



Catch Her
if You Can

Diamonds of London

BOOK 3

SANDRA SOOKOO

USA Today Bestselling Author

Catch Her if You Can

Diamonds of London Book Three



Sandra Sookoo



New Independence Books

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Author's Pledge and Promise

You have my promise that I have never used AI technology to produce any part of the books I write and publish, and that I never will. Each and every word is mine. I spend copious hours every day outlining my books and then writing them. I refuse to use AI technology because then that product isn't writing. That is cheating and asking a computer to do the work for me.

So much of writing is organic, and computers simply can't make a reader feel the things a hero and heroine go through. I absolutely love connecting my characters with my readers, and letting my readers have a fully immersive experience while reading my stories.

Rest assured that I will still write every single word in each one of my books, and you have my guarantee that what you have purchased is the genuine book and not artificially created.

I adore my readers far too much, as well as the craft of writing, to cheat them in any way.

Thank you for your continued support.

Dedication

Aida A Lorenzana. You've been with me a long time and rave about nearly all of my books. It's so refreshing to have a reader—and a friend—like you, and your enthusiasm always makes me smile. It helps lift me up on the bad days. Keep being you.

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Blurb

When a lady snubs love and romance in favor of being ruined, all hell will break loose.

Lady Katharine “Kitty” Gibson is the youngest child of the Earl of Armestead. At six and twenty, she wants no part of living a fairytale and desires love even less. She has dreams for her life that do *not* include romance, but tolerating a man long enough to be ruined would be a lovely addition and might allow her past society’s dictates that domestication and a good match is all she should aspire toward.

Mr. Reginald Healy made his first fortune with the East India Company and his second importing beautiful silk fabric and selling it first to ladies in America then to the *beau monde* in London. All he has ever wanted is to be respected as a gentleman instead of the “earl’s fool” he’s been nicknamed. When he purchases a rundown manor house in the countryside and furthers his acquaintance with a winsome blonde who is not in his usual style, his dream shifts to include a wife and possible family.

While Reginald tries his best to be more to Kitty than a gentleman with benefits, she thinks him endearing and a tad embarrassing. He’s not much changed from when he’d proposed to her ten years prior, but the longer his clumsy attempt at wooing continues, romance creeps in to mar her lovely no-strings-attached affair. Terrified and confused, she sets out one night to flee into obscurity, but as Reginald gives chase, unexpected peril on the road makes them both face their biggest fears and has the capacity to show them both that falling in love can be whatever they need it to be.

Chapter One



July 8, 1801

Armestead Hall

North of Watford

Hertfordshire, England

“Oh, there is quite a crush in the ballroom. That bodes well, don’t you think?”

Lady Katharine Gibson frowned as she took a peek into said room from her mother’s side. Her parents were the ones hosting the summer ball, and since she was to make her Come Out next year, they had consented to let her attend even though she was only sixteen. The unspoken hope of them all was that she would make a sensation and be snapped up into an engagement, thereby becoming the talk of London at her ability to snag a suitor without officially having a Season or even having a first year at a fine finishing school.

And prove herself just as successful as her three sisters before her.

“It will only bode well if there are handsome men worthy to ask for my hand.” After all, she would align herself with nothing less than an attractive, blond, noble hero-type who had a title and full coffers and was well respected within the *beau monde*.

Her three sisters had all married men in a similar vein, so that is what she wanted for herself too. They were well-matched and from all accounts quite happy with their husbands. Two of them already had two children, while the

other sister—the one closest to her in age—was decidedly more progressive. She and her husband wanted to experience life together for a bit before starting a family.

To Kitty's mind, that was simply a ridiculous notion. Why marry a man if you didn't wish to bear his children or provide everything that would entail? Wasn't that the reason for marrying? *Well, I want the perfect life.* Besides, it might help her gain notice and praise from her parents, and since she was the baby of the family, she was often overlooked. Aside from her one brother who was the oldest of the siblings, she hadn't been matched or made a name for herself yet. Edward—her only brother—was a decade older than she, which meant there was an interesting age spread between all the Gibson siblings.

“If I can land a duke, Papa would be thrilled.” That was the ultimate goal. However, the availability of single dukes that weren't ages old or hideously ugly was rare.

“To be sure.” Her mother smiled and smoothed a hand down the front of her pink satin gown. “Remember, though, don't go off in a man's company alone tonight. I don't want to hear of even a whiff of scandal.” There was a stern warning in her brown eyes and in her voice. “There are far too many fortune hunters out there who are angling to wed a daughter of an earl, and you are quite young and without experience. Truly, you need the finishing school before we marry you off, but you've always managed to wriggle your way out or around the rules.”

Perhaps she *had* been a tad spoiled. “I believe I know enough not to make foolish decisions.” She'd witnessed all three sisters being courted and then ultimately wed. “But I want to marry higher than the girls.” The oldest of which had married an heir to an earl. Someday, she would be a countess, while one of her other sisters would be a viscountess and the other was currently the wife of a baronet.

A ghost of a smile curved her mother's lips as she nodded to a few acquaintances that passed their location to move into the ballroom. “I'm sure your papa would adore such a thing, and he *does* want the best for his baby girl.”

Kitty shook out the skirts of her gown of fine white lawn with a few flounces at the hem. Dear little rosebuds and vines had been embroidered about the bodice and the hems of the short sleeves, with a pink ribbon that went about her waist. “When shall we go in?”

“As soon as your father can tear himself away from the men in his study. Why he thought to conduct business tonight before the ball I’ll never know.” She shook her head. “In fact, why don’t you go fetch him and remind him there are other things that require his attention tonight.”

“All right.” Then she could secure his undivided attention for a time. As she followed the corridors through the manor, she came upon Edward’s best friend.

“Uh, Lady Katharine. A word, if you please.” A look of such determination reflected on his face that foreboding trembled down her spine.

“Oh, Mr. Healy.” Frantically, she cast a glance up and down the corridor, but aside from the footman at the end of the hallway, they were quite alone. “I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight.” Was it her fault that she couldn’t summon enough enthusiasm into her voice?

He wasn’t exactly the image of her ideal man with his lanky body and his evening clothing that seemed to hang on his thin frame. And he certainly wasn’t blond, not with his hair of midnight black that tended to curl. The telltale sheen of pomade bore testament to that fact. Not to mention the fact Mr. Healy wasn’t a member of the *beau monde*, and if he was a member of the gentry, he certainly had nothing to recommend him.

“Edward invited me.” He tugged on the knot of his cravat. “I only accepted the invitation for one reason.”

“Oh?” Kitty didn’t care much, for she needed to find her father, so he would formally open the ball and she could go husband hunting. She breathed a sigh of relief when a knot of people tarried at the end of the corridor. Still, she made certain there was a good amount of space between her and Mr. Healy. “Whyever for?” Truly, they barely knew each other,

had been introduced when her brother had the man down to London once when they'd finished university. After that, she'd only seen either of them in passing.

"I have always held you in high regard, ever since the first time I saw you, and I rather think I wouldn't be happy with anyone else."

Oh, dear. This does not sound promising. "I don't believe this is a good time for a private conversation." Or anything for that matter.

"I understand that, but it can't wait, especially if you do well tonight," he said in a rush.

Her lower jaw dropped. "What do you mean?" *Please don't let this be what I think it might.*

"I would like permission to pay my addresses to you." Though he looked rather green about the gills, he continued on. "In fact, there is more to it than that." He peered into her eyes, his sapphire depths reflecting back nothing but honesty. "I admire you and would like it overly much if you would marry me."

Annoyance warred with excitement in her chest. *My first proposal!* Yet, it was from *him*. "How dare you ask for my hand in this way and ruin the experience!" She went so far as to stamp her foot in frustration. "I truly must decline."

"Perhaps if you think about my proposal more?" A hopeful note road in his tones.

"I'm sorry."

"Hear me out, my lady," he was quick to implore and dared to take her hand in his gloved ones. "I have plans; I'm going to make a fortune. You'll see."

"While that is well and good, and I hope you are successful, I intend to become a Diamond of the First Water in my first Season if I am not matched before then." Kitty shook her head. There were far bigger fish in the marriage mart. "Honestly, I don't want to waste my shine on a no-name man without a future."

“For now.” His eyes implored her even if there was hurt at the backs of them.

Her words might have been harsh but true. “I’m sorry, Mr. Healy. I won’t change my mind. You are *not* my ideal man.”

Panic entered his expression before he buried it under acceptance. His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow, but he nodded. “I will work as much as I need to in order to make you proud, Katharine. To be the sort of man you want.”

“Don’t do it for me.” She shook her head. Oh, this was horrible. Her first proposal and her first time in breaking a man’s heart. “Make *yourself* proud. No woman wants a man who has no self-possession.” In all of her dreams of this very moment, in none of them was he standing there. Quite simply, he was wrong for her. Would *always* be wrong.

“I see.” Pain echoed in his voice and reflected in his eyes. “Well then.” He cleared his throat. “It seems I have much to figure out if I want a future with you.”

“I won’t change my mind, I’m afraid.” She softened her voice. “Perhaps you should find someone else.”

“There will never be a woman as good as you.” Mr. Healy gave her a slight bow from the waist. “Until then, my lady.”

Quick tears stung her eyes, which only annoyed her further. She stared after him and brushed impatiently at the moisture. “Well, that was horrid.” Even though she had no feelings for the man, her heart still felt a tad wounded. “I hope my next proposal is much better.”

No matter what, she would never tell anyone about this.



October 10, 1817

Armestead Hall
North of Watford
Hertfordshire, England

What in the world had brought on that particular memory?

“Kitty, are you listening to me?”

Oh, right. That. She blew out a breath of frustration as she trained her gaze on her brother, Edward. The lecture she received from him every autumn when he dropped in to visit her at the hall where she’d been banished by that very same brother a few years ago.

“Quite frankly, no. I am not.” She briefly swept her gaze at the ceiling before resting it on him again. “Remind me again.”

How long had it been since she’d seen or even heard about Mr. Healy? It had been probably ten years since that horrid night. But then, she wasn’t in London, so if that was where he’d gone, she wouldn’t have known it. And Edward certainly never talked much about him.

It was her brother’s turn to huff. “You are six and twenty for lord’s sake. You need to be married. I won’t have a spinster on my hands.”

“As if that is the worst thing.” She frowned at the piece of embroidery in her lap. It wasn’t that she worked the poor, pathetic thing often; she detested handiwork, but she always brought it out whenever Edward visited, so he would think she wasn’t quite as hopeless at everything an English lady in the *beau monde* was supposed to be proficient in. And even if he did, she didn’t much care.

Years ago, she’d made her peace with the fact she was different—too stubborn, too strong-willed, too opinionated, too different from other ladies.

He sighed and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. His hands dangled between them. His blond hair, arranged into a popular style, glimmered in the sunlight that passed through the window. “Listen, you are my baby sister and the only one who isn’t matched and comfortably settled into married life with a family.”

“Interesting to note that you are my oldest sibling, yet *you* aren’t either of those things.”

A mottled red flush rose up his neck to hover about his collar points. “That is neither here nor there.” He scrambled to his feet and then took to pacing. “You need to stop hiding here —”

“—where you have ordered me to be due to what you call ‘my penchant for falling into scandal—’”

His second huff was decidedly louder than the first. “Perhaps marriage will curb the wildness about you, which means that I can attend to my own life without having to constantly worry about you and wonder who will look after you.” At eleven years her senior, he was no doubt feeling pressure to marry and beget an heir.

“While I understand that, I’m afraid marriage isn’t a state I particularly wish to enter into again.” Over the last ten years, many things had changed in her life since she was a naïve girl who had a specific checklist in her mind for the man she’d hoped to marry.

After that ball, she’d not told anyone about her first proposal. It was far too embarrassing. Though she’d been quite popular at that event, none of the men had met her then criteria. Her mother had sent her on to finishing school in Brighton, and after three years there, learning how to be everything society wanted in a lady, she came home to her first Season.

She hadn’t been wrong when she’d told Mr. Healy that long ago day she would be a Diamond of the First Water. At nineteen, she’d taken the *ton* and London by storm. Her looks were in that season, and she was society’s blonde, brown-eyed darling. Her name was on every hostess’ guest list, her dances

were all reserved before she'd ever stepped into a ballroom or drawing room. Her father had fielded ten offers of marriage before that first Season was out.

But she'd not loved any of those candidates. There was something always... lacking, and though she'd adored the attention, if she had accepted any of those offers, that attention would evaporate. There would be nothing left except to fall into domesticity. She would have been lost in her husband, an extension of him, no longer her own person.

Slowly, her mind had begun to change, for while she'd been away at finishing school, she'd begun to think that perhaps there *might* be opportunities for women beyond a wife and mother, and dreams had begun to bounce about her mind like soap bubbles.

Just when she thought she might have found another avenue, her head had been turned by a young captain in the army a few years older than herself, and what was more, he held more than a few attributes her sixteen-year-old self had always wanted in a husband. They'd married in haste after her father had accidentally come across them both in the barn in various stages of undress, especially once she'd pleaded the state of her heart.

Spoiled, indeed.

Unfortunately, the military and the war waited for no man. Her brand-new husband was recalled to his regiment, and since she'd been suffering from a bad case of influenza contracted at the wedding ceremony, they'd never had a chance to consummate their marriage in the usual way. That was the last time she saw him, for he perished in the next battle he was sent to.

During that year of mourning, her father had succumbed to complications of pneumonia that next winter. More mourning followed, and by the time she was allowed to resume a somewhat normal life, *everything* had changed. She had changed. Her viewpoints had changed. Life was entirely too short, and extremely fragile. Why not seize the day and

enjoy herself—and the people around her—while she had the chance?

And she did *not* need a husband to either agree to or forbid those plans.

The sound of her brother's voice wrenched her from her thoughts. Apparently, he'd been droning on for a while, so she focused on his face. "If all you want me to do is attend society events here in the country in an effort to find a man, my answer is no." In an effort to further antagonize him, she cocked an eyebrow. "The war took far too many good men—scandalous ones too—so the pool is rather picked over, but if you wish for me to marry *anyone*, why not send your best friend my way?"

"Reggie?"

"Is he still your best friend? I haven't paid attention, nor have I seen him about the place recently."

"He is, of course, but the man has been out of the country, only just returned to London late last year." Shock lined his face as he shook his head. "Absolutely not. Reggie isn't the type of man I wish to see you matched with."

"Why, because you insist on making him dance attendance upon you, still calling him the Earl's Fool?" Outside of that disastrous proposal, Mr. Healy didn't have much to recommend him. Why he let Edward make jest of him and order him about, she couldn't fathom, but then she supposed she didn't much care. He wasn't her type, even with her changed views.

"He's an easy pushover." Her brother shrugged. "And desperate to belong from what I can see. Still, the two of you are not suited to each other. There are better men to choose from."

"Then you'll be conjuring them up soon?" Kitty made a show of glancing about the room. "I certainly don't see them here."

Remarkably, Edward chuckled. "There will be opportunities soon, no doubt, but I would like to see you

settled. And preferably to a man with a title.” He sobered. “Our sisters are scattered about England and busy with their own families. They are happy, and I want that for you.”

She snorted. “If their letters are to be believed, they are being run ragged by their broods and all the responsibilities that come with them.” There were always stories of the antics of the children, sicknesses they’d had, trials they were going through, or complaints that her sisters didn’t see their husbands as much as they wanted or that the fire they once shared had faded to banked embers. “I would rather not possess any part of what they have. It sounds positively horrible.”

“You don’t wish to be a mother?”

A tiny little stab of longing went through her heart. “If it happens during the course of my life, I won’t rant about it, but quite frankly, I rather doubt I am the nurturing type, so I won’t openly court finding a man for a lifetime.” There were far too many other things she wished to continue exploring in her life without being domestic to complicate everything.

Edward sighed. He shoved the fingers of one hand through his hair. “Promise me that if there is a man who might show interest in you and who might fascinate you a little bit, you will explore that? Mama made me promise while on her death bed that I would look after you, find you someone who won’t dull your sparkle.”

For the first time she saw her brother as the caretaker of the title and everything that entailed. Their mother had died from an innocuous infection obtained after she cut her leg in the garden. That had been the proverbial last straw for Kitty. What was the point in loving someone—anyone—when they would slip from the world anyway?

“I’m sure I shall be perfectly happy with what currently occupies my time and attention.” Slowly, she rose to her feet. The handiwork tumbled from her lap to the floor, and she left it there. “Enjoy the remainder of your afternoon.”

So would she, in freedom.

Chapter Two



October 12, 1817

White Swan Park

North of Watford

Hertfordshire, England

Mr. Reginald Healy stared out over the rolling expanse of the back lawn of the estate he had purchased a few months prior. The house itself was smaller than a manor house but was larger than a tenant house. Possessed of two levels and five bedrooms, as well as a separate suite that could serve as a nursery should there come a need—with enough attic space that one could convert part of it for rooms if one wanted a couple of live-in servants—it had all the amenities a country gentleman could ever want. It was called a cottage, but he rather thought it had more personality than that.

With his hands propped on his hips, he looked about him with a faint grin, for never had he felt so satisfied. It had taken many years of hard work and steely determination, but he'd finally made his fortune—two if he were being honest—and with some of that coin, he'd bought this acreage that had been lost when the previous owner had gone bankrupt.

One of the reasons why he'd wanted this particular property was that it bordered part of the Earl of Armestead's acreage. He and Edward had been close friends since their university days, but ten years ago he'd proposed—perhaps stupidly—to the earl's youngest sister. She'd rejected him soundly, and rightfully so, but that had sent him into a quagmire of confusion in which he'd set out to reorder his life.

That had led him first to India, and once he'd learned all there was to know about tea, he'd made friends with some of the locals in the shipping towns he'd visited. That was where he'd discovered the gorgeous silken sari fabrics that were embroidered with gold and silver threads, the fabrics themselves in striking and color-rich colors. With some of the coin he'd made through the tea trade, he purchased several shipments of the sari fabric and had it shipped ahead of him to his next destination—New York City in America.

After his stint in sweltering India, he knocked about his new locale for a bit before settling in the Hudson Valley, where he made a new life—and another fortune—for himself by importing various new teas as well as selling the beautiful sari fabrics to the wealthy denizens of the area. In that new life, he'd married a sweet lady and eventually lost her as well.

That's when he decided to return to London. Now, he'd been back on English soil for nearly two years, still selling tea and sari fabric, had renewed his acquaintance with the earl, had even put himself up for ridicule and jest in order to stay close and perhaps have a chance of rubbing shoulders with members of the *beau monde*. Did it grate that Edward referred to him as “the earl's fool”? Of course it did, and all because he wasn't titled or wealthy or hadn't the pedigree required to hang about those men.

Except now he *did* have the fortune, and he might not be able to change his bloodlines or lineage, but he could do the next best thing. Which is what he did. The second he'd gotten wind of a property in need of repairs that had gone up for sale, he swooped in and bought the thing for a song, which was basically making the taxes current.

Did the property need work? Yes, and badly, but he'd merely rolled up his sleeves, hired workers, and threw himself into the back-breaking labor alongside them. Now, as the roof of the cottage came into sight as he walked the property, a feeling of contentment came over him. They'd managed to do much of the most dire of the repairs in the last three months. Yes, there was more to tackle, but he had every confidence they'd be completed before winter's onslaught.

“Hell’s bells. Is that you, Reggie?”

The sound of the earl’s voice brought Reginald out of his musings and had him looking about. “Armestead!” He waved as his best friend drew nearer. “How goes it?”

“Well indeed.” Bouncing about his boots were two energetic beagles who went sniffing and running through the longish meadow grasses. “Here I am walking the dogs and who should I see but the man who’s been quite scarce since he returned to London. What are you doing here?”

“As fate or fortune would have it, I bought the neighboring property. It’s called White Swan Park, and for the moment, I’ll keep the name.” He shot a smug grin at his friend. “As of yet, I haven’t seen any swans. Plenty of field mice we’ve had to evict from the house, but no swans.”

“What prompted you to buy the property?” The earl cast his gaze over the landscape toward the rooftop. “For that matter, I didn’t know it had been abandoned, but then, I’m not often in the country.”

“Too busy making scandalous overtures to even more scandalous women?” Reginald well remembered his days visiting clubs and crashing society events with the earl. Of course, Edward would always do something to make him look the fool in front of his other friends, a scapegoat for their escapades, or used him as a convenient object of jest, but they’d managed to charm women, compete for their attention, and more often than not bed them before leaving them and moving on.

“Ha!” Edward chuckled and Reg joined in because they both knew it was true. “While I won’t deny there have been a few mistresses over the years, I am not exactly ready to settle for any of them in parson’s mousetrap.” Then he pinned Reg with a look. “None of that answered my question, though.”

Heat crept up the back of Reginald’s neck. “I have grown tired of playing the fool. I want to be a part of society that people can look at and respect. So, when I knew this property was up for sale, I made the proper moves to purchase

it.” He shrugged. “It needed much work, but it’s livable now. Give me another few months, and the interiors will have been redecorated and redone. New textiles and furniture have been ordered for a while now.”

“How is any of this been possible?”

It was Reginald’s turn to chuckle. “I made my first fortune in India, which I told you about in a letter, but I made my second in America. It’s not as if I’m a slouch with empty coffers.”

For long moments, the earl stared at him. “I hope this won’t give you airs, my friend. Most of the *beau monde* don’t take kindly to the *nouveau riche* class.”

At the last second, Reginald tamped the urge to roll his eyes. “I am not trying to compete for status or position. I merely wish to be seen as successful.”

“To what purpose? Don’t I always bring you along to all the highly sought out events?”

“Of course you do. However, now that I am able to compete with the *ton* on a financial level, I wanted a residence to go along with my new status.”

The earl snorted. He whistled for his beagles, but the dogs refused to heel. Apparently, they enjoyed exploring the countryside more. “While I am glad we are neighbors, what will you fill your time with? Especially once renovations are fully complete on the house?”

Reg shrugged. “Anything I would like. The last ten years were full of life-changing experiences, so now I would like to relax and enjoy the world around me.” And none of it would have happened had Lady Katharine not rejected his suit.

“Your letters were oftentimes sporadic. How did you keep yourself occupied while in America?”

Again, heat crept up the back of his neck. “I built a shipping business, and at some point during that, I met then subsequently married a lovely woman. She was the daughter of a man I partnered with and still work with now.” Grief stabbed through his heart to remind him that though he hadn’t

been married long—just under three years—that didn't mean he didn't miss his wife any less. "We didn't have much time together nor were we blessed with children, but it was a lovely life."

Yet always at the back of his mind was the idea of wooing and finally winning the heart of the earl's sister. Never could he forget Lady Katharine, and no matter how good or content his life had been while away from England, she remained uppermost in his mind. He couldn't explain it, wouldn't try to deny it if someone were to call him out on it; it just *was*.

She would always be part of his life. If that, indeed, made him a fool, so be it.

"Ah. I didn't know. I'm sorry for your loss." Sympathy reflected in the earl's expression. "You must have loved her very much to have not told your best friend you'd married."

"It happened quickly, and since we were in America, by the time the news would have reached you, the ceremony would have already occurred." Abigail had been the sweetest of women, but she hadn't been adventurous, and she would have taken to her bed if the thought of scandal touched her name. "Then life became busy and I'm afraid I simply was swept away."

"Understandable."

Reginald nodded. "Come. We're not far. I can give you a quick tour of the house. In fact, I'm planning to host a small masquerade rout in under two weeks. To introduce myself to the area. With just under one hundred acres, there is enough land that I could do whatever I'd like with it... once I figure out what that will be."

"I never thought of you as a farmer, Reg." Amusement wove through Edward's voice.

"Neither do I, and truly, that is not my goal. Sheep might be nice. Pretty to look at." As he stepped off, his friend easily kept pace.

“Regardless, throwing a rout is a clever way to find out which of the ladies in the area is available.” The earl whistled for his beagles, who trotted in their general vicinity. “Let us hope the weather will be decent for it. Autumn can be temperamental.”

“Indeed.” Then he frowned. “Though I don’t quite know if I am wanting to be thrust into parson’s mousetrap a second time. It was rather exhausting and emotionally wringing that first time.” And that was only being in love with a woman gently. He couldn’t imagine what all of that would entail if he were obsessed with someone or had carried a torch for them.

“I understand that as well. In fact, I had much the same conversation with my sister not two days prior.” Edward frowned as if the memory of that talk still stuck in his craw.

“Oh? Which one? If I recall correctly, you have four.”

The earl’s chuckle pulled a grin from Reg. “And thank goodness three of them are so involved in their own lives I don’t need to worry about them.” The relief in his voice was obvious. “There is only Kitty to consider. And she is quite stubborn.”

That was perhaps a rather large understatement, but he frowned. After all these years, the fact that she was still referred to by the shortened version of her name set his teeth on edge. It simply wasn’t as elegant as her given name. Reginald kept his own council on a myriad of topics as they walked toward the cottage. It wouldn’t do to show an interest in her before he was ready. “Ah. Then she hasn’t changed over the years.”

“I should say not. However, there has been no end of scandalous endeavors the girl has tumbled into.” Edward heaved out a sigh. “It’s largely why she’s at this estate. To keep her out of the public eyes in London and still maintain a chance that she’ll marry well, for the first union was rather a failure.”

Surprise rolled over him. “I didn’t know Lady Katharine had been wed.”

“Oh yes.” The earl nodded with enthusiasm. When one of the beagles doubled back and got underfoot, he tripped and missed a couple of steps before regaining momentum. “A handful of years back. Damned fool of a man. Captain in the army got himself killed in the first battle he returned to after marrying Kitty. She spent more days being a widow than she did a wife.”

How truly sad. “I assumed she loved him?”

“I would like to hope, or at least that’s what she told us after Papa came upon them in the barn on this property near ready to do unspeakable things to each other.” Another chuckle from the earl only further provoked little stabs of jealousy through Reginald’s chest. “A hasty marriage followed, of course. Not that it curbed Kitty’s penchant for setting the *ton* on its ear.”

“And thus, the reason you wish for her to marry again.”

“It will tame her and see her settled. Then I can turn my attention to my own life.”

Why the devil would any man wish to tame a woman’s spirit? Wasn’t that what made them unique and motivated the urge to chase said woman? “What if *I* were to pay my addresses to her?” *Well damn.* He hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that, but there was nothing for it. When it came to Katharine, he always seemed to rush his fences.

“Absolutely not.” The earl came to a halt, forcing Reginald to stop walking as well. “There will never be a time when I would allow you to court my sister.”

“Why?” Reg crossed his arms at his chest and narrowed his eyes. “I *do* have a fortune now.” Which was far more than he’d had ten years ago.

“Be that as it may, you don’t possess a title, which is what I want for Kitty. All of her sisters married well; she should too. She needs that sort of respectability.” There was a note of resolution in his voice that other men would steer well

clear of, but then Reginald had never been one to let caution guide him.

“What difference does it make? I have the means to care for your sister. I have purchased a home in which to keep her and perhaps start a family.” Was that something she even wanted for her own life? “Now I only need your cooperation so that I can court her.” Truly, he didn’t need the permission. Both he and Lady Katharine were fully capable of making their own decisions outside of the earl’s opinion. However, agreement from Edward would make his suit more convincing and might carry more weight in having the lady accept him.

Unless she was too contrary and stubborn. He hadn’t seen her in ten years and hadn’t fully known her all that well before then.

“But... you *are* my fool, my friend. I wouldn’t feel comfortable with *you* courting her. Imagine what the *ton* would say.” Slowly, the earl shook his head. “With your penchant for removing to India without warning and then going on to America—hell, even marrying without a word to any of us—you aren’t the most stable person, and Kitty needs a firm hand. She’s never grown beyond the desire to play the hoyden.” He laughed as if he’d just thought of a joke. “You are so indecisive, in fact, you have no confidence in yourself, which is why it is so easy to make jest of you.”

This was an impossible conversation. “Whose fault is that, when for the whole of our friendship you have found an easy target in me?” And he’d put up with it due to his desperation to be accepted by that world into which he wasn’t born but wanted exclusive access to. He might sell pretty fabrics to people who inhabited that world, yet at the end of the day, those gates were firmly closed to him.

The question of the moment was why did he want to be a part of the *ton*? Was it for his own reputation and future, or was it so he would appear more appealing to Lady Katharine’s eyes? Had she ever thought of him in the years since he’d prematurely proposed?

“As if you had the backbone to bid me nay,” Edward said with a slight shake of his head.

Annoyance stabbed through his chest, for the words cut all too deep. It was a problem he’d had the whole of his life. What he’d allowed in his friendships had now become his prison, and in order to break free of those patterns, he would need to completely reorder the nature of said relationships, and in the process, risk losing the very connections he’d fought to build.

Bah.

Perhaps he should focus on the earl’s sister instead of his own life for the moment. “Is a man currently pursuing her?”

“Well, no, but—”

That was all to the good. “Has she shown an interest in a man in recent days?”

“She has not, yet I am hopeful—”

“Then why shouldn’t I try my luck?” He cocked an eyebrow. Even better that she hadn’t developed a *tendre* for someone. “Isn’t a bird in the hand worth more than two in the bush? Perhaps she’ll fall madly in love and then she’ll be off your hands.” He shrugged. “It certainly can’t go worse than what happened ten years ago.”

“What do you mean?” The man went as far as shoving at his shoulder. “What the hell did you do to my sister ten years ago?”

Confusion plowed into Reginald’s chest. Had the lady not told her brother? “You don’t know?” Interesting, that. Why wouldn’t she say anything about that highly embarrassing encounter?

“Obviously not.” It was the earl’s turn to glare. “And?”

Heat sneaked up the back of his neck. “I, uh, attended that ball you threw a few years before your sister made her Come Out. I was so enchanted by her that I asked her to marry me.” When it seemed that the earl would explode, Reg held up

a hand. “Erroneously, I can see now. I wasn’t in a position to marry anyone back then,” he rushed to explain before his friend could land him a blow. “Of course she declined. I was so embarrassed that I left for India as soon as I could make the arrangements. That was the first step into changing my life.”

So that he might be worthy of her. Everything he’d done in the interim had been for her, he realized now, and that was just as bad as not having a farthing to his name, for had that meant he’d not done right by the woman he’d married in America?

Those thoughts were for another time indeed.

Edward stared with shock in his expression. “She never told me.”

“It is probably good she did not. It didn’t reflect well on me.” Reginald shrugged. He resumed walking toward his cottage, pleased when the earl fell into step beside him. “Regardless, I am a different man now, so I hope you will consider my interest.”

“By that as it may, the lack of a title hinders you, my friend. I have a few men in mind who might catch Kitty’s eye, but I appreciate your candor.” He clasped his hands behind his back and whistled for his dogs. “Let’s a take a look at your new home. Does this mean you won’t be coming to London any longer?”

Reginald grunted at the abrupt change in subject. “It does not. I maintain a townhouse in a modest neighborhood in Mayfair.”

“Ah, good. Then we can still knock about together.”

“Indeed.” And all the while, he meant to find a way to court and even win Lady Katharine’s hand.

I’m not declaring defeat quite yet.

Chapter Three



October 23, 1817

White Swan Park

North of Watford

Hertfordshire, England

The autumnal chill in the air was most welcome as Kitty scurried along the lane that ran between her brother's property and that of the new neighbor. Apparently, whomever had purchased the piece of property as well as the residence had renovated it, for he was hosting a masquerade rout this evening with dinner to follow.

And it had been ever so long since she'd enjoyed any sort of society event. The only reason she'd consented to do so tonight was it would be masked and her dratted brother had forbidden her to go. Apparently, he was still in a snit because she'd recently challenged a few of the young men in the village to a horse race in which she'd appeared in man's breeches and other clothing.

Not once had he congratulated her on the win.

Perhaps she should have taken a gig over, but she didn't think the brief walk of a mile or so would have been overly taxing. However, the thin leather soles of her slippers didn't agree with that reasoning. That is what happened when one was bored and in the mood for a light flirtation that would further aggravate her overbearing brother.

A grin curved Kitty's lips as she took her silk skirts in hand and lifted them up so she wouldn't soil the hem. Done in colors of mossy green, brown, and cream, and with a low enough bodice to pass for the fairy queen from Shakespeare's

Midsummer Night's Dream, she couldn't wait to discover if her looks would still pass muster. After all, it had been quite a few years ago when she'd been a diamond in London.

The fairy wings made of cleverly bent wires with gossamer fabric stretched on those crafted frames felt all too odd on her shoulders, but the air was crisp, and it cooled her excitement-heated skin. Perhaps one of the planned flirtations tonight would lead to a kiss or two. It had been ever so long since she'd enjoyed one of those, and it didn't matter the man, either. Kissing didn't equate to a lifetime, no matter what Edward would say.

Or her sisters.

Not that she begrudged her sisters the lives they'd chosen for themselves. While the Season was well underway in London and they would no doubt be hosting their own soirees while managing their growing broods, Kitty much preferred the countryside. Yes, Edward had banished her here, and it suited her more than Town, but soon he would return to London due to his responsibilities within parliament, which meant she would finally have full freedom once more to pursue whatever interested her.

Of which there was much, though none of it deemed helpful or desired within society.

The thought of kisses kept her buoyed as the cottage came into sight. Every window was lit from within with golden light, and many of the glass panels had been thrown open to no doubt encourage the cooler air into the dwelling. While she lightly ran up the curved drive, gravel and shells crunched beneath her slippers. The low buzz of laughter and joviality drifted to her ears. Oh, it had been so long since she'd gone out and enjoyed herself!

No, she wasn't certain she wanted another husband, but a tryst sounded like a wonderful idea. She could rid herself of her innocence and finally know what being desired by a man locked in the depths of passion felt like in one fell swoop. That had been an overwhelming need since her husband went off to war, for outside of fondling his naughty bits a couple of

times—once when Edward came upon them—she was woefully inexperienced in the art of coupling.

It was her only regret from her marriage, and frankly, holding on to her innocence was a ridiculous notion. She was already in and out of scandal, and she was a widow besides. That alone afforded her a certain amount of freedom, so why shouldn't she be one of *those* wicked widows, those women who seduced men into their beds for the sheer sport of it?

The idea sounded quite exceptionally delicious.

By the time she entered the house and gave her cloak, which she'd wrapped carefully about herself to accommodate the wings, to the butler, there was already quite the crush of party guests. Ah, to be among people again was both exciting and intimidating, for it hadn't been so long ago that she'd been in mourning for her husband and her father.

When she swept her gaze through the gathering, she frowned. What was Edward doing here? He'd said he was returning to Town, but then again, his Hertfordshire estate wasn't that far from London. Whomever owned this property must be an acquaintance, for of course she recognized her brother, mostly due to his penchant for dragging out the same highwayman costume for every masked event. He never put any creative effort into his appearance, unless it was to show off a new waistcoat or pocket watch chain. If he found her here, he would immediately order her home, regardless of her being old enough to know her own mind and being a widow besides.

All the same, she would avoid him tonight. Her agenda didn't include a pompous lecture on proper deportment or the admonishment that she should be husband hunting. Neither topic held interest for her.

Slipping past with her head averted and making certain there were plenty of people between her and Edward, Kitty turned down one of the corridors that formed an "L" shape of the house and soon found herself in the large drawing room that featured a frescoed ceiling. Oh, dear, it wasn't quite to her taste, for she didn't especially enjoy the fact that fat, half-

naked cherubs were staring down at her, but that didn't mean the new owner of the property didn't enjoy that sort of artwork. Truly, it belonged in the past when such works were popular, but to all appearances, it did look as if there had been recent renovations within the room. Doric columns had been removed, for the design of the tiled floors had been made to accommodate the places where those things had once stood.

Perhaps the owner was progressive.

A country reel was underway in the room, and it was quite the thrilling scene to see everyone wearing various designs of domino masks. There was something about not knowing the identity of anyone that made a masquerade party that much more intimate.

On the other side of the room, French-paned doors had been thrown open to presumably encourage the night air into the overheated space, and as she prowled toward those doors, there was the hint of a terrace beyond that rested on the inside of the "L" shape formed by the two wings of the house. What a lovely and mysterious place one could steal a few kisses. There were plenty of potted plants arranged on the terrace, and no doubt there were gardens beyond.

Oh yes, I mean to explore all of that tonight!

Then her gaze collided with what could be the perfect candidate for a dance or a light flirtation. "Oh!"

With a glance at the door to make certain Edward hadn't yet arrived, Kitty moved in the masked man's direction, and he was quite easy on the eyes dressed in a Roman style toga that fell over his lean frame. Though the fabric draped over a form that was surprisingly given to muscle in the right places, the bits it shielded practically made her mouth water. Peeks of black chest hair captivated her; he was clean shaven, but his black hair had been arranged into the Brutus style that had been popular nearly twenty years ago.

The closer he came along the perimeter of the room, the more she noticed about him. The golden sandals on his feet had straps that crisscrossed his firm calves and shins. A matching golden laurel leaf crown rested on that midnight dark

hair, but the sapphire eyes beneath the gold-painted mask beckoned to her, invited her to come near without him saying a word.

And she willingly went, for how could she not? He was nothing like her ideal man when she'd been a girl of sixteen, and he was certainly nothing like her husband had been. Absurdly, he'd had the ideal looks and character, but then fate had taken him.

Perhaps it was for the best that her tastes had changed. Otherwise, expectations would have been too heartbreaking, and she refused to remember grief on this night.

Finally, she paused before the mysterious Roman man. She wouldn't go quite so far as to say he had the figure of a god, but then a man needn't. Looks and a body were one thing, but did he know what to do with them, show them to his advantage?

And hers, if all went well.

Heat seeped into her cheeks as she offered him what she hoped was a slow, seductive smile. "My, my, I never thought to have such good fortune as to see a Roman god in this gathering tonight."

A chuckle escaped him, and its rich timbre shivered over her skin like a fleeting caress. "Hmm, not a Roman gladiator?"

"I don't see a shield or a sword." In a blatant move, she slowly drew her gaze along the front of his body, pausing briefly at his groin. "Unless the sword is hidden?" Where had this new daring come from? But then, isn't that why she'd landed here in banishment from London to begin with?

A hint of ruddy color crept up his neck. How odd and somewhat endearing. Did that mean he wasn't accustomed to flirting or had she gone too far? "I don't know I would call it a sword..."

Oh, he would flirt back! Her pulse accelerated. "Hmm, I wouldn't mind sitting in judgment of that." *Or on that...*

A charming grin curved his sensuous lips, and she dropped her gaze to his mouth. What would a kiss from him feel like? “Perhaps that could be arranged for a fairy queen such as yourself.” He held out a hand. “Would you care to dance this next reel with me, or would you prefer to skip the pleasantries and talk candidly—and more privately—out on the terrace?”

She slipped her fingers into his palm, and immediately the warmth of his skin next to hers brought out another grin. Another reason why costumed events were such fun—there were hardly any rules. When he guided her hand to his arm and focused that intense blue gaze on her, a tremor of *something* careened down her spine. “By far, I would enjoy going out onto the terrace. The idea of dancing a reel suddenly holds no appeal, and neither does staring at that frescoed ceiling.” But out on the terrace, they would be in darkness and shadow where anything could happen.

“It *is* rather much, but I have it on the best authority it will soon be gone.”

“Ah, are you friends with the owner, then?”

“You could say that.” Again, he chuckled. “Wonderful choice for the evening, though, and who am I to disappoint a fairy queen?”

Oh, that voice! The tremble of his baritone buzzed in her chest, and she uttered a sigh of pure decadence. It didn’t matter where the evening might lead, for right now, the potential was staggering.

As he led her about the perimeter of the crowded room, Kitty enjoyed strolling next to him. He was perhaps a handful of inches taller than her five feet three-inch height. She adored having to look up at him in order to meet his gaze; her husband had been of a shorter stature. And goodness, this man smelled heavenly! Definite notes of lime, Caribbean spices, and rum. It was quite intoxicating.

Who was he?

The second they stepped through the open doors and out onto the terrace, she breathed in a quick sigh of relief. Since it was a clear night, stars twinkled from the black velvet heavens as if an unseen hand had scattered a collection of diamonds.

“If you grow too cold, we will return inside.” The masked man led her toward the stone railing and deeper into the shadows.

“Or you could kiss me,” she suggested with a gentle squeeze of her fingers on his forearm.

His chuckle sent butterflies scudding through her lower belly, but he slipped an arm about her waist and reeled her a tiny bit closer to his body. Slowly, oh so slowly, he bent his head toward hers, his lips nearly brushing hers as he spoke. “In the spirit of full disclosure, perhaps we should unmask before that happens.”

Why was he so insistent at a time like this? But when he tugged at the strings at the back of his head holding his mask in place, Kitty did the same, and that was when she received a rather large shock. That face! Oh, dear God, the eyes! How could she not have seen the familiarity before? She stared in both annoyance and horror as she sprang away. “Reginald?” Confused and with the heat of embarrassment in her cheeks, she shook her head. “Why are *you* here?” And flirting with her in such a manner? For that matter, why the devil did he look like *that*?

Though he frowned, he regarded her with amusement dancing in those dark blue eyes. “Why not? I live here.”

“What?” Again, she glanced about. How could she not have known? Why hadn’t her brother informed her of their new neighbor? Did he know? And she’d nearly kissed him! Reginald Healy! She wanted to shudder with revulsion but another quick peek at him with that all too revealing costume had her second guessing what she should have thought.

With a faint grin curving that mouth she couldn’t stop staring at, he nodded. “After I made my fortune—well two, really—I didn’t wish to keep knocking about London with no

purpose, so I bought this property and thought to try my hand at being a country gentleman.”

“I see.” Though she truly didn’t. Kitty fiddled with the ribbons of her mask, wishing she were anywhere else. “So you bought a house on land adjoining my brother’s property.” It wasn’t a question.

He flashed her a grin, but she fought against the stupid little flutters that went through her lower belly this time. Absolutely under *no* possibility could she think Reginald was charming. “It was available when I consulted with a land agent.”

Surely this cannot be happening. It was her turn to frown. “I suppose it makes sense. You are the earl’s fool, after all, so you would want to stay close to Edward.” She huffed out a breath of frustration. It wasn’t ideal but there was nothing to do about it.

Mottled red colored Reginald’s neck, which wasn’t a good look for a man wearing a toga and presumably nothing else. “I don’t wish to be that any longer.”

“Then why do you let it continue?”

“It is easier to have Edward make jest of me than become angry about it. Perhaps it’s better than fighting.” He heaved out a sigh that sounded as if it came from his toes. “Besides, he is of a higher class than I am.”

“Ha!” What a nodcock answer. She planted her hands on her hips regardless that she still held her mask. “That doesn’t matter. It is quite rude of my brother. You don’t deserve that.” Over the years, Edward had been quite horrid to Reginald, and sometimes to the point of being cruel by making fun of him within mixed company, but never once had Reginald complained. He merely played along, further making himself out to be exactly what Edward called him—a fool.

“While I realize the truth of your words, taking said action is not easy nor is it probably feasible at this time.” When his hand holding the mask fell to his side, the movement

drew her gaze to the nip of his waist and his lean hips, the hem of his tunic that ended at a far too interesting thigh.

“Coward.” Kitty tossed her head in an effort to stop thinking about him and how much different he was from the younger man who’d proposed to her ten years ago. “You need to have some respect for yourself. It’s sheer nonsense you allow this to continue.” Why did she care? This was *Reginald*, after all.

He peered at her in the murky darkness. The golden edge of the light from the drawing room didn’t reach their location. “Is that the type of man you want?”

“Oh, I...” As sudden confusion poured over her, she snorted. “I don’t want a man at all.” Then she waved a hand. “Well, let me revise that statement. I don’t want a man to *marry*.”

“What the hell *do* you want a man for, then?”

Another round of heat slapped at her cheeks. “That is none of your concern.” But she was curious about his life since the last time she’d seen him.

“Oh.” He sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh!”

Well, he wasn’t dense, she’d give him that. “Indeed.”

Remarkably, he chuckled, and once more, the flock of butterflies took flight in her belly. She ignored the reaction. “Can I assume you are not matched or spoken for if that is where your thoughts lie?”

That was outside of enough. “I am not.” But she huffed to let him know she wasn’t pleased at his continued prying.

“Ah.” He nodded and closed the distance between them by a few feet. “I would like to pay my addresses to you.” When she began a protest, he held up his free hand. “I realize you rejected me ten years ago, but I am a different man now that I have made something of myself.”

That was readily obvious. Despite her best efforts, she once more slid her gaze down his body. No doubt he would be

delicious to explore, even if it *was* Reginald who possessed such a form. “I see.”

“I have full coffers. I have an estate, as well as a townhouse in London.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh at him or gawk at him. Looking at him now but remembering him as the man from ten years ago, he was an impossibility that shouldn’t exist. Those two men didn’t go together. Slowly, she shook her head. “I don’t want a courtship, and even if I did, I wouldn’t choose you.” *Drat*. That came out all too harsh. “I apologize. I mean you aren’t the type of man I want.”

“Ah.” His frown nearly caused her upset, but she kept her composure remarkably well. “I assumed after your coquettish behavior tonight that you—”

“No.” Quickly, Kitty shook her head. “It was me passing the time.” With shaking hands, she fit her mask back to her face and then tied the ribbons. “I should return to the drawing room, and you have guests to attend. Now that you are a country gentleman, I should think your time will be much spoken for.” Especially once women figured out who he was beneath that mask and got a close look at his undeniably mouthwatering frame.

“I suppose you are right. No sense in throwing a rout if I am not available for follow up invitations, hmm?”

“Yes.” Jealousy stabbed through her chest, but she ignored that as well. This was Reginald Healy, the earl’s fool, and she wanted nothing to do with him.

Wasn’t that still correct? Not knowing, she left the terrace and fled back into the crowded room, hoping to become invisible.

Chapter Four



Reg stared at the empty place on the terrace where Lady Katharine had just been. He frowned, for she hadn't given him a chance. Once again, she'd dismissed him as if he was worth nothing, but was that truly how she felt?

The question sat in his mind, for he'd seen the interest in her eyes when she'd ogled him with obvious desire... before he'd stupidly unmasked. He'd been so close to kissing her, to showing her who he was without prior knowledge ruining it, but he'd wanted nothing except honesty going forward, and that had ruined his opportunity.

Or had it? If he wanted something badly enough, he needed to pursue it. That was what he'd done in his life the past ten years, and it had worked well. Why shouldn't he employ those same techniques in the quest of a woman?

With annoyance and confusion crashing through his chest, Reg screwed his courage to the sticking place and followed the lady into the drawing room. She hadn't gone far, for her brother was holding court at the top of the room. A waltz would begin in a few moments, and while it was unlikely she would wish to dance, he'd risk the humiliation anyway. Perhaps he didn't know better; perhaps he was desperate to know the touch of her fingers on his arm again. It was difficult to tell, but he approached her, weaving through the crowds of people waiting for the floor to open so they could secure a place on the temporary dance floor.

"A second of your time, Lady Katharine," he said softly so as not to startle her. "If you please," he added so she could see he carried no ill will toward her.

She glanced at him and huffed out her displeasure. "Oh, Reginald, I don't wish to talk further about your

intentions.”

“We could dance a waltz. One can let the dancing say what words cannot.” When had he developed a penchant for flowery speech?

“That wouldn’t be a good idea.” Yet her gaze dropped first to his mouth then slipped further down his body, and when it came to his waist, she gasped and snapped her regard back to his face. Since he hadn’t donned his mask, his identity was clear. “I need some air,” she whispered as she shoved past him again and then once more darted onto the terrace.

“But you were just out there.” Clearly, there was no figuring her out nor would he be able to placate her. Not willing to leave her to her own devices or see her fall into trouble, Reg followed, but she didn’t linger on the terrace where a few other couples had gathered.

She took the handful of stone steps down to the gardens below, her skirting in hand to allow her unimpeded movement, and she didn’t stop when greeted with the mess that the gardens were. The gossamer and wired wings attached to her shoulders truly did seem as if they were fluttering from her energetic walking.

If he’d had more time, he could have a team of gardeners out, but since he hadn’t acquired the property until later in the year, the area was a tangled puzzle of weeds, flowers, shrubberies, and trees, all of which desperately needed pruned and trimmed. There had been nothing for it; he’d wanted to host a society event more than he needed the grounds immaculate, but come next spring, the area would be returned to its former glory.

Whatever that had been.

Even still, with the pathways strewn with weeds and fallen leaves, it was a spooky, interesting place in the autumnal chill and moonlight. He’d been damned fortunate it hadn’t rained, for that would have put a damper on his inaugural event.

Finally, with an overexaggerated huff, she turned, and with her hands planted on her hips that only called his attention to the curve of those hips as they led into a trim waist, frowned, and in those precious few seconds of silence, he had the opportunity to study her, openly without anyone wondering why he did so.

Petite and short—even more so if she weren't wearing heeled slippers—she possessed enough curves to tempt any man to sin, but what caught and held his attention was her hair of spun gold. Even though it was caught in a bun at the back of her head and held in place by combs and a sparkling tiara to go with her costume of fairy queen, some wisps had escaped to frame her face with curls. Did they run to the whole length? Was it maddening to her that she couldn't tame those tresses?

Suddenly, he needed to see that hair down, falling about her back and shoulders like molten gold, yet that wouldn't happen while she remained guarded around him.

“Is there something amiss, Mr. Healy, or has the proverbial cat gotten your tongue?” A light dose of sarcasm fairly dripped from the inquiry.

And provoked a grin from him. She would prove a challenge. “None of that. I was simply taking the time to admire a beautiful woman.” The obvious flattery was, perhaps, too lofty, but it wasn't wrong. The gown she'd chosen for her costume shimmered over her form, draped in such a way that it was both blatant and mysterious. Since the bodice was quite low—even for an evening social engagement—he was afforded a glimpse of the tops of her breasts, and once more, carnal interest shivered through his shaft. The semi-cockstand he'd sported on the terrace from her open admiration and her verbal word play about swords had returned, and he was thankful for the darkness and shadows that would hide that arousal.

No longer was she the young girl he'd proposed to ten years ago. Oh no. Lady Katharine Gibson was a woman, and she'd been born to bring a man to his knees.

“Beautiful? Ha!” She chuckled and shook her head. Why she didn’t think the same about her looks he would never understand. “I am adequate, I think. My sisters are the beauties of the family, and Edward an Adonis. I was given whatever was left. Why else must I make a sensation to gain notice all the time?”

Ah, that was a telling admission. Had she meant to say as much to him?

“Poppycock. All the Gibsons were granted looks straight from the gods. In that I envy all of you.”

“Such gammon.” She pointed her gaze to those very heavens before focusing on him. Clearly, she didn’t believe him. “Why are you following me, Mr. Healy?”

As much as he despised the formality, it was time to stop being the earl’s fool everyone knew him for and show her—and anyone else who might care—what sort of man he truly was. “We weren’t done with our earlier conversation.”

The lady snorted. “You might not have been, but I certainly was.” There was every inch the earl’s daughter in her haughty tones.

While he admired her sharp tongue and penchant for plain speaking, he refused to let her cow him. He had the feeling she did that more often than not to the people around her, and they played along because invoking her anger was probably not pleasant. Though, what would she look like in the height of fury? Locked in ecstasy? More than anything, he wished to coax her out of that overconfidence and delve into the woman she’d become while he’d been away. If the rumors surrounding her as well as her own behavior on that terrace not a half hour past were to be believed, she certainly was no longer an innocent, and of course she wasn’t, for she’d been married.

“There are more people in the world than you, my lady, and we don’t all revolve around you as if you were the sun.” If there was a trace of annoyance in his voice, he couldn’t help it. She vexed him in every way.

Her lips twitched. “Bravo, Mr. Healy. Not many people are able to put me in my place so succinctly.” As she relaxed by increments, he stifled a sigh of relief. “I suppose I owe it to you to continue our conversation. Being left to my devices has let me run wild, and I have never been adept at social graces.”

“I would imagine you caused your parents grief over the years.”

This time she giggled, and he rather enjoyed the tinkling, fairy-like sound. It was quite out of character to the tough, haughty woman she’d shown herself not two minutes ago. “This is so. My poor mama must have run out of patience with me more than a few times.”

“How does she fare?”

A flash of sadness went over the lady’s face, made even more mysterious from the moonlight. “Mama died a while back from an infection. I’m afraid I didn’t have much time with her.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You have my condolences, of course.”

“Thank you.”

He glanced back to the darkened gardens. “Perhaps we should walk further. It wouldn’t do for your brother to come looking for you and find you in my company.” That complication would work at cross purposes with how he planned to win her.

“Agreed. Edward can be a bit of a bother. Especially lately, since he’s declared I should marry, and he won’t rest until that’s accomplished.”

“Did he give you a reason why?” When Reg offered her his arm, a few seconds passed in charged silence before she slipped her hand through his crooked elbow. “One would think having three sisters already wed and the other a widow would mean he was quite successful in looking after his family.”

“Unfortunately, he doesn’t see it that way. He thinks of me as a loose end, an impediment to living his own life as he

wishes.” When she shrugged, her shoulder brushed his arm. Heated tingles moved through that limb. “Apparently, he’s got some nodcock idea that until I’m married and settled, he cannot do the same.”

“Well, Edward has a way of being overbearing even though he complained about the same from his father. How easily some men forget.” He caught her gaze and understanding passed between them.

“Thank you for the reminder. My brother blows in much like a summer storm, upsets the daily balance I have found here at his country estate, and then he returns to London leaving life in a mess without thought to what I might want.”

Ah, here was his opening, but he would need to go slow. Reg snorted. “In all my time of being his best friend, he has never once mentioned the need or even desire to marry.” He led her to a wrought iron bench, swept away some of the leaves and detritus from nature, and then invited her to sit. Once she did so, he sat beside her, and since the bench was on the shorter side, it was a rather cozy fit.

“Perhaps he realizes he’ll need an heir soon. He’s not growing any younger.”

“No, he’s not,” Reg murmured, for the earl was the same age as him. “Mortality has a bad habit of sneaking up on us and taking us unawares.”

“Exactly. Life is far too fleeting to pass it in somberness or attached to arbitrary rules of society that are nothing more than prisons meant to suppress women.”

His eyes widened. “Unless I miss my guess, you have probably read the works of Mary Wollstonecraft.”

The little gasp of surprise went straight to his stones. “You know of her?”

“Indeed, I do. She was quite the female philosopher. I have even read her book.”

“But... why?”

“Why not?” To better accommodate his presence beside her, Reg rested an arm along the back of the bench and let his fingertips drift close to her nape. The wings made it dashed difficult for flirtatious touches, but he would manage. “I like to consider myself well read. And after living in both India and America, I have been fortunate enough to see a wide variety of life, classes, situations, and how various people find life and love in those existences. It is quite fascinating, really, but also sad too, for women are treated little better than cattle in many societies.”

“That is so infuriating! Mary’s work says the only difference between men and women is education. Why the people who rule our society think that female children cannot learn is beyond me.” The vehemence in her voice surprised him. “Knowledge means power. It means a certain freedom. If women know how to read or figure sums or explore sciences, they have access to better places. But society represses them—us—makes certain we should only value embroidery, dancing, painting, how to keep a house or rear children.” She shook her head, and in the moonlight, he caught the annoyance in her face. “That is why I’m...”

“Yes?”

“Never mind.” She shook her head. “I don’t wish to reveal too much for fear Edward will ruin everything.”

Which only made her more interesting. For the moment, he wouldn’t push. “Understandable.” For a long while, they sat in a comfortable silence. Occasionally, he would brush his fingers along the nape of her neck but didn’t look at her. Would she think it was merely the flex of his fingers as he resettled on the bench, the casual trail of a fingertip to dislodge a dead leaf?

Finally, she once more removed her mask. “That is not to say I’m not grateful for his time as well as his support. There are worse things for a widow with her husband’s meager pension.”

It was the first time she’d spoken of her husband or even the fact she’d been married, but it was far too early in the

conversation to delve deeper. “No doubt Edward is feeling a touch guilty, and since he doesn’t quite know what to make of a sister who knows her own mind and is a bit wild, consigning you to the country was his way of seeing to your care and reputation.”

She snorted. “Reputations.” With a wave of her hand, she dismissed that. “Yet another prison. Reputation is what a person *does* with their life, how they treat people who cannot further their positions, what they do with their own privilege.” When she met his gaze, the banked fires in those brown depths drew him closer. “Strangers with self-given positions within a society that has built itself on absurd rules should never decide on what someone else’s *reputation* is.”

“What a wonderful way to look at society in general. Thank you for that.” It made him feel less inferior since he was always in the earl’s company and competing merely to be heard.

“You are quite welcome, Mr. Healy. When I enter into discourses such as these, people tend to leave the discussions quite early, yet you remain.”

“It is fascinating.” And would suit his purposes well enough. “Please, though, call me Reginald. I dislike standing on ceremony with someone I have known for years.”

“Very well, and you may refer to me as Kitty.”

“Actually, I never did care for the shortened version of your name.” Reg grinned in the hopes of disarming her further. “You will always be Katharine to me.”

“Oh.” He couldn’t read her expression. “That is rather sweet.”

“Thank you.” Again, he brushed his fingertips along her nape, and this time was rewarded when she gave into a shiver. “Earlier this evening, you told me I wasn’t the type of man you wanted.”

“I did.” She frowned and flicked her gaze to something above his shoulder.

“Tell me about the kind of man you *do* want. Is it different than it was ten years ago? I know enough to realize I was no one’s ideal back then.” His laugh was self-deprecating. “Which was one of the reasons I left England.”

“Oh, dear.” Katharine pleated the fabric of her skirting with her fingers. “About that time. I really should apologize for my rudeness.”

He chuckled. “Rejecting one’s suit isn’t necessarily rude.”

“Of course it’s not, but the way I did it surely was.”

Ah, did that mean that time in history had haunted her as much as it did him?

“Ten years is a long time. People change exponentially in that wide gap.”

“Did you?”

“In many ways, but then, you probably have as well, beyond your looks.”

The urge to grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I have, yes, which is why I’m curious to know what sort of man it is you now favor.”

With a sigh, she kept her gaze on her skirting. “Certainly not the idiot, noble type from fairy stories and romances.” For long moments, she remained quiet. “Love, I think, is a fleeting mockery that hurts more than it makes one fly. Also, it is quite foolish to put all one’s energy and emotion into loving someone as fragile as a human who is only on this earth at the whim of fate.”

“But doesn’t having love make that fleeting time all the more bearable?”

“Ha! Is that how you would explain marrying and then receiving a letter not six weeks later that the same man you waved goodbye to had perished in battle, for the greater good of England?” A trace of bitterness clung to her voice.

“Again, I am sorry for your loss.” She had been wounded by life, as they all had. “In many ways, I’m not

certain our intent on this mortal coil is to delve into the riddles of our being as much as it is to help others around us into being made more comfortable or better off. It is also for connecting with someone in a soul-deep way—however your own soul defines such a relationship—that we are led to stepping into our higher selves. In that way, perhaps we will have a deeper understanding of ourselves and then perhaps can begin learning those mysteries.”

Where the devil had *that* come from? Was it to offer her reassurance that everything would come out right as rain or that it wasn't supposed to, and humans had to make the best of it? Travelling did tend to make a man accumulate different viewpoints, which was a good thing.

When she continued to frown at him, he shrugged and tried to downplay the profoundness of the statement. “But then, I am not a philosopher.”

“You are not, but there is an inherent knowledge about you one can only glean from being a world traveler.” A sigh escaped her. “I envy you that.”

“The traveling?”

“No, the adventure. The opportunity to be away from England, to make a difference.” Then confusion filled her expression. “In answer to your question, I'm not entirely certain what type of man I want, but I do know that he would need to have the whole of his attention on me more than half the time he's with me. I am *quite* done with being made to stand in second to whatever it is that tears him away.”

“I see.” He tucked those facts into the back of his mind for use later. “Would you ever marry again?”

“I'm not certain.” Katharine swept her gaze upward, and though it was fleeting, he thought he caught a glimpse of a come-hither look before she lowered her eyes again. “Also, I don't know you well enough to discuss something so private as men in my life or for what purpose I want them.”

That statement left far too much space for interpretation, and suddenly, he very much wished to research

deeper into what she wanted and how he could be exactly that.

“I should return to the house. The last thing I need is for my brother to come searching.”

“In that, I quite agree.” Reginald scrambled to his feet, and taking her hand, slowly drew her into a standing position as well. “Thank you for the conversation. It was quite enlightening.”

“Perhaps, but I appreciated that you let me speak my mind without judgment.”

“Of course.” Then, because she was so damned beautiful in her confusion and that costume, he apparently took leave of his common sense, for he gently cupped her cheek, bent his head, and just as tenderly claimed her lips in a kiss. It had taken ten years to kiss this woman, but it was worth the wait. Those petal soft lips trembled slightly. She rested a palm against his chest, and the heat of her nearly seared him through the fabric of his toga.

Seconds later, she pushed him away and looked at him with rounded eyes and shock in her expression. “Goodnight, Mr. Healy.” With that, she fled back down the path that would eventually lead to the stairs and terrace.

Hell's bells. Why had he done something so stupid, just when she might have been starting to trust him? Yet it had been everything he'd hoped, and kissing Katharine was the next step in the natural progression of his *tendre* for her. With his head full of plans, Reg sat on the bench. He needed time until his cockstand settled, regardless, but now he knew what he would do.

Be her friend first, and quite possibly her lover second. Then, if all went well, the third and final step would be to convince her to marry him. How hard could it be?

Chapter Five



October 24, 1817

Kitty stood at a washbasin in the stillroom. She'd been washing off small pebbles and interesting rocks she'd found during the week. Collecting such things had become habit when she was a young child, and it made her feel calm to sort each color and size into a specific pile. Being born into such a large family had often come with noise, constant ploys for attention, parents playing favorites, and more than enough activities that she'd felt lost.

That's when she'd gone outside to explore the world—especially in the countryside—and when she came to collect pebbles.

Back then, it was merely to have something of her own. Since she was the baby of the family, all of her siblings were older, had their own likes and dislikes, and they'd often looked down on her penchant for pebbles as a waste of time or dirty, or were embarrassed when in London and she'd dart into the street or gutters on the hunt of an interesting piece to add to her collection.

Nowadays, though, Kitty used the rocks for a much greater purpose than merely for her own admiration. In fact, she had made a tidy income from those unassuming pebbles. Started out of having nothing to keep her occupied while mourning first her husband and then her father, over the years, she glued the small rocks and pebbles onto canvas, creating beautiful, outlined drawings of animals and at times portraits, which she then sold on commission with a shop off Bond Street who dealt with all sorts of art.

At the age of two and twenty, she'd developed a lovely little balance in the Bank of London—her father-in-law had assisted her in opening the account because she hadn't wanted Edward to know—and the proceeds from those sales then went to fund one of her passion projects in London—educating underprivileged women.

In the last four years since she began selling the artwork, she had been able to put together and then open a modest and unassuming classroom in East London. The placard on the door wasn't flashy or eye-catching, and there was nothing to advertise its presence, but inside the two rooms, any female member of the working poor could take two classes a week—introductory reading and remedial mathematics. Both were offered early in the morning or late in the evening to accommodate various schedules, and the teachers Kitty employed were quite skilled and very patient.

The classes were free for anyone who applied, because that's how much she believed women of every class should be educated.

No one outside of a few servants, her father-in-law, the instructors, her banker, and a few other trusted individuals knew of her involvement, and if she were fortunate, it would remain in secrecy. She didn't do these things for the accolades; she did them because England's laws were unfair to all women, and she wanted that narrative to change.

Period.

“What creations will you make with this load, my lady?”

The sound of the maid's voice wrenched Kitty from her musings. “Apologies, Susan. I was woolgathering.”

“That doesn't often happen to you.” A soft laugh issued from the maid. “What about? When my friends sometimes do that, they are mooning about a man.” She gasped. “Is there one in your life?”

“Of course not.” The very idea of that pulled a laugh from her. Then her mind went once more tumbling back to last

night when Reginald had kissed her. But *why* had he done it? She'd done nothing to warrant it and she certainly hadn't angled for it.

"Well, that is too bad. I think you'd do well with having a man at your side."

"I don't know." *Get hold of yourself, Kitty. It wasn't that good of a kiss, so no sense lingering on it.* She shook her head. "What did you ask earlier?" Best to cease all talk of men lest she let Reginald's name slip. This particular maid was one of the first women Kitty's teachers had helped. In fact, she was still taking classes.

"Wondering what you'll make with these?" She tapped a long, slender finger against a willow basket of cleaned pebbles.

"I haven't decided yet, but I took a book from the lending library the other day. It is full of drawings of exotic African animals. Perhaps I shall do a hippopotamus or an elephant since there are many gray pebbles."

"How exciting." Susan picked up the basket. "Should I take these up to your rooms?"

"Yes, please." She finished rinsing her own basket of pebbles and rocks. "And once this one has drained, it can go up as well."

The maid nodded. Tall, thin, with a plain face, she was clever and intelligent, so there would come a point when she moved on from domestic service, and Kitty couldn't wait to see where she ended. "Will you work on the pictures today?"

"Perhaps. Right now, I intend to go for my morning ride then have a late breakfast. After that, I'm not certain of my plans."

"You have much correspondence to answer," Susan told her as she headed to the door.

"Thank you for the reminder." Kitty sighed. She detested answering letters. It was so incredibly dull, and by the time the recipient received the missive, the news was already out of date. Perhaps when the maid had gone through all of her

classes and became proficient in reading and writing she could then be trained as a secretary of sorts. “It would appear my day has been spoken for after all.”

“Well, there is one thing to remember.” The maid giggled. “You are a lady. If you don’t wish to do a thing, you needn’t do it. There are no consequences.” Then, with a wave, she was off.

Kitty frowned. Was that what the lower classes thought of the *beau monde*? That they could do whatever they wanted, and no one would ever tell them nay? Knots of worry pulled in her belly. Not once had she lorded her position over those around her, but enjoying that privilege now made her feel almost ill.

It seems that I have much more work to do.

The best thing to do when her mind required clearing was to go riding. After she dried her hands and left the basket of pebbles to drip in the sink, Kitty quickly returned to her room and exchanged her day dress for the pair of tan breeches and loose lawn shirt she preferred when riding in the morning hours. Both had been done in style of men’s clothing, complete with frontfall buttons—without the panel found on a pair of breeches made for men—but the clothing had been tailored to her body. The shirt had darting in it to accommodate her breasts and waist, and a silly fall of dainty ruffles down the front proclaimed it a feminine creation.

Perhaps privilege had its advantages after all.

With a grin, she donned a brown velvet waistcoat, done in a style that she could easily manipulate the laces in the back herself. Once she shrugged into a matching brown velvet jacket—again, modeled after its male counterparts—she did up the handful of pearl buttons. It took all of a few seconds to shove her feet into the riding boots that came to her knees, done in a Hessian style. Why go to the trouble of finding actual male clothing she would need to fight against or try to make work when she could go to a seamstress, and have exactly what would suit her?

After all, her husband wouldn't have wished for her to live a life of mourning or spending her days in dull pursuits. And one of the best parts of dressing thusly was the fact that it enraged her brother. As if someone on the road might lose their mind if they caught sight of her in breeches. If a man didn't realize by now that women had legs beneath their skirting, then there was no hope for civilization.

As the longcase clock struck the eight o'clock hour, Kitty was already exiting the house through the back door as she finished braiding her hair and secured the end with a loop of leather. The decided nip of autumn in the air invigorated her, so she lifted her chin to better catch the breeze that was redolent with the scents of woodfires, apples, and the smell of the earth preparing to bed down for the winter.

"Good morning, Lady Katharine," the stablemaster said with a grin. "We've got Lady saddled and ready for you."

"I appreciate that, Samuel." While it was lovely to have so many people know her schedule and habits, it was somewhat alarming too. Was she that predictable, then? Would her life always be like this, with nothing to break up the monotony, no adventure?

Other than an unexpected kiss from a man she didn't like in *that* way.

Heat filled her cheeks as one of the grooms brought her chestnut mare from the stables and to the mounting block she always used. She accepted the stablemaster's help, and then once she was atop her horse—astride—she dusted her gloved hands together. "How's the weather this morning?"

"Lovely and fair, but my knees are aching, so we'll have rain by dinner." When the older man shot her a grin, she smiled back as she gathered the reins in her fingers. It was another of her routines. "Have a care this morning, my lady. There's been talk that a few raggedy former soldiers are in the area begging. When that doesn't work, they've resorted to stealing and poaching."

"Oh, thank you for the warning. I'll be vigilant." That was always the risk, especially the closer to winter. Indigent

people were everywhere and each one had a story, but since parishes and their churches were responsible for the poor, those unfortunate souls weren't allowed to stay in one place long before being run out.

Another reason reform was desperately needed to move through the houses of parliament. Already, it felt as if the country sat upon a powder keg. How that would explode over into everyone's lives, she didn't know, for she made it a point never to involve herself in the meat of politics—especially since she was always on the opposite side of issues than Edward—but something was brewing. It was just a matter of when it would come to a head.

The stablemaster patted her booted ankle. “We'll be looking out for you too, my lady.”

With a nod, Kitty urged her horse out of the stable yard. She patted the horse's head. “Is it a neck-or-nothing day, Lady, or shall we take a leisurely trot through the morning?”

Apparently, the mare wasn't in the mood to work up a lather, so they both settled into a comfortable trot, which allowed Kitty's mind once more to wander.

Why did the kiss from yesterday bother her so? As kisses went, it hadn't been heated nor did it have passion behind it, yet there had been something about that soft and gentle joining of mouths that had held her captive for a few seconds. She swore she could still feel the fleeting pressure of his lips on her, that warmth as he'd lingered there, slowly moving his mouth over hers. If she hadn't pushed him away out of confusion, would he have tried to deepen the embrace? Would he have taken her into his arms?

Despite knowing in her head that the man was naught but Reginald, her brother's best friend and the man he called “fool” the rest of her body suddenly clamored for that bit of excitement that would be a man's embrace, to feel the strength of male arms about her again, hear the whisper of endearments against her ear as they fell to the earth, lost in—

“Well, imagine my surprise to see you here and at this hour of the morning. And in such a delectable form of dress.”

Frissons of alarm twisted down her spine while budding awareness for *him* danced over her skin at the sound of his voice. “Mr. Healy. Of course you would be so rude as to mention my attire.”

“How could I not? How often is a man presented with the sight of a woman in breeches? I feel as if I have witnessed a miracle.”

There was no mistaking the teasing in his voice. When she glanced his way from where he sat on his own horse—a dappled gray stallion—at the lane that ran between his property and Edward’s, prickles of annoyance stabbed through her chest, for he was far too handsome for his own good. Then that annoyance expanded to encompass her, for she’d noticed him. Again. “What are you doing here?” Drat his eyes anyway! She certainly wasn’t ready to see him so soon after that kiss.

What had he been thinking? If she were to tell her brother what had occurred last night, Edward would cut the man to ribbons for the slight. But then, that only made the man more attractive for all the possibility of a forbidden relationship was tempting.

“Riding, the same as you.” He shrugged as if were obvious. “I enjoy taking in the morning air. It’s quiet and I have the world all to myself, but I had no idea you would be out here as well.”

She frowned. Usually, if they were fierce enough, men that annoyed her—people, really—would take themselves off and leave her in peace. Unfortunately, Reginald either didn’t take visual clues well or he simply was amused by her, like a cat toying with a mouse before it goes in for the kill. “It had become a habit of mine since removing to the country.”

“Ah.” He grinned, and when a shallow dimple appeared in his left cheek, a few flutters moved through her lower belly. It made him entirely too endearing and appealing. “Then we shall ride a bit together.” Then he winked. “And I believe I asked you to call me Reginald, or Reg if you’d rather. Just not Reggie. I detest that moniker.”

“So do I, actually.” Not that she wanted anything that might bind her to him. When he didn’t move off or bid her a good day, she huffed out her frustration. Lady danced impatiently beneath her. “Fine. You may ride alongside.”

“Excellent.” He manipulated the reins, and her gaze dropped to his gloved hands. Did he know how to pleasure a woman in bed? For that matter, what sort of marriage had he enjoyed? She knew next to nothing about him. Why the devil was she suddenly so obsessed with him physically? It was Reg for lord’s sake! “What shall we talk about? Unless you are one of those grumpy individuals who don’t function well before noon.”

A dratted grin tugged at the corners of her mouth while she set Lady into motion. “You have a sense of humor; I’ll give you that.” And he’d come all too close to one of her truths. Fool that she was, she added, “I dislike waking early, but since I do—sleep is sometimes elusive—I take myself outside. Being in nature calms my worries.”

“Have you always had difficulties sleeping?”

“Not always, but in the past few years, yes.” She turned her head and glanced at him, and once more she was impressed that he’d dressed with care. His tweed jacket and gray breeches were almost as fine in quality and stitching as Edward’s, which meant he was charming enough—and had coin enough—to employ a good tailor. If she didn’t mind herself, she’d soon become lost in how exquisitely the fabric hugged his ruggedly masculine thighs or how well he seated his horse, which was a testament to the fact he regularly took in such exercise. “It’s odd, I know, for one would think such restlessness would be found while living in London instead of the country.”

His chuckle tickled through her chest. “I’ll admit, when I first moved here, it took me a month to acclimate to the sounds—or absence thereof—as well as the complete darkness.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten about that part. Now, it’s one of my favorite times, but it will take you by surprise if you aren’t

ready for it.” Oddly enough, she felt at ease in his presence. Most of the time, if forced to be in a man’s company, she was all too anxious, annoyed, or even bored, and though Reg *did* annoy her, he was quite lovely to talk to. “I also like to ride recklessly. If presented with a good meadow or flat stretch of land, I’ll give Lady her head and we’ll fly over the property. It’s the closest thing I can get to freedom.”

Why had she admitted *that* to him?

For a time, they rode in silence before Reginald stirred. “I’m sorry your marriage was so short-lived.”

“Life is like that.” She shrugged. “Though I wish Bartholomew would have been with me longer, that wasn’t his fate. I am only glad I could make his last weeks happy. Or I’d like to assume, since he was on the march at the time.”

“The man must have had extraordinary willpower to leave you directly after being wed.” When their gazes collided, there was nothing but honesty in his eyes. “That would have torn me up, but I’ll wager his last thought was of you.”

Unexpected tears stung the backs of her eyelids. “I hope you are right. Death is horrible enough to contemplate without having your last memory be the man who pulled the trigger.” It was something she’d adamantly prevented herself from thinking about. “I was forced to mourn for a man I’d be married to for barely six weeks, but we only had a week together as man and wife. During that time, I suffered from a bout of influenza and was no good to anyone.” As she blinked away the tears, Kitty sighed. “It ended up sweeping through the family after that. I sometimes wonder if that didn’t weaken Papa’s body enough to usher in his eventual demise.”

“That sounds horrid.” He didn’t offer any further comment, and for that she was grateful. It was embarrassing enough knowing she’d never been bedded by her husband, and that as a widow, she was still an innocent. No one knew that truth.

And sometimes she thought she might go mad with never telling it.

“It was.” She frowned at Lady’s ears that twitched every time Kitty spoke. “I wasn’t immediately emotional once that letter arrived telling me about Bart’s death.” When she let up on the reins, her mount drifted to an enticing patch of grass at the side of the road, and Kitty didn’t begrudge her the snack. “It wasn’t until a month or so had passed that I realized I would never see him again, that he wouldn’t come home on leave, that he was indeed dead and that I didn’t truly know him all that well since we met and married in haste.”

Which was another reason she refused to marry. Never again would she let attraction and passion dictate her future, for she wouldn’t tie herself to a stranger whom she would be forced to mourn, which was confusing enough.

“Have you ever talked about this to your family?” Those impossibly blue eyes of his held a level of compassion that would cause her to break if she wasn’t careful, and she certainly didn’t wish to show such weakness in front of him.

“I have not. Instead, when I come outside to ride or walk, I have fallen into the habit of collecting interesting or colorful pebbles.” When he eyed her askance, she sighed. Perhaps she was halfway insane anyway. “I make pictures with them—art.” Briefly, she explained. When she reached the part where she’d put together learning classrooms, his lower jaw fell open.

“Hell’s bells, Katharine. That is amazing.” Genuine admiration lay stamped over his face. “After traveling, I feared there wasn’t much to impress me, but here you are, telling me this story, and suddenly I’m not nearly worthy to be in your presence.”

She snorted. “Stop. Such gammon you speak.” Kitty gave him a smile. “I merely believe that everyone should be educated, like I told you last night. An illiterate population is easily controlled by those with power.” One of her eyebrows lifted. Would he get the hint that his relationship with her brother was a prime example? Not that he was illiterate or even stupid, but the longer he allowed the behavior, the more his own worth shrank. “I do not want men in charge of how I

live my life, what I do within that existence, or how I spend my days.”

“I am quite in agreement.” For long moments, Reginald rested a speculative gaze on her. “I’m going to tell you something I haven’t told anyone outside my man-of-affairs.”

She sucked in a breath. “Not even Edward?”

“He and I don’t exactly land on the same side of political or ethical issues at times; he is much his father’s son and makes decisions based on tradition or how they have always been done.”

Slowly, Kitty nodded. “I suspected as much, for he declines to speak of certain issues with me. Calls it scandalous that I even wish to know about matters best left to men who have the minds for it.” She rolled her eyes. “His words, not mine.”

“You are far more intelligent than he will ever be, I fear.” When he frowned, she dipped her gaze to his mouth. Somehow, that fleeting kiss from last night hadn’t been enough to make a decision about him. “I have been experiencing a pull deep in my soul to try for a seat in the House of Commons. Not that I’ve done anything about it, but that urge has been with me for a year or so, or since I returned to England after living in America. After traveling, after seeing how the world is... you suddenly want better for your own country and everyone who lives in it.”

There was such passion in his voice, such conviction in his deep timbre that she knew a moment of pure joy because there was another person in her circle who believed much of what she did. “You’ll need a sponsor, someone who has funding.”

“I will, indeed, but I’m confident I can succeed in gathering enough votes, and I can make my own way regarding the coin. Or affect large donations to help those votes along.” Not once did he drop her gaze. “While Edward constantly reminds me that I’m not good enough for many things because I don’t have a title nor am I a member of the

ton, I would like to try my hand at a running merely to discomfit him.”

“And to help make England a better place for all classes,” she said with a wink.

His grin almost knocked her off her horse for its brilliance. “There is that, of course, but imagine being able to go head-to-head with him over a political floor.”

A thrill of excitement wound up her spine. “Then I will slip into one of the galleries dressed like a boy so I can hear you speak.” Where had that come from? That assumed she would be with him in some capacity as he began his political career.

Surprise jumped into his eyes. “You believe I can do this? Affect change like you are doing?”

“I believe that every man—and woman—has the capacity for great power and yes, change, but that most people are too lazy to do anything about it.” With a knee into Lady’s side, she edged her horse close to his and dared to lay a hand on his sleeve. His muscles flinched beneath her touch. “England will soon need good men who think as you do, for we as a country cannot continue on like we are. The class divides are too much; the number of poor and indigent grows with each passing year. Something must be done, and the people need a man charming enough they can rally around, a man who can be their voice when theirs has been trampled.”

“Thank you. Now there only remains a sponsor, but there is time enough for that. Elections will be held next year.”

“I will sponsor you.” How did those words come out of her mouth? She’d had no intention of uttering them aloud, yet here she was, pledging him her support. “For as good as it will do since I am a mere woman.” It would be the closest she would get to entering the political arena and fighting for equality.

“I appreciate that.” He took her hand and squeezed her fingers. “This conversation has grown entirely too serious, and

I'm not in the mood for that just now, especially before breaking my fast."

"Agreed." Suddenly feeling lighter than she had for a long time, she nudged her horse away, breaking her contact with Reginald. "Race me to the house. You can have breakfast with me. No doubt Edward will be up by now, so you can needle him."

What the devil is wrong with me?

A chuckle proceeded his nod. "Neck or nothing back to hall?"

"I adore the rush such things bring." Then, with a click of her tongue and a knee into Lady's side, she urged her horse into motion.

It was a daring game she played with him, and as of yet she had no idea where she wanted it to end, but it amused her and filled her time. For the moment, it was enough.

Chapter Six



October 26, 1817

Reginald narrowed his eyes as he watched Edward joke with some of their contemporaries.

“Hey, Reggie, what say you to coming into village this evening with a few of us. You can practice your prowess in charming ladies on one of the serving wenches at the tavern. Show us lords how it’s done.” The cajoling tone in the earl’s voice set Reg’s teeth on edge.

“I’ll pass. Thank you. I’m not one for blatant, drunken displays, and if you cannot puzzle out how to win a woman, I rather think that is your problem not mine.”

Earlier that morning, they’d gathered in one of the fields on the earl’s property for the express purpose of hunting pheasant, and while he enjoyed hunting occasionally, he wasn’t in the mood for it, and neither did he like pheasant—on his plate or otherwise. But now the actual hunting and shooting portion of the day was over with ten birds waiting in a pile for their efforts.

It was the first of a planned string of such events.

When they all chuckled over Edward’s rebuttal and glanced his way, his patience with them and the event snapped.

He tucked his rifle beneath his arm, turned fully toward them, and glared. “If you have something to say to me, at least have the decency of coming over here and saying it to my face. Like a gentleman.” Where the burst of bravery had come from, he couldn’t say, but being friends with members of the

ton was one thing, being the brunt of their humor quite another.

“Come out of the boughs, Healy,” one of the other men said with a guffaw. “As the earl’s fool, you should already know you’re the butt of most jokes.”

One of the other men, Viscount Tannerton, joined in on the laughter. “We’ve been doing the same for years. Never heard you call an exception.”

“Perhaps I am tired of being good enough to be in the presence of men such as yourself but never being good enough to be fully accepted by the group.” *What the hell is wrong with me?* He’d not minded the slights before.

But that had been before he’d started talking to Katharine. Briefly, his mind jogged back two mornings ago when they’d met during horse riding and had a surprisingly honest conversation. Afterward, they’d raced their mounts to the earl’s manor, and that had been the most exhilarating activity he’d indulged in since returning to England.

Edward frowned as he made his way over the grass toward Reginald. “What’s this, then? We accept you, of course. You are my best friend, for God’s sake.” He clapped his free hand to Reg’s shoulder. “Don’t take everything personally, but if you like, I can make jest of Tannerton for a bit. I mean, he *is* the only man I have ever seen who resembles a lame cricket on the dance floor.”

A few of the other men burst into laughter.

“Thank you, but that won’t solve the problem.” He shook off the other man’s touch. “Are we finished bedeviling pheasants? If so, I’d like to go directly into luncheon. There are a few items on my agenda for this afternoon I had hoped to attend in a timely manner.”

“Of course.” With a look of confusion, Edward turned to address the ten or so men milling about the lawn with their dogs in tow. “We’re going to take luncheon now, so feel free to head toward the hall. I shall be there directly.” As the company

broke to clear the lawn, the earl held Reg back. “What is bothering you?”

Beyond constantly having fun poked at him, and then not being able to find the words or the courage to stand up for himself? “I honestly don’t know.” That was a lie. The one overwhelming subject that his mind kept returning to was Katharine and how much he’d enjoyed that fleeting kiss from the other night. Beyond that, he liked being in her company and giving her the space to open up to him, to learn of her history and her dreams. “I’ve been out of sorts for a handful of days.”

“Perhaps you don’t find the country life as stimulating as you first thought.” Speculation shadowed the other man’s eyes. “I leave for London at month’s end. You are welcome to accompany me. At least there are clubs and other entertainments to keep you occupied.”

“It is difficult to tell, but I’m not willing to declare defeat on this new way of life.”

“Very well.” Edward nodded and swept his gaze over the immediate area. “If it were anyone else, I’d wager there was a woman in your life bedeviling you, but you don’t seem interested in taking a new wife let alone a lover.”

Annoyance once more stabbed through Reg’s chest. “I haven’t definitively said no to either of those things; it’s merely more of the problem that I haven’t had time to devote to such.” Quite frankly, he wanted the wife over anything else. Katharine, in particular, but thinking along those lines right now was rushing his fences.

“There is that, I suppose.” The earl gave his shoulder a good-natured shove. “Pull yourself out of the blue devils. My damned sister is in a snit with me. I don’t need to have the same from my best friend.”

“Oh?” That was interesting enough to make him forget his own troubles. “Why is Lady Katharine angry with you?”

“Who knows?” Edward shrugged as he began walking toward the hall. Reg fell into easy step beside him. “She’s

always shrieking at me for one reason or another.”

Would that he could go immediately and find her to have the whole story. “Give her time. I’m sure she’ll come ‘round again. She’s stubborn but she’s not heartless.” And with every passing day, she intrigued him even more. “One day she’ll make some man quite fortunate.”

“Ha!” The earl snorted with laughter. “Kitty? I rather doubt that. Once I manage to marry the girl off, the poor sot who will be her husband might as well submit himself for castration, for she’ll eat him alive.”

As if she would allow herself to be pushed into a situation she didn’t want. Brother or not, Edward would have a fight on his hands. *I’d rather she use that tart mouth on me in far more creative ways.* Imagining the warmth of her lips around the head of his shaft, of feeling his length sink deep into the hot cavern of her mouth had interest shivering down that organ.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the naughty thoughts, Reg grinned. “Was that how she treated her first husband?”

“Actually, no. From all I could see, the pair married for love. They hadn’t known each other long, so what they thought might be love could have been lust. It certainly looked that way to me when I stumbled upon them in the barn, but they seemed happy enough.” A sigh escaped him. “I only wish he would have survived long enough to come back from the war and tame her.”

By willpower alone, Reg kept himself from pointing his gaze to the heavens. “Perhaps your sister isn’t one to be tamed. After all, isn’t that personality, that attitude something that makes her unique? If she were to give that up, she wouldn’t be your same sister.” He certainly had no intentions of taming her if he were lucky enough to have the right to marry her. Truth be told, he would probably only encourage her outspoken behavior, for she didn’t do it to be problematic but out of necessity.

To give others a voice. To be seen for herself.

He stifled a sigh. That was it. Katharine wanted the world around her to see her for the woman she was, not for someone they all wished that she was. Being the youngest in a large family, she probably felt overlooked and often forgotten, especially since her sisters were all married with families. The more Edward picked at her, prodded at her to do something she didn't want to do, the more resistance he would encounter. And if she had a partner in crime, as it were, who would oppose that highhanded treatment, the better he—Reg—would look in her eyes.

I need to see her.

“Despite my sister being a diamond when she entered society, she destroyed that achievement by becoming a hoyden. She married in haste with nothing to show for it. Now that she's nearly a spinster, it's impossible to rein in her wild streaks.” A groan escaped the earl. “It will take a man with a guiding hand.” He turned his head and glanced at Reginald, and once more that speculation filled his eyes. “A man who is strong in his own right to stand up to her.”

Perhaps not that but definitely a man who wouldn't let her damned brother cow him or make constant jest of him. “Or perhaps she merely wants support, someone to listen to her and cheer her onward,” Reg couldn't help but stay in his position as the devil's advocate.

“You know, this is the second time you've said something similar to me regarding Kitty.” The earl frowned. “I haven't changed my mind about you courting her.”

“I didn't think you had. I am simply saying that perhaps you should ask your sister what *she* wants from life. You might be surprised.” Knowing Edward still opposed a possible match between them only made Reg want it more.

“She wants to be left alone, I'll wager.” The earl sounded rather glum about it. “Perhaps her heart was broken when her husband died.”

“Or she has goals that have nothing to do with marriage or domestication.” Reg shrugged. Why couldn't

Edward understand? “There is more than one way for a woman to live her life.”

“Yes, but if she doesn’t figure it out, I cannot proceed into my own.”

This time Reg did roll his eyes. “Then ask her to move into the dower house and make your own plans. I fail to see why any of this is an issue.” Then he groaned. “Unless you plan to move your mistress to this estate.”

A mottled red flush appeared on Edward’s neck. “The thought had crossed my mind. What’s the point of having a fancy piece if I cannot have access to her all the time, no matter if I’m here or in Town? I certainly pay enough monthly to keep her.”

“I don’t envy you the balancing act.” But he kept his own counsel on the rest.

“Let us not talk of any more unpleasantries. I’m famished.”

“As am I.” Except Reg doubted tucking into **luncheon** would appease the hunger restlessly snaking through his being.



After the meal, everyone drifted into the billiards room for a few friendly games for those interested, but Reg stood at the windows that overlooked the back lawn. He’d intended to pour out a measure of brandy, but colorful movement below caught his attention, and when he turned his head to look, he was just in time to see Katharine scurrying over the lawn, her skirting of a bright cheerful marigold adding a splash of autumnal color to the area. Every so often, she would glance over her shoulder as if fully expecting to be followed, then she put the hood of a brown cloak over her head and continued on her way.

With as much nonchalant ease as he could, Reg made his way across the room. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to

return home for a bit. I'm having a few of the rooms repapered today and want to check the progress." That wasn't necessarily a lie, but the team he'd hired was the best at what they did, and the paper as well as draperies and rugs had already been picked out. Supervision wasn't required.

Edward waved him away. "I shall see you for dinner."

By the time Reg reached the back lawn, he had to run in order to catch Katharine up and finally did so when she was well out of eyesight from the manor.

"Katharine! Hold!"

"Go away, Reginald," she shouted over her shoulder. "I'm not inclined toward company just now."

When had that ever deterred him before? Increasing his steps, it wasn't long before he'd reached her side and kept pace with her quick stride. "Where are you going?"

She huffed. "You truly don't fear to tread where others won't, hmm?"

"When a man wants something badly enough, he'll do just about anything." He left his statement at that and let her read the silence.

"Ha." The lady tossed her head, but he saw the curve of her lips before she trained her gaze forward and the edge of the hood hid her face from him. "If you must know—"

"—I must," he interrupted with cheeky daring.

Another huff, then, "I am going to the village."

"Why?"

Again, she tossed a look at him that proclaimed him the most annoying thing she'd ever encountered. And what was more, he rather enjoyed pestering her into such a mood. It wouldn't be long before he could make her laugh. "I am angry at Edward, so I'm going to spend his money on fripperies and frivolous things I don't need."

"What a delightful form of revenge." Each little leaf he turned over regarding her revealed another lovely facet to her

personality, and if her ire was directed at someone other than him, all the better. “Why are you cross with him?”

“The deuced man has decided in all his male wisdom to invite a man to dinner tomorrow night. He wants to match me with said man, so I’ll be forced to sit there while this person looks me over as if I’m a piece of horse flesh at Tattersalls.” Heavy annoyance wove through her voice. “I am six and twenty, for lord’s sake. I don’t require handholding and I certainly will not stand for a marriage that is more or less arranged.”

“I don’t blame you.” Unexpected protectiveness welled within him. If he could, he would try and protect her from whatever ills she encountered. “Stand your ground, my lady. This is no longer the Middle Ages, and he cannot lock you in your rooms until you agree.”

A sound between a snort and a giggle issued from her. Amusement danced in her brown eyes as she regarded him. “I appreciate that.”

Reg nodded. “I’m coming with you to the village, for I’m annoyed with Edward as well.”

“Oh?” One of her blonde eyebrows rose. “Why has he angered you?”

Briefly, he told her about the events of the morning while hunting and afterward. Obviously, he left out the part where they’d spoken about her.

“Well, you need to fight back, Reginald. I keep telling you this. The longer you allow my brother the trespass, the more he’ll make jest and consider you his fool, making you do things for his amusement.” She shook her head as they reached the main road that would lead to the village. “It’s a bit cruel what he’s doing to you, and I’m sorry for you, but only so far. Grow a backbone and fight back.”

“Easier said than actually done, but I am working on it.” With her support, he would eventually do the necessary.

“Good.” She touched a hand to his arm, and he reveled in that acknowledgement. “Since you travelled to India as well

as America, do you think you'll ever leave England again?"

That was a good question indeed. "I'll be honest and say the urge to travel, for adventure, to experience all the world has to offer never goes away." He was silent for a bit. "I'm afraid that I'll grow bored, even if purchasing this property and renovating the house has been a long-held dream." But if he found a life partner that might enjoy doing the same things he did? It might not be so bad.

"I can only imagine what that must feel like. I've never been beyond this property or London. Not even to Brighton. There was a time after I wed that I would have followed Bartholomew on the march, but Edward forbid it." She huffed. "I was young at the time and listened to him. Not any longer."

"Oh, I have learned that about you." When Reg chuckled, she joined in on the mirth, and in that one perfect moment, it felt very much as if he were always meant to be there.

"Would you marry again?"

Damn, but she asked difficult questions. "I did enjoy being part of a married couple, being someone's husband, having a wife to pamper and spoil, but my favorite part of being wed was sliding into bed at the end of a long day, feeling the heat of that someone beside me in the dark, of the confidences, the hopes and dreams and fears that were shared before we drifted off to sleep."

"I can see that." Katharine's voice broke on the last word. "It was something I was never able to experience due to the brevity of my own union."

"Yet you are dead set against doing it a second time." Perhaps he would learn more about her in this unexpected conversation.

"Marriage requires me to give up a part of myself I'm not certain I can offer again." For long moments she kept her own counsel as they walked. The journey wasn't far, perhaps a few miles, but it already felt far too short in her company. "I don't want to merely be some man's wife, some child's

mother, for I feel as though I were born for a higher purpose than that.”

“That is understandable, and unless we make peace with ourselves and who we are, we will never have that contentment with someone else.” Did that mean the door was permanently closed for a possible relationship between them? It was perhaps too soon to tell.

“Were you and your wife able to have children?”

“We were never blessed in that regard.” Sadness caused his heart to squeeze, for that had always been one of his dreams. “Our union was far too short—three years—but I was never able to puzzle out if I was at fault or if she was or if we simply needed to practice more patience.”

Again, Katharine touched his arm. “I’m sorry.”

“That is the way of things, but there are other interests to keep me occupied.” However, now that the renovation of the cottage could run itself, he was in danger of growing bored once more. Perhaps it was time to begin his pursuit of her in earnest, before she slipped out of his fingers forever.

“May I tell you a secret?”

“Of course. You have my discretion.”

The lady blew out a breath. “I fear that I might not be the maternal type, might not have enough of a nurturing urge to be a good mother if that were to ever occur.”

Reg frowned. “Why do you think that?”

“Babies are rather loud and messy. They’re bad-tempered and unwieldy.” She shot him a rueful glance. “When my sisters reproduced, I never wanted to hold the infants, don’t particularly care for children until they’re old enough to talk and think and look after themselves to a point.”

“Many of us feel the same way, and none of that is wrong.” On impulse, he took her hand and threaded their gloved fingers together. After all, there was no one around for miles. “There is no rule of life that says you need to be a mother in order to live a successful or fulfilled life.” Yet would

that cause friction between them should he eventually win her heart?

Perhaps it didn't matter.

"I simply feel there are far too many unwanted children already in the world. Why must every woman be impressed upon to bear more into an already overcrowded world when the hundreds in orphanages would do much to have such parents."

Ah, so that was the reasoning behind her worries. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but now I will. Thank you for opening my eyes to the issue." She made him think differently, and that made him grow as a person.

"I am glad for you, Reginald."

There was something special about the way she said his name, as if she'd savored the word in her mouth before it danced on her lips as she released it into the air. "What?" The compliment was surprising but left him with pleasant warmth in his chest.

She nodded. "You never judge me for my forward-thinking ideas or for telling the truth about what I'm feeling. You never tell me that I'll change my mind regarding love or marriage or starting a family."

"Life is difficult enough without adding criticism." But damn if her fingers on his didn't feel all too right. "The best we can do is focus on what makes us happy, pursue the things that light our souls on fire, and then muddle through the rest of it."

It would be that much sweeter if he had her at his side, but he would wait. Earning her trust was more important than rushing his fences. He'd already waited a lifetime. What were a few weeks more?

Chapter Seven



October 27, 1817

Kitty glared at the gown her maid had selected from the clothes press. There was nothing wrong with the frock. In fact, it was one of her favorites. The navy silk skirting had hundreds of tiny glass beads sewn onto it that made the fabric twinkle with her every movement. Matching beads followed the bodice and the hems of the short sleeves. She adored the dress, except tonight she would be made to wear it for her brother's dinner guest.

The man he wishes to match me with.

It was outside of enough Edward thought to go through with his maddening plan, and the gown would quite be wasted on this person of whom she'd not heard much.

It would serve them both right if I either plead a megrim or simply opt not to go down to dinner. I still have free will.

Besides, didn't her brother already think she was difficult? A stunt like that would only reinforce the theory and then perhaps he would leave her alone.

"I'm going to take this gown down and have it pressed, my lady. Did you wish to have a bath before dinner?"

"I haven't decided yet, Susan, but once I do, I'll be sure and ring for you." With a glance at the carriage-style clock on the mantel, she realized there were just under three hours until the dreaded meal. Edward's friend would no doubt arrive soon for drinks, billiards, and conversation prior to the dinner. If she were to skip out on the event, she needed to think of a plan and soon.

“Very well, my lady.” The maid carefully gathered the gown into her arms. “You will look like a dream in the candlelight in this gown.” She lowered her voice and glanced toward the open corridor door. “Gossip in the servants’ hall says the earl’s dinner guest is a viscount. He’s not much to look at but he’s as rich as Croesus and has property in the north.”

“I don’t care about coin.” Having a fortune didn’t make a man appealing, though she wasn’t as naïve to think it didn’t help. Kitty made a sound in her throat as she pulled a face. “Uh, what else do you know about him?” Usually, she didn’t make it a habit to perpetuate gossip, but in this case, it was warranted.

Susan shrugged and the gown in her arms rustled. “I believe he is older than the earl, and that he has two youngish children from a prior marriage.”

More information didn’t make the prospect better. How could Edward even consider this man for her? Immediately upon wedding she would become a wife and a mother with little hope of escaping. Panic rose in her chest. *I have to get away.* “Thank you, Susan. I think I’m going to have a bit of a nap before dinner.” At least it would mean time to herself where the maid wouldn’t check on her.

“I’ll wake you when it’s time to start dressing.” Then Susan left the room and pulled the door closed behind her.

The panicky feeling didn’t fade once Kitty was left alone. “I don’t want a husband,” she whispered to the potted fern in one corner of her bedchamber as she strode to the full-length cheval glass. “And I certainly don’t want a husband who in all likelihood merely wants a new mother to his brood,” she murmured while she looked at her reflection. Annoyance had put pink color into her cheeks. Flyaway curls framed her face, for her hair refused to be tamed.

Suddenly, the need to seek out Reginald and talk to him grew overwhelming. He was level-headed and fair and never judged, and oddly enough, she always came away a bit soothed after being in his company. Once she told him about

this viscount, she would ask his opinion on whether she should attend or not.

Knowing it would take too much time to change into her favorite riding outfit, she smoothed her hands down the front of the day dress in a lightweight rose-colored wool. “This will have to do.”

Thirty minutes later saw her riding astride despite wearing skirts on Lady and trotting over the road and into Reginald’s property. Where would he be at this time of the day? When she’d left, it had just come onto the three o’clock hour. Or worse yet, what if he were paying calls to neighbors? When a cluster of outbuildings came into view, the sound of someone chopping wood reached her ears. Surely one of the servants would know where he was.

As she rounded the side of the first building, she sucked in a breath, then just as quickly breathed out in wonder and appreciation. Reginald was by himself, stripped down to his shirtsleeves which he’d rolled up to his elbows. Draped over the rails of a fence were his jacket and waistcoat. While she watched, he set a log on a chopping block and then wielding an axe, he quickly split the log in two.

“My goodness.” Surely the man she knew as Reginald wasn’t the same person as the one who currently labored in front of her. The folds of her cloak fell around her, but she suddenly wanted to fling off the outerwear for heat prickled over her form the longer she watched. “How utterly wonderful.” It wasn’t often that a man impressed her by doing nothing more than manual labor, but leave it to Reginald to do just that.

The power in his form left her speechless. The way his firm buttocks were shown to perfection each time he bent for a new log made her throat dry, and seeing his bare forearms had awareness dancing over her skin. For the space of a few heartbeats, she was incapable of doing anything except gawk at him.

“How long are you planning to stare before you greet me?” The maddening man paused in his work and wiped his

brow with the back of his wrist.

Well, drat. Heat seeped into her cheeks. Kitty played with the reins in her hands. “I apologize. Perhaps I was woolgathering.” Let him think what he would. “Good afternoon.”

He shot her a grin as he drew his gaze up and down her person. When his regard lingered on her legs with her skirting rucked up to her beribboned garters, shivers of anticipation danced down her spine. “Unless my memory is faulty, you have a rather important dinner tonight with your brother and his guest. Yet here you are, on my property, looking windblown and wanton, and of a mind for scandal. Do you have an explanation for that?”

For the first time since he’d come back into her life unexpectedly at that rout, she knew a moment’s clarity about what she wanted for her immediate future. “There is no explanation except that I feel like doing something naughty to offset my nerves.”

Would he be a willing partner for the next few hours?

“Oh?” After setting the axe down and leaning it against the chopping block, Reginald slowly closed the distance between them as he dusted his gloved hands together. “What have you got in mind?”

Her grin felt this side of wicked. Was she truly contemplating doing this and with him? The longer she looked at him in that degree of undress, coupled with their previous meetings and talks, the more she thought it sounded like a grand adventure. “That depends. Did you wish to finish your chores?”

“Ha.” Reginald laid a hand on the toe of her half boot while Lady danced with impatience. Heated tingles twisted up Kitty’s spine. “Firewood can wait. The winter isn’t here yet. Why?” Curiosity lay stamped across his face.

Fluttering filled her lower belly. “I wish to race my horse with you again.”

The veriest of frowns pulled at the corners of his sensual mouth. “Is that all? I think I’ll stay and finish with the wood.” Yet teasing rang in his baritone.

Cheeky man. “That is too bad. I thought to race around your acreage and back. Neck or nothing. Complete freedom.”

“And? There has to be more of an incentive for me to go fetch and saddle my horse.” Yet he was already moving to the fence railing where he’d left the remainder of his clothing.

“Why, Mr. Healy, if you can manage to catch me, you can kiss me.” She batted her eyelashes in outrageous fashion. “Is that enough of an incentive?”

“Hell’s bells.” He donned his waistcoat. “Stay right there. I’ll be back with my horse then we’ll start the race.” As he ran toward the stables, he shoved his arms into the sleeves of his jacket while Kitty fanned her flushed face with a hand.

What she’d do with him if he indeed won that kiss, she didn’t know, but she had a glimmering of a notion. It might be poor form to play upon his obvious infatuation with her, but he might be exactly what she needed for the afternoon... as well as the excuse to miss dinner.



By the time Reginald returned to the outbuildings, Kitty’s mount was anxious to be off. She stamped and snorted, and when she saw the newcomer’s horse, she uttered a low wuffle of greeting.

“Are you ready?” Kitty asked. The silly man had run a comb through his hair, which was damp as if he’d tried to clean himself up a bit. There was also water at the front of his shirt and hastily tied cravat. His cuffs and collar were still missing, and she rather enjoyed the ragamuffin look of him.

“For anything we should happen to encounter.” He guided his mount over to hers, and when his leg brushed hers,

charged energy zipped up her leg. “Where is the start/finish line?”

She glanced at the immediate area. “Ah. See that large oak past the first outbuilding?”

“Yes. I use it as a landmark on my morning rides.” He shot her a glance brimming with charm and slight vulnerability. “It sounds stupid, but I like to think the tree welcomes me home.”

Well, that was quite adorable. “There is nothing wrong with making the land your own. You must learn not to put stock into those people in your circle who make jest of you. It only means they are miserable in their own lives.” Then she arranged the folds of her cloak more comfortably about her. “We’ll start on a count of three, run around the edges of your property, and then come back here. Agreed?”

“Sure, but the property is quite large. It might take some time and the horses will tire before we finish.” His horse nudged hers, which once more had his leg brushing hers.

“Fair enough.” Kitty frowned and tried to concentrate mentally on the land between here and there, but it was growing more difficult with Reginald so close. “Let us start at the oak.”

He nodded.

“Then race from that point over the grounds of Edward’s property, through two fields, come up the lane that leads to the manor house, then at the duck pond turnabout, come back, and finally end at the oak tree.”

“That would work. Just under two miles. Shouldn’t be bad.” Reginald flicked the reins, and his horse pulled away from hers. Both animals whinnied in protest, but he held steady. “What made you decide to challenge me to such a race this afternoon?”

She urged Lady into a trot to keep up with him. “I am hoping to avoid attending Edward’s dinner tonight. It’s in less than three hours.”

“Ah.” He chuckled and the butterflies were back in her belly. “The matchmaking dinner.”

“Yes.” In some annoyance, she told him what Susan had told her about the viscount. “How can Edward even think I’d want to marry a man like that?”

“Your brother isn’t one to read subtle clues, but he *is* trying to see you cared for.” At the oak tree, he turned his horse around to face west. “If you truly wish to vent your spleen on him, ask the earl *why* he wants your future settled.”

For the second time that afternoon, Kitty gawked at him. “Do you know?”

“I do.”

“Will you tell me?”

“I will not, for it’s not my business to share.” The look he gave her was earnest. “Just like I never shared any part of our discussions with him.”

“At least you’re honest and fair.” She couldn’t help but respect him for that, damn his eyes. “Knowing Edward, it’s not from the kindness of his heart.”

Reginald snorted. “His heart isn’t the organ that’s guiding the decision.”

“Oh, you men!” A few muttered curse words drifted out of her mouth, much to her companion’s amusement. “I will dress my brother down at a later time. Right now, I intend to win this race.” She maneuvered Lady beside his mount.

“What do you get if you win?”

Kitty shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Then what assurance do I have that you’ll give me a fair race?” That dratted charming grin did dangerous things to her insides. “What motivation do I have?”

“Well, if kissing me isn’t enough for you, I don’t know how to help you.” With a wave, she dug a knee into Lady’s side and laughed when the equine shot away from the tree and into a smooth gallop.

“Cheat!” But the pounding of hooves that echoed in her ears told her he’d spurred his horse into immediate action as well.

It was pure bliss to urge Lady into flight, to lean over her horse’s neck and softly encourage her to go faster. The reins were clutched tight in her hands as she gripped the horse’s sides with her knees. As they thundered over the ground, Reginald and his mount came into her peripheral vision. No matter which of them won the race, she would come out the victor.

The first field fell to their pace all too quickly. She glanced over at her opponent. He looked back with a grin that reflected confidence, and as they flew through the second field—scattering a few deer in the process—exhilaration shot through her veins.

“Give up, my lady. I shall win this race!”

She laughed at his teasing call, for it didn’t matter. The race was merely an excuse, for she wanted to give him a reason to kiss her, but she adored his willingness to enter the spirit of competition, and she *did* love to ride. “You can try!”

They thundered up the lane that led to the manor house. Neck and neck they rode; it had been a long time since she’d had so much fun in the country. At the duck pond, Reginald made the turn first. The look of concentration on his face was a beautiful thing and made her catch her breath, but she quickly came up behind him once she’d made the turn for herself. There was something about Reginald that she couldn’t quite figure out. Beyond him apparently carrying a torch for her over the years, he always had the air of wishing for more from life.

Which was what she wanted as well.

Dust and grass flew about them as the horses jockeyed for position as they once more shot through the fields. The movement of muscles beneath the saddle was soothing in a way, but the race itself fired through her blood and left her feeling more alive than ever. Nothing else mattered except

flying over the earth, coming ahead of Reginald then agonizing that he gained the lead from her.

All too soon the outbuildings on his property came into view. She flicked the reins. "Come on, Lady. You can do it, and there will be extra oats in the offing for you."

The horse bobbed her head, but in the end, it was Reginald's mount that reached the oak tree a mere handful of inches ahead of her horse.

"Woo!" His shout of satisfaction was oddly stimulating. "Victory is mine." A breathless sort of chuckle escaped him. "Well, really it belongs to Apollo. He's my fastest horse."

Kitty brought Lady abreast of the other equine. Both animals gleamed with sweat and their sides heaved, but otherwise they seemed no worse for wear. "You won fairly. Nicely done, Mr. Healy. That means you may have your kiss."

"That is infinitely better than winning anything else." With a gleam in his eye she didn't quite trust, he dismounted and then patted his horse's neck. "You may graze to your heart's content, old boy." As he removed his gloves and set them atop his saddle, he looked at Kitty. "If we should become distracted and he's bored, Apollo will wander back to the stables."

"Ah, then you believe we'll find an interesting distraction?" The moment he laid a hand on her knee, heated tingles flew through her blood as if she were still racing.

"It's a fair assumption. Come, let me help you down."

Awareness of him washed over her while she removed her own gloves and laid them above the pommel. Then she twisted in the saddle, bringing her other leg over, and Reginald was there, his hands on her waist as he assisted her down. The wicked man brought her close, and she slid along his body until her feet found purchase on the ground. The spicy BayRum scent of him blended with the crisp outdoors and sweat into an intoxicating blend that further set fire to her

blood. She rested her palms on his chest, and he didn't relax his hold.

In fact, he tightened his grip on her hips ever so slightly as he peered down at her. "I believe I'll take that kiss now, my lady."

"There is nothing stopping you, and those were the terms after all," she said, and already her voice was a breathless affair. Had he always been this rugged and sensuous? And if so, why had she only noticed when he'd been chopping wood?

"Indeed." Slowly, never breaking eye contact, Reginald cupped her cheek and she trembled with anticipation. "How you manage to surprise me and challenge me at every turn, I'll never know, but it is quite a heady mix."

Just when she would have responded, he claimed her lips with his. It was much like the other kiss he'd stolen, but when she sighed from the sweet familiarity of it, he gathered her more comfortably into his embrace, and that's when the tone of the kiss changed. One second it was almost chaste and in the next it became something else entirely.

There was a mastery there, a solid confidence about him as he moved over her lips like a man who has thought too long about what he'd wanted. The kiss became insistent as he explored her lips, almost as if he were done with introductions and now he wished to tell her who he truly was beyond what she already knew.

Kitty curled one hand into the lapel of his superfine jacket while she urged the other to his nape as she lifted onto her toes to better receive his advances. Heat tingled down her spine, for she wanted to answer all of his unspoken questions. It was far too easy to give up control to him, and when he probed the seam of her mouth with the tip of his tongue, she gladly opened for him, wanting that kiss to deepen as much as he did.

All too soon, tongues met and tangled. Satin slid against silk as they dueled for dominance. She should have known he wouldn't let her boss him in this. Though she might

have that latitude on a societal stage due to her position, within a kiss there were no rules, no pecking order, and no one was better than the other.

And he was well versed in how to kiss a woman. Reginald left no part of her mouth untouched. He put his stamp on her, imprinted himself into her consciousness as one of his hands drifted downward to cup an arse cheek. Desire streaked through her to lodge between her thighs.

Dear God, she wanted this man!

Eventually, she wrenched away merely to do something as pedestrian as breathing, and as she stared up at him, she knew exactly how she wanted to pass the remainder of the time, and yes, she would most certainly miss dinner. “Come with me.” Quickly, before she could change her mind, she took his hand and gave it a tug.

“Where are we going?”

“There is an old folly on the southwest corner of Edward’s property. My sisters and I used to use it as a fairy castle in our childhood. It’s quite private and nestled at the edge of a wooded area. There is a pretty little stream that runs across that corner and goes into the neighbor’s land.” Her words almost tripped over each other, for the need of him, to have his body moving against hers while locked in passion, was nearly overwhelming.

“And you wish to go there, why?” But he had to know, for the same desire coursing through her veins graveled his voice.

She snorted and met his gaze. “Why do you think?”

“Hell’s bells.” His eyes darkened. “Lead on, my lady. If I’d known that winning a horse race would net me such a prize, I would have done much more of it.”

There was no way to contain her smile of victory. No, she didn’t want him for marriage, but he would do nicely for an affair if this first tryst went well.

Chapter Eight



Reg couldn't believe his luck as he followed the lady through the grass and around countless hedgerows. He didn't remember a folly being on Edward's property, but then, he hadn't met the earl until their university days, and most of their interactions had happened either there or in London. The few times he'd been invited to the hall, they hadn't used that time to tramp through the property.

"Ah, it must be in the woods. We didn't get out there much. I seem to recall the lord who owns that parcel didn't suffer poachers or vagrants kindly. Far too much chance of being shot if one wandered over."

"That's exactly where it is." There was a breathless quality to her voice he found appealing. Was she that overwrought from just his kiss? "The stable master told me a few days ago there was an increased activity of those sorts, so we should be mindful."

He didn't especially wish to have a mad or perhaps desperate person come upon them while they were completely naked and engaged in illicit activities, but there was nothing for it. Too many wagging tongues at either of their properties would land them into scandal, and there was something far too exciting about sneaking around. "I'll protect you from brigands and bandits." Not that he was skilled in fisticuffs, and he certainly hadn't brought a pistol, but he meant every word.

"I don't need your protection." Katharine stopped abruptly, which made him run into her, and he took the opportunity to steady them both by slipping his arms around her. Damn but she felt all too wonderful. "I am quite capable of looking after myself."

“Oh, I am well aware, but that doesn’t mean I still won’t fight for you.” As he talked her gaze dropped to his mouth. “I may not be worth much in your brother’s eyes, but I *am* a gentleman.” If that were entirely true, he wouldn’t be running off to claim her body, so he shoved that thought from his mind.

Her eyes darkened as she stared up at him. Baby fine curls had escaped their pins and now framed her face, and in the late afternoon sunshine, she was truly an angel. “Did you know that flying over the earth on the back of a horse, feeling the strength and movement of the animal between my legs makes me think very naughty thoughts? I always wish to play the wanton after a satisfying ride.” She drifted a hand to the buttons of his jacket and popped one free of its hole.

Hell’s bells I’m in a spot of bother. A rush of hot sensation moved through his shaft, hardening it. Damn, but he wanted her, and if they didn’t hurry on their way, he’d lay her down in the tall grass with her skirting over her head and take her like an animal. “Is that right?” Since she was already in his arms, Reg took full advantage and brushed his lips over hers. Every touch, every tiny contact sent him closer to the inevitable.

“Very much so.” Another button surrendered to her manipulation. There was no mistaking her intent, for it shadowed her eyes. “Do you have the courage enough to continue this journey with me?”

Did she mean in this moment or for something else entirely in the future? “Haven’t I already proved myself to you?” Because he could, and because he was so damned hungry for her, Reg claimed her lips in a kiss designed to tell her exactly how much he wanted her.

The desire, the blatant need that had simmered between them since that night at the rout spilled over and set fire to everything. Even in this, Katharine was no shy miss. Her lips were soft and insistent, and she matched him in all that he offered within the embrace. Too soon tongues were entwined, and hands were exploring. The buttons of his jacket came undone, and she turned her attention to his already loosened

cravat while he cupped her breasts beneath her cloak, worried her nipples into stiff peaks that had her making sounds of pleasure at the back of her throat.

The lady wrenched away. Twin spots of color blazed on her cheeks, but the look in her eyes promised sin and scandal. “The sooner we arrive at the folly, the sooner we can continue this.”

“Lead on, then.” With regret, he let her out of his arms, but the parting was only temporary. Their steps quickened, matched the rapid beat of his heart while they moved amidst trees that thickened into a forest once off the earl’s property. This part was merely a continuation of gardens on Edward’s side of the property, but they hadn’t been as properly maintained as the ones closer to the house. Had he forgotten about them, or did he wish the land to reclaim them?

Perhaps fifty yards into the trees, they came upon a weed-choked clearing where a single castle tower stood as if it had fallen from a large edifice centuries ago. Perhaps in Edward’s grandparents’ time, it was quite popular to put follies such as this into gardens as a feature of interest, for they served no practical purpose. If there were a couple of rooms inside, perhaps they could be used to house guests or such, but as it was, this tower soared only three stories into the air. A couple of windows looked out onto the world, and a wooden door lay hidden behind ivy and vines.

“I rather hope the door isn’t locked,” he said with a hush in his voice as they approached.

She snorted. “Did you truly think I would bring you out here if I didn’t have a way of getting in?” Here and there, she pressed her fingers against the stonework of the tower’s façade. Then, with a soft cry of triumph, she carefully removed a gray stone that wasn’t a stone at all. It was merely a shell fashioned out of putty to resemble the stones. Inside was a large brass key. Quickly replacing the stone, Katharine moved a few of the vines away from the door’s lock, inserted the key, and with some force, turned the locking mechanism.

“Impressive.” Truly, it was, and the fact she’d remembered after all this time had his admiration for her rising.

“Wait until you see what else I can do.” With a wink, she opened the wooden panel. It creaked and groaned with age and hinges that hadn’t been oiled, but they quickly entered the tower. “It’s close quarters, but there is a room at the top. It’s where my sisters and I used to play.”

“What of your brother?”

“Ha.” She closed the door and then used the key to turn the lock from this side, leaving it in the mechanism. “Edward would only consent to join us if he could be the knight riding to our rescue on his horse, demanding we all come home to his castle where we could act like proper ladies.”

There was a decided chill inside the stone folly, and it was full of shadows since the only windows were high up. A narrow stone staircase wound tightly upward, and that’s where Katharine led him. Someone must have been tasked with caretaking the structure, for there was not the grittiness of dirt beneath his boots nor were there cobwebs clinging anywhere.

“So then he was always a prick.”

Her laughter echoed weirdly inside the structure. “Of course. Being the only boy and heir in a large family will make a child’s head swell.”

Reg didn’t answer, for he was too busy watching the sway of her hips as he followed her up the staircase. Knowing he’d soon see those curves, those legs free of clothing sent heightened sensation through his shaft, making each step upward rather uncomfortable.

Then they reached the top where the stairs emptied into a hexagon-shaped room with two windows. Furnished like any bed chamber in any manor house but on a smaller scale, the room contained a bed, a square table with four wooden chairs, a wooden shelf that still held books and games, all waiting and ready for those four little girls to remember their presence. Sheets protected the bed, and as Katharine tugged them from

that piece of furniture and a rather comfortable-looking brocade winged-back chair, he suddenly had the opportunity to peer into her childhood.

“I rather doubt mice or other rodents have gotten in. Every quarter, someone comes down to clean the folly and check it over for repairs.” Her voice echoed slightly in the silence. “And sometimes, when I need to be away from Edward, I come here to remember who I am and what I want from my own life.”

“I don’t blame you.” Knowing that, he could now see the addition of modern adventure novels as well as a shawl that had been draped over the back of the chair. “Never lose that verve, that excitement for doing what’s on your heart.”

“I have no plans to do otherwise.” Apparently finished with small talk, Katharine came back into his arms. She tugged his head down while pushing onto her toes and kissed him with the same enthusiasm she showed for every aspect of her life.

And he was lost from that moment. After all, they hadn’t come here for a social visit.

Reg drank from her as if he couldn’t have enough. The years of pining after her and wondering what life might have been like if she’d have accepted his proposal ten years before fell away, for in this moment, she was his, and he’d finally come into his own.

Clothing fell indiscriminately to the stone floor: his jacket and waistcoat, her cloak. His cravat followed, as did her dress. Never once did she bid him nay, and he adored that she embraced the act of sex with complete abandon and joy. As he removed his shirt, his hands shook, especially while he watched her take off the fine lawn petticoat until she stood before him in her shift and stays.

It was one of the most erotic things he’d ever seen and certainly better than his fantasies. “Never could I have guessed how lush your body was, made for scandal and temptation,” he whispered, for the scene was nearly sacred after all this time. “May I—”

She cut his words off with a fierce kiss even if there was a pleased smile on her lips. “No talking. I only want you, so take off the remainder of your clothes, Reginald.”

“Right.” *Damn.* A wave of need slammed into him for the fact that she thought to assume command of the coupling. He would let her think that, but in this, he would win. Quickly, he tugged off his boots, hopping from one foot to the other as he did so. They fell to the floor with two dull thuds.

While he struggled out of his breeches and his rampant, thick length jutted outward, she manipulated the laces of her stays. She glanced at his shaft, and the damn woman moistened her bottom lip. What was she thinking? Then she shimmied out of the garment, saying nothing as he paused to watch. The outlines of her hardened nipples thrust against the shift. The sight temporarily separated him from reality, for this was finally happening. He would bed the woman he’d dreamed about for so long.

“Focus, Mr. Healy. No woolgathering. I want your attention completely on me.” The amusement in her voice yanked him out of his musings.

“No worries there.” The breeches were off and tossed to the floor in a thrice. As soon as she toed out of her half boots, he caught her into his arms, kissing her, claiming her lips, making love to her mouth as he slowly fisted the fabric of her shift and equally as slowly drew it up her body. The kiss was broken long enough to see the garment free, and once it hit the floor and she stood clad only in garters and stockings, he paused merely to admire her. “I don’t know what to say.”

“The greatest compliment is seeing the admiration, the desire in your eyes.” She was unashamedly naked with her body bared to his inspection, but she found his gaze and there was a trace of apprehension there. “I need to tell you something that I have never told anyone else.”

“There is nothing you can say that would make me want you less.” It was odd for a widow to show such sudden shyness as Katharine did. “But I thought you didn’t wish to talk.” He prowled forward, grinning as she retreated over the

floor until she tumbled onto the narrow bed dressed in a covering featuring the colors of pink, moss green, and cream.

“I don’t, yet you should know this one little thing about me.” When he joined her on the mattress, came over her body and settled between her bent knees, a sigh escaped them both, for the immediate glide of her skin against his, the softness of her body beneath his hard angles was most thrilling.

“All right.” Clearly, it bothered her enough that they wouldn’t be able to go forward until she confessed. “Tell me.” Then he tempered the words with a string of feather weighted kisses pressed beneath her jawline.

She slipped one arm about his middle and the other about his shoulders, and that innocent touch hurtled him closer to the edge. “Even though I was married, my husband and I never...” As a blush stained her cheeks, Katharine opted to press her lips to the side of his neck. “That is to say, I have never been properly bedded.” A tiny huff escaped her. “We’d both indulged in kisses and caresses and intimate touching, but I am not like most widows.”

“I see.” Shock ricocheted through his chest. *Dear God*, if he bedded her now, he’d take her innocence. It didn’t matter if society considered her a widow. “Yet the rumors surrounding your reputation imply...”

“That I’m scandalous and fast?” Her smile reflected in her eyes. “I spent a good amount of time cultivating that image, for I was embarrassed I’d never been bedded.” Then she shrugged and gave that patch of skin a lick. If she continued on, he’d be driven mad. Already, his engorged shaft throbbed from where it rested against her belly. “Besides, I truly do adore having male attention on me. It has been my plan to give away my innocence. It may as well be to you.”

While he appreciated her frankness, his chest tightened and the urge to protect her again made itself known. “I promise not to take that lightly.” When he moved to kiss her lips, she blocked him with the fingers of one hand pressed to his mouth.

“I trust you, Reg, because I want the experience, because in this moment, I want you doing wicked things to me. That is all.” She cocked a blonde eyebrow. “Understand?”

“Yes.” How was it possible to be randy and humbled at the same time? He didn’t know, but she was forever running him through a gambit of emotions. Why would now be any less true? Then he kissed her, sought to show her how much he appreciated her as well as this boon.

With a soft sigh, the lady surrendered fully into his care, and it was that little act of trust that sent him falling, scrambling down a very slippery slope indeed.

If he weren’t already half besotted with her, kissing her, exploring her body while she did the same to him would have done the trick. Soft, silky skin met his wandering fingers, glided beneath his lips as he sought to familiarize himself with every nuance of her form. The slopes of her breasts, the curve of her hips, the gentle swell of her stomach all called to him, begged for his touch, and she was as gorgeous and vibrant as he’d imagined. It mattered not that she was an innocent, for her natural curiosity and enthusiasm for the joining was an intoxicating mix.

The moment he closed his mouth around a pebbled pink nipple, she moaned and arched her back while he kneaded her other breast, rolled the bud which pulled a gasping sort of sound from her throat. The faint scent of sun-warmed forest combined with the lighter floral fragrance of apple blossoms on her skin spurred him onward. He couldn’t have enough of her, of kissing every portion of her body he came into contact with. While she danced her fingers along his back and abdomen, he nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, nipped and nibbled a path between her breasts, over them, teased those tips with his tongue and teeth, explored her navel and points beyond. She was a puzzle to be solved, and he couldn’t wait to have all the time in the world for just that, and slowly he made his way down her body.

“You make me feel as if I’m floating,” she admitted in a whisper as she bent her knees. “But you also make me want

to have my wicked way with you, to see what I can do, to discover how to drive you mad.”

Hell's bells. If that were true, she just might usher him to an early grave. “There is time for all of that.” For this wouldn't be their only coupling. Then he wasn't of a mind to talk; he wanted to show her how much he admired her, why she wasn't wrong in trusting him. “Bid me nay if you don't enjoy yourself. My wife was ambivalent regarding this particular act.”

As Reg kneeled, he hooked his hands beneath her hips and lifted her bottom half off the bed. With a hammering pulse, he dipped his head between her splayed thighs and drew his tongue along her folds. Apparently, she hadn't expected that, for she gasped and squirmed from his attention.

“Dear lord, what are you doing?” One hand curled tightly into the bedding.

“Tasting you. Bringing you to release in the quickest way possible.” There was a certain smug satisfaction in knowing he'd be the first to do this to her, and he chuckled against her skin. Seconds later, he encouraged that tiny bud at her center out of hiding and then set to work worrying it with his lips, alternately sucking it into his mouth and soothing it with swipes of his tongue. Katharine struggled to her elbows. She held his head tightly against her flesh, her fingers furrowing through his hair, yet in the next second she attempted to shove him away when he did his work all too well.

I can be as stubborn and daring as you, my lady. He wouldn't stop his torment until he'd sent her over the edge. *Come for me. Let me see you shatter.*

“Oh!” A surprised cry left Katharine's throat as he increased the friction against that all-important nubbin. She squirmed, fell onto her back, which put her lower half more securely into his care, and he continued his onslaught. “I had no idea such feeling could be achieved by oral stimulation. Ah!” A softer scream issued from her, and she must have tumbled into a gentle release, for she gasped, stared at him in

wonder as her body shook. A pretty pink flush spread over her chest and cheeks while she fisted both hands into the bedding.

“Indeed, it can, but I’m surprised your husband didn’t at least attempt it even if you were ill at the time.” Pure masculine smugness welled within him at the thought as he came back up her body. He’d made her spend, and they had barely started.

“He was perhaps far too noble. I’d wondered about this act, of course, but—”

God, she was adorable. He cut off her words with a kiss he hoped worked to further swamp her with feeling. “Should I send you over with my fingers or would you rather get right to the coupling?” If they delayed further, he would either embarrass the hell out of himself by coming early or die from a rampant cockstand.

She snorted. “What do you think?” Then she winked. “I am too far gone with need to have you draw this out, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t want you to experiment later.”

Ah, so then this wouldn’t just be a one-off occasion. “As my lady commands.” Reg came back up the bed, he settled between her bent knees, paused with the tip of his shaft kissing her opening. There was so much he wanted to share and experience with her, but for now, he would content himself with this.

“Don’t make me regret my decision,” she said, and when she met his gaze with a nod, he thrust his hips, penetrating her fully and as deeply as he could go. “Oh!” A soft hiss of breath was the only indication of pain from her stolen innocence, but she wrapped her legs around his, wriggled into a more comfortable position, and then her heel was at his arse, prodding him to continue. “You are quite large, quite... filling.”

“I’m glad you think so.” It had been some time since he’d lain with a woman, so the honest compliment was most welcome. Slowly, he went to allow her time to acclimate to his intrusion.

“Goodness!” Katharine trained her gaze on his face. Wonder clouded those dark brown depths, marvel lined her expression. “I should have done this sooner!”

He grunted as jealousy speared through his chest. The last thing he wanted to do was spend time thinking of her in another man’s arms. “We have only just started.” Though he wanted nothing more than to spend the next few days closeted away with this woman, showing her all the ways a man could join with a woman, the fact he was nearly gone wasn’t lost on him. After all, he had long dreamed of this very moment, and he’d been well primed for it. As he stroked in Katharine’s beautiful, tight body all of that wondering, the years of playing the earl’s fool faded away, for in her arms—however temporarily—he wasn’t a failure.

It wasn’t long before he was completely lost in her. Over and over, he pumped until he found a rhythm and she matched it. They moved together in that dance as old as time like they’d been doing it for years. One of her hands curled around his upper arm while she raked the fingers of the other up and down his back. Each consecutive thrust was more powerful than the last, for Reg couldn’t have enough. Her honeyed heat welcomed him and that took him by surprise. With a grunt, he continued to claim her, lost to everything around him. She had become his world in every sense of the word.

“Oh, um, Reginald?”

“Yes?” His eyes were half-shuttered, but hers were open and watching him, the irises darkened to the hue of melted chocolate. The sting of her nails at his back stimulated his actions.

“Give me more. Let me feel you everywhere inside me.” A waver of uncertainty had entered her voice. She squeezed his arm. “Show me I was right to take a chance on you.”

Well, damn.

Desperately, he wanted that same chance, in a million different ways. While her challenge motivated him to give her

all of him, he unexpectedly lost a piece of his heart to her in that moment.

Harder and faster, he went in claiming her as his. Deeper and deeper still his strokes came while stars burst behind his closed eyes. Already, he adored her, and now he worshipped her with his body, giving her everything she'd asked for and even more until he feared he'd be too far gone over her, and she'd make a fool of him too despite the fact he adored her. Yet, he couldn't stop.

All in an effort to pleasure this demanding, maddening woman who'd sent his life tip over tail in a handful of days. Who'd haunted his dreams and kept guiding him throughout the years as if she'd somehow become his muse. It was all too much too fast, and his body had been primed for too long. Hot sensation rushed through his shaft, tingled in his stones as they drew tight to his body. "I can't last." Sweat trickled down his spine and dampened his forehead. Still, he worked her over, thrust again and again and *again*, for he didn't want this coupling to end, for she might toss him aside as just another distraction in her life of privilege.

The coupling came to a rapid, shattering, spectacular ending. Katharine's body stiffened. Her moans intensified, and as she slipped a hand between them to play with the button he'd tormented earlier with his mouth, he lost the remainder of his control. Never had he seen anything as erotic as a woman who knew exactly what she wanted, even during intercourse. Then his mind jogged to the possibility her husband had at least taught her that, but had she pleased herself over the years after he'd died?

The picture in his head completely broke him. Reg's release crashed over him before he was ready, and he didn't merely fall over the edge into bliss. More to the point, he was hurtled, thrown, violently pitched into a whirling vortex of need and want and pleasure as sparkling colors swirled around him, everything fighting to steal his breath and sap his strength and bind him further to this woman.

A scream of repletion came from her, ringing in his ears, telling him in no uncertain terms that he'd done his job

well. She clutched at him in a bid to hold him close; her body shaking and her feminine walls convulsing around his pulsing shaft. “Reg-in-ald!”

But he was too far gone to say anything in response. In a misguided effort to prolong the coupling, he ground his pelvis into hers, but there was nothing left for him to give. She’d taken it all, and he would gladly give it over to her again should she crook just one of her fingers in suggestion. Eventually, his strength gave out and he collapsed on top of her, his breathing as ragged as hers. “That was incredible,” he whispered as he tucked his arms around her.

“It was.” Those two words were breathless and propelled on exhaustion. She kissed his shoulder, his temple, his cheek, his lips before pressing her own into the curve of his neck. “Thank you for that. I don’t think I can move.”

“Then don’t. Your life is your own, Katharine,” he said against the shell of her ear. There was something far too intimate remaining pressed into her with tangled limbs, and he was loath to break the spell, for in this moment, he could pretend that he’d won her instead of accommodated her for a tryst.

For a long time, they remained like that, lost, sated, adrift on a sea of heated contentment and lethargy, and then Reg acknowledged to himself what he had known at the back of his mind all along: he was rapidly going tip over tail for this woman and there was nothing to stop the slide.

It remained to be seen what would happen in the future, but for now, he would do whatever she asked of him merely to keep her close in the hopes that she might come to care for him too.

Until her brother found out and dashed that dream.

Chapter Nine



Eventually, Reginald came back to reality. “Damnation, but this has been one hell of an afternoon.” Not that he minded. If given the chance to do it all over again, he wouldn’t have changed any portion of it.

“It rather has.” Amusement threaded through Katharine’s voice. She pushed at his shoulder, and he remembered he still lay on top of her. “Resituate yourself, or I cannot be blamed if I go exploring.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “Did you wish to be off immediately, or do you want to linger for a bit?” Gingerly moving off to the side of her, he propped an elbow on the mattress and held his hand on his hand. “If it’s up to me, I don’t want to do anything except stare at you.” Truly, he couldn’t have enough of her naked form. He was so damned fortunate.

The way she looked at him with satisfaction in her gaze had renewed awareness crashing over him. “Oh, I’m not done with you yet, Mr. Healy.” The smoky sound of her voice had interest twitching through his shaft. She tucked an arm beneath her head as she peered at him, which only served to put her body more fully on display.

No matter that he adored how comfortable she was in scandal or *sans* clothing, the fact that he’d taken her innocence or was even here with her now was beyond the pale. “Be that as it may, I should never—we should never—have done this,” he gestured between them, “to begin with, but since we did, I feel compelled to ask for your hand. Once your brother finds out, he’ll practically demand it, even if he thinks I’m not good enough for you.” That was, perhaps, revealing too much, but there was nothing for it.

“You *would* ruin what we just did with a marriage proposal, wouldn’t you?” Annoyance hung heavy in her voice.

“I must.”

She blew out a breath. “No, Reginald. I will *not* marry you. This was a tryst, not a commitment.”

“But I should have been more honorable than this.” He frowned. Why was she so stubborn?

“Honor has nothing to do with sharing each other’s bodies.” Katharine shook her head. When she reclined on her elbows and her deliciously pert breasts were thrust upward, Reg nearly lost the ability to think, for he wanted her all over again. “I refuse to be an obligation. I want an affair with you over a marriage. No expectations and certainly no future.”

Well, that was a surprise, for she hadn’t discussed that with him, even if he’d already known she wasn’t marriage minded. And while he could possibly follow her down that far too interesting rabbit hole, what they’d just enjoyed might result in a pregnancy, and he refused to leave her in scandal. “Perhaps that is so, but—”

“No.” As she sat up, she pressed the fingers of one hand to his lips. “Stop. If you want another round soon, you will leave off with this subject.” The emotions in her eyes were too difficult to read. “I am enjoying your company. Don’t ruin it with thinking you must adhere to societal rules.” As somber as he’d ever seen her, she held his gaze. “I haven’t become a society lady before; I’m not about to start now.”

Slowly, he nodded, and she lowered her hand. “Interesting ultimatum, but I want you to know, that if you find yourself in a scandalous way as a result of this coupling, I ___”

“I know.” With a sigh, Katharine flopped onto her back with her head on the pillow. “I recently had my menses, so I think we should be fine for a few days.”

Women were mysterious creatures indeed. Though she’d explained to him why bringing a child into the world wasn’t the most ideal thing for her, he couldn’t help but persist

in dreaming that secret little dream of having a babe in his arms. “So, what now?” They couldn’t both lounge around naked in this little forgotten bit of land.

Could they?

“If you cannot puzzle out what to do when you have a woman in your bed who clearly wants another go ‘round, I’m beyond helping you.” She sent him a look that would have withered most men.

“I can, of course, but—”

“Why don’t you lie down next to me?” she asked with exasperation in her voice as well as her expression. “We shall see what happens after that, hmm? I was truthful when I told you I refuse to attend Edward’s dinner tonight.”

“Oh, I received that message quite well, thank you.” The earl would have his head if he ever discovered the reason for his sister’s defection or distraction. Perhaps it didn’t matter in this moment, for he stretched out to his full length on the bed, and lying on his side, wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. She squirmed onto her side as well, and when her backside went flush to his front, his shaft began to harden with renewed interest. “Shall we discuss what we just indulged in?”

“I’d rather not, but suffice it to say, I was pleased. Being ruined is marvelous fun.” She laid an arm over his, brushed her fingertips over his knuckles. “Now that the loss of my innocence is out of the way, I needn’t worry about it any longer. Which means we can go directly to the business of a torrid affair.”

“Torrid, you say.” It seemed there was no moderate ground with her. He buried his nose into her fragrant hair and breathed in that apple blossom scent.

“Well, if one wishes to indulge in scandal, it’s best to do it to the best of one’s ability. Don’t you think?”

“It makes sense.” If one didn’t think about it too closely. There was something pleasant about spending time with her thusly, in the sheer joy of holding a woman close

without anything carnal about it. Somehow, in this largely forgotten place with this woman in particular, he was content in the world, and he hadn't been that since his wife had died.

“Tell me about your American wife.”

Hell's bells, it was almost as if she could read his mind. “We didn't have a long union.”

Softly, Katharine snorted. “Neither did I, but at least you had a few years.”

“True.” As he searched his brain for the words to say, to share that portion of his life with the woman in his arms, he aimlessly brushed his fingertips along her side. When she shivered slightly and made a sound much like a cat's purr, he grinned. “Meredith was different than English women. Though she was delicate, there was a decided American *something* about her that I couldn't define. But Americans are distinctly stubborn and determined... and definitely not quiet and collected like the British.”

“I don't know that I've ever met an American before.”

“I'd met a few while in India. A breed with gumption, that's quite certain.” He drew the pads of his fingers along her hip and then back up her torso to pause beneath the curve of one breast. “In any event, when I arrived in New York, I'd made a few connections through the East India Company. I had loads of goods to trade and ship, so when I partnered with a man I met shortly after arriving, it was only natural that I'd sit down to dinner with him and his family.”

“Where you met Meredith.”

“Yes.” Daring much, Reg roved his fingers around her breast, making concentric circles tighter and tighter about her nipple until he strummed his forefinger over that puckered tip. When she uttered a tiny gasp, he grinned and continued his low-grade teasing. “I suppose you could say I fell in love instantly; I was more than ready to put an end to my bachelor existence and take up the reins of being a husband.” At that point, he was still nursing a broken and battered heart from Katharine's rejection, for he didn't take things like that lightly.

“No doubt you were quite lovely at it.” She put her hand on top of his, gently maneuvering him to where she wanted him, so he took the hint and worried that nipple as if he had all the time in the world.

“I didn’t think to ask, but Meredith never complained.” For several moments, he lost himself in caressing various places on Katharine’s body, and when his hand wandered between her thighs, she planted a foot flat on the mattress, bent the leg at the knee to give him the access he wanted. “In any event, Meredith was captivating, and I was quite taken with her, but her health was never the strongest. I didn’t think anything of it figuring she merely needed to be nurtured and properly cared for.”

No one had told him she’d struggled for two years with what they finally discovered was the wasting disease called consumption.

“Were you devastated when she died?” The lady’s breathing hastened the longer he played at the swelling button he’d encouraged out of hiding.

The fact she was even letting him do such wicked things to her so soon after they’d concluded a coupling held him in awe. “For a time. Mostly I was confused, angry, definitely lonely.” For the space of a few heartbeats, he concentrated on bringing the woman in his arms to pleasure, and the more friction he plied to that slippery button, the more she squirmed and made soft sounds of pleasure at the back of her throat. “For a while, I feared I’d married her to stave off those feelings.”

At least that was the truth. It was how he’d felt since he’d gone off to India in the attempt to forget about Katharine’s rejection.

“Grief is... difficult. It, uh, sneaks up on a person when they’re not expecting it!” A half-strangled sort of scream swallowed up any other words. For all intents and purposes, she rode the crest of a gentle release if her pressing his hand tightly against her body was any indication. “Oh, goodness.”

A shiver shook her frame and then she completely relaxed in his hold. "I can become all too used to *that*."

He couldn't help but chuckle, for she was too damned honest most of the time. "I know what you mean. There are times when I miss having Meredith about, miss what our lives might have been like if she hadn't died so soon." Would he have had a couple of children? And if that had been part of his path, would he have remained in America after she died? There was no way of knowing.

Now? He maneuvered his body around the woman currently in his arms to better hold her, wrap himself about her in protection. Well, now there was the hint of a new dream. Though she wasn't any closer to wanting marriage than she'd been before, she'd consented to being bedded, and by him, and that was more than he had a week ago.

"I like to think you would have been happy in America." There was a dreamy quality to her voice he wanted to explore.

"That largely would have depended on many factors. I am happy enough here back in England with my new property."

And new hopes.

"I always wondered what had become of you after you proposed ten years ago, but then life happened, and I got caught up in all the exciting things it had to offer." She idly strummed her fingers along his forearm, and every stroke put new fires into his blood. "Until love made me trip and ruined everything," she added in a softer voice.

Ah, so that was what she was afraid of. "Is that something you don't care for?"

"Falling in love?" She snorted. "It is fleeting at best and lying at worst. I don't like not feeling in control of my own life or my person, and that is what love does. Keeps me confused all the time so that I don't know myself any longer."

"That is part of it, yes," he said against the side of her head. "But being in love also makes a person feel as though

they can conquer the world, as if they were made for exactly that moment when they look at that one person on the morning of their wedding and know without a doubt they were meant for that life.”

“You make it sound like a story from a fairytale book, or what my sisters used to speak of when they were being courted.”

“Why can it not be?”

She huffed. “Because life isn’t like that. It’s messy and cruel and perplexing. And often disappointing,” she added in barely audible tones. “Definitely heartbreaking.”

“It can be, but if you change how you look at romance —”

The sound of the door downstairs rattling cut into his speech.

Katharine struggled into a sitting position. Her rounded eyes rested on his face. “What was that?”

“I don’t know.” When the sound came again, he vaulted off the bed. “There is someone outside who wishes to be inside.” Quickly, he donned his breeches and shirt in silence. “I’m going down to check things out and possibly warn away the intruder.”

She padded over to one of the windows and peered out. “I don’t see anyone.” The announcement was said in a whisper.

The sound of dogs barking reached their location, followed by a sharp command. “Christ, I recognize that voice.” As knots of worry pulled in his gut, he went to the window as well, but there was no one on the immediate grounds. “Your brother is out there with his beagles.”

A gasp escaped her. “Do you think he knows about us?”

Not if there is a god in heaven. To her, he said, “I’m about to find out.” He moved silently to the stairs. “Stay here, and please, for the first time in your life, follow orders.” Then

he quickly moved down the circular staircase while trying to tug on his boots at the same time.

Once he slipped outside, he drew a breath of relief when Edward wasn't near the door, but he wouldn't relax fully until he'd assured himself the earl wasn't still lurking. He'd tramped halfway around the folly before he located his friend. The beagles had run ahead, barking and cavorting through the nearest field.

"What the devil are you doing here, Armestead?" For dramatic effect, he clutched at his chest. "You've nearly caused my heart to attack me."

"Reggie!" The earl whirled around. Shock lined his face. "Why are you out here?" He glanced around. "For that matter, where's your horse? And why are you in shirtsleeves? This is a rather out of the way place to reach by foot. I'd almost forgotten about it until a few of the stable hands got to talking about possible drifters or poachers slinking over the property. I thought to make certain they hadn't broken in here."

"Ah, well I was out for a walk and lost track of the time." Knowing that Katharine was no doubt listening to everything they said, he led the earl a bit away from the folly. "Then I tripped over a rather largish branch that I thought was a snake and fell into a patch of mud that ruined my jacket and waistcoat." He shrugged as if such things happened all the time. "I'll probably head back soon. Just stopped for a drink at the stream and to wash the worst of the grime from my clothing."

"Understandable." The earl hooked a thumb back toward the folly. "My sisters used to use the tower as a playhouse. It was tucked away back here so they were out of my father's hair—and mine. Having four sisters meant there was never any silence."

"I can imagine." Here was a natural break in the conversation he could use to his advantage. "How is Kitty, by the way? I haven't seen much of her since I've been in residence at the new property."

“She is well.” Edward frowned. “Why do you ask?”

Reg shrugged. “I just wondered is all.” Would there ever come a time when the earl might accept a suit from him?

“Well, she remains the handful she has always been. In fact, no one seems to know where she is at the moment, and she is supposed to be preparing for a dinner, which would have gone off in an hour, but I’ve had to postpone due to her tardiness.” Annoyance went through his voice. “Have you seen her about as you’ve wandered?”

“I have not.” By willpower alone, he refrained from looking back at one of the windows.

For long moments, Edward leveled his gaze on Reg. “If you still harbor the ridiculous notion of having an interest in my sister, disabuse yourself of that right now. She is *not* for you.”

Annoyance stabbed through his chest like a hot poker. “Why? I am a man of worth. There is no reason why I cannot compete with titled men for her hand.” Especially since he’d claimed her body not an hour past and she seemed quite pleased with that.

“You are naught but a fool. She needs someone better.”

Some of Reg’s patience snapped. “Because I have endured your teasing and jokes for years in an effort to fit in and be a part of the society you keep?” God, he’d been pathetic for far too long. Well, all of that changed now.

“You certainly didn’t stop any of it. Until recently.” Edward narrowed his gaze. “Why is that, I wonder?” Before he could offer a rebuttal, the earl continued. “Unless there is a woman in your life, hmm? And you wish for a better image. Perhaps that is why you’ve suddenly come by some unexpected courage.”

Heat crept up the back of his neck. “My personal life is neither here nor there. I simply inquired after your sister’s well-being and told you I grow weary of being the butt of your jokes and displeasure. Where is the harm of that?”

“I don’t suppose there is...” Speculation entered the earl’s expression. “Perhaps you *should* have a woman in your life. Then you’d stop sniffing about Kitty’s skirts. I have a man in mind for her that can give her the life she needs.”

“Before you force her into something she’ll end up hating you for, perhaps you should talk to your sister and ask her what *she* wants.” That was something Reg intended to bring up and soon... in a post coital haze preferably.

The baying of the beagles in the distance signaled they’d tracked something to earth.

Edward sighed. “I apologize for my treatment of you, Reg, and will make strides in the future to rectify that. In the meanwhile, I’ll think about what you’ve said, but I need to go. The last time the dogs roamed the countryside, they nearly treed one of the tenant farmer’s sons.”

“I appreciate that and hope they’ve only just found a pheasant or rabbit.” He waited until the earl was well and truly on his way before going around the folly and coming back inside.

“I’m so proud of you!” Katharine pounced upon him before he could even gain the first step, and thank the gods, she was still naked. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him with all the enthusiasm and passion he’d come to expect from her. “Standing up to my brother will do amazing things for you, I’m thinking.”

“We can only hope.” With a grunt, he lifted her into his arms and carried her up the curving staircase. Once in the room at the top of the tower, he set her on her feet long enough to allow him time to remove his clothing.

“Oh, you are going to be rewarded for what you just did.” Stalking him over the floor, she gently but firmly shoved him into the chair then promptly joined him and straddled his lap. When she met his gaze, she smiled, and the sensation of falling assailed him. “There is something about you I find intoxicating.” Then her eyes rounded. “You *will* agree to the proposed affair, won’t you?”

“As if I could deny you anything.” Edward and his prejudices be damned. Then he claimed her lips with his.

What a fine day this had been, and equally surprising. Perhaps she would do well with a slightly firm hand and level-headed direction after all, but there was plenty of time to discuss the future. For the time being, he would be whatever she wanted, and if all went well, by Christmastide, she would be his for the rest of his life.

Chapter Ten



October 29, 1817

White Swan Park

It was one of those typical English days when a cold rain had taken over the earth. Though the pitter patter of precipitation on the windows and roof was comforting, there was a decided chill in the air, but Kitty didn't care for she'd spend the bulk of the day with Reginald.

They were two days into the affair they'd both agreed upon, and she couldn't have been more pleased with the outcome. He might have ridiculous notions regarding marriage, but he was lovely and exciting when it came to bed sport, and some of those encounters had sent her flying so high she never wanted to return to Earth.

How had she ever thought him not in her usual style? He was as adventurous as she, and he never turned her down when she wished for a roll in the sheets. Now that he'd opened her world to carnal pleasures, she couldn't have enough. Yet it was more than that. She truly enjoyed spending time with him, for he had a wonderful sense of humor, he was intelligent and learned on many different subjects, and some of the tea that he served in his house was beyond any she'd ever tasted before.

"You have the look of a woman who is supremely content with her life," he said as he came into the drawing room with a silver tea tray in hand.

Another thing she liked about Reginald was the fact he was uncomfortable with having his staff wait on him. For example, they'd both wanted tea, but he'd been eager to go

downstairs and make it himself, for there was yet another blend he'd wished for her to try. More often than not, he was a "hands on" sort of man and stood shoulder to shoulder with his servants doing repairs to the cottage or grounds, and what was more, everyone seemed to genuinely like him. His attitude and compassion went beyond class divides, which would make him an excellent candidate for the House of Commons.

She set aside the book she'd been reading—he had quite a lovely library—and offered him a smile. "I am, actually." One of the things she adored most about him was the fact he didn't stand on formality, nor did he kowtow to society's rules. If he felt at home while she was in his presence, he would oftentimes remove his jacket and roll his shirtsleeves up to his elbows. It made him at once approachable but at the same time far too attractive. "These past two days have been... indescribable." Not knowing what to expect from an affair, she'd gone into it blind, and the fact that it was so much more than bed sport had come as a bit of a surprise.

"That's good to hear. I've found the time with you to be charming as well." Then he busied himself with making a cup of tea for her. "This is an oolong from China. It will be much smoother on the palate than regular black tea." When he offered her the delicate porcelain cup, their fingers brushed during the hand off, and heated tingles danced up her arm. "It is rapidly becoming one of my favorites."

"Thank you." When she took her first sip, it was indeed smooth and a bit smoky. "This is lovely."

"It is. It also lends itself well to the addition of spices or fruits and other lighter teas if one wished to be adventurous with one's blends." Reginald poured out a cup for himself and then settled beside her on the sofa. "We have spent the past two days together, ever since we came together at the folly."

"We have." She allowed herself a small, secret smile. Everything had changed since that day, and nothing would ever be the same. Why hadn't she thought to embark upon an affair sooner?

“Does your brother ever question you about where you’ve gone?”

Kitty snorted. “He is not pleased I’m out so often, but he also knows that if he asks too many questions, I’ll give him a dressing down. My life is my own.” Already, she’d brought some of her things over to Reginald’s home—a basket of pebbles that she’d started making another picture with, a couple of her favorite books, a shawl she used when there was a draft in this very room, and a comfortable pair of slippers to wear about the house.

“If he ever comes to visit, I shall have to either keep him from this room or hurriedly throw your possessions beneath cushions or behind pillows.” That didn’t stop a pleased grin as he cast a glance about the room. “I rather like the homey touches you’ve brought as much as I enjoy spending time in your company.”

Tiny frissons of alarm swirled through her belly, for this scene had all the earmarks of becoming far too domestic for her tastes. “Well, we cannot very well conduct our affair at Armestead Hall with my brother underfoot. He should leave after his All Hallow’s Eve ball, though, which means we won’t need to be as strict at hiding.” Not that she minded sneaking about. It added to the exhilaration, but she’d rather not have to listen to a lecture from her brother.

“There’s that. He already thinks I’m not good enough for you. Best not give him fuel to add to that fire.” A frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. “The only person’s opinion I care about is yours.”

“I appreciate that.” She nodded and sipped at her tea, but her mind went back to the fears brought on by domestication. What would she do when the excitement and the newness of the affair wore off and she was left with the man? Did she want anything past the physicality of the relationship? The sound of his voice was quite delicious, and he would make a great orator if he won a seat in the Commons, and spending time in his company had given another layer of purpose to her life, but is that where she wanted to see herself in a month, in two months, in six?

And what if one or the other of them tired of the affair by then?

“I can almost hear you thinking.” Reginald nudged her shoulder with his until she looked up at him and their gazes connected. “Nothing in our connection just now requires such heavy thought.”

“While this is true, I am trying my best to remain in the moment.” Except, how did men manage to keep mistresses, to keep those relationships to strictly carnal endeavors. Perhaps they didn’t. It was all too difficult, especially when one found the partner in such a thing unexpectedly fascinating. “Do you, uh... Are you enjoying what we’ve embarked upon?”

“Of course I am. If I didn’t think I would, I’d never have agreed to your plan or your seduction.” He set his teacup on the low table in front of him then gently took hers from her hand and did the same. “Are you having second thoughts only two days in?”

“I’m not.” For the moment, it wouldn’t do tell him that confusion was sneaking in to upset her lovely affair, for then he might do something stupid and propose again, which would completely ruin everything. “Perhaps I’m worried what will happen if Edward finds out.” That wasn’t far from the truth.

“Then we will make certain he doesn’t.” With a grin that promised wicked things, he tugged her into his lap so that she was more or less straddling his waist. “What say we lose ourselves in kisses for a bit before I insist on escorting you home? I’ll say I met you in the village and offered to drive you back.”

“Why?” She couldn’t think of anything while this close to him, with the heat of him calling out to her and the scent of him infiltrating her mind. “Where will you be?” For the past two nights, she’d spent at least part of the time with him, after swearing her maid to secrecy regarding her comings and goings.

“I have been invited to dinner with Squire Davidson, and I accepted so I can begin my campaign of gathering endorsements for my bid in the Commons next autumn.”

“Oh.” Kitty brushed a shock of hair from his brow. “You do know his eldest daughter is marriage-minded, don’t you, and she shamelessly flirts with every guest her father asks to dinner?” A stab of hot jealousy went through her chest at the thought of another woman stealing him away merely because she didn’t wish to wed.

“You have nothing to worry about.” One of his hands disappeared beneath her skirting as he slipped his palm up her leg. “Trust me on that.”

“I should hope I’d be enough to keep you occupied,” she whispered as she manipulated his cravat. Need danced up and down her spine, for every time he touched her or looked at her in a specific way, her body reacted. “You will do just fine in accumulating support for the Commons. Of this I have no doubts.”

One needed to be fearless in order to change the world, and Reginald was exactly that.

“I appreciate your confidence.” He brushed his lips against hers. “And yes, you are more than enough to hold my attention, so why don’t we remove upstairs where there is more privacy?”

“I would like that above all things.” How had she become so addicted to him so quickly?

“Good.” Gently but firmly, he set her aside and then scrambled to his feet. “By the by, I should hope you’ll reserve me a waltz at your brother’s ball in two days. I didn’t have the chance to dance with you at my rout.”

Slowly, she stood. “I will, though only if you promise we’ll get up to scandal at some point during the evening. It would be perfect knowing you and I sneaked off somewhere in the manor while Edward was holding court in the ballroom.”

“You, my dear, are trouble of the first order.” He put a hand to her arse cheek and gave it a soft pinch. “I both adore it and endorse it.” Then he winked. “First one upstairs gets to pick the position.”

With a happy squeal, Kitty pelted from the room, seconds ahead of him. For however long this lasted, she would enjoy it to the hilt. Settling into domestication was not for her, especially if the excitement like this would die in favor of being a wife or a mother to some man her brother had chosen. But how long could she possibly avoid Edward's machinations? No doubt he would have some scheme in mind to see her matched at the ball.

I cannot be matched if I'm too busy. For she intended to remain in Reginald's company all night long. Edward and his plans could go hang.



Later that evening, she glanced up from reading a book in the drawing room when Edward entered the room. "I'd wondered where you got off to after dinner." That had been a couple of hours ago, and true to his word, Reginald had driven her home shortly before that with the story of how they'd met in the village on his lips. Then she and her brother had passed a congenial evening at dinner discussing the finer points of the All Hallow's Eve ball.

"I had some paperwork to finish, and then my land steward came by to make a report. I'd forgotten about the meeting beneath all these other preparations." He eyed her askance. "It would be lovely if you would help with some of this though."

"I wasn't the one who wished to throw a ball." Truth be told, he undoubtedly had everything under control and finalized but wished to make her feel guilty. "Besides, my time has been better spent trying to find a gown I liked well enough."

"Then you promise to attend?" he asked as he dropped into the chair nearest her location. "Of course, I have invited a few men I'm hopeful you'll find interesting enough to perhaps pursue." He held up a hand when she offered a protest.

“However, I won’t push. I’m leaving for London a day or two after the ball due to duties with parliament and other business ventures in Town, but by the year’s end, I do need a plan of action from you regarding your future. By this time next year, I want you settled, no matter how that comes about.”

“That’s not fair.” The interest in her book forgotten, she let it drop from her hands. And it would seriously cut into her plans with Reginald.

“I think it’s more than fair.” The look he gave her brooked no argument. “I have given you far too much latitude lately, which has resulted in more scandal than usual.”

“What do you mean?” Knots pulled in her belly. Did he suspect what she was doing with his best friend?

Edward snorted. He began ticking items off on his fingers. “Riding neck or nothing through the countryside astride. Sneaking out of the house at odd times—lord only knows what you’re up to then. Deliberately thwarting my plans for you.”

She relaxed, but only slightly. “Oh, but I have always done these things. What else do you expect me to do here?”

“I expect you to not be so vexing.” With a sigh, Edward rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “I just want you happy, Kitty, but since you prefer scandal to stability without a suitor in sight, I am going to have to step in.” Slowly, he shook his head. “While I don’t enjoy being high-handed about things like this, I now understand why Papa had to be with you girls.”

“Can you not see that I am living my life how I please and I’m happy doing so? Why must you persist in your thinking that having a man will bring me to that state?” Yet ever since she took up carnally with Reginald, her mood had shifted in small ways. Of course, being regularly bedded *did* improve one’s outlook.

“While this is true and you have seemed to thrive while in the country where your sisters would have wilted away, you need someone to look after you. Not because I think you

incapable,” he rushed on when she made a sound of protest, “but because having a companion to go through the remainder of your life with would be good for you. I know you think me an ogre, but I worry about you.”

It was one of the first times she’d seen her brother vulnerable. “Please don’t. I am enjoying my life right now and have no desire to return to Town. And don’t forget, I’m a widow, so not quite the failure you believe.” She forced out a laugh, but he didn’t join in on the mirth. “If by thirty I’m still unmatched, then I’ll become a spinster and you have every right to shuttle me off to one of our sisters to help care for their growing broods.”

“Perhaps.” He nodded but there was concern in his eyes. “However, I’ll try to see you matched at the ball. The family has promised to come to Armestead Hall to spend the Christmastide holidays, so there will be other opportunities to gather together for society functions at that time.”

Kitty released a huff of annoyance. “Or perhaps I could find a man organically without your assistance at all.” Wouldn’t that serve him right if she fell hopelessly in love with a farmer?

“Ha!” He offered her a small smile. “I might warm to the idea. Just as long as whomever you select is not Reggie. I cannot see my sister wed to a man who is naught but a fool.”

A streak of hot anger stabbed through her chest. “He is hardly that, and you should stop treating him as if he’s beneath you.”

“He is, though.”

“He is not! Having a title doesn’t make you better than anyone else, Edward.” She tempered her reaction before it gave her away. “If you’d bothered to talk to him, you’d know he has a heart of compassion and very lofty plans.” *Well, drat.* She’d said, perhaps, too much. Another knot of worry pulled in her belly, for she wondered if she might be developing feelings for his best friend that went beyond the parameters of their affair.

And that would probably anger him more than if she'd taken up with a farmer. For whatever reason, he was violently opposed to such a match, even if she wanted to be wed.

“When have you had cause to talk with him?” Edward's frown was fierce and his gaze piercing as he studied her.

“I've met with him a time or two since he is our neighbor. He's been about the area or the village.” Not exactly a lie but skimming the edge of the truth.

“I see.” For long moments he watched her with narrowed eyes. “Make sure to keep your dealings with him shallow. From all accounts, the man has no motivation now that he's made his fortune, and I rather doubt he'll ever make a name for himself.”

As if what Reginald was now was anything to sneeze at. In a huff that aligned with her usual attitude when she talked with her brother, Kitty stood. “Thank you, once more, for the warning. Between avoiding him and the vagrants or poachers sighted on the property, I will be rather busy, hmm?” Then she swept out of the room. Thank goodness he couldn't see how badly her hands shook.

The need to see Reginald swept over her. He had a unique knack for soothing her worries and bringing her back to calm. Then the muscles in her belly tightened. *What is wrong with me?* This felt all too similar to being in love, and she wanted no part of that.

Right?

Chapter Eleven



October 30, 1817

White Swan Park

“Good lord, woman, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re trying to kill me,” Reginald gasped as he thrust into her honeyed heat once, twice more before collapsing on top of her, but at the last second, he withdrew from her body. His shaft pulsed and spilled its seed into the sheets, for he was adamant that he not leave Katharine in the midst of scandal, and aside from the first time they’d come together in that folly, he had taken control of at least that.

Yes, he admired and loved the hell out of her, always had, wanted the right to protect her openly and above board, but until that time came, he would protect her this way even if she looked at him with censure or exasperation. There had to be some sort of honor within an affair.

“Never,” she panted, for she’d found release seconds ago. Even now, as she wrapped her arms about him and held him close, he could feel her shake from those residual tremors. “I quite enjoy you alive and like this.”

The lady had sneaked over to his cottage an hour earlier, and when it had become evident she wished for a tryst—quite desperately in fact—he’d sent a footman over to the earl’s manor with a hastily written note saying he suffered from a megrim and wouldn’t be able to take part in the pheasant hunt this morning.

No doubt that was exactly what had motivated Katharine’s visit.

Not that he minded. Any time Reg could linger in her company, he'd take it, but he couldn't help but wonder just how long she intended the affair to go on. Eventually, he would need to return to Town and check on his import business as well as to make plans for his political campaign. Truth be told, if she were to meet him in London, it would be more difficult to hide their affair, and all too soon Edward would get wind of it.

With a grunt mixed with a sigh of repletion, Reg flopped onto his back as his breathing regulated. Damn but she wore him out in the best of ways, and since her energy was boundless, she made him feel far younger than he was. "I could become all too used to having you in my bed."

"Or your chair, against the wall, on your billiards table, in a meadow..." Her words were slightly breathless and when she chuckled, the sound went straight to his stones, for they had made good use of a variety of locations since the affair began. "Somehow, there are many more places—and positions—I am keen to try."

Absolutely, she is trying to kill me. "I appreciate your enthusiasm." He threw an arm over his eyes. "Yet I am still holding my breath in thinking you'll come to your senses soon enough and realize this is all too wrong. Then you'll walk out of my life, and I'll never see you again." It was a valid fear, and one he couldn't help but persist in having.

"Hush. I am having far too much fun with you for that." When she turned to her side to face him, she rested a hand on his abdomen. Muscles tightened beneath her touch. "This week has been all too wonderful."

Nothing except truth reflected in the dark depths of her eyes. "While I agree, sooner or later, your brother will discover what we're doing. Already, we are skirting the bounds of propriety, and I rather think he won't believe some of the excuses I've given him recently."

"I don't wish to talk about my brother." Leaning down, Katharine skated her lips along his chest, moving slowly upward until she peppered the underside of his jaw with tiny

nips and nibbles. “He means to see me married by next Christmastide else he’ll ship me off to live with one of my sisters as little more than domestic help with their children.”

He snorted, for no matter how he envisioned it, he couldn’t see that happening. “Is he growing more desperate to have you off his hands then?”

“Apparently.” She moved her attention to covering his face with feather weighted kisses, and when she finally arrived at his lips, his arms came around her and he applied himself to kissing her back, for why wouldn’t he? By the time the kiss broke, she lay half over his body and half pressed against his side.

Either way, it was erotic as hell. “No doubt he’ll try and push you toward any number of potential suitors at the ball tomorrow night.” Jealousy speared through his chest, and he held her a tiny bit closer in possession. As far as he was concerned, Katharine was his and no other man would be good enough, but how to convince not only her but the earl as well?

“He can try but I am still not interested in marrying anyone.” Moving her hair over her shoulder, she peered down into his face. “Or we can skip the ball in favor of doing something far more scandalous and satisfying. I have always wondered what pleasuring a man in a bathtub would be like.”

Oh, dear lord.

“You are so very tempting.” And he was in danger of losing his heart to her all over again. Not that he’d ever pulled away from that in the ten years they’d been separated. Now that he’d come to know her better, he loved her even more, and in his mind’s eye, the image of them together, setting London on its ear persisted in shimmering there.

A couple who believed in their causes and helping those who needed it. The dream was nearly in his grasp if the lovely woman in his arms would stop being so stubborn and fearful of the married state. But he would wait, for she was worth it.

“Good.” She dropped a kiss onto his chin. “I’m having the best fun with you.”

A squeeze went through his heart. “Don’t fly into the boughs, but this feeling, this companionship we’re enjoying doesn’t need to end merely because nuptial vows might be said. Marriage is what a couple makes of it, and that needn’t be a prison for either side.” Had he rushed his fences after being so careful these last handful of days?

“Oh, Reginald.” Katharine blew out her breath, clearly frustrated. Confusion clouded her eyes. “Why does everyone in my association think my life is incomplete for the simple fact that I am not wed?”

“Because at some point during a person’s life, they will grow weary of sneaking about and want to respect their lover much more than keeping her in the shadows.” He winked to soften his words. “A man will want to see his lady on his arm, to tell the world that he has won the best of all women.”

A slight blush went through her cheeks. “You are far too romantic, I think.”

“And you are far too fearful at times.” He slid a hand down her back to the sweet curve of her arse then gave a cheek a light pinch, chuckling when she squealed. “That is why we rub along so well together.”

She moved the knee that rested over his shaft, and very blatantly brushed it over that organ as it awakened once more. “Shall I rub this fellow so he’s ready for another round?”

“Allow me a moment’s peace and rest. Then I will claim you all over again.” Snatching up her hand, he brought it to his lips. “In the meantime, please think about what I’ve said. With the right man, marriage can be everything wonderful and meaningful. A support instead of a prison, flight over having your wings cut. Love opposed to drudgery.”

For long moments, she held his gaze, but before she could say anything, a discreet knocking on his door interrupted whatever she would have said.

“Hell’s bells.” With a softly murmured curse, Reg rolled her onto her back, pressed his lips to hers, and then struggled off the bed. As he padded over the floor, he wrapped a banyan about himself. “Don’t move,” he mouthed to Katharine, and when he pulled open the door slightly—shielding her presence with the panel—he frowned at his butler. “What is it?”

“I apologize for disturbing you but the Earl of Armestead is in the drawing room for you.” The butler raised an eyebrow. “He is quite insistent.”

“Damn. I had told him earlier in the day I was in bed suffering from a megrim.” He’d been in bed all right...

“That doesn’t seem to matter to His Lordship.”

“Very well. Tell him I’ll be down as soon as I can throw on some clothing.”

“Of course, sir.” With speculation in his eyes, the butler departed, and Reg reluctantly closed the door.

“Edward is here.”

“What?” Katharine struggled into a sitting position.

Reg nodded. “Just what I said.” Seeing her disheveled hair settle about her shoulders like a blonde cloud had him wishing to dive back into bed with her, but he couldn’t, not while the earl was waiting. He retrieved his breeches from the end of the bed and then yanked them on as his banyan slipped to the floor. “My butler says he wishes to see me right now.”

“Do you think he knows about us?” she asked in a barely audible whisper.

“Who can say, but he’ll most certainly know my excuse for not joining him to hunt pheasant this morning was a lie.” After snagging his lawn shirt from the floor, he pulled it over his head and smoothed it down his torso, finally tucked the tails into his breeches.

“Should I go?”

He frowned when she donned her shift and covered up her luscious naked form. “I shouldn’t be long, but if you feel

uncomfortable here...”

“I don’t, but if my presence will give you a lecture from my brother, I’ll gladly go home.” Quickly, Katharine closed the distance between them. She lifted on her toes, pressed her lips to his, and then peered into his eyes. “Don’t let him bully you, Reginald. You are worthy of existing merely because you are here, and you are you. No longer are you his fool. Understand?”

“I do.” She was exactly what he needed, for with her support, he felt as if he could do anything.

“Good. You *are* the next member of the House of Commons, and it will be such fun to see how you and Edward work on opposite sides of the political arena.” When she grinned, the sensation of falling assailed him.

Yet he didn’t want any of it unless he managed to win her, to have her in his life in all the ways that mattered. “Don’t gloat too hard, for if Edward discovers the charities and causes you represent, that you have taken it upon yourself to teach the women on his staff how to read and better themselves, you’ll receive a lecture as well. Perhaps bundled off to a convent.”

“So he thinks.” She crossed her arms at her chest, covered those fantastic breasts. “It is a cause I believe in, no matter how much animosity I receive, and if that means removing myself from my family, so be it.”

God, how much did he admire her? By willpower alone, Reg moved away from her toward the door. “I will return as soon as I send your brother on his way.”

“Order tea on your way back. I am quite parched and starving.”

No doubt she was, for her appetites were voracious. With a grin, he hurried downstairs to the drawing room, only to find the earl pacing in some annoyance in that room.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Reg said without preamble. “I thought you’d be up to your neck hunting pheasant. Fine day for it.”

“Oh, yes, quite.” Edward waved a hand in dismissal as he turned and faced Reg. “I’m certain it was a fine time among my fellows, but I begged off.”

Now *that* was surprising. “Why? The pheasant season is one of your favorites.”

“Kitty is missing.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Concern creased the earl’s brow. “My sister is missing. I doubled back to the house; I’d forgotten my favorite rifle, you see, and popped into her room to ask if she’d like to join. She wasn’t there.”

“I fail to see why this is a problem. Doesn’t your sister have interests in the neighborhood? And she enjoys morning rides as well.” Which is how she came to arrive at Reg’s cottage soon after Edward left for the hunt.

“Yes, of course, but no one from the hall has seen her today. Her horse hasn’t come back. There are no appointments in her diary. Even her maid hasn’t seen her since she rose for her ride this morning.” Edward shoved a hand through his hair. “Where is she?”

“How the hell should I know?” It was best he act nonchalant. He gestured to his state of dress. “In the event you haven’t noticed, I am not at my best just now.”

“The megrim.”

Heat crept up the back of his neck. “Well, that was an excuse, for there is a woman, even now, upstairs in my bed, and I would like very much to return to her.” At least it wasn’t a lie, and knowing that woman was the earl’s sister, Reg stared the man down, almost daring him to connect the dots and have done with the charade.

“*You* are keeping a mistress.” It wasn’t a question. “You.”

He allowed a tiny, one-sided grin. “It was... unexpected.” With the clearing of his throat, he crossed his arms at his chest. “So you can understand why I won’t go with

you to search for your sister, but I'm sure she'll return to the hall soon enough. With Katharine, you need to be patient and allow her to have her head. She is harmless, of course, but some of her ideas are well beyond her time."

Edward glanced sharply at him. "How would you know?"

Oh, God. He shrugged. "I listen on the occasions I've been in her company."

For long moments, Edward stared. "And you're certain you don't know where Kitty is currently?"

"Quite. No doubt she's in the village or off putting the finishing touches on her gown for tomorrow." And then he took it one step further, perhaps too far in order to needle his friend, but he wanted to know what Edward knew. "Or, since she is a woman grown, it is entirely possible your sister has taken a lover. Leave her be, Edward," he said when the other man began a protest. "If it makes her happy, let her alone, for I suspect she hasn't been that in quite a long time."

A muscle ticced in the earl's cheek. "I *have* been worried about her, this is true. However, that doesn't give her leave to throw herself headlong into scandal. Another one!" Then Edward closed the distance between them, took hold of Reg's shoulder in a hard grip, his eyes boring into Reg's. "If I find out you're the one who has been trifling with her..."

"I can honestly tell you that I have *not* been doing that." He removed the earl's hand from his person, for everything that happened between him, and Katharine had been consensual. It was his turn to glare. "However, I *can* tell you this. If I were to be together with your sister, it wouldn't be merely to trifle with her, as you say, and it wouldn't be only to act as her lover. I would be with her because she is a wonderful woman who has the full of my admiration. I would be with her in an effort to protect her and support her, to help her meet all of her goals."

Well hell. Had he inadvertently given himself away?

“I see.” Speculation lined Edward’s face, but though he watched with narrowed eyes, he said nothing else. “Well, then. I should probably return to the hunt, hmm?”

“Those pheasants won’t walk themselves into the line of your firing squad.” *Dear God.* He’d more or less declared himself with those words, but were they true? His head spun with the implications, and his heart gave a squeeze. Yes, they were indeed the truth, and he meant each one of them. His goal from ten years ago had never changed, but the motivation behind it perhaps had. It had clarified and made everything as clear as crystal.

Damn it was freeing.

I love Lady Katharine Gibson. And nothing will ever change that.

“Indeed.” Then the earl’s emotions cleared. “I trust you will attend the ball tomorrow?”

“Of course.” He escorted his friend to the door as his pulse threaded heavy through his veins. “I suspect it will end up being the premier event of the season.”

There was a twinkle in the other man’s eyes Reg didn’t quite trust, but the earl nodded. “Indeed, it will be, Reginald. Indeed, it will be.” Finally, the man left the room, and Reg crumpled into the nearest chair.

Whatever happened now, he would stand by his words, his convictions, and his truths. If all went well, by the end of the ball tomorrow, he would somehow find a way to cajole Katharine into marrying him, for they needed each other.

For everything.

Chapter Twelve



October 31, 1817

Armestead Hall

All Hallow's Eve ball

Merciful heavens, I have never been this nervous before.

In mere minutes, she would need to go downstairs to the ballroom where Edward would open the ball with a waltz, and since he wasn't courting anyone and she was the only available member of his family, he would lead her out in front of everyone.

To say nothing of the fact that Reginald would be there, and she would need to interact with him in a social capacity instead of their clandestine ways since their tryst had begun.

And worst yet, the fear that she was beginning to have romantic feelings for him, that she was starting to want things she shouldn't with him terrified her to her soul. When she'd married before, some of those feelings were there, but not to the extent they were now. Of course, she hadn't had intercourse with her husband the way she had with Reginald, but from everything her sisters had told her of their own relationships, that sort of intimacy wore away the longer a woman was married, especially if there were children present in the union.

Beyond that, her sisters had also told her that once they presented their husbands with the heir and the spare, the men ceased spending much time at home with the family. Clubs and other interests took up their time, and though two of her

sisters hadn't actually revealed their husbands had taken mistresses, she couldn't count that out.

If she married Reginald, would he stray? That would break her heart, and that would be when the prison bars would close in on her. Under no circumstance would she willingly allow herself to be trapped with needy children and a household to run without him offering to help... and he already had aspirations for the House of Commons.

Where does that leave me? There was no way to know. She had no experience with this part of life, and she couldn't very well ask her maid for advice. That would spread like wildfire and soon reach her brother's ears, and by the time she would write and send out a letter to one of her sisters and they replied back, who knew how much time would have passed. *I wish Mama was still alive.*

Her maid came into the room with a golden butterfly brooch in her hand. The stomach part of the piece was an oval citrine. "I think this will look so beautiful in your upswept hair, my lady, and go wonderfully with your gown."

"Thank you, Susan." Kitty peered at herself in the cheval glass. "It *is* a pretty frock." The gown of saffron-colored silk was very autumnal. A squared bodice set off her décolletage nicely while a brown satin ribbon at the waist fell into a sweet bow at the back. Tiny brown, yellow, and clear glass beads had been sewn to the skirting, so every movement she made shimmered and winked in the candlelight. Tiny sleeves—not quite capped but not exactly strapless—showed her shoulders to advantage and when she donned opera-length ivory gloves, her arms looked long and slim. Matching satin slippers awaited on the foot of the bed. "I'm so glad I thought to wear this tonight." Beneath the gown was a new petticoat of fine lawn that had been embroidered at the hem as well as new embroidered stockings. Those she'd worn especially for Reginald in the event that they did manage to slip away.

"The color suits your complexion." As the maid fussed with her upswept hair and arranged for the strategic fall of a few curls, Kitty frowned into the mirror. What was the point of attending the ball when all she wanted to do was pull Reginald

into a shadowy corner and kiss him until she didn't feel so ill at ease? As Susan secured the brooch in her tresses, she silently admitted the effect was darling.

“Oh, Susan, what if I fail tonight?”

“Why would you? Think back to your Come Out year. You were a diamond, and you are no less stunning now, even as a widow.” Susan continued to pluck and straighten and brush the gown.

“I suppose.” She touched one of the baby fine curls that had popped out at her temple. “I'm not very poised in social situations, though. Put me on a horse or have me do unusual things with pebbles and I excel, but gather about and make inane conversation or even remember the steps to every set most ladies could perform in their sleep? It makes me very anxious.”

“You will be fine.” Susan met her gaze in the cheval glass. “Besides, won't the man you're sweet on be there? Once you see him, all your worries will melt away.”

Kitty gasped. Heat filled her cheeks. “I'm not sweet on anyone.”

The maid snorted. “You can continue to lie to yourself, my lady, but I have eyes. Every time that handsome Mr. Healy has been in your company, your whole being lights.”

“Pish posh, Susan. Bite your tongue.” But she quickly turned away lest her maid see the truth in her eyes. “I suppose Mr. Healy is a nice enough man, but he's not for me.”

“Time will tell, but if you continue to play coy with him, some other woman will surely snap him up. He is too fine a gentleman to remain a widower for too much longer.”

That put yet another layer of worry into her mind and more knots in her belly. “I shall bear that in mind.”

The maid pattered about the room while Kitty donned the slippers and then her gloves. “You are quite striking tonight, and I hope you find success.”

“Thank you.” With nothing else to do and no more reason to linger in her rooms, Kitty began the trip downstairs. As she passed the drawing room on the second floor, her brother came out of the room while pulling on his second glove.

“Ah, Kitty. I was just on my way up to escort you.” Appreciation lit his eyes as he took in her gown. “You are quite beautiful tonight, and you certainly have Mama’s looks.”

“Oh.” Her chin trembled, for it was a very nice compliment. “Thank you. I miss her so much right now.”

“As do I.” When he continued to stare at her, she became self-conscious. “In the event that it hasn’t been made plain to you over these last few months—or at all—I truly do care about you and only want to see you happy.”

A trace of moisture sprang into her eyes. “I know.” She took one of his hands and held it. “I don’t deliberately try to be difficult; it is only that marriage is quite permanent, and if I marry the wrong man, the consequences could be devastating. Our parents’ marriage is the model in which I want for my own life.”

“I understand, perhaps all too much.” For long moments, he remained silent as he looked at her. “However, I will say that you are different, somehow, and have been thus for the past few days.”

“Gammon.” She frowned even as her pulse accelerated. Had he discovered her secret affair?

“It’s true.” Edward took her hand and encouraged her to twirl about for him. “You are very much happier somehow. Sparkling. Prone to smiling more. And I’ve even heard you laughing. That is something you haven’t indulged in for a long time.”

Oh, dear. Heat slapped at her cheeks. “I cannot think of anything that has changed.” What a lie! Could he tell? Did he know? Would he lecture her when he discovered she’d gone into scandal with his best friend?

“I think you have learned to dissemble all too well, little sister.” A soft grin curved her brother’s lips. “Have you a suitor you haven’t told me about? A man who has put that special sort of lilt in your steps and light in your eyes?”

Was it as bad as all that, then? If other people could see the change in her and she was already struggling with her feelings for Reginald, did that mean she was truly in love with the man? “Of course not.” She swept her gaze away from his so she wouldn’t give anything else away. “Perish the thought.” But she knew all too well what these feelings meant. “My heart—my life—is still very much my own.”

Wasn’t it? Or did that silly traitorous organ wish to be given over wholly into Reginald’s care? That’s what it meant if she wished to be in his company all the time and outside of a carnal capacity. The fact she yearned to know everything about the man was damning evidence indeed, as was her exhibiting of those symptoms.

Well, bother. Why was love so blessed complicated?

“You know, Kitty, it is quite all right to let yourself fall,” Edward said in a low voice. The buzz from guests arriving downstairs drifted up the staircase to reach her ears. “You won’t be seen as any less strong or determined, and sometimes, life is about taking a chance and seeing where it might lead.”

She stared at him as if he’d grown two heads. Suddenly, she needed his counsel, as her brother. “And if that chance has too much potential for problems? Or if it is against your wishes for me?”

An odd expression went over his face. “We can, of course, talk about it later. My only goal in life is to see you happy and taken care of. If you have found that with a man you can boss about and lead a merry chase, all the better, but I promise not to give you too much opposition.”

The relief that coursed down her spine nearly reduced her to tears. “Thank you.” Kitty threw herself into his arms and sighed when he hugged her, held her tight in support. “I don’t mean to antagonize you—much—but it is terrifying to

give up my freedom or to extend my heart to someone only to have it ripped away if something were to happen to that person.”

“I know.” He bussed her cheek then held her at arm’s length. “At some point, though, you have to have faith, hmm? Turn fate on its ear if you must to meet your goals, but there is nothing wrong with taking control of a situation and bending it to your advantage.”

“I’ll try to remember that.” Did that mean he’d given her his endorsement? Oh, everything was so confusing! “You’d best go open your ball.” She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the fingers of her gloves.

“Not without you.” Edward held out a hand as he grinned. “Then I will leave you to your own enjoyment.” When she put her hand in his, a tiny sigh escaped. There was far too much in the offing tonight, and since it was All Hallow’s Eve, it felt as if anything could happen.

Even magic.

By the time the opening waltz had concluded, the polished parquet floor in the ballroom had grown crowded. There was quite a crush of guests in attendance tonight, and the excitement in the air was palpable. Immediately, Edward was surrounded by ladies eager to dance the next set with him, so Kitty slipped away toward the side of the room, but she hadn’t gone far before the hairs on her nape prickled and the feeling of being watched assailed her.

With a slight gasp, the moment she moved her gaze about the room, it alighted on Reginald, and it was as if everything melded into the background. No longer did the noise of the guests swirl about her. The varying scents from perfumes and powders and candle wax faded. Even the colorful gowns and flashes of jewels vanished, for the only person she saw was him.

“Oh, dear lord, he is incredible,” she whispered in awe to no one except herself.

As a country reel got underway, her feet felt rooted to the floor while he came toward her. There was something all too delicious about seeing a man in full evening clothes. The tailcoat called her attention to his lean frame; the waistcoat of rust-colored satin embroidered with white leaves and vines had her fingers itching to explore beneath it. His cravat had been manipulated into an elaborate knot that spoke to either his own skill or his valet's. A ruby stickpin had been inserted into the starched folds, and that drop of red was almost mesmerizing. The dark as a raven's wing hair had been arranged in a popular style regardless of its want to curl. Then he was there before her, and his scent of rum, limes, and Caribbean spices wrapped around her.

It was insane how much she wanted him in that moment. After all, she'd spent the bulk of the last handful of days twined about him in some capacity or another, both talking and doing other, more scandalous things, but tonight there was a different edge at play. She wanted all of him—*needed* all of him—in all the ways that mattered, even if that meant putting her own future into potential jeopardy.

Was she daring enough, brave enough, to grasp what he would offer?

“Good evening, Mr. Healy.” Her throat felt all too dry.

“Good evening, Lady Katharine.” When he grinned, the delicate skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled. “You are beautiful tonight, like the harvest personified.”

Heat went through her cheeks. “Thank you.” Why couldn't she think of anything more erudite to say? “You are quite splendid as well.”

Another slow grin curved his sensual lips, and oh, what she wouldn't give to tug him right out of that room and into a corner so she could kiss him! “I'm glad you noticed.”

“I will always notice, Reginald,” she said softly as she hovered on that edge between falling and flying. What would she do? Did she trust herself enough to make that tumble, knowing he would be there to catch her?

“I’m told the next dance is a waltz. Will you do me the honor of partnering me?”

“Of course.” Kitty came back to the moment with a slight start. The country reel had concluded, and more than a few couples were now finding spots on the floor for the next waltz. In a daze, she let him lead her out, and almost as if she were in a dream, she slipped her hand into his and rested the other on his shoulder, for this would be a Continental waltz. “I apologize in advance if I don’t remember all the steps. I’m not quite the accomplished and sought-after society lady.” Never had she regretted her lack of social skills more, for he was so poised, so confident, and if he became a member of the House of Commons, entertaining would be a natural part of that life.

It was not where she excelled.

“Look at me.” The soft note of command in his voice caught her by surprise, and she did as he instructed. “You are thinking far too much. Everything *will* be well. I promise.”

She tightened her fingers on his shoulder. “I feel that I’m staring into something both familiar but frightening at the same time, and though everyone wishes for me to jump, I cannot make myself do it.”

“Don’t worry about that now.” His hand at the small of her back was both comforting but exciting. “However, if you feel such it’s a good indication you are on the right path.”

Then the first notes of the waltz filled the air and Reginald set them both into motion. Seconds later, she was lost to the rhythm of the dance, to the feel of his arms more or less around her, caught up in the steps and on each turn when he tugged her a tiny bit closer to him. Her skirts swirled about her legs and his, and through it all, she held his gaze, searching in those sapphire pools for the reassurance she needed to finally let go. Heat filled her person, for they were scandalously close, and each movement had various portions of her body brushing against various parts of him. The faint grin on his lips nearly drove her to madness, for she wanted his kiss above all else, yet they were still in the ballroom, and

every now and again, Edward would follow their progress over the floor with speculation in his expression.

The faint pressure of Reginald's fingers at the small of her back recalled her to the moment, and she was lost once more in the glory that was him. They went through the steps together as if they'd been performing them since the cradle, and the few times when she tripped, he held her upright as if nothing happened, guided her with a few soft words or an encouraging smile without censure or embarrassment.

Shortly before the dance ended, he led her through the open French-paned doors and onto the terrace beyond. The ambient coolness in the air immediately regulated her overheated skin, and the relative silence from the outdoors was a welcome relief to her ears.

Without words, they strolled to the railing. The weather had cleared somewhat, so stars were prominent and sprinkled throughout the midnight sky like spilled diamonds. It only enhanced what had become a magical evening, and if the veil between this world and the spirit one was truly thinned at this time, she hoped that they could escape into that realm where decisions would never have to be made and the loveliness of the waltz would always be there.

"What a gorgeous night," she murmured and appreciated the warmth of him at her side.

"Indeed. Imagine how many wishes upon countless stars have gone up over the course of history." Reginald slipped an arm about her waist and dared to pull her closer even though the two sets of open doors were mere feet away from their location. "I wonder what all of those people wished for when they looked up into the heavens and found the brightest star of their choice. If fate were kind, I'll wager it was to spend their lives with the person who makes them the happiest."

How romantic he was! Her hand shook so she hid it in her skirting. "I suppose that is what life sometimes boils down to. When all the obstructions and excuses are stripped away, we are all searching for belonging and to feel wanted by that

one special person who will enhance our lives, the person we can do the same for, wholly and without reservation.”

“That is a good way of explaining what has puzzled scholars through history.” He turned toward her, took one of her hands, brought it to his lips, and then kissed the middle knuckle through her gloves. “Katharine?”

“Hmm?” How much did she adore the fact that he never called her by the shortened moniker? When she peered up at him, caught the reflection of the stars in the blue depths of his eyes, she was lost on a sea of so many emotions she couldn’t stop to analyze them.

“What do you *really* want from your future? When you move aside the desire, the flirting, the pursuit of scandal, what is left that you wish to hold on to?”

Flutters of alarm went through her chest. “I...” Kitty swallowed to stave off the dryness in her throat. She struggled with the answer, but finally said, “Respect. Adventure. Excitement. Security. Freedom. Support. Love.”

He nodded. “How easily all of that is obtained once you meet the right person.” Not waiting for a reply, he tugged her into the shadows and into his arms. Then he fit his lips to hers, treated her to an impossibly tender kiss that told her he would give her all of that and more if only she would open her eyes and see him standing there. In that kiss, he asked without words if she would share her future—her life—with him.

As she kissed him back, clung to him as if he were her only lifeline in a suddenly turbulent life, she very nearly gave him what he wanted, but she hesitated, wobbling once more on that edge of the familiar and the unknown. Reginald was everything she could ever want in a man, in a husband, but fate had shown itself far too fickle to find comfort in merely a feeling. She had made a life for herself that didn’t depend on the machinations or whims of a man, and it was far too important to let it go to weed if he would eventually not approve.

Panic climbed her chest, her throat. Fear twisted down her spine and played havoc with her stomach. So much so that

she pushed out of his arms with a gasp. “I should return to the ballroom.” She needed to get away, to think, to make certain marriage to this man was what she wanted, come what may. “Edward will look for me.” Not knowing what else to do, she took awkward, stumbling steps back toward the opened doors.

“Katharine, wait.”

“Yes?” She glanced over her shoulder at him. He’d extended a hand, but when she didn’t take it, he let it fall to his side.

“Eventually, you will need to let yourself complete the fall. Stop running, sweeting, and come to rest long enough to enjoy the life you’ve made for yourself as well as the people and things around you.” Emotions passed through his expression, but the greatest of all was sadness. “Give yourself over to love and trust that it won’t hurt you or hinder you... that *I* won’t do anything to cause you to doubt me.”

Oh, dear God. He was perfect for her, and she would ruin the relationship due to fear and being stuck in her own head. “I... I... I’m so sorry.” With a half-stifled cry, she ran from him, ducked into the ballroom, because she was a coward and couldn’t make that leap.

Chapter Thirteen



Though the night had begun with such promise, it had certainly not ended with the same.

Reginald downed a measure of brandy. He shook his head then set down the crystal tumbler the same time that Edward came into the library, which was across the corridor from the ballroom.

“I’d wondered where you gotten off to, had just assumed you’d gone off somewhere with a willing woman.”

“Ha.” He snorted. His spirit was too dented to talk with any sort of civility. “If only the woman I want was willing to give me... everything.” Why was Katharine so damned impossible? But then, if she wasn’t, she wouldn’t have captivated him so neatly as she had. “Women are vexing.”

“They are indeed.” The earl frowned as he came closer. “I, uh, saw you dancing with my sister earlier, and from all accounts, it seemed you both were lost in your own little world.”

Now was not the time to be truthful with his friend nor spill out the contents of his heart. However, perhaps doing so would be helpful. “Quite frankly, Edward, your sister is amazing. As I told you the other day, there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her.”

“Did you come here tonight with a specific purpose?”

What did it matter now? “I did, and I think you know what that purpose was.”

Slowly, the earl nodded. “Did you ply Kitty with kisses on the terrace?” There was no censure or anger in the question, merely curiosity and concern.

“I did.” Not that it did much good. “However, before I could arrive at my point, she spooked, no doubt by her own thoughts, and she ran from me.”

“Where?”

He shrugged. “Most likely upstairs. She’s probably locked herself in her room, and at the moment, I don’t have the strength to go another ‘round with her.” As he stood there, waiting for the lecture he was sure was coming, all the earl did was pace in front of the cold fireplace. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Are you not going to dress me down for having the audacity to court your sister behind your back?” Courtship was stretching the relationship a bit, but the earl didn’t need to know that. On the other hand, Reg had spent copious amounts of time with Katharine, so it might be construed as a courtship with the added bonus of coitus.

Not that he would tell Edward *that* either.

“I am not.”

“Why?”

The earl frowned. “Like you, I simply don’t have the capacity just now to argue with my sister, and after what I witnessed from her in the last handful of days, if I had to wager, I’d say she has well and truly fallen for you. But her heart and her head aren’t in agreement.”

Reginald gawked at his friend. “What?”

“Oh, yes. Kitty is a changed creature.” He offered a small grin. “When I watched the two of you dancing, I was almost embarrassed for you. The looks exchanged, the way you held her, the complete abandon she showed while in your arms...” With a quick shake of his head, the earl shrugged. “It is clear to see the both of you are enamored with the other.”

Hell’s bells, that was interesting as well as confusing. If she were truly in love with him, why did she run? “Yet you continue to believe I’m not good enough for her.”

“I am her brother. It is my duty to fully vet each man she comes into contact with.” He rubbed a gloved hand along the side of his face. “At the end of the day, I want to know the man I give my permission to will love the woman she is, faults and all. I want to know that the man she has chosen will caretake her heart and keep her from harm.” A trace of vulnerability went through the earl’s expression. “She is my baby sister, Reggie, and a treasure. Though she is stubborn and far too independent and rather annoying, she deserves a man who will love her and support her even while she leads him on a merry chase. Your fortune and full coffer aside, will you be that man?”

He reeled from the conversation, from the knowledge that his best friend wasn’t the arse he’d previously believed. “I have always believed I was. Nothing has changed in that regard, but if that is what you believe as well, I want your respect. No more of treating me like your fool simply to get laughs from your fellows.”

“Agreed. I am sorry I didn’t show you that respect all along. You have worked damned hard for what you have, and that alone shows your integrity.” For long moments they stared at each other. “Shall I go upstairs and convince her to come down and talk?”

The night wasn’t yet over, so he could still win her hand by midnight. “That would be lovely. Thank you.” Reginald couldn’t believe the boon he was given as the earl departed. Though he could use a second brandy to steady his nerves, he told himself he wanted a clear head when next he spoke to Katharine.

All too soon, Edward returned. “She has declined to see me or anyone. Her maid tells me she has taken to her bed and that no one is allowed into her rooms.”

One of Reg’s eyebrows soared. “Her mind must truly be conflicted. I have never known Katharine to act like a delicate, overwrought chit from the *ton* before.”

“She is either emotionally upset or she is lying. I’ve come to suspect both from my sister.” He clapped a hand to

Reg's shoulder. "I'm sorry, old bean. You'll have to try another day, and for what it's worth, if you *do* manage to land her, I look forward to welcoming you into the family. It's madness with my sisters, but I think you'll weather it just fine."

"I appreciate that." Now was not the time to put forth the idea of his running for a seat in the House of Commons nor of the charities that his sister supported. And now was certainly not the time to let slip that he hoped to take Katharine on a world tour for their wedding trip before they settled down. "Since I find myself exhausted, I am going home to lick my wounds in private."

Edward nodded. "Don't stay away too long. Her fits of pique never last past a few hours."

"Except this isn't that. When the heart is involved, it can be one hell of a mess until one arrives at love." He gave his friend a wry look. "I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

They shared a laugh then Reginald said his goodbyes and made his way to the entry hall, where he collected his outer things from a footman at the front door. Once he'd jammed his top hat on his head and shrugged into his greatcoat, he left the manor.

Heartsick and more than a bit shaken, though he'd thought after the shared kisses on the terrace to ask for Katharine's hand and that she would have given him a different answer than the other two times he'd asked, none of that had occurred. Instead, she had let fear defeat her and she'd run, leaving him with her brother.

The earl's acceptance had been odd unto itself, but then, it *was* All Hallow's Eve, and anything was possible. Reg hadn't gone after her, figuring that if he gave her enough time and space, she could possibly see reason. Before he'd ended up in the library, he hadn't felt much like socializing, and even though he'd danced two sets, his heart wasn't in them, and his conversation with both partners had no doubt fallen flat. It didn't matter, for every beat of his heart called out Katharine's name.

She was his ideal woman in every way, and she had been for the past ten years. Never had he wavered from that, and now that he'd come to know her better, he was doubly certain they were meant to be together. Though he might not have a title, he was every bit as good as members of the *ton*—definitely better than some.

Despite the obstacles that still lay ahead, he intended to fight for the right to be with her, for as long as it took. One solace from the evening was the fact that while she'd locked herself away upstairs, she hadn't been in the company of another man. It meant that she'd managed to thwart both her brother's as well as Reginald's own plans, but he was confident that if he were allowed enough time to talk her through everything, he would eventually win the day.

But hell's bells, why couldn't a courtship of the woman just be easy?

At least he more or less had Edward's blessing now. Would that carry more weight with Katharine and help her to accept his hand, or would it be a hindrance since she disliked doing anything that might please her brother?

Strong women were certainly the most maddening, but damn, to finally land them would be the most rewarding accomplishment.

As he walked along the lane that would eventually lead to his home, the thunder of a horse's hooves alerted him to the presence of a rider going neck or nothing. With a soft curse, he left the hardpacked road to walk in the grass beside it, merely so he wouldn't be run over, and as they finally came abreast, even in the dark he recognized not only the mount but the rider.

“Katharine?”

She flew past him, her navy cloak billowing behind her and the white shirt she wore when riding astride almost glowing in the starshine.

“Katharine, stop!”

“Leave me alone, Reginald! I don’t need a man!” She didn’t stop, and from the looks of things, it would be a while before she’d come home to roost.

“Damn it all to hell.” Was the woman so daft that she didn’t spare a second thought to her own personal safety? It was after dark, and there had been confirmed sightings of vagrants or other desperate people down on their luck in the area. Well, she might not want him to take care of her, but she was wrong. He would *always* protect her, would always come through when she needed him, because that was what he was meant to do when she was around. If she assumed that having a man in her life would make her weak, he looked forward to the years ahead in showing her how erroneous her thinking truly was.

And when he caught her this time, he wouldn’t let her go until they’d had a heart-to-heart talk and he forced her to make the leap.

It took twenty minutes before he arrived in his stable yard, and another ten to have a horse saddled and ready. By that time, he was well and truly annoyed.

His stable master frowned. “Where are you headed at this nearly ungodly hour, Mr. Healy? It’s folly to traverse the area without a light.”

“True enough, but I’m going after the woman I love, my friend. If I can keep her from harm, all the better.”

One of the footmen came near with a lantern in hand that he gave to Reg. “If it’s Lady Katharine, I’d go after her too. She’s a real brick, that one, and pretty too.”

A tight smile curved his lips. “That she is.” *She’s also a bloody problem*, and one that would cause his heart to attack him if he couldn’t secure her promise. Then his confidence wavered slightly. She would rather flee helter skelter into the night than marry him? Had she only wanted him for the trysts? Did he not mean more to her than that? “I’ll try my best to bring her back, though.”

Once he caught her, he would have his answers, and if she turned him down this time, he wouldn't give her the chance to do it again. A man had to have some pride after all. Even if that meant leaving the property he'd lovingly tended to these past few months, fixing it up so that it might be a love nest for the two of them.

"Best of luck to you. I can ride out with you if you'd like."

"While I appreciate that, this is something I should do alone."

The stablemaster patted the horse's flank. "Do you wish for a pistol?"

"No. I'll take my chances." He secured the lantern to the pommel of the saddle. "The way I'm feeling, it might be nice to pound my fists into any man who wishes to make trouble."

"Very well. I can see you're itching for a fight." The stable master nodded. "I'll keep a light burning for you then."

"I appreciate it." At least someone cared about him, yet he knew in his heart of hearts Katharine indeed returned his regard. It was merely a matter of helping her see past her fears, of assuring her he would always be there to catch her.

Then he tugged on the reins, brought his mount around, and then rode off in the direction that he'd last seen Katharine go. The lantern's light bobbed and put broken arcs of golden illumination over the ground as he went, but then worry set in, for he had no blessed clue where she would have run to.

On a hunch, he went by the folly at the edge of Edward's property, but it was clear she hadn't been there. The door remained locked, and the key was still hidden. Where else would she flee? She'd never spoken of having a place special enough to go... unless she was running for running's sake. Once, she'd told him that flying neck or nothing over the countryside was as close to freedom as she could come, so was it possible she'd temporarily gone out of her mind, to give her horse its head merely to clear hers?

Knots of worry pulled in his belly. If that were the case, it meant she would be blind to everything around her, which would leave her an easy target for nefarious people hiding in the shadows. And if her aim was to run somewhere and then hide until he—Reg—gave up his pursuit, he would be glad to prove her wrong.

This time he wouldn't go until she'd laid out a case that made sense, until she was able to examine her own feelings and then decide based on that.

He guided his horse on the lane that ran between his property and Edward's. At the main road, he followed it, moving in the direction of the village. Glad for the lantern's glow, he let his mind wander, mull over the possibilities and outcomes.

A high-pitched woman's scream rent the silence of the velvety night and nearly stopped his heart within his chest.

"Katharine!" Where was the source? Where the devil was she? He took the lantern in hand and held it aloft. Trees lined both sides of this stretch of road, and even though some of the leaves had already fallen, the foliage and shrubberies still managed to hide a fair amount.

When the scream came again, followed by the unmistakable sound of a hand slapping flesh, Reg was out of his saddle in a trice. With his chest tight with worry, he crept toward the side of the road where he thought the sounds had emanated. Once he gave chase and then rescued her, he would marry her and have the right to protect her for the remainder of their days.

Please, God, give me the courage and the patience I'll need to accomplish all that I must do tonight.

Chapter Fourteen



Well, drat.

Out of all the things she thought the night would hold, being taken captive was not one of them. Two men sprang out of the darkened woods in front of her horse. Lady reared, which pulled a scream from Kitty's throat, and she scrambled to keep her seat—a much easier feat when riding astride as she was.

“Look who we have here, Jonas.” A rough-looking man wearing a stained and ragged greatcoat approached her location. “I told you if we were patient the lady would soon come by.”

“You were right.” The man she presumed was Jonas came toward her from the other side.

Lady snorted and pawed at the earth. Clearly, she didn't like being cornered, and neither did Kitty.

“Let me pass,” she demanded in her most haughty tones. “You are trespassing on the Earl of Armestead's property, and he won't take that lightly.” At least she assumed her brother wouldn't, for vagrants and indigent poor moving through the countryside were growing in numbers with each passing year. While she did her best to offer food and blankets when she could, making it a habit would only swell the numbers, and then there would be a bigger mess on their hands.

“Oh, we know where we are,” the man whose name she didn't know said as he came ever closer. “Why do you think we were waiting for you?” This man held a lantern aloft, and in that dim illumination, two of his front teeth were rotting, and there were heavy whiskers on his heavy-set face. “You'll fetch a nice price in ransom.”

Her stomach turned, and still she attempted to calm her mount. “If it’s a fight you want, you’ll have it, for I belong to no man.” That brought out an unexpected swell of tears into her eyes that she quickly blinked back lest they think her afraid. The only man to whom she *did* wish to belong to, she’d left walking the road back to his home.

Alone.

For once again, she’d let fear of the unknown and her own stupid prejudices guide her hand instead of using logic, instead of trusting Reginald.

“In this moment, it doesn’t matter what you want, *my lady*.” The man called Jonas mocked her title as he came forward. “We’ve watched you gallivant all over the countryside, dressed like a man, tempting everyone with your legs on display.”

Lady huffed once more, for she had no place to go with the two men fore and aft.

“It is no concern of yours what I choose to wear or where I choose to go. Men need to have enough wherewithal not to attack women merely because they have lustful thoughts.” This was outside of enough. She should have stayed home, gone back, and found Reginald, talked to him like the grown woman she kept proclaiming that she was instead taking refuge in running away like a child. “Now let me pass.”

“Don’t think that’ll happen, will it Dawson?”

“She’s the most valuable thing we’ll poach on this land. Seems fitting that someone will pay a mound of coins for the return of this rabbit.”

Then the men sprang into action. Obviously, this wasn’t their first time taking unwary travelers by surprise. The tall man—Jonas—lunged at the horse. He succeeded in ripping the reins from her hands, and while Lady danced about in a circle and whinnied, Dawson reached up and wrapped his hand in her cloak. When she attempted to get loose, he yanked her bodily from the saddle and into his waiting hold.

“Unhand me!” *Dear God*, the man smelled like dirt, moldy cheese, and sweat, but he was stronger than he looked, for he soon wrestled her hands behind her back. She screamed with pain when he wrenched one of them too sharply.

“You know, Jonas, she’s got nice spirit. Could have some fun ourselves with her before we apply to the earl to come fetch her.”

Oily laughter was exchanged between them while Jonas led Lady further into the trees and then secured her to a branch with the reins.

“And come away with scratches and bites? I don’t think so.”

The other man put his face near hers and breathed in her scent. “Don’t need to face a woman to fuck her. That way there’s no scratches.” He glanced at his partner in crime. “She smells good.”

Disgust roiled in Kitty’s belly. The more she squirmed, the tighter Dawson held onto her. “If you rape me, there *will* be hell to pay.” Edward’s wrath would come down upon them both as well as Reginald’s anger. And she suspected his would be the greater of the two. Oh, what she wouldn’t give to see him right now!

“You don’t have rights here, my lady.” The man urged her into the small clearing that apparently served as the men’s camp. “Since England turned its back on us after we served in the damned wars, we’re going to take what’s ours.”

“By hook or by crook,” Jonas added as he brought the lantern into the clearing. Lady waited just outside the ring of light. “They cheated us in pay, yet we were good enough to fight their battles but not good enough to be looked after now.” He shook his head. “We are owed whatever we can get.”

Kitty glared at him as he came closer still. “You are despicable. Yes, I am sorry how our country treated you when you came home, but you cannot use that as your excuse for everything. Eventually, you’ll need to stand on your own two feet and make something of yourself. Like the rest of us.”

Jonas uttered a bark of laughter then sneered. “As if you have ever worked a day in your life, little rabbit. You, the daughter of an earl, sitting all posh and warm in your townhouse or manor, with food always in your belly and coin to squander on shit that doesn’t matter.”

Perhaps it was time to try a new tactic. It wasn’t difficult to summon tears into her eyes, for they hovered there on the edge due to potentially losing Reginald. She sagged in her captor’s arms. “Your fight isn’t with me. I’m merely a woman. The two of you have more rights in our society than I do, privilege or not.”

The damned man shot out a hand and slapped her cheek. Then he held her chin in a vise-like grip, moving her head until she was forced to stare into his dark eyes as hers welled with tears of pain and anger. “But *you* have money; we do not, so now you are our bargaining power.”

“Fine.” If he wanted to be difficult, he could do so with a limp. As she straightened to her full height, Kitty rammed her knee into the soft flesh between his thighs. Immediately, Jonas doubled over in pain with his free hand pressed to his privates. “I dare you to try and take your pleasure from me now, you stinking idiot.”

Behind her, the man called Dawson howled with laughter, but when she tried to kick back and give him the same treatment, he sidestepped her. “None of that.”

“Tie her to a damned tree while we make a plan,” Jonas gasped out as he shuffled to his feet.

Though her captor was stronger than her, Kitty didn’t make it easy on him. As he secured her wrists behind her back, she kicked and butted him with her head as often as she could, but when he tied her to a slender birch, wrapping a rope about her chest and another about her ankles, there was naught else she could do.

“Not as effective now, are you?” Jonas drifted close once more. “God, women like you are too much trouble, but I’m certain there is a man out there who will pay good coin to break that spirit.” He dared to touch her, fist a hand in her hair,

yank her head about so she had to look at him while tears prickled her eyes. “You’ll fetch a decent price, and may God have mercy on any man’s soul who’ll take you on.”

“I will gladly take her. Whatever your ransom, I’ll pay it.”

Every head swiveled at the sound of *his* voice.

“Reginald.” The word sailed out on a tide of breathlessness. He was here! Frantically, she looked him over. Though he still wore his evening clothing and was no less handsome than when he’d been in that ballroom, there was something all too compelling about him, with his eyes intense and one of his hands balled into a fist.

The former soldiers exchanged glances, but it was Jonas who came forward. “How do I know you’re good for the coin?”

“Don’t give these men money!” She tugged at her bonds, but the brigand had done his job all too well. “They don’t deserve it.” And she wouldn’t be the reason he was fleeced from his hard-earned funds.

“Shut up.” This time it was Dawson who slapped her in an effort to keep her quiet.

A growl emanated from Reginald. “I’m good for it.” He removed a small leather pouch from a pocket of his greatcoat and tossed it in the direction of Jonas. It landed with a dull thud and the unmistakable jangle of coins at the man’s feet. “Consider this a downpayment in good faith.”

Quickly, the man retrieved the pouch. It disappeared into his coat. “Why should I let the girl go just because you’ve given over a payment?”

“Because if you don’t, I’ll clean your clock.” Reginald flexed his fingers and once more closed his hand into a fist. “It matters not to me.” There was a threatening note in his voice that sent tremors up Kitty’s spine.

“Don’t do it. They’re not worth the trouble,” she warned him.

All three men ignored her.

Dawson snorted. “You don’t look like you got much fight in you, friend.”

Reginald’s eyes flashed as he glanced at the man. “Try me and find out.”

“What else do you have on you?” When Jonas brought out a pistol, Kitty gasped. This was rapidly getting out of hand.

“Another purse of coin and that’s it. I merely want the girl.” He threw her a glance, but there was no trace of humor in his expression, and the lantern light cast his face in weird, slightly frightening shadow. “Are you all right?”

“Slightly, but I’ll be more annoyed if you fight these cowards.”

Only then did one corner of his mouth lift in a grin. “For you I would do anything, even if it risks your wrath.”

The Dawson fellow, apparently put out at the chatter, lashed out with a fist, and caught Reginald in the jaw, and the force of the blow sent Reg staggering backward more than a few steps. “Hand over the remainder of the coin and we might not bash your pretty head in too much.”

Jonas snorted with laughter, but he agreed. “Coin first then we’ll negotiate for the woman.”

“Don’t pay them anything else,” Kitty warned and once more pulled at her bonds.

Without comment, Reginald withdrew another leather pouch. He tossed it in the direction of Jonas. “That is all I have but it’s enough so the two of you won’t starve or freeze to death for the next several weeks. Take it in good health and leave us be.”

That pouch was snatched up as quickly as the first had been and he left the lantern in its place. Then Jonas saluted his partner. “I hope he doesn’t do too much damage, my friend, but I’m leaving for a better situation.” He moved beyond the

ring of illumination. Seconds later, Lady protested when he mounted her and rode quickly out of the area.

“Well, shit.” Dawson turned around and faced Reginald. “I guess it’s just you and me, and I’m not the coward that Jonas is.” Slowly, the man came toward Reg, his every step that of a prowling jungle cat, his body balanced, the tails of his tattered greatcoat flapping in the faint breeze. “After I finish with you, I’ll take the woman.”

“Like hell you will.” She tugged at her bonds, but they held.

“I have to agree with the lady.” Reginald never took his eyes from the former soldier. “However, a man in love is reckless. That emotion makes us do stupid things, and right now, there is nothing I wouldn’t do to win said lady.”

“Ah, now I know why you are here, but not even love will help you.” Hatred glittered in Dawson’s dark eyes. He sprang forward while Reginald retreated, keeping his body lightly balanced. “Do you truly think I can’t best you with my fists?”

“I’m in better physical condition, so let us see how quickly you fade.”

“Oh, dear God.” Kitty trembled when Dawson threw the first punch. Reginald darted and the blow clipped his shoulder. He came back with a strong uppercut that caught the other man’s chin. They broke apart in order to circle one another, the tails of their greatcoats flapping around their bodies.

This time, Reginald threw a punch, but Dawson ducked and skittered away. While Reg regained his position, the other man got in a quick series of jabs to his stomach. Reg groaned and doubled over.

With her heart pounding, Kitty bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out and possibly ruining his concentration. Her head ached from anxiety, but she couldn’t tear her focus from the combatants.

As if they had all the time in the world, the fighters exchanged blows and punches. The silence of the night was punctuated by grunts, groans, and the sickening sound of flesh hitting flesh. Dawson struck out. A howl of pain issued from Reginald. Dark blood oozed down his face. No doubt his nose had been broken.

“You need to do better than that!” she cried, so caught up in watching the fight.

“Doing my best,” he responded from between clenched teeth. He came roaring back, a storm of anger, cuffing Dawson’s ears and then delivering a powerful blow to the man’s midsection. While the soldier stumbled, Reginald planted the sole of his boot into the man’s chest and shoved.

“Argh!” The brigand’s arms pinwheeled. His boot heel struck a tree root and he flailed backward, landing hard on his arse. “Think you’ve won, have you?”

Reginald wiped at the blood on his face. “That was the idea.”

With a cry of pure rage, Dawson surged upward, easily finding his footing. He came at Reginald, pummeling his fists into the other man as if possessed. When Kitty cried out with horror, Reginald came up to the mark. He defended his ground, not only dodging and deflecting most of the soldier’s rage but also giving as good as he got. An uppercut to Dawson’s chin sent the man reeling back, and then another lightning quick jab to his midsection left him winded and gasping for breath.

“Oh, I can’t bear to watch anymore of this.” Every time Reginald received a blow, her soul shivered with pain. Eventually, one of them would best the other, and she feared what the other man would do if he were the victor.

As the primal battle waged on and the sound of fists hitting against skin echoed in her ears, Kitty squirmed against the ropes that bound her to the tree. “For the love of God, put the brigand down, Reg. I grow weary of this.”

He snorted. “What the hell do you think I’m striving to do, love?” He wiped at the mess on his face with his sleeve.

“You two are pathetic.” Dawson swung out with a fist, cuffing Reginald in the right ear.

“Yet we aren’t the ones running about the countryside kidnapping people.” With a cry of rage, he bodily threw himself at the other man. When he tackled him to the ground, he straddled his waist and proceeded to beat the stuffing out of the man. “What the devil is wrong with you?”

If she didn’t do something and soon, Reginald would kill his opponent. “Stop, Reg. Obviously, he is not a match for you, and if you kill him, the authorities will be involved.” When it didn’t appear he’d heard her, she tried again. “You’ve already come to the rescue. Despite the other man stealing my horse—which I am *not* amused about—simply knock this one out so we can leave. You look like a dog’s breakfast.”

“As one does when he’s rescuing the love of his life.” But he didn’t stop punching the man beneath him.

Oh, why was he so frustrating? Yet his casual declaration squeezed her heart. “I cannot properly thank you if you don’t leave off, and I certainly won’t be able to show you how much I’m coming to adore you while tied to this damned tree.”

Finally, her words must have sunk into his brain, for he delivered one final blow to the side of the man’s head. Immediately, Dawson went limp. “Truly?” He glanced at her from over his shoulder, but it was too dark to read his expression.

“Yes.” Again, her stomach roiled, but her heart was in her throat. “Is he... dead?”

Reginald yanked off his gloves. After tossing them away, he pressed the fingers of one hand to the pulse point in Dawson neck. “No. Merely unconscious.” With a groan, he heaved to his feet and then stumbled over to her location. “I must say, there is something utterly delectable seeing you restrained and utterly at my mercy.” The exhaustion in his

voice matched the fatigue that lined his face. “What happened?”

Kitty shrugged as best she could. “I was ambushed while riding, set upon by these two men. One wanted to...” A shiver moved down her spine. “Well, let us just say he didn’t have the chance since you arrived and paid them off.” She shook her head and frowned at him. “A waste of coin, that, but worth it to see you enter into fisticuffs.” Oh, he’d been magnificent!

That brought out a grin and made the blood on his face less hideous. “I do have surprises left, you know.” After yanking a handkerchief out of a greatcoat pocket, he mopped up as best he could, which made him look ever so much better. “You were beautiful in the gown tonight. I hate that you changed your clothing before you set out.”

She narrowed her gaze. “It was necessary for a cross-county ride.” Then she widened her eyes. “Will you untie me?”

“I suppose I’d better else you’ll scream down the bloody forest in an effort for me to pay attention to you.”

“Well how else should I do it when you didn’t come after me?” Every time they got up to verbal bantering, tiny fires lit her blood.

“You told me to leave you alone, if I recall correctly, and before that, you ran from me as if I’d contracted the bloody plague.” He went onto one knee and worked the knots that held her ankles.

Heat went through her cheeks. “I have been confused, and I...”

“Right, so confusion is now a catch-all excuse, hmm?” He bent his attention to the knots that bound her to the tree.

“No!” She shook her head, and when the rope fell away, she stumbled forward, suddenly off balance, but Reginald was there, ready to catch her. Without comment, he turned her about and worked to release the knots that restrained her wrists. “I truly didn’t know what to think after

that waltz. It was all perfectly wonderful, and you were so dear and romantic with what you said on the terrace that—”

“Do hush, Katharine.” Then he turned her about a final time, took her head between his large palms, and claimed her lips with his in a hard kiss designed to tell her without words, without the typical flirting exactly how he felt about her.

With a tiny sigh, Kitty gave herself up to the embrace. She slipped her arms about his shoulders, furrowed the fingers of one hand into the hair at his nape, urging him slightly closer, for she couldn’t have enough of him.

However did she think she could outrun this man, when he had always been there, waiting in the background even when she hadn’t noticed?

Eventually, she wrenched away merely to breathe but she clung to his coat’s lapels. “Where is your horse?”

“Not far. Why?”

She took his hand and began to tug him away from the clearing. “We are going to the folly.”

“No.” Reginald grabbed the lantern on their way out. “I am taking you home. You have bruising on your cheek and have endured quite the ordeal.”

“Ha.” Dropping his hand, she whirled about to face him. “No, you are *not*.” She shook her head in the event he didn’t understand. “I am taking you to the folly. We aren’t nearly done tonight, and I refuse to go back until things between us are settled to *my* satisfaction.” As his eyes widened in the anemic light, she smiled. “After all, shouldn’t I have a say in my own future?”

Chapter Fifteen



Every muscle in Reginald's body screamed in protest, but he didn't care. He'd rescued Katharine from the vagrants who'd taken her, cleaned one of the men's clocks, and if he ever found the other one who'd stolen her horse, there would be additional hell to pay, but none of that mattered in the moment, for she'd more or less confessed her feelings for him.

Oh, he would make her say it; even he deserved to hear the words, but knowing she returned his regard gave new life to his steps. He ignored the pain of the beating he'd taken, and as he led her to his mount hidden in the trees, he couldn't help but grin, even if it made his bottom lip hurt.

"We really should have your cuts and bruises seen to."

She batted away his hand. "They are nothing compared to what you received."

"Perhaps, but I would feel better if we went home and had someone look you over. Your maid can draw you a bath and then put you to bed."

Slowly, she turned her head and when she met his gaze, so much wicked promise twinkled there, he caught his breath. "Oh, I intend to spend time in bed."

A shiver of need coursed down his spine to lodge into his stones as he untied the reins from a tree branch. Speaking a few soothing words to Apollo, he then tossed Katharine up into the saddle, handed her the lantern, and mounted behind her. "Meaning?" He asked against the delicate shell of her ear merely to press his body close to hers. As he set the horse into motion, he grinned into her hair, for she felt so good in his arms with her back rubbing against his frontside.

"Are you that daft?" A huff of exasperation escaped her. "Don't pretend you cannot understand my meaning."

It might be a dangerous prospect, this continuing to bait and tease her, but he was just so damned happy he couldn't think of a better way to celebrate. "Ah, then you want me only for a continuation of our carnal trysts." He feigned annoyance as he resituated the lantern on the pommel. "I'd hoped you might want me for me, beyond what I do for you in the sheets."

"I never thought you were a nodcock, so why are you acting as if you are?" The damned fool woman swung herself around in the saddle even though they were in motion until she faced him. The flexibility required for such a feat left him gasping, and with each pace from the horse, her body rubbed against his as she curled her fingers into the lapels of his greatcoat. Damn but it was titillating as anything he'd ever shared with her. "I want you for..."

"Yes?" It was quite difficult to breathe; he wanted to hear those words so badly, for it would mean growth on her part.

"Because, I..." Her exhalation warmed his chin.

"Mmhm?" The lady had put him through hell, and it required payback to a certain extent.

"Oh, why are you like this?" Frustration rang in her tone.

"Like what? I am only trying to figure out how you truly feel about me so we can both move forward with our lives."

"Argh!" Aggravation was unmistakable in her cry. "Stop the damned horse."

When he did so with a slight grin, the equine in question snorted, apparently as annoyed as she. "You were saying, my lady?" God, it wasn't noble of him at all to keep teasing her, but he couldn't seem to stop. Every tit for tat ramped his need and desire, and now he vibrated at a point that he thought he might die if he didn't have the opportunity to bury his shaft deep into her heat, merely as a reassurance that

they had survived this ordeal and they were all too right for each other.

“I didn’t want to like you, Reginald, didn’t want you in my life in any capacity.”

“Well, that certainly makes a man feel wonderful,” he said with plenty of sarcasm dripping from the words.

“Do hush.” Once more she huffed out a breath but this time, she held his head between her hands. At his tiny hiss of breath, she tsked her tongue while peering into his eyes. It was too shadowy and dark to see properly the emotions in her face as the horse danced beneath them, but he could imagine them well enough. “I thought I wanted an affair that focused primarily on the physical aspects of a relationship, and while that was well and good—wonderful even—I began to question the wisdom of it.”

“Oh?” Daring much, he laid one of his hands on her thigh while guiding his horse with the other.

A shiver racked her body. “After rubbing on well enough with you, both in and out of bed, I changed my mind. You are the perfect companion, don’t chatter excessively when I need quiet, let me have my space to do the things I enjoy that don’t require your company.”

“Yet you clung to the idea of continuing on with a carnal relationship only. Why?” In this, he would persist, for he wanted no more secrets between them, no more hiding.

“Well, first off, you arouse me, and just looking at your naked form gives me delicious shivers all over, and may God strike me dead, but I adore plundering your body.” She fiddled with a button on his greatcoat as she focused her gaze on his cravat. “I told myself that a relationship which had no meaning was right for me, that I could have the best of both worlds so to speak.”

“And did you?” It was so odd to have this conversation on the back of a horse in the dark, but then, nothing about their connection had been conventional.

“In the beginning, yes, but then I found you so datted charming and... sincere that I fell for you bit by bit.” She heaved out a sigh. “But as time went on, I was more comfortable with you, and even though I was afraid of sharing my heart with anyone else again, afraid of how my life might change—”

“—enhance or deepen, really,” he interrupted with a wide grin.

“—afraid that my freedom would be taken away, those feelings continued.”

His heartbeat accelerated. “Do you still feel afraid?”

For long moments, she remained quiet then she nodded. “Yes, but I am moving forward with my plans anyway.”

“I see.” It was difficult to maneuver the reins with her facing him, for all he wished to do was take her in his arms and kiss the hell out of her, but they hadn’t come to an understanding just yet. Through it all, his heart squeezed, and he sat on the edge of something wonderful. “Well, I have told you how I feel enough times in enough ways that I shouldn’t need to do so again merely to convince you. However—”

It was her turn to interrupt him. She lightly patted his cheek. “Don’t be dense, but if you *desperately* need to hear the exact words, listen now.” As if it were possible to lean even closer into him, she said near his ear, “I love you, Reginald.” Her sigh whispered across his cheek. “I fought it, but you wore me down, showed me that even though such falling is frightening, you will always be there for me. Whenever I need you, there you are, and I rather enjoy knowing that. It comforts me.”

“You love me.” There was no question there, just shock and a modicum of relief. *Dear God*, those were the sweetest words he would ever hear.

“Yes.” She dragged her lips beneath the underside of his jaw. “Quite desperately, in fact, as evidenced when I saw you interact with those raggedy soldiers.” Emotion graveled

her voice. “Every punch was a personal affront to me, for I am the only one who should order you about.”

His lips twitched. “Ah. Now I understand why you were so motivated to get free.”

“Hush.” The dear woman playfully smacked his shoulder. “Though you shouldn’t have given either of them coin. I am not worth that.”

Oh, if only she knew! “You are worth every farthing I have to my name, sweeting. I would gladly go into hock if I knew I’d have you at the end of it.” Suddenly, his muscles didn’t ache nearly as much as they had when he’d mounted his horse. Not when she was there and a whole new world had opened up before him.

She loves me. No longer are my feelings unrequited. It was quite the shock.

For long moments, they rode in silence, and with each trot of the horse’s stride, Katharine’s form rubbed insistently against Reginald’s. Desire shot through his body to lodge in his shaft. Damnation but he wanted to claim her, to show her the depth of his regard.

“Tonight has been quite emotionally exhausting and has left me vulnerable. I am not accustomed to that sort of thing.” It wavered in her voice.

“I adore your honesty and the way you indulge in plain speaking.” Most of the time. Would that they were so open with each other going forward. “Vulnerability isn’t something shameful, though. It means you want a thing so much that you are willing to look foolish or put yourself in harm’s way in order to acquire it or protect it.”

“Oh!” A gasp emanated from her. “Is that why you’ve let Edward make jest of you for so long? Because you wished to stay in his good graces in the hopes you might see me?”

Heat crept up the back of his neck. “Partially, but I did wish to hang about to be included or absorbed peripherally by high society. That would go a long way to impressing you.”

“It is not needed. What care I for a title or accolades when you are enough and always have been?” Slowly, she undid the buttons on his tailcoat then started on the knot of his cravat. “Seeing you fight that man made me extremely aware of you physically, and if I hadn’t already taken blatant advantage of you this week, I would now,” she admitted in a choked whisper. “It would be in your best interests to reach that folly soon.”

“Understood.” Then the need to touch her, to do something to show her how much he adored her grew too strong. “Hell’s bells but you tempt me beyond reason.” His cup had run over, but he put a hand to her cheek, slid his fingers into her mussed hair, and then he kissed her with all the tenderness he could muster. Finally, he had won the woman who’d held his heart for so many years, and he would tell her all of that after he worshipped her with his body.

For as many times tonight as she would let him or needed him to do so.

After breaking the kiss, Katharine pressed her lips to the spot on his throat she’d just uncovered from undoing the cravat. “I cannot wait to have you naked, to take what I want from you and give you the same.”

“How can I deny you anything?” For that was exactly what he wanted as well. Reg slapped the reins against his horse’s side in an effort to move the animal along quicker. By the time they arrived at the folly, his shaft pressed against the front of his trousers, and he was hard enough to drill through the stone façade of the building.

As soon as they came to a halt, Katharine dismounted. She busied herself with uncovering the key and unlocking the door while he left his horse to graze. If Apollo grew bored, he would find his way home without them.

Then the door swung open. Reginald took up the lantern and followed her inside. While she closed the wooden panel, he hung the lamp on a hook nearby. Immediately, the golden pool of light expanded to illuminate most of the cramped entry of the tower.

“Finally alone.” She threw herself into his arms, set out to kiss every available part of him with a frenzy he hadn’t encountered from her before. “Don’t ever frighten me like that again, Reginald,” she said between kisses and nips and licks as she frantically undressed him.

Pieces of clothing went flying and falling to the stone flooring while he tried to move them both upstairs. “I wasn’t the one who was taken captive,” he managed to get out as he relieved her of the cloak. It joined his greatcoat and tailcoat on the spiral staircase while they climbed ever higher. “But I would caution you not to do that to me again either.” It would behoove him to hire a few men to patrol the perimeter of his property as well as to poke into the wooded areas a few times a week to keep drifters at bay.

Now that Katharine was more or less his, he would protect her with his dying breath.

“Should we limit our rambles outdoors to the daylight hours then?” After she’d made a mess of the laces at the back of his waistcoat, she uttered a cry of victory when she was able to relieve him of that garment.

“It might be best, but then, we no longer have a need to skulk about and find isolated places in order to conduct our trysts.” And if he was fortunate a bit longer, he would soon procure her promise. As his wife, they could be as randy and wicked as they wished, wherever they pleased. Pausing to press her backside against the curved stone wall, Reginald shoved his hands beneath her fine lawn shirt to cup her breasts. “You have tempted me since the ball earlier tonight.” Damn but those warm mounds of flesh were perfection. Seconds after he teased the nipples with the pads of his thumbs, they hardened from his play, and he couldn’t wait to have his mouth on them.

“There is nothing stopping you from taking what you want.” Her eyes in the dim light glittered, and he’d wager the same need coursing through his veins would reflect in those dark depths. “*I want you.*” She nipped the underside of his jaw. “Make me feel alive and grateful we’ve both survived the ordeal tonight.”

With a groan, he shoved her shirt up and then off her form where it fell indiscriminately to the stone stairs. "I could lose myself in your body for hours." While holding a breast tight in his hand, Reginald dipped his head and suckled one straining tip into his mouth. When she moaned in encouragement, he rolled the other nipple, kept her against the wall with a knee jammed between her thighs, and nearly went prematurely over the edge himself while she grinded herself on him.

He wasn't gentle in his approach at claiming her this time. Oh, no. In fact, each time she pleaded in a whispered voice that she needed more, he gave it to her tenfold. Licks and nibbles to her nipples and the fragrant skin of her neck grew into light bites and nips that would further enhance her arousal. The sounds of her enjoyment echoed eerily in the spiral staircase, but he wouldn't let her continue the climb.

Not until he made her come. Plunging a hand beneath the waist of her breeches, he delved his fingers past her mons and through the damp curls shrouding her sex. While he brought that pearl out of hiding, he made love to her mouth as if he had all the time in the world. As soon as he'd spread her flesh to make the nubbin more prominent, he rubbed the flats of his fingers over the bud over and over again without relenting.

Her moans of encouragement and the way her fingers dug into his shoulders urged him onward. The dear woman undulated her hips, put a hand atop his to hold him tight to where she wanted him the most, but he kept her trapped between the wall and his body, and still his fingers moved as he worried the hell out of that button.

"I, ah!" She fisted a hand into the front of his shirt and caught some of his chest hair in the process as she fell into that first release. Those tiny pricks of pain distracted him from his own need as it throbbed through his shaft. "Goodness that was quick." Her breath came in short pants, but she grinned up at him. "There will be payback."

"Ha!" A chuckle escaped him, for they were well matched in carnal pursuits. Though he moved away from the

tempting picture she made topless, he paused to wrench off an evening shoe since he hadn't had the luxury of changing his clothes like she'd done. "Let's make it fair." The other shoe was removed as quickly as the first. Then he separated himself from his own shirt. It fluttered down the stairs like a rejected ghost.

"There is nothing fair about bed sport." Katharine stumbled up the stairs after him, pausing a couple of times to take off her boots. One of them must have bounced down the steps, for the eerie thuds echoed slightly in the darkness. "And since you won the first round, I plan to retaliate in a very wicked way."

"You can try, my lady." No sooner had he'd shucked out of his trousers and made short work of the hosiery still clinging to his calves than Katharine was there, as completely nude as he, and when she launched herself at him, he caught her in his arms but tumbled backward onto the bed with her sprawled over him looking like sin and scandal with her blonde hair falling in curly waves about her shoulders. "God, you're gorgeous." Like Venus or Aphrodite, his very own goddess.

"Let us see how long you can withstand teasing, hmm? Then I promise, when we couple you can have the lead and do whatever you want." Her eyes were rounded, and in the faint moonlight that came in from the two windows, concern clouded those dark depths as she rocked her hips into his merely to rub against his rampant shaft. "You will catch me any time I run, won't you Reginald?" The tiny hint of vulnerability in her voice made him fall all over again.

"Always, love." He didn't know what to do or where to look, for she occupied every part of his being. "There will never be a time when I won't pursue you, and no matter how many times you wish for me to catch you, I'll be there." Those were perhaps the most honest words he'd ever said to anyone, but if she needed reassurance, he'd be glad to give it.

"Good." Then she slid off his body to kneel beside him and pressed her lips to his abdomen. "Now, let's begin. After tonight, I want us both to have no doubts."

After tonight, I might just end up being the first man to succumb to death by intercourse.

But what a way to go.

Chapter Sixteen



Kitty's heartbeat raced as if she'd ridden here all the way from France. Everything she'd ever wanted was within her grasp, and she could hardly believe that she'd pushed through her fear enough to admit to her feelings for this man.

Pausing long enough to shimmy out of her breeches as well as the socks, she then stretched out on her side propped up on an elbow while gliding a hand over his chest and abdomen. "Even though I have thoroughly enjoyed and explored your body this week, it always brings me such joy to send you skittering to the edge."

"I look forward to it each and every time." Reginald brushed the knuckles of a hand over one of her nipples. He chuckled when she shivered. "But if you don't hurry along, I'll embarrass myself."

"Right." Daring much, she scrambled to her knees, leaned over him, and made sure her breasts glided along his chest. The crisp hairs curling over his skin only enhanced her need as they rasped over sensitive nipples. She licked a path around his naval, cupped his stones and caressed the root of his straining shaft. The more she played and made his back arch off the mattress, the more she imagined this hard, hot part of him spearing into her to bring her no end of pleasure, and those images sent her perilously close to the edge once again.

"Never say you are woolgathering during this?" The dratted man took full advantage of her inattention by teasing her nipples with his tongue and teeth as he sent her over onto her back. Wild sensation skittered through every nerve ending. He rolled those puckered tips between his thumb and forefinger, using varying degrees of pressure until she cried out and begged him for more, her concentration completely shattered.

“I am trying not to, but you make it difficult.” A sigh shuddered from her. Heat swirled through her belly. It wouldn’t be long before she broke again.

“I hope that’s a good thing.” His grin positively grinned with wicked intent.

“It is. Truly, and if you continue to tease me for years to come, neither of us will be bored.” She wrapped the fingers of one hand around his hardened member and pumped it. Much like satin covered steel, he filled her palm and then some, and he made her feel amazing when they coupled. “Do you wish for me to bring you to release with my hand, or would you rather us come together in the usual way?” As she talked, Kitty kept a firm grip on his equipage, and with every stroke, his breath caught.

“Such choices.” Reginald froze but his shaft twitched from her manipulation. “However, I think we should both experience the flight together.” In the dark gloom, his gaze was filled with the same raw need and surged through her veins. “Off the bed, my lady.”

“What?” She followed the inquiry with a squeeze to his shaft, for this was different.

“Vixen, I want to show you something we haven’t done yet.”

“All right.” Feeling as if she were seconds away from completely shattering both from the anticipation and his teasing, she slid off the bed seconds ahead of him. “What next?”

With a throaty chuckle, he spun her about until she faced the curved wall. “Bend over, put your hands on the wall to brace yourself. You’ve tempted me beyond reason this night and my patience for foreplay has quite vanished.”

“Mmm, I rather like this forceful side of you.” The command in his graveled voice sent shivers down her spine. As tingles tripped down her spine, Katharine did as he asked, but she glanced over her shoulder at him. “What else haven’t I seen from you?”

“You will have to be patient as the years play out,” he all but growled. The intensity in his expression enhanced her own need. “Ready?” When she nodded, he gripped her hips while she splayed her legs, and he fit his wide tip to her opening.

Dear God, he was incredible! And every time he assumed command, she thrilled with knowing he wouldn't let her boss him too badly. “I think I have needed the man you are now all along and—”

He thrust into her passage with such authority and went so deeply they both groaned in appreciation. “Damn, but you feel so good.”

“As do you.” Her eyes crossed as intense pleasure shot through her body. Why had no one told her how wild and amazing coupling in this position could be? Up until this point in their affair, they hadn't gotten around to coming together like this. She shifted her stance into something more comfortable as the stones in the wall dug into her palms. “Show me I haven't made a mistake in choosing you.”

From this angle every time he stroked into her channel, he went deep, oh so deep and managed to fill her so incredibly well she wanted to scream her enjoyment for the world. As he did, he snaked a hand around to rub his fingers against the swollen nubbin at her center, enhancing the need he'd already invoked. Tingles zipped through her belly, and the urge to shatter sat front and center.

“You haven't made a mistake.” His hold on her hips was hard enough that he'd probably leave marks on her skin. How odd she craved that souvenir, wanted to see his mark of possession on her. “This will go fast.” Already his hips were pistoning, and each time he slammed into her, he sent her closer and closer to that glimmering edge. “I won't be able to sustain momentum.”

“Then give me everything you are.” She was lost to the madness he created, couldn't wait to completely lose her grip. Her fingernails scraped the stones of the wall as she rode out his mastery. A low moan released from her as he continued his

carnal play. “Harder, Reginald. I need more, want to truly feel you.”

The dear man came up to the mark splendidly. He renewed his hold on her hips, and as he pushed into her, she shoved her body backward to meet those forceful thrusts. “Tell me how much more you want me,” he demanded in a hushed voice. “Tell me that we’re well-matched.”

Oh, dear God, her legs shook so much! Maddening flutters filled her belly as terrible pressure built and stacked, seeking release. Kitty bit her bottom lip in concentration, but she adored that he was perhaps as vulnerable as she. “There is no one else for me who I’d rather bedevil.”

“And?” The rhythm he set would soon launch her above the trees, and as he dug his fingers into her hips, he went even deeper, apparently in an effort to touch her soul.

“And I will never have enough of you.” Her breath came in short pants, and she could hardly remember the gist of the conversation. “I have wanted you in my bed since the night you kissed me at your rout, but now I need you in every aspect of my life, cannot imagine anything without you there.”

“Ah, Katharine. You both humble me and push me to greater heights.”

Over and over, he penetrated her, giving her exactly what she’d asked him for. It was heady stuff, and she couldn’t have enough. Craved him, needed him. “So close,” she gasped, lifting her head, and looking at him from over her shoulder. Fierce pleasure lined his face, and to watch his lean body as he stood behind her had her even closer to leaving reality. Truly, he was the most handsome man, and what was more, he was hers. “Reginald...”

“I know, and I am right there with you.” He tangled a hand into her hair. Gently but firmly, he pulled, angling her head backward. “Let go, sweeting. Let me send you into bliss.” Emotion graveled his voice, a true testament to the control he exhibited. “Give *me* all of *you*.”

“Yes, oh yes!” The slight pricks of pain along her scalp enhanced the pleasure filling her being. “I’m nearly done.”

“As am I.”

Deeper he stroked. Faster he moved as their breathing rasped in the silence. This coupling had nothing to do with emotions or thoughts of the future. It was raw, real, and based on mutual need and primal passion. It was the assurance that they’d survived an ordeal and had worked through the challenges that had held them back. The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed in her ears. Her breasts swung wildly from the exercise. Heat engulfed her and the ambient coolness tempered the flush on her skin. As she pushed backward, he thrust more forcefully while she bucked her hips against him, meeting each one on equal terms.

“I need...” When he again snaked a hand around her hips to rub his fingers over her swollen button, her control shattered. “Yes!”

His only response was a growl. After treating her to a series of deep, oh so impossibly deep and hard, teeth-shatteringly hard thrusts that sought to separate her soul from her body, he gasped. “Shit. I’m going...”

“Me too!” White light moved up to meet her as she fell over the edge and tumbled, hurtled really, into an intense release. A scream pulled from her throat. It was all she could do to stay upright as he speared into her once more. Her core convulsed frantically around his member. Seconds later, he followed her into bliss, shouted out her name, buried himself in her passage while tugging her tight to his body. His shaft jerked and pulsed. Warmth filled her, for he hadn’t withdrawn this time, and that tiny tell sent tears into her eyes.

It meant he knew they would enter into the future together, come what may.

“That was...” Truly, there were no words for what just happened, for what they shared, for what they’d given each other.

“Bloody madness is what it was,” he whispered and wrapped his arms around her, trapping her between the stone wall and the hardness of his body. His breathing was as ragged as hers. “I had no idea I could come that hard.”

“Agreed.” Every point in her body shivered from reaction. “That was amazing.” She laughed, but it was a shaky affair. Exhaustion clung to the sound. After the trial of the evening and the gambit of emotions she’d gone through since the ball, she had no strength left. “I rather think you’ve spoiled me for anyone else.”

“I should think so, because I won’t share. You *are* mine, Katharine. I’ve waited too long to finally win you.” When he pulled away, breaking their intimate connection, her knees wobbled, and she teetered. With a chuckle that tickled her chest, he picked her up into his arms. “Knowing a woman can’t walk after coupling is the best compliment a man could receive.” Then he carried her to the bed and laid her gently on the mattress.

“This is most decidedly true.” Not wanting to give him up just yet, she tugged him down over her and she kissed him, put every ounce of feeling into that one meeting of mouths until she was well and truly spent. “What am I to do with you, Mr. Healy?”

But she *knew*. Oh yes, she knew, yet she needed to rest a few minutes before she put *that* thought into action.

“Well, too much more of this, and you’ll certainly kill me.” Exhaustion and affection warred for dominance in his voice as he collapsed into the chair. “However, you make me feel young, so there’s that.”

Too tired to laugh at his joke, she merely grinned and waited for her breathing and heartbeat to regulate.

When the unmistakable sound of the door below opened and the scrape of a bootheel echoed in the darkness, she caught her breath and darted a frantic look to Reginald. “I don’t think I locked the door,” she whispered in a barely audible voice.

“Kitty? Are you here?” Her brother’s voice echoed oddly in the silence. Then he gasped. The squeak of a lantern’s handle sounded. “What the hell is going on in here?”

No doubt he’d seen the clothing strewn about the tower. She scrambled off the bed, her earlier lethargy forgotten. “Go away, Edward.” Exchanging a look with Reginald, she left the sanctuary of their nest to take the first treads down the stairs. When she came to his discarded shirt, she snatched it up and quickly donned it, glad that the tails covered at least her arse and thighs.

“After the ball ended, I went to talk to you only to find you gone and your horse missing.” He’d started up the stairs, but she met him close to the lower level. “Even more troubling was the fact that Reggie’s mount strolled into my stables with a lantern still attached to the saddle but missing its rider.” When he held *his* lantern aloft and took in her state of undress, his eyes rounded. “What the devil are you about?”

She snorted. “I would think it obvious.” Especially since Reginald came down the steps not far behind her with his breeches in hand. How much did she adore him for not being so cowed by Edward that he immediately covered his naked form?

His mouth opened and closed like a caught trout while his gaze went to Reginald, who shrugged. Finally, her brother must have found his voice, for he cleared his throat. “*This* is what you’ve done after leaving the ball? I thought you didn’t wish to have anything to do with Reggie after you danced with him?”

How would he know that?

Before she could respond, Reginald yanked on his breeches, tucked his flaccid length inside, then did up the frontfalls. “Your sister decided to run away tonight but passed me on the road. I gave chase. Unfortunately, she was waylaid by a pair of desperate former soldiers bent on ransoming her.”

“Yet you are here. With her. *Sans* clothes,” her brother said, as if the thought had stuck in his brain while he stared.

“Yes. This is the end result.” Reginald winked at her before training his gaze on Edward once more. “Back to my story. As luck would have it, I paid one off. He stole her horse and went on his way, but the other needed more... encouragement, so we exchanged punches until I managed to render him unconscious.”

“Yes.” Kitty nodded as pride for him welled within her chest. “He untied me from the tree and wanted to bring me home.”

“Except, you coerced him to the folly where you had your wicked way with him,” Edward finished the story for her.

It was Reginald’s turn to chuckle. “Actually, yes, coming here *was* her idea, but before we arrived, we talked honestly and intimately, exchanged feelings, and then it was me who was all too wicked in how I claimed your sister’s body this time.” He winked again at her, and heat went through her cheeks.

“Before you give me a lecture or a dressing down, I should add here that I have been conducting an affair with your best friend for the bulk of this week, and truly he has been quite... extraordinary.” Perhaps the best way of handling Edward was to take away his ability to interject.

True to form, her brother sputtered as he bounced his gaze between them. “You have willingly entered into scandal —”

Reginald snorted. “It’s only scandal now that we’re found out.”

Edward scowled. “I didn’t want you together—”

“—but now you’re thinking it’s a good idea,” Reginald interjected with slightly widened eyes as he and her brother exchanged a glance.

“It is difficult to see, yet—”

“Such theatrics. If you wish things to be above board...” It was past time to end this as well as to secure her future, for if one looked at the situation from Edward’s point of view, it *would* be rather a lot to swallow. As Reginald came

around them to stand near her, she sank to her knees in front of him. “Reginald Healy, you have already heard the contents of my heart and seen my commitment to you with my body, so there is only one thing more to do.” Besides, such things didn’t need to be discussed in front of her brother. They were her triumph alone. She took his hand, held tight to his fingers. “Will you marry me?”

“Dear lord, Kitty, this is the *height* of scandal,” Edward said, in a voice that was clear as a bell. “For the love of everything holy, please stand and let the men have this conversation.”

“Since I have no intentions—married or not—of giving up scandal, I will remain here, thank you. Marriage is quite a large part of my future, so I’d rather have it done to *my* specifications or not at all.” She cast a glance at Reginald and smiled. As much as she enjoyed teasing him into distraction, annoying her brother would always be her favorite game.

“Hold, Armestead.” Reginald’s chuckle sent a tickle through her chest. “Since much of what has occurred this week truly *has* been her idea, I suppose it is only best that she makes an honest man out of me.”

She simpered up at him in the dim light while her brother blustered further. “Then answer the question, Mr. Healy.” Truly, why couldn’t her daft brother just leave as the better part of valor? The only thing she wished to do was encourage Reginald out of those breeches and play with his equipage. Since she was already on her knees, there was much she wished to do to him... “Reginald, do you deign to answer or are you still cowed by my brother?”

“I am not.” He tugged on her hand, encouraged her into a standing position. “And yes. Of course I will marry you. As I said before—and showed you—I love you, sweeting.” Another wink had the heat in her cheeks returning. “Besides, since you anticipated my question, it saves me from needing to ask you a *third* time.”

“What was that?” Edward’s eyes almost bugged out of his head. “You’d already asked for her hand despite my

objections?”

They both ignored him in favor of exchanging heated glances.

It was Reginald who continued. “Regarding our future, love, if you don’t want ordinary or traditional, we don’t need to be that sort of couple.” He slowly brought her hand to his lips, turned it over, and put his lips to her wrist where her pulse pounded. “England has far too many of that kind already. Quite frankly, I think they are only trying to impress themselves.”

She couldn’t help the trembles that played up her spine, for he was quite romantic. “What shall we do, then? You have political aspirations and I have my charities.”

“And those are all good things we needn’t give up merely to wed.” He moved to cup her cheek, regardless of Edward’s presence. “If you wish to travel, we shall do that. Perhaps a trip ‘round the world following our nuptial ceremony? If you want to continue riding astride, by all means do that—with me accompanying you—here in the country but never in London, especially if I do win a spot in the Commons.”

“The Commons?” Edward squawked.

They both ignored him.

Reginald winked. “And lastly, if you wish to have intercourse in unusual places, I would be happy to comply, for I only want you to be happy, only want you, and I always have.”

“Oh, Reg.” Her heart fluttered. It was pure madness, this feeling unreasonably content and excited over a man, but there was nothing for it. “That is the best speech anyone has ever said to me.”

“I enjoy keeping you on your toes.” He brushed the pad of his thumb along her bottom lip, and she caught her breath.

Edward cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose even a blind man can see that you care for each other, but there *are*

contracts I will need to have drawn up. Love might be splendid, but it cannot pay the bills or see to my sister's comfort should things go wrong."

Finally, Katharine glanced at her sibling. "Pish posh, Edward. There is plenty of time to do things up right and tidy." She waved a hand at him but kept her focus on her husband-to-be. "Unless you wish to bear witness to me doing *very* wicked things to your best friend, it would behoove you to go home."

"But Kitty, this is quite disturbing, and that shirt is *quite* too short, and—"

"—the way it will be for a bit," Reginald said to him with a grin. Not even the dim light or shadows could hide the love twinkling in his blue eyes. "Your sister has led me on a merry chase, and I don't believe it's over yet. Praise be."

Edward sputtered again as if his brain had finally caught up to the conversation. "Political aspirations?"

He chuckled. "All will be revealed soon. Perhaps tea tomorrow, hmm? At my place?"

"Fine." Then her brother took his lantern and quickly left the tower, slamming the door behind him. The jingling of a harness indicated he'd mounted his horse.

Alone, she wasted no time in lifting onto her toes and pressing her lips to Reg's. When he slipped his hands beneath her shirt to take her breasts in his hands, she gave into a shiver as tingling need danced through her blood once more. "I cannot wait to start our lives together." Too much more of his attentions—oh dear lord, why did his every touch make her wish to lose her grip on sanity?—and she would demand he take her right there on the stone floor at the foot of the stairs. "Wherever that might take us."

"Good." Reginald nuzzled the crook of her shoulder before lifting her into his arms. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, he chuckled. "And unless I've missed my guess, we have already gotten a week's start on that life, hmm?"

“Perhaps we have.” For the first time in a long while, she felt as if anything was possible and that she was also happy for no other reason than loving him had given her another sort of freedom she hadn’t truly seen before. “I suppose you’ve well and truly caught me now.”

“Indeed, I have, which means I have your leave to do whatever I want with you, yes?”

“Oh, yes, and please make it soon.” She sighed as he claimed her lips while carrying her once more up the spiral stairs.

Life was decent enough when going alone, but if one was fortunate to find a partner to indulge in scandal with? It was that much more amazing.

Epilogue



January 19, 1819

Hinley House

London, England

Katharine never failed to smile as she walked the corridors of the townhouse she shared in London with her husband, Reginald. Apparently, he'd taken his mother's maiden name and titled the house, and she thought that a fine idea, for the morning room had been decorated as if the woman had been there to do it herself. He talked about her with reverence, and she thought it just the thing to honor her.

They had taken a year to tour the world, just as he'd promised, for the wedding trip, and now that they were back, there was the business of settling in to attend to. That wasn't to say the wedding trip wasn't splendid, for it had, indeed, been the most wonderful thing she'd embarked upon to date.

Every available shelf space, curio cabinet, and tabletop lay cluttered with mementos from their travels, and there were even more books they'd acquired still awaiting unpacking in crates.

At some point, they'd also acquired a cat in Rome, a young male chef in Paris, and a pretty but strict woman who would step in as housekeeper when they'd toured through Africa. Originally, she'd been meant to be a governess, but when Katharine's secret hopes to be a mother were dashed twice, they changed directions. Adding to their ranks were two young, orphaned girls from Romania who would be maids, a gimpy young man with the features of an angel who would be trained as the newest footman, as well as a stout Scotsman

who'd recently been widowed and wanted a change of pace who'd signed on to be their head groundskeeper.

By the time they'd returned to England with their growing and quite eclectic new "family" of sorts, life had already been quite enjoyable. The varied and international staff made her feel exceedingly happy, and knowing they had turned about so many people's lives continued to pluck at her heartstrings.

Yet there was much to catch up in jolly old England. The least of which was meeting the woman Edward had married in their absence. And from all accounts, that was a scandalous tale, from the man who wished to avoid scandal at every turn. She couldn't wait to meet the woman who'd found her way into the earl's heart, but that was a story for another day.

However, just now, her only concern was for her husband. Voting had recently taken place for open chairs in the House of Commons, and she couldn't wait one more second to know the results. Obviously, as a woman, she wasn't privy to what went on behind those most lofty closed doors—men were such babies about that sort of thing—but if Reginald got in, she meant to attend a few meetings in the gallery by dressing as a young man.

As if that were a difficult feat. Breeches and a cap, perhaps affecting a slight limp and men never looked directly into one's face. Cowards, the lot of them, but then, that was how England would change, and once a few of those men voted with her husband, then more of them would follow. Politics wasn't an exact science, but it *was* a game of patience.

Thankfully, Reginald had plenty whereas she did not.

"Ah, there you are!" Her husband met her just as she was coming into the drawing room and he coming out. "I was just going to search for you." Excitement lined his face and danced in his sapphire eyes.

"Then this is fortunate timing." Anticipation built in her belly, for he wasn't very good at keeping secrets. "Has the post come?"

“Yes, a few minutes past.” He held up an envelope. “It is the news we’ve been waiting for.” Then he pulled a face. “Well, there are actually two pieces of news.”

“And?”

He slipped an arm about her waist and led her into the room. “Come. Sit beside me. Our lives are about to change.”

By the time they’d both settled onto a sofa near the cheerful fire, she looked at him and huffed in exasperation. “Well? Tell me. Did you get into the Commons?”

“I did.” Reginald took the letter from its envelope, unfolded it, and then handed it to her. “There were three seats available from the Hertfordshire district.” He nudged her shoulder with his. “It seems all the pre-campaigning I did as well as my willingness to donate coin to various causes has paid off. They voted me in, so as soon as I pay my dues, it will be official.”

“Truly?” She couldn’t read the written words on the stationery from the tears blurring her eyes.

“Truly. Your backing helped my cause, as did Edward’s grudging support.” Though they remained on opposite sides of the political arena, the men were still fast friends and thrived off trying to convince each other to change their minds. “Once the November session convenes, I’ll take my place to help change England for the good of everyone.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you!” Katharine put her arms around him in an impromptu hug. “I knew you could do it, and I cannot wait to see how you’ll influence those men. We shall need to throw a dinner party soon and invite some of your biggest supporters as well as men whom you hope to garner as allies.” And that would mean she’d need to play hostess. Being in society wasn’t one of her core skills, but she would do her best.

“Thank you, but I’m proud of you as well.” He pulled out of her embrace and then gave her a second letter. “This is from my friend who has a shop off Bond Street. He has agreed to let you sell some of your pieces of art on commission there,

and if they are successful, that might lead to talks of having more of your pieces in a gallery show this summer.”

“What?” While they’d been travelling, she had continued to work with the pebbles and glue, and since she’d found many interesting pebbles and sea glass around the world, she’d included those in her newest drawings. They were all pretty, but she didn’t know if they were gallery worthy. “This will raise so much money for my charity.”

“And just think of how many more women will learn to read because of your efforts.” His grin prompted her own. “Tiny little steps like this will help turn the tide in London—in England. We will be a part of history, and when reform finally happens, we will know that we trod those first footsteps, guided those first people down the right path.”

The letters fell to the Aubusson carpeting at her feet. “You truly are everything I’d ever hoped for in a husband.”

More than a year into their marriage and he’d not once disappointed her. Oh, they still found themselves on opposite sides of things which led to bickering and arguments at times, but the glory of that was they could talk things through, see the disagreement from both sides, and then make up spectacularly. Never once had she felt imprisoned, talked down to, nor had she been forbidden to do anything she had a mind to. And neither did she appropriate all of his time.

“It is far too easy with the right partner.”

“Do you, uh, regret some aspects of our lives together?” It was the one cloud on her horizon just now, and she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“You refer to our not having children.” It wasn’t a question. When she nodded, he sighed, tucked an escaped lock of hair behind her ear, and let his fingers glance along her cheek. “We do not need children to have fulfilled lives. You not being a mother does *not* diminish your worth.”

“Oh, I know all of that, but I want to know what *you* think.” It would break her heart if he was expecting children and she couldn’t give them to him.

“Sweeting, I wanted *you*, married *you*, love *you*.” He drew the pad of his thumb along her lower lip. “Children were never an expectation when we married, and we are currently building a wonderful life regardless. If we should happen to have children, then I will be pleased, but *you* are my family, the people we’re helping *are* my family. Young ones aren’t necessary to happiness or fulfillment.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “I feel the same way.”

“Good, but that doesn’t mean we cannot continue to try. I mean, the act that might lead to pregnancy is quite satisfying.”

“Yes, it is, especially with you.”

A flush rose above his collar points. “Minx. Put such worries out of your mind.” He glanced at the open door just as the longcase clock in the corridor chimed the three o’clock hour. “We have been invited to dine at Ambassador Wetherington’s home tonight at eight. He is back from Rome for a few months and has promised to hear some of the notions I’d like to get into law once I start my political career, but we might have time for scandal before we need to dress.”

Need twisted down her spine. “Oh?”

“Yes.” Reginald stood and brought Kitty to her feet as he went. “The only thing you need to decide is how you would like to come together. Slow and leisurely in our nuptial bed or fast and frantic, perhaps against the wall in our dressing room or perhaps in a chair in the library?”

Delicious heat twined through her blood. “All of it sounds appealing.” Then she winked. “If you can catch me, you can have me.” Before he could respond, she darted to the door.

The sound of his rich chuckle followed her into the corridor. His bootheels rang on the hardwood, a sure indication he was right behind her. “When have I never caught you over the course of our union?”

She glanced at him from over her shoulder as she gained the stairs. “Then it is a good indication I’m still sought

after, and I haven't lost my appeal.”

“No, you have not.” Since his legs were longer than hers, he easily came abreast of her on the staircase, swept her into his arms, and then continued to the next floor. “Here’s to many more years of scandal with the woman who has had my heart for longer than I care to remember.”

Was it any wonder why she adored him? With a sigh, Kitty settled in his arms and grinned. Life truly was what one made of it, so why pass it being miserable or afraid when one could let oneself let everything go and usher happiness and love into those days?

The End



If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on the site of your choice.

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[*The Lady's Daring Gambit* \(Diamonds of London #2\)](#)

Pope Lady Cakes

Small, sweet cakes flavoured with almond or rose water.

Formerly made as human figures, possibly with fruit decorations for eyes, etc. A tradition associated with St. Albans, the origin is unknown, though they were in some way connected to a myth relating to St. Joan.

Pope Ladies

<http://www.therecipeboxproject.com>

Foods of England:

<http://www.foodsofengland.co.uk/popeladycakes.htm>

WB Gerish's 'Folk-lore of Hertfordshire' (1911) says that 'Pop-Ladies' were a tradition of New-Year's eve.

'British Popular Customs' by Rev TF Thiselton-Dyer, of 1900 has; "At St. Alban's certain buns called "Pope Ladies" are sold on Lady Day, their origin being attributed by some to the following story: - A noble lady and her attendants were travelling on the road to St. Alban's (the great North road passes through this town), when they were benighted and lost their way. Lights in the clock-tower at the top of the hill enabled them at length to reach the monastery in safety, and the lady in gratitude gave a sum of money to provide an annual distribution on Lady Day of cakes, in the shape of ladies, to the poor of the neighbourhood. As this bounty was distributed by the monks, the "Pope Ladies" probably thus acquired their name. Another correspondent ... says these buns are sold on the first day of each year, and that there is a tradition that they have some relation to the myth of Pope Joan."

Original Receipt from 'Feast-Day Cakes from Many Lands' by Dorothy Gladys Spicer (1960) reported in

A few generations ago, “Popeladies! Popeladies!” was a familiar street cry on New Year’s Day in the ancient Hertfordshire town of Saint Albans, where hucksters carried about baskets of curious-looking buns and bakeshops displayed them in windows. Pope ladies went out of fashion long ago. This is strange, too, since they taste much like hot cross buns. Their shape delights the fancy of children and arouses the curiosity of adults. The form of pope ladies is indeed extraordinary. Nobody knows how it originated. The dough is fashioned into the rude outlines of a female figure. A small round bun with currant eyes makes the head. The body, which has no legs and ends in a point, resembles nothing so much as an Egyptian mummy case. Two small lumps at the sides indicate arms.

Today pope ladies are an amusing accompaniment to punch or hot spiced cider at the New Year’s party. Drop-in guests on New Year’s Day will appreciate them hot, with homemade preserves, and coffee or tea.

Scald milk, add butter, sugar, and salt. Stir, and when cooled to lukewarm add yeast, which has first been thoroughly dissolved in the water. Sift together flour and nutmeg, and add gradually to the first mixture. Combine thoroughly. Add beaten eggs and mix together to make soft dough. Set to rise overnight in warm place, in a greased covered bowl.

In the morning punch down the dough and shape into small buns that look something like this:

Add currants for eyes, a tiny knob of dough for nose and two small strips for arms. Lay the buns about 3 inches apart in a greased pan and let rise in warm room. Brush over the top with

mixture of egg yolk beaten with 1 tablespoon water. Bake about 20 minutes in moderately hot oven (350° F.)

The following receipt, widely reproduced in recent cookbooks, with minor variations, is for a large, undecorated, Pope Lady Cake. It uses baking soda and cornflour, which would not have been available before the mid-19th Century.

Pope Lady Cakes

8oz self raising flour
8oz caster sugar
1oz cornflour
8 egg whites
6oz butter
1/4 teaspoon almond extract

Grease and line an 8” round, deep cake tin. Cream the butter and the sugar and 4 of the egg whites together. Add the almond extract and fold in the flour and cornflour. Beat the remaining egg whites till they are very stiff and gently but thoroughly fold into the cake mixture. Pour the mixture into the tin and bake in a pre-heated oven at 110°C/220°F/Gas mark 1/2 for 1 1/2 hours. Remove from the oven and cool on a wire rack.

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Author Bio

Sandra Sookoo is a USA Today bestselling author who firmly believes every person deserves acceptance and a happy ending. That is why her characters are not in the usual style and oftentimes struggle with things out of the norm. She's written for publication since 2008. Most days you can find her creating scandal and mischief in the Regency-era, serendipity and happenstance in the Victorian era, or historical romantic suspense complete with mystery and intrigue. Reading is a lot like eating chocolates—you can't just have one book. Give her the chance with one book and you'll be hooked.

When she's not wearing out computer keyboards or mice, Sandra spends time with her real-life Prince Charming in Central Indiana where she also runs a gourmet cookie business and makes moments count with the man because the key to life is laughter. Inspired to storytelling by Walt Disney since the age of ten, when her soul gets bogged down and her imagination flags, a trip to Walt Disney World is in order. Nothing fills the well and fuels her dreams more than the land of eternal happy endings, hope and love stories.

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