortable at all. As she wrapped her arms around his waist, the distance between them disappeared entirely, and when he spoke she *felt* his voice. It pulsed through his body, humming against her skin before it sank into her bones. Her breasts were pressed against his back as she bobbed up and down in the saddle along with the movement of the horse, they began to feel sensitive in a way that was entirely new to her. Her nipples grew hard, like they did in the cold, but the similarity ended there. Instead of discomfort, she felt a tingling sensation, one that shot through her like sparks, stealing her breath.

Stealing her sanity.

It’s Was this arousal? She’d seen the looks her brother and Violet shared when they thought no one was looking. Whatever it was that passed between them, it was different from love. It was flirty, and it was hot, and Georgie had quite understood it.

Georgie Now she, too, was gripped by something unfamiliar. And strange, because this was Nicholas, and even though she had decided to accept his marriage proposal, she hadn’t thought she’d feel this urge to hold him closer, this need to feel his body pressed hard against hers.

front. She felt hungry. At her center, at that part of her body she was not supposed to talk about.

Not hungry. Ravenous.

Already Dear God.

get “Are you all right?” Nicholas asked, sending a brief glance at her over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she somehow managed to say. “Of course. Why?”

and no “You made a noise.”

r. Thank *God* they were on horseback, with sound muffled by the wind and the beating of the hooves. Because she had an awful suspicion that when the horse had shifted from a trot to a canter, she’d actually moaned.

in “Just a yawn,” she improvised. But she was glad for his question. As she walked in a steady stride, her embarrassment. She’d needed something to snap her out of her sultry haze.

“It’s not much farther,” Nicholas said.

the She nodded against him, enjoying the warmth and the closeness, his masculine scent, and the slightly scratchy wool of his coat.

Nicholas had been magnificent this evening. There was something thrilling about a man who was capable, who could do things and fix things. She

and he'd been mesmerized by his hands, by his flat, square nails, and the quiet confidence of his movements.

She could be happy with him. She was sure of it. Maybe it wouldn't be the great love story she'd seen her brother and sister find, but she would be happy. More than happy, even.

Her brother asked, "What lay between happiness and love?"

She replied, "If all went well, she'd marry this man and find out."

They reached the edge of Aubrey Hall's south lawn, and Nicholas brought the horse to a stop, keeping them veiled in a small copse of trees. "We shouldn't ride any closer," he said. "It will make too much noise." He dismounted, then reached up to help her down, his large hands spanning her hips.

Her feet touched the ground, and he let go, exactly as he should.

But she wished he hadn't.

She liked being near him. She liked his quiet strength, his sense of purpose. And when his hands had been on her hips, even just to help her get down from the saddle, she'd liked the way it had made her feel like she was his.

"How do you propose to enter the house?" he asked, demonstrating that his mind wasn't on such fanciful thoughts. In fact, he looked terribly stiff and formal, clasping his hands in front of him in that way gentlemen were supposed to do whenever they stood still.

Georgie felt a stab of disappointment. It served her right, though, she supposed, for having said no when he'd asked her to marry him.

"Thamesly and I left one of the doors ajar," she answered. "In the sitting salon. It's far from the servants' quarters."

He nodded. "I will walk you to the house. It's still dark enough. No one will be about."

"It's not necessary. I can always say I went for a walk."

He looked down at her. "Dressed like that?"

"I've done stranger things." She shrugged, but she couldn't stop her hands from tugging the collar of her dressing gown closer together.

He let out the tiniest of sighs. "Indulge me my gentlemanly tendencies and pray allow me to see you to the door."

For some reason this made her smile. "You'll be able to see me from almost the entire way."

He did not look happy, but he did not argue.

She swallowed. It was now or never. “Before I go, I wanted to ask you . . .”

be the His eyes met hers.

e “Is it . . .”

This was so *hard*. And it was her own fault that it was.

“I was wondering,” she began again, not quite looking at him, “if . . .”

He shifted his posture, clasping his hands behind his back. “What is brought Georgie?”

She looked up, because this was the sort of thing that deserved some more genuine than her gaze on the ground.

ig her *He* deserved more.

“I would like to reconsider your offer of marriage,” she finally said.

And then he said—

“Why?”

What the devil?

er “Why?” she echoed. She had not thought he would question her. He e was say yes, or he would say no, and she would carry on from there.

that his “Why,” he repeated. “You were quite firm this afternoon.” He frowned that *his* “Yesterday afternoon, I suppose it is now.”

and “You surprised me,” she said. It was certainly the truth, and surely it taught best to be honest. “I should have taken the time to think before answer e but everyone has been so pitying and it has been awful, and all I could was that you felt sorry for me, and wasn’t that a terrible reason to ask someone to marry you, and I didn’t want you to regret it.”

lver But then she realized this wasn’t quite what had happened. She took one breath and said, “No, that’s not true. I wasn’t thinking about you. I was thinking about myself, which isn’t as selfish as it sounds, or at least I h not, but it’s a horrible thing to be pitied. It’s just horrible. And I couldn’t past that.”

self Her words came out like a flood, but his expression remained even. emotionless, not unkind, just . . . even.

She wasn’t sure if this scared her.

ies and “What changed your mind?” he asked.

1 here. Finally, an easy question. “I got home and realized I was being an idiot. One side of his mouth hitched up. Almost a smile. That had to count something.

But he did not speak, which meant she had to, and now that she’d m

to say the important part she wasn't sure she had anything left.

"I think . . . I think . . ."

I think I can make you happy. I know I will try.

I think if I go with you to Edinburgh I might find that I'm not the person I always thought I was.

." *Maybe I'm someone better.*

it, "Georgie?"

"I will be a good wife to you," she said.

ething "That was never in any doubt."

"I was going to come see you tomorrow." She looked up at the sky and she knew how to tell time by the stars. Stars that weren't even out. The clouds still hung heavy, but it didn't feel like rain. "Today, I suppose. I have no idea what time it is."

"I was planning to leave for Edinburgh."

"I was planning to come very early."

would "Were you?"

ned. She nodded. There was something teasing in his voice, and it left her with a feeling she could only describe as fizzy.

t was "I was. But then all this happened"—she waved her arm behind her, assuming he'd correctly interpret that to mean Freddie Oakes and his being, arm—"and then I saw you . . ."

think This seemed to amuse him. "You saw me?"

"Tending to Freddie's arm."

"Technically," he said, "I saw *you* tending to Freddie's arm."

a deep "You're making this very difficult," she muttered.

s He crossed his arms, not in an angry way; rather, there was something almost sarcastic to it, as if the very motion said—*What did you expect?*

it see "You were practicing medicine," she said. It seemed far too formal a phrase for the moment, but she didn't know what else to say. And so she

Not continued in her apparent quest to have the most awkward conversation of her life. "There was something very attractive about it," she mumbled.

"About practicing medicine?" he asked, and she couldn't quite tell if he was dubious or amused.

liot." "You knew what you were doing," she said with a helpless shrug.

t for "You like a man who knows what he's doing?"

"Apparently I do."

anaged His eyes settled on hers, and she could not look away. She didn't want

look away.

“Well, then, Miss Bridgerton,” he said. “I suppose I will ask you again.
Her breath caught. It wasn’t a surprise. She’d known he would renew
son I offer; he was too honorable a man to refuse her. But she had not anticipated
just how anxious she would feel, regardless.

He took her hand. He had not done that the first time around.

“Georgiana Bridgerton,” he said, “will you marry me?”

She nodded solemnly. “I would be honored.”

And then . . . nothing.

as if They just stood there.

“Right. Well,” Nicholas said.

I have Georgie swallowed. “That settles it.”

“Indeed.”

She rocked on her feet, wondering how on earth she felt more awkward
now than she had when she was actually asking him to marry her.

Or rather, when she was asking him to ask her to marry him. Which
r with quite possibly worse.

Finally, he broke the silence. “It’s almost dawn,” he said.

She looked to the east. There was no pink or orange to be found, but
broken edge of the horizon, the sky was a lighter shade of blue.

“I should go,” she said, without actually making a move to do so.

“Right.” He brought her hand to his lips. “You should know that I am
wealthy man. My family is, but I, myself, am not.”

“I don’t care.” It was the truth. And while Nicholas might not be wealthy
in the manner of an earl or a viscount, he would certainly never be poor
ng his wife, she would want for nothing important.

“I will work for a living,” he continued. “Some might call me a citizen.”

a “No one whose opinion matters to me.”

he He held her gaze for a few more seconds, then murmured, “It is almost
n of morning.”

“You should kiss me,” she blurted out.

f he His grip tightened on her hand.

“Isn’t that what people do?” she asked, trying to cover her embarrassment.

He, too, looked a little uncomfortable, which made her feel better. “
suppose it is,” he said.

“I’ve never kissed anyone,” she whispered. “Freddie tried, but . . .”

int to He shook his head. “It wouldn’t have counted, even if he succeeded.

ain.”
w his
pated

“No, I suppose not.” She swallowed nervously, waiting.
Waiting.
Why was he just looking at her like that? Why didn’t he kiss her?
Maybe this was up to her. He had been brave when he asked her to r
him. Now it was her turn.
She rose onto her tiptoes, leaned forward, and touched her lips to his
lingered there a little longer than she thought she was supposed to, and
set herself back down.
Well. That was that.
Her first kiss.
All in all, it wasn’t very exciting.
She looked up at him. He was gazing down at her in a manner that v
utterly inscrutable.

ard
was

She cleared her throat. “I don’t suppose that was your first kiss too?”
He shook his head. “No. But my kisses have not been legion.”
She stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Your kiss
not been legion? What on earth does that mean?”
“It means that I have not had many of them,” he ground out.

at the

And she realized—*he was embarrassed*.
Maybe. She wasn’t sure.
But it made sense if he was. Theirs was a stupid society, she was coi
m not a realize. Men were supposed to have experience before they married an
women were meant to be pure as snow.

althy
r. As

Georgie had accepted this as the way things were, but after all that h
happened in the last few weeks, she was fed up with the whole thing. I
the same hypocrisy that led the *ton* to celebrate Freddie Oakes while sl
deemed soiled.

ost

Very well, maybe they had not *celebrated* him, but his reputation ha
taken no hit.
“I’m sorry,” she told him. “That was terribly rude of me. It was you
wording that was amusing, not the sentiment behind it. Although, I mu
confess . . .”

sment.

“Yes?” he prompted.

I

Her cheeks were burning, but still she admitted, “I’m *glad* you have
kissed many women.”
He started to smile. “Are you?”

.”

She nodded. “You won’t be much better at it than I am.”

“We could try it again,” he suggested.

“Now?”

“No time like the present.”

narry “I’m not sure if that’s strictly true,” she replied. “At present we are l
s. She behind a tree in the shadows of my home, and it’s, I don’t know, perha
l then in the morning. We’ve just treated the broken arm of my sworn enemy
necessitated my literally cutting the shirt from a man’s body, and—”

“Georgie?” he interrupted. “Shut up.”

She looked at him, blinking like mad.

“Let’s try it again, shall we?”

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“We could try it again,” he suggested.

“Now?”

“No time like the present.”

“I’m not sure if that’s strictly true,” she replied. “At present we are hiding behind a tree in the shadows of my home, and it’s, I don’t know, perhaps five in the morning. We’ve just treated the broken arm of my sworn enemy, which necessitated my literally cutting the shirt from a man’s body, and—”

“Georgie?” he interrupted. “Shut up.”

She looked at him, blinking like mad.

“Let’s try it again, shall we?”

Chapter 12

Once the engagement was announced, it was remarkable how quickly it moved forward.

Nicholas was impressed. Or rather, he would have been impressed if he had not been so frustrated. And overwhelmed.

But mostly frustrated.

That kiss . . . the one he'd been so suave in suggesting when he'd murmured *Let's try it again, shall we . . . ?*

Disaster.

He'd leaned down to kiss Georgie, and honestly he didn't know what happened—maybe she'd jumped?—because his forehead knocked her with enough force to make him lurch back in surprise.

He wouldn't say he saw stars. That seemed far too grand a description for the jolt of pain that shot through his skull. Stars were a good thing, and he was . . . not.

He'd tried again, of course. He'd just spent the better part of twenty minutes in a rather uncomfortable state of arousal. *And* she had made it clear she wanted to be kissed. *And* he was going to marry her.

So yes. He was going to attempt another kiss. Frankly, he thought he was rather restrained considering he'd ridden from the farmhouse to Aubrey Hall with his future wife's bare legs wrapped around his thighs. She'd tried to preserve her modesty with her dressing gown, but that had lasted no more than thirty seconds.

Even when he kept his eyes forward (which he did, some of the time) he still got a glimpse of the moonlight rippling across her pale skin, there was still the matter of her breasts, which had been pressed up against his back, and her hands, which had been pressed up against his belly.

Everything. Her everything had been pressed up against his everything, and by the time they reached Aubrey Hall he was hard as a bloody rock.

which was no way to ride a horse.

Or dismount from a horse.

Or help a lady dismount from a horse. When he'd placed his hands on Georgie's hips it had been all he could do not to slide them down the length of her.

Instead he'd let go as if she'd caught on fire. Metaphorically speaking wasn't that far from the truth.

He'd clasped his hands in front of himself because *Good God*, what was he supposed to do? He couldn't just stand there with his cock trying to bust out of his breeches.

But their first kiss had been uninspiring. And their second downright painful.

He'd pondered a third, but then the horse sneezed. On Georgie.

That was the end of it. The sun was close to rising, his ardor was cooling, and frankly, there were plans to be made.

He needed to go home, inform his parents that Georgie had accepted his proposal, and see to putting that special license to use. They'd be married in a day, maybe two, and he could be on his way back to Scotland. He was precisely sure how he and Georgie would manage once they reached Edinburgh—he was quite certain he could not bring her to live with him in his rented boardinghouse rooms. His father had said something about renting a house in New Town, but surely such arrangements took time. Georgie might want to wait in Kent until they could secure a lease.

But this was not the time to make such a decision. He could bring it up later, when she wasn't in her dressing gown and he didn't still have a handkerchief in his pocket stained with whiskey and Freddie Oakes's blood.

They said their farewells—perhaps a little more stiffly than was warranted—and Nicholas remounted his horse.

“Wait!” Georgie called.

He turned his mount. “What is it?”

“How shall we tell them? Our families?”

“However you like.” Honestly, he had not thought about it.

“Yours already knows, I imagine.”

“Just my parents. And obviously they do not yet know you have accepted my proposal.”

She nodded, slowly, the way he'd come to realize she did when she was thinking something through. “Will you come with me?” she asked. “Will you tell them?”

“If that is what you wish.”

“I do. They will have so many questions. I think it will be easier for you are there to share the burden.”

“The very definition of marriage,” he murmured.

She smiled at that.

“Shall I call upon you later this morning?”

“That would be most welcome.”

And that was that. There was nothing romantic about the moment, not to make his breath catch or heart leap or any of that nonsense.

Until she smiled.

His breath caught.

His heart leapt.

And he felt *all* the nonsense.

Soled,

Georgie was eating breakfast when Nicholas arrived. It was as they’d planned; she wanted to make sure that her parents were both available when he arrived, and as the Bridgerton family tended to keep to a regular morning schedule, it seemed the best time for him to find them all in attendance.

She had not anticipated, however, that he would arrive with his own parents in tow.

“You’re all here,” she said with faint surprise when he leaned down to greet her.

“Surely you did not think I would come on my own.” He quirked a little the expression oddly devilish on so serious a person. “If I am to share your familial burden, you must share mine.”

“Fair enough.”

He sat beside her. “Also, I couldn’t stop them.”

This made her grin, but for some foolish reason she hid this behind a sip of her tea.

The Rokesbys were regular visitors to Aubrey Hall, but it was somewhat unusual for them to make a call so early, and indeed Lady Bridgerton showed an expression of surprise as she rose to greet them. “Helen!” she exclaimed as she went to her friend’s side. “This is unexpected. What brings you to Aubrey Hall this morning?”

“Ah, well, you know . . .” Lady Manston mumbled a string of nothing. Georgie was impressed. She knew Nicholas’s mother quite well; she had been bursting with the news.

“Is something amiss?” Lady Bridgerton asked.

me if “Not at all.” This, however, was said with enough vigor and emphasis to cause the whole room to look her way.

“Mother,” Nicholas said under his breath. He leaned out of his chair and took hold of her arm, gently tugging her away from Lady Bridgerton. He looked over at Georgie. “Where is Edmund?”

“He and Violet already left with the boys.”

othing “Probably a good thing,” he replied. “It’s going to be chaos enough at the moment.”

Lady Bridgerton looked from person to person. “Why do I feel as if I’m missing a secret and everyone knows it but me?”

“I don’t know it,” Lord Bridgerton said genially, getting back to his breakfast. “If it makes you feel better.” He motioned for Lord Manston to take a seat beside him. “Coffee?”

“Or champagne,” Lord Manston murmured.

when Nicholas’s head whipped around. “*Father.*”

orning Georgie bit her tongue to keep from laughing at his frustration.

! “You’re not helping,” he warned her.

Georgie decided there was nothing to do but make her announcement.

“Mama, Papa, I have something important to tell you.”

to Nicholas cleared his throat.

“That is to say, we have something important to tell you.”

orrow, Georgie had not intended to draw out the moment. But there was something fascinating and delightful in watching the parents react—Lady Manston’s giddy smile, Lord Manston’s smug happiness. Her own eyes widened as she realized what was happening. Her father, of course, remained clueless until Georgie announced, “Nicholas and I have decided to get married.”

a sip of “Oh, that’s *wonderful!*” Lady Bridgerton exclaimed, and Georgie decided to think it was an exaggeration to say that her mother leapt across the room to give her a hug.

ed as “This is the *best* news,” Lady Bridgerton continued. “Oh, the very best news. I could not have hoped for better. I don’t know *why* I didn’t think of it, except that Nicholas was not here, and it never occurred to me—”

igs. “It does not matter how it came about,” Georgie interrupted gently, “but I know that it is happening.”

ad to “Yes, of course,” her mother said. She looked over at her husband. “

need a special license.”

is to “Done!” Lord Manston called out, and Georgie could not keep her n from falling open when he whipped the document out of his pocket.

and “I have it right here,” he said. “We could get them married this after
He Georgie tried to intercede. “I don’t think—”

“Should we?” her mother said. “I mean, yes, of course, there is ever reason to get it done and quickly, but would such haste be unseemly—

in a “Who will know if it’s unseemly or not?” Lady Manston put in. “No
there knows when he asked her, and it’s not as if anyone will think it’s not in response to the scandal.”

“That’s true,” Lady Bridgerton mused. “It really is more of a we-mu make-the-best-of-it situation.”

to “I’m delighted,” Lord Bridgerton said to no one in particular. “Just delighted.”

Lord Manston leaned over and said something in his ear. Georgie w lip reader, but she was fairly certain it was: “This was my idea.”

Nicholas turned to Georgie. “Do you think anyone will notice if we leave?”

it. She shook her head. “Not even a little bit.”

“We must make plans,” Lady Bridgerton announced.

“No time for a grand wedding,” Lord Bridgerton reminded her.

“I’m not talking about the wedding,” she replied. “I’m talking about Where will they live?”

ady “Edinburgh, Mama,” Georgie said, even though the question, while
ther’s her, had not been directed *toward* her. “Nicholas must return to school

se, “Yes of course, but . . .” Lady Bridgerton let her words trail off, and
ded to made a little motion with her hands that seemed to indicate that she ex everyone to understand what that meant.

d not “But nothing, Mama. I will go with him to Scotland.”

m to “Darling,” her mother said, “you don’t want to go to Edinburgh righ away.”

est. I Georgie kept her expression scrupulously even and matter-of-fact. “
except do.”

“Don’t be silly. Nothing will be ready.”

“just “I don’t mind.”

“That’s only because you don’t know.”

‘We’ll Georgie tried not to grit her teeth. “Then I’ll learn.”

Lady Bridgerton turned to Lady Manston as if to say, *Help me here.*
mouth Lady Manston smiled brightly. “Lord Manston wishes to lease a house
you in New Town.”

noon.” “New Town?” Georgie echoed. She didn’t know much about Edinburgh
she realized. Nothing, really.

y “It’s the new part of town,” Nicholas said.

” “Oh, that’s helpful,” she muttered.

one He shrugged. “It’s true.”

some She scowled. “Really?”

ist- “Some of Andrew’s friends are involved in the planning,” Lord Manston
said. “It’s all very progressive, I’m told.”

Nicholas’s older brother Andrew was an architect by training, if not
degree. Georgie had always enjoyed talking with him about architectural
engineering, and if he said New Town was the place to lease a house, she
as no sure he was correct.

This did nothing to mitigate the fact, however, that if one more person
to tell her what she wanted, she was going to scream.

“Georgiana,” Lady Manston said, “it will be very rough in Edinburgh.”

“Rough?” Georgie echoed. What the devil did that mean?

Nicholas leaned forward, frowning at his mother. “What are you talking
about? It’s a perfectly civilized city.”

after. “No, no,” Lady Manston replied, “that’s not what I meant. I’m sure
be a lovely place to live. Eventually.” She turned to Georgie. “You must
about understand—even once a suitable house is found, there will be much to
.” Furniture to purchase, servants to hire.”

she “I can do all that,” Georgie said.

pected “Georgie,” her mother said, “I’m not sure you understand—”

“I can do all that,” Georgie ground out.

it “Only if you want to,” Nicholas said. He was trying to be helpful, she
sure, but what she really needed was for him to put an end to all of this
interference and insist that they travel north as a couple.

But I “I am not going to remain in Kent after I marry,” Georgie said firmly.

“It *would* send an odd message,” her mother acquiesced.

“I don’t care about the message,” Georgie said. “I care about myself
Nicholas,” she added hastily.

He nodded graciously.

“If I am marrying him, then I am marrying him. Boardinghouse and

Nicholas cleared his throat. "Actually," he said, "I'm not certain if ladies are permitted in Mrs. McGreevey's establishment."

"Even married ladies?" his mother asked.

"I honestly don't know. I never had cause to ask. But the current tenants are all male." He turned to Georgie. "I do want you to come with me to Edinburgh, but I'm not sure you will be comfortable in such an environment."

"We won't know unless we try," she muttered.

"They can have Scotsby," Lord Bridgerton suddenly said.

All eyes turned in his direction.

"Scotsby," he said again. "I'm sure I've told you about it. It's a small hunting lodge. Haven't been there in ages, but it's not too far from Edinburgh. I don't see why they can't stay there. Nicholas can travel if he needs to."

"That is most generous of you, sir," Nicholas said, "but how far is it to Edinburgh, if I might ask?"

Lord Bridgerton frowned. "I don't recall precisely, but it can't be more than two hours."

"Two . . . *hours*?"

"By coach," Lord Bridgerton clarified. "Half that on horseback, I would think."

"Papa, that won't work," Georgie said, leaping in before Nicholas could protest. "Nicholas is very busy. He can't possibly be expected to travel an hour each way just to get to school."

"You have to go every day, then?" Lord Bridgerton asked.

"Most every day, sir," Nicholas said politely.

"I beg your pardon," Lord Bridgerton said. "I'd assumed it was most tutors and that sort of thing." He looked up at the room at large. "That will work then."

"But Georgiana can stay at Scotsby," Lady Bridgerton said.

Georgie's head snapped up. "By myself?"

"You won't be by yourself," her mother assured her. "We're not going to let you go to Scotland without staff."

"I meant without Nicholas," she said.

"It's only temporary, dear," Lady Bridgerton said with a gentle smile.

"Until Lord Manston can see to the house in New Town."

"We can find our own lodgings," Nicholas said firmly.

adies “When?” Lord Manston said. “You’re always telling me how busy y
are.”

“Not too busy to find a place for my wife to live.”

ants “Nicholas, dear,” his mother said. “Please accept our help.”

o “I am happy to accept your help,” he said. “Just not your control.”

Silence.

“What Nicholas *means* to say,” Georgiana jumped in, “is that we w
prefer to make our own decisions.”

Silence.

ll “What *Georgie* means to say,” Nicholas began, but his tone was suc
Georgie thought it best not to let him finish. She gave him a sharp elbc
fixed an accommodating smile on her face.

1 when “Scotsby will make a fine temporary home until we figure out a mor
term solution,” she said. She turned to Nicholas. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

from He looked unconvinced. “It depends on the definition of temporary.”

“Obviously,” she muttered.

ore “Regardless,” Lady Bridgerton said, after watching this exchange w
interest, “you will need some help, at least at the outset. I insist that yo
Mrs. Hibbert.”

ould Georgie looked at her mother. “Mrs. Who?”

“Mrs. Hibbert. She is Mrs. Brownley’s sister.”

ould “Mrs. Brownley?” Nicholas echoed.

l an “Our housekeeper,” Georgie explained. She turned back to her moth
was not aware she had a sister.”

“She is new to the area,” Lady Bridgerton said. “Recently widowed.
she has experience and is looking for a position.”

tly “Well, then,” Georgie said. She couldn’t *not* agree. Not if Mrs. Brov
won’t sister needed work.

“And we shall provide a butler,” Lady Manston said.

Georgie blinked. “I’m not sure we need—”

ng to “Of course you do,” Lady Manston said. “And besides, it’s Wheeloc
nephew. You can’t say no to Wheelock’s nephew.”

“Richard?” Nicholas asked.

“Yes. Wheelock has been training him for several months.”

e. “But what if he doesn’t want to move?” Georgie asked.

“Head butler positions don’t open every day,” Lady Manston said. “
sure he will want to snatch this up. And besides, Wheelock is originall

you the north. But by all means, you can ask Richard yourself.”

“Marian will accompany you, of course,” Georgie’s mother put in, “don’t feel right sending *only* Marian. I believe Mrs. Hibbert has two daughters. They shall go, too.”

“You can’t separate a family,” Lady Manston said.

“Certainly not.”

ould Georgie cleared her throat. “This seems a rather large retinue for a s and his wife.”

h that her husband. “You can see to the carriage. Whatever is best for cold w and weather.”

“We’ll have to send them with two,” Lord Manston said. “They’ll n e long-everything in one.”

?” “We don’t need two carriages,” Georgie protested.

” “Of course not.” He looked at her as if she were *very* silly. “One wil to Kent.”

ith “Of course,” Georgie murmured, wondering why she felt so chastise

u take “But you’ll need two drivers,” Lord Manston continued, “and at leas spare in case one of them takes ill.”

“And outriders,” Lord Bridgerton said. “The roads are dangerous th days. You cannot be too careful.”

ier. “I “I’m afraid nothing can be done about a cook,” Lady Bridgerton sai “You’ll have to hire one in Scotland.”

“We’ll manage,” Georgie said weakly. “I’m sure.”

. But “The daughters of your housekeeper’s sister,” Nicholas’s mother sai Georgie’s mother. “Can any of them cook?”

vnley’s Georgie turned to Nicholas. “Didn’t you say you took the mail coacl down?”

“Most of the way, why?”

“It’s starting to sound very appealing.”

rk’s He made a crooked grin. “That’s because you’ve never ridden in a n coach.”

“We could take one and elope?” she said hopefully.

“NO!” roared her mother.

And his mother.

I’m Georgie startled. She’d thought she’d been speaking under her breat y from “Banish the thought,” Lady Bridgerton said.

“I was joking, Mama.” Georgie turned to the rest of the table, rolling
‘but I eyes. “I was joking.”

No one seemed to be amused. Except for Nicholas, who said, “I thought
was funny.”

“It’s a good thing I’m marrying *you*, then,” she muttered.

“Tomorrow,” he said suddenly.

student “I beg your pardon?”

“Tomorrow.” He paused, somewhat dramatically. “We will marry
ied to tomorrow. And leave immediately thereafter.”

This was met with immediate resistance, the loudest of which came
his father who said, “Don’t be daft, son. You can’t pack a household that
ever fit quickly.”

Nicholas shrugged. “Then the next day. Either way, I’m leaving. I’m
back. I’d rather not leave Georgie to travel north on her own . . .”

I return “She can’t do *that*,” his mother said.

He smiled. “Then we are agreed.”

ed. And somehow, they were. The parents who had just been arguing that
st one couldn’t possibly send them off to Scotland in under a week seemed to
no problem with two days’ time when the only other alternative was or

ase Georgie stared at him in wonder. He was *good*. She couldn’t even
begrudge his smirk. He deserved that smirk.

d. Two days. She would be married in two days.

Or to be more precise, she would be married and off to a new country
d to where she knew absolutely no one except her soon-to-be-husband. She
find a new home, set up a household, make new friends, learn new cus

She *should* be nervous.

h She should be terrified.

But she wasn’t.

And as everyone talked around her, the parents making plans and Ni
taking notes, she realized she was smiling. Grinning, even.

nail This was going to be grand.

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icholas

Chapter 13

It wasn't going to be grand.

The wedding was lovely. The wedding breakfast delightful.

But the journey north . . .

No one was going to come out of it alive unless something was done
Cat-Head.

The other two cats were easy. Judyth had curled up in her basket like
proper feline and gone straight to sleep. Blanche had felt the need to
demonstrate her contempt for all humans, so she'd spent a few minutes
fussing and hissing before finally parking herself as deeply in the corner
of the padded coach bench as possible.

But a furious Blanche Georgie knew how to handle. Blanche would
sullen and resentful, but she was easily bribed with a nugget or two of
Cat-Head, on the other hand . . .

Cat-Head moaned.

Cat-Head howled.

Cat-Head made noises Georgie would not have thought possible out
purgatory or hell.

And while Georgie might have been able to withstand such torture
on her own, the traveling party had grown to fifteen, and she wasn't sure how
she could inflict him on the others.

GRAOWWW!

Georgie peered nervously at Nicholas, sitting across from her in the
carriage. He was doing an admirable job of hiding his flinches. Much better
than—

GRAOWWW!

—Marian, Georgie's trusted maid, who seemed to have developed a
bruise on her left cheek.

GRAOWWW!

“Cat-Head, hush,” Georgie said, patting him on the head. She didn’t why she thought that might make a difference. It wasn’t as if she’d me success the first one hundred and sixty-three times she’d said it.

GRAOWWW!

“How long have we been on the road?” Marian asked.

Georgie attempted a cheerful tone. “I’m not carrying a timepiece.”

“I am,” Nicholas said without looking up from his medical journal. ‘ been three hours.”

“That long?” Georgie said weakly.

GRAOWWW!

Marian’s eye began to twitch.

Georgie gave Nicholas a hard stare, the kind where one widened one e about eyes and jutted one’s chin forward. It clearly meant *Do Something*.

He returned with the sort of expression where one widened one’s ey e a instead of a jutted chin one tipped one’s head to the side, as if to say a shrugful *What?*

Georgie jutted her chin.

Nicholas tipped his head.

They both widened their eyes.

“Is something wrong?” Marian asked.

cheese. *GRAOWWW!*

“Besides that,” she muttered.

“Nicholas,” Georgie said pointedly, “perhaps Marian would like a si your whiskey.”

side He blinked, then gave Georgie an expression she was fairly certain r —*How was I to glean that from your buggy eyes and jutting chin?*

in her “Er, Miss—”

long *GRAOWWW!*

“Miss Georgiana,” Marian croaked. “I don’t know how much longer —”

“Whiskey?” Nicholas asked, thrusting a flask in her face.

etter Marian nodded gratefully and took a swig.

GRAOWWW!

“Georgie,” Nicholas said, “is there anything to be done?”

tic in He probably deserved her admiration for lasting this long before say anything, but three hours of constant cat-moaning had left her nerves v frayed. “If there were,” she said peevishly, “don’t you think I would ha

“I know done it by now?”

“It’s t with GRAOWWW!

Marian drained the flask.

“Will it continue like this the entire trip to Edinburgh?” Nicholas asked.

“God help us,” Marian muttered.

“I don’t know,” Georgie admitted, finally pulling her eyes off her mother whom she’d never seen drink more than a quarter-glass of sherry. “I’ve taken him in a carriage before. The other two are managing well enough.”

“Are you sure about that?” Nicholas asked. “That one looks like it’s plotting your death.”

Georgie peered down at Blanche. She’d been quiet for most of the trip. Georgie had thought she’d resigned herself to the situation, but at some point during the past few hours the sun had shifted far enough to shed light on her position in the corner of the coach bench. Thus illuminated, it was now clear that Blanche’s repose was really the stiffened *I-cannot-BELIEVE-you’re-doing-this-to-me* stare of utter betrayal.

Georgie silently handed Blanche a piece of cheese.

GRAOWWW!

“Maybe that one would like some cheese, too,” Nicholas suggested.

Georgie shrugged. At this point she was willing to try anything. “Cat-Head?” she said sweetly, holding the creamy nugget in her hand. Cat-Head scarfed up the treasure, and they all breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn’t particularly quiet eater; there was plenty of tongue-smacking and whistling and snuffling, but it was better than—

neant GRAOWWW!

“Can you give it more cheese?” Marian begged.

“I might have more whiskey,” Nicholas said.

“We’re not giving whiskey to my cat,” Georgie said.

r I can Nicholas and Marian exchanged a glance.

“We’re not!”

No one rushed to agree.

“It can’t be that much farther to London,” Georgie said, with some desperation.

Nicholas peered out at the road. “An hour? Maybe ninety minutes.”

ing vell — “That’s all?” Georgie said with forced brightness. “That’s nothing. V

ave GRAOWWW!

“Can you put it in a basket?” Marian asked.

Georgie looked down at Judyth, all fluffy and silver gray, still delightfully quiet in her wicker home. “I’ve only got the one basket.”

“How is that possible?” Nicholas asked.

Georgie thought about that for a moment. “I don’t know. We had three baskets starting out. The other two baskets must have ended up in the other car. Or perhaps up top.”

“Up top, you say?”

Georgie felt her expression turn glacial. “We are not putting Cat-Head on the roof.”

Marian turned to Nicholas with a shake of her head. “We’d still hear the point of view.”

Georgie honestly could not tell if he was being serious.

“Well, if you’ve only got the one basket,” he said, “take the other car.”

“But she’s being so good,” Georgie said, gesturing down. “She hasn’t even made a peep.”

“Perhaps she’s dead,” Nicholas said.

“Nicholas!”

He shrugged. “It would free up the basket.”

Georgie fixed him with an icy stare. “I am not going to dignify that with a response.”

He shrugged again.

“And there’s no guarantee that Cat-Head wouldn’t howl if he was in the basket.”

Nicholas held up a finger. “Response.”

Georgie muttered something under her breath that would not have been considered appropriate for a lady of her station.

GRAOWWW!

“We’re nearly to London,” Georgie said, almost desperately. She was stroking the cat now with renewed firmness, moving to its cheeks, scratching them with just enough pressure that maybe he wouldn’t be able to actually open his jaw . . .

But he tried.

Grrrrrrrrrr.

“That was better, don’t you think?” Georgie said.

Grrrrrrrrrr.

“It sounds like it might combust,” Nicholas remarked.

Grrrrrrrrrr.

ntfully “It can’t be healthy for it to hold it all in like that,” Marian worried. Georgie looked at her. “You want me to let go?”
“No!”

ree Georgie nodded and kept up with the cheek and chin scratching. “Th
riage. you go, Cat-Head. It’s not so bad.”

ad on Cat-Head did not seem to appreciate her efforts. *GRRRrrrrrr*, he mar and Georgie found she had to exert more pressure to keep his yawls tra
in his mouth.

“Good kitty,” she murmured. “Good, good little kitty.”

“Very bad kitty,” Nicholas said. “The worst, really.”

Georgie glared. “Good kitty,” she practically growled. But Cat-Head
little jaw was straining.

it out.” *GRRRRRrrr . . .*

l’t Marian’s brow knit with concern. “That sounds unsafe.”

“No, I’m sure he—”

GRAAAAAAOOOOOOOOWWW!

Cat-Head let out a shriek of such unholy proportions that Georgie’s
popped right off his head. The noise rent the air, and the cat, clearly bu
with a with the need to let it all out, thrust its legs and head out like a stiff, fu
orange pentagon, howling at the injustice of the world until . . .

He stopped.

the The three human occupants of the carriage held their collective brea
“Is it dead?” Nicholas finally asked.

een Georgie looked at him in horror. “Why do you keep assuming my ca
dead?”

“But is it?”

as “I think he fainted,” she said, peering down with concern. The cat w
sprawled on its back, belly up, one paw thrown dramatically over its fa
atching Gingerly, Georgie put her hand against his chest. “He’s still breathing,
ally said.

Marian let out a sigh. Though *not*, Georgie thought, one of relief.

“Whatever you do,” Nicholas said in a low voice, “do not move. If y
wake that thing up—”

“It’s a cat, Nicholas.”

“If you wake that *cat* up,” he amended, with no discernable remorse
misery will know no bounds.”

Marian peered out the window. "Are we slowing down?"

Georgie frowned and leaned forward to look.

"Don't move!" Nicholas and Marian hissed.

"Are we here?" Georgie asked, making a great show of remaining in

ere "That depends on your definition of *here*," Nicholas murmured, "but assuming you meant London, then no, we're not."

aged, The carriage came to a complete stop.

pped "Stay put," he said. "I'll find out why we've stopped."

Georgie and Marian watched as he hopped down. After a moment, C said, "We can't be that far from our destination."

l's "No," Marian murmured. "We're meant to get there early evening. I Manston sent word ahead for the staff."

Georgie nodded, suddenly very aware of the flock of butterflies taking in her stomach. The only good thing to have come from Cat-Head's caterwauling was that she hadn't been able to think about the night that ahead.

The plan was to spend the night at Manston House, in London. It was a logical first layover on the journey north, and it meant that Georgie and Nicholas would not have to have their wedding night at an inn.

They also would not have to spend it with their families, who were both in Kent. Georgie could not imagine spending her wedding night at Crake, knowing that Nicholas's family were all in their own bedchambers, just the hall. The only thing worse would be spending the night at Aubrey House with her own family right there.

"Can you see what's happening?" she asked Marian, who was now leaning out of her seat and hanging out the open door.

"Mr. Rokesby is speaking with Jameson," Marian said.

as "Jameson the groom?"

ice. Marian nodded. "He looks peaked."

"she "Jameson or Mr. Rokesby?"

"Jameson," Marian confirmed. "Wasn't he meant to be riding ahead to London?"

ou "He *did* ride ahead to London."

"Well, he's back."

"That doesn't make any sense," Georgie countered.

, "our Marian turned back to look at Georgie. "Sense or not, he's here and talking to Mr. Rokesby, and neither one looks pleased. Oh, hold up, he

come Marcy and Darcy.”

Marcy and Darcy were Mrs. Hibbert’s twin daughters. Georgie was how old they were—fifteen? Sixteen? They were riding in the second place, along with their mother and Wheelock’s nephew (also called Wheelock) traveling party was rounded out by two Aubrey Hall footmen serving as outriders, two Crake footmen (also serving as outriders), an Aubrey Hall coachman, a Crake coachman, an Aubrey Hall stableboy, and Jameson groom from Crake who had ridden ahead to London.

Georgie “Do you know what’s happening?” Marian asked Marcy.

Or Darcy, Georgie wasn’t sure which. The two girls were wholly identical in appearance.

“Something about pestilence,” Marcy-or-Darcy said.

“Pestilence?” Georgie echoed, instinctively starting to rise.

“Don’t move!” Marian whisper-shrieked.

Georgie grumbled, but she did as bid. She didn’t want Cat-Head to do any more than Marian did.

“What was *happening* in your coach?” one of the twins asked Maria. The other wandered off, presumably in search of more interesting conversation.

“The noise?” Marian asked. “It was the cat.”

“There was no way they could hear him in the second coach,” Georgie protested.

The young maid shrugged. “It sounded like the devil himself was riding here with you.”

“Again,” Georgie said, not that anyone was listening, “I don’t believe I could hear him.”

Marcy-or-Darcy (Georgie was really going to have to learn how to tell the two apart) poked her head in. “Did you kill it, ma’am?”

“No, I didn’t kill the cat,” Georgie snapped.

Marcy-or-Darcy looked unconvinced.

“I’m sure Mr. Rokesby didn’t say anything about pestilence,” Georgie said.

“Not Mr. Rokesby, ma’am,” Marcy-or-Darcy said, “Jameson the groom.”

“I hardly—I’m sorry,” Georgie said. She could not go on like this. “You Marcy or Darcy?”

“Marcy, ma’am. You can tell us apart by our freckles.”

“Your freckles?”

Marcy leaned farther in, although the effect was somewhat comical

her chin was on level with the floor of the carriage. "I have more than I can't sure does," she said, motioning to her cheeks. "See?"

coach "Perhaps one of you could consider wearing your hair differently," suggested the Georgie.

is "We used to do," Marcy confirmed, "but Mama said we must wear it all in proper tight buns now that we're in service." She bobbed a quick curtsey, the if only just then remembering that she was speaking with her new employer. Unfortunately for her, this caused her to thump her chin on the carriage floor. "Ow!" she let out.

entical In Georgie's lap, Cat-Head shifted position.

Everyone froze. Well, at least Georgie and Marian did. Marcy clutched her cheek with her hand and jumped up and down as she whimpered in pain. "Is she bleeding?" Georgie asked.

"Don't move," Marian begged before turning back to Marcy. "Are you awoken bleeding?"

"I think I bit my tongue."

n. The Georgie gasped when Marian moved to the side and Marcy's head came into view. Marcy was trying to smile, but all that did was reveal blood-stained teeth.

gie "Oh, dear," Georgie said. The poor girl looked positively ghoulish. "I'd better fetch Mr. Rokesby. He will know what to do."

ling up "He's a doctor," Marian assured her.

"He *will be* a doctor," Georgie corrected. "Soon."

re you Marcy scurried off, and Georgie continued to watch Marian as she hopped out of the carriage to try to figure out what was going on.

ell the "You might as well just get out," Georgie muttered. She looked down at Cat-Head, still asleep in her lap. "Since I can't."

Marian gave her a look, as if to get one last verification that Georgie wasn't mind if she fled the scene.

gie "Go," Georgie said. "But see if you can find out why we've stopped here."

Marian nodded, then sat on the floor, dangling her legs out before her. "Down." Georgie heard her land with an *oooff*, but she was clearly unhurt because she dashed off.

"Well," Georgie said, not quite daring to direct her soft comment at Cat-Head. "It's just you and me."

Blanche looked up and yawned.

since "And you and Judyth," Georgie said, giving Blanche a little nod. "But"

she you can endeavor to make me forget you again, we'll all be happier.”

Blanche gave her a disdainful sniff but she lay back down, clearly p
that the death-stare she'd been directing at Georgie for the past few ho
had its intended effect—that was to say, the carriage had stopped movi

it back But just as Blanche got settled, Cat-Head began to stir, and after a w
rtsy, as yawn it became clear that he was awake and planned to stay that way.

loyer. But again, they weren't moving, so at least he was quiet. Georgie se
floor. down on the seat beside her and scooted toward the open carriage door
might as well stretch her own legs now that she no longer had to hold (C
Head still. Everyone else seemed to be walking about.

ned her One of the Aubrey Hall footmen saw her in the doorway and rushed
in. to help her down. But before Georgie could make her way to Nicholas
in deep conversation with Jameson—Marian came dashing over.

rou “Oh, it's terrible, Miss Georgiana,” she said, out of breath from runn
“London is overrun with plague!”

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you can endeavor to make me forget you again, we'll all be happier.”

Blanche gave her a disdainful sniff but she lay back down, clearly pleased that the death-stare she'd been directing at Georgie for the past few hours had had its intended effect—that was to say, the carriage had stopped moving.

But just as Blanche got settled, Cat-Head began to stir, and after a wide yawn it became clear that he was awake and planned to stay that way.

But again, they weren't moving, so at least he was quiet. Georgie set him down on the seat beside her and scooted toward the open carriage door. She might as well stretch her own legs now that she no longer had to hold Cat-Head still. Everyone else seemed to be walking about.

One of the Aubrey Hall footmen saw her in the doorway and rushed over to help her down. But before Georgie could make her way to Nicholas—still in deep conversation with Jameson—Marian came dashing over.

“Oh, it's terrible, Miss Georgiana,” she said, out of breath from running. “London is overrun with plague!”

Chapter 14

God save him from hysterical women.

“London is not overrun with plague,” Nicholas ground out, chasing Marian before she started a riot.

“Not even a little bit?” the maid asked.

“Do you want it to be?” he asked, somewhat perplexed by the hopefulness of her question.

“No!” She turned to Georgie. “My goodness, such a thing to say.”

Nicholas resisted a retort, but only barely. In any case, his attention was diverted by Marian’s next outburst.

“Brimstone and pestilence!”

He stared at her. “What?”

“It’s what Jameson said,” Marian explained.

“No,” Nicholas countered, “that’s not what he said.” But technically was almost precisely what Jameson had said. He’d just said it with a lot of swearing and not-fit-for-the-ears-of-ladies modifiers.

God save him from hysterical *men*.

He took a breath and turned to Georgie. “There are several cases of influenza at Manston House. Nothing approaching the level of brimstone. And certainly no plague.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” she said. “Isn’t it?”

“Inasmuch as it’s better than black death, yes,” he said dryly. “But influenza is no trivial matter. We will have to bypass London. There is no way we can stay at Manston House.”

“Surely it cannot be so dangerous,” Georgie said. “It’s such a large building. We need not go near the affected section.”

“Influenza is highly contagious, and we don’t understand how it spreads. It is simply not safe, especially for you.”

“For me?” Georgie’s eyes widened, possibly from surprise, possibly

irritation. He could not tell for sure.

“It is a disease of the lungs,” he told her. “You may not have had a breathing episode for several years, but you are almost certainly more susceptible than most to this sort of illness.”

“Mr. Rokesby is right,” Marian said emphatically. “Your mother would flay us alive if we took you to a house with such disease.”

Georgie turned to Marian with a sharper expression than Nicholas was used to seeing on her face. “My mother,” she said, “is no longer responsible for my welfare.”

“No, but *I* am,” Nicholas said, eager to be done with the discussion. “We’re not going to London.”

He would not put Georgie—or any of the others—at risk.

It was odd. It had not been until Jameson had breathlessly informed the outbreak in London that Nicholas had felt the full weight of his new obligations. It wasn’t just Georgie he was responsible for now. He was with a household.

“We need to help them,” Georgie said. Then as if something had shifted inside her, her voice filled with emotion. “We need to help them, tend them, and . . . and you’re a doctor.”

“I’m not a doctor yet,” he reminded her.

“But surely you would know what to do.”

“I know enough to know there is nothing I *can* do.”

She gasped.

“No, no, I don’t mean it like that,” he said quickly. Good God, he had sounded fatalistic.

She made a questioning motion with her hands.

“Based on Jameson’s report,” he told her, “there is nothing I can do for them that is not already being done. A doctor has been called for, and they have all been given willow bark and bone broth.”

“Willow bark?”

“It seems to help with fevers.”

Her brow dipped into a vee. “That’s so interesting. I wonder what the reason . . .”

He waited for her to finish her thought, but she just shook her head. “I don’t know what you mean, but I’ll do my best to help you with your mind.” She blinked, then looked up, her eyes suddenly bright and clear.

“What now?”

“We press on,” he said. “And find a place to spend the night.”

“Will that be a problem?”

Nicholas let out a sigh. His father had sent a man ahead to reserve some coaching inns along the route, but obviously no arrangements had been made for the first stop.

“We shall take our chances like everyone else on the road,” he said. “I’ve gone back and forth to Edinburgh several times, and I’ve never had difficulty securing a room before.”

Of course he’d never traveled with a wife, thirteen servants, and three cats. *Meow.*

“And it was a delicate sound, quite unlike the howling they’d endured all afternoon. He looked at Georgie, his brows raised in question.

She shook her head. “That wasn’t Cat-Head.”

He sighed. “Of course it wasn’t.”

But she didn’t hear. She was already hurrying back to the carriage, taking a man to the one she called Blanche.

Which was almost as ridiculous a name as Cat-Head, given that Blanche was almost completely black.

“Did anyone find the other baskets?” Nicholas asked as he followed Georgie to the carriage.

“I don’t think anyone looked,” Marian said, scurrying along after him. “Do you want us to?”

“No, best to be on our way. We’ll find them for the journey tomorrow.”

Marian nodded, but when he stepped aside to allow her to enter the carriage before him, she said, “If you don’t mind, sir, I thought I might as well take the second carriage.”

Georgie, who had already alighted, poked her head out. “Are you sure you’re smaller than this one, and you’ll be three across on the seat?”

“We will be just fine,” Nicholas said, putting an end to the discussion. Frankly, he’d been surprised when Marian had entered the lead carriage at their departure. Surely as newlyweds, they could expect to have the space for themselves.

Meow.

He sighed. Along with the cats.

“Never mind. At least the he-devil was quiet. Although the true test would come when the wheels began to—

GRAOWWW!

“I’m sorry,” Georgie said.

Nicholas attempted a smile. “Nothing to be done.”

She smiled in return, an expression that was one-part apologetic, one-part grateful, and one-part ready to tear her hair out.

GRAOWWW!

“I’ve fixed the cat with an icy stare. “You have no interest in romance difficulty you?” he muttered.

“What did you say?” Georgie asked, startled.

GRAOWWW!

He shook his head. Funny how it hadn’t been until they were packing the carriages and it became clear that Georgie was bringing her pets that he remembered that he didn’t much actually like cats. His sister had had cats. They had been the most spoiled creatures on the planet, and they left footprints everywhere.

GRAOWWW!

And some of them, apparently, liked to complain.

“Sorry,” Georgie muttered. She picked up a shawl, and then—

His eyes widened. “Are you swaddling that cat like a baby?”

“I think it’s helping.”

GRAOWWW!

“Do Well, it wasn’t hurting, at least.

“There, there, Cat-Head,” Georgie said. “We haven’t much farther to go.”

She looked up at Nicholas. “Do we?”

He shrugged. He wasn’t sure where they were going to spend the night ride in. He’d instructed the driver to stop at the next reputable coaching inn, but there wasn’t room, they’d have to keep going.

Grrrrraow.

“I think he’s falling asleep,” Georgie whispered.

“Praise the Lord.”

Georgie sighed. “Indeed.”

By the time they finally stopped for the evening, Georgie was exhausted. She’d got Cat-Head to sleep, but then she’d had to hold him like a baby for the rest of the trip. She’d tried to set him down once, careful to keep the swaddling tight and firm, but the minute he touched the bench, his eyes popped open and his howling began anew.

“No, no, Cat-Head,” she murmured, desperately trying to settle him down.

She then tried to keep her hold on him while at the same time setting
down on the bench. She felt ridiculous, all bent at the waist as she lean
over him, but if she could get him to fall back asleep in such a position
maybe he'd stay that way when she pulled her arms away.

"Pick him up," Nicholas had begged.

"He doesn't know the difference."

"He knows!"

"How can he know? I have my arms around—"

"He knows!"

She picked him up. He quieted instantly.

He knew.

Damn cat.

So she held him. The whole trip.

She held him when they stopped at the first inn, only to be told there
no vacant rooms.

She held him when they stopped at the second inn, where she waited
Nicholas and the drivers conferred for at least ten minutes, only to decid
they did not like the look of the other travelers.

Georgie was not exactly sure what that meant, but as they all had
experience traveling the Great North Road and she did not, she decid
to go." take their word for it.

It was late, though, much later than they would have normally chose
retire for the evening, and she sensed that everyone was eager to put an
to the day's journey when they came to a stop in front of the third inn.
Unfortunately, it proved only marginally more fruitful than the other two.

"Bad news, I'm afraid," Nicholas said when he opened the carriage

Georgie had been waiting in the coach, Cat-Head still swaddled in h
arms. "Please don't tell me they are full."

"They're not, but they've only one room available. I'm afraid you sh
have to share with the maids."

"All five of us? Will we fit?"

"The innkeeper says he can send up extra bedding."

"But what about you?"

"I shall sleep in the stables, along with the rest of the men."

"But it's our—"

Wedding Night.

The words hung unspoken.

g him “We shall make do,” Georgie said firmly. Maybe it was for the best.
ed she really wish to spend her wedding night in a coaching inn called The
l, Brazen Bull?

 “We could keep going,” Nicholas said, “but it sounds like the other
inns are also full, and—”

 “It’s fine, Nicholas.”

 “The horses are spent,” he said, “and I suspect we’re all exhausted.”

 “Nicholas,” she said again. “We will be fine. I promise.”

 He stopped talking finally, and just blinked up at her. “Thank you,”
said.

 “There is nothing to thank me for.”

 “You could be very ill-tempered about it all.”

e were “I could.” She smiled. “I still can.” She held up Cat-Head. “Want a c
l while “God, no.” He held out his hand. “Let me help you down. We should
ide that some haste. It’s late, but I’m told we can still get supper. I’ve made
 arrangements for a private dining room.”

 The cats were handed off to the maids, the footmen saw to the luggage
and Georgie and Nicholas made their way across the courtyard.

l to The inn was at a busy crossroads, and after so long in the carriage, C
 was unprepared for the sheer volume of humanity sharing the scene.

n to Nicholas, however, seemed perfectly at ease. He strode forward with
1 end purpose, threading between strangers as he made his way to the front s
 the old Tudor building that now housed The Brazen Bull Inn. Georgie
 thankful for him, or to put a finer point on it, for the crook in his elbow
no. which her hand was tightly tucked. She could have done without his le
door. being quite so long; she had to scurry like a mouse just to keep up.

er But then he stopped suddenly a few feet from the entrance—Georgie
 no idea why; she hadn’t been paying attention—and she smashed right
all him. Her arms flew around his midsection as she tried to keep hold of
 balance. It was muddy, and the ground was hard—a fall would have be
 messy, embarrassing, and probably painful.

 It was over in an instant, but the moment lengthened the way a blink
last forever. She felt her fingers spread against his firm belly as she reg
her balance, instinctively pulling herself against him for stability. She
cheek press against his soft wool coat. She felt her breath catch.

 “Are you all right?” Nicholas asked, and she felt him start to twist in
arms.

Did "I'm fine, I—" She stopped, realizing that she was hugging him. He
e was pressed into his strong back, cradled in a curve she hadn't even kn
was there.

nearby "I'm fine," she said again, reluctantly loosening her grip. He finishe
turning, and they were face-to-face. How were his eyes so luminously
even now when the night air stole the color from the sky?

Was it just because she *knew* what he looked like? She'd grown up a
the Rokesbys; they all possessed those marvelous azure eyes.

he But this felt different. *She* felt different.

"Are you sure?" he asked. And she realized his hand had covered he
felt . . .

Intimate.

cat?" She looked down at their hands, then back up at his face. She had kn
d make him forever, but suddenly the whole world was strange and new. He w
holding her hand, and she was suddenly full of emotion and confusion
something she couldn't quite define.

ge, "Georgie?" he said softly. "Are you all right?"

She smoothed out her breathing, and said, "Yes."

Georgie Then the moment was over.

But something inside her had changed.

steps of It turned out that The Brazen Bull's private dining room was private or
was insofar as it was separated from the main dining room by a wall with a
7 in doorway in it.

gs But just a doorway. If a door had once resided there, it was long gon
while the inn's other patrons respected the boundary with their bodies,
e had same could not be said for their words and conversation, which poured
: into and bawdy through the air.

her It made conversation a challenge, and Nicholas almost wished they'
een pressed for their meal to be had up in the room with the maids, but the
remembered that the maids had the cats, and at least one of those cats v
can probably howling, and frankly, he wanted nothing to do with it.

gained Uncharitable of him, perhaps, but it was the truth. Even the raucous
felt her singing wafting in through the doorway wasn't bothering him. Not tha
normally would, but Georgiana was a lady and if he was hearing corre
1 her someone was extolling—in rhyming couplets, no less—the tongue-rela
talents of an unnamed, yet highly industrious, female.

r face He *should* get up and say something. But he was damned hungry, and
rown beef stew was surprisingly good.

Oh my sweet Martine, something, something quite unclean.

d Nicholas grinned in spite of himself. *Martine*. She was probably French
blue, And hopefully imaginary, poor woman, if the lyrics were anything to
by.

around He stole a glance at Georgie, hoping she wasn't too bothered by the
language. She had her back to the doorway, so at least she couldn't see
men dancing along in their clumsy jigs.

rs. It Georgie's brow was fixed into a frown. Nothing distressing, just that
faraway look people got when their mind was somewhere else.

Nicholas cleared his throat.

rown She seemed not to hear him.

as Nicholas reached forward and waved his hand in front of her eyes.

and "Georgiana," he said, his voice a little bit singsong. "Georgiana Bridge
Rokesby, he realized with a start. *Georgiana Rokesby*.

He didn't think she noticed his mistake; instead, she seemed to be
embarrassed that he'd caught her woolgathering.

She blushed. *Blushed!* And she looked . . . beautiful.

"Pardon," she murmured, looking down. "I was thinking on a dozen
different things. This noise makes it hard to concentrate."

ly "Yes," he said, but what he was really thinking was that looking at *her*
made it hard to concentrate. She was pretty, of course, she'd always be
pretty with her strawberry blond hair and intelligent blue eyes. She was
ie, and wife now, he thought, and when he looked at her, it felt different.

the And strangely, he wasn't so sure it was only because they were married.
loud He had the oddest feeling that even if they had not stood before the priest
d morning and said their vows, he would see something new every time
gaze touched her face.

n he She had become a discovery, and he had always had an endlessly curious
was mind.

She took a sip of her wine, then dabbed at the corner of her mouth with
napkin. Her eyes flicked over her shoulder at a particularly loud burst of
t it laughter from the men in the other room.

ctly, "Are coaching inns always so noisy?" she asked.

ated "Not always," he replied. "But I find this quite soothing after the cat
She let out a little snort of laughter. "I'm sorry," she said. "That was

id the well done of me.”

“Who do you fear offending? The cat?”

“He tried his best,” she said.

nch. “He is a demon.”

o go “Don’t say that! He just doesn’t like to travel.”

“Neither do I,” Nicholas said. “He’s ruined it for me.”

coarse She gave him a look, lips pressed together and eyes both narrowed a
e the thoroughly amused. “He will grow on you,” she said primly.

“If I don’t kill him first.”

t “Nicholas!”

“Don’t worry,” he said with purposeful blitheness. “It’s not me you
fear. The maids will surely crack first.”

“Cat-Head is a very brave kitty.”

At this he could only raise his brows.

erton.” “He was the one who attacked Freddie in the tree.”

“That was *that* one?”

“He was brilliant,” Georgie said, eyes flashing with the memory. “Y
would have loved it.”

“After having seen what he did to Oakes’s face, I’m inclined to agree

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:.”
; not

“First he did this”—Georgie made a motion with her arms that did a
surprisingly good job of demonstrating a cat jumping out of a window
—“then he did *this*”—her arms rose past her face in a clawed vee—“an
he did *this*.”

Nicholas could not make out this last motion. “What is that?”

Her face split in a gleeful grin. “He wrapped himself over Freddie’s
Honestly, I don’t know how Freddie could *breathe*.”

Nicholas started to laugh.

“I would draw it for you if I had any talent. It was the funniest thing
ever seen. Or rather, it is now. At the time I was too terrified Freddie w
fall from the tree. But oh my goodness, if you had seen it for yourself .
was shrieking, ‘Get it off! Get it off!’ and he was clawing at Cat-Head

“*Clawing*,” Nicholas gasped, because that was somehow the funniest
he’d ever heard.

And then his laughter set her off, as laughter often did, and the two c
completely lost the battle for dignity. They laughed and laughed, until
Georgie had to set her head on the table and Nicholas feared he’d strai
muscle.

“Well,” Nicholas said, once he’d mostly recovered and Georgie had returned her attention to her meal. “I suppose I owe him a debt of gratitude. But you must admit, Cat-Head is a stupid name for a cat.”

He watched Georgie pause, spoon lifted midway to her mouth.

“What?” he said. Because honestly, she had the oddest expression on her face.

She set her jaw and lowered her spoon. “Oh?” she said with calculated pacing. “A stupid name, is it? And I wonder whose fault that is.”

Nicholas paused. This was clearly a question to which he was supposed to know the answer. “Edmund?” he guessed, because Edmund was usually responsible for such things.

“You, Nicholas. *You* named my cat Cat-Head.”

“I named a cat Cat-Head.” It came out more of a statement than a question.

“You named *my* cat Cat-Head.”

“Surely you jest.”

Georgie’s mouth dropped slightly open, and she neatly laid her spoon on the table. “Surely you remember Pity-Cat.”

Nicholas had no idea what she was talking about.

“Mary’s cat?” Georgie prodded. “Your sister’s tabby from when you were at Eton . . .”

The memory came to him, then. It had been years and years before, and then he actually liked that cat. It was a scrappy little thing that liked to hide under his mother’s skirts and nip at her ankles. She’d cry out randomly in surprise, yes, it was funny.

Then he frowned. *Pity-Cat?*

He shook his head. “That cat wasn’t named Pity-Cat.”

Georgie’s whole face turned into a heart-shaped *I-told-you-so*. “No, I’ve never seen that cat’s name was Turnip, but then you and Edmund thought it was much more fun to say Turnippity, and—”

“It is more fun to say Turnippity.”

Georgie pursed her lips. He could tell she was trying not to laugh.

“I mean,” he continued, “who names any breathing creature Turnip?”

“Your sister did. She names all her pets after food.”

“Yes, well, let’s be thankful Felix didn’t let her name their offspring Dumpling, Pudding, or Bacon.”

“One of her cats *is* named Dumpling.”

He rolled his eyes. “It was only a matter of time.”

Georgie rolled *her* eyes at that. “*I’d* named Cat-Head *Patch*.”

tude. “Why?”

“Have you ever looked at him?”

Not really. “Of course I have.”

n her Georgie’s eyes narrowed.

“Although *mostly* I’ve listened.”

ed She rolled her eyes again.

He snickered. “Oh come now, you must give me credit for that one.”

sed to “Very well, touché.” And then she stared, waiting for him to set the

ly conversation back on course.

“Very well,” he acquiesced, “tell me the story. How am I responsible for your cat’s ridiculous moniker?”

uestion. She needed no further encouragement. “As I said, *I’d* named him *Pa* has little markings around his eyes. Rather like how the broadsheets draw Dutch sailors with the triangular patches over their eyes.”

n back Nicholas skipped over the obvious question of how broadsheets depicting piracy occurring mere miles from Aubrey Hall made it out of the security of Lord Bridgerton’s office and into the hands of an impressionable young man and instead merely said, “Just the one eye, I’d think.”

1 were She mock-scowled. “Yes, well, I thought it a perfectly proper cat name. He’d but then you and Edmund came home for a few weeks after term and before your time you went back, Turnip went from Turnip to Turnippity to Pity-Cat and somehow that led to you deciding that Patch ought to be Cat-Head.”

se and “I have no recollection, although it does sound like something we would do.”

“I tried to bring him back to Patch, but he wouldn’t answer to it any Pity- It was Cat-Head or nothing.”

1 more Nicholas was skeptical that cats answered to their names at all, but felt no need to argue. “I’m sorry?”

“You are?”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

” She took a moment to consider this. Or at the very least, give the impression of doing so. “To be fair, I don’t know that it was you as much as Edmund who led the naming brigade.”

; “Regardless, how about I stay out of the naming of our children, the way

He wasn’t sure where the thought had come from, or why on earth he had said it out loud, but the words *our children* seemed to shut down the fe

like-old-times familiarity with the swiftness of a guillotine.

He supposed it was a lot to joke about when they had not even share wedding night.

Then, a quirk in her cheek, Georgie raised her gaze to his. There was playfulness in her eyes as she said, "You trust me not to name a child Brunhilda then?"

"Brunhilda's a fine name," he replied.

"You think so? Then I'll—"

But whatever she might have said was cut off by the sound of a door slamming open followed by a panicked male voice shouting, "*Is there a doctor in the house?*"

Without thinking, Nicholas rose to his feet.

"What do you think . . ." Georgie murmured, and she followed him toward the doorway. In the main dining room they both saw a man—a groom by the looks of him—covered in mud and blood.

"*We need a doctor in the stables!*" he cried.

"Let me assess this situation," Nicholas said to Georgie. "You should eat the rest of your meal in the room."

"But—"

He looked at her. "You can't stay here on your own."

"No, that's not what I meant. I should come with you. I can help."

And in that moment, he knew deep in his core that she could. And that she wanted to. And she'd be helpful. But—

"Georgie, they need me in the stables."

"Then I'll go with you to the stables. I can—"

"Georgie, women aren't allowed in the stables."

"That's ridiculous." She smoothed her skirts, making every indication she planned to follow him. "I'm in the stables every day."

"You're in Aubrey Hall's stables. These are public stables."

"But—"

"No," he said, because he could not imagine trying to keep an eye on her welfare and tend to an injured man at the same time. "I'll send a footman and a groom back to escort you to the room where the maids are."

"But—"

"You cannot come with me to the stables," he said firmly.

"But I . . . I . . ." For a moment she looked lost, as if she could not decide what to do. But finally she swallowed and said, "Very well. I was almost

done eating, anyway.”

“You’ll go straight back to the room?”

She nodded. But she didn’t look happy about it.

“Thank you.” He leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’m likely won’t see you until morning. I’m spending the night in the stable anyway. Once I’m done, I might as well just settle in for the night.”

She let out a tiny sigh. “Good night, then,” she said. “I guess—”

“Straight back to the room,” he said one more time. The last thing he needed was to worry about Georgie’s welfare.

“Yes,” she said impatiently. “I’m going. You can watch me if you want.”

“No, I trust you. I’ve got to go. I think Wheelock’s got my medical bag and—”

But she wasn’t listening. She couldn’t. He was already out the door, his feet carrying him faster than he could finish his sentence.

He turned around one last time. “Go,” he said. “Back to the room. Please. And then he ran off, feeling rather like he was about to save the world.”

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Chapter 15

Georgie was not in a good mood when she woke up the following morning. She knew she shouldn't be annoyed with Nicholas for insisting that she go back to the room the night before while he tended to whatever injury a man had in the stables, but surely the very definition of emotions meant that people were not always rational.

Also, she was tired.

One very small room, one rather lumpy bed, five women (each with a braid), and three cats—*comfortable* was not a word anyone had spoken in the evening before.

Sam (the groom who hailed from Aubrey Hall) was sweet on Darcy, so he'd brought a hammock from the stables and strung it from the rafters. He offered it to Georgie first of course, but he'd brought it for Darcy, and since Georgie did look at it with curious longing, she did not take it.

So Darcy had been in a hammock, and Marcy had—at her mother's insistence—slept on the floor, but that had still left three women in a bed that had been meant for a cozy two. Georgie had woken up with Marian's elbow in her armpit and an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

And no abatement of the frustration from the evening before.

Now, as the women made their way through the busy loading and unloading areas in front of the stables, she looked for Nicholas. If she could not help him with his medical work, she could at least force him to tell her about it.

But Nicholas was nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Rokesby," Georgie said to one of the footmen as she handed Judith's basket up to Marian. "Where is he?"

"He's sleeping, Mrs. Rokesby, ma'am."

Georgie stopped with one foot on the blocks. "He's sleeping? Still?"

"Yes, ma'am. He only finished up with the injured man a few hours ago."

“My goodness, what happened?”

“I’m not sure, ma’am, but there was quite a lot of blood.”

Another footman appeared at her other side. “It was a broken leg, ma’am. The sort where the bone comes through the skin.”

“A compound fracture,” Georgie said. She might have been showing off. No, she was definitely showing off.

“Er, yes.”

“Will he be all right? The man with the broken leg?”

The footman shrugged. “Hard to tell, but if he’s not, it won’t be Mr. Rokesby’s fault. He was a proper hero, ma’am.”

Georgie smiled. “Of course he was. But, er . . .” What to do? She waited charge now, she realized. It was an unfamiliar sensation. Unfamiliar, but they she was relieved to discover, unpleasant.

She cleared her throat and drew her shoulders back. “We’d planned an early start.”

“I know, ma’am,” the first footman said. “It’s just that he was so tired he wanted to wait until as late as possible to rouse him. He’s got cotton stuffed in his ears and he tied his cravat around his eyes so it’s not surprising he’s still sleeping, but . . .”

“But?” she prompted.

The first footman looked at the second footman and then into the carriage. The second footman just looked at Georgie’s shoe, still perched on the ground. “But?” she prompted again.

“But we’re really quite nervous about the cat.”

Georgie paused for a moment, then stepped down. “Would you please show me to him?”

“To the cat?”

She forced her expression into one of utter patience. “The cat is already in the carriage. I would like to see Mr. Rokesby.”

“But he’s sleeping.”

“Yes, you’d mentioned.”

The three of them stood for an extended moment in awkward silence. Finally, the first footman finally said, “This way, ma’am.”

Georgie followed him to the stables, where he stopped at the entrance and pointed. Over on the left side a single hammock still hung, a fully clothed Nicholas barely discernable in the low light. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his eyes were covered by his cravat.

She wanted to hug him.

She wanted to strangle him. If he had let her help the night before he
a'am. wouldn't be so tired.

This wasn't, however, the time to be petty.

g off. She turned on her heel and strode back toward the carriage. They co
delay their start by an hour. Nicholas needed his sleep, and it went with
saying that no one was going to get any rest inside the carriage. Holdir
Head like a baby seemed to help, but it didn't keep him completely qui

She paused, peering back over her shoulder into the stables. She cou
quite see Nicholas any longer, but she could picture him in the hammo
as in swinging slightly with each breath.

ut not, He'd looked so comfortable. She hated to wake him. It was really to

to get "Ma'am?"

She looked up. One of the footmen was regarding her with concern.
ed. We no wonder. She'd been standing there for what had to have been a full
uffed minute, frozen in thought.

ie's "Ma'am?" he said again.

A slow smile spread across her face. "I'm going to need some rope."

riage. Nicholas awoke with a start. It was unnerving to open one's eyes and s
step. nothing, and it took him a moment to remember that he'd tied his cravi
his eyes the night before. He unwrapped his makeshift sleeping mask a
yawned. Christ, he was tired. The hammock had been more comfortab
se take he'd have anticipated, but as he'd been settling into it the night before,
he'd been able to think was that he really should have had the opportuni
sleep in a bed with his wife.

ady in His wife.

He'd been married a day and he'd barely even kissed her.

He was going to have to do something about that.

He looked around. His was the last hammock hanging and the stable
e. The was wide open. The sky was a bright English white. Blue would have l
cheerful, but white without rain he'd take.

re and His feet hit the ground just as one of the Crake footmen appeared in
ned doorway and waved at him.

er his "Good morning, sir," the footman called. "We're just about ready."

"Ready?" Nicholas echoed. What time was it? He reached into his p

for his watch, but before he could take a look, the footman said, “Mrs. Rokesby has been very busy.”

“Arranging for breakfast?” Nicholas asked. It was half eight, much later than he’d meant to start his day.

“That, and the, er . . .” The footman frowned. “You should really see for yourself.”

Nicholas wasn’t sure whether to be curious or scared, but he decided to wait with curious until convinced otherwise.

“She’s right clever, she is,” the footman said. “Mrs. Rokesby, I mean.”

“She is,” Nicholas agreed, although he could not imagine what cleverness she’d managed to display at half eight in the morning at The Brazen Bitch.

He made his way to the stable door and stopped short. There in the middle of the driveway were the two carriages, surrounded by a small crowd of onlookers.

Who all seemed to be watching his wife.

Georgie was standing on the main carriage’s step, dressed for travel in a plum-colored frock, her gingery hair unadorned by a bonnet.

“Yes, like that,” she said, calling out instructions to some unseen people within. A pause, and then: “No, not like that.”

“What is going on?” Nicholas asked the first person he came across.

“Strangest thing I ever did see.”

Nicholas turned and blinked, only just then realizing that the man was not whom he was speaking was not a member of their traveling party. “What are you?” he asked.

“Who are you?” the man countered.

Nicholas motioned toward Georgie. “Her husband.”

“Really?” The man grinned. “She’s something.” And then he started laughing.

Nicholas frowned. What the devil?

“Been watching her for a quarter of an hour at least.”

Nicholas decided he did not like this man. “Have you now?” he murmured.

“If she makes this work . . .” The man shook his head with admiration before turning to face Nicholas head-on. “You wouldn’t happen to be heading north?”

“Why?” Nicholas asked suspiciously.

His new best friend took this as a yes. “Do you know where you’re stopping? I’m desperate to know how it turns out. We’re taking bets on it.”

“What?”

“Or we would be, if we could be assured we’d hear the results. Don’t suppose you’re planning to make a stop at Biggleswade? Could you let word at the King’s Reach and let us know how it works out?”

Nicholas gave the man one last irritated glance and stomped off to Jameson, who was standing closer to Georgie.

“Jameson,” he said, perhaps a little more gruffly than he’d intended. “Has a crowd of spectators congregated around my wife?”

“Oh, you’re awake!” Jameson said. “Good morning, sir.”

“Is it?” Nicholas asked. “Is it?”

“We all hope so, sir. Mrs. Rokesby is certainly trying her best.”

“But what is she doing?”

“A little higher!” Georgie called. “Right, good. Now tie a knot right Make sure it’s tight.”

GRAOWWW!

Nicholas had almost forgotten the particular horror of that sound. “What is it?” he asked in a desperate voice. Good Lord, he had not slept well. Rather, he had not slept much. He could not bear to ponder another full the carriage with the beast.

“We found its basket,” Jameson said, pointing to a wicker basket cur resting on the lead carriage’s footboard. “It doesn’t seem to like it, though.”

GRAOWWW!

Nicholas resolutely turned his back on the cat. “Would I be correct in assuming that Mrs. Rokesby’s current machinations have something to do with the cat?”

“I would hate to spoil her surprise, sir.”

“Almost . . .” they heard Georgie say, followed by, “Perfect!”

She poked her head out. “We—Oh! You’re awake.”

Nicholas gave a little bow. “As you can see.” He glanced around the crowded courtyard. “As everyone can see.”

“Oh, yes.” Her cheeks turned slightly pink, although it seemed to be with pride than embarrassment. “We seem to have garnered a bit of an audience.”

“One can only wonder why.”

“Come in, come in,” she urged. “I must show you my masterpiece.”

Nicholas took a step forward.

“Wait!”

He stopped.

't She held up a hand. "One moment." Then, looking past him, she said
ave "Could someone hand me the cat?"

There was no question which cat she was referring to. One of the grooms
retrieved Cat-Head's basket and handed it to one of the maids, who handed it
up to Georgie.

"Why "I will be ready for you in just a moment," she said. Then she shut the
door.

Nicholas looked at Jameson.

Jameson grinned.

GRAOWWOOWWW!

Nicholas frowned. That didn't sound quite right. Not that anything that
there. did sounded right, but this sounded more wrong than usual.

GRAAAAOOOWWWAAAOWWW!

Nicholas looked at Jameson. "If she doesn't open the door in five seconds
Where I'm going in."

Or Jameson shuddered. "Godspeed, sir."

day in There were sounds of a tussle, followed by another howl, slightly more
Nicholas took a breath. Time to save his wife.

Currently *GRAaaa . . . Graaaa . . .*

ugh." *Meow.*

Nicholas stopped short. That sounded almost . . .

n Happy?

do *Meow.*

"She did it," Jameson said, in a statement that could only be described as
reverent.

Nicholas looked at him, and then back at the carriage.

Georgie opened the door. "Do come in," she said, the very model of a
gracious hostess.

With equal parts trepidation and curiosity, Nicholas ascended the steps
of the carriage, only to be met with the sight of—

"Is that a hammock?"

Georgie nodded excitedly.

"For the cat?"

"It's my design. But of course I could not have put it together without
more Sam's help."

Nicholas turned and blinked at the heretofore unnoticed groom, who

crouched at the far end of the carriage, looking inordinately proud of himself, “It was all her idea, sir,” the groom said modestly.

Nicholas could only stare. First at the groom, then at Georgie, then at the orange cat, who was suspended in a loose webbing of rope.

“I think he likes it,” Georgie said.

Nicholas wasn’t so sure about that. It was true that Cat-Head sounded almost content, but he *looked* ridiculous.

And ridiculously uncomfortable. All four of his legs had been poked through holes in the webbing and hung down like furry twigs. Its face was squished but visible through another gap, a thick piece of rope supporting its chin.

“Is he going to choke?” Nicholas asked, looking over at Georgie with concern.

“No, I think he’s comfortable. Feel him.” She grabbed his hand and pressed it under Cat-Head’s belly. “He’s purring.”

Nicholas looked at Sam. Why, he wasn’t certain. But surely someone possessed a shred of sanity. “Are we certain it’s not just indigestion?”

“No, no,” Georgie said, “that’s definitely a purr. Although you do bring up an important point. He will need to relieve himself at some point.”

“We will all need to relieve ourselves at some point,” Nicholas said, somewhat dazedly.

“Yes, of course. It’s just that it’s a bit, er, complicated to get him in there

“And out of it, as well?”

“I haven’t yet made the attempt,” she admitted.

“Let’s hope we figure it out before his needs become urgent.”

Behind him, Sam let out a little snort of amusement.

“But what do you think?” Georgie asked.

He thought she’d gone mad, to be honest, but she was so damned proud of herself he was never going to say that.

“I think it’s ingenious,” he said. Which was also true. It was ingenious that she’d gone mad.

“I wasn’t sure if he would like it,” Georgie said with palpable excitement and pride. “And I still don’t know what will happen once we start moving, but it was worth a try.”

“Indeed.”

“After all, you looked so comfortable in your hammock this morning.”

“Me?”

himself. “I didn’t want to disturb you. Everyone said you worked so hard last night. You’ll have to tell me about it later today.”

at the “You modeled this on me?”

Cat-Head made an odd noise, but it wasn’t a howl.

ed “He sounds . . .” Nicholas searched for the correct descriptor. “Not like exactly.”

“But better than yesterday,” Georgie said brightly.

l “Absolutely.” Nicholas said this with utter conviction. It couldn’t possibly be worse.

ing its *Grrrmphamow.*

h Nicholas moved his head for a better look. It was possible that the change in volume may have been due to a simple inability to open its mouth. But as long as it could breathe . . .

placed “Shall we be on our way?” Georgie said.

Sam scooted to the door. “Yes, ma’am.”

ie still But no sooner than he had hopped down, Marian appeared in the doorway.

“Are you riding with us today?” Georgie asked.

ring up Nicholas gave the maid a long, hard stare.

“Er, my things are here,” Marian said, nervously motioning to a small satchel on the rear-facing bench.

Long. Hard. Stare.

o it.” “But I can ride in the other carriage,” Marian said very quickly.

Nicholas gave the maid an almost imperceptible nod.

“Are you sure?” Georgie said. “I think the cat will be better behaved than yesterday.”

“I . . . ah . . .”

oud of Nicholas did not take his eyes off Marian’s face. She, in turn, was trying very hard not to look his way.

“I think . . . I think I had better . . .”

us *and* Marian accidentally caught his eye. His brows rose.

“I should like to get to know Mrs. Hibbert better,” Marian blurted out.

ment “And Marcy and Darcy.”

ing, “Oh,” Georgie said. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“Also”—Marian cast a wary eye toward Cat-Head—“that looks a little unnatural.”

g.” Georgie frowned. “Technically speaking, I suppose it *is* unnatural.”

Nicholas looked at the cat. In all honesty, it was hard to look away.

t night. *Meow.*

“Time to go,” Nicholas announced. Someone had to make a decision. He handed Marian her bag. “We’ll see you at the next stop.”

And then, before anyone could make a noise of protest—even Cat-Head happy, he shut the door.

“Gah, finally,” Nicholas muttered.

“Is everything all right?” Georgie asked. She sounded . . . not nervous, possibly exactly. Maybe curious.

“Nicholas?”

Maybe a little nervous.

at’s “You should sit down before we start moving,” he said.

nouth. “Oh. Yes. Of course.” She sat, although not where he’d wanted her to.

“You don’t get sick riding backward?” he asked.

“What? Oh. No. Not really.”

“Not really?”

orway. They started moving. They held their breath, but Cat-Head didn’t make a sound.

“Not much,” Georgie amended.

ill “Then sit over here.” He reached out, took her hand, and pulled her into the forward-facing seat. “I don’t bite.”

He didn’t let go of her hand.

She blushed. “I thought you’d want room.”

“There’s plenty of room.”

l than She gave a little tug, and he reluctantly let go of her hand; he supposed he needed it in order to get herself settled.

ying They moved slowly through the village, Nicholas and Georgie both keeping a wary eye on the cat.

But it didn’t make a sound.

“Unbelievable,” Nicholas murmured.

“I wasn’t sure it was going to work,” Georgie admitted.

it. “You may very well be a genius, Mrs. Rokesby.”

She turned to him and smiled.

And again, all he could think of was the sun, and the way he felt happy when it broke through the clouds on a long gray day.

“Georgie?”

Her eyes lit with curiosity.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

Because honestly, it was past time.

1. He

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sed she

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Because honestly, it was past time.

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Chapter 16

In a way, Georgie knew what he was going to say before he said it. There was something in his eyes, in the way he looked at her and covered her with his before he spoke. And of course it was crazy that they hadn't kissed properly.

They were married. They were *supposed* to kiss each other.

Georgie just wasn't sure it was supposed to feel . . .

Or that *she* was supposed to feel . . .

She looked at him.

She looked at Nicholas, at the man she'd known her whole life, the man she'd only recently stopped thinking of as a boy. She couldn't seem to take her breath, or look away from his mouth, or wonder what it might feel like if his lips touched hers.

And she thought about the fact that she'd taken his name. She had promised herself to him for better or for worse, till death did they part. It was supposed to be holy, but what she was feeling right now wasn't spiritual, it was lustful and it was carnal, and it thrilled her even as it terrified her, and—

“Georgie?”

His voice. It did things to her. This was new.

“Georgie?”

She dragged her gaze from his mouth to his eyes.

“You're thinking too much,” he murmured.

“How do you know?”

His lips curved. “I just do.”

“I think you know me,” she whispered.

This seemed to amuse him. “I've always known you.”

She shook her head. “No. Not like now.”

“Not like I *will*,” he vowed.

Mere inches separated them, and then slowly, softly, his lips touched

At first it was the softest brush of skin. Then his hand touched the back neck, and it was all she could do not to melt into him then and there. His tongue traced the seam of her lips, and what had started as a hint of a kiss turned into something deeper.

Hotter.

Georgie gasped at the unexpected rush of sensation, and when her lips parted, the kiss grew even more intimate, more luxuriant.

She hadn't known that a kiss could involve more than just a touch of lips. Or that she could feel it everywhere, across her skin, in her blood, very center of her soul.

ere
r hand
issed,

"Nicholas," she murmured, and she heard the wonder in her voice.

"I know," was his response. "I know."

She felt his hands move to her back, but it didn't matter if he was pushing her against him because she was already pressing forward. This need for her—she didn't fully understand it. All she knew was that she wanted to be closer. She wanted to be closer.

She wanted *him*.

man
catch
like if

She kissed him back—or at least she thought she did. She'd never kissed anyone before, not like this. She could only assume she was doing it right because he seemed to like it.

And she knew *she* liked it.

ledged
posed
case

Tentatively, she brought one of her hands to his hair. Surely at some point in her life she'd touched it before, but suddenly she had to know—*right*—what it felt like between her fingers. Was it soft? Springy? Both? His hair had always had the tendency to curl, just a little bit, and she was gripped by the most foolish desire to find one of those almost-ringlets and give it a tug, just to see how quickly it would spring back into shape.

But first she just wanted to touch him. To feel his warmth, and to revel in the knowledge that he wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

It was a heady, giddy feeling.

It was glorious.

"Georgie," he murmured, and she heard the wonder in his voice.

So she said, just like he had, "I know."

He smiled. She felt it against her skin when his lips trailed across her neck to the line of her throat.

d hers.

She tipped her head back, shivering with delight as his lips found the hollow above her collarbone. She didn't know . . . she'd had no idea . . .

κ of her anyone had told her . . .

his *Meow.*

hiss “Nicholas,” she whisper-squealed. He was doing something utterly shocking and delightful, and—

Meow.

ps Maybe if she ignored it . . .

Meow.

f the She made the mistake of looking up.

. in the Cat-Head.

Staring at her with freakish intensity.

“What’s wrong?” Nicholas murmured, his lips still warm against her.

“Nothing,” Georgie said in a firm voice. She shut her eyes.

illing *Grrra—*

vithin “Stop!” she said, her eyes flying back open.

this. Nicholas jerked back.

“No, not you!” She clutched his shoulder. “Don’t you stop.”

He stared at her in confusion. “What is going on?”

issed “*Mee-OW.*”

ght Georgie glared at the cat. Without a doubt, that was the smuggest *m* she’d ever heard.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

point Nicholas kept kissing her, moving to a particularly lovely spot near

it now “Ignore him.”

s hair “I can’t.”

ed by “Try harder.”

a little Georgie turned her head, giving Cat-Head the cut direct.

She heard an indrawn kitty breath, and then—

vel in *GRAOWWW!*

“No,” Nicholas practically moaned. “No no no.”

Georgie looked back up at the cat. “Stop that,” she hissed.

Cat-Head gave a little cat shrug.

Georgie turned back to Nicholas.

GRAOWWW!

r cheek “What?” She whipped back around.

Cat-Head purred.

e “You slippery vixen,” she breathed.

. . if Nicholas went mostly still. “Are you talking to me or the cat?”

Georgie disentangled herself from her husband's arms and sat up so could give Cat-Head a full-on glare. "Enough."

"I really hope it's the cat," Nicholas remarked.

"He only makes that awful noise when you're kissing me."

"What if *you* kiss *me*?"

"Nicholas," she groaned.

"Not that I wish to defend the beast," he said, "but he did howl for a six hours yesterday. And we were not, as I distinctly recall, kissing."

"Yes, but that was different. He wasn't in the hammock."

Nicholas ran a hand through his hair and looked up at the ridiculous r skin. trussed cat. "To be fair, it's hard to see how the hammock is helping."

"He's being quiet right now. And also, I don't have to hold him."

"True," Nicholas murmured. He sat back, and they both watched Ca Head, swinging gently as the carriage sped along the turnpike.

"This is actually interesting," Nicholas murmured. He leaned forward eyeing the cat with a shrewd expression. "We should test the hypothesis."

A statement Georgie found baffling. "What?"

He immediately shifted into academic mode. "A hypothesis is a theory eow made on the—"

"I *know* what a hypothesis is," she cut in. "I just don't know what you mean about testing one."

her ear. "Ah. Right, well. As you know, the hallmark of scientific investigation is the rigorous examination of hypotheses. A theory is only a theory until you conduct an experiment to prove it."

Georgie regarded him with suspicion. "What is your theory, precisely?"

"Technically," he replied with a tip of his head, "it was *your* theory."

"Mine?"

"That the beast is trying to stop us from kissing."

"That's not exactly what I said," Georgie pointed out. "And at any rate, I doubt it's true. He's just not that clever."

"Clever or not," Nicholas muttered, "he is the spawn of Satan."

"Nicholas!"

"When we get to Scotland we're getting dogs."

"Not so loud," Georgie warned. "Judyth will hear you."

He gave her a *you-must-be-joking* look.

"She *is* very clever."

Nicholas stared at her for a long moment before executing a particular

she sardonic combination of head-shaking and eye-rolling.
“You’re the one who wishes to conduct a scientific experiment on me.”
He looked pointedly at Cat-Head, still hanging from the hammock like an odd, furry plant. “I’m conducting experiments?”
“It worked, didn’t it?” she said. “He was completely quiet.”
“Until I kissed you.”
t least “Well . . . Yes.”
His eyes lit with anticipation. “Now it’s time for *my* experiment.”
“You’re scaring me a little,” she said.
ly He waved this off. “May I kiss you?”
Georgie was a little surprised—and to be honest, perhaps a little disappointed by the clinical tone of his voice. But she couldn’t think of a reason to say no, so she nodded.
it- Nicholas touched her chin, drawing her close. Their lips met, and once again, she melted into him. The mere touch of his mouth on hers seemed to set her fingers tingling, and her body was—
is.”
GRAOWWW!
ory “I knew it,” Nicholas grunted. He whipped around, glaring at the cat. Georgie blinked. “What?” She sounded dazed. She *felt* dazed.
ou “Damned, meddling . . .”
There were other words, but his voice went too low for her to hear them.
ion is “Look how innocent he looks,” Georgie said. She reached out and scratched Cat-Head’s smushed little face. “There’s no way he’s purposely sabotaging us.”
ly?” “Facts are facts, Georgiana. Your cat is a demon.”
” She sputtered with laughter. There was simply no other possible response.
“Can I turn it?” Nicholas asked.
“The cat?”
ate, I “Is there any way to turn the hammock so he’s not facing us?”
“Eh, no, I don’t think so.” Georgie grimaced, looking over her contraption again. “Not unless we take him out and face him the other way.”
This, she did not want to do. It had been a struggle to get Cat-Head in the hammock in the first place, and she had the scratches to prove it.
But she also really wanted to continue kissing her husband, so she said, “We could move.”
He looked at her.
arly She pointed. “To the other side.”

“I thought you said you get sick on the rear-facing bench.”

ly cat.” “Not if you’re kissing me.”

ike an “That makes no sense whatsoever,” he said.

She smiled. “I know.”

He looked at her. He looked at the rear-facing bench.

He looked at Cat-Head, smirking down at them both.

“Off we go!” He grinned and hopped over to the other side of the car, pulling her along with him.

Georgie tumbled onto the seat, laughing as Nicholas landed on top of her.

“Much better,” he growled.

This just made her giggle more. “I didn’t realize this could be so much fun.”

“You have no idea,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

ice She pulled back, just far enough to look at him with a mischievous smile.

ed to “I thought you said your kisses had not been legion.”

He growled again, his weight settling on her in a thrillingly possessive manner. “I know enough to know I’m going to enjoy our wedding night immensely.”

t. “Just you?” she teased.

His eyes sobered, and he brought her hand to his mouth. “Georgie, I promise you that I will do everything in my power to make it a pleasurable experience for you.”

hem. He looked so serious; it made her smile. It made her want to make him smile. She reached up and touched his cheek. “Surely more than pleasurable.”

sefully He paused before saying, “It can be difficult for a woman the first time.”

ponse. She stared up at him. Could he be speaking from experience? “But you haven’t . . . I mean . . . Not with a woman who hasn’t . . .”

He shook his head. “No. No, of course not. But I . . .” He cleared his throat. “I’ve spoken with people.”

Georgie touched his cheek. He looked terribly embarrassed, and she smiled at him for it. She supposed some women wanted a husband with leagues of experience. Leagues of experience with leagues of women.

ugh.

aid, She *liked* that Nicholas had not been with many women before her. She didn’t want him comparing her to other women. And after the way society had treated her following the whole Freddie Oakes affair, she’d decide if it wasn’t good for the goose, the gander could damn well do without.

“Georgie?” Nicholas said with soft amusement. “Where’d you go?”

“Hmm?”

He kissed the corner of her mouth. “You look far too serious right n

“Just thinking.”

“Thinking, eh? You shouldn’t be thinking.”

She could not help but smile. “No?”

riage, “If you have the capacity for thought, I must not be doing a very good
of this.”

of her. “No, not at all, I—Oh!”

ch His hand continued to do devilish things to the back of her knee. “Like
that, did you?”

“Where did you learn this?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Making most of it up as I go along.”

mile. Georgie sighed, then sighed again. Because this was really just the
loveliest way to pass a long carriage ride.

ve And lucky for them, they had all day.

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too.

“Georgie?” Nicholas said with soft amusement. “Where’d you go?”

“Hmm?”

He kissed the corner of her mouth. “You look far too serious right now.”

“Just thinking.”

“Thinking, eh? You shouldn’t be thinking.”

She could not help but smile. “No?”

“If you have the capacity for thought, I must not be doing a very good job of this.”

“No, not at all, I—Oh!”

His hand continued to do devilish things to the back of her knee. “Like that, did you?”

“Where did you learn this?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Making most of it up as I go along.”

Georgie sighed, then sighed again. Because this was really just the loveliest way to pass a long carriage ride.

And lucky for them, they had all day.

Chapter 17

By the end of the day, Georgie was in a mostly wonderful mood.

Mostly.

Cat-Head's hammock had held for a stunning five hours. Five glorious lovely hours of kissing, then napping, then kissing again. And somewhere in the middle of all the napping and the kissing, Nicholas treated her to an incredibly detailed, thoroughly exciting, gruesomely recounted tale of the previous evening's compound fracture.

Georgie was riveted. She wasn't quite as immune to the gore as she would have liked—her stomach lurched when Nicholas described how he sliced the bone back into place, but only a little, and she was sure it was something she could get used to with a little practice. She said so to Nicholas, and he admitted that he felt the same way when he was first beginning his studies. Some of his classmates had even fainted. They had taken a ribbing, but apparently it was all quite normal and to be expected. Almost a rite of passage for any new group of medical students.

Georgie was not used to tales of men fainting. Whenever someone gossiped about someone swooning it always seemed to be a woman. She had long suspected, though, that this had less to do with a so-called weaker constitution and more to do with corsets. As someone who knew quite intimately the sensation of losing one's breath, Georgie could not imagine who had thought it was a good idea to strap people into garments that squeezed the ribs, compressed the lungs and generally made it impossible to do anything that required energy or movement.

Or breathing.

The case of her sister and the fire at court was a prime example. Bill was the most athletic and coordinated person Georgie knew, male or female. He had once ridden a horse backward, for heaven's sake. If she couldn't manage to walk through a room in hoops and a corset without setting someone

fire, Georgie could not imagine who could.

Very well, hundreds of girls had made it through presentation at court without committing accidental arson, but Georgie was sure that not a one of them had been the least bit comfortable in her gown.

At any rate, no one ever talked about men fainting, so Georgie was secretly delighted to hear that more than one of them hit the floor the first time they saw a body cut open.

It seemed wrong to her that women could not be doctors. Surely a woman doctor could do a better job treating female patients. She *had* to have a familiarity with the female anatomy than a man did. It was simple common sense.

She'd said as much to Nicholas. He'd looked over at her with a considering sort of expression, then said, "You're probably right."

Georgie was already leaning forward, girding herself for an argument. When none came, she sat back, momentarily speechless.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked.

"It has just occurred to me that most of the time, adages become adages because they are true."

This made him grin, and he turned more directly to face her. "What mean?"

"You took the wind right out of my sails."

His smile grew. "Is that a good thing?"

"It is for you." She, on the other hand, didn't quite know what to do for herself.

He laughed. "Did you expect me to argue that women should not be allowed to become doctors?"

"I didn't expect such a wholesale capitulation."

"It isn't capitulation if I was never on the other side of the issue," he pointed out.

"No, I suppose not." She thought about that for a moment. "I've never heard you express an opinion on the subject, though."

"It's not something to which I've given much thought," he admitted with a shrug. "It doesn't affect me directly."

"Doesn't it?" She frowned. His statement bothered her, although she did not precisely put her finger on the reason why. "If you worked alongside women," she said, thinking aloud, "you might view your patients differently."

You might see the entire world differently."

He regarded her for a long moment, then said, “This conversation seems to have taken a very serious turn.”

She nodded slowly, looking down at their hands when his fingers found hers. He gave a little tug, and she let herself be pulled into his embrace.

“I don’t want to be serious right now,” he murmured.

Nor did she, not when he was whispering naughty words against her ear.

And that was how the morning went. Kissing and conversation, conversation and kissing. It was enough to make a woman think that a week’s journey by carriage might actually be something to look forward to.

But all too soon it was midday, and the traveling party came to a stop. So did everything wonderful—including Cat-Head’s success in the hunt.

Georgie *had* to take him out. It would be unconscionable to leave an animal as comfortable as he seemed to be.

All three cats had a little break, as did most human members of the traveling party, and then they all piled back in to their respective carriages.

Judyth and Blanche curled up in their baskets (Blanche only after being bribed with an extra piece of cheese), but Cat-Head was having none of it.

The sound he made when Georgie attempted to put him back in his hammock . . .

“Good night,” Nicholas exclaimed. “Are you gutting him?”

Georgie turned and glared, even as Cat-Head pushed against her forehead with his right front paw. “Do you want to try?”

“God no.”

Georgie moved the paw from her forehead and slid it through the appropriate hole in the hammock webbing, only to be rewarded with a nip and another paw, this one under her chin. “I don’t know why he’s making such a fuss,” she grunted, dislodging the second paw from her person. “He was perfectly fine this morning.”

Nicholas rubbed his chin. “Do you think he can remember that far back?”

The look Georgie gave him was not particularly warm.

“You yourself said he’s not very bright.”

“He’s bright enough to remember this morning,” she retorted.

Nicholas did not look swayed.

And thus began the second half of the day’s travel.

After suffering through nearly an hour of ungodly howling, Georgie found a position that Cat-Head seemed to sanction, and she spent the night there.

ems to three hours rocking him like a baby. At one point Nicholas offered to t
over for her, but Cat-Head had clearly decided it was Georgie or no on
und after five minutes, it was agreed that it was best for everyone's sanity i
: Georgie took him back.

By the time they reached their designated stopping point in Alconbu
: neck. Georgie's arms were so tired her muscles were shaking. And if the phy
discomfort wasn't enough, she was full of inner turmoil. Every time sh
two- looked at Nicholas she remembered how they had spent the morning. S
to. shouldn't have felt shy, but she did, and—

p. And No. She didn't feel shy. That's not what this was.

nmock. She waited for another burst of clarity, another eureka moment that
y define this strange, conflicted feeling in her chest, but none was forthc

how All she knew was that she had *feelings*.

About Nicholas.

For Nicholas?

ges. No. That was impossible. She'd known him her whole life. It was ill
g to think that everything between them would change just because they
f it. placed rings on their fingers. It had only been a day, for heaven's sake.

"Georgie?" the man in question murmured.

She looked down. He'd already exited the carriage and was holding
hand to help her disembark. He looked tired, although not nearly as tire
ahead she felt.

"Let's get something to eat," he said as she put her hand in his.

She nodded, letting him help her down. Her feelings—whatever they
—were going to have to wait. Firstly, because she could not be certain
yowl nature of *his* feelings, and she was not prepared to ponder the possibili
ing one-sidedness, and secondly—and more urgently—she was so hungry
"He would have happily eaten an entire cow.

Cooked, of course. She wasn't a complete savage.

ack?" It was late enough when they arrived that everyone decided to eat ri
away, and she and Nicholas were led to what was clearly the second ni
spot in the dining room, at the end of a long table, scarred by use, but
thankfully clean. A sour-faced couple and their sour-faced son sat at th
end of the table, which was closer to the fire. They looked to be almost
with their meal, but Georgie was too tired and hungry to wait for them
finally vacate their seats. She'd be warm enough at the far end of the table.

ext "Are you hungry?" Nicholas asked as he held out her chair.

ake “Famished. And you?”

e, and “The same.” He took his seat across from her and set his hat on the t
f beside him. His hair was askew, with bits and pieces sticking out in
unexpected directions. It would never do in a formal drawing room, bu
ry, on the road she found it charming.

ysical “I’m half ready to eat the meat off their plates,” he said with a tip of
ie head toward the family at the far end of the table.

she But when a youth came by with cheese and a basket of bread, Georg
watched Nicholas stop following the food with his eyes as soon as he g
glimpse of the boy’s forearm.

might “That’s a nasty burn,” Nicholas said. He reached for the boy’s sleev
oming. “May I?”

The boy started to snatch his arm away, but he couldn’t due to the b
tucked under his arm. He quickly set it on the table, then tried to pull h
short sleeve down as he took a step back.

logical “It’s nothing, sir,” the youth said, shooting a look over his shoulder.
'd be back with the rest of your food in a moment.” He gave a quick bow
“sir” and a “ma’am,” and fled.

Georgie watched Nicholas fix his gaze on the doorway through whic
out his boy had disappeared. She watched him take a deep breath, look at the
ed as before him, hungry eyes flitting from the bread, to the cheese, and to th
bottle of wine.

And then again at the door.

y were And back to the bread, which he started to reach for, then stopped. I
of the as if he only had enough energy to do one thing, and thinking about th
ty of meant he couldn’t figure out what to do with the bread.

she He looked hungry . . . and resigned.

Georgie wanted to kiss him.

ght “He’ll be back in a moment with soup,” she said. Though to be hone
icest had no idea if soup or the boy would be forthcoming. They waited,
inexplicably leaving the food untouched, until a nervous-looking youn
woman came with two steaming bowls. She set them on the table and t
ie other to leave, but Nicholas caught her with a “Mistress?”

t done The woman had to stop and turn. “Sir?” She bobbed a quick curtsy t
to Nicholas, but she looked as if she wanted nothing more than to run.

“The boy who was just in before you,” Nicholas said. “His arm—”

“He’ll bide, milord,” the woman said quickly.

“But—”

able “Please, sir,” she said, her voice dropping to a nervous whisper. “Mr. Kipperstrung, he don’t like us tending to nothing but work until after the meal’s been cleared away.”

“But the boy’s arm—”

his An older man—Mr. Kipperstrung, Georgie presumed—emerged from the door to the kitchens and made a great show of planting his fists on his hips. The young woman turned back to the table and made more of a show of slicing the bread that sat between Georgie and Nicholas.

got a “Martha!” Mr. Kipperstrung gruffed. “Dinnit be justen thand.” His voice made no sense to Georgie, but his intent was clearly to summon Martha from their table.

ottle “Martha?” Georgie said quietly. “If you please, how did the boy bur- is too- arm?”

Nicholas looked at Georgie and for the life of her she couldn’t tell if she was being stern, encouraging, or something else entirely. All her life she’d said a felt confident that she could read him, or at least his general mood. Now she’d gone and married him, it was as if he was a stranger.

ch the “Please, ma’am,” the woman practically begged while making a mess of spread the bread. “We’ll be turned out.”

ie Georgie tried to meet her eyes, but Martha turned back to the bread, slicing another two ragged pieces before setting down the knife.

t was Georgie then looked at Nicholas. Was he going to say something? Should she say something? Was it even their place to do so?

e boy Nicholas let out a breath, and for a moment he seemed to sink further into his chair.

Then, with a weary inhale, he stood up.

“Milord?” Mr. Kipperstrung called out. “Did Martha make a mess of dinner? She’s as useless as her—”

g “No, no,” Nicholas said, and Georgie watched him spread a smile across his face that did not reach his eyes. He patted Martha on the shoulder and stepped deftly around her. “She’s neat and quick. My wife and I are most grateful.”

o The burly man did not look convinced. “You need only tell me and I’ll have ’er—”

Nicholas did not let him finish. He held up a hand, then turned to Martha and said, “If you please, my wife is hungry and tired. Would you see her to bed?”

her room and make sure she has whatever she requires?”

r. And before Georgie could say, “Now wait just a moment,” to Nicho
he he’d started for the door.

“My good man,” he said in a tone that Georgie thought almost pomp
am a doctor, and the boy I saw a moment ago has a burn on his arm in
m the I am quite interested.”

hips. Mr. Kipperstrung let out a loud snort. “’Tis but a scratch, milord. He
of clumsy boy, and he’s lucky I keep him. He needs to learn his job prop
he won’t get hurt.”

words “Nevertheless,” Nicholas said, his voice just slightly clipped. “I hav
a away treated a burn of that nature in quite some time, and I could do with the
n his practice. After all, it’s not like we can go and burn people for the purpo
healing them later.”

Georgie choked on a *highly* inappropriate bubble of laughter. That li
he sentence had been for her benefit, of that she was sure.

ne’d Mr. Kipperstrung seemed not to know what to say, especially as Nic
w that was already walking smoothly past him. In fact, he only seemed to reg
power of speech once Nicholas had already disappeared through the
ss of doorway, and even then, all he could do was splutter and stomp after h

Several moments of extended silence followed. Georgiana blinked. ‘
slicing she blinked again. Had she just been completely dismissed?

“What just happened?” she said out loud.

hould Martha eyed her warily, clearly not sure whether the question was
rhetorical.

r into Georgie set down the spoon she only just realized she was still holdi
She looked up at Martha.

f the Martha managed the weakest of smiles. “Should I take you to your r
Georgie shook her head, murmuring to herself, “I can’t believe he ju
me here.”

ross “I . . . ah . . .” Martha wrung her hands, watching the kitchen door as
is he expected flames to shoot forth at any moment.

ost “I could help, you know,” Georgie said. She looked at Martha. “He
even ask.”

I’ll “Ma’am?”

Georgie stood.

artha “*Ma’am.*” Now Martha sounded a little panicked.

er to “Please take me into the kitchen.”

"What?" Martha's face drained of color. "I mean, are you sure?"
 las, "Entirely so," Georgie said in her best *I-am-a-woman-of-means-and shall-not-be-crossed* voice.
 ous, "I It was a somewhat new voice for her, but she'd had very good role r
 which "But ma'am, it's the kitchen."
 e's a "I assume that is where Mr. Kipperstrung just took Mr. Rokesby."
 er and "You mean the doctor?"
 "The very same."
 en't "Oh, no, ma'am," Martha said. "You don't want to go there."
 e Which made Georgie quite sure there was no place she'd rather be.
 ose of Georgie held her smile firmly in place. "I rather think I do."
 "But you're a *lady*."
 This didn't seem to be a question, so Georgie did not answer it. Inst
 ast started to make her way around Nicholas's now abandoned chair. Mart
 looked fit to cry.
 holas "If you please, ma'am, my lady." Martha scurried forward, practical
 ain his throwing herself between Georgie and the door. "The doctor—your hu
 he said—"
 im. "I believe he said something about whatever my needs were."
 Then "Your meal . . ." Martha said weakly. "I could carry it up."
 There was a resounding crash from the kitchen. Martha made an aw
 step toward the door just as Nicholas strode back through it, ducking to
 the doorway with a limp boy slung over his shoulder.
 "Georgie!" Martha called out in what was clearly concern and surpr
 ing. That stopped Georgie cold. "Excuse me?"
 "Georgie," Martha said, pointing at Nicholas.
 oom?" "His name is Georgie?" Nicholas asked Martha.
 ist left "Me clotheid brother," Martha said, using the colorful Scottish mod
 without a lick of a Scottish accent.
 s if she "And his name is Georgie?" Georgie asked Martha.
 Martha nodded.
 didn't "My name is Georgie," Georgie said, her palm flattened on her ches
 Martha looked aghast. Whether she was horrified at the prospect of
 with a man's name or at a lady suggesting a tavern maid call her by sai
 name—this was unclear.
 She also seemed entirely unaware she was making such a dramatic f
 Georgie, on the other hand, suddenly realized she no longer felt ever

little bit tired. There was no way Nicholas was going to get out of letting help this time.

The other Georgie picked that moment to groan. If Nicholas reacted to the noise, neither Georgie saw it. “Martha,” he said, “your brother is going to be fine. But I can’t fix his arm in the kitchen. “Why not?” Martha said, swinging her head around looking for— Mr. Kipperstrung, who burst through the doorway in an incongruous cloud of flour. “Why not?” he demanded.

Nicholas clenched his teeth, and Georgie could see that he was losing patience. “Why not here?” she asked cheerfully, swinging her hand across the expanse of the table. When no one responded, she lowered her arm, and then deftly started to sweep the leftover mess from the sour-faced family table. Martha hadn’t been able to get to yet.

“Wait,” Nicholas said. He looked surprised when this actually worked. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him. He shook his head slightly and then maneuvered Boy-Georgie to the other end of the table. “What happened?” Georgie asked.

Nicholas gave her a brief glance before turning back to his patient. “I fainted the moment I touched his arm.”

“He tried to tell me it didn’t hurt,” Martha whispered. “May I have a small pot of hot water and some clean linen?” Nicholas asked the proprietor.

Mr. Kipperstrung stared, mouth agape. “Me, fetch water?” Nicholas smiled. “Yes, please. If you will.”

“How can I help?” Georgie asked with cheerful eagerness.

“Honestly?” Nicholas asked her.

She nodded.

“Feed me.”

t.
a lady
id

face.
n a

little bit tired. There was no way Nicholas was going to get out of letting her help this time.

The other Georgie picked that moment to groan.

If Nicholas reacted to the noise, neither Georgie saw it. “Martha,” he said, “your brother is going to be fine. But I can’t fix his arm in the kitchen.”

“Why not?” Martha said, swinging her head around looking for—

Mr. Kipperstrung, who burst through the doorway in an incongruous cloud of flour. “Why not?” he demanded.

Nicholas clenched his teeth, and Georgie could see that he was losing his patience. “Why not here?” she asked cheerfully, swinging her hand across the expanse of the table. When no one responded, she lowered her arm, and less-than-deftly started to sweep the leftover mess from the sour-faced family that Martha hadn’t been able to get to yet.

“Wait,” Nicholas said. He looked surprised when this actually worked, and everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him. He shook his head slightly and then maneuvered Boy-Georgie to the other end of the table.

“What happened?” Georgie asked.

Nicholas gave her a brief glance before turning back to his patient. “He fainted the moment I touched his arm.”

“He tried to tell me it didn’t hurt,” Martha whispered.

“May I have a small pot of hot water and some clean linen?” Nicholas asked the proprietor.

Mr. Kipperstrung stared, mouth agape. “Me, fetch water?”

Nicholas smiled. “Yes, please. If you will.”

“How can I help?” Georgie asked with cheerful eagerness.

“Honestly?” Nicholas asked her.

She nodded.

“Feed me.”

Chapter 18

It was only when Nicholas climbed the stairs to his room at the Alcont Arms that he realized two full hours had passed.

Georgie had been amazing. Spectacular. True, she'd looked at him as if he might be a lunatic after he'd asked her to feed him, but only for a moment.

Once she'd realized what he was about, she gave him a businesslike meal and turned to the food on the table, ripping off small bits of bread, cheese, and something he hoped was sliced beef. Piece by piece she popped them into his mouth so that he could keep his hands free to work on Boy-George.

When he'd asked her to take Jameson and go back out to the carriage to hunt for his personal medical supplies she hadn't balked that he was sending her away from the area, she just did it, then came back and continued to feed him food while he assessed the situation and began the initial debridement of the wound.

Georgie had rolled her sleeves up to match his and waited for him to tell her. She wiped his brow, helped remove bits of burned skin from the area he was working on, and, when he asked, held the candle closer. She even dabbed away a drip of wax with her bare hand.

But once she'd got involved with tending to the boy's arm, she'd forgotten to keep up with supper. He'd forgotten, too, but this was typical. Hungry as he was, the passage of time—none of it seemed to interfere with his concentration on the boy he was with a patient. Only his hair falling in his face (which Georgie pushed back) and the waning of the light (which Georgie fixed with a second candle) interrupted his systematic attention to the boy's arm.

It was not as simple an endeavor as he'd first thought. The burn was more than a day old, and no one had cleaned it properly. Bits of dirt and dust were embedded themselves in the tender skin, and Nicholas thought it a minor miracle that there was no sign of infection. He worked carefully and methodically—he liked this type of medical care; there was great satisfaction

to be had when one could see results as one went along—but it took time especially when he was trying extra-hard not to cause the boy any more

When he'd finally got it down to just some minor burning at the edge of the main injury, Nicholas looked up from Boy-Georgie's arm to Girl-Georgie's face and saw that she was literally falling asleep.

"Darling," he whispered.

She jerked and opened her eyes.

"You should go up to bed."

"No," she said blearily, shaking her head. "I'm helping you."

"And you've been indispensable," he assured her. "But I'm almost cured. And you're dead on your feet."

She blinked and looked down. At her feet, he could only presume.

He smiled. He couldn't help it.

"Don't you need the candlelight?" she asked.

"There are still people about," he said. "Someone else can hold it. Georgie will be fine, I promise." And then, when she did not look convinced, he

"I would not let you leave if I were not sure I could manage without you." This seemed to mollify her, and she yawned. "You're certain?"

He nodded. "Go. You'll want some time to yourself before bed, I'm

"I'll wait up," she promised.

But she didn't. Wait up, that was. Nicholas had no doubt she'd tried. He'd been stuck in the dining room much longer than he'd expected. As he was finishing with the boy's wound, Martha came forward shyly and asked about a lump on her elbow. Then Mr. Kipperstrung confessed to a terrible earache, and Mrs. Kipperstrung—Nicholas still could not quite believe *she* was a Mrs. Kipperstrung—pulled him aside and asked if he might take a look at her bunions.

Bunions. Ah, the romance of medicine.

By the time he entered his room, he was bone tired. He moved quietly, suspected Georgie would not be awake when he opened the door, and found she was lying on her side, one hand near her face, her chest rising and falling softly with each breath.

"It seems that we're to be denied our wedding night once again," he murmured. He barely made a sound; it was really no more than a movement of his mouth. But he wanted to say it, to feel the words on his lips. He wanted to stroke her hair, too, to brush aside the wisps that tickled her face. But he did not want to wake her. He needed her, but she needed sleep more, a

ne, suspected that he did, as well.

e pain. Nicholas did not know if he could make their first time perfect, but l
es of determined to try, and he knew this did not mean mauling her while th
were both so tired they could barely function.

He looked down at Georgie, asleep in a moonbeam across her pillow
of their families' matchmaking, a more contrived visual could not have
concocted. The moonlight through the window was romantic, and his
sleeping wife's long plait falling off the side of the bed was oddly invi
Nicholas was gripped by a whimsical urge to lift her braid and put it on
lone. pillow next to her.

He could not imagine what it was like to have so much hair one had
contain it before bed. Nicholas had never grown his hair long; it simply
wasn't his style, and frankly, it seemed more of a nuisance than it was
His brother Andrew had once worn his past his shoulders, but he'd spe
o on. I nearly a decade at sea as a privateer, and apparently queued hair was a
e said, expected aspect of the role.

ou.” Nicholas liked Georgie's hair. He'd never seen it down, or at least n
since they were children. But even pulled back, the color was an under
sure.” beacon of warmth. It was red, but not *red*, not in the way one usually th
of redheads. Which was to say, it wasn't orange.

, but They'd napped a bit in the carriage, and during one stretch while she
s he dozing and he was not, he'd peeked down at the strands, marveling tha
sked was somehow a different color—red and brown and blond and even a
ble he'd swear were white, and they all combined to make something he c
: there only describe as the morning dawn on a winter's day.

a look He changed into his nightshirt and crawled into bed, taking care not
disturb her. But as he drifted off, it occurred to him that there was noth
more welcome on a winter's day than that first glimpse of sun, that pro
ly; he of warmth. And even though he'd tried so hard to give her the space sh
indeed, needed to sleep, his body felt the pull of hers, and he moved. He curve
falling behind her, and his hand found hers, and he slept.

Georgie came awake slowly, one sense at a time. The cool morning air
ment face, the pink of the sunlight filtering through her eyelids. She felt imp
wanted cozy and cocooned under the quilt, and even as her brain slowly rose t
it he her sleepy fog, she wanted to burrow in, to press herself into the warm
nd he the strength.

Into Nicholas.

Her eyes flew open.

He was in bed with her. Which shouldn't have been shocking, except she had no memory of how he'd got there. What had happened the night before? Nothing intimate, surely. They'd helped the boy, the other George, and then Nicholas had insisted that she go up to the room and get ready for bed. He'd thought she'd want some privacy to get ready. She'd thought so considerate. And then . . .

She must have fallen asleep.

She closed her eyes again, abject in her embarrassment. What sort of case was this? She fell asleep on her wedding night? Or the night after the wedding night, case was. But it didn't matter. She was still a terrible wife.

She stayed like that for several seconds, trying to hold herself utterly still. What was she supposed to do now? Wake him? Surely not. Should she slip out of the bed? His arm was thrown over her waist. Could she move without disturbing him?

Could she move *herself* without disturbing him?

She gave it a little test, edging forward just a smidge.

Gremmremph.

As noises went, it was sleepy. And adorable. And she wished she could actually see him, but they were both on their sides, and she was facing away from him and if her miniscule motion elicited his sleepy mumble, she'd surely wake him if she tried to turn.

But maybe if she moved just a *little* more. And then a little more after that, inch by inch until she could slip out from under his arm. Then she could see what he looked like when he slept. Was he a quiet sleeper? What did his dreams play out on his face?

Were his lips closed, or did he hold them ever-so-slightly open? And what about his eyes? Had she ever truly looked at him when they were closed? Had he held a blink for long enough for someone else to remember the expression? Did he still look like a Rokesby if she could not see the electric blue of his irises?

She pushed herself forward again, wiggling across the sheets, using her concentration just to move an inch. And then she waited, because it wouldn't do to move too quickly. She needed to be sure he'd settled back into sleep before she moved again.

And maybe she also needed one last moment before leaving the bed

because nothing had ever felt quite so perfect as his hand on her hip.

She sighed. She loved his hands. Big and strong and capable, with flat square nails. Was she mad to find a man's hands so attractive?

Then she felt him move, a yawning, stretching motion, the kind one when one wasn't quite yet awake. "Georgie," he said, his voice sleepy and husky.

"Good morning," she whispered.

"Georgie," he said again. He sounded a bit more lucid this time. And happy.

"You were sleeping," she said, not really knowing what to do with herself as her "I didn't want to disturb you."

He yawned, and she took the moment to rise from the bed, but his hand tightened on her. "Don't go," he said.

She did not leave the bed, but she did sit up. "We probably need to get ready. It's—" She looked around. If there was a clock, she didn't see it. "I don't know what time it is."

He rustled in the bed behind her, and out of the corner of her eye she saw him sit up and look toward the window. "It's barely dawn," he said. "The sun is still very low on the horizon."

"Oh."

What was he really trying to tell her? That she didn't need to get out of bed yet? That he didn't want her to get out of bed?

"I love the dawn," he said softly.

She should turn around. He was right there behind her, close enough that she could feel the heat from his body, even beyond the hand that still rested on her hip. But she was nervous, and she felt oddly misplaced, and she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do.

And no one liked not knowing what to do.

"You were asleep when I came in last night," he said. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"Thank you, I mean—" She shook her head, just a little, in that way she did when they weren't sure what to say. "I mean, thank you," she said. Not that it sounded much different backward. "I was very tired." She turned to face him. She was a coward if she didn't, and she did not want to be a coward. "I meant to wait for you."

He smiled. "It's all right."

"No, I don't think it is."

“Georgie,” he said, affection coloring his voice. “You needed to sleep.
lat Hell, I needed to sleep.”

“Oh.” Did that mean he did not want her? That didn’t seem to make
made after the hours they had spent in the carriage. He’d kissed her like he w
blurred her. He’d kissed her like he wanted *more*.

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Stop thinking so hard
d She frowned at him, taking in the amusement in his azure eyes. “Ho
d stop thinking so hard?” she asked, with perhaps just a touch of peevish
her voice. This was easy for him. Or if not easy, at least not quite so
herself. complicated and new.

He gave a shrug. “I don’t know, but I swear if you think any harder,
and will start coming out of your ears.”

“Steam. Really.”

He grinned. “Smoke?”

t. “I *Nicholas*.”

“You’d be surprised what they teach us these days in medical schoo
e saw said, his expression oh-so-innocent.

The sun “Apparently so.”

His fingers walked their way up her thigh, crossing to her hand, and
up her forearm. “I’d like to kiss you again,” he said softly.

She nodded. She wanted that, too, but she wasn’t sure how to put it
: of bed words. Or even into action. It wasn’t that she felt frozen—that was far
cold a sensation to describe what had come over her body.

But she was still. Utterly motionless save for her breath, which had,
i that opposition to everything else, begun to quicken. She didn’t know how
ested wasn’t move; she’d lost the ability to do so. All she could do was react, and on
touched her . . . really touched her . . .

She wasn’t sure what would happen, only that it would be like nothi
: to she’d ever known.

He sat up, his nightshirt gaping a little at the neck to reveal a sprinkl
people chest hair. It seemed so intimate, especially since she, too, was dressed
again. loose white muslin of sleep.

“Georgie,” he said, and his hand came to her cheek, part caress, part
urned entreaty. He leaned in, and she leaned in, and they kissed.

It was exactly how it had been in the carriage.

And at the same time completely different.

He groaned her name again, and his other hand came up so that he w

ep. cradling her head, holding her close as he explored. The kiss was deep and hot, and it stole everything from her in a way that made her just want to give more.

wanted The entire moment was a contradiction—the same but different, steady but giving. It was all so new to her, and yet he seemed to know exactly what to do.

How do I take in exactly the right way to make her simmer with desire?

“Tell me what to do,” she whispered.

“You’re already doing it.”

steam She did not see how this could be the truth, but she wasn’t sure she could. She just kept kissing him, doing what felt right and trusting that he would tell her if it was wrong.

He touched her leg, his hand trailing delicious shivers along her skin. “Tell me what to do,” he whispered.

l,” he She felt herself smile. “You know what to do.”

“Do I?”

then She drew back, feeling the confusion on her face. “Haven’t you done this before?”

He shook his head.

into “But—but—you’re a man.”

too He shrugged, the very picture of nonchalance. But his eyes didn’t quite meet hers. “Everyone has to have a first time.”

in “But—But—” This made no sense. Men of their society sowed their oats before they married. It’s what they did. It was how they learned. Why would he be any different?

“Do you mind that you’re my first?” Nicholas asked.

ng “No!” Goodness, that had come out with a bit more force than she’d intended. “No, not at all. I’m merely surprised.”

ing of “Because I’m such a rogue?” he said with a self-deprecating quirk of his brow.

“No, because you’re so good at it.”

His mouth slid into a wide, naughty smile. “You think I’m good, do you?” She covered her face with her hands. Dear God, she was blushing so much she was going to burn her palms. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Oh, I think you did.”

vas She made a vee with the fore and middle fingers of her right hand and

, and it peered through the space. “Maybe just a little?”
ant to “Just a little bit good?” he teased. “That’s not much of a complimen
“Do you see how embarrassed I am?”
aling He nodded solemnly.
r what “And you have no remorse.”
Again with the solemn nod. “None.”
and She snapped her fingers back together.
“Georgie,” he murmured, gently prying her hands from her face. “If
any good at this, as you say, it is only because I’m with the right perso
“But how do you know what to do?” she asked suspiciously. Because
cared. didn’t . . . well, they were going to be in trouble. She’d been counting
uld tell being the one to move things along.
“All I’ve done thus far is kiss you,” he said, “and I must confess, I h
1. “You done that before.”
Her eyes narrowed. “With whom?”
His lips parted with surprise, and then he let out a bark of laughter. ‘
you really want to know?”
e this “Wouldn’t you want to know if it were me?”
He didn’t answer right away. “I’m not sure,” he said.
“Well, I am. Who was it?”
He rolled his eyes. “The first time was—”
iite “It was more than *once*?”
He poked her lightly in the shoulder. “Don’t ask questions if you do
: wild want the answers, Georgiana Bridgerton.”
Wasn’t “Rokesby,” she reminded him.
“Rokesby.” His eyes softened. “So you are.”
She touched his shoulder, letting her fingers trail seductively over hi
| nightshirt to the warm skin of his neck. “Although . . .”
His voice hitched. “Although?”
f his Her eyes met his. A strange womanly thrill zipped along her skin. “I
would say,” she said slowly, “that I’m not truly a Rokesby yet.”
He kissed her, once, and lightly, whispering his words against her lip
you?” “Then I suppose we will have to do something about that.”
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Chapter 19

Nicholas had never planned to remain a virgin so long. He had certainly never explicitly thought to himself—*I shall not lie with a woman unless we are wed.*

He had no moral objection to sexual congress before marriage, nor any religious one, either. Perhaps a medical objection—he knew far too much about syphilis to find attraction in indiscriminate intercourse.

But he'd never made a conscious decision to hold on to his virginity until he lay with his wife. It was more that the opportunity never seemed to come of itself. Or at least not the right opportunity, and the thought of doing the deed simply to have it done had never sat well with him.

If he made love to a woman it should mean something. It didn't have to mean they were married. It didn't even have to mean he was in love. But it ought to mean more than the ticking of a box.

Maybe things would have been different if he'd done it when he was young, when all his friends were foolish and immodest and eager for pleasure. It might have happened—hell, it probably *would* have happened in his first year at Cambridge had it not been for an ill-timed head cold. A number of his friends had gone out carousing, and they'd ended up at a high-end brothel. Nicholas had meant to be with them, but he'd taken ill the day before, and the thought of adding a hangover to his congestion was more than he could bear.

So he'd stayed in his rooms, and his friends were taught the so-called art of manhood. He'd listened to their boasts because—well, because he was nineteen years old. Did anyone think he *wouldn't* listen?

But he'd also thought he might learn something. Then he realized that a number of his friends had a clue what they were talking about, and if he wanted to really learn something he ought to ask a woman.

He never did, though. Who would he ask?

But he kept listening, and over the years men talked and boasted, us when they were slightly—or extremely—intoxicated. Most of it was u shite, but every now and then he'd hear something that made him think —*That makes some sense*. And he'd file it away in his brain.

Because he'd want that information eventually. When he did finally love to a woman, he wanted to do a good job of it.

That time had finally come, and now, as he kissed his wife, he realiz he was nervous. Not because this would be new for him, but because it be new for her. He *knew* he was going to enjoy it. Hell, he was damn n certain he was about to have the best morning of his life.

But he wasn't sure he could make this the best morning of *her* life. I wasn't even sure he could make it pleasant, or fun, or without pain.

Although come to think of it, if this wasn't good for Georgie, it was: going to end up being the best morning of Nicholas's life after all.

If ever there was a time to excel at one's studies, this was it.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He had been staring at her for so long, he realized. He'd made her u

"I want to know you," he said, his voice soft with desire. "I want to every inch of you."

She blushed at that, the faint pink of emotion shimmering across her and neck.

He kissed her brow, then her temple, then the tiny indentation near h

"You're perfect," he whispered.

"Nobody's perfect," she said. But her voice was shaky, as if the repl ned— automatic, an ingrained attempt to bring levity to a moment that was a group disquieting in its intensity.

"Perfect for me," he murmured.

"You don't know that."

He smiled down at her. "Why do you keep saying such silly things? Her eyes widened.

"You"—he kissed her nose—"are"—and now her mouth—"perfect" was mouth again, but this time with a growl—"for me."

He gazed down at her again, pleased with his handiwork. She blinke at none several times in rapid succession, and he could not help but feel deligh d to he'd managed to so thoroughly discombobulate her. It was hard to tell expression was one of surprise or desire—maybe a combination of the maybe something else altogether—but her lips were parted and her eye

ually wide, and he wanted to drown in them both.

ter How could he have lived his entire life knowing her and not knowin
k needed *this*?

Never had he seen anything as beautiful as Georgie's skin, pale and
make luminous in the early morning sunlight.

Her nightgown had not been designed to entice; it was a basic, utilit
ed that thing, much like his own, but as he slid the hem up her slender legs, in
t would tantalizing inch, he was grateful for it. At some point in the rushed we
ear plans, he'd heard her mother bemoan the lack of a proper trousseau. H
wanted to see Georgie in French silk and Belgian lace, but not yet. He
He think he could take it.

"You have to tell me what you like," he said.

n't She nodded, her eyes shy.

He touched her thigh, his large hand skimming over the front before
gave it a gentle squeeze. "Do you like that?"

"Yes."

neasy. His thumb slid from position, stroking the soft skin of her inner thigh
know careful not to stray too high.

She wasn't ready for that yet. And maybe he wasn't, either. If he tou
: face her there, felt the heat of her, he might explode.

He had to make this last. He was as hard as he'd ever been in his life
ier ear. despite this being new, he felt the primal instinct of man rising within,
and fast. He wanted to claim her.

y was He wanted to mark her as his.

The need was so fierce and intense he barely recognized himself.

When he spoke again his voice was shaky. "What else do you like?"

She looked at him as if she couldn't believe he was even asking.

"Everything," she whispered. "I've liked everything you've done."

"Everything?" he said in a low growl. It was almost embarrassing ho
much he liked hearing that.

'—her She nodded shyly. "I really like it when—"

"What?" he asked urgently. He had to know.

d "When you kissed me," she whispered, bringing her fingers to skin j
t that below her collarbone. "Here."

if her He sucked in his breath. *Here* was where the swell of her breast beg
two or *Here* was a short journey to the pink tip he was aching to discover.

as were *Here* was an excellent place to begin a journey.

g he He replaced her fingers with his mouth, his tongue drawing lazy, sensuous circles on her skin. She arched toward him, moaning with pleasure, and the sound stoked the fire that was already raging inside him.

arian ch by lding e didn't "You're so soft," he murmured. Had her skin ever been touched by the sun? He wanted to explore her, every inch of her. He wanted a map of her body, and he wanted it drawn on his own.

Dear God, where were these thoughts coming from? He was a scientist and a poet. And yet when he kissed her—her lips, her cheek, her neck—he swore the world broke out into song.

he Her nightgown tied at the neck with a simple bow, and he gave it a little tug, watching as the loop of the bow grew smaller and smaller until it eventually popped free. He didn't think the gown was meant to be low-cut over her body, but the loosened neckline gave him access to a wider expanse of her skin. He kissed one of those newly revealed spots, and then another.

And then another, because he couldn't seem to resist a single inch of her. Her nightgown couldn't be lowered any farther, so he moved his lips to the muslin, skimming along her plump breast until he found the peak.

She gasped. He took it in his mouth, and she gasped again, but this time it was colored by a moan of pleasure.

g, and hard "Do you like that?" he asked, thinking he might very well die if she said no.

"Yes."

He took her other breast in his hand, playing with her nipple through the fabric of her nightgown. She writhed beneath him, breathless in her desire. He felt like a god.

"I didn't know they were so sensitive," Georgie said.

This surprised him. "You've never touched them?"

ow She shook her head.

"You should." Nicholas nearly came right then, just thinking about himself touching herself.

just "Is it the same way for you?" she asked.

an. It took him a moment to realize what she was asking, but once he caught her meaning, he sat up and whipped his nightshirt off so quickly he was stunned it did not tear.

"Touch me," he said.

Or he might have begged it.

usual She reached up and touched her fingertips to his chest, starting at the
d the center before trailing lightly to his nipple. He shuddered, and she snatched
her hand away.

the “No,” he said, barely recognizing his voice. “I liked it.”

her Her eyes met his.

“I want it,” he said.

tist, not She reached up again, and this time her touch was more sure. It was
could she suddenly knew what she was doing—he had a feeling neither of th
—but she was secure in the knowledge—bold, even—that she was bringing
ittle him pleasure.

ered It was a mighty aphrodisiac, that. He knew it, too. Every time she merged
with delight, his own body burned in response.

spanse “Can I kiss you?” she asked.

ther. “Please.”

f her. She sat up, her head tilting as she regarded him. The curiosity in her
s over was mesmerizing; she seemed to be studying every line and plane of his
chest. It was odd to be the object of such intense scrutiny, but he could
fault her for it; he wanted to do the same. And if it made her more
uder, comfortable in their marriage bed, he would stay there for hours.

She could explore him at will.

said Honestly, he could not imagine a lovelier torture.

He held his breath as she leaned forward and touched her lips to his
muscles jumped beneath his skin, but he held still. His heart was pounding
and it felt as if his soul was straining against his body. He wanted to grab
1 the push her down against the mattress. He wanted to lay his body atop her
sire. make her feel the heat of him, the weight.

He wanted her to understand what she did to him, to know that in that
moment he was hers to command.

And at the same time he wanted to dominate her.

ner He drew a shaky breath, the sound of it rushing past his lips like a gust,
and she looked up.

“Am I doing it right?” she asked.

ught He nodded. “*Too* right.”

is “Is that possible?”

“You’re killing me, Georgie.”

“But in a good way?” she murmured. It was barely a question; she was
clearly growing confident in her feminine prowess.

e
hed He nodded again, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. “I want you,” he said.

She didn’t say anything, but her eyes flared, and a pale blush washed across her cheeks.

“Will you let me?” he whispered.

She nodded, but she didn’t move. She needed him to remove the nightgown for her, he realized. She was not yet so bold.

em did He bunched some of the thin cotton in his fingers, never taking his eyes from hers as he slowly lifted the gown over her head. Her lower body was still concealed by the bedsheets, but the rest of her was bared to him.

oaned Gloriously.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said.

She blushed. Everywhere. But she didn’t try to cover herself.

He wanted to touch her breasts, to cup them in his hands, but even now he wanted to feel them pressed against his bare skin, so he gathered her in his arms and kissed her again.

not And again.

And again, holding her tight as he lowered her to the bed. He pressed his pelvis against her, his blood jumping in his veins as he asked, “Do you know what you do to me?”

1. His She nodded, but she looked unsure, so he said, “It changes when arousal gets bigger. Harder.”

ding, She nodded again, but again, her eyes held questions, so he touched her cheek and said, “Do you know what happens between a man and a woman?”

rs, “Yes,” she said. “My mother told me, and then Billie did.”

is For some reason this made him smile. “And how did their accounts compare?”

“My sister was far more frank.”

“And encouraging, I hope.”

asp, Georgie’s mouth curved into a tiny smirk. “Very much so. Although I said—” She cut herself off with a little shake of her head.

“Tell me.”

“No.” She shook her head, but she was smiling as she did so. “I can’t.”

“What did she say?”

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

was Nicholas brought his mouth to her ear. “I can get it out of you, you know I have my ways.”

to see And while she was twisting to get a look at his face again, he brought
fingers to her ribs and gave a little tickle.

d She shrieked.

“I thought I remembered that you were ticklish,” he said.

“Stop. Oh, please stop.”

“Tell me what Billie said.”

“Oh my—Nicholas, stop.”

eyes off “Tell me . . .”

till “All right, all right.”

He stopped tickling, but he didn’t move his hand.

She looked pointedly down.

“Not removing the threat just yet,” he murmured.

“You are the worst.”

more he He shrugged, wondering what spectacular god was granting them th
his much laughter in their first marriage bed.

Georgie pressed her lips together in a peevish expression before say
d his “She told me that I will be certain that it won’t work, but that I would l
feel wrong, and it would.”

He considered that. “Why is that embarrassing?”

“Because she said I would be certain it would not fit,” she ground o
used. “Why is *that* embarrassing?”

“It just *is*.”

her He rested his forehead against hers. “It’ll fit.”

man?” “How would you know?” she retorted.

And then he started to laugh. He laughed so hard he could no longer
himself up and he fell against her, his full weight pressing her down. H
laughed so hard he eventually had to roll off of her and onto his back.

He laughed so hard he didn’t even realize he was crying until she wi
away his tears.

she “I wasn’t trying to be funny,” she said.

“That’s what *made* it funny.”

She scowled. Or rather she tried to. He saw through it.

’t.” “It’ll fit,” he said again.

“You know this because you’re a doctor?”

He slid his hand to the juncture of her thighs. Even without venturin
know. In her folds, he could tell she was hot. And growing wet.

“I know this,” he said, “because you were made for me.”

at his She gasped a little, arching her back when he touched her more intimately. “And were you made for me?” she asked, her voice barely a breath.

He stroked her, every manly part of him puffing with pride and delight as she grew slick. “Let’s think about that,” he murmured. “You’re the first woman I’ve lain with. So yes, I think I was.”

Her eyes flared, and he took advantage of her delight by slipping one finger inside her. She was tight—tight enough that he understood why she might think his cock might not fit, but he was a patient man. His body was screaming for release, but he was more than happy to continue with his current ministrations, stroking and caressing until she was ready for his invasion.

“Do you feel that?” he asked, his voice husky with desire. “Do you feel how wet you are?”

is She nodded.

“That’s to make sure I fit. Your body changes too.”

ing, Her face lit with an expression of wonder. It was almost intellectual. be Maybe it *was* intellectual, or maybe it would have been, had she not been in the grips of her own desire. He realized that his words did just as much to arouse her as his touch, and so he brought his lips to her ear and said, “at. I touch you like this, you grow softer. And wetter. It means you’re getting ready for me.”

She nodded shakily.

“Do you feel empty?” he asked.

Her brow creased with confusion.

hold “Like you want more,” he whispered. “More here.”

le He slid another finger inside her.

“Yes!” she gasped.

iped “Yes, you feel empty?”

“I did.”

“But not now?”

She shook her head.

“You will.” He moved his fingers and was rewarded by another rush of heat. “You’ll want even more.”

“Another finger?”

g into He smiled deviously. “Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shall we try it?”

nately. She nodded.

He slid another finger in. "As you command, my lady."

ght as "Oh my God!" she shrieked. But it wasn't with pain. He could see th
st her face.

He could bring her to completion like this. It had not occurred to him
e he could do so; truly, he'd only been trying to ready her body for his en
she But if she climaxed, if she experienced the womanly "little death" he'd
might so much about, surely that would make their inevitable joining all the m
his pleasurable, wouldn't it?

s "You like being stretched, don't you?" he murmured.

It took her a moment to speak, but when she did, her words were cle
feel do."

"Do you like it when I move like this?"

Her breath became shallow.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Nicholas . . ."

æen in "Do you like this?" He crooked one finger, tickling her on the inside

1 to She liked it. She didn't say anything. He suspected she couldn't. Bu
'When clear she liked it.

ing He moved his thumb, caressing her outer lips, the little bundle he'd
was so sensitive. "What about this?" he whispered devilishly.

Her lips parted and she began to pant. Somewhere in it all, he saw h
"More?"

She nodded. Urgently.

"Someday I'll kiss you there," he said, his words the naughty lyrics
song of his fingers. "I'll take my tongue and—"

"Oh!"

She arched beneath him, her body coiling tight. Her inner walls spas
around his fingers, and dear God he almost came all over her right ther

"What was that?" she gasped.

"The French call it *le petit mort*."

1 of "I can see why."

He slid his fingers out of her, and her eyes flew to his. "Now I do fe
empty," she whispered.

He moved into place.

"I think you're going to fit," she said.

He nodded. "Oh yes."

Her body was more than ready for him now, her muscles still warm flushed with pleasure. Three strokes and he was fully seated, and all he thought was that this was the best thing he'd ever felt in his life.

And he hadn't even started to move.

"Does that hurt?" he asked, all the while thinking *please say no, please say no*.

"No," she said. "It feels very strange, but it doesn't hurt." She looked more

"Does it hurt you?"

He grinned. "Oh no."

"What happens now?" she asked.

He put a little more weight on his elbows as he started to move. "Thank you," she said.

Her eyes widened with surprise.

"Please tell me if it hurts you," he begged, because he knew that her words were the only thing that could possibly have slowed him down at that moment. His hunger for her was taking over, and he just wanted to pound into her to make her feel him. He wanted to mark her, to claim her, to know that it was his body inside of her and only his, that he was the one to bring her such pleasure, that he was the one who would—

He came so fast he didn't even see it coming.

He let out a cry as he slammed forward, again and again and again until he didn't think there could be an inch of her womb that wasn't coated with his seed.

And then he collapsed.

He couldn't believe he had waited so long to try this.

Except he could. Because it would never have been like this with another woman.

It was Georgie.

There was only Georgie.

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There was only Georgie.

Chapter 20

Three weeks later

Georgie had been none too pleased at how quickly Nicholas had left St. Louis following their arrival.

They'd had one evening together.

One.

Mrs. Hibbert had prepared a simple but lovely dinner. She'd fussed and apologized that it was all she was able to pull together for their first night at the newly opened home. She assured them there would be proper men and women moving forward. Georgie had not minded. They could have had tavern brown bread and end-of-the-night soup for all she cared. She just wanted to be with Nicholas.

Alone.

The trip north had been glorious. It hadn't seemed to matter that Cat had howled half the time or that Sam's affection for Marcy (or was it Darcy?) hadn't been returned, and then it was, and then not, and then—well, he'd been gone. Georgie had no idea what had happened except that there seemed to be an awful lot of drama surrounding it all, culminating in Mrs. Hibbert giving her daughter a tongue-lashing to end all tongue-lashings, only to discover she'd told off the wrong girl.

Georgie noticed none of this. She'd been lost in a blissful haze of new love, of shared conversation and laughter, of soft, quiet moments, and of erotic discovery.

Marriage, she'd decided, was turning out to be a most splendid institution. But then they'd reached their destination.

Georgie had known that things would change. She just hadn't anticipated how fast.

One night. That was all.

She'd had a proper bath, which had been nothing short of bliss after many days of traveling. She'd even washed her hair, a process that for took an inordinately long time. She'd always been envious of her sister who could scrub her hair clean, apply a bit of apple cider vinegar mixed with lavender oil to her wet, straight tresses and then simply comb it out and done with it.

For Georgie, however, there was no simple about it. Her curls were overly plentiful, and of a delicate texture. Taming them was, as Marian "a minister's own penance." Her hair had to be dried very carefully, or she'd wake the following morning with a bramble on her head.

cotsby Or she could just braid it. It didn't turn out as nice as when she so carefully combed, treated, and air-dried it, but it was a lot quicker. And had she that Nicholas was leaving the next morning, that's what she would have done so that she might join him sooner in their new bedroom.

and She smiled, despite her current ire. He'd been undone when she let her hair down for him, all damp and silky. It had been quite the most innocently executed move; her pins had simply loosened under the weight of it. She'd reached up to fix it, doing what she did when alone: tossing her head up and down, shaking it out and then flipping the whole mass of it back. She'd not resented her curly hair quite as much as when he gathered fistfuls of it with both hands, uttered "Jesus," and pulled her to him.

:-Head (y?) They'd made such a mess of her hair that night Marian had nearly recognized the sign of the cross when she saw her the next morning. Georgie might have laughed—Marian wasn't even Catholic—but she was in far too despondent a mood to muster humor.

an Nicholas was gone.

ng her she'd He'd awakened her to say good-bye, at least. A gentle kiss to her cheek and then a soft shaking of her shoulder. Georgie had looked up at him on the side of the bed, gazing down at her as shafts of weak sunlight dripped down from the high window.

'w nights She'd smiled, because such a sight would always make her smile no matter how she'd shamelessly scooted herself up to sitting and pressed her naked back to his clothed one and then—

tution. And then he said his horse was saddled and he'd be off as soon as he'd kissed her. He'd been playful and sweet, but the reality of his oh-so-imminent departure was like a cold, wet wind.

pated He kissed her, and he was gone.

so And he'd stayed gone for almost a week.

her Georgie had pouted off and on for days. There had been a lot to do, r Billie, stayed busy, but she did not like that he'd left her behind.

d with Yes, she knew she could not go with him to Edinburgh, at least not y
d be was still living in a rooming house, one not suitable for women.

And yes, she was fully cognizant of the fact that he hadn't *left* her. F
tight, to go back to school. As was necessary. He was a student, and he'd alr
1 said, missed several examinations.

' else And yes, *fine*, she'd known this was coming. It wasn't a surprise, an
had no right to be petulant.

refully But she was. She was in a new place, a new country for heaven's sal
known what felt like the wilds of Scotland, and even though she knew Nichol
e done behaved exactly as he must, she felt abandoned.

So she'd thrown herself into getting Scotsby up and running. Georgi
er hair never quite subscribed to the belief that idle hands really were the devi
y playthings, but busy ones usually worked well to keep one's mind off t
he unpleasant.

pside But there was only so much to do. Mrs. Hibbert had also taken up th
l never of getting the house in order, and to be frank, she was better at it than
of it in Georgie. Furthermore, it was Georgie's aim to *not* be living at Scotsby
long—weren't they planning to lease a house in Edinburgh, after all? F
ade much work did she really wish to put into a house that would soon sit e
it have She was bored.

ident a And she was lonely.

And Nicholas was hours away, learning all sorts of interesting thing

Now, nearly a week after he'd left for Edinburgh, she tried not to lo
eek impatient as she waited for him to return. There was no getting around
sitting impatient, but she didn't need to be obvious about it.

ifted As it turned out, when one was the mistress of a house it was not as
blend into the woodwork as when one was merely the daughter. At Au
w, and Hall she'd curled up on a window seat with a book, or retired to her ro
ody to no one thought twice.

Scotsby was much smaller, though. And as the only family member
e residence, she had the undivided attention of the staff.

minent All of them.

It was impossible to get a moment of true solitude. Georgie had tried
feign not feeling well, but the looks of concern were immediate and ob

Clearly her mother had sent them all off with strict instructions not to so she endanger her “delicate health.”

So that hadn't worked.

yet. He But it was finally Friday, the day Nicholas had said he'd return. He l classes on Saturday or Sunday (although he'd warned her this was not le had the case), and he'd promised to ride home that evening. Georgie had n eady what time to expect him. By her calculations it could be anywhere from hours past noon into the late evening.

d she She hoped it was on the early side. The cook Mrs. Hibbert had hired the village was a veritable fount of dire stories of highwaymen and ke, in mischievous fairies. And while Georgie was not too worried about fair as had idea of highwaymen did make her concerned for Nicholas's status as a solitary rider.

ie had Maybe he should have used the carriage.

l's It would have made his journey all the more slower, though.

he Georgie sighed. She was literally waiting by the window.

“I am pathetic,” she said to no one in particular.

ie task No, she wasn't pathetic. She was just lonely. Which was startling in own way. She'd always been content when left to her own devices. Ce very she enjoyed gatherings with friends and family, but she'd never been tl low of person who could not get along on her own. She *liked* the quiet. She empty? *enjoyed* solitude.

She just hadn't realized it was possible to miss someone quite so mu

s. At nine that evening she was back at the window, back to feeling pa To her credit, she hadn't been there all day. After feeling sorry for hers ok earlier that afternoon she'd got up and found some mostly unnecessary *feeling* household tasks to complete. Then she'd had her supper. She was hung and she knew Nicholas would not want her to wait.

easy to But now she was back to waiting for him. The days were still growin brey longer; they were almost to the solstice, and the sun would not set unti om and ten. And it would not be true dark until a good hour after that. Althoug Scotsby was in a fairly wooded area—it did make the night seem dark in it really was.

l to But apparently the old saying about a watched pot was true, because vvious. minute Georgie got up to use the chamber pot was the minute Nicholas into the drive, and he was already in the front hall by the time she'd co back from her room.

“You’re home!” It was all she could do not to throw herself into his arms. She would have done, had he not looked so tired.

And wet. It wasn’t raining at Scotsby, but clearly it had been somewhere between there and Edinburgh.

“I’ll have Marcy draw you a bath,” Georgie said, reaching for his hat before Wheelock-the-younger could take it. “You look terribly cold.”

“Summer in Scotland is like winter anywhere else,” Nicholas said, with a little shiver as he shrugged off his coat.

“How was your week? Did you learn anything new?”

He looked at her with faint surprise. She supposed he was not used to the interest in his studies. “Yes, of course,” he said. “We’ve been focused on the properties of circulation primarily. Plus a bit on—”

“And did you meet with the land agent?”

Nicholas handed off his coat to Wheelock, who’d practically jumped in front of Georgie to get it. “The land agent?”

“For the house,” Georgie said.

“The house,” he repeated.

“In which we might live.”

He blinked.

She told herself that he was tired. That she must be patient. So she said, “Edinburgh. Surely you don’t want to remain at Scotsby any longer than you must.”

“No, of course not. It’s only I hadn’t the time.”

“Oh.” Georgie followed him into the dining room. This was not what she had been hoping to hear.

Nicholas looked around. “Is there anything to eat?”

“Yes, of course, we’ve been keeping it warm for you.” Georgie motioned to a chair. “Sit.”

He did, and she took a seat next to him. “Lamb stew,” she told him. “It’s nearly very good. With freshly baked bread and raspberry trifle for dessert. I’m sorry I did not wait for you.”

“No, no, don’t be silly. I was delayed.”

Georgie waited while Mrs. Hibbert brought out supper. Then she waited while Nicholas ate a few bites. But then she couldn’t wait any longer. “Why didn’t you even contact him?”

He looked at her blankly.

“The land agent,” she reminded him.

arms. “Oh, yes.” He wiped his mouth. “Sorry, no.”

Georgie did her best to keep her disappointment off her face. He was here she reminded herself. He was learning how to save actual lives.

Nicholas reached forward and took her hand. “I’ll do it this week, I promise.”

She nodded, then managed to wait five whole seconds before asking giving a “Once you do contact him, how long do you think it will take to find a house?”

“I don’t know,” he said with the beginnings of impatience. “I’ve never o such leased a house before.”

on the “But didn’t your father say he was sending notice ahead? So he’ll be expecting you.”

“It’s possible.”

d in “Perhaps by the time you meet with him it will all be settled.”

Nicholas scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Honestly, I don’t know. dead on my feet, Georgie. Can we talk about this tomorrow?”

She smiled tightly. It felt like all her smiles were tight this evening. course.”

He ate, and she watched, and then, because the silence was making l aid, “Initchy, she asked, “Did you learn anything new this week?”

1 we He looked at her. “Didn’t you already ask me that?”

“You didn’t answer.”

“You didn’t give me a chance.”

it she’d “I’m sorry,” she said, unable to keep all traces of sarcasm from her v

“I was preoccupied by the fact that you haven’t been to see the land ag

ioned “I’m sorry I was too busy to see to it,” he snapped. “I spent the entire dealing with everything I missed traveling down to Kent for *you*.”

There it was. The expectation of gratitude. She’d almost forgotten th “It’s she’d been waiting for it.

m “Thank you for marrying me,” she said, shoving her chair back so sl could stand. “I am sorry it has made your life so difficult.”

“For God’s sake, Georgie. You know that’s not what I meant.”

ited “I know it’s not what you *thought* you meant.”

“So “Don’t put words in my mouth,” he warned, rising to his feet.

“I knew this would happen.”

He rolled his eyes so hard she wouldn’t have been surprised if he sa brain.

“I’m going to bed,” she said. She walked to the door, hoping he’d try to stop her, hoping he’d say something, say anything.

“Georgie, wait.”

She turned just as he laid his hand on her arm.

“I don’t want to go to bed angry,” he said.

Something inside of her softened. “Nor do I.”

“I don’t even know why we’re angry.”

She shook her head. “It’s my fault.”

“No,” he said, and his voice was firm even as his weariness seemed to cloak them both. “No, it’s not.”

“I missed you,” she said. “And I was bored. And all I wanted was to be that I would be able to move to Edinburgh so I could be with you.”

He pulled her into his arms. “That’s all I want too.”

A part of her wanted to ask why, then, hadn’t he gone to see the land agent but she knew that would be petty. He was exhausted, and he had every right to be.

“Of course I don’t want you to feel grateful that I married you,” he said.

“But I do,” she admitted.

“Fine, then. Feel grateful.”

She drew back. “What?”

“If you want to feel grateful, feel grateful.”

She blinked. This was not what she’d expected him to say.

Then he took her hand and raised it to his lips. “But I get to feel grateful too.”

That was when she knew. She loved him. How could she not?

“Can we go to bed now?” he asked. “I’m so tired. I don’t even know I’m still standing.”

She nodded, not quite capable of words. This feeling—this love—it was still too new. She needed to give it time, to see how it felt.

“Can we talk about all this in the morning?” he asked. “The house? The land agent, moving to the city? Can we talk about it all later?”

But they didn’t. Talk about it, that was. They were distracted—delighted so, Georgie had to allow—but that meant that when Nicholas returned on Edinburgh Sunday night, nothing of import had been discussed or settled. And Georgie found herself looking ahead to another week of very little to do with which to occupy herself.

“There aren’t even books in this house,” she despaired to Marian two

y to after Nicholas had departed.

“It’s a hunting lodge,” Marian said. She looked up from the socks she was darning. “Do men read when they hunt? I thought they just went around shooting things.”

“We need books,” Georgie said. “We need books, and we need paper, ink, and honestly, I’d settle for embroidery right now.”

“There’s no thread,” Marian admitted. “None that’s suitable for mending. We didn’t bring any up from Kent.”

to “Why not?” Georgie asked testily.

“You don’t like to embroider,” Marian reminded her.

hear “I was starting to like it,” Georgie grumbled. She’d liked when she’d done all those even identical stitches. That had actually been, well, maybe not so much but certainly rewarding.

l agent, “I suppose we could pick flowers,” Marian suggested. “Orrrrrr . . . Very right could *look* for embroidery thread. Mrs. Hibbert found a bolt of muslin in the storeroom the other day. Very fine quality, and never used. Who knows else is hiding there.”

“I don’t want to embroider,” Georgie said.

“But you just said—”

“That’s it,” Georgie announced, because the last thing she needed to do was an accounting of all her contradictions. “We’re going shopping. Finish up something tomorrow.”

eful “In the village?” Marian gave her a dubious look. They’d been to the village. It was charming. And without shops.

“No. We’ll go to Edinburgh.”

7 how “Us?”

“Why not? We have a carriage. We have a driver.”

was “Well . . .” Marian frowned. “I don’t know. I suppose I thought we were meant to remain here.”

The “Meant by whom?” Georgie retorted. “Aren’t I the lady of the house to whom must I answer?”

ghtfully “Mr. Rokesby?” Marian said.

to “*He’s not here.*”

ed. Georgie’s volume was such that Marian’s face took on an expression of faint alarm.

o days “He’s not here,” Georgie repeated, this time with a bit more modulation. “I’m in charge, and I say we are going to Edinburgh.”

“But we’ve never been to Edinburgh. Should we not go for the first time with someone who knows his way?”

“The only person we know who knows his way is Mr. Rokesby, and he’s already there. Cheer up, Marian. This will be exciting.”

But Marian did not look excited, and Georgie supposed this was understandable. Marian liked routine. It was part of the reason she and Georgie were so well suited. Until recently, Georgie’s life had been no *but* routine.

“Tomorrow, you say?” Marian said with a sigh.

“Tomorrow,” Georgie said firmly. She was feeling better already.

They left early the following day, and were at the outskirts of the city by ten in the morning.

“Oh, look, it’s the castle!” Georgie exclaimed, pointing at the grand fortress on the hill right in the middle of the city.

Marian scooted along the carriage bench to get a better look. “Oh, no,” she said with surprise. “It’s right here.” She looked over at Georgie. “Can you visit?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s used as a prison now.”

Marian gave a delicate shudder. “Perhaps not, then.”

“It may have other uses,” Georgie said. “We can find out. But we don’t have time today, anyway. We have far too much to do. Our first stop is to see the land agent.”

Marian turned sharply to face her. “What? You can’t do that. Not without Mr. Rokesby.”

Georgie folded her hands primly in her lap. “He has failed to do it with me, so I must take the reins.”

“Miss Georgiana”—Marian had not quite got used to referring to herself as Mrs. Rokesby, and truth be told, Georgie had not quite got used to hearing herself referred to that way—“you cannot go to the land agent by yourself. It is not done.”

“It has *not* been done,” Georgie said with deliberate obtuseness. “That’s true.”

“But—”

“Oh, look, we’re here.”

The carriage came to a halt outside a tidy office front, and Georgie vaulted out while Jameson opened the carriage door and secured the steps.

time “I’m going in,” Georgie said with steely resolve. “You may come w
or you may remain in the carriage. But it will certainly be more proper
l he’s come.”

Marian let out a noise that was probably meant to be a sigh. “You w
the death of me,” she muttered.

“Heavens, Marian. We’re not going into a brothel.”

thing Marian’s mouth pinched into a line as she looked up at the sign hang
over the door. “Is Mr. McDiarmid expecting us?”

“Likely not,” Georgie admitted. “But he will know who I am. Lord
Manston has been in contact, I believe.”

“You believe.”

oy ten “I’m *sure*,” Georgie said, looking over her shoulder as she stepped c
the street. “It was a figure of speech.”

Marian still did not look convinced.

ly,” “He’s probably wondering what has been taking us so long,” Georgi
giving the edges of her gloves a little tug so they fit smoothly over her
Can we fingers. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already found a house.”

“That would be exciting,” Marian allowed. “Although you wouldn’t
to try to take up residence today, would you?”

on’t “No, no, that would be quite impossible,” Georgie said briskly. Tem
but impossible. For now, she simply had to focus on securing a lease.

s the Everything else would follow.

ithout With one last look at Marian, she marched up the steps and pushed c
the door. “Let’s get this done.”

ithout “Oh, that was brilliant!” Georgie exclaimed several hours later. She an
Marian had settled into a table at the White Hart—practically around tl
r as corner from the anatomical theater where Nicholas sat for his lectures—
ring were sharing a pot of tea. “Wasn’t it brilliant?”

self. It Marian opened her mouth, but before she could say a word, Georgie
answered herself. “It was brilliant.”

at is Georgie faced the nearby open window and grinned up at the sky, w
rewarded her with clear blue bliss. “We have a home!”

“We have a home at Scotsby,” Marian pointed out.

waited “Yes, but now we have one in Edinburgh. Which makes so much m
sense. Mr. Rokesby can’t be riding back and forth every day.”

“He *wasn’t* riding back and forth every day,” Marian said.

ith me, Georgie rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Scotsby is beautiful if you it’s dreadfully inconvenient.” She laid a hand on her breast. “I’m a newlywed. My place is with my husband.”

ill be “That is true,” Marian allowed. Georgie watched as she fanned herself trying to calm her nerves. Georgie wasn’t sure why the maid had been overcome at the prospect of two women entering the land agent’s office. ging had found it exhilarating.

Mr. McDiarmid had not wanted to lease a house to her. He hadn’t even wanted to show her a property. She needed her husband, he said. Or her father. Or her brother. Or someone who could make a decision.

“I assure you,” Georgie had said with all the ice in her veins, “I am not out into capable of making a decision.”

Not that Georgie had much ice in her veins, but she’d seen her mother Lady Manston in action. She knew how to fake it.

ie said, “Your husband will need to sign,” Mr. McDiarmid had replied, his voice mincing as pie.

“Of course,” Georgie had sniffed. “But he is a very busy man. He has not want entrusted me to do all of the preliminary viewings so that he might weigh only when truly necessary.”

pting, Marian had almost gone and ruined the whole thing right then, coughing until her eyes watered. Fortunately Mr. McDiarmid had been distracted enough getting her something to drink that he didn’t hear Georgie when she open hissed, “Stop that right now!”

Or when Marian said helplessly, “But Mr. Rokesby hasn’t entrusted me to do anything.”

d Honestly, Marian was the worst liar.

he After another ten minutes of hemming and hawing, Mr. McDiarmid admitted that he had indeed received the request from Lord Manston, and —and did have two properties in mind that might do for the young couple. But absolutely, positively put his foot down at the idea of showing them to without her husband. He absolutely, positively could not even entertain the idea until—

hich Georgie stood right up and announced that she would find a different agent.

ore It was remarkable how quickly they’d gone to see the first house after

Georgie had known instantly that it would not do. The floor was crooked and it was painfully short on windows. But the second house—in the N

ful, but Town Georgie had heard so much about—was perfect. Light, and airy, ready to be leased fully furnished. The décor was not quite what Georgie would have chosen herself, but it was close enough. And if it meant she'd have to move in sooner rather than later . . .

so Blue was just as good as green for a sitting room. Honestly, she didn't care.

“Have you had enough tea?” Georgie asked Marian, even though they'd barely been sitting for five minutes. “I want to go find Nicholas. Mr. McDermid said he can sign the lease today.”

“He's going to be very surprised to see you,” Marian said.

“But good surprised,” Georgie said with more certitude than she actually felt. She didn't *think* Nicholas would be angry that she'd taken care of her house on her own. But he might not like her coming to Edinburgh without informing him ahead of time. Men were funny that way. Still, what was done was done, and she was eager to share her news.

Mr. McDermid had inadvertently shown her the location of the mechanics school, boasting of its proximity to the houses he was showing her, and though Georgie was confident she knew where she was going as she, Marian, and Jameson made their way to Teviot Place.

Nicholas had told her about the grand anatomical theater, about the tiered seats looking down at the small stage at the bottom. He'd told her sometimes the lecturer just spoke, but sometimes there was a dead body down there, cut open for all to see.

Georgie wasn't sure she wanted to see *that*, but she was eager to see the room where her husband spent so much of his time.

It wasn't difficult to find the anatomical theater, but as it had well over a hundred men in it, all facing away from her as she peeked through the door, finding Nicholas from among the many was. Georgie was wearing a dark green day dress and a hat that wouldn't be called fancy in any drawing room, but in this place she was decidedly out of place.

And conspicuous.

But luck was on her side. The bench just outside the door was positioned such that if she leaned over the armrest she could hear almost everything. She didn't recognize half the words, but the context was helpful, and she was riveted.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered to Marian. Something about blood and how much of it was in the human body.

and Marian closed her eyes. "I'm trying not to."
Georgie leaned farther. Now the lecturer was talking about why blood could be bled, and how bloodletting was frequently essential to restore balance to the nervous system.
not "*The body is an animated machine!*"
Georgie looked down at her hands. "I suppose," she murmured.
they'd "What are you doing?" Marian whispered.
Georgie shushed her, tipping her ear back to the open door. Drat, she had missed something.
". . . *perform a variety of motions . . .*"
usually Georgie opened and closed her hands. All right. She could accept that.
the ". . . *and to communicate and interact with external bodies.*"
without Well now, *that* just made her think of Nicholas.
is done "We're leaving," Marian declared.
"What? No."
logical "You're flushed. I don't know what they are talking about in there, I don't
I don't *know* it is not appropriate." Marian stood up with alacrity, exchanged a few
and quick words with Jameson, who had been waiting on the other side of the
hallway, and then ushered Georgie right out the building's door and into the
steeply sloping courtyard.

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over a
door,
step
room,

opened
ing. She
was

od, and

Marian closed her eyes. "I'm trying not to."

Georgie leaned farther. Now the lecturer was talking about why blood was red, and how bloodletting was frequently essential to restore balance to the nervous system.

"The body is an animated machine!"

Georgie looked down at her hands. "I suppose," she murmured.

"What are you doing?" Marian whispered.

Georgie shushed her, tipping her ear back to the open door. Drat, she'd missed something.

". . . perform a variety of motions . . ."

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"We're leaving," Marian declared.

"What? No."

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Chapter 21

“Georgiana?”

Nicholas’s heart had nearly stopped when he exited the lecture hall and saw Jameson waiting for him in the corridor. There was no reason why a footman should be here in Edinburgh, much less on the grounds of the medical school.

No reason except an emergency.

Jameson must have seen the panic on his employer’s face, because before Nicholas could get out anything more than, “What are you—” Jameson blurted, “Nothing’s wrong, sir!”

Still blinking with surprise—and yes, concern, even though he’d been assured there was no reason for it—Nicholas let the footman lead him into the sunny courtyard where his wife waited.

“Georgiana?” he said again. She was chatting with her maid and must have heard him the first time. “What are you doing here?”

“Nicholas!” she cried with clear delight. She jumped to her feet to greet him. “I have splendid news!”

His first thought was—*she’s pregnant*.

Except that it was too soon. Not for it to have happened—their recent behavior was of the sort that pretty much guaranteed it *would* happen. It seemed too soon for her to know. Maybe suspect, but not know.

And besides, it wasn’t the sort of thing she’d tell him right in the middle of a busy academic courtyard.

He took her outstretched hands, still somewhat suspicious of the joy on her face. “What is it?” he asked.

“Oh, don’t look so concerned,” she said. “I promise, it’s nothing but good news.”

“I am concerned,” he told her. “I can’t help it. I was not expecting to see you here.”

Not to mention that she'd never been to Edinburgh before. She didn't know her way around the city, and there were many areas that were not safe for a lady. Hell, there were many areas that weren't safe for him.

"I spoke with Mr. McDiarmid," she said.

"Who?"

Something impatient flashed across her face, but then she seemed to let it go. "Mr. McDiarmid. The land agent."

"Oh, yes." Damn it, he'd been meaning to go see the man for over a week. It was just so difficult to find time with all of his academic commitments. "My father's man."

and
of the
gave his hands a tiny squeeze before tugging her own away. "I assure you he's never met your father in person. If he *had*—Well, that's hardly he there."

before
1
Nicholas stared at her for a moment, but no, she didn't seem to have intention of illuminating that cryptic remark. "Would you please just tell me what is going on," he said. Honestly, he didn't have the energy to guess.

"I found us a house!" she exclaimed.

en
out
"Why, that's won—"

But she was far too excited to listen to his congratulations. "He didn't want to show me anything at first," she said, probably not even aware that she had cut him off. "He insisted that you be there, even though I told him that we were terribly busy, and if he wanted our business he was going to need to deal with me." She paused, rolling her eyes. "He's really not a nice man to put up with him since I just wanted to find a house."

"You leased a house?" Nicholas asked.

it
But it
middle of
on her
"I haven't signed anything of course. You need to do that. But I told you that you'd entrusted the search to me and that you would go along with whatever I chose." Her eyes narrowed a bit, and her lips pressed together before she added, "You'd better like what I picked out, because if you don't I'm going to look a fool and worse, that awful man will never do business with another woman again."

good
said. "It sounds as if women shouldn't want to do business with him," Nicholas said.

to see
"I hadn't much choice, not if I wanted something right away. Besides, she flipped her hand in the air in a *this-ought-to-be-obvious* sort of motion. —"I don't know how to find another land agent."

't They'd likely all be the same way, Nicholas thought. Most men would
t safe willing to do business with a widow, who could sign her own contracts
not a married lady. Not when her husband could so easily gainsay her.

"How did you get him to show you the properties?" he asked her.

She gave him a cheeky grin. "I told him I'd find another land agent."

shake He laughed out loud at that. "Brava," he told her. "I am impressed."

week. "You should be," she said pertly. She was clearly impressed with her
its. and it was stunning how much Nicholas liked seeing that expression on
face.

"Can we go to his office now?" she continued, all brisk determination.
She said you could tour the property this afternoon. I've been crossing my
you, that you would be free."

re nor "I am free, but I don't need to see it." Nicholas reached out and hooked
pinkie finger with his. "If you think it's suitable, I trust you."

any She looked at him as if she could not quite believe his words. "You

all me "Of course." He shrugged. "Regardless, it ought to be more your decision
s. than mine. You'll be there more than I will."

"Then can we go sign the lease?" she asked, her face lighting with
excitement. "He said he'd have it prepared, but I'll be honest—I'm not
t want he meant it. I think he's half-expecting you to swoop in and give me a
he'd tongue-lashing for my impertinence."

you "A tongue-lashing for your impertinence?" Nicholas murmured.

l to "Intriguing."

n, but I "Nicholas!" Georgie exclaimed. Her eyes widened and she motioned
her head toward her maid, who was still seated on a nearby bench.

l him "She can't hear us," he whispered. "And she wouldn't know what I
anyway."

1 "That's almost as bad. I don't want her thinking you don't approve of
her actions." She drew back, just a tiny bit. "You do approve, don't you?"

don't "Of your taking care of the land agent so I don't have to? Hell, yes.
less I'd thought of it." He touched her chin, tilting her face toward his. "But
me know ahead of time if you're going to do something like this again
cholas like to know what you're up to."

"To be completely honest," she said, "it was a spur of the moment thing
s"—only decided yesterday." Her eyes turned shy. And maybe a little
tion embarrassed. "I don't like to spend all week in the country without you

"I'm sorry." He squeezed her hand. He didn't like leaving her at Sc

uld be but he didn't see how there had been another option.
s, but "You have nothing to be sorry for," she replied. "I knew what I was
into. I just didn't know how much I wouldn't like it."
He leaned forward. Only about an inch; they were in public, after all
" "Does it make me a bad husband that I like hearing that you're miserable
without me?"
rself, "I didn't say miserable," she said, with a little coquettish tilt of her h
n her "Humor me," he said. "I've been miserable without you."
It wasn't entirely the truth. Most of the time he was too busy to be
n. "He miserable, and when he wasn't too busy he was too tired.
fingers But he missed her. At night, when he lay in his narrow boardinghou
he longed to reach out for her, pull her close. And then during the day,
ked her oddest moments, he'd notice something—usually something odd or fu
unusual—and he wished he could point it out to her.
do?" He'd grown accustomed to her presence in a way that ought to have
cision terrified him.
But it didn't.
It only made him want more. And that started with getting the house
t sure New Town sorted. "Where is Mr. McDiarmid's office?" he asked Geo
"We'll take care of it right now."
Georgie grinned and pulled a scrap of paper from her reticule. "Here
have the address written down."
He gave the words a quick look. "That's not too far. We can walk th
d with Give me a moment, and I'll make arrangements for Jameson and your
They'll need to find a suitable place to wait for you."
meant, "It shouldn't take very long."
"No, but now that you're here, we should make a day of it. I can sho
of my the city."
"Really? You don't have anything else you need to do?"
I wish He had a mountain of things he needed to do. He was still behind on
t let studies, and he needed to prepare for a meeting later that week with on
. I do his professors, but he could not see beyond Georgie's smiling face. His
was here, and he wanted to be with her.
ring. I "Nothing that will not keep," he told her. "Come. Let's get that leas
signed. Then we shall have some fun."
1." She placed her hand in his and grinned, and he had a sudden flash of
otsby, memory. It was from when they were tending to Freddie Oakes, and sh

smiled at him, and it had made him want to grab the sun from the sky and getting hand it to her on a platter.

l. It was still true. One smile from Georgiana, and he thought he could do anything.

le Be anything.

read. Was this love? This crazy, heady feeling, this sense of endless possibility. Could he have somehow fallen in love with his wife? It seemed too soon, and yet . . .

“Nicholas?”

He looked at her.

se bed, “Is something wrong?” she asked. “You looked very far away.”

at the “No,” he said softly. “I’m right here. I’ll always be right here.”

nny or Her brow creased with confusion, and he couldn’t blame her. He was making sense. And at the same time, it felt as if the entire world was finally clicking into place.

Maybe this *was* love.

Maybe.

in Probably.

rgie. Yes.

3, I Ninety minutes later, Georgie was tiptoeing up the stairs in Mrs. McGreevey’s Respectable Boardinghouse for Bachelors.

ere. “We’re not being very respectable,” she whispered.

maid. Nicholas put his finger to his lips.

Georgie giggled. Quietly. She couldn’t help it. She felt positively giddy sneaking into Nicholas’s rooms.

ow you The meeting with Mr. McDiarmid had gone smoothly, although Georgie could not help but be somewhat miffed at how much more accommodation she had been with Nicholas than with her.

t his She kept her complaints to herself, though; there was nothing to be gained by voicing them. She wanted the lease signed, and she wanted it signed quickly. It was clear that the most efficient path to her goals was to sit back and play the deferential spouse.

2 She knew it wasn’t the truth, as did Nicholas, and that was what was important.

f Once they had all that taken care of, though, they still had a bit of time before she was supposed to meet Marian and Jameson for the ride back

and Scotsby. Several hours, in fact. Nicholas had said that he would show a bit of the city, but then they just happened to be walking past the boardinghouse, and Mrs. McGreevey just happened to not be anywhere in sight . . .

The next thing she knew she was giggling her way up the stairs. “I feel so naughty,” she whispered as Nicholas turned his key in the lock. “You *are* naughty,” he said. “Very, very naughty.”

He leered at her and before she knew what was happening, the door closed behind them and he’d tossed her onto his bed.

“Nicholas!” she whisper-shrieked. “Shhhhh. You’ll get me in trouble. I’m not supposed to have women in my room. I’m your wife.”

He looked at her with a ridiculously innocent expression. “But think how long it would take to explain that. All that time wasted when I could be doing *this*.”

Georgie let out a little squeak. She wasn’t sure if *this* referred to his hands on her thigh or his lips on her neck, but both were delicious. And she had no idea how she was supposed to keep quiet.

“What would happen if she found me?” she asked. “Would she ask me to leave?”

He shrugged. “No idea. It wouldn’t be the worst thing. We did just sign a lease for a new house.”

Georgie forced herself to be serious, if only for a moment. “It won’t be ready for occupancy for at least a week. And as much as I would love to have you with me at Scotsby, you can’t be riding back and forth every day. You’d be exhausted.”

Nicholas gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “Then we’ll just have to be extra quiet so I don’t get caught.”

“Well, yes,” Georgie said. But now she was concerned. It was only a few more weeks, but Nicholas needed this room. “Surely Mrs. McGreevey would understand.”

Nicholas groaned. “Why are we talking about Mrs. McGreevey?”

“Because I don’t want you thrown out of your rooms.”

“I won’t be,” he said, “because we’re going to be so very, very quiet.”

Georgie sucked in her breath. His voice was hot and seductive, and she found herself melting into his embrace.

“Can you do it?” he murmured. He squeezed her thigh in a way they

her a both learned she loved, his thumb skating dangerously close to her
womanhood.

e in “Do what?”
“Keep quiet.”
“No,” she said frankly.

lock. “Pity.” His fingers went still. “I’ll have to stop.”
She grabbed his hand. “Don’t you dare.”

was “But you’re so noisy.” He shook his head with mock resignation. “V
am I to do?”

Georgie laid a bold hand on his member. Over his clothes, but he’d
here.” idea. “What am *I* to do?”

“Minx,” he growled.

about She squeezed. “Can *you* be quiet?”

ild be He quirked a brow. “I can if you can.”

She’d never been able to raise a single brow, so she did a silly almost
hand wink. “Well, I can if you can.”

iad no He stared at her for a long moment, and Georgie thought it a wonder
did not burst into flame. Or laughter. Then he stood.

you to “What are you doing?” she asked, scooting into a sitting position.
“I”—his hands went to his cravat—“am very quietly taking off my
sign the clothing.”

“Oh.”

be “Oh?” he echoed. “That’s all you have to say?”

to have She licked her lips. “I am quite pleased with your decision.”

You’d He finished untying the linen and whipped it off. “You are pleased v
my decision,” he restated.

oe “Quite pleased,” she corrected.

He smiled. Devilishly. “Do you know what would please me?”

for one “I have my suspicions,” she murmured.

would His hands went to the buttons on his shirt. There were only three, but
needed them undone so that he could pull the garment over his head. Now
Georgie should have been tending to her own clothing, but watching his
strip with such slow deliberateness might have been the most arousing
t.” she’d ever seen.

she felt He didn’t speak, but he didn’t need to. His eyes locked onto hers, and
Georgie knew what he wanted. She brought her fingers to the bodice of
’d dress, to the silk fichu that filled the neckline of her gown.

Slowly, she tugged it free.

“I’ve become brazen,” she whispered.

He nodded, his eyes flaring with desire before he pulled his shirt up over his head.

“I can’t do all the buttons,” she said. She twisted, giving him just an inch of her back so that she could still peer over her shoulder.

“A most impractical frock,” he murmured. He sat next to her and began to work the buttons, one by one.

“I’ve always had help,” she whispered.

He kissed the patch of her skin bared by the top few buttons. “I am your servant, Mrs. Rokesby.”

Georgie shivered, wondering how his voice somehow enticed her just as much as his touch. He was always such a gentleman, but when they were alone in the privacy of their marriage bed he said the naughtiest things . . .

He didn’t just do things to her, he spoke of them with hot, needy words. He told her what he wanted, and when she wanted something, he made her do it too.

Somehow that was even more shocking. *Tell me what you want*, he’d say, and it was so hard to bring herself to do so. She wanted him to take charge, to take the decisions from her control, but he would not let her.

You have to say it, he’d say.

She’d shake her head, too embarrassed, but he would not allow her to get away with that. *Is this what you want?* he’d ask, touching her breasts. His hand would slip between her legs. *Is this?*

Even now, as they were trying to be so quiet, he whispered sinful words into her ear.

“I want to taste you.”

She shivered. She knew what he meant.

“I’m not even going to take your dress off. I’m just going to crawl up under your skirts, and lick you until you explode.”

He started kissing his way down her body, taking his delicious time with her breasts. Then, he looked up, and good heavens, somehow that felt even more erotic—his eyes locked and burning on hers.

It was like she was the only woman in the universe. The only woman he’d ever see. The only woman he’d ever want.

“Well,” he said, his voice husky with promise. “What do you say to me?” She nodded. She wanted him so much.

His fingers crept beneath her skirt, but only just. “Not good enough, darling.”

and “I want it,” she whispered.

ough “What?” he asked, and in one quick movement, he was back over her face-to-face. “You want what?” he pressed. “Tell me.”

gan to Her body felt electric. She didn’t understand how speaking her desire could make her so desperate for him, but it did.

“I want you to taste me.”

ever He eyes held hers for a long second, and then with an animalistic grin he practically dove down her body, spreading her legs to his seeking mouth.

st as She almost screamed. She actually clamped one of her hands over her mouth.

ere in He looked up with a cocky grin.

“Don’t stop,” she begged.

rds. He He gave a throaty chuckle and went back to work, torturing her in the most exquisite way possible.

d say, He had done this before, and she still could not believe she had let him do that. No, that wasn’t true. She believed it. She would probably let him do anything to please her.

o get She just couldn’t believe she had liked it so much. His mouth . . . the way it was so intimate. And then when he was done . . . when *she* was done . . . he always kissed her again.

Then And she tasted herself.

It was wicked, and it was carnal, and she loved it.

ords in But he’d moved away from her sex and was now taking his sweet time raining soft kisses on the inside of her thigh, never quite going back to where she wanted him. Where she needed him.

nder With a restless groan she parted her legs more widely, but all he did was chuckle against her.

“So impatient,” he murmured.

on her “I need you.”

1 more “I know.” He sounded very pleased.

She arched her back, thrusting her hips forward. “Now, Nicholas.”

n he’d He nipped her, his teeth softly abrading her skin, so close to where she wanted him. “Soon, Georgiana,” he said.

that?” “Please,” she begged. She didn’t know how he knew how to make her want him so desperately, but she didn’t care. She just—

my

“Oh!”

“Shhhh.” His hand came up to cover her mouth. “We must be quiet.

er, But his tongue was stroking her at her very core, making lazy circles
spot she’d learned was the most sensitive.

“Nicholas, I—”

e He shushed her again, slipping a finger into her mouth, then groaned
she started to suck it.

“My God, Georgie,” he groaned against her. She could not imagine
rowl, was feeling as much pleasure as she was, but there was something about
mouth. sucking on his finger that made her feel so excessively wanton, so hun-
er more.

His tongue began to move faster.

She sucked harder.

“Georgie,” he moaned, his words vibrating against her.

ie most She grew tighter, tenser.

im. He worked her with his fingers, sliding two inside, even as his mouth
nibbled and licked.

anything She exploded.

ere. It No, she *came*. That was the word for it, he’d told her, at least one of
And it made an odd sort of sense, because when she came, when he brought
. . . he her to the point that she came, she felt as if she had arrived somewhere
important.

She could not have explained it, could not have defined it, except that
knew she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

me, With him.

where With Nicholas. Her husband.

Home.

was “Oh my,” she sighed. She wasn’t sure she could move. He might have
melted her bones.

“I love feeling you when that happens,” he said, moving up her body
his face was near hers. “It makes me want you even more.”

He nudged against her, not in a demanding way, but rather just a little
reminder. He was hard, and he still wanted her.

he “I need a moment,” Georgie somehow managed to say.

“Just a moment?”

er She nodded, although in truth she had no idea. She was completely
undone. Her skin was sensitized beyond belief. He was still touching her

lightly, just on her arm, but it made her shiver uncontrollably.

” “What are we to do with you?” he murmured, a hint of laughter in his voice.

“I can’t move.”

“Not even a little bit?”

She shook her head, but she made sure to keep a teasing expression in her eyes. They lay side by side for a moment, squeezed together on his narrow bed, and finally Georgie said, “You didn’t even undo your breeches.”

“Do you want me to?”

She nodded.

He turned, kissed her cheek. “I thought you couldn’t move.”

“It might be possible to rouse me.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded again. “I want you to be pleased, too.”

His eyes turned serious. “You always please me, Georgie.”

“But you didn’t . . .”

His hand covered hers, and he rolled them both so they were face-to-face. “It’s not a quid pro quo. I give to you freely.”

“I would like to give to *you* freely,” she whispered. Then she felt he grow sheepish. “When I can move again.”

“I can wait,” he said. He kissed her on the nose, then on each cheek, then on her mouth. “For you, my love, I can wait forever.”

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“I would like to give to *you* freely,” she whispered. Then she felt her face grow sheepish. “When I can move again.”

“I can wait,” he said. He kissed her on the nose, then on each closed eyelid, then on her mouth. “For you, my love, I can wait forever.”

Chapter 22

“I don’t understand bloodletting.”

Nicholas looked at Georgie in surprise—nay, in shock.

Nay, in astonishment.

Because barely five minutes had passed since the most extraordinary sexual experience of his life—which perhaps wasn’t that meaningful a descriptor considering he’d only started *having* sexual experiences a few weeks earlier—but still.

He was quite sure they had turned the earth on its axis. Weather patterns would change. Day would be night.

Hell, he would not have been surprised if they had created their own gravitational force. They might have pulled down the moon.

None of which explained his wife’s sudden inquiry into the taking of blood.

“What did you just say?” he asked.

“Bloodletting,” she said again, not looking the least bit interested in romance despite their current position, which was to say, naked in bed in another’s arms. She shifted her weight so that she could look at him more directly. “I don’t understand it.”

“Is there any reason you should?” Nicholas hoped he was not condescending; he did not mean to be. But it was a complicated topic. Laypeople did not understand the science behind it.

To be honest, he wasn’t sure *he* understood the science behind it. He wasn’t sure anyone did, just that it seemed to work. Some of the time, at least.

“Well, no,” Georgie said, scooting out from under him so that she could sit on her side, head propped up on her hand. “Not really. But I heard a little of the lecture earlier today. It didn’t make much sense to me.”

“Today’s lecture wasn’t specifically about bloodletting,” he told her

was just mentioned at the end as a disruptor of circulation.”

She blinked a few times.

“Which *was* the topic. Circulation.”

Again, she said nothing. And then, as if she’d decided she’d heard his words and found them irrelevant, she said, “Right. Well, here is the problem. I don’t understand how, if men regularly bleed to death on battlefields, you can mention all the other people who bleed to death at other times, people who say that the removal of blood from the body can be helpful.” She stared at him for a moment. “It’s clear that blood is necessary for survival.”

“Ah, but is *all* of our blood necessary for survival?”

“Ah, but wouldn’t you think that more is better?”

“Not necessarily. Too much fluid in the body is called edema, and it’s very dangerous.”

“Edema?”

“Swelling,” he explained.

“This is like that ecchymosis thing,” she said with a slight curl of her lip.

“Doctor-speak so the rest of us don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You mean a bruise?” he asked innocently.

She swatted him on the shoulder.

“You’ll ecchymose me,” he pretended to whine.

“Is *that* a word?”

“Not even slightly.”

She chuckled, but then, ever tenacious, returned to the topic at hand. “I still haven’t said—why *do* you bleed patients?”

“It’s all about balance,” Nicholas said. “Of the humors.”

“Humors,” she repeated skeptically. “This is accepted scientific fact.”

“There are some competing theories,” Nicholas admitted. “And in some schools of thought bloodletting is falling out of favor. It depends a great deal on whether the physician is a devotee of heroic medicine or solidism.”

This, she seemed to find too much to accept. “Wait just a moment. I’m not telling me that there is such a thing as heroic medicine?”

“Some would say all medicine is heroic,” Nicholas tried to joke.

“Stop that,” she said impatiently. “I want to hear more about this. It’s a little bit very self-congratulatory for a branch of science to label itself *heroic*.”

“I’m not entirely certain of the origin of the phrase,” Nicholas admitted. “It is also known as heroic depletion theory.”

“That’s not off-putting at all,” Georgie muttered.

“Likely why the more basic term has prevailed,” he replied.

“But what does it mean?”

“It follows the idea that good health is achieved when the body’s humors are in balance.” He explained further: “Black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood.”

“All liquids,” she observed.

“Precisely. Which is why the theory stands in contrast with solidism which follows the idea that it is the solid parts of the body that are vulnerable to disease.”

She frowned. He’d noticed she did this when she was in deep thought. He’d also noticed that he found this fascinating. When Georgie thought deeply on something, her face was in constant motion. Her brow might furrow or her eyes would dart from side to side.

She was not a passive thinker, his wife.

Then something occurred to him. “Were you ever bled?” he asked her. “For your breathing illness?”

“Twice,” she told him.

“And did it work?”

She shrugged. “According to the doctor it did.”

Nicholas did not find this reply satisfying. “What was his criteria?”

“For success?”

He nodded.

“You’re not dead?” She looked at him frankly. “I’m not dead.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake—”

Georgie cut him off with a shake of her head. “According to my mother, that is the ultimate proof of cure.”

Nicholas smiled, although he didn’t really think this was funny.

“But,” Georgie continued, “I don’t think that the bloodletting had anything to do with my getting better. If anything, it made me feel worse. It was exhausting. And it hurt.”

“The exhaustion is to be expected. The body must work to produce a healthier blood.”

“—that is more in balance with the other three humors,” she finished.

“That is the thought.”

She frowned, and an odd, growly sound came from the back of her throat. She was impatient, he realized.

“How do we know I wouldn’t have improved without the bloodletting?”

she asked. "How do we know I wouldn't have improved *faster*?"

"We don't," he admitted.

mors
, and Georgie's eyes met his and then held them in a piercingly direct man-
ner. "Would you have bled me under the circumstances?"

l,
I and "I can't answer that," he said. "I don't *know* all the circumstances. I
know how labored your breathing was. Was it shallow, rapid? Did you
ht. fever? Muscle aches? Rigidity in your spleen?"

ht. He paused for a moment, even though his questions were largely
rhetorical. "It is dangerous to dispense medical advice when one does
t dip, have all the facts at hand."

t
t dip, "I'm not sure the *doctor* had all the facts at hand," Georgie muttered
"He certainly had more than I do."

er. She dismissed this with a little snort. "But think about it," she said. "The
difficulty was in my breathing. Whatever was wrong with me, it was in
my lungs, not my veins."

"Everything is connected," he said.

She rolled her eyes. Hard. "You keep answering with platitudes that
explain anything."

"Sadly, medicine is as much an art as a science."

She wagged her finger at him. "Another platitude."

"I didn't mean it as such," he said. "I swear. I *wish* we had more pro-
fessionals to guide our practices. I truly do. And I'm not sure I would choose to bleed
a patient who was having difficulty breathing. At least not as a first mea-
sure."

ther, "But when someone is having difficulty breathing," she said quietly
"It may not be time for a second measure."

A cold shiver passed through Nicholas, the kind one didn't feel so much
in the winter. He had never witnessed one of Georgie's breathing attacks. He
knew nothing about them over the years, though. He hadn't given them a lot of thought,
but he always seemed he found out about them well after the fact, when it was
too late. That she'd come through with no lasting implications. So he had not realized
new, just how serious they had been.

d. And besides that, he'd been young. And not medically minded. Certainly
not thinking like a doctor.

throat. "Georgie," he said slowly, his thoughts coalescing as he spoke, "did
a doctor ever suggest you might have asthma?"

ing?" "Oh yes, of course," she replied, with a tone and expression that sug-
gested she found his question somewhat silly.

“No, no,” Nicholas said. He had a feeling he understood her reaction. Many doctors—especially those who were not affiliated with a university—thus not as up-to-date on medical progress—used the word “asthma” to describe any sort of breathing malady. He explained this to her, then asked, “Did anyone ever use the term *spasmodic* or *convulsive* asthma?”

She thought for a moment, then gave an apologetic shrug. “I don’t know,” she said. “Not to me. Maybe to my parents.”

“It’s a very specific sort of breathing disorder,” Nicholas explained, “that manifests itself differently in different people.”

“And this makes it difficult to diagnose?”

“Not that so much as difficult to treat. Different people seem to respond to different treatments. The good news is it is rarely fatal.”

“Rarely,” she echoed, her voice flat.

“My late professor—he died just last year—wrote extensively on the subject.”

At that she smiled. “How fortuitous.”

“To be honest,” Nicholas said, “he wrote extensively on almost every branch of medicine. His major life’s work was the arrangement and classification of disease.”

“In a book?” Georgie asked. “I should like to read that.”

He regarded her with some surprise. “You would?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“I already have done,” he answered. Dr. Cullen’s tome was required reading of every medical student at the University of Edinburgh. Nicholas knew that some of his classmates had skipped the sections they were not so much as interested in, but he had tried his best to give his full attention to the dreaded hardwork.

Which hadn’t always been easy. *Synopsis Nosologiae Methodicae* was not a clear word, dense.

“Did you find it interesting?” Georgie asked.

“Of course. Well, most of it. I don’t know that there is any doctor who doesn’t find every aspect of medicine interesting.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I think I would enjoy reading it.”

“You probably would. Although you might like a different one of his better. It’s less about the classification of diseases and more about how to best treat them.”

“Oh, yes, that does sound more interesting. Do you own this book?”

1. "I do."

ity and "Is it here or at Scotsby?"

o Nicholas glanced at his overflowing bookshelf, and then tipped his head
sked, its direction. "It's right there."

She twisted to look, not that she could have possibly known which book
now," was motioning to. "May I take it back with me? Or will you need it?"

He smiled. "Not between now and when I next see you."

"one Her entire face lit with anticipation, and it occurred to Nicholas that
looked far more excited at the process of reading *First Lines of the Principles
of Physic* than any medical student he'd ever seen, himself included.

ond to "Thank you," she said, before snuggling into the pillow with a sigh.
will give me something to do while you're gone."

"Is it so very dull, then?"

e One corner of her mouth turned down—not sad, but a little sheepish
shouldn't be. I have so much to do. But at the same time it feels like there's
nothing *to do*."

y topic "Nothing you *want* to do," he said.

ion of "Something like that." She inched up a little on the pillow to look at
"I *want* to set up our household. I think it will give me great joy. But that's
not Scotsby."

"One more week," he said, giving her hand a squeeze.

l She nodded, closing her eyes as she slouched back down into the pillow.
wish I didn't have to go."

olas "As do I," he murmured. Although it had to be said, his bed was
ot uncomfortable enough with only him sleeping in it. If she spent the night
neither of them would get any sleep. And not for the reasons he'd like.

ire "Do you know what time it is?" she asked. Her eyes were closed; she
as, in looked almost unbearably content.

Unbearable because he was going to have to rouse her from her position
momentarily.

ho He reached over to his nightstand and checked his pocket watch. "Well,
going to need to leave soon," he said. "You're due back at the carriage
in an hour."

s texts She let out a groan. "I don't want to go."

r to He chuckled, giving her a nudge.

"What if I remain here?" she asked, one eye popping open. "I will be
as a church mouse. You can bring me food, and I'll read your medical

and—”

“—and Mrs. McGreevey will likely have heart failure the next time she comes in to clean my room.”

“She does that?”

“Every other day.”

Now Georgie looked panicked. “Every other—”

“Not today,” he cut in.

“Oh, thank goodness.” She sat up, regrettably pulling the bedsheet under her. “I was only joking about staying here, you know. Well, mostly on a lark. I was joking.”

“It would make me far more eager to see you in the evenings.”

She rose from the bed to dress, facing his bookshelf as she pulled on her frock. She’d need help with the buttons, and he wondered how he’d manage to help himself do them up when all he wanted was to kiss the tender skin on the nape of her neck.

“Don’t forget to get the book for me,” she said, oblivious to his hungry stare. “I don’t know which one you mean.”

“It’s the green one, all the way to the left,” he said, “but I’ll get it for you.” It still seemed strange to him that she’d want to read it, except . . . when she actually thought of it, it wasn’t strange at all.

He’d never have thought that anyone not involved in medicine would want to read such a thick text.

But not Georgie. For her, it made sense. Nicholas wondered if there were any medical schools that accepted women. He had a feeling his wife would be an excellent student.

They finished dressing and made it out of the boardinghouse undeterred. It was a warm day for Edinburgh, and the stroll to the carriage was most pleasant. Nicholas had one arm looped through Georgie’s, and the other holding the thick textbook. They chattered about nothing of importance, but they didn’t need to. The air was bright and warm, and they were so comfortable in each other’s presence, that there was no urge to fill the silence with anything profound.

The carriage was waiting at the edge of Old Town, in a relatively quiet square. Jameson and the driver were sitting on the seat, sharing a loaf of bread, and it looked like Georgie’s maid was waiting inside.

“There you are,” the maid said, poking her head out when they

approached. "It's getting late."

she It wasn't, but Nicholas saw no reason to point that out. He waited for Marian to go back into the carriage, and then gave Georgie a boost.

But when she ducked her head to enter, he did not release her hand.

"Nicholas?" she said, gazing down at him with an expression of genuine amusement.

He looked at her. At her face, which was so familiar to him. Or rather, it *had been* familiar. Somehow it had become new. Her eyes were the same blue, merry, but not quite as bright as his own. Her nose—it was the same nose she'd always had. Same for her lips, and her hair, and every little detail about her, except . . .

She was new.

to her He was new.

to make They had just begun.

to her "I love you," he said.

Her eyes went wide. "What?"

to cry "I love you." He brought her gloved hand to his lips. "I just thought you should know."

to cry you." She looked about, her eyes not quite panicked, but maybe a little nervous. She discombobulated, as if she were expecting someone to jump out at any moment and yell, "Surprise!"

to wish "I love you, silly girl," he said.

Her lips parted. "Silly?"

to were "For not believing me."

to would "I—I believe you."

"Good." He smiled, waiting patiently for her reply.

to cted. It She began to blink, and her mouth moved, just a little. She looked quickly over her shoulder at her maid; Nicholas wasn't sure why, perhaps it was a reflex. But then she turned back and said, "You love me."

to e; they "I do."

to able "Well." She swallowed. "I love you too."

to l the "I'm very happy to hear it."

Her mouth fell open. "That's what you say in response?"

to iet "You said, *What?*" he reminded her.

to of "I was *surprised*."

He gave a little shrug. "I wasn't."

She gasped. "You—"

r “Ah ah ah,” he said, with a little step back to avoid the swat she had
about to land on his upper arm. “You don’t want to do that. You love r

Her eyes narrowed. It only made him laugh.

“You do,” he said. “You can’t take it back.”

tle “I can’t believe you told me *now*,” she said.

er, it He hopped up onto the carriage step, one hand grasping the edge of
me, roof for balance, the other wrapping around her waist.

“Nicholas?”

me “I couldn’t wait,” he said.

thing She flushed, smiling, then whispered, “Are we making a scene?”

“Do you care?”

She shook her head. “Do you?”

“Not even a little bit.” He kissed her again. “But alas, I have to let y
I don’t want you on the roads after nightfall.”

She nodded and he hopped down. “I’ll see you on Friday evening,”
said. “I’ll leave for Scotsby just as soon as my classes are over.”

you Then he shut the carriage door, and watched it pull away. Damn, he
going to miss her.

Mr. McDiarmid had said they could occupy their new house at the e
next week.

Nicholas couldn’t wait.

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as a

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He hopped up onto the carriage step, one hand grasping the edge of the roof for balance, the other wrapping around her waist.

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“I couldn’t wait,” he said.

She flushed, smiling, then whispered, “Are we making a scene?”

“Do you care?”

She shook her head. “Do you?”

“Not even a little bit.” He kissed her again. “But alas, I have to let you go. I don’t want you on the roads after nightfall.”

She nodded and he hopped down. “I’ll see you on Friday evening,” he said. “I’ll leave for Scotsby just as soon as my classes are over.”

Then he shut the carriage door, and watched it pull away. Damn, he was going to miss her.

Mr. McDiarmid had said they could occupy their new house at the end of next week.

Nicholas couldn’t wait.

Chapter 23

Two days later, Georgie was back in Edinburgh.

She wasn't supposed to be there. Or rather, Nicholas wasn't expecting her. The plan had been for him to ride to Scotsby that evening, but Georgie received a message from Mr. McDiarmid that there were additional papers to sign regarding the lease of their new house. She supposed Nicholas could have just taken care of this the following week, but truthfully, she'd be looking for an excuse to go back to the city.

She had it all planned out: She would surprise him again outside of Scotsby so they could see Mr. McDiarmid so Nicholas could sign the papers, and then they would travel back to Scotsby together in the carriage. Surely that would be more comfortable for Nicholas than to ride the whole way.

Now that she knew her way around Edinburgh—at least enough to get herself to the lecture hall—she was able to convince Marian that she did not need her accompaniment. Jameson would be with her; the driver, too. Georgie was no longer an unmarried maiden. She did not need chaperones every time she left the house.

Not to mention that with Marian at Scotsby, Georgie and Nicholas would have the carriage all to themselves for the long ride home.

Georgie might be new to marriage, but she was not stupid.

But first there was the ride to the city. Georgie had never had difficulty reading in carriages, so she brought the medical textbook Nicholas had given her to help pass the time.

First Lines of the Practice of Physic by William Cullen, M.D. Thus far, she'd only managed to get through the preface and the introduction. Fifty pages in all, though, so it wasn't as if she was being a layabout. The material was fascinating, but she'd never read anything like it before, and it required far more of her attention and time than her usual reading choices.

She'd also discovered that Nicholas had given her only the first volume

four.

She'd be reading this for months.

Then she thought of all the other books he had on his shelf at the boardinghouse. Had he read them all? Was it even possible for a human being to do so?

She wondered if Dr. Simmons, the man who'd treated her asthma back in Kent, read books like *First Lines of the Practice of Physic*. According to the copy, the original publication date was 1777. Dr. Simmons was easily in his sixties. He would have completed his medical training well before 1777. He continued his education on his own? Was he required to?

Who kept track of doctors once they finished their studies? Anyone?

Georgie had questions.

But these could wait. Instead, she busied herself with the book. She turned to the first page of Part I.

Of Pyrexiae, or Febrile Diseases.

Fevers. This would be interesting.

She finished that page fairly quickly, then turned to the next.

Book One.

Wait, *Book One of Part One?*

She continued.

Chapter One.

She blinked. *Chapter One of Book One of Part One.*

Good heavens.

At least Dr. Cullen had broken his text into even smaller portions, not even half a page long. The white space on the page seemed to make it easier to separate each topic in her mind. Chapter One began with portions eight through seven having been taken up with the introduction.

Out of curiosity she flipped ahead to the end of Book One. Two hundred and thirty-four separate portions!

How was it possible there were two hundred and thirty-four different things to know about fevers?

She was beginning to develop new respect for Nicholas's studies, which was saying something, as she'd already respected it a great deal.

Georgie read for about an hour, looking up every now and then to watch the countryside roll past her window. She couldn't help it. She needed her eyes a break. Maybe that was why Dr. Cullen had broken his text up into so many smaller portions. Maybe he understood that human beings could

focus their attention on such difficult material for more than half a page at a time.

How could something so interesting be so difficult to read? She was now forty-four, which began, somewhat discouragingly: "This may be difficult to explain . . ."

She sighed. It was also difficult to understand. Maybe she needed to rest. She closed her eyes.

Just for a moment.

7. Had she just long enough to clear her mind for a few minutes before diving back into the textbook. Just a little nap until . . .

"Ma'am? Mrs. Rokesby?"

Georgie opened groggy eyes. Were they already in—

"Ma'am," Jameson said, looking up at her through the open carriage window. "we're here. In Edinburgh."

So they were.

Georgie blinked herself awake, rubbing her forehead inelegantly as she peered out the window. They were parked just outside of the university lecture hall. They wouldn't be able to leave the carriage there for a long period of time. The plan was for her and Jameson to get out while the carriage took the carriage to the square where he'd waited earlier in the week.

"I'm sorry," she said as she gathered her things. "I must have fallen asleep."

"It was a smooth ride, ma'am," he said.

And a long book, she thought.

He held out his hand to help her down, and then, once the carriage had departed she turned to him and said, "You need not come into the building with me."

She was quite certain Jameson would rather stay outside. The last time they'd been within earshot of the lecture he'd gone a bit green about the time Marian had later told her that he'd confessed that he sometimes fainted at the sight of blood.

But he shook his head. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, but you can't do it by yourself."

"I will be just fine," she assured him. "I know exactly where to go. I can give there is a bench right outside the lecture theater. I can sit quietly while you go up into the lecture hall for Mr. Rokesby to emerge."

Jameson did not look convinced. "I don't think Mr. Rokesby would

e at a approve.”

“He won’t mind at all,” Georgie said, which was only a small fib. No one would almost certainly prefer it if Jameson accompanied her, but he would be likely to be angry if he did not.

“I will be sitting right outside the room,” Georgie continued. “If something happens, all I have to do is raise my voice, and Mr. Rokesby will come running.”

But Jameson would not be swayed, so the two of them walked into the building together. Georgie brought the large green textbook with her, thinking it might make her look as if she was meant to be there.

Obviously she *wasn’t* meant to be there—the University of Edinburgh accepted no female students—but maybe she’d look like someone’s assistant door, or a visiting dignitary.

Still unlikely, but she felt better with the book. Academic armor, so speak.

They walked in, and Georgie took a seat on the bench, right next to the open door to the theater. Jameson stood across the hall, but she had a feeling it wasn’t far enough away to keep him out of earshot because he started to look ill within minutes.

It wasn’t surprising. Today’s lecture topic had something to do with care, and the professor had just begun talking about worms.

And maggots.

Georgie wasn’t sure she understood the relevance, but that was the least of her concerns. Jameson’s skin had gone gray and pasty and he was clutching the wall. Surely he would do better outside. “Jameson,” she whispered to get his attention.

He didn’t hear. Or possibly he needed to focus all of his energy on remaining upright.

“Pssst. Jameson!”

Nothing, but he swallowed a few times.

Georgie’s eyes widened. This did not look good.

“Jameson—” Forget that. She stood and hurried over. “Jameson, I think you should—”

And “*Urg uh blear . . .*”

I wait Oh, God. He was going to—

“*. . . uharfff!*”

Everything—and Georgie meant everything—that was in Jameson’s

stomach came out of his mouth.

Nicholas She jumped back, but she wasn't fast enough to avoid it all. It hit her shoes, and probably the hem of her dress, and—*Oh dear God he must have eaten fish.*

Nothing Her own stomach started to turn. Oh no . . .

“Oh, Mrs. Rokesby,” Jameson groaned. “I don't think I can . . .”

Apparently he hadn't expelled everything the first time around because he heaved again, this time spewing the dregs of his breakfast.

Georgie clamped her hand over her mouth. The *smell*. Oh, God, the mess was making her sick, too.

“I have to go outside,” he moaned.

“Go!” Georgie clutched at her own roiling belly. She needed him gone so she could get away from the smell she might be able to keep her own breakfast down. “Please!”

He ran out, just as men poured forth from the lecture theater.

“What's going on?” more than one demanded.

“Is someone ill?”

“What is—”

Someone slipped in the mess on the floor.

Someone else crashed into her.

They *all* wanted to be of service, to be the doctor who would save the

“Are you ill, ma'am?”

“Are you fevered?”

They kept pushing forward, and none of them were Nicholas, and she couldn't get away from the smell . . .

She tried not to breathe.

She took a gulp of air.

And another. But it smelled terrible, and she gagged.

And then she tried for another, but it didn't seem to come.

She gasped.

“Miss, are you—”

“Nicholas,” she wheezed. “Where is—”

She couldn't breathe. She opened her mouth, and she thought she was pulling in air, but it wasn't reaching her lungs.

She couldn't breathe.

She needed air.

Everyone was so close.

She couldn't breathe.
r She couldn't breathe.
have *She couldn't breathe.*

Nicholas almost always sat near the front of the lecture hall. He had a sneaking suspicion that his eyesight was not what it once was—probably from all the close reading he'd had to do these past few years—and he found his attention was less likely to wander if he could see the expressions on his professors' faces as they lectured.

Today he was in the second row, which was why he was among the first to realize that something odd was happening just outside the lecture hall. Some of the students near the exit were gone by the time he turned around, and several more had jumped up from their seats and were hurrying out.

Nicholas shared a glance with the man seated next to him. They both shrugged.

"Do you know what's happening?" Nicholas asked.

"I think someone fainted in the hall," another student said.

"What was someone doing in the hall?" yet another asked.

Nicholas shrugged again. The hallway outside the lecture theater was usually vacant while class was in session. Sometimes a tardy student ran through, hoping to slide into one of the back seats without being noticed. He supposed that occasionally people waited on the bench for class to get out. That's what Georgie had done when she'd come a few days earlier, before her maid had insisted on waiting outside.

"Dr. Monro!" came an urgent holler.

The professor, who had been watching the exodus with visible irritation, set down his notes and bounded up the steep steps.

"Should we get up to help?" the man next to him asked.

Nicholas shook his head. "It's too crowded. We'd only get in the way."

And then, in the split second after he stopped speaking and before anyone else began, a panicked yell rang through the building.

"SHE'S NOT BREATHING!"

as *She?*

Nicholas rose to his feet. Slowly at first, as his brain caught up with his legs.

She?

There were no women here. There were never women here, except

when . . .

When Georgie . . .

He ran.

He tripped past the man sitting next to him, stumbling his way to the

Georgie was here. He didn't know how he knew, but he did. She wa

ly and she needed him.

'd He ran up the steps and pushed his way into the hall. A knot of peop
sions were surrounding someone on the floor.

"Out of the way," someone yelled. "Give Dr. Monroe room!"

last to Nicholas shoved his way forward. "That's my wife," he said, even th
Most he couldn't see her yet. "That's my wife."

nd Finally, he made it through the crowd, and there she was, sitting on
floor, gasping for breath.

h "Lie her down!" Dr. Monroe said. He spoke with the authority of a do
who had been practicing for decades, who knew what to do.

Except the minute he lay her back, her body began to spasm.

"Stop!" Nicholas yelled. "She can't get enough air like that."

"Get him away from me," the doctor snapped.

is Nicholas grabbed him by the arm. "She's my wife."

ished Dr. Monroe turned to him with a sharp expression. "If you value her
ed, and being, you'll back off and let me do my job."

get out. Nicholas swallowed and took a step back, watching as his professor
fore of the most well-known and respected doctors in Great Britain—began
assessment.

tion, "She has a history of spasmodic asthma," Nicholas said, hoping it w
Everything Georgie had told him indicated this diagnosis. And that wa
certainly what he saw when he looked at her now. Georgie's inhales se
more like gasps, her lungs convulsing as they tried desperately to fill.

ly." Dr. Monroe gave a curt nod.

nyone "Sir," Nicholas said, "I believe she needs to sit up."

Georgie's eyes met his. He could see she was trying to nod.

The doctor grunted but helped ease her into a sitting position. Georg
a gulp of air, but Nicholas could tell it wasn't enough.

his *Please*, her eyes seemed to say. She thrust her hand out, toward Nicl

He shoved forward. Maybe the doctor needed room, but Georgie ne
him.

"What did I just say?" Dr. Monroe snapped.

“She wants my hand,” Nicholas replied, fighting to keep his voice calm. “She needs comfort.”

The doctor gave a single brisk nod, then said, “How often does she experience dyspnea?”

“Not often in adulthood,” Nicholas answered. “Far more frequently she was a child.”

He looked to Georgie for confirmation. She gave a tiny nod. She was breathing more regularly now, but every exhale made a wheezy, whistling sound.

“It sounds as if she is improving, sir,” Nicholas said. He looked at her carefully as he put an arm around her shoulders to support her. “Are you getting more air?”

Again, another tiny nod. “It’s . . . better.”

“I’m not satisfied yet,” the doctor said grimly. “I’ve seen cases when a patient seems to improve but then relapses. Especially young women prone to hysteria.”

“She’s not prone to hysteria,” Nicholas said stiffly.

“I know—what—” Georgie tried to say something, but she was having much trouble catching her breath.

“Don’t speak,” Nicholas said. “You need a bit more time.”

“But—he—”

“We need to bleed her,” Dr. Monroe said.

“What?” Nicholas looked at him in shock. “No. She’s already improved.

“And this will hasten her recovery.” He looked up at the crowd. “My lancets. Now!”

Several men scurried off. Dr. Monroe took Georgie’s wrist and started taking her pulse.

“Sir, no,” Nicholas said. “She should not be bled.”

His professor gave him a look of utter disdain.

“She’s been bled before,” Nicholas said. “It does not work.”

He prayed this was true. He had not been there. He did not know the details. But Georgie had said it had not helped, and he owed it to her to believe her account of her own body, of her own health.

Dr. Monroe ignored him. “We’re going to have to cut her sleeve to access the veins in her arm,” he said to the man next to him.

“You will not bleed her,” Nicholas said forcefully. “It does not work.”

“She’s alive, isn’t she?” Dr. Monroe snapped.

alm. “Yes, but not because she was bled. She said it made her worse.”
The doctor gave a snort. “Patients are notoriously unreliable, especially when recounting events from several years earlier.”

when still pale, but her color had improved, and her lips had lost that terrifying bluish tint they’d acquired when the doctor had had her lie down. “Are you feeling any better?” he asked her. “You seem to be—*euf!*”

ling One of the other medical students pitched forward and knocked into them. They were all still crowded tightly around, eager to watch the great Dr. er
Monro at work.

ou “Back off!” Nicholas barked at the crowd. “She needs space.”
Georgie nodded. “They’re too close. I need—”
Another whistling wheeze.

re the “Everyone, take a step back,” Dr. Monro ordered. “I need room to work here to
none to “She needs room to breathe,” Nicholas retorted.
Dr. Monro gave him a sharp look before turning back to Georgie. “I found that blood in the dominant arm has stronger circulatory properties. I’m saying too
ing too said, not to her but to the students gathered round. He flicked his eyes to
Nicholas. “I assume this would be her right arm.”

Nicholas gave a curt nod just as someone returned with a set of lancets.
“But you will not be—”

“Excellent,” Dr. Monro said. “Now then, observe my selected blade
“I want to choose one that—”

y “No.” Nicholas jerked Georgie away.
“Mr. Rokesby,” the doctor said, “I advise you to move away from your wife.”

d “No.”
“Mr. Rokesby,” Dr. Monro said sharply, “may I remind you that you are not yet a physician? And that your becoming one is predicated upon my approval? I will say it one more time. Move away from your wife.”

“Nicholas did not hesitate. “No,” he said again. He gathered her in his arms
to trust and stood. “I’m taking her outside.”

“The colder air will be too much of a shock,” Dr. Monro said. “She needs access
to remain inside.”

Nicholas ignored him. “Clear the way,” he said to the assembled crowd.
“This is a bad idea,” the doctor warned.
Nicholas didn’t even look at him.

ally “If she dies,” Dr. Monro said, “it’s on you.”
ally “You’re not going to die,” Nicholas said to Georgie as he strode down the hall.

ne was “Not today, anyway,” she said with a weak smile.
ng Nicholas gave her a tender smile. “I would scold you for such a joke
: you under the circumstances, I’ll take your humor as a sign of improvement.
 She nodded, and when she exhaled, there was less of a whistling sound than there had been earlier.

him. “Please say I’m doing the right thing by taking you outside,” he said.
 “It was too crowded.” She took a few breaths. Nicholas could see that she was focusing on slowing her inhaled breaths.

ork.” “And the smell,” she added as he pushed through the front door.
 Nicholas had noticed that, too. “Did you vomit?”
ork.” She shook her head. “Jameson.”
 “Jameson vomited?”

have “It was the lecture. He’s—” She coughed. “He’s very squeamish.”
es,” he “Good God,” Nicholas muttered. “Remind me never to allow him near my offices when I become a doctor.”

 If he became a doctor. He did not know if Dr. Monro would make good on his threat. He wouldn’t have thought him so vindictive, but he’d also never seen him so angry.

. You But Nicholas didn’t care. Not at this moment, at least. He had Georgie outside, and if the city air was not as clear as he’d like, it was still a damn sight better than in the hallway outside the lecture theater, with dozens of men pressing in on every side.

our Georgie’s cheeks had even started to show the first traces of pink.
 “Don’t scare me like that again,” Nicholas said. His voice trembled.
1 are had not thought it would.

y She reached up and touched his cheek. “Thank you.”
 “For not letting him draw blood?”
s arms “For believing in me.”

needs They sat on a stone bench beneath a tree, Nicholas still holding her hands scandalously close for such a public place. But he wasn’t ready to let go.
 “How are you feeling?” he asked.
ord. “Better. Not quite right, but better.”
 “How long does it usually take to feel back to normal?”
 She gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know, really. It’s hard to say.”

He nodded. And then, because he had to say it—
vn the “I love you, you know.”
She smiled gently. “I love you too.”
“I’m going to tell you every day.”
), but “I will be glad to hear it.”
it.” He frowned. Just a little. That was not *quite* the response he’d been l
ind for. “And . . . ?”
She brought one of his hands to her mouth and kissed it. “And I will
l. *you* every day as well.”
at she “Much better.”
“To think,” she said, with what he could only describe as a mystifier
of her head, “you were right there under my nose, all these years.” She
looked up, her eyes suddenly wry. “Do I have to thank Freddie Oakes?
say I don’t.”
“Freddie Oakes?” Nicholas echoed.
“He did bring us together.”
ear my Nicholas rolled his eyes. “We would have found our way. It just wo
ood on have taken a little longer.”
ever She let out a long breath, slow and sustained, and Nicholas was plea
hear only the slightest remnants of a wheeze. “People are watching,” si
whispered.
jie He looked over at the building. The front door was open, and severa
mn classmates stood on the front steps.
of “I’m fine!” Georgie called out. She waved, but then the exertion led
little cough.
“Stop that,” Nicholas scolded.
He “They’re worried. It’s sweet.”
“It’s not sweet, it’s intrusive.”
“Can you blame them?”
Nicholas supposed not. She had collapsed in front of a group of mec
students. There was no way they were not going to be curious.
“Why are you here?” he suddenly thought to ask.
jo. “Mr. McDiarmid has more papers. I wanted to tell you, and then I th
we could ride back to Scotsby together.”
“Forget the papers,” he said. “Let’s go home now.”
“No! The sooner you sign, the sooner we can move into the new hou
“The house can wa—”

“The sooner we can be together,” she cut in firmly.

He tapped one finger against her hand. “You do have a point there. I then it’s straight to Scotsby. And you are remaining in the carriage while I deal with Mr. McDiarmid. I want you to rest.”

“Yes, sir,” she said with an uncharacteristically meek smile.

hoping “And then when we’re home it’s more rest,” he ordered.

She placed her hand on her heart. “I promise.”

to tell “Nothing too exerting.”

Her brows rose. “Nothing?”

He groaned. He’d been looking forward to many exertions.

and shake “I see Jameson across the street,” Nicholas said. “I’ll have him arrange to have the carriage meet us at Mr. McDiarmid’s office. Do you think you could please walk there?” They’d done the same walk just two days earlier; it was not

She nodded. “I think it will help, actually, as long as we go slowly.”

Nicholas dashed off to give Jameson instructions, then returned to Georgie’s side. Together, they walked through Old Town.

could “Nicholas,” she said.

He turned.

he said to “I love you.”

he He smiled. “I love you too.”

They took a few more steps, and then, with a little tilt of her head, she said, “I just wanted to say it first.”

“Competitive, are we?”

to a “No,” she said, a small pulse of amusement in her voice, “I just wanted to say it without saying, ‘I love you *too*.’”

“Oh. Well, in that case, I love you, and I love you too.”

“Who’s competitive now?”

“Not me, surely.”

“Well, then, I love you thrice.”

logical “Does that even make sense?” he asked.

“I think it does, actually.” She let her head rest on his shoulder. Just for a moment; they could not walk more than a step or two in such a position.

thought “Everything about you makes sense,” she said.

“That’s hardly true.”

“Everything about *us* makes sense.”

use.” She was on to something with that.

“Georgie?” he said.

But
ile I

She looked at him.
“I love you.”
She grinned. “And I love you.”
“Too?”
“Always.”
He smiled. That would work.

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“I love you.”
She grinned. “And I love you.”
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Epilogue

A few years later

“Shouldn’t the doctor be doing this?”

Georgie smiled and assured Mr. Bailey that she knew what she was doing. “Dr. Rokesby often asks me to stitch wounds,” she said.

But Mr. Bailey was not appeased. He yanked his arm off the table, r causing her to reopen the small section of wound she’d successfully cl

“I want the doctor,” he said.

Georgie took a breath and once again plastered a smile on her face. She understood why patients wanted Nicholas. He was the esteemed Dr. Rokesby, and she—despite all the knowledge she’d acquired these past few years—was, and always would be, Mrs. Rokesby.

She liked being Mrs. Rokesby. She liked it a lot. But it would have been handy at a time like this to be able to spear Mr. Bailey with a withering glare and say, “I, too, am a physician.”

Dr. and Dr. Rokesby. What a thing that would be. Alas, her inquiries at the University of Edinburgh had been met with incredulity.

Someday a woman would be granted a degree in medicine. Georgie was certain of it. But not in her lifetime.

Unfortunately, she was certain of that, too.

“Dr. Rokesby!” she called out. Nicholas was treating another patient in the next room, one with a much more serious condition than Mr. Bailey’s lacerated arm.

Nicholas poked his head in. “Is there a problem?”

“Mr. Bailey would prefer that you stitch his arm,” Georgie replied.

“I assure you, you don’t,” he said, directing his words at Mr. Bailey. “My wife is far more skilled with a needle than I am.”

“But you are the doctor.”

Georgie rolled her eyes in anticipation of what she knew Nicholas would say. They’d been through this before, and she knew it was the only way

convince men like Mr. Bailey, but still, it was galling.

“She’s a woman, Mr. Bailey,” Nicholas said with a condescending smile. “Aren’t they always better with needles and thread?”

“I suppose . . .”

“Let me see what she’s done thus far.”

Mr. Bailey showed Nicholas his arm. Georgie hadn’t managed to get it done before he’d balked at having been placed in her care, but the five stitches were neat and tidy and, yes, better than anything Nicholas could do.

“Brilliant,” Nicholas said, flashing Georgie a quick grin before turning back to Mr. Bailey. “Look at how even they are. You’ll have a scar—but no getting around that—but it will be minimal thanks to her skill.”

doing.

“But it hurts,” Mr. Bailey whined.

nearly
used.

“There’s no getting around that, either,” Nicholas said, his voice finally starting to betray his impatience. “Would you like a shot of whiskey? I found it helps.”

She
Rokesby,
s—

Mr. Bailey nodded and grudgingly agreed to allow Georgie to continue. “You’re a saint,” Nicholas murmured in her ear before returning to the other room.

been
& stare

Georgie bit back a retort before turning to Mr. Bailey with a purposefully bland expression. “Shall we resume?” she asked.

s at the

Mr. Bailey set his arm back on the table. “I’ll be watching you,” he warned.

was

“You should,” she said sweetly. It was really too bad he wasn’t the sort who fainted at the sight of blood. It would make all of this so much easier.

t in the

Twenty minutes later she tied off her knot and admired her handiwork. She’d done an excellent job, not that she could say that to Mr. Bailey. Instead, she gave him instructions to return in a week’s time and assured him that Rokesby himself would inspect the wound before deciding if it was time to remove the stitches.

. “My

He departed and she wiped off her hands and removed her smock. It was nearly six, certainly late enough to close the small clinic Nicholas had opened in Bath. They had loved living in Edinburgh, but it was too far from family. Bath wasn’t exactly around the corner from Kent, but they’d both wanted to live in a proper town, and it was easy enough to visit home.

would
y to

Besides, Georgie had discovered she liked having a little distance between herself and her family. She loved them and they loved her, but they’d never seen her as a capable, grown woman. Her mother still went into a panic

time she coughed.

mile. No, this was good. She looked around the clinic. This was where she meant to be.

“Give him three drops every evening before bed,” she heard Nicholas as he walked his patient to the door. “And apply the poultice I recommend much. If he’s not feeling better in three days’ time, we will reassess.”

“And if he is feeling better?” a female voice asked.

ld do. “Then we shall all be delighted,” Nicholas replied.

ng Georgie smiled. She could so easily picture his face, warm and reassuring here’s He really was an excellent doctor.

An excellent man.

ally The front door shut, and she heard Nicholas turn the lock. They live upstairs, their rooms accessible by a stairway in the back.

’ve “What are you smiling about?” he asked when he appeared in the doorway. “You.”

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he “I *am* smiling.”

“So you are. Forgive me for not making the connection.”

efully Georgie crossed the small room and stood on her toes so that she could give him a kiss. “I was just thinking,” she said, “that this was where I *am* meant to be. And you”—she kissed him again, on the other cheek—“and I *am* meant to be with.”

sort “I could have told you that,” he murmured. He leaned down.

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Georgie crossed the small room and stood on her toes so that she could give him a kiss. “I was just thinking,” she said, “that this was where I am meant to be. And you”—she kissed him again, on the other cheek—“are who I am meant to be with.”

“I could have told you that,” he murmured. He leaned down.

And this time, *he* kissed *her*.

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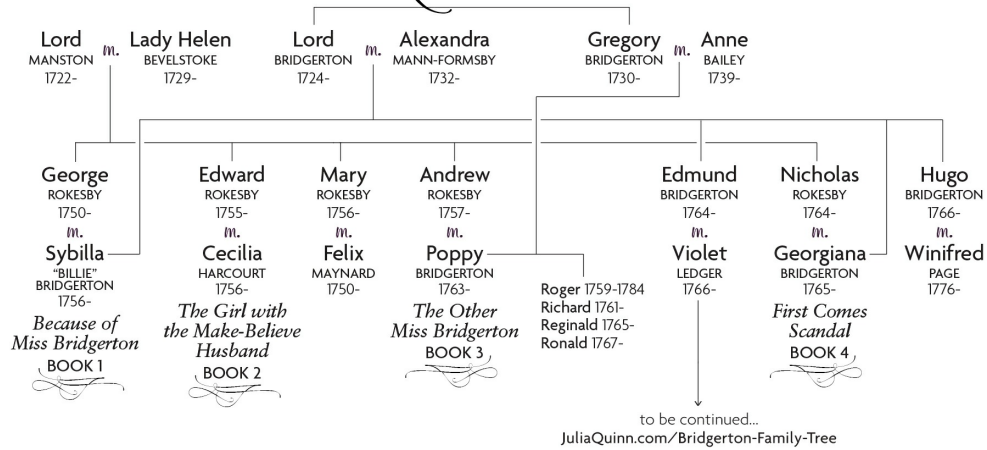
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About the Author

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author **JULIA QUINN** began writing one month after graduating from college and, aside from a brief stint in medical school, she has been tapping away at her keyboard ever since. Her novels have been translated into forty-three languages and are beloved the world over. A graduate of Harvard and Radcliffe colleges, she lives with her family in the Pacific Northwest.

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With her brother Thomas injured on the battlefield, orphaned Cecilia Harcourt travels across the Atlantic, determined to nurse him back to health. But after a week of searching, she instead finds the handsome officer Edward Rokesby. Cecilia vows that she will save this soldier's life, even if staying by his side means telling one little lie... But when the truth comes out, Edward may have a few surprises of his own for the new Mrs. Rokesby.



THE OTHER MISS BRIDGERTON

Fiercely independent, Poppy Bridgerton will only wed a suitor whose keen interests match her own. While visiting a friend, her delight turns to dismay when two pirates kidnap her, leaving her bound on the captain's bed. When Captain Andrew James Rokesby learns that she is a Bridgerton, he knows he will likely have to wed her. But when Andrew's secret is revealed, will his declaration of love be enough to capture her heart?

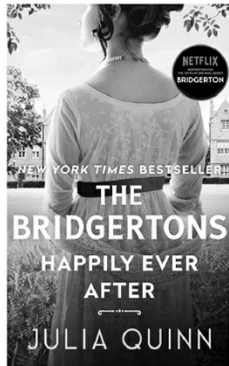
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Georgiana Bridgerton's reputation is hanging by a thread after she's abducted for her dowry. When Nicholas Rokesby discovers that Georgie is facing ruin he knows he must marry her. But Georgie doesn't want to be anyone's sacrifice. As they embark upon their unorthodox courtship, they discover first comes scandal, then comes marriage. But after that comes love...



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HAPPILY EVER AFTER/WHISTLEDOWN BOOKS

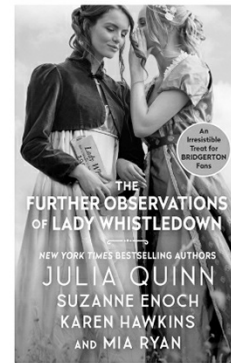


THE BRIDGERTONS: HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Julia Quinn’s Bridgerton series remains one of the most beloved among historical romance readers, and this collection of “second epilogues” offers fans more from their favorite characters. Also in this collection is a Bridgerton novella, featuring Violet Bridgerton, written especially for this book, which will be sure to satisfy the legions of Julia Quinn fans.

THE FURTHER OBSERVATIONS OF LADY WHISTLEDOWN

The new year has arrived in London and, as Lady Whistledown observes in her ever popular paper, romance is in the air. Four couples are caught in the whirl of London’s most fascinating seasonal festivities including a theatre performance, an amusing ice skate on the frozen Thames, the Shelbourne Ball, and Valentine’s Day morning itself, when presents and hearts are given freely.

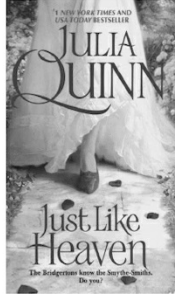


LADY WHISTLEDOWN STRIKES BACK

At one of the highlights of the season, a brand-new ruby bracelet is mysteriously stolen. Was it one of the guests? Things become a little complicated—and a lot entertaining—as four couples speculate over, avoid suspicion of, and even investigate the disappearance of the bracelet. And of course, Lady Whistledown dutifully takes note of the evening’s events to tantalize her readers once again.

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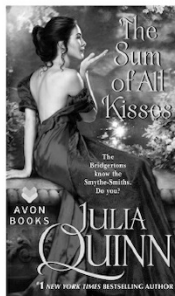


JUST LIKE HEAVEN

Honorina Smythe-Smith is to play the violin (badly) in the annual musicale performed by the Smythe-Smith quartet. But first she's determined to marry by the end of the season. When her advances are spurned, can Marcus Holroyd, her brother Daniel's best friend, swoop in and steal her heart in time for the musicale?

A NIGHT LIKE THIS

Anne Wynter might not be who she says she is... Daniel Smythe-Smith might be in mortal danger, but that's not going to stop the young earl from falling in love.



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Sarah Pleinsworth can't forgive Hugh Prentice for the duel he fought three years ago that nearly destroyed her family and left Hugh himself with a badly injured leg. That's fine with Hugh, who can't tolerate Sarah's dramatic ways. But when the two are forced to spend a week together, they begin to change their minds...

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Sir Richard Kenworthy has less than a month to find a bride, and when he sees Iris Smythe-Smith hiding behind her cello at her family's infamous musicale, he thinks he might have struck gold. Iris is used to blending into the background, so when Richard courts her, she can't quite believe it's true.



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