

A woman with dark hair styled in an updo, wearing a bright yellow, short-sleeved, floor-length gown with a large bow at the waist. She is leaning against a white classical column on the right side of the frame. The background is a warm, golden-yellow color with a subtle floral pattern. The overall mood is elegant and classic.

Annabelle Anders
Amy Rose Bennett
Clair Brett
S Cinders
Alyssa Clarke
Emmanuelle
de Maupassant
Tamara Gill
Caroline Lee
Carrie Lomax
Beverley Oakley
Ebony Oaten
Eve Pendle
Sky Purington
Amy Quinton
Stacy Reid
Lily Reynard
Ellie St. Clair
Mariah Stone
Laura Trentham

I LIKE BIG
Dukes

AND I CANNOT LIE

**I LIKE BIG DUKES AND I
CANNOT LIE**

TAMARA GILL ANNABELLE ANDERS AMY ROSE BENNETT
CLAIR BRETT S CINDERS ALYSSA CLARKE
EMMANUELLE DE MAUPASSANT CAROLINE LEE
CARRIE LOMAX BEVERLEY OAKLEY EBONY OATEN
EVE PENDLE SKY PURINGTON AMY QUINTON
STACY REID LILY REYNARD ELLIE ST. CLAIR
MARIAH STONE LAURA TRENTHAM

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I LIKE BIG DUKES AND I CANNOT LIE

From the delightfully debonair to the devilishly dangerous, these dashing dukes can't help but command your attention. And let's not forget the real stars here—the dazzling, damsel-not-in-distress heroines who don't need a title to rule. These are ladies of wit, grit, and not a little bit of mischief.

Every one of these novellas has a duke for its leading man. They're haughty, they're naughty, and they've got estates large enough to lose a spouse in. But beneath their stony aristocratic exteriors, beat hearts ready for passion... and the right touch of scandal.

Dive into the pages of "I Like Big Dukes and I Cannot Lie," where the tea is strong, the dukes are stronger, and the heroines are an irresistible force of nature. After all, you know what they say— the duke-ier, the merrier!

SWEET DUKE O'MINE

ANNABELLE ANDERS

Born into the lower echelons of society, Miss Daisy Montgomery had once shared a forbidden love with the dashing young heir to the Duke of Lovington, but circumstances forced them apart.

A decade later, when Daisy least expects it, fate cruelly reunites them when the he is left behind her shop, presumed dead, and suffering from amnesia.

As Daisy nurses him back to health, she must navigate the shadows of the past, hoping he'll remember the humble girl who captured his soul long ago.

CHAPTER
ONE

“I intend to speak with your father tomorrow morning, Daisy Margaret Montgomery.” Alastair William Frampton, the future Duke of Lovington, inhaled the fresh scent of Daisy’s hair as he tightened his arms around her. *My Sweet Daisy*.

A hint of vanilla from the pastries she’d baked earlier competed with the grass and trees surrounding them but there was also something warm and floral.

Moving closer, he inhaled the subtle scents of the latest oil she’d mixed.

“I like this blend.” He nuzzled his face along hers. “A new one?”

Her answer was a relaxed, lazy hum while also rubbing her bare foot up his leg.

Together, they lay entwined on a wool blanket in the shade of the remote woods on his father’s property.

“I used honeysuckle with clove and sage...” she answered.

“It’s my new favorite. You drive me mad, you know.”

“The feeling is mutual.” She hummed again. “Let’s never move from this spot—just stay here forever.”

Alastair cradled the supple weight of her breast with one hand, and settled the other over the intimate flesh between her legs—velvety folds of heat and warmth that tempted him to throw caution to the wind.

Today, they had very nearly taken matters too far.

But she was just seven and ten and he only two years older. They were not engaged. They were not betrothed. Worst of all, he lived in the main house, and she in one of the tenant cottages.

If either of their parents knew what they were up to, there would be hell to pay.

All the more reason for Alastair to make their relationship official.

Three years ago, when he'd met this lovely young girl on the brink of womanhood, they had become friends. Meeting secretly ever since, their attachment had grown into a sizzling affection.

Bringing them alarmingly close to becoming lovers.

Alastair would act with honor, which meant making her his wife—protecting her.

No doubt, his father would initially disapprove, and his Uncle Calvin, who oversaw Woodland Priory in his father's absence, would, of course, forbid the match.

But Alastair would make a personal appeal to the duke—a man who'd loved his wife dearly—and he would eventually relent.

Regardless, nothing could change Alastair's mind.

She'd stolen his heart!

Life would not be worth living without her—his sweet Daisy, with her curly blond hair—ringlets so tight he could barely run his fingers through them—and her large blue eyes and cherry red lips. He loved seeing the world through the unique lens she shared with him, listening to her laughter, teasing a blush to her heart-shaped face. But his love went beyond all of that. She listened to him. She was his best friend, his confidante, and soon...

She would be his lover in every sense of the word.

But first, he needed to make her his wife.

On the last few occasions they'd met secretly, their kissing and fondling and tasting hadn't been enough. If nature followed its course, he'd endanger not only her reputation but her future—along with any consequences they might be blessed with.

He stared at the few wispy clouds in the sky, and she nuzzled closer.

Yes, it was time to make an official offer, and not just because it was the honorable thing to do, but because he loved her. He plucked a sprig of clover from the grass above her head and brushed it over her forehead.

And then around her mouth. "My sweet." And then, he sprinkled the blossoms in her hair before kissing her.

They were soulmates—a concept his uncle would scoff at. His father would understand, however, and then welcome her into their family.

"It's a beautiful dream but you know my father will say 'no'," Daisy said, but she did not relax her hold on him. "Even if he approved, the duke would never allow it." She laughed a little. "Your uncle most definitely will not approve."

“My uncle will not have the final word. He is not the duke. Nor is he the heir.” Sometimes Alastair’s uncle forgot those two pertinent facts. Alastair might not yet have achieved his majority, but the time would come when his father’s younger brother would no longer act as his master. Besides... “My father loved my mother,” Alastair insisted. “He will not stand in the way of true love.”

And as he uttered those words, Daisy squirmed around to stare up at him. “Love?”

This was not how he’d intended to tell her. And yet as heat burned the back of his neck, he moved so he could stare into her eyes. “You know I love you. I have for years.” And with his father spending all his time in London now, she was the one constant in his life. This girl, the daughter of one of his father’s tenants, provided him a glimpse beyond the façade of society’s hierarchy. He was not only valuable for the blood flowing through his veins, but for the thoughts in his head.

For the feelings in his heart.

She gave him reason to believe John Locke’s assertion that they were all born equal, with their lives a blank slate to be written on.

“I was born loving you.” Her mouth tilted into a genuine smile that hid nothing from him. But then a flash of darkness flickered in her eyes. “You cannot marry the daughter of a tenant, though. It’s impossible.” She grimaced, squeezing him. “Let’s just enjoy what we have now.”

Alastair shook his head, ignoring the wisdom of her words.

Dearest Daisy had always been the practical one.

A little too practical sometimes.

And on this matter, Alastair would not be thwarted! Not because he was foolish or naïve, but because he was beyond determined that Daisy be his duchess.

There had been discussions of a betrothal between himself and the Marquess of Waterbury's daughter, but it would not come to pass.

Because Alastair was in love. And his love for Daisy would conquer all.

Daisy pushed thoughts of the future away. Unlike Alastair, she did not delude herself that the time between the two of them would not eventually come to an end. They might have one more year together, or one more month. But eventually, this surreal connection they shared would be severed.

He would one day be a duke. Her father farmed that duke's estate.

When the time came, yes, he would have no choice but to break her heart. Long after he'd married a proper lady of high birth, Daisy would have nothing but memories to warm her heart. And she must accept this.

She would toil in the fields beside her father, planting and harvesting, and in the evenings, she'd cook and clean beside her mother, and eventually, possibly beside a husband, with children of her own. But she would always have memories of being loved by Alastair—memories of being loved so wonderfully by a beautiful, honorable, and perfectly unattainable gentleman. Her sweet duke.

Unless Alastair is right...

For all her practical thoughts on the matter, she could not help but dream that this love was special—that it could overcome the dictates of society.

Oh, but that was a dangerous thought—one that would surely lead to disappointment.

Alastair trailed his mouth along the edge of her face, and she turned her head to kiss him properly—to inhale his scent and savor the spicy warmth in his mouth, uniquely his.

“Daisy,” he murmured against her lips. “My everything.”

“Yes,” she answered. “Forever.”

He rolled her onto her back. “My Daisy.”

She widened her legs, her gown already gathered around her hips as he settled between her thighs.

And his member, straining against his breeches, reignited the ache, an ache that was impossible to deny. She thrust her hips up at the same time he shifted and growled into her neck. Everything but the two of them disappeared.

Nothing else existed. Only Alastair. Only this feeling. Only this love, bared beneath the clear blue sky, blessed by the summer sun.

Time whirled into infinity, impossible to contain. Tall oak trees stretched to the skies providing cover. Fresh grass spread across the ground as their bed.

“I love you, Alastair.” She needed him to know.

Long after the two of them went their separate ways, he would know that he’d been fully loved—that he would forever possess a piece of her heart.

Long after he took up his legacy and reclaimed his own.

Daisy squeezed her eyes closed. Remember this.

Remember me.

He moved one hand between them, fumbling at his falls.

She belonged to him. Nothing else mattered in that moment.

This day, this hour, this second. It belonged to the two of them.

And so Daisy moved to help him, freeing buttons first, and then the two of them tugged his shirt up and over his head.

Daisy had seen his bared torso before when he'd taught her to swim in the pond at the far end of his father's property. She had even felt the smooth texture of his skin when he'd kept her afloat.

And yet, she paused, trailing her fingertips from his shoulders to the rippling muscles of his abdomen.

He trembled.

"You are so beautiful, Alastair." This boy. Her best friend. No one knew him as she did. No one else knew his secret fears, or the doubts he'd nurtured in his father's shadow.

When he'd admitted feeling inadequate, she'd listened, and knowing words would never be enough to take it away, she'd simply been his friend. Someday, his actions—the decisions he made in his life—would reveal the truth of his character to himself.

Already, he'd grown more confident. He would one day rule the dukedom he'd been born to reign over.

And he would do it with wisdom, power, but also heart.

Some day.

Not yet.

Today, he belonged to her.

She arched her back while his palms and fingertips skimmed her tender flesh. Drinking kisses from his mouth, she welcomed his touch that ignited a pleasure so exquisite she nearly broke.

Sounds clawed up her throat, incoherent words and thoughts expressly for him. “Need. You. Mine. Love...”

And she nearly wept when he drew back, kneeling between her legs, his breeches unfastened. The beating of her heart thundered in her ears while he stared down at her with heavy eyes, his mouth glistening and parted. Daisy settled her gaze on his member... his *penis*. The foreign-looking organ strained toward her, red and purplish and undulating beneath its own weight.

She pushed herself onto her elbows, reached forward, and touched it. “It’s hot,” she said. “And soft.” She caressed the texture, which reminded her of the finest silk.

God’s silk.

“Not soft.” Alastair covered her hand and wound both their fingers around it. It was thick, pulsing beneath her palm.

“Oh.” Steel wrapped in silk. Hot and tender. Milky liquid appeared at the tip.

She should look away. She should let go. Instead, she swirled her thumb over the single pearl, spreading his seed around the skin.

Alastair inhaled a sharp breath.

“Does it hurt?” She hesitated, waiting.

“You touching me.” His voice caught. “Feels like heaven. If you only knew how many times I’ve dreamed of this...”

She searched his expression and her insides heated at what she saw. His aquiline nose, strong cheekbones, and chiseled jaw would forever set him apart from all other mere mortal men.

But it was his eyes that stole her breath—a light green lit from within with hope, a light capable of lifting her to the top of the world. And on this day, she saw more.

She saw desire. Adoration. But also... soul-consuming love. His looks stole her breath but she loved him for the man inside.

And she always would.

“Soon you’ll be my duchess, but I’ll always remember you like this, on the grass, under the sun.” His words sounded like a vow. “Mine.”

Daisy imagined what he saw. Her untamable blond curls clustered around her face, her pale breasts mottled with pink from his kisses, and her naked thighs widened to invite greater intimacy.

Alastair’s hand left hers and when she nodded, he gathered her skirts up higher, revealing the triangle of her private curls.

This was a first for both of them. She knew because neither kept secrets from the other. And when he swirled one finger around a very intimate curl, her breath hitched. His gaze slid from her face to between her legs. Another first for both of them.

Exploring.

Ignoring embarrassment she ought to heed, she studied him while he studied her. She allowed her gaze to travel down his neck, over his taut belly to his shaft, to where he touched her. No words were necessary. Trust bound them together, casting out all inhibitions.

And then his careful finger slid between her folds, easily, lubricated by her arousal. Daisy watched as the tip disappeared inside. Mesmerized, she watched as he added a second one, stretching her. Exciting her. Building the need that had kept her awake night after night.

Their eyes locked, both filled with questions. This level of familiarity was too much and yet it was not enough.

Daisy nodded, and Alastair lowered himself onto her. Chest to chest, hip to hip, mouth to mouth. And while covering her, he stroked her with his member.

“Daisy,” he breathed. “My Sweet Daisy.”

She cradled his face between her hands, their mouths fused, breathing the same air. Loving him.

Fullness. A twinge of pain. But then more fullness. And for the first time in her life, she felt like a whole person. No longer one heart, but two.

She'd been created for this man.

“Yes.” She sucked his tongue into her mouth. He shifted back and then entered her again. “Yes,” she urged him.

Alastair filled her again. “Love you,” he said. He shifted out and then in again. “Love you.”

Daisy moved with him, fulfilling destiny, and allowing fate to guide this ultimate act of love.

Alastair's thrusts intensified, and the promise of pleasure swelled from the friction to her core, belly, chest, and limbs.

And then he stopped. Before she could cry out in protest, Alastair stilled his mouth against hers.

Disappointment nearly summoned tears to her eyes.

But Alastair was holding a finger to his lips even as three wrinkles appeared between his eyes. And then Daisy heard it too. Pounding hooves growing louder, closer, until the pounding gallop made the earth tremble beneath her.

Someone was coming, and the pace indicated urgency.

Alastair's mount, which he'd tied off at the edge of the forest, whinnied.

Alastair withdrew, his stare locked with hers. But there wasn't time to lament this interruption. Hoofbeats halted and, acting in a panicky haste, both she and Alastair rushed to repair themselves into some semblance of decency.

"Master Alastair!" An angry voice bellowed from behind the curtain of thick hanging willow branches, exposing their secret place.

"My uncle," Alastair whispered.

Not as tidy or put together as she'd like to be, Daisy ducked behind his shoulders. She hated to be seen under these circumstances, knowing what their intruder must be thinking of her.

"The entire household has been searching for you," Lord Calvin barely affording Daisy a disgusted glance.

Daisy had seen Alastair's uncle from a distance several times, and of course, she'd heard him shouting at various

workers. But being of little significance, she'd never been introduced to Lord Calvin.

Close up now, she immediately noticed the family resemblance. He shared Alastair's thick mahogany hair—albeit streaked with gray—high cheeks, and aquiline nose, but it ended there.

Whereas Alastair stood tall, with broad shoulders that tapered to a flat belly, his uncle hunched over and his jacket strained at his paunch. And although the older man's eyes were green, they lacked any goodness or warmth whatsoever.

According to her father, the man lacked the character of his older brother and the tenants were all grateful he wasn't the duke.

But unfortunately, until Alastair reached his majority, the duke's younger brother acted as proxy for Alastair's father, who currently resided in London to be near his physician.

Alastair tossed his jacket to Daisy to provide her a modicum of privacy and rose to face his uncle. "You've found me. What is so urgent that it could not wait until later this afternoon?" He sounded angry but also concerned.

"Word from London." Lord Calvin frowned, softening his voice almost sympathetically. "Your father... You must go to London immediately. It might already be too late."

Alastair shook his head. "What's happened?"

"No time to explain." The older man's gaze finally shifted to behind Alastair, where Daisy huddled, but only for a second. "The physician says he's asked for you."

"You must go!" Daisy had hopefully covered herself decently as she handed back the jacket.

Alastair *loved* his father.

Her dearest friend, her one true love, caught her gaze, looking torn. "I need to escort you home."

"No." She held up a hand. "I'm perfectly capable of getting myself home. You mustn't waste time."

And yet he hesitated. He'd wanted to speak to her father tomorrow. He'd had dreams of making her his duchess.

A sharp pang squeezed her chest. She didn't want to believe it was a premonition and yet deep down, she knew. Nothing would be the same.

She knew.

Perhaps it was best this way. He would go to London and take his place in society alongside his father. Proper ladies who had been raised to be perfect duchesses would be presented to him. They would be beautiful and refined, and she would be relegated to a pleasant, eventually distant, memory.

Lord Calvin folded his arms across his chest. "Time is of the essence, Wadsworth." He addressed Alastair by his courtesy title. How long before he was duke?

Which only further reminded Daisy of all the reasons their love affair could only ever be fleeting. What had she been thinking?

She'd been thinking that she *loved* him. She'd made a conscious decision to take whatever joy she could have before it ended.

Alastair frowned. "I'll return," he promised, his eyes searching hers. Secret thoughts communicated between them. Thoughts only the two of them could comprehend.

I won't leave if you don't want me to.

Go to your father. I love you.

I am so sorry we were interrupted. I love you. I'll return soon. Wait for me.

“Go.” Daisy reached out and squeezed his arm. Because he would not return right away. His love for her would fade. They were lucky that they'd been interrupted—that he had not spent inside of her. “Be safe.”

Following a very long moment, a moment in which Lord Calvin's impatience thickened the air, Alistair finally nodded and allowed his uncle to draw him away.

And long after the thundering of hooves disappeared, Daisy sat alone on the blanket they'd shared, remembering.

Hoping.

And then weeping.

Because it was the end. It must be.

CHAPTER
TWO

Three months later

“Papa.” Daisy squeezed her father’s shoulder, shaking him gently.

Mr. Randolph Montgomery rested in his favorite chair where he’d collapsed after a hard day’s work, exhausted but also replete following the stew and bread she’d served for dinner.

“Mr. Kemp is here to speak with you.” She kept her voice low. Mr. Kemp was the new estate manager who’d taken over less than one month ago.

Two months had passed since the old Duke of Lovington’s death. Since then, much had changed.

A visit from this newly appointed steward did not bode well.

Following the dry spring, and then an unusually wet August, this year’s harvest already disappointed. Nothing could be done.

Which meant her father would once again come up short in paying their rent.

Although Alastair officially held the title, Lord Calvin acted as landlord and would do so until Alastair reached his

majority.

On the few occasions when the acting master had come to meet with her father, she'd felt Lord Calvin's eyes trailing after her. She would never forget the man's cold, hard eyes when he'd found her disheveled with Alastair, making his opinion of her quite clear. And although he'd not mentioned a word of the escapade to her father, he treated her family with thinly veiled disgust.

Unfortunately, her father attributed the threats and reprimands to his own failure to produce abundant crops, even though their farm's production was not much different from others at Woodland Priory.

Despite her guilt, however, Daisy could not bring herself to confess what had happened between her and Alastair. Her father *loved* his only daughter with all his heart and often boasted of her to others.

Daisy couldn't bring herself to disappoint him. And she did not. Instead, she lived with the ever-present shame, putting all her energies into weeding, watering, and tending to the crops that showed even a hint of promise in the daylight hours. In the evenings, she cooked and cleaned and cared for her mother, who was entering her seventh month of a late-in-life confinement. Which was proving exciting but also terrifying as the local midwife had warned that if Daisy's mother didn't commit to full bedrest, she'd lose the babe.

A possible son for her father.

One would think the endless tasks would be a godsend—that they would make it impossible to dwell on the humiliation of Alastair's abandonment.

They had not. She'd imagined herself prepared to lose him, but she'd been stupidly, horribly, devastatingly wrong. Allowing hope into her heart was not a mistake she'd make again.

Her head had refused to believe Alastair's promises but her heart had failed miserably. And now she was paying the price.

Because he had not returned from London, or written, or sent any sort of message whatsoever. All of which she'd expected.

But he would, someday, return to Woodland Priory. He would bring a wife. He would fill his nursery.

He would be a stranger.

"Father." Daisy shook his shoulder using more force, jolting him awake. "Mr. Kemp is here to speak with you." Daisy's father opened his eyes, pretending he had not been asleep.

"Send him in, Daisy." He straightened his back, frowning, his tone unusually tense as he sent her to fetch the austere gentleman waiting in the foyer.

"This way, Mr. Kemp." She beckoned the estate manager to precede her into the parlor.

The room was small, but it was cozy, and a cool breeze moved the drapes on an open window. Upon seeing the man to the settee across from her father, she closed the two inside.

But she did not return to the kitchen.

In order to know what was coming, so that she might prepare for troubles that lie ahead, Daisy listened through the wood.

Out of necessity, rather than curiosity.

Because her father, bless him, took to heart his position as the head of the family diligently. He would keep the burden of their troubles secret for as long as possible, which would only make matters worse in the long run.

The floor creaked, and she recognized the sound of her father rising to greet the other man. It was the movement of a man who'd worked his entire life—of a man whose bones ached from a lifetime of labor.

“Allow me to have my daughter bring tea.”

“This isn't a social visit, as I'm sure you suspect. And you must be aware that Lord Calvin's patience has been dwindling for some time now. Your rents are in arrears, and this crop looks to be no better than the two years prior.”

Upon hearing the muffled words, Daisy's heart plummeted.

“A fortnight! But my wife can't be moved. She's in the family way.” Daisy's father's voice took on the edge of pleading. “I beg of you. One more season. His lordship will not regret it. I'll do anything.”

Daisy swallowed around her suddenly swollen throat.

Her mother's late-in-life pregnancy was both a gift and a curse. Because although matters appeared to be progressing normally so long as her mama remained in bed, managing the farm without her had been difficult. And moving her could be dangerous.

Beyond that, where would they go? How would they make a living? Aside from her father's sister in London, they had no one.

“You know as well as I that you can't make good on such promises. The fields are too far gone, and unless you've

stumbled on buried treasure, you've nothing to pay your debts. Lord Calvin has been gracious enough to extend a fortnight for you to vacate the cottage. With the shift from agriculture to livestock, the estate needs tenants with sons—strong men to do the work.”

Daisy winced as she listened to her father's attempts to bargain with the steward, making impossible promises of future payments, of performing additional work... None of which moved the steward's position in the least.

“I am not in the position to extend your tenancy, sir. As matters stand, you're already six months in arrears. I am truly sorry about your wife, but these are his lordship's terms.”

His lordship? Not the terms of His Grace?

When solid footsteps approached the door, she backed away from the door and silently slipped into the kitchen.

They were going to lose not only their means of making a living but their home—everything.

And how was she to protect her mother through all of this?

Alastair had either forgotten her or deliberately relegated her to his past—a fling with one of his father's tenants. Until this moment, she hadn't accepted either of these explanations for his absence.

He had not even had the courage to write to her. And now, her family faced utter ruin.

She'd been a fool to hope for more. She'd not make that mistake again—ever!

She stood frozen, not moving as she heard her father walk the steward to the door and bid him farewell. Nor did she move when her father found her in the kitchen.

“I suppose you heard that.” Her father understood her all too well. “It’s not the end of the world. I was afraid this might happen so I’ve written to your Aunt Theodora in London. She’ll take us in.”

Daisy nodded. She didn’t want to move to London! She wanted to live here in the country—just in case...

“You can help your Theo with her soaps. Perhaps do something productive with those oils you like to mix. Meanwhile, I hear there are good jobs in some of the factories. Plenty to be made in town these days.”

“But how are we to move Mother?” Daisy lamented. “The midwife said—”

“We’ll keep her comfortable. Don’t worry, Daisy. Think of this as a great adventure.”

Daisy’s smile was more of a grimace. Her father’s optimism only caused her to worry more.

CHAPTER
THREE

“**T**oo bloody hot for spring,” Daisy muttered into the steaming cauldron. Despite having been in London for nearly ten years, she doubted she’d ever grow accustomed to spending summer in the city.

It was only May and she dreaded it already.

There were no endless meadows to freshen the breeze, nor bubbling brooks to cool off in. Instead the cobbled streets held the heat of the sun and the buildings prevented the stench of humanity from blowing over.

There was Hyde Park, of course, and although she walked there on occasion, she never felt completely comfortable there. She didn’t belong.

Brushing one arm across her forehead, she caught the droplets of sweat before they could sting her eyes, keeping her other hand on the large paddle as she churned the dear ingredients she used to make her soap. Olive, coconut, and almond oils bubbled just so while the lye dissolved. She needed to keep the fire just hot enough while moving the liquid steadily to avoid ruining the batch.

Necessity demanded that she produce a superior product in order to turn a profit in her shop so that she could raise her brother properly.

Three days after making the tedious move from Woodland Priory to her aunt's house on a crowded and then passed away two days later.

She'd lost too much blood, they'd said—likely due to the stress of the move.

The memory never failed to set her teeth on edge. Not only had Alastair abandoned her, but he'd left all the tenants at the mercy of his uncle—which had effectively led to her mother's death.

And yet he still wormed his way into her thoughts far too often—while performing mundane tasks, while walking on the street, and many nights, while she lie in bed at night

Daisy had distracted herself by incorporating her oils into the soaps her Aunt Theodora sold. And although her father had easily found employment, he suffered a disabling injury a little over a year after moving to the city.

It had killed his optimism, and a year later, it killed him as well.

Daisy and her much younger brother lived nearly seven years with Aunt Theo before she'd died in her sleep.

But Daisy remained grateful. Not only did she have the shop, left to her by her aunt, but she had the best brother a girl could hope for—the only family she had left.

Caring for Gilbert gave her life meaning and blending her soaps was her passion. Her salvation. Her life.

And so she churned.

The churning was the most tedious aspect of soapmaking but required precision and diligence. She embraced the process. Once it cooled, she would separate half into another

pot, allow the entire batch to cool and add the scented oils she'd prepared earlier. This part of the process filled the entire shop and house with aromas normally reserved for royalty.

Contrary to common practice, soap did not need to smell like bacon, cows, or God forbid, fish. It could be heavenly. It possessed the potential to improve every aspect of life.

And lucky for her, those Mayfair residents who could afford her special soaps were willing to pay for such a luxury—the discerning residents, anyhow.

They paid enough so that she could feed her brother and herself. Enough that her brother could attend a proper school—one that would allow him opportunities he'd never have had if they'd remained at Woodland Priory.

And this, she decided, was the silver lining in all these clouds.

A glimpse into the large pot showed that the lye had thoroughly dissolved into the oils even as she heard the ringing bell on her shop door.

“Just me, Daisy!” her brother called out. Gilbert, not quite ten years old, never failed to return straight home to assist with any errands that needed running. Afterward, he'd sit at the table working on his studies until they could sit down together for their evening meal.

Daisy was not only a sister to him but mother and father as well.

Aunt Theodora, who'd been well into her eighth decade, had taught Daisy everything she knew. Daisy, who'd already been enamored with mixing scents and oils, developed the soaps and managed the impossible.

She'd created a life for herself and Gilbert.

She turned just enough of a profit to pay rent on the small shop and apartment nestled between two much taller brick buildings.

Against all odds, she ran a good business. A woman. On her own.

But that was not all. Daisy inspected the cooling pots and smiled to herself.

She had managed to bring a small part of the country to London, fencing in the tiny courtyard behind her shop and configuring it into a protected garden where she grew herbs, spices, and fragrant flowers. The deed to her property wasn't clear as to who technically owned the land that backed up to the filthy alley, but seeing as none of her neighbors cared about the space, she'd quietly claimed it for herself.

And it was more than a garden or greenhouse. It was a place of peace, a place of calm.

She placed a kiss on Gil's forehead and handed over the paddle. "Will you stir while I gather some petals for this batch?"

Rose petals added a special touch to the soaps. It was early May and they were at the height of bloom.

"I've got it." Gilbert took over proudly. A few streaks of dirt dragged across his cheeks, but his face wasn't gaunt like many of the lads living in the shadows all around them. Furthermore, her brother's eyes stared back at her with intelligence. "And then I'll show you my essay! It earned me the top score!"

"I knew it was good when you showed it to me." Daisy smiled proudly as she made her way to the back, opening the

door and stepping into the filtered sunlight where she nurtured her plants like a mother would a newborn.

The space was by no means vast, and she could cross from one side to the other in less than eight steps. In setting up her raised boxes and having a tall fence built, in fact, she'd measured the space to be twelve by eight. But it was enough. And by allowing the sunlight to enter through colored netting stretched from the wall to the fence, no one paid it any heed. Which was just as she preferred.

Hidden beneath the soot and stench of the city, she'd created her own paradise. More than that. She was able to grow the plants that made her soaps special.

A scuffling sound on the opposite side of the fence stilled her. The alley occasionally attracted vagrants and thieves, so she held her breath and listened.

“Is ‘e dead, ya think?” The alarming question echoed off the surrounding brick buildings. Such a callous voice, speaking of death so casually, sent a shiver down her spine. Curious as to what poor animal might be dying in the narrow walkway, she silently moved closer to the fence. There, she peeked through the slats and spied two gentlemen hovering around whatever lay on the ground.

Neither of them appeared drunk or slovenly as she expected, but rather wore dark blue jackets and tall top hats—the uniform reserved for the newly formed Metropolitan Police force.

One of them stepped to the side, and Daisy's heart skipped a beat.

A man—not an animal—curled lifeless on the ground.

The shorter of the two men raised his hand and swung a stick downward, striking the person rather unnecessarily.

Daisy winced at the resulting thud.

“If he weren’t dead already, he is now,” the officer declared.

The taller man nudged the lifeless figure with the toe of his boot. “Just what His Lordship ordered. Take the ring off his hand for proof. No one will look here. Just another penniless bloke whose enemies caught up with him.”

“What about his clothes, Giles?”

“In this neighborhood? They’ll steal them off his back. The crows will take over from there.”

A burst of laughter, and then their conversation grew muffled as they drifted away.

Daisy shifted her gaze back to the dead man—barely visible between the boards of the fence. He looked like a pile of dirty laundry, disposed of with less ceremony than a barnyard cat.

Although his body lay face up, there was no making out his features. The half that wasn’t covered with a thick and matted beard was bloodied and bruised.

The situation disconcerted her on several levels.

Because she always had Gilbert to consider.

A dead man might draw attention to her very private garden—which she needed to keep private for a multitude of reasons.

Left alone to decompose, the smell would eventually attract attention. And that was something she, with her expert

sniffer, certainly could not abide. Normally she'd send for the police, but it had been uniformed officers who abandoned the man.

She, like many of those who lived around her, found the Metropolitan Police to be more than a little suspect. What was a person to do?

And then the question became moot when the dead body...

Moved.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and a lightening-like sensation swept through her.

She would see what she could do to help. It was the right thing to do.

Quietly unlocking a carefully camouflaged gate, Daisy glanced in all directions before silently slipping into the passageway and crossing to the body, which surprised her by straightening one leg.

Just as she suspected, it was a man.

As she neared, she noticed that his boots, along with his tan breeches, waistcoat, and jacket, although torn and filthy, had been tailored from fine fabrics.

But he was breathing.

She lowered herself beside him.

“A combination of seeping and crusted blood covered the man's beard and hair, but the smell concerned her most. He reeked of the scent she associated with death. Older wounds no doubt, had begun to putrefy.

He moved again, this time with a groan.

His thighs were thick, as were his chest and arms. *Who is he?*

Gilbert's face poked around the gate. "The lye is cooling." And then his stare flicked to the man on the ground. "Who's he?"

She couldn't leave the man here. He was a nob. The discovery would draw all manner of attention to her growing space—attention she did not want.

And although she'd long since lost any sympathy for members of the aristocracy, she felt a tug for this particular one.

"I don't know, but he's injured pretty badly," she half-whispered. "Help me get him inside."

Gilbert raised his brows but moved quickly, only making a face when the the stench of infection hit his nostrils. Maneuvering the deadweight of what was not a small man took near inhuman effort over the next three or four minutes.

Only when the gate was closed and locked behind them did they take a moment to rest, both breathing hard, Daisy's muscles were so fatigued that her hands shook.

"What should we do with him now?" Gilbert asked.

It was a good question. One she needed to consider carefully.

Because if one of those thug police officers was to come back, he might want to launch an investigation, which would put her secret growing garden at risk.

But mostly because, beneath all that blood and filth was a human being. She sighed. She would do what she could to help him—and hope that he lived.

Apparently she'd not grown as cynical as she'd imagined.

The officers who'd left this man to die cannot have done so in their official line of duty. She'd heard evil in their voices. They'd acted with wicked intentions—the shorter one had even seemed to enjoy it.

But there was a lord out there somewhere who wanted this man dead. If the officers learned their efforts had failed, they would likely return to finish what they'd started.

If the man could still be saved, that was.

“Bring me a sheet and we'll drag him inside.” Out of the sun and away from the flies buzzing around his open wounds—wounds that desperately needed attention. What was it her aunt had used on her father's injury? Honey, vinegar, alcohol, and... onion juice? Daisy rubbed the bridge of her nose. She would get him to drink some willow bark tea, and... laudanum.

Dash it all, she was a soap maker, not a physician.

Gilbert returned, carrying an old linen sheet, clean cloths, a bucket of water, and a half-bar of soap.

“Perfect.” She stared at the man's chest, which barely rose and fell. Their efforts might all be in vain, but she'd help in all the ways that she could.

Aristocrat or not, helping him was the *right* thing to do.

“What should I do about today's batch of soap?” Gilbert reminded her helpfully.

She wasn't going to have time to add the rose petals. “Portion it into the pans.”

Gilbert nodded, and Daisy absently noted that his curly hair, so similar to hers, needed shorn. *Later.*

“Anything else?” He flicked a wary glance toward their patient. “If you want to finish the soap, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“I’ll be fine.” Gilbert was at the age where he was beginning to think he had a duty to protect her.

“If you’re sure?” He frowned.

“Quite. Now, go on and save my soap while I clean him up.” Best for her brother not be witness anything too gruesome.

At the tender age of ten, what with their father’s injury and then Aunt Thea’s drawn-out illness, he’d already seen more than a boy his age should have.

She could spare him this.

Left alone with her patient, a buzzing teased her insides as she wiped the dirt off of the man’s face and head. Once the wound was mostly clean, she poured a few drops of vinegar onto it.

“Please live,” she whispered.

Fearful she’d find herself cleaning a corpse, she grew bolder as she worked. After doing her best with the soap, she took only a moment to fetch the small box her aunt had kept to use on scrapes and bruises, and willow bark powder.

Putrefied wounds led to death more often than not.

The jarring thought pushed her past feelings of modesty and out of necessity, she removed his proper gentleman’s clothing.

She fashioned poultices and bandages and even succeeded at pouring some willow bark tea down his gullet.

Having finished with the soap, Gilbert fetched one of their father's old nightshirts and by nightfall, the two of them had successfully dragged their patient onto a makeshift mattress set up inside the pantry near the kitchen stove.

It would have been impossible to carry him up the stairs making the crude accommodations their only option. The space wasn't large, but it was dry and clean, and most of all, would keep him out of sight.

The last thing she needed was customers to begin asking questions, or even worse, her nosy neighbor.

Long after Gilbert retired to his room, long after she'd cleaned up and nibbled on a small supper, she tended to the near-dead stranger, terrified that if she left, she'd find him dead in the morning.

Rather than retire to her own room, she waited.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Morning brought some relief.

Whether a miracle, simple good luck, or Daisy's clumsy attempts at medical care, as the sun crested the horizon, her patient was still alive.

And there was something... she couldn't be sure...

When he'd thrashed around sometime after midnight, she'd dosed him with the laudanum her aunt had refused. And long after he'd settled down, Daisy sat beside him, cradling a cup of tea, staring at him.

With his face hidden by that thick beard, his eyes swollen closed, and bruises coloring nearly every other visible inch of skin, the man was utterly unrecognizable.

And yet, a sense of familiarity pricked the back of her neck.

Oh, but her imagination had turned against her!

Her patient was of the approximate age Alastair would be by now, and he wore the clothing of a gentleman, but she'd been awake all night and was likely becoming delusional.

What had this man done to invite such violence? A lord had ordered him killed, so there was little chance the beating was part of a robbery. More likely, it had to do with honor—

perhaps her guest had ruined some debutante and refused to act honorably.

She guessed that he wasn't married. Having disrobed him herself, she knew for a fact he wasn't wearing any jewelry. There was the white band around the base of his pinky finger on his right hand—where a ring had been stolen. But he showed no evidence of ever having worn a wedding band.

Was the man an itinerant gambler who'd failed to honor one too many of his vows? Or had he witnessed a crime? A murder?

Her mind went in all directions as she tried to imagine the circumstances that had nearly gotten him killed.

“Hrgmph...?” the stranger moaned.

In the dim candlelight, he turned his head, and for the first time, opened his eyes.

Eyes that were a deep green color, framed by thick lashes. Startled, she could almost believe...

But no. The exhaustion from her overnight vigil summoned foolish impossible memories.

She blinked and leaned forward.

His eyes held more than a hint of panic. How long had he been held captive?

“You're safe now,” she assured him. “No one knows you are here.”

“I... don—” He groaned and attempted to lean forward, but Daisy pushed down on his chest. He was so weak that she required hardly any strength to keep him from sitting up.

“You need to rest.” She lifted the half-full cup of willow bark tea she’d used overnight.

The man instantly stilled, studying her.

“I won’t hurt you,” she added, and after a split second of hesitation, he closed his eyes, sipped, and swallowed.

That look of terror in his eyes squeezed her chest. “Is there someone I can send for who can help you?”

Looking confused, he flinched when the door opened.

Gilbert stood in the open door, newly dressed with his face clean and his hair combed. Daisy set her hand on the man’s arm.

“It’s just my brother.”

“He didn’t die then?” Gilbert’s voice sounded loud after the night of mostly silence.

His eager expression reminded her that she had other responsibilities. She had breakfast to make so Gilbert would be alert and energized for his day at school, and soaps to package, deliveries to make, and the garden to tend to. And all of it must be done without having slept a wink.

But she *was* grateful for all of it, knowing that she and Gilbert’s lives could be so much worse. Other families that had been banished from the priory hadn’t been so lucky, and consequently, hadn’t done nearly as well. She’d kept in touch with a few of the families and for everyone who’d moved onto another estate to work for another landowner, another had died in one of the workhouses or ended up in prison.

But a farmer without a farm had little to live for and she’d learned that more than one of her father’s oldest friends had taken their own lives.

She exhaled.

“Not dead. Obviously,” she answered, stretching as she rose. “But you need to eat something before you leave for school. We’ll discuss what we’re going to do when you come home.”

“I could stay with you—”

“And get behind in mathematics? I think not.” She shooed him along. “Wash your hands, and I’ll be right out.”

“I’m ten, not five,” Gilbert answered from the kitchen.

“And you still forget to wash your hands...”

Reluctant to leave her patient alone, but needing to start her day, Daisy stared down at her patient’s face—at his thick lashes, his forehead, his lips. She’d washed away a good amount of dirt, but even with the lower half hidden behind his beard, he remained a mystery.

Recognition niggled the back of her mind, and her heart skipped a beat.

He was resting, laying perfectly still.

Too still?

Please live.

It was the same thought that had echoed over and over in her head for most of the night—that had kept her spooning liquid into his mouth. It had prevented her from leaving him alone for more than a few minutes.

He was a person who, for reasons unknown, had been brought to her by angels, the universe, or... fate?

Or was his presence just bad luck?

He was wholly dependent on her—a perfect stranger.

Please live.

He made no sound. No movement.

Nothing.

She waited a few seconds and only after confirming that his chest was rising and falling, did she rise and stretch.

Her responsibilities awaited her.

She retrieved some linen-wrapped bread and a package of butter before joining her brother in the kitchen. After Gilbert left for school, she'd portion out and then package up the batch of soap she'd mixed the day before.

"We didn't have a proper supper last night, Gil. I imagine you're near starving this morning." At the tender age of ten, Gilbert seemed older than his years—in both appearance and intellect. He glanced up from his book.

"Why would the police beat him up?" He asked the question she'd mulled over for half the night. "Do you think he's a criminal?" His eyes widened. "He could be a murderer!"

Last night, Daisy had provided what little explanation she'd had to her brother—what she'd heard, what she'd seen, and why they couldn't leave the man to die. Although she was the older sister, the two of them were a team, and Gilbert understood the importance of keeping their garden a secret.

No one else seemed to care about the small plot of land she'd made use of but living in the city, she'd quickly learned that any sheltered space was susceptible to attracting vandals or vagrants...

Her growing space was too important to risk.

But above and beyond all of that, Daisy would have her brother know that life had value—all life.

“He doesn’t *look* like a murderer,” she said, her opinion based on nothing more than instinct.

And yet she knew she was right.

“Why attack him like that? Why wouldn’t they just put him in jail?” Her brother had the same questions she did. “

“He must not be a criminal,” she answered. “Which means those officers are the worst kind—corrupt.” Daisy rolled her lips together. “Hopefully he’ll wake up soon to provide an explanation.” *If he lives*. Contemplating all the different scenarios their guest might be caught up in, Daisy placed the bread on the worktable in the center of the kitchen.

“That’s absurd,” Gilbert said. “For a police officer to be corrupt.”

“Agreed.” Out of the mouths of babes. “They aren’t all like that,” she added before changing the subject back to their patient. “He must have people. Judging by his clothing, I’d imagine he’s the sort with family who might be looking for him.” *Nobs*. And yet it was *a lord* who had wanted him killed. She spread butter and preserves over a thick piece of bread for her brother and made a smaller piece for herself.

Gilbert merely frowned. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay home with you today? In case he wakes up. Or worse, in case those men come back. I shouldn’t leave you alone.”

Before he finished making the suggestion, Daisy was shaking her head, warmed by her brother’s intentions but determined he make the most of the education she was paying for—which meant he only missed classes when absolutely necessary.

She wanted better for his life. He could be *someone*.

“I’ll be fine.” She moved around the table and pulled his head toward her to drop a kiss on the top. It seemed, these days anyhow, that he grew overnight. Just a few more years and he’d be a man. “You mustn’t worry about any of this. You focus on your studies and getting high marks. I...” She placed her hands on her hips in an attempt to look stern, to appear confident and in control. “...will deal with our guest.”

For a moment, Daisy thought her brother was going to ignore her orders, but then he grinned. “I suppose you can just plant him a facer if he makes any trouble.”

“Right you are,” she laughed. “Now off with you.” She shoed him along, but not before adding, “Don’t say a word about...” She gestured toward the pantry, and Gilbert nodded.

“I know.”

And then Daisy was left all alone for the day.

With a stranger possibly dying in her pantry.

CHAPTER
FIVE

One second he was burning up, the next, shivering uncontrollably. But every time he opened his eyes, *she* was there. Like a distant dream that felt more like a memory.

But the pain kept him from keeping his eyes opened very long—throbbing, piercing, aching in his brain. How had he become trapped in this place between life and death.

And he didn't care. Mostly. Had he given up?

That wasn't like him.

He searched for anything to ground himself in a place as a person but came up empty over and over again.

Aside from vague recollections of a cold, dark room, boots kicking him, and endless beatings, he'd lost himself.

"Swallow." A melodic voice penetrated his thoughts.

He didn't have the strength to fight her. He didn't have the strength to fight much of anything. When panic overwhelmed even his pain, he latched onto the woman's comforting words, and occasionally her touch. Warm. Soothing. When the pain intensified, he welcomed the darkness again. Over and over, knowing it must be the end.

But then a peace found him. Kept in a windowless room, he couldn't tell if it was night or day, nor could he tell how

long he'd been unconscious. When he awoke, his eyes were so heavy he struggled to see for more than a few seconds at a time.

He was on a mattress but on the floor. The room was dark and unfamiliar. Was this a... larder? Delicate aromas drifted around his nostrils. He stirred and even as he wished for some light, a door opened and the woman from his dreams appeared.

His head ached and his entire body must be one massive bruise, and yet staring at her, his heart leapt. Because he felt... something.

“You’re awake!” Her bright blue eyes widened as though she didn’t quite believe it. And then she smiled.

“I—” A word died on his tongue, and it didn’t seem to matter. It didn’t matter because he didn’t know what he’d been going to say.

She disappeared but then almost immediately returned, this time with a cup in one hand. And even in his condition, he found himself appreciating her hour-glass figure as she lowered herself to sit on the footstool at the side of the mattress.

“It’s just water and some willow bark powder. I ran out of laudanum two days ago.” Leaning over, she touched his forehead, and he felt her soft breath on his cheek. “I think it’s gone now. The fever. I thought we were going to lose you a few times, but it seems you’ll live to fight another day.” And then she sat back, staring at him.

Expectantly.

He couldn’t help but stare back. In the dim light coming through the open door, he found himself wondering if her skin

was as smooth as it appeared and if her lips would feel pillowy and soft. How long had she sat beside him, reassuring him?

She resembled an angel—almost. Because instead of a halo, tight blond ringlets framed her face. Dozens of corkscrew strands spilled out of a messy bun, and the temptation to twirl one of those silky curls around his fingers should not have been so difficult to resist.

A result of the beating he'd taken, no doubt, even if he couldn't deny that this woman's essence warmed the room.

But whose larder was this? And who the devil was she?

“Where—” He cleared his throat. “Where am I?” He had a head full of empty thoughts. Questions without answers. He felt like that blank slate John Locke wrote about.

“You are in my pantry,” she announced, “and I am Miss Daisy Montgomery.” When he made no response, she peered closer. “Who are you?”

Again, he lost himself in her eyes, large and blue and inquisitive. *Daisy*. Her name whispered through him, and all he could do was try to remember why. *Sweet Daisy*.

She blinked, but then she shook her head.

“*Who are you?*” she asked again.

“I am—” But no words came. “I am...” He closed his eyes. “My apologies, Miss. I'm...” Confusion followed by panic swelled in his chest, and he raised both hands to keep the pain in his head from exploding. “I cannot...”

“Shh...” She pushed his hands away and soothed his brow with a cool cloth. “You mustn't upset yourself. Trust that you are safe here. I won't let anyone hurt you.” Her voice replaced the emptiness, and he grasped at it like a drowning man.

“I should protect... you.” He was a gentleman, for God’s sake. What had brought him to his knees like this? “I should —”

“Hush,” she said. “There will be plenty of time to talk later. For now, just rest.”

Rest. He’d been resting for days now, possibly weeks. How much rest did one man need?

But a massive weight held his limbs down, and the spinning in his head dragged him away from reality.

The darkness returned, and he slept.

Certain he would sleep for some time, Daisy returned to the kitchen intent on finishing her usual tasks before Gilbert arrived home. She needed to measure and cut another batch into equal portions and package them up for delivery. She was a successful entrepreneur who made goals for herself and calculated the best way to achieve them.

And yet, the hand she used to hold the knife was shaking.

His eyes... She hadn’t seen those eyes for years. Light green, alive and hopeful—mesmerizing.

But for the few amber flecks surrounding his pupils, they seemed cool. Oh, but they could burn hot. They had certainly once melted her heart.

So familiar but also distant.

It was not him.

It could not be him.

The lack of sleep had disrupted her thinking, that was all. Nearly a week had passed since she and Gilbert had begun caring for him. It seemed he would surely die on several occasions, so that week had not passed easily. A few times he'd appeared to be in so much pain that she believed he would have welcomed death.

But he had held on. He'd endured.

As had she.

And now her imagination was playing tricks on her.

But she was not that naïve and romantic girl who'd secretly clung to the promises made by her first love—for far too long.

It was not him. *It cannot be him!*

“Get a hold of yourself,” she whispered.

And now she was talking to herself.

Oh, but for a second, she'd been swept back in time—before the old duke's death, before her life had been turned upside down—to a warm spring afternoon when she'd been young and so hopeful and in love.

Throughout their special friendship, Daisy had known change would eventually come. She hadn't, however, expected that afternoon to be the last time she ever saw him.

The blood in her veins cooled at the memory.

She'd been concerned when he'd not returned right away. Then she'd been angry. In the end, she had been devastated.

But, God help her, she'd been unable to fully banish the hope.

After the move to London resulting in her mother's death, followed by her father's decline, she'd grown up quickly. There hadn't been time to grieve the loss of a childhood romance.

And so she'd done her best to banish him from her thoughts, succeeding for the most part.

Except in the middle of the night. Or while performing mindless tasks.

With the sleeping man in her pantry never far from her thoughts, Daisy attended to a few customers, swept out the front shop and then polished the wood to a high shine. Such tasks normally relaxed her, but today they failed to calm her racing thoughts.

Because of *him*.

On a few occasions, she imagined that she had seen Alastair walking down the street, fantasizing that he was looking for her—that he'd been looking for her for years.

Desperately.

She'd been disappointed every time. Over and over again.

Until the day she'd overheard two of her customers discussing that the Duke of Lovington was in town—and mentioning the magnificence of his five-story manor across from Hyde Park.

She'd been unable to resist walking past it. Always keeping her distance, of course.

"*It isn't him,*" she grumbled. "*It can't be.*" She forced the knife into the soap and cut five vertical lines parallel to the pan's edge, and then five horizontal ones, making twenty-five evenly proportioned bars. She'd just finished wrapping the last

one in burlap and tying it off with a kelly-green ribbon when Gilbert burst into the kitchen.

Daisy stared at the clock in disbelief. She'd been hard at work for over eight hours. She'd checked on the patient a few times, but he'd slept the entire day away.

She hoped it was a good sign.

"Is he still alive?" Gilbert asked the same question he'd asked first thing every day this week. His eyes, so similar to hers and their mother's, stared wide and curious.

"He is. And he woke up." Daisy exhaled. Because of course, Gilbert would have questions.

"Who is he?"

"I still don't know. He was only conscious for a few minutes, and he wasn't very... aware." She paused, running through the encounter again and then tilting her head.

She was wrong. He had been aware. Of her. Of the pantry. But he'd not been aware of...

Himself.

"He's most certainly a gentleman—a nob," she said out loud. He'd apologized to her.

Twice.

Because he couldn't answer her questions? Or for no reason at all?

He'd grown frustrated, and his pain had quickly returned.

"Do you think he'll live then?" Gilbert had been as helpful as Daisy had been willing to allow.

Although weak and ill, their mysterious patient was male. No man had resided with them since the death of their father

and if anyone got wind of it, her reputation could be damaged.

And she needed her reputation in order to do business with members of the *ton*.

“I believe he’s out of the woods,” Daisy answered vaguely.

Even with the stranger out of sight, both she and Gilbert were acutely aware of his presence. And the complications that came along with it.

“Mrs. Farley stopped me on the way home. She asked about you. Asked why you haven’t come ‘round for tea this week.” Gilbert dropped his books onto the chair by the door, and his comment further solidified that she needed to proceed with caution.

“Such a well-meaning neighbor. What would we do without her?” The question was rhetorical as they’d likely never know. “I’ll drop in on her tomorrow once I’ve made my deliveries.”

Mrs. Farley, one of her aunt’s old friends, had lived next door for decades. The elderly lady made it a point for everyone to know that she’d never missed a Sunday at church, even going so far as to criticize the vicar when she felt his sermon wasn’t to her standards. When Daisy had asked her aunt why she endured the woman’s company, however, Aunt Thea had explained that Mrs. Farley was obviously lonely. Once a person got past the more annoying aspects of their neighbor’s personality, she was mostly tolerable.

And so Daisy had made a habit of taking tea with her once a week.

“Better to be friends with your neighbors than enemies,” Aunt Thea had added. Which, Daisy had conceded, made sense.

Unfortunately, and occasionally a little vexing, Mrs. Farley considered it her Godly duty to keep Daisy apprised of her opinion—on other families who lived nearby, as well as the state of Daisy’s soul, which was in peril, seeing as how she, a woman of seven and twenty, insisted upon living her life without the protection of a husband.

But Daisy would deal with Mrs. Farley later.

For now, with the stranger showing signs that he might live, Daisy had an altogether different concern.

What on earth was she going to do with him?

CHAPTER
SIX

When Daisy checked on her patient after supper, she was pleased to discover his fever had not returned. And although he hadn't woken up again, his sleep seemed restful. She hoped it was restorative.

She had not allowed herself to contemplate the shock she'd felt while staring into his eyes until later that night. Lively green eyes—identical to the ones she'd lost herself in years ago.

Except for the light of hope.

When she'd completed all her chores, and long after Gilbert completed his homework and went to bed, Daisy crept into the pantry and lowered herself onto the small stool beside the mattress.

After she'd washed out the dirt and blood, his dark hair was as silky and rich as Alastair's had been. Making out features on the lower half of his face was nigh impossible, however, with the beard that had thickened with each day. It prevented her from studying the lines of his cheeks or his jaw. And his lips were dry from suffering through his fever.

Ten years had passed since she'd seen Alastair—not including the few glimpses she'd had from a distance, on the

few occasions when she'd loitered in the park. But those glimpses had been fleeting.

He was nearing thirty now—a grown gentleman, not the young man on the brink of adulthood. Would he have such a sturdy build as this man did? Would his whiskers have grown this thickly?

He stirred, and Daisy jumped. And then his eyes opened again, reaching inside her heart and squeezing it.

She'd never seen anyone with eyes like Alastair's—a unique green color surrounded by starlike flecks of gold.

Until now.

He lifted his gaze to meet hers, sending a shiver down her spine.

“Hello.” She cleared her throat. “Do you remember waking up before?”

He blinked and when he spoke, his voice sounded coarse. “Daisy,” he said. For half a second, she thought he must be Alastair, and that he remembered her from all those years ago, but then he added, “You've been nursing me.”

Her heart slowed to normal. Because, *of course*, she had provided her name earlier. She had introduced herself.

She reached for his water with a trembling hand. “You should drink.” She helped him to lift his head, holding the cup to his mouth.

She'd felt perfectly comfortable touching him while he'd been very sick, cleaning him, forcing him to swallow medicine, but now that he was awake, this intimacy chipped at her confidence.

“How do you feel? How is your head? Are you in pain again?” she asked. Why was she so flustered?

He propped himself up to sit, and Daisy was reminded of how large of a man he was. “A little. It’s not as bad.” His gaze shifted to the shelves towering above and to the half open door. “Where am I?”

“You’re in my pantry. Do you remember what happened?”

He kept his stare on the shelves, unfocused, and his frown grew deeper with each second that he didn’t answer.

She didn’t want him to get frustrated again, so she added, “You were beaten badly and left for dead. Do you know why?”

“I can’t recall...” He frowned. “Much of anything.” And then he turned that disconcerting gaze on her as though she had the answers.

But she didn’t. Because he *was not Alastair*.

“Can you remember what happened to you?” she asked. “Anything at all?”

His brows furrowed. “I remember... pain.”

The agony in his voice summoned a stinging to her eyes. His haunted expression had her hugging her arms in front of her.

“But why? What else do you remember?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and winced. “It’s there.” But that defeated look was returning. “I just can’t...” He looked up at her again. “You are familiar though. Your scent. It’s—”

“Honeysuckle,” she answered for him. The signature scent of her soap but also the perfume she made for herself.

Sometimes it permeated the entire shop. He would have been smelling it on and off since he'd arrived.

Although, it had always been her favorite, and it grew ubiquitously in the trees where they'd spent hours and hours together, alone, talking, and eventually... loving.

No. No. No!

This man was not Alastair. *Her* Alastair would be safe and sound in his grand manor—most likely married to a well-bred wife—to a woman of high birth, one who would be appropriate for a duke.

He might have a nursery full of children by now. Little heirs to his dukedom.

“Who is your family?” she asked.

He frowned.

She could not continue keeping a strange man in her storeroom. There must be someone who would want to claim him!

The trouble was, he'd been beaten. Beaten by men wearing police uniforms. At the time, she'd been mostly concerned about protecting her garden, but what had they said?

They'd taken a ring, wanting to use it as proof. And they'd mentioned that *His Lordship* had wanted it done...

Her patient was obviously a refined gentleman. Who was this lord who'd ordered him killed, and if her patient returned home, would he be putting himself in danger once again?

When she'd first dragged this man inside, she'd purposefully tucked such questions away. But she could no longer ignore them.

She needed a recent copy of the *Gazette*. Someone must have reported him missing!

“Who are you?” she asked, locking her stare with his. “What is your name?”

More silence.

He stared down at the sleeve of the night shirt she’d found for him—one of her father’s old garments. Flicking his wrist from side to side, he then opened his hand, flexing it a few times.

He sucked in a weighted sigh. “I don’t know.”

The memory of that last blow delivered by the meaner of the two officers reared itself. Had that injury done permanent damage?

If he didn’t know his own name, how could he find his people?

It wasn’t as though she could keep him, handsome though he might be.

She stared at the open vee of his nightshirt, not for the first time, and without making a conscious effort to do so, admired the taut and silky skin it revealed. His entire chest was smooth but with a smattering of dark hair. She knew from having bathed him—quite thoroughly, in fact.

Only because his fever had burned so hot. She’d been faced with the choice of offending her modesty or having him expire when she might be able to prevent it.

Thank God he had not expired. He was very much alive and waiting for some sort of response from her.

Her mouth had gone dry. Was he waiting for her to reassure him?

“It’s only been a few hours since you woke up. I’m sure you’ll remember everything by tomorrow.”

But what if he didn’t?

His dark stare echoed her thoughts. Oh, but those eyes needed hope again.

Flustered, she smoothed her skirts and glanced around the small storage room.

“Are you hungry? I have soup left over from supper.” With all the complications this man had brought to her home, she was happy to address a need that she could actually do something about. He needed nourishment. That she could do.

He would be better in the morning.

Meanwhile, he kept his gaze fixed on her. And this time, when she met his stare, he smiled—just a small tilt of his lips. Warmth danced from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. It was that feeling. A feeling she’d all but forgotten ever since Alastair left to be with his father in London.

“I’m pleased to say I actually have an answer to your question, at least. Because as a matter of fact, I’m starving.”

Daisy found herself grinning back at him, and although it was short and ironic sounding, they both laughed just a little. When she rose, however, he turned serious again.

“I’m inconveniencing you, though. Am I not?” Even seated on the mattress, he exhibited a very specific dignity. *Definitely a gentleman.* “As soon as I’m able, I’ll take myself out of your way—out of your pantry. So you can go on as you wish.” A wince this time, masquerading as a tight grin.

Daisy shook her head. “You’re not inconveniencing me,” she lied. He’d only turned her life upside down.

But he'd obviously been through a lot.

And for the first time in a very long time, she felt... alive in an intriguing way. Each day since he'd arrived, she'd been inspired. She'd been thrilled to wake up, make better soaps, and was excited about the future.

Caring for Gilbert gave her purpose, caring for this man... provided something different—hope?

Not hope. Pride?

But that was not why she needed to keep him here.

“You were beaten and left for dead. Your wounds need to heal completely before you put yourself back in danger.”

Until he remembered his circumstances, he wouldn't be safe. And she had not nursed him back to health to send him right back into danger.

Which meant her guest wouldn't be going anywhere soon.

Not if she could help it.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

He remembered nothing.

No names, places, or... anything that mattered.

Disappointment swept through him the next morning as he lay on the mattress staring into the darkness. For most of the night, he'd forcefully attempted to search all the places in his mind but had come up empty over and over again. What the devil was wrong with his head? The flash of faces came like lightning, there but gone in a half a second. But for similar flashes of a large country manor, he landed on nothing that provided him with any useful information.

Not even my own bloody name.

Voices sounded outside the pantry, and he ran one hand through his hair. From the brief rundown Daisy had shared with him the night before, he recognized what must be her brother chatting with her in the kitchen.

After bringing him soup the night before, she'd sat with him and talked, much like a nurse would read a bedtime story.

She'd told him about her brother and his schooling, and the soap she made, her clients, and mentioned her father and mother.

She'd intentionally steered all talk away from his situation.

Even now, hearing her footsteps, he didn't feel quite as lost. Daisy Montgomery felt... familiar to him. In between the darkness in his memories, his thoughts snagged on wide blue eyes and blond curls that refused to be tamed as they fell around her face. The image provided him with a sense of hope.

No doubt, it was because she'd been the person to care for him. Aside from her brother, an eager lad of about ten, she was the only face he knew.

The only face that meant anything.

And this morning, with the pain in his head diminished to a dull ache, he was more than ready to rejoin the living.

Ignoring the straining in his joints and muscles, he threw back the blanket and sat up.

Much better. But he needed to *move*.

And aside from a few bruises here and there, and what he thought might be some cracked ribs, he wasn't as bad off as he'd thought.

Almost.

Gripping the edge of the shelf, he hardly groaned at all pulling himself to his feet and he grudgingly conceded that it was a good thing he had something to hold onto.

Because the world swam and his legs felt like pudding.

Taking a few seconds to gather his wits, he waited for the sluggishness to pass. A man could only lie abed so long before it drove him mad. Especially when he had no idea who the hell he was.

Normally, he would have preferred to don proper clothing first, but there was nothing to be done for that. Besides, the

nightshirt fell past his knees, and he knew well enough that Daisy would have already seen far more than any lady ought.

The thought humbled him, but when he imagined her hands on him, he struggled to dismiss inappropriate ideas.

At least one important organ remained intact. But such evidence would not only embarrass her but her brother.

The nightshirt was short, but also worn thin, and not the best garment to provide a man with much modesty.

So, he waited, shifting intrusive images of Sweet Daisy's hands on his body in favor of contemplating the few tidbits of information she'd shared with him. He was only partly successful.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the kitchen.

She moved about the kitchen, her behind shifting invitingly beneath her gown even as her curls fell down her back, some settling along her neck, others moving when she turned her head.

It wasn't like him—at least he didn't think it was—to be so distracted by a woman.

He'd heard of military men falling in love with the women who nursed them back to health, but he didn't think that was the case.

No, he *knew* her.

She was a stranger, but not a stranger.

Before more frustrating thoughts hit him full-force, he closed the door behind him and approached the worktable. A massive black stove stood prominently near one wall, and shelves with neatly stacked clean dishes proved that along with being compassionate, Daisy was also tidy and efficient.

It did not surprise him.

“You’re awake!” a young boy who looked a good deal like his sister announced.

Daisy pivoted around, and he couldn’t help but appreciate that her cheeks flushed at the sight of him.

And he liked it.

Perhaps he wasn’t the proper gentleman he imagined himself to be.

“What are you doing out of bed?” she scolded, but he could also see that she was a little pleased.

Because it meant he was getting better, and the sooner he could remain upright for more than ten minutes at a time, the sooner she could be rid of him.

The thought of leaving shouldn’t take the wind out of him like it did.

But it didn’t signify. For God knows how long, he’d relied upon her for everything. He couldn’t go on like this. One glance around the kitchen and it was painfully obvious that she worked very hard just so that she could make ends meet.

And also pay for her brother to go to school.

She’d spent much of her precious time nursing him back to health—out of the goodness of her heart.

After settling his affairs, he’d find a way to pay her back.

“I can’t lie abed indefinitely.” He shrugged. “I need answers.” And then he glanced down at his bare feet and ankles. “Although I suppose I’ll have better luck if I can borrow a pair of breeches.”

“But you can’t—” Daisy was cut off when a bell rang, signifying someone entering her shop, but the footsteps didn’t pause in the outer room. Instead, they approached with deliberate purpose.

If he had his wits about him, he would have ducked back into the pantry. But his wits had apparently abandoned him.

Furthermore, he wasn’t the sort of man who hid.

How could he know something like that but not know his own name?

“Miss Montgomery?” The voice of an elderly female floated into the kitchen. “If the mountain won’t come to Mohammad, then Mohammad will...” The woman appeared at the kitchen threshold, and she paused just long enough to lower the spectacles perched on her hawkish nose and inspect him from head to toe—bare legs and all. “...come to the mountain,” she finished.

Must go. He mentally corrected the quote. *The mountain must go...*

His brain wasn’t completely useless... He’d only forgotten the important matters.

Like who he was. Where he lived. *My entire life up until this moment.*

Having no explanation, he kept silent. Because although he had no memory, he did remember the notion of propriety.

And he was not so clueless he didn’t realize that anything he said could make matters worse for his hostess.

Daisy’s guest, however, had no trouble expressing her opinion.

“Pray tell, why is a half-naked man standing in your kitchen?” The woman was likely well into her eighth decade but had keen eyes and a rigid posture. “What sort of immoral behavior are you exposing your brother to? He’s but a child! Hasn’t he suffered enough already?” It was all too easy to imagine puffs of affronted air shooting out of the gray-haired lady’s nostrils. “As I live and breathe, Miss Montgomery, your dear Aunt Theodora would be rolling her grave if she were to witness such going’s on.”

Daisy stepped forward, extending out a hand as though she could hold the woman back. “Mrs. Farley. This isn’t what you think it is.” But Daisy sounded uncertain, apologetic.

Because of him. His very presence had put her in this uncomfortable situation.

“I’m curious as to what it is, then.” Mrs. Farley’s voice came out sharp and commanding. He would have answered, but curse it all, he didn’t know his own name, much less any plausible explanation that would appease this fire-breathing octogenarian.

“He’s—um...” Daisy’s gaze darted around the kitchen as though searching for some explanation.

“I should have known something like this would happen with your aunt gone.” Mrs. Farley pinched her mouth together.

“Its been nearly four years!” Daisy pointed out.

“And that matters, why? My but how quickly you’ve allowed your true character to come to light. I warned your aunt that you needed to marry, but she insisted you knew what was best. And now, left to your own devices, you’ve fallen into a life of sin.”

“I have not fallen into a life of sin!” Daisy declared. “This isn’t what you think Because this man is...” Daisy lifted her chin. “He is my husband, Mr. Alastair... Montgomery. Alastair, this is my neighbor and very good friend, Mrs. Farley.”

Alastair?

Had this sweet young woman been holding out on him?

Why the hell hadn’t she informed him of this very pertinent fact before?

Her husband?

If she knew his name, she likely knew his entire history.

He’d be angry later, very angry. But for now... He was more than a little relieved that although he didn’t know all the answers, he could get them from her.

Alastair Montgomery.

The name failed to dislodge any of his memories. Even so... Having Daisy as his wife felt quite plausible. That explained her willingness to care for him in what would have at times been considerably intimate circumstances.

It also supported the intense physical pull he felt toward her.

But...

Something wasn’t quite right. Perhaps they’d been estranged? Or had argued? He vaguely recalled her asking if he knew who would want to hurt him.

Indeed, the two of them would most definitely have a serious discussion about all of this after their guest departed.

“I apologize for my attire, madam,” *Alastair*... said, shooting Daisy, who was obviously reluctant to meet his stare, a suspicious glance. She very deliberately directed all her attention to the nosy neighbor as he continued. “*My wife* and I weren’t expecting company so early this morning.”

Did her lovely complexion tinge pink?

Alastair wasn’t wholly opposed to the notion of being married to the spirited blonde he’d come to know since waking up. No. Not at all.

Despite how little he knew of her, this woman made up his entire world.

“Your husband? But, *Miss Montgomery*, you’ve never mentioned him—not even a word. How can this be?”

Daisy’s hands fidgeted at her waist. “He—Alastair has been away. I wasn’t sure when he would return... or if he would.” At this, she strode across the room and wound her hand around Alastair’s arm. “His absence has always been too painful to talk about.” She emphasized the point with a loud sniff.

“But where have you been, young man?” Mrs. Farley turned her attention back to Alastair. “Are you a military man?”

Curious to hear her answer, he silently waited.

“Not the military,” Daisy said. “But he worked on a ship—er—importing and exporting and whatnot. It was attacked by pirates, and... I hadn’t heard from my—from Alastair for nearly a decade. But now he’s returned, safe and sound, and I couldn’t be more pleased.”

She was making this up. He didn’t know how he knew, but he *knew* her. And she was lying.

Ah, yes. The two of them would have a conversation.

Mrs. Farley appeared suspicious but mostly willing to accept Daisy's story for now. "Why didn't your aunt mention this when I encouraged her that you should marry?"

"Out of respect for my sensibilities," Daisy answered solemnly. "Alastair is, in fact, the very reason she resisted your suggestions for me." Daisy swiped the back of her hand across her eyes as though holding back tears. Alastair noticed that her brother was looking almost as fascinated with his sister's tale as himself. "Aunt Thea knew how devastated I was at his disappearance."

"You must have been awfully young when you married. What were you, all of six and ten?"

"Seven and ten, actually. And I was old enough to fall in love," Daisy returned.

Alastair glanced down at her because of all the announcements she'd made this morning, this particular one rang true. And although her cheeks were pink, her eyes blazed like blue fire.

He inhaled a sharp breath, and the sweet scent of honeysuckle filled his senses.

Was she telling the truth? Had he fallen in love with this woman ten years before? But he couldn't get any answers as long as they had an audience.

"So you see," Alastair said. "Everything is quite above-board." Or was it? He wasn't sure what to believe.

Mrs. Farley studied each of them and then finally dipped her chin in approval.

“I’ll come for tea this week,” Daisy said. “I promise.” All along his side, Alastair could feel Daisy shaking beside him.

She’d been afraid—for her reputation? The realization only deepened his determination to remove himself from their lives. His presence here already caused too much trouble.

She released his arm then, and chatting about recipes and tea, steered Mrs. Farley out of the kitchen and out the front door. Only after they’d disappeared did Alastair turn to Gilbert, who was looking more than a little entertained by the entire exchange.

“We’re brothers then, eh?” Alastair cocked a brow.

“Maybe.” Gilbert proved quite loyal to his sister, clamping his mouth shut and backing out of the room.

Leaving Alastair to wait for Daisy.

Who was, apparently, his long-lost wife.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Daisy's heart raced as she all but shoved Mrs. Farley out the door and onto the street. Not in a hundred years would she have imagined her patient would step into the kitchen wearing nothing but her father's old nightshirt. Goodness! She hadn't realized he could even stand!

But she couldn't spend time marveling at either of those things. Because before they'd been interrupted, he'd announced his intentions to leave. What on earth was he thinking?

Oh, but this morning wasn't going at all as she'd envisioned it.

Firstly, it was her fault for not anticipating that Mrs. Farley might show up as she'd done on a few occasions before. But her timing this morning had been...

Uncanny.

A nightmare.

And it had presented Daisy with the potential of having to deal with the fallout brought on by a scandal of epic proportions. Not much in the grand scheme of things, but where her business was concerned, it could prove catastrophic.

Closing the shop door, she locked it this time and then pressed her back against the wood. But, oh dear! Mrs. Farley had no doubt already told half the street what she'd discovered in Daisy's kitchen this morning.

Daisy touched both palms to her cheeks. It wasn't that Daisy required a spotless reputation the same as other young women, but her business did. If even a few of her customers took their business elsewhere believing she was tainted, she'd be ruined.

Financially.

Which was why she'd told such an outrageous lie. Not outrageous—*necessary*.

Declaring that her patient was her long-lost husband had been the only viable reason to explain his presence in her home.

Practically naked.

But calling him Alastair? What was her reasoning behind that?

Had she done that out of foolishness or wishful thinking?

She pushed off the door and made her way toward her kitchen. Oh, but how simple her life had been before she'd decided to help her handsome stranger.

And dull, the voice in the back of her head reminded her. Not that she didn't find satisfaction making soaps and caring for Gilbert, but...

Having him here... She liked it.

Oh, but what must he think of her now? He must think her mad for telling Mrs. Farley he was her husband.

She stepped into her kitchen to find him alone—waiting for her.

She brushed her hands down her skirt and then met his gaze.

“I imagine you’re wondering what that was about?” She couldn’t quite keep the shaking out of her voice.

“I was going to take my leave today or tomorrow, but why would I do that?” He frowned. “If you are my wife?”

Daisy stilled. Gilbert hadn’t told him anything then, and he’d yet to have regained his memory.

“You don’t remember anything, then?” He’d be in danger if he left. Foolish man!. “You can’t leave. You’re not fully healed yet.”

“I refuse to be more of a burden than I’ve already been.” He kept his stare fixed on her. “But being married to you would explain a few things. You being my wife...”

Daisy’s mouth went dry. “What would it explain?”

He cleared his throat and then scrubbed a hand down his face. “The feeling I have when I’m with you...” He exhaled. “The fact that you would take me in—a total stranger. And that you would care for me—so thoroughly.”

The air settled thick between them. Because, yes, she’d cared for him. She’d washed him. She’d seen every inch of him. And why?

Because it was the right thing to do.

“Wouldn’t any decent person care for a person in need?”

“No.” His answer came quickly. “Not in my experience.”

Did that mean... “You remember something?”

“No.” He frowned. “However, in light of recent events...” He stared at her meaningfully. “But you haven’t answered my question. Was any of what you told your neighbor true? Did you know me before I was attacked?”

This man had never been her husband—nor had Alastair.

And yet... seeing him stand there and listening to the cadence of his voice sent a chill down her spine...

“No,” she answered, and then went on, preempting the question she was sure would follow “But Mrs. Farley is a horrible gossip, and it was the only explanation for how you came to be standing in my kitchen practically naked.” Daisy closed her eyes. “I do wish you’d stayed in the pantry...”

“Because you would be *ruined*...”

“Being ruined presents distinctive repercussions for a woman like me. My clients... My blends of oils and soap are special—too expensive for regular people to buy. It’s taken a good deal of work to build up my customer base, and I rely on them—for everything.” She exhaled. “And these customers. They are... proper.”

He nodded, his expression pensive, and then his eyes met hers.

Nobody had looked at her like this in a very long time—looked at her as though he not only wanted to see her but also hear her and understand her. As though he wanted to know all the things she wasn’t saying.

The same way Alastair had.

She resisted the urge to squirm.

“Then I must leave,” he finally said. “I’m too much of a burden, and I could become a liability. Tell your nosy neighbor

your husband is a lout who refuses to settle down.”

Daisy held out a hand, shaking her head at the same time. “You can’t leave. You aren’t healed properly yet!”

“I’ll be fine.” He shrugged. “I was wearing clothing when you found me?”

“Yes.”

“Did you keep it?”

“I did. But... You cannot go. I—the men who were beating you. They’re still out there.”

“Did you get a look at them?”

“Barely. I was outside when I heard them through the fence... The attack was not random. They needed to report to...” Daisy frowned, trying to remember exactly what those horrible men had said. “His Lordship. The person who wanted you dead is a lord. They took a ring to give to him.”

“The one from my pinky.” He extended his left hand where a white mark indicated he’d once worn a ring.

She nodded. “Yes. At first, I thought they’d be taking a wedding ring. But it’s...”

“The wrong finger.” He frowned.

“They were going to use it as proof, so it could be a family ring? Something that would have revealed your identity.”

He stared at his hand, looking incredibly thoughtful. Was he remembering something? She kept silent for nearly an entire minute, not wanting to interrupt him in case memories were returning.

And then he shook his head and exhaled. “I don’t know,” he finally said.

“Which is precisely why you need to keep out of sight for now. You are too vulnerable. It was two *policemen* who left you there. And although they can easily recognize you, you wouldn’t know who your enemies are if they stood right in front of you.”

“Possibly.” His brows furrowed. “What could I have done to make someone want me dead?”

“It might have more to do with who you are. But until you remember something, you can’t go gallivanting around the city showing your face.”

He kept right on watching her. “But none of this is your problem. You have your soaps to make and your brother to care for.” His eyes searched hers. For what? “You are not keeping something from me, are you? Because you do seem familiar. More familiar than anything else.”

His admission sent a tremor through her.

Daisy swallowed hard. “You remind me of someone. But you cannot be him. I think I’m familiar to you because my face was the one you saw when you were wracked with fever. At times, you would open your eyes, but you were somewhere else.” She twisted her mouth into a small smile. “But I am not keeping anything from you.”

She would not go into more detail than that. She never discussed Alastair with anyone, and now that her parents had passed, no one remembered that she’d once been in love with the son of a duke.

To imagine that someone like her had been so foolish was a little embarrassing.

“I see,” he said.

“I cannot allow you to put yourself in danger. A few days ago, I thought you were going to die. Give yourself some time before seeking out whoever was trying to kill you. At the very least, wait until you’ve fully regained your strength.”

“You’re too generous.”

“And you’re looking tired. I’ll be terribly angry if you die on me after all those nights I stayed up with you.” It was a morbid thing to say, but she truly didn’t want him to push himself too hard. “Mrs. Farley will already have told half the street that I’ve a newly returned husband so your presence is already explained. When the time comes for you to leave, then I shall complain of your inconsistency—that you are a man unwilling to settle down and have returned to your wandering ways.”

She laughed and was a little surprised that it sounded a little sad. Because although his eyes looked tired, even dressed in nothing but an her father’s old nightclothes, there was something about this man. He was so very handsome, but he also carried himself with a confidence she was unaccustomed to seeing. He was unafraid.

And what had he said?

The feeling I have when I’m with you...

He’d not seemed chagrined when he’d thought she might be his wife. No, he’d seemed almost relieved... And if she was going to be perfectly truthful, the fantasy was not a distasteful one.

She stomped down the thought. She barely knew him, for heaven’s sake!

“Very well,” he said, nodding. “I’ll rest today but as soon as I feel stronger, I need to look into all of this. Until then, I

refuse to be a burden. If I remain, I will do all that I can to be useful.” He let out a short laugh. “I suppose Alastair is as good a name as any. At least you didn’t call me Cornelius, Obadiah, or some other god-awful name.”

But she didn’t laugh.

“You wish me to call you... Alastair?”

“From what you say, we don’t have much of a choice,” he said.

“True.”

What had she been thinking calling him that name? Uttering it was going to be... heartbreaking. If she wasn’t already so aware of this man’s resemblance to the man she’d once loved, addressing him by the same name was going to feel like salt in the wound.

“And your brother? Will this be a problem for him?”

Daisy shook her head. “Gilbert knows the truth, as he was the one who helped drag you inside, but he’s never been one to gossip. He’s only ten but he’ll understand the reasons for the deception. He’s unusually mature for his age.”

Despite Daisy’s best efforts, her brother had been forced to grow up quicker than some. But not as quickly as the street urchins lurking in the shadows of the streets surrounding them. She and Gilbert were very lucky to have a home—and to know that each night they would have food on the table.

Too many others went hungry.

And that was why she could not afford to lose any of her customers. Protecting Gilbert, providing for him... It was her greatest purpose. All because of the Duke of Lovington.

Because Alastair hadn't cared about the fate of his father's tenants.

How could she forget him with this enigmatic stranger here?

"Now." Daisy walked across the room, meaning to steer him back into the pantry. "You must rest." But when she touched him, awareness thrummed through her.

She *liked* touching him.

She liked *him*. She didn't even know his real name and she liked him not just as a friend, but in the way a woman likes an attractive man.

Was keeping him here a mistake?

"You're terribly bossy." Was he teasing her?

"You must not be accustomed to efficient women," she answered. "But I'll take it as a compliment."

He laughed. "I'm sure I can come up with a better compliment than that."

His gaze caught hers, and she felt a warm blush on her cheeks as she looked away.

It was almost as though they were flirting.

CHAPTER
NINE

Since Gilbert had slipped out for school while she'd dealt with the fallout from Mrs. Farley's visit, Daisy had most of the day to prepare answers to questions her brother would have when he came home.

He'd barely set his books down before initiating the conversation. "You aren't really secretly married, are you? You just made that up."

"I did." Daisy handed him the small sandwich she sometimes had waiting for him. Gilbert, who was already taller than most boys his age, never refused food. How long before he towered over her? "Do you know why?" she asked.

"Because he wasn't dressed." Gilbert snorted. Ah, yes. Her brother understood on a very basic level.

"Him joining us in the kitchen like that wasn't very appropriate." She tried to instill manners and propriety into her brother whenever possible. He might need it someday.

"I don't suppose he had much choice. Stuck in the larder like that."

"True." Daisy smiled at her brother's logic. "But you and I need to talk. Ala—our guest still hasn't remembered who he is, so he's going to stay with us a little longer. And since I told

Mrs. Farley that his name was Alastair, *my husband*, we're going to keep up that story until he is safe to go."

Gilbert, who'd been listening carefully while he chewed, nodded. "Will he still sleep in there?" He pointed to the pantry door.

Daisy hadn't thought this part through, but there were only two small rooms upstairs, and Gilbert's was so small it barely held his bed.

Downstairs, Daisy had fashioned the parlor into a sales room for her oils and soaps. Aside from that, they had the kitchen and a small dining room where Gilbert did his homework and took dinner, and where she sometimes took tea with Mrs. Farley.

But the dining room was larger than the pantry, and it had a window... If they moved the mattress in there, he'd be more comfortable. Gilbert could do his homework in the kitchen, and they'd simply move the mattress elsewhere if Mrs. Farley came for tea.

Daisy certainly couldn't share her small bedroom with him.

Alastair.

Impressions of a long-ago afternoon unexpectedly raced through her mind. Impressions she'd struggled to keep at bay because they hurt too much.

"We'll move him into the dining room next time he's up." But then she changed the subject. "Now, tell me about your day..."

Gilbert, although not a gossip, could go on and on about academic subjects that interested him. History and philosophy topped that list.

“We’re reading John Locke,” Gilbert said just before tearing a bite off his sandwich.

“He is a philosopher, no?”

Her brother nodded. “We’re reading the fourth book of his *Essay Concerning a Human Understanding*.”

Before Daisy and Gilbert’s father began farming, he’d attended the small village school where he’d learned to read, studied history, and even enjoyed philosophy. So much so, he used to joke, that he’d married the teacher.

Therefore, when Daisy was young, both her parents had encouraged Daisy to share her latest lessons over supper, or while working in the kitchen with her mother, or the field with her father. Looking back on those simple times years later, she’d realized that they’d tricked her into learning.

So, she’d practiced the same habit with Gilbert, encouraging him to share his lessons with her every evening.

If he could teach them to her, he would likely have a stronger grasp of the material.

And aside from the practicality of this habit, Daisy, like her father, wasn’t opposed to filling her brain up with new thoughts. She especially loved literature and history.

She had loved listening to Alastair discuss new ideas he’d learned over the long winter’s when he’d been away at school.

“Tell me about Mr. Locke,” she said as she scrubbed out one of the bowls she’d used earlier. She vaguely remembered that he’d been one of Alastair’s favorites.

“He was a physician first, which allowed him a unique perception of humans. Humans as individuals, but also how

they exist with other humans—and how governments ought to work for their greater good.”

At times like this, Gilbert truly did seem mature for his age.

“And when did he live?” Daisy prodded.

“The seventeenth century. And before you ask, he was English. I believe he was born in Bristol.”

“I have heard of him.” *A long time ago.*

Daisy dried the bowl and placed it on the proper shelf while Gilbert continued.

“He writes that humans are born with no preconceptions about anything. That our minds are blank slates.”

“A state which I am unfortunately far too familiar with.” The unexpected comment had Daisy whirling around in surprise. Her patient stood in the pantry doorway, one eyebrow cocked.

In less than twenty seconds, his presence shot the temperature in the room up by at least ten degrees. How did he do that?

Daisy swept her gaze down his tall form and nodded in approval. She’d left some of her father’s clothing on the chair in the pantry, and although they weren’t a perfect fit, they were far more appropriate than the old nightshirt.

“Although,” he continued. “I’m not sure my particular condition is what Locke had in mind.”

“I have your clothing,” she said, lest he question the small fit. “The ones you wore when I found you, and they’re clean. But—” She opened a nearby cupboard and extracted the newly washed and mended linen shirt, an embroidered waistcoat, a

pair of well-cut breeches, and a worn pair of Hessians. “I’m not sure how we would explain why a seaman dresses better than the king.”

She went to put them away, but he was already moving around the worktable toward her. “Let me take a closer look at them.”

And as he crossed the room, she noticed that although he moved slowly, he wasn’t limping. It was a miracle he was up at all.

He lifted the fabric, studying each piece, and as he stood beside her, Daisy resisted the urge to lean closer to him.

Perhaps she was coming down with something.

She’d considered him attractive while he’d been vulnerable and bedridden, with him towering over her, he took her breath away.

His broad shoulders brushed hers as he examined clothing that could only have been owned by a wealthy gentleman.

A man who’d worn a ring on his pinky.

“Do you—” She swallowed the strain in her voice. “Do you remember them?”

He opened up each piece of clothing and smoothed his hand along the fabric. Daisy took a step back, partly so she could look at him properly and partly to put some distance between them.

Two lines appeared between his eyes. “I know they’re mine, and yet, they aren’t specifically familiar.”

“Like Locke?” Gilbert asked.

He chuckled without glancing up. “Like Locke.”

But then he located one of the patches she'd applied and rubbed his thumb over her dainty stitches.

"The garments are fine," Daisy pointed out. "Even mended."

She held her breath, wondering if he would remember them, and didn't exhale until he lifted his gaze to meet hers.

"You didn't need to do this." He licked his lips. "Daisy Margaret Montgomery."

Her name in his mouth sent bells ringing in her head. A wave of dizziness threatened to wash over her.

How could he *not* be Alastair? She touched the worktable to maintain her balance. Why would he call her that?

Because he'd introduced herself to him—that was why.

"I had time to work on them while you slept," she admitted before deliberately steering the conversation back to her original point. "These are not a working man's clothing." If she'd wanted to, she could sell them for nearly half a year's profits.

"No," he said. "They are not."

Gilbert looked on in awe. "I'd wager you're a nob. Even without the fancy clothing, I could tell by the way you talk."

Alastair nodded.

Daisy turned back to face the worktable but couldn't seem to remember what she'd been doing.

"He's not wrong," she said softly.

CHAPTER
TEN

While Gilbert finished his sandwich, along with stating all his opinions on John Locke, Daisy assembled another sandwich for... Alastair, who'd not been without his own opinions.

The conversation was both fascinating and disconcerting.

Fascinating because so many of the ideas were new to her, and disconcerting for a number of reasons, not excluding that their cozy conversation in her kitchen felt unbearably natural—as though Alastair belonged.

And these circumstances were only temporary.

“I need to write my theme, so I'll be in the dining room, Daisy,” Gilbert announced, gathering his books up before turning to their guest. “Thanks for the help. Now I need to get these ideas down on paper.”

“The tricky part,” Alastair said.

After Gilbert disappeared, Daisy brushed her hands together, wiping up a few breadcrumbs in an attempt to appear busy. Her growing inability to concentrate in this man's presence was getting more than a little annoying.

“Daisy?” Alastair said quietly, almost as though he sensed her unease.

“Yes?” She forced a bright smile. “Are you still hungry? I could make some soup...”

He simply shook his head and then rubbed his fingertips over his beard. “I wondered if you might have a razor?”

“A razor...? Oh! A razor. Actually, I have my father’s. Excuse me one moment, and I’ll fetch it for you.”

She dashed out of the kitchen and upstairs to her room where she kept a trunk of her father’s belongings. After his death, for sentimental reasons, she’d not wanted to part with them.

Now, between this and the clothes, she was glad of that.

Back in her kitchen, she found Alastair seated on the stool Gilbert had vacated.

She set the small velvet pouch on the table, opening the flap to reveal a gleaming razor and a leather strop. “My father kept it sharp.” She smoothed the blade over the strop and inhaled the bittersweet scents, taking her back to before her father had allowed gin and other vices to rule his existence.

“Were you ever married?” Alastair’s voice broke into her thoughts, startling her.

“Oh, no.” She laughed at the notion—at the irony of him asking her this. But it was impossible. She bit her lip.

She could rule him out as Alastair after he shaved—because she could never forget his mouth... his chin.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” he said.

“Oh, no. It’s quite all right. But marriage isn’t for me. I have Gilbert to think of, and my shop...” She covered her disquiet by keeping her head down, moving the blade up and down the strop. Time would have dulled the blade.

“You look as though you know what you’re doing,” Alastair commented.

“My father preferred to be clean shaven, and his hands shook horribly in the end.” She rarely spoke of those days. She certainly hadn’t reminded Gilbert of them.

And for years, although not alone, she’d felt... lonely.

Alastair had been her best friend.

Foolish memories. *Impossible* memories.

She kept her head down, blinking away the sudden storm of emotions—carefree days while working the farm and before Alastair left the Priory.

She couldn’t be distracted by past disappointments. No, she had Gilbert’s future to think of—and her own. And she was succeeding, *dash it all!*

She worked diligently to make the best soap in all of London, blending it with oils extracted from flowers and herbs she’d grown herself. She’d managed to not only create a valuable product but to find customers willing to pay for that value. What was she doing imagining she’d find Alastair’s face beneath that thick beard?

She’d never expected him to actually marry her, but nor had she expected him to send her family packing.

He’d left all the tenants at the mercy of his uncle. She ought to hate him.

Alastair’s gaze never left her face, and she couldn’t help but ask. “Are you sure you’re up to the task?” Just a few days ago, he’d been on the brink of death.

“I cannot think I ever allowed it to grow this long. I’m feeling more than a little uncivilized.”

Ah, yes, his speech was indeed that of a refined gentleman.

“Looking uncivilized isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” Daisy said. “Makes you appear rather rugged, if I say so myself.”

He propped his elbow on the table, resting his chin on his. “Shall I leave it, then?” Green eyes would forever be her favorite—especially those with dancing lights of hope.

Which inexplicably lifted her spirits.

“Absolutely not. I want to see your face.” And she did. She *needed* to know for certain. “And lucky for you, I just finished a batch of my gentleman’s soap this morning.”

“How is it different than your other soaps?”

This was a subject she could talk about for hours.

“I make it with a higher fat content, vegetable fat, to create a thick barrier between the blade and your skin. And I use earthier scents.” She stepped to the cupboard where she’d stored some and removed a prettily-wrapped bar—this one tied off with burlap string. “Cedar, rosewood, orange, bergamot, clove, saffron, cinnamon... leather.”

“How do you make soap smell like leather?”

“I use warmer spices, ones with animal notes.”

“But you made them to sell. You needn’t waste it on me.”

“It’s not a waste. I’ll consider this research, testing it on a thick beard.” But she was curious to know how the cedar and rosewood oils blended with this particular man’s skin.

Because scents were different on different people. And she might just have had him in mind while putting this blend together.

Not him. *Alastair*.

Glancing around the room, she frowned. “I have a small looking glass in my bedchamber—” She resisted blushing at the mention of her bed and made a decision. “But why don’t you allow me to shave you this time? I’d rather not have to clean up any more of your blood.”

The words were meant half-jokingly, but Alastair caught her gaze. “Was it that bad?”

The reminder caused her to nearly dropped the soap in her hand. Without wanting to, she remembered how blood had been caked on his face and body—and the terrible wounds.

It *had* been bad. She simply hadn’t allowed herself to dwell on it at the time.

“After we got the bleeding to stop, a few of the wounds festered. I was terrified you were going to die,” she said.

“I was a stranger to you.”

“But you are a human being.” Her voice shook. Because he’d nearly died.

“Have I thanked you yet?”

“I think so...” It was the last thing on her mind.

He climbed off the stool, took the soap out of her hands and poured water into a small basin.

And then, he took her hands in his and squeezed them.

Daisy held her breath at first. His hands felt sure and strong and... Without stopping to think, she dropped her head and rested it on his shoulder, absorbing a few seconds of physical contact.

It wasn’t that Gilbert never allowed her a short embrace but this was different. It was man to woman, and with each

second that passed, a warmth spread through her.

“Thank you,” he whispered from above her head. “Thank you for saving my life.”

She wanted to protest, but he shushed her before she could do so. “You are a compassionate and courageous woman. Not everyone would do what you did. In fact, I think most would be inclined to look the other way.”

“I couldn’t.” For some reason, Daisy felt like crying. She made a little sniffing sound and then reluctantly pulled away until he had no choice but to drop his arms. “I would do it again.”

“I know,” he said, gently reaching out to tuck a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

They stared into one another’s eyes, and she swallowed hard.

As their eyes locked, a gentle and unspoken understanding seemed to pass between them. Daisy could see the gratitude in Alastair’s gaze, and she couldn’t help but feel a flutter of something more than friendship. The intensity of the moment made her heart race, and she took a small step back to compose herself.

Her heart raced at his touch, and she found herself drawn to him, both emotionally and physically. There was an undeniable chemistry between them, and she couldn’t deny the flutter of excitement in her stomach. “Now.” She cleared her throat. “Why don’t you sit down, and we’ll see about civilizing you again.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind? I can make do myself.”

Without a mirror, he’d maim himself for life.

“Quite.” Willing her hands to stop shaking, Daisy poured warm water from the kettle into the basin, soaked a clean cloth, and lathered the soap. Already, the scent had transformed the mood of the room. She inhaled. “Do you smell that?” she asked.

“Cedar?”

“And a combination of rosewood and roses. If you concentrate, you’ll notice the cinnamon and smoke.”

“I like it.” Alastair sat waiting, his feet tucked beneath the stool, while she arranged the tools. “It’s not too flowery.”

“No.” She took a fortifying breath and turned to face him. “That’s the idea. To keep the scents subtle and low and clean. There’s nothing worse than a man who smells like he’s been doused in perfume.” Was she rambling?

“Wouldn’t want that,” he agreed.

In the days she’d nursed him, she’d touched him intimately—she hadn’t any choice, really.

Nonetheless, she’d never felt the connection she did now.

“I’ll try not to douse you.”

First, she submerged the cloth and then soaked his beard with it. This was the easy part. Next, lacking a brush, she lathered the soap and then lifted her hands to his jaw.

He watched her with hooded eyes.

And as she smoothed the soap over his whiskers, his gaze grew hotter.

Being the object of his close attention unnerved her. It also released butterflies in her chest, made her skin ache, and sent liquid heat shooting to her core.

Ignore all of it, Daisy.

She would be touching a blade to his skin. She needed to keep her wits about her.

Taking up the razor, she used one hand to stretch the skin high on his cheek and the other to begin cutting away with short downward strokes. “Hold still,” she whispered.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t talk.”

This time he barely grinned while she applied what she hoped was the perfect pressure to slide the blade in the same direction as the whisker growth.

As she worked, she revealed high cheekbones, a sharp jawline, and her own ability to remain extraordinarily calm under distressing circumstances.

Because it was *him*. She’d once known this face better than her own.

This man was *Alastair*. She could hardly believe it but then again, her heart had known it all along.

Her breath caught in her lungs even as she attempted to keep her movements slow and even.

His jawline was harsher than she remembered, but he was older now. When she’d known him, he’d only been on the cusp of manhood.

He was all man now.

She paused, holding the blade to his neck, and he leaned his head back.

“You trust me?” The blade rested just above his Adam’s apple.

“You’ve proven trustworthy so far.” His voice sounded gruff, but his eyes were indeed trusting.

She rinsed the blade and went back to work, occasionally adding a little more soap.

For these few minutes, he was hers again.

No. No. No!

But she ignored the practical warnings. They’d done little to protect her heart before.

She reminded herself that his apathy had killed her mother, and eventually, her father.

“Open your mouth,” she ordered. “Make an ‘O’”

He followed her commands, and Daisy went to work on his mustache—slow and steady. His breath caressed her face while she allowed the blade to do its job.

She remembered this mouth. She remembered the scar just above his lips, a half-inch cut he’d given himself chasing her up a tree when they’d been so very, very young.

When she finished, she set the blade aside and then, using cool water this time, smoothed away the remaining soap. When he went to rise, she held him in place. “Wait, I have a balm.”

Again, he obeyed, sitting patiently while she poured the silky liquid into her hand.

“What is it?”

“Shea butter and grape seed extract.” This particular product sold for a pretty penny. She didn’t care.

Her heart battled her head, and her heart won.

This was *Alastair*.

She should have known the moment he opened his eyes. She smoothed the mixture over his cheeks, around his jaw, and around his neck.

For good measure, she brushed some over his forehead and down his nose.

And then, lost in another world, she parted her lips, leaned forward, and kissed him.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Daisy felt Alastair freeze beneath her hands, but only for an instant. He groaned and slid his hands around her waist.

“Daisy.” Her name vibrated between them.

The kiss was familiar but also brand new. And perfect.

It was a moment created out of dreams, and they were both dreamers. For an instant, two people from different worlds created their own reality.

Daisy moaned into his mouth. How had she lived without him? It was as though she’d been half alive. She’d breathed, she’d eaten, and she’d even loved.

But a piece of her heart had been frozen. A piece only Alastair could defrost. Along with the scents she’d lathered on him, she tasted his essence.

Again, the same, but different. Stronger. Older.

Sexier.

His mouth left hers, trailing a fiery river along her jaw, to her neck, and then, as though he couldn’t help himself, back to claim another kiss.

Daisy’s heart raced, and her fingers grasped the hairs at the back of his neck.

“Alastair,” she whispered. “It’s you.”

He’d moved his hands to her face, cradling her cheeks, turning her head so he could deepen the kiss. “So sweet,” he murmured. “Sweet Daisy.”

He’d backed her up to the table. His hands dropped to her thighs, and he lifted her to sit on the edge.

She parted her knees so he could step between them. She didn’t want this dream to end. Clutching the back of his head, she was another person. Someone from the past but also someone she would never be.

Because Daisy Montgomery didn’t take what she wanted. Daisy Montgomery worked. Daisy Montgomery had love to give, but not like this. She nurtured. First her mother, then her father, her brother, and her aunt.

Even her grumpy neighbor.

Until today.

Today, she wanted more, and she was taking it.

And then... it stopped.

Alastair had released her and was standing two feet away, breathing harshly, looking torn, and oh, God, looking guilty.

And regretful.

Daisy’s stomach flipped, filling her with doubt.

“My apologies, Daisy.” He shook his head.

“I kissed you.” She barely managed to speak the words around the thick sensation in her throat. What had happened to her sensibilities?

She.

Kissed.

Him.

“I didn’t stop it.” He shook his head.

Oh, God.

Embarrassment swept through her. “I’m so sorry. Please. Pretend that never happened. I can’t believe that I did that.”

He was injured and weak. He didn’t even know who he was, for heaven’s sake, let alone remember her. He’d belonged to her once, a very long time ago.

He nodded.

“My apologies,” she echoed his sentiment. “If you’ll excuse me, I have... things to do.”

And then she dashed up the stairs, feeling like that naïve girl of seven and ten again and locked herself in her small bedchamber.

What had she done? She stood staring out the window as the sun hovered on the horizon and eventually dipped behind it.

She was going to return to her kitchen, but what would she say to him?

What *could* she say to him? Was he angry? Or worse, would he pity a woman who would act in such a forward manner?

He was the most handsome man she’d ever met, and furthermore, a duke. It was possible he had a fiancée. He didn’t wear a wedding band, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have a wife.

Kissing him, as incredible as it had been, had been a mistake of historical proportions.

But as she lie on her bed, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling, she couldn't bring herself regret it.

Even though she should.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

He'd been tempted to take the blade from her hands and then capture her ruby-red mouth with his.

But she'd kissed him first. And he had done nothing to stop it.

Dear lord in heaven, if he never recovered his old life, given the opportunity to live out his days with Daisy Montgomery by his side—in his bed—he could almost be satisfied.

Almost.

But he was a man of purpose. He could not turn his back on reality, and as long as he existed as nothing more than an empty shell, he couldn't even court her.

He might not *be free* to court her.

He needed to know his history, his legacy.

If he was going to have a future, he first needed to have a past.

Hell, for all he knew, he could be married... He ran a hand through his hair.

When he'd ended their kiss, she'd run away as though the hounds of hell were chasing her. And after the door slammed

behind her, she'd set the lock so loudly that he heard it click into place all the way downstairs.

Alastair had been too stunned. Because had broken a very basic rule of propriety by kissing him like that. And he had welcomed it.

That kiss...

It left him paralyzed in a chaos of emotions. Arousal. Affection. The notion that he'd discovered something he'd lost long ago.

But also... confusion.

That kiss...

It shook him to the very core. Given a few more seconds and he might have made love to her in the middle of her kitchen, her brother in the adjacent room.

Made love? He hardly knew her.

But that wasn't true.

In the wake of her hasty flight, Alastair cleaned up the remnants of the shave, located a clean cloth, and wiped every surface and cupboard.

Still, she did not return.

As evening turned to night, he paced the length of her shop until his body protested. Following that, lying on the mattress in that damned pantry, he spent much of the night staring at the dark ceiling.

The few times he drifted off, he was plagued by a dream that felt more like a nightmare. It was the same each time...

He hovered over her, his palms planted on the ground protecting her from his weight, not caring how badly his

muscles strained.

He'd do anything for Daisy, his best friend, soon to be his lover. Honeysuckle and sweet lemonade. Her soft curves lined up with his perfectly. And as his fingers tangled in her blond curls, he imagined the children they would have together.

Daisy made up the other half of his soul. He'd live for her.

He'd die for her. He leaned down to capture her mouth, and suddenly...

She was gone.

She was gone, and it was all his fault.

Alastair jerked to sit upright, his eyes finding mostly darkness, just a hint of light leaking beneath the door.

Harsh breaths tore from his throat. It had been a dream, but was it? His cock, hard and stiff between his legs, begged to differ. His imagination wasn't good enough to invoke someone like Daisy, even if it had conjured up the meadow and the flowers and the warm breeze to cool their heated limbs.

The dream had felt like a memory. He could almost believe it was real.

Sucking in a trembling breath, he inhaled hints of cedar and rose, enough to remind him of the events from the evening before.

Her capable hands had dragged the blade across his face, but then she'd smoothed her fingertips along his jaw, rubbing fragrant oil into his skin.

The woman was damn near irresistible. She was a rare gem, and as much as he needed answers about himself, he wanted to discover all the facets that made her shine.

God, he was a pitiful man right now. His head throbbed and his other various aches and bruises had him grumbling beneath his breath.

Nonetheless, he needed to make himself useful.

Rising from the mattress, he peered into the kitchen, and the sunlight slanting inside rebuked him for sleeping so late. Her brother would have left for school, and she'd mentioned she had deliveries to make.

She'd mentioned moving him into the dining room, which he found all too easily. But moving his bed did nothing to quiet his mind, which shot right back to that kiss.

Thoughts racing, Alastair lowered the mattress onto the floor in the far corner. The table rocked beneath his hand, and grateful for any distraction, Alastair located some tools and shaved and measured until he'd leveled it.

When he'd finished that, he took on each of the chairs.

Thinking. Torturing himself. Seeking answers in the recesses of his brain.

Because something important was just out of reach and for the life of him, he couldn't quite grasp what it was.

Daisy unlocked her shop door and stepped inside tentatively. She wasn't sure how she felt about facing Alastair—for two reasons. Firstly, because she'd kissed him the night before. Hot embarrassment shot through her veins because he'd been the one to put a halt to it.

But she was also nervous because of the newspaper article she'd read. She had to show it to him. She had to tell him the

truth.

With both the sales room and kitchen quiet, she imagined he might be sleeping. A peek into her pantry revealed otherwise.

It was empty! Even the mattress was gone!

Had she scared him away by throwing herself at him like that? Or did he leave because he'd remembered? It was possible he'd remembered who he was and immediately left her small home to return to his townhouse in Mayfair.

Where his uncle no doubt waited for him—his father's younger brother, Lord Frampton, who in the event of Alastair's death would become the next Duke of Lovington.

The idea sent a snake of unease sliding down her back at the same time a scraping sound coming from the back of the house broke the silence.

Of course, he'd moved the mattress into the dining room. Momentarily forgetting the kiss, she forced her weak knees into motion and followed the sounds of activity. And in the threshold, she waited to announce herself, instead watching him repair one of her unmatched chairs.

Dressed in her father's clothing again, he lifted and measured his work, his muscles flexing tantalizingly beneath the thin linen.

"What are you doing?" she asked, no longer reluctant to see him.

He glanced over his shoulder, and although a shadow of his beard had returned, there was no mistaking his identity any longer.

He was Alastair.

And she needed to tell him.

“Fixing your table and chairs.” Squatting, he pushed a chair in and tried rocking it back and forth. Sure enough, all four legs proved to be the same length.

He walked around the room and did the same with the other three. And the table as well.

“You didn’t have to—”

“It’s the least I could do.” He frowned and then turned to face her. Gripping the edges with his hands, he rested his backside against the table he’d just fixed. “How are you?”

Such a simple question and yet she had no idea how to answer it.

The truth, she supposed, was as good as anything. “When I saw the pantry empty, I thought you left.”

“Why would I do that?” His voice level, his eyes never left hers.

Oh, dear. He would make her say it out loud?

“Because I kissed you.” Realizing she had been gripping the doorframe, she dropped her hands and clutched them at her waist. “And I apologize for being so... forward.” She needed to tell him the truth. Inhaling, she sought the words to do so. “It’s just that—”

“I would have kissed you first if you hadn’t beat me to it.”

The words on her lips vanished. “Really?”

“I’ve been thinking about it since the first time I woke up.” He pushed away from the table and stepped toward her, not looking at all pleased with himself. “But you, Daisy Margaret Montgomery, are not an easy woman to resist.”

To say she was stunned would be an understatement.

Scowling, he ran a hand through his hair, causing some of those too-long, silky brown waves to stand on end. “You are a beautiful, compassionate woman. Not to mention intelligent, brave, and,” he gestured toward her soaps, “talented.”

Oh, but he was the irresistible one—and she wasn’t sure how to handle it.

She reached out to tentatively touch her fingertips to his shirt, barely skimming it as she dragged them to where it had been folded back revealing sinewy, capable, *uniquely male* forearms.

There, she circled her fingertips over his olive skin, smooth beneath a smattering of soft black hairs. A shudder ran through him. Noticing the raised hairs, she lifted her gaze to meet his.

“But you barely know me.” Or did he remember—deep down?

He shrugged but turned his hand to clasp hers. “It doesn’t make sense. But...” Another shrug. “You feel it too?”

She nodded. *What was happening?*

He’d left her once before because she was too far beneath him—something she’d known and accepted all along.

And nothing would ever change that. A hint of bitterness rose up—bitterness she’d done her best to bury but never quite succeeded.

Much like other feelings she couldn’t shed.

Not because he’d finally accepted their very different stations in life, but because he’d never returned to say

goodbye. Especially after the closeness they'd shared, as friends, but also on that last afternoon.

She was also angry with him for not caring about the families his uncle had turned off of Woodland Priory—families who'd worked the land for generations.

But until he regained his memory, he knew none of this.

He simply knew that he was attracted to her. So much so that he had difficulty resisting her.

She stared down at their hands. She would not throw herself at him again. She would not!

So why did she feel the need to sway toward him—to bury her face against his chest?

“As much as I want you...” He tipped her chin up so she had no choice but to hold his gaze. “I cannot...” He must have seen something in her eyes, for he winced. “I want nothing more than to do... so many things with you. But I cannot. I realize I wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but that doesn't guarantee that I'm not married. Until I know something...”

He lowered his forehead, resting it against hers. “I'm so damn sorry, Daisy. Someday, maybe... but until I get some answers, that's the most I can promise.”

Daisy froze even as her insides shook. And then she blinked in disbelief.

Again?

He was telling her to wait again? But perhaps that wasn't fair. He didn't remember the first time but his promise only served to remind her of the past.

What had he told her before? *I'll come back for you.*

He had not.

He would not. This connection would always exist between them but the obstacles keeping them apart were stronger.

“Like I said, I’m sorry for—I’m sorry for my actions last night. It won’t happen again.” She did her best to muster some dignity, brushing her hair back, not meeting his eyes. Why had she expected something different? What the devil was wrong with her?

Daisy stepped back and reached into her apron pocket. “Perhaps this will provide a few answers.” She handed over the folded article. “This was printed in last week’s *Gazette*. I could never afford a subscription of my own, but one of my clients passes them to me after her husband finishes reading them.”

“*Duke of Lovington Missing, Presumed Dead,*” he read the headline out loud.

Lines appeared between his eyes. “That is you,” she announced. “You are the Duke of Lovington.”

He didn’t move, but for the ticking along his jaw as he stared at the neatly printed words.

“Does the name mean anything to you?” She watched his expression closely.

Alastair nodded but kept reading until he’d finished the entire article. Daisy already knew what he was learning, most notably that he although he worked diligently to promote progressive ideals in Parliament, he’d avoided other responsibilities, such as marriage and setting up a nursery.

“I am this Lovington fellow.” He inhaled sharply. “This duke.”

“Yes. You are Alastair William Arthur Frampton, 6th Duke of Lovington,” Daisy confirmed.

“I am unmarried,” he continued reading. “And I’ve no sons.”

“Lord Calvin, your uncle, is your heir presumptive. Do you remember him?”

He shook his head and his throat moved.

Daisy continued, “With the little information we have, it’s not too much of a stretch to consider that he may be the lord who wanted you killed. Your estate is one of the most valuable in all of London.” And before he could speak, she added, “Until you remember what happened, Alastair, you aren’t safe. You were not attacked randomly. Someone deliberately ordered you dead. And that person was a lord. You cannot show your face in public until you get your memory back. It would be... You would be putting yourself in too great of danger.”

Finally, he seemed to exhale again.

“I suppose you have a point.” He glanced around. “But I can’t hide forever.”

She wasn’t prepared for the tears to sting the backs of her eyes. Seeing him again—like this. Was life really this cruel?

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “I’ve put you and your brother in danger.”

But they were not the ones in danger.

“We’re fine,” she pointed out. “Besides, no one knows you are here.”

“Your neighbor does.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t know who you really are.” Daisy laughed. “The very idea that I would secretly harbor a duke—in my pantry no less—is laughable. Trust me, we’re quite safe here.”

“True.” He stuffed the article into his pocket and then exhaled.

“I should be sorry that fate dropped me here.” His eyes burned bright. “But I’m not.” And then he surprised her.

By crossing the room—and then taking her into his arm.

He tucked her head under his chin and his warmth absorbed some of her resentment. Daisy squeezed her eyes closed and allowed all that was Alastair to cocoon her—his heartbeat, his scent, his strength.

Because it felt oh, so perfect. *Too* perfect.

“I’m not sorry either,” Daisy said without thinking. “And I don’t want to see you hurt again.” The truth was, a part of her heart, a part that had never stopped loving him, didn’t want him to remember.

Once he remembered, he would leave. And this time, Daisy wanted to keep him.

Foolishness!

Daisy dismissed the thought.

She tilted her head back to look at him. “Promise you won’t show yourself in public until you remember. Don’t go home until you know who your enemy is.” All that mattered was keeping him safe.

His mouth twisted into a sad smile. “What if my memory never returns?”

“Then you stay here with me.” Her smile, no doubt, was equally sad.

“I could live with that.” And as he captured her mouth with his, she almost believed it.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

He kissed her softly at first. Because he was a guest and he didn't want to take advantage. And although she was an independent woman, capable of running her own business while also raising her brother, he sensed that she was also lonely.

When she'd admitted that he could stay with her, a sharp arrow had pierced his heart. Absent any recollection of his identity, she'd become his entire life.

And now... he oh-so-carefully caressed her arms, smoothing his hands around her back and up to cradle her heart-shaped face.

He should not.

He most definitely should not!

"Alastair," she whispered, raising her hands to cover his. She parted her lips for him to explore inside her mouth and then wound her arms around his neck, pressing her soft form against his.

He smoothed his palms down her arms, appreciating that they were slim but strong, and then around her waist, holding her tight.

Her enthusiasm fuelled his own, sending hot desire racing from his chest to his limbs. And his cock, curse it all.

Was he this much of a cad?

They were alone in her house and she...

Was trembling in his arms.

Daisy. The name was perfect for her. A flower not only beautiful and sunny but strong enough to endure harsh sun and strong winds.

She was a woman to be reckoned with—one who would bring a dying stranger into her home and spend that strength nursing him back to life.

“We shouldn’t,” he whispered. Not with his future unknown—or his past for that matter. And yet the present was all he had. It was the only thing that was real.

And Daisy was real. Her mouth, her skin... Just like in his dream.

She broke the kiss and moaned into his neck. “Finally,” she whispered.

Finally? The word struck like a discordant note in an opera.

Finally?

As badly as he wished to keep right on kissing her, and... other things, he pulled away.

Because...

Some of what she’d said didn’t make sense. Was she keeping things from him?

“Alastair...” He pondered. “It is not a common name—the name you told your neighbor also belongs to this duke.”

She bit her lip.

“What’s going on, Daisy? I don’t believe in coincidences.”

She lifted wide eyes to stare at him—guilty eyes,

“How do you know I’m this duke?” he persisted, cringing at what he’d read. Because the man described in the article wasn’t the man he wanted to be, but rather, seemed an irresponsible rogue. “Did you know him? I can’t imagine a soap maker runs in the same social circles as the aristocracy.” His tone came out wary.

Someone had tried to kill him.

He *needed* to be wary.

“I knew you before—But I wasn’t sure.” Daisy dropped her lashes. “A long time ago. My father was a tenant at Woodland Priory, as his father was before him, and his father before him. I grew up there—until your uncle evicted us.”

She stiffened as she spoke and then stepped out of his embrace. Alastair’s hands fell away. There was so much of her confession to examine that he hardly knew where to start.

“You grew up on Woodland Priory?”

“We were friends,” she said. “As children.”

“Did you know? When you found me?”

She shook her head. “Not until I saw your face—shaved.”

Alastair searched her gaze. Was she lying? He’d told her he didn’t believe in coincidences. This was, to say the least, an incredible one.

What had been her first reaction after shaving his beard? She’d kissed him.

He'd sensed something familiar about her from the very beginning. But what about his dreams? Just now, she'd whispered that she'd waited so long...

"We were just friends?" he asked, and then waited nearly half a minute for her answer.

"We were more than friends," she admitted.

Large expressive eyes stared into his and that desperate sense of familiarity shot down his spine. Yes. They had been more than friends.

"But we had no future." She winced before forcing a smile that had him wanting to comfort her again. She'd backed away, putting distance between them, and he needed to honor that.

"Because of our stations," he concluded.

"Yes," she said.

But staring at her, his needs battled with his honor. Her explanation explained a great deal.

His entire being was drawn to her. By God, his body remembered claiming hers. How was that possible?

"We were lovers." It wasn't a question.

"Once," she said, her cheeks flushing pink.

Unease pricked him.

If what she said was true, he'd bedded Daisy once and then abandoned her. The thought felt off, difficult to believe. What kind of person was he?

Moving one of the chairs, he pulled it out for her. "We need to talk," he said.

But she refused to sit down. “It doesn’t matter. It’s all in the past.”

“It does though. All of this matters. Why didn’t you tell me... before?”

She plucked at her apron, still avoiding his eyes. “I didn’t recognize you at first. When I found you, with your beard, and all the blood, there was little to recognize.” She crossed to the window and gazed out at her carefully tended garden. “I didn’t suspect anything until you opened your eyes. The color... it’s quite memorable.”

“How so?” He wanted to know everything now. *She knows me*. It was difficult to imagine someone like this woman giving herself to just anyone—or that she’d allow intimacies merely because he was the estate owner’s son.

What wasn’t she telling him?

She smiled and laughed a little self-consciously.

“The color is unique but also... the green is surrounded by yellow flecks of gold. In nearly ten years, I’ve never seen eyes like yours.”

“You should have told me.”

She shrugged and then grimaced. “I would have, I suppose, if I’d believed it myself. It seemed too impossible—too much of a coincidence that it would be you, after all these years.” And then she looked up again. “Good Lord, why, of all places, would you be left for dead behind my shop?”

Fate? No. Alastair didn’t really believe in fate.

Alastair dropped into the chair he’d drawn out for her. Not because he’d tired himself out, but because this truth all but crushed him.

She had remembered his eyes.

“I need to know everything that happened. Before.”

If she'd been one of the tenants' daughters, he never should have become involved with her. But if he had, he couldn't imagine walking away.

“We were friends at first. You caught me picking berries and insisted I share them. The next day, you taught me how to fish. I was four and ten and you were two years older. I didn't realize you lived in the big house and by the time you told me who you were, I didn't care. We swam. We climbed trees. I'd never had a friend like you. Those are some of my favorite memories. And then later...”

“Later?”

She refused to meet his eyes.

“I suppose nature took its course and... things changed. The second summer, you held my hand. And sometimes kissed my cheek. We were pirates, but we were also spies. We even pretended to marry once.” She laughed. “And by the third summer... We believed ourselves to be soulmates. We were incredibly naïve, of course. By then, my parents knew we met sometimes. My father warned me not to become attached. And rightly so.”

She lifted her arms and hugged her middle.

“What happened?” *How did it end?*

“Your father became ill, and you had to leave for London.”

“But not forever,” he said.

She let out a short laugh, and for the first time, he sensed something other than kindness and affection. “Yes. Forever. After your father passed, your uncle took over the estate. With

your approval, he evicted the tenants who were behind in their rents.”

Her words rang true. And if they were, he'd been a bastard. Perhaps it would be better all-around if he never remembered.

Damn my eyes.

“I'm—”

She held up a hand and exhaled a cynical sounding laugh. “I don't blame you.”

Oh, but she did. How could she not?

And yet, she'd saved him.

And she'd kissed him.

“Of course you do,” he said. “How could you not?”

She shook her head, but didn't contradict him this time.

“Families with sons stayed on at the Priory, but changes had to happen and the new steward insisted that in order to thrive, estate resources needed to be directed tow away from growing and toward livestock. I knew it wasn't your fault. I realized that. I just wished—”

Self-reproach weighed heavy as he waited for her to finish.

She picked at a thread in her dress.

“What did you wish?” Alastair knew and he wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

The thread unraveled and the seam began to split. And then she let go, brushing it out of her fingers.

“I wished you had come back to face me—to tell me goodbye yourself.”

She couldn't hide the pain in her voice—a pain that he, apparently, had inflicted. And good god, by giving in to his attraction now, was he on the cusp of doing it again?

His chest squeezed and energy shot through him. How could he fix something he couldn't even remember?

“I kept waiting...” Her voice trailed off.

What had kept him? Had he really been such a cad?

“We were friends first.” Another of those half-smiles. “You were my *best* friend. When I had to quit school, you brought me books to read. You encouraged me, and I almost believed I could be anything. Because you believed it.”

Alastair clenched his jaw. He'd been a fool once, lacking backbone as a young man. But by God, he might be missing some memories, but he knew his own mind. And regardless of what happened between Daisy and himself now, he'd never let her suffer again.

“You saved my life,” he marvelled.

She'd thought him a stranger. She easily could have hardened her heart, become cynical, concerned only with her and her brother's needs.

But she had not.

“You must hate me. God, *I wish I could remember.*” He would have answers for her, but also for himself—even if he ended up resenting the person he'd been.

Daisy crossed to where he sat. “You will remember.” She took him by surprise by dropping to her knees. “I never hated you. I wanted to, but I knew your father meant the world to you. And he needed you. And I understood that upon his

death, incredible responsibility would land on you. Your uncle, I'm sure, only wanted to protect you."

Alastair stiffened. "How so?"

"He knew about the two of us, and of course, he didn't approve. I've no doubt he did his best to discourage you from coming home." She squeezed his hands. "I was upset, but I also understood."

But there was something in her eyes.

"I should have returned." Alastair's throat felt unusually thick. He didn't like the truth she painted, and yet, he believed every word she said.

But now that he had a few pieces of the puzzle, he wanted to sort them out. "Tell me more about this uncle of mine." He took her by the hand and tugged her upward. "But from up here."

She was too far away, but also, seeing her on her knees like that gave him massively inappropriate ideas.

Ideas that oughtn't enter his thoughts, let alone be entertained.

But because it felt like the most natural thing in the world, he drew her onto his lap. She did not resist, rather, she made herself comfortable there before continuing with what she knew.

"Lord Calvin Frampton is your father's only brother—his younger brother. It was he who delivered the news of your father's decline. I think he must have followed you that day—to our secret place. He interrupted..." She ducked her head. "Well, he came upon the two of us at a very inconvenient time."

“Ah...” Alastair raised his brows, wishing like hell he could remember.

“I knew who he was, but of course, had never been introduced. My father later told me your uncle advised him to keep the two of us apart, which he tried to do. But I never took my father’s warnings seriously.”

“And later, your family was evicted.”

“Yes.”

“You believe my uncle was behind it.”

“Your uncle hired a new steward. At the time, I believed that might be *your way of dealing with me*. Only later did I realize that until you turned one and twenty, your uncle, as your legal guardian, was running the dukedom. Especially as you needed to finish your education.”

“That sounds about right,” Alastair noted.

“He is your heir apparent.” Daisy spoke the words as though they had great meaning.

“Yes.”

“You used to joke that Lord Calvin coveted your position. And of course, you dismissed the existence of any real threat, but when I saw the article, I couldn’t help but remember...”

“You think it’s possible that my uncle was the one who ordered me killed.” Alastair didn’t want to believe it, but without his memory, and with no other evidence to go by, the possibility had to be considered.

“Would he kill his own flesh and blood?” She pondered the question. “I could easily be wrong. But it’s the only theory we have to go on.”

Alastair shifted but kept his arms around her. “Which is precisely why I need to *do* something. How can I hide here when someone wants me dead?”

“You don’t have much choice right now, but you’ll figure it out. Don’t act hastily, please? Give yourself time to remember?” She held his gaze steadily, and her mouth hovered a few inches from his.

“I hate when wisdom contradicts my wishes.”

“I know you are frustrated, but you’ll heal. And then you’ll hold all the cards.”

“Because they think I’m dead.”

“Yes.” She winced, and his gaze flicked from her eyes to her mouth.

“In that case, I’m going to need more furniture to repair.” He hated feeling so useless.

“I’m happy to arrange that.” She wriggled a little and sent him a teasing smile. “You could always help out with the laundry.”

“Laundry?” He lifted one of her hands, hands which knew hard work, hands which had labored to keep him alive. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Your wish is my command.”

“Only if you’re feeling better...”

“I’m fine.”

“Except for your head.”

“Well, yes...” He brushed his thumb along the back of her hand. “And I’ll deal with the laundry later. But right now, I’m going to kiss you.”

“Because of the past?”

“Because of the *present*.”

And then he leaned forward, claiming her mouth again, surprised at the tenderness that seemed to expand in his chest.

So strong, but she needed protecting. So proud, but she needed support. And there was something more—something beyond words.

Several minutes passed, hands exploring, hearts racing, and the kiss that began like a gentle rain erupted into lightning and thunder.

Ragged breaths broke the silence when Daisy drew back, ducking her head.

He should be sorry. He was not.

He should regret it. He did not.

He just didn't know why.

“This is all too much.” She stared at her hands, both planted on his shoulders. “Part of me wants to throw caution to the wind, but I've been here before. And...”

“There are no assurances, are there?” *Blast and damn.*

“It's... complicated, and a little terrifying,” she admitted, finally looking up at him again.

“We need to wait,” he said. Doubt and pain lurked in her gaze, and as much as he wanted to promise her the world, he couldn't.

He didn't know if it was his to give.

She didn't answer but pushed herself to stand, and after sending him a sad little smile, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Leaving Alastair to curse the person who'd treated her so callously in the past.

But also making a vow.

If he had anything to say about it, he'd bring joy back to those blue eyes of hers. He'd ensure she had a reason to laugh every single day.

Unless fate wasn't playing matchmaker after all—but was instead playing a cruel joke on them both.

And if that was the case, he'd do all those things from a distance.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Following their discussion earlier, Daisy expected to feel awkward going forward. Oddly enough, she didn't. Even if confusion lingered in her heart.

Perhaps it was because ultimately, all they could count on was the here and now. Alastair was safe, and he was here.

For now.

No use borrowing trouble.

Furthermore, conversation, as it always had, came easily between the two of them.

And since Alastair retained most of his academic knowledge, the two of them discussed current political issues, such as taxation and the voters' reform act, along with other Parliamentary goings on, and even fictional books they'd both read.

And her soap.

Alastair listened but also assisted in tending the garden while she described the importance of her fragrant oils and other key ingredients that made her soaps superior. The days flew by, and the evenings took on similar rituals. Once Gilbert learned the extent of Alastair's breadth of knowledge, Gilbert

happily discussed his latest lessons while Daisy cooked supper.

Daisy didn't mind having such moments to herself—to calm her thoughts and regain her balance. This was when her father's voice echoed in the form of her conscience, whispering that she needed to curb her expectations.

The time could have been idyllic, if any of it was real. But it was not. She sensed Alastair's growing impatience—with himself and the uncertainty of his circumstances. How much longer before he insisted on seeking out his enemy?

Because yes, he was Alastair, but he was not the same person she'd loved. He was the Duke of Lovington.

He didn't even remember her! What if he never did?

So although she'd decided there was nothing to do but live in the moment, she did her best to keep an appropriate distance between herself and Alastair. It was safer this way—smarter.

Because he would, undoubtedly, return to his old life soon enough. And the man who lived that life, the Duke of Lovington, was the man who'd hurt her.

He was the one her father had warned her about.

Tossing and turning at night, she did not allow herself to dwell on the magic that lived between them, nor of the future she'd dreamed of long ago.

But truth be told, she'd never let go of him the way she wished she had.

The reminder had her climbing out from beneath her covers and removing a carefully hidden box from beneath her bed.

How could she have forgotten the articles? She might be able to help him remember.

Moving to where the moonlight cast a filtered light into her room, Daisy opened the well-worn wooden box and lifted out her treasures.

It didn't matter that she would be embarrassed at having followed his life so diligently, she needed to show these to him.

His accomplishments. His successes.

Gossip regarding a few unsavory exploits.

But any of these details could possibly jar the puzzle pieces of his memory back into place. And the sooner he remembered, the better off they'd all be.

Even Gilbert was growing too accustomed to having a gentleman's perspective—mostly about his schoolwork, but Daisy suspected other issues as well.

She couldn't help but acknowledge that becoming reliant upon Alastair was so very dangerous. The scars on her heart were there to prove it.

So, first thing the next morning she carried the box downstairs. Alastair already had water on the stove and was moving about cooking breakfast.

When he'd first attempted to cook, it had been more than obvious that he'd lacked experience. And because he was Alastair, of course, his efforts only endeared him to her more.

As did, of course, the fact that he managed to look ridiculously handsome so early in the morning, with his hair ruffled, his shirt unbuttoned, and his feet bare.

Dangerous indeed!

“Good morning.” He shot her a proud expression as he slid one slightly burned egg onto a plate for her.

It was odd not to be the first person awake—not to be the person responsible for setting the tone of the day, the person to ensure everything went off right on time.

“Good morning.” Daisy pushed a curl behind her ear, wishing it would remain there. Ignoring all the reasons against doing so, she’d begun taking more time than usual with her appearance. Her hair would never be tamed but she did manage to tie it back in a pretty knot. She dared not consider why she’d been wearing her prettiest gowns.

Preening for him was ridiculous. She shook her head at herself and smoothed the fabric of her pretty blue muslin.

“Are you hungry?” He flicked a proud glance at her egg.

Daisy exhaled the usual tingles with a little laugh. “Ravenous.”

But then she set the box on the worktable. “I’ve something for you to look through.” She crossed to where her apron hung and, after unhooking it, slipped it over her gown.

Like an armor of sorts.

“I don’t want to burn Gilbert’s eggs.” His grimace reached right down and melted her heart.

“Mm...” She took a bite and shooed Alastair toward the articles, where they rested on the worktable. “I’ll keep an eye on them while you look at these.”

Her belly flipped, knowing what he would read—knowing that any pretense that she’d put him away from her thoughts over the last ten years couldn’t hold after he saw them.

His expression turned wary, and he moved around the table to take the seat he'd intended for her.

“What are these?”

“Articles I've saved over the years. They might be helpful...”

“A bit daunting,” he confessed. But he unhooked the latch and, when he lifted the lid, revealed a stack of carefully cut-out newspaper articles. The folded papers on the top of the stack remained a dingy white while the ones toward the bottom had yellowed with age.

Alastair's shoulders relaxed as he carefully lifted them out. “Oh, Daisy...”

Daisy all but held her breath while he sorted through the top articles. One by one, he read various headlines aloud.

“*Lovington betrays father's memory by siding with the Whigs—Lovington unwilling to abandon election reform. Is Lord Griswold's daughter good enough for the elusive Duke of Love?* These cannot all be about me.” He paused to peruse a few of the articles but dismissed twice as many.

“My apologies for their condition.” Daisy turned to the stove, checking the water for no reason, and shrugged, hoping he wouldn't notice the heat ebbing up her neck. “My client's husband reads over breakfast.” She pointed to a greasy spot. “Hence remnants of kidney pie and spilt tea.”

“You cut out the articles,” he said. “And saved them.” It wasn't an accusation, rather a statement laced with either shock or awe.

“It's terribly embarrassing, really, and I never expected you'd be such a favorite of the gossip columnists. I remembered I had them last night and realized they might be

of help now.” Her insides shivered at her admission. *He has to know.*

He had to know why she’d saved them.

The gossip sections were the worst, tying him to various ladies of the *ton*—notably a beautiful and famous opera singer. She hadn’t minded when she’d read of their split.

Oh, how she’d hated those, yet she’d kept each and every one.

Would she ever be able to let go?

“These go back years,” he stated.

Daisy watched his slim but strong hands sort the clippings out across the table.

Why did his attackers leave him outside *her* garden, of all places?

“Fate has a wicked sense of humor, wouldn’t you agree?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he moved slowly around the table toward her, causing her breath to catch and her heart to race when he slid his arms around her waist.

“I don’t know what to say.” His voice caught, and his warm breath stirred a few errant curls. “Part of me is honored, another part disgusted with this Duke of Lovington person.” He frowned. “A simple apology seems trite.”

She twisted around and, unable to stop herself, buried her face in his chest. “I tried to let it go—to let you go.” She sniffed. “And I did. I really did.”

His hand stroked the back of her head. “Of course, you did. You were just curious about an old friend.”

“Exactly.” She nodded. “I was just curious.”

Curious enough to torture herself when he’d become engaged, and curious enough that she celebrated silently when he broken it off. And then she’d tortured herself again each time a columnist wrote of his rakish behavior. Until that was, he used politics to replace those wayward ways.

A champion for the people, of course. He’d always been foolishly optimistic.

“You should read them. You never know what may or may not lodge your memory.” She stepped out of his arms. “They’re mostly in order.”

“Will you think less of me if I admit the prospect is only slightly less than terrifying?” He stared at the articles as though one of them might jump up and bite him.

“Not at all.” Daisy feigned nonchalance as she scurried into the pantry, located the ingredients required to make bread, and did her best to keep busy so she wouldn’t be tempted to watch him read.

She had a large bowl of dough rising near the stove by the time he set them aside.

She wasn’t sure what she expected his reaction to be, but it wasn’t the one he had.

“I don’t think it was my uncle who wanted me dead,” he announced.

Daisy disagreed. “Do you remember any of it?”

He was shaking his head but had separated a handful of the articles and slid them across the table toward her. “I’ve been rather opinionated when it came to the details of the Reform

Act. And not in a way that solidified friendships. My views, in fact, might have turned more than a few peers into enemies.”

“Lords.”

“Yes.” He pointed at a name listed in one of the articles. “The Marquess of Denningham, for instance, says I ought to be shot for treason.”

“Because you want to extend the vote to the working class. And women.”

“Yes.” He looked grim. “Ultimately, most of my ideas are doomed. I’ve put myself in the minority.”

Was that what nearly got him killed?

Even as a very young man, he’d shown empathy for those who were less fortunate. He’d always proved himself compassionate.

It was partly why she’d been so very disappointed when he’d not come back to tell her goodbye.

“I need to speak with my uncle.” He spoke with such confidence that Daisy ought to be reassured, and yet more than a prick of unease trickled down her spine.

“Perhaps. Wait a few more days to see if your memory returns. You can’t know who is against you if you can’t remember what happened.”

He clenched his fists and paced around the table. “Perhaps...”

“Yes?”

“Perhaps if I went to Mayfair—placed myself in familiar surroundings. I might see things that will make my brain function again.”

“Your brain is functioning just fine,” Daisy practically growled. “It’s just temporarily closed for repair.” Daisy

“I need it opened.”

But not yet!

“What if someone recognizes you?”

She could practically see his internal struggle when his fists clenched and he glanced toward the window. “I’ll wear a disguise,” he said.

If he was half as stubborn as he’d been ten years ago, he’d not give this up.

Which meant she wouldn’t be making much soap today.

“In that case...” She brushed her hands together. “As soon as Gilbert leaves for school, you and I will do some exploring.” He may not be able to remember, but she had seen the faces of the men who’d hurt him. Furthermore, he required a little protecting.

The decision made for a busy morning. While Alastair sat with Gilbert for breakfast and then sent him on his way, Daisy located “disguises” for both of them.

Alastair’s beard had already partially grown back, and along with a cap worn low over his face and a few layers of her father’s clothes, he was nearly as unrecognizable as he’d been when she found him.

Although it was likely that his uncle had long forgotten the young woman he’d discovered his nephew with on that sunny afternoon, Daisy couldn’t discount the possibility of the man recognizing her.

To disguise herself, she stuffed most of her hair into a mob cap and dressed in a thick, matronly gown that had belonged

to her aunt. To complete her ensemble, she opened an old lace parasol that might come in handy if they ran into trouble.

When they stepped onto the street together and Daisy locked the door behind her, Alastair paused. “I don’t know where it is.”

“Mayfair?”

“My home.”

“I do.” Because of course, she’d wanted to know where he was—how he lived. “Mayfair is this way.” She began walking in the direction that would lead them toward the upscale neighborhood. Although it might as well be situated in a completely different world than hers, the upscale lordly dwellings lived a surprisingly short distance away. “Lovington House is situated across the street from the park.”

Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, Alastair leaned close. “And you know this because...”

“Common knowledge.” She lifted her chin. Well, not exactly common. But common to her... after a little investigation. “It *is* a ducal townhouse.”

Although she’d only witnessed him coming or going from afar, she’d never seen him close up. She’d been grateful just knowing he was near.

Which further proved what a foolish woman she was.

“It’s not far,” she filled the silence.

“Don’t be embarrassed with me.” He covered her hand with his, as though he knew... Of course, *he knew*.

The reality of walking with her oldest friend, the person who’d then stomped on her heart and now threatened it again, weakened her knees.

She exhaled. “This feels surreal. Walking with you.”

“Did we ever come to London together?”

She shook her head. “We spent hours and hours in one another’s company, but we never once left the estate together.” If they happened to run into each other in the nearby village, they locked gazes, but only for a second. At times, it was exciting and secretive. Later on, she realized she should have seen it for what it was. A clue as to what the future held for them.

Nothing.

Except... that wasn’t entirely true. Because here they were, walking together toward Hyde Park.

“Is any of this familiar?”

“It is. The air. The hackneys and carriages. I believe I own a racing curricule. A blue one. Someday I’ll take you riding.”

“Oh, Alastair...” she sighed.

They took several steps without either speaking.

“I’m beginning to believe that of the two of us, you were the practical one,” he commented, unwittingly touching on the root of her reservations.

“It’s not that you weren’t practical.” She exhaled.

“It must be though. From what you’ve told me, it was I who failed to comprehend the grip of society’s expectations. Otherwise, I can’t help but believe I’d have handled matters differently.”

Matters.

Such as an inconvenient affair with a very inappropriate young woman.

“When we were younger, you rarely took my concerns seriously. It was oddly... endearing.” He’d loved her and she’d loved him, and that, he’d believed, was all that mattered.

“It was reckless of me,” he said.

“Yes, but...” Daisy turned to look up at him. “For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t change any of it.” She’d asked herself this several times. The great love she’d experienced had ended with great pain. But what was life without seasoning?

And then she remembered how it had affected her parents. His actions—or perhaps his lack of them—had resulted in her mother’s and ultimately, her father’s deaths.

But it was also her fault. She’d been warned. And she’d ignored those warnings.

“I’m glad for that, I suppose,” he replied.

They’d arrived at the park, and Daisy lifted her chin, shaking off the melancholy. “Your townhouse is up ahead. On the right. We can see it from the lawn if we go this way.”

Thankfully, the hour was too early for drivers to be out yet.

“You walk here often?” He kept her hand securely tucked in the crook of his arm.

“Many of my clients live in Mayfair, and I deliver the soaps and perfumes personally—to the back door.”

“They are lucky.”

“I agree.” She chuckled and slid him a teasing glance.

“And so very modest.” He laughed with her but then turned serious. “But you should be proud, Daisy. You’ve accomplished something special. You took your knowledge,

and the resources available to you, and made a living for yourself.”

This is Alastair. Encouraging and supportive.

As they neared his rather impressive townhouse, Daisy leaned closer to him. “And you’re working toward something special as well.”

“I hope so.”

“John Locke, I believe, was one of your favorite philosophers. It seems that you’ve remained true to your beliefs.” Even when they’d been younger, he’d been fascinated by Locke’s theory that all people possessed potential. In theory, Daisy had agreed. But as he’d said, she’d also been practical. “I’m not surprised that you would try to expand the reform bill.”

“But how could I vote otherwise, in good conscience?”

“There are many who don’t heed their conscience.”

Daisy halted, and Alastair did the same.

“There it is.” She did not point but tilted her head in the direction of the massive manor that loomed over the street.

He stiffened, and Daisy waited.

“I remember it.” He continued staring. So much, that Daisy worried someone might take note.

And yet, she didn’t want to interrupt his thoughts—especially not if memories were working their way free.

A carriage pulled up, however, and when the door opened, Daisy grasped Alastair’s arm and forced him to turn away from his home.

“Have a care.” She tensed, spying the tall, older gentleman climbing out of the elegant coach. He was perfectly put together from the top of his black hat to the tips of his shining shoes. “Your uncle.”

Exhibiting more discretion now, Alastair glanced over one shoulder as a second horse and buggy passed. When the road was clear, his uncle had disappeared inside.

Alastair turned them both to walk back in the direction they’d come from.

“I didn’t get a look at his face,” he explained. “But I remember the house. I remember the carriage. All of it is familiar.”

“That’s good then! The rest of your memories can’t be far off.” And she was happy for him.

I am!

He winced, wrinkles forming on his forehead. “They’re so close—but when I reach for them, they elude me.” He made a disgusted scoffing sound. “Over and over again. You can’t imagine, Daisy.”

“I’m so sorry. They’ll come. I know they will.”

Rather than allow him to war with his thoughts, she turned the subject.

“What does the inside look like?”

“It’s not as formidable as the exterior. When my father ordered renovations he preserved much of the original concept out of respect for the dukes who’d come before him. He was not opposed, however, to some modernization.”

“It has running water?”

“Hot and cold,” he said. “And someday, every house will be plumbed —” Alastair caught himself.

He had remembered a good deal.

Daisy grinned, and on the walk back to her home, she stopped at a vendor to treat them both to a savory pastry pie. Alastair had been horrified that he couldn't pay for it, but she'd promised to collect once he was restored to his abundant riches.

And they'd laughed. Despite all the uncertainty, they still laughed.

Afterward, they visited a bookstore, and then stopped at one of the mercantiles where she proudly pointed out the display of her soaps.

“These are sensational,” he said. But the look in his eyes conveyed something else.

You are sensational.

And for what remained of the day, the sky shone brighter than usual, and the air smelled sweet and fresh.

Daisy felt like she had her friend again.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Meanwhile, Alastair existed in a world that had tilted on its axis.

The brain was a funny thing, hiding crucial memories but also allowing him glimpses of the inconsequential, all while seemingly functioning normally. On one hand, Alastair knew who he was; he knew the essence of the man he was. At least he thought he did.

On the other, he couldn't remember events that had occurred just a few weeks before.

But while he'd stood staring at his townhouse in Mayfair, the curtain had partially opened. And spotted memories of Daisy suddenly broke through.

Bringing a myriad of emotions—unanswered questions he wasn't prepared to ask.

He remembered that they'd begun as friends. That friendship had blossomed into more. Growing up, he'd been separated from boys his own age and when he'd stumbled across her on his father's property, he'd found someone to connect with—someone who saw him for the person he was, not the duke he would someday become.

She'd given him a reason to anticipate each day when he woke up. Eventually, he'd imagined their life together, her bearing his children.

What he didn't remember was *why* he'd abandoned her. Why would he abandon someone who meant the world to him?

"You're quiet," Daisy said, interrupting his thoughts as she walked beside him back to her house. The district she lived in wasn't even a mile from Mayfair but it might as well be on the opposite side of the world.

This was something he'd failed to truly comprehend when they were younger. He'd thoughtlessly ignored the barriers they'd face. But why hadn't he tracked her down? Why hadn't he fought harder?

"I remember you." His voice emerged thick and gruff.

Her footsteps faltered, but she kept on walking. "Everything?"

"Not quite. But a lot. I remember.... us."

They arrived at her door, and when she lifted her hands to insert the key, her hands were shaking. Not only her hands but her shoulders, her chest—her breaths.

Alastair took the keys and managed the task for her.

"When was the last time we were together?" he asked.

"The day you were called back to London." She had told him this, wringing her hands.

And this was where the curtain closed again.

But he'd never believed in fate. And he couldn't help but wonder, of all the places in London to be dumped, why the

vacant alley behind *her* house?

The backs of his eyes itched to know.

“When you brought me into your home, you’re sure you didn’t know it was me?”

“I didn’t think I did. But now, I can’t help wondering if on some level part of me suspected. I could *not* let you die. I was *desperate* to keep you alive.” She crossed the room, keeping her back to him. “I think I knew the moment you woke up, when I could look you in the eyes. Seeing you without the beard only confirmed my suspicions.”

And then she spun around to face him, betrayal in her eyes. “Why didn’t you say goodbye? I know I told you I understood, but I thought I deserved something...” She ducked her head and waved a hand. “Never mind. You don’t need to explain. I understand.”

“No. You can’t understand. Because *I* don’t understand. I don’t know the answer to that question. Didn’t I write to you? I would have missed you, desperately.”

She frowned. “I never received anything...”

“Perhaps someone didn’t want us together. Your father —?”

“Your uncle—” She clamped her mouth shut. “My father *needed me*. And although he warned me away from you on several occasions, and I’m sure my connection to you was part of why we were turned off the estate, my father would never lie to me. He’d never intentionally hurt me.”

“My uncle ran the dukedom until I turned one and twenty. Those years are still blurry.” He rubbed his chin. “But by the time I returned to Woodland Priory, your family was gone. My understanding was that you’d married.”

Daisy simply stared at him, and he hated the distrust he saw in her eyes.

“The new estate manager sent us away after your father passed.” Her hands fluttered in front of her, as though she might find some other answer.

“You never married,” he said.

“No.” She chortled.

The backs of Alastair’s eyes burned. He’d loved Daisy, he was certain of it. Even now, years later, the pull towards her was stronger than gravity.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. He moved across the room quietly, almost as though approaching a wounded animal.

Had his heart recognized her even when his memory failed to? But no, he saw all of her—the woman she was today and the girl she’d been a decade ago.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” She squirmed but Alastair kept his hands on her shoulders.

“But I do.” He’d figure out what the hell had happened and then he’d spend a lifetime making it up to her.

She turned her chin and tucked her face beneath his. “I knew you would leave eventually.” she murmured. “But I hoped.”

And yet he’d abandoned her!

“You were the light in my life. You made me laugh but you also forced me to see the world with more appreciative eyes. You taught me gratitude.” Alastair buried his face in her hair. “I remember the first time you let me kiss you. Do you remember? I’d just returned from school and yours was the only face I wanted to see.”

“You said you hated school that first year.”

“And you scolded me for that.”

“You liked when I scolded you.”

“Not at first.” He exhaled. *Not until I realized she scolded me because she cared.* “You made me read to you.”

She tilted her head, and Alastair kissed her neck.

“I liked that,” she whispered.

“I remember feeling like you were a part of me.” Her pulse fluttered beneath his lips. “I remember making love to you. And then I also remember wanting you again ever since.”

She let out a little cry and spun around, tightening her arms around his neck as though afraid he’d disappear.

“Daisy.” Alastair claimed her mouth.

Impossibly perfect. *A dream.*

This time, his kiss burned through a decade of despair. The wave of emotions had been tethered too long. Their hunger for one another went beyond mere carnality. It was desperate. Powerful enough to break them both forever.

“I missed you so much,” Daisy whispered against his jaw, and Alastair lifted her into his arms.

“Upstairs,” he said. Alastair was already walking her back toward the small staircase. “Too long.” Half carrying her, two steps at a time, he felt reborn.

Was this what they’d had before? Was this love?

“The door on the right,” she directed him in between kisses.

He kicked it open and paused just long enough to take in the tidy wardrobe, a desk and chair, and a carefully made-up bed—all in a room scented with honeysuckle and... Daisy.

Before he'd lowered her feet to the floor, she was working the buttons on his shirt while he hastily unfastened her gown. Of all the questions plaguing him about his life, she was the only answer.

He dragged his gaze over her delicate features and then tasted the length of her neck.

Sweet. Smooth.

Mine.

Desire tore through him in an all-too-familiar way. There had been women in his life but none had ever consumed him like Daisy could.

Because Daisy....

Daisy possessed the other half of his soul—and perhaps the entirety of his heart. How did a man label feelings like this—from the past, but also the present?

Compelled beyond all logic—beyond reason, he dragged the thick gown she'd worn as disguise to below her bosom and around her waist.

She pushed off his jacket and then lifted his shirt over his head. He all but tore her stays. She wrestled with his boots.

When they'd removed all impediments, they stood naked before one another. She was pink and creamy and even more beautiful than she'd been in his dreams.

He stood in awe. *Glorious.* It was the only word to describe her. He'd been with well-practiced women, along

with some of England's most sought-after actresses. None of whom rivaled this woman.

Because Daisy had been *made* for him.

Her lush curves and contours celebrated feminine strength.

"I never saw you..." he remembered.

In the meadow, they'd remained partially clothed. She had been shy and concerned they'd be found.

She'd been right to worry.

"This is not the first time I've seen you," she admitted.

"When?" And then it struck him. "While I slept."

"I had no choice." She reached behind her nape to release the long knot she'd pinned there. When she dropped her hands, a silky braid draped over her shoulder and between her breasts—plump but high and firm.

"You are sure?" He kept his hands clenched at his sides.

"Tomorrow is never guaranteed," she said.

For an instant, he thought he spied a shadow dance across her expression, but then she curved her mouth into a sensual smile.

Alastair could not refuse the invitation.

"My sweet, sweet Daisy." Locking his gaze with hers, he tackled her onto the bed and held himself above her. "That day, in the meadow. I remember thinking you were more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen."

She dragged her fingertip along his arm. "And now?" She may have meant the question to sound teasing, but he heard vulnerability.

“Even more beautiful.” And he meant it. He captured her mouth in a scorching kiss and then abandoned it to slide his body down hers.

“Alastair,” she complained, trying to drag him back up to her but to no avail.

Pink and creamy skin smoothed along his harder planes. Petal-soft, her body formed to his.

Alastair was on a mission and didn’t stop until he could rest his chin low on her body, his chest nestled between her thighs.

He dragged a single fingertip to her cleft.

The only time he’d made love to her before, it had been their first. He’d been rushed and more than a little clumsy.

Pushing himself up, he drew back and kneeled on the bed before her. “Open for me, sweet Daisy.”

She hesitated but then, trusting him, widened her knees.

“Plump and pink and perfect,” he growled, his fingers lingering at her opening, which was already wet, *ready for him*. His cock stiffened almost painfully, but he ignored it.

As much any man could ignore it under similar circumstances.

Because this time, he was determined to make it perfect for her.

So rather than lining himself up at her opening, he circled the intimate flesh between her legs.

“Ala—Alastair.”

He crawled lower, kissing the indent of her belly and then tasting the skin around her hip bones. She cried out, and he

dragged his whiskers from one side to the other.

Her hands clutched his head now, her fingers practically tearing out his hair.

And then this woman guided him to her center. Alastair kissed her opening and inhaled. He shouldn't, but he couldn't stop himself.

He could do this forever—whatever that might look like.

“Please,” she begged, thrusting her pussy against his mouth.

Daisy had always been cautious, but she'd hardly ever been afraid

“You taste like heaven.” Alastair circled his tongue around her bud and then dipped it lower. “So sweet.” He delved inside.

Her body jerked, and he inserted a second finger, listening for hushed gasps of pleasure, and then tasting and touching her accordingly.

Heaven. Daisy. Fuck. A dream. So good. A stream of meaningless thoughts hammered him. She stiffened and tightened her ankles around his waist.

And then... surrender.

A violent shudder ran from her core to her limbs as completion rolled through her, again, and again, and yet again... In the aftermath, she shivered and a few short sobs escaped.

Equally shaken, Alastair waited until she relaxed before crawling up the bed to take her in his arms.

“Are you all right?” He touched his lips to hers. She filled all his senses, and when he pushed her hair away from her face, his hand trembled.

“Very much so,” she answered. She opened her eyes and held his gaze. “But this time, I want all of you.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

The instant Daisy spoke the words out loud, sending them up to the stars, she couldn't summon them back. Her meaning went beyond that room, beyond that moment. She'd forgive him, even if she couldn't forgive herself.

But she wanted whatever he was willing to give. Did that make her weak? Did that make her immoral? She would pay, again, after he left. Perhaps it was punishment for all the troubles she'd brought on her family the first time.

She did not make this decision lightly.

They might only have one day, a few weeks, or even months. He was different, as was she, and despite all her self-recriminations, a tiny flame of hope flickered.

Firstly, he'd been left behind her house—which was nothing short of a miracle. And he'd lived.

And he remembered her.

Dare she imagine fate *wanted* to bring them together?

“You want all of me?” Alastair stared down at her looking determined but also, oh, so devastatingly sweet. And those eyes—they saw straight through to her heart. It was the same face she'd always loved, hardened and chiseled now. But he was Alastair.

She didn't need all the details to know he'd collected a handful of scars. She had scars of her own.

And yet here they were. In her bed. Loving one another.

Lovers and friends.

"All of you." She lowered one hand and wound it around his thick shaft.

Silken steel.

Together, they moved him to her opening.

She had never forgotten that afternoon of loving. If she hadn't, she'd never have known what she lost.

Wiser now, she realized perfect moments like this one were ethereal. Even the most powerful love could be defeated.

But love could also be magical. And perhaps nothing could keep two lovers apart forever.

Alastair pushed inside, and every cell of her body came alive.

Magic. The depths of the deepest valley followed by the pinnacle of the highest mountain.

He withdrew and then entered her deeper.

Fate.

She moved with him, savoring their joining, each kiss, each touch, each stroke and thrust. And again, while embracing everything about him, a second round of tears escaped. Tears of awe and joy.

They moved together purposefully, holding one another's gaze until the emotions became too intense.

“My love, my sweet Daisy.” Alastair moved faster, working the friction between them, bringing her with him.

Daisy went willingly.

Touching his face, squeezing him. Aching and arching.

She rode out the exquisite pleasure, shattering a second time. And then Alastair unleashed himself, pumping into her like a man possessed before releasing his seed, stiffening with a harsh moan.

This was always meant to be.

She soothed her hands down his back. “My love, my Alastair, sweet darling...”

She would always love him.

With the afternoon sun slanting into the room, they slept.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

When Daisy awoke, it was to sounds of her brother and Alastair downstairs in the kitchen. She needed to dress and join them, ask Gilbert about his day, but she remained lounging in her bed, the covers rumped around her.

She wanted to savor this day—an afternoon she never could have imagined.

After the first time, she'd barely slept a few minutes before waking to Alastair's touch. "I want you again," his voice had rumbled near her ear.

She smiled sleepily, recalling his hand between her legs, his mouth tasting her everywhere.

The second time they'd made love, he'd rolled onto his back.

He'd told her to take what she wanted, to move how she wanted, and she'd done just that. Had it been *too good*?

An unexpected vice squeezed her chest. Fear? Reasonable but unwanted, she refused to acknowledge it.

But the flicker of fear got her moving, washing up and changing into a different gown than the wrinkled one on the floor.

Downstairs, she didn't immediately announce herself, but waited at the threshold, watching her brother chop vegetables while Alastair sautéed chicken on the stove.

She couldn't ignore the lump in her throat. Her brother had barely known their father and seeing him enjoy the companionship of another male was bittersweet.

"Don't forget the salt. And garlic. Daisy always adds at least four cloves of garlic."

Alastair was cooking her recipe. With her brother.

Dash it all, if she didn't shake this off, she'd turn into a puddle of sentimental treacle. So she pushed herself away from the door and stepped inside. "Supper smells like it's going to be delicious."

Alastair glanced over, sending her a look that further weakened her knees. Her brother halted the movements of the knife and studied her with concern.

"I've never known you to sleep in the day. Are you unwell?"

"Just lazy, I'm afraid." She most certainly couldn't tell her younger brother that although her muscles ached, her body was essentially a mass of satisfaction. "But I'm fine."

Alastair raised a brow.

"Quite well, actually," she added. She would not blush.

She donned her apron and went to work dicing an onion and again found herself melting inside as the conversation flowed around her.

All of this felt too natural—*too perfect*.

In no time at all, the stew had thickened, and the three of them sat down to have dinner together.

Gilbert, oblivious that Daisy's life had been thrown into chaos, enthusiastically shared the more interesting facets of his lessons that day. Alastair encouraged him with astute comments and challenging questions.

And Daisy sat quieter than usual, unable to keep herself from wondering what happened next?

“Have you remembered anything yet?” Gilbert asked toward the end of the meal. It was the first thing Gilbert asked her every morning since Alastair arrived. *Who is he?*

But the answer was far more complicated than a simple name.

Was Alastair her friend? Her lover? More than that?

Would he go away again? But he had to! He was a duke!

“Just a few images, unfocused though.” They'd decided that until Alastair knew all of the truth, they would keep his identity to themselves. “Interesting that I've retained the benefits of my schooling. The brain, young Gilbert, values education.” He laughed, meeting Daisy's gaze as he took a bite of stew.

She dipped her chin in an almost imperceptible nod.

She didn't want to bring Gilbert into any of this. It was all too new. Too... fragile.

And possibly dangerous.

When they finished eating, Daisy shooed her brother off to finish his homework, and she and Alastair cleared the table together.

“You don’t have to help me, you know. You’re a guest.” She suddenly felt stiff with him.

Was she reaching too high? But she hadn’t reached, she clarified for herself. She had only dreamed.

“I told you.” Alastair wrapped his arms around her from behind, warming her limbs until she relaxed. “I refuse to be a burden.”

“I know,” she whispered and then spun around in his arms. “I just...”

“I need to speak with my uncle,” he announced. “Until I figure out who tried to kill me, I’m putting both you and your brother in danger.”

“But your injuries—”

He touched two fingers to her lips, effectively silencing her objections. “Physically, I’m fine. And with most of my memories returned, I need to seek out the truth.”

“But what if the culprit is your uncle?”

Alastair’s mouth twisted into a doubtful grimace. “My father’s brother would never attempt to harm me. There was too much love between them.” He touched his hand to his heart. “It’s impossible.”

Daisy didn’t agree, but... How could she argue? She valued family above all else and ached at the possibility that her father withheld Alastair’s letters from her.

How must Alastair feel to hear someone suggest that his uncle would try to *kill him*?

The inkling was quite a stretch. Especially when the articles she’d saved suggested Alastair had cultivated political enemies.

“It would be good if your uncle could help. When will you go?” But she knew.

“First thing in the morning.”

She dried a dish, placed it on its proper shelf, and then turned around to meet his stare. “Will you come upstairs?” she asked. “Later?”

She didn’t want to risk her brother discovering the two of them but she felt... afraid for him.

Alastair had been in her life once and then disappeared for what felt like forever. She would never take him for granted again.

“If you’ll have me,” he said.

“Oh, yes.”

“But you’ll have to be quiet.”

She pulled back. “I am quiet!”

He was chuckling softly to himself and she realized they would pretend time had no meaning. They would live in the moment. “More than once this afternoon, I feared your Mrs. Farley might come knocking, demanding you show your face to prove that I wasn’t murdering you.”

“You’re joking!” But Daisy vaguely remembered a few times... “Perhaps I was a little loud.”

“Don’t worry.” He stole a kiss, cradling her breast with one hand, sliding his knee between her thighs, and holding her there with the other. “I’ll take care of that mouth of yours.”

She gasped as he nipped at her lips, sparking every inch of her skin to life. When had she become so sensitive?

She dropped her hands over the wool of his breeches, imagining all sorts of things she wanted to do to him tonight.

“I have a few ideas,” she whispered.

“Daisy?” They jumped apart at the sound of her brother calling from the dining room. “Do you have an extra pencil?”

“I’ll be right there!” But her gaze dropped to where she’d been touching Alastair. He wanted her again.

But was it enough?

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

“**T**omorrow then.” Daisy exhaled, content and almost boneless in his arms. Midnight had long passed, and in the wake of a good deal of catching up, she ought to be sleepy. But she couldn’t help but worry.

“The sooner I find out who attacked me, the sooner I can move forward.” He drew lazy circles on the back of her wrist with his thumb. “Because I want more of this.”

Daisy’s heart skipped a beat.

Did he mean what she wanted him to mean? The words echoed her deepest desires. They also taunted her.

“It’s not that simple.” She’d argued this before—more times than she could remember.

But this time, rather than dismiss her objections, he dipped his chin, acknowledging them.

“It isn’t. In fact, it’s complicated as hell.”

She twisted around to see if he was joking. He was not.

“Anything worth having, Daisy, is not going to be easy.” He squeezed her hands and pressed his mouth against her shoulder. “*You* are worth having, and I’m prepared to fight for us this time. I’m no longer an ill-informed heir—easily manipulated by society’s dictates.”

“And those of your uncle,” she felt it necessary to add.

“He only did what he thought was best, I suppose. I do know that he mourned my father as deeply as I did. And he is my uncle. My flesh and blood.”

She could not argue. She had not been there.

“Do you have a plan?” She trusted Alastair.

Fate, not so much.

“I will hear what my uncle knows. Then. I will tell him I’ve found you again and that this time, you are my betrothed. We’ll go to the authorities together. They’ll need a description of my attackers and until they are brought to justice, I’ll hire watchmen for protection.”

She twisted around again, this time feigning indignation. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” She hated the effervescence bubbling in her chest.

Don’t trust this. Her conscience warned in a voice that sounded like her father’s.

And yet she couldn’t help but adore the shadows along his jaw, the fullness of his lips, and most of all, the undisguised affection in his eyes.

He frowned but then his eyes widened as he realized his blunder. “I have not asked you, yet.”

“You’re blushing.”

He rolled over, pinning her to the mattress. “I’m a duke, dukes don’t blush.” He held himself up, allowing only some of his weight to rest on her.

“Oh really.” She cocked one brow.

“Marry me. Be my wife.” This time, he was not just a boy.

He was a grown man—a duke no less.

Her duke.

But his proposal was too perfect—too much of a dream. “I am no duchess.”

“You need only be yourself.” His eyes blazed with determination. “We’ll figure everything out later. But I can’t lose you again. Please, Daisy, make me the happiest of men.”

He was... impossible. Extracting a promise neither could keep.

And yet, he was willing to fight for her. Was she such a coward that she’d give up so easily?

“I’m not... I don’t even know how to set a table properly. I wouldn’t know how to exist in your world.” He must know this about her. It’s likely why he never came back before.

“Which, in being honest, is part of what makes you the perfect wife. You are more intelligent than any lady of the *ton*, and elegant, and beautiful. You are real, Daisy. You make me real.” He placed his palm over her heart. “You’ve proven stronger than most men, by caring for your brother, by providing for both of you, against all odds.”

His words stunned her.

“You are compassionate and caring. Daisy, *by God*, you possess the heart of a queen. But most important of all, I love you.” His voice hitched, and a tremor ran through him.

She was falling and there was nothing she could do to stop herself.

“I’ll fight for us too,” she said. But a part of her was terrified—afraid of the aftermath of failure that was a distinct possibility.

“Is that a yes?” He smiled.

“Yes.” And then she wound her arms around him, pulling all his weight so that it toppled onto her. “If this all works out, I’ll marry you.”

“It’ll work out. Trust me.”

What could possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Very early into the next morning, when a rose-colored light hovered on the horizon, Alastair was out of bed, dressed in the clothes Daisy had mended. Tempted to wake her, he paced the room in indecision.

If he left her to sleep, she wouldn't worry.

He could go now, speak with his uncle, and possibly have everything sorted out before she finished serving her brother breakfast.

And if he woke her, she'd try to stop him.

So instead of nudging her gently, he dropped a light kiss on her forehead and crept down the stairs.

What he'd not anticipated was that her brother would be seated in the kitchen, his head bent over a book in the light of one flickering candle.

Alastair fell under the scrutiny of an outraged brother, who eyed him accusingly. The young man lifted his jaw proudly, a gesture very much like his sister's.

"You have remembered," the boy said, exhibiting hints of the man he'd one day become.

"I have." Alastair kept his voice low.

“And so you are sneaking out in the middle of the night—sneaking out of my sister’s bed. I’m going to have to challenge you.”

The young man’s pride stunned Alastair into silence. But only for a moment. Daisy’s brother would stand up for her honor—a tribute to how she’d raised him.

“I’m going to return later today. I’m not abandoning her, or you. In fact, I intend to take care of you both.”

“You were supposed to only pretend to be her husband. But you’ve taken advantage of our hospitality.” The charge stemmed from deep loyalty. The makings of a fine man, indeed.

“I’m going to clear the way so that I can marry her. I love your sister.”

These words gave the young man a pause. “She has agreed? She knows you are leaving?”

Daisy knew he planned on confronting his uncle. Alastair nodded. “When she wakes, she’ll explain everything to you.” Alastair wouldn’t presume to tell the boy without discussing it with her first. Daisy might wish to keep some of their history to herself.

Alastair crossed to the table and placed his palms flat on the surface “I should have talked with you first.” He showed her brother the respect he deserved. “I’d be honored to have your blessing.” The thickness in his throat surprised him, but following a tense few seconds, Gilbert nodded.

“So long as it’s what she wants.” There was no talk of marriage contracts or dowries. And yet the genuineness of the moment would be with him forever.

“It is. As of last night, anyhow,” Alastair said. He then rose to his full height. “But first, I need to settle my affairs.”

“Are you in danger?”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You promise?”

“Absolutely.”

Alastair strode to the door but then paused and turned. “Tell her...” *I love her.* “Tell her I’ll return soon.”

“I will.”

Alastair slipped through the doors and moving from one shadow to another, minded his surroundings, keeping fully alert, prepared to fight for his life.

His future depended on it.

And for the first time in a very long time, he anticipated that future.

Because...

Daisy.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Alastair didn't enter Lovington House through the front door but instead crept around to the back.

But he couldn't get past Mrs. Tanner, the robust woman who had reigned over the kitchen for as long as he could remember.

And when she first caught sight of him, the blood seemed to drain out of her familiar and somewhat ageless face. ““They said you were dead, I don't presume you are a ghost.”

“Not a ghost, Mrs. Tanner.” The familiar kitchen brought dozens of memories, reassuring him that he was, indeed, home. “But I would appreciate it if you'd keep this to yourself. I have a few matters to sort out.”

“Should I send for the authorities?” Without fail, servants knew more than their employers gave them credit for.

“Not yet,” he said. Any members of the police force who arrived might be working for the person who'd attempted to kill him. “Is my uncle in this morning?”

“You know he rises with the sun. He's in the study, *your* study, as we speak.”

“My thanks, Mrs. Tanner.” Alastair pivoted toward the exit.

“Your Grace?” The cook’s voice stopped him.

“Yes?”

“It’s good to see you home.” She bestowed one of her rare smiles on him. And if he was not incorrect, her eyes sparkled with tears.

“Good to be back,” Alastair answered with a wink and then continued on to the small stairway normally reserved for servants. Once he reached the main floor landing, to avoid drawing attention to himself, he stepped quietly and looked both ways before venturing into the corridor.

He did not knock before stepping into the study that would always remind him of his father.

He did not expect the wave of foreboding he experienced that washed over him.

“Uncle Calvin,” Alastair addressed the man sitting behind the large desk, windows at his back. Everything about the room welcomed Alastair, from the rich walnut molding to the leather sofa and the warm coals glowing in a hearth big enough for grown men to stand in.

As his uncle stared at him, the man’s face paled.

“My God!” Lord Calvin Frampton nearly tipped his chair backward as he shot to his feet. “What the devil?” He covered an expression of shock, fear, and guilt with what ought to be relief.

Alastair noted the elaborate lace at his uncle’s wrist, along with the purple velvet jacket he wore over an embroidered waistcoat. And the ring—Alastair’s—on the man’s left pinky.

His ring.

The police officers had taken it—to give to the lord as proof of his death.

The last missing pieces of the puzzle fell into place and Alastair remembered...

Everything.

“Who, precisely, are you calling on for help, Uncle? God or the devil?” The pages of his mind opened. Daisy had been right!

Remembering the events following his father’s death nearly knocked him over.

Alastair had *never* forgotten Daisy. He’d never stopped searching for her.

Alastair had assumed his uncle provided his greatest support.

But Uncle Calvin, a man as familiar as the back of his hand, was not the man Alastair believed him to be.

Casually reaching an outstretched hand across the desk, his uncle did an admirable job hiding his dismay. “My boy. Where in God’s name have you been? We were beginning to believe the worst had happened.”

Alastair recalled the article. His uncle had all but declared him dead.

“Not the worst.” Alastair took his uncle’s hand with a firm grip, searching the man’s gaze as he did so. “What did you think happened?”

The older man frowned, not meeting Alastair’s stare. What would he say? He had no way of knowing Alastair had lost his memory.

“We had no idea. All of Scotland Yard has been looking for you. One day you were here, and the next...” He plucked the lace around his wrist. “You were not.”

He then sat down at Alastair’s desk—looking far too comfortable. A sense of *de ja vu* slammed into Alastair, along with a wave of emotions. *Shock. Anger. Pain.*

“You knew where I was going.” Alastair didn’t beat around the bush.

“I told you it was a mistake.” His uncle spoke dismissively.

“What I don’t understand,” Alastair’s voice came out deadly and calm, “is why, if you wished me dead, you would wait until now to take action. We separated years ago.”

For half a second, Alastair thought his uncle might deny it. But then his uncle dropped a mask.

“I never intended it to come to that.”

“Then why?” Alastair struggled with the betrayal he felt. “Simply because of her social status?”

“You know it’s more than that. I refuse to allow you to taint the line with that... with that... boy!”

“*Boy?* What boy?” What the devil was his uncle talking about? Had he gone mad?

“Don’t pretend you haven’t been staying with that woman the entire time. You were seen with her yesterday—at the park.”

Surely his uncle didn’t mean *Gilbert*! An icy sensation slid down Alastair’s spine.

His uncle continued. “You couldn’t leave well-enough alone, could you? You had to go looking for her.” He threw his hands up in the air. “After all I did to get rid of your little problem. The matter ought to have been resolved once and for all. Ten years, Alastair. You lived fine without her for ten years. Did you really imagine I wouldn’t protect you from her again?”

But he had not been perfectly fine for ten years. He’d looked for her everywhere. He’d lived as half a man without her.

But Alastair kept silent. Daisy had been right all along. In hindsight now, he recognized all the signs.

He hadn’t wanted to believe it, *Damn my eyes*.

“Again?” Alastair prompted.

“Well, of course. Who do you think got rid of her after your father died?” Alastair had sat with his father for the last week of his life. But then Alastair, too, had become ill. Not only ill, but contagious. The doctors had all but locked him in his chamber until the sickness passed.

“I wrote her letters.”

“That never needed sending.” His uncle looked almost proud of himself. “Besides, she and her family had already been evicted. Once I realized they relocated in London, I had a few of my men keep tabs on the family. That’s how I learned about the boy. But as long as she ceased to exist for you, the child wasn’t a problem.” He pointed at Alastair’s chest. “You were the one who couldn’t let it go. This is your own fault.”

His uncle’s words unraveled a darkness Alastair hadn’t realized he’d been living in.

Alastair had loved Daisy for years and had confided his feelings to his uncle on more than one occasion.

And that he would always be searching for her.

He clenched his fists at his sides. If not for a little luck, he'd have remained in that darkness.

Dumb luck was the only reason he'd found her.

After years of disappointment, he'd inadvertently stumbled onto a clue while dancing the waltz with Countess of Grassley. The widowed lady had proudly accepted Alastair's compliment of her perfume and then announced that she had it specially made by a young woman who owned her own shop just outside of Mayfair.

The fragrance wasn't the same as he'd remembered, but until then, Alastair had never known another woman to adorn herself with honeysuckle oil.

Fashionable ladies of the ton, he'd discovered, usually wore more common perfumes—blended scents of lavender, jasmine and roses.

He'd excused early, returned home and unfortunately confided what he'd learned to his uncle—along with the fact that he would go to her—that he'd see Daisy again.

“I was going to meet with her. But you couldn't allow that, could you?” He heard the anger and pain in his voice. *He'd trusted his uncle.* “How could you?”

“Everything I've done has been to honor your father and the dukes who came before you.” His uncle's face had turned a deep red.

“You're mad.” Alastair had been going to see her when the officers attacked him. “You would kill me?”

“Not you, that child!” His uncle leaned forward. “It was the boy. His very existence is a threat to the dukedom.”

“The boy?”

“Your son.”

“I don’t have a son!” Alastair paced the length of the room. “Gilbert is her *brother*, for God’s sake.” He experienced two seconds of doubt. Was it possible? Had Daisy given birth while he’d been held up in London?

She was not above a lie in order to protect what was hers. But he just as quickly dismissed the possibility.

In the end, she’d told him everything. Gilbert was *her brother*. Daisy would have told him otherwise...

But his uncle had cultivated some misguided idea that Daisy’s brother was a threat.

To the *bloody* Lovington Dukedom.

“Even if he was my son, he wouldn’t be legitimate.” Surely his uncle comprehended this? The laws were quite clear when it came to these matters.

Alastair rolled his shoulders. *His uncle was wrong.*

Not that Alastair wouldn’t have been proud to call the intelligent young man his son, but that was not the case.

While Alastair dismissed the possibility that he could be the father of a ten-year-old boy, his uncle had retrieved a file from the desk drawer and tossed it across for Alastair to open. It had been compiled by Alastair himself and contained every note or piece of evidence he’d collected over the years while searching for Daisy.

Even old letters she’d sent him while he’d been at school.

The last time he'd looked through it, he'd replaced it in his safe.

“The boy is legitimate, is he not?” His uncle slapped open the front page. “Right here. A marriage certificate.”

Alastair blinked at the familiar souvenir from his youth and would have burst out laughing if not for the fact that his uncle was prepared to use the certificate to justify killing an innocent boy.

He and Daisy had drawn up the document one summer afternoon when they'd pretended to marry.

“The church lacked further verification, but I couldn't risk that it was not authentic.”

And that was the moment Alastair turned livid. Leveling an ice-cold stare across the desk, he spoke very softly. “Believing this young man was my legitimate son, you think you have a right... to kill him?”

Why wouldn't he, if he'd been willing to see Alastair killed first.

“That boy never would have been an issue if you'd listened to me and stayed away from her. I told you long ago she was a mistake. When I saw you in the park, I had no choice...”

“No choice?” Tragic possible outcomes raced through Alastair's mind.

His uncle knew where Daisy lived.

His uncle believed Gilbert was Alastair's legal son.

And Alastair had left the two alone this morning—unprotected. He had no time to waste. But before he lurched

into action, the door burst open. Two officers of the new police force stood on the threshold.

Alastair tensed, prepared to fight them, until he saw dismay on his uncle's face.

"What's the meaning of this?" Lord Calvin demanded.

Mrs. Tanner hovered behind them in the shadows and looking proudly defiant, addressed Alastair.

"I called for them, Your Grace." Mrs. Tanner answered.

"My everlasting thanks." She deserved a raise—a huge raise.

But Alastair needed to get back to Daisy's house *post haste*. Walking toward the door, he addressed the officers.

"Lord Calvin here, my uncle, tried to have me killed, but that's not important right now. A ten-year-old boy's life is in danger." And Daisy, God help him, what would might they do to Daisy?

There was no way in hell she'd allow anyone to hurt her brother without a putting herself in the way.

"I need one of your horses," Alastair addressed the officers. There wouldn't be time to have the stable ready one of his own. Then he pointed at the larger man. "You come with me." He turned to the shorter. "And you take Lord Calvin into custody. Once I know everyone's safe, I'll give you my statement."

With precious seconds wasting away, Alastair sprinted outside, onto the officer's horse, and toward a small shop where his entire life waited.

He needed to get there fast.

And once he had Daisy in his arms again, he'd never let her go.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

“**W**here is he?” Daisy pounced on her unsuspecting brother the minute she stepped into the kitchen. She then strode across the room and opened the cupboard where she’d left Alastair’s mended clothing. Her heart dropped when she found the cupboard empty.

“He said he’ll be back today.” Gilbert’s cheeks flushed. “He says he wants to marry you.”

“When?”

“When will he marry you?”

“No! When did he leave?” The hour was early, and yet the house was unusually empty. Fear curled around her. It was almost as though her spirit felt his absence.

“Five, maybe ten minutes ago. He said he’d be careful.” Gilbert drew back his shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure.”

She ran her hand through her hair and scowled when her fingers caught in tangled curls. She had come downstairs in such a hurry that she hadn’t bothered brushing it.

Was there something wrong or were these feelings spun by her imagination? He’d said he was going to speak with his

uncle today but hadn't informed her that he would be leaving so early.

She frowned.

If nothing was wrong, why had her blood run cold when she'd reached across the mattress and found it empty? She paced the length of the kitchen, torn between logic and her intuition.

If he was right about his uncle, she had nothing to worry about.

But if he was wrong...

"I need to go after him." It was likely too late to catch him but there had to be something she could do. She'd figure that out on the way. "But, drat it all, I need to get dressed first!" Not waiting for her brother to answer, she ran up the stairs as quickly as she'd come down. Once in her chamber, she dressed quickly, barely getting her half-boots tied but not taking the time to pull on stockings or bother with her hair.

And when she returned to the kitchen, she found her brother blocking the way to the front door, looking quite determined as he waited for her.

"I'm coming with you," he announced. The stubborn set of his jaw reminded her of herself. "I can afford to miss one day of school. I cannot afford to lose my sister."

"You aren't going to lose me," she answered, but seeing the wisdom of not going alone, she didn't argue. Instead, she gestured toward the door. "Come on then."

But when she opened the door to the street, she froze.

Because standing outside waiting for them were two faces she'd hoped never to see again—the men who'd tried to kill

Alastair.

Thank God he wasn't here. All she could do was hope he stayed away before she could get rid of them.

"Good morning, Officers." She kept her voice calm. "If you'll excuse me, I was just walking my brother to school. Come back later today and I'll be happy to show you some soaps."

"I'm afraid our business can't wait." The larger man blocked her path. "This will only take a moment, if you and your brother don't mind stepping back inside."

She had no choice but to go along with what they wanted. "I don't mind at all, Officer... What are your names?"

"I'm officer Giles. He's Officer Brown." The shorter of the two answered

"I can assist you now, but my brother needs to leave for school. He's had perfect attendance this year and I refuse to ruin his streak with a tardy." She turned to Gilbert. "Run along, Gil, while I assist the officers." Daisy sent Gilbert a meaningful look. *Get help.*

Gilbert hesitated, obviously reluctant to leave her alone with the two men. Looking very young and innocent, he dipped his chin.

But as he moved to leave, the taller of the two men, Officer Brown, snagged Gilbert by the arm.

"You aren't going anywhere," he stated with that exaggerated authority a few members of the new force had adopted.

But she would not stand for it.

“Unhand him!” Daisy demanded just as a hand covered her mouth. With no one to stop them, the two officers clumsily dragged Daisy and Gilbert back into the shop.

The instant the hand left Daisy’s mouth, she inhaled, intent on screaming for help, but was cut off when pain exploded along the side of her face.

Reeling, she stood frozen, shocked at having been slapped by Officer Giles.

The realization, more so than the pain, reinforced her initial assessment that these men were either corrupt or imposters in the force.

“What do we do with her? After we’ve dealt with the boy?” Officer Giles asked his partner in crime, his hands clamped around her wrists.

“What do you mean, dealt with the boy?” Daisy demanded.

“Not your business Miss.” Officer Brown responded in clipped tones.

“But what about her?” her captor asked.

“Seeing as she’s seen us, she’ll have to disappear as well. His Lordship wants the job done properly this time. No witnesses. Nothing to lead the authorities back to him.”

“We should charge him extra then.” Officer Giles sounded almost gleeful.

“Perhaps.”

“But why?” Daisy tamped down her panic. They’d been after Alastair, not her!

Why on earth would anyone want to hurt Gilbert?

None of this made sense, but if she was going to save her brother, she needed to keep them talking.

The two hired brutes stared at one another until Officer Brown shrugged. “Can’t hurt her to know now, I suppose.”

And then the other one answered. “He is the duke’s heir, but he’s common and Lord Calvin won’t allow it.”

“The duke’s heir? As in the Duke of Lovington?” Hysterical laughter threatened to escape. “Gilbert is my *brother*. Even if he were the duke’s son, he wouldn’t be legitimate.” She began shaking her head. “This is a horrible mistake. If Lord Calvin thinks my brother has a claim to the title, he couldn’t be more wrong. Please, I beg of you. Go back to your employer and tell him he has nothing to worry about.”

“Be quiet.”

Her astonished laughter caught in her throat when a knife appeared in Officer Brown’s hand. He pressed it against Gilbert’s throat and proceeded to drag him out of the front room away from the windows. Terrified for her brother’s life, Daisy complacently followed with Officer Giles.

“What if she’s right?” her captor asked, sounding uncertain for the first time.

“She’ll say anything to protect him.” Officer Brown’s eyes narrowed, his eyes darting around the kitchen. “This time, we’re finishing the job properly—not sure about you but I intend to get paid this time.”

Officer Giles kept hold of Daisy’s hands behind her back but he’d inadvertently loosened his grip.

“But this is a mistake!” she kept her voice calm. “Gilbert is no relation to the Duke of Lovington! Lord Calvin is mistaken!”

“I said to be quiet.” Officer Brown snapped.

Daisy mentally inventoried her options. This was her kitchen. Her domain. She had heavy pots and pans. She had knives. Somehow, she needed to turn this around.

But how?

“Where should we do this?” Giles asked.

“Right here is as good a place as any.”

But suddenly Gilbert’s expression wasn’t as fearful as it had been a second ago. His eyes narrowed, and he flicked his gaze beyond her shoulder.

Someone was there.

As curious as she was to turn around, she remained focused on the two horrible officers.

“You both must be thirsty.” Daisy said the only thing she could think of. “Why don’t you allow me to make you some lemonade while we discuss this?” The suggestion was absurd but it was the best she could come up with.

Delay.

And watch for any opening to make a move.

The two men stared at her as though she’d gone mad.

“I have biscuits as well,” she added, noticing that the grip on her wrists was even looser now. “You both must be famished.”

“I haven’t eaten since yesterday afternoon.” Officer Giles admitted.

Officer Brown wasn’t so easily distracted. “This isn’t a bloody tea party.”

Daisy moved gingerly toward the counter, daring to put some separation between her and the man detaining her. “Oh, but I have scones, and preserves and cream—”

But that was as far as she got before a shot exploded behind her. A dark spot appeared on Officer Brown’s chest—seeping blood. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and he dropped to the floor.

“Step away from her or you’ll be next.” Alastair stood, pistol in hand. And although he might appear calm to someone who didn’t know him, she recognized the tension in his shoulders, the readiness in his eyes.

He’d returned.

He’d come back to her.

Officer Giles was not, however, prepared to surrender. He tightened his grip and pressed against himself against Daisy’s back, using her body to shield himself.

At the same time, he managed to scoop her bread knife off the counter, pressing it into her abdomen as he worked his way toward the back exit.

She ought to be afraid, but Alastair was here.

He had *come back*.

And he had saved *Gilbert*.

“Gilbert isn’t your son.” The words flew from her mouth. She needed to clear the matter right away. If these were her last moments on earth, she didn’t want to leave that particular question unanswered. She wanted nothing but the truth between them.

Because it mattered. It meant everything.

“I know.” Alastair flicked his gaze away from her captor, and for just an instant, it warmed. “You would have told me.”

“I would have.” She was so grateful that he trusted her.

And she trusted him.

“Not that I wouldn’t be proud to have such a fine young man for a son—one who reads as much as you. I have great appreciation for a good philosopher.”

Alastair stared at Officer Giles but his words were for Gilbert.

Gilbert, who had silently moved closer to the stove and carried something behind his back.

The Treatises of Government by John Locke.

Daisy twisted just in time for Gilbert to whack the side of Officer Giles’ face. And in a flash, Alastair was across the room to wrestle the knife out of the fiend’s hands.

“I’ve got him.” He locked his arms around the officer’s neck. “Are either of you hurt?” Alastair’s gaze shifted between Gilbert and Daisy.

“I’m fine. Just a little cut.” Gilbert answered.

“Take this.” She handed Gilbert her handkerchief. “But it needs a proper cleaning.”

“It’s nothing,” her brother insisted, wiping at the cut.

“It isn’t nothing. They nearly killed you.” Her hands were shaking and her knees felt weak. For the first time in her life, she comprehended why ladies fainted.

“You two are amazing,” Alastair, still securing the stunned villain, sent both of them approving glances.

“You came.” She answered, locking her gaze with his.

“Get used to it,” he answered just before half a dozen officers swarmed her kitchen.

Presumably, legitimate officers this time.

“Good show!” The lead man addressed Alastair, relieving him of the prisoner. “We’ve been trying to get solid evidence against these two for months now. I’m Inspector Barrington.” He flashed a shiny badge. “I’ll have my sergeants take this one back to Scotland Yard but I am going to need statements from all of you.”

The inspector directed his subordinates even as he removed pencil and paper from his coat. “Is there somewhere we can speak privately while my men deal with...” He flicked a grimace to the floor where Officer Brown had fallen, and lowered his voice. “The body.”

“Of course. The dining room.”

She stood frozen, however, until Alastair’s hand pressed against her back.

“You’re shaking.” Alastair spoke so only she could hear and then wound his arm around her waist. “Are you up to this?”

She nodded. Best to get this part over with.

After that, they needed to discuss the future—whatever that might look like.

“This will only take a moment.” The inspector said. “But it’s important.”

“Good shot, Alastair.” Gilbert, who ought to look upset, appeared more impressed than anything.

Daisy laughed a little when she heard her brother’s voice—so normal—and safe!

She might be on the verge of hysteria.

“Come this way.”

Daisy allowed Alastair to lead them. She hadn't realized she was clutching his hand until she felt his reassuring squeeze.

They were fine. The villains had lost and Alastair seemed to have his memory back.

And although her insides trembled at the near-tragic turn of events, she had a few questions of her own.

Alastair pulled out a chair for her and she lowered herself into it gratefully.

Alastair took the seat beside her, and Gilbert and the inspector took the opposite chairs.

Finally, she would have some answers.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

“How did you come to be acquainted with Mrs. Montgomery?” The officer addressed Alastair first.

“We knew one another before. And she is *Miss* Montgomery. The two of us were engaged but separated a decade ago when my father fell ill.” Alastair locked his gaze with Daisy’s, and she knew his answer were as much for her benefit as the inspector’s. “I was called to London for his final hours, but then I too, fell ill. Over the course of my illness, I wrote letters informing Miss Montgomery of these circumstances but my uncle failed to post them.”

He remembered everything.

“You were ill?” she asked. She’d considered that up until she’d read about him in the newspapers. There had been times when she’d even wondered if he was still alive.

“Cholera—My father succumbed but I had youth and good health on my side.”

This time, Daisy squeezed his hand. She’d come so close to losing him forever. More than once.

“How bad was it?” She didn’t want to know, and yet, she needed to know everything now.

“I was out of my head for weeks, bedridden for months. It felt like a lifetime.” With his words, years of pent-up feelings lifted from her shoulders.

“You would have come,” she said. She had not been wrong to hope. She’d not been foolish.

“I would have come.”

The inspector cleared his throat. “But you recovered, obviously, and have since reunited.” The man had obviously noticed Daisy holding Alastair’s hand, or the way she leaned into him. “What does all of this have to do with Lord Calvin’s involvement with my corrupt officers?”

Alastair turned to face Daisy, eyes burning. “My being left here for dead was not a coincidence. It was not fate.”

“But if it wasn’t fate—”

“It was your soap.” He smiled.

“What?”

“One of your clients, Countess of Grassley, told me about you. And I knew. I knew it had to be you. As soon as I learned you might be in London, I began making plans for us. I should have come to you right away, but I... wanted a plan for courting you. You always said we came from different worlds, but we didn’t really. And I needed to address your objections first. Unfortunately, I shared those plans with my uncle. You were right about him all along.”

“Why would he think Gilbert was your son?” Daisy asked.

Alastair ran a hand down his face. “The marriage certificate. I saved that damned certificate you drew up.”

She tilted her head. “From when we—”

“From our secret ceremony.”

“He believed it was authentic?”

“Wait,” Gilbert interrupted. “You’re my sister. Please, don’t tell me—”

“Yes. And of course, I am your *sister*. I was there when mother birthed you. Ask Mrs. Farley if you don’t believe me.” The house had been dark and somber following their mother’s death, but having an infant to care for had kept her going.

Gilbert had provided Daisy with purpose. Yes, she had loved him as her own, but... “Mother and father loved you. Never fear that you are my brother.”

“Are you secretly married?” Gilbert persisted.

Daisy turned back to Alastair at the memory. “We held a pretend ceremony. Alastair collected me a bouquet and one of the stable cats acted as vicar.”

“And I saved the certificate.”

The inspector cleared his throat. “But why did Lord Calvin hire my constables?”

“My uncle is my heir.” Alastair’s voice turned hard. “He thought I had replaced him—with one of whose bloodlines he did not approve.”

“Your constables tried killing Alastair—the duke first.” Daisy explained what she’d heard the morning she’d found Alastair half dead, what they’d said about reporting to a lord, and the fact that they’d stolen a ring off Alastair’s hand.

“My uncle was wearing the ring when I confronted him earlier,” Alastair added.

The inspector shook his head. “Nasty business whenever nobbs are involved. Your uncle is currently under house arrest, but I suppose I’ll have to bring him in.”

“He ordered an innocent boy killed.” Daisy’s stomach lurched. “Not to mention his own nephew—a duke. I want him prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

“We mustn’t allow disgruntled heirs to get away with this sort of thing, now can we? Is there anything else you wish to share with me?” The inspector tucked the pencil into his pocket again.

“Just that you should vet your officers better if you want the people’s trust,” Gilbert said. “You wear the same uniform. That ought to mean something.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, young man, but I’m afraid you’ll have to take that up with the commissioner.”

“You can be certain that we will,” Alastair said.

“Thank you, inspector,” Daisy said.

“If we think of anything else, I’ll send for you at once,” Alastair dismissed the man before sliding his arm around Daisy’s shoulders. He seemed to know just how terrified she had been. He knew what Gilbert meant to her.

“I’ll help with the body,” Gilbert volunteered. “I’ll bet I’m the only boy at school who’s seen a dead body.”

Daisy winced.

“That won’t be necessary.” The inspector frowned.

“You don’t have to go to school today. Not after...” Her voice broke. “I’m so sorry.” How was it possible that a fake marriage certificate had nearly gotten both Alastair and Gilbert killed? “It was my fault.”

“Not at all, Dais. And I’m perfectly fine. Besides, I have that test on Locke this afternoon. And drat, the book has blood on it now. How am I going to explain that to my professor?”

“Tell him you saved your sister with it. That’s what you should tell him,” Alastair suggested.

“Yes, tell him the truth,” Daisy added. She was too overwhelmed to come up with anything more creative than that. The truth, she supposed, was as good as anything.

Gilbert was already on his feet, and the inspector rushed after him, leaving Daisy and Alastair alone.

Along with the events of the past hovering between them.

“It was not fate,” she finally said after the door closed. “Finding you that day.”

“No,” Alastair confirmed.

And she pondered how she felt about that.

“Fate’s overrated,” she eventually said.

“You think?” Alastair took her by the hand and pulled her across to sit on his lap. “You were right about my uncle. I hate that I failed to see what he was doing.”

All those years, she’d secretly strolled past his townhouse, imagining he’d forgotten her—imagining he had found some other woman to love.

But he hadn’t.

“This is better than fate,” she said.

“This?”

“Love,” she answered. “Because with fate, we’re at the mercy of chance, but when it’s love, our future depends on us.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Alastair and Daisy were not, as it turned out, left alone for long.

After Gilbert left for school, and the inspector and his men carried off the dead body, Mrs. Farley arrived demanding to know the reason for all of the hullabaloo.

Of course, she'd watched everything play out from her front window and even a person who wouldn't be inclined to gossip would be curious about such goings-on.

What with the shooting, the screaming, and then a body being carried out by an army of police officers.

“What's the meaning of all of this?” the gray-haired woman glanced around the kitchen.

This time, Alastair was properly dressed. Wearing the apparel Daisy had mended, he looked quite ducal.

Daisy, on the other hand, hadn't had a chance to fix her hair, or change into a clean gown, but she made no apologies as she endured nearly half an hour of her neighbor's inquisition.

She fended off the questions carefully, because Mrs. Farley still believed Alastair was Daisy's husband. For now, anyhow.

With a future that had yet to be resolved, Daisy still needed to protect her reputation.

Alastair, on the other hand, was less accommodating, and as soon as Mrs. Farley finished her tea, he ended the visit abruptly. “Thank you so much for your concern.” He steered Daisy’s nosy neighbor out of the kitchen, thanking her, promising they’d send word if they needed her assistance, and then finally, clicking the lock on the front door.

“Thank you,” Daisy exhaled when he returned. They’d both endured the unthinkable that morning without the benefit of a full night of sleep.

She stared down at her hands, afraid to hope.

“You never have to thank me,” he said. “For anything. In fact, all of this is my fault. I put Gilbert in danger. I put you in danger.” Alastair stood at the door watching her.

“Your uncle was all you had left. And he lied to you. How could you have known?”

“I took his word,” Alastair said. “I should have known that you would have waited for me.”

“I would have.”

“We were too young to know what we had,” Alastair pushed off the wall and crossed to where she sat. Rather than join her, however, he swooped her up and into his arms.

Right where she wanted to be.

“We are both smarter now.” He maneuvered them out of the dining room and proceeded to carry her up the stairs to her chamber.

“Are we?”

He lowered her onto the bed and then sat beside her. He grasped her hand and traced the lines of her palm with his fingertip.

“You forgive me?”

“Of course.”

“And you, have you forgiven yourself yet?” His question proved how well he knew her.

“But I—”

“Trusted me.”

“And they died.”

“Because I failed you. Not because you failed them.”

His words struck her heart, making her eyes burn. “He warned me.”

Ah, Sweet Daisy. “I don’t think anything could have kept us apart back then.”

She pressed her face against his shirt. She couldn’t argue with his reasoning.

“So will you, forgive yourself?”

She nodded. “I’ll try.”

He pressed a kiss against her forehead.

“I won’t ask for more. Meanwhile,” he said, “I believe I am finished with London for now.”

“Oh?” She pulled away to see his eyes.

“I’d like to spend some time in the country with my wife. Allow her to come to terms with being my duchess.”

Determination filled his voice. He meant to follow through with everything he’d told her before.

Daisy licked her lips.

“You wish to take a wife to Woodland Priory?” Daisy was ninety-nine percent sure of his meaning but needed to hear him speak the words.

Because, yes, he’d expressed these sentiments before, but that had been before he remembered.

Before he knew all the obstacles they would face.

“It’s where I fell in love with her. And I’d like to renew our vows at the chapel there.” One side of his mouth curved into an ironic grin. “But with a real vicar. We’ll make it legal this time.”

“If you’re asking what I think you’re asking, I’d like that.” And she would love returning to Woodland Priory.

“So, you’ll marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, Daisy.” He pulled her close and touched his lips to hers. “We have so much time to make up for.” His tongue slid past the seam of her lips. “So many kisses.”

“So much love,” she whispered against his mouth. But they needn’t rush. They had a lifetime to look forward to.

Their lips parted and Alastair cradled her face in his hands.

“I lost you and that never should have happened. I was irresponsible to trust my uncle with my heart or my legacy. Going forward, I’ll make decisions regarding the Priory. I can’t change the past but I can make better choices for the future.”

“I like the sound of that.” Daisy touched the side of his face. “I could still make my soap.” She smiled. She could

teach tenant wives her craft so they too could make better lives for their families.

“I’ll hire a tutor for Gilbert. And when he’s ready, if he’d like, we can send him to Eton.”

It was unreal. Sitting with him—making plans for the future.

“Are you sure?” Daisy asked.

“More than ever.” His eyes glowed with hope, and something else now—love.

She would finally belong to him. And he would belong to her.

She reached up to capture his mouth with hers. To kiss him. to love him.

“My sweet, sweet Daisy.”

Daisy closed her eyes and savored his kiss.

“I love you.” She whispered against his mouth. “Sweet duke of mine...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Married to the same man for over 25 years, Annabelle Anders is a mother to three children and two Miniature Wiener dogs . One day she sat down and began to write romance novels which had until then, existed only in her imagination. Annabelle is happy to have found her place in life.

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AN IMPROPER DUKE

AMY ROSE BENNETT

Having an affair with a heart-stoppingly handsome, much younger duke is all kinds of improper...but when he's also your stepson's best friend, it's positively scandalous.

Bookish Celia Wyndham, the widowed Lady Ashdown, has been half in love—and shockingly in lust—with her stepson's best friend, Hugo Dehavilland, the very eligible Duke of Tremayne for the longest time. When Hugo attends a week-long house party at Ashdown Hall—and then accidentally discovers he's the object of the viscountess's erotic fantasies—he suggests they embark on a passionate affair...a wicked proposition that Celia simply cannot refuse.

PROLOGUE

A Highly Improper Entry from Lady Ashdown's Diary...

2nd August 1819

It's an impossibly warm summer night and I cannot sleep because my thoughts—nay, my wicked fantasies—about H. fill my head. They consume me. I should not want him, but I do. Quite madly. Quite hopelessly and utterly—against my better judgment and all dictates of social decorum. I might be a widow, but I am beside myself with longing. My entire body yearns to be filled and fucked (I cannot believe I just wrote such a filthy word on paper but there it is, it is true, and I cannot unwrite it, just as I cannot unthink it...)

Only you, my Dearest Diary, knows that my dearly departed husband was not the most amorous of gentlemen, even at the best

of times, and since I've been widowed, I grow more lonely and more desperate by the day. Indeed, my entire soul aches for something "more" from this life. Something I have not known. It has not helped that my dear friend, Lady B., recently lent me one of her erotic books and I have been reading it nearly every night this past week...

...I really shouldn't commit these highly improper thoughts of mine to paper, but I must, in the vain hope that once they have been voiced—even just in ink—then perhaps my mind will quiet and then I shall be able to get some rest. At least tonight...

So...(I still can't quite believe that I'm going to write all this down)...here it is, a list of erotic acts I have never done before with anyone—and probably never will do with anyone, let alone H. of all men—in all their glorious shameful shocking wickedness...

1. Give oral pleasure to H.
2. Have H. give oral pleasure to me.
3. Watch H. make himself come off by his own hand.
4. Bring myself to orgasm in front of H.
5. Watch another couple making love (only if they like to be watched. I've heard this is a proclivity of some individuals, and I suspect I will find it quite titillating.

*Reading erotic stories has certainly been titillating!
Now, if H. was also with me... I shiver with delight
just imagining the possibilities...)*

6. *Make love in front of a mirror.*
7. *Make love outside in a moonlit garden.*
8. *If truth be told, I would love to make love anywhere
but a boring bed, flat on my back, when all the
candles are snuffed out!*

*Of course, all of this hinges on H.
noticing me in a sensual, purely carnal sort
of way... Although, I suspect I would die if
he actually did. After all, he is a highly
eligible duke now, and the most handsome
man I have ever seen. No doubt he'll be
attending A.'s house party next week. If he's
back from his Grand Tour in time... I live
in perpetual, yet agonized hope...*

*Drat and blast... It's an hour later and
I still cannot sleep. I think I shall have to
touch myself while imagining it is actually
H. who is touching me... That it's his
enormous male member that's filling me and
thrusting and plunging and pumping until
I scream his name. He is so well-made, I
suspect he must be rather well-endowed in
that particular department...*

*If only he would notice me. If only he
did desire me. But then what, Celia, then
what? H. is not for you, and you know it.
No matter how much you wish it to be
otherwise...*

CHAPTER
ONE

Ashdown Hall, Sussex

Summer, 1819

T *hunk.*

The cumbersome, leatherbound copy of *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* hit the desk, raising a small cloud of dust...

A moment later, Celia Wyndham, the widowed Viscountess Ashdown, screwed up her eyes and nose ever so tightly and sneezed, most inelegantly. “Achoo! Damn and blast,” she muttered as she pulled a fine lawn kerchief from beneath her muslin fichu then delicately dabbed at her nose.

Undeterred, she deposited another tome onto the growing pile of books. Books on ancient antiquities—a small library’s worth if truth be told—that would soon be moved to the Ashdown estate’s dower house, Beechwood House...her new home.

Well, soon-to-be new home.

Of course, Celia could have asked one of the many housemaids employed at Ashdown Hall to dust the bookshelves in her private study before she’d commenced the sorting process. But really, considering Celia *was* leaving, it

hardly seemed worth it. Especially since most of the staff were buzzing about preparing for a summer house party at Ashdown Hall... A party *she* hadn't been invited to.

Celia sighed and tucked her kerchief back into her bodice. She supposed her twenty-six-year-old stepson, Andrew—the new Viscount Ashdown—considered her to be as withered up and ancient as the books she so loved. No doubt he'd reasoned that his stepmother couldn't possibly want to play hostess at such a “party.” Which meant it would be one of “those” house parties that the *ton* whispered about. The sort of party that she, Celia, had never been invited to. Not when she'd been a passably pretty but far too plump and painfully shy wallflower for year after agonizing year. Not even when she'd eventually become the wife of Andrew's father, Neville, Lord Ashdown.

Though Neville had never hosted a house party during their four-year marriage, Celia *had* managed to master her nerves enough to play the part of a passable hostess at quiet dinner parties and the occasional soiree. She always suspected that was the main reason the widowed, much older viscount had wed her. He hadn't needed an heir—he already had Andrew, after all. No, he'd needed another viscountess—someone quiet and dependable like she was—to manage his domestic and social affairs. Despite the vast difference in their ages—Neville had been twenty-five years older than Celia—she had been pleasingly surprised at the offer and content with their marriage of convenience...

For the most part...

Celia picked up another book and studied the gold-lettering on its tooled-leather spine. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Volume I*. She released another sigh and added it to her ever-growing “yes” pile.

She really wasn't *that* ancient. Not empire ancient, at the very least. She was only four-and-thirty for heaven's sake and she certainly didn't see herself as a crotchety old dowager. But considering Andrew *had* asked her to move—he'd been scrupulously polite when he'd made the request—she really couldn't refuse. Besides, Beechwood House was quite a pretty little two-story limestone brick house, so she really shouldn't complain.

She would be comfortable there with her books. There was a neat little parlor that would serve nicely as a drawing room, and a lovely garden to sit in, and she could always get a cat or two to keep her company...

Yes, she *should* be grateful and mustn't decline into a state of melancholy. She should ignore the little voice at the back of her mind that whispered she might be missing out on something...or worse, lots of things. Just because her friend, Abigail, Lady Barsby, who lived nearby, was blissfully wed to a handsome young baronet, Sir Nicholas, and had just announced she was increasing. No, Celia *wasn't* envious at all.

Oh, who was she fooling. Celia pulled another book from the shelf and scowled at the cover. It was a tome on the cultivation of root vegetables. She loved her friend, but she *was* also envious. Positively green-as-a-cucumber with jealousy. Celia was jealous that she'd never had a child. Jealous that at thirty-four, she'd never had a fulfilling love life. Jealous of everyone who would be going to Andrew's licentious house party to have a rollicking, orgiastic, simply brilliant time. Apparently "dry and dusty old widows" were not allowed.

"Well, a pox on everyone who attends," Celia muttered grumpily as she threw *A Guide to Growing Root Vegetables in*

England onto the “no” pile...and then she promptly sneezed again. And yet again.

Ugh, this dust!

“Bless you, my lady,” came a rich deep voice from the doorway behind her. A very familiar voice. The one voice that never failed to make Celia’s stomach flutter madly. A voice that turned her knees into melted butter. Even though she knew she shouldn’t react like a giddy schoolgirl whenever she encountered this particular gentleman, she couldn’t help herself.

Drawing a deep and hopefully calming breath, Celia plastered a serene smile on her face, then turned to face the man she had a most inconvenient, bordering on improper *tendre* for... Hugo Dehavilland, the Duke of Tremayne.

A man who was eight whole years younger than her. Her stepson’s best friend. Just back from a trip to the Continent... Italy and Greece and Malta and Constantinople and a thousand other places Celia longed to visit.

As usual, much to Celia’s dismay, Hugo Dehavilland took her breath away. Perhaps even more so on this particular occasion because it had been four months since she’d last seen him.

He was lounging in the doorway, one wide shoulder propped against the polished oak frame. His arms were crossed and his substantial biceps were straining the seams of his superfine coat sleeves. Above his pristine white cravat his throat and face were sun-bronzed, and his dark blond hair—the rich color of sand after a wave had washed upon the shore—was tousled and streaked with gold. His deep brown eyes—as rich as hot chocolate beneath straight dark brows—were

dancing with devilry and some other emotion Celia couldn't quite place as he regarded her.

Oh, the Duke of Tremayne was handsome... *Too* handsome. Too tall. Too intelligent. Just too delicious.

And he always had been.

Even when he'd just been "Hugo," a student at Oxford and then after that, Mr. Hugo Dehavilland, Esquire, solicitor and grandson of a duke. And now...

Despite Celia's best efforts to remain as cool as an ice from Gunter's Tea Shop, she *knew* her cheeks were turning a hot bright pink. She probably looked like a blushing flamingo that had been out in the noonday sun for far too long. Her face was probably iridescent with color.

Nevertheless, she said, "Good afternoon, Your Grace," as blithely as she could. As though she hadn't a care in the world as her gaze met the young man's wickedly twinkling eyes. "It's lovely to see you back at Ashdown Hall. It's...it's been a while..."

Damn and drat and damn again. Why had she said that? It sounded like she'd marked the duke's absence. Like she'd been counting the days off in her diary until his return. Which she hadn't. Not really...

Well, maybe just a little bit...

Hugo's wide mouth tilted into a smile. "Yes, it has been a while, my lady. It's certainly wonderful to be back." His gaze wandered over her at a leisurely pace, lingering on her larger-than-average bust and the curve of her plump hips before returning to her flushed face. It were almost as though he were assessing her appearance, even admiring it. As though he were

drinking her in...or thinking about devouring her like a hungry lion.

Surely not...

All the same, it was most disconcerting. Hugo had *never* looked at Celia quite like this before. He was the same...yet somehow completely different. It wasn't just his sun-kissed locks and tanned complexion. There was a look in his dark eyes that sent a delicious shiver across Celia's skin. That made her nipples tighten beneath her stays to hard aching points.

My goodness... She needed to stop thinking about her nipples, right this instant. She needed to *say* something and not just gape and swoon like a ninnyhammer in front of her stepson's friend.

She swallowed then cleared her throat. "I...er...take it you're looking for Andrew?"

"I've already seen him... I'm afraid he's holed up with his steward, trying to get as much estate business out of the way as possible before this house party gets underway tomorrow." Hugo—no, she must think of him as "the duke" and "His Grace" even though she'd addressed him for years and years as *Mister* Dehavilland (and Hugo in her head and in her wicked dreams)—prowled closer to the desk where her piles of semi-sorted books sat. "What are you doing?" he asked, his tone mildly curious as he picked up the book on root vegetables and squinted at the cover.

"I'm sorting through all my books. Working out which ones to take to the dower house with me before the house party starts."

The duke—yes, "*the duke*"...*well done*, Celia—cocked a brow. "The dower house? You mean, you're moving to

Beechwood House?”

“Yes. I am.” Celia pushed her “yes” pile a little to the left of the desk, quite unnecessarily, just to give her hands something to do. “Most of my things are already at Beechwood House and I expect to be fully installed there tomorrow. Of course, Andrew has every right to ask me to move. Ashdown Hall is *his* now and has been so for a year. In fact, I’m surprised he hasn’t asked me to move *until* now...” She shrugged a shoulder. “As a bachelor, I’m sure he doesn’t want his stepmother hanging about, looking over his shoulder. Especially since he is throwing a house party for the first time. I don’t want to be the proverbial wet blanket. It’s probably for the best that I make myself scarce.”

The duke—*not* Hugo or Mr. Dehavilland—made a noise in his throat. A disapproving noise. “Hmmm.” He placed the root vegetable tome back onto the “no” pile. “I don’t think you could ever be considered a wet blanket, my lady.” His gaze lifted to meet hers. “I’ve always thought your conversation to be lively and your company most diverting. Would you like me to have a discreet word with Andrew? At the very least you could stay for the party...” His mouth curved into a heart-stopping smile. Then he winked. “Why should you miss out on all the fun?”

Was the duke *flirting* with her? Flirting? With her? He’d never done so before. Not ever.

Celia was clearly overset by the young man’s sudden arrival in her private domain and now her imagination was running riot. Her *tendre* was putting nonsensical ideas in her head. Ideas which she needed to harness and bring under control. And swiftly, before she made a complete and total tit of herself.

Ack, now she was thinking about her breasts again.

“Oh... Oh no, I wouldn’t want to create any discord between you and Andrew...” Like her kerchief, Celia tucked her thoughts about her bosom firmly away then managed to don a smile. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll be so busy talking to all your friends about your travels—and no doubt mingling with lots of fine, eligible young ladies—that my absence won’t even be noticed.”

Actually, the more Celia thought about it, the more she realized that it was a very good idea that she wouldn’t be living in Ashdown Hall during the week-long party. She really didn’t want to see the duke courting other women right in front of her nose. Perhaps even seducing them. Of course, he had every right to do so. After all, it was none of her business what he got up to with members of the opposite sex. He was six-and-twenty and handsome and now a wealthy duke. He’d have women practically falling at his feet, vying for his attention and affection. No, she did not want to bear witness to any of that.

“Well, *I’ll* notice that you’re not there.” The duke’s expression was the epitome of disgruntled as he pulled a pair of spectacles from his pocket and balanced them on his aristocratic blade of a nose. “I mean, who else will be able to converse intelligently about Byzantine art or history”—he picked up Celia’s copy of *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantineae*— “or Etruscan sculpture or Phoenician architecture?”

Celia managed a small laugh. “I suspect you’re right on that score.”

She and Hugo—dash it all, *His Grace*—did share a love of ancient history and antiquities. Celia’s father, the third son of

an earl, had been quite the scholar, and during her late adolescent years and early twenties, she'd quite happily served as translator and scribe for him. She liked to think she could read Latin and ancient Greek just as well as any Oxford or Cambridge graduate. Perhaps better. It was a fact that Hugo had learned when they'd first met, five years ago. At Andrew's invitation, his best friend had been spending his Yuletide holidays at Ashdown Hall and had been struggling with a translation for a particular university essay on Homer's *The Iliad*. He'd only been twenty-one to her twenty-nine years, and she'd barely been married to Neville for six months... But try as she might, she couldn't stamp out the ember of attraction which had sparked for the studious young man. He'd been serious and earnest, perhaps even diffident back then, just like she'd been, and in many ways, still was. She was a quiet, bookish sort of person. When she'd been forced to endure several Seasons in her early twenties, she'd hated every minute of it.

Over time, that ember of yearning for Hugo—both physical wanting and a tiny flame of kindred feeling—had continued to smolder, even though Celia had tried to douse it in cold water. After Neville had passed away a year ago, and after Hugo—suddenly the Duke of Tremayne—had departed for a Grand Tour, she'd prayed the fire in her breast would die a natural death.

But it seemed that it hadn't. And Hugo—yes *Hugo*—right at this moment, was only making the fire worse.

With his lingering glances, and Adonis-like looks—and his talk of wanting to spend time in her company—he was turning her into a big puddle of helpless, useless longing.

Curse him! Celia sent him a surreptitious scowl as he nonchalantly flipped through the pages of her book on Byzantine history with his long, tanned fingers. He should not behave this way, flirting with her like some wicked rakehell bent on seduction. And she...she should be immune to such obvious ploys and machinations. She was a widow. She was the stepmother of his best friend. She should not feel this way.

She. Should. Not!

Celia pressed her lips together. The sensible thing to do would be to send Hugo away with a flea in his ear. Tell him she had a megrim. Tell him anything to put some physical distance between them so she had a chance to quell these unruly thoughts. To subdue her unseemly lust.

But the afternoon was warm, and here in the relatively close confines of her private study, standing so close to Hugo—oh, what was the point in calling him “the duke” any longer?—his delicious spicy cologne with its intoxicating notes of sandalwood and citrus and heady musk floated around Celia. Enticing her to do something completely insane like pressing her heated countenance into his shirtfront or against that tanned sliver of sun-bronzed flesh between his collar and his sharply cut jaw. She’d inhale deeply and wrap her arms about his neck and sift her fingers through his silken, overly long hair...

Celia’s recalcitrant nipples began to tingle and stiffen again. And her face was aflame. *Ugh.*

“Is it...is it hot in here? I think it’s rather hot. I mean, it’s *almost* the middle of August...” Celia all but fled across the room to the window. It was already open, but she threw one of the casement sashes wider to let in more fresh air. A light breeze drifted inside, carrying with it the scent of roses and

honeysuckle, and the sound of droning bees from the garden bed below. Somewhere, in the distance, a bird warbled.

Hugo was watching her over the top of his spectacles. “Yes...yes, it is unseasonably warm for England.” His mouth kicked into a grin. “Now, if I was still sailing the Mediterranean, I’d be mercifully dishabille from the waist up.”

Dishabille? Did he mean coatless? Waistcoat-less? Even... shirtless?

Celia reached for her diary that she’d left on the window seat—and dear God it had been open!—and began to furiously fan her face with it. Her mind was conjuring up all sorts of inappropriate images. She needed another distraction.

She needed to cool down.

Tossing her diary back onto the window seat, she crossed to the bellpull and gave it a swift tug. “I think I should send for a pitcher of lemonade. What say you, Your Grace?”

Hugo propped one lean hip against her desk. “I think that sounds like a capital idea, Lady Ashdown.” He picked up another book from the “yes” pile. “Especially since I would like to help you sort out your book collection...” Looking up at her, he cocked a brow in query. “If you would like me to... I can reach anything you like on the topmost shelves.”

Well, he did make a good point. At five foot and three inches, Celia *was* on the petite side. She’d always intended to commission a new, sturdier ladder for the library—intentions which had never come to fruition. Like so much of her life. “Yes. Of course. I won’t say no.” *Even though I should say no.* “That’s most kind of you.” She gave a little nervous laugh. “It would certainly save me from having to clamber up my old rickety library ladder to retrieve them myself.”

“I’d hold you—I mean the ladder—steady,” Hugo replied, dark brown eyes meeting hers. “I’ll do whatever you like. I’m at your disposal, my lady. Say the word, and I’ll do it.” His smile edged into wicked territory again. “Anything at all...”

CHAPTER
TWO

I'll do whatever you like. I'm at your disposal, my lady. Say the word, and I'll do it. Anything at all...

Celia gave a little gasp. She couldn't help it.

What. On. Earth?

It seemed Hugo *had* turned into a rake while he'd been away. Celia really didn't know how to react to what he'd just said. Not at all.

"If...if you could just take down the volumes from the top shelf of the two bookcases behind you, I'd be eternally grateful," she said after a long moment spent pulling herself back together. "Then sort them into my 'yes' and 'no' piles." She gestured at the two small stacks on the desk.

He grinned, perfect teeth flashing whitely in his tanned face. "Done."

Perhaps Hugo is simply testing out his newfound flirting skills before the house party begins, reasoned Celia as she wiped her damp palms down the dove-gray muslin silk of her day gown. Of course it didn't *mean* anything. Not really. How could he know that his words and how he'd said them could have such a catastrophic effect on her person? That she was,

indeed, in danger of swooning. And how embarrassing would that be?

Calm down, Celia. You're a thirty-four-year-old widow not a twenty-four-year-old virginal debutante. Thank God Hugo didn't know what was in her diary... Celia's gaze slid to the small scarlet leather-bound notebook sitting on the window seat. She'd best hide it in case Hugo picked it up by accident. There were things in there he should *not* see.

Things like her innermost thoughts and wicked fantasies... involving him.

Just at that moment, there came a knock on the door. A maid had finally responded to Celia's summons. After ordering the lemonade, she shut the study door and turned back to face the room, where Hugo was removing the out-of-reach books and depositing them on a spare corner of her desk.

He threw her a glance over one wide shoulder. "That lemonade can't come soon enough, my lady. In fact..." He placed an enormous pair of books down then dragged a forearm across his brow. "I know it's not the done thing, but would you mind terribly if I removed my coat? My new tailor didn't quite get the measurements right...so it's a tad constrictive, and I fear I am melting in this heat. It's not the weather for wearing wool."

"I..." Celia swallowed. *Oh, heavens.* "Yes...yes that's perfectly fine, Your Grace." She attempted a carefree smile. "I mean, I am a widow. Practically a dowager. It's not as if I haven't seen a gentleman in his shirtsleeves before. And a lot of the ancient artwork I admire is of—" She broke off. *Oh, dear God.* Why had she almost said *naked men*? A tide of heat engulfed Celia's entire face and she dropped her gaze. "Well,

suffice it to say, I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable," she mumbled at the floor.

Hugo's voice was tinged with amusement, no doubt at her expense as he replied, "Thank you, my lady."

Steadfastly ignoring the breath-stealing sight of Hugo shrugging off his navy tailcoat and casting it over the back of a nearby chair—and the way his cambric shirt and gold satin waistcoat clung to his lean, muscular form—Celia returned to the window seat and picked up her diary.

Where on earth could she hide it? There wasn't a compartment beneath the window seat. She could secrete it in her desk of course, but Hugo was standing *right there*. Then again, he probably *wouldn't* notice her hiding the little red book away, sliding it into a drawer, especially if she did it when his back was turned. Perhaps she could just cast her diary out of the window, into the rosebushes below and she could retrieve it later.

But what if one of the gardeners found it?

She could of course, push it behind one of the many silk cushions on the window seat, but what if... *Ugh*. She pressed the cover of the book to her lips. She really was overthinking this. Making a mountain out of a molehill. Dithering about like a bird-witted biddy—

"What have you got there, my lady? Another treasured tome for the 'yes' pile?"

Celia whirled around. Hugo was smiling at her, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Oh, this?" Celia waved her diary. "It's nothing. Just a notebook where I jot down random thoughts and ideas, and lists, and notes about other inconsequential matters. You know,

things I wish to discuss with the housekeeper, or items I wish to purchase at the modiste, or books I wish to order from Hatchards. Th-that sort of thing.”

Hugo placed his hands on his hips. The posture emphasized the breadth of his chest and shoulders, and Celia had to force herself to drag her gaze back to the young man’s face so he wouldn’t notice her ogling his impressive physique.

“I’m sure your thoughts and ideas are anything but random or inconsequential, my lady,” he said, one cheek dimpling with his smile. And then a shadow crossed his features and the expression in his dark eyes grew solemn. “Your presence really will be missed during the house party. I mean that.”

“I...” Again, Celia wasn’t sure what to say. This man—this new worldly and direct version of Hugo—was a complete stranger to her, and he had her completely dumbfounded and confused. Her whole world suddenly felt off-kilter. He might be wearing his reading glasses, but he really didn’t seem like the scholarly and perfectly proper Hugo she had hitherto known.

She pressed her diary against her chest where her heart beat an unsteady rhythm and somehow she marshaled her tangled thoughts into some semblance of order. “You’re very kind to say such a thing, Your Grace,” she said at last. Because surely that’s all it was. Kindness that had motivated such a pronouncement. Hugo Dehavilland, the Duke of Tremayne, wouldn’t really miss her company despite his assurance. One did not *miss* the stepmother of one’s university “chum.”

The duke took a step toward her, his expression suddenly endearingly earnest and serious and something else. Something hotter and almost urgent. “I assure you, my dear Lady Ashdown that it’s not kindness but—”

A knock came at the door and Hugo swore softly beneath his breath. The maid had returned with the lemonade.

Celia sighed. *Of all the times to interrupt...*

After the maid had departed, Celia deposited her diary beside the lemonade tray where it had been set up on the table in front of the window seat. There was no point in hiding it now. Hugo would be sure to become suspicious about the contents of the notebook if she made a fuss about it, and besides, he was a gentleman. He would not go poking about, now he knew it contained her private thoughts. She picked up the cut crystal lemonade pitcher. “Shall I pour you a glass, Your Grace?”

“Yes. I would like that,” he said, drawing closer.

As he took the crystal tumbler Celia offered him, their bare fingers brushed, and Celia swore she felt a spark then a warm tingle that shot up her arm and settled somewhere in her lower belly.

That heat only intensified “down there” as she watched Hugo drink his fill. Tipping his head back, his Adam’s apple worked in a succession of impressive swallows...and it was then that Celia realized he’d loosened his cravat and collar, exposing the strong column of his tanned throat.

When had he done that?

Celia really had no idea. Suddenly conscious that she was staring at Hugo again, she focused on sipping her own lemonade. Hopefully it would cool down her flushed face, if nothing else.

Hugo put down his empty glass and proceeded to undo the cuffs of his shirt before rolling up the sleeves, exposing corded forearms dusted lightly with golden-brown hair. He seemed

determined to expose as much of his damnably attractive flesh as possible. Or maybe he'd picked up new, less stuffy ways while he'd been touring the Continent. Or maybe he *was* just hot, and since he'd been visiting Ashdown Hall for years, he simply felt at ease. Almost as if he were at home and he'd decided a degree of dishabille was permissible.

"Right, back to work?" he said, clapping his hands together, pulling Celia from her confused musings.

She gave quick nod. "Yes... Yes that would be a good idea." If they focused on sorting her books, then she wouldn't be tempted to openly gawp at him quite so much.

Oh, but standing right beside Hugo turned out to be far, far worse than Celia had anticipated. It was heaven and utter torture at the same time. While they fell into easy conversation about the books on ancient relics and art that they both knew and loved so well—and of course Hugo regaled her with fascinating anecdotes about his overseas adventures during the summer—there was a strange expectant tension in the air. A flashing, sparking, heated awareness that something out of the ordinary might happen.

Indeed, to Celia, the atmosphere surrounding her and Hugo felt charged with electricity. Like there was something elemental brewing in the middle of her private study—a stirring of currents, gathering momentum and force. Surely she was not the only one to notice. The air fairly crackled, and at any moment, Celia suspected she might catch alight. Especially when Hugo's arm or shoulder brushed against her. Or their hands accidentally touched as they passed each other books. Or she caught Hugo's delicious masculine scent...

Celia wasn't the least surprised when she heard thunder rolling outside. The afternoon certainly was sultry enough...

In more ways than one.

She removed her kerchief from her bodice and dabbed at her fevered brow. She really needed another drink, even if it meant she could press a cool glass to her cheeks.

“I don’t know about you, Your Grace, but I’m rather parched. Would you like another glass of lemonade?” she asked, moving across the room to the low table where the pitcher and their tumblers still sat. Condensation had beaded on the cut crystal and the jug was quite slippery as she began to pour. She gripped it with both hands.

Hugo had followed her. “Yes, I would. Thank you...” And then he added in a low voice, “You know, when we’re alone, you should dispense with all the formal ‘Your Gracing.’”

Celia didn’t quite know how to respond as she offered Hugo his refilled glass. She gave a small laugh. “What do you suggest that I call you then?” she asked, her belly fluttering wildly. This change in the young man’s demeanor had her completely flummoxed.

Hugo’s all but smoldering gaze caught hers as he reached out to take the tumbler. “For a long time, you called me Mr. Dehavilland. And of course, that was right and proper...back then. But now, I’d like it very much if you would just call me Hugo. In private. If you wanted to...”

Whether it was Hugo’s unexpected suggestion, the intimate nature of it, or the fact his fingers didn’t just *brush* but actually stroked against hers as he took the glass of lemonade, Celia couldn’t have said. Perhaps it was all three. She jumped like she’d been scalded...and the condensation-slicked tumbler slipped from her grasp before Hugo could grip it tightly enough...and it fell. It hit the table, tipped over, and a

tide of lemonade flowed around her diary, splashing over her skirts.

Hugo immediately snatched up the book. “Damn. I’m so sorry for being so dashed clumsy. You’re wet and your diary is too.” His expression rueful, he pulled out a handkerchief from his waistcoat and began to wipe the damp cover. “I hope none of your lists are ruined...”

“It’s...it’s all right.” Celia suddenly felt breathless as her pulse began to race. *Oh God, if Hugo opens it...* “I... It’s not my diary. Just an ordinary notebook, Your Grace.” She held out her hand, palm facing upward, her meaning clear. “I’ll have a maid clean it. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“*You*, are a very bad liar, my lady. And aren’t you going to call me Hugo?” The duke’s mouth hitched into a small, crooked smile. “Or if you prefer...*H?*”

What? Celia’s mouth dropped open as dawning horror engulfed her. Surely Hugo hadn’t said— But that would mean —

Oh Lord above! Oh no!

“You’ve seen it, haven’t you? You’ve read my diary?” Celia whispered, a great surge of mortification rushing in to join the horror—and underneath all of that was a rising wave of anger. When she spoke next, her voice quivered with accusation and hurt and fury. “How...how dare you invade my privacy like that! You had no right! How dare you, Hugo?”

Celia clamped her mouth shut because she’d uttered his first name like a curse. All she’d ever wanted to do was say it softly and with tender reverence or perhaps even, with heartfelt passion.

“My lady...I have an explanation for my actions,” Hugo said. While there was a look of concern on his face, there was also an unabashed earnest light in his eyes. “I never intended to breach your trust.”

“But you did, and most grievously. I thought...I thought we were friends. But this feels like...like a betrayal.”

“Yes, I have breached your trust. I’ve done all of the things you’ve just accused me of. But I never intended to cause you such great distress. God dammit, I’ve made such a hash of this.” Hugo’s wide shoulders rose and fell on a great sigh as he scrubbed a hand across his brow. “Earlier, as soon as I arrived at Ashdown Hall and I heard Andrew was busy, I popped in here to see you. I...well, I knew you’d be here. Or I thought I did. I was just brimming with excitement at the prospect of telling you all about my Grand Tour. But you *weren’t* here so I thought I’d wait. I chose a book, wandered over to the window seat and discovered your diary was there. It...it was open, and the breeze was stirring the pages...and I accidentally saw your...your list about *H*. I assure you, I didn’t *mean* to read it, but it was there and...” He shrugged. “I did wonder if *H* might be me, given the man you described is a duke and has been on a Grand Tour...”

“Oh God. Oh *God*. Oh, good grief.” Celia pressed her trembling hands to her flaming cheeks. Hugo knew how much she desired him. How wicked her lustful musings were.

She’d never been quite so humiliated in all her life.

Hot tears pricked her eyes. “I think you should leave.” Her voice was a harsh whisper. Any moment she would fall apart, and she wouldn’t let Hugo see that. She might not have much dignity left, but she would try to preserve whatever tiny shards remained.

“My lady... Celia...” Hugo’s handsome features were transformed by a look of deep remorse. “Before you banish me from your study—and I will go *if* that is what you truly want—I think you should know that while I deeply regret hurting your feelings, I do not regret seeing what you wrote about me. In fact, I’m very pleased I did see it... Because if you meant what you wrote... If I am indeed this man that you have erotic fantasies about, you must know that I want to do those things too. With you. All of them. And more besides.”

For the second time that afternoon, Celia was totally lost for words. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound emerged. Just a faint croak.

Could it be true? Did Hugo truly desire her in the same way she desired him?

Hugo drew closer. Caught her hand. Rubbed his large thumb along the underside of her wrist where her pulse beat hard and fast. “I’ve shocked you, I can see that. But if there’s any hope at all that you could forgive me for reading your diary. If there’s any chance at all that I could be your lover—”

Celia bit her lip. “Hugo, if you are jesting—”

Hugo caught her other hand and brought it to his lips. The touch of his mouth was soft and warm as he pressed a kiss to her fingers. “I swear to you, I’m not. I...I want you too, Celia. And I have for the longest time. I’m surprised you didn’t sense it.”

“No. I never did,” said Celia, offering Hugo a shy smile. “Well, not until this afternoon perhaps. When you began throwing off your coat and undoing your cravat and rolling up your sleeves. You were deliberately teasing me, weren’t you?”

He grinned. "I was. I was testing the waters. I wanted to see if you would look at me in a new light. With desire in your eyes."

"Humph." *Men.* "You were showing off. Like a strutting peacock."

He shrugged. "A little. I like to think my strategy worked..." His mouth kicked up into another little grin. "You said in your diary that you might die if I noticed you. But I rather hope you won't."

Celia huffed. "Well, I rather thought I would die of mortification only a few moments ago." But she couldn't really stay cross with Hugo. In fact, her blood was now fizzing with excitement.

Truth be told, it was something of a relief to know she didn't need to hide how much she wanted this man anymore. And of course, it was a thrill to know those feelings of desire were reciprocated.

Perhaps sensing that her chagrin was dissipating, Hugo continued, "Even though Andrew has not invited you to his house party, that doesn't mean we can't use this week to explore all the things you've thought of doing with me."

And Celia was breathless again. What an offer. She could hardly turn it down. For so long she'd yearned to make love with Hugo...even though nothing could come of it. "If...if I agree, we'll need to be discreet. Andrew cannot even suspect that we've become paramours. He must never know."

Hugo's expression grew serious. "I know."

"He would be so very angry if he found out," she continued. "And hurt. You could lose your friend."

Hugo nodded, his voice firm as he said, “It’s a risk I’m willing to take. If you are too...”

Celia bit her lower lip as she considered Hugo’s words and all the ramifications. There were so many, but to decline this offer... She didn’t think she could. “Because I’m moving to Beechwood House, he won’t see me all that much,” she said after a moment. “But yes, if he’s very angry, he might banish me from his estate altogether. I’d have to move away. Of course, I’d survive, but still...”

“We’ll be careful.” Hugo gave her hands a light squeeze. “I promise.”

Celia nodded then inhaled an unsteady breath. It seemed she was really going to do this. Embark on an illicit affair with her stepson’s best friend.

While part of her was practically cavorting with glee at the mere thought of acting out her fantasies with the man she’d dreamed about for so long, a tiny voice at the back of her mind urged her to be cautious for another reason. She was more than half in love with Hugo already—thank God she hadn’t written *that* in her diary—but she mustn’t entertain the idea, even for one moment, that they could have more than this week. She’d have her wicked pleasure with him, and then they would go their separate ways.

For the sake of her heart and sanity *and* her future, she must abide by this strict tenet. She had a widow’s jointure and some money set aside that she’d inherited from her parents, but she was only in her early thirties. She’d have to be frugal with those funds if they were to last into her dotage. Yes, she really *couldn’t* afford to be cast out of Beechwood House if Andrew should discover what she was up to with his friend.

But to be with Hugo—even for a little while—she would risk it. She might never have this chance again.

CHAPTER
THREE

“**S**peaking of being careful...” Hugo glanced at the study door, his pulse racing. Even holding both of Lady Ashdown’s delicate hands in his—all while he was shockingly underdressed—would be viewed as *highly* improper if anyone walked in. A scandal in the making.

A servant would knock of course, but if Andrew came looking for him...

Celia—since the woman had become a widow, Hugo had struggled to think of her as Lady Ashdown—took his meaning. “Perhaps I should lock the door,” she suggested in an endearingly soft, almost breathless voice. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark-lashed, violet-blue eyes shone with an emotion Hugo hoped was excitement. “Then,” she added, “we can discuss how we should tackle the logistical issues of this next week without the risk of being interrupted.”

“Agreed.”

As Celia crossed to the door, Hugo moved to the desk and leaned back against it, taking a moment to absorb the sight of the woman he wanted beyond all reason. Her petite and lusciously curved body, the glossy shine of her chestnut-brown curls, everything about her made his body thrum with sharp anticipation. He doubted Lady Ashdown really knew how

much he desired her. Or how much he loved her, and indeed, had done so for years. But he'd always, *always* kept his feelings and his lust in check. He'd buttoned them up tighter than his ill-fitting coat and hidden them away. Buried them deeply.

Until now.

When he'd first met Celia, he had been but twenty-one and still at Oxford with naught but limited prospects. While he'd studied hard, he'd only become a lowly law clerk, and then a solicitor. Given that he was but the grandson of a duke—and his own father hadn't been the heir apparent—Hugo had never, ever thought that one day such a title and great fortune would be his. But then it had...

Until Hugo had unexpectedly become the Duke of Tremayne, Celia—Lady Ashdown—had been far above him. Completely out of his reach. She'd been a viscountess who was eight years older than him *and* his best friend's stepmother. Indeed, Hugo had told himself for years that his feelings, including his great desire for Celia, were inappropriate and misplaced, and a million other things that could be classed as “wrong.” But no matter how hard he'd tried, he couldn't stamp them out.

When Hugo had set out for the Continent four months ago, he'd been determined to rid himself of his lust and his yearning for Lady Ashdown, once and for all. He'd thought that exploring the places he'd always wanted to visit—ancient ruins in Italy, Greece, Malta, and Constantinople—would occupy his mind. And of course, he'd contemplated indulging in a holiday affair or two.

But he hadn't. None of the women he'd met compared to Celia. Not at all.

It seemed distance and time hadn't extinguished the burning flame in his heart or in his blood for this gorgeous woman. In fact, his longing—both emotional and physical—had only grown while he'd been away. When he'd returned to England only a week ago, he'd been half-mad with how much he'd missed her. As soon as he'd seen the invitation for Andrew's house party waiting for him in his London townhouse, he'd determined that he had to attend. A whole week to discreetly explore if there might be any chance that the widowed viscountess might want him—she was well out of mourning now—was an opportunity he could not turn down.

What a revelation it had been to stumble across Celia's diary and the oh-so-revealing entry about *H.* the duke. A gift from above. Hugo knew he shouldn't have invaded Celia's privacy. Indeed, his conscience had howled at him not to look. But the words of the woman he loved had been right there in front of his nose, and in the end he hadn't been able to resist the temptation to read her thoughts about him...and all of her erotic dreams.

He'd had no clue Celia's experiences in the marriage bed had been so unsatisfying. So unremarkable. No wonder she had been living off fantasies.

Well, that was all about to change.

For Hugo, finding that diary had been *his* dream come true. While Celia's words had only described her great desire for him—she hadn't mentioned anything about caring for him—it gave him an opening. That longed-for chance to explore what “could be” with her...if she were willing to take the risk of incurring her stepson's censure. Perhaps even the censure of the rest of polite society... Because if Celia *could* love him,

there was no way that Hugo would give her up. Even though Andrew might condemn them both to Hades.

But for now, at this delicate stage—for Celia’s sake—Hugo would be cautious.

After Celia locked the door, she turned back to face him. Her lovely eyes were still alight and her cheeks were still a delightful rosy pink. Her breathing had quickened. Her ample breasts rose and fell at an increased pace, the plump flesh straining against the pale gray silk of her gown.

Hugo knew he was staring too much, but he couldn’t help himself.

Damn, woman.

“Come here,” he said, removing his reading glasses and pocketing them. “There’s a far more pressing issue that we need to address before we work out tactics.”

“Oh?” Celia approached, a slight frown creasing her brow.

“Yes...” Hugo caught Celia about the waist with both hands and drew her close, into the space between his thighs. Her delicious scent—violets and vanilla and something else that was just “Celia”—wove around him like a spell. Making his mouth water... “I have this urgent need to kiss you...”

Celia bit her lip, as though she were coy. But then her hands settled on his chest and she looked up at him through her lashes. “Are you sure?” she murmured huskily. “I’m all wet and sticky with lemonade.”

Hugo grinned wolfishly. “You say that as if it’s a bad thing... But maybe I like wet and sticky.”

Celia’s blush immediately deepened. It was one of the things he loved about this woman—her complete lack of

artifice.

He was finished with fighting his feelings. Now he'd made up his mind on that score, he was determined to make Celia his. Especially now he knew the wanting wasn't one-sided.

“Well...” Celia's small pink tongue darted out and skimmed across her plush lower lip, leaving a light sheen of moisture that only intensified Hugo's need all the more. “If you really want to kiss me right now, Your Grace...you may....”

“Oh, I do, my lady.” Hugo skated one hand up Celia's back and curved his palm about her delicate nape. All his attention was focused on Celia's lush mouth and thoughts of exactly how he was going to kiss her filled his head. He'd dreamed of this moment for so very long. He would not cock up this kiss.

Speaking of cocks, his was already stirring and thickening at the mere idea of claiming Celia's mouth. Of having her luscious body pulled up against his.

Five whole years he'd waited for this...

He suddenly couldn't wait a second longer.

Drawing a shaky breath, Hugo bent his head while simultaneously cupping Celia's flushed cheek with his other hand. He gently angled her head just so...fitted his mouth to hers...and kissed her.

Sweet Lord above...

There were so many delicious sensations to savor as Hugo fell headlong into a pool of hot, decadent pleasure. The heady taste of Celia flooded his mouth. She was both sweet and tart—lemon and sugar and heaven. Then there was the silken glide of her soft lips. The humid rush of her breath when he stroked inside the warm recess of her mouth and she gave a

small gasp. The velvet caress and drag of her tongue as she tasted him back.

He felt Celia's fingers twist in his hair to pull him closer. Their kisses grew more urgent. Hotter. Wilder...

A thrill of discovery flashed through him. She was just as desperate for him as he was for her.

Hugo slid the hand at Celia's nape across her shoulder, tugging her silk sleeve down her arm. He suddenly needed more than kisses. He needed to touch Celia's bare skin. He burned to taste her everywhere—

But he couldn't. Not here in Celia's study in the middle of the afternoon. Instead, Hugo contented himself with burying his face in Celia's fragrant neck. He pressed his hot hungry mouth to the satiny flesh, licking and sucking and devouring, searching for all the sensitive sweet hollows that made her shiver and moan.

He wanted to learn every little thing about this woman he'd loved from afar for far too long. He wanted to make wild, passionate love to her until she was weak-kneed and incoherent and writhing with pleasure. And propriety be damned, he would.

This week he would learn how to please Celia so well, she wouldn't be able to give him up.

Hugo's hand found one of her plump breasts and as he gently squeezed, he could feel her nipple was already puckered and hard as a pebble. It took every ounce of his remaining self-control to stop himself from ripping open her bodice to expose the luscious mound to his gaze. To quell the urge to swirl his tongue around and around that tight sensitive

peak until Celia was shuddering in his arms, crying out his name.

He wanted her naked and heavy-lidded and flushed with satisfaction. He wanted to bury his already throbbing cock deep inside her—

Steady, steady... You have a whole week, Hugo...

In his heart of hearts, Hugo knew that one week would not be enough.

With painful reluctance, he forced himself to draw back. Celia was clinging to him, drowsy-eyed, just as he wanted. Her lips were kissed bruised and her sleek brown tresses were spilling from their pins. She looked utterly ruined yet more beautiful than ever.

And his. All his.

“We must stop,” Hugo murmured, voice thick with lust. “Because if we keep this up, it won’t be long before I’m flipping up your skirts and tugging you on this desk.”

Celia laughed softly. “I wouldn’t object to that at all,” she whispered. “But you’re right. We should stop now. I should go and change out of my lemonade-splashed dress.”

Hugo tucked an escaped curl behind her ear. “You might want to fix your hair as well.” He winced with a wry chuckle. “I’m afraid I got carried away and messed it up a little.”

“Will...will you still be here when I get back?” Her tone was endearingly hopeful.

“If you still need my help, I will gladly stay... Although I should probably restore my own attire to something that at least approximates “gentlemanly.” And we should probably open the door.”

“Yes... For the sake of appearances, I might call a maid or two in, too, to clean up the lemonade I spilled and to dust off my books. They really do need it.” Celia suddenly reached out and lightly stroked Hugo’s jaw. “But before I go, I want to thank you,” she murmured, eyes sparkling. “Your kiss was everything I’d dreamed of. And more.”

Hugo’s heart swelled at the singular notion that he’d managed to bestow a kiss that had impressed Celia. He hoped it would be the first of many. A lifetime of passionate kisses, in fact. “One thing I can promise you, my lady, this is only the beginning of our wicked week together,” he said. “I think the best way for us to explore our mutual passions is for me to visit you at the dower house or elsewhere in the grounds once night has fallen. When everyone—especially Andrew—is preoccupied. Does that sound workable to you?”

Celia smiled and pressed a small kiss to his lips. “Eminently workable. I shall see you anon, Hugo.”

The sooner the better, thought Hugo, fingers fumbling as he attempted to tie his cravat. Though he needed to tread carefully so he wouldn’t arouse Andrew’s suspicions, he’d be damned if he didn’t make the most of the time he had with Celia this week.

One way or another, one wicked kiss at a time, he’d win her over.

He had to.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Beechwood House

By noon the following day, Celia was fully installed in the dower house with her possessions...and she didn't mind at all.

The very thing she'd been reluctant to do for months and months—move out of her own suite of rooms in Ashdown Hall into the much smaller and isolated two-story “manor house” on the edge of the Ashdown estate—didn't seem quite so dispiriting anymore. Not when it meant she now had the freedom to do what she liked whenever she liked.

Aside from a skeleton staff of her own lady's maid, Polly, a middle-aged housekeeper-cum-cook, a scullery maid, a maid-of-all-work, and one ancient manservant, there were no other prying eyes about. No one to naysay her.

Yes, Celia could do just about anything at all with Hugo this week...

She was so thrilled by the prospect, she could barely contain her excitement. Fate had conspired against her and Hugo meeting up for another romantic liaison after their “first kiss tryst” in her study—she'd been busy settling into Beechwood House and she suspected Hugo had been so busy catching up with Andrew, he hadn't been able to steal away. Although, soon after Andrew's guests had begun to arrive for

the house party during the course of the afternoon, Hugo had managed to send word—via his valet—that she should dress in her finest ballgown and don a domino mask and be ready to leave Beechwood House just before midnight. Hugo would meet her in the small grove of beech trees just behind the dower house's back walled garden.

All afternoon, Celia had been wondering what Hugo had planned. While it appeared he might try to sneak her into Andrew's masked ball, the first major social event of the house party, surely he wouldn't do something so foolish. Andrew and at least some of the other tonnish guests would be sure to recognize her, even if she were masked. Hugo had agreed they would need to be discreet.

Perhaps he would make love to her in the moonlight somewhere in the grounds of the Ashdown estate... Now, wouldn't that be all kinds of wonderful?

As she waited in the shadows of the beech grove, Celia waved her silk fan to cool her burning cheeks. The summer night was unaccountably warm and she was rather glad she'd foregone wearing undergarments—aside from a pair of silk stockings—beneath her gentian-blue satin gown.

To her credit, her trusted lady's maid, Polly, hadn't seemed perturbed at all when Celia instructed her to press her ballgown and to dress her brown hair à la Grecque with ringlets cascading from her crown down to her nape. Indeed, Polly hadn't even batted an eyelid when Celia didn't don stays, petticoats, or a chemise. As she'd handed her mistress her fan, she'd even given her a small smile.

It made Celia wonder if the young woman was secretly pleased that her mistress might be embarking on an amorous adventure as widows often did. Why else would Celia dress in

such a risqué way? The lady's maid knew very well that the late Lord Ashdown had not visited Celia's bed very often. That their relationship had been amicable rather than passionate.

Celia certainly couldn't wait to begin her passionate journey with Hugo. And to think, he'd been lusting after her and she'd had absolutely no idea. She'd completely forgiven him for sneaking a look at her diary. If he had not done so, then she wouldn't be standing here waiting for him, her whole body humming with anticipation.

Just the memory of the exquisite kisses they'd shared in her private study the day before was enough to put her to the blush while simultaneously making her quim pulse with acute need. When she'd hopped into her new bed in the dower house last night, she'd touched herself while thinking about Hugo.

Of course, she'd done so many times before. Now that he'd kissed her, now that he'd held her in his arms and had even touched her breast, her erotic fantasies had been more vivid and intense. She'd been so very wet, she'd come off in no time at all.

Celia pressed her gloved fingers to her lips. How would she feel after they'd done all kinds of wicked and wanton things together? Would her longing be appeased? Or would it be sharper, perhaps even painful, because Hugo would never be hers? Not without creating a monumental scandal. Not without destroying her relationship with her stepson. Not without Hugo losing his friend...

No, she wouldn't dwell on that, not tonight. She would live in the moment. She would enjoy herself because in the long, lonely years ahead, at least she would have memories of this week to store away in her heart. They would be her very own erotic secret treasures.

The deep shadows in the beech grove shifted, attracting Celia's attention. She glimpsed a flash of white—a cravat perhaps—and someone's masked face. Then a deep familiar voice cloaked in a whisper reached her ears. "My lady. You came."

"Of course." Heart tripping, Celia lifted her skirts and moved toward Hugo. "I had to."

When she reached his side, she felt his ungloved hand grasp her arm. His long fingers lightly wrapped around the bare flesh between her sleeve and silk glove, and he drew her closer. The scent of his spicy cologne teased her as he bent low and murmured, "I was worried you might change your mind."

"There wasn't a hope in Hades of that happening," she returned softly, touched by the fact that Hugo would have been disappointed if she hadn't taken him up on his invitation.

"Christ, it's been torture being apart from you. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you." Hugo's voice was low, urgent. His warm breath stirred the curls at her temple. "About what we're going to do..."

Beneath the satin of her bodice, Celia's nipples tightened to hard aching points. "Me too."

"Before I tell you what I have in mind, I have to taste you..." All at once, Hugo dragged her against him and claimed Celia's mouth in a hot searching kiss. As his lips slid almost frantically against hers and his tongue plundered deeply, Celia tasted brandy and passion.

Hugo wanted her. Quite desperately. There was no doubt in her mind.

The idea was intoxicating and Celia's head began to spin with the wonder of it all.

She wrapped her arms about Hugo's neck and threw herself into the kiss, meeting his tongue stroke for stroke, giving herself to him. When Hugo pressed her back against a tree and roughly kneaded her breast, she rejoiced at the insistent press of his male member against her belly. She reveled in how wild and out of control he seemed.

She wanted wild. She wanted unrestrained coupling.

She wanted Hugo to take her. Right here up against a beech tree. On the nearby garden seat. Or even on the ground. Anywhere and any way would do.

Coming up for air, Hugo pulled back, breathing heavily. A wash of pale moonlight filtering through the branches above them revealed that his thick hair was in disarray. Even though he was wearing a black domino mask, Celia could still see his eyes. In the velvet darkness of the night, they appeared black and burning.

"When I kiss you, I feel...drunk," he murmured huskily. And then his expression sobered. His brows had descended into a frown. "My need for you is great, Celia. I...I hope I wasn't too rough or demanding."

"No. Not at all." Celia caressed his lean cheek, seeking to reassure him. "You can have me any way you want, Hugo."

"Good God." Hugo pressed his forehead to Celia's. "When you say things like that, when I think of what you wrote about me in your diary, I could come undone in seconds."

Celia laughed, giddy with the thought she had this much power over the man she'd wanted forever. Never in her wildest dreams had she believed that such a thing would be possible. "Well, that would be a shame...to finish before we've barely even begun. But tell me: what did you really have in mind for

tonight? I'm gowned and masked like Cinderella. But I assume you're not going to escort me into the ball."

"You're quite correct..." Hugo entwined his fingers with hers. "I suggested you wear a ballgown and mask so that from a distance, in the dark, you'd pass for any other guest. As for what I have in mind..." He leaned down and his lips grazed across hers in a teasing kiss. "Tonight, I thought we could take care of several of your erotic fantasies at the same time," he whispered, his voice as smooth as dark velvet. "Outside in the moonlight, if you are agreeable..."

"Yes... Yes I am." In actual fact, Celia was more than agreeable. She was ecstatic. Her heart was already doing a little jig and she was slicker than a buttered crumpet between her thighs.

"Come then." Hugo led her out of the trees and toward the extensive gardens of Ashdown Hall. "I have just the place in mind where we can play to our hearts' content. We won't be discovered or interrupted."

As they crossed the relatively deserted lawn, Celia spied another pair of lovers entwined and kissing by the temple folly by the ornamental lake. They were too far away to be identified, so Celia was confident she wouldn't be recognized either. Otherwise, there was no one else in sight. The masked ball still seemed to be in full swing though. The sounds of unbridled carousing—chatter and laughter and music—carried toward them on the warm night air. Before long, Celia could see that Hugo was leading her to Ashdown Hall's maze.

"We must be quiet," he cautioned as they passed through the open wrought-iron gate which guarded a leafy corridor bordered by towering yew hedges. "You never know who one might stumble across... And they might be up to anything..."

Celia couldn't help but wonder if Hugo was about to make the fifth item on her list of erotic fantasies come true: to observe another couple making love. A wicked thrill shot through her, all the way to her lower belly. She simply couldn't wait to find out.

She knew the maze like the back of her hand. Apparently, so did Hugo. He led her unerringly toward the center—an octagonal shaped “walled” garden that contained neat parterres of flowers and low hedges with a fountain in the very middle. At various intervals around the octagonal perimeter were strategically placed stone benches. Four arched entrances flanked by marble statues of romantic couples from classical mythology provided admittance to the center.

It was the perfect place for a tryst.

Or the perfect place for observing a tryst. It seemed that was exactly what Hugo had in mind, just as she'd suspected. When they paused by one of the four arched entrances to the maze's center, he put a finger to his lips in a shushing gesture. Apart from the gentle splash of the fountain, Celia could hear nothing else except for the rush of her own elevated breathing.

Then a woman laughed, the sound clear yet soft. It was a sound that spoke of secrets and shared intimacy and was soon followed by a man's low voice.

Oh, heavens...

Anticipation unfurling in her belly, Celia stood on tiptoe and whispered in Hugo's ear. “Your Grace, you haven't brought me here to spy on others engaging in pleasures of the flesh, have you? Because that would be all kinds of wicked.”

Hugo's whisper was just as low as hers. “Then it seems I am very wicked because that's exactly what we're going to do,

my lady. And just to reassure you, the couple in question don't mind at all. It's well known that they happen to like being watched from a discreet distance."

"Th-They do?"

Hugo pushed one of Celia's curls behind her ear. "Yes. They do." His mouth curved into a smile that was so sensual, it made Celia's toes curl in her slippers. "We're going to stay back here in the deep shadows using the statues"—he indicated the marble figures of a half-naked Diana and her youthful love, the shepherd Endymion—"as additional cover. Just to preserve our anonymity. No one will ever know it is you, my lady."

Celia nodded her agreement. Then her attention snapped to the lovers—a man and a woman—almost directly opposite their hidey-hole. Even though the amorous couple were partially shielded from view by the fountain and its sparkling veil of cascading water, Celia could still hear and see a great deal of what was going on.

And heavens, it was eye-opening.

Indeed, Celia was utterly riveted by the erotic "show" taking place in front of her, as though it had been arranged for her personal pleasure.

The masked woman—a willowy blonde—was naked from the waist up as she reclined upon the stone bench; her gown had been loosened and the bodice yanked down, exposing her breasts. They were high and proud and glowed like marble in the moonlight. Her skirts were bunched up about her waist and the man she was with was kneeling on the ground at the end of the bench, his head buried between the woman's pale slender thighs. She seemed to be enjoying whatever he was doing because her hands were buried in his hair, like she was

pressing his face into her sex. And the uninhibited sounds and words spilling from her—moans and sighs and gasps and cries of “Oh God” and “yes”—Celia had never heard anything quite like it.

She’d certainly never felt any need to cry out in ecstasy when she’d been with Neville. She’d barely made a sound because it had all been so “proper” and sadly, underwhelming.

Indeed, whenever Neville had “made love” to her, he’d begun by pressing his lips against hers—no tongues were ever involved—while he squeezed her breasts a handful of times through her chaste, buttoned-up night gown. Then he’d part her with clumsy fingers before thrusting inside her for a minute or two while Celia had lain passively and patiently beneath him. She’d been as still and silent as one of the marble statues in the maze because that was what he seemed to expect of her. He’d behaved in a “gentlemanly manner” while he’d exercised his conjugal rights, and she’d behaved like a “lady.”

Oh, but she’d been missing out.

Celia swallowed. Neville had hardly touched her down there—she’d often wondered if he found that part of her distasteful—let alone put his mouth on her. But she’d heard that other men loved the taste of a woman’s quim. At least, according to Lady Barsby and from what Celia had read in her borrowed copy of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

And now she was witnessing it. And it was a revelation.

Celia’s face might be aflame, but she couldn’t deny that her own quim had begun to throb in earnest. She was so wet, she could feel her folds and upper thighs were slippery.

Hugo had taken up a position behind her, his hands resting upon her shoulders, and she was not the only one mightily

aroused. As his large body pressed up against hers, she could feel the long hard ridge of his erect manhood.

“Do you like what you’re seeing, Celia?” he whispered, his breath caressing her ear, making her shiver. His hands slid to her breasts and through the satin, he lightly pinched her already taut nipples. “Would you like me to do that to you? Lick your cunny? Suckle the pearl of your clitoris? Thrust my tongue inside you and savor your sweet nectar? Feast upon your sex until you writhe and scream and come beneath my mouth?”

“Yes...” she whispered back, no longer ashamed to admit it. “Yes. I do want that. Very much.”

“I promise you I will do all that, and more, before our week together is through. But first, I want you to do something for me. And I’m going to do something for you.”

Celia’s sex clenched tightly in anticipation. “A-Anything.”

“I’m going to pull down your bodice and I’m going to play with your nipples,” Hugo said as he removed her fan from her wrist then stripped off first one of her silk gloves, then the other. “And at the same time, you’re going to lift your skirts and play with your own cunny. And I’m going to watch you. Just like you wrote about in your diary. What do you say to that?”

“I...” Celia hesitated, but only for a moment. Refusing was not an option. “I’ll do it.”

“Good girl...”

With trembling hands she lifted her skirts, exposing her bare nether region to the warm night air. The satin would be hopelessly crushed by the time her tryst with Hugo was over, but she really didn’t care.

As she slowly slipped a hand down to the curls covering her mound, Hugo undid the buttons at the back of her dress and slid her bodice down. Her bare breasts spilled free and Hugo groaned. His erection seemed to grow even larger as it pressed against her.

“You naughty thing,” he purred as he cupped her heavy breasts in his palms, as though testing the size and weight of them. “You’re not wearing anything beneath your gown.”

Celia shivered as she slid two fingers toward her damp crease, her gaze still fixed on the couple making love right before her very eyes. “I-I hope that’s all right. I thought undergarments would only get in the way.”

“Oh, that’s more than all right...” Hugo grazed his lips across her hot cheek then lightly squeezed and tugged on the tips of her breasts with his fingers. “I whole-heartedly approve. You have the most gorgeous, luscious tits by the way... What color are your nipples?”

Celia brushed a fingertip over the swollen hood above her throbbing clitoris and shuddered. Hugo’s wicked fingers and words were so arousing, she knew she’d only have to rub herself a few times to come off. “Pink...” she whispered huskily.

“Soft shell pink, or apricot pink, or a deep strawberry?” Hugo was rubbing his thumbs around and around her tightly furled nipples and hot sparks were shooting straight to her quim.

“Ummm...” Celia closed her eyes and leaned back against Hugo. “Shell pink,” she breathed. “I think...”

Oh, but she couldn’t think. All she could do was feel.

Hugo shifted and Celia sensed he was looking over her shoulder. “Why aren’t you fingering yourself, my lady, as I instructed? I want to watch you touch yourself. I want you to moan and come apart in my arms.”

“I...er...” Celia pressed a fingertip to her clitoris again, and this time a moan of pleasure did escape her. She began to rub herself with abandon, her fingertip flicking and circling around and around her slick excruciatingly sensitive flesh, and all the while, Hugo played with her nipples, driving her inexorably toward her peak. She squeezed her eyes shut, even tighter than before, unable to bear the intensity of—

“Open your eyes, Celia,” Hugo commanded. “Watch the wicked performance before you. Look at how she sucks her lover’s cock.”

Celia dragged her eyelids open and gasped as she took in exactly what Hugo had described. The man was on the bench and the woman was now kneeling on the ground; it seemed the pair had switched places while her eyes had been closed. The woman’s head was bobbing up and down and the man was groaning and cursing. His fingers were gripping the back of his lover’s head and his own head was thrown back as though he were about to orgasm.

“Do you want to do that to me, Celia? Do you want to wrap your fingers and lips around me and pleasure me until I spend all over your—”

Oh God. Celia couldn’t contain her climax anymore. With a hoarse cry, she let go and hot pleasure like she’d never known before burst through her body like exploding fireworks. Her back arched backward like a bow and her thighs quivered and she felt fresh moisture well about her trembling fingers.

Hugo had wrapped his arms about her to hold her steady. She felt his lips upon her cheek, at her temple, in her hair. “My darling Celia. How wonderful you are,” he crooned softly. “My very own sensual goddess of the moon.”

Celia let her skirts drop as she turned her head to the side, seeking Hugo’s mouth. They kissed gently and she murmured, “Unlike Endymion, I hope that you will not go unsatisfied.”

Hugo chuckled. “I think you can probably tell that I’m wide awake and ready for action,” he said. “You’ve made me harder than a marble pillar... You also wrote in your diary that you wished to watch me stroke myself. Would you like me to return the favor and do that now?”

“Yes please... Or I could do what that other woman over there”—she gestured with her chin in the direction of the two lovers—“just did to her paramour? If you recall, it was the first item on my list of erotic fantasies...”

Hugo turned her round in his arms so they were facing each other. From behind his mask, his dark brown eyes gleamed in the moonlight. “You really want to suck my cock, Lady Ashdown?” His voice was low and graveled by lust.

“I do indeed, Your Grace,” she returned. Suddenly feeling uncharacteristically bold, Celia dared to reach out a hand and cup his impressive cockstand through the fabric of his trousers. Squeezing gently, she added, “I *long* to take you in my mouth. To taste your seed on my tongue—”

“Christ.” Hugo closed his eyes and gripped her shoulders. “I wish I could say no. But I can’t. I want you to do that too, Celia.”

“Good. Then we are in agreeance.” Her blood humming with fierce contentment, her spirit glowing with newfound

power, Celia dropped to her knees on the manicured carpet of grass. She'd end up with stains on her satin skirts, but she really didn't give a fig. Not when she was about to make one of her most wicked dreams come true.

As Hugo helped her to undo the fall front of his trousers, their fumbling eager fingers brushed together clumsily and they both laughed.

When Hugo's enormous cock sprang free—jutting proudly upward like it was standing to attention just for her—Celia couldn't help but gasp. “You are...” She gulped as she gently clasped his hot rigid length. “You are *considerably* bigger than I'm used to, Your Grace,” she murmured. “I'm...I'm impressed.”

Hugo chuckled. “I'll take the compliment, my lady.”

“Before I begin, I should tell you that I've never done this before,” she admitted shyly. Which seemed silly, given the fact she'd just played with herself in front of Hugo and was still half-naked. Only a few yards away were another trysting couple who'd probably heard her bliss-soaked cry. “Lord Ashdown and I never... From what you read in my diary, you would already know that we never did anything much at all really. So although I've been married, I'm frightfully inexperienced.”

“Celia...” Hugo caught her chin and gently angled her face upward so she couldn't escape his gaze. Even though they were in the shadows, she could still discern his soft yet grave expression. “If you don't want to do this, you don't have to. I would never force—”

“No. You misunderstand me, Hugo. I do want to pleasure you this way. So very much. It's just that I might need a little guidance.”

“I’m sure that whatever you do will be perfect and I’ll love it,” he said, brushing the backs of his fingers against her cheek. “I don’t have to spend in your mouth.”

“No, I want that too. I want all of it. All of you, Hugo.” Celia gave his shaft—steel encased in velvet—a gentle squeeze. It seemed to pulse and jerk in her hand with a life of its own, and she just knew Hugo was dying for her to take him in her mouth. She didn’t want the gentlemanly version of the man she loved, the man the world saw. She wanted the real Hugo—stripped and open and undone. “Please let me.”

And then she held her breath and waited...

CHAPTER
FIVE

No, I want that too. I want all of it. All of you, Hugo...
Please let me.

Hugo closed his eyes for a brief moment. Even though Celia had just confessed that she'd never given anyone oral pleasure before, he couldn't deny her request. She was a grown woman of four-and-thirty. She knew her mind.

Of course, he'd gathered from Celia's diary entry that her experiences in the marriage bed had been far from exciting, bordering on inadequate. But he hadn't fully understood the extent of her inexperience. She'd been married for four years, for God's sake. It made Hugo wonder what Celia and Lord Ashdown's marriage had really been like. The much older viscount had been a quiet, scholarly man who'd always seemed much older than he actually was. Perhaps he was sedate in more ways than one.

He'd clearly been too conservative and stuffy for the lovely Celia.

But Hugo didn't want to think about the late Lord Ashdown. Not when Celia held his cock in her delicate hand and God, when he glanced down, she was actually licking her lips and eyeing him as if he were a decadent treat.

And devil take him. Her breasts. They were plump and tipped with delightfully large nipples. If Celia hadn't already offered to take him in her mouth, he would like nothing more than to slide his rock-hard length up and down her deep cleavage until he came all over her pale luscious flesh.

Lust like he'd never experienced before suddenly surged through his veins, making his cock throb and his ballocks ache. He suspected he was already leaking seed.

He couldn't deny himself, or Celia, this opportunity. Not tonight. Not when they'd been waiting to be together for so long.

"Very well, my lovely brazen moon goddess. Bewitcher of my soul. Have your wicked way with me," Hugo all but growled. Ravening, desperate need had roughened his voice. He released Celia's chin and wrapped his own hand around his shaft, guiding the head of his cock toward Celia's mouth. "Do what you will with me," he continued. "I'm at your complete mercy."

Celia reached up a hand and pressed it to his taut abdomen. When she spoke, it was as though she were making a vow, and Hugo was unaccountably touched. "I'll do my best to give you pleasure, Hugo. If this week is all we'll ever have—I want you to remember this." Then her tongue darted out and curled over and around the crown of his cock. The sight and sensations were so amazing, Hugo's legs almost gave out.

Fuck...

Celia's tentative licks and suckles were the most exquisite of tortures. Hugo lightly grasped the back of her head, her silken curls spilling around his fingers, only just resisting the urge to thrust his pulsating length all the way inside the hot sweet cavern of her mouth.

But he couldn't do that to her. He wouldn't. She was a novice at this. He'd let her go at her own pace, even if it killed him.

Celia continued to lap and lick at him, but after a minute or two she stopped and looked up, seeking his gaze. "I'm not doing it right. I'm not doing enough. Tell me what to do."

Hugo swallowed. While his chest was flooded with a sweet tender warmth, the base male in him wanted more from Celia too. It wouldn't hurt to teach her, would it? "Stroke and squeeze me, like this," he said, wrapping his fingers around Celia's and showing her how to pump her hand up and down his shaft. "Then with your mouth, take me deeper...if you can...suck a little harder..."

And oh, sweet Jesus, she did. She took him so deeply, Hugo almost saw stars.

"That's it... That's right..." he groaned as potent lust pounded through his veins and he began to pump his hips, just a little. His orgasm was building, gathering force, and it wouldn't be long before he lost all control.

Celia caught his rhythm and she gave a little moan of pleasure as if she were enjoying this act just as much as he was. And then, good God, she did something untaught yet absolutely wonderful with her tongue, swirling it around him, and his already frayed control completely snapped.

Devastating pleasure rose up in a great wave and as Hugo came, he clutched Celia's head and rode her tongue. Gasping, shuddering, he flooded her mouth with his seed in a series of hot uncontrolled bursts. But she didn't seem to mind. She held onto him, gripping him, taking everything he poured forth.

When his orgasm was at last over, Celia released him from her mouth with a soft popping sound.

“Well,” she said, wiping her lips with trembling fingers, “that was the most thrilling thing I’ve ever done.” As she looked up at him, she smiled. “I think I acquitted myself quite well.”

“Quite well?” Hugo hardly knew how he was able to speak as he urged Celia to rise. “That is an understatement if ever I heard one. If you’ll pardon my crudeness, I’d say that you were bloody spectacular.”

She laughed. “Bloody spectacular? That’s the most wonderful compliment I’ve ever had. I must add it to my diary.”

Hugo slid a hand behind her head, keeping her close. “Thank you, my gorgeous goddess of the moon.”

“Perhaps I should have been christened Celina instead of Celia,” she murmured.

“No, I love your name just like I lo—” Hugo broke off. Good Lord, he’d just been about to confess his love for Celia. But he wasn’t sure if she were ready for such an admission. He didn’t want to scare her away if she didn’t love him in return. “I think you’re perfect just the way you are,” he finished.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I could say the same about you.”

They righted their clothes, and after Hugo retrieved Celia’s gloves and fan from the ground, he offered to escort her back to the dower house. The other couple—the Earl and Countess of Saltram—had long since disappeared, but the longer he and Celia lingered in the grounds, the greater the chance they would be discovered together.

He wouldn't think it was the end of the world if they *were* caught, but he didn't yet know how Celia felt about him. While he knew that she wanted to explore her sensual side with him, he really wasn't sure if she felt anything for him beyond mere lust and a degree of friendly affection.

He had this week to find out...and if she *did* love him, he knew they'd be a match made in heaven.

CHAPTER
SIX

The following day, Celia could not stop smiling. As she went about the business of arranging things in her new house, her body hummed continuously with deep satisfaction. She was no longer piqued at all that she hadn't been invited to the house party. She felt as though she'd discovered her own little pocket of paradise. And her week of sexual discovery with Hugo had only just begun.

Polly had frowned a little upon seeing the grass stains on Celia's crumpled blue satin gown, but she hadn't made any comment. Celia trusted the maid wouldn't say anything to anyone, even if she did suspect her mistress was having an affair.

An affair... What a delicious word. Celia smiled as she readied herself for Hugo later that evening. And then she put down her silver brush on the dressing table and eyed her reflection a little sternly. *But remember, that's all this is. It's a whirlwind affair. Nothing more.*

At the end of the week, Hugo will go on his merry way and find a perfect, pretty young debutante to be his duchess. And you...you will remain here, pretending to be the epitome of a respectable widow. No one will know that you are the sort of wanton, wicked woman who self-pleasures in the presence of

others, then brazenly goes down on her young lover. Her stepson's best friend..

Well, no one would know, except Hugo...

As Hugo had left her last night, he'd promised to send word about their next tryst. True to his word, during the afternoon his valet had arrived with another note.

Celia slid it from the pages of her diary and perused it again:

My dearest C.,

I shall visit you at Beechwood House as soon as I can. Around midnight. Be sure to leave your door unlocked. I don't fancy scaling a wall to your window, but I will if I must!

I honestly can't stop thinking about you and I'm counting the hours until I can be with you again.

I remain yours,

H. xx

Celia pressed her lips to the small piece of notepaper and fancied she could detect a hint of Hugo's cologne.

She had already dismissed Polly for the night. After the maid had quit the chamber, Celia had thrown off her frumpy white cotton nightgown and had donned a flimsy lawn and lace night rail instead. It was a garment Abigail had insisted

Celia purchase when they'd visited the modiste together toward the end of the Season. "You never know when you might need something like this," she'd said. "A gorgeous young widow should always be prepared for anything." She'd winked at Celia as she'd handed her the delicate nightgown. "Or anyone."

Celia had laughed, thinking she wouldn't have any use for such a scandalous item of night attire. Now she was nothing but thankful.

As she examined herself in the mirror, she admired the way the night rail clung to her curves. She'd always been a little on the plump side and she was thrilled Hugo didn't seem to mind in the slightest. In fact, he seemed to enjoy her Rubenesque figure. Especially her not inconsiderable breasts.

Just the memory of how Hugo had worked them was enough to arouse her...

Her puckered nipples poked impudently against the gossamer thin fabric and hid little of the dark thatch of curls at the juncture of her thighs. With one tiny tug of the blue ribbon securing the neckline, Celia's bountiful breasts would spill free... And oh, she really couldn't wait for Hugo to do wicked things to them again. Maybe tonight he'd use his mouth on them too, just like she'd imagined in her dreams.

Already Celia's cheeks were flushed pink with excitement and her dark blue eyes shone. She liked to think that she looked younger than her thirty-four years. Her hair was thick and she couldn't detect any silver strands in the tumbling mass of chestnut-brown waves...not yet.

She rather thought that Hugo might like the fact she'd left her hair down tonight.

She glanced at the mantel clock and impatience nipped. It was nearly half-past twelve and she really hoped Hugo wouldn't keep her waiting for too much longer. Or that he hadn't been waylaid by some other woman, more sexually experienced, with seduction on her mind. Or a younger woman determined to woo him with her abundant feminine wiles and tempt him into marriage.

Celia cleared her throat. She really should stop thinking about others who might vie for Hugo's attention. He was young. He was heart-stoppingly handsome. He was good-natured and intelligent and kind.

And he was a duke.

Other women would always want him.

How could they not?

With a sigh, Celia rose from the seat at her dressing table and wandered over to the window to stare out at the moonlit garden behind Beechwood House. In the distance, through the trees, she could see the lights of Ashdown Hall and hear the sounds of wild merrymaking.

And she...all of a sudden she was on the very edge of plunging into a bout of melancholy.

Celia toyed with the little blue ribbon nestling between her breasts. She really must learn to live in the moment and forget about tomorrow. For now, Hugo was hers in every conceivable way.

Except he's not. Not really, Celia. You don't have his heart. If you were truly honest with yourself, you'd acknowledge that you're not just half in love with Hugo. You're utterly, madly, completely in love with him and have been for a very long time.

And after this week, it will be harder to live without him.

Maybe you should stop this affair now, before you become too addicted to the man...

A soft tap on the door made Celia start.

“Celia?”

It was Hugo.

Her heart leaping, she rushed to the door and let her lover in.

Too late, she thought as Hugo backheeled the door shut behind him, then caught her in his arms and kissed her. *I can't stop. I won't stop...*

How could she deny herself his passion? This chance to experience true joy?

She wasn't strong enough to say no.

Hugo devoured her like he was a starving man and she was the only thing that would satisfy him. His hands were in her hair, tangling in the loose locks, then they were cupping her face. As they kissed, he backed her toward the bed until she was pressed against the bedpost, his large body flush with hers. His manhood was already hard and ready for her. His thumbs dragged on her jaw, forcing her mouth wider, and his tongue delved deeply with long, sinuous strokes.

And Celia loved it.

She wanted this wild and desperate version of Hugo because perhaps it meant that he needed her. That he'd sincerely missed her. That he *had* actually been counting the hours until their next romantic rendezvous.

When Hugo at last drew back, he was just as out of breath as she was.

“I’m sorry for being late. And for behaving like a ravening beast,” he said huskily, gently stroking her cheek.

“Don’t be sorry,” Celia murmured. “About being late or anything else. And I adore the way you kiss me. Hard or soft. Gentle or frenzied, I love it all.”

He cocked an eyebrow and his dark brown eyes twinkled with a teasing light. “Love, Celia?”

Celia blushed hotly and dropped her gaze to the snowy white folds of Hugo’s artfully arranged cravat. *Oh, dear Lord above.* Did he suspect she was in love with him? How...how mortifying. Because he didn’t feel that way about her. He desired her, yes. No doubt he viewed her—his friend’s stepmother—as “forbidden fruit” and it added an element of excitement to the whole affair. He might even be fond of her because of their shared love of ancient history and antiquities. But love? How could he *love* her? She was so much older than him.

She needed to explain herself. Fast. “I...I didn’t mean to imply... I don’t want you to think...” she said in an incoherent rush, addressing Hugo’s gold and ruby cravat pin. She drew a breath and tried again. “I don’t want you to feel as though you are obliged to feel any sort of deep and abiding affection for me just because we’ve become lovers. We both agreed to explore our mutual passion this week and this week alone. I suppose I just want you to know that I’m enjoying myself and that your kisses are wonderful.” She dared to raise her eyes to meet Hugo’s again. “That’s all.”

A dimple flashed in his tanned, lean cheek. “I knew what you meant,” he said softly. “I was just teasing you.” He raised

a hand and gently caressed the side of her face. “I love it when you blush. And as for kisses...there’ll be countless of those tonight. Kisses of all kinds and in all sorts of places.” As though to emphasize his point, he brushed a finger slowly over the bodice of her night gown, heading south. Celia’s nipple immediately contracted and heat flashed through her, all the way to her quim.

“Yes please,” she whispered. “I like the sound of that.”

“Well...” A devilish smile transformed Hugo’s features as he then ran his fingertip around the night rail’s low neckline. “As pretty as this is, my lady,” he murmured as he tugged the blue ribbon undone, “might I suggest that we begin by removing it? Because I suddenly have the all-consuming urge to kiss and fondle your glorious tits.”

“My—my glorious tits?” she repeated breathlessly as Hugo eased the night rail off her shoulders and it slipped to her waist.

“Glorious, stupendous, marvelous, delectable...” He lifted her breasts in his hands and grazed the pads of his thumbs back and forth over each tight pink tip, making Celia shiver. “You’d be the perfect muse for sculptors and artists,” he said huskily. “Men the world over would come to admire how stunningly perfect these beauties are. Other women would be jealous.”

Celia released a breathless laugh. “You’re making me blush. Again.”

“Good. I intend to make you blush all over.” Without further ado, Hugo lowered his head and flicked his tongue over one nipple and then the other. When he began to suckle, Celia squirmed with delight.

Oh God, yes. She clutched Hugo's head. She'd never known that having one's breasts pleased in this way would feel so, so good.

Hugo transferred his attention to her other nipple, alternately sucking and laving it with his tongue. All the while, he gently tortured her abandoned damp nipple with little pinches and tugs and flicks of his wicked fingers. Everything he did to her lit sparks that shot straight to her sex.

Indeed, the throbbing in her quim had intensified and Celia couldn't help but rub herself against Hugo's rampant erection. She needed something, any sort of pressure or friction down there to help alleviate the building exquisite tension.

The not-so-subtle undulation of her hips didn't go unnoticed as Hugo lifted his head from her breasts and murmured thickly, "As much as I'm enjoying what we're doing, you are going to make me spend in my trousers very soon if you keep rubbing yourself against my cock, darling Celia. And I don't want to come just yet."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's just that...you make me so very aroused and I need..."

Hugo's dark eyes fairly smoldered. "You need what, my lady? Do you want me to play with your cunny? Stroke it and lick it and kiss it?"

Celia did indeed blush. Heat flooded her face then poured elsewhere. "Yes... I...I would like that very much. Just so you know, I've...I've never done anything like this before..."

Hugo frowned. "It doesn't sound like the late Lord Ashdown was the best of lovers."

"No... Neville, he was rather too gentlemanly for my liking in bed."

Hugo cocked a brow. “Too gentlemanly?”

“Yes...” And then Celia explained, haltingly at first and then in a great rush, what it had been like when her husband “made love” to her. How she’d lain very still in her nightgown while he’d exercised his conjugal rights. How he’d barely touched her body, beyond a minimal degree of stimulation to “get the job done.”

“It was a duty, more than anything else,” she said, her words weighted with sadness. “I didn’t *dislike* his attentions. But I knew there was something missing. That it *could* be more enjoyable if he...if we... If we did other things that were a little more improper.” A blush of shame burned her cheeks. “You will think me terribly wicked and a bad wife, but I...I sometimes used to think about you when Neville came to my bed. Th-That it was you who felt my breasts through my nightgown and touched my quim to see if I was ready—”

“Good God, Celia.” Hugo’s mouth was set in a grim line and his dark brows had arched into a deep frown. “I had no idea it was that bad for you. Of course, I had no reason to know. But you poor darling.” He gently cradled her face with one hand. “It’s no wonder you had to fill your head with erotic fantasies because bloody Ashdown certainly wasn’t fulfilling any of them. What a complete arse.”

“You’re...you’re not shocked?” asked Celia hesitantly. “You don’t think I’m wicked because I was being unfaithful... at least in my head.”

He gave her a gentle smile. “Of course I don’t think you’re wicked. Besides, you were thinking about me and what we could do together. I like the sound of that. Very much. It fuels my desire for you even more.”

Celia sighed, overcome with relief. Hugo still wanted her. He hadn't judged her. He *understood*.

What a gift he was.

Before she could think of what to say, Hugo gathered her into his arms and grinned down at her wolfishly. "So...where were we, my gorgeous goddess? I was momentarily distracted there, and I like it when you tell me exactly what you want."

Celia bit her lip. "You...you had offered to pleasure my quim. With your mouth."

"Oh, that's right." Hugo slowly stroked his fingers over her breasts, then pushed her night rail to the floor. His smoldering gaze slid lower and he gave a low whistle. "My lady. What a pretty pussy you have. I think it needs a thorough examination—not just visual, but physical and oral—to make sure it's as delectable as your breasts."

Before Celia could draw another breath, Hugo had hoisted her onto the bed so she was lying on her back, legs dangling over the edge of the mattress. He dropped to his knees on the floor and Celia felt his hands settle lightly on her bare thighs. "Now be a good girl and spread your legs," he all but growled. "I'm hungry and I want to feast on your sweet, sweet ambrosia."

Heart racing, Celia complied, slowly moving her thighs apart. Hugo had said he wanted to see her blush all over and she was certain she was pink from the crown of her head to the ends of her toes.

She'd never been fully naked in front of a man before. And this was the man she *loved*. She prayed he found her attractive everywhere. She wasn't perfect by any means. She was curvaceous with a slightly rounded belly, dimpled thighs, and

a sizable bottom. Was Hugo's idea of perfection a figure on the Rubenesque side?

Celia held her breath, fervently hoping Hugo wouldn't renege on his promise to use his mouth on her most private parts. She was so aroused, embarrassingly so, she would die if he rejected her now because she was a little plump.

She needn't have worried. Hugo's next words were the balm needed to assuage her fears. "How deliciously wet you are for me, my darling Celia," he murmured huskily, as though he were in awe of what he saw. He started to stroke the inside of her quivering thighs with feather-light caresses that raised gooseflesh and made her clitoris throb in earnest. "I'm...I'm so very honored."

Celia dared to raise her head and when she glimpsed the rapt expression on her handsome lover's face, all her anxieties flew away. She even rolled her hips a little in blatant invitation. She was suddenly so very eager for Hugo's touch.

Hugo must have sensed her impatience as he emitted a low chuckle. His warm breath gusted over her wet sex and she shivered. "I know, I know, my sweet. I'm taking far too long as I savor the tantalizing view." He looked up along the length of her body and caught her gaze. At the same time he ran one long finger between her slippery folds, spreading her moisture upward toward the apex of her sex.

But he didn't quite touch her where she needed him most.
Curse him.

"While I taste you," Hugo continued, breath tickling her to the point of madness, "I want you to play with your glorious tits. Will you do that for me, Celia? Pinch them and tug them and make them as plump and rosy-red as the lips of your slick little pussy?"

Celia gave a quick nod. *Oh God*. The filthy things this man said to her. She loved it. “Yes...” she whispered. She’d do anything for this man. Anything.

She dropped her head onto the silk counterpane and began to pinch her sensitive, aching nipples...and then, when Hugo at last flicked her with his tongue, she almost levitated off the bed. Exquisite sensation shot through her like lightning and her whole body arched. And Hugo had been able to do that to her with one tiny lick. What would it feel like when he “feasted”?

She didn’t have to wait long to find out because a moment later, Hugo gently parted her folds with his wicked fingers and began to swirl his tongue tip over and around her clitoris.

And it was bliss. Celia’s thoughts disintegrated into a thousand tiny pieces as she was pulled into a maelstrom of pure pleasure. Her head spun. Her sex pulsed. Her body was twisting and writhing as she plucked at her nipples and Hugo explored every part of her quim. Yes, he *was* truly feasting on her.

And he clearly liked what he tasted.

Hugo hooked her legs over his wide shoulders and slid his hands beneath her bottom and lifted her as he devoured her with his tongue and lips. And the sounds he made... The laps and suckling noises. His low growls of pleasure. The whole experience was indescribably wonderful.

Indeed, it was transcendental. Celia felt like Hugo was transporting her to heaven, one wicked lick and perfect suckle at a time.

And then all at once, it was all too much to bear. Celia's orgasm struck with such force, she cried out. Her whole body bowed. As overwhelming waves of ecstasy engulfed her and carried her away, she clutched Hugo's head like it was her only anchor in this storm of pleasure.

When at last the ripples of satisfaction subsided, Hugo crawled up the length of her spent body and kissed her gently. "So, my beautiful Celia, how was that? I take it you enjoyed yourself?"

Celia prised her eyelids open and met her lover's dark glowing gaze. "I think it's rather obvious that I did. What you did was perfect." She reached out and stroked his chiseled jaw. "You're perfect."

Hugo's smile was wonderfully self-satisfied. The man seemed nothing but delighted that he'd brought her to climax. "Thank you... But the fun is far from over, my lady."

"Oh?" Celia stretched her arms above her head. She felt like a lazy cat lying in the sun, all loose-limbed and drowsy-eyed and replete.

Hugo sat back on his haunches, threw off his coat, and began loosening his cravat. "I'm going to strip naked and then fill and fuck you with my enormous male member until you scream my name. And we're not going to do it in this bed..." He glanced around then nodded at her dressing table. "Your thoroughly improper duke is going to you take from behind, in front of that mirror. What do you say to that?"

"I say, 'yes please.'" Celia pushed herself up and began to help Hugo remove his clothes. "I rather suspect you memorized that diary entry of mine."

Hugo shrugged off his waistcoat then pulled off his shirt, revealing a heavily muscled, sun-bronzed chest and lean, ridged abdomen that had Celia gawping. “I did.” He tapped his temple. “It’s all in here. Every single word of it.”

Celia rose to her knees and trailed her fingertips through the light dusting of golden-brown hair on Hugo’s pectoral muscles. “I’m impressed. And a little humbled...”

Hugo began working on the fastenings of his trousers, fingers inexplicably struggling. “How so?”

“Because it makes me wonder...” Celia bit her lip. She couldn’t say that it made her wonder if Hugo cared for because he’d taken the time to learn what she wanted.

That she mattered to him.

Because what if she were wrong?

But then Hugo pushed his trousers down his muscular thighs, releasing his cock and Celia was completely and utterly flabbergasted. “My God, Hugo. You are huge! I can’t believe I managed to do what I did last night.” She wrapped her fingers around him, and when she gave his iron-hard shaft a tiny exploratory squeeze, he gave a little hiss. “I should call you ‘Huge Hugo.’”

His mouth curved in a wicked smile. “I only look huge because your hands are so small and delicate, my lady.”

Celia laughed. “Unlike my tits. Or even my hips or bottom.” She looked down at the impressive length in her hand and shook her head. “No. I have to disagree with you. You are huge, Your Grace. Massive. Enormous. Or even just plain big would suffice.” She lifted her eyes to his face again. “And I simply cannot wait to have all that long hard throbbing cock inside me.”

Hugo cradled her face and kissed her deeply. “You say all the right things, Celia,” he murmured against her lips. “Now, let’s hop off this boring bed so I can fuck you like there’s no tomorrow. I want to hear you scream.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Yes, Hugo Dehavilland, the Duke of Tremayne was going to thoroughly enjoy being completely improper—not a gentleman at all—with the woman he loved.

He was going to give Celia the best damn swiving of her life. She bloody deserved it.

Celia had already scrambled off the bed and moved to her dressing table. Her eagerness was palpable, her need for him acute. Hugo, his rampant cockstand jutting upward, straight toward his navel, prowled toward her.

While he wanted to take Celia hard and fast, he also couldn't ignore the feelings of warm tenderness flooding his chest.

Somehow she managed to look thoroughly ravished and utterly adorable at the same time. He loved her lustrous brown hair and the way it tumbled around her bare shoulders. It was the perfect contrast to her pale satiny skin. The way her tresses spilled over one perfectly plump breast and curled around her dusky pink nipple made his mouth water.

And speaking of mouth-watering... Hugo's gaze wandered lower to the dark triangle of curls at the apex of Celia's lovely thighs. He adored all of her lush ripe curves. He loved the way she tasted. He loved how she felt beneath his hands. He loved

her mind, her intellectual curiosity, the sharpness of her wit. He loved her spirit and the fact she had a curious, adventurous side. She'd kept it hidden for years, and now she'd set it free—now Hugo really knew her—he couldn't help but love her all the more.

When he reached Celia's side, he palmed his painfully engorged erection. "After I make you come with my cock, I'm going to withdraw and spend my seed outside of you," he said gruffly. "I...I don't want to get you with child. And you'll be able to see me come by my own hand. Just as you want."

Celia nodded. She was biting her generously curved bottom lip and a tide of pink had risen in her cheeks. Her beautiful violet eyes shone with an emotion Hugo couldn't quite work out. There was desire, most definitely, but dare he think there was love there too?

"I appreciate your consideration, on both counts, Hugo." She murmured. "I..." Her long black lashes fluttered downward, concealing the mysterious expression in her eyes. "I'm not sure if I'm fertile. I never fell pregnant when I was married."

"Do you want children, Celia?" Hugo asked, curiosity rising just as swiftly as the color in her cheeks. Now he was a duke, he was obliged to produce a single heir at the very least. Although, truth to tell, he'd never given the matter much thought. When he'd been a mere law clerk, then a poorly paid solicitor, marriage and everything that went along with that was but a hazy vision on the horizon of "the future." And then of course, the woman he loved—the only woman he wanted to wed—had been married to his best friend's father.

A fine line had appeared between Celia's delicate dark eyebrows as her eyes returned to his face. "Perhaps... If I ever

married again,” she answered softly. Her blush deepened and she turned to face the dressing table.

Hugo caught her gaze in the mirror. Held it. “I’m sure you will marry someone else. One day.” *You’ll marry me...*

Her smile was shy. “Yes. Maybe. One day.”

She placed her forearms on the dressing table and leaned over. Glancing back over her shoulder, Celia murmured huskily, “Will this do? I’ve read about this sort of thing before. In *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. But I’ve never actually done it like this.”

Hugo drew close to her delightfully peach-shaped derrière. She’d read about it, had she? They hadn’t come across that particular book in their sorting just days ago but given the illicit and highly erotic nature of it, he suspected she kept it well hidden. His cock, already weeping, twitched as he regarded Celia from this angle. He placed a hand on her delightfully curved hip. “Almost,” he answered, voice roughened by lust. “If you could just part your legs a little more...”

Celia obeyed and Hugo swallowed. *Sweet Jesus*. The lips of Celia’s sex were dark pink and glistening, and if he hadn’t promised to have her in this way, he’d be tempted to drop to his knees and make her come again with his mouth. He’d take his time and tease her with soft lingering licks and the most delicate of suckles.

No, next time...

Fighting for control, Hugo whispered, “That’s perfect.” Gritting his teeth, he gently swiped the swollen head of his cock through the slick of nectar welling at her entrance.

Celia moaned and rocked back. “Take me, Hugo,” she begged, voice breathy with desire. “Fill me like you promised.”

“Don’t worry, my darling.” Hugo firmed his grip on her hip and his throbbing cock. “I will.” And he slid deep in a long, slow smooth glide.

Fuck. Stars exploded behind Hugo’s closed eyes as Celia’s intimate flesh clenched around him, sucking him deeper. She was so superbly tight and hot and as slick as liquid satin. If he didn’t come in a minute or less, it would be a miracle.

Dear God, he’d have to concentrate to tease her to a peak before he lost all control...

He withdrew slowly, then plunged deeper and Celia moaned. When he looked in the mirror, he could see that her expression was caught between agony and ecstasy.

“Are you all right? Am I...am too big for you?” Christ, he hoped he wasn’t. If he’d hurt Celia, he’d never be able to forgive himself.

But when she opened her beautiful eyes, he could see she was smiling. “No...no, I’m perfectly fine. It’s been over a year since I last...” She blew out a quick breath. “I love how you feel inside me. While I’m stretched and so very full, it feels... it’s wonderful.” She rocked her hips a little as though she wished to show him that she meant it. “Truly.”

Reassured, Hugo grasped her hips and thrust into her again, and then again. He set up a slow and steady rhythm, enjoying the delicious friction of their joining as he pulled out, and then the welcoming squeeze of Celia’s sex as he sank back in.

Yes. Fuck yes.

Slow and steady was good, but very soon Hugo felt the urge to thrust harder and faster. It was time to make Celia find pleasure again.

He began to pump his hips, his cock stroking wildly in and out of Celia, and she matched his fierce pace perfectly. When he looked at his reflection and Celia's, he swore he'd never seen a more erotic sight in his entire life: her face flushed, her breasts jiggling and bouncing. And Hugo...Hugo would own that he looked nothing like the gentleman he was supposed to be. With his hair tumbling into his eyes and his body glistening with sweat, he looked more like a rutting beast.

But Celia didn't want a gentleman. She wanted to be fucked.

She wanted *this*.

The warm night air around them was filled with the sounds of their enthusiastic, almost frenzied coupling: the slap of sweat slickened flesh, Hugo's own ragged breathing, and the delicious moans tumbling from Celia all coalesced into the most exquisite of harmonies.

It wouldn't be long before Hugo came, and he prayed Celia was close. He had to make sure. Without breaking his rhythm, his free hand leaned down and palmed one of Celia's breasts. Tugged on her nipple. Twisted and reveled in the answering moan. Then he licked his fingers and reached for her clitoris and strummed that hard little pearl. "Come for me, Celia," he ground out as he continued to hammer in and out of her hot sweet cunny. "Come around my cock."

She responded to his demand almost immediately, her inner muscles trembling and clenching. But he knew for certain she'd found bliss when she gasped and her back arched and she screamed his name. "Hugo!"

She spasmed around him with such force, Hugo almost plunged over the edge into pleasure too. *Christ and all his saints—*

But he didn't. He stopped thrusting even though his ballocks had tightened and his cock pulsed and everything within him was urging him to let go. But he'd promised Celia he wouldn't spend inside her. He wouldn't break her trust.

"Turn around. Watch me," he commanded Celia as he pulled himself from her body and gripped his dew-slick shaft. And she did. She turned, fingers still gripping the dressing table for support, and fixed her wide-eyed gaze on him, staring with avid attention as he quickly pumped himself to completion.

With an almighty groan and a shudder, he surrendered to the overwhelming need to come. His hot seed spurted across Celia's body, coating her belly and mound and thighs in thick white streaks.

"My goodness," she whispered, staring down at herself and his handiwork. "How fascinating." She slid a fingertip through one creamy trail then gave it a delicate lick. "You told me that you like wet and sticky," she said, her eyes alight with mischief. "I rather think I like wet and sticky too."

Hugo groaned again. "Good God, Celia. If you keep that up, I'll be hard again in no time."

She gave him a shy grin. "I don't think that would be a terrible thing at all."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. "I'm only just beginning to learn that you're quite insatiable, my lady."

Celia slid her hands over his chest then laced her fingers behind his neck. “It’s only taken us two nights to do everything on my list, so perhaps you are correct. It also seems we’ve run out of things to do...” She gave a little sigh and her nipples brushed against his chest hair. “Which is a shame, considering we have at least five more nights before this house party is over... What on earth will we do to fill the time?”

Hugo released a huff of laughter. “Well, we shall simply have to go through your list again. And again. And you know, you could always add more items to your list... I’m more than happy to oblige.”

Celia looked up at him through her lashes. “I should like that, Your Grace.”

Hugo twirled a lock of her hair around one of his fingers. “I have a confession to make though. I have a list too... I made it two days ago, right after I read yours.”

Celia’s eyes lit up. “You did? Will you share it with me?”

Hugo smiled down at the woman he now knew he loved with his entire heart. “You’ll find out soon enough, my darling Celia.”

At the end of their week together, he’d reveal all.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Beechwood House,

Five days later...

“Hugo, you are a wicked, wicked man,” murmured Celia breathlessly. “The most improper duke in all of England, if not Britain.”

But she was smiling, and Hugo knew that jesting look. He knew all her looks and loved them all. He *needed* them all.

She was lying in his arms, both of them scandalously underdressed as they sprawled across the sofa in the small drawing room of Beechwood House. It was late afternoon, and the room was suffused with a soft golden glow.

The sunlight filtered through the diaphanous chintz curtains shielding the open French doors. It touched the gilt edges of the furniture and the mirror above the fireplace, causing them to gleam. It also caressed Celia’s lustrous brown hair, highlighting strands of auburn and deep gold amongst the darker locks. Hugo wound a tumbledown tress around his finger, admiring the silken texture.

Celia had given all her servants the afternoon off, so Hugo had dared to sneak in through the back garden and the French doors. Andrew and his guests had headed off on a picnic

around midday, but they would no doubt return to Ashdown Hall very soon. And he would have to follow suit.

It was risky for Hugo to linger here, but at this point, he really didn't give a damn. The house party would be over tomorrow. He was "supposed" to be leaving. But all going well, his journey with Celia was only just beginning. He just had to take the bull by the horns and tell her how he truly felt.

One thing was certain in his mind: he could not, *would not*, say goodbye to her. An affair—as astounding as it had been—would never be enough.

He kissed Celia's temple and moved to sit up.

"Are...are you leaving already?" she asked hesitantly. "My servants won't be back until much later... We won't be interrupted for several hours."

Celia's expression had shifted from drowsy contentment to crestfallen in a heartbeat and Hugo's heart contracted with guilt.

After a whole week spent making love to this wonderful woman—at least, whenever he'd been able to steal away from the house party—he was certain the love he felt for her was reciprocated. Why else would the idea of his imminent departure make her look so downcast?

But she wouldn't be downcast for long.

As Hugo took a moment to assemble his words—to profess his undying love and the fact he never wanted to be parted from her—Celia spoke again.

"Unless..." she said, her frown deepening. "Do you think... Does Andrew suspect anything is going on between us? Is that why you're returning to the Hall? So he doesn't come looking for you?"

“He hasn’t said anything...” Hugo dropped another kiss on her forehead. “And no, I’m not leaving yet. My arm has just gone to sleep. I need to move it.”

It was only a tiny white lie. Now the moment to tell Celia that he loved her was upon him, Hugo was unaccountably nervous. Everything he’d wanted to say—he’d been planning it all week—was suddenly jumbled in his head. For a man who prided himself on his superior intellect—he’d done well at Oxford and had graduated law with honors, goddammit—it was all rather discombobulating.

“Oh, I’m sorry—your poor arm.” Celia immediately sat up. Her skirts were rucked up around her waist and her muslin gown was half undone; a great deal of her delightful breasts were exposed to Hugo’s gaze. “You should have said something. I’ve been using you as a pillow for ages.”

Hugo chuckled softly at that. “I love being your pillow.” *That* wasn’t a lie.

He wanted Celia in his arms and his bed, using her as a pillow forever.

As Celia began to do up the buttons of her bodice, he stayed her hand. “There’s no need to get dressed just yet,” he said, his voice low. “Andrew and the rest of the guests shouldn’t be back from their picnic for at least another hour or two.”

“Very well...” Celia relaxed back into his arms, head resting against his shoulder. As she idly traced a fingertip over his wrist bone and the veins on the back of his hand she added softly, “You *are* sure. Aren’t you? About Andrew?”

In actual fact, Hugo *had* started to wonder if Andrew did suspect something was going on, but he couldn’t be certain.

Moreover, he also didn't care if Andrew did learn the truth. He'd do anything for Celia, even risk losing his friendship with Andrew.

But he also couldn't continue lying to Celia about things that mattered to both of them. Not when he could see she was so troubled.

He suddenly saw a way to broach the topic that needed to be addressed. He cleared his throat. "If I'm being perfectly honest, there have been a few occasions during the week that have made me a *little* suspicious of Andrew. What he might know, I mean. It's almost as though he's been deliberately trying to hold me up right before I intend to see you. For instance, three nights ago, he insisted I share several drinks with him after I expressed my desire to retire for the evening. That was why I was late visiting you here at Beechwood House. And just last night, he delayed my departure again by demanding that I play another round of cards with him and then a game of billiards. I won both of course, but still."

"Hmmm." Celia's fine brows descended into a frown and guilt pinched Hugo's chest again.

He drew a fortifying breath. "Would...would it be so bad if he did find out?" he asked softly. "About us?"

Celia worried at her lower lip. "He might be very angry and cast me out," she said at last. "I...I really don't want to be made homeless. I'd manage of course. In a financial sense. But all the same, it would be so very hard starting again on my own."

Hugo tucked a curl behind Celia's shell-like ear. *Now* was the perfect moment for him to at last declare himself. But he would tread softly, lest he scare Celia off. "You know," he

began, nerves frayed and lungs tight, “you could always come and live with me... Be my duchess.”

Celia sat up straight and turned to face him. A look of confusion crossed her features. “You can’t be serious. I’m-I’m far too old. And don’t you want a pretty young thing? Someone you can have lots of chubby bouncy babies with to ensure your family line continues?”

Hugo shrugged a shoulder. “To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think I’d ever be a duke. I’m really not all that fussed about begetting an heir. Although”—he ventured a small wicked smile—“the begetting part would be fun, regardless of whether an heir eventuated or not.”

Celia dropped her gaze and plucked at a silk tassel on one of the cushions. “Well, there is that,” she murmured.

Heartened, Hugo continued to state his case. “Besides, you’re not too old. You’re only thirty-four.”

Celia looked up at him again, brow furrowed. “I’m eight whole years older than you, Hugo. That’s practically a decade. Are you...” She closed her eyes for a moment and swallowed. When she spoke again, her voice trembled. *And, oh God, were there tears in her eyes?* “Are you seriously thinking of asking me to marry you, Hugo?” she whispered. “Because marrying someone like me, an older woman—a possibly barren widow, the stepmother of your best friend—that would be all kinds of madness.”

Hugo took both her hands in his and cursed his own ineptitude. He had to do a better job. He had to make this right.

Suddenly his nerves dissipated and disordered thoughts reformed. He knew exactly what to say to convince Celia that

he was sincere. That this would work.

He gave her a soft smile. “What if I like older women with chestnut-brown hair and violet eyes and lush curves that I want to lose myself in forever? A *slightly* older woman who has the same interests as me? A mature, witty woman I can talk to for hours and hours about Etruscan art and the mosaics on the floor of a Knights Templar temple in Malta or Rhodes? A woman who agrees that Lord Elgin had a bloody hide carting off ancient Greek artifacts and installing them in a London museum? We’d be wonderful together, you and I...”

Celia blinked at him. She was clearly flummoxed by all he’d said. But the beginnings of a soft smile—a tiny quiver—had started to form at the corners of her lovely mouth. “Hugo... You *are* serious... Is this... Is this a real proposal? Of m-marriage?”

Hugo’s chest swelled with sweet expectation as he prepared to tell this incredible woman everything he’d always wanted to say. All the words he’d kept hidden, all the emotion he’d attempted to push aside. “It is indeed a proposal. I love you, Celia. With my entire heart and soul. And the idea of saying goodbye to you today—to ending our love affair—that’s something I simply cannot do. When I wake up, my first thought is of you. All day long I think about you and what we could do together. I dream about you every single night. And I love talking with you about anything and everything. I especially love making love to you...” His heart beating wildly with a potent blend of love and nerves and hope, he reached out and gently stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. “You are more precious to me than mere words could ever express. Please say you’ll be mine, darling Celia. Please say you’ll be my wife.”

“Oh, Hugo...” Celia’s violet eyes were brimming with tears again, but this time, Hugo suspected they were tears of joy. “I love you too. I have for years and years, but I never thought... I never dreamed that us being together could even be possible. Like you, I would own that I would risk everything to be with you. So Hugo, my love, I say yes to your proposal. I will be your wife. Nothing would make me happier.”

Yes... She said yes! Hugo’s heart was flooded with such elation, he thought it might burst. He captured Celia’s beautiful face between his hands and kissed her with all the tender adoration that was rushing through him. That he felt all the way to his very bones. Glorious emotion that warmed his soul.

When he drew back, Celia’s cheeks were glowing and she was smiling.

“I’ll speak with Andrew in the morning,” said Hugo. “After the majority of his house guests have departed. I’ll tell him everything and pray to God that he understands.”

Celia nodded but a shadow of concern flickered in her eyes. “He...he wouldn’t call you out? Would he?”

Hugo gently squeezed her hands. “I hope not. Unless he believes that I’ve slighted his honor. Or perhaps I’ve disrespected his father’s memory? In any case, I don’t think he’s the type of man to throw down the gauntlet.”

Despite his certainty, Celia’s expression was doubtful. “Some men call other men out for quite inconsequential things though... And this, what we are going to do, *is* something of consequence.”

“Even if Andrew does, I won’t accept the challenge. He can’t fight me if I don’t fight back. I’d rather be branded a coward than fatally wound a friend or lose my own life in a duel. I’ll simply walk away. It seems I’m not a very noble sort of nobleman.”

Celia touched his jaw. “You are the best type of nobleman. You have honor *and* good sense. I pray Andrew can forgive me for coming between you two.”

Hugo turned his head and pressed a kiss to her palm. “No doubt he’ll be hurt,” he said. “At the very least, surprised. And that’s something I do feel bad about. But as I said, I cannot give you up, Celia. I love you too much. You’re my everything.”

The unexpected crunch of footsteps on the gravel footpath outside had Celia yelping and leaping to her feet, fingers scrabbling at her gown.

“Who the bloody hell is that?” muttered Hugo, even as a sense of inevitability settled over him. He rose and began to tuck his shirt back into his trousers. He wouldn’t have time to do up his collar or retie his cravat.

“I’m...I’m not expecting anyone,” whispered Celia as she tugged her bodice closed and began to frantically do up the buttons. “It might be one of my servants.”

Hugo threw on his waistcoat hurriedly. He supposed he could have ducked out of the room and hidden, but now he and Celia were engaged, there didn’t seem much point in hiding from a mere servant.

A moment later, there was a perfunctory tap on the glass pane of the open French door...and then the curtains parted to reveal Andrew in his riding attire, complete with a riding crop.

Bloody hell.

Hugo dragged a hand down his face and his heart plummeted to the floor as Celia whispered, “Oh God.”

Even though Celia’s gown was done up, it wasn’t enough to disguise the fact she’d been up to something with Hugo. Her hair was down, she’d missed a button, her skirts were terribly ruffled, and her slippers were on the floor. And of course, Hugo was still dishabille. Cravat-less, coatless, and with his waistcoat hanging open, he knew he looked exactly like a lover caught *in flagrante delicto*.

Andrew took one look at them both and his dark brows plunged into a ferocious frown. “What the hell do you think you’re doing with my stepmother, Tremayne?” he all but growled as he began tapping his riding crop against his buckskin-clad thigh. “What the deuce are you playing at?”

Hugo scrubbed a hand through his already tousled hair. “It’s not what it looks like,” he began, but Andrew cut him off.

“To hell it is,” he scoffed. “I’m no green gilled youth. It’s plain as the nose on my face that you two are lovers. I’ve a mind to call you out, you rogue.”

Celia’s hands flew to her cheeks. Her countenance had blanched to the color of parchment. “No! No, Andrew. You can’t do that!” she cried, desperation threaded through her voice. “It’s not Hugo’s fault. It’s mine. Besides that, we’re... we’re in love. He just proposed to me and I’ve accepted.”

Andrew raised a hand. “Enough! This is between me and my *supposed* friend.” He aimed his fierce gaze at Hugo. “Your *Grace*...”

All of a sudden, he strode across the drawing room until he was standing right in front of Hugo...then he grinned and

clapped Hugo on the back.

“You wily fox,” Andrew crowed. “I knew it! I God damn knew it. I’ve always suspected Celia had a *tendre* for you. And it was clearly reciprocated. I’m not bloody stupid.”

What? Hugo was flabbergasted.

Celia clearly was too. Her mouth, which had dropped open during her stepson’s speech, snapped shut. Then she shook her head as though clearing her thoughts and said, “But...if you knew...all this time, why didn’t you invite me to the house party? Why did you all but banish me to this dower house? I’m so confused.”

Hugo frowned, anger mingling with his earlier concern. “I am too. I think you owe both of us an explanation.”

“And you shall have it, my friend.” Andrew transferred his attention to his stepmother. “I knew Hugo wouldn’t let you languish here all alone, dearest Stepmama. Asking you to move here, not inviting you to the house party, was my way of spurring Hugo into action. I just *knew* he’d seek you out. In fact”—Andrew’s grin widened—“it was rather fun watching him squirm every time I tried to delay him from sneaking away to see you. I gained a great deal of enjoyment from it.”

Hugo shook his head. “You dog,” he said, but he wasn’t angry. He was nothing but relieved. It was all going better than he could ever have planned.

Celia’s expression was still dubious. “But Andrew, are... are you sure you’re comfortable with all of this? I’m your stepmother. Hugo is your friend. Your closest friend.”

Andrew’s smile was kind. “We both know my father was too old for you, Celia. I know you were fond of him, and he was fond of you, but it wasn’t a love match by any means. I

wish you two”—his gaze switched to Hugo then back to Celia —“nothing but happiness. Truly. Let me be the first to offer you my sincerest congratulations. Goodness, I shall even host the blessed wedding if you like.”

“Thank you, Andrew,” Celia said softly. “Your understanding and support mean so very much.”

“Yes, thank you,” agreed Hugo. “Although, I shall look forward to giving you a sound thrashing in the boxing ring sometime to pay for what you’ve put me through this week. And Celia.”

Andrew laughed. “Well, when we return to London—no doubt you’ll be rushing off there to get a special license, Hugo—I’ll meet you at Gentleman Jackson’s Saloon.” His eyes glinting with mischief, he added, “Dear God, does this mean you’ll be my stepfather, my friend?”

“Don’t you dare call me, Steppapa,” said Hugo with a soft chuckle. “If you do, *I* might have to throw down the gauntlet instead of giving you a bit of a good-natured drubbing.”

Andrew flashed a grin. “Duly noted. Now”—he lightly swatted his gloved hand with his riding crop—“I must be on my way. I still have guests to see off. And besides”—he winked at Hugo and then smiled at Celia—“I’m rather certain you two love birds will want to celebrate your betrothal without me in the room.”

He bowed and took his leave.

As soon as he’d disappeared, Hugo gathered Celia into his arms. “I can’t quite believe what just happened, but it seems we have nothing to worry about.”

“Yes,” agreed Celia, beaming. “I might have to ask you to pinch me to make sure I’m not dreaming.”

“Or I could just kiss you instead...”

Celia smiled as she ran her hands up Hugo’s chest until they came to rest upon his shoulders. “I won’t say no to that.”

When they both eventually came up for air, Celia asked, “So where will our honeymoon be?”

“Wherever you would like it to be, my love. Greece or Italy? Malta and Constantinople? I’d love to show you all the places I’ve just been. I can think of nothing better than exploring them together.”

“I like the sound of that too.” Celia reached up and kissed him again.

“Hugo...” she said at length. “You never actually told me what was on your list. The one you said you’d written at the start of the week.”

“Ah, my list...” Hugo smiled. “It has but one item on it.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “Only one? What is it? I’m dying to know.”

Hugo tilted his adorable fiancée’s chin up and gazed directly into her beautiful violet-blue eyes. Eyes that reminded him of the sky, just before dawn. “To make Celia Wyndham my wife,” he murmured, “and to love her forevermore.”

And that’s exactly what he did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Rose Bennett is an Australian author who has a passion for penning emotion-packed historical romances. Of course, her strong-willed heroines and rakish heroes always find their happily ever after.

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Fraternizing with one's footman—no matter how young and handsome he is—is not the done thing...but Lady Wells is going to do it anyway...



HER RELUCTANT DUKE

CLAIR BRETT

Becoming a duke out of the blue, gives enemies a chance to have the love taken from them long ago.

To take back his life, the first thing the New Duke of Chatham, Whitcome McDumont must do is make longtime enemy, Deidra Lightowler, his. After breaking her heart years ago, Deidra Lightowler is not interested. Can the power of a duke turn back the clock and transform enemies to lovers?

CHAPTER
ONE

“**L**ord, Jesu, and bloody hell woman, I’m in the bathtub!”

Whitcome McDumont screamed, grabbing a slip of cloth to throw into the tub to cover himself. Did she think she could barge into his house, traipse up his stairs, enter his bed chamber and confront him in his own private bath chamber? Apparently.

Deirdra Lightowler stood in the doorway, all five feet of her, with her hands plastered on her hips and a look like a banshee on her face.

“Pigs, McDumont?” She growled. Only his mother had ever been able to strike that particular tone. His ear hurt just thinking about what usually came after that voice.

“Oh, that.” He chuckled and relaxed back into the tub, picking up the soap and lathering his arm.

“Oh, that? Oh, that?” she screeched and came fully into the room right to edge of the tub. “You talked my father into betting away enough money for a month’s worth of bills and supplies, and all you have to say is ‘Oh, that?’”

“My Beatrice is sure to win. He wasn’t betting on anything.” Beatrice had won her last five races in the county

and this one was said to be the best one yet.

“How do you know she is going to win? Have you made hammock stew out of her competitors’ feet so they can nay run?”

He looked up at the mighty wee whistle pot standing in front of him. Her expression was one of murder, but even in that serviceable dress with the fichu covering her milky white breasts, she had a body for something much more pleasant.

He caught the strip of linen just before his erection shot it across to the bottom of the tub. That would not play well at all. “That is particularly gruesome and ruthless even for you.”

“Listen McD—”

“Ye are standing in my private chambers, just inches from me naked in my private bath. I would think the least you could do was call me by my Christian name.”

He must have struck a chord because her high and mighty cheek bones went from flushed with anger to blaze red with embarrassment and she took a step back.

He heaved a heavy sigh, that really was more for drama, because it was not as if he didn’t set her nerves on edge every moment of her day. In fact, he was certain she woke angry at him most mornings for things he had yet to think of. And they weren’t even courting.

“Fine, Whitcome, you know I keep my father’s ledgers, and I am not exaggerating when I tell you the sum you swindled from my father may well keep food off our table.”

Before Whitcome could find a pithy retort, the butler appeared in the doorway, “Ah, good Lowell impeccable timing. Miss Lightowler was just asking where the door was to leave.”

“Yes, Master Whitcome, it is just that, your mother sent me to tell Miss Lightowler that tea will be awaiting her in the drawing room when she is finished.”

Whitcome laid his head against the tub back and stared at the ceiling. Lord help him. “I see Lowell. So I take it that no one within the walls of this manor care that an unattached woman is standing in the lord’s bath chamber then?”

To Lowell’s credit he cleared his throat and shifted his weight showing his unease. And one glance toward Deidra still standing with her arms crossed like a statue told him this morning was not to improve until he could get to the stables.

“I will be in the drawing room with your mother, waiting your arrival. Do not think this discussion is over.” Flames shot out of her large doe shaped hazel eyes spewing dislike only a misguided kiss years ago could fuel.

He watched as Deidra Lightowler stalked out of the room with Lowell close behind, and the room was once again silent. He despised cold water, so he could not remain in the tub long, and he was sure his mother would have warned the staff to send him toward the drawing room when he poked his head out of his bed chamber. There was only one solution then.

Whitcome rose and quickly rubbed the cooling water off his goose-fleshed skin with a large linen and hurried to dress. One benefit of living in the country, that he had not appreciated appropriately until now, was the absence of needing a valet. He had no need to wait on a man to come and primp him like a prized debutante. He could dress himself thank you.

Crossing the room to the large expanse of windows overlooking the fields and his mother’s flower garden his stomach let out a great growl. “Damn it,” Whitcome muttered.

He would need to send a stable boy back to the house to nick biscuits and ham from last night, else he starve to death before he could safely return. Throwing open the window, he reached out and stepped onto the sturdy tree limb, making his way down and across the lawn before anyone would be more the wiser.

No good deed ever goes unpunished with that woman. Not one.

“My dear, your tea is getting cold. Come and sit.”

Lady McDumont patted the cushion next to her own on the settee. Deidra liked the older woman; she had also liked her husband, the last Laird of McDumont estate. It had been a sad day when the news of his passing made its way down the lane to her house.

“I am sorry, I am just angry, and I do not sit well when I am angry.” Deidra crossed the room and perched on the cushion, taking up her teacup and drinking.

“My dear, if you don’t find another exercise to expel such feelings you will never weigh more than eight stone sopping wet. Men are nothing if not infuriating. That is what I tell Rowan, and, in her absence, I will impart my years of experience on you.” Lady McDumont sipped her tea with her usual calm nature. A trait Deidra never saw from her own mother.

“You are correct of course.” She conceded to the lady of the house. And mentally tacked this on her list of reasons why the married state would never suit her. She thought briefly of her three sisters all happily married when a familiar prickle of

envy surfaced. Deidra shoved it down. She would not marry but instead find productivity and fulfillment in caring for her parents and the household. Besides Rowan, her best friend would most likely not marry. They would be fast friends for life in all things. “Have you heard from Rowan?” A change of subject was a promising idea.

“My lady, I am afraid Master Whitcome was just spotted jogging down the lawn toward the stables.” Lowell announced.

“Mm, of course he was.” Lady McDumont said into her teacup. “Thank you, Lowell.”

The butler nodded and left them alone.

“I am sorry my dear, he seems to have found a more industrious way to avoid us this morning.”

Deidra smiled. “That is fine. I got to enjoy tea with you.” It was a waste of her energy to allow Whitcome McDumont to make her so angry. He did not deserve such strong emotion after all. It seemed she should embroider that on a pillow.

“Might I ask what my son has done to peak your ire so?”

“He convinced my father to waste a good sum of money on a pig race. Money that would well be spent elsewhere in our household,” Deidra explained.

“Men. No matter our intentions and hard work, they will do as they like,” the older woman pointed out.

Deidra understood the unspoken meaning. Whitcome was not innocent, but neither was her father. He was technically the head of their family and should be worried about such things as enough food or paying the other bills. He was not, and that led her to McDumont.

“I do believe that my father and your son would benefit taking a page from Sir Roydon’s book.”

“How so, my dear?” her hostess asked with genuine curiosity.

Deidra had no proof of any of the kind acts Lachlann Roydon, their neighbor to the east had bestowed on her family over the last few years, but the proof mattered not. “He puts others’ needs before his own monetary gain. He has gone out of his way to be kind and would never swindle money from those with less than him.”

“Well, a veritable paragon of the county that one is, isn’t he?” The tone Lady McDumont used was not fully sarcasm, but there was enough of a hint to tell Deidra Lady McDumont did not care for him. Deidra’s family spent the last half of winter warm instead of lacking in peat because of the man’s generosity. That stood for something in Deidra’s mind.

“Thank you for the tea, and the conversation. It is pleasant to chat with someone outside of my own home now and then.” She stood, indicating her decision to leave.

“My dear, you are welcome at any time. I will always have a kettle near the stove for such a visit. I hope you come back soon. Rowan will be returning sooner than planned. We will all rejoice to have her enthusiasm back in the valley,” she said, smiling up at Deidra.

Once outside, her feet itched to march down to the stable and continue her tirade now that Whitcome was dressed and not so damned distracting. She could not lay that at his feet, she supposed. He had not summoned her to his bathtub. And he had warned he was naked when she first entered.

Instead, she headed back down the path toward home. It was muddy and she was sure to dampen her skirt hem, but it was the quickest route. The cool spring air felt good on her heated cheeks. She told herself it was pure anger for that man, but she had to be truthful and admit her temperature rose the moment she laid eyes on his bare chest and shoulders.

The sound of plodding hooves gaining ground at a quick pace interrupted her thought. Not having to turn to see, Deidra knew it was not hooves, but large gangly paws heading her way.

“Aoife, love. I thought you had missed my visit.” Deidra turned just as the monstrous gray Irish Wolfhound, Scottish Deer Hound mix puppy tried to halt at her feet, but the mud and her overly long legs, sent her into a slide. “Oof, good Lord, you will have us both down and in a pile.” She laughed as she steadied her legs to take the blow.

One of the more endearing, no, Deidra changed her mind, his only endearing quality was Whitcome’s love of animals, especially his love of hunting dogs. Aoife was the latest in his attempt to create a new breed from the massive Irish Wolfhound and the Scottish Deer Hounds. She was still a puppy, but one would not know it looking at her. Already reaching Deidra’s waist at the sway in her back. She would grow for at least another year.

The puppy flipped onto her back in the mud for the customary belly rub. “Your papa is going to be outraged when you go home covered in mud you silly girl.” But Deidra smiled at the thought. He would know Aoife would hunt Deidra down to get attention, which would only add to his consternation.

The dog finally managed to get all her legs under her and stand, leaning against Deidra's now mud-sodden skirts, and gazed up at Deidra, eyes filled with love. It was a mistake when McDumont introduced his new litter of pups to her and his sister Rowan. The runt of the litter managed to snuffle her way out from under the group to the edge of the whelping bed. Every time McDumont would pick her up and nestle her back to the warmth of the litter, she would defy his actions and squirm back until Deidra bent down and picked her up. And that was that. Since that day, whenever Aoife goes missing someone from McDumont's lands will come searching and find Aoife happily curled up at Deidra's feet no matter where she might be.

“You know you need to return home. As soon as they find you missing, they will know where you are. I am sure you have hunting lessons this afternoon. And you know how important hunting lessons are to a young hound such as yourself. I mean how will you ever find a suitable mate if you are not able to prove how good your bloodline is?”

Aoife cocked her head to the side causing one of her ears to flop across her head pointing in the opposite direction as if to say, she wasn't at all concerned with such trivial matters.

“It appears,” Deidra went on, rubbing the dog's head as they walked. “You and I are cut from the same cloth. Neither of us are interested in such pursuits and both of us are naturally talented at vexing your papa.”

Once home and dried-off, Deidra found her way to her parlor. The large oak desk her father had removed from his own study to make room for his work bench and potting mixes had been reclaimed from another storage space and set up here.

The fire crackled throwing heat into the space. Deidra sat at the desk. The household ledgers sprawled out made her grounded unlike McDumont. Aoife lay curled under the desk on top of her feet. At some point the dog would be terribly disappointed when she no longer could squeeze her long limbs and huge body into such a position. But for now, Deidra would soak up the affection.

Glaring down at the ledger in front of her did not make for a feeling of comfort. It had been a brutal winter and even colder spring. The climate in the north of England on the Scottish border was never forgiving, but when one's coffers did not extend through the harshest months, it made appreciating the mild ones more difficult.

“Deidra! Deidra!” The shrill sound of her name heralded Lady Lightowler's arrival. Deidra loved her parents, she reminded herself. They loved her and gave her, if not a stable childhood, at least one filled with love in harder times and an appreciation for good fortune when it landed in their laps.

However, Deidra was working on her feelings for her mother. Three years ago, the family had a horrible scandal hanging over their heads. Dark days indeed. Lady Lightowler, unable to contend with it all, left the family to go live with her sister for a time. All was resolved thanks to Ainsley, her sister, but Deidra's sense of familial responsibility made her mother's betrayal difficult to forgive.

“Deidra, there you are. Did you not hear me calling you?” The slight, but dazzling woman swept into the study.

“I am certain they heard you at the border, mother. I knew you would discern my whereabouts,” she responded in a cold tone.

“Well, good. Cook and I need to discuss the spring dinner we host with all the best families in the area.”

Deidra looked up at the blond, blue-eyed creature. It was distinctly possible that Deidra might have been left on the doorstep, because she not only didn't look anything like the woman standing before her, but she was certain if her mother had ever been in possession of common sense, she would have traded it for some bauble.

“Mother, we discussed this. There is no way to host such a dinner. Maybe later in the summer, but—”

“Deidra, my dear. I appreciate your due diligence, but you are not the lady of this house, I am. I will dictate when we will or will not host a gathering. If we do not, neighbors will begin to talk. They will assume we lack the funds.”

“Mother, they would assume that, because it is truth. We have bills coming due from almost every merchant in the area. We cannot add to our debt we already have for appearances sake.” She drew in a breath. “I will make note of it and try to add it into our budget for June or maybe July. We have quite a sturdy group of pregnant sheep and goats this year, I am certain their offspring will bring a hefty sum.”

She returned her attention to the ledger page that had more negatives running down the columns than positives and prayed her mother would leave in her customarily petulant temper but would be gone from her none the less.

After a few tense moments, her mother swept out of the room with several humphs and a veiled threat about bringing her father into the matter.

Putting the now dry quill back in the ink well, Deidra leaned back in the chair and looked down at Aoife. “I am

certain your mother is not so difficult. Oh, well your master is another story of course. Neither has any true understanding of what it is like to struggle in this world.”

Satisfied when the still puppy seemed to nod in agreement, Deidra hunched forward over the ledgers, decided it was time to figure out a payment schedule for the weeks ahead.

CHAPTER
TWO

Whitcome's desk, normally tidy, lay in ruins. Since the letter from his uncle's solicitor arrived it was impossible to concentrate on anything. he was abandoning the hope that he'd get to bathe with some peace.

Then Miss Lightowler interrupted his turmoil. Escaping to the barn was an attempt at avoiding them both. It was short lived.

"The woman is a menace," he grumbled to no one. Now, he not only had to contend with the letter staring at him but thoughts of Deirdra in full peak of anger. Oh, but that is a sight he thought, enjoying the slow smile his vision conjured.

"Sir, your mother asked if you would join her for luncheon?" The butler disturbed his thoughts, which was for the best.

"I gather it is not a question, but a summons?"

"I believe, my lord," Lowell answered.

"Very well, tell her as soon as I clear off my desk."

The butler nodded and left the room.

In the silence, Whitcome turned to sorting the days of mail. Luncheon would give him a good break, then he would come back and settle into the stacks of parchment. He took the

letter and folded it, sliding it into the top drawer of his father's desk. Out of sight hopefully out of mind.

The lilting sound of his mother's humming met him in the family dining room. The bright space made it inviting. He stood in the doorway and watched his mother tending a large vase of cuttings. If he allowed nostalgia to invade, he would be lost. His was a happy childhood, and even now he had no great complaints. Though he wished his father was still above ground.

"Oh, there you are Whitcome. I was starting to think I would have to fetch Lowell again." His mother turned and gave him her brightest smile. No matter how many times a day she infuriated him, he loved his mother.

"I wouldn't miss a luncheon date with you, mother." he assured her, walking in and placing a tender kiss on the cheek she offered him. "The cuttings are looking very fresh, even with the limited availability this early in the season."

"Yes, they are." She agreed while Whitcome pulled out a chair for her then found his own.

"So, what have you decided? Are we soon to call you duke?"

"Nothing like nixing the pleasantries. You curdled my potato soup," he complained. He blamed the housekeeper for leaking the contents of the packet. He had hoped not to mention it, because he knew his mother would have an opinion. One could depend on few things in this world, but the sun rising and setting and his mother having an opinion were three things you could set your watch by.

"You need to hurry; you are, after all, the only living relative you should take your title."

He tucked into the fresh warm bread and creamy soup, hoping a hearty meal would settle his nerves.

“I cannot imagine what your father would say,” she went on. “We attended your uncle’s wedding at Chatham Abbey, and that was the last time I saw him. I wish your uncle and father hadn’t stopped speaking. After his wife and son died in childbirth we’d all expected him to remarry, Perhaps your uncle thought it would be an olive branch to reconnect two brothers.”

“I would have thought a letter over the years might have done well to repair the rift. At the very least to inform father that he was the heir to the dukedom. I am sure father would have mentioned it.”

His mother nodded, a far-off expression she got with any mention of the late laird. At least stricken sorrow was not a stark reminder of their loss anymore. It was more of a misty remembering gaze.

“I’m not sure how your father would have taken such a letter. I would have expected his struggle would have been louder than yours.”

Whitcome had to laugh. At no point in his life had his father not yelled expletives and spat on the floor as much as he had when some poor fool would bring up his father and brother.

“Well, I just wish someone had mentioned I might be in line to inherit a dukedom.”

“Yes, that would have been most helpful.” His mother dismissed the statement as if this was a normal conversation any son and mother could be having.

Whitcome pushed his bowl away. His appetite had been shot for two days. “If you were me, mother, what would you do?”

She looked up at him with a shocked expression. As if she wasn't already planning on telling. “Well, I would ask myself many difficult questions. I can tell you what your father would have done; he would have let the dukedom fall into abeyance. A last declaration of defiance against his father and brother.” She eyed Whitcome until he felt uncomfortable. She always knew what he was thinking. “I would caution, a wise man should not act on behalf of a dead man to avenge a feud that has died with all parties. This is about the future. The future of the McDumonts, not their past.”

Well, damn, Whitcome thought but didn't bother to say. “Well, I would like to make a decision based on as much knowledge as I can, so what was the reason father stopped speaking to his father and older brother?”

She sat, spoon hovering over her bowl. For a moment he thought she might not answer him. Then she placed the spoon into the bowl and sat back as well. “Your father stopped speaking to his father before there was any issue between him and his brother. Your father refused to marry who his father wanted, instead he chose to marry me, the daughter of the head groom. Your grandfather felt I did not have a healthy enough lineage and I would spoil the bloodline.”

Whitcomb knew this story; his parents had a love match. It was clear everyday they were together and every moment since his father's death that his wife thinks about him.

“Your uncle championed our union and defied his father by standing with us against their father. It was a clear blow to

the duke and one he did not take lightly. He never spoke to your father again and did not send regards at your birth.”

“And his brother?” he prodded.

“That is more of a mystery. However, from what I could gather, it had more to do with his new wife than any argument. I believe your grandfather put a bee in the future duchess’s bonnet toward your father and his unacceptable union. She was never considered the charitable sort, and was marrying the heir to a dukedom, not a McDumont, if you understand. I would never speak ill of the departed, but that is what I think.”

Whitcome knew if there was a person to be spoken ill of, dead or alive, his mother would speak plainly.

“Have you told her yet?” She changed the subject.

“What? Told who? Rowan?” The look she shot him, he knew. “You mean Miss Lightowler? Why ever would I burden that woman with any bit of information about anything?”

“Precisely.” She nodded but continued, “She may have some insights since all her sisters have married into the Ton. Well, perhaps Spanish aristocracy doesn’t hold to account as much here in England, but I am sure she is not turned away from Ton events.”

“Mother, I must commend you. It is the longest you have had a conversation with me before reminding me that Deidra is the only Lightowler sister that has yet to marry. Wouldn’t you say so Lowell?” Whitcome teased.

“I would not know enough to say, my lord,” Lowell drolled, ever his mother’s champion.

“Well, I have no idea what you are implying, I just thought she would be the most likely person to have at least some inside knowledge about how this may impact your life.”

He knew well how it would change his life. It would turn it into chaos. At least half the year he would attend to his ducal duties, whatever those entailed, which would be in London or at Chatham House the seat of the dukedom and not here taking care of his lands and people he was groomed to care for.

It would mean dressing for occasions he didn't want to attend and being congenial to people he gave not a whit about. Plus, he would not be here to protect those he cared about and to keep others in check.

But it also meant connections that could help improve his father's legacy.

"I still think it wise to at the very least in passing ask Deidra about her sisters' experiences. You all had a similar upbringing. If they found it easy to adjust, it may mean you would settle in better than you think."

He was done dwelling on this subject for the moment. He nodded to tell his mother he heard her. If the situation presented itself, what would it hurt to ask? It isn't like Deidra cared one whit about where he laid his head. In fact, he was certain she would champion the idea of him being gone from her sight. Whitcome doubted there would come such a circumstance to ask, so he put it out of his mind.

"Mother, I have a desk full of correspondence to contend with before I go check on the dogs later. I thank you for the company, but I must get back in there."

"Of course, dear, but you hardly ate anything. I will have cook send you in a cold plate you may pick at while you work. Your father practically survived off such fare."

He kissed his mother again on the top of her head, as she remained seated still eating, and left the room.

“Miss, miss you ‘ave a visitor.”

A maid bustled into the study. Deidra looked up from the ledgers she had focused on for what felt like days, but in reality was more like the past several hours. The poor maid’s face was marred by dancing numbers and weaving negative signs. She blinked to focus.

“A visitor? I am not expecting anyone.”

“No miss, he said you weren’t, but said he was here to collect his property.”

Understanding dawned, and Deidra bent down to see the pup still curled around her feet under the desk. “I am afraid you have been found out, my dear. He has sent someone to fetch you.”

The dog picked up her massive head, flicked her ears and repositioned, turning her head away from the annoying voice that woke her.

“Send him in.” Deidra instructed but didn’t bother to leave her desk. Once the stable hand or groom called her, Aoife would obey. Whitcome was many things, but a poor dog breeder was not one of them.

The maid curtsied and went to fetch the guest. Blinking and squinting to further re-energize her vision she bent back to the column that vexed her to no end. She must figure out how to reconcile that before she quit for the moment. It all seemed to hinge on that one column. When had her entire life’s security been held hostage from a column of numbers?

Before she could bother to answer herself, Deidra heard Whitcome's bored deep velvety voice shoot across the room sending reverberations through her.

"Whitcome, I did not expect you to bother with such a chore. A groom usually manages this well enough."

He was standing in the doorway, not bothering to enter the room, one shoulder leaned into the door casing and one booted foot, lazily draped over the other, with his toe to the ground, arms crossed. If she had more of a hearty constitution, she would point out the fact she felt he was trying too hard, but the vexing part was it didn't matter if he tried or tried not, the figure he struck standing there without a damned care in the world contradicted every reaction and feeling she had for the man. In that moment, he was just a man like any other, except he was the man of men. With the light hitting him from the bright room, but the dark hallway casting him in relief, he might have been one of her sister Constance's statues. Light loved him. It cradled him like a soft hazy pillow, caressing every curve and wrinkle his crossed arms created from his muscled shoulders and biceps straining the fabric, to the elegant, long line of him from hip to booted foot. Damn him.

He smiled, knowing she was transfixed. Drat it all.

"I did not steal her." She forged ahead, ignoring the electricity in the room.

"I never said you did. That one has the worst taste in companions. She will be the one who finds some back ally barn dog to mate with. And I am perfectly aware a groom could have conducted this rescue mission, but perhaps I was hoping to find you lounging in a bathtub, hoping to have a brief moment of solace from the world. I thought it only fair I keep visiting until I can return the favor." He pushed from the

doorway, and sauntered into the room, settling in a library chair set in front of her desk. It seemed to not bother him she was sitting at the desk, doing the work of the head of household.

“I can assure you, my lord, you will never be allowed such an audience, so if you have that as a life goal, I am afraid you will die an unfulfilled man.”

Whitcome bent his head and put his hand over his heart. “I am a wounded man now. I may never recover that blow.” The churlish smile and the laughter in his eyes made it hard for her to remember how much she disliked him. “Now, wherever could that pup be do you think?” he asked, looking around the room.

Deidra sat back in her chair and didn't give away her companion's location. However, it only took a moment before the rhythmic thud, thud, thud, of her bushy tail gave her away. Whitcome was looking down smiling. Deidra leaned on the desk to lift herself enough to look over and there sticking out from under the desk was the offending tail thwacking the carpet.

“She really is no trouble, and I would have returned her before dark.” Deidra tried to defend the runaway.

“I am certain of it. I needed to stretch my legs, and this afforded the opportunity to do so. I seem to have wasted most of my day in a similar fashion to you. Making any headway?” he asked, without any questions about why she was doing a man's work. This was what was so infuriating about the man. He vexed her at every turn, never giving her time to gain a foothold in a conversation.

“No, if you must know. If it were not for this one column, I would be fine.”

“Let me guess, expenses? That is always the one column I cannot easily reconcile. I am never truly prepared to see the cost of things, and then must figure out how that will impact all the other decisions.”

She smiled. Probably he was correct that it was the same no matter the size of the estate, but the difference was, he did have more control over decisions than she, and he had money already to pay for last year’s bills. She was trying to figure out how to pay last year, so they would extend her credit for this year, so she could rob from her future earnings again next year to keep the cycle going, and everyone fed.

“Is there something I might assist with?” he asked, as he leaned in to read the ledger page upside down.

With a force that even unnerved her, Deidra flopped the large book closed and splayed her arms across it in a protective stance. “I do not believe I asked for your opinion, and I definitely did not ask for your pity.”

He sat back, scrutinizing her. Preparing for an argument about how a man’s brain can better work out problems concerning such things, she was again thrown off guard at his next question.

“Very well, I do have another question. How do your sisters enjoy London and all the fuss and pomp of the Ton? Did they find it difficult to adjust?”

“What? Oh, well—” She cut off, trying to understand why he would wonder such a thing, then she understood. “Are you asking for Rowan? Is she thinking of attending the season?”

“Rowan? Yes, she has mentioned it and with her struggles as it is, I was wondering if you had any insight that might help me keep her from getting her hopes dashed.”

Rowan had not mentioned London in any of the letters she sent Deidra. If she were thinking of going, Deidra would have been told, but perhaps there were things she shared with her brother that she did not share with her closest friend. “Well, I think if Rowan wants to attend the season, all of my sisters would be more than excited to present her to the Ton. I know Maria struggled, because she married very high up and her husband had been considered one of the most desirable that season, but in true Maria fashion, she has either won everyone over, or made those who are not less relevant. I personally think Rowan would make quite the splash on the season.”

“So, your sisters don’t long to be back home?” His tone told Deidra quite a lot hinged on this one question.

“I will say, they speak of missing the quiet and mother and father, but no. I do not believe any of them pine for the solitude of northern England.”

His shoulders visibly slumped and he looked upset by that news. He just sat, deep in thought about what Deidra could only speculate. Then, just as suddenly, he slapped his hands on his thighs and rose. “Well, thank you for that answer. I will keep that in mind when Rowan returns and we discuss it.”

“Returns? I thought she was in Bath for at least another month?” Hope welled. She knew the mineral baths were healing for Rowan, and the weather much more accommodating in the south, but Deidra always missed her friend when she flitted off. Rowan often invited her, but spring was not a suitable time for her, the sheep and goats were birthing, crops were being tilled, and the books had to be reconciled.

“Yes, I got a missive yesterday saying we should expect her return in a week’s time. I have stopped trying to keep track

of her. She is forever changing her mind.”

“Oh, that will be wonderful,” Deidra said, not at all caring that she showed her veritable enemy her weakness. Whitcome was a lot of things, but he would never try to come between his sister and her best friend. After the accident, Deidra almost didn’t leave Rowan’s bedside for a fortnight. If the two of them agreed on anything it was Rowan’s happiness.

“I will let you get back to your calculations then. Aoife, come.” He turned toward the door. The lanky puppy scurried from under the desk, shoving Deidra’s chair back in the process and trotted to Whitcome’s side.

“I see how it is. You, my dear, are a fair-weather friend. It will not serve you well in this world,” Deidra snapped, but Aoife only had eyes for her master now. Tomorrow, if given the chance, the dog would be back standing next to her or lounging under Deidra’s desk, but for now, she understood where her place was.

“Good day, Miss Lightowler.” He put his hat on and bent it in a mock bow.

“Good day, Whitcome. We should be careful, twice in one morning will lead to people thinking we like each other.”

And without giving him a chance to come back with the rejoinder, she bent her head back to the book, flopping the large cover back open and searched for her page. As she had feared, the numbers had not reconciled themselves on their own. She would no doubt be having dinner at her desk.

CHAPTER
THREE

“**T**ell me again why we are riding into the village?” Maddox, Whitcome’s cousin on his mother’s side questioned as the horses were saddled.

“I have business in town. I told you that,” Whitcome answered, knowing Maddox would not let it rest.

“Yes, you did, but unfortunately for you, I have an exceptional nose for bullshit. Any business you might have would be done by your secretary.” His cousin and closest friend stood propped against a stall, waiting, while a large gelding rested her chin on his shoulder, fluffing his hair with her breath.

“Fine.” Whitcome gave in. He figured Maddox knew the truth of it all anyway. “I had to fetch the dog yesterday and just happened to see the ledger Deidra was pouring over. I want to make certain Mr. Dumprey will give her the respect he would give any landholder in the area.” A very sound argument, Whitcome commended himself.

Maddox pulled away from the stall door. “First, you are the first one, when Miss Lightowler’s name comes up to point out how much you dislike her, and you then point out she often sticks her nose where it does not belong.”

Whitcome nodded. “I do.”

“But whenever her household is in need you see to it that the problem goes away.”

“It is to my advantage to see to the Lightowler’s continued ownership of the property adjoining my own. Lightowler is a good neighbor.”

“We are not talking about Baron Lightowler,” Maddox corrected.

“Aren’t we? If he wants to allow his daughter to run his estate that is his business. He is, however, still the signor on all things. If I want them to remain my neighbor, I will say we are always talking about Baron Lightowler.”

“Ah, but are we really?” Maddox threw the accusation out as he lifted himself into the saddle. That gave Whitcome a moment to collect his thoughts on the matter. Maddox knew the history between Whitcome and Deidra better than anyone. Maddox knew Whitcome’s mind better sometimes than even Whitcome. “You, my besotted friend, still like her.” He added just to rankle.

“I would argue that our relationship is amicable enough, but beyond that, it is complicated,” was the response he settled on.

“Tis complicated, cousin, because you two make it so. However, complicated does not produce heirs, it also does not protect the Lightowler property over the long term, and it surely does not help your cause in her eyes, when you run off to do clandestine gallant acts, that she is never made aware of. Hell, Whitcome, more than half the time, she thinks it is that damned fool Lachlann Roydon who has saved them.”

“My father always said no bad deed will go unpunished for long. That man will get what is coming to him for taking credit

for things he did not do.”

“Among other sins, perhaps, but before or after he woos Deidra under false pretenses and marries her? If he marries her, your attempt at keeping the Lightowlers as owners would no doubt be in jeopardy. Lightowler doesn’t surface from his roses long enough to know community politics, or how awful that bastard is.”

The horses broke out of the barn on a trot, and both shook their manes in the mid-morning sun. The men guided the horses to the road and soon left the warmth of the sun behind for the wooded lane leading toward the village. It took that long before Whitcome got his temper under control and could speak. The idea of Deidra being wed, but especially to Lachlann, rankled him in a way not much else could.

“I cannot claim to understand that woman’s mind. All I can do is what I am doing. If she chooses to marry so below her, that is her poor life choice.”

“Not if she is being fed false information... about everything.”

Whitcome hated when his cousin stepped too close to his failings as a man. It was time to give Maddox something else to chew on.

“I need to ask your counsel in another matter.” His tone obviously sounded as dreaded as the topic, because Maddox turned in his saddle to look at Whitcome.

“Of course. Whatever could be so horrific?”

“My uncle died.”

“The duke? That uncle?”

“Yes.”

“My condolences. I know you were not close, but any death in a family deserves reverence.”

“I never met the man, and he turned his back on my father because of his wife’s closed mindedness and my grandfather’s sway over his daughter-in-law. I have little opinion on his death beyond how it may affect my own life and family.”

“And how is that?”

“He had no direct heirs. I am to inherit if I so choose.”

Maddox stopped his horse and sat silently in the middle of the lane just staring. “You are now a duke?” he asked, incredulous.

“No. I am not a duke. Not until I agree to accept it. I can option to abandon the title and let it go into abeyance.” Whitcome gently pressed his horse, a large grey, to move forward and he ambled along, until Maddox caught up to him.

“Why in God’s name would you do such a thing?” Maddox asked, once he gathered his thoughts and caught up.

“It will take me away from my lands and responsibilities for a sizable portion of the year. Not to mention the headache of running such an empire. It isn’t all about fancy parties. The dukedom itself has three homes, two of which are active estates. Not to mention my family’s personal property that I will inherit regardless of the title. It will more than double the properties and quadruple the people I will handle.” Silence engulfed the world as they trotted along and Maddox didn’t comment. “Well?”

Maddox looked at him, shaking his head. “Sorry, cousin, I was trying to calculate the downside of this. How many of the properties are losing money or are in disrepair?”

“None,” Whitcome answered with a tone that denoted a hit to his own pride. What was wrong with him? He would not admit it, but at least he understood his contradictory reactions. He would not admit to them, but he understood them. This pride in something he never knew would be his and never wanted perplexed him.

“And the fortune is such that it will not be a hardship for you to take over these properties?”

“Yes, the fortune is secure. The ducal properties are easily supported within the accounts tied to the title, and each of the personal estates has for years, according to the solicitors, maintained themselves nicely.”

“And yet, you are still finding fault in this situation? Have you not considered the power you would instantly gain in this community if your personal holdings were tripled overnight?”

He hadn't. His concerns were closer to home than the amount of power he would gain. Who would be there for his mother, or his sister? How would it affect his dog breeding? Not to mention how it would impact the neighborhood. If he was taken from the area, he would not know when people around him needed something.

“You make a valid point about the power. I would have more sway in the community if I had the title. However, my biggest concern is closer to home. I need to be here for mother and Rowan. I do not wish this to take away from my breeding and training schedule. I am so close to perfecting my pack.”

“And, you won't be here to know when it is time to swoop in and rescue your blood born enemy, Deidra Lightowler, if you are out of county,” Maddox included, with too much enjoyment in Whitcome's opinion.

“You have always hoped to inject an emotion between Miss Lightowler and myself that does not exist—any more. Perhaps, it is you who holds an affection.”

“If that is what you need to tell yourself, cousin, who am I to correct you? But I have been by your side longer than your sister and I know your mind, sometimes better than you. Deidra is an exceptional woman in any circle. A bit terrifying, but that seems to be what draws you to her. As for any concerns, even including a misplaced sense of responsibility to your neighbor, you have plenty of people, including me, who can step in as needed. I would never abandon my aunt or my cousins.”

Whitcome decided retreat was the better choice. “Thank you, Maddox. I know you will be the first one to come to my family’s aid if I am not present. It is one of the only reasons I am considering it at all.”

The village came into view. For northern England, it was a well-developed, busy community. It being perfectly situated on the main road to Scotland, and the fact it was the only village in miles with two well stationed inns, helped. And Lightowler was a local celebrity because of the rose he created and named after Prinny. The little village of Issacs Loc, had been put on the map. They made their way through the bustling main throughfare, dismounting at the Gander and Bull Inn. A young groom agreed to water and house the horses until they returned.

“Where to first, cousin? And, just to be clear, you are going to buy me luncheon here today. I left so early, I did not make it to kitchens this morning.”

“I believe a free meal is in order. You know with all the harping you do on me, the sooner you get married the sooner

there will be someone to make sure you are fed?”

The two laughed walking to the mercantile. Mr. Dumprey, a savvy business owner, had just added a spacious front room with shelves lining the walls. If a woman came to purchase flour, she could pick her ribbons up in the same place. Whitcome doubted such a novelty would bring rich women flocking, but time would tell.

Inside, the newness did draw a crowd, and the two men waded through the patrons to find Mr. Dumprey standing in the back. When the man saw Whitcome he left his place and rounded the counter to greet him.

“Laird Whitcome, a pleasure.” He shook his hand, by wrapping his free hand around Whitcome’s, causing a manacle hold. Whitcome was not certain the man would relinquish his hand.

“Yes, it looks like spring is your season. I was hoping you and I could discuss a matter that I want taken care of with the utmost discretion.”

“Of course, of course. I cannot, however, leave the floor right now. I am waiting for my boy to return from an order run. If you could but wait.”

Whitcome nodded. “Of course. We will look around.”

In front of the large room, Whitcome noticed Roydon. “Damn.”

Maddox followed his direction of sight. “Damn, is correct. Does the man have a spy sitting in your mother’s potted plants listening to your every word?”

“I doubt it. He is probably here regularly, since he does not have a staff large enough to accommodate such. I, on the other

hand, have staff who afford me the pleasure of not having to do such jobs until I see fit. Ignore him.”

The men circumvented the back of the room to stay out of sight. Roydon meandered his way to the front desk, paid for his items and left without having noticed.

“Gentlemen, my son has returned, please follow me.” Dumprey waved them over and they followed the store owner into the back.

Whitcome settled with Dumprey that no matter what Miss Lightowler required for a repayment schedule, she was to be afforded a line of credit, and that his payment was secured. If not by Miss Lightowler, it would be covered by Whitcome’s private accounts. And as usual, this was to remain between them.

Whitcome’s triumph was short-lived. They walked out of the back and ran into Roydon, a person Whitcome would never choose to spend time with. He was severe in how he carried himself and also with those under his care. He was demanding, and often to the detriment of his employees. Whitcome had more maids than one man should consider, because it was almost a monthly occurrence that one would find their way to his doorstep in tears. Not to mention his own personal history with the man.

“Whitcome, whatever are you doing in such a pedestrian place? Shouldn’t you be racing a pig or something else industrious with your time?” Lachlann greeted.

“That is on my list for later today. You would be surprised how very full that list is, Lachlann. Are you here trying to find another pool of unaware young women for your maid positions?” Whitcome quipped back.

“I am here securing my feed and other deliveries for the coming months. I pay for it all in advance.”

“I never said you were bad at business; I just said you were a horrible person.” Whitcome pointed out.

Roydon did not take the bait dangled so close to his ego, he simply smiled and nodded. “Well, I wish you the best this season. I see that Lightowler has managed to accumulate a large herd of sheep. I am hopeful the births will aid them in their endeavor to stay afloat.”

“I am sure it is well in hand.”

“Yes.” Was all Lachlann said. He nodded to Maddox, who blinked in reaction.

They watched Roydon walk away.

“I was perfectly happy letting the two of you banter back and forth, though I had plans to stop you if either of you had reached for the flap on your breeches to size each other up. There were women present after all.”

Whitcome frowned at Maddox but didn't bother arguing. It was clear the two men did not like each other and Whitcome did not care who knew it.

“Luncheon?” Whitcome asked, as they entered the warm sunshine of the wide street.

“Luncheon, indeed,” Maddox agreed.

“**Y**ou are the highlight of my month! I bet your mother is beside herself with happiness.” Deidra sat on the settee in the front parlor, Rowan's favorite sitting spot when she visited.

“She is not aware I am home. You were my first stop my dearest friend.” Rowan smiled, with a hint of sadness. Life had not treated her well, and Deidra had made it her quest to someday wipe the sadness from her gaze.

“I am honored. I do know how much you miss home when you are away.” Deidra reached out and placed a hand on her arm to show her affection.

“I am touched you are honored, but I must confess I do have dubious intent at stopping here first.” She reached over and barely reached her teacup. She would have to remind the staff that when Rowan visited certain accommodations would need to be met. After a lifetime, one would think it would just happen.

“I do not believe you have a dubious bone in your body, but I am intrigued. I have always wished to be embroiled in a dubious plot of some sort.” Deidra smiled wide, coaxing her childhood friend to expand on the true meaning for her visit.

Rowan sipped her tea, and accepted the saucer when Deidra reached over and brought it to her so she could rest the dainty cup. “I did not want to return home without some idea of what I will be walking into.”

Deidra felt her eyebrows knit together. That did sound dubious. “I am unsure what you mean. I was there just two days ago, and I saw nothing untoward or out of the ordinary.”

“Hmm. Well, the letter mother sent me last said Whitcome had gotten a letter from our uncle’s solicitor and was having difficulties deciding.”

“I heard about your uncle. Please take my condolences.”

“Pish posh, I never met the man, nor my grandfather. I feel sorry for a life lost, but no more than if it were any other

stranger,” she responded.

“Yes, I remember. What did the solicitor want? Did he leave your family an inheritance?”

“One could say that, I suppose, but it is more to be a burden than a Godsend, I fear. According to mother, the letter states that Whitcome is the heir apparent to the dukedom. And, in true Whitcome fashion he is dithering.”

“Oh, my. I don’t know what I expected, but certainly not that,” Deidra said with surprise. She brought her teacup to her mouth to cover her tightened lips. Why it should affect her at all what Whitcome did or did not do, she couldn’t say, but when Rowan explained the letter, Deidra had a vision of the neighborhood without him present, every insufferable moment of the day, and she didn’t much like the way it made her feel. Her chest went heavy, and her shoulders sagged.

“Me either,” Rowan admitted. “And now, I am unsure if I should be for or against this. It is, of course, none of my business, but I know Whitcome will ask for my counsel. It is the reason I cut my trip short. Well, that and I was deuced bored. There were few people that I knew in attendance, so I spent much of my time alone. Oh, now, get that scowl off your face. I could have gone to anyone and introduced myself, as much as they could have done the same.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Deidra asked her normally outgoing friend.

“To be honest, most of the unwed girls were younger by at least five years and did not appear interested. I was not up for the forced kindness I would have been shown. There were still a few women who were my age that sat with me for tea, and we reminisced about when we were the young damsels. That was most enjoyable.”

Deidra's heart broke for her friend. She had been invited to go, but like every other time she chose to stay home where she was, if not perfectly safe and taken care of, at least she knew who the enemies were around her. That was why she chose to avoid ballrooms, community luncheons, and any other situation where she was out of her element. People, even those close, could be cruel and take advantage of you, so there was no desire in her to navigate strangers. She had to commend Rowan for her bravery. After her accident when they were children, she did not let her disability stop her from doing all the things. All things but find love. Of course, Deidra's legs worked just fine, and she too had not found a companion for life.

"I know what you are thinking Deidra, and you being there would not have helped. It simply is what it is. I normally enjoy my own company, so it is unimportant."

"Then why was this different?"

"I was expecting to see someone there, but apparently I was mistaken." She answered with a frown.

Deidra was intrigued. Her best friend did not keep secrets, or so she thought. "And who was that?"

"If you must know, it was a gentleman. We met the last time I was away and had been corresponding. I am sure he was kept away for a good reason."

This was the first time Deidra had heard of a gentleman in Rowan's life. She was over the moon happy for her friend, but a bit hurt she wasn't trusted with the information.

"I was not keeping secrets from you. In fact, I thought we were merely acquaintances, until he asked if I would be

visiting the area. I am sure I read more into the exchange than he meant.”

“I understand we live different lives, and I do not expect you to share every tidbit with me. I am sorry there was a misunderstanding at any rate. It disappointed you and that is what I care about.”

“It is over now, and I have to help my brother with his decision. What do you think Whitcome should do?”

Deidra’s first thought was to stop his foolishness of racing pigs and filling the county with dogs the size of donkeys, though Aoife was one she was very fond of. “I think he should do what he feels is the right thing for your family. Not his uncle’s family. I would imagine a dukedom would bring much wealth and opportunity for your family and your brother. However, it would probably require him being gone and attending to other business in London.”

“Yes, but what is the correct choice do you think?” She pressed.

“If there is one thing I know about your brother, he will not choose until he is ready.”

“I am just nervous he will limit himself. That he will refuse the title because of myself and my mother. He never puts himself first.”

Deidra opened her mouth to argue all she knew of Whitcome was to put himself and his desires before anyone else’s, but when it came to his family, she would have to admit he would sacrifice anything for their comfort. “You know full well, Rowan, I am not the person to talk with about your brother’s finer points. I find most days he has no finer points,

and the points he does have are rocky and sharpened like blades.”

Rowan laughed. She knew too well the history between her brother and best friend and would not choose a side. “That is why your opinion is so important. You will be honest. You would not steer him to do something that could hurt our family. You are the perfect one to give me counsel.”

“I think your brother is fully capable of taking on such an enormous weight. I am uncertain though if he would choose to.”

“How do you mean?” Rowan asked.

Deidra hated Whitcome for moments like this. She had thought him a good man once, and it pained her that his actions did not reflect the hope she had once held so close to her heart. She would not lie to her closest friend either.

“Whitcome has what he needs but often chooses to ignore all his gifts to instead frivolously spend his time in the enjoyment of less inspired endeavors.”

Rowan smiled at that. “You are correct. He would rather swim naked in the brook than do something more industrious.”

“And that is my point. Dukes do not swim naked in brooks as far as I am aware. They all appear to me to be sullen, upstanding fellows with responsibility as their top priority.” Deidra said with far more assurance than she ought.

Rowan, a more well-traveled young lady, cocked her head and squinted one eye considering this. “I am not certain you are correct, at least not fully. I have met many dukes. I have also met men who were not yet dukes but destined by birth. You are correct that once cloaked in the mantle of the title,

they often take a jaundiced view to entertainment, but those same men were carefree and much like my brother before.”

Deidra thought about this for a time. The birds outside the parlor window chirped happily. “I cannot say that Whitcome could not stand a reckoning into adult behavior. He goes about life in a much too easy fashion, but if becoming a Duke changes a man so, I am worried that you will not like the man he becomes.”

Rowan nodded. “My thought is the same. For example, if he began acting like Mr. Roydon—”She shivered at the thought. “Why, I would just be miserable.”

Deidra stiffened. Rowan and she spoke little about Mr. Roydon, or any unmarried man in the county. Deidra resigned herself to the task of remaining unwed to care for her parents, and with Rowan’s injury and inability to have children, there was no need for such topics. However, over the last few seasons, Deidra had gotten the notion that Mr. Roydon had silently seen to her family’s comfort. She was certain that over the winter when the peat shed ran out of peat, and her letters to her sisters for assistance in the matter were slow to arrive, that Mr. Roydon was responsible for the night the staff woke to a full peat shed. Who else would have done so? Not to mention, when she did see the man a week later, he mentioned seeing a healthy billow of smoke from our chimney. He was not the cocky boy she grew up with. He had matured.

“I am not certain Mr. Roydon is as you see him. It would do nothing but benefit Whitcome if he were to pay more attention to Lachlann and how he takes life seriously. There are many of us who do not have the luxury of raising dogs for enjoyment.”

Before she could come up with a suitable way to apologize without changing her stance, Rowan spoke. “I know Whitcome stands for many things to you, many awful things, but Lachlann is not a good man, Deidra. I have told you of the maids my brother has taken onto our staff, because they appear at our kitchen door in tears with tattered dresses and desperate expressions. Please mind yourself when it comes to that man.”

Deidra laid her hand on Rowan’s and squeezed. “I assure you, I remember those stories.

All I am saying is that we all only know one side. I do not believe anyone has asked Roydon what happened.”

“I am sure you are correct.” Deidra knew was Rowan’s way of ending the conversation. “Will you come with me to greet mother? She dotes less when you are there. I would appreciate a buffer.”

Deidra smiled. “Of course I will join you for a bit.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

Deidra took the path that snaked around the frog pond on her father's property. An unease settled deep in her as she thought more about Whitcome being a duke. He would no longer be just next door. He would be in the world, meeting people. An unwed duke would cause quite a stir in London. Stomach clenching, she scolded herself. After her one attempt to show affection for the cad, she didn't want him anymore. She should not care if another woman wed him. That was a fact she lived by, so nonsensical nostalgia would not be allowed to wheedle its way into her mind.

A rustle of branches and leaves to her right startled her. "Who's there?" she demanded.

Aoife bound out of the brush and onto the lawn almost slipping into the pond.

"You startled me. You must stop that." The dog sat and nuzzled her snout into Deidra's hand undeterred. "Very well, come along. We will find you a snack."

A snack was forgotten when they got to the edge of the path that meandered around the house to the front drive. Men ran among two carriages unloading and yelling commands back and forth. "What in the devil?"

Aoife's hair stood up on her back and she hunched down in front of Deidra growling.

Deidra smiled at the dog's bravery. "While I appreciate your willingness to protect me, I am afraid you are lacking the grace to do any real damage. Come, let us see what has the yard in an uproar." The dog huffed, obviously insulted by Deidra's lack of faith, but tucked in beside her. There, standing like a rose in a mud puddle, stood a familiar coach. She would have preferred it be one of her sisters; she so missed having them as sounding boards. Instead, the coach was proudly embellished with the emblem of The Duke of Sizemere. While she enjoyed visits from her godmother, this was not a surprise visit. Her mother had sent word, probably weeks ago, begging Lady S., Lady Lightowler's long time friend, to come help her push the dinner party. Her mother knew her daughters and understood Deidra would not be moved by pleas alone.

All Deidra needed to do was show the woman their ledger and the case for a dinner party was not an option. She took one step toward the front door and heard the yipping of the gaggle of pugs Lady S. traveled with. The noise was all it took for Aoife to take off like a shot, barking. This would go one of two ways. Either Aoife would bound in and befriend everyone, except her mother, her mother disliked Aoife, or would upend the entire room and Lady S. Deidra picked up her skirts and raced after the overgrown puppy with a determination she didn't often feel.

Her fears were unfounded. When she raced into the room, skirts still hiked past her knees, the scene made her stop and laugh. Aoife took no time to get on the level of the low-to-ground pugs and just flattened herself to the floor. The pugs, with curiosity equal to Aoife's, took no time in surrounding the beast and began the tedious task of sniffing every inch.

The youngest of the pugs, or so it appeared, had all but laid across Aoife's face and was chomping on her ear. To this Aoife just shook her head, knocking the smaller dog to the floor but, undeterred, the puppy began chomping at the other ear.

"Well, I say." Her mother bellowed at her, sitting in her chair with her arms held high and her feet tucked as close to the chair as possible. "Why do you insist on allowing that beast to follow you back every time? It does not live here."

"Sorry, mother," Deidra answered and dropped her skirts, smoothing them out as soon as she remembered. "She heard the pugs and was curious."

"She is darling." Lady S. interrupted. "Just look at how good she is with my precious babies, Odette."

"Yes, very good." Her mother answered in a flat tone. Deidra was not accustomed to hearing her mother's Christian name, and it made her remember the bond her mother had with the duchess.

"Deidra, look at you! I have missed seeing you. I do wish you lived closer." The older woman rose to her full height which was still tall and straight for her age. She was a willowy woman, naturally thin, and her hair had gone from a yellow blond to a more muted wheaty color that suited her complexion. Deidra met her halfway into the room and allowed the woman to envelop her in an embrace.

"How are my sisters?"

"Oh, dear they are lovely. All of them happy beyond belief. I am hopeful they will all be with child before the holidays. Before it slips my mind, things do that often now my dear, I have letters from them all for you."

Deidra fought the urge to ask her for them immediately, so she might disappear to read them all and see what her sisters were up to. “Thank you for delivering letters. It often takes a good month for us to receive mail from London. I do wish they would write more but can imagine the requirements of their time as married women.”

They both found their seats and settled in, with her mother patiently waiting, which was very much unlike her, Deidra thought as she drank her fourth cup of tea for the afternoon. Or was that six? She had lost count but was certain to turn into a teapot soon if she was forced to drink much more. “Well, now that you are here—“

“Now, Odette, I want to hear all about what Deidra has been up to. From what you say she has been single-handedly running the household right down to the ledgers and payments. That is quite a feat, my dear.”

“Not really, father has no care to bother himself with such trivial mundane matters, and mother has repeated that just thinking about looking at the ledgers sends her to bed with a headache. If we are to eat, one of us must.” *Really, Deidra, you must work on your tone, you sounded horrid.* She thought to herself.

Her mother only slightly reddened at the comment in front of her oldest friend. “Hear, hear.” Lady S. lifted her cup. “Here is to a young lady who sees what must be done and is willing to step in so that her poor mama can go through the day headache-free. I think that is the mark of an excellent character. I, myself, much prefer to leave such tedious tasks to others.”

This was why this woman was considered a paragon in the Ton. In two sentences she not only made Deidra feel like a

saint, but made her mother feel justified in her hatred for anything so low as finances, Deidra thought.

“That is why you are the perfect person to help us.”

Deidra’s cup stopped mid sip. Here it comes. This is where she pitches the dinner party in such a way Deidra would leave the room feeling like the worst sort of daughter for not capitulating. “And what, pray tell, am I the perfect person for?” she asked.

“Well, to help convince Lord McDumont, he must accept the title of duke, of course.”

Deidra tried to set her teacup on its plate, but the resounding thud showed the force in which the action happened. “I am sorry, I think I misheard you. Did you say, I must help convince Lord McDumont to take the title? Don’t you want to argue my mother’s case for a dinner party?”

“Oh, of course, but that is a moot issue. You see, my plan is to use that party to introduce his grace, so I am happy to fund whatever part of that you may need. Your mother and I will oversee that. You must handle Whitcome.”

Deidra sat back in her chair, placing one hand on her stomach and the other over her eyes. “I do not handle Whitcome, and in fact the very phrase sounds particularly unpleasant.”

“Well, my dear, then you are doing it wrong.”

Deidra flung her arm back to her side and eyed her godmother with suspicion.

“What makes you believe I have sway over what that man chooses to do with his life? Or for that matter that I would give two whits about the life choices he makes? I am afraid

whatever scheme you, my mother, and I assume Lady McDumont are concocting, I will not be part of it.”

Rising, she could no longer remain in the room. She felt the heat creep up her chest and singe her hairline above her forehead. It was bad enough the damned fool still poked at her heart every now and then, she was not about to assume she had any resulting affect on him and did not plan to prove it.

“Dear, now dear, do sit down,” her mother demanded.

“No, mother, I am sorry. As for your dinner, I will be blunt, probably bordering on rude in front of our guest, but what I told you earlier was not a lie. We do not have the funds to hold your dinner this year. If Lady S. so chooses to be your benefactor, I wish you well, but none of the household funds can be used.”

With that, she quit the room. Not her finest moment, she thought, as she whisked her way to her room for a moment of silence. Her mother knew the pain she once confessed about Whitcome, and here she expected Deidra to set it aside and literally set up Whitcome’s future wife to be a duchess? She couldn’t do it.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Deidra walked out of the mercantile and into bright sunlight. Thus far, she managed to avoid her household. A small win. The shop owner had agreed that a payment plan, no matter how small, was sufficient and he would be happy to extend more credit as she needed it. Though she happily accepted the lax terms, she was certain there was more afoot than his kindness.

“How did it go?” Rowan asked as Deidra settled into the chair. Rowan insisted on joining her. While Deidra attended to her business, Rowan procured a table and had tea waiting. Both women would prefer to avoid what waited them at home, so a leisurely luncheon seemed the most socially acceptable way.

“Much better than I thought,” Deidra said.

“Why the frown?”

“Something isn’t right. It went too well.”

“Deidra, why do you question every good thing that comes your way? Sometimes a good thing is just that.”

Nothing happened just because.

“Oh look, Whitcome and Maddox are headed this way.”

Deidra held her breath, hoping they would walk past, but hope was dashed when Rowan leaned to rap on the window just as they walked by and motioned for them to come in. Her stomach flipped and sent butterflies buzzing throughout her body in an uneasy fashion. She set her teacup down.

“I see it did not take you long to flee mother’s grasp and spend my money at the best inn.” Whitcome greeted his sister with a kiss on the cheek as he slid behind her and took the chair in the window directly across from Deidra. His cousin bowed and nestled into the chair next to her. “Miss Lightowler, are you accompanying my sister, just to spend my money as well?”

Deidra would not allow him to bait her, “No, my lord. I had an appointment in town and Rowan needed fresh air and good tea. She insisted on accompanying me and using her coach.”

“Ah, well, I hope your appointment went well,” he added in a friendly manner.

“Yes, it was quite successful, thank you for inquiring.”

Just then the door to the inn jingled making them all look up. It was Lachlann. He made eye contact with Deidra and sauntered over while his secretary went to have a table readied. “Miss Lightowler, what a pleasure to see you taking time out for a refreshing luncheon. I know how tirelessly you work to run your father’s estate.”

“Tis not a trial I assure you.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Whitcome seethed in his chair. If it were possible, she would have thought there was smoke coming out of his collar.

“I am just in the village finalizing my deliveries for the season. After a quick bite, I am headed to my solicitor’s office. I do wish you a good day. Lady McDumont.” He bowed to the table and stepped away.

A warmth in her chest beat down the infernal butterflies that rose whenever she glanced at Whitcome. Who now looked as if he would like to break something.

“See, Rowan, I told you he was a kind man. Not everyone remains as they were as children.”

Rowan crinkled her nose in dislike, but sipped her tea, and their cousin Maddox jumped into the conversation,

“You know, I don’t believe—ow!” He stopped in mid-sentence to bend over and rub his knee.

“Are you quite all right?” Deidra asked.

He looked around the table at Whitcome? Rowan?, then at Deidra and sighed, “Yes, sorry. Old riding injury.”

Deidra was saved from having to respond as the waitress came with two tankards and informed them their meal would be ready soon. And thankfully, Whitcome took a long sip and began chatting with his sister, ignoring her all together.

Deidra took the chance to look at the would-be duke, really look at him as the man he was now, not the boy who took a token from a shy young girl and presented it to someone else, as if it was nothing more than a throwaway gesture. He was more rugged. His jaw, while always firm, was chiseled with a bristling of reddish blond stubble even at this early hour of the day. His eyes were a steely blue that hazed over to stormy gray when he was angry or challenged. She wondered if the maid who received her token of love could say what color his eyes were when he kissed her? And, unlike when they were

children, his eyes now crinkled in the corners when he smiled at something his sister had said.

“Don’t you think so Deidra?” she heard Rowan ask. Deidra quickly investigated her teacup hoping no one caught her staring.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

Rowan smiled. “I told Whitcome I was looking forward to Beatrice’s race next week. Aren’t you?”

Her stomach turned and a foul taste filled her mouth. “I do not care in the least about a pig race and especially one that stands to lose my father a month’s worth of his pension.”

She glanced at Whitcome after her tart comment in time to see his eyes flash almost silver before settling into gray storm clouds. “I would think you would be hoping for a win, if you fear your father’s fortune,” he countered.

She leaned in, because if she didn’t whisper it, she might well yell, “I cannot understand the character of a man willing to risk anyone’s money, fortune or otherwise, on something so trivial as pig racing. I would think you have more pressing things to ponder.”

At that last statement, Whitcome’s eyebrow popped up in a regal manner, and she saw in that moment the future duke, with his haughty expressions.

“A man must attend to some form of entertainment, otherwise what is the purpose of all the more mundane parts of life?”

“Yes, well, some of us do not have time for such entertainments, for trying to keep all those mundane parts moving so the rest of you can enjoy yourselves.”

“And here is the food. Praise be!” interrupted Maddox.

The rest of the meal went without incident, but she caught Whitcome several times staring at her. Once they ate, Rowan asked for her carriage. They all rose and stood waiting for Rowan’s footman to carry her to the carriage. Which left Deidra alone with Whitcome.

“What do you know of the things I must be pondering? What did my mother tell you?” he said as he cornered her on the street as they arranged Rowan and her wheeled chair.

“I was just goading you. It appears I still know your weak points.”

He leaned in, and she could smell the ale on his breath, warm in the afternoon sun, but it sent prickles of gooseflesh along her neck and arms. “I think you are lying. I am still able to tell. Your chest and neck get red when you lie. Always did.” He leaned in further and she could have sworn he inhaled deep as he got closer. “I will win that race and bring your father a tidy sum. You just watch me.”

CHAPTER
SIX

Whitcome lay awake unable to find even a moment's solace in his own bed. But it wasn't his bed. It was his father's bed, in his father's chamber. He was a fraud just living in the shadow of a man respected by most and feared by the others. How the hell was he to take on the mantle of duke from a man he did not even know? He was barely doing this after watching his father his entire life.

“Damn it all!” Rising, leaving the warmth of the bed covers for the coolness of the room, made Whitcome feel grounded. The crispness of the early morning air abraded his skin leaving gooseflesh in its wake. He should coax the fire back into a small blaze, but that required effort he did not have.

Outside a black blanket covered the gardens. He could dress and be in the stables in no time. Then what? Put his horse in danger by riding out at night? No, he would prowl his chamber until the first specs of morning shone on the horizon.

Standing at the window next to his writing desk, the small hand-carved box that sat on his desk called to him. Though he looked at it every day, he rarely opened it anymore. There was no point. It held no promises any longer. Why he even kept it on his desk he couldn't reason. But, in the darkness of the

room, Whitcome brushed his fingers along the top, feeling the rose and vine pattern. The clasp was cool to the touch as he lifted the lid.

The delicate handkerchief that lay within had begun to yellow from the years. How long had it been? Ten and three years. An overly confident boy who thought himself a man and too good for all those around him. Without having to see the token, he knew the delicate embroidery would rub along his palm, and he knew every stitch, no matter how rudimentary and unpracticed they might be. Some were short and tight, and others were long and dangerously loose, but he cherished them more than the master suites he slept in and more than all the power in the world. It was the first token a maiden had ever offered him, and it was the last one he accepted. After botching it so badly, he vowed never to take what did not belong to him ever again. For to this day, he was still paying the price for his cowardice. It was still soft to the touch against his chin. The scent was gone now, but like a favorite memory, if he tried, it came back to him.

“You were a fool then, Whitcome, and you are still a fool,” he ground out in the silence. Looking out the window, grasping the delicate piece of fabric in his hand, he thought for just a moment what his life may have been like had he not been too much of a coward to admit his feelings and not trounce the feelings of another? It never helped one to sit and ponder what-ifs all day, but he guessed at three o’clock in the morning one could dwell on what one wanted.

Outside, at the edge of the garden, he caught a flash of a lantern bobbing along the path to the stables. “What in hell?” He was sure his grooms would have warned him if there was a problem with one of the animals, so why was someone about at this hour of the night?

Whitcome put the token back in the box and hurried to get dressed.

Thirty minutes later he broke out of the path along the side of the horse paddock, no sign of the phantom lantern as he looked around. Perhaps he imagined it. Anything is possible at three in the morning. Then, a flash of light caught his eye. The kennels. They were headed to his dogs. If someone was attempting to steal one of the puppies, he would have his head before the sun came up. They were nowhere near ready to leave their mother, and this newest batch would pull in a tidy sum for all his efforts.

No need to skulk about on his own property, Whitcome thought, rising to his full height. He walked with purpose to see who was trespassing. The door of the barn had been pulled shut but slid soundlessly open for him to duck in without being detected. The lantern light bobbed down the aisle until it found not the newest whelping box, but the open stall for the trained dogs. He was alone. No groom would be up at this hour unless coming back from a tryst, so Whitcome needed to see what the intruder was up to and formulate a plan of attack. The scene, however, was not what he expected. There in the middle of his pack of trained wolf-deer hounds was the last person he ever expected to see in his barn at this hour.

Deidra.

“I brought snacks for everyone, so don’t be greedy. It is the least I can do when you share your space.” He heard her crooning at the dogs, who were staring at her with all the reverence of a much-beloved owner. No wonder Aoife disappeared to search her out every chance she got. The dog was well and truly in love. “Here you go, mama, you get the first snack. “She reached out a hand filled with probably a

day-old scone and a slice of meat. The dog, who often would rather take his hand off than accept food, wagged her tail and gently plucked the midnight treat from her hand as if Deidra was made of glass. If it were any other person, he would be jealous of the affection they all showed for his neighbor, but he could not blame them. Most people fell in love with her the moment they met her. It was no fault of the animal.

He stood in the shadows watching. No other woman, save his sister, would happily snuggle down in the fresh hay with a pack of wolfhounds. He didn't want her to know he was there just yet. For the past ten years or more when he was this close to Deidra they were sparring. Often, he didn't even know what about, but Deidra always made it clear it was something he either did or did not do.

However, at night in his bed, he would think of her in a vastly different way. A more gentle, coaxing dance of sorts. He knew what to say and how to say it. He would make her smile when she least expected it.

Damn it all. He was turning positively nostalgic. The last thing he needed was this perplexing woman adding to his distractions.

So not to frighten her outright, he cleared his throat as he walked into the beam coming from the lantern. It only had a marginal effect if the fear on her face was an indication.

“Who’s there?”

She sat up and brandished a riding crop from thin air.

“I come in peace,” he answered, hands raised in supplication. He walked over to the edge of the open stall. Mama made it clear he was not welcome, while Aoife wagged her tail and laid on her side hoping for a belly rub. “Sleep eluded me. I was looking out my window and saw a lantern. You should not be so far from your manor at this time of night. Tis not safe.”

This scolding got him the scowl he knew it would. “I am a woman grown and not your concern.”

“It is my concern if you get assaulted or hurt on my property, Miss Lightowler,” he pointed out.

“Yes, well, I suppose you have me there. Some nights are too quiet without my sisters. We were close. Coming here to see the dogs gives me connection. They do not expect anything from me. Not even a snack. Nights when I do not have a morsel to offer, they still welcome me happily.”

What he said now would have more weight than much he had said recently. “Taking on the running of a household is not for the faint of heart. It can be isolating. I often find myself down here as well.”

She relaxed a bit by stroking mama’s ear. The matriarch of his pack melted into her. That must be the secret to the dog’s heart, he thought. Lord knows he had been trying to figure that out for ever. “What, no pithy barb about how a woman is not made to the task?” He saw a glimmer of a half-smile on her face, but it was guarded.

“A woman’s brain in my estimation is a scary and marvelous thing. I have seen both my mother and sister handle situations that a mere man would stumble through. I have no doubts your father’s ledgers are in much better shape with you in charge.”

She motioned for him to join the little group all curled up in the hay. “You should take care Lord McDumont, or I might be swayed to forget you are such an insufferable, contrary scoundrel.”

He laughed. Deidra Lightowler forgot nothing, especially how she felt about him. “I would not know how to go on with my life without you reminding me of my short comings constantly, Miss Lightowler. That would surely bend the bounds of reality.”

She slid over, closer to mama, leaving a space for him between Aoife and her. The other dogs laid about waiting for their own turn at attention. “You know, mama is a most discerning creature. There are few people she will tolerate and fewer she has affection for.”

“You don’t say,. And what category does she have you in, pray tell, my lord?”

“Like you, she has me squarely in her tolerate category. You two seem to have that in common,” he said, smiling. There was a time he knew he was not in a lesser bracket for Deidra, but that was a lifetime ago.

“I suppose we do.” She continued to stroke the dog’s ear allowing the dog to lean her head into Deidra’s palm, while Aoife, not to be ignored, pawed at Whitcome for attention. He happily let the pup flop over onto his lap for a belly rub.

Letting the silence stretch and fill the space, he found it wasn’t awkward, but comforting. Both were in constant need to act, and sitting in silence seemed a luxury. Finally, he had to know, “Do you come here often in the wee hours of the morning?”

She didn't answer for a moment. "I have on occasion. when I cannot bear to be home any longer. I know it is wrong and I should not trespass, but I swear, at home I can hear my mother's thoughts at night drifting down the hall to my room making demands for my time or father's money. Here it all goes away."

How many nights had he been asleep in his chamber, not a care in the world, sleeping away while she was traipsing through the woods alone to come and sit here for just a moment's peace? Whitcome realized he may never have a full night's sleep as long as he lived. He would lay in bed staring at the ceiling wondering if she was a path's walk away from him.

"There is nothing written anywhere that says you are not welcome on this land, Deidra, and there will never be such a thing. You have been the best of friends with my sister, regardless of your esteem for me, and that requires you be considered family. You need not ever think you are imposing. Ever." The last word came out harsh even to his own ears. He cleared his throat for the ridiculous emotion that built within it.

Then, before he had a moment to brace for it, she reached over and laid a hand on his thigh. His thigh for God's sake! "Thank you. I appreciate the kindness. I know I am not always as affable as I should be toward you."

Her touch seared through the leather of his pants and sent warning shots of arousal through him. He needed to grab the reins before he acted on ten years of wanting. "You and I both know our relationship is as it should be. I do not begrudge you your estimation of my character."

Her eyes glowed in the lantern light, the specks of gold that always appeared to be swimming in the emerald sea of her eyes flashed, not dampening the desire he was losing his battle

with. Deidra, for her part, appeared unaware of the battle raging inside him. She held him to a standard he would never reach. A better man, maybe would, but Whitcome was not a better man, and in this instant he didn't care. Tomorrow, they would both go back to their perspective roles in their families, with heavy weights around them. Tonight would not in any way change his sins of the past, but tonight even if it would, he didn't care.

Her cheek glowed dewy and pink as a summer plum, matching her overly voluminous lips. He watched, unable to react as his hand rose and cupped her cheek in his palm. It was madness, he was well and truly mad, but it mattered not one whit now. To his shock, she did not pull away or slap him outright. It was scandalous to be alone with her, and at such an hour. If they were caught, well, he did not want to think about that. What he wanted to do was live in this moment forever. Deidra Lightowler, the most confounding woman in the county, perhaps all of England, did as mama had done to her. She leaned her cheek into his hand and accepted the caress, even fluttering her eyes closed.

He leaned in. "Deidra, I am going to kiss you now. If you don't want me to, you should tell me." Her eyes shot open, hesitation clear in the depths, but she made no move to pull back or run from the barn. Instead, she looked at his lips and damn it if she didn't lick her own. The small spark of her hand on his leg ignited into an inferno. Leaning in, he drew her closer with his hand behind her head. Her lips were all he remembered, but fuller and more confident. Ten years ago, neither of them knew what they were doing. They simply copied what they had seen couples doing in secluded alcoves or behind a tree in the gardens during their parents' parties. There was no skill or finesse.

It seemed they both had practiced. The idea of someone's lips other than his being on hers did nothing to dampen his desire, but it added a shot of jealous rage. He thought as he explored her generous mouth and the curve of her shoulder. His hand slid from her neck down to rest on her hip, which seemed to be made just for his hand.

Her hand wound around his neck and grasped the hair at his nape, giving her leverage to lean into the kiss more. That being all the coaxing he needed, his hand found her waist and pulled her until she was sitting on his lap. Whitcome's head spiraled with thoughts, but none would remain long enough for him to settle on one.

Her weight on him pressed into his thighs sending heat spiraling. How many nights had he dreamt of this? How many mornings had he awoken hard, sore, and unsatisfied? Lachlann would always appear in his dream, as a warning. A coldness sank into his bones. If Roydon appeared, she would be ruined. He promised as much. Marriage to Deidra had never lost its appeal for him, but he knew she wanted nothing to do with such a thing.

He would not risk making her live in a situation she despised because of his inability to control himself. He would do her that one favor. "Deidra, love." He attempted to pull away, but her hand held fast to his neck. And damn it he didn't want to walk away. Not again. A flash of her ten years from now bitter and unhappy cooled his ardor more. Gently, he grasped her elbows and pushed her hands away from his embrace.

Her gaze even in the dim light was dazed with desire. Damn everything in the world, he wanted to scream, but

instead took a steady breath. “I cannot take advantage of an upstanding woman in my barn. I am sorry.”

“Upstanding woman? I am not into prose or poetry, Whitcome, but even I am certain that line falls flat if it is meant to seduce,” she pointed out, as she slid off his lap and into the soft pile of hay, not actually making eye contact anymore.

A chain of pretty sentiment, followed by a litany of what he would like to do to her filled his thoughts, but none were allowed freedom to release. Instead, he just looked away and gained more control. “It was wrong of me if I gave you any assumption of affection.”

A disgusted chuckle filled the air. “From you, Whitcome, I would never assume to know your intentions, other than to assume they were for mere instant gratification and nothing more. You are in no way held to any account from me. I should get back. I will be missed if I am not back by sunrise.”

Deidra rose, petting mama as she did so. Aoife rose too, like she had arrived with her. “No, little girl, you stay here with your mama and family. I am sure you will roam my way tomorrow and we will see each other again.” She bent and patted the dog. Aoife sat but cocked her head in question.

“I must insist on escorting you back, at least to the end of the path. From there I can watch to make certain you are safe.”

“Nonsense—”

Whitcome held up a hand, “I did not ask permission. We may have arguments, but t’would be a much duller world without you in it to point out my shortcomings and faults.”

She sighed in protest but made no further argument. Aoife invited herself along and trotted next to Deidra, head lolling as

they trudged in the dark at her elbow.

“I am very much looking forward to the race in three days. Beatrice is ready.”

“Oh, are you? I am interested to see this paragon of pig flesh as well.” The disgust in her voice was thick.

He deserved her ire and remained silent for the rest of the walk. He watched helplessly, her retreating form disappearing. Nothing was ever easy with Deidra.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“**G**one? How do sheep and goats about to give birth, just disappear?” With no sleep, this was not the news she wanted, but here she was. Dedria stood in the middle of the yard where fifteen livestock waited to give birth. These new babies meant life to her family’s future, but without half the herd, she would be sunk.

“Sorry Miss Lightowler, we don’t know. They were here last night. None showed signs of labor, so we decided not to leave someone overnight. The door was unlocked from the inside but closed. I personally locked that door before I went to bed.”

“So, what you are saying is someone stole them? Perhaps they were hiding in the barn when you were feeding and waited until you left?”

“Yes, miss, unfortunately, that is what I am saying.”

The why mattered not at the moment. There were seven pregnant animals lost and they must be found. “Very well. Send out a group to search for them, and I will send a maid or two to the local manors to ask them to keep a look out.”

“We have two goats in labor miss, I am afraid I can only send out two men.”

“Very well, do that. I will be back as soon as I instruct the maids and tell the household where I will be.”

Deidra wished climbing back into bed and ignoring the outside world were an option, but this was her world and her problem. No one would be coming to swoop in and rescue her or her family this time. She would return to the barn and dismiss one of the other stable hands to search as soon as she could.

An hour later, she sat with two laboring goats. “Tis not long now, dear,” she assured one of the goats who expressed her dislike of the current situation as her belly swelled and moved with the baby. Hot tears stung Deidra’s eyes. What would she do if she lost not only the sheep and goats, but the babies too? She did the math, and they would not have the funds to pay back her debts. She doubted her secret savior would be willing to save the entire livelihood of the family from the goodness of his heart. The question was, would Deidra even be able to accept his offer if it came to that.

“I came as soon as I heard.” A deep velvety voice filled the space, sucking the air from her lungs.

She turned, Whitcome’s form blocking the sun from blinding her. “Whitcome, what are you doing here?”

“Your maid said you were missing seven of your pregnant livestock. I brought a group of men to offer aid in searching. Do you know how long they have been gone?”

Despite the flip her heart did, and the hope that rose in her chest, she steadied her breathing, but also made note that he was here, while her mother and father were not interested one bit in helping to search. She turned back to check on the goats in her charge. “They were here at feeding time last night and

locked into the barn. This morning the door was unlocked from the inside and closed, and the sheep were gone.”

The wave of anger emanating from his expression vibrated through the barn like a thunder strike. “So, they were stolen or at the very least, let out.”

“Yes.”

Whitcome stepped into the barn yard, allowing the sun to once again flood the space. One of the goats let out a cry and Deidra went to assist. This kid would be out in the world sooner rather than later. Two tiny hooves were showing, which was a good sign.

“Well, I see you and I are left to do the dirty work.” Whitcombe’s voice washed over her settling her nerves. She knew how to give birth to children and had been present for many births but never had she been active in the births. His presence was welcome. Her pride would not allow him to know that, however.

“I would not think a possible duke would have the stomach for such things,” she said with a smile to soften the insult.

“Ah, but I am not a duke, so my constitution is still well-established. Anytime a new life comes into the world, I am amazed.” He sat down on a stool next to hers.

As the men left the barn yard, the silence stretched, just the heavy breathing of the two animals and her thoughts. Thoughts that were so fractured from their kiss the night before and Whitcome’s presence now. She let the silence rest her nerves.

“Oh, here we go,” Whitcome proclaimed as another contraction moved the hooves to reveal long lanky legs, then the snout. “Watch out,” he warned, and moved so that he could

take hold and assist. The kid came into the world into Whitcome's arms. Deidra couldn't help a stray thought about that not such a bad way to enter this world.

A moment of panic for Deidra until the tiny little animal blatted and wriggled to life. "There you go, mama," Whitcome crooned to the mother goat as he moved the baby so she could begin the cleaning and caring of her newborn.

At the noise, all the other goats began to poke their heads into the slats of the stall to see the new addition. Deidra watched the mother tend to the baby and realized at that moment she had made the choice to never have a child. The thought flooded her cheeks with heat, as she realized the intimate moment her and Whitcome had just shared. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. He would be an excellent father, she thought. Where that thought came from, she didn't know, and tried to unsay it, but it persisted in her mind. He would be a good father, and now that he would be taking on the dukedom, it would be more important than ever that he marry and have an heir.

It was none of her business, of course. She knew she had no say in who he would marry. Sadness settled heavy in her chest.

"Are you unwell? Witnessing a birth is traumatic. You are welcome to take air if you need it. I can watch over our other mama," Whitcome said, fortunately mistaking her uncomfortable thoughts, for nausea.

"No. I am fine. It is just overwhelming to see a new life come into the world. I certainly do not need air, or smelling salts. My constitution is much sturdier than that. I assure you."

"Of course, it is," he said around a smile. "It looks like we will not have much of a wait for our other lady either." He

pointed to the pile of hay where, again, tiny hooves proclaimed it would not be long.

“Miss,” She heard her head stable hand calling to her from the door.

“Did you find them?” she asked, hoping his news was good and not that they found remains. She wasn’t certain how many predators were in the woods but was certain that a gaggle of pregnant animals would not outrun any predator.

“No, but we did find what we think was their path. However, no sign they are still in the area.”

“What direction did the path lead?” Whitcome stepped in and asked.

“My lord, we believe they were led northeast toward the Bourne, which is running high with all the snow runoff.”

Whitcome nodded, his expression stark, not giving Deidra security.

“Where did you lose the trail?” He pushed on with questions. Just then the birthing doe let out a yell. Deidra moved to assist, still listening.

“About at Creg’s Pass. There was too much animal sign to tell where our does went. It divides there.”

“Well, north is better than not knowing a direct at all. My men headed east, so when we regroup, perhaps divide the groups and continue at Creg’s Pass.”

Deidra grabbed the legs, while cradling the head of the kid and applied a gentle tug. The kid flopped into her lap and almost immediately began wiggling and making noise. Deidra couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her throat. The baby was beautiful in all its slippery mess.

“Well, look at you. The lady of the house a midwife. We will need to get a placard for you to attach above the manor door,” Whitcome said with a chuckle. He hefted the newborn from her lap and placed it so the mother could begin her parenting journey. Deidra remained seated, looking down at her dress. Though just a serviceable garment, this might well be the end for its usefulness.

“I do not believe I am ready for a placard above the door,” she jested. “But it does appear we are both in need of new clothes.”

“I was thinking of wearing this to your mother’s dinner. You wouldn’t approve?” e laughed.

“Oh, I am certain I am not the one to ask about that. I would approve of any attire that might put an end to her nonsense. That reminds me. I put this lavish affair at your feet.”

“And why do I get such an honor?”

“Because I had her talked out of it, or at least convinced I would not be allowing any funds to pay for it, but my godmother arrives to assure your acceptance of your inheritance, and my concerns and wishes are set aside and ignored. The only reason I can joke about it is that my godmother’s husband is paying for it.”

Whitcome nodded. “Yes, well, I am afraid I cannot argue with that estimation. I am loath to admit I still do not have an answer for her. So, perhaps she has traveled and spent money to be no further along in her quest.”

Deidra opened her mouth to give him the sad truth, that what her godmother wanted, she usually got, but one of Whitcome’s men came to the door.

“Sorry, my lord, but may I have a word? Outside,” he said, glancing at Deidra nervously. He appeared out of sorts, and she knew Whitcome to be a sound and sensible employer not prone to fits of rage, so her curiosity was piqued, but she needed to stay near the new mothers and their kids to make sure all was well.

“Excuse me.” He walked from the barn. A few moments later, he reappeared looking none too pleased. “I must go tend to something at my own barn. I will send your head stableman in to assist.”

“I hope nothing too urgent, but I understand. Thank you for helping with—” she paused, trying to sort out what she was thanking him for, “well, just, thank you,” she decided was easiest.

He bowed and left, tight-lipped. Only a moment later the head stable hand arrived and suggested she go call for a bath. He would alert her to any updates on the missing sheep.

Her morning had not started as she would have liked, and she would have happily lounged in a bath for an hour, if only there were any people available to run a bath, but her mother and godmother had every last servant running ragged for that ridiculous dinner. Her best option would be a quick dip in the frog pond. No one would be about. She hurried to the clothesline and took off one of her morning gowns that hung to dry. She would have to wear it without her stays, but she could fix that once back at the house.

The cool water would help to calm whatever turmoil whirled inside her. Perhaps it would be easier to list the turmoil she was not feeling at the moment. There had to be something.

“What the bloody hell do you mean, you found them penned up on my property?” Whitcome ground out, not even fifty paces down the path from Lightowler’s property.

“That’s just it, my lord. I can’t explain it, but I seen it with me own eyes. And one has birthed a little one. They are just all there in a newly made pen.”

“Bastard!”

“Scuse me, my lord?”

“Not you,” Whitcome assured him. He knew who was to blame, but he would need proof; proof Deidra could not ignore. That bastard had her convinced over the years it was Roydon’s charitable nature that came to her rescue when it was actually Whitcome.

He needed to buy time but keep these sheep safe and away from prying eyes. This was going to be the end of it all. No longer would Whitcome be beholden to that bastard for fear of what he would do or say to Deidra. The question was, was she too far gone and too convinced that Whitcome was the villain to hear the truth?

“What should we do, my lord? Bring them back?”

“For the love of God, don’t do that! And don’t tell anyone where you found them. For now, get some men you trust and round them up and move them to our old dog barn. Beatrice is there, but it is safe, and you can keep them separate. Assign three men. Two to keep watch and sound the alarm, and one who can birth the kids if any more go into labor.”

The servant nodded and left. Whitcome had many things to do before the dinner party in two days. Settling things with Deidra was top of the list. But how? He turned, heading west along the path. It was a longer walk to his manor, but he always thought better in the fresh air. As he passed the frog pond to his left, he heard a splash. Then an “Oh, God, yes!” Deidra’s throaty almost moaned declaration had him frozen in his tracks. Had she fallen in? He knew she could swim, but he also knew how difficult it was in all those layers of fabric from her skirts.

Without thinking, he pushed through the brush off the trail and cut onto the lawn, the frog pond to his right. He froze.

“Sweet Jesu,” he said, his vision pinpoint narrow on the naked back of Deidra. She was waist deep and he could just see the dimples at the base of her back and the gentle curve of her hips, creating what he imagined was a perfect heart-shaped arse. Her back was long and regal as he followed her backbone from her neck to the watery depths. Her hands were outstretched beside her, skimming over the water making ripples. He knew if he had come out on the other side, his view would be quite different, and perhaps he would have dropped from heart failure.

He must have made a noise, because she glanced behind her, arms shooting up to cover her chest and making a distressed squeak, she sunk down into the water until all he could see was her head bobbing above the water.

“What in sweet hell do you think you are doing? Spying on me?” Her tone was pure Deidra.

“If I am, we should all be glad I am not practicing for the good of king and country. I do not believe that is one of my most adequate skills.” He chuckled, pointing out his lack of

concealment. “I heard a scream and a splash. I came to see that you were not drowning. How was I to know the upstanding Miss Lightowler would be swimming sans attire in the middle of the day?”

He watched as her shoulders relaxed a bit and she took her arms away from her chest, keeping them covered by the dark water. “I needed a bath, but with the planning at the house, I would have been cruel to add filling a bath to the poor servants’ jobs. Everyone else in my employ was busy. I did not see a problem. I did not take into consideration Peeping Toms among our community.”

“Very economical of you to consider your staff’s time. I believe I, too, will heed your sage advice.” Before he thought about all the ways this could go bad, he began walking toward the pond, divesting himself of the clothing that would no doubt have to be thrown out or burned anyway.

“What are you doing? Stop. No, sir. I demand you stop this instant!” Deidra demanded in a weak, high-pitched voice. She scooted farther out into the pond away from the edge, but Whitcome noted she made no attempt to escape or for that matter look away.

“Nonsense. This is quite a large frog pond. More than enough room for two of us,” he countered, coming to edge of the pond. He sat to yank one, then another, boot from his feet. He chose to throw both up the bank. A shirt and waistcoat are one thing. To ruin a pair of such fine boots would be a crime. He glanced back at Deidra who remained silent, eyes round like threatened deer. Perhaps he would be willing after all to destroy a pair of boots if it meant holding her naked body to his. He lifted his hand and swished his finger in a circle. “You

might want to turn around for a moment. I wouldn't want to shock you."

It took her a moment, then understanding blazed on her cheeks and she swung around sloshing water as she did. "If we are found, I do not want to consider the consequences, my lord," she tried to reason.

The water bordered on cold instead of refreshing, and he sucked in a deep breath before plunging in headfirst. When he rose, she had turned to face him. "Well, now I am awake," he said with a laugh.

He swam around her in a large circle, careful to give her enough room that she didn't feel threatened. He would never force himself on a woman and would only accept Deidra on her terms. "I should point out, that this could be considered turn-a-round being fair play."

Her unease turned to quiet annoyance, so his attempt to deflect her attention worked. "Oh, and how do you estimate that, my lord?"

"Simple, it wasn't a fortnight ago that you let yourself into my house and my private chamber just as I was partaking of a bath. Did you forget?"

"No," she answered, defiance thickening her words. "I did not know you were in a bath. That is entirely different." She lifted her chin a notch then dropped it, looking down to make sure she was still covered.

"Ah, so you heard me splashing and thought I might be drowning like I did you just now? You were intent on being my champion, were you?"

The noise Deidra made would not have been considered ladylike anywhere in London. It made him smile wide as he

tightened his circles around her. They had spent hours in this very pond as children, so he knew the precise moment when it dropped suddenly off to deeper depths, but he doubted she was thinking about that. He stood and shook the water off his hair, slicking it back. With careful, determined strides he encroached on her space.

Deidra remained crouched down to keep her modesty as best she could, until he saw in her face the moment she remembered the step off into the depths, and under she went. He watched as she rose back up spitting and waving her arms to stay afloat, “You did that on purpose. You horrible man!”

He nodded, “I did, as a matter of fact.” And he stepped off the edge, but bobbed up with more aplomb, or so he thought. He floated closer to her, until they could feel each other’s movement under the water. “Hello,” was all he said.

“You are horrible. Do you know that?”

Those were the words he was waiting for. No, get away, or don’t touch me. He knew her too well. Whitcome floated over and wrapped his arms around her, pressing her naked body to his own. The slick water keeping any friction from between them. “Thank the Gods, you have done nothing but remind me of that my entire life. Thank you,” he said with a warm smile, hoping Deidra could see the emotion in his eyes, then before she had a moment to grasp at a rejoinder, he kissed her. Lord help him, he knew after last night, he would not be able to go long without her taste on his lips again. Like a man lost to the desert too long. Her taste was as cool and nutritious as the water itself.

To her credit, she leaned into his chest and kissed back. His utter undoing was when she wrapped her bare legs around and intertwined them with his own. In all his years and all his

experiences with women, none were more sensual and affecting than this moment. He pulled her tighter, deepening the kiss. Years of dreaming poured through him, warming the pond water by several degrees.

“Deidra,” he managed in between ravaging her lips. She tasted of breakfast tea and honey. His hands, though holding tight to not let her float away, searched to learn every crease and curve of her body. He hadn’t known when they first kissed all those years ago what to put to memory. Hadn’t understood so many years since what his dreams would search for. Damn it, if he never got another chance to know her body, he would leave this pond a wiser man.

“Whitcome,” was her lazy reply to his declaration. Because her name was his declaration of all things good in the world. If she did not exist, his world would be a bleak place indeed. He would rather have her hating him loudly than silent. At least that was what he had resigned himself to, but not anymore.

She moved her kisses to his cheek. Whitcome feared she was coming to her senses and would pull away, but instead she nipped at his jaw line and continued spreading kisses down his neck. There was no doubt she was acting of her own free will.

“God, Deidra, I want you. I must have you.”

“Here?” She asked, ever the practical one.

“Yes, here.” The image of her legs wrapped around him, floating as he made her his, made him throb with the need for her. He took her lips with his and drove his tongue into her mouth, a promise of things to come and an assurance he wasn’t going anywhere. Deidra was his, always, this would secure his claim.

He slid a hand up her ribcage and cupped one breast, bringing it out of the water, the rosy nipple glistened in the sun with droplets sparkling. He watched her face as he bent and took it in his mouth. Her eyes fluttered shut on a moan. “Whitcome...” Her voice trailed off when he suckled and rolled the nib with his tongue, putting the right amount of pressure with his teeth.

His other hand wrapped one of her legs around his hip, then glided up her thigh finding the patch of hair at her apex. Catching his breath, he slid one finger in her folds and waited. Every step would be her decision, he would but light the way. After a moment, the woman in his arms got restless and using her leg for leverage began to rub against his hand. He would die a happy man now no doubt.

“Deidra, do you know what we are about to do?” he asked, trying to salvage the last of his control if it would be needed.

“Mmm, I do. I am chaste, not ignorant, my lord.” She kissed the tip of his nose and rubbed harder.

“Lord, I always knew you would be the one to kill me,” he growled, sliding his finger deep inside her, wrenching a deep satisfying moan from Deidra.

Unable to wait any longer, he swung her other leg around his other hip and positioned himself. He hoped the water would help where dry bed sheets would not. In one fluid motion he filled her, her heat soaking into him and spreading through him like lightning. She used his hips to pull herself up higher and settled over him as deeply as she could.

“Are you in pain?” he asked, knowing if he held fast too much longer, he would be the one in pain.

She shook her head. He leaned in and kissed her. This wonderful tyrant of a woman who held his heart since he was old enough to know he had given it away. She was his.

They floated in the pond oblivious to their surroundings. The only sensations from their bodies. They rose and fell with his every motion. Just when he thought she was pulling away, she would wrap her legs tighter and pull him deeper. His only thought was he couldn't wait to get her in his bed. As unique as the lake was, he needed them grounded with a solid surface underneath them to bring her where he wanted to.

“Whitcome—” she cried with uncertainty as he picked up the pace and the ripples around their bodies sloshed across the pond. “Whitcome, I— “

“I know love, trust me, let go in my arms. Trust me,” he crooned, hoping beyond hope he could hold himself until she came.

“I always have,” she said before she reached her climax and let it carry her away.

Watching her face as realization dawned and the first strings of the orgasm took her was more than he could take. He exploded, like nothing he had experienced before. If he could have stayed there in the throes he would never leave. Speech and reason left him. All that was left were the shock waves and her still in his arms, limp and sated, but still wrapped around him. Her words the only echo outside his physical bliss—*I always have*.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

How long could two people float in a pond without tiring and drowning? Deidra would have happily attempted to find out if she could. Nothing with Whitcome had ever been easy or expected. This was no different. Wrapped in his arms, their slick bodies entwined, created a haven she had hoped for every day of her life. If only the world would leave them alone. If only her brain hadn't stopped functioning altogether after what just happened.

“Well, that was unexpected.” His deep voice ruffled the hair on the top of her head, the only part of her dry.

She buried her face in his chest to hide the blazing blush apparent from her heated cheeks. “Yes, it was.”

Sliding his hand under her chin, lifting her face to meet his gaze, he asked, “Shyness, Deidra? You never have to be shy around me. And do not let anyone convince you that what we had between us is worthy of shyness.” His gaze had turned determined.

“I am just getting used to this new world I am now part of,” she admitted. A world she never considered an option. Whitcome would never have chosen her in the other world, the real world. In this new and strange place, she found herself in, nothing seemed real.

“No one has to know this happened, love. We never have to tell anyone.” He kissed her just above her eyes and didn’t seem to notice the knitting of her forehead as she realized what that statement meant.

“Of course, my lord, I would never tell anyone. You are free of any obligation toward me.” She turned from him and paddled to the shore. If she were quick about it, she could get into the clean dress and flee before he saw the tears spilling down her cheeks. Why had she even considered the possibility he would want her anymore now than he did when she was a love-struck girl?

“Deidra? What? What did I say?” he called as he made his way, in an annoyingly short time, to the edge. She heard his footfalls on the grass but refused to face him. Not only did she not want him to see her crying, she knew he was naked with not a care who on the property might happen by. “What in bloody hell is wrong? I thought we just shared something important.”

Taking a steadying breath and hoping all those hours of mother training her to not show any uncomfortable emotion would kick in, “We did and now it has passed, like many fleeting enjoyments. Now, I must get back to my day with all of its demands, and I am sure you have your own duties, my lord.” She did turn, then, and showed him what she hoped was a dazzling smile and not the fragile fortress it was.

She could see him trying to piece together where he went wrong, but in truth he had not gone wrong. It was her brain again, reminding her of childish dreams that she thought long ago abandoned. If she could walk away with her dignity this time, she could hold this memory for years to come. It would

be her refuge as she watched her sisters' families grow and life move forward without her.

She cupped his still-wet cheek and rose on bare tiptoes to kiss the other one. "Thank you. I will always remember this. You have given me a true gift."

His shocked silence gave her the courage to be the first one to walk away and disappear into the house.

The servant hallway was dark, and empty, thank God. She turned and hurried up the back stairs and to her room. Inside, her maid sat working on mending. "Oh, you startled me. I assumed mother would have you off on some errand to prepare for the dinner."

"No, I told her you were not feeling well when you awoke this morning, and I was going to sit with you until you felt up for breakfast and getting dressed." The maid's expression was warm, with a hint of knowing.

"I was down helping to birth two kids. With so many sheep ready to deliver they need extra hands. Then I found it easier to bathe in the frog pond to save anyone having to draw a bath." She wasn't lying. That was exactly what the plan had been.

"Well, then. Thank you for leaving that off my list of chores. I hope the births went well," she said going along with the story, but with an air of unbelieving at the same time. "Now, I suggest you get yourself by this fire. The pond must have been mighty cold. Your lips are so swollen and red from the cold they almost look bruised, miss."

Deidra decided she would sit on a footstool in front of the fire not arguing. The flames warmed her skin, leaving a hollow feeling where Whitcome had touched her. She was sure

such melancholy would pass. It was obvious he would not spend any further time thinking on the experience. It was nothing special to him.

For her it was her everything. The pain would pass, and, in its wake, she would feel a contentment and sweet memory. Wasn't that what the poems said? Perhaps one day she could ask one of her sisters. Aisling would be the best, she thought. But, not for quite some time. This was hers and hers alone. For some reason the idea of sharing it sat wrong with her. She wasn't embarrassed, though she knew she was now a fallen woman, but that was not what kept her from wanting to share it. If she shared it, it might lessen the experience somehow.

“What is on the docket today? Anything I should be aware of?” She changed the subject to her duties and mundane things. If she didn't, she would sit and recreate it for an eternity.

“The flowers will arrive this afternoon and need to be sorted and arranged for the various rooms and the terrace. I also believe your mother and her grace want you in attendance when they go over the final menu.”

“They will be the end of me. Either mother will spend all the money in our accounts and possibly sell the titled property off as well. Or my godmother will buy half the county and demand I marry the next duke she lays her eyes on.”

“What if that next duke was Lord McDumont? Isn't that why she is here?”

“Yes, thank you for reminding me,” Deidra answered flatly. Feeling her cheeks blaze at the mention of his name. If she wasn't more careful, her mother and godmother would figure out what happened, then she would be marrying the newest duke, but for the wrong reasons.

“Well, no point in putting the day off any longer. I need a serviceable dress today if I am to be as busy as I think. And, also, we are still missing those sheep. If anyone comes from the barn with news, find me no matter what I am doing. It is of the utmost importance we find those sheep and their kids if they have birthed.”

She stood and allowed her maid to prepare her for the day, neither one speaking any more about anything, even the telltale light red stain on her thigh.

“T ell me you moved the sheep without any Lightowler people seeing.” This was the last thing he needed.

“Yes, we did. We also found a trail leading to Roydon’s lands. Tis not hard proof, but ‘tis a start.”

“It does not matter as long as they are safe, but he has been one step ahead of me for a very long time. I, however, am no longer a scared boy unsure of my power.”

The old, grizzled man beamed his pride. “I knew you’d find yourself eventually.”

The praise warmed Whitcome’s heart. Hopefully, that would pass on to Deidra who seemed to be doing her damndest to distance herself from the love they made earlier. He was sure she mistook his words for some nonsense, but right now that couldn’t be of importance. He would gladly spend the rest of his days making amends. Now, though, he needed to break them both free of the prison Roydon held them in for the past ten years.

“My lord, your solicitor is here as you requested, and master Maddox as well,” said a doorman sent from the house.

“Thank you.” Turning to his stableman, “You know what to do here. Also walk Beatrice, I will not be able to.”

“Will do.”

Considering just this morning he still had no decision whether to take the title or not, his quick choice did not scare him. In fact, he felt this one opportunity left to him by a family he was never allowed to know would be his saving grace and get him all he ever wanted.

“Good you are both here. I have decided to accept the dukedom. Miles, did you draw up the papers I asked to have at the ready?”

“Yes, my lord. I have them here. I also have the official parcel that I can send private carriage to London if you like.”

“That won’t be necessary. Duke Sizemere’s duchess is in residence at the Lightowler’s for that express purpose. We need a courier to deliver it, and I will dispatch several men to guard the exchange. We happen to currently have a situation that makes me uneasy letting it bandy about the countryside with no protection.”

The solicitor, who did not care for situations in general swallowed hard and nodded, the color draining from his face into the collar of his starched shirt. “Very well. Will you be signing as witness?”

Maddox nodded, sending questioning glances to Whitcome.

“Thank you, cousin. I will bring you up to speed as soon as these are signed and dispatched.”

It was a very anti-climactic event, signing paperwork accepting the burden of a dukedom. There would be more paperwork in the days and weeks to come. He would be spending time at his new estates and meeting with all of his solicitors and estate managers. He was certain his more progressive ideas would come as a shock to many of the old guard. It was his title now; he didn't care. He wondered what Deidra would think of his plans? Would she have ideas to include? He chuckled out loud. Of course she would.

“Cousin, what is the joke so we may all laugh?” Maddox looked more concerned by the moment.

“Nothing of import, just the importance of the day settling in, I guess.” He stood from his desk and reached out his hand to thank the solicitor. Now, he not only was a duke, but his cousin was the legal heir to the McDumont estate and would oversee its running when Whitcome was not in residence. There were provisions for his mother and sister to be cared for in perpetuity, and also a new clause the solicitor added at the desk for Whitcome's future wife to retain all of the property that comes with her in the marriage as her own, and that in the event of his death she would also be cared for until her death.

The solicitor agreed to be the courier, and Whitcome sent him off in one of his private carriages, with no less than seven household staff who looked like they enjoyed a good brawl when it called for it.

Now, sequestered in his study with the door shut, he poured two drinks, handing one over to the man he trusted most in the world.

“Now, spill it cousin. What in the devil has gotten into you? It is like someone has lit a fire about your feet.”

Whitcome sat and opened his mouth to tell Maddox everything, but a hard rap came on the door.

“Whitcome, open this door. I want an answer to the very question Maddox just asked you. I will remain outside this door until I get it.”

Whitcome closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. Rowan. For all the regard he held for his sister, this was something he did not want to tell her. She was Deidra’s closest friend, and he didn’t see it his place to tell her certain things. But if Deidra remained angry, he might need Rowan.

Nodding to Maddox to let her in, Whitcome sipped his drink, calming his nerves. The logistical part was over. Now it was just a matter of moving the other pieces on the chess board.

“Brother, or should I say, your grace.” Her smile beamed. “Mother and I are very pleased with your choice, but I must admit I am surprised at your turn of thought.”

He poured a drink for Rowan, who also enjoyed a dram of whiskey from time to time. And this was the time for it. Then he ran down the events of the morning. He left out the rendezvous in the barn the night prior. He was still allowed some secrets.

“That bastard,” Rowan spat and took a shot of whiskey, no doubt to wash her mouth of speaking about Roydon. “Other than that, it sounds like everything is finally falling into place.”

“That is what you have to offer?” Whitcome asked, shocked at his sister’s lack of shock about the entire ugly mess.

“Why should there be more? I have known our entire lives you and Deidra belonged together. I knew you loved her, and understood you had your reasons for being such a pompous ass the last ten years. As for your tryst in the pond, I have seen how the two of you look at each other while arguing. I may be a maiden, but I am not unread or unexperienced. I assumed there had been trysts over the years. Now, I simply say, about time. Don’t tell me my progressive feminist views surprise you, brother?”

Whitcome laughed at that. “What surprises me, is that you claim to have had questions and never once asked them in ten years. That must have almost been your undoing.”

He turned to Maddox. “Now, I need you to take this letter to the archbishop. You’ll need sufficient coin as well.” He handed over a heavy pouch with the letter which carried the new ducal seal, might as well use his power now that he had it. “I need that special license in my hand before the dinner tomorrow night. Can you, do it?”

His cousin cocked an eyebrow. “Do you think I cannot? How many men should I take?”

“At least four. I need that license.”

Maddox drained his glass and left to find the archbishop. The room fell silent. Nothing to do for the moment but wait he supposed. Dukes must do a lot of waiting, he thought. Any other thoughts were interrupted by the loud throat clearing of his sister. “What?”

“Did you tell her you love her and that you have always loved her?” she asked, arms crossed with accusation flying from her eyes.

“We made love Rowan, of course she knows I love her.” She sat silent and unmoving, waiting.

“Oh my God, you don’t think she assumed I take virgins’ chastity in frog ponds all the time?”

“I think you have spent ten years convincing her you are not in love with her and have no interest in spending time with her. You cannot possibly think one bout of love-making would erase ten years of wondering why you turned on her after your first kiss? If you do, you are a bigger dummy than I thought.”

Like a brick, his words this morning came rushing back to him. And now he heard them from Deidra’s perspective. “Damn it all! Why didn’t she say something?”

“I don’t know what all you probably said to her, but you do not get to put any blame on my dear friend. She will most likely be trying to protect her heart from being broken all over again. Just like you were willing to do whatever Lachlann demanded of you to not see those ill effects. I would also guess that he knows you have moved the sheep and he will be trying to control the situation by paying her a visit and offering all his help.”

So much for sitting and waiting. Whitcome rose and made his way to the door, stopping to kiss his sister on the top of her head. “Remind me to thank you properly once I am married and this is behind me.”

“Oh, I will not. I have a list. I am now the sister of a duke. I plan on prospering well from that relationship,” she called after him.

CHAPTER
NINE

“Miss, I thought you should know your father has a visitor.” Gwen, her maid, entered the dining room turned flower studio.

“A visitor? Who could that be?” Deidra wondered aloud. Her hands ached from trimming the stocks and had little red angry dots from the various thorns. She was tired, not a tired that a nap would cure. A tiredness that seeped into her bones.

“It is Mr. Roydon. I do not like or trust that man, miss. I think he is up to no good.”

“Gwen, Mr. Roydon has come to our rescue more than once and never did he want any attention for it. I do not understand why everyone sees him as something different.” She wiped her hands down her skirt. “Perhaps I will pop in and say hello. I can also mention the sheep and see if he may have noticed them wandering.”

“Yes, miss.” Was all Gwen offered in reply, “He went to the greenhouse, where your father is.”

Deidra made her way outside and around the patio to the large greenhouse.

As she approached, panic rose in her chest.

“I saw them with my own eyes. It was disgraceful, my lord. Utterly so. Of course, I do not blame Deidra— “

“Shite!” she spat and whirled through the door. “Good afternoon, papa. I heard we had a guest.”

Her father looked up from his workbench, annoyance at the interruption of his work clear on his face. “Ah, just in time love, I believe Mr. Roydon needs a word with you. Perhaps you can offer him tea in your study.”

“Sir, I do not believe you heard me. Your daughter was caught in broad daylight naked, carousing with McDumont in your frog pond. This cannot stand. She is ruined.”

Deidra’s face blazed, but more from anger that this man would go to her father, or perhaps it was that the one thing she wanted to hold tight to and not share with anyone was going to be shared with the world. And the world would see it as Roydon did, and as Whitcome did, but she would not see it that way.

“My boy, it seems to me that since you are the only one who has bothered me today with such a story that you probably were the only witness other than the two lovers. And since my daughter did not think it something to share with me, and Lord McDumont has not been here to confess a sin against her, I’m going to surmise you are the only one caring to make this public at all. Deidra, dear, do you have anything about your private personal life you care to share with me?”

Her heart soared. Of all the times for her father to come out of his haze of books and flowers, to come to her rescue now made tears well in her eyes. “No, papa, I don’t have anything I would like to share.”

“Well, then, my boy, I fear you got your blood boiling for naught. My daughters all have had the freedom to live their lives as they wished. I was adamant to my wife that they had their own minds and as long as those minds functioned well enough, then why not put them to use.”

Roydon stood in the greenhouse and looked from her to Mr. Lightowler, then back. Deidra’s estimation of the man standing in front of her was dropping by the second. She knew if he left the room this would not be the end of it. But she didn’t know what else she could do.

He bowed at Lightowler, who was too busy with his work to take notice. Turning to leave he stopped momentarily and leaned into whisper, “We are not finished with this discussion. I will be compensated for all my trouble. But, for the time being, I would strongly suggest you take a walk on the north path to the pastures. I believe you have lost something.”

He stormed out and slammed the door making every glass section vibrate with his anger. The room again filled with silence. It was too much, and Deidra crumbled to her knees sobbing. It all crashed in on her at that moment. All the years of feeling obligated to care for her parents, all the years she hated Whitcome for making her love him. All the troubles and heavy debt she carried alone. Was it too much to ask the Gods for this one thing?

She felt gentle hands on her shoulders and took her hands from her face. There on his knees as well was her father. “My dear, whatever is troubling you? You are not my daughter prone to tears.”

“Oh, papa, I just don’t know anything anymore,” she cried, then a sob wracked her so fiercely it burst from her like a bullet, and she folded herself into his lap. He didn’t bother

with any soft words. He just sat on the floor and held her, letting her cry.

After her sobs stopped and she could breathe without hiccupping, he asked in his soft, gentle voice, “Do you love him?”

“I do. For all it will do me, I do love him, papa.” She sat up quickly then, fear replacing her despair. “Oh, papa don’t make him marry me. Please, I would rather die a thousand deaths than to force him into marrying me. He will resent me. I will run away. I swear it.”

Her father chuckled softly and opened his arms for her to return to the sanctuary there. “My dear Deidra, I would never. You are well past the age of consent in my eyes. You know your own mind as well.”

He wasn’t going to force her hand. That was all that mattered. She would need to speak to Whitcome now, so he was prepared for the talk. What was the etiquette when being caught in a tryst? That was a lesson her mother never taught.

After more reassurance from her father that the family would weather any ruination storm that passed over them, and that even her mother would remain at her side, she decided against her better judgment she needed to check out what Roydon had hinted at. She was sure she would not like what she found.

The path to the barn was well worn and the coolness of the tree cover felt good on her heated skin. She had one of the mules saddled. She never learned to ride the larger horses; besides, the mule liked the exercise. “Here we go. No wandering off and not listening. Your stomach is not my priority right now.”

The mule grunted but allowed Deidra to take the lead onto the north trail.

She could sense her life was changing. The person she was yesterday she would never be again. The question was: should she have anticipation or dread?

The corpse of trees opened, and in the corner of Whitcome's northernmost pasture a small corral stood empty. Deidra's heart ached at the implication Sir Roydon was making. Just then, the man who had not left her thoughts in the past hours emerged from the other side of the field on horseback. When he saw her, he pulled the horse to a stop and remained frozen.

Deidra's choices were clear, did she see the evidence of Whitcome's duplicity and sentence him to forever be her mortal enemy for trying to ruin her life? And why? Roydon showed his true colors moments ago, but was he capable of such a thing as stealing her livelihood then blaming it on someone else? And, if he was, what else had he lied about over the years?

Whitcome urged the horse forward toward her. "Damn," she swore. Not only was she still uncertain how to behave after their interlude, but now she had so many questions, and she still had to prepare for the blasted dinner. Deciding retreat was the better part of valor, Deidra turned the mule and urged it back down the trail, praying Whitcome would give her this escape. She needed time to think before she dealt with any of this.

The manor was a buzz of activity when Whitcome rode up to the front door. A footman came running to take the reins from him. “What in bloody hell is going on? Did Prinny himself stop for a visit?”

“No, my lord, ‘tis Duchess Sizemere. She arrived right after you left.”

Whitcome dismounted, handing over the reins. All he wanted to do was chase down Deidra and force her to listen to reason. But he knew there was no moving forward with Deidra without going through his mother and the duchess. He marched, he believed like a soldier would, into the parlor.

“Ladies, your grace, welcome.” He greeted them and bowed a well enough bow he hoped.

“Well, Whitcome, ‘tis about time. We have been waiting on you,’ his mother chided.

He didn’t for one moment buy her anger, because she had been close friends with the duchess since childhood. “Sorry, mother, I had some dealings with the livestock.”

“I do hope all is well,” the Duchess cut in.

“Oh, well enough for the moment, but I am certain you are not here to talk to me about animal husbandry, your grace.”

She smiled at that. “No, you are correct. This morning I had a visitor who handed over the parcel of papers you have signed. I came to be the first of the Ton to welcome you. And to assure you my husband is ready to aid you in any way you need.”

He joined the women in their circle, choosing a seat closer to his sister, who had remained oddly quiet. That alone unnerved him. He looked around at the faces watching him and unease crept up his neck.

“Thank you, your grace. I am sure I will need all the help I can muster, but I get the sense this is not the only reason you are here.”

“No, I wanted to take the time to chat with you about your prospects of a wife? As the newest duke in the Ton, and unwed at that, you will no doubt be inundated with potential brides as soon as you take residence. In fact, once it gets out you have accepted, I would not be surprised if some mamas put their daughters on your doorstep here even before you leave for the city. I would suggest if you have a prospective duchess, you should square that away before I leave with the paperwork.”

Whitcome did not blush easily. but he was heated from his collar to eyebrows. He glanced at Rowan, who was looking across the room avoiding making eye contact. “What did you tell them, Rowan? What?”

An uneasy panic rose in his chest. It would be hard enough to convince Deidra he wasn't an ass as it was, the entire countryside knowing about the frog pond would not make that easier.

“Rowan told us nothing. In fact, I suggest you put her on your staff to keep secrets,” the duchess interjected with a bit of annoyance. “It was your unlikeable neighbor, Mr. Roydon. He came to the house this morning and caused quite an uproar; enough to pull Lightowler out of his greenhouse. He had some awful accusations about poor Deidra.” She fell silent allowing that to sink in.

“He saw us?”

“It appears so, love.” His mother put her hand on his leg and patted it.

“I came here as soon as I knew the story as Lightowler understood it. Deidra was nowhere to be found. I hope I do not need to express how damaging this news might be if she is a prospect for your duchess. Your very reputation and standing in the Ton could be affected if news of this indiscretion gets out. She might be viewed as a lightskirt and that is the best. At worst, she would be shunned for forcing you into marriage.”

Whitcome knew his new title would come with certain frustrations, but this would not stand. He stood. “If one person in the Ton dares to treat Deidra anything but my duchess ever I will see to it that they are never invited to another social event for the rest of their days! She is the most upstanding, smartest woman I know. I will duel with anyone who dares to say otherwise!” His voice boomed in the parlor, bouncing off the walls. Ten years of protecting Deidra’s reputation came to a head in that moment.

The duchess, his mother, and Rowan, however, sat as if he wasn’t about to destroy the very walls that surrounded them.

“That is good to hear. I would not have given my approval of the match had you not been so passionate about her. She is, after all, my goddaughter and worthy only of someone that would destroy her enemies like you just proclaimed. Now, we need to formulate a plan to convince her of the same.” The duchess gave him a pointed look that told him he would not be leaving that room until they all agreed on the plan. He sat, disappointed, because wringing Roydon’s neck until it hung limp in Whitcome’s hands was probably not part of the plan.

“I hope some of you have ideas, because I just saw her, and she turned and went the other way.”

“I told them you had a special license coming, if the archbishop is so inclined,” Rowan started.

“It just so happens my husband is visiting the archbishop while I am here. Once he hears who it is for, he will handle that man,” the duchess assured Whitcome.

“Now,” his mother cut in, “how best to talk to Deidra? And, then how to deal with Roydon?”

He knew Rowan would not have shared the entire story of how Lachlann ruined his chances with Deidra ten years ago, and he preferred to keep as much of that between him and Deidra as possible. “There is a past here, and I know just how to manage that blackguard. It is Deidra I am at a loss with. I know how to argue with her. I do not know how to ask for forgiveness.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Rowan said with a grin.

“Well, good. If there was anything I learned from decades of marriage when two people feel such anger at each other, the corresponding emotion is passion. Passion we can work with,” the duchess assured him.

CHAPTER
TEN

Morning broke as Deidra watched it slowly limp on the horizon. It was late she thought, considering she had been up for hours unable to sleep waiting for it. She had spent the remainder of the yesterday in her room, panicked she would have any of a number of visitors. They had left her alone.

“Good morning, miss. It is going to be a lovely day, don’t you think?” Gwen entered her room, finally breaking the silence.

“I know it will be busy, I am certain.” Deidra said, unable to muster any enthusiasm.

Gwen walked over and knelt by her knee, “Oh, my dear, it will all work out. You watch. You are meant for so much better than this.” She patted Deidra on the arm. And the kind words broke something inside of her. The sobs, like yesterday, came so fast she could not hold them back. Her maid encircled her with an embrace.

“You cry, miss. You’ll feel better letting it out. Then we will get you ready for war. Today will be a battle, I will not tell you otherwise. It is like all parts of your life have come together in a great storm. But when the sun comes up tomorrow you will be better for it all. I promise you,” she crooned in Deidra’s ear.

The words seemed to be the only thread Deidra had remaining in her hopes of surviving the next twenty-four hours.

“Lord, I do hope you can see the future, Gwen,” she managed to reply through her tears. They sat in silence until Deidra collected herself. Today was not a day to allow such emotion. “Shall you dress me for battle then?”

Gwen beamed at her. “There’s my girl. I think the royal blue walking gown for the pig race this morning, then for dinner the burgundy with the silver embroidered overlay.”

“That is a bold color, don’t you think?”

“Yes, miss, I do,” was her only answer as she set forth to prepare Deidra for the day.

If the pig race annoyed her before, the idea that after the last two days’ events Whitcome still thought this a smashing idea infuriated her. Gwen had convinced her the best strategy was indifference. She rode next to her father in the carriage as it strolled toward the village where the race would be held. He had been uncharacteristically concerned when they met in the breakfast room. He did not say a word, but simply watched her for signs of something. She knew both her parents loved their children; she had always just figured that they were both too involved in their own endeavors to pay much attention. Her father was directly challenging that belief.

“What say you, my dear, is this not just the thing to bring some levity to the day? How many can say they started the day attending a pig race, then ended the evening with a formal dinner?”

“Father, you know I do not approve of such a foolish way to spend one’s money. I believe there are much more important

things men should be concerned with than racing pigs.” But the corners of her mouth tried to pull into a smile nonetheless. “If money were not at stake, I agree that it is more pleasurable an option than a formal dinner party.”

“There’s my girl! And never mind about the money. McDumont has not once lost me money. He has a real knack for pig racing. Beatrice is a marvel.”

Deidra considered Beatrice for a moment. It seemed Beatrice was living the life Deidra would like at the moment. Loved by all, pampered, without a care in the world.

The small square was filled with townspeople. The carriage had to leave the road and rumble across the grass since the main road had been cut off as the racing track. Hopefully, this spectacle would last mere moments. *Men*, she thought, as one of Whitcome’s grooms stood waiting to hand her down from the carriage.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, Miss Lightowler. His Grace would like very much that you come and wish Beatrice luck.”

“His Grace?” She repeated. It would take some time to get used to that, but it also sobered her in the realization that she was correct, her life was about to change. Until yesterday, she lived in the comfort of knowing all her childhood acquaintances remained much as they were. Now, it was all different. Never to be the same.

“Aoife! Go away!” The groom yelled at the dog as she came bounding up, stopping just short of stomping on Deidra’s kid boots.

“She is fine. She can remain with me.”

He nodded and made his way back to his master.

“So, we have ourselves a duke now do we?” she questioned the dog as she patted between her ears. Aoife squinted her eyes, unimpressed, enjoying the scratch. “I agree, not very interesting.” She turned to walk toward her father who had gone to wish Beatrice luck. Her eyes, however, were drawn to Whitcome, towering over the crowd with a beaming smile and gregarious personality to everyone, pauper and lord alike.

She knew in that moment he could not have taken her sheep. Deidra had called Whitcome many things over the years, but dishonest was never on that list. He looked up just then and caught her staring. His smile slipped a bit before he caught himself and fixed his expression. His eyes, though, never left hers. They were filled with questions. Questions she was not about to answer in such a public place.

He left the group and sauntered to her side, putting the dog between them. Aoife panted and wagged her tail at seeing her master. He indulged the pup by ruffling her big ears. “We need to have a serious discussion,” he said, trying to appear for the crowd to be offering pleasant conversation.

“I agree. But a pig race is hardly a forum for serious conversation of any kind. And, after this, I am busy the rest of the day preparing for my mother’s blasted dinner that, by the way, just had to be elevated because there is now a duke on the guest list.” She was making a big deal out of watching Beatrice be rubbed down but spared him a sideways glance. The smile on his face told her he understood the olive branch that was her sarcasm.

“May I suggest, then, we find a quiet place to talk before the dinner is called?”

“You may. I am sure there will be time, if you do not have extra primping now that you are closer to royalty.”

He leaned in close. “I think I will need to find a suitable punishment for every time you attempt to use my new title to my disadvantage Miss Lightowler.” He walked away, calling Aoife with him as he did.

She needed to keep the hope that what she thought was correct, and he was not the villain of her story, but perhaps her hero, well, probably antihero was a better term.

A local landowner stepped up on the stocks and called the group to order. “See here, we all have things to get to, so let us get this race started! On my left, Beatrice, the current champion for the county!” He allowed the crowd to cheer. She seemed to take the fame in stride. “And, on my right is Horace, new to the sport. Perhaps today is his day!” Everyone cheered for Horace. “Now, the rules. Lady Aoife will lead the pigs down the street, around the stocks and then back. The first pig to cross the finish line wins! Has everyone placed their bets?” Nods and whoops went through the crowd.

Whitcome stood holding the collar around Beatrice, another man, surprisingly from Whitcome’s employ, did the same with Horace, and yet another of Whitcome’s men stood out front holding Aoife. The man announcing walked down from the stocks and out in front of the crew. He rose his arm, and when it dropped Aoife took off like a shot, with Beatrice and Horace following suit.

It was clear right off that Beatrice understood the directions. Poor Horace seemed distracted, plus there was a woman selling freshly baked meat pies. The heavenly scent filled the crisp morning air. Horace got one whiff and decided

his stomach was more important and ambled off into the crowd after the meat pies.

Before they could get Horace back onto the track, Aoife and Beatrice rounded the stocks and flew up the street. The wind from their efforts ruffled Horace's fur as they breezed by him to the finish line.

Deidra's father beamed. "See, my dear. I told you he never steered me wrong." Whitcome joined them with a heavy bag of coins and handed it to Mr. Lightowler. "Thank you. Exceptionally good mind you have for racing pigs my boy. Don't let anyone tell you all you have going for you is your new title."

"Thank you, sir, I am glad I was able to help you almost triple your original bid."

"You what?" Deidra piped up, shocked. She knew how much Whitcome had swindled out of her father and to have that sum tripled would pay for her winter feed for the animals. From the look on Whitcome's face she knew she caught him.

Her father handed over the bag. It hung low in her hand. "Here you are, my dear. I know you already have plans for this, I am sure."

"My lord, Mr. Tull wants to know if you want Horace back at your barn or to keep him in his?"

"Aha!" Deidra pointed a finger at him. "Horace was a ringer? You owned them both!"

"I never said I didn't." He winked at her and walked off, deep in conversation about Beatrice and her next race, leaving her holding a bag of money.

“Are you sure the burgundy isn’t too strong of a color?” Deidra asked again.

“My dear, poor Gwen has answered your question at least a half dozen times. I am blown away by the beauty standing before me. Can you feel the buzz in the air? Your life is about to take a turn. And one should look their best when they are in the midst of life change.” Her godmother stood tall and thin, much like Deidra’s sister Constance. She was dressed in a regal gown fit for the duchess she was. “Regardless, you have wasted enough time. It is time to meet your parents’ guests as they arrive, so be off with you.”

Deidra lifted her skirts and followed the duchess downstairs. She wasn’t sure what her godmother had hinted at, but she could sense the shift in her life. Something would happen tonight that would make her life never the same. She just wasn’t certain if it would be a good something or bad.

She intended to speak to both men and then decide who lied to her. It was only fair.

She no more than stepped off the stairs than a large hand took her elbow and guided her around the corner away from the receiving line. She looked up to see Roydon next to her. She had expected Whitcome, but realized in that moment the pit in her stomach was clearly directed at this gentleman, unlike the butterflies when Whitcome entered the room.

“Excuse me, my lord, but what in hell do you think—”

“Shut up, you tart. We need to talk right now.”

She ripped her arm away and gained some distance. “Well, then, lead the way,” she said, motioning for him to keep walking. He opened the door to her study and held it for her then shut it behind them. “Sir, that is improper. I demand you open that door.”

“You are already a fallen woman and will not be leaving this room until we come to an agreement, so getting caught with me, will only make haste with it all,” he bit off as he stalked toward her.

“Excuse me? An agreement?” She held her ground.

“I do not have time or any more patience for your nonsense. You are going to marry me, and we will announce tonight at this dinner.”

“I most certainly am no—”

He stopped her proclamation. “I suggest you listen before you reject me. If you reject my offer, I will make certain Whitcome’s entrance into the Ton is less than a sensation. He will be blacklisted in all the clubs and won’t be allowed on any committees in Parliament. I will ruin his family name, and I will also make certain your entire family is ruined because of your poor taste in who you let between your legs.”

Fear and outrage warred within Deidra. She had her answer. If she followed her heart, countless people would feel the ill effects. But her pride screamed to call for help and reject him very publicly. As she considered his words, Roydon claimed a position so close his thick breath warmed her cheek. If she could keep him talking, perhaps she could find enough proof of his duplicity that she could catch him in his own trap, meanwhile praying someone she trusted found them.

“Let me get this straight: you want to marry me? Why did you not court me? I have never had a suitor. I would think you could have easily?”

“I knew your heart laid with someone else. You have carried that flame since we were all in the schoolroom. No matter what I did to pull you apart it was like you were drawn to one another. I thought your hatred would send you in my direction, but no.” He spat, obviously thinking she was agreeing to his demand and lying was no longer necessary.

“The fool even helped me, when he would surreptitiously do good deeds but not admit he did them. I would swoop in and claim them for myself, but still not an extra glance. Then, when I happened on the two of you in the frog pond, well that was just too juicy of a plum not to pluck for myself.”

Her fear was quickly being overtaken by outrage. All those things Deidra had attributed to Lachlann had been Whitcome coming to her rescue all along. No matter how horrible she had been.

“May I ask why you were on my father’s property two days ago so early in the morning? And would you elaborate on how you think you would make me hate Whitcome?”

“I can answer that, if his mouth is getting dry from his confessional.” Whitcome’s deep, velvety voice filled the space, but the edge on it was not one Deidra had heard. He quietly, and with a dangerously steady hand, shut the door behind him. The only sound was the click of the latch.

“This has nothing to do with you. Whitcome. Get out!” Roydon demanded with disdain dripping from every word.

“No,” was all Whitcome said, but he never took his eyes off Roydon. “He was lurking in the yard, because Roydon had

a paid spy in both of our households who told him we were both at the barn. No doubt he wanted to see your unease when you learned half of your herd was missing, knowing your land depended on that revenue. Then he probably followed you to make sure you went to the house, but when the opportunity arose to see you naked, he couldn't help himself. He was not, however prepared to see me enter the picture.”

Deidra's cheeks flamed, and tears stung her eyes. Such a beautiful memory tarnished by a sick man.

Whitcome stepped closer to Roydon but handed an engraved box to Deidra. She reached out and accepted it, running a finger across the intricate carving. When she opened the box, her breath caught and the tears she had been holding spilled over and down her cheeks. Inside, neatly folded, was the poorly embroidered handkerchief she had offered to Whitcome as a token of her love. The love of a thirteen-year-old girl with all the expectations sewn into each uneven, ugly stitch.

The two men were facing off in silence, not aware of the emotion overtaking her. She looked up and caught Whitcome's gaze. “I thought you gave this to a maid you had a fancy for. I hated you for that.”

“I know,” he said through gritted teeth. “After you left the gazebo that day, Lachlann and his cronies appeared from nowhere. It seems his lurking behavior started early. They took the handkerchief and once they were done beating me, Lachlann told me that if I ever made an attempt at courting you, or told you what really happened, he would make sure your reputation was shredded to the point my father wouldn't ever allow me to marry you.”

Maddox and I devised a plan for stealing the handkerchief back, but I was young enough that I believed every word and didn't see any other option. As we grew up, it was easier to fuel your hatred for me. And every once in a while Roydon would remind me of his family connections and make sure I knew just how much damage he could do to your family."

Deidra's tears flowed freely now, for every tear that was joyous in knowing Whitcome had not scorned her there were three or more spilling out in anger knowing this man, this one angry, unlovable man, controlled their very lives for so long and she had no idea, had even gone along with the story. How stupid could she have been not to notice?

"Did Rowan know?"

Whitcome opened his mouth to answer, but at some point the door had been opened and several people stood in the doorway, Rowan well into the room in her rolling chair. "I knew Whitcome behaved out of character with you, but I did not understand why, and he refused to tell me. I am now sorry I never saw fit to run this scoundrel over with my carriage when I was learning to drive."

The duchess stepped forward and placed a hand on Whitcome's shoulder. "That was more than a fourteen-year-old boy should have had to carry."

"Yes, it was," Whitcome agreed, never taking his eyes off Deidra.

"Thank you," she whispered, shame filling her mouth and tasting rancid. "I am so angry with myself for all of the cruel things and accusations I hurled at you over the years. You must think me a terrible person."

That is when Whitcome stepped around Roydon, taking him for the first time in ten years out of the picture and dropping to his knees in front of Deidra. “The fact you singled me out to spew your anger, left me hopeful that in the anger was still an affection I would one day deserve. Deidra, now that I am a duke, there is nothing he can hold over either of us. He does not have the power to tarnish my reputation or yours. He will remain on his lands, alone.”

“He is correct there, love. I can tell you his uncle the earl isn’t any more liked in the Ton. Whatever clout he claimed to have because of his uncle was fabricated poppycock. That man has been banned from most of the lower gentlemen’s clubs and was actually never admitted to Whites. Besides. I am your godmother, your sister is married to a Spanish count, and your other sister to an earl, plus another sister is married to a would-be duke. Your place in society is set, darling.”

Whitcome stared up at Deidra. Hope filled his eyes, and she could see the fourteen-year-old boy who took her token offering with reverence into his hands. How could she have ever thought he would throw it away? “Deidra, though Roydon managed to keep us apart, he was never able to stop me from falling helplessly in love with your strength, intellect, and determination for standing up for what you believe. I am hopeful all our arguments were the product of you as well fighting an affection you still hold for me. If that is true, would you do me the honor of becoming my duchess?”

Deidra dropped to her knees and cupped his face in her hands. How much can one cry before they have cried all their tears? She didn’t know, but she knew now they were filled with joy and love. “If you will have a disagreeable, angry, argumentative spinster, then, yes. I will be your duchess.”

A chorus of cheers erupted in the room and filled the hallway. “I have always loved you. And I promise no one and nothing will ever keep us apart again. Not another night will I sleep without you.”

Shock filled her, then panic. One indiscretion could be overlooked, but she doubted the Ton would be so forgiving as to overlook her sleeping in his bed before they were wed. “My lord, we may be engaged, but we are a far cry from being married.”

“Perhaps, miss, I could help with that.” A man’s quiet voice filled the room. Deidra looked up and the archbishop dressed in his full robes stood in her study with his bible in hand.

“I may have been a bit overconfident and procured a special license,” Whitcome admitted sheepishly. Deidra could do nothing but laugh and wrap her arms around him.

They stood and allowed the ceremony to proceed before the first cocktails were served. At some point Roydon slithered from the room in defeat, and not one person missed him. Her mother declared the dinner a resounding social triumph as she hugged her daughter, the new duchess and her son-in-law. And all before the first course.

It was a meal Deidra would never have a bite of, because as he promised, Whitcome led her from her childhood home and hied her away to his empty house and his even emptier bedchamber. Her life was never to be the same and it was a good, good thing indeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Almost empty nester, Clair Brett, lives in NH with her hardworking husband, two cats who make sure Clair gets her word count in, a white spotted boxer/beagle, and for right now the youngest Tenacious Teenager. Her other Fearless Firstborn daughter is serving our great country as a NH Air Guard medic and planning her college career for her RN.

When not writing sexy, witty, independent historical heroines, Clair enjoys watching the Red Sox, cooking, pinning—everything on Pinterest, and planning vacations she may never get to go on until someone leaves her a fortune.

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**DUKES GIVE LOVE A
BAD NAME**

S CINDERS

Nathan, Duke of Blakeney, finds his carefree existence turned upside down when a shocking revelation leaves him as the guardian of three young women. But as they enter his world, one glance at the eldest reveals her struggles with various disabilities, guiding Nathan on an unexpected path of compassion and understanding.

Amidst the chaos, their radiant caretaker catches Nathan off guard, captivating his every thought and stirring emotions he never knew existed. When the boundaries of love blur, Nathan finds himself entangled in a heart-wrenching battle between duty and desire. Can he resist the allure of the caretaker, or will he succumb to a love that defies societal norms and steals his very soul?

As the Duke of Blakeney unravels the mysteries surrounding his new family and unruly heart, he realizes that sometimes, it's the unconventional bonds that give us purpose and ignite true passion.

PROLOGUE

*“Now more than ever seems rich to die, To cease upon the
midnight with no pain.”*

-John Keats (1795 - 1821)

Nathan stole into his father’s darkened bedchamber. The familiar walls, painted a soft muted shade of green, were barely visible in the dim light. The thick velvet curtains covered the once-bright windows, drawn closed to block out the afternoon sunlight. The sense of foreboding and the blazing fire in the fireplace choked Nathan, despite the seasonably pleasant weather the rest of England was enjoying. It was as if everything surrounding them was aware of the tremendous gravity of his father’s illness. Could one mourn for someone that hadn’t quite left this mortal coil? Nathan knew the answer to be yes.

The centerpiece of the room was a four-poster bed with mossy green velvet drapes that matched their counterparts at the windows and starched bed linens of the highest quality. It was there he caught his first glimpse this day of his father, Edward. A man who had always seemed larger than life to Nathan. Now, in the final season of his life, Edward seemed frail. Almost as if he had to fight against being swallowed up by the delicate embroidery and frills of his bed linens.

Nathan's heart squeezed with dread each time Edward couldn't help coughing or wheezing. It was apparent that Edward's breathing had grown increasingly labored. Nathan watched helplessly, wanting to do something, anything to help the man who had loved, cared, and raised him. How did one prepare to lose a parent? Nathan couldn't fathom a world without Edward in it. He wasn't just saddened; he dreaded the imminent loss of his father. It would have been easier to take it on himself, and yet Nathan knew death was a natural part of life.

Seeing his father beckoning him closer, Nathan immediately went to his side.

"Yes, Father?"

"Nathan, my boy," Edward gasped, "I don't have much time left. I need to tell you something important."

Something of a dandy, Nathan had always prided himself on being well-dressed. But on this occasion, he cared not about wrinkling his long-tailed coat as he rushed to take his father's hand. Nor did he even think about his silk trousers as he knelt by his father's bedside. What did fashion matter at a time like this? The world might be aware of the greatness which would soon be slipping from its grasp, but Nathan was consumed by a violent storm of emotion.

Clutching his father's hand, Nathan fought for control. He hated feeling so hopeless. Anger, grief, anxiety - Nathan wasn't sure how to feel. All he knew was that as he watched his once strong and independent father lying there, so frail and weak, he vowed within himself to do whatever was in his power to fulfill his father's dying wish.

Edward had always been Nathan's hero, the one he turned to for advice and guidance. But now, it was Nathan who was

the one doing the teaching. He helped his father sit up and took care of his every need.

“Take your time, father,” Nathan pleaded as his father began to become agitated.

Thinking back on all the times they’d spent together, Nathan couldn’t help but recall numerous hunting parties, countless Sunday afternoons spent fishing in the lake, and endless literary discussions as they argued philosophy or sciences.

As he gazed at his father, Nathan was overwhelmed with how much he loved him. He didn’t want to lose him. Yet, according to the doctors, there was nothing else to be done.

“I know it’s not been easy for you,” his father rasped.

Nathan shook his head. “Nonsense, you were the best father in the world.”

A faint smile touched his father’s lips, but it was gone just as quickly as it had come. Nathan sat there, holding his father’s hand, praying that he’d have one more day, or even one more hour.

“Boy?” Nathan leaned in with wide eyes full of concern.

“I need you to promise me,” Edward said weakly, “that you will look after Albert Abbott’s girls.”

Surprised by this request, Nathan furrowed his brow. It was a highly unusual request for his father to make. While Nathan had heard of Albert Abbott—a British officer in the East India Company—he’d never met him or his family. “Who are they, father?” he asked.

“Albert was a good friend,” Edward explained, speaking slowly to formulate the words. “He and his wife, Anne, were

killed in an accident in India when their daughters were very young. I promised Albert that if anything ever happened to him, I would do right by them. I should have done more.”

Knowing his father to be an honorable man, Nathan protested, “I’ve no doubt that you’ve provided them with every comfort, father.”

“I saw that they were brought to England, and schooled as befitting their station. But I didn’t care for them as I should have. There are things you don’t know about my time with the East India Company.”

“Then tell me,” Nathan begged. “Help me to understand.”

“I wasn’t always fair to your mother,” Edward choked on a cough that rattled in his chest, and the sound was concerning to Nathan.

“We can talk about it later,” Nathan soothed, but Edward wouldn’t be silenced.

“No, I am afraid we must talk about it now. Albert loved Anne very much, but I too had a tender for her. It wasn’t unusual for the officers of the company to find companionship with one or two of the women there. One night when I was three sheets to the wind, I’m afraid I confessed my feelings to Anne. She tried to let me down gently, but I wouldn’t be dissuaded. I was an ass, and I forced myself upon her.”

“Father, you didn’t,” Nathan, aghast, visibly recoiled.

“A kiss,” was Edward’s raspy admission. “She hadn’t encouraged it and swiftly taught me a lesson. Anne socked me right in the eye, and it was well-deserved too. I had to go around telling people I’d tripped on a loose rug to cover the true reason behind my black eye. I don’t believe she ever told Albert of my indiscretion. I know she couldn’t have, or he

would have called me out. I felt a tremendous amount of guilt over the whole affair. Especially when I learned of Albert and Anne's early demise. That guilt stopped me from being the kind of guardian that those girls truly deserved. I won't shirk that responsibility any longer."

It wasn't lost on Nathan that despite Edward's willingness to do right by the girls, he wouldn't be doing the actual measures; Nathan would be expected to pick up the torch. As death approached swiftly now for Edward, he pleaded with Nathan: "I need you to fulfill that promise."

It was hardly the sort of thing that a single gentleman would do. Nathan hadn't the slightest idea of what to do with three young girls. The thought had Nathan's blood running cold. "Where are they?"

"They're boarding at Mrs. Bloomfield's Institute for Young Ladies," replied Edward between coughs.

Nathan had heard of the prestigious seminary, catering to the finest families. However, he thought the school had been closed. Perhaps he'd been mistaken?

His father explained that the two oldest girls, Elise and Annabelle, were likely past due for presentation into society. But the youngest girl, Victoria, shouldn't be old enough, at least he didn't think so. The truth was that Edward hadn't kept on top of his duties as a guardian. It was something that had rankled him in recent years.

Nathan's mind raced as he contemplated all of the changes that would need to take place in his life to accommodate three young debutants. He supposed he could find them a respectable governess. Someone who would introduce them at the right parties, help them to mingle, and hopefully teach the

young ladies how to snag a husband so they'd be off Nathan's hands as soon as possible.

Nodding again, as Nathan's mind raced about with ideas on how to handle these newfound responsibilities that had just been thrust upon him.

"I believe I can do that, But, Father, what are you truly asking? What would you like me to do?"

From there, they devised a plan.

CHAPTER
ONE

“No more let life divide what death can join together.”

— Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 - 1822)

A fortnight later...

“**Y**our Grace, welcome to Worthington Hall.”

Your Grace. Nathan couldn't help but notice the emphasis on his mother's given name in addressing him by his new title. It had been a title he had never intended to hold. Just a fortnight ago, his world had crumbled when he stood in a lovely churchyard, bidding his father's soul a fond yet final farewell.

Nathan felt utterly bereft as he looked down upon the graves of the two people he loved most in the world. It hardly seemed fair that he was expected to carry on, live, and breathe despite feeling so completely and utterly alone.

The last thing he wanted was to step into his father's shoes and continue the thriving shipping business of the East India Shipping Company, through which his father had amassed his vast fortune. However, the responsibility of caring for the Abbott girls, his father's dying wish, was equally unappealing.

He should have been thankful for his inheritance, despite the hardships it brought. But how was he to know that barely a

fortnight after his father's passing, he would receive word that his estranged uncle, Clarence Everett, the Duke of Blakeney, had met an untimely demise by choking on a chicken bone during dinner?

The indignity of it all. Nathan hadn't been raised as the grandson of a Duke, although that was the truth of his paternity. His father, Edward, had cut ties with his parents when the Duchess forbade his courtship with Grace Merritt, a shopkeeper's daughter.

The Duke, an indolent rake often inebriated or in the company of his mistress, didn't care who his son married. But the Duchess, a daughter of a Marquess, was quite a different story. She had married the Duke, even with his rakish reputation, to improve her station.

Edward and Grace were deeply in love, but their marriage led to the Duchess's resentment, and the ties between the Everett family and their son were severed. Nathan often wondered if his grandmother regretted her decision to cut her son out of her life and cheat him out of his rightful inheritance. What would have happened if Edward had chosen duty over love?

However, such questions would never be answered. Nathan was grateful to his father for choosing love, as his childhood had been filled with love and happiness. But his grandmother's absence now at Worthington Hall was hardly surprising. He doubted she even remembered the moment when she had insulted him and his mother years ago.

Before Nathan stepped over the threshold of his new home, he glanced about the vast estate, majestic in its lines and vast in its gardens. He couldn't help but notice a cold feeling that nearly caused a shiver to race up his spine. Shaking the

ominous feeling away, Nathan blew out a breath and inclined his head toward his new butler, Mr. Stewart.

Stewart took Nathan's coat, hat, and walking stick, and introduced him to the other staff members present. Nathan was determined to show respect and appreciation for their hard work and dedication. He greeted each one with a firm nod and a kind smile, even though he couldn't remember all their names.

The absence of his grandmother's presence was conspicuous, but Nathan wasn't surprised by it. He hardly expected her to welcome him with open arms, but he couldn't help feeling a pang of disappointment at her absence.

Stewart mentioned that the Duchess wished to speak with him as soon as possible. Nathan couldn't help but recall a memory of a long-ago encounter with his grandmother, one that left him feeling less than another human being due to his birth.

Even now, as a grown adult, Nathan fought the urge to walk away from the woman who had caused his parents so much pain. Yet, he knew he had responsibilities to uphold. He needed to see to his father's promise and care for the Abbott sisters. The idea of having to find suitors for them, especially the two eldest who were considered long in the tooth, weighed heavily on him.

Nathan resolved to join the social season in London, hoping suitors would overlook the young ladies' ages in the hopes of connecting with a Duke. He instructed Mrs. Simpson, the housekeeper, to assess what the girls needed upon their arrival, and they would soon move to London for the season.

Despite his feelings about his grandmother, Nathan knew he had to face her. It was time to confront the past and

embrace the new responsibilities that life had thrust upon him. With determination in his heart, he prepared himself to meet the Dowager Duchess of Blakeney, unsure of what awaited him in their encounter.

CHAPTER
TWO

“Breathes there the man with soul so dead ...”

—Walter Scott (1771 – 1832)

The sun had barely risen over the horizon, painting the sky with hues of pink and orange, when Nathan found himself in the opulent drawing room of Worthington Hall, awaiting the arrival of the Dowager Duchess of Blakeney. Despite the early hour, he was fully dressed and prepared for the meeting, determined not to keep his grandmother waiting.

Nathan stood by the large bay window, watching the world outside awaken. He could only imagine what the arrival of the Abbott sisters would bring. He'd likely find Elise, the eldest, exuded an air of maturity and grace. Annabelle, the second sister, would possess a gentle and kind demeanor. And last Victoria, would likely be shy and retiring, not ready for the social rigors of society.

As their guardian, Nathan felt the weight of responsibility settling upon him. It was his duty to ensure they were well taken care of and properly introduced to society. He knew he needed to find suitable matches for them.

Lost in his thoughts, Nathan was startled when the door to the drawing room opened, and the Dowager Duchess of Blakeney entered. She was a formidable figure, with silver

hair pulled back tightly and an air of haughtiness that filled the room.

“Your Grace,” Nathan greeted her with a polite nod, though he couldn’t hide the hint of tension in his voice.

The Duchess regarded him coolly, her piercing blue eyes sizing him up. “Nathan Everett,” she said, her voice carrying an air of disdain. “I must say, I never expected to see you as the Duke of Blakeney.”

“I never expected it either,” Nathan replied, trying to keep his tone even. “It was not a title I sought, but one I now bear.”

The Duchess scoffed. “Yes, thanks to your father’s foolish choices. He should have known better than to marry a commoner’s daughter.”

Nathan felt the anger rise within him, but he kept his composure. “My parents were deeply in love, and their marriage brought them both great happiness.”

“Happiness that came at the expense of our family’s reputation,” the Duchess retorted. “I see you’ve brought those Abbott girls into my home. What do you intend to do with them? Marry them off to the highest bidder, I assume?”

“They are my wards now, and I will ensure they are well cared for,” Nathan replied firmly. “I will see to it that they receive the proper education and introductions to society.”

The Duchess gave a condescending smile. “It’s a pity your father didn’t see fit to raise you as a proper Duke. Perhaps then, you would have known how to manage the estate and carry yourself with the dignity befitting your title.”

Nathan took a deep breath, trying to remain calm. “My father taught me many valuable lessons, and I intend to honor

his memory by being a responsible Duke. As for the estate, I have capable advisors who will help me manage it.”

The Duchess raised an eyebrow. “Capable advisors? And who might those be? Your father’s old business partners, I presume?”

Nathan resisted the urge to argue further. He knew that he needed to stand his ground but also show respect to his grandmother. “I have chosen a team of trusted advisors to assist me in matters of the estate. They have proven their loyalty and expertise over the years.”

The Duchess seemed to take a moment to process Nathan’s response before speaking again. “Very well, if you must carry on with this charade of being the Duke, then at least do it with some semblance of decorum. You are not fit to host the annual Blakeney ball, but I will allow it this once. But do not think you can turn my home into a circus.”

Nathan bristled at her words but maintained his composure. “I assure you, the ball will be conducted with the utmost propriety. I will do my best to uphold the traditions of the Blakeney family.”

The Duchess seemed to consider his words for a moment before giving a dismissive nod. “Very well, but do not expect me to attend. I have no desire to associate myself with this farce.”

“As you wish,” Nathan replied evenly, though he couldn’t help but feel a pang of disappointment. He had hoped to bridge the gap between them, but it seemed that his grandmother’s disdain for him and his parents was too deeply ingrained. “To be clear, this is my home and I will do as I wish. You will be moving to the dowager house immediately. Are we clear?”

With a final icy look, the Duchess turned to leave the room. Before she could take more than a few steps, Nathan found his voice again. “Wait.”

The Duchess paused, turning to face him with a raised eyebrow. “What is it now?”

“I know you have your reservations about me, but I will not tolerate unkindness to my wards. Surely you have it within you to have compassion on three orphaned girls?”

“Why should I?” She responded frigidly. “They are nothing to me.”

Nathan wondered why he had even bothered to speak with her. His father had been right in his estimation of the woman. “If you want a farthing more to continue this lavish lifestyle you’ve enjoyed all of your life, I recommend that you do as I ask. Once you remove yourself, we need not speak again if you don’t wish to. But in society you will do as I ask.”

Her lips thinned into a tight line and Nathan was certain that she would revolt. But rather than argue she tipped her head into a sharp nod and then looked away. Clearly he was dismissed.

CHAPTER
THREE

“If we revert to history, we shall find that the women who have distinguished themselves have neither been the most beautiful nor the gentlest of their sex.”

—Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 - 1797)

Mrs. Bloomfield’s Seminary for Young Ladies
“**Y**ou can’t make us leave,” Victoria cried as she threw herself over the freshly made coverlet. “Please Beatrice, you are our only family! You simply cannot cast us out.”

At one and thirty, Miss Beatrice Bloomfield had witnessed her fair share of Victoria’s dramatic declarations. While they often amused her, the owner and sole proprietor of Mrs. Bloomfield’s Seminary for Young Ladies stifled a heartfelt sigh. She loved the Abbott girls just as much as she would have if she had indeed birthed them. However, the truth of the matter was, she wasn’t family. Beatrice was simply their caretaker.

“Darling,” Beatrice admonished, “You mustn’t carry on so! Have you learned nothing about behaving like a lady?”

Victoria scowled, but her countenance seemed to prick her a little, and she climbed off the bed to straighten the wrinkles she had caused by being reckless. Then, almost as if she

couldn't help herself, Victoria threw herself into Beatrice's arms.

Beatrice, well aware of Victoria's dramatic fits and overtly fiery passions, was there to soothe the young woman. "Don't cry, Vicky. You and Annie will have a grand adventure, you'll see. You are both far too beautiful to be stuck here in the countryside. Don't cry so; you will be happy, just wait and see."

"I could never be happy without you and Elsie. What does a stupid old duke want with us anyway?"

"He's our new guardian," Annie, christened Annabelle, answered from the doorway, reading one of Beatrice's private letters.

Beatrice frowned when she saw that Annie had gone through her private things again and taken the letter. She shot her a look, but sadly where Vicky was still cowed by Beatrice, Annie was not. It was hard to exercise authority over someone who was so close to one's own age.

When the Abbott girls had first been sent to Mrs. Bloomfield's Seminary for Young Ladies, it had indeed been a seminary run by Beatrice's mother. Well known for its excellent reputation, Mrs. Bloomfield's had been the place for London's finest to send their young daughters. At the end of their training, these young women were polished, excellent at needlepoint, at the very least dabbled in watercolors, and played the pianoforte to perfection.

They spoke only when spoken to, never interrupted a man while speaking, always laughed at the inanest of jokes, and above all else, married where their parents deemed appropriate. It was only in recent years that more and more

young ladies were turned away from Mrs. Bloomfield's Seminary.

Indeed, if the truth were known, Beatrice would likely be in a whole heap of trouble. Her mother's health had declined over the years, and slowly, the teachers had begun to find other situations that paid better and more frequently. Then, a little over a year ago, Beatrice's mother, the real Mrs. Bloomfield, died of a fever.

The handful of young ladies that had remained at the seminary were sent home early, and only the three Abbott girls stayed in residence as they had nowhere else to go. Their guardian had sent them to live at the seminary more than ten years ago, never once sending for the girls at Christmas or even visiting.

Their yearly dues were paid like clockwork, and thankfully Beatrice's mother had been good at economy. This had sustained them for the past year, but when the current bill for the girls went unpaid. Beatrice began to panic.

Without any income from the seminary, Beatrice worried about how she would provide for herself, Elsie, Annie, and Vicky. The Duke's letter had come as a shock to all of them. It told that their previous guardian, Edward Walcott, had passed away and the guardianship had fallen to his son, the new Duke of Blakeney. What was even more curious was the duke had insisted the three girls travel to Worthington Hall, his country estate, to prepare for the next London season.

While most young ladies would have been over the moon for such an event, the Abbott sisters were not.

"Who is minding Elsie?" Beatrice asked, releasing Vicky and walking over to where Annie was skimming the duke's

letter. Without any preamble, she yanked it out of Annie's hands.

"That was uncivil," Annie groused.

"Where is Elsie?" Beatrice asked again.

As if on cue, Elise Abbott, Elsie to everyone who truly knew her, ambled in. She had something red on her cheek that immediately caused Beatrice's heart to leap into her throat.

"Elsie, darling, come to Bea. Let me see what's on your face?"

Gently she pulled the childlike woman to the light where she could get a better look at her cheek.

Contrite, Annie spoke in a hushed tone, "I'm really sorry. I was supposed to be watching her. I told Nurse that I would. I just got distracted and left her in your office. I'm sorry, Bea."

Vicky tried to peer over Annie, who was at least an inch and a half taller. "Is it blood? Is Elsie okay?"

Beatrice reached out and swiped the red smear on her cheek and popped it in her mouth. Both Annie and Vicky gasped as Bea laughed, "She got into the tea cakes Cook left for me. It's raspberry jam. Elsie just couldn't resist a cake, could you, darling?"

In response, Elsie giggled and laid her head on Beatrice's shoulder while Beatrice gave her an affectionate squeeze.

Annie snorted. "You know Elsie, she loves her sweets."

"That she does," Vicky added with a laugh. Then, sobering, she added, "What are we going to do about Elsie? It's obvious from the duke's letter that he has no idea she's ..."

There were plenty of ways that people had described individuals like Elsie. Simple or childlike was the kindest. Elsie needed to be watched constantly because she had the mentality of a very young child. However, unless you knew her or observed her behavior, you wouldn't immediately know about her condition just by looking at her appearance.

When the Abbott girls had come to live with Beatrice and her mother, Bea had begged her mother to allow Elsie to stay. Bea's mother had agreed under the stipulation that it was Bea's responsibility to care for Elsie.

Some of the other students had gossiped that a sanitarium, asylum, or institution would be better for individuals like Elsie. Some were even cruel enough to imply that she wouldn't know the difference either way. But Bea knew that Elsie had no problems getting her wants and feelings across. While she couldn't speak, she certainly could cry, laugh, and show her love and joy in various ways. No, Elsie didn't use words to communicate; she used just about everything else.

Bea had been grateful that her mother hadn't sent Elsie away. She didn't know if it was because of the generous fees their guardian paid or if it was the kindness of her mother's heart, but somehow she doubted the latter. Her mother was a lot of things, but sentimental wasn't one of them.

It hardly mattered now.

The truth was that Bea didn't know what to do about the duke's demand that all three girls join him at his home, Worthington Hall. Would he care for Elsie the way that she had? Or would he see her locked away in an asylum? It was a risk that Bea couldn't take.

"Perhaps we shall send you both ahead," Bea said to Annie and Vicky. "We could write to the duke and inform him that

Elsie isn't well enough for travel."

"Lie?" Vicky stretched the word out, ending with a dropped jaw and incredulous eyes.

"Lying is a sin," Annie and Vicky repeated in unison.

"I didn't say to lie," Bea retracted, even though they all knew it had been implied.

"What are you saying then?" Vicky pressed.

"I don't know!" Bea huffed, "I honestly don't know."

"We should run away and join a traveling theater," Vicky suggested.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Only you would find that appealing. Besides, don't you think it would be hard to hide from a duke? They are about as powerful as a man can get."

"They aren't gods," Vicky muttered.

"They're cousins!" Annie shot back.

"Familial ties don't work like that," Bea muttered to Annie. Then turning to Vicky, "Nobody is joining a traveling theater."

"Then what are we to do?" Vicky asked. "We can't make it here much longer without any money."

Bea colored a bit, knowing that she wasn't as good with her money as her mother had been. With the care of Elsie, it was hard to be on top of everything else. "Maybe I could open the seminary again?"

"That is ridiculous. You are far too young and not nearly married enough," came Annie's blunt response.

The truth stung Beatrice. It was true, she didn't have the time to run a seminary. She'd hardly had a free moment to

herself in over ten years. While Elsie was a joy to be around, she was also very challenging, and sometimes threw fits that quite terrified Bea. The weight of her situation rested heavily on her shoulders.

Out of the silence, Vicky suddenly inquired, “How much married do you have to be?”

Annie thought about it for a moment before answering, “All the way, I reckon. Why?”

Proudly, Vicky tapped her crown. “I’ve figured it all out. We just need to find Bea a husband!”

“You’re an idiot,” Annie said without missing a beat.

Vicky scowled at her sister. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“If Bea went and got herself married, why would she still bother with the lot of us?” Annie reasoned.

“Hey now,” Bea tried to interrupt, but the sisters weren’t finished arguing.

Vicky frowned, adding, “Because she loves us.”

Annie sighed. “Of course she loves us, we are incredibly lovable. But do you think her husband would want Elsie? You heard what some of the girls said? That she was wicked or our parents bad and that’s why they died and Elsie is simple.”

Vicky’s ire seemed to fizzle out. “They are idiots,” she said softly.

Bea sighed. “Tremendous idiots, the lot of them.”

Annie nodded in agreement, and as if on cue, Elsie popped up to her feet, rubbing her eyes.

“Annie?” Bea asked. “Can you take Elsie to Nurse for her nap and then meet Vicky and me for tea? I will run down and see if Cook can toss something together for us.”

Annie agreed without an argument, and Vicky followed Bea to the kitchen to speak with Cook and then back to the front parlor where they both sat down to enjoy the afternoon sunlight.

“I shall miss you when you’re gone,” Bea said wistfully.

Vicky pursed her lips for a moment. “You know, the Duke said that we were to bring along any staff that we are in need of.”

Bea straightened. “I’m hardly your staff.”

Vicky snorted. “No, that’s not what I meant. I am just saying that you are what we are in need of. It said we are to have everything we need. Well, we need you.”

“I don’t think that’s what the duke meant.”

“Why not?” Annie said from the doorway. “I couldn’t agree more. Bea is precisely what we need. That’s all there is to it. We have to bring her along.”

“You two are encourage-able,” Bea huffed.

“You will love it,” Vicky mocked Bea from earlier, “think of it as a grand adventure!”

“There is a reason the two of you never graduated from the seminary,” Bea grumbled.

Annie shuddered. “Thank heavens we didn’t turn out like those girls. Perfectly horrible.”

Vicky laughed. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Bea couldn't help but smile at the girls' playful banter. Despite the weight she carried on her shoulders, their lightheartedness always had a way of easing her worries.

"Alright, alright," Bea relented, giving in to their persistent arguments. "I suppose I could consider it. But Vicky, I want you and Annie to promise me that you won't be marrying just for the sake of finding a stable household for all of us. You both deserve a chance at happiness."

Annie shrugged. "Sometimes, unconventional is exactly what we need. After all, we are unconventional. Our mother was from East India, and our father was from England. That enough was cause for many of the girls to snub us. I would think plenty of our potential suitors will do the same thing."

Vicky nodded. "And then there is Elsie. I would never marry a man that would put her away. I couldn't bear it. So, while I am open to going with the duke and looking for a match, I won't enter anything that will destroy our little family. And that includes you, Bea. You aren't our caretaker."

Bea sighed. "But I am your caretaker. As far as that stuffy duke is concerned, I am my mother, still running a ladies' seminary. I am afraid that if he pulls just one of the loose threads about our arrangement, the entire situation will unravel before our eyes. If I keep Elsie here, you both could have a chance to live a relatively normal life."

Vicky wrinkled her nose. "I should never wish to be anything so commonplace as normal."

Annie laughed. "I couldn't have said it better myself, and besides, who's to say that love can't grow from an arranged marriage? Stranger things have happened."

Bea pondered their words for a moment, her mind swirling with the possibilities. Could either of the girls marrying truly bring a sense of stability and happiness to their lives? And what about Elsie? Would she be accepted by the potential husband? It was a gamble, to be sure.

“Annie has a point,” Vicky chimed in, her eyes flickering with excitement. “Love might come later, but finding someone who would accept all of us, including Elsie, could be life-changing for all.”

Bea sighed, feeling her resolve crumble. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to keep an open mind. But let’s not rush things. First, you girls will need to find someone who understands and embraces our unique situation.”

Annie nodded in agreement. “We’ll search carefully, Bea. We won’t settle for anything less than extraordinary.”

With a newfound sense of hope, Bea felt the weight on her shoulders begin to lift, even if just a little. Perhaps, just perhaps, this grand adventure her sisters spoke of could be the fresh start they all needed.

As they sat in the sunlight, sipping their tea and envisioning the possibilities that lay ahead, Bea couldn’t help but feel a glimmer of excitement amidst the uncertainty. Maybe, just maybe, love and happiness were waiting for them in unexpected places.

CHAPTER
FOUR

*“I try to avoid looking forward or backward, and try to keep
looking upward.”*

-Charlotte Bronte

Worthington Hall

Vicky, true to her spirited nature, sat nervously inside the lavish carriage, having finally exhausted all the questions her young mind could come up with. Annie, who was sitting right beside her, seemed more excited than nervous.

“Can you hardly believe this carriage?” Annie asked for what seemed like the hundredth time. “If this is the carriage, I can’t even imagine what Worthington Hall will be like.”

Bea, swallowing the bile that had been threatening to make an appearance since they’d left their humble home, couldn’t have cared less about Worthington Hall’s appearance. She simply wanted to get there. Having never traveled before, Bea hadn’t known her stomach wouldn’t be up to the excitement of the bumpy carriage.

There was also the matter of her backside. One never spoke of such things, but Bea was almost positive her bottom was covered with bruises. How one could enjoy traveling, she would never know. Elsie had been a trooper through the whole

trip. Content to watch the passing countryside, she hadn't been a minute's trouble. At least Bea could thank the good Lord for that. Because other than Elsie's compliance, Bea saw nothing positive to report about the seventy-two-hour carriage ride.

Vicky waved the letter, signifying their new beginning.

Her eyes were bright, and her color was high as she asked, "Annie, pinch me! I'm all agog to meet our new guardian, the Duke of Blakeney. It's almost like a fairy tale, don't you think?"

Annie nodded, her curls bouncing as she replied, "I picture the Duke as a lovely older gentleman with white hair that grows out of his ears."

Vicky giggled. "And not a hair on his head?"

Annie nodded. "With liver spots and teeth yellowed from tobacco."

Bea would have shaken her head at the girls if only she had felt better. But as it was, it took all of her concentration to keep herself calm.

Elsie had laid her head against Bea's shoulder, and from the slightly damp patch, Bea figured she was drooling.

Annie picked at her pelisse. "It feels like a dream, doesn't it? We were struggling to make ends meet, and then the wealthy duke came along and saved us."

"That sounds like one of your horrible gothic romances," Bea muttered.

Vicky took Annie's hand. "I completely agree with you."

There was silence for a moment before Vicky spoke, "But what if he doesn't like us?"

That was something that had been on each of their minds. There was far more riding on this meeting with the duke than met the eye. He truly held their fate in the palm of his hand.

Answering her own question, Vicky continued, “Don’t worry, Annie. We have Bea and Elsie with us. And Bea will surely make a good impression. Besides, we’re not children anymore. The Duke will surely appreciate our maturity.”

Bea choked a little. “Doing it a bit too brown, don’t you think?”

Annie giggled. “I don’t know about maturity, but we are awfully pretty.”

Bea closed her eyes. “Humble too. Maybe you should let the Duke discover your best features on his own. That means without any hints, Victoria.”

Vicky wiggled her eyebrows at Annie, who giggled once more. Bea opened one eye and glared at the girls.

“Please be well-behaved,” she begged them, just as the carriage came to a stop.

Annie peered out the window and gasped. Vicky, never wanting to be left behind, elbowed her sister out of the way so that she could see what Annie had.

The carriage had pulled up in front of a grand estate. The immaculate gardens and landscape were only second to the massive structure showcasing the Duke’s opulence and power.

“Gracious,” Vicky muttered. “It’s like a palace.”

Bea, curious now as to what the girls were describing, carefully extracted herself from Elsie’s sleeping form.

But before she could look out the window, the carriage door was opened by a footman. The ladies froze for a second,

uncertain of what would happen if they decided not to step outside. But it wasn't to be. An older gentleman, who appeared to be the butler, came into view.

“Am I to assume that you are Mrs. Bloomfield and the Abbott sisters?”

They had decided that it was best to continue the ruse that Bea was her mother. After all, after her mother's passing, they had continued to take the payments for the girls.

“I am Mrs. Bloomfield,” Bea said at once. Motioning to Elsie, she said, “This is Elise, who is sleeping. And these two are Victoria and Annabella.”

He nodded in acknowledgment. “I am Stewart, the head butler. His Grace is expecting you.”

Bea swallowed hard. It was now or never. They could simply tell the truth and hope that the older gentleman had a kind heart. But that was before she saw him.

The Duke, a handsome and charismatic man in his late thirties, stood outside waiting for them to alight from the carriage. Bea turned to Stewart, saying, “I will send Annabelle and Victoria along and stay with Elise. I wouldn't want her to become frightened if she awakened alone.”

It was at that moment that Elsie tugged on Bea's elbow. Turning, Bea saw that Elsie was indeed awake and making the sign she used when needing to use the necessary to relieve herself.

“Never mind,” Bea said hurriedly. “She's awake. Well then, come along, ladies.”

Each of them exited the carriage with the gracefulness that had been instilled in them, each of them except one. Elsie

clung to Bea's hand. It was clear that she was frightened by the new situation and strangers she didn't know.

Bea could only imagine what it must look like—a woman in her early twenties with the mannerisms of a young child. Inwardly berating herself for even bringing the girls to Worthington Hall, Bea was careful to act as if nothing was amiss.

The Duke was not old, nor did he have liver spots or white hair growing out of his ears—much to Vicky's dismay.

Instead, there stood a handsome gentleman with thick dark hair, an autocratic nose, and a muscular build. His deep brown eyes were curious, but not unkind. He seemed to be taking things in, and yet Bea didn't sense disapproval or disappointment.

“Welcome, ladies. I am pleased to finally make your acquaintance,” he said as they approached.

“Your Grace,” Bea responded with a polite curtsy. “This is Miss Elise Abbott, Miss Victoria, and Miss Annabelle.”

Vicky and Annie both sank into a perfect curtsy and murmured a polite greeting. Bea was thankful that, for once, the girls were actually behaving.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Vicky said. “We are honored to meet you at last.”

The Duke looked from Vicky and Annie over to where Elsie was partially hiding behind Bea. His gaze lingered on the young woman, and Bea felt a flutter of unease in her stomach. She clutched Elsie's hand firmly, not wanting the girl to run in fear. But Elsie didn't run away. Instead, she smiled back at the Duke and then turned to walk alongside Bea as they followed Stewart into the great hall.

“Miss Bloomfield,” the Duke called out once again, making Bea stop and turn around.

“Yes, Your Grace?” she asked.

“I would like to speak with you at your earliest convenience.”

“Of course,” she said at once, anxiety once again ratcheting up.

It didn't help that he continued to smile warmly at her or that he gave Elsie a little wave that the girl responded to with one of her own. Why did he have to be so charming?

Despite her nerves, Bea couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance that this grand adventure could turn into something more than they ever imagined. But as she followed Stewart through the grand hall of Worthington Hall, the weight of the uncertainty and responsibility settled on her shoulders once again. Only time would reveal what destiny had in store for them in the opulent halls of the Duke of Blakeney's estate.

CHAPTER
FIVE

“There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature.”

—*Jane Austen*

Nathan sat impatiently at his grandfather’s desk—his desk— although he was struggling to feel that any of the duchy was actually his. The scene that had greeted him this afternoon was a far cry from what he had been anticipating.

From what his father had said about the Abbott sisters, Nathan had determined they were little more than school girls. However, it was fully grown women who had arrived on his doorstep, all in the care of a particularly beautiful caretaker who looked nothing like any of the school teachers that he had ever known.

And then there was the eldest girl, Elsie. Why hadn’t his father told him that she was simple? Had he not known? That alone was almost unfathomable. How could someone have the guardianship of three young women and not know anything about them aside from their ages? He hardly wanted to think poorly of his father. The man had been a true testament to fatherhood and manhood. But in the same breath, he’d made a

promise to his friend to father his children and neglected them woefully.

It was a conundrum that made Nathan's head hurt.

He glanced at the clock once again, trying to anticipate how much longer the lovely Miss Bloomfield would take until she came to meet with him. He was determined to get to the bottom of things, and she held the key. But if he was also being honest, Nathan wanted to see her again. She had a quiet dignity that somehow seemed more pronounced by her innocent beauty. Nathan had a feeling that Miss Bloomfield had shouldered most of the responsibility for the girls.

The whereabouts of her mother notwithstanding, it was clear that Elsie was very attached to the woman. Young Annabelle and Victoria were also very protective of her. He could see that in how they stood and interacted with one another. It was all the more curious to him how this had come to be.

There was a scratching at the door that shook him from his thoughts. Standing, Nathan walked across the thick carpet and opened the mahogany door to see Elsie making her way down the hall with what looked like a feather hat in her grasp.

"Miss Abbott," he called out, but she ignored him.

Uncertain of what he should do, Nathan decided to follow her. His steps were far grander than hers, so he easily caught up.

"Elsie?" He asked kindly.

She looked up at him and wrinkled her nose a little.

"Hello," he wasn't sure what else to say.

But apparently, he didn't need to say anymore because she shoved the hideous feather hat in his face and beamed proudly.

“Ooh! That's a lovely hat,” he said, feeling only a little bit stupid.

Her smile brightened, and she hugged it rather violently to her chest.

“I see,” he said at once. “It's yours.”

Elsie grinned and turned to continue to make her way down the hallway.

“Should you be out here on your own?” He called out, but it wasn't Elsie that answered.

Nathan watched as Miss Bloomfield—what had the girls called her? Bea. He watched as Bea came racing down the corridor.

“I am so sorry, Your Grace,” Bea panted, trying to catch her breath. “I have been searching for her everywhere. Your home is quite a bit larger than our previous one. Elsie slipped away on me.”

“Elsie?” Nathan asked.

Her cheeks pinked delightfully, much to his delight. “Er, yes, we call her Elsie for short. Annabelle usually goes by Annie, and Victoria answers to Vicky. Not that it should matter one way or the other, I'm sure. Dear me, I am rambling like an idiot, aren't I?”

She placed her hands on her cheeks as if to cool them. Nathan was utterly enchanted by the woman.

“Tell me, Miss Bloomfield, how did you come to care for my three wards?”

Her eyes widened a fraction, and was that fear that flitted across her face?

“Oh, I was merely the one to help bring them to you,” she said blithely. “My mother was in charge of their care.”

“Will she be joining us?” Nathan asked.

It was the oddest thing—one moment she was flushed pink, and the next she had paled to the point of looking wan.

“Oh, no, she’s terribly busy with the school,” Bea added while wringing her hands and looking as if she would rather be anywhere but speaking with him.

Nathan lifted a brow. “My man of business informed me that your mother hadn’t been taking on students for several years now. I was under the impression that the Abbott sisters were the only ones attending Mrs. Bloomfield’s Seminary for Young Ladies. Perhaps he’s been misinformed?”

She looked rather ill, and Nathan could hardly understand the cause. However, he was almost certain that something was amiss with the seminary. It was at that moment that Elsie decided to throw her hat and plop herself down on the floor.

Bea raced over to where she was sitting and implored the girl to get up. But Elsie wasn’t having it. She tried pushing Bea away and nearly knocked the woman to the ground.

It was obvious that Elsie was a handful, surely they had servants to help care for her? Nathan watched as Bea tried to bribe Elsie to stand with promises of a sweet. At long last, she finally got to her feet, yawning.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I must see Elsie to her room.”

Before Bea could do that, Nathan rang the bell. “If you could just wait a moment?”

Bea waited just a moment before Stewart joined them in the hallway.

“Please inform Mrs. Simpson that we will be needing some additional staff to ensure the happiness of the ladies. I’d like to see that taken care of right away.”

Stewart nodded. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“If someone could be fetched to care for Miss Abbott,” Nathan inquired. “Miss Bloomfield and I need to discuss the upcoming season for Vicky and Annie.”

“I can care for Elsie,” Bea added hurriedly, anxiety clearly written on her face.

Nathan smiled at her. “I’ve no doubt that you’ve given the utmost finest care to Elsie. But I also believe that it takes more than one individual to make things run smoothly. Miss Annabelle and Miss Victoria will also be needing your assistance. Stewart, please have Mrs. Simpson involve Miss Bloomfield in the process of finding some competent individuals for Elsie.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Stewart bowed. “I shall inform you, Miss Bloomfield, when the candidates arrive.”

Bea looked relieved, and Nathan couldn’t help but admire her for her dedication to the girls. The sight of her caring for Elsie had only strengthened his belief that Miss Bloomfield was the right person to help guide the Abbott sisters through their debut season.

It certainly warmed his heart to know that the lovely woman would be nearby. Not that Nathan desired the woman.

She was just beautiful to look upon and for lack of better words, she made him smile.

As the sun set over Worthington Hall, Nathan couldn't shake the feeling that the arrival of these unexpected visitors had brought a new sense of purpose to his life. With Miss Bloomfield's assistance, he was determined to fulfill his promise to his father's dearest friend and become the guardian these young women deserved.

CHAPTER
SIX

“No, thank you, I don’t mind the rain,” I said. I always lacked common sense when taken by surprise.”

—Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey

In the grand sitting room of Worthington Hall, Mrs. Simpson, the stern and no-nonsense housekeeper, sat primly in her chair, while Bea, Miss Beatrice Bloomfield, tried to suppress a giggle as the first candidate for Elise’s nurse position entered the room.

The door creaked open, and in walked a stout woman with frizzy gray hair, a fuzzy mole on her chin, and a rather loud and booming voice. She was dressed in a garish outfit that seemed more suited for a circus than a respectable household. Mrs. Simpson raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed.

“Good afternoon, ladies! I am Nurse Matilda, the best there is when it comes to caring for young ones,” the woman announced with a flourish.

Bea’s eyes widened, and she exchanged a puzzled glance with Mrs. Simpson. With Elise’s mind was childlike, nothing else about her could be quantified by the term young ones. Trying to keep a straight face, Bea nodded politely. “Thank you for coming. Please have a seat.”

Nurse Matilda plopped down on the sofa, her mangy bag banging against the expensive fabric and causing a cloud of dust to rise from the offending article. Mrs. Simpson visibly cringed but maintained her composure.

“So, Nurse Matilda, tell us about your experience,” Bea asked, attempting to steer the conversation in a more serious direction.

The woman leaned back, and much to everyone’s horror, she propped her feet up on the coffee table. “Oh, I’ve cared for dozens of children, my dear. Posh ones, orphans, aristocrats, I am just the one you need for the job. They all loved me! I can handle anything a child throws at me!”

Bea glanced at Mrs. Simpson, who looked moments away from throwing the vulgar creature out of the sitting room. Was it any wonder that it was in that precise moment that Elise came racing into the sitting room with what looked like mud on her dress and an amphibian in her hands.

Upon seeing her favorite person, Bea, she grinned and raced over to show her prize.

The squawk that erupted from Nurse Matilda scared Elise, the frog, and likely Nurse Matilda.

“What kind of place are you running here?” She bellowed.

Elise’s sweet face crumbled and tears began to fill her eyes.

Bea quickly wrapped an arm around Elise, never once making a fuss about the mud or the frog. “It looks like you’ve got a crackerjack frog there.”

Elise’s tear stained face turned up to Bea’s for reassurance.

“Oh, I see what’s going on here.” Nurse Matilda grinned, revealing a set of blackened teeth that were missing a few. “You need to be firm with these kinds. A good swat on the behind never hurt anyone!”

Mrs. Simpson’s eyes practically popped out of her head, and she quickly interjected, “We do not condone corporal punishment in this household, Nurse Matilda.”

The nurse’s smile faltered for a moment, but she quickly recovered. “Well, I’ve never had any complaints before! Besides, isn’t an asylum the safest place for someone with these special challenges?”

Bea’s demeanor changed. It wasn’t anything overtly obvious, but Mrs. Simpson stood down and awaited the younger woman’s verdict for their colorful applicant.

“Thank you, Nurse Matilda,” Bea said with clipped tones. “We won’t be in need of your services.”

Then, without further delay she assisted Elise back to the nursery. It had been decided that the nursery was the best place for Elise to have the things she loved and enough space for a nurse and caretaker.

When Bea made it back down for their next interview, she was on edge and worried that this was all for not. Fortunately, that was when Nurse Gertrude was introduced.

Nurse Gertrude was the complete opposite of Nurse Matilda. She was petite and soft-spoken, with a gentle demeanor that immediately put Bea at ease. She wore a crisp and practical uniform, giving off an air of competence.

“Good afternoon, ladies. I am Nurse Gertrude. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said with a warm smile.

Bea and Mrs. Simpson both felt a glimmer of hope as Nurse Gertrude took a seat gracefully.

“We’re delighted to have you here,” Bea said. “Tell us about your experience, especially caring for those with additional challenges.”

Nurse Gertrude’s eyes sparkled with genuine passion. “My sister was born without the ability to speak or walk. My parents didn’t want to send her away despite the advice of the local doctors. I’ve spent many years working with individuals with whom some might call simple or challenged. I have a passion for helping them achieve what’s possible for them. I feel that creating a nurturing and supportive environment helps each individual to thrive and reach their full potential.”

Mrs. Simpson nodded approvingly, clearly impressed with the candidate. “And how do you handle misbehavior?”

Nurse Gertrude’s smile remained warm. “I believe in positive reinforcement and gentle discipline. Often the individuals aren’t aware that what they are doing is wrong. They respond best to patience and understanding. I’m also a believer in a team approach. With two or three caregivers who are committed to the individual’s success, we will find the best environment for your loved one to be successful.”

Bea felt a sense of relief wash over her, knowing that Nurse Gertrude would be a much better fit for Elise’s needs. “And if I might be so bold, what happened with your sister?”

Nurse Gertrude’s eyes softened, and she spoke with heartfelt sincerity. “She passed on more than ten years ago now. But it was through Lizzie that I gained a love of helping these people. I always approach each client with individualized care. I’m patient, adaptable, and always eager to learn and grow in my profession.”

Bea and Mrs. Simpson exchanged a knowing look, both in agreement that Nurse Gertrude was the ideal candidate.

“Well, Nurse Gertrude, we are delighted to have you as a potential member of our household,” Bea said, unable to hide her enthusiasm.

Mrs. Simpson nodded in agreement. “Indeed. We’ve a few other candidates that I would love to coordinate with you and see if we can possibly build this team you speak of. We want the best for the duke’s ward.”

As Nurse Gertrude left the room, Bea couldn’t help but let out a small sigh of relief. “Thank goodness for that,” she whispered to Mrs. Simpson.

The housekeeper smirked, clearly amused by the previous spectacle. “Indeed, Miss Bloomfield. It appears we have found our candidate.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“I would always rather be happy than dignified.”

—Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre

Over the following week, Nathan found himself spending more time in the company of Miss Beatrice Bloomfield, or simply “Bea” as the girls affectionately call her. He longed for the time when he too could take such liberties. It seemed that every interaction with her only deepened his admiration for the caring and dedicated woman who had taken on the responsibility of the Abbott sisters.

Nathan couldn’t deny the charm of Worthington Hall’s newest inhabitants. Annie’s infectious laughter, Vicky’s lively spirit, and even Elise’s mischievous antics all brought a newfound lightness to his days. But it was Bea who held his attention the most. Her gentle demeanor and selflessness touched a part of him that he hadn’t known existed.

One evening, after the girls had retired for the night, Nathan found himself in the library, trying to focus on the financial reports spread out before him. However, his mind kept drifting back to the image of Bea’s warm smile and the way her eyes lit up when she spoke about the girls.

Lost in thought, Nathan didn’t notice when Bea entered the room until she cleared her throat softly. Startled, he looked up

to see her standing there, a gentle blush gracing her cheeks.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Your Grace,” she said, “I just wanted to inquire about the plans for the girls’ debut season in London.”

Nathan pushed the papers aside, giving her his full attention. “Of course, Miss Bloomfield. I’ve been giving it some thought, and I believe it’s best to start making arrangements as soon as possible. The London Season will be upon us before we know it. However, I believe that a ball, held here at Worthington Hall will give them the proper introduction to society.”

Bea nodded, her eyes shining with excitement. “I’m sure the girls will be thrilled. This is a wonderful opportunity for them, and I want to ensure that they have the best experience possible. If you don’t mind my asking, will it be the Duchess who will be sponsoring them?”

Bea knew that in order for the girls to be successful they would need to have vouchers for Almac’s and come out under a proper chaperone. As a teacher’s daughter, she was just a hair’s breadth away from trade. As much as Bea would have loved to be a part of the girls introduction, there was no room for her in The Ton.

“I have no doubt that under your guidance, they will make a remarkable impression,” Nathan said sincerely. “Your dedication to them is evident, and I cannot express how grateful I am for everything you’ve done.”

Bea’s cheeks turned even pinker, and she lowered her gaze. “It’s my duty and pleasure, Your Grace. However, I cannot sponsor them. Surely you know that? I was never presented, nor did I come out.”

Nathan leaned forward. “I will admit that I had hoped the Duchess would take the girls under her wing. However, she isn’t so inclined. I don’t mean to air the family squabbles with you, Miss Bloomfield. It’s just, you must know what a calming presence you’ve had upon all of us at Worthington Hall. Since you arrived here with the girls, you’ve been something of a wonder.”

Bea’s eyes widened, and she seemed at a loss for words.

Nathan, never one to mince words, pressed forward with a plan that was barely hatched. But every moment in her presence, he felt more inclined to present the crazy idea to her.

“I find myself looking forward to each moment we spend together. You are wonderful with the girls and have a way about you that is ... I can’t even think of a way to describe it.”

“You flatter me, Your Grace,” Bea said softly. Her attraction to the man had been very intense, but she’d no idea that he felt the same.

“I wish to discuss something with you. Something of a personal nature,” Nathan began, deciding to throw caution to the wind. “I never meant to marry. And yet, I see now that it is necessary.”

Bea took a step back. Surely he wasn’t suggesting ... No. It couldn’t be.

“It would be a traditional marriage. After all, I need an heir. However, I am a kind man. I wouldn’t stand in the way of your dreams or be a terrible taskmaster. I should think we would rub along well together, and grow to have a rather nice friendship. That’s far better than love, isn’t it Miss Bloomfield? And if we were to marry, Elise would have a

familiar face. Someone who loves and cares for her. What do you say? Will you marry me?"

The air seemed charged with unspoken emotions. Bea could hardly breathe. How stupid was she to have thought, even for a moment, that Nathan might have developed feelings for her? He wanted her as a broodmare and caretaker for his wards. There was nothing about love in his proposal.

And yet, it was likely the only proposal that Bea was going to get. At one and thirty, she wasn't at the top of anyone's eligible young maidens. She was so firmly on the shelf that she'd begun gathering dust.

Perhaps this was her chance to have a family, to see the girl's settled, and to find happiness. Even if love wasn't to be part of the equation. The thought made her stomach clench.

Bea's eyes filled with tears, but she swallowed that emotion and forced her face to relax into a soft smile. "I never imagined that I would marry."

Nathan moved in a fraction closer to where she was standing. "I've upset you, forgive me."

Bea shook her head. "No, you've honored me, Your Grace. I should be proud to call you husband."

Nathan gently wiped away a tear that had escaped down her cheek. "And these are happy tears?"

Bea desperate to get away and have a good cry, nodded. "I would be honored to accept your offer of marriage."

Much to her surprise, he drew her into a tender embrace. She'd never in her life been so close to a man. To feel his arms around her, to smell the rich cologne, and his chest pressed against her own. It was almost too much to bear.

“Your Grace,” she whispered rather breathlessly.

“We are betrothed,” he said, his head bent and so very close to her own.

Bea felt as if her body was melting. She wasn’t sure how she was standing on her own. His male presence was enough to throw her equilibrium off. But the sexual magnetism between them was overwhelming. She wondered what it would be like to feel his lips against her own. Surely he wouldn’t kiss her, would he?

She stared at his lips, half fearing and half hoping he would lower his head just a bit further and put her out of her misery.

“Please, call me Nathan,” he asked huskily. “And I shall call you Bea.”

“Bea,” she repeated stupidly and then flushed when he smiled down at her.

“You are so very lovely,” he said simply. “Inside and out.”

Had she raised upon her toes? Bea hardly knew who was in command of her person because surely it wasn’t her who splayed her hands across his broad chest or tipped their face up clearly begging for his kiss.

As if he couldn’t help himself. Nathan leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

Bea never could have imagined how perfectly wonderful it would be to kiss a man. To kiss this man, someone she had come to admire and if she was being honest, someone she was starting to develop a tender for.

He kissed her once, and then gently once again.

Bea relished every moment. This was pure bliss. She could have stood there forever, and likely would have if the sharp knock hadn't interrupted them.

They split apart just as the door opened with Vicky and Annie stumbling inside.

"Oh, Bea, we have been looking everywhere for you!" Vicky admonished.

"You look very strange right now," Annie added. "Are you feeling unwell?"

Bea shot a look at Nathan as he stifled a laugh.

"I am perfectly healthy, I assure you. How may I be of assistance?" Bea asked in her no-nonsense tone.

"The dressmaker needs to get your measurements. She's waiting for you in your dressing room."

"What?" Bea's confused expression flew from the girls to Nathan.

He shrugged. "I've arranged for each of you to have a new wardrobe. I should imagine that Elise's might require a bit of tweaking. If you don't mind sharing that information."

Bea stiffened. "I don't need a new wardrobe, Your Grace."

"Nathan," he insisted, not caring how Vicky and Annie both gasped. "We're to be married, remember?"

"Married?" Vicky squealed. "Oh, how famous! I am in raptures!"

Annie seemed just as over the moon as Vicky. "It's just like a fairy tale."

"It's nothing like a fairy tale," Bea groaned, feeling embarrassed at the girl's attention and unsure if she'd truly

made the right decision. Could she be a duchess?

“Come along,” Bea said to Vicky and Ann. “His Grace has work to be done.”

“Nathan,” came the ringing reply of not only Nathan but Vicky and Annie in chorus as well.

“Looks like you are overruled,” Nathan said with a twinkling grin. “You might as well give in.”

O ver the next few weeks, the preparations for the girls’ debut season in London were in full swing. With the help of Miss Gertrude, Elise’s new nurse, and a team of skilled dressmakers, the sisters were soon outfitted in elegant gowns and ready to make their entrance into society. The excitement in Worthington Hall was palpable, and even Nathan found himself caught up in the anticipation of the upcoming events.

As the day of the grand ball approached, Nathan found himself seeking Bea’s company more and more. They spent hours together, discussing the plans for the ball and the girls’ future in society. With each passing day, Nathan discovered new layers to Bea’s personality and fell more deeply under her spell.

One afternoon, they were walking in the gardens, enjoying a moment of quiet away from the hustle and bustle of the preparations. The sun was beginning to set, casting a warm golden glow over the estate. Bea looked radiant in the fading light, and Nathan couldn’t help but be captivated by her.

“Bea,” Nathan began hesitantly, “I hope you know how grateful I am for everything you’ve done for the girls and for

me. You've brought so much joy into our lives, and I can't imagine facing the future without you."

Bea blushed and looked down, feeling her heart flutter at his words. "I only did what I felt was right, Nathan. The girls needed someone to care for them, and I couldn't stand by and do nothing."

Nathan gently lifted her chin, so their eyes met. "You've done far more than anyone could have asked for, and I am deeply thankful for your presence in our lives. You've become indispensable to us, to me."

Bea's heart pounded in her chest, and she could hardly believe what she was hearing. "I never expected any of this," she admitted softly. "I never thought I would marry, let alone marry a duke."

Nathan smiled warmly. "Life has a funny way of surprising us, doesn't it? I never expected to find someone like you. I've come to care for you deeply. You've brought light and happiness into my life, and I can't imagine spending it with anyone else."

It wasn't the declaration of love that Bea wanted but, it was something. The more time that she'd spent with Nathan, the more she fell for him. He was genuinely kind, he had a good heart, he was wonderful with Elise and he'd be a good father.

He was everything she could have wanted in a man. But he didn't love her. Could it be enough? Or would she come to resent him? The thought was lowering.

As if he could sense the battle being waged inside of her, he gathered Bea into his arms and whispered softly, "Marry me now, Bea. Let's not wait any longer. I can get a special

license and we can be married right away. Instead of announcing our engagement at the ball we can announce our marriage. Say yes, please say yes.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

*“I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace,
against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement
that could be.”*

—*Charles Dickens, Great Expectations*

Two days later, Bea found herself in a gorgeous dress. It was a masterpiece, meant to showcase the beauty and grace of the wearer. The pale peach silk draped across Bea’s body creating a womanly silhouette. The bodice was fitted, highlighting the smallest part of her waist, all the while enhancing her delicate shoulders.

Delicate lace adorned the short capped sleeves, showing her slender arms to perfection. The full skirt cascaded from the waist, looking ethereal as the slight bell shape floated around her. Never had Bea ever felt as beautiful as she did on this day.

Accepting to marry Nathan with a special license was both terrifying and exciting. She knew now without a doubt that she loved him, and she was fairly certain that he cared deeply for her as well.

But he didn’t love her.

The thought had kept her up half the night. Many people married without love. Hadn’t she and the girls discussed this

very thing before they'd come to Worthington Hall? Love could grow out of affection, surely it could. If only Bea could know that she was making the right decision.

It had been decided that only the family would be present at the wedding. Nurse Gertrude had been a godsend with Elsie. Bea was happy that Elsie was settling into their new life just as well as her sisters Annie and Vicky. Nathan had insisted that Nurse Gertrude have all of the assistance she needed to see to Elsie's happiness.

For the first time in as long as she could remember Bea was free to just be herself, and the thought was terrifying. Instead of being Elsie's caregiver, she was committing to be Nathan's Duchess. What did she know of such things? While she'd learned a great deal from her mother, it hadn't covered any situation quite like this.

"Are you ready?"

Bea turned to see Annie and Vicky peering into her room from the doorway.

Annie's breath caught and her hands flew to her mouth. "Bea, you look so beautiful."

"Just like a fairy tale," Vicky added wistfully.

"Good heavens," Bea sighed, although she couldn't hide her smile. "You two are incorrigible. Now, are we ready to go?"

It had been decided that the ceremony would take place in the small chapel at Worthington Hall. With an excited nod, the girls happily escorted Bea through the house, and across the lawn until at last, Bea stood in the doorway of the church.

Nathan turned to see her, his breath caught at the sight of Bea, radiant in her wedding gown. His chest tightened and his

heart beat wildly as he saw her light flush. She was stunning. Nathan, waiting at the altar, couldn't take his eyes off her, feeling like the luckiest man in the world.

As she walked towards him, Nathan felt a swelling of love in his heart that surprised him. Surely it was just the emotions of the day, wasn't it? He'd offered Bea a marriage of convenience. It was hardly sporting of him to turn the tables now, especially at the very last moment.

Nathan needed to get his emotions in check. He was just caught up in the magic of it all.

The vows were exchanged, and the moment they were pronounced husband and wife, a wave of happiness washed over both of them. The small congregation consisting of Annie, Vicky, Elsie, Nurse Gertrude, Nurse Mable, Mrs. Simpson, and Stewart erupted into applause as Nathan and Bea shared a brief kiss.

However, amidst the celebration, a shadow loomed in the form of the Dowager Duchess. Standing tall and imposing, she observed the proceedings with a stern expression on her face.

Nathan hadn't the slightest idea who could have invited her, it certainly wasn't him. Rather than make a fuss over her entrance, he chose to ignore her sullen expression.

However, it would seem that the Dowager Duchess wasn't in the mood. "What is the meaning of this, Nathan?" she demanded, her voice filled with anger.

Nathan held Bea's hand firmly in his. "The meaning, Your Grace, is that I have married. Bea is my wife, my new duchess, and she will be treated with the respect and honor she deserves."

The Dowager Duchess scoffed, her disapproval evident. “You have married beneath your station, just as your father did before you. You have disgraced the title and the legacy of our family.”

Nathan’s eyes flashed with determination. “My father’s love for my mother was genuine and true. He defied tradition for love, a sentiment that we all could take lessons from. I will not allow society’s expectations nor a grandmother that I hardly know, dictate whom I marry. Bea is the woman I choose to spend my life with, and I will not apologize for that.”

Bea, who had been silently listening, felt a glimmer of hope rise within her. Nathan had spoken of defying tradition for love as a noble quest. Did that mean he loved her, or that he could grow to love her.

She hardly cared what the old viper said about her. After learning what the Dowager Duchess had done to her son and grandson, she held little respect for the woman.

The Dowager Duchess remained unyielding, but Nathan’s resolve only grew stronger. “Grandmother, I am the Duke of Worthington, and my decisions as the head of this family are final. I expect you to treat my wife with the respect she deserves as the Duchess of Blakeney or you will not be welcome here at Worthington Hall.”

The tension in the room was palpable, but Nathan held his ground, unwilling to back down. His newfound love for Bea and his determination to protect her from any judgment or disapproval were enough to overcome any misgivings he had of speaking so frankly with his formidable grandmother in front of others.

With a final disapproving glance, the Dowager Duchess turned and left the room, her disapproval still evident, but it was obvious that her authority was weakened. It was silent for a long moment.

Then Vicky and Annie began to cheer for the married couple, and soon everyone followed.

The tension dissipated, and joy filled the air once again. They all moved to the house where a lovely meal was waiting and the toasts were made to the happiness of the newlyweds.

Annie and Vicky, proud and delighted witnesses to the wedding, exchanged knowing glances. They had played a part in bringing Nathan and Bea together, and now they had seen the Duke stand up for Bea against all odds. Clearly their work was done, and a fine job they'd done of it.

As the day wore on, everyone drank a little too much champagne, danced until their feet were sore, and laughed to their heart's content. It was lovely and beautiful, a day they would not soon forget.

But as Bea returned to her new bedchamber, the duchess's quarters, with only a door between the Duke's bedroom, she felt a fission of apprehension. She hardly knew what happened in the marriage bed, and didn't have anyone to tell her otherwise.

The dressmaker had provided her underthings as well as some filmy dressing gowns that seemed hardly fit to wear. Was that what she was required to put on? Bea sucked in a breath and looked it over. It was nearly see through. Certainly there was another piece to the garment? It was thus how Nathan found her nearly a half an hour later.

CHAPTER
NINE

“My real purpose was to see you, and to judge, if I could, whether I might ever hope to make you love me.”

-Jane Austen

“**H**ow long are you planning on holding that garment?” he asked dryly from their connecting door.

Bea whirled around, the gauzy fabric clutched to her chest. “Oh! You startled me. I wasn’t quite sure ... I mean. Oh, I don’t know what I mean.”

Compassion and understanding lit his handsome face. No longer teasing, Nathan entered her bed chamber and took the fabric from her hands.

“I don’t want to pressure you, Bea,” he said gently. “If you aren’t ready to consummate this marriage, I can wait.”

“Oh no. I mean, yes. I mean ... Goodness, I hardly know what I mean. I do want to consummate the marriage, as you say. But I am afraid, I don’t really know how.”

Her cheeks had taken on the sweet color of her dress, and it was obvious that she wasn’t comfortable speaking of such intimacies. Nathan knew he’d have to work to change that. He wanted her to be able to tell him anything at any time. But he

was terribly proud of her for overcoming that fear and telling him the truth.

“How about we just try kissing?” he suggested huskily.

Bea nodded, her smile reaching her eyes. “I do enjoy kisses,” she added innocently.

He gently gathered her into his arms and lowered his head. He kissed her softly, just as he had the few times before. He’d always had the temptation to take things further and deepen the kiss. But he hadn’t wanted to scare her. Now she was his wife.

The thought alone had blood coursing through his veins and his breeches becoming a trifle tight against where his arousal lay.

Brushing his lips once again against hers, he gently opened his mouth and licked the seam of her lips.

Bea gasped and he slipped inside.

His only indication that she was onboard was the way her fingers dug into his shoulders and how her body sank against his. He kissed her gently, but felt the fire and passion begin to swell between them. She angled her head and he deepened the kiss.

A moan escaped her lips and Nathan knew that his firm hold on his passions was starting to slip. She was a natural at kissing. Her hands sliding up from his shoulders to sink into his hair. Her firm breasts pressed tightly against his chest.

He wasn’t sure how much longer he could just kiss her without moving things forward when she brushed her tongue shyly against his own.

Fire ignited in his belly and the kiss went from innocent and exploratory to passion filled and fiery. His hands moved down to cup her ample bottom. And this time it was his groan that filled the air. Her soft moans quickly followed. He needed to be nearer to her. But she was wearing so much clothing.

Pulling gently away from her lips, he kissed her jawline, his hands coming down to cup her breasts. Bea gasped as his finger rubbed over the nubs of her nipples through the gown. She arched into him, a keening cry escaping her lips.

It was all fuel to Nathan's fire. He continued to caress her, kissing his way across her neck, nipping at her ear and along her collar bone. Then he undid the top part of her gown and pulled one of her breasts free from the dress, thank God for the low neckline. So that he could suckle her breast.

If she had cried out before, it was nothing compared to the sounds she was making now. His tongue laved the reddened flesh, loving how her nipple tightened like a rosebud. He licked and sucked, flicking his tongue back and forth until she was in a frenzy of need.

“Please,” she whimpered. “I need, I just need ...”

But she hardly knew what she needed, and Nathan knew how to take this intense need away.

He pulled the other breast free and performed the same ministrations. By the time he was finished, Bea was panting and begging him for more. It was a sound he knew he would never get enough of.

Turning her around, Nathan saw the elaborate stays and the delicate lacing. Impatient, he pulled his pocket knife from his pocket and cut the material away easily pulling the fabric from

her body. Bea tried to cover her nakedness, but Nathan stopped her.

“You are my wife, and you are beautiful. Please do not cover yourself.”

“But I am naked and you are fully clothed,” Bea reasoned, her color high and her beautiful nipples still tight and reddened from his tongue.

“Indeed,” he said wolfishly. “That is something I will immediately fix.”

It didn't take him long at all to remove his wedding finery and then suddenly he was as naked as she was. He loved the way her eyes kept sneaking glances even though she was trying to seem unaffected.

Once she saw his manhood, her eyes went wide. “Whatever are you going to do with that?”

He laughed. “Have you enjoyed everything so far?”

She nodded warily.

“Then you will enjoy the rest. Come to bed, and let me kiss you again.”

She eagerly followed him to the bed and kissed him.

Soon they were a tangle of limbs as he continued to kiss her, only without clothing, he was able to tease and touch her in far more intimate areas. When his hand brushed against her mons, Bea moaned.

She'd felt such an achiness between her thighs and couldn't figure out why.

His first touch nearly sent her soaring. He stroked her tenderly at first, getting her used to the sensation. But as their

passion grew so did he increase the speed of his fingers. With her hips bucking and her body straining, Nathan knew that she was close to her release.

He moved his fingers to circle her clit and she shattered in his arms, her body convulsing as wave after wave of passion swept over her. It was beautiful to watch. Nathan felt that same surge of love wash over him that he had when she was walking to him in the church. This was his happy ending, his beautiful wife.

Moving between her thighs, he settled his length there and whispered, “You are going to feel some pressure, Bea. I’ve tried to lessen it as best I can. It won’t always hurt, but I’ve heard the first time can be unpleasant.”

She nodded, a bead of sweat on her brow. She was so lovely, he struggled to contain himself. Slowing entering her body, he reached between them and began to circle her clit once again. Her back arched and she unconsciously spread her legs further apart. She was so wet that Nathan was thankfully able to enter her. However, she was tight, her virginal walls unused to the activity of lovemaking.

He began to slide within her. Bea’s breath caught and her moans grew deeper, more guttural.

He felt the moment he’d breached her womanhood. She cried out, but whether in pain or passion he didn’t know. Her second orgasm swept over her and spurred him onward.

Pumping in and out of her, Nathan was soon spending his seed between her thighs, marking her as his own. His Duchess. His wife.

CHAPTER
TEN

They forgot everything the minute they were together.

–Emily Brontë

The morning sun streamed through the tall windows of the dining room, casting a warm glow over the table adorned with a delightful spread of breakfast delicacies. Nathan, Duke of Worthington, sat at the head of the table, dressed in a formal but slightly disheveled morning coat. His hair was a little ruffled, and there was a newfound softness in his eyes as he gazed across the table at Beatrice, now officially the Duchess of Worthington.

Bea, still blushing from the events of the previous night, couldn't help but fidget with her teacup. She wore a beautiful morning gown, her hair neatly arranged in a simple bun, but her nerves were evident in the way she avoided direct eye contact with Nathan.

The servants moved about the room, serving breakfast with practiced efficiency, but even they couldn't help but notice the newfound tenderness between the Duke and Duchess. The atmosphere was charged with a mixture of formality and intimacy, leaving everyone a little unsure of how to act.

Nathan cleared his throat, trying to find the right words to break the gentle tension that hung in the air. "I trust you slept

well, my dear?"

Bea looked up, her cheeks flushing slightly, and nodded. "Yes, thank you, Nathan. The bed was quite comfortable."

He smiled, his eyes lingering on her face. "I'm glad to hear that. You know, it feels rather strange to be sitting here like this. As husband and wife, I mean."

Bea nodded again, her fingers tracing the delicate patterns on the edge of her teacup. "Yes, it does. But it's a pleasant kind of strange, don't you think?"

Nathan chuckled softly. "Indeed, it is. And it will take some getting used to, but I must say, I find it rather delightful."

The corners of Bea's lips twitched into a shy smile, and she finally looked directly at him. "I do too. You were right, you know. It's nice to have a familiar face in this new role."

Nathan reached across the table, his hand gently covering hers. "And I am grateful that it is your face, my dear. I couldn't have asked for a better partner in this journey."

Bea's heart fluttered at his touch, and she felt a warmth spread through her entire being. "Thank you, Nathan. I feel the same way."

"Are the girls excited for the ball tonight?" He asked, turning back to his breakfast.

Bea, thankful for his change of subject, launched into a long story about a mix-up at the dressmaker, but in the end all was put to rights. Thankfully, it seemed that they could indeed have a regular conversation despite the intimacies they'd shared. Bea felt just a little harder for the Duke she now called husband.

Later that evening the grand ballroom of Worthington Hall was aglow with the warm light of crystal chandeliers, and the walls were adorned with exquisite floral arrangements. The night had finally arrived for Annie and Vicky to make their debut into society, and the excitement was palpable in the air. The room was filled with a mix of aristocrats, high-ranking officials, and esteemed guests, all eager to witness the much-anticipated event.

Annie stood in front of a full-length mirror in her opulent dressing room, adorned in an enchanting ball gown. The dress was a vision of pale lavender silk, delicately embroidered with silver threads and adorned with cascading ruffles that accentuated her slender figure. Her dark hair was artfully arranged in curls, held in place with a crown of sparkling jewels.

Vicky, equally radiant, twirled in front of another mirror, her gown a striking shade of emerald green that complemented her vibrant personality. The gown featured a fitted bodice with a sweetheart neckline, embellished with intricate beadwork that shimmered in the light. Her long hair was elegantly swept up, with soft tendrils framing her face.

The sisters exchanged excited glances, their hearts fluttering with a mixture of nervousness and anticipation. “We look like we’re ready to dance with princes and dukes,” Vicky exclaimed with a giggle.

Annie laughed, feeling a surge of joy and gratitude. “Well, we just might,” she said, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

As they made their way down the grand staircase, the murmur of the guests hushed, and all eyes turned toward the magnificent duo descending to greet their awaiting guests. The room was momentarily filled with awe and admiration as they made their entrance.

Annie and Vicky glided gracefully into the ballroom, their hands held by their guardian, Nathan, the Duke of Worthington. He was beaming with pride, for the Abbott sisters who had become such an important part of his life.

Nathan led them to the center of the dance floor, where the orchestra began to play a waltz. With poise and elegance, Annie and Vicky danced with a suitor chosen by Nathan. Having just publicly announced his wedding to Bea, the Duke took her into his arms and danced alongside the other couples. Their joy was infectious, and soon the other guests joined them on the dance floor.

Throughout the evening, Annie and Vicky were introduced to countless eligible suitors, each vying for a chance to be in the presence of the Abbott sisters. But amidst the whirlwind of introductions, both sisters couldn't help but steal glances at their guardian and honorary sister, the Duke and Duchess, who stood nearby, ever the watchful guardians.

As the night wore on, the dance floor remained alive with laughter and music. The ball was a resounding success, and Annie and Vicky were the belles of the evening, charming everyone with their grace and wit.

At one point, as Annie was engaged in conversation with a particularly charming young lord, Vicky caught Nathan's eye from across the room. She excused herself gracefully and made her way to him.

“Nathan,” she said, taking his arm, “you look a bit too serious over there. This is supposed to be a night of celebration.”

Nathan smiled softly at her, his eyes warm and grateful. “I can’t help it. I can’t believe how grown up you both look tonight. It feels like just yesterday that you were running around Worthington Hall, causing mischief.”

Vicky chuckled. “That was the day before yesterday.”

They shared a laugh and then Vicky went on in a more serious tone. “I know that we weren’t what you were expecting.”

Nathan went to protest, but Vicky held up a hand. “I know we weren’t. The truth was that we’d given up hope that our guardian would ever come for us. And that worked to our advantage because it was obvious that he knew nothing of Elsie’s struggles or he never would have sent her to the ladies seminary.”

Nathan felt hot under the collar. He’d felt the same way about how his father had bungled things up. It was so inconsistent with who his father was. However, it didn’t seem as if Vicky was blaming him, just explaining herself.

“Bea became part of our family. When her mother died, we could have been cast out, but Bea didn’t do that. She sold things, used brilliant economy, and did whatever it took to make sure my sisters and I were taken care of.”

Alarm bells went off in Nathan’s head. “Bea’s mother is dead? Are you certain?”

Vicky’s complexion pales. It was obvious she hadn’t meant to divulge that. “You mustn’t blame Bea for continuing to take the school fees. She barely made it even with those wages. As

a young single woman with three dependents and one that is nearly child-like, she was doing the best she could. Oh bother! I've ruined everything!"

Tears gathered in her eyes.

"I'm not angry with Bea," Nathan said kindly. "Please do not get yourself so worked up. If anything, I feel even more ashamed at my father's treatment of you and your sisters. Although, I am man enough to admit that I'm not sad how things worked out. If he would have removed your girls earlier, I might never have met Bea. And that would be the real tragedy."

"You truly care for her," Vicky replied, drying her eyes, "don't you?"

"I love her," he said at once and knew at that moment that it was true. It wasn't the emotion from the wedding or the passion from their lovemaking. He loved Bea and it was high time he told her of it.

Not wanting to waste another moment, Nathan excused himself and went to find his wife.

Bea was conversing with a few of the matrons when Nathan interrupted them. "I beg your pardon ladies, but I am afraid that I need my wife at this moment."

The older women giggled behind their fans and watched as a very surprised Bea was led away by her handsome husband.

"You realize that people are going to talk?" she whispered to him as he guided her to a darkened alcove.

"About how I am obsessed with my wife?" he answered glibly.

“Yes,” Bea said honestly. “Or they might go on about how we live in each other’s pocket. Some might even say that it’s a ...”

She left off, but Nathan was there to finish it for her. “A love match?” He added softly.

Bea was thankful for the darkness of the alcove. Blast her fair complexion and the constant blush that she seemed to always have in his presence.

“If you must say it aloud, then yes. People are going to say that it’s a love match.”

“Then they would be right,” he replied, his tone taking on a huskier note. “Because I am very much in love with my new wife. And I am dying to know if that feeling is returned.”

Tears filled Bea’s eyes. “Are you certain? It’s not just gratitude or affection? How can you be sure it’s love?”

“I seem to be in the habit of making women cry tonight,” he said, causing her to look at him strangely. “Bea, I know what gratitude is. And yes, I am eternally grateful for everything you have done for my wards. I know what affection is. I feel that for Elsie, Vicky, and Annie. But that is nothing like the overwhelming feeling of love that I have for you. I love you. And I have to know, do you feel the same?”

Bea threw herself into his arms. “I love you, Nathan. So very much that I feared you would never feel the same. I didn’t want to push you or make you do anything you weren’t ready for. But I think I fell in love with you that first day we met and you were so kind to Elsie. I knew then that you were someone I needed to know better. That grew into a deep and abiding love.”

He crushed her lips against his own, uncaring if someone stumbled upon them. The love of his life returned his feelings and as far as Nathan was concerned, all was right with the world.

The night wore on, and the ball continued in a whirl of laughter, dancing, and merriment. Annie and Vicky danced with one suitor after another, but as the evening came to a close, it was clear that their hearts hadn't been engaged.

As the guests bid their farewells and the ballroom began to empty, Annie and Vicky found themselves surrounded by family and friends, their hearts full of love and gratitude for the magical night they had shared. And in the midst of it all, Nathan stood proudly by their side, knowing that he had witnessed a momentous occasion—the official entrance of the Abbott sisters into society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. CINDERS is a multi-genre author with over thirty titles ranging from sci-fi romance, historical romance, new adult romance, fractured fairy tales, to paranormal romance. S. CINDERS lives in the Midwest with her husband and two teenage sons who keep her on her toes. Known as the naughty romance author, you will remember her for her banter and engaging characters. Once you start, you won't want to stop!

I hope you enjoyed Duke's Give Love a Bad Name. For more stories involving the Abbott sisters please sign up for S. Cinders newsletter.

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**TWO DARES, A
DUKE, AND A
RUNAWAY BRIDE**

A WAGERS AND WALLFLOWERS
NOVELLA

ALYSSA CLARKE

After a botched elopement, Lady Evie hatches a daring plan: impersonate the wife of a soon-to-depart duke to gain lodging at an inn. However, an unexpected storm maroons them together, igniting undeniable chemistry. As their pretend marriage morphs into nights of fiery passion, Evie grapples with her growing feelings, fearing she's diving headlong into a love that promises only heartbreak.

CHAPTER
ONE

“I dare you to make me the happiest of men and marry me, my dearest Evie.”

Those unexpected words from Viscount Masterson momentarily robbed Lady Evelyn Watson—Evie to her friends and family, of breath. She clenched her fingers over the latest book she had been reading by the acclaimed author *S. Lovellette*, a dear friend who was really the Duchess of Collingswood.

Evie placed her copy of *Beloved* on the small walnut table and tried her best to present an unruffled composure. Surely, the viscount could not know that his alarming words would send pinpricks of alarm darting through her heart.

Could he know that I am a member of a secret ladies' club?

The only people she anticipated a dare from were her dearest friends at 48 Berkeley Square, in a place where taking on a dare was considered sacred. Stepping up to the challenge was a sign of both courage and self-exploration. It indicated a willingness to confront one's deepest desires and take daring steps toward achieving aspirations that had once appeared unattainable. The Viscount's emphasis on the word 'dare' hinted that he was well-acquainted with their unique ethos.

“Why are you so silent?” he asked, leaning forward to take her hand between his. The viscount’s brow knitted with concern. “Surely you know of my affections?”

“I ...” Evie pressed a hand to her throat, never expecting a marriage proposal from the viscount, a close friend of her brother. While they also owed to a tentative friendship between them, she had not imagined it had bloomed into an attachment. She gently withdrew her hands from his and folded them in her lap. Evie met the viscount’s clear green gaze. How earnest he seemed. “I thought you were in love with Miss Sarah Bellamy?”

Everyone had seen his attachment to Miss Sarah, who was a bit unfortunate in her connections. Evie thought her kind and lovely, and while her father was a baron, society seemed determined to remind everyone her mother’s family were merchants. There was also a small rumor that she had no dowry.

The viscount grimaced and looked away, visibly shaking fingers through his hair. “Please do not give any importance to such rumors.” He returned his regard to hers, his expression softening. “Please say you will marry me, Evie?”

She stood, nerves quaking through her heart. “I will think on it, my lord.”

Astonishment widened his light green eyes, but he had enough sense of self to merely nod and rise to his feet. “Very well. Is it permissible for me to call upon you tomorrow for an answer?”

That is too soon!

Evie, however, did not protest, for if she needed more time to discern if the viscount was a good match, perhaps they were

not suited. She nodded, and after a few more polite pleasantries, he departed. She hastened to her bedchamber and collected her bonnet, shawl, and specially-made parasol that held a blade in the curve handle.

Evie went downstairs and slipped from the townhouse without a maid following her. It was only a few minutes to noon, and the walk to 48 Berkeley Square would take her less than twenty minutes. Her thoughts whirled as she briskly walked. The viscount last week had asked her to call him Lloyde. He had taken her out in his phaeton in Hyde Park, and at Lady Cringleford's ball, he had asked her to dance twice.

Oh, how was I so obtuse?

Somehow, she had not believed his attention to be more than a solicitous friend. She heaved a sigh of relief upon reaching the club, hurrying up to the steps to lift the knocker. The club's butler, Gibbs, opened the door, and Evie hurried inside.

Several of the ladies were in the wager room on the lower floor, scribbling wagers and dares on the large board tacked to the wall. Evie made her way to the second floor, searching for her friends. Surprisingly, Harriet, the new Countess of Warwick, was in attendance, and her head was closely dipped toward Jocelyn's, and they whispered.

"Ladies," Evie said warmly.

Jocelyn jerked guiltily and blushed.

Evie arched a brow. "Oh, what wicked deeds are being plotted?"

Harriet grinned, a rosy blush growing on her cheeks. "Someone was most curious about the delights of the marriage

bed and thought the few tidbits from our other friends were not forthcoming enough.”

Ebie grinned. “Why do you need the knowledge? Have you finally decided to seduce your brother?”

“*Stepbrother!*” she said hotly, her cheeks burning brighter. “He has never seen me as a sister in the ten years his father married mama.”

Harriet’s eyes widened, and Evie decided it was wise to not tease her friend about a matter that clearly pained her heart. Quickly, she told them about her offer and how she felt about it.

“Evie,” Jocelyn breathed, “will you accept him?”

She twisted her fingers together. “I ... I do not know.” Taking a deep breath, she told her friends of what her mother suggested. “Lord Emerson has made his intention known to my parents ... and they approved.”

“*Lord Emerson?*” her friends cried in union.

“Yes.”

“The earl is over sixty!” Harriet growled. “Why do parents so easily try and decide our futures with no regard to our feelings? Are social wealth and connection all that matters?”

That heavy pang in Evie’s heart grew. “Mama said I would be foolish to not accept him.”

“Nonsense,” Jocelyn said crossly. “You are very pretty, and your dowry is respectable.”

“I’ve still had three seasons.” Because there were far better options available to the gentlemen of the *ton*. At any given ball, there might be dozens of ladies and only a handful of eligible gentlemen. While her father had increased her dowry,

the one gentleman who ardently pursued her was a notorious gambler who lost his inheritance. Evie could not imagine what Lord Emerson's reason could be. The earl had never asked her to dance or conversed with her.

"I shall think about the viscount's offer," she murmured. Evie laughed. "Did you know that he dared me to marry him? I cannot tell if he knows about our penchant for dares and wagers or if it was a coincidence."

"Given the viscount's personality, he would have used his knowledge to greater advantage," Harriet said. "I can tell you do not love him. There is no glow in your eyes, Evie. You seem ... sad."

"Never say so," she cried, pinning a determined smile on her mouth.

Evie did not want her friends to realize how morose she was at her lack of courtship. With each season, a family of her own, a man that she held genuine affection for, seemed a silly, useless wish. Only she witnessed firsthand the happiness that can be found in a love match. So many of her friends were contented with their lot, and Evie wanted such happiness for herself.

She wanted it so bad she lay awake at night with tears slipping down the corner of her eyes and a fervent hope burning inside her heart.

Perhaps I only need to accept a dare and find my own joy.

CHAPTER
TWO

A few days after telling her friends about the viscount's offer, Evie sat in a carriage that rocked gently as it traversed the uneven terrain, its lanterns casting shadows that danced on the sides of the road. Evie looked out, watching as the landscape morphed from recognizable London streets to the vast openness of the English countryside. The night was unusually quiet, except for the rhythmic sounds of hooves and wheels and her own accelerating heartbeat.

Earlier, she was at Lady Bronson's ball. Evie pled a headache, and her mother had called around the carriage to take her home. Once there, she had not changed her ballgown but had merely affixed a hat with a veil over her hair. Evie had collected a small valise she'd packed, sneaked outside, and met the viscount. That had been almost two hours past, and she knew her family would not know that she was missing until it was too late. She traveled with the viscount along the Great North Road, which would eventually take them to Gretna Green, Scotland. Evie admitted that she had started to have doubts once they passed the Smithfield market on the city edge of London.

The rumble of thunder echoed through the air. Streaks of lightning split the sky like jagged veins of electricity, illuminating the dark, bloated clouds for a fleeting moment.

The wind swirled, setting both leaves and grass into a restless dance. The entire atmosphere was suffused with an unsettling sense of foreboding, making the night feel as if it were laden with impending danger or change.

Oh, I am too silly with my imagination!

“Why do you look so worried?” the viscount said softly, his voice tinged with an inviting warmth as he looked at Evie. His light green eyes twinkled in the dim light of the carriage, and his smile had an effortless charm that had initially drawn her to his character.

“I cannot help feeling eloping was not the wisest course of action,” Evie said, her voice quivering. “I’ve had three seasons without any offer of marriage. I think my mother will be thrilled that we have formed an attachment.”

“And so she should,” he replied, raking his fingers through his thick dark hair, a nervous tic she had started to notice. “I made my suit known to your brother, and he was not happy.”

“Ah, James.” She sighed, rubbing her temples as though the mention of her brother induced a physical ache.

During her debut season in society, her brother effectively deterred multiple would-be suitors by rigorously questioning their motives. Having experienced the pain of falling for a woman who was merely attracted to his wealth, James was resolute in his advice to his sister: consider only those with a stable financial standing, as this would help ascertain if their feelings were genuine or driven by material needs.

At the outset, she felt grateful for his protective measures. However, her gratitude morphed into a sense of despair as the invitations to dance grew increasingly rare. As a result, each

subsequent social season felt like an interminable stretch of missed opportunities and loneliness.

“He has always been so protective. It’s both a blessing and a curse, really.”

“Exactly. Your family might not see this as the best decision, but we’re adults, capable of making our own choices.”

“And the potential scandal?” she asked, gripping the edges of her seat. “Surely, it is not as simple as merely making choices. We are *eloping*.”

His hand found its way to hers, and for a moment, she allowed herself to revel in the warmth of his touch.

“No one will know, Evie, dearest. Your family will hush this up. Only you and I will both know the truth of this matter. Once it is revealed we traveled alone and married over the anvil, they will not protest our union and help us to organize a proper affair to please society.”

Why did this make her feel less reassured?

“We will be happy,” he vowed.

“Yes, we will be,” she mused, looking down at their entwined fingers. But something was amiss. Her heart should have been soaring, filled with romance and excitement. Instead, she felt like a bird tethered to the ground, uncertain and hesitant.

“Evie, if you’re having doubts, you must tell me now,” he said, catching the nuance of her introspection. “I would rather you be honest with me, even if it leads to heartbreak.”

Could she truly see herself waking up beside the viscount for the rest of her life? Surely he was a better choice than Lord

Emerson? As she peered into his earnest eyes, she couldn't help but wonder, would their days be filled with love, or would she forever feel the gaping absence of it?

It was then that Evie realized that she had agreed to this escape as an act of desperation, propelled by the fear that no other offers would come. Her heart had leaped at the idea of being wanted, but now she questioned whether it had ever truly yearned for the man before her.

"I—" she began, but her words trailed off, swallowed by the heaviness in the air.

He waited, his gaze unwavering. "I will make you happy, Evie."

Perhaps I need to give him a chance. Love takes time to grow. She nodded, her throat tight.

"Good," he said softly, his voice tinged with a hint of relief. Then he sighed, a long, shuddering breath that seemed to deflate him.

Evie withdrew her hands from his and leaned her head against the squabs. Perhaps once she was married, there would be a sense of excitement. An hour passed in silence, and soft snoring from the viscount pulled a smile to her lips. She peered at him, wondering why she did not feel that heart-pounding thrill her friends felt when they looked upon their husbands.

Perhaps I should allow a kiss and see if it comes then.

The viscount was handsome, and he was charming. He shifted on the padded carriage bench, trying to find a more comfortable position to sleep. A piece of paper fell from his pocket, coming out of its fold as it landed on the floor. Evie

reached for it, pausing when she saw something that could be her name. Frowning, she opened it fully.

Dearest Sarah,

As I pen this letter to you, I find my hand trembling, not with excitement but with trepidation. My heart beats wildly for you, the one woman whose name dances through my thoughts and courses through my veins. I beg you, Sarah, do not cast me aside; do not seek another protector. The momentary separation that stands before us shall not be long. I vow this to you.

I am aware that my next words may not be ones you wish to hear, but I implore you to understand that circumstances force my hand. I am to be wed to Lady Evelyn, a lady of notable family and considerable fortune. While the estate of my family has fallen into a grievous state of indebtedness, this union shall bring us back from the brink. However, I want you to know that this marriage does not and cannot change the tender affection I hold for you. My heart was yours from the moment we met, and it shall remain steadfastly yours.

You might wonder why I dare make such a promise when it appears that I betray you. This union with Lady Evelyn is one of obligation, not of choice, and certainly not of love. It is a harsh necessity that a man of my station must face when times are difficult and when responsibilities weigh heavy upon his shoulders. I am entrusting you with this secret, Sarah, that while Lady Evelyn will become my wife, she shall never possess what you alone have captured: my heart.

I am coming into a sum of money through this marriage that will allow me to provide for you in a manner more befitting your worth. I promise that the hardship you may face now will soon be replaced by comfort and luxury. Do not forsake me at this time. Wait for me, as I have waited for the day that I can give you all that you deserve.

When I am able, I will visit you, and I pray you will receive me as you have in the past, with warmth, love, and the understanding that exists only between us. I know I ask much of you, and it is a selfish request, but my love for you is also selfish.

I can only reiterate my desperate hope that you will understand the difficult situation I find myself in and forgive me for the actions I must take to salvage the future of my family's estate.

With all the love my heart holds,

Lloyde

Shocked, Evie's fingers trembled. This was ... she glanced at the sleeping viscount. *The fool*. This handwriting was his, for he had sent her a few pretty poems that held even more flattery than this letter to his lover.

Evie searched her heart, wanting to feel this sense of betrayal but only feeling relieved.

I thought I wanted this—I thought I wanted you. But it seems I've been more in love with the idea of escape, of being wanted, than with the reality of it. I cannot in good conscience continue on this path when my heart is not fully committed, and you clearly love another.

Except ... she was now ruined.

Evie closed her eyes tightly and furiously thought about how to solve this. She was adept at sneaking out to visit 48 Berkeley Square and help her friends carry out their various shenanigans. This ill-judged trip could be counted as such an adventure, and she only needed to escape and return home. Only it was unavoidable for her parents to know, and she would have to face the consequences.

Her gut warned her that was what she would need to do, escape the viscount's clutches. He was desperate to marry her

for her dowry, and Evie could not imagine he would willingly let her go. Though she had learned the art of self-defense from the club, she was alone with him with no support.

If you can escape a risky situation without a fight ... do so, for you are inferior in strength and skill to a man's own.

The words of their self-defense tutor ran through her thoughts. Her heart thumping, Evie allowed the letter to slip from her fingers to the floor. Dipping into her small valise, grateful it was with her and not the coachman, she retrieved a piece of paper, ink, and a quill. Evie quickly scrawled a note.

I will not marry you. I wish you the best in your endeavors. I urge you to marry Sarah and render her respectable.

There, that should inform him why she had left. Brushing aside the carriage curtain, she saw no dwelling in the distance. There was bound to be an inn on the road journeyed by so many travelers. She only needed to wait for the opportune moment. It was an almost terrifying wait as she watched the viscount, hoping he would not awake before she enacted her plan of leaving him. Evie could not say how long passed before she saw a light in the distance. Relief filled her body. She waited several minutes for the carriage to draw closer, and then Evie placed her note on the floor beside the other letter. She gently knocked on the carriage roof, signaling the driver to stop. She held her breath, wondering if the viscount or coachman heard the soft sound. Thankfully, the viscount did not stir, but the carriage slowed. Once it had come to a halt, she opened the door and stepped out, hurrying to descend without any aid.

“Carry on,” she ordered the coachman, reaching up to ensure her veil was firmly in place. Gripping her valise and parasol with the hidden blade, she stared at the coachman. “I

implore you to not inform your master where I came off the carriage. I ... I will not be eloping with him anymore, and should he try to force me, I will not hesitate to start a scandal.”

He glanced behind her at the inn in the distance, then back to her. “Will you be safe, miss?” he asked, worry marring his features.

The concern in his tone removed some of the knot of worry from her belly. Perhaps he might keep her confidence from his employer.

“I’ll find my way,” she replied, her voice steadier than she felt.

The carriage pulled away, leaving her standing alone on the darkened road. Evie whirled around and dashed toward the inn with a simple and firm plan in mind. She would stay the night and, in the morning, take the stagecoach and return to London without the risk of scandal.

Only she did not feel assured as she hastened toward the bustling courtyard, only a sense that perhaps this time, she might have completely destroyed her reputation, her family’s faith and trust in her, and she might have to marry Lord Emerson to fix everything.

CHAPTER
THREE

“**B**ring around His Grace’s carriage and alert the coachman to prepare for travel,” a footman dressed in livery said to a young stable lad as Evie hastened past them. She felt the footman’s curious gaze upon her; however, she continued without looking around.

“His Grace will be departing soon,” the footman continued. “Hurry, lad.”

“Tonigh’?” the young lad asked, peering at the sky. “An’ no’ in ‘he mawnin’? I’ seems rain is bound ‘o come soon. There is a bad chill in ‘he air.”

“Who are you to question His Grace? Get going!”

Evie entered the inn, stilling on the threshold. It appeared to be a very respectable inn, the décor clean, and the interiors did not smell of stale air. She hastened to the area where the proprietor of the inn waited. Or perhaps a worker. Setting down her valise, she rapped her knuckles on the wooden counter. “A room, please,” she said crisply.

The man peered at her veil and scowled. “Get on with you. There is no room for yer sorts.”

“I beg your pardon?”

A portly lady who had come up leaned forward and whispered, “Tis be a lady, Samuel, look a’ ‘er fine dress!”

“A lady traveling alone? A tart, you mean! Either way, we are at capacity!”

Shocked, Evie pretended she had not heard that outraged whisper. There were no more rooms to let! And she suspected that even if there was one, it would not be available to her. It was then she recalled Perdie’s story, another dear friend and member of 48 Berkeley Square, who had run away once and had to stay at an inn. No respectable lady would travel alone, and no respectable person would rent a room to a woman alone, fearing her presence would soil their establishment as one who rented to courtesans. If that happened, no decent person would want to rent from them, and the quality of their inn would devolve.

Drat. Evie’s heart pounded, and she stood there, uncertain of what to do. She had no gentleman accompanying her like Perdie, with whom Evie could pretend to be his wife. What would she do if this man would not rent—

Her thoughts skittered to a stop as she recalled the conversation she walked past just now. There was a duke in residence, and he was *leaving*. This was a risky move and certainly desperate, but she had little option. Evie sensed this man would not be moved by her plight should she divulge it to him.

“If I were to call my husband, he would be most displeased,” she said, lifting her chin. “His Grace did not inform you I was to join him? Of course not! Are we now to explain our activities to you?”

Evie infused all the arrogance of her background into her tone.

The proprietor blanched, and the lady wiped her hand in an apron around her waist. Her eyes were kind but wary.

“Forgive my husband, Your Grace! I just served a warm meal and a decanter of port to His Grace in the dining room,” the woman said nervously, subduing her rough accent.

“Since there seems to be some confusion, go and fetch my husband. He loathes being disturbed, but it cannot be helped if you would dare to impugn me in this manner! I say we may never visit this establishment again, nor would I recommend it!”

Evie winced inside, guilty and regretful for stirring such fear in their hearts. The worst thing for a business would be if someone from the aristocracy said they were displeased.

“Your Grace,” the lady cried. “Tis not necessary. Please allow me to escort you to the duke’s room. I will have a warm meal and a hot bath sent up for you right away.”

Evie softened, relief pushing through her. “Very well. My husband loathes being disturbed when he enjoys a meal.”

The proprietor bobbed, and the lady who introduced herself as his wife escorted Evie up the stairs. Though the overheard conversation said the duke was leaving, and the innkeeper said he was supping in the dining room, dread knotted Evie’s stomach when they climbed the stairs. Though quite unlikely, what if there were more than one duke present? What if the duke’s belongings were still in the room? What would she do?

Evie’s mind raced as she ascended the stairs, her gloved hand lightly resting on the banister, grateful the veil hid her troubled expression. The lady, who had introduced herself as

Mrs. Thompson, led the way, her posture stiff with apprehension.

“Here we are, Your Grace. The duke was offered our best rooms,” Mrs. Thompson announced, standing by the door.

Evie hesitated. “Might I inquire if His Grace is alone or accompanied?”

“He is alone, Your Grace,” Mrs. Thompson assured her, sympathy softening her expression.

Perhaps the lady wondered if the wife asked after a lover. Evie bit back her groan. “Very well,” she said, nodding for her to open the door.

As Mrs. Thompson swung the door open, Evie glimpsed a room adorned with polished furniture and rich draperies. It was a room fit for a duke, indeed.

“I will have some supper and a bath sent up for you right away, Your Grace,” Mrs. Thompson said, hastily retreating.

“Thank you,” Evie replied. “However, a bath will not be necessary; I would welcome a warm supper.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Once the door closed behind Mrs. Thompson, Evie quickly and thoroughly searched the room, sighing her relief. It was empty. She had no plan if the duke’s belongings were still there. Thankfully, it seemed the duke was already packed for his imminent departure. If his servant already checked him out of the inn, given her attitude just now, they would be unwilling to question anything. Evie would ensure they were compensated for the extra night.

Her knees wobbled, and she sank down on the bed. It was only then a choked sob escaped Evie. She closed her eyes and

struggled to maintain her composure.

All is well, and I have a safe dwelling until the morning.

She stood, walked over to the door, and turned the lock with a small *snick*. Evie removed her veil and slowly removed her ballgown and dancing slippers. She kept on her knee-length drawers, shift, and stockings. She removed the pins from her hair, stumbled over to the bed, and dropped her weight onto it. The pitter-patter of rain against the windowpane was punctuated by the rumble of distant thunder, an oddly comforting rhythm. Evie groaned in delight and closed her eyes, reluctant to sleep but unable to prevent herself from being pulled under.

Daniel Sutcliffe, the Duke of Audley, lowered the cup of coffee he was drinking to the saucer with a small *clink*. The nervous woman who had brought another serving of coffee stared at him with an air of anxiety.

“Mrs. Thompson,” Daniel said. “You are telling me that my *wife* has been comfortably situated, and her meal will be sent up soon?”

Seemingly eager to please him, she bobbed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“My wife?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Daniel masked his astonishment and merely went back to the newssheet he read. Understanding she was summarily dismissed, the innkeeper’s wife breathed a soft sigh of relief and then hastened away.

“Mrs. Thompson?”

The woman paused and whirled around, hurrying back to him. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Thank you for sensing I needed another cup of coffee.”

Her eyes widened with shock, and her expression informed him she did not expect men of his ilk to express words of gratitude to those who serve them. A smile touched her mouth; she bobbed once more and went about attending to the other guests in the dining room.

Having drained his second cup of coffee, Daniel stood up and exited the private dining room. When he stepped outside, he was immediately greeted by gusts of fierce wind and torrential rain.

“Hell,” he muttered under his breath, realizing that the storm had materialized with an intensity he hadn’t anticipated.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. He had to be in London for his mother’s extravagant ball, an event that meant the world to her. While she was overjoyed at his decision to attend, her enthusiasm was tempered by her lingering hope that he would finally select a bride during the current social season—a hope he had no intention of fulfilling.

Daniel found the entire season excruciatingly tedious, a social circus where both eager debutantes and their ambitious mothers circled like sharks, ready to pounce at the slightest hint of his interest. It seemed he couldn’t so much as share a dance with a young lady without igniting rumors that she could be the future Duchess. If he failed to send flowers the day after a casual dance, his mother accused him of being emotionally distant and unapproachable. It felt as though he couldn’t simply exist without the added burden of

expectations. That's why he'd decided to avoid the frenzied nature of the season until he was genuinely prepared to look for a spouse. After all, he was only twenty-nine and saw no need to rush into matrimony; even his father had waited until he was thirty-five to marry.

Thunder rumbled menacingly, and jagged bolts of lightning split the sky. He glanced at his footman, who looked as miserable as he felt. It was apparent that nobody wanted to undertake a journey in such abominable weather conditions.

"Jefferson," Daniel said, "We will depart in the morning. Return the horses and the carriage to the stable."

Relief brightened the footman's eyes. "Very well, Your Grace." He hurried away to do his bidding.

Daniel walked back into the inn, pausing at the front desk. "I will extend my stay for another night."

Mr. Thompson frowned. "Er ... yes, Your Grace. Her Grace went up already, and my wife just sent up a tray."

Daniel stilled. A blunder must have occurred on the part of the innkeeper, or could it be that someone was audacious enough to impersonate him and claim to be his spouse? Daniel found himself torn between indignation and amusement at the situation.

"So, this woman was actually shown to the room I had been staying in?" he inquired.

"Yes, Your Grace. A tray was sent up just now."

Intrigued yet puzzled, Daniel proceeded to ascend the staircase, contemplating who would have the audacity to make such a bold move. A maidservant hovered by the door, appearing uncertain. When she saw his approach, she bobbed

and explained, “I am to deliver a warm meal to Her Grace, Your Grace, but there is no answer.”

He held out his hand for the tray, disbelieving someone was truly inside this room. “I will take it in.”

“Thank you, Your Grace!”

Daniel tested the knob of the door, but it was closed from the inside. He fished his key from his pocket and unlocked it. He then took the tray from the servant, pushed the door open gently and secured it behind him with a quiet *click*. As he entered, he was instantly enveloped by an intoxicating blend of sun-ripened peach and jasmine fragrances, causing him to pause in surprise. Motionless, his eyes widened as they settled upon the bed in front of him.

Stretched out on the luxuriant sheets was a young woman, scarcely clothed, her form outlined by the faint room light. Her silver-blond hair fanned out around her, cascading like a silken waterfall over the pillows. Though he tiptoed closer to get a better look, she remained undisturbed, her deep, even breaths suggesting a peaceful slumber.

Upon closer inspection, Daniel noted that her features were very pretty. She was generously curved, with a genteel face that was stunning in its repose. The suppleness of her youthful skin suggested she was no older than twenty.

A perplexing sense of wonder seized Daniel. What circumstances had led her to his room, of all places? And why had she undertaken the brazen act of masquerading as his duchess?

Pretty liar. And what exactly am I to do about you?

As if sensing the weight of his scrutiny, the mysterious woman’s eyelashes quivered and then lifted, revealing eyes of

an arresting cobalt blue. Startled, she drew in a sharp breath as she realized a man was leaning over her.

“Who are you, and why are you in my room?” she demanded, her voice tinged with apprehension but also a note of steel.

“I will be the one asking the questions,” he drawled. “Who are you?”

Rather than responding, she made a sudden, agile move that caught him off guard. In one fluid motion, she reached for a parasol resting on a small table beside her, expertly slid a concealed blade from its handle, and pressed it firmly against his chest. Daniel was taken aback but also genuinely impressed. The swiftness and precision of her actions spoke volumes about her skill, raising even more questions about who she could be. He did not like liars and schemers.

So why the blast do I feel so damn ... captivated?

CHAPTER
FOUR

The silence that lingered in the room seemed brittle. Evie's thoughts churned, and with alarmed realization, she concluded this self-assured gentleman could only be the duke.

What rotten luck!

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my room?" the duke reiterated, his eyes narrowing with focused intensity.

In a move that showcased either supreme confidence or foolhardiness, he nonchalantly flicked a finger against the edge of the blade that was still pressed to his chest. "If you don't lower this blade immediately, my good lady, I shall have no choice but to regard you as a legitimate threat."

The understated menace in his voice sent a ripple of fear coursing through her. Evie stared back at him, her eyes attempting to pierce the inscrutable facade he presented. His dark golden-brown eyes offered no clue, cloaked behind an impenetrable veil of calm deliberation.

Evie couldn't ignore the compelling attraction of his features. He was strikingly handsome, although in a rather severe, austere manner. His facial symmetry, the chiseled jawline, and even the way his eyes were steady contributed to an imposing, if somewhat unnerving, physical presence. She lowered the blade, conscious she was only in her drawers and

shift. Evie could feel the blush burning her skin and sweeping up to her throat.

“Forgive me. I only presumed it because I thought you were leaving. I passed your servants in the forecourt preparing for departure. The innkeeper would not let to a woman traveling alone. I felt I had no choice but to pretend to be your wife.”

He took a few measured steps back, his gaze sweeping over her figure on the bed.

“You are a respectable lady?”

She stilled. “Of course!”

“There is nothing certain about it,” he said drily.

Oh.

“Ah, that bright blush is enough to convince me. It seems we will need to share this room until the morning.”

“*Share?*” she asked, her voice a croak. “Are you no longer leaving, Your Grace?”

“Not in this weather.”

The windows in the room chose that moment to rattle under the fierce wind.

“There is a small river ahead that might also make the road impassable for the next few days. A common occurrence this time of the year.”

“We are trapped in a storm? I ... I cannot stay here *alone* with you.”

“Why not? Are you not my wife?” he demanded icily.

A choking sound came from Evie, and she winced. “I—”

“You are welcome to leave and cast your hope on the innkeeper and his wife. Perhaps they will let you have a room if you explain your circumstances well. You may leave.”

Evie quickly rallied, knowing there was no vacancy, nor would they take kindly to a lady who had lied and intimidated them. She lifted her chin. “Very well, we shall make the best of the situation.”

A dark brow winged upward. “We will?”

“Yes.”

He was silent for a moment, then he said. “This is the best room the inn has to offer. It is very spacious and comfortable. The bed looks ... large and well cushioned and—”

“We cannot share a bed! Unless you are prepared to offer marriage in the morning,” Evie said in a nervous rush.

His golden eyes grew unfathomable, and a cynical sneer touched his mouth. “Nothing would induce me to marry. If you fear being compromised, I dare say it is too late for that. As I did not have a hand in your compromise, I will not be responsible for it.”

His voice was so cold Evie was stunned.

“I ... I did not expect you to, Your Grace. I was merely nervous at the thought of sharing a bed with a ... a gentleman! I would not dare to expect anything from you because I am trapped in this room with you. If we are discreet, no one need know about this ... *debacle!*”

Why did she feel so shattered and on the verge of tears? “I will take the bed, and you will take the chaise,” she said shakily.

The duke stared at her for so long that she started to fidget.

The duke sat on the chaise and leaned forward, dropping his hands between his legs to brace on his knees. “*I will take the chaise?*”

Another wave of taut tension filled the space. “You are the gentleman.”

He smiled, yet she only grew more nervous.

Thunder cracked, and she jerked, barely stifling her scream.

His expression was one of curiosity as he stared at her. “Afraid of the storm?”

Yes, but she would never admit that weakness to this man.

“Your choices are to sleep on the chaise or in the bed with me, miss?”

“Lady Evie,” she murmured. “I ... I will take the chaise.”

His breathing fractured, and he was the first to look away into the fire for a long moment before his gaze came back to her. “Good. A tray was sent up for you. I propose you eat and get some sleep.”

Her nerves were simply too shattered to eat. *Oh, what have I gotten myself into?*

Daniel swallowed his sigh as he lay on the bed, his fingers laced behind his head. Almost two hours had passed since he encountered the stranger in his room. No more words passed between them, and she had merely wrapped the sheet around her chest and padded to the chaise. A servant had bustled in to stir the logs in the hearth and hastily departed. The tension in

the air felt ... tight and peculiar. Her eyes seemed to have been stamped upon his consciousness. A deep violet blue, a little feline in shape and ringed with long, dark lashes.

By heavens, the little hoyden is beyond lovely. Though her speech and mannerisms said she was a lady, Daniel could not imagine how a lady of quality found herself alone at an inn on such a night as this. The rain sleeted harder, and she tossed restlessly atop the chaise.

She thumped it and muttered something.

“able ... insufferable ... uncharitable ... uncomfortable ... I hope he cannot sleep ... but he is also kind ...”

Daniel grinned, suspecting Lady Evie mumbled about him. Perhaps he was too harsh with the lady, but he'd not softened his heart even after she gave her reason for lying her way into his room. He had turned her story over, analyzing it and decided it was not a trap to compromise him. If it was, it was a poorly thought-out one because the lady could not have known he would have returned to the room. Daniel had been the target of three truly insufferable compromising situations, and they had been far more conniving. Somehow, despite his reticence, many mothers of society had quite convinced themselves he needed a wife.

Ridiculous. Their resolve only strengthened his own commitment to avoid falling into the traps and machinations. He would marry when it became a desire in his heart. If that desire never manifested, he had a younger brother who would inherit the dukedom. What Daniel would not be is forced or trapped.

Thunder rumbled again, a deep growl that shook the windowpanes. From the chaise longue across the room, a soft whimper sounded. Daniel turned his head on the plush pillow,

squinting into the darkened chamber as a flash of lightning briefly illuminated it.

“You are truly afraid of storms?” he inquired.

A small sniff broke the silence, followed by a somewhat shaky reply, “Of course not. I am made of sterner stuff.”

The words carried a blend of defiance and bravado as if daring the storm outside to prove her wrong. Oddly enough, this audacious response evoked a smile from Daniel, who found himself inexplicably charmed by her spiritedness amidst her vulnerability.

Turning his gaze toward the ceiling for a moment, he pondered the mystery that lay curled up on the chaise. What had brought her to this point? Finally, his curiosity overpowered him, and he felt compelled to ask a question that had been gnawing at him since their meeting. “Who is your father, Lady Evie?”

Daniel felt the weight of his question hang in the air, mingling with the sound of rain pelting against the windows, as he waited for her response.

The silence deepened, and he could feel her thinking.

Finally, she said, “I *cannot* own to it, Your Grace. That I have said that I am Lady Evie has to be enough. Given the unusual circumstances, it is best we retain ... some secrecy. Is that not the best way to avoid a scandal or a trap?”

His lips quirked. Not only was the situation unusual, but so was the lady. “Why are you here, alone?”

Her breath hitched.

“Ah, is that a secret as well?”

“Yes.”

He made no comment on that. Another rumble of thunder, louder than the last. This time, she shrieked and lurched upright.

Daniel sighed. “I am over six feet, Lady Evie. That is the reason I cannot sleep on the chaise, and the uncomfortable position will aggravate a wound that is finally healing nicely. I swear upon my honor, should you sleep beside me, I—”

His words choked off as she dashed off the chaise as if a ghost chased her and clambered on the bed. The little hoyden did not bother to go around to the vacant side but climbed over his body.

He was vaguely startled to feel the prickling of heat rushing through his veins. *What the hell is this?* Daniel scowled. It must be the soft, heated scent of sun-ripened peach that wafted from her. And the fact he had been without a lover for months. He was never the type to be attracted to a lady simply because she was beautiful. He appreciated a lady of wit, intelligence, and beauty. Though a part of him suspected this lady possessed great ingenuity.

Once she made her way to her designated side of the bed, Lady Evie moved with careful deliberateness. She picked up the pillows that lay scattered across the bed. One by one, she arranged them meticulously, creating a makeshift barrier—a line of cushioned mounds—between her space and Daniel’s. It was as if she were constructing a soft fortification to delineate their respective territories, a silent but clear message of boundaries not to be crossed.

He smiled but did not speak. Daniel merely watched her, a very peculiar feeling shifting inside his chest. Her eyes shifted to the small table beside her. Her parasol lay there, its handle curved elegantly, its fabric folded tightly. She reached out and

repositioned it so that the handle was now pointing toward her, ensuring that it was within arm's reach.

“Battle lines have been drawn, hmm?”

Another rosy flush bloomed on her cheeks, rendering her astoundingly beautiful. “One cannot be too careful; I am very pretty.”

The laugh that escaped from his throat surprised Daniel. She sniffed, ignoring his reaction, her fingers lightly brushing against the line of pillows. Lady Evie peeked across the divide at Daniel as if silently communicating that she had done her part in preserving the fragile boundaries between them. And with that, she eased back against the padded mattress, pulling the blanket up to her chin.

As if wanting to provoke her, the rain became torrential. From time to time, her body jerked in time with each rumble of thunder. She was so tightly wound that Daniel knew she would not sleep.

“I was eloping,” she whispered in the stillness of the room.

Those words pounded shock through his heart. “*Eloping?*”

She delicately cleared her throat. “Yes. You cannot ever repeat it.”

“To whom? We do not move in the same circles, Lady Evie. I have never seen you before.”

“Who are you?”

“Daniel, Duke of Audley.”

“I’ve heard of you, Your Grace, though we have not formally met,” she said softly. “Society considers you one of their most eligible bachelors.”

“As expected.”

Her gasp was one of outrage, and he smiled.

“You are arrogant.”

“Of course, as a duke should be.”

Her smile flashed in the half-darkened room.

“Where is your husband?”

“Oh, I did not go through with it.”

Bloody hell. In Daniel’s experience, those gentlemen who convinced young ladies to go against their family’s wishes and elope were desperate bounders. “He willingly let you go?”

“No. I merely hopped from the carriage when he slept. I did leave a note that I wish him well.”

How simply stated, yet it belied the courage it must have taken for her to act. So, she is reckless ... inventive ... but brave. A most interesting combination. “Why did you change your mind?”

Her sigh was long-suffering.

“I ... I daresay like most ladies I want a marriage ... and perhaps the thrill of something forbidden and adventurous.”

A sentiment he could almost identify with. Most days, he felt bored and uninspired. Still, Daniel asked, “Most young ladies wish for the thrill of the forbidden?”

“Most certainly,” she said chidingly.

“I shall monitor my younger sisters much closer. Thank you for the insight, Lady Evie.”

“*Borish,*” she muttered under her breath.

“So eloping was not adventurous enough for you?” Daniel murmured.

She shifted to rest on her back and stared at the ceiling. “It was, but I did not love him. I thought we could grow to love each other. I have a few friends who, when they married, had no love for their husbands, but now they cannot imagine a single day without seeing them. I envisioned that could happen to us. So, I ventured forward with reckless haste.”

“So, you do know you were reckless?”

“I am very self-aware,” she drawled.

And he heard the tremble of fear in her tone. The young lady was fully aware that she was irrevocably ruined. *Bloody hell.*

“I found a letter he wrote to a lover. It slipped from his pocket while he slept. He only wants to marry me for my dowry and promises to love her faithfully even though he plans to vow this to another lady. The butt-face buffoon. If he loves another, he should marry her.”

“A very inventive curse.”

He felt her stare.

“I know more.”

“That was not a solicitation for you to offer them, Lady Evie.”

The lightest of laughs filled the space between them.

“You sound the proud, aloof sort, I couldn’t resist.”

She jumped as another thumber cracked.

“Why do you fear the storm?”

“Is it very obvious?”

“A bit.”

She sighed and released a nervous laugh. “It is silly.”

“No fear is silly.”

He felt her astonishment and shifted his head to see her peering at him. Her lovely eyes were widened and filled with curiosity.

“Daniel,” she began.

The lady was bold. He arched a brow.

A soft sigh that rasped against his senses came from her. “We are *sharing* a bed; surely I cannot keep calling you ‘Your Grace.’”

“I agree, Evie.”

A stunned look at his ready capitulation entered her gaze.

“Ah, not so boorish, am I?”

Evie laughed again. After the slightest hesitation, she whispered, “You are ... interesting.”

“So are you.”

A peculiar tension crept between them, and she shifted to the edge of the bed.

“I’ll not catch you if you fall.”

Her gaze gleamed with a provoking light. “I was merely making myself comfortable.”

“You were shifting closer to your blade,” he said drily.

She grinned, and he couldn’t help feeling charmed.

“The sound of thunder has frightened me ever since I was a girl,” she said, almost with a soft shyness. “I cannot explain it, and I have always reacted so. My mother usually told me

stories whenever there was a storm. Of course, this stopped as I grew older, but the fear remained.”

“I could always regal you with a story until you fall into sleep.”

A choking sound came from her, and she stilled. “Truly?”

“Yes.” Simply because he could feel the tension in her, and he unexpectedly loathed the idea of her spending the night in restless terror. Evie did not provide an immediate answer but mulled over his offer for several beats.

“May I request the type of story?”

“Very well.”

“May I ... may I know more about you ... Daniel?”

A simple request, yet a curious hunger stirred inside at the softly amused tone that she used.

CHAPTER
FIVE

An hour later found Daniel sitting up against the plush headboard of the bed, a decanter of port in hand that he'd braved the lower levels of the house to acquire. Beside him, Lady Evie was also propped up, a cushion supporting her back as she, too, indulged in the late-night libation.

"Perhaps a drink would settle my nerve."

"You drink?"

"Don't you, Your Grace."

"Are we no longer Daniel and Evie? And what does my drinking have to do with you?"

Her gaze had gleamed with rich humor, then an unladylike scoff. *What men have done; we ladies can do.*

And so, he had ventured downstairs for the decanter and two glasses. To help her settle in comfortably, Daniel found himself sharing tales of his childhood, stories he hadn't revisited in years. The golden glow of the low-burning fireplace allowed him to admire her freely. With each story, peals of Evie's laughter filled the room, each note striking chords within him that he didn't even know existed. There was something in that laugh—a warmth, a sweetness, an

unrestrained joy—that made him feel as though he'd stumbled upon a hidden treasure.

Foolish and whimsical, he silently chided, amused at himself, for he had never been the sort.

Taking a sip from the crystal glass filled with port, Evie's eyes twinkled with amusement as she handed it back to him. "So let me ensure I understand your tale. Your mother set a place at the table for your pet cat so as not to upset your young sensibilities? And your cat started to dine with the family? At the table?"

"Aye, that's how the tale goes," Daniel confirmed, chuckling. "My grandmother never lets me forget it. She says she's saving the story and many others for the future Duchess of wherever I end up, whenever that may be."

"Ah, I am very privileged to learn them. I thank you, Daniel." Evie tilted her head, her eyes still sparkling. "And you decided it would be a fine idea to drink from your cat's bowl? What motivated you?"

Daniel laughed, shaking his head in self-mockery. "I can't even begin to fathom what possessed my five-year-old self to think it was a reasonable thing to do. I'm eternally befuddled by my own childish logic."

She chuckled again, that sweet sound filling the room, and for a moment, they both sat there, caught in a bubble of shared laughter and easy conversation. The thunder occasionally rumbled, but she did not seem frightened. The atmosphere had changed entirely from the cautious partitioning of earlier. The line of pillows had been set aside, and they were both comfortably in their own yet shared space.

"What was your cat's name?" Evie inquired.

“Aphrodite,” Daniel responded, enjoying the flash of surprise that crossed her face.

“Surely you did not conceive of that name yourself?” She seemed both amused and impressed. “You were a wee lad of five.”

A smile crept onto Daniel’s lips. “I did. Some of the stories my father shared were of mythology. They were rich and compelling, and my father enjoyed finding me first editions in the original languages. It is an interest I still pursue today.”

Her eyes lit up, and for a moment, he saw a flicker of something more—excitement and warmth.

“Truly?”

“Yes.”

“I, too, have a soft spot for mythology. My brother often despaired of it when we were growing up. He couldn’t understand why I would bury my nose in dusty old tales instead of more ‘suitable’ reading.”

She sighed and said no more. Daniel liked the small moments of silence that fell between their threads of conversation. He wondered what she thought about. Was her curiosity about him also growing in unchecked leaps and bounds? “Do you have any favorite myths or stories, Evie?”

“The tale of The Argo,” she said, smiling, “built with the assistance of the Gods, designed to be the strongest vessel of its time. Led by Jason, it carried the Argonauts on their quest for the Golden Fleece. The story always thrilled me—heroes, gods, mythical creatures, and thrilling adventures. I have read it and many others several times. Can you imagine if these were real? What if they were?”

Daniel liked the way her eyes sparkled as she spoke. “A classic indeed. It’s a tale that reminds us of the daring spirit of adventure but also warns us of the perils that lie in shattered promises and broken vows.”

“Exactly!” she exclaimed, clearly delighted to meet someone who shared a similar interest. “I think the romance between Jason and Medea was real and not just an alliance for mutual benefit. My dear friend Jocelyn argues there was never any true love between them. I think there was. If not, would Medea want revenge because Jason ruined their life together and broke his marriage promise? She relied on Jason for home and safety, and he betrayed her, knowing she could never return to her old home in Colchis and had nowhere else to go for help. Her disappointment and pain were profound.”

This was no superficial interest. Lady Evie had clearly given these stories thought and approached them as if she studied literature and the classics. “What other tale do you enjoy?”

“The story of Hades and Persephone. I hurt for Demeter when she tried to find her daughter, but there was something about the dark obsessiveness of Hades’s love that I like.”

“Scandalous,” he murmured teasingly, never expecting a lady to have such a view. Most ladies condemned Hades’s forcedness in pursuing Persephone.

She laughed. “At 48 Berkley—”

Her words cut off abruptly, and her eyes widened.

“What is at 48 Berkeley Square?”

A rueful smile touched her mouth. “Another secret between us, will you honor it?”

“Yes.”

“It is a ... salon of sorts where like-minded ladies meet.”

He lifted a brow. “That is very common. Why is it a secret?”

“It adds to the excitement,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

Daniel suspected there was more to it, but he did not pry.

“We often discuss the story of Hades and Persephone.” She rolled her eyes in an unladylike fashion. “We ladies are forbidden from reading about it.”

He glanced at her side table. “Is that where you learn to hide a blade in your parasol?”

“Very good,” she murmured. “Yes, and to defend myself from lecherous advances if necessary.”

“And read forbidden books.”

She sniffed. “Only forbidden to ladies, as if we have weaker minds than men.”

Daniel arched a brow at that tart reply. This salon she frequented was a place that clearly defied the conventional expectations set for ladies in society. This was not just a venue for gossip or idle chatter about fashion and marital prospects. Her words suggested it was a haven for intellectual discourse, spirited debate, and perhaps even the sort of activities that polite society might deem inappropriate for ladies.

He found the notion both unexpected and thoroughly refreshing. Daniel had grown weary of the traditional social circuits—the balls, the soirees, and the tedious matchmaking endeavors. Most women he met there seemed primarily invested in securing a husband, namely him, due to his social standing and wealth. They wore perfect masks of propriety,

hiding whatever true thoughts and feelings they might have for the sake of his and societal approval.

Evie was uniquely refreshing, and he felt a pulse of interest never before experienced. This salon she described seemed to echo her own character—unconstrained by society's expectations, unapologetically authentic. And he was neither surprised nor put off by it; in fact, he found it to be one of the most captivating things about her.

What would it have been like if he had met her at one of the traditional social gatherings of the *ton*? Would she have been the same intriguing, unconventional lady, or would the stifling atmosphere have forced her into the same mold as the rest?

Something told him that Evie was the kind of woman who would stand out regardless of her surroundings, and that idea filled him with a befuddling mix of curiosity and admiration.

“You are staring,” she said softly.

“You are a remarkably beautiful lady.”

Her eyes crinkled at the corner. “Remember the parasol.”

“As I am not the lecherous sort, I have no fear.”

As he looked at Lady Evie, her face animated by the soft light in the room, Daniel felt a dart of desire going through him. Her lush lips were entirely kissable. *Bloody hell*. He looked away from her mouth, sharply and silently reminding himself of the proprieties. This unexpected encounter, even if it felt deeply intimate, should not push him to forget himself and his conduct toward a young lady.

Unexpectedly, he was ... glad that she had snuck into his room and he was not alone. That awareness shocked him, but

he carefully masked the reaction and planned to examine it at a later date.

“Would you like to continue sharing stories?” he asked, refilling their glasses with port and savoring the richness of the moment. “Or are you now ready for sleep?”

She smiled, shaking her head. “I cannot sleep. I ... I would prefer to converse more. I daresay I feel like I want to know *everything* about you.”

She blushed at his unwavering regard.

“Perhaps afterward ... we might remain friends,” she said softly.

“That I believe I would like.”

“Why do you sound so astonished?”

“I confess to never having a lady friend before.”

Daniel looked at Evie, their eyes meeting in a silent acknowledgment of the unexpected intimacy of the night. A becoming flush crept up her slender neck, pinkening her fair cheeks. He smiled, wondering about the many layers of Lady Evie he had yet to discover. *And why do I want to know them so badly?*

CHAPTER
SIX

The gentle touch of a finger on her brow jolted Evie awake. Her gaze collided with bright brown eyes that were more golden. Lion eyes. It took her several moments to realize there was a gentleman in bed with her. In bed! The shock of it almost pushed her into a faint, then she recalled the night in its entirety. They had spoken for hours, sharing many childhood anecdotes.

Evie had told him the fear and wonder of climbing a tree for the first time as a child of nine. She spoke of teaching herself to ride a horse astride—ignoring the standard sidesaddle that was deemed proper for ladies—a rebellious act that made him admire her all the more. She even regaled him with stories of her pet parrot back in the countryside, a creature with a character as colorful as its feathers.

Daniel spoke fondly of his twin sisters, Amelia and Anna, and his younger brother, Gregory, revealing a deep-seated loyalty and love for his family. Evie was moved by the way he recounted his father's passing when Daniel was just twenty, detailing how he had stepped into the enormous responsibilities of being the Duke of Audley without hesitation. His voice had been a soothing rumble that suppressed the fear of the storm, and she had wanted to curl

into the pillows and let his voice wrap around her and lull her to sleep.

By the time Evie felt her eyelids grow heavy, giving way to the pull of sleep, she was filled with a profound realization. She had never met a gentleman like Daniel, the Duke of Audley, nor had she ever anticipated that she would.

Awareness of their position seeped into her consciousness, and she fought back the dreaded blushing. “My foot is on your hip,” she murmured. “I deeply apologize for this, but I am a terrible sleeper.”

She removed her foot, loathing how her heart pounded beneath her breastbone. Her body was simply filled with too much awareness of the duke!

Her eyes met his, searching the depths of those golden irises that seemed so warm and yet so enigmatic. A small smile hitched at the corner of his mouth, and Evie did her best to pretend that her attention was not consumed by the duke. Her heart pounded, and she felt ... too warm.

“Aye, you fell asleep after demanding no less than all of my life stories.”

“Were they real?”

He stilled, a small frown cutting into his handsomeness. “Yes.”

“Thank you for sharing.”

“Thank you for sharing yours as well. I daresay you feel like an old friend.”

Her stomach let out an unmistakable grumble, a complaint she couldn't ignore. *Oh dear*. It was a sound that could have been embarrassing, yet it only elicited a small smile from

Daniel. Unfazed, he reached behind him to a small side table where a bowl of fruit was placed. Selecting an apple, he turned back to her and held it invitingly in front of her mouth.

Evie's heart lurched. The offer was unspoken but clear, and she took a bite. As her teeth pierced the apple's skin and sunk into the flesh, a blend of sweet and tart flavors erupted. For a moment, her eyes closed, savoring the deliciousness.

When she opened her eyes, she found Daniel watching her, his gaze intent. And in that moment, something remarkable occurred to her: there was nothing scandalous about this interaction, nothing improper, despite the fact that a duke—someone with a social standing that demanded a certain level of decorum—had just fed her an apple in such an intimate manner.

“I ventured downstairs. It is as I feared; the roads are impassable.”

She lurched up into a sitting position. “What do you mean?”

“The innkeeper said that whenever such heavy rain falls, the river overflows its banks, and the road becomes too mud-logged and dangerous for the stagecoach and carriages to travel on. We must give it time to become travel-worthy.”

Dazed, Evie shook her head in denial, pressing a hand over her mouth. “I cannot be here for days without my family knowing where I am. I cannot. Even if I must walk, I need to return to town.”

“You risk serious injury should you try it.”

Evie flinched, pressing her palm tighter over her mouth. Such sorrow and regret cleaved her heart. She had not told anyone of her plans. What will her parents and brother think

upon not seeing her this evening? They would anticipate that she would sleep late after a night of revelry at the ball and would perhaps only become alarmed in the afternoon. To their mind, she would simply have vanished. Then, as one day slipped into two and then three without a word, her mother would become petrified.

Sobs tore from her and trailed down her cheeks. “I have let down my family in every way imaginable. How will I ever make up for this? Mama will be ... devastated. How could I have been so thoughtless?”

“You did not plan the storm, Evie, nor did you foresee this.”

“I was *selfish* and—”

“You were determined. Did you not say that others already whispered you were on the shelf and destined to become an old maid even though you are only three and twenty? Were you not being pushed to marry a man that is incompatible with your character? A man who is considerably older than you are?”

She breathed raggedly, staring up at him. Yes ... she had trusted him with so much of her intimate thoughts last night. “Yes.”

“You acted to ensure a good future for yourself. It is out of the bounds of what is expected of ladies of your station, but that you dared act is admirable. Do not berate yourself too harshly. If you give me your trust, I will ensure a letter is sent to your home explaining your dilemma upon returning home.”

“I ... what?”

“Pen a letter, Evie. I will find a local who is adept at navigating the swollen rivers to make a trip to your home. I

will reward him handsomely for this trip. Two hundred pounds.”

“That is a fortune,” she said in a choked voice.

“A mere pittance to see those shadows gone from your eyes.”

“Why do you care?”

“After telling you that I got down on my knees, thinking I was a cat and lapped cream from Aphrodite’s bowl, am I not to think we are friends? I will not look at the address given. I will preserve the anonymity that you desire.”

Evie looked up at Daniel, her eyes brimming with tears. The compassion and understanding he demonstrated were not the mere courtesies offered by a gentleman to a lady; they were the kind of genuine concern and respect one might expect from a dear friend.

She sniffed, attempting to regain her composure. “It is rather astonishing to think we might have formed a friendship in a single night.”

“We spoke for almost four hours. That is longer than I have ever spoken to a lady in a year.”

She choked. “With so little attempt at conversation, how are you sought after by ladies?”

“My wealth and title,” he said bitingly, a shadow moving through his eyes.

“I am sorry,” she said softly.

Daniel smiled warmly. “A friendship born of sincerity has a quality of its own, don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” she whispered, almost too soft to hear.

“Then will you write that letter? Give your family some peace of mind and yourself freedom from this burden of guilt and worry?”

Evie nodded, taking a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes, I will write it. And I do trust you, Daniel. It’s strange to say it out loud, but under these most peculiar conditions, I trust you.”

The duke’s eyes met hers with a seriousness that resonated deep within her. “I will not take this trust lightly, Evie. I will ensure your letter is delivered as quickly as possible.”

Evie felt as if a weight had lifted, not entirely, but enough to let her breathe. And in that moment, she realized that she had indeed found a friend in the Duke of Audley.

How simply remarkable.

As Daniel sifted through his belongings, he found a sheaf of paper, an inkwell, and a quill. Handing them to Evie, he watched as she clutched the sheet to her chest as though they were a lifeline and slowly made her way to the small table by the window.

Outside, the sky remained an ominous shade of gray, and rain still drizzled down the glass in tiny rivulets. For a moment, she looked out, her eyes lingering on the gloom, before focusing her attention back on the empty sheet of paper before her. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she dipped the quill into the inkwell and began her letter.

Dearest Mama,

As I pen this letter, my heart is laden with regret for the worry and heartache I know I will be causing both you and Papa. Please

know that I am safe and that I also understand the weight of my decision to leave home without a chaperone or informing you. My actions were thoughtless and selfish, and for that, I am truly sorry.

Evie paused, her eyes filling with tears. This was the hardest part—admitting her failures, her selfishness, and being honest with her mother. She took another deep breath, exhaling slowly as she readied herself to continue. With a steadier hand, she resumed her writing.

Because I feared being persuaded to marry Lord Emerson, I allowed another persuasion to sway me to elopement. On the journey, I had a change of heart and left without the other party being aware of it. I am confined to an inn along the Great North Road due to inclement weather, making the roads impassable. I might be home in a few days. I cannot express enough how much I regret putting you through this ordeal. I am well cared for and in good, respectable company, and I promise to return home as soon as the weather permits and it is safe to do so. Until then, please try not to worry too much. I am taking all necessary precautions for my safety, and I am in the company of a trustworthy person. I will divulge more

when I see you. I am acting in a most discreet manner, and I am also assured of the discretion of all parties involved.

Your daughter,

Evie.

Once the ink had dried, Evie carefully folded the letter, her emotions a complex mix of relief, remorse, and a newfound sense of hope. Holding the folded paper in her hands, she made her way back to Daniel, who was waiting to carry out his promise.

As she handed him the letter, their eyes met, and in that silent exchange, a multitude of unspoken feelings and thoughts passed between them. Except, Evie did not fully understand what they were.

Perhaps I am being too fanciful!

Daniel stood up, preparing to leave the room. “I will find someone capable, skilled, and trustworthy to undertake this task.”

“Please, if it is too risky to their safety ... do not allow them to undertake the journey.”

He nodded. As he moved toward the door, she called out softly, “Daniel?”

The duke paused, looking back at her.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes meeting his, “for being ...” *simply wonderful.*

He dipped his head in acknowledgment and departed. Evie hurriedly performed her ablutions with water found in a basin

and dressed in a simple day gown. She left her hair rippling down her shoulders and watched the outdoors from her windows. She nibbled on the tray of fruit as she awaited the duke's return with searing anxiety. Almost thirty minutes later, the duke returned, water droplets on his hair.

"It is done. The letter will be delivered by this evening."

She surged to her feet. "Thank you."

Daniel made no reply, merely stared at her as if arrested. Evie curled her bare toes into the carpet. "You are once again staring," she said huskily.

"I am thinking."

There was a noticeable hitch in her breathing, and she fought down the blush. "About?"

"Ah, that would not be wise to share," he said in a tone rich with warm amusement as he padded closer. "However, I can admit that your prettiness merely struck me dumb for a moment."

Her heart jerked, but she stood still, trying to understand the weakness assailing her. Finally, she murmured, "You flatterer."

"I do not stroke your vanity," he said, "It is the mere truth."

Something hot and unexpected quivered low in Evie's belly. It hovered on her tongue to ask, but Evie had to remind herself that she was already running from a potential scandal. Somehow, she knew his words, should he speak to them, would be provocative.

And we will be the only ones to hear them, the reckless heart of her whispered.

A peculiar tightness rose in her throat as longing well inside of her heart. His eyes as he stared were piercing, and she suddenly felt vulnerable and uncertain. Suddenly, Evie knew his thoughts. The duke wanted to kiss her. She saw the burn of desire in his golden gaze and felt the touch of his eyes on her mouth. Somehow, Evie knew he would not initiate kissing her. Throughout their long conversation, she realized he was honorable, and he would never take advantage of her. Even if she probed, he would not reveal his thoughts, especially if they were carnal.

I have never been kissed.

The faint thought shocked and mortified her. Only Evie realized she had never wanted someone to kiss her. Yet she desired to feel Daniel's mouth upon hers. Evie felt a knot tighten in her stomach. Since she was already ruined and most certainly, upon returning to town, would be banished to rusticate in the countryside, Evie decided to indulge. Acting before she could reassert her good senses, she leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his. He stilled, and a few beats passed.

She leaned back, her heart drumming. They stared at each other, and her heart squeezed.

“What was that?” he asked.

Evie swallowed. “I ... a *kiss*. What else would it be?”

Humor darkened his gaze. She sucked in a breath when he leaned in, and his lips, soft and hot, pressed against the tender skin beneath her ear. “I can see that you are not intimately acquainted with kissing.”

Mortified, she leaned back and glared at him. “Then what is a proper kiss? I do have some idea, my friends share ... I

have just never experienced it.”

His stare dropped to her mouth, his desire to kiss her a tangible thing.

“I am never desperate, but I am damn well aching to kiss you.”

The sensual cadence of his voice wrapped around her senses, and a wicked, forbidden thrill shot through her. Evie had never been so conscious of any gentleman before, and she breathed in his warm, masculine scent, savoring it. “I suppose you enjoy the pangs of suffering. Is that why you still hesitate when it is evident I am willing?” she whispered.

His soft laugh sounded like a groan. Daniel cupped her cheeks in his hand and slanted his mouth over hers, taking her soft kiss to one of deep intimacy. He stroked his tongue along the seam of her closed mouth, and with an inarticulate murmur, she parted her lips. Evie felt as if her world had caught flight as pleasure curled through her like molten honey.

How ... why ... how could it feel this wonderful?

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Their tongues slid against each other, and Daniel realized with some bemusement that her kisses felt shy, uncertain, and untutored. The lady was truly innocent. The kiss transformed the latent tension between them into something palpable, something that could no longer be denied or set aside. Daniel could feel the pounding rhythm of her pulse under his thumb. He wanted to drag his mouth to that spot and suck. The very thought of taking his mouth on a journey down her neck, to her breasts and to that valley between her thighs had Daniel's cock jerking in anticipation. He groaned as desire flared through his body. Though she was passionate in her response, he would not take this further. Daniel broke their kiss, a harsh breath shuddering from him. She arched her neck to allow him access, and he kissed along her throat. A kiss had never before been this incendiary for him. What was it about her that made everything feel new and different?

“We must kiss no more,” he said raggedly.

She lightly stroked his jaw. “Why not?”

“I have no wish to act the bounder and ruin you.”

“Silly,” she breathed. “I am already irrevocably ruined.”

The truth of her words slammed into his gut. A lady of her standing would not be able to recover from being alone at an

inn for however long it took the roads to clear. Bloody hell.

“Does your family have the power to cover this up?”

She hesitated, then said, “Yes.”

Relief filled him. “Then—”

“There are no guarantees in this life, Daniel,” she said, a throb of regret in her tone. “Perhaps if I am indeed ruined, I would not be forced to marry Lord Emerson.”

Daniel stilled, understanding immediately that would be her parents’ solution. Forcing her hands with even more ruthless persuasion. He looked into her eyes and saw the awareness there.

The corners of her mouth lifted in a small, sad smile, and something inside Daniel tightened at the sight. He couldn’t bear the thought that she was resigning herself to a fate that didn’t suit her. She had struck him as a woman of courage, of daring—a lady who didn’t simply accept the societal mold but actively sought to break it.

It was disconcerting to see that spirit tempered by disappointment or resignation, even if momentarily.

“Evie—”

She pressed her fingers over his mouth. “I do not want to think about tomorrow or what I will face next week or eventually. I daresay I want to live in the moment ... in *this* moment.”

Hearing the longing in her voice, Daniel felt a sudden urge to meet her needs. *Whatever they may be*. There must be something in the damn air. He was never a man who acted in the moment. Daniel had always been logical and shrewd; there was nothing whimsical in his heart.

“What is this look in your eyes,” she whispered. “It has never been bestowed on me before, but it makes my heart dance with a most peculiar sense of wonder and anticipation. I wonder if I will ever feel like this again.”

“Hunger for you,” he said with raw honesty.

Her soft sigh was one of pleasure.

A tug of desire, something he had never felt so visceral, pulled him sharply toward her. “What do you want, Evie?” he demanded gruffly.

Her eyes brightened. “More kissing.”

By God, this woman captivated him.

She smiled. “I like the idea that a wallflower like me can ruffle a man of your ... elegance.”

“A wallflower?”

“Some call me so?”

She did not seem hurt but amused.

“Those damn fools.”

Her lips parted, and a rosy blush crested over her face. Evie kissed him, and it was soft, sweet and tender.

“Perhaps we can play chess afterward. I have a board in my valise,” he said, a bit desperate, for he wanted her badly.

“I will delight in trouncing you.”

“Good, are you?”

Her lips quivered, and mischief danced in her eyes. “Oh, yes.”

For an instant, he stood motionless. Daniel could not resist this fiery sweetness. He thrust his fingers through her hair,

tugged her closer and kissed her deeply.

Evie allowed herself to be swept under the wave of desire coursing through her body. She did not resist Daniel when he swept her into his arms, and within a few strides, he was bearing her down onto the bed. The fierce longing she felt for him shocked and enthralled her senses. Every kiss and touch over her body drove her to feverish heights. His finger trailed over her shin, the sensual glide along her stocking-clad legs filling her with hunger.

Evie felt languorous, achy, and far too heated. His fingers teased the soft skin of her inner thighs, and she moaned into his kiss.

Daniel undressed her in between passionate kisses until Evie lay on the bed naked and breathless with longing. He brushed his mouth over the bridge of her nose and her cheek with a tenderness that brought a lump to her throat. She felt so sensual, treasured, and powerful.

He bent to nibble at her throat, the teasing strokes of his tongue rousing sensations she had never felt before. He teased lower, licking over a throbbing nipple. Evie gasped, arching her body to his at the sensation his laving built. His palms molded themselves to the full mounds of her breasts, his thumbs and forefingers capturing her peaked nipples and rolling them. He kissed them, taking a nipple into his mouth and sucking deeply. A startling rush of pleasure burned through her, and she felt the pull of his mouth low in her belly.

One of his hands went between her thighs, gliding over her folds, caressing right to where she ached. He slipped that

finger inside, and she whimpered at the punch of pleasure low in her belly. Evie whimpered when a second finger joined the first, stretching her, yet underneath that bite of pain, there was a piercing ache for more. His thumb found her clitoris, and Evie almost shoved him off her, so intense was the sensation. She grew terribly wet. Given his groan of pleasure, this was welcomed. His kisses went lower, and she jolted at the touch of his mouth on her inner thigh.

It felt like fire had invaded her body.

His mouth kissed her deeply, his tongue licking against her nub, striking it with pleasure. Evie cried out, lifting her hips, pushing against his mouth as he sucked her clitoris. Ecstasy blew her apart, and she unraveled as pleasure swept through her. Evie shook, gripping his shoulders as he rose above her, bracing his weight on his elbow. Daniel wedged his powerful body between her splayed thighs, reached between their bodies and pressed his manhood at her sex.

Their gaze collided, and a lump formed at the tender lust in his golden gaze. He dipped, kissing her gently as he flexed his hips and entered her body. He swallowed her cry at the harsh burn of pain, distracting her and taking her away from the discomfort with his arousing kisses. Daniel gripped one of her hips and held tight and used his other hand to hug her to him, caging them in sensual intimacy, then plunged in and out of her body, over and over, devastating Evie's senses with pleasure. A desperate ache coiled low in her stomach, drawing tighter as the piercing sensations intensified. She cried out as the coil burst, and pleasure swept through her in a hot, unrelenting rush. With a ragged groan, he withdrew to release outside of her body.

Of course, she knew what he did. Evie had learned much from her married friends and understood the duke protected her from falling with child. With aching tenderness, he kissed her over and over, and to her surprise, that fire kindled low in her belly once more. However, Daniel broke their kiss and rested his forehead against hers until they caught their breaths.

Her belly grumbled, and she grinned sheepishly.

“Mrs. Thompson informed me a beef soup and a roast with potatoes will be ready soon.”

“It sounds wonderful,” she murmured.

He kissed her nose. “Let’s head down to eat. But first ...”

He captured her mouth in a kiss, holding her to him for a very long time before they broke apart.

They spent four more days wrapped in each other’s arms, Daniel making love to her at least twice each day. Evie never knew tugging could be this glorious or adventurous with such varied positions. They were greedy in how they came together, sensing that they would soon part. Neither spoke of seeing each other again, yet Evie felt her heart reaching for him, and she feared that for the first time in her life, she might truly be falling in love.

It was too soon; the sensible part of her tried to warn, but her stubborn heart would not listen. Each moment together pulled her deep into the duke. They laughed and conversed on politics, history, Greek mythology, and *ton* gossip. She found him wonderful. The promise to trounce the duke at chess never

happened, but Evie was satisfied that their three matches ended in a draw.

That night, Evie and Daniel learned from the innkeeper that the roads would be passable by morning. With a mixture of relief and a tinge of regret, Evie realized that whatever connection they shared was nearing its end. Daniel graciously offered to take her to London in his carriage, and she gratefully accepted, though she remained secretive about her full identity. It was a mutual agreement—unspoken but understood—Daniel did not press her for more information, and she didn't volunteer it.

This false sense of anonymity lent a unique freedom to their interaction, allowing Evie to be more open, more genuine, and more scandalous than she might have been under different circumstances. Confined to their room at the inn, they sensually explored each other without limitations. Thrilled with their bantering and interactions, Evie decided to show Daniel some of the self-defense moves she'd secretly learned at 48 Berkeley Square. It was a daring revelation, one that many men of his station might find appalling or unfeminine, but Daniel seemed genuinely intrigued.

With a playful glint in her eye, Evie used her foot to hook around his ankle and pulled, intending to bring him down to the floor. However, Daniel was quick to react. As he fell, his arms encircled her, pulling her down with him but also cushioning her fall. In a fluid motion, he rolled, positioning himself above her. For a moment, they both paused, their eyes locking. There were unfathomable emotions in his gaze. She wanted to ask his thoughts, but Evie acknowledged she was afraid to shatter this soft intimacy.

Daniel lowered his head, his lips capturing hers with a hunger that was as surprising as it was electrifying. Evie responded passionately, lost in the heady sensations. As they pulled away, their eyes met again. She smiled tremulously. When dawn arrived, this scandalous interlude would end. An awful ache rose in her heart, and she gripped his shoulders tightly, drawing him down and kissing him with all the emotions burning inside her chest. He shoved her dress upward to her hips with impatient motions, opened the flaps to his trousers, widened her legs and shoved his manhood deep inside her. To Evie's shock, a powerful climax rolled over her at his shockingly forceful and seemingly desperate penetration. Daniel made love to her right there on the thick carpet, loving her over and over until she screamed her pleasure into his mouth.

Oh, how I wish this would never end.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Several hours later, Evie woke, and a peek outside revealed that it was barely dawn. The stagecoach would pass through within a few minutes. Evie slipped from the bed and hurriedly dressed in her knee-length drawers, shift, dress, and walking boots. The duke slept peacefully, and she did not want to disturb him. She blushed, recalling how wild and passionate they had been last night. She had to leave before he woke.

Let this be a wonderful memory between us.

It was unlikely they would ever encounter each other, given that she had three seasons and had never been introduced to the man. A pang of sorrow filled her chest. These last five days of laughing and talking had been incredible. She might live a lifetime and not find a connection so wonderful. She hastened from the room, gently closing the door. She went down the stairs, noting that everyone seemed to be up and about, happy that the rains stopped and the river reduced, so the roads were now passable. Hoping to discreetly slip away and board the stage, a cry escaped her when someone grabbed her from behind and hissed, “Evie!”

Heart lurching, she was spun around rather suddenly, and she felt momentarily dizzy. “Release me,” she snapped to the viscount, wondering how he had found her. She had been

trapped in the inn while the storm raged, and she'd rather hoped the viscount would have found his way home and into the arms of the lover who awaited him.

“How could you leave with just one line,” he hissed. “I was dreadfully worried, Evie. When I realized you were missing, I turned around immediately, but the storm trapped me here for several days, so it is my good luck that I found you here.”

“Your good fortune?” she said icily. “My note was rather succinct and to the point. I said I will not marry you, and I wish you all the luck in your future endeavors. I am at a loss as to why you searched for me, Lord Masterson.”

For a moment, he appeared startled. “This is a poorly conceived jest on your part,” he said, his gaze narrowed. “We traveled *alone* and planned to marry. You cannot just change your mind!”

Evie's belly clenched when she noted they had attracted attention. Was that Countess Lynford and her husband? Her heart pounded with dread. Had they always been at the inn? Evie had spent almost all of her time in the room with Daniel, with most of their food delivered. Good heavens, it was the countess. And she seemed to be paying keen attention to Evie and the viscount, especially the hand he had on her arm.

“Release me,” she said once more, tugging forcefully.

“I will not. You will come with me.”

“I have already excused you, my lord.”

“And I do not accept it,” he said tightly.

Damn her audience. She would not allow herself to be manhandled in this manner. Evie swept out her foot and turned her body slightly. She would drop him on his arse and damn

the consequences. Evie was about to execute her move when the innkeeper noticed that she was accosted. Outrage dawned on his face, and the man surged forward.

“You will release the duchess at once!” Mr. Thompson snapped.

“Duchess?”

Three voices cried together. Evie felt faint. The countess was a notorious gossip, and her gaze gleamed as she inched close.

“Duchess?” Lady Lynford asked with a lifted brow.

This ... is bad, Evie silently cried. Her ruse was about to be made public, and she would be ruined in a way she had never conceived. *Why is this happening?*

“Why is he calling you a duchess?”

“That is not your concern. You are making a spectacle of us!”

Awareness dawned in the viscount’s eyes. “She might have pretended to be a duchess, good sir, to force you to rent a room. Everyone knows single ladies traveling alone are not able to let an inn. My good man, you have no need to intervene here. She is my fiancée.”

“I am not your fiancée! Release me!”

His expression darkened with ire. “I will—”

“I do hope you have a good reason to lay your hands on my wife,” a cold voice interjected. “Forget that; your reason does not matter. How dare you touch my duchess?”

Shocked, the viscount released her as if he had been burned and snapped his gaze to the cold and imposing figure

that descended the stairs. Evie's heart pounded with dread. Daniel had declared publicly that she was his wife in front of members of the *ton*.

Oh dear, oh dear, what am I to do?

As the weight of the situation settled in, Evie found her cheeks flushed and her breath stolen. The duke was now standing next to her, his icy gaze fixed on Lord Masterson. He seemed to recognize the duke, for he paled.

Lord Masterson stammered, "I—Your Grace, I had no idea —"

"You rarely do, Masterson," Daniel said, an air of disdain circling him like an icy wind. "Now, I suggest you leave before my patience thins any further."

Turning to the innkeeper, who had been bristling like an angry rooster, the duke nodded respectfully. "Mr. Thompson, my apologies for the spectacle. My wife and I will be departing shortly. You will be amply compensated for your troubles and discretion."

Mr. Thompson's face flushed a deep red, clearly torn between his anger at the viscount and the awe he held for the imposing figure of the duke.

He bobbed. "Of course, Your Grace."

As for Countess Lynford, her eyes sparkled with the pure delight of a gossipmonger stumbling upon a goldmine. She sidled up to her husband, whispering audibly enough for Evie to catch her words.

"Are they truly married? Why have we not heard an announcement of this news?"

Evie couldn't help but cringe. She glanced at the duke, who was now standing beside her, his eyes locking onto hers. Was he angry? Or had he rescued her only to subject her to public scandal and ruin? The duke gestured toward upstairs with a silent nod. "Shall we, Your Grace?"

Her heart rippled at the soft, intimate way he spoke. Sensing no other option and desperate to escape the stifling atmosphere of the inn's main hall, Evie whispered, "Yes, let's."

She mounted the stairs, conscious of his stare on her shoulders. Once inside the privacy of their room, the atmosphere grew palpably tense. Daniel closed the door and faced her, his brow furrowed as if he were pondering the answers to questions not yet asked.

"Why did you try to leave?" he finally broke the silence.

Evie gripped her fingers until they ached. "I was afraid of bidding you farewell and that you might suggest" *That we parted amicably*, she ended silently.

"You feared being tied to me?"

Shocked, she said, "It never occurred to me you would offer."

He grimaced as if her answer disappointed him. Confused, Evie stared at him. "Daniel?"

"You decided to run away without the courtesy of a farewell or even telling me how I might find you. Even after hours of talking and learning about each other, you did not think I would do the honorable thing. We were both in that bed ... and on the chaise," he concluded, a bitter laugh escaping his lips.

Blushing, she said, “I would never marry for something as cold as honor.”

His expression closed. “Quite noble of you. I would.”

She hesitated, her belly knotting. Evie did not understand why she felt so uncertain and confused. *Was it truly possible to know someone in a few days?* “You’ve publicly claimed me as your wife in front of members of the *ton*. I ... how do we proceed?”

“I will deal with Lynford.”

Why did she not feel relieved? “Thank you.”

As he walked away, something unknown and painful tangled deep inside Evie’s belly.

Precisely three days later, Evie’s heart pounded as she alighted from the carriage in front of 48 Berkeley Square. The sense of urgency in Jocelyn’s note delivered to her home an hour ago had left Evie with a tight knot of worry in her stomach. It had taken an incredible effort to convince her brother to accompany her after the heartache she had caused the family. While they had been relieved at her safe return, as she expected, her mother believes the solution was a hasty marriage to the earl.

Evie had drained her emotions by convincing her mother there was no scandal, and it was all secretive, so there was no need. Then, in the nights, she wept from missing Daniel. Several times she started to pen a letter to him. After all, she knew his identity, and it was quite easy to unearth his address.

Somehow, she had prevented herself. But she missed him terribly.

“Evie,” her brother said, “Do hurry, I have an engagement in an hour.”

“You were the one who insisted on being a chaperone,” she said tartly.

“Do you blame me?”

Evie did not answer him. He peered up at the imposing townhouse and resolved to wait in the carriage as she went inside. Her brother only knew she called upon the Duchess of Hartford without any knowledge of the club.

Evie hastened inside. She had been friends with Jocelyn since they were debutantes, sharing secrets and dreams that only the closest of friends could. Whatever had compelled her friend to summon her so urgently must be serious indeed. Taking a deep breath, she greeted their butler with a warm smile. The plush carpets and fine artwork that decorated the townhouse were lost on her as Evie made her way upstairs, searching for Jocelyn.

“Evie!” Jocelyn exclaimed, jumping up from her seat as soon as she entered the parlor on the second floor. Her eyes were wide with a mixture of relief and urgency.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Evie’s eyes darted around the room, half-expecting to see some sign of distress or chaos, but everything appeared as it always did: refined, luxurious, and impeccably arranged. “Has a dare or wager gone wrong?”

“Sit, sit.” Jocelyn gestured to a chair before pouring them both a glass of sherry. “You’ll need this.”

Oh dear.

Harriet bustled into the room, smiling when she saw Evie.
“You are here!”

“Yes.”

She exchanged a warm hug with her friends.

Taking a small sip for courage, Evie asked, “What’s this all about, Jocelyn? You and Harriet are both here. Your note alarmed me.”

Jocelyn hesitated for a moment before blurting out, “Are you married, Evie, dearest?”

Evie felt a chill run down her spine. “*Married?*”

“Yes.”

“No. On my way to Gretna Green with the Viscount I started feeling terrible doubt. And as if the heavens felt my worry, a letter dropped from his pocket. It was from him to his mistress, letting her know their affair would not end because he is only marrying me for my dowry!”

Jocelyn’s eyes hardened. “That cretin!”

Harriet scowled. “I actually thought him good-natured and honorable. We were very deceived by his character. But ... we were not referring to a marriage to the viscount.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We meant to the Duke of Audley.”

The room spun around Evie, and she collapsed onto the sofa. “There are rumors?”

Harriet winced and handed her a folded newsheet.

Dearest readers,

In a season teeming with engagements, nuptials, and whispered secrets, this author is delighted to present you with a tale that has set the highest circles of society abuzz. Ladies and gentlemen, I have it on the highest authority that the Duke of Audley, a man who has long remained a bachelor and the object of matrimonial aspirations for many a debutante, has finally succumbed to Cupid's arrow. Yes, dear readers, he is married!

The fortunate, or shall we say, the highly cunning lady in question, Lady E., a young woman of beauty and grace, albeit one who has survived three full Seasons without an offer. One might argue that her patience has been rewarded, for she has captured one of society's grandest prizes. Yet, it begs the question: How did Lady E manage to enchant the enigmatic Duke?

Was this a clandestine union born of a desperate situation? We must speculate on the secrecy that shrouds this sudden wedding. There have been no formal announcements, no banns read, and nary a hint of a betrothal period. Are we to assume that haste implies impropriety or perhaps even a

looming scandal? The ton is simply rife with theories!

Or could it be, perchance, that this was a love match? Has the illustrious Duke of Audley, known for his aloof demeanor and guarded heart, finally met his match in the form of Lady E.? A romantic might hope that the Duke has found his heart's true companion, for they say even the most impenetrable fortress can be conquered with the right key.

My dear readers, only time will reveal the veracity of these delicious claims. What prompted such secrecy? What draws two seemingly disparate souls into a union? Love or necessity? Until we have answers, we can but speculate and, of course, avidly observe.

One thing is certain, though; we shall all be watching with keen interest to see how this fascinating tale unfolds. Society's eyes are upon them, scrutinizing each glance and gesture for clues to the mystery that now surrounds the Duke of Audley and Lady E.

Until the next whispered secret crosses my desk, I remain your faithful informant, weaving the tales of society's ever-enthralling drama.

Yours Truly,
A Curious Observer

Evie felt as if the ground had been pulled out from under her feet. Her eyes scanned the scandalous lines of the gossip column once, twice, unable to believe what she was reading.

“You paled, Evie. Is this true?” Harriet asked, eyes filled with concern. “Have you married the Duke of Audley?”

Jocelyn looked at her with a mixture of worry and expectation. “If it’s true, Evie, you must say so. We can manage this. But we *must* know.”

Evie took a deep breath. “I ... I have not married him. We had an incredible connection during our time together at the inn, and I will admit something intimate occurred between us. But there has been no wedding.”

“Then how did this rumor start?” Harriet wondered aloud.

“The Countess of Lynford overheard the duke referring to me as his wife during the encounter with Lord Masterson at the inn,” Evie said. Quickly, she relayed everything to her friends. “The duke said he would have dealt with them. It seems he was not successful in securing their discretion. The countess told someone, and now ... it’s *this*.”

Jocelyn sighed. “Ah, the double-edged sword of a gentleman’s rescue. It might free you from a boorish viscount but tie you to a duke.”

Evie felt the weight of their stares and the heavier weight of her situation. “What am I to do? If this rumor spreads, I could ruin the Duke of Audley’s reputation as well as my own. Once it is revealed we are not married in truth, society will say

he took advantage and discharge me. Perhaps society will not suspect that Lady E is me.”

Her friends exchanged a glance, and her belly tightened. “What?”

“I first heard the rumors from Lady Meredith this morning at Hyde Park. I did not believe it, and then I saw the scandal sheet,” Harriet said softly. “She mentioned you by name, Evie. I fear everyone will believe it is you.”

Oh God. “I am not certain what to say,” Evie said shakily.

Jocelyn took a sip of her sherry and set it down with a determined *clank*. “First, we act as if it is not you.”

“And then?” Evie asked.

Harriet leaned forward, resting her hand over Evie’s. “Then, dear friend, you must speak to the Duke of Audley. If you share a connection as deep as you say, he deserves to know what’s happening, and you two must decide how to proceed. Perhaps this rumor could become a reality?”

A shocked laugh escaped Evie even as tears burned behind her eyes. It had only been a few days together at the inn, but it had felt like a magical lifetime. “Are a few days too soon to know that you love someone?” she whispered.

“No,” Harriet said.

From the smile in her friend’s eyes, Evie knew she reflected on her own scandalous courtship with the Earl of Warwick. Had Harriet and the Earl also not fallen in love at a weeklong house party?

Evie felt a swirl of emotions: fear, anticipation, and an undeniable sense of hope. “I will speak to the duke and ask his help to squash the rumors. How I cannot see because it was

clear to the countess that we were together. Everything certainly feels overwhelmingly daunting.”

Jocelyn grinned, her eyes twinkling with the fire of impending battle. “Perhaps. But we women are stronger than society gives us credit for. You’ll not give into despair, and we must not allow this scandal to force you into a match that will make your life wretched.”

She smiled at the determined glint in her friend’s eyes.

“And who knows,” Harriet added softly, “you may yet get your happily ever after, with a duke, no less.”

Evie looked at her two friends. They were right. She would face these scandals head-on and hope for the best. Only, her heart felt weighted with dread and doubt.

“Thank you for being such wonderful friends,” she said, smiling. “This could turn into a terrible scandal. I know you will not want to, but distancing yourself from—”

“No!” Harriet and Jocelyn cried together.

Evie felt a mix of gratitude and awe for her friends.

Harriet lifted her chin. “I might have created a small scandal myself when Warwick and I ran away from my wedding, but I *am* a countess, and so many clamors to call upon me daily. My support and the support of so many of our friends, especially Theo, will go a long way. We support you, always.”

“We do not hide away but attend all events with our heads lifted high,” Jocelyn replied, her voice tinged with a resolve that left no room for doubt. “You do not deny or confirm that you are a duchess or not. Smile and wave away the rumor with an air of indifference. The vultures will stop circling then.”

Evie felt a weight lift off her shoulders. With friends like Jocelyn and Harriet by her side, she suddenly felt like she could face any challenge. “Thank you. I don’t know what I would do without you both.”

Jocelyn lifted her glass. “That’s what friends are for. To the battle ahead!”

Evie and Harriet lifted their glasses. “To the battle ahead.”

As they sipped their sherry, Evie was grateful her friends would not let her face this scandal and ruination alone. They would face it together, just as they had faced every alarming situation that happened at 48 Berkeley Square. If only this unwavering determination would strangle the knot of fear tightening inside her heart.

CHAPTER
NINE

That evening, Evie bravely attended Lady Belmont's midnight ball under the sharp eye of her mother and brother as chaperones. Evie felt every eye upon her as she made her entrance. A ripple went through the crowd, and several ladies lifted their fans before their mouths. She lifted her chin. Dressed in an exquisite gown of ivory silk and lace, she made every effort to appear radiant and composed, though inside, she was a bundle of nerves. She had chosen the gown carefully, wanting to appear as a picture of calm elegance even though her world felt as if it were crumbling.

Jocelyn and Harriet had joined her, both friends acting as shields and supporters.

"Remember, not a word confirming or denying anything," Jocelyn whispered into her ear as they glided into the opulent ballroom filled with society's elite.

Evie nodded, acutely aware that every whisper, every sidelong glance was directed her way. "If rumors were currency, I'd be richer than King George by now," she muttered.

Before any retort could be offered, the room went silent. The footman at the entrance loudly announced, "His Grace, the Duke of Audley."

All conversation ceased, and every gaze shifted, following the tall, imposing figure as he made his entrance. Evie felt her heart leap into her throat; she had not expected him to be here. Did he not say that he eschewed social events, for he was tired of this game played on the marriage mart? She followed the gaze of the crowd. Her heart lurched, and the knot in her belly tightened.

Daniel looked rather handsome and commanding. His clothes were faultlessly tailored to his lean, graceful physique, and he cut quite a dashing figure in his black trousers, well-fitted matching jacket, and an exquisitely designed dark-green waistcoat. Midnight black hair complimented his lean, strong features, and his eyes glowed like burnished gold.

Their gazes collided, and for a moment, the rest of the world faded away. Ignoring the stares, he walked directly toward Evie, who felt as though her heart might beat out of her chest. With each step he took, the tension in the room ratcheted up a notch until it was almost palpable.

“Why is he coming over?” she asked, almost panicked. “Do you think he knows of the scandal sheet?”

“Yes,” Jocelyn said. “Be courageous, Evie.”

She took a steadying breath. Stopping before her, he extended his gloved hand. “May I have this dance, my wife?”

My wife.

Shock almost pushed her into a faint. The duke was indeed fully aware of the rumors. The room collectively inhaled. Evie’s mind raced, a thousand thoughts flickering through her mind in the span of a heartbeat. The duke was publicly declaring her as his wife, effectively tying their fates together whether she liked it or not.

Why?

Unpardonable anxiety filled her heart. Their gazes collided, and she saw a depth of emotion she had never seen before—tenderness and burning desire. Her heart lurched and reached for him. Evie could feel her mother’s probing gaze upon her.

Oh, what do I do? Should we not be speaking privately before he acts? Either way, Evie realized she could no more deny him this dance than she could stop her own heart from beating. Suppressing the wave of dizziness that washed over her, Evie placed her hand in his.

“It would be my pleasure, Your Grace,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

The duke’s lips twitched in what could have been a smile, and he led her onto the dance floor. As the orchestra struck up a waltz, he took her in his arms, and they began to move in time with the music. Evie was acutely aware of the eyes of the crowded ballroom upon them, the hushed whispers filling the room. Yet, as they waltzed, something magical happened. The stares, the gossip, the impending scandal—all of it faded away, leaving only the two of them gliding across the floor as if in their own private world.

“I did not expect to see you again,” she said shakily.

“Yet it was all that I hoped for,” he murmured.

She searched his gaze, and a smile bloomed on her lips at the steadiness she saw in his eyes.

“I have not been able to eat or sleep. I have penned a dozen letters asking to court you properly. I planned to go back to the inn and find the lad who delivered your letter so he could tell me where you live.”

For that brief moment, Evie allowed herself to forget the complications, the unanswered questions, and the uncertain future. All that mattered was the man holding her in his arms and the haunting melody that seemed to speak of sensuality and love.

“That’s it,” he said, tugging her scandalously closer. “You are a lady of fierce strength, wit, and beauty. I do not like to see this fear in your eyes. Don’t you know that I can slay ... and will slay anyone who hurts you?”

“Arrogant,” she said fondly.

“Confident,” he asserted.

As the music swelled and then slowly faded, he said, “Whatever comes next, know that this is real for me, Evie.”

“What are you saying?” Evie asked, her heart pounding.

“You have been my wife in every sense of the word, I now *dare* you to make it official.”

Evie felt her heart swell, all the confusion and dread dissipating like morning mist. “What are you saying?” she asked again, feeling like a parrot.

“I am saying I am falling in love with you. Hell, I am already there, and I am asking you to marry me. Be my wife, my friend, my lover, and my duchess. Will you have me, Evie?”

As she looked into his eyes, the weight of her earlier worries seemed so trivial. Here was a man with whom she’d shared the deepest connection, a man who had just declared himself to her without reservation. The love and laughter bubbling inside spilled over, and people glanced at each other. She did not care if they saw her merriment and sheer joy. With tears in her eyes, Evie nodded. “Yes, I will. Dare accepted.”

He escorted her back to her mother, who stared at him with an expression akin to shock. He dipped into a bow. “Lady Wilburn, a pleasure to see you. I hope to call upon you and your husband tomorrow.”

Relief burned in her mother’s eyes. “We look forward to seeing you, Your Grace.”

The grand ballroom was a sea of silks, satins, and jewels, with whispers flowing as freely as champagne. Despite the thrum of excitement, a palpable tension hung in the air. As the duke made his way through the crowd, greeting his fellow peers, many ladies cast their gazes from the duke to Evie. Their curiosity was rabid, and their whispers hushed and speculative. Oddly, Evie was amused by it all and admired his shrewdness in handling this matter. Although rumors swirled of a secret wedding, the duke’s calculated silence on the matter did nothing to quell the speculation. He seemed to revel in the uncertainty it created, a private joke shared only between him and Evie.

The night passed in a blur, and to everyone’s delight, the duke danced with Evie twice more, creating another scandal before this current one was fully understood by the *ton*.

The next morning, Evie found herself in an almost unbearable state of excitement. Pressing her ear to the drawing room door, she listened intently as the duke spoke with her parents.

“I met your daughter under unusual circumstances, but ones that I do not regret,” he was saying.

Her mother's response was muffled, and Evie pressed her ears closer to the oak.

"And you wish to marry our daughter?" her father inquired, his tone imbued with both skepticism and curiosity. "Do you know fully the circumstances that led her to encounter you at that inn?"

"Yes," the duke answered firmly. "I am well aware that she is willful, capable, adventurous—"

"Rather willful," her father interrupted, in a tone that suggested he found this more of a warning than an endorsement.

"That is why she is perfect," Daniel countered, his voice full of a conviction that sent Evie's heart soaring. "And let me be clear. I am not seeking Evie's hand to stave off scandal, but because I love her."

A hush fell over the room, so silent Evie could practically hear her own heart beating. She hugged herself tightly as though she could contain the joy that was bursting from her. She caught the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Evie quickly moved away, her cheeks flushed as she tried to look casual, as though she hadn't been eavesdropping.

The door swung open, and there he was. He closed the door behind him, and the sound of her parents' voices filtered through the oak. Evie grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the music room. An indulgent smile on his mouth, he followed. Once they were in the room, he hauled her into his embrace and kissed her. She melted against him, slipping her hand around his nape.

"By God, this wedding needs to happen *now*," a shocked voice snapped.

Evie wrenched from the duke and whirled around to face her brother. The shock on his face pulled a giggle from her.

“This is not a laughing manner, Evie.”

“You will forgive us,” the duke said smoothly. “We were merely overcome with happiness. Your parents gave their blessings.”

A snort escaped her brother. “As if, if they withheld their blessings, it would have stopped you from getting what you want, Audley.”

Her duke merely smiled. Her brother left the room, leaving the door wide ajar. Evie smiled up at him, and he cupped her cheeks tenderly.

“We will be married by tomorrow morning by special license. I am damn sorry I am not able to give you a grand wedding.”

“I only want you. I love you, and I am looking forward to falling deeper in each moment spent with you,” she said, such love and happiness swelling inside her heart.

Daniel smiled, and as they kissed, Evie couldn’t help but think that perhaps scandal was the price one paid for finding something truly extraordinary.

Thank you for reading Daniel and Evie’s story!. If you enjoyed their romance and would like to learn more about the ladies from 48 Berkeley Square, I invite you to read my Wagers and Wallflowers series! These ladies are wallflowers, bluestockings, merry widows, and debutantes—members of a secret, exclusive Lady’s Club in Berkeley Square! There, ladies indulge in

daring wagers, learn to fight, read scandalous books,
and learn the art of wooing the gentlemen they will
bring to their knees ...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Clarke writes steamy Regency Historical Romances featuring swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, sometimes unconventional heroines! Her debut novel—Love me, If you Dare: Wagers and Wallflowers, came to her in a dream as a hot, fun enemy to lover romance where she played the leading lady who fell in love with a duke who looked remarkably like Henry Cavill.

When not writing, Alyssa enjoys hiking, games/movie night, with her husband and two beautiful children, and her Siberian Husky—Cronus. She is a lover of wine, cheesecake, and more wine.

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THE LADY'S GUIDE
TO WELL-ENDOWED
DUKES

THE LADY'S GUIDE TO LOVE, BK

7

EMMANUELLE DE
MAUPASSANT

The 11th Duke of Pembridge is endowed with everything a man could desire. Good looks. Charm. Intellect. A wealthy estate. And an enormous specimen of...masculine splendor. It's time for wily widow Estela Bongorge to take this 'unconquered' duke in hand.

PROLOGUE

Venice

Late September, 1905

Moonlight shimmered on the canal as the gondola passed. The seated woman wrapped her cloak close, looking up at the edifices of Istrian stone and exposed brickwork. The buildings bore a faded elegance, the balconies empty and the rooms dark.

Only as they passed from the narrow avenue into a larger waterway did the sound of music float upon the air. The gondolier guided them onward, toward a building far grander than those that surrounded it: the Palazzo di Zorzi Tiepolo. Here, the mullioned windows shone. Somewhere within, an orchestra was playing.

His passenger turned her face to the light, and the gondolier was struck by her dark-haired beauty. Why was such a woman, dressed so finely, travelling alone at this hour?

There could be only one answer.

An assignation.

Drawing level with the ombre-colored walls, he brought them close. The gondola rocked as she stood, and he offered his hand to aid her step into the arched portal.

Behind her mask, eyes of mesmerizing green which matched the hue of her gown conveyed thanks.

Once inside the woman made haste, climbing to the grand hall of the palazzo where a footman took her cloak, departing with it.

The gilded ceiling soared above, ornately decorated with scenes of Venetian life and lit by a monumental chandelier of hand-blown glass, each crystal droplet sparkling. To her left, past marble columns, was the entranceway to the ballroom. The murmur of conversation filtered through, from a sea of half-obscured faces, the wearers adorned in rich brocades and bobbing feathers, silks and jewels.

But her interest lay not in the decadent delights of the masquerade. Tonight, she came with an objective far more vital.

The staircase to the upper apartments was sited at the far end of the hall. It was there she must go, to seek her prize. With a last glance at the revelers, she made her way toward the broad flight of steps.

However, she'd barely half-crossed the hall when a lurching figure, broad in the shoulder, appeared from a small doorway to her right—dressed as a gaudy version of the famous 'Hunchback' of Paris fame. Seeing her, he stopped and made a courtly bow, waiting for her to pass ahead.

It would not do.

As unassuming as the man appeared, she did not wish to be observed making her way upstairs.

Smiling, she called to him. "*Signore, vuole ballare con me?*" She indicated the ballroom. If he would but follow her,

and could be persuaded into a few moments of dancing, she might then rid herself of him and continue on her way.

Though he hesitated, he returned her smile and offered his arm, escorting her through. At once, they were plunged into the crowd, amid shrieks and laughter. There was a circular dance of sorts, though the inebriation of the partygoers was such that there seemed no rhyme or reason to their movements. She lost hold of her partner, her last sight of him being his frowning face, dark eyes glinting behind the grey and black of his mask.

All well and good.

As he was carried away, she pushed back toward the exit. The hall was an oasis of calm in comparison. Without wasting a moment, she ran for the stairs, taking them as quickly as her gown would allow. Making haste along the carpeted passageway, she reached the portico at the end. There, a small vestibule led through to a heavy wooden door.

She dropped to her knees, placing her eye to the keyhole. If some maid were there, or the Contessa herself—entertaining some lover, perhaps—there would be no alternative but to turn back. To her relief she saw no movement; nor did voices carry from within. Sliding two pins from her hair, she made short work of the mechanism and entered the room.

This was the place in which the Contessa entertained. The shutters had not been closed on the windows, allowing the silvered moonlight to reveal a sumptuously appointed sitting room—as she'd been led to expect. The Contessa's sleeping chamber was part of the adjoining suite. Hurrying over, she found the connecting door unlocked.

Opening it, she gave a start, for the opposing wall featured a mirror of great size, and she was met by her own reflection

looking back at her through the gloom.

Hold your nerve!

Softly, she closed the door behind her.

Here, the maid had been more meticulous, drawing the curtains loosely. There was a lamp upon the table to her right but dare she light it?

Perhaps not.

With the curtains parted a fraction, there would be enough light by which to see, and she hoped not to be here long.

The chamber was much as one would expect, dominated by the bed. Though it was too opulently lavish for her own taste, it was undeniably grand—a piece fit for one of the most powerful families in all Venice. Had circumstance been different, a wicked tumble upon its coverlet would have amused her no end, disturbing the prettily arranged cushions.

The Contessa's dressing room was beyond this again, but that held no interest.

What she sought was here, and located in the dressing table, if her source had been worth the coin she'd paid.

To her irritation, the thing had a multitude of drawers: five on each side and three across the center.

Where to begin?

She pulled at the middle, which rattled but did not open, though there was no obvious lock.

It was a good sign. No keyhole meant a hidden mechanism. Bending low, she felt beneath and found the lever without difficulty. The drawer clicked open.

However, her disappointment was immediate. An assortment of small brooches filled the compartment.

Nothing else.

Would she have to check every drawer!

She was about to try the next along when a sound from the adjoining sitting room disturbed her.

Hellfire!

There was no time to hide beneath the bed—and to simply make for the dressing room was risky.

She settled on the curtains.

No sooner had she pressed herself there than the door opened.

Whoever it was did not light the lamp. Footsteps crossed the room. Tilting her head fractionally, she peered around the fringing of the heavy drapes.

And saw the figure of the hunchback!

He'd moved aside the stool and was lying prone on the rug before the dressing table, reaching to the very back. The next moment, the lowest drawer of the lefthand pedestal popped open. From within, he extracted some letters—eight or more—tied with ribbon. He glanced only quickly at the script before pocketing the bundle and closing the drawer.

She ducked back behind the curtain.

Someone else here tonight, on the same mission as herself! And he'd known exactly where to look.

Her mind spun.

What could she do? Confront him and demand the letters? Wrestle them from him?

Neither seemed likely to prove successful. A commotion of any sort would only bring others. At worst, the fellow might have a knife or pistol. Even without one, he looked strong enough to knock her unconscious, or strangle her.

She was not without skills of self-defense but, with him, she did not rate her chances.

What then?

Let him leave. Trail him. Locate his dwelling. Live to seek out the letters another day, or perhaps this very night.

His light steps took him again across the room. The door clicked open and closed.

Letting go the breath she'd been holding, she stepped out. A few moments were needed, for she could not follow directly on his heels; nor could she dally too long.

Hoping her judgment was adequate, she set off. On swift feet, she retraced her steps, pausing at each turn to ensure he was not visible—nor she to him.

There was only one way to leave the palazzo, short of jumping from a balcony. He would be heading for the portico where a gondola must collect him.

Her own gondolier she'd instructed to wait for her on the opposite side of the canal. She had only to signal him, and they might give chase, at a discreet distance.

Her heart pounded.

He could not get away!

Reaching the hall, she made herself walk sedately, though it barely mattered anymore. She would be away in her gondola

within a minute of reaching the outer door.

The footman who'd taken her cloak called after her, but she did not look back, skittering down the final steps to the lower level.

There was no one upon the platform. All was well. He could not be far ahead.

Giving a low whistle, she summoned her vessel and climbed aboard. The boat pitched as she hopped on, but she was too frantic to care.

She glanced along the canal in both directions. The moon had ducked behind a cloud, but it was not entirely dark. Illumination suffused from the palazzo, casting a glow on the water beneath.

Yet she saw no retreating gondola, carrying the man who'd stolen what she'd come for.

"Where is he?" she asked of the gondolier. "The man who left, just now."

"*Scusami.*" The gondolier shrugged. "There is no one. Only us."

Impossible!

And yet where was he?

She beat her fist upon her lap.

Returning inside, she scoured the ballroom for her devious 'hunchback' but he was nowhere to be found. The man had vanished into thin air.

CHAPTER
ONE

*Aboard the Maria Cecilie, departing for Southampton, from il
Porto di Venezia*

Estela Bongorge cast an appraising eye over the young steward placing her baggage within the cabin and reached up to remove her hat pins—all the better to emphasize her well-leveraged bosom.

“Such an exertion!” With one hand resting above the curve of her hip, Estela laughed breathily. She fanned herself with the large blue disc of a hat, topped effusively with feathers. “All those steps!”

Her Italian was far from perfect, and her accent liable to drift, but she was familiar enough to make herself understood. In any case, the message she wished to convey did not require great facilitation with the language.

The steward answered in faltering English. “The signora wishes for tea? Darjeeling, oolong or lapsang souchong? I carry to you straight away, with the *torte alla crema*. *Deliziose*. All very fresh.”

He looked exceedingly pleased to have made the speech, and to be offering his service, which was just as Estela intended.

“A tempting offer. There is nothing like Italian cream, and I confess I can be quite greedy.” A dip of the chin enabled her to look up through her lashes. “But there’s no need for tea; champagne, I think.”

“Only the best. I go now and fetch for you.” He set off swiftly, allowing Estela a brief view of his tight rear through the starched white of his uniform.

With the click of the closing door, she cast aside the hat and flopped full-length onto the bed. He would do, she supposed, although he’d likely have scant idea of how to conduct himself. Only in maturity did men garner the skills to truly satisfy a woman. She would make the best of it. In her current mood, a tumbling was the only thing that would take the edge off her irritation.

With any luck, the champagne would arrive chilled to the correct temperature. Her young steward could manage that, if not much else, she had to hope.

Testing the mattress with a gentle bounce, she was pleased to find it firm, and without too much creaking of the springs. The room itself was decorated quite pleasingly—the wallpaper a delicate oyster silk with matching swagged curtains. Light voiles ensured a degree of privacy, since the window was of the regular sort, offering a wide view onto the upper promenading deck.

The furniture—a dressing table and stool, a small dining arrangement, a good-sized wardrobe, and a plush velvet chaise—was a little over-gilded. Nevertheless, it was of a better standard than she’d been expecting.

She’d been fortunate in acquiring passage, given the short notice and her insistence on having one of the more superior cabins. The extra expense was justified. If she was going to

spend more than a week at sea, with uncertain weather, narrow company, and even more limited entertainment, she intended to be comfortable.

Not that she'd ever suffered with *mal de mer*. She'd twice crossed the Atlantic and had been a guest on various private yachts visiting the ports of the Mediterranean.

Arguably, it would have been quicker to travel by rail to Calais, before crossing the Channel. She was procrastinating—putting off the time when she'd have to admit to Mathilde that she'd failed.

Sitting up, Estela worked free the buttons of her travelling jacket and, reaching behind, tugged the sleeves down her arms. Next, she pulled at the laces on her kid boots. Pushing them off, she gave her toes a rub.

It had been a long day, securing first her ticket and then transport to the harbor in time for embarkation. Her maid had packed most of her belongings, but the close hour of their departure had necessitated Estela's help.

She ought to shake out something to wear, she supposed. Naturally, Antoinette usually did such things, but Estela had been only too relieved to send her away for a while. If it weren't for her great talent in arranging hair, Estela would have let her go well before, but it was so tiresome training up anyone new. These trips abroad always made her maid sour faced.

Estela sympathized.

Antoinette wasn't the only one feeling her age.

Not that Estela looked her thirty-six years. Her hair remained a lustrous ebony, and she'd taken care to remain out of the sun, despite her travels to exotic locales. Her vices were

numerous, but she avoided excessive indulgence. As far as lovers were concerned, she'd always ensured she was well-protected—from the complication of pregnancy, in addition to anything else unsavory.

She glanced at the dainty silver watch about her wrist. There was another hour or so before Antoinette came to dress her to dine. Plenty of time to consume the champagne, and to see what her eager steward could provide in the way of an amuse-bouche.

From the largest trunk, Estela lifted out a crepe silk gown in dark green overlaid with black lace. Her mother had believed the color unlucky, but Estela hadn't found it to be so. Men told her the shade brought out the green in her eyes.

Though perhaps her mother had been right. She'd worn it upon the night of the masquerade, and much luck it had brought her. Still, there was no sense in berating herself. The letters she'd been searching for were in another's hands and, despite her best efforts, she'd been unable to track down the devil who'd managed to take them from under her nose.

The fellow had been clever. She could only conclude he'd cast off his first costume—hump and all—and had some other beneath, the better to divert anyone who might have seen him climb the stairs.

It wasn't the first time Estela had been asked to recover a love token, or something else of a private nature. Gaining an invitation to wherever she needed to go was easy enough. Otherwise, she might slip in unnoticed to a larger event.

Genteel Society, the company of which Estela generally avoided where she could, no doubt viewed her as immoral (though they could be aware of but a fraction of her misdemeanors). Invitations were extended on account of her

wealth; though it didn't hurt that she was an amusing conversationalist. She made sure to always provide some tidbit of gossip, for which hostesses were grateful. No doubt other women were privately united in their censure, but Estela considered this a service of sorts. For didn't everyone need someone of whom they heartily disapproved?

It was often necessary to play a part, but that added to the thrill, in most cases.

There had been an instance, almost two years ago, when she'd felt a strong repugnance, but it hadn't prevented her from retrieving the item she'd been sent to procure. She'd wasted no pity on Baron Billingsworth, who she'd gained access to without the least trouble, having ascertained that his tastes were of a particular sort. Learning that her target was attending a Christmas houseparty at Studborne Abbey, she'd swiftly maneuvered herself an invitation.

The duchess had been lining up suitable brides for her brother. Estela was too long in the tooth for that honor herself, and still married to her last husband at the time. She'd managed to put forward Esther as a potential candidate, though her sister was far too much of a mouse for a man like Burnell.

The handsome archaeologist was a notch Estela would have happily carved into her bedpost but, to her irritation, her flirtation hadn't borne fruit. Nonetheless, she'd located the artefact she'd been sent for and returned it to its rightful place.

Setting aside the green gown, Estela lifted out the next. Heavily beaded through the bodice, it was somewhat out of fashion. Fortunately, the width of the square neckline made up for that. The russet shade provided an immensely flattering contrast to the paleness of her skin, especially by candlelight.

Where is that steward?

She was gasping for the champagne, and the release she very much hoped he was going to provide her with. If he didn't return soon, she was going to have to see to herself, which she never found as satisfying.

Damn Mathilde!

It was understandable that she couldn't ask her own parents for assistance, but the hoyden should never have gotten in such a ridiculous situation, nor have expected Estela to put things right.

They weren't even related by blood—only indirectly through Estela's second marriage. Certainly, she wouldn't have gone out of her way to help, but for the fact that Mathilde was the favorite of her many nieces—accumulated through two decades and four marriages.

Mathilde was also second cousin to the King, and the consequences of her dalliance were far more serious than the girl realized. Estela's conscience was rarely pricked but it was she, after all, who'd invited Mathilde to stay with her at the villa on Lake Como the previous summer.

The beguiling Conte Sforza had been among Estela's most steadfast admirers—or so she'd thought. Her own vanity had blinded her to the possibility that those visits endured due to the presence of Mathilde.

Estela had also underestimated the chit, who'd exercised a great deal of cunning in arranging her clandestine meetings.

To Estela's annoyance, she'd had to curtail her sojourn to accompany Mathilde back to England.

Thankfully, the girl was sensible enough to accept Estela's entreaty that the Conte was entirely unsuitable as a long-term

prospect (besides the fact of his being imminently intent on walking down the aisle with someone else entirely).

Before the summer was out, Mathilde had set aside any lingering heartbreak, and duly fallen in love with the match her parents had spent months cultivating.

Since there was no pregnancy to give evidence to the breaching of Mathilde's maidenly state, Estela had thought nothing more of the matter.

She hadn't reckoned on the little imbecile having trapped herself in the guise of ten lengthy letters of devotion to the Conte, embellished with a surprising level of titillation.

Apparently, it had taken well over a year for the new Contessa to come across the lavender-scented missives—by which time she'd delivered the Conte an heir and had another on the way. In light of that, she might have overlooked the indiscretion, had not Mathilde naively signed and dated the blasted things. Discovering that Mathilde had been warming her husband's bed mere days before she was about to climb into it herself had ruffled the Contessa's feathers too briskly for her to turn the other cheek.

The upshot was that she'd threatened to expose Mathilde not just to her own family but to that of the man she was now about to marry. As this happened to be the Crown Prince of Montegiana, a heap of trouble was about to land upon Mathilde's head.

Even if her prince were willing to forgive his beloved's scandalous behavior, Estela doubted the King and Queen of Montegiana would be so understanding.

Their kingdom was a tiny principality but, holding a strategic position within the Balkans, the marriage had been

engineered to ensure Britain a friendly foothold within the region. Estela had no doubt that Mathilde had been chosen from among King Edward's many female relatives for her seemingly spotless reputation. Moreover, in likelihood, the national coffers had been called upon to endow Mathilde with a persuasive dowry.

The love letters were irrefutable proof that the affair had taken place and, as such, their recovery was paramount. Estela had promised Mathilde she'd succeed; and she'd been so very close!

She could only hope that whoever now possessed them had no ill-intention.

Perhaps, having no wish to be dragged into an international scandal, the Conte had himself arranged to have them purloined from his wife's apartments.

If so, she hoped he had the sense to destroy them, not least because Estela had little hope of persuading anyone that she'd been entirely ignorant of the affair.

One way or another, she was returning to a scenario in which several sorts of steaming manure would have to be dealt with.

A sudden knock startled her into releasing the gown, which she'd been crushing in her fists.

At last!

With alacrity, she allowed the steward entry, trundling a trolley before him. Proudly, he indicated the selection of pastries, beginning some ramble of their names and the regions of Italy from which each variety hailed.

Estela wasted no time in taking up the champagne from the ice bucket and popping the cork. Without bothering to fill a

glass, she tipped back the cool liquid, drinking her fill directly from the bottle.

“Signora, please!” The steward looked perturbed. His hands fluttered. “You are overcome by the sun. It happens to the older ladies. You must sit and I pour in the proper way. See the beautiful *torte*. You taste, then take the nap and all will be fine.” His cheeks were quite flushed with shock.

Estela gave the heaviest of sighs. Much as she desired male company, she was in no mood to cajole, nor to seek charity.

“Leave the trolley. I shall see to the rest myself.”

Hurrying him out, she closed the door.

CHAPTER
TWO

By the time Estela had polished off her bottle of 1874 Dom Pérignon, she was feeling significantly more optimistic toward life in general, and the whole Mathilde-debacle in particular. She had been so sure of retrieving the letters that it had come as something of a blow to find herself outmatched. However, instinct told her that hope remained, and the vengeful Contessa's plans had been thwarted in some way as-yet-unexplained. Estela reminded herself to trust in the guiding Fates, who mostly served her well.

However, although the champagne had done its job in taking the edge off her nerves, it had done nothing to quell the ache of desire deep in her loins. Quite the opposite, in fact, and she was determined to deal with that as soon as possible. It was doubtful that any of her fellow passengers would be suitable. From her observations upon boarding, most were either extremely elderly or were travelling in couples. Given the close quarters of their environment, a fling with one of the dining waiters might be the simplest solution, or possibly a member of the bridge crew.

In honor of the hunt, in which she fully intended to be successful, Estela had finally decided upon her rich red velvet with matching plumes in her hair, secured by a large ruby pin. The neckline was exceedingly low. The scant ribbon of black

guipure lace, which threaded seductively at the top of the bodice, only increased the effect. No male between the ages of 16 and 106 would be unaffected.

The choker of smaller rubies about her throat sent a subliminal message, she liked to think. That she wore matching garters above red stockings was her own little secret, which she looked forward to sharing with the lucky recipient of her wiles.

The sleeves of the gown were no more than little swags of fabric and she wore her evening gloves high upon each arm, with a mere sliver of ivory visible above the black silk.

Entering the grand salon of the ship's dining room, Estela had never felt more confident of her allure, nor more determined to put it to good use.

The Maître d' was just escorting her across the room towards the captain's table, having pocketed a guinea for his trouble. They were moving through the center of the room, past marble columns and potted palms whose upper reaches almost brushed the majesty of the glass-domed ceiling—when an excited female somewhere to the left trilled her name.

“Heavens be!” exclaimed the voice, with its pronounced Scottish lilt. “Is that wee Stella? It is, I'm surely certain!”

“Hullo!” A second voice chimed in. “Stella, it's us! Margaret and Oona.”

Estela stopped in her tracks.

“Och, she's seen us.” Oona's arm came into view, waving madly from behind the leaves of a fig plant.

Estela hadn't seen either of her godmothers for more years than she could remember, but they'd been close in the past. Her parents had been prone to gallivanting for long periods,

leaving her brother Charles at Eton, and Estela buried in the Highlands with the two sisters for months on end. It had been long before Esther was born.

Only later did Estela see how the pair had provided her with a sense of stability, besides giving her freedom to climb trees and build dens and ride their cart ponies endlessly up and down. More than that. She'd known they were fond of her. With her own parents, she'd sensed her presence was tolerated. Her godmothers had always seemed genuinely delighted by her company.

Naturally, the relationship had become more distanced as she'd matured, and entered a world of dances and concerts and myriad other entertainments designed to present her for the perusal of potential suitors. She'd been little more than eighteen on her first wedding day, and immeasurably pleased with herself. Her parents seemed satisfied with her, at last.

Her husband had been twice her age and more, but she hadn't minded in the least. He'd been kindly and generous and had taught her a great deal. She couldn't say she'd actually been in love, but her sadness at his untimely death two years later had been heartfelt.

Oona and Margaret had attended the celebrations, but she'd given them only the briefest of embraces before letting herself become lured away. She'd thought herself so sophisticated, joining her new London set, and her godmothers far too provincial.

Through the years they'd corresponded with relentless regularity, despite Estela's far less frequent, hastily scribbled replies. Estela felt a pang of shame. When had she last written? A quick note in the last Christmas card perhaps?

Leaving the Maître d' standing, she swiveled on her heel.

“How wonderful to see you.” Standing between the ladies, Estela dipped her head, kissing each upon the cheek. “I may join you, I hope.”

“Aye, o’ course ye must sit.” Oona took Estela’s hand with shining eyes. “We were just saying how glamorous everyone looks, and how beautiful everything is, and that it’s just the sort of place we always imagine ye to be—and here ye are, as if we summoned ye with our wishful thinking!”

There were two free chairs on the opposite side of the circular table, providing ample room for Estela to settle herself. The Maître d’ swept in to tuck her chair. A moment later, her wine glass was being filled and a plate of oysters made an appearance.

“You both look well.” Estela spoke honestly. Though the sisters were most certainly above the age of seventy, their appearance was sprightly. Their neatly curled hair was as it had always been, though now thoroughly silvered.

“It’s the excitement o’ travelling,” said Margaret. “We decided to follow Cousin Flora’s example and set off for an adventure. We took the train all the way doon to join the ship and have been having a guid old time of it.”

“How marvelous.” To Estela’s knowledge, the pair had never been further than Inverness, though their famous cousin, Flora McTavish, was quite celebrated for her expeditions into wild territory. She’d spent considerable time in the Wadi deserts of Jordan and Syria. Estela had managed to catch one of her lectures, on Ms. McTavish’s return to London, detailing her time spent living among a Bedouin tribe.

“Have you been touring the cities at each port of call?”

Oona looked slightly sheepish. “We did take a turn about the place when we reached Cádiz, but it was fairly hot enough to roast. We decided it would be a deal more convenient to stay aboard and view the sights from the comfort o’ the lounge chairs on deck.”

“Very sensible.” Estela smiled inwardly as she tipped back one of her oysters and swallowed it down. She supposed the warmth of the Mediterranean must feel a tad overwhelming after near-continuous Scottish mizzle. “Though perhaps I can tempt you ashore on this return leg. Our first stop is Bari. We might go together and find a nice shady piazza in which to sit.”

“That does sound pleasant,” Oona looked hopeful. “We could watch the world go by from a nice quiet spot.”

“Aye!” Margaret jumped in hurriedly. “T’would be just the thing. We didnae fancy having to traipse round with a group, and we were a might apprehensive to go wondering off.”

“Then it’s settled.” Estela raised her glass, encouraging them in a small toast. “I’ll be your chaperone. No one shall bundle you into a laundry basket while I’m watching out for you.”

Oona shot a look at Margaret, before turning her gaze back to Estela. “We did worry it was a possibility, after what happened to Flora on her last trip.”

Three waiters chose that moment to sweep in, replacing their empty oyster shells with a selection of cold hors d’oeuvres: olives and pickled artichokes, thinly sliced meats, and caviar perched on crackers, in addition to a selection of tiny fish. There was a pause while they all tucked in, but

Estela was too intrigued to let pass the reference to Flora McTavish's escapades.

"Do tell me more. I hope your cousin wasn't inconvenienced in some way."

Margaret lowered her voice in a conspiratorial manner. "Captured by pirates and sold into a Turkish harem!"

Estela nearly choked on the sardine she'd just popped into her mouth.

"T'was awful!" Her other godmother leaned forward. "Although quite thrilling in a way."

"Naturally, Flora insisted on a marriage ceremony before she'd allow this sultan of hers any truck with her person," Margaret went on, "though such a ritual could hardly be recognized by the good Christian Church."

"She said she'd only do his bidding if he gave her the position of first wife," added Oona, "which might count for something, but it rather put out of joint the noses of his other seventeen wives."

"Goodness!" Estela savored the bresaola. One did hear of such things happening. "Was she rescued by someone from the British Embassy?"

"Och no, not at all, though some overtures were made," answered Margaret. "Flora made it clear she was perfectly happy where she was, though the sultan was quite demanding. She insisted she was learning things she might never have otherwise—from within the lion's paw as it were. She said she owed it to her sister-explorers to take full advantage of the opportunity."

"How noble of her." Estela bit at her lip.

“Absolutely,” went on Oona. “’T’was a crying shame that the Royal Geographical Society refused to let her present her papers—though her findings were, admittedly, somewhat beyond the usual scope.”

“But if some diplomat didn’t intervene on her behalf, how did she escape?” Estela couldn’t begin to imagine.

“Quite against her will, apparently. She persuaded the sultan that his wives ought to be educated and volunteered her own services, beginning with Latin and the early philosophies of the Greeks, as well as a course in mathematical theory.” Margaret shook her head. “The poor things tried poisoning her several times.”

“Well, Pythagoras isn’t for everyone.” Estela conceded.

“Fortunately, Flora’s heightened nasal capabilities alerted her in good time,” Oona tapped her nose.

“They then left a deadly asp under her pillow, but Flora has a wonderful way with animals of all sorts, and made it her pet. The women were left with no choice but to pounce upon her one night and gag her. Then it was only a matter of concealing her in the linens sent for washing. After an arduous few hours, she found herself deposited on an outgoing cargo ship and—” Margaret stopped in mid-flow, her eyes fixing upon something behind Estela.

Oona, similarly agog, blinked and stared.

Twisting about, Estela understood why. If she hadn’t been sitting, she’d have been at risk of her knees giving way.

A shiver overtook her.

Her pulse sped.

Desire took hold of her, deep inside, sending a flood of wetness between her thighs.

To cap it off, her nipples shot to attention, as if someone had given them both a sharp tweak.

The man striding across the plush Persian carpet of the ship's dining salon was the most god-like specimen she'd ever laid eyes upon. He exuded raw, delicious sex-appeal, and he was headed straight for their table.

CHAPTER
THREE

Lord Rockley would have turned on his heel without a second thought, if it weren't for the fact that he was ravenous. Not a single table remained vacant, and he was in no mood to make the obligatory small talk with strangers if he was forced to share.

He should have ordered supper to his room, but he was here now and the sooner a plate of roast beef was in front of him the better.

A sharp survey of the salon showed him a seat no more ten steps hence, where three ladies appeared deeply engrossed in conversation. It was far from ideal but, if they were talkative among themselves, he might manage the meal in relative peace. Nodding his intention to the Maître d', Rockley strode out and had almost reached the table when the dark-haired woman with her back towards him turned.

His breath caught.

Did they know one another?

He thought not, for an introduction to a woman as handsome as the one before him would not slip his mind.

Yet there was something familiar in her features, or perhaps it was her hair: a cloud of ebony above an elegant

neck, with wisps curling upon her nape.

He was looking into eyes of languid softness.

Her chin lifted, and her lips parted. The desire came upon him to press his thumb there, to the center of her plump lower lip. He imagined her drawing it into her mouth and sucking upon it. Another image came fast upon that, and it was impossible to prevent the swelling stir of his cock.

A mere twelve months prior, he would have paid her every attention but, as alluring as she was, the last thing he needed was an entanglement. He wrenched away his gaze, making himself address the older ladies.

“I beg your pardon. May I seek the favor of joining you?”

“Please, do.”

“It would be delightful—”

The welcoming responses came without hesitation. The Maître d’ had now caught up with him, in time to hear the matrons’ invitation. The vacant chair was pulled out to receive him.

Without delay, he sat. “You’re too kind.”

The Maître d’ was hovering. “Lord Rockley, you are joining the Misses McTavish, and Mrs. Bongorge.”

Rockley inclined his head in recognition of the introduction.

“Such a treat!” One of the silver-haired women tittered. “A titled gentleman at the table, and so stately in appearance. We shall be the envy of every lady in the salon.”

“Oona, dear, you’ll have him sprinting for the door,” the other chided.

“The pleasure is all mine.” A carafe of White Burgundy appeared at his shoulder, alongside a fish course.

“I hope Lord Rockley shan’t mind us asking if he has been enjoying his trip.” Oona McTavish ventured again. “Although I wouldn’t dream of pressing him.”

The second Ms. McTavish cast a reprimanding eye upon the first. “I fear my sister has forgotten she’s no longer a debutante casting about for suitors at her first ball. Really, Oona, leave Lord Rockley to enjoy his meal without being interrogated.”

Rockley couldn’t help but be amused. The pair were harmless enough, and their Scots accent was gentle on the ear. The lemon sole was also very good, served with purple-headed broccoli and Chartreuse potatoes. While the ladies pushed morsels delicately onto their forks, he was close to finishing his portion.

He obliged the inquisitive Miss Oona McTavish with a reply. “I had business in Italy, which is now concluded. I’m journeying back but am in no hurry. Some time at sea seemed appealing.”

Taking a sip of his wine, Rockley tried not to be distracted by Mrs. Bongorge’s perfume—a heady mix of musk and spice. It was an unusual choice for a woman, akin to the cologne he favored himself. She hadn’t spoken, though he was aware of her observing him.

“I hope you didn’t dedicate your time entirely to business.” The languor of her voice, rich and harmonious, lent a suggestive air. “Venice, after all, is the City of Love.”

Her dark lashes flicked upward, and he was caught in the tunnel of her gaze. He swallowed hard. “Many cities are

named so. Paris, for instance.”

“Venice is more alluring, don’t you think? So much is hidden and mysterious; a more compelling prospect than the obvious glitter of the French capital.”

“I defer to your judgement.” He made himself look away. “I fear I’m not the romantic sort.”

The statement was not true. Of all cities, Venice held an enduring appeal, with its maze of waterways and ancient palaces. By night, especially, he found it enchanting. However, he wished to steer the conversation into more innocuous waters. If the Misses McTavish could be encouraged to take up the narrative of their lives, he felt sure his own remarks could be kept to the minimum.

In this way, the next three courses were dispatched, until the elderly ladies declared themselves not only too full to enjoy dessert but in need of their beds.

He was about to excuse himself in a similar manner when a platter of grilled peaches was placed before him, topped with mascarpone and drizzled with honey and orange liqueur.

Mrs. Bongorge had barely spoken since their earlier interaction, and he thought himself safe to enjoy the dish before making his own exit. Yet he’d taken only one succulent mouthful before he felt something brush his leg beneath the table.

“A nightcap, Lord Rockley? I have a fine bottle of Vecchia Romagna brandy in my room. The vanilla is pleasing on the tongue but complimented well by the darker spices. I’m sure you’ll find it satisfying.” Mrs. Bongorge’s hand came to rest, unmistakably, upon his thigh.

The blatancy of the invitation could not be mistaken and, despite himself, he was tempted. He'd spent the past hour trying not to think of how it would feel to have her mouth upon him, and her hands. The cut of her gown left him in no doubt that her breasts were magnificent. What shade would her nipples be: pale pink or a ruddier crimson? He imagined spilling there, over her creamy fullness.

If he allowed his cock to make the decision, he'd have her naked before she could unstopper the damn brandy. There were plenty of ways to enjoy one another without the ultimate consummation. But his world had changed, and his obligations. He held himself, now, to a different standard.

Gently, he moved her hand away. The swiftest way to extricate himself was through honesty. "Much as I'd love to sample what you're offering, I've an appointment at the church for a little over two months' time, and a bride who deserves better than a man who shares his favors freely."

Mrs. Bongorge's eyebrows rose. "How noble, though a disappointment for me. I must say—and I hope you won't take offence—you don't give the impression of a man in the grip of all-consuming love."

Rockley was under no obligation to explain himself. Yet, she struck him as a woman who might read a man, regardless of what he spoke aloud. That being the case, he supposed she sensed his attraction to her.

"It isn't that sort of marriage," he said simply. "Miss Maitland was betrothed to my brother, though the ceremony was delayed by family bereavement on her side. A year ago, most unexpectedly, Frederick died. She was twenty-three when they became affianced and is soon to have her twenty-

sixth birthday. It would be cruel for me to deny her any claim upon myself.”

Mrs. Bongorge looked thoughtful. “It is a great sorrow to lose a sibling. Please accept my condolences. But your sense of duty is excessive, is it not? Unless you feel a great attachment to the lady yourself? We do not live in the age of our grandmothers. If the lady is agreeable and well-connected—as I imagine she must be—she will not lack suitors.”

“Her ancestry is perfectly acceptable.” He spoke firmly. “Her grandfather was the youngest son of a baronet and, though her father lacks a hereditary title, he was knighted a decade ago for his services to industry: an achievement for which I have the greatest admiration.” He frowned. “But those considerations mean nothing. Miss Maitland was promised a certain status, and only I can make amends.”

His betrothed possessed not only respectable lineage but an ample dowry, thanks to the success of her father’s ceramics business in Derbyshire. However, Marjorie was a shy creature, with neither the manner nor looks to attract men in the way he imagined Mrs. Bongorge took for granted. For her to re-enter the marriage mart would be painful on many levels.

Mrs. Bongorge’s lips, so full and sensual, pressed in disapproval. “She’s being passed along like a second-hand petticoat.”

“That isn’t how I view it, and I should hope it is not how Miss Maitland feels. Her company is not unpleasant. Her kindly nature and modest bearing are conducive to a companionable arrangement. I’m led to believe she finds me similarly tolerable. I shall give her every freedom. The liaison has the greatest chance of happiness.”

“What lovebirds you will make!” Mrs. Bongorge’s eyes flashed. “Does it not occur to you that, beneath the wings of your gentle sparrow, may hide a yearning heart? She deserves more than that paltry consideration.”

The outburst took him aback. To his own mind, he was without reproach. His wife would be denied nothing, if he could but navigate the one area that worried him, and father the children he had no doubt she wished for.

Not that children were a necessity. His younger brother had already wed, and there were cousins. An heir to the title and estate was ensured, one way or another. But Miss Maitland—Marjorie—would want a child, he assumed.

As for himself, he was of the notion that marriage comprised but one part of a man’s life. It was natural for a woman’s interests to center within the home. Rockley Hall, situated close to the Welsh border, was generally held to be impressive, if somewhat lacking in modern luxuries. He intended to give his wife free rein in its decoration, and she might have any number of guests come to stay. He, meanwhile, would spend the majority of his time in town. Naturally, he would visit, but not above a few months each year. It would be adequate.

As captivating as Mrs. Bongorge was, she had overstepped the mark. “Madam, do not presume to know what is required to make my bride-to-be content. I venture that Miss Maitland’s temperament is vastly different from your own.”

Dropping his napkin to the table, he rose, bowed to the smallest degree, and departed. If some quietly insistent voice whispered that there might be a degree of truth in Mrs. Bongorge’s statement, he pushed down its unwelcome pestering.

Lord Theodore Rockley, eleventh Duke of Pembridge, would marry Miss Maitland, and she would be every bit as happy as he intended her to be.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Once safely in her cabin, Estela took up a cushion from the chaise, buried her face upon it, and gave vent to a long and heartfelt scream.

Rockley had dropped into her lap like a glorious treat—and just when she needed it most. It was too horribly disappointing for him to turn out to be a cold fish, spouting all that chivalrous nonsense about saving himself for marriage to his dead brother's betrothed. She'd lay odds on his dumping his bride back on the family estate within a month of the honeymoon, before kicking up his heels to hit the fleshpots. For all that men liked to believe themselves noble, the baser instincts tended to win out. There were exceptions to the rule, she would allow, but they were rarer than hen's teeth.

A gentle knock at the door heralded Antoinette's arrival and Estela was obliged to contain herself again. There was plenty that she did share with her maid, but she was in no mood to admit to her failure. The sooner she was disrobed and in the little bath that filled one end of the en-suite facilities, the sooner she'd have the chance to relieve some of her frustration.

Once in her wrapper, Estela opened the brandy she'd been hoping to share with the insufferable Rockley, and poured

herself a large measure. Antoinette saw to the bath, adding the orange blossom oil her mistress favored. With a bob, she then departed, leaving Estela to wallow in peace.

A full half-hour submerged beneath the scented water, coupled with some self-love and the warmth of the brandy running through her veins, placed Estela in a slightly better mood. Rockley was absent, but she did an adequate job of conjuring an image of him lying naked in his own cabin. She pictured a finely muscled torso, a nice dappling of chest hair, thickening below the navel, and a solid piece springing ripely to attention from his thatch.

Enjoying the sense of power the little game gave her, she carried on. He was thinking of her with a large dose of regret, realizing that he'd bollixed things up. Now he was reaching down, giving himself a steady fisting, growing harder and increasingly lubricated, all the while wishing that she was with him.

Having achieved her aim, Estela put aside the daydream and climbed from the bath. There were limits to how far she wished to dwell on the undeserving Lord Rockley.

Pouring another brandy, she sat down with the pile of correspondence that had been gathering. Taking up her pen at the current moment wouldn't be wise, but she ought to remind herself of what was waiting. There was something from her brother, she recalled.

Charles was inviting her to Yardmore Court—the family seat in Hampshire—for the usual festive gathering. It had been several years since she'd attended, but he always asked, which was gracious. It wasn't his fault that Estela found he and his wife rather dull and thought similarly of the company they kept. Even their children were shockingly docile. Esther, her

far younger sister—who'd recently found wedded bliss in the arms of Yardmore's own country vicar, was clearly cut from the same cloth.

Goodness only knew how her siblings had ended up so staid and sensible. It seemed that only Estela had inherited the madcap ways of their parents, bouncing from party to party and place to place, not to mention lover to lover.

It was perhaps why she'd invited Mathilde to join her the previous summer. One couldn't help admiring the girl's adventurous spirit.

Taking another draught of the brandy, Estela savored its mellow richness upon her tongue. She only hoped that Mathilde's vitality was not quashed by the confines of marriage—assuming the match went ahead.

Where were those letters now?

Burnt in the grate of a fire, and no more than ash, Estela hoped. If Conte Sforza was behind their disappearance, it would be the best outcome. Time would tell, and there was nothing more she could do about it.

The next envelope bore handwriting with which she was less familiar. The rear, where her knife had already opened the paper, bore the stamp of Dalreagh Press. Withdrawing the notepaper, she skimmed through the proposal once more. Written in the neat script of the owner of the tiny publishing house, the missive was refreshingly to the point, much as she remembered the author having been, when they'd first met—at a Bloomsbury soirée some five weeks prior.

Dunrannoch Castle

Perthshire

August 30th, 1905

My dear Estela – I know you shall not mind my familiarity,

What a great pleasure it was for us to meet at Vanessa and Virginia's residence the other night. As promised, I am writing with a favor to ask.

It was a surprise to discover our happy connection, if only distantly through your great-grandmother. I hope you may visit us at the castle before long, where you shall be very welcome, and are sure to enjoy the company of my grandson and his new wife.

Now, to the matter in hand!

As a sister of our illustrious line, I call upon you to add your expertise to the volume which it has been an honor for the women of our family to keep in circulation these several hundred years.

I refer to 'The Lady's Guide to All Things Useful', a pocket edition of which I passed to you upon the night of our meeting.

While the book continues to sell in pleasing numbers, I'm reluctant to admit that almost two decades have passed since the text was

substantially revised. Naturally, times change, and it falls to me to ensure that the guide begun by Flora Dabreagh—our legendary forebear—remains pertinent.

Our interaction convinced me at once that you are a suitable candidate to tackle a particular segment of the chapters: namely, those relating to sexual congress.

You shall not mind my candid speaking, for you are not a woman who shrinks from naming a spade.

I hope, most sincerely, that both your inclination and your schedule will allow you to take up the gauntlet and bring our modest little book into the 20th century.

With all regard, and in anticipation of your reply,

Lavinia Dabreagh

Countess Dunrannoch

From her nightstand, Estela flipped open the small leather-bound book, which Lady Dunrannoch had pulled from the depths of her capacious handbag to press upon her new acquaintance.

In fact, it was not the first time she'd seen the strange little collection, which seemed to comprise largely of remedies for

warts and chilblains and other unsavory conditions. Hadn't that peculiar young woman, Miss Mortmain, been reading it? Or had it been delicious Mr. Burnell? Estela's memory failed her.

In any case, she'd perused it for an hour or so during the interminable rail journey on her way to Venice.

The whole thing was dry as dust and could certainly do with sexing up a bit. Some frank advice in that department was severely lacking. Knowing how to lance a boil was all very well, but there were more advantageous skills. She hadn't landed herself four extremely wealthy husbands by knowing how to treat carbuncles.

There were a few promising sections, but far too vaguely written to be of any real use. If one had the boldness to name a chapter 'Seduction' one ought to favor the reader with at least a few little somethings to make the mouth water.

As for the chapter entitled 'Bedroom Matters', Estela could only roll her eyes.

For those who lack warm feelings towards their husband, bedroom sports are more to be endured than enjoyed. However, allow him as many freedoms as you can bear, even where his practices may be against your own inclinations. Only ensure that he does not injure you and, in time, you may take pleasure in what first seemed abhorrent.

There was some truth in it, she supposed. Estela's last husband, being well advanced through his winter years, had been confined to his bed for the majority of their seven months of marriage. She'd performed her wifely duties to the extent

required, considering the frail state of his health. Fortunately, Ephraim had largely preferred to have her read to him and had been content to have *The Iliad* recited in translation rather than the original Greek. Fittingly, he'd drifted off somewhere in the thirteenth book, just as Zeus was at last taking leave of the battlefield.

She'd discreetly attended to her own physical needs during that time, largely aided by two of the more handsome footmen employed at their London residence. Estela knew she was bad—if not quite to the bone. Husbands were useful for many things, but it was foolhardy to rely upon them to satisfy sexual needs—especially when marrying men so much older.

There was a snippet which mentioned lovers, but she'd scoffed to read it.

A lover should never be chosen like a tidbit at a supper buffet. The brief pleasure of conjoining flesh is nothing to the deeper satisfaction of a lover who speaks to the mind and the heart. Where physical passion meets emotional and intellectual compatibility, a couple may enter into a lifelong partnership without regret.

Really, as if one entered into a fling with the intention of keeping the object of one's lust around for more than a few months—at the utmost. Lovers fulfilled a specific purpose. There was not a single one of her own with whom she'd have wanted to prolong matters.

As for husbands, they fell in a different category altogether, and could be discounted. She considered herself fortunate that all her marriages had been brief—even if she had been fond of each groom, to an extent.

And what did it mean to ‘speak to the mind and heart’?

Sentimental twaddle!

The young women of today would be better served to know how they could have their cake and eat it, taking pleasure as they desired while avoiding any unpleasant repercussions. Estela had plenty of experience on that front.

Her first inclination had been to decline Lady Dunrannoch’s proposal, but something about the project appealed to her. If the Countess wanted the book brought into the new age, she would certainly do her best to oblige, and have a little fun in the process.

Oh yes. We can certainly improve upon this!

Estela tossed the book across the bedspread.

And if Lord Rockley is as impressive in the bedroom as I’m confident he will be, it will provide just the sort of inspiration I need.

Estela squeezed her eyes shut against the morning sun penetrating the drapes. The day was going to be another fine one and the sea was calm, but her head spun, nonetheless. It was still early, with no voices carrying from the deck—only the occasional caw of the ever-whirling gulls.

She’d drunk more than was wise the night before. The brandy had been a particular mistake.

If Rockley had only played along and returned with her for what would have doubtless been an enjoyable romp, she’d be waking up now feeling becalmed and wonderfully herself. As it was, she had a low thump in her temples, her stomach was

gurgling uncomfortably, and objects she knew to be stationary were swirling at an off-putting velocity.

She vaguely wondered if Rockley was nursing a similar headache. She rather hoped he was, except that she didn't recall him drinking much the night before. He'd been depressingly sober. The prig! If he'd loosened up a bit, he mightn't have been so sanctimonious regarding her proposition.

Gingerly, she sat up and poured some water from the carafe on her nightstand. Drinking it down, she felt marginally better. She pushed the pillows into a more accommodating position, closed her eyes, and drifted off again.

There was a rapping sound. For the briefest moment, she had the notion that it was Rockley—as if their altercation of the night before had never happened and he'd come looking for her at last.

“It's me, dear. Are you awake?” Margaret's voice carried through the door.

“Just a moment.” Estela swung her legs out and threw on her robe. What time was it? Her head was immensely better. The spinning motion had altogether improved. Only her tummy still felt a little peculiar. Unlocking the door, she stepped back to allow her godmother entry.

“Thank goodness.” Margaret looked at Estela critically. “We wondered whether you might be unwell. That maid of yours is sitting on a deckchair out here, sunning herself. She tells me she tried three times to stir you without success. I see you're fine, though you don't look greatly rested.”

Margaret clapped her hand to her mouth, her eyes widening. “You didn’t—?” Her imagination was clearly moving at an accelerated pace. “We could see you had eyes for each other. It was part of the reason Oona and I left you alone, but we didn’t anticipate...” Her gaze darted about, as if expecting to see Rockley surprised from mid-coital action.

“Margaret!” Estela gulped back her laughter. “What are you thinking!”

Margaret pinked. “I may be a spinster but I’m not utterly green to the ways of the world. Lord Rockley is very handsome, and clearly enamored. I was only shocked to think you might have leapt into shenanigans on such short acquaintance.”

“That would be shocking.” Estela framed her features into some semblance of seriousness.

“Although, impulsive actions can sometimes encourage a man into expressing his feelings,” Margaret added quickly. “I wouldn’t discount such a course of action entirely.”

“I’ve simply overslept, and I’m very much alone. As pretty to look at as Lord Rockley is, he doesn’t interest me as a long-term prospect, and the feeling is mutual, I can assure you.” As open-minded as her godmother was appearing, Estela didn’t think she’d condone luring a man into bed for no reason beyond the unashamed seeking of pleasure.

Margaret arched one eyebrow. “Tush! I don’t believe it for a minute. An eligible gentleman with a dukedom! Yes, it’s true. I checked in the ship’s library directly after breakfast—which we were most surprised you missed. There’s a brand new volume of Debrett’s and there he is, Lord Theodore Rockley. Such a romantic name, and lands near Monmouth.

'Tis bonny country, though lacking the majesty of the Highlands.”

“You have been busy.” Estela folded her arms.

How had she not known the name? Was it because the estate was close to Wales, which was not somewhere she'd bothered to travel? Either that or her memory was slipping. In any case, it was inconsequential. Margaret's claim that he was 'enthused' was a product of her godmother's wishful thinking.

Margaret seemed to have regained her composure. “I'm merely saying what I see. You're not in your dotage yet, wee Stella, and if a perfectly nice duke is wanting to pay his compliments, I hope you won't be turning your nose up.”

She gave a sniff. “Anyway, I shall say no more. I came to let you know that Oona and I have made some friends while you've been sleeping the morning away: Mrs. Titby-Titton, and her daughter Tabitha. They've asked if we'd like to join them in taking a look at Bari. They're experienced travelers, from all I can tell, though not in Flora's league, naturally. I hope you shan't mind us going without you. I guessed you mightn't be disposed to escort us yourself.”

Estela's conscience pricked. She'd promised to take her godmothers ashore. Instead, she'd drunk herself silly and forgotten all about the excursion. It wasn't her finest hour.

“Of course, you should go.” She took Margaret's hand, giving it a small squeeze. “I'm sorry to have been so thoughtless. I'll make it up to you. We moor at Port Messina tomorrow. Sicily isn't to be missed.”

“Think nothing of it.” Margaret returned the pressure of Estela's fingers. “I did wonder if you might prefer to spend your afternoon in the company of someone closer to your own

age. So don't be worrying about us. We'll be having a grand time."

She dipped her chin, looking pointedly at Estela. "Now, do get dressed, dear. One never knows what the day may present, and it does no harm to be looking one's absolute best, does it."

Estela felt strangely cheered.

When she did 'happen' to bump into Lord Rockley, she intended to show herself to full advantage.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Rockley had already taken eleven laps of the deck. Looking again at his watch, he wondered how he'd managed to miss her. He was certain that Mrs. Bongorge had not joined the Misses McTavish for breakfast; nor had he observed her leaving the ship to go ashore.

If keeping to her room, she must surely emerge at some point, wishing to take the air. He had merely to keep watch. He would then intercept her and...

And what exactly?

Apologize? His choice of words to her had been unfortunate. Unaccustomed to being challenged, he'd perhaps over-reacted.

It was within her right to speak as she saw fit, regardless of whether that opinion irritated him. Moreover, he was aware that his reaction was an indication almost entirely of his troubled conscience regarding Miss Maitland.

With the date of the wedding looming closer, several worries quietly assailed him. He could not picture them sitting across the table from one another, engaging in light conversation. In fact, it was difficult to think of them as man and wife in any of the usual social situations. He'd little idea

of her preferences regarding the theater or music or art. Did he even know which poets and novelists she admired?

That was his own failing. He'd been remiss in not making greater efforts. He'd leapt into Frederick's shoes so quickly, doing what he thought was morally correct, that he'd given no thought as to whether he and Miss Maitland were suited.

Mrs. Bongorge's declarations were impertinent, since the affair was none of her concern; and yet, perhaps her very distance from the matter gave her objectivity.

He tried to remember Miss Maitland's reaction when he'd initially made his offer. Marriage proposals usually occurred in a joyful setting, whereas they'd both been in the throes of grief over Frederick's passing; it muddied the waters. She'd asked for time to think but sent a note of acceptance no more than a day later. He'd taken it as a sign that his actions were absolutely correct but, of course, she would have taken advisement from her parents. The response was theirs as much as her own.

Coming to one of the benches set out along the promenade deck, Rockley seated himself, looking across at the view. The harbor was picturesquely curved, reflecting the vista in its still waters: tall palms and stone villas, gleaming white.

He'd never visited Bari. Were it not for his desire to speak to Mrs. Bongorge, he would have gone ashore. If she were to appear, there was still time. They might explore together.

He shook that thought away. He merely wished to make his apology. Anything else would complicate things. Despite their cross words, she tempted him in a way that was dangerous. To his shame, his imagination had been full of her while satisfying the arousal with which he'd woken.

It should be Miss Maitland he thought of, if he was to think of anyone...but he could only picture her retreating from him, looking horrified. He'd been telling himself that he'd work things out somehow. Plenty of people married who began as strangers. A closer bond could be formed in time. Yet one fundamental difficulty remained—perhaps insurmountable, in every sense of the word.

He could not sit here, pretending that he waited for Mrs. Bongorge purely to make his apology. He knew in his heart what he wished to discuss. It would no doubt shock her but he had a feeling that, if anyone were able to help, it would be this woman.

That thought excited him far more than it should.

It was too late for breakfast, and too early for luncheon. Nevertheless, the Maître d' seated Estela in a quiet corner of the dining salon and she was able to order several dishes, accompanied by a pot of steaming coffee. Now that her stomach had settled, she found herself inordinately hungry. Once fortified, she intended to take a turn about the deck. If she should happen upon the duke, so much the better.

Despite having woken in such a poor state and having much upon her mind, she was in good looks, much aided by the careful choosing of her costume. The stiff white taffeta striped in raspberry pink brought out the roses in her cheeks, while her hat, jauntily positioned and with a cascade of full-bloomed peonies upon the uppermost side, provided the perfect finishing touch.

To her immense satisfaction, it appeared that she had no need of seeking the gentleman who remained uppermost in her mind, for no sooner had she made short work of a custard pastry when he appeared of his own volition. He did not see her at first, which gave her the advantage of assessing him. In his evening tails, he'd looked handsome in the way all men did. This morning (she believed it was still before the hour of noon) he looked even more delectable, wearing a three-piece suit in cream linen, paired with a crisp white shirt.

Rockley exchanged some words with the Maître d', who nodded discreetly in her direction. Locating her amidst the parlor palms, he made his way over. "Mrs. Bongorge,"—a furrow creased his brow, as he took in the various plates surrounding her—"you're eating."

She smiled over the rim of her coffee. "This being the dining room, it is the most usual activity."

"Indeed." He looked uncomfortable, which suited her just fine.

"You wished to say something?" She sipped at the beverage.

"I did. That is, I do." He was definitely squirming. "Last night, my manner was uncalled for; rude, in fact. A gentleman does not lose his temper, nor departs from a lady with cross words between them. I spoke in haste, and I apologize, most sincerely."

Estela set down the cup and gave him one of her most winning smiles. "You accept, then, that I understand some portion of what your Miss Maitland may be feeling, despite our temperaments being 'vastly different'."

“You are a woman and so is Miss Maitland.” Taking off his hat, he held it before him.

“How observant!”

“As such, I need your help.” He looked at her most sincerely.

“And your first thought was to come to me?” For a moment, she was dumbfounded.

An apology, she’d hoped for; a request for her assistance was unexpected. It was not an unwelcome development. To be needed, in any capacity, gave one the upper hand, which was a position she preferred. It also gave her the chance to taunt him, just a little.

“You must know a great many women: sisters, aunts—friends even?”

“The last people I wish to confide in are those of my intimate circle.” The brim of the Panama was receiving a through pleating. If he carried on, it would be quite unwearable.

“To be blunt, there are aspects of my forthcoming marriage which give me pause.” He sighed. “I am...anxious.”

Estela was intrigued. The previous evening, he’d given the impression of being quite set in his plans, but a man who was certain of himself did not admit to anxiety.

“Please”—she indicated the chair beside her—“let me pour you some of this excellent coffee.” Fortunately, a second cup was to hand. “You shan’t mind if I continue with my breakfast?” She picked up her knife without waiting for his answer and neatly decapitated a boiled egg, before dipping a finger of asparagus within.

Rockley added a dash of cream to his coffee and was stirring it thoroughly. Far more than was necessary. A small tick worked in his jaw.

“You’re perfectly welcome to watch me eat, but it might be best to explain what’s on your mind. I can’t be of assistance otherwise. I assure you, nothing will shock me. I have had four husbands.” Estela proceeded to bite the tip from the delicate green spear.

Almost imperceptibly, Rockley winced. “I had an inkling you’d have experience to draw upon.”

Estela could hardly take umbrage at his insinuation, given her forwardness of the night before.

“Come now, do spit it out, or I shall grow bored of you. A woman likes a man to be decisive. You may think of that, if you will, as my first marriage tip.” With a certain smugness, she took up more of the asparagus, polishing off the stems and her yolk.

His gaze dropped to his coffee cup. “To put it bluntly, I’m exceptionally well-endowed. It’s vulgar to mention such things, but there we are.”

“As all men of nobility should be.” Estela pushed aside her now empty egg shell. She drew the next plate forward, which contained a selection of cold meats. “A rich estate and a portfolio of wise investments are nothing to be ashamed of. I’m sure Miss Maitland will be delighted.”

“You misunderstand me.” Rockley picked up his cup, then replaced it abruptly upon its saucer. “When I speak of my endowment, I don’t just mean financially.”

Poised to pierce a skinny little Barese sausage, Estela paused. “The most attractive asset of all.”

“I do not consider this an advantage. Quite the opposite. If you understood how difficult...”

“Now, now.” Estela lifted the sausage on her fork, giving it a thoughtful twirl. “All men believe they have enormous appendages, and that women are frail flowers who will be crushed if you exhibit your true desire. Let me see...some actress, or an opera singer perhaps, has convinced you that your truncheon is frighteningly large. ‘Oh, Your Grace, you are too, too huge! However will I...?’. All the while, her legs were clamped firmly about your ducal buttocks, urging you on.”

He looked alarmed, glancing about the room. The salon remained empty but for themselves and the Maître d’, who was adjusting a floral arrangement on the far side of the room. Still, Rockley answered in a hissed whisper. “Keep your voice down and stop playing about with that sausage; either put it in your mouth or set the thing down.”

Estela grinned. Depositing the slender Barese, she replaced the morsel with a particularly fat bratwurst, nestling on the plate next to salami and mortadella. “Is this more like it? Quite girthy, but certainly manageable.”

“You’re impossible!” Rockley passed a hand over his brow. “Forget I said anything. In fact, forget that we ever met. I shan’t disturb you again.” Looking peeved, he made to rise.

“Don’t be such a child!” Estela rapped sharply on the table with the handle of her cutlery. “Another marital tip for you; women like a man who perseveres. Tantrums are for infants. Are you telling me that you believe you’re so large in that department that your bride won’t be able to...”

Rockley narrowed his eyes, but remained where he was. “Accommodate me? Yes.”

She could tell he was gritting his teeth.

“It’s always been a problem. Even with...” He diverted his eyes again, clearly too embarrassed to articulate the obvious.

“Even with ladies who are well-used to accommodating every sort of customer, and every sort of request?” Estela—enjoying herself immensely—nibbled the top of the bratwurst. “I suppose one has to protect the tools of one’s trade. But, surely, there must have been someone brave enough to give you a go.”

He could hardly be so colossal that not a single night-butterfly in the whole of London would take him on. As a regular visitor to the soirées of the demi-monde, she was acquainted with plenty of women who would see his supposed ‘affliction’ as an enticing challenge. Her own interest was being piqued along much the same lines.

He was blushing. “Attempts were made. In my younger years, I didn’t realize the size of the... ah...the anomaly.”

The situation was growing ever more irresistible. A thought occurred to her—so wildly shocking that she almost choked on the tidbit she was chewing. Rockley’s status and desirability were unquestionable. In spite of these displays of annoying shyness, he would be tantalizing to women of all ages and persuasions; attractive to his own sex in the majority of cases too, she’d wager.

Was he really telling her that he’d never done the deed?

That he was, to all intents and purposes, a virgin?

By the sound of it, he’d experimented sufficiently to have some sexual experience. But to have never managed penetration! She was incredulous.

And he thought she could help?

He must believe her the biggest trollop on the continent if he had hopes of her succeeding where seasoned whores had failed.

The cheek of it!

She turned blazing eyes upon him. She ought to slap his face good and proper, or stick him with the fork—which she was still clutching, and rather tightly too.

“I haven’t any notion of you obliging in that way.”

He looked suitably alarmed. “I’ve long accepted that I shall never ‘know’ a woman fully, in the Biblical sense. There are other things that are possible, and I must be content with those. Indeed, some of them are extremely pleasurable...” He gave a self-conscious cough. “It is only that, my first duty to my wife must be to give her a child. She will want a family, and—though there are any number of male cousins ready to take the title upon my demise—it would be agreeable to think that a son of my own line would have that privilege.”

Estela looked him dead in the eye. “You do understand how a woman comes to be carrying a man’s offspring? That certain things are necessary?”

“The mechanics are within my grasp. I simply thought that you might have a notion or two on how the grain”—he coughed again—“might be delivered, as it were, into the belly of the ship, without a thorough reach into the hold.”

Estela didn’t know whether to laugh or cry for him; the man looked horribly agonized. “If we are to discuss this, we can’t be talking about copulation in nautical terms.” She fought to keep a straight face. “Cock and cunny shall do, or sheath if you prefer, and Miss Maitland—Heaven help her—will be carrying your child in her womb.”

He blew out his cheeks in a long breath. “Quite right. Better to speak plainly. But the question is, do you have any suggestions?”

Though it was not a subject Estela had ever considered, her instinct was to rise to the challenge. Furthermore, there was no way upon Earth she was going to pass up the chance to take a look at this supposed leviathan of a member.

It was not her fault that her wicked nature conceived several other things she wanted to do besides looking. Miss Maitland was not yet his duchess, after all—and, if Estela was successful in finding a solution, it would be Miss Maitland who would benefit.

One could not be expected to go out of one’s way to help without some sort of profit to oneself. Only nuns and missionaries were that altruistic, and Estela doubted even they were totally selfless.

Estela drained the last of her coffee. “Cabin twenty-seven in half an hour. I shall be waiting.” Without looking back, she made her exit, in full confidence that His Grace was following the sway of her bustle, and that he would not be even a minute late.

CHAPTER
SIX

The passageway was empty. All was quiet, but for the low hum of the electrical lights.

Rockley paused before knocking. What was he about to do? He was far too attracted to the woman waiting for him. As for her interest, it could be in little doubt. She was a seductress, used to having her own way. He didn't intend to fall in line with those plans, but he was flesh and blood.

She might well be the one to find a solution—but at what cost?

Being at anchor, there was no noticeable movement from the ship. He might be in the corridor of any London hotel. An image assaulted him of a future in which he might stand many times as he did now. How often would he come to the door of someone who wasn't his wife, seeking comforts he couldn't ask for in the marital bed?

A knife twisted in his gut.

Was that how it would be?

For all Miss Maitland's decent qualities, his instinct told him he never would desire her in that way. Told him, too, that she felt no such attraction towards him. It was a miserable thought.

Hitherto, his life had been so full that he'd given little consideration to marriage. When it had crossed his mind, he'd conceived the idea through rose-tinted spectacles. Someone who shared his adventurous spirit, and was unafraid to stand her ground, yet was also loyal and compassionate. Someone with a wicked sense of humor, tenacity, and strength of will, but who was also softly compliant, letting him worship her in the bedroom. An enthusiasm to fulfil his every filthy fantasy would be the cherry he would eagerly consume.

Such a woman did not exist.

Even if she did, it didn't mean he deserved her. The nature of his work often took him from the country, placing him in danger.

Miss Maitland might truly be glad to be left to her own devices for months on end, but the woman he imagined as his soulmate would want to never leave his side. How then would she feel, seemingly abandoned?

Rockley rested his forehead upon the door.

These were idle daydreams. Moreover, he was procrastinating—putting off the moment when he intended to knock and give himself into the hands of the fascinating Mrs. Bongorge. Something told him she was his best hope and, if he walked away now, he would regret it.

He only hoped he could navigate the temptation she presented.

As the door opened, Rockley fell forward, finding himself almost nose to nose to the lady. He was steadying himself

against Mrs. Bongorge's shoulder, which stopped him toppling altogether; his other hand had planted firmly upon her bosom. She was no longer wearing her jacket, so that his palm cupped her left breast through the thin muslin of her blouse.

"Rather forward of you, Lord Rockley. It might be an idea to wait until I've pushed shut the door before greeting me quite so energetically." A mischievous glint lit her eyes.

He retracted both hands, mumbling apologies.

It wasn't like him to be clumsy, or to be left-footed, but something about her set him off-kilter.

Ushering him in, she clicked the door quietly closed. She'd guessed, he could tell, that he'd been lingering outside.

"Do sit." She indicated the chaise, while positioning herself opposite upon a padded stool.

The room was tidy enough, though filled with female paraphernalia. Bottles of fragrance and lotions ranged the dressing table behind her. Hanging from a hook upon the wardrobe door was a gown in some frothy stuff. He'd seen someone else wearing a similar gown of late, though he couldn't think where. The design must in vogue, though it was unusual in being such a dark shade of green.

To one side sat the hat she'd been wearing earlier, and the jauntily striped jacket.

There was a rustle of fabric as she arranged her skirts. "If you're hoping to spot a pile of underthings or a flimsy nightgown hanging upon the bedpost, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. My maid is quite meticulous."

Feeling himself color, he ceased bumbling on. He was guilty as charged.

He'd been reluctant to simply look at her, but he did so now, and felt his pulse rise in pace. The simplicity of the blouse, adorned only minimally with lace, only drew greater attention to the beauty of the wearer. Her complexion was that of an English rose, while the darkness of her hair, pinned in lush waves, spoke of more exotic heritage. As for those dancing eyes, which seemed always to be laughing at him, he could not exactly decide the color. Some shade of green, though flecked with warmth, as if from the shaded sun. With the voiles at her window being drawn, the room was bathed in filtered gold.

“Lord Rockley?” She summoned his attention once more. “Shall we begin? We have a lot of ground to cover. I suggest we begin with an assessment of the situation. I have questions, which I hope you’ll answer candidly, before we move to a more practical approach.” If he was not mistaken, her gaze dropped by increments, coming to rest in the vicinity of his lap.

He adopted a business-like manner. “First, there should be rules. This being a highly unusual arrangement, we should both be aware of where we stand.”

“If you wish.” She answered sweetly. “I’m content to be of use to you, however you might see fit.”

“We are agreed then, for there to be no emotions involved? I know women like to have feelings.”

“We do, but I promise not to run away with any notions of being in love with you. That would be quite contrary to my plans for this trip, not to mention my immediate and long-term future.”

“Very good.” It was a relief, though her no-nonsense approach was rather more forthright than he'd been

anticipating. “Nevertheless, it might be an idea to know one another’s first names, don’t you think?”

She rested one finger upon her chin. “A simple ‘Madame’ will do for me, if my married name is too much of a mouthful. Otherwise, I am Estela. For my part, it suits me perfectly well to call you ‘Your Grace’.”

“It does not suit me.” He couldn’t help being abrupt. He was yet to become accustomed to his new status and took no pleasure from it. Hearing it only made him think of his brother, or their father. It was not an address he’d ever thought to associate with himself. Besides which, there was such a taunting to the way she spoke. “I prefer simply Rockley, or Theo, if you wish it.”

“Theodore? A gift from god? How apt”—her lips twitched in teasing fashion—“all things considered.”

“As I said before, I consider my condition more a curse than a blessing.” There was a great deal riding on whatever happened next in this room. She’d said she had some ideas to put forward. If they proved successful, it would be a great weight lifted. If not...

“You must know, a man does not like to consider himself a failure.” Resting his forearms upon his knees, he kept his gaze upon the soft pile of the Persian carpet. “If you are unable to solve this predicament—or to help me solve it myself, I should say—it is a cross I will likely bear forever more.”

“I do understand.” Her tone was suddenly serious. She leant forward, touching his hand lightly. “Be assured, you shall have my advice, in all earnestness.”

Taking a deep breath, he sat straighter again.

“Now, first things first.” She gave him a bright smile. “Much of what I shall teach you concerns your bride more than yourself. It is she who must be placed at ease. You must take time to prepare her, to seduce and to arouse, to make her feel cherished and desired.”

He nodded. It would be no easy task, but he owed it to Marjorie to do his best. Above all, he could not risk doing her harm. To have even a chance of performing the act sufficiently to allow conception, she would need to allow him the liberties of the conjugal bed.

“It would help greatly if your bride also received some honest counsel. One would hope her mother would see to the matter but it cannot be taken for granted.” She looked thoughtful for some moments. “If there were some comprehensive manual on the subject, I would suggest its purchase but I know of nothing, as yet, which would do more than alarm her or confuse.”

Rockley appreciated the conundrum.

For young men, there were any number of avenues through which to learn prior to meeting one’s spouse in the marriage bed. Besides a wealth of literature, accompanied by detailed illustrations, there were opportunities for first-hand practice—and the conversation of one’s peers. He’d been listening to others’ boastful tales of conquest long before he was of an age to attempt anything himself.

“It may be possible for me to meet with your bride in person, after you are wedded but prior to any relations occurring,” Mrs. Bongorge went on. “Though I would certainly not wish to intrude.”

His first reaction was one of horror. It would not do, at all, for the two to meet. For all her innocence Marjorie would

guess, surely, at something being amiss, and it would only create awkwardness.

“Let me think on that.” It would not do to offend Mrs. Bongorge by dismissing the idea out of hand.

“In any case,” she continued, “there are other things Miss Maitland may do to ready herself for you, though I think these tasks will also need to wait until you are man and wife. One moment...”

Turning, she brought forward a box from her dressing table which he had assumed contained jewelry. Her opening of the lid allowed him to see exactly what was inside. It was not the first time he’d seen such objects, but he was taken aback by breadth of her collection.

“I assume you are familiar with such toys.” Matter-of-factly, she withdrew the smallest from where it nestled on its velvet bed. She looked at the column fondly.

“Finest Carrara marble. I’ve heard that our old Queen possessed a set just the same, gifted by her dear Albert. These were a wedding present from my third husband. These were custom-made, with the bulbous end designed to resemble his own anatomy. He did so like to watch me pleasure myself.”

Rockley’s sharp intake of breath brought on a coughing fit. Mrs. Bongorge jumped up in alarm, then hurried to the small room adjoining and returned with water.

“I’m fine.” He croaked, thumping at his chest. “It was only the surprise of...”

“Yes, yes.” She sighed wearily. “Men never expect women to speak plainly of these things, but it is quite silly to do otherwise. So much is wasted if one is circumspect.”

He was in no position to argue. “If I may ask, why so many?”

“Even a woman of experience needs some time to prepare herself.” She picked up one of the columns from the center of the box. “It helps to work up to something of this magnitude.” She tapped it thoughtfully against her chin. “You might make a similar gift to your bride. She could practice with the smaller pieces, until she might be ready to accommodate you.”

Rockley understood the concept well enough, but his spirits slumped. As worthy as Mrs. Bongorge’s suggestion was, it highlighted her lack of appreciation for the proportion of the problem.

“If she needs persuading, you could turn this into an amusing diversion.” Lifting out the tray from the box, Mrs. Bongorge took out a long sash. “Restrain her a little, so that she may be permitted the fantasy of you obliging her in the game. Be gentle, but masterful. You may be surprised at her response.” With a playful air, she held up the sash like a half-veil, batting her eyelashes over the top in mock-allure.

His voice emerged somewhat higher than was usual. “I can’t quite imagine Miss Maitland being comfortable... that is, I’m not sure it fits with what I know of her.”

Mrs. Bongorge’s laughter was immediate. “Come now. It’s likely you don’t know the first thing about what she’s really thinking. I have no doubt your bride is a virgin, but this does not preclude her from having knowledge of her own body; more so than you may realize. Besides which, you must encourage her not to be ashamed of any part of her sexual nature.”

With the sash replaced, she tipped forward the box again, so that he could see the contents clearly. Giving him another of

her serious looks, she asked, “Which of these does your cock most resemble?”

Rockley swallowed hard. “I really don’t think...”

“This perhaps?” Mrs. Bongorge held up the instrument second from the end. “It is a great deal fuller in girth than most men possess, but not prohibitively sized, if the recipient is willing.”

At the shake of his head, she raised an eyebrow. “Not this, surely?” She lifted out the final tool, which had the girth of a particularly well-nourished leek.

“Something akin to it.”

She would know the truth soon enough, for he could see where the conversation was leading. At some point, she would ask to see the scale of the obstacle, as it were. There was no way around the issue, for she could hardly be expected to help without all the facts.

“Goodness!” Somewhat flustered, she snapped the lid shut and put the box aside. “To meet your aim, there is no need for you to achieve full penetration. An inch or so should be adequate. Then, it is only a matter of your bride elevating her hips, to allow the seed to flow naturally to its destination.”

Despite her clinical way of talking, hearing Mrs. Bongorge speak of the act was arousing. As for Miss Maitland, he remained very much unsure of whether she could be persuaded to embrace the idea, though practicing with marble penises seemed to have some scientific advantage.

“Naturally, it will be prudent to let her become familiar with the real thing before you launch it at her,” Mrs. Bongorge went on. “The act of looking at and touching a man can be

very arousing for a woman, and it is your bride's arousal we must focus upon. Try to involve her as much as possible."

"Involve her?" Did she mean, in making him hard? He couldn't imagine Miss Maitland wanting to. He'd always thought, if he allowed her a full viewing of what he needed to deliver upon her, that she'd be repulsed or horrified. Requesting that she stroke him to arousal seemed an unnecessary evil.

"Just remember to let her progress at her own pace and praise her efforts. That is the surest way to making her feel comfortable. Put aside your own eagerness to see the deed done and let her take the lead."

"I see." Rockley couldn't help feeling a little incredulous. He'd been thinking the best way would be to conclude matters as quickly as possible. It had never occurred to him that Miss Maitland might respond well to being given charge of the situation.

"Let us change tack." Mrs. Bongorge stood. "There are other things you can do to prepare your wife, which are just as important, if not more so. Please, let me demonstrate."

She motioned him to his feet. Reluctantly, he rose, aware that it was impossible for him to hide the swell of his arousal.

He observed her glance downward, taking in the sizable bulge now apparent.

Her eyes widened. "I see there is no hurdle to your achieving your own awakening but let us keep our concentration upon the more important aspect. We must ensure your partner reaches the appropriate mental and physical state to allow congress to occur."

She looked him in the eye. “Here is the scene. This is our wedding night, and I am your bride. I stand before you in my nightgown, trembling and fearful, uncertain of what is required of me, or how to please you. What shall you do, in this moment, to put me at ease?”

He felt himself sway, somewhat dazed, possessed by the picture she’d just painted—except that it wasn’t Marjorie he was imagining!

“Lord Rockley?” Mrs. Bongorge snapped her fingers. “Are you paying attention?”

He made himself focus. “I am only thinking...of what would be appropriate...”

His voice trailed off. There were no words for what he was feeling in this moment or, certainly, none that seemed right.

Mrs. Bongorge clucked her tongue. “I see I must get you started.”

Taking his hand, she brought it to her face. Her eyes she kept downcast, while turning her cheek into his palm.

For some moments, she did not move, merely resting there, with her head tipped slightly to the side. “Touch softly and I shall shiver. Trail your kisses and I shall melt.”

He was very much aware of the movement of her breath.

His gaze fixed upon the pale skin of her throat. He wanted to tip back her head and bring his fingers into the thickness of her hair; to hold her thus as he pressed his lips to that sensitive place. He wanted to taste her skin and hear her gasp as he captured the lobe of her ear between his teeth.

She was guiding him lower, skimming the muslin of her bodice, brushing the outer swell of her breast, until he rested

upon the crook of her waist. There, she held fast, so that his hand was captured beneath hers.

They were standing much closer.

Her head was bowed. “This night, you are the first to behold my body; your touch is the first to make me sigh. Whisper to me—that you have thought of nothing else, that you burn to taste and explore and to cherish. Tell me I am the only woman you shall ever desire from this moment. You wish only to protect, to nurture and to love. Nothing shall ever hurt me.”

Her voice was mesmerizing, speaking of all that he desired to give, and the sweet, lush femininity he wished to possess.

Exhaled from a place deep within, his response was barely a murmur. “Yes.”

When she raised her eyes, they held a look of faint surprise.

“I’m glad you approve. You see how it easy it is to seduce a woman. You have only to speak tenderly and match your embraces to your words. Convince the woman in your arms that you are willing to wait an eternity, and she is sure to move along the pace quicker than you can imagine.”

He took a ragged breath. “If I ever say such things, it’s because I believe them true.”

“Of course you do. I’m sure you can be very convincing when you put your mind to it.” Her lips quirked a little. “Now, we cannot have all our lessons in one go, but I do think it would be useful to establish what we’re dealing with.” She let her gaze travel downward. “Don’t be coy. You have given me some idea of what to expect, but the time has come to show the dog the rabbit, as it were.”

Reaching forward, she ran her knuckle across the outline, so obvious, straining at the front of his trousers.

He sucked in his breath. The way she was rubbing, he'd burst the buttons if he didn't free himself. But if he allowed this situation to progress, there was every chance he'd be unable to contain himself. All this talk of penetration and tying up, not to mention the way she'd gotten him to touch her, and the things she'd said...

It was too much.

He'd known there was danger in coming to her cabin. If he let things proceed, he'd a good idea of what would follow. One caress of her bare hand upon his shaft or—dare he think it—her tongue licking at the purple head, and he'd be undone.

“Not bashful?” She dropped her chin, looking up at him through those thick lashes. “I promise, I shan't be so overcome by the sight of you that I'll fall instantly in love. Don't you want to show me how magnificent you are?” Again, she reached for him.

“Stop that.” He caught her wrist.

This had gone too far. The part of his brain that was hardwired for sexual pleasure was racing into overdrive.

Mrs. Bongorge, meanwhile, didn't appear the least deterred. Only when he relaxed his hold upon her did he discern a flash of disappointment.

“You mustn't think I'm ungrateful.” He made himself take a solid step backward. “You've given me much to think about.”

She summoned a smile, though it did not quite reach her eyes. “There is a great deal more I would suggest, if you wish

further enlightenment...” She gave a small sigh. “You know where I am, should you desire me to be of further assistance.”

He bowed in recognition of the offer. It was rather ridiculous under the circumstances, but observing the formalities allowed him to retain some belief that he’d acted within the bounds of ‘decency’.

There was nothing more to do; nevertheless, he considered throwing everything he’d just said to the winds.

If Frederick had never died, he would not be in this position with Miss Maitland. He’d be free to act as he desired, and what he wanted right now, more than anything, was this woman in his arms.

But how could he live with any degree of dignity, knowing he’d been so weak? His decisions affected others beyond himself.

It took the last vestige of his self-control to compel his departure.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Estela didn't know what to make of her encounter with Lord Rockley. It had not gone as planned and she was left feeling...

Foolish? Frustrated? A little wistful?

All of the above.

She told herself he'd soon seek her out again.

However, there had been no sign of him in the dining salon the night before and he was absent again this morning. Estela was forced to conclude that he really had experienced a change of heart. Her pride was a little buffeted but far from crushed.

Oona and Margaret were chattering on about their little excursion to Bari, while all three tucked into some exceptionally good frittata. Estela was glad they'd enjoyed themselves. To take a cruise of this sort and not go ashore was a crying shame. She hoped they would be brave enough, now, to take advantage of every opportunity.

However, as they told her of the souvenirs they'd purchased, the delicious lunch, and how majestic they'd found the *Cattedrale di San Sabino*, Estela found her mind wandering.

Lord Rockley had been tempted, she was certain. But whatever lure she exerted over him, it was clearly not enough.

Was she losing her touch? Or, God forbid, had she come across as a touch desperate?

“What do you think, dear?” Margaret’s voice interrupted. “These noble Italian families seem just as bad as our own—always marrying their own cousins and such forth. There is an argument for it, I suppose, but I can’t help thinking it does a bloodline good to have a little shake-up now and then.”

Lifting the coffee pot, Oona topped up their cups. “Just look at Major and Lady Millicent Muttstanley—the new residents at Randymount Hall. Obsessed with their breeding regime! The Major asks two guineas for stud services, which isn’t to be sniffed at.”

Margaret helped herself to sugar. “He regularly catches us after church to let us know what they’ve been up to. Going through his maneuvers in the garden at all hours. Posture is so important. Lady M looks quite worn out. The Major’s Golden Boy is well-awarded, mind you, so I suppose practice makes perfect.”

Estela suppressed her laughter. “Are we speaking of horses?”

“Skye Terriers, dear—those funny wee dogs with bodies twice as long as they should be and eyes buried under a great fringe. Affectionate, though I wouldn’t trust them being left alone with anything smaller than a Jack Russell.” Margaret slathered butter on her third slice of bread.

“Lady Millicent is convinced the Major will claim best in show at the Longmuckity Christmas Fair, though he has stiff

competition from the kennels at Slickend Manor,” added Oona.

“Now, Stella dear”—Margaret fixed her with beady eyes—“How are you getting along with that handsome duke? You were awfully quiet last night, and I see you’re deep in thought again this morning.”

“It shan’t come to anything.” Estela did her best to appear nonchalant. “An admirable lady by the name of Miss Maitland is to become his wife.”

“Oh my!” Oona looked terribly disappointed. “I’m sure that’s wonderful for this Miss Maitland, but is it really all set?” She glanced at her sister. “We did think...that is, we hoped...”

Margaret clicked her tongue impatiently. “I’ve never seen a man try so hard not to look besotted, and to fail so miserably. He could hardly keep his eyes off you. I’m not one for believing in love at first sight, but he gave a good impression of tumbling headfirst in the heather.”

It gave Estela pleasure to hear it but her godmothers were far from impartial. As for mooning over her at the dining table, the vast expanse of bosom she’d had on show was likely responsible for that. Physical attraction could fool a man into thinking all sorts of things which lasted about as long as it took to tumble a woman into bed.

“Whoever this Miss Maitland is, I’m sure she isn’t a patch on you.” Oona gave a despondent sniff. “And I’d be surprised if her relations are anywhere near as illustrious. Very few can count themselves so lucky as to be related to the ancient Dalreagh line—albeit distantly. Though you’re yet to have bairns of your own, the family is renowned for being prolific. How many is it Charles has now—six?”

“Seven, with an eighth due to make an appearance before Easter.” Estela took another sip of her coffee.

The issue of children was among the reasons she’d taken to avoiding Yardmore Court. It wasn’t that she disliked her nephews and nieces, nor that she hankered after a large family herself (even the thought of having offspring was a little frightening). It was simply that most people from her brother’s circle considered her to be a ‘failure’ for not having experienced motherhood.

As she aged, the pitying remarks only worsened. It didn’t seem to matter that she led an exciting life, filled with travel and parties and every other sort of amusement. As for having outlived four husbands, she had a pretty good idea of the rumors that inspired.

“Shush, Oona.” Margaret threw a pointed look. “If Lord Rockley has found his bliss elsewhere, it’s not for us to pass judgement, even though we do know he couldn’t do better than our Stella.”

“Shall we ready ourselves for today’s excursion?” Estela cut in.

Oona’s eyes lit up. “Where is it that we’re anchoring this morning, dear? The Isles of Scilly?”

“Sicily,” Estela gently corrected. “The port is called Messina, and there’s plenty to keep us occupied. It’s a new destination for me, but there’s a chapter in my guide book. We can take a gentle walk and find a nice spot for lunch. It’s no distance at all from the harbor to the main square.”

“That sounds delightful.” Margaret nodded her approval. “I would suggest that the Titby-Tittons join us, but Titania is adamant that she must have an official Sicilian guide. She’s

heard it's the worst place for men taking liberties—bottom-pinching and such. She's making Tabitha remain aboard but is bravely taking the risk herself.”

Estela gave an inward smile.

“Just us then.” She was more than a little relieved.

They'd descended the gangway and were standing upon the harborside consulting Estela's map when Lord Rockley appeared. Oona saw him first and beckoned him with a cheery wave.

“Ladies.” He gave a chivalrous bow and doffed his hat. “I see you're headed into town. If you'd welcome my company, it would be a pleasure to escort you. I know something of Italian architecture.”

Very smooth, thought Estela. One might think he'd been waiting to intercept them at the appropriate moment. He looked a little tired, but handsome in his sand-colored linen suit, paired with a simple cream tie and matching kerchief.

She wasn't sure what he was playing at but it irked her. He might have joined them at dinner if he wished to continue a cordial association. Instead, he'd left her wondering and waiting, growing increasingly disappointed.

Now she'd be obliged to be nothing but polite while nursing her annoyance. She folded her map closed and was about to let him know that he needn't bother. However, both Oona and Margaret were expressing their delight, and the matter was settled.

Exactly as Estela had planned herself, he led them to the Piazza del Duomo, where the warmly-hued cathedral bore customary stripes and a high-arched central entranceway, flanked by ornately-framed doors upon either side.

Estela was not averse to visiting sacred buildings, but she did hope Lord Rockley wasn't going to be a bore, making them spend hours inside and inundating them with facts no one wanted to hear.

Crossing the square, they came first to a large and surprisingly intricate fountain, which deserved some moments of regard.

“The Fontana di Orione—widely regarded as the most beautiful in Italy,” pronounced Lord Rockley. “It was designed by Angelo Montorsoli, who studied under Michelangelo himself. The piece was commissioned to celebrate the completion of the city's first aqueduct; hence the four reclining figures from whose amphorae water flows into the lower basins. They embody the rivers Nile, Tiber and Ebro, as well as the local Camaro, which feeds the fountain itself. Most of the other figures follow the theme, in portraying dolphins, sea monsters, naiads and so on.”

Estela made as if to conceal a yawn. For whatever reason, Lord Rockley had clearly set about memorizing his guidebook.

Oona was peering at the figures—all very much naked and without so much as a fig leaf perching on their manly parts. She adjusted her spectacles. “It's baffles me, if such works are modelled on some masculine ideal, why the sculptors make the membrum virile so tiny one can hardly see it. I've been led to believe the male anatomy is somewhat more imposing.”

“Oona!” Margaret exclaimed, blushing to the roots of her silvered hair.

Estela framed her features with as much seriousness as she could muster. “I've often wondered the same. What do you say, Lord Rockley? Do they fear sending women into a frenzy or a faint?”

To his credit, any shock seemed to have shifted to amusement. “Men tend to underestimate a woman’s strength. I can hardly believe that a mere statue, however well-turned, would affect the female population adversely.”

“Quite right,” Oona went on. “I’ve always thought it unfair, since the female form is portrayed so abundantly in art. Far more satisfying to behold.”

Lord Rockley cleared his throat. “Orion stands proudly at the top, as the mythical founder of Messina—the son of the sea-god Poseidon and Euryale, daughter of Minos, who ruled Crete.”

“I thought Hermes and Poseidon joined Zeus in relieving themselves on a bull-hide, and then buried it, from which Orion sprang forth magically.” Estela had been quite keen on Greek mythology in her younger years. “In fact, doesn’t his name derive from *ourios*—meaning urine!”

“Or *oros*, meaning mountain,” Lord Rockley countered.

Estela recalled Orion as a rather unsavory character, who’d committed at least one assault upon some maiden or other. She wracked her memory. “Is he the one who boasted of having such hunting prowess that he could kill all the beasts of the earth?”

“He is,” Lord Rockley admitted. “Quite justifiably, Gaia sent a scorpion to put an end to that notion. They were both then placed in the stars, as opposing constellations. One sets as the other rises.”

“Hmmm.” Estela turned away. “I think Orion has had enough of our time. Shall we move on?”

They spent the next hour inside the cool, marble interior of the Basilica Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta. Estela did not

consider herself a proponent of any organized religion, disliking dogma for its own sake. There was something immensely calming, however, about the great space within the cathedral. They moved quietly between the columns, looking into archways housing statues of the apostles. They marveled at the mosaics in the left apse, and the right. They gazed reverentially into the dome at the center of the transept.

Estela noticed Lord Rockley light a candle upon the votive stand. He bowed his head, and she wondered whom he might be praying for. His brother, perhaps.

Soon after, it was he who realized, before Estela herself, that Oona and Margaret were flagging.

Ushering them back across the piazza toward a charming restaurant, he secured them a table beneath a wide parasol.

When the waiter hurried over, Rockley ordered for them in Italian far more fluent than Estela's own.

“As we must hydrate, I've requested a jug of orange juice.” He turned to the older ladies. “Some say the Sicilian fruit are the best in all the world, thanks to the climate and fertile soil. Also, a carafe of Marsala wine to accompany arancini, and the specialty of the house—Caponata di Melanzane. It was once a dish of only the nobility, made with expensive lampuga fish, but the people made it their own, by substituting eggplant. The result is even better, in my opinion, with just the right amount of sour and sweet.”

Estela settled back, feeling strangely contented. Despite her confident ability to navigate the ordering of lunch, there was something rather pleasant in allowing Rockley to take charge. It did not escape her notice that Margaret and Oona thought so too.

The meal proceeded in friendly fashion, with Rockley encouraging her godmothers to speak of their home. Before long, they were regaling him with stories of Estela's childhood. Most did not place her in the most flattering light, since she'd largely run amok. However, Rockley egged them on, seeming to enjoy hearing of her wayward youth.

"We must end with the cannoli—crisp outside and soft within." Rockley rose. "This place is famous for adding fruit to the rich ricotta. Excuse me. I'll look at all they have and order a selection for us."

As soon as he was gone, Oona and Margaret shared beaming smiles.

"There! Didn't I say he was taken with you!" Margaret folded her hands upon her lap. "As good natured as the duke is, I doubt he usually goes out of his way to charm elderly spinsters."

Estela took a sip of the excellent pressed oranges. She'd been wondering herself about his motives, and could only conclude this was an olive branch of sorts. Whether it was the afternoon sun, or the wine, or the deliciousness of the food, she was feeling a great deal more benevolent towards him.

Nonetheless, that didn't change the substance of the situation.

"You're forgetting Miss Maitland." Estela tapped her fingernail upon her glass. "His Grace wishes to honor the betrothal. He and I had a long chat about it yesterday, and he made himself clear."

Margaret looked thoughtful. "I'm sure you know best dear. Still, gentlemen do change their minds, almost as much as we ladies."

Estela had to admit, Lord Rockley had made such a fuss about behaving honorably and keeping his word that it did smack of ‘protesting too much’—as if he’d been trying to convince himself, rather than her.

There had been a moment when she’d felt sure he was succumbing, despite his principles. She knew she oughtn’t to mention what had passed between Lord Rockley and herself, but the substance of his ‘problem’ was too tantalizing not to allude to.

“I think our handsome escort is simply wanting to make up for a small awkwardness between us. You see, he did come to my cabin while you were in Bari and...”

Oona clasped her hands in obvious excitement.

“Go on, dear. We’re all ears.” Margaret leaned forward.

“Naturally, Lord Rockley wishes to fulfil his duties as a husband, and to give Miss Maitland the marriage every woman deserves. However, there’s an obstacle.” Estela glanced over to the door of the restaurant, reassuring herself that he was still closeted inside.

Did she dare go on? Her godmothers would be discreet, and they were quite open-minded, but the matter was so delicate.

“To be frank, it’s a bedroom matter, and the duke asked if I might have advice to offer, to aid him, so to speak—having been married so many times myself.”

Oona looked perturbed. “He wanted to discuss a bedroom matter, for Miss Maitland’s benefit, and he came to your cabin, where nothing happened between the two of you?” Her hand flew to her mouth. “He has a terrible disease! And it’s on his

piddle-paddle! The poor man! Has he pustules? Are they very bad?"

Margaret looked similarly horrified. "It all makes sense now. He's afflicted in some way so embarrassing that he could never tell his bride to be. Is it a wilting walloper? His mighty oak is more of a weeping willow?"

Estela shook her head, barely suppressing her laughter. "No pustules, and no withered wallopers—at least as far as I know. From what I gather, the...um...artefact in question is in full working order."

"Then whatever is the problem?" Oona's brow furrowed as she searched her mind for other possible ailments. "Don't tell me he's blighted with a teensy tiddler! A plunger too puny to perform the job. A miniature maypole. A Lilliputian holy-poker. A diminutive dingle-dongle. It's too tragic!"

"Dear me. That is disappointing." Margaret's shoulders slumped.

"I can assure you, that's not the problem." Estela bit at her lip. Of course, she hadn't yet seen it, but she'd gained some idea of the duke's proportions purely from the swell at the front of his trousers during their tête-à-tête.

"Then it must be his nuggins!" Oona fairly shouted the word, causing several heads to swivel in their direction. "They do vary in size, so I've heard, but even the most modest nutmegs are capable of spawning offspring."

"Oh yes, that's far less distressing, although still unfortunate, I suppose." Margaret looked thoughtful again. "Men can be quite sensitive regarding their pibbles. He wanted you to take a look, I suppose, to hearten him that he wasn't too much below par."

“Not exactly. Lord Rockley is actually possessed of something...bigger than one finds in the general way. Much larger in fact. One might say, an asset of generous proportions.” Estela was enjoying this far more than she ought to. “As a result, he fears consummation will be impossible. He sought my advice but, when it came down to it, he proved too coy.”

An astounded silence ensued. Oona’s mouth dropped open slightly. Margaret’s eyes doubled in size.

The hush was broken by the arrival of the man in question, closely followed the waiter, carrying a silver platter laden with unarguably phallic-looking cannoli.

“Awe-inspiring are they not?” Lord Rockley looked from face to face, clearly under the impression that the pastries had produced the stunned expressions worn by Oona and Margaret.

“They most certainly are.” With the aid of the tongs, Estela helped herself to the uppermost of the pile, setting it upon her plate. She then raised the cannoli and bit down upon it with a murmur of approval.

A liberal amount of filling escaped the confines of the roll, so that she was obliged to lick it from the corners of her mouth.

“Most delicious, Lord Rockley.” Saucily, she dipped her tongue to the center and gave him a wink.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Replete from the cannoli, a companionable calm descended upon the four of them.

The Misses McTavish were an eccentric pair, clearly bent on furthering the acquaintance between himself and Mrs. Bongorge—or Stella, as the others referred to her. However, he couldn't find it in himself to be annoyed. The ease he felt contrasted with the formality between himself and Miss Maitland. As amiable as her parents were, he hadn't found himself able to relax and laugh in their company as he had today.

Rockley felt surprisingly amenable. Impulse had driven him to join them ashore, despite his earlier resolution to keep his distance. He was a grown man; not some adolescent ruled by sexual caprice. He was capable of enjoying the company of Mrs. Bongorge without casting off all his principles.

At first, she'd been somewhat prickly, no doubt uncertain of his motives in accompanying them. They'd parted in a way that could only be described as uncomfortable. However, it hadn't taken long before she indulged her usual playful manner.

She was looking particularly lovely, too—in frothy white muslin embroidered with rosebuds. He didn't usually pay

much attention to the details of a woman's dress, but he approved of this one. A wide sash accentuated her waist, above the padding and contraptions going on beneath the skirts. He'd a feeling her own hips would be perfectly adequate in giving the outfit shape, creating just the right counterbalance to the curves within her bodice.

He didn't mean to stare, but perhaps he was, for she adjusted the positioning of her hat, hiding her face behind the great saucer. "If I sit much longer, I shan't be able to move at all. A short turn about the square, I think. Please remain as you are."

"Nonsense, dear," said Margaret McTavish. "Lord Rockley will accompany you. Even if you are in plain sight, we're in a foreign country. Better to have a gentleman by your side."

"We might climb one of the bell towers, if you're feeling up to it? The steps don't number more than about a hundred, and the view is worthwhile." He found himself hoping, very much, that she'd consent.

"Oh yes," the other Miss McTavish prompted. "You must see that, and there's no need to hurry back. We'll sit until you collect us."

Mrs. Bongorge rose and took his arm, walking in step with him across the piazza, towards the western of the two belltowers. The spiral upward being narrow, he sent her ahead. All was quiet, but for the sound of their step and the slight brush of her skirts over the rising stones, though she lifted her hem, giving him a view of white boots and a modest heel.

She kept a good pace, though her breathing came more noticeably as they approached the final turn. Emerging onto the open-windowed balcony of the summit, she pressed her hand to her chest, laughing and triumphant.

It was just as well they were alone in having made the ascent, for there was little enough room for the two of them. The bell hung within the vault, its rope tied to one side.

Taking off her hat she leant out, gazing down at the square and across the terracotta rooftops, then farther, towards the strait and the harbor. “Look, we can see the ship! I can see everything... except—” she moved to the next opening. “Is that Mount Etna? It’s smaller than I imagined.”

“It’s the tallest of all Europe’s volcanoes; the most active, too.” He came to stand directly behind her, and the breeze carried her perfume to him—jasmine today, underlaid with earthier notes. A raven curl had broken loose from the pins coiling her hair. “At least a quarter of the island’s population lives on its slopes, since those are the most fertile.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” She squinted westward.

“Not as much as you might think. It’s been more than five decades since the last eruption. In any case, the lava travels slowly. Farms and homes are swept away, but rarely lives. Far more people have been lost to conflict over the years, not to mention disease and hardship.”

“Everything looks so peaceful, it’s hard to imagine it any other way.” She was watching the passing of those far below.

“Not entirely peaceful.” He knew more about that than she needed to hear. There were organizations on the island of Sicily whose methods of keeping the peace were far from civilized—though, superficially, they did the job as effectively as any government. “It was a British protectorate for a time, to ensure access to the sea routes during the Napoleonic wars. Like most places, it has its secrets, and a history layered with glory and strife. Almost every power in the region has taken control here, at some time or other: the Phoenicians and

Carthaginians, Greeks and Romans, all the way through to the Normans and Spanish.”

“All things pass, don’t they. Like a woman’s beauty—fleeting. One day we’ll be gone, and who will be able to say they ever knew us?” She pressed back against him, resting her head lightly upon his shoulder. He stood very still—aware of the warmth of her body; knowing she would feel the heat from his.

When she turned her lashes were lowered, but she tilted back her head, parting her lips, entreating him.

His gut tightened.

She wanted him to kiss her, and with every fiber of his being, he wanted it too.

He clasped her tightly, anchoring her to him. Gently at first, he tugged her bottom lip, teasing, but when he entered with his tongue, he uttered a low, rough sound.

As the kiss grew in urgency, she gave herself over to it entirely, letting herself melt into the heat of his body and the commanding hunger of his mouth.

He moved his hands lower, to cup her behind through the flimsy material, squeezing her roundness, while pressing himself to her belly.

She loved that he wanted her, that he was unafraid to surrender, to give in to the hot lick of passion.

She was no demure debutante, and immediately desired more.

She wanted everything—to unbutton him and take him in her mouth, to caress and suckle. Then she wanted to lift her skirts and have him bury his cock inside her—that mysterious, gargantuan cock he believed no woman could endure. She wanted him to take her right there, with her legs wrapped around him.

She let her own palms travel lower, seeking out the hard curve of his buttocks.

“Stella.” He was breathing hard. “Stop. We must stop.”

“There’s no one here; no one to see.” She brought one hand to the waistband of his trousers. “I can make you feel wonderful. Just let me...”

“No.” He looked at her with beseeching eyes. “I began this, but I was wrong.”

Despite the warmth of the afternoon, a chill enfolded her.

He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

She knew it to be true.

A man didn’t kiss like that unless he felt something.

“You still plan to wed.” Her voice wasn’t her own.

He looked wretched. “Think of your own marriages. Did you make them because you fell in love?”

Of course she hadn’t. As sister to a viscount, she’d always been assured a level of social acceptance. Coupled with beauty and wit, there had been nothing to stop her from making almost any match. But there was a reason she’d sought out the husbands she had. Love—at least on her side—had not been a prerequisite. In return, she’d enjoyed great wealth and, more importantly, freedom.

Only now was she rethinking what she needed.

Her funds were sufficient that she need not marry again. As for position, there were circles in which she wasn't welcome, but she couldn't summon much regret on that count.

"If I break off the engagement, Miss Maitland will be humiliated. I can't be responsible for that and maintain any sense of self-worth."

How could she argue? He'd made his feelings plain from the start. Nothing but her own foolishness had led her into thinking it might be otherwise, and she truly did feel a fool. He was set to marry a nice, innocent girl—young enough, almost, to be her daughter.

"You're right. Forgive me." She made herself say it. She was the one at fault, tempting him to throw away his self-respect for... what exactly?

Whatever problems Rockley thought he had, he'd overcome them eventually, and sire the heir he deserved. That ship had sailed for Estela. Even were she willing to bear a child for a man she thought she might care for, her age made that highly unlikely to happen.

"We should go down." Without further appeal, she began the descent. By the time she'd reached the bottom, her mind was made up. The only possible answer was to have nothing more to do with him. The alternative would lead to actions they'd both regret. "Would you be kind enough to return to the restaurant? I wish to sit in the cathedral for a while, but I won't be long."

His eyes were anguished, though whether on his own behalf or hers, she couldn't say. "Let me stay with you. I can sit far off if you prefer."

“Kind of you, but not necessary.”

She needed to reassert the version of herself with which she was more familiar. Emotions were always a bad idea. She’d had it right from the first. What she needed was a damn good rodgering, and if His Grace didn’t wish to oblige, she’d find someone who would.

L eaving him at the bottom of the tower, Estela moved into the half-light of the cathedral. It was eerily quiet, compared with earlier in the day. An elderly woman, all in black, knelt nearby, her hands clasped in prayer. In a side chapel, one of the clergy was polishing the crucifixes adorning the small altar.

She was going to do something terrible; something blasphemously wicked—purely to remind herself of what she was capable. This was who she was: a woman without scruples who took what she wanted.

Prissy Lord Rockley, who couldn’t make up his mind, could jump in the harbor for all she cared.

Entering the side chapel, she touched the robed man’s sleeve. He was younger than she’d anticipated. A novice priest? It would explain why he was conducting menial duties. Nevertheless, when she whispered in his ear, he nodded, leading them towards the confessional.

Only once the door on his side was closed did she cast her eyes the length of the nave, assuring herself they were unobserved. The next moment, she was slipping into the gloom of the booth where the young man sat.

He started in surprise but made no sound. Nevertheless, she placed one hand upon his mouth. With her other, she caressed his cheek—as yet untainted by any growth of beard. A brush of her lips across his eyelids brought the quickening of his breath.

She'd barely had time to take to her knees when the door opened behind her. A figure loomed on the threshold, silhouetted against the light.

The figure of Lord Rockley.

CHAPTER
NINE

She was so angry—with herself, with him, with everything!

Holding her nose, she dipped backward, holding herself beneath the surface of the bathwater, letting it close over her head entirely. When she came up for air, water sloshed over the edge of the tub and across the bathroom floor.

He was an arse; a pompous, self-righteous arse who had no business interfering. He was going to marry his Miss Maitland and, she, Estela, was going to carry on doing whatever the hell suited her.

She could have made more of a scene, but she'd let him haul her up and frogmarch her out of the cathedral and across the square, back to where Oona and Margaret were waiting. She'd had no choice but to pretend all was well, though they could hardly fail to notice the frosty silence between her and Rockley.

As soon as they'd boarded, she'd pleaded a headache and retired to her cabin. The way she was feeling right now, she'd no desire to re-emerge; certainly, she didn't want to see that beast of a man ever again.

She knew his kind only too well, thinking they were better than everyone else.

She scrubbed at her arms with the soap, then embedded her nails in the slab, indulging a fleeting fantasy of holding His Grace under the water, while pushing the soap into his mouth.

What she wanted was a drink—but she'd been in such a hurry to get Antoinette out of the room and herself in the hot water, she'd forgotten to bring the brandy through. She needed something to take the edge off this prickly mood.

Stepping out, she slipped on her silk dressing gown and tied it loosely. There was no point in drying herself. She'd simply grab the bottle and return to wallow.

However, she was only halfway across the room when there was a tap at the door. She stood very still. As much as she loved her godmothers, if one of them had come plying a preparation for her supposed sore head, she'd no intention of letting them in. Better for them to think her asleep. Only a few seconds passed before a louder knock came. She waited, and the rap on the door interrupted a third time, even more persistently.

Blast!

She was fed up standing like a ninny, with her hair dripping. This was her cabin and she deserved some peace. Margaret had been most worried about her when they'd returned to the ship, and it was no doubt she who'd come to see how Estela was feeling.

She'd quickly reassure her, while letting her know she'd be taking supper in her room. Going to the door, she clicked open the lock.

No sooner had she done so than it pushed open, revealing neither Margaret nor Oona. Instead, the glowering form of Lord Rockley towered above her.

She went to slam the door, but he was too fast, jamming his foot there. Before she knew it, he'd stepped inside.

His expression—usually so impassive—betrayed barely contained rage. He leaned back against the door, saying nothing, while his eyes glinted dangerously.

Her hair had dampened the front of her robe, making the thin silk cling, so that nothing was concealed of her shape. She itched to fold her arms, to hide herself from him, but she'd be damned if she'd let him see he was unnerving her.

Somehow, she managed to hold her voice steady. "Get out."

"I don't think so." The lock clicked shut behind him. "You've been desperate to see what's in my trousers since the first moment we met; or should I say, you're simply desperate?"

"Bastard!" Estela hissed low between her teeth. "What I do is none of your business. Because you deny yourself, you think I should too? I happen to enjoy sex, and I intend on having as much of it as I like."

"So I saw. You're used to taking what you want, aren't you, without thinking of the consequences." He shrugged off his jacket. "Well, two can play. You want sexual satisfaction, and I'm here to give it to you." His waistcoat followed the jacket to the floor.

"You wouldn't dare!" Estela's mouth was dry. Much as she liked rough play, she wasn't prepared to be taken against her will. Besides which, if Rockley were as large as he indicated, there would be more pain than pleasure in a forced coupling.

"You'll find out soon enough." He loosened his tie, dispensing with it before unbuttoning the top of his shirt.

With the shedding of each garment, he'd taken a step closer, which she'd countered by inching back herself. Nevertheless, he was close enough that Estela could smell the perspiration on his body.

If she'd made for the bathroom as soon as he'd entered, she'd have had a chance to lock herself there, but that time was past. He could push her to the floor in a moment.

No. She wasn't going to run.

He thought he could intimidate her, but she was going to prove him wrong. "You think you know what I want? Let's see you try."

Something shifted in his eyes. In a heartbeat, his hands were upon her waist, and he was throwing her back towards the bed.

She gave a small shriek as she hit the mattress. There was barely time to catch her breath before he was upon her, hauling her up towards the pillows. With one leg, he pinned her hips. Then he was drawing out the sash from her dressing gown. Too late, she realized what he was about. Dragging her hands above her head, he tied them together.

"I didn't agree to this," she gasped as he looped the sash to the headboard, pulling the restraint tighter.

"You told me to give you what you want." His expression was smug now, looking down at her helplessness. "Perhaps I know what that is better than you think."

Her dressing gown had fallen partially open, and he didn't hesitate in twitching the silk aside, baring her completely. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Lord Rockley let his gaze roam. "One might almost think you were expecting me."

Unashamedly, his gaze raked her nakedness, still damp from the bath and flushed pink.

It was thrilling and infuriating.

At last he laid hands upon her, spanning her torso, his palms warm over her ribs. She tried to subdue her breathing, but her heart was beating too fast, her pulse racing at the thought of what he would do next.

With the smallest smile, infuriatingly knowing, he moved up to cup her breasts. Softly, slowly, he massaged their fullness, circling inward. As he approached her areolae, she breathed harder, desperate for a firmer touch: a pinch, or the lowering of his mouth—to nip and suckle.

He did neither, holding her in limbo, despite the hungry look in his eyes.

She cursed him again.

“You want me to stop?” He brought his thumbs and forefingers close to each rose-colored bud.

She took a deep breath, so that her breasts rose against his palms. “You’ll have to work harder if you want me to remember this tomorrow.” He wanted to torment her, but that was a game they could both play.

“And how shall I do that?” At last, he gave each nipple a long, hard squeeze, making her whimper.

When he removed his hands entirely, rising from the bed, she near moaned in frustration. But he was not gone for long.

From her dressing table, he collected the box she’d shown him the day before. “Shall we start with the smallest and work our way up, or shall we skip the preliminaries?” He selected

the very largest of the columns and touched it against her belly, making her jump from the coolness of the marble.

Yet she was already growing wet at the thought of him using it upon her. She watched as he trailed it downward, to the dark curls at the crux of her thighs. Nestling the bulbous tip within her outer labia, he ensured the stone made contact with her most sensitive part. She panted, biting at her lip as, with the smallest of movements, he pushed then retreated, making her wait for the next moment of delicious pressure.

But she wanted more. If he didn't put the damn toy inside her she was going to scream.

“You want me to fuck you with this inanimate thing?” There was a hardness to his voice. “We can do better, don't you think?”

Tossing it aside, he replaced it immediately with his fingers. He located her nub with expert swiftness and pressed upon it, caressing until she was cursing him again.

Then, without warning, he slid downwards, entering her with two fingers. The suddenness of it made her cry out, but her body arched in response.

God, yes!

There was no more teasing this time.

She was thoroughly wet, offering no resistance to his penetration, and he'd surely done this before, knowing how to crook his fingers to glide over the smooth and rougher places within her sheath.

His thumb he employed upon lightly upon her pearl, delivering the tortuous provocation she craved. She closed her eyes, giving herself over to his clever ministrations. When he replaced his thumb with an insistent tongue, drawing her peak

hard into his mouth, she bucked, crying out as the ultimate wave of pleasure rode through her body.

If she'd had the use of her hands, she would have held him there. As it was, she twisted and lifted, wanting to wring every last ounce of delight from his intimate attention.

Even when she lay spent, he nuzzled there, as if he'd yet to take his fill of her taste and scent. When he arose, it was to kiss gently up her inner thigh, and when he withdrew his fingers from her aching wetness, it was to place them deep in his mouth, sucking them clean.

The way he looked at her made her tremble, for she could tell he was only beginning.

Her gaze dropped to his trousers. While administering to her, he'd partially unbuttoned, allowing his arousal to grow unhindered. The bulge was obscene in its largeness.

His eyes had a new darkness to them as he released the fastenings on the other side. Pushing them away, his small garments went with them, and his erection sprung forward.

She was transfixed.

Never had she imagined...

Though the hair at his groin was abundant, it did nothing to mask the length of his engorgement.

From the root, where it met two firm, plump, generously-sized testicles, she guessed a full twelve inches; more than any woman could take. As for the girth, her hand would not encompass it.

He'd dispensed with his cufflinks and, reaching above, was pulling his shirt forward. Throwing it aside, he bared chest and shoulders and strong arms. The thatch about his

member joined that travelling down from his navel, and the hairs of his chest were similarly generous, all but covering taut brown nipples.

Nudging her legs apart, he knelt between them, and took his cock in his right palm.

“This is what you want most of all, isn’t it?” He moved the skin back and forth at the tip, all the while looking at her: first, at her mouth, then her breasts, the gentle curve of her belly, down to her sex.

She was weeping there, cream dripping. She clenched inside, wanting him to do more than look.

If he tried to penetrate her now, would she be able to take him? The head, perhaps. She tried to imagine how it would stretch her, and how that would feel. If he took his time, would it be possible for him to enter further, to fill her more thoroughly than she’d ever experienced before? How far could he go before she was entirely crammed with that masculine organ, stuffed to the entrance of her womb? She could only conceive of him holding still at that point. For her to endure his thrusting, sliding his mammoth cock repeatedly into her sheath, would require more bravery than she possessed.

The thought made her feel quite faint,

But she had to trust that he wouldn’t hurt her.

He was now gripping the middle portion of his shaft, taking longer strokes there. Clear liquid beaded from the eye of his penis.

Instinctively, she licked her lips.

When he moved to the very base of his meat, he squeezed upward, tugging hard, then caressed the full length to take hold of the head again.

“You want me inside you.” His fisting grew faster, so that a drop of liquid fell upon Estela’s thigh. “What if I make you watch what you cannot have?”

With his free hand he reached between her legs, extending a single finger to slip inside.

She was so wet, she hardly registered the penetration, until he began stroking in rhythm to the movement of his other hand.

One finger became two, and she felt herself rising again, towards that place of pulsing delight he’d given her before. When he added a third, she dropped her legs wider, though she bit her lip against the awkwardness of the intrusion.

His breathing came gruffly now while he invaded her, all the while bringing himself to greater arousal. His cock stood proudly upright, deep-veined and dark.

Suddenly, she was climaxing again, pulsing about his fingers, mewling, and straining against the ties about her wrists. Tremors shook her, bringing every part of her body vibrantly alive, while simultaneously dashing her into a place of obliteration.

As she returned to herself, she saw the fierce expression on his face, watching her with glittering intensity. The tugs upon his erection came faster. He was going to ejaculate, on her belly, or her breasts, or over her mound. His testicles were in proportion to his cock. Did that mean his seed would flood more abundantly? There was something deliciously forbidden about the idea.

But he surprised her again. In one swift motion, he turned her over, so that her wrists crossed. With her cheek pressed

firmly into the quilt, she took a rasping breath. He was lifting the back of her dressing gown to expose her buttocks.

A stab of alarm took her.

He wouldn't attempt to enter her there!

Not that she was entirely inexperienced in the art of anal play, but she was unprepared, and he was too large for her to ever consider that desirable.

“Don't fear. I wish... only... to...” He could barely speak.

The next she knew, he'd lowered himself and she felt a nudge between her cheeks. He was no longer pleasuring himself with his hand but between the orbs of her behind, angled so that he slid where she would naturally grip him. She was aware of his thickness, the tickle of hair, and his testicles, bumping rhythmically against her lower lips.

She parted her legs further and was rewarded by his growling appreciation.

He managed only one more stroke before spurting, hot and wet, over the dimples at the base of her spine.

He was blinded by the strength of his orgasm, exploding from his balls to suffuse every limb. He clung to her, torn apart and spent, knowing only the gloriousness of her body and the glow that radiated from deep within himself.

She was magnificent. The taste of her, and the feel—possessing her with his hands and mouth!

The look upon her face when she'd reached her climax had been almost more than he could bear; knowing that he was

responsible, that her pleasure was in his power.

He hadn't known exactly how things might play out when he'd come to her room, but he knew a woman like Estela Bongorge wanted more than chivalrous words and tender kisses.

He'd harnessed his anger to serve his purpose and, from the response he'd witnessed, he guessed he'd hit the mark. Seeing how aroused she was becoming had only spurred him on.

Nothing would be the same now. They'd known each other barely a handful of days, but it seemed far longer. Long enough for him to know that he couldn't just let her walk off the ship at Southampton and out of his life.

He couldn't know, truly, how she felt in return. He didn't have the impression she was in pursuit of a husband. Her interest might be no more than physical—in which case, all she was after was a fling. It didn't mean that they couldn't become something more to one another, but he couldn't take that for granted.

As for Miss Maitland, they needed to speak honestly—for him to find out her wishes, and, if they were to part, to plan ways he could make amends.

Meanwhile, there was only one woman who filled his thoughts, and that was the wicked, irresistible creature lying beneath him.

As if to remind him of that fact, she gave a wriggle. “As wonderful, and surprising, as that was, I'd appreciate your untying me!”

Of course! He was a clot!

Moving off her, he loosened the sash and set about rubbing her wrists.

“You’re alright? I didn’t crush you?”

She moved onto her side, looking up at him like the cat that got the cream. “Perhaps I like being a little crushed.”

He gathered her to him again, and she immediately crooked her leg over his. All of her—lush and yielding—pressed to the hardness of his body.

“Stella.” He held the sound of it within his mouth.

She tilted back her head, inviting his kiss again, and for some moments they lay just as they were, lost to the sensation of closeness and warmth and the sharing of something he did not yet know how to name.

At last, she broke off, breathless.

“There is nothing I can teach you. You have all the skills to rouse your bride. She is fortunate indeed.” Though she laughed, there was an awkwardness to it.

“Let’s not talk of that now.” Rolling off the bed, he fetched the handkerchief from his jacket, and filled two glasses from the side—one with water and the other from a bottle of something stronger.

When he returned, she’d slipped off the silk wrap, and was lying altogether naked on her stomach, coquettishly displaying the lusciousness of her bottom. He held out both glasses and she took the brandy, warming it between her palms while he cleaned himself from her skin.

Lying beside her once more, he dropped a kiss upon her shoulder. “I feel as if we’ve known each other always, though I really know nothing about you at all.”

“And what would you like to know?” She swirled the liquid in its glass. “Whether I play the pianoforte, or sing? If I enjoy watercolors? Which novelists I most admire? Those are the sort of questions one asks of a woman one is courting.”

He wasn't sure where to begin. He'd a feeling that 'knowing' Estela Bongorge would require long acquaintance; even then, she'd only reveal what she wanted you to see.

“Have you children?” It was a clumsy question, but an important one.

“I do not.” She sipped the brandy. “Just as a man has other spheres that occupy him beyond his family, so might a woman. I find plenty with which to busy myself.”

“Siblings?” He stroked the smooth line of her back, following the trail of his fingers with the light brush of his lips.

“A brother and sister. Charles may need to build another wing on the house if he sires more offspring. Esther recently married a country parson. They're both content.”

He dipped to kiss the small of her back and the upper curve of her behind. “And your parents?”

She stiffened slightly. “No longer alive. It's been more than ten years. A malady while residing on the Continent.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.” He placed his cheek where he'd kissed.

“I hardly saw them after I was married—and not a great deal before.” She answered in a matter-of-fact tone, but he sensed there was more to this particular piece of her history.

“What is it you're thinking?” She twisted round, tipping him from his resting place. “That because they didn't give me the attention I craved as a child, that's why I've had so many

husbands—not to mention lovers? That I’ve been hopelessly searching for my own little haven of contentedness?”

He winced. Clearly, he’d hit a nerve. “Aren’t we all searching for that?”

“Perhaps we are, but what makes you think it has eluded me? My marriages have been very successful, in their way.” She fixed him with a penetrating look. “And what about you, Lord Rockley? I take it there’s a reason you’ve reached the age you have without making it down the aisle. Shall we blame that on your parents? It’s a very convenient catch-all.”

Gently, he guided her to lay comfortably again. “No reason but my own inclination. I simply didn’t find anyone I wanted to ask; nor was there any necessity, since my brothers had things in hand. Michael, though a little younger than myself, already has three infants in his nursery. Besides which, there was my underlying fear of how I’d manage...”

He didn’t need to elaborate on that. Full coitus remained an obstacle to be overcome, in time.

Resting her head upon her hands, she closed her eyes while he stroked from the crease of her behind, down her thigh.

“And were you just as annoying as a child as you are now? Always thinking you had the right of things, and telling others how they should carry on?” She peeked at him over her shoulder, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Minx!” He delivered a playful slap on her rump. She laughed throatily at that, then sighed, as he brought his hand lower, to rest upon the still damp place between her legs.

Sighs became moans, as he showed her once more that there were some things he most certainly didn’t need her advice upon to do very well indeed.

The hour was well past midnight, and he lay asleep in her bed.

His cock was beautiful, and it tasted sublime. She'd done her best to satisfy him, with kitten licks and nibbles down his shaft, taking his pliable testicles into the warmth of her mouth and humming there, stroking the tender place beneath.

He'd spent far more time on her pleasure, sending her tumbling over and again into a blissful state.

They had not performed the full sexual act though, more than once, she'd tried to coax him. He feared hurting her, of course—but what could one know, if one didn't try? If sheer desire were enough to make it possible, she had that in abundance.

Rising, she went through to the bathroom, where the water remained in the tub. Carefully she lowered herself in, though it was cool now, causing her to goosebump all over.

She exhaled, trying to clear her mind of the hundred thoughts jostling for precedence.

He was a darling. Quite different from how she'd first imagined. She was coming to like him very much. Was he rethinking his betrothal? She sensed he was.

Dipping her hands into the water, she splashed it upon her face.

At heart, he was an honorable man.

There was the crux.

If they continued this affair, what then?

This was no ordinary passion, at least on her side, but even the brightest flames died at last. What if, in a few months from now, he discovered she was not all he thought her to be?

Would he come to resent her?

Could she bear that?

However much she wanted to pursue this, was she only heaping fuel on a fire that would burn her at last?

CHAPTER
TEN

The dining salon was arranged tonight for dancing, the tables placed close upon the perimeter. The music of the orchestra soared into the great glass dome, while couples glided across the marble floor below.

Estela sat beside Margaret and the Titby-Tittons, watching as Rockley waltzed Oona sedately. It was kind of him. In his formal attire, moving upon light feet, he was a graceful dancer. Ladies outnumbering the gentlemen, he was much in demand.

All day, she'd felt a nagging doubt.

With the ship having sailed through the night, they'd docked in Sardinia, allowing a short excursion into Cagliari. She'd sent Antoinette with a message for Margaret and Oona, letting them know she was indisposed.

She and Rockley had spent the time closeted in her cabin.

Was it so wrong? To shut out the world and enjoy this moment?

He'd spoken nothing of his plans when they reached England, as if to do so would break the enchantment. They conversed on many topics but any mention of Miss Maitland he diverted.

The waltz came to an end and the dancers drifted off to take refreshment. Rockley led Oona—quite pink from the exertion—back to their table.

“Mrs. Bongorge”—he bowed in courtly fashion and extended his hand—“Would you do me the honor of partnering me?”

For some reason, she found herself hesitating. They’d enjoyed almost every intimacy, but the thought of them dancing in public made her self-conscious. She did wish for it, of course. She would simply pretend the room was not crowded with others observing them, seeing how she looked at him, how she trembled to be close to him again.

He swept her into the moves she’d danced a hundred times or more—with other partners, in other places. Yet, tonight, it were as if this were the first time. Her feet knew the steps, but she feared she would stumble. Meanwhile, her heart fluttered to feel his hand upon her waist. Her gown of golden tulle was gauze-light, so that the heat of his palm suffused through the fabric to her skin.

He did not speak, but his attention never left her, as if he were drinking in every nuance of her appearance—as if this were the last time they would hold each other, the last time he would see her.

When the music drew to a close, her hand and waist remained captive, as if he were in some trance. She stood for some moments before whispering, “Lord Rockley, the dance is ended.”

He came to himself, apologizing, but still did not release her.

“You must let me go.” It required her own effort to free herself.

She was not his. He had no claim upon her. There was no understanding between them, and she was not his to command. Something choked inside her.

“Excuse me.” She walked faster than was seemly, leaving the salon at the far end, where a door led directly to the deck. There she was assaulted by the night air, for they were sailing once more, toward Marseille. She regretted the absence of her shawl immediately but could not bring herself to return inside.

Instead, she hurried past the windows of the salon, wanting to escape. She was in the hold of emotions she could not subdue, and her tears welled. Brushing them aside, she ran, until her shoe slipped from her foot. She didn’t care to pick it up, but took herself to the nearest rail, and clung there, letting the wind whip her hair.

The moon hung low, streaking the sky violet through shredded clouds, while the waves rushed and frothed, passing in monotonous repetition as the ship moved relentlessly through the water. A sob rose up from deep within her chest and she was helpless to control it.

“Stella!” Rockley’s arms came unexpectedly about her, pulling her tight to his chest.

The warmth was exactly what she needed; nonetheless, she tried to pull away.

She was impotent against his strength; powerless when his mouth brushed beneath the lobe of her ear. Weakly, she dropped her head back upon his shoulder, wanting his comfort, no matter the pain it would cost her.

His lips found her neck and he buried himself there. “Come back with me—my bed this time.”

What am I doing? She wasn't sure she'd uttered it aloud, but he replied nonetheless, his mouth brushing beneath her ear.

“We don't need to name this. Just let me love you.”

Turning her to him, he claimed her mouth in a kiss that left her soft-boned with desire. She wanted to resist, to hold herself apart, but she could not. She said nothing as he led her to the interior of the ship, along passageways quiet but for the distant hum and throb of the engine deep beneath their feet.

She scarce took in the appearance of his cabin. It was the same as hers, without the litter of feminine paraphernalia. The bed was neatly turned back, the sheets crisp white.

“I want you naked.” There was raw need in his voice. He didn't bother with his own attire, focusing all his efforts on stripping her of hers. The tulle soon pooled at her feet, her corset was unlaced, her chemise, petticoats and bloomers were thrown aside. He kissed each portion of her body as he revealed it to the air, grazing his teeth over her buttocks, biting and squeezing there. Her breasts he devoured just as ferociously, filling his mouth with her abundance.

Only her gloves he left as they were, the black silk reaching beyond her elbow. He raised an eyebrow on finding her to be missing a shoe but was too intent on removing her stockings to enquire. Kneeling, with his thumbs hooked at the top, he drew them down, then kissed his way up again, from the inside of her ankle to the top of each thigh. A shiver wracked her when, from his position at her feet, he brought his mouth to her sex. He moved her leg to his shoulder, the better to enter her there, making his intimate invasion with his tongue. She came hard and quickly, her fingers wrapped in his

hair, and he looked up at her from his position of submission, his face lit by an adoration that pierced her heart.

Her voice was husky with need. “I want you naked too.”

Together, they made short work of his clothing, and he soon stood before her, tall and broad, a lithe animal. Pressing her own, gentle kisses, she walked about him, letting her breasts skim his nakedness, delighting in the tickle of his hair as she brushed against his masculine beauty. She trailed gloved fingers across his muscular thighs, across tight buttocks and the hard planes of his back. His nipples, small and dark and flat, each received their own kiss and the teasing flick of her tongue, stealing a half-caught sigh from him before she cast a path down his taut stomach.

She reached for his cock, so large and heavy, and already swollen hard.

“You want me to touch you here?” She wrapped her gloved hand around the base.

“Yes, touch me.” He swallowed hard.

“Like this?” She squeezed where she encircled, then began to stroke. The sight of him—firm and full and hot—was more arousing to her than anything that had come before. His lubrication dripped clear.

“I want to taste you.” She dragged her hand along his length, moving her grip to take him there, working his tip, smearing his slickness.

“You want that too, don’t you, Your Grace? You want my tongue on your cock? You want to feel me lapping you?”

“Yes!” The yearning on his face was tortured.

She knew he was watching as she slithered downward, kneeling as he'd done before her. She kept her hand upon him all the while, maintaining a rhythmic motion as she brushed her lips along his arousal. Reaching his sac, she breathed deeply, inhaling his musky scent, before taking one succulent plum into the warmth of her mouth. She hummed with pleasure, wanting him to feel the vibration deep in his root.

She gave the other the same treatment before working her way upward again, using the flat of her tongue upon the underside of his length. She broke off to rub her cheek there, reveling in the velvet-smoothness which wrapped the rock beneath.

Reaching his tip, she swirled her tongue, licking and lapping. Then, stretching her lips, she encompassed his head, sucking him between the roof of her mouth and her silken tongue. He dropped back his head, uttering a deep, throaty growl.

Her hands she moved lower, to grip his base again—and beneath, stroking the soft skin between his balls and anus.

“Dear God, stop!” He was breathing heavily.

The intensity in his eyes fueled her own desire. She was wet and aching, licked by flames stoked by this feeling of power. She was his seducer, though his strength placed her ultimately under his dominance.

Gathering her up, he hoisted her under her bottom, lifting her in his arms towards the bed. There she wrapped her legs about his waist as he kissed her neck and shoulders, her collarbone, her breasts. At last, she dragged his mouth to meet hers, and opened to him, wanting kisses rough and deep.

His shaft nudged beneath her, sliding between her legs, against her cleft. She rubbed herself until her cream coated him, riding his length with abandon, in the only way possible. Then she shifted, taking him in her hand, guiding his tip to her slick, molten slit.

“Stella!” The look in his eyes was desperate.

She eased his head between her inner lips and held him there.

This wasn't just for herself.

She wanted him to know her this way—to sink into her softness and be consumed by the heat of sweet flesh, to know the all-consuming, enveloping ecstasy of burying himself inside her. She wanted to hear him moan as he moved, and moan harder when he felt her move with him. She wanted to rock him to greater heights until he knew only the joining of their bodies.

This would make him indelibly hers; always, always, always.

As she took him further inside, she screamed silently, for the sensation was beyond what she could have imagined. Yet her body responded, stretching to take what it craved. Her wetness trickled, helping him gain purchase. It was torture and pleasure. Her heartbeat was like thunder and she struggled to breathe.

“So tight! I never knew...” He took a jagged breath, retreating slightly, before moving inside her again.

She cried out audibly this time, though he gave her only a fraction of himself. The pain was savage but swiftly became something else. Her pulse pounded within her sex, and then she felt an easing.

She was clinging to him, her nails raking his back, and he was inside her. Not fully, of course, but as much as she could bear.

He pulled back, then slid forward, as slowly and gently as if she were a true virgin. The sensation was no longer piercing.

“Theo.” She brought up one hand to cradle his cheek and realized there were tears upon it.

“I can’t last. It’s too much...” He gasped.

Quickly, she grasped him. In the heat of the moment, he might press forward. So far she was only bruised, but his size was formidable. They couldn’t risk him accidentally tearing her.

“Stella!” His moan came as she slipped him from her sheath, and his seed drenched her mound and cleft.

“**Y**ou’re unhurt? Stella, you must tell me!” Rockley’s anguish was real, holding her close then putting her from him—as if he could tell from her expression alone whether he’d harmed her.

“I’m fine, truly.” She kissed his palm. “You were more....bigger...but in a good way. I told you it was possible. We can keep trying...” It was hard to put into words how she felt.

“Thank God.” He folded her to his chest. “I didn’t expect you to...and then you did...and I couldn’t stop myself. It was so damn wonderful. I’d no idea, and you felt so good.” He dropped his forehead to hers. “You’ve stolen a piece of me. It’s yours forever now. I don’t think I’ll ever feel...”

“Hush.” She brought a finger to his lips. She didn’t want him to say something that wasn’t real, just because his emotions were overwhelming him. Men believed all manner of things in the afterglow of their orgasm; things that couldn’t be relied upon. If he were to tell her what she hoped he would, there were better times for that.

He was already growing sleepy.

She turned, letting him curl around her back. In no time at all, his breathing changed. He was asleep, and she guessed it would take a trumpet blast to rouse him.

Without difficulty, she moved his arm and rose from the bed. The room was dim, the curtains upon the larger windows being drawn. However, there was sufficient light from a single unshaded porthole, through which moonlight cast illumination. On quiet feet, she found his bathroom and attended to herself there. Then she located her chemise and slipped it over her head.

In the morning, in the light of day, she would ask him his intentions. She had to know. Not just if he could love her but if he saw a future for them. To carry on as they were? Impossible. Her own feelings she was now certain of, but she would not declare them until she knew his mind.

No matter what the future held, he wouldn’t forget her. She was his first, and he would always belong to her, in a sense, because of that claiming. If he went ahead and married his bride, he would remember these days and nights. All else might be lost to her, but not her place in his memory.

Soft snores came from the bed.

If only there were a way to know more of his thoughts. With a sigh, she lowered herself to the stool beside the little

desk, and leaned her elbow there. Her foot touched something hard beneath and she bent over to look.

A portmanteau. Dark leather with a metallic clasp.

She sat upright again.

What did a man keep in such a travelling case? Correspondence? Legal papers? A diary?

Would any of the above reveal what she wished to know?

It would be wrong to pry, but she'd been wicked far too long to pay consideration to such small matters.

She would only look briefly, and ignore anything which had no pertinence to the last few days, since he'd met her.

Clicking open the bag, she tipped it towards the light. At first, there appeared nothing of interest. Newspapers, maps, a book of poetry, paper, ink and quills. She swept her hand across the lining. Was there a side pocket? She found nothing. But, there was something uneven about the base. Removing the various items, she felt again, running her nail about the edge.

There was a snag, and the stiff bottom peeled up at one corner. A concealed compartment? Lifting it out, she peered inside.

A mask was there—grey with a black trim: a strange thing to hide away, even if it had sentimental value. Picking it up, she frowned. It was an ordinary half-mask, designed to tie at the back. There was nothing remarkable about it, and yet it caught at her memory. She'd seen someone wear one just the same, very recently.

Setting it upon the desk, she looked again into the bottom portion of the portmanteau, and something within her froze.

Letters, bound in ribbon, the name upon them written in a girlish hand. The recipient: Il Conte, Tommaso Sforza. She didn't need to open them to know these were the letters she'd been searching for at the Palazzo Zorzi Tiepolo.

The man who'd entered the Contessa's chamber behind her, taking the letters from under her nose, had been Rockley. All this time, he'd had them!

A pain began to throb in her head. Had he recognized her from the masquerade? Followed her onto the ship even? It hardly made sense, if that was the case, for him to approach her—but who knew what he was thinking. To keep her under surveillance, perhaps? Who was he working for?

She had no choice but to take the bundle, to hide it among her possessions and... The next thought hit her like a punch in the gut.

Whether or not Rockley suspected her of anything already, he certainly would when he found the letters missing.

She would have to depart the ship, at Marseille, as soon as they anchored. There were trains to take her north. From Calais, a cross-Channel boat would ferry her to England. Even if Rockley tried to follow her, she'd have a head start.

There was no time to waste, and none to spare for what he'd think when he discovered her deceit. With any luck, by the time he woke, she would be gone.

With trembling fingers, she replaced the mask and the other contents, then eased the clasp shut.

He would hate her, but there was no other way. Her loyalty to Mathilde overrode all other considerations.

Had anything Rockley said been true, or was even the story of Miss Maitland a ruse? A way to get closer to her, and

discover why she'd been at the palazzo? A wave of nausea rose up, but she couldn't afford to succumb to it.

Gathering her dress, she donned it as best as she could. The single shoe she pushed onto her foot. The other garments she crammed into her arms.

She didn't know Rockley at all. He wasn't the man she'd thought he was.

That thought would have to comfort her on the cold nights ahead. There would be many of them, but no winter's frost would ever match the ice that crept now about her heart.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

The Royal Opera House, London

December 23rd, 1905

The lady's retiring room had emptied some five minutes earlier, the performance being soon to begin. Estela sat on the circular chaise in the center of the ornately gilded chamber, aware that she ought to join the merry company with whom she'd arrived. However, just the thought of keeping up the pretense of good spirits was exhausting.

She'd filled her evenings with the theatre, soirées, supper parties and balls, the ballet, the opera. Nothing had provided the distraction she sought. She'd contemplated taking a new lover, but even that amusement held no allure.

Rising, she shook out her skirts and proceeded to the floor-length mirrors at the far end of the room. A last inspection, and she would steel herself do as she had every night since her return to the capital. She would smile and flirt and pretend all was right in her world.

She leaned in to her reflection. Her kohl was perfect but a touch more vermilion wouldn't go amiss. She tugged off a glove and then, from her evening bag, extracted the little pot. Using her finger, she applied a smudge to her lips. The remainder she dabbed at the apple of her cheeks, blending to

achieve a natural effect. Her history might be more checkered than that of most of the courtesans living in a five-mile radius of the opera house, but she hardly wished her maquillage to mark her out as such.

All things considered, she was in reasonably good looks, for she hadn't been sleeping well. She surveyed her figure from the side. Though she wasn't allowing Antoinette to lace her corsets quite as tightly these days, the dress—her red velvet, as she'd worn on the first night she and Lord Rockley had met upon the ship—still fitted. That would not be true for much longer.

Across the room, the door opened and someone hurried through but, instead of taking herself to the privacy of the cubicles, headed for the mirrors. She twisted about, attempting—rather ham-fistedly—to secure a partially wayward coiffure.

“Please, allow me,” Estela offered.

“That's very kind.” The other woman accepted gratefully. “I've spare pins in my bag.”

She looked admiringly at Estela's costume. “What a beautiful fabric. I must say, it's the one thing I'm looking forward to about being married—wearing more of the darker shades.” The young woman pinked somewhat. “Oh dear, that came out wrongly. My fiancé wouldn't be very flattered.”

Estela smiled. “I'm sure he finds you very lovely, whatever color you're wearing.”

With her pale complexion, the peach organdy was not the wisest choice, and the bodice was over-fussy, with an effusion of lace ruffles, bows and ribbon work where some simple embroidery would have done better. Nevertheless, the young

woman would turn heads. Her hair, almost white in its bloneness, was remarkable.

“There you are, being kind again.” The woman frowned. “I don’t deserve it, I’m afraid—or him, I should say. He’s been very considerate, and I know I should be gratified, but I just can’t bring myself to... That is, I’m sure he’s everything a man should be, and, sometimes, I think I might be able to feel properly fondly, as one should, but then I worry that I can’t, and never shall. I’ve a dear friend, Ingrid, who’s already been married, and didn’t enjoy it at all. She tells me it’s hopeless, and I should find a way out, but it would cause such disappointment.”

She gave a heartfelt sigh. “It’s not that he’s awful in any way. It’s just that, when I think of how easy it is to be with Ingrid, compared to... ” She stopped abruptly, this time blushing more prominently. “I’m sorry. Forget I said that. I’m rattling on.”

Smoothing her handiwork, Estela stepped back. “Understanding and companionship, with someone who wishes only the best for us, are worth a great deal. Don’t be blinkered by preconceived notions of how happiness should look.”

The woman looked contemplative. “I think I already know where my future lies. The trick is simply not to be afraid of stepping towards it.”

“Quite right.” Estela swallowed back the small lump that had formed in her throat.

As the young woman hurried away again, Estela rested her hand low upon her belly.

There was only one man she wanted by her side, but his future was mapped out elsewhere, and she wouldn't be the one to disrupt that.

A baby had not been on her agenda—had not been something she'd even thought possible—yet here she was. An extended trip abroad would be necessary. At first, she'd thought she might locate an adoptive home for the poor thing, but she knew she'd never find it in her heart to part with this child. She'd return to the villa on Lake Como, and conjure an Italian widow as a companion—one who was soon to bear her late husband's child. A few letters to family and friends mentioning the imaginary woman's tragic passing during her delivery would allow Estela to proclaim herself the poor orphan's guardian, and no one would be the wiser.

She would always have this part of Rockley to love. One day, perhaps, she'd be able to read of him in the Society papers—of his wedding, and his children born within the sanctity of his marriage vows—and she'd feel glad to have done what was right.

The opera was not where she ought to be.

Her brother's invitation still stood. On the morrow, she'd put herself on a train and be in Hampshire by the early afternoon. She owed it to her family to see them before she departed and owed the same to Oona and Margaret. Four nights at Yardmore Court would be sufficient, then she could return to London to catch the Scotch Express, to spend Hogmanay with her godmothers. She'd send a telegram ahead, letting them know. It would go some way towards making up for her abandoning them during the cruise back to Southampton. Though she'd left a note, and had corresponded

since, she knew it had caused them distress, and amends were due.

At this rate, she thought wryly, she'd hardly recognize herself. For the first time in quite a while, she felt a sense of hope.

Having climbed the red carpeted stairs, Rockley took the passageway to where his box was located: the family box used by generations of Rockleys—although the exact position had changed over the years, with the various rebuildings of the opera house.

He'd missed most of the first act of the gala performance; not that it caused him much sorrow. There were to be arias from the most popular operas—all of which he was familiar with, and would no doubt see again. Slipping inside, he nodded to the Maitlands—who looked understandably nonplussed at his tardiness—and took his seat beside Marjorie.

She turned her head briefly, looking less reproachful than he deserved, before casting her eyes back to the soprano center stage. It was unforgivable really, to be absent when he was their host, but there would soon be other reasons for them to find him unconscionable.

The buxom diva was warbling her way to a grand crescendo, her voice carrying powerfully to the far reaches of the theatre. Rockley let his gaze wander. He glanced first to the royal box, in time to meet King Edward's eye. Despite having failed in his recent mission, the king gave him a civil nod. It was pure luck that things had turned out as well as they had.

Discovering Estela gone, and then the letters with her, had been more crushing than he cared to own. By the time he'd admitted to himself that the acquisition of the correspondence must have been her intent all along, the opportunity to disembark at Marseille had passed.

From there the ship headed south, to navigate the Strait of Gibraltar, and there was no sense attempting a quicker route by land. He'd been forced to grit his teeth for the remaining days until he reached British shores once more, and could take positive action.

It hadn't taken long to track down the address where he might accost her but, before he'd had the chance, the palace had summoned him. There, one of the royal equerries explained that the letters had found their way back into the correct hands; the matter was concluded.

A furious day and night followed, in which Rockley had made it his business to discover why, exactly, Estela had become involved. The answer was laughingly simple, once he'd identified her relationship with that chit, Mathilde. It was not what he'd been expecting but then, nothing ever was, where Estela Bongorge was concerned: stubborn, fiery, ferocious when angered, yet capable of the greatest tenderness, and the greatest passion.

Loyal, too, apparently—at least towards those she trusted.

Clearly, she'd been unaware of who he was working for, and that stealing the letters for herself was entirely unnecessary. He guessed it was Mathilde who'd made the appeal to Estela, all the while in ignorance of the greater forces working on her behalf.

The well-oiled wheels of espionage tripped up by a feather-brained girl and a woman who'd made an utter fool of

him! That smarted the most. Not just that he'd failed in his duty but that he'd allowed himself to be so taken in.

On his side, their affair had been the start of something undeniably special. The torture of these past weeks had taught him that. Despite the way she'd used him, he couldn't help the way he felt about her. The connection between them was real—even if she had cultivated it for her own ends. That she would never know his honorable intention in stealing the letters tore jagged at his heart—for her opinion of him mattered.

She mattered.

And yet he'd held himself aloof, avoiding places she might be. He'd done his best to hold himself to the promises made long before Estela Bongorge entered his world, but he couldn't do this anymore.

Rockley was aware of applause around him. The aria had finished. The lights rose and people around the auditorium got to their feet, keen to stretch their legs for a short interval and take refreshment. Mr. Maitland leaned over, and they shook hands. Rockley made an apology for his lateness.

“Come, Judith,” Mr. Maitland offered his arm to his wife. “Let us leave the young people alone. We'll order you a brandy, eh, Rockley, and lemonade for Marjorie?”

He could only nod.

She looked nervous and relieved at the same time.

“Miss Maitland. Marjorie”—he cleared his throat—“there is something I must speak of to you, regarding the wedding. I've been remiss in letting the days go past—”

“I have something to say too.” Marjorie jumped in. “I haven't said anything of it yet to my parents, but it's good that

we speak first—since it's our future that's affected.”

He was intrigued. It was unlike his fiancée to assert herself, but she looked quite determined.

“You mustn't think I came to this decision lightly. In fact, I've thought of not much else since Frederick died; even before that...” She looked down, at her lap.

“Please. Do go on.” Rockley laid his hand over hers. Clearly she had something on her mind and, though his own news would likely turn hers on its head, she deserved her chance to speak.

Her gaze darted to the curtain separating the box from the passageway, as if fearful of her parents returning. “You are a gentleman, and perhaps we'd be happy together, in the end. I know it's what you wish, because you are good and kind.” Miss Maitland bit at her lip. “But the truth is that I have feelings for someone else.”

It was last thing he expected her to say.

“I see this is a shock to you.” She pushed the heel of her hand to her forehead. “It's almost a shock to me, but I had a conversation this evening that showed me what I already knew, and it made things so much clearer.”

“A conversation?” He was most confused.

“Yes. Someone in the retiring room. A stranger who knows nothing of me, nor of you. She made me see that I need to follow my heart, and not be afraid.”

“I see.” He didn't, really.

Miss Maitland had led a sheltered life. Her parents had only allowed them this time alone together because they were due to marry within a matter of weeks. Nevertheless, she'd

surely met someone to have inspired this change of heart. Whomever the fellow was, Rockley imagined her parents would have something to say about it.

“You’re telling me that you’re in love with another man?”

“No!” She declared abruptly, then looked taken aback by the strength of her own reply.

Now he truly was baffled.

“I’m sorry.” Miss Maitland looked as perturbed as he felt. “I don’t think I shall ever be someone’s wife. I don’t think I even wanted to marry Frederick, though I was much younger then, and for a time I thought everything would come out alright. The person I’d like to be with can’t marry me.”

Rockley spoke softly. An inkling of the truth was beginning to dawn on him. “But you are in love?”

“I think I am.” She nodded. “I don’t know what else to call it—when you want to be with one person all the time. When their happiness is as important to you as your own.” She raised pleading eyes to his. “That’s love, isn’t it? To want someone so much that the idea of being without them is desolate?”

“Yes.” He knew that feeling all too well. There had been a hollowness inside him since Stella had walked off the ship and out of his life. He’d accepted it because he believed it must be what she wanted—to have nothing more to do with him. But the pain remained.

If he had to carry on, living like this, without ever seeing her, without letting her know what she meant to him, he didn’t know how he’d bear it.

If that wasn’t love, what was?

“We haven’t much time.” Miss Maitland was speaking quickly again. “You do see? I don’t think I can marry you. It’s an awful spanner in the engine. Mummy will have to uninvite all the guests, and there will be a lot of brouhaha. She and Daddy will be cross, but they’d be even crosser if they knew who it is I really want to be with. They’d say I didn’t know my own mind and try to persuade me to reconsider.”

“Don’t let them do that.” Reaching across, Rockley squeezed her hand. “You’re being brave, standing up for what you truly want. You’d be surprised how many people don’t.”

Himself for one, although he was going to do something about that.

Miss Maitland sniffed. “If I’d known you’d be so nice about it, I’d have told you sooner. We’ve rather been wasting time, haven’t we; and time is a precious thing.”

“It is.” A curious lightness had come upon him. The weight of worry had been lifted, though it hadn’t come about at all as he’d been expecting.

However, there was something he still needed to say, if he was to resolve the situation in a worthy way.

“I can’t let you bear the brunt of your parents’ disappointment, nor face wider censure for having thrown away what Society will view as a desirable match. You must let me intercede.”

She blinked, waiting for him to go on.

“We may say that I am the one in love with someone else, and the breaking of the contract is entirely at my door. I shall pay all expenses and settle a large sum upon you—enough that you shall be independent, regardless of how your parents react to the news. The sum will enable you to live however you

should like, and with whomever”—he held her gaze —“regardless of there being a marriage between you. You will need to continue being brave, but if the person you love feels the same way, you may conquer anything together. It may mean making your home somewhere quietly—on foreign shores, if that appeals—but you’ll find a place in which to claim the happiness you deserve.”

The way Miss Maitland threw her arms around his neck, her parents had quite the wrong idea, upon their return. It was up to Rockley, however, to explain things as they really were.

As he’d known, and Miss Maitland had herself, there were tears, but there was also the hope of much better things to come.

He would call upon Mrs. Bongorge in the morning and leave her in no doubt of his devotion. If she had no love for him, he would walk away, as he must—but he’d be damned if he’d do so without laying every last one of his cards on the table. There was nothing to lose and so very much to gain.

One thing he vowed: the woman he desired as his duchess would be in no doubt of his true feelings.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Yardmore Court, Hampshire

Near midnight, December 24th, 1905

With the gates of Yardmore Court at last in view, Rockley sent up a prayer of thanks. It had been a hideous journey, with a blizzard descending some ten miles back. His driver had advocated for them pulling in at the nearest coaching inn, but Rockley had promised generous compensation for his efforts, and they'd pushed through.

Of course, he ought to have taken the railway, as Estela had done—or so her butler had told him, on Rockley having bowled up at her Mayfair residence. The ducal emblem on his carriage had ensured him being appraised of the location of Yardmore Court forthwith.

He was hardly presenting himself as he would have liked, after almost twelve hours of bone-rattling travel. He only hoped his rather disheveled appearance wasn't too noticeable—for, if he was successful in his suit, he anticipated a formal meeting with Yardmore and the rest of Estela's family.

As it was, he was turning up at the Viscount's home uninvited, hoping that his name alone would ensure some degree of welcome. To his relief, many of the windows along

the porticoed facade were lit warmly and, even outside, the sound of music was audible.

A party no less!

Which would suit his purpose just fine.

The door opened as Rockley was mounting the steps, with the butler taking his coat and hat, before directing his coachman to where the poor man—not to mention their horses—would have a chance for proper rest.

“Will you go through to the ballroom, Your Grace, or should I announce you more privately to His Lordship?”

One couldn't fault a butler for having a keen eye as to the provenance of a coach!

“It's the Duke of Pembroke, but—” Rockley assumed a confidential manner—“while I anticipate speaking with Lord Yardmore in due course, I'm rather hoping to surprise another member of the family tonight. I don't suppose you've noticed the whereabouts of his sister, Mrs. Bongorge, this evening?”

Rockley could only hope she hadn't retired early; he wasn't above sneaking up the stairs to accost her in her boudoir, but he could hardly locate her chamber in a house of this size without persuading one of the servants to assist him. It wouldn't be the best way to begin his introduction to the family.

“I believe the lady is taking a respite from the dancing at present, and can be found in the conservatory, Your Grace.” The butler, to his credit, didn't blink an eye at Rockley's unusual request. “Follow me, if you please.”

They passed through several connecting rooms until they emerged into a space which appeared to span a large portion of the southern end of the house. A glass vaulted ceiling stretched

loftily above. On silent feet, the butler retreated, leaving Rockley to wander onwards.

Beyond the vast, dark windows, the snow glowed a dull white, stretching off across blanketed lawns. Flakes drifted thick, attaching themselves to the edges of the panes.

After a moment, her voice carried to him from the far end, though he caught only a fraction of the actual words as he drew closer.

“... the scent of oranges is divine. One day, I’ll peel them for you.”

Rats!

If she was with someone, it complicated matters.

He passed a large stove blazing merrily to provide a degree of heat to the conservatory, then rounded a bank of well-established ferns, before spotting her leaning into one of the citrus trees.

As for whoever she’d been talking to, they must have departed through some other door, for she was entirely alone after all.

“Estela.” He called her name softly.

He hadn’t wanted to startle her. Nevertheless, she gave a small shriek.

“Oh, my love!” He went to take her in his arms, but she shrank back.

“Why are you here?” She was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling fast within her close-fitting bodice.

She looked so beautiful in green, and the black lacework was very fine. He’d seen something like it only once before—

in Venice, wasn't it...

The truth of it struck him like a hammer blow. How had he not realized before!

"It was you!" His voice rang out in the cavernous space. "You were there that night, at the Palazzo Zorzi Tiepolo."

With a pained cry she picked up her skirts, making for the doors which led outward, but he was quicker than she, blocking the way.

"For God's sake, Stella. Don't run from me. I know why you took the letters; that you were only doing what you thought was right."

Her eyes blazed. "I know what I was doing but I can't say the same for you."

He cursed inwardly. This was not the romantic reunion he'd hoped for. He'd long since resolved his feelings over Estela's involvement in the Venice fiasco but, of course, she was unaware of his role. He hesitated to answer, but keeping silence wouldn't do—not if she was to be his, sharing his life.

"Who sent you for them?" She wasn't letting this go.

"Someone guarding Mathilde's interests, in the same way as yourself—and the interests of the Empire. You understand the import of your niece's marriage. Thanks to our efforts, everything will go ahead as planned. We both did what had to be done."

She frowned, taking in what he'd just told her.

"The letters no longer matter; that isn't why I'm here."

"It isn't?" Something caught in her voice.

"No more pretenses. I want the truth."

“About what, exactly?” She prickled, folding her arms.

“Why you went to such efforts to seduce me.” He hadn’t planned on confronting her so directly but there were things that had to be said. He needed to hear what her feelings had been.

“It was you who approached me. What were your motives, Lord Rockley? You say you’d no idea I was at the palazzo, but perhaps you were keeping me under your eye.”

The ridiculousness of the situation was beginning to dawn on him. “It was chance entirely. Do you think I’d have brought you back to my cabin if I’d suspected you were after those letters?”

“Then why did you? Was it all just a way to pass the time, before you returned to your bride? When is the wedding? Oughtn’t you to be in London for the last-minute preparations?”

It gave him hope. If she could become so riled, she must feel something.

“Stella.” He spoke softly again. “The day in Messina convinced me that I had to know you better—not just because you made me laugh, and there was such a connection between us, but because of the rage I felt when I saw you with another man. I knew then that I was in the grip of something stronger than I’d ever felt before.”

“You never said anything.”

He could tell that, behind the curtness of her responses, there was a measure of hurt.

“I’m telling you now. The engagement is broken—more amicably than I could have hoped for. Miss Maitland is extraordinary, in her way. You’d like her, truly.”

“You broke it off?”

“Stella.” This time, when he stepped towards her, she didn’t shrink away. “I haven’t stopped thinking about you; every moment. Not just thinking of you; wanting you.”

“I want to trust you, but all this time...” She looked up at him, her eyes pleading. “You didn’t come looking for me or send any sort of message. I knew you’d be able to find me. I thought you must prefer to forget everything—as if it never happened. Not to mention hating me for stealing from you.”

He brought one hand to stroke her cheek. “I was so tied up convincing myself you felt nothing for me that I lost sight of the most important part of all.”

“And what was that?” She was looking intently at his lips.

“That I love you.” He put his arms around her, drawing her close. Bending, he brushed his lips to her forehead, then to the arch of her eyebrows and her lids. “I’ve thought of you every day we’ve been apart.”

“And the nights?” she asked huskily.

“Those as well. Definitely the nights.” Finally, he took the kiss he’d been dreaming of, falling into the softness of her, yielding and eager. He gave her all his passion; not just the desire he felt through his body but the yearning in his heart.

When they drew breath, he cradled her face within his hands. “Estela Bongorge, my woman of mystery and untold mischief, will you let me cherish you and protect you, bringing you the same peace that I feel when you’re near? Can I convince you to place your happiness in my hands, from this moment, and forevermore?”

Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed the finger where his ring would proclaim her his wife. “Belong to me, Stella. Say

you'll marry me.”

E stela's breath slowed.

She'd given up believing that he might come for her; had told herself there was no going back. Yet here he was, saying what she hadn't dared hope. She'd almost convinced herself she didn't need him—that what she had would be enough. But he was offering her everything, and she was so filled with joy she couldn't speak.

The ground seemed to fall away beneath her feet, while her bliss lifted her. Was this what the poets meant, when they spoke of being transported by love? She thought she'd experienced all there was, but this was new. She felt strangely young, and vulnerable, and uncertain. Except that, there was one thing she did know for sure.

Rockley was the man she wanted to spend her life with.

Very gently, she nodded. “I love you too and, for the first time, I think I know what that truly means. I can't say if I'll be the perfect wife, or the wife that you deserve or even if I'll make you happy, but I want to try. I want to be everything you need, in the way that I know you'll be everything to me. I want this to be as if you're the only man I've ever...”

She could speak no more. There was too much she wanted to say, and she feared that none of her words were the right ones.

“My love!” The elation in his eyes said everything.

“You're perfect to me. Gloriously perfect! And I'm perfect for you. That's the sort of perfection that matters.” He

squeezed her hand.

“As for the wedding, whatever you wish is yours. I’m impatient, of course, but it shall be exactly as you choose. We can marry from here, or hold the ceremony at Westminster Abbey if you prefer. The King would be in attendance if that were the case, and there would be more to organize, but you would be the most beautiful bride the Abbey has ever seen.”

Jubilant bubbled within her. “A quiet arrangement will suit me perfectly. I don’t need a grand show, or other people’s approval—least of all the King’s. All I want is you—just the two of us.”

Except, that wasn’t entirely true, was it?

There would be not just two, but three.

A slight panic gripped her. This was no way to begin a marriage. She’d been planning to keep the pregnancy from him, and she realized suddenly how terrible that would have been.

“Rockley!” He was bending to kiss her again, but she pushed against his chest. “There’s something you must know, and you may yet hate me—though what I’m going to say isn’t an awful thing. It’s just that I didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t think I could.” He’d always deserved to know. Her fear had kept her from being honest with him; fear that he’d reject her in spite of the child or, worse, act through obligation alone.

Shushing her, he stroked her hair. “Whatever this is, it won’t change my love for you. We’ve both been cock-eyed, but we can face anything together.”

“On the ship, you remember when we...” It was impossible she was blushing! “I don’t know how, although of

course I do... The fact is, a child is coming. Your baby. In about six months. A June baby.” She held her breath.

For a long moment, he said nothing. At least five emotions crossed his features in quick succession.

“A baby!” He gave a whoop.

She hadn’t known he could look so happy, nor that seeing him so would make her own heart swell to bursting. Scooping her under her bottom, he spun her wildly.

“Theo, do stop! You’re making me dizzy—and sloshing the baby about.” Still, she couldn’t help laughing. “I was just telling him how the oranges are even more delicious in the villa gardens on Lake Como, and that we might be taking a journey overseas quite soon to see them. He’ll think we’re crossing the Channel already.”

Putting her down, he dragged his hand through his hair, a whole new set of plans clearly assailing him. “Will your family forgive me if I whisk you straight to Gretna Green? Of course, I’ll need to sort a few matters with my solicitors in London, but honeymooning in Italy sounds just the thing.”

She patted his chest. “A trip to Scotland is a marvelous idea. In fact, Oona and Margaret are expecting me. It will be no matter at all to ask the vicar at Slickend to perform the nuptials.”

“Slickend?” He pulled a face. “By the by, you never did tell me what made you accept my less than decent proposal, that morning, over breakfast.”

“Well, I do love sausage. The way you described yours was quite irresistible. I could hardly walk away without attempting a taste.”

“Saucy minx.” He gave her ear a playful tug.

“And there was the matter of research,” she went on.

“Regarding sausages?” Finding her bottom again, he gave it a soft pinch.

“Exactly. I’m writing something for one of those handy little guides, on what girls should expect on their wedding-night... and beyond.” He was caressing her in a way that was making her feel quite light-headed.

“In that case, I heartily approve, and shall do all in my power to advance your knowledge. By my recollection, we still have a great deal to tackle on that front—although the real meat may need to wait until late next July, if my reckoning is right.”

“That may be true; we’ll see.” She gave a small moan as he pulled her to rub upon the hard ridge now prominent in his trousers. “Well-endowed dukes must be managed carefully, and thorough investigation of the topic will be essential, but I feel certain the results shall be worth the effort.”

The future Duchess of Pembridge then allowed herself to be carried to a handily placed chaise, and submitted to attention that might have made her quite chilly, were it not for the heated breath and hands of her duke.

Farther off, the Yardmore grandfather clock began proclaiming the hour of twelve, and there were distant shouts of ‘Merry Christmas’.

Estela bit her knuckle and sighed happily, as the duke gave her the second of many delightfully unexpected gifts.

EPILOGUE

Villa Belliano, Lake Como, Italy

June 27th, 1907

Gentle light filtered into the bed chamber, and a breeze stirred the ivory voiles. It was not yet the height of summer, but Estela liked to keep the windows ajar.

Theo was still sleeping.

Slipping on her robe, she padded on soft feet to the adjoining room. Little Teddy was also, thankfully, not yet awake. Like his father, he had an excess of energy and an adventurous disposition. The previous week, he'd not only taken his first proper steps but had shown ambition towards climbing the curtains.

Tiptoeing out again, she headed for the balcony which stretched the length of the villa on the upper floor. This time of day was always best for gathering her thoughts, while listening to the early morning calls of the birds who nested so abundantly around the lake.

Settling into her chair, she tucked up her feet, and breathed deeply of the pure, mountain air, overlaid with the scent of bougainvillea. The wisteria and azaleas had finished flowering, but the hydrangeas were still giving a good show.

The terraced gardens leading down to the waterfront were a riot of color.

It was going to be a hectic day; a lively few months in fact, with so many visitors. Oona and Margaret were arriving tomorrow, and she wanted to fill their bedrooms with blooms from the garden. Fortunately, they were easy to entertain. A trip to Bellagio would be a good idea, as well as to the towns of Varenna and Tremezzina. Arriving by boat was best of all, and her godmothers were still steady enough on their feet to manage the cobbled avenues. Mostly, they would want to relax, and there were plenty of shady spots in the garden to do so, while admiring the view across to the foothills of the Alps.

Marjorie and Ingrid were due to visit directly afterwards, staying at least a week as part of their tour of the region. Estela was so glad they'd been able to remain friends. Meeting Marjorie for the first time had been rather a shock—realizing that the fair-haired young woman was none other than the stranger she'd met at the Royal Opera House.

Estela had felt an awful pang of worry that she'd influenced Miss Maitland unduly, though entirely in ignorance. However, it didn't take long to see that Marjorie knew her own mind. She and Theo would have muddled along, but they would never have been devoted to one another in the way Marjorie and Ingrid clearly were.

In any case, it had all turned out marvelously. Theo had assured her that he'd already known Estela was the only woman he could marry—well before Marjorie surprised him by breaking things off herself.

Estela had extended invitations to Esther and Charles, and their respective spouses and offspring, but she wasn't sure they'd make the trip—even though the railways did make

things so much easier these days. Her siblings were content on Britain's shores, which was all well and good.

There was a letter from Mathilde she ought to answer, asking if she and Theo would like to visit them in Montegiana. She really ought to reply to that. Mathilde had delivered twin girls straight out of the gate and had some hairbrained idea of a betrothal between one of the princesses and little Teddy. Estela would need to disenchant her on that front. When it came time for the next Duke of Pembridge to choose a bride, she fully intended that he do so himself, without the least bit of interference.

There was time, perhaps, to put pen to paper before the household awoke and she was distracted by other things but, first, she had something else in mind.

Returning to the bedroom, she was pleased to see Theo stir. Rolling over, he reached for where she should be lying beside him. In doing so, the sheet covering him slipped. He was most certainly awake—at least in one vital department...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emmanuelle de Maupassant lives in a medieval tower house in the Highlands with her husband (maker of tea and fruit cake) and her snuffle snoof, Archie, her favourite hairy pudding connoisseur of squeaky toys and bacon treats.

If you enjoyed Theo and Estela's story, you'll love joining Bathsheba and Jorge on their tropical island, madcap treasure hunt adventure in 'The Lady's Guide to Escaping Cannibals'.

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MY VIRTUOUS DUKE

TAMARA GILL

Arthur Winter, Duke Beaufort, needs an heir; to gain one, he requires a wife. A problem that since he is not the suavest nob in London. Thankfully, his closest friend and widow, Lady Deandra Coleridge, agrees to assist him in wooing a willing debutante.

Yet, when a moment of schooling involving a kiss sparks a hunger in him that Dee Dee seems more than willing to reciprocate, will any debutante do? Or has the woman he truly wants and desires been before him for the entire time?

CHAPTER
ONE

“**D**ee Dee, are you at home?” Arthur called from the foyer.

“In the library,” Deandra, or Dee Dee to her closest friends replied, standing up from behind her desk to meet one of her oldest friends she had not seen since last Season. Too long, since she always loved Arthur’s company.

The Duke of Beaufort entered, his smile as warm and wide as hers, and pulled her into a tight embrace. “Oh, how I have missed you.” He did not let her go until he had squeezed her, as was their usual greeting after such a long absence.

She chuckled and lifted her head to take in his magnificence, which she had always been fond of, even if never in a romantic light. Well, except for that one time when she was eighteen and enjoying her first Season in town.

“Come and sit,” she said. “I shall have tea and cake delivered so we may catch up. I’m certain there is much to discuss now that you’re back in town and the Season has commenced. What took you so long to arrive? I was starting to think that you would never return.”

“Ah, well, as to that, I’ve been at a house party in Surrey, the one Lord Digby holds each year. I met a delightful young lady who’s having her coming-out this year. In fact, she should

be in town by now, and if my belief is correct, I should have an invitation waiting for me on my desk for her ball tomorrow evening.”

“Well, that does sound promising,” she said, walking over to the mantel and pulling the bellpull. “So I gather from your conjecture that you fancy the young woman to be a potential bride for yourself. I was starting to wonder when you would marry. You are not getting any younger, after all, Arthur.”

She smiled when the duke scoffed and tried to appear offended, not that he ever fooled her. They had been friends far too long for any secrets to still be between them. “Not everyone marries their first Season like you, Dee Dee. But my uncle has started threatening me with castration if I do not secure the ducal line, and soon. He forever reminds me that his sons are married with boys who can take up the mantle if I’m not man enough to complete the job. Which even I’m loath to fail. My father, dearly departed as he is, would come back and haunt me if I did not secure the line.”

“That would be a shame, yes, especially when the Beaufort line has been strong for over four hundred years.” Deandra smiled at the memory of how proud his mama was of her only child and son. Not that she herself had been blessed with children, no matter how much she and Lord Coleridge had tried during their short marriage.

She shook the melancholy thoughts aside, knowing that while Arthur’s ability to sire sons was not hindered by age, hers most certainly was. And at nine and twenty, the same age as Arthur, her time to become a mother had long slipped away. And she was not entirely sure she could carry a child, not after all the disappointments she endured, month after month,

failing the one thing that could have given her happiness in the marriage.

“So,” Arthur said, slapping his knees as he sat beside her. “This is one of the reasons why I’m here today seeing my oldest and best friend.” He stared at her a moment, his gaze turning serious. “I need your help, Dee Dee.”

“My help?” she stated, pointing to herself and forgetting for a moment they were the only two in the room. “Whatever do you need my assistance for? You’re a duke, and a wealthy one at that. I would be of little service to you.”

“Ah, but you see, that is where you’re wrong. You are part owner of one of the wealthiest gaming and gentlemen’s clubs in London, and a widow. And with that comes experience and information I think I shall find useful, especially since I have been locked away in Somerset for the past two years taking over the estate after my father’s death.”

Deandra frowned, unsure where this conversation was going or what he wanted from her. “What are you asking? You have me thinking all kinds of things, and none of them comforting.”

“Well, I thought it would be obvious. You know that I’m not like most men.”

That was very true. In fact, for several months many years ago, Deandra had thought Arthur had preferred the company of his own sex over the fairer one, but his interest soon turned toward the feminine side of society, and so she forgot about such thoughts. But now, what on heaven’s door was he talking about?

“I think that the fact you’re not like most men is a blessing, not a sin, but please tell me what you’re after so I can say

either yes or no to your request. You are being quite elusive.”

“If I’m being reticent, it’s only because I’m nervous to ask you. Some things regarding men ought to be kept an enigma, and I’m concerned that you will judge me.”

Maybe her past thoughts on his sexual preference were correct after all, and he was going to ask her how to help him overcome that to marry this debutante he’d met. “Arthur, say it now or leave. My patience is waning,” she said, throwing him a pointed stare.

“Very well, I shall ask what I need to and declare something I know you’ll find difficult to believe, but please do not laugh at me, for all I’m about to say is true.”

She schooled her features and nodded. “I promise not to laugh or judge.”

Arthur took a fortifying breath and met her gaze. “While I enjoy female company and have almost kissed a lady or two, not debutantes mind, I do not want to find myself hitched to someone who is not whom I want. I have never actually been with a woman. I’ve not the skills to seduce whom I would like as my bride, and that’s where you come in. My best friend and closest ally who would never do me ill or wrong, now would you, Dee Dee?”

She gaped at him, unsure she heard his words correctly. “Are you asking me to school you in the art of seduction and sex?”

His cheeks turned a bright pink, and Deandra had the answer to her question.

“I fear I shall disappoint whomever I marry, and since you’ve already been married and own a gaming hell where all sorts of trysts occur, you know the intimacies of the

bedchamber.” He paused. “And, well, we already love each other as friends. I thought, who better to ask than you?”

Deandra stared at him for several moments, the urge to laugh absent even after his absurd question. “Arthur, you’re a natural at whatever you do in life. I’m sure it’ll be the same when it comes to taking things further with your betrothed, whomever that ends up being. You do not need me to school you in such things, and when you mention schooling, do you mean we’re to sleep together? Have sex?”

His eyes widened, and he sat back in the chair, stunned. “Oh dear, no, I would never ask that of you. I merely need you to explain things to me and show me how things work without actually having to do any deeds together. As much as I wished I could have slept with women, and many of them, to this day, I have not. It never seemed honorable, if you understand. To follow through on such an act was tainted and wasteful when it was not with the right woman.”

A little piece of her heart melted at his explanation. She reached out and clasped his hand. “I think you having not ejaculated yourself around London is commendable, Arthur.”

“Oh dear Lord, Dee Dee. That is a visual I do not wish to imagine.”

She chuckled, having thought the imagery quite hilarious herself. “So many men, my husband included, thought it a hoot to squirt all over London, and with some of my friends, no less, even though they think I do not know their treachery. That you have not only makes you more darling in my eyes than you were before, and so yes, I shall help you. Owning the gaming hell, one does see many things others do not, and as a widow, I think I can help you become a master of your art, so whomever you marry will be well pleased.”

“You’re a sweetheart, and I thank you. Now, what shall you teach me first? I must know as much as I can and as soon as possible. Lady Mabel’s coming out ball is tomorrow evening. If I’m to be a leading candidate for her hand, I must be suave and seductive, without being unnerving.”

“I think first I must watch you at the ball, see how you perform without my infusion so I know where your skills may be lacking and where I can help most. So tomorrow night, we shall attend the Ryder ball, and I shall observe. But truly, Arthur, I do not think you’ll need my help. You ought to give yourself more credit for being such a gentleman and coming to a marriage without having rutted half of London. One never wants to marry a man and be fearful of catching syphilis or some such ailment. A fear I, too, held after marrying Lord Coleridge.”

“You did?” he stated, surprised.

She threw him a dubious look. “Do not play dumb with me, even you know what kind of man I married. Now, off you go. I have work to do, and I shall see you at the ball tomorrow evening.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Dee Dee. You are the best person I know.”

She smiled and watched him go. “As are you,” she whispered into the empty room as she heard the front door shut.

CHAPTER
TWO

He was an utter disaster.

Deandra wasn't sure she had ever seen someone so uncomfortable and awkward around people of their status. Arthur stumbled over his words, even when she stood beside him, smiling and helping the conversations he had with several young debutantes, but nothing could help the silence when it descended on them all or the pleading looks from the young ladies toward their mothers to get them away from the bore.

Even if he was the Duke of Beaufort.

"So, how do you think I'm faring?" Arthur asked her, smiling and clearly unaware of how terrible he was and out of practice he was at wooing women.

"I think there is room for improvement, but it is not so very bad," she lied. "Nothing that cannot be rectified with a little practice."

He nodded, a small smile on his lips that made her heart clutch. How ignorant and sweet he was because of it. She watched him for a moment, debating whether what he told her yesterday was true. Surely he was not a virgin. If he were, he would be one of the oldest in England, and possibly the continent too.

She sipped her ratafia, nodding toward Lady Mabel, who sauntered toward them. The very debutante whom Arthur had set his sights on. However, on closer inspection of the young woman, the hairs on the back of Deandra's neck spiked when she came up to them and curtsied. The young woman smiled, the gesture smug and lofty, as if she thought herself above even the duke who stood before her.

She should not. Even if Arthur were very timid, he had her as a friend, and she would not let him be led astray or made a fool of. Not even for a wealthy debutante eleven years his junior.

The thought gave her pause. Maybe Lady Mabel was too young for Arthur. Perhaps her friend needed an older woman, one who could match his intelligence and look upon society with one's eyes open to the politics and fickleness that she had not known at eighteen.

"Your Grace, Lady Coleridge," Lady Mabel said, dipping into a perfect curtsy, her eyes demurely glancing up at Arthur before fluttering closed. Deandra schooled her features and smiled, determined to give the young woman a chance to impress her, since she had clearly impressed Arthur at the house party he attended.

"Lady Mabel, how very lovely to meet you. I understand this is your first Season."

"Yes, my lady," she said, barely glancing at her before giving her full attention to Arthur, who stood beaming like a man blinded by the sun.

"Although I've been to London numerous times. My parents did not like leaving me in the country when they came up to town to enjoy the Season, so I know the city well." Lady Mabel paused, turning toward Deandra and now giving her

full attention. “Are your children in town, my lady? I should imagine you have many since you were so fortunate, as fortuitous as I wish to be, to be married during your first Season.”

Deandra cleared her throat, taking a fortifying sip of her drink before she answered. She did not dare glance at Arthur, whom she felt was waiting, too, for an answer, but perhaps not the one that Lady Mabel was expecting.

“I was fortunate to marry Lord Coleridge during my coming-out, but alas, no children.”

“Oh, I’m so very sorry. You reside on Curzon Street, do you not? The home is one of the largest on the road. What a shame that only you and Lord Coleridge are living there.”

Deandra couldn’t help but think she was purposefully being discourteous. Few in London did not know Lord Coleridge had died while under his whore. “It is only me, as his lordship passed some years ago,” she explained, fighting to keep a calm demeanor. Lady Mabel’s smirk, barely hidden by the dip of her head, made her hackles rise, and perhaps what she said next was beneath her, but nor could she help to say what she did. “Your fichu is a little low, Lady Mabel. Perhaps you should move to the retiring room and repair it before you give the incorrect impression to all the young men here this evening.”

The young woman looked down at her gown in horror and hastily excused herself and fled the ballroom, not comprehending that her fichu was perfectly fine.

Deandra watched her depart, fighting off the urge to giggle. The silly little fool.

“Dee Dee, you know perfectly well that her fichu was as it should be. Why did you scare her away?” he asked, looking after the young lady with a sullen expression that annoyed her more than she was already.

“My first lesson to you, Arthur, is not to look so desperate for her attention. You’re coming across as a man who’s already decided on whom he wants for his wife.”

“But I have made up my mind. She’s perfect as the next Duchess of Beaufort. She has the right breeding and a good dowry, and she’s very pretty, not to mention young enough to give me sons before my uncle has an apoplexy.”

“Again, and I cannot stress this enough, you sound desperate, and she’ll smell that distress like a shark after a school of fish. Do you not want a little passion in your marriage? Speaking from experience, when there is none, the lack of it is taxing, and you’ll end up wishing you listened to me and followed my advice.”

Arthur sighed and ran a hand over his mouth, a quizzical line between his brow. “I do believe I have felt this passion that you speak of, but many years ago, and I long lost hope for that future when ...” He paused and cleared his throat. “In any case, the connection was not meant to be, but that does not mean I’m totally without some clue of what I ought to feel for a woman. For instance, when I’m around you, I find you attractive and amusing. We’re friends, and I love you as you love me ...”

Deandra watched as a bright, rosy hue covered Arthur’s cheeks, and his words halted. Where on earth was he going with his words and thoughts? That she did not know, and nor would she ask him only to further his embarrassment. “I will teach you how to court a woman and ensure that with

whomever you marry, there is at least a spark of attraction. Do not marry a woman merely because she ticks your precise boxes. I want more than that for you.”

“When will our lessons begin? The Season is underway, and if I do not convince you that Lady Mabel is suitable as my future wife, I’ll have to look elsewhere, which will take time.”

“You may escort me home in your carriage, and we shall discuss further my plan for you, but I will warn you now, Arthur, it will involve touching and kissing. Something I know you may feel uncomfortable with, considering your beliefs to remain chaste until marriage, and because we’re friends.”

His lips pursed, and he studied her with an intensity she had never seen before. The pit of her stomach fluttered, a reaction she had not felt in years, and for a moment, she was left a little discombobulated as to what to think or say next.

“You are my friend, and if I’m to kiss anyone without any repercussions, it should be you. I trust you, Dee Dee. I know you only have my best interests at heart.”

She reached out and clasped his hand, squeezing it. “I shall always put you before anyone, Arthur, and not lead you astray. I promise.”

“Good evening, Dee Dee, Your Grace,” her sister, and spinster sister at that, said before dipping into a curtsy.

“Dorothy, I did not expect to see you here this evening. Are you back from Bath so soon?” Deandra asked, having thought her sibling was in the country for the entirety of the Season.

“I’ve returned. Lord Ponsonby was being a bore, but now that I know you are enjoying the Season and with His Grace, I

think I shall remain and enjoy this society much better,” her sister said with a smirk.

Deandra ignored her sister’s words, determined to discuss Ponsonby at another appropriate time, and turned back to Arthur. “Arthur was about to escort me home, so our little reunion will have to wait. I hope you do not mind,” she said, not wishing to go into what her sister was insinuating at the Ryder ball.

“Oh, of course. Our conversation can keep until tomorrow.”

Deandra clasped Arthur’s arm and guided him away from her sister. “Until tomorrow then, Dot.”

“I cannot wait,” she heard her sister call out from behind.

CHAPTER
THREE

Arthur sat opposite Dee Dee and couldn't help but admire her beauty. Her long, dark locks coiled atop her head, the Coleridge diamonds adorned her neck, and pretty little pearl pins strategically placed in her hair twinkled in the street's lamplights.

He could not remember a time when he had not had Dee Dee in his life, nor did he want to imagine a period with her absent from it. He hoped that his upcoming marriage, hopefully to Lady Mabel, did not impede their friendship. He was loath to lose her.

“Do you think you'll ever marry again?” he questioned, unsure where the inquiry came from, but now that he'd asked it, he needed to know if there was someone she thought to have in her future. A look of disgust crossed her features before she shook her head, the diamonds around her neck he admired before glittering.

“No, not at all. It's not something I want, nor do I need to marry, not for status or wealth. Coleridge left me a sizable fortune upon his death, the one mercy he bestowed since there were so few in our marriage.” She paused, and he couldn't help but wonder just how bad the union had been. He knew the understanding had been arranged by her parents and the late

Lord Coleridge. Two great families who had wanted to become more powerful than anyone else if they could manage it, and they did for a time, but at the expense of their children.

“I wish you had not had to suffer through that ordeal,” he said, reaching for her hand and pulling her to sit beside him.

She came willingly, and he settled her into his arms. The contact, the embrace was so natural and common between them that when the scent of rose wafted from her hair, igniting a burning ache in his stomach that he’d never experienced before, he frowned.

“Will you not miss the conjugal relations that you had with your husband?”

She scoffed and looked up at him. Her large, blue eyes, almond-shaped, and always direct, made the ache in his stomach burn hotter.

“What marital relations, other than the ones to get me with a child? Other than those, Lord Coleridge wasn’t interested in me as a wife, or even a human being. And this is why I worry about you so, Arthur. I do not want you to have a loveless, passionless marriage. Nothing is worse than going through life knowing you have made a mistake that no one can undo.”

Of course, he understood where Dee Dee was coming from, and he did not want a marriage such as the one she had had. But surely love would come, especially if one was committed to the union, such as he would be. Lady Mabel may seem a little aloof now, but he was sure she would mature with time.

“Are you certain about the lessons? I do wish to learn, but I do not want to make you uncomfortable. I know it would be scandalous of us to interact so, even if only for lesson’s sake.”

“We will be careful, and no one will witness us. And anyway,” she said after a moment’s pause. “Who else will instruct you on the art of seducing your intended?”

He chuckled, nodding in agreement. “Touché. So tell me, what are you going to prepare me for first?” he asked, eager to start. He had always wondered what kissing Dee Dee would be like. She had the prettiest lips in London, full and wide when she smiled. There was little not to like about her, if truth be known.

“First, you must learn the art of making a woman eager to be kissed. Such as when we’re alone, just as we are now, sitting beside one another with no one else about, you ought to sit beside me, look at me longingly for an extended period, and let the lady you wish to kiss read in your eyes that is what you want to do, what you intend.”

Arthur took a fortifying breath and prepared to do as Dee Dee instructed. His stomach was in knots, and his heart raced for what he was about to do. Never before had he kissed a woman, and certainly not one who knew how to be kissed. He doubted the late Coleridge would not have participated in such a pastime with his wife. Even if they were not a love match, there would be no man in London who did not lust after the delectable Lady Coleridge.

She clasped his hand and brought it to her face. He cradled her cheek, the butterflies in his stomach soared, and nerves almost got the better of him.

“Now, look at me as if you want to kiss me, Arthur.”

Not a hard proposition. Was he really about to kiss his closest and most-loved friend? A woman he had once thought could be a potential wife before she became betrothed to another? He met her eyes and could not glance away.

His hand slipped to cup her chin, and he heard her startled intake of breath. A good sign, he hoped. His attention dipped to her lips, pouty and open from her gasp, and he lowered his head, taking heed to slow his progress. Common sense told him to tread lightly and with consideration in this situation.

But a breath from her lips, the scent of wine and her sweet perfume of lilies filled his senses, and he lost all governance of his faculties. Damn, she was pretty and his to kiss as much and for as long as she wished to continue the lessons.

The moment their lips touched, he realized the mistake they both had made partaking in such a game, such lessons. Anyone who kissed Dee Dee would never wish to kiss another. Ever again.

Her mouth parted willingly, letting him kiss her soundly. Their tongues tangled, and their breaths became one. He clasped her face with his hands, bending her to his desire, kissing her with all the longing that years of being chaste had built up within him.

She did not pull away, far from it. Her hands reached and entangled in his hair, drawing him against her in a way that made his cock stand on end and pulsate. The image of them in a bedroom, atop his bed, making love filled his mind, and he knew that if they were to keep kissing, if he allowed the lessons to continue, that was where they would end.

But could he stop the inevitable?

Hell no.

She was a rich widow, protected by a title and money. He was unmarried and would be hurting no one if they were discreet.

The moment the idea materialized in his mind, he cast it aside. They could not do that, he would not ask that of his friend. It was wrong.

But nor could he deny how right it felt with Dee Dee in his arms.

Her body against his gave him a sense of her breasts. They were full and soft and squashed against his chest. His hands moved to clasp her waist, holding her against him.

She did not draw away, her little mewls of delight drove him on, made him eager to please her, give her what she wanted.

Was it him?

Somehow between kissing and holding Dee Dee, she moved, almost straddling his leg. He clasped her ass, pressing her against his thigh, and she moaned. The sound nearly undid him, as much as the feel of her rubbing his leg most seductively.

“Tell me that you feel pleasure? What we’re doing is what you would suggest I do to the lady of my choosing?” he asked, desperate to please her, offering her what she would suggest he show to another.

She wrenched from the kiss, leaving him bereft. Her eyes widened as if startled by the situation and position they now found themselves. He did not mind the location of their bodies, but by the blush that burned her cheeks, she was not of the same opinion.

Dee Dee scrambled off his lap and sat as still as a marble statue, her gaze focused ahead. “That’ll be all for tonight’s lesson, Arthur,” she said, her breath labored. “You did well regarding your first kiss.”

The carriage rolled to a stop before her town house, and before he could respond, she had fled the vehicle, not even waiting for her footman to open the door or lower the step.

“Goodnight,” he called after her to no reply but for the closing door of her home.

Arthur sat back in the squabs and ordered the carriage home, pleased by his abilities. For anyone who could discombobulate, Dee Dee, as he had this evening, would have no problems seducing an eager debutante hunting for a husband.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Deandra slammed the door on the vision of Arthur, ruffled and utterly desirable after their kiss in the carriage. What had she been thinking, agreeing to help him? He was supposed to have kissed her with a degree of ineptitude, but instead, he had thrown her world into a spin. Kissing her with such skill, such a seductive air, that she had lost all ability to think straight or to remember she was kissing her best friend.

She balked, knowing she had practically thrown herself at him, taking what he offered, giving life back to her romantically starved self that craved the touch and contact of another man, anyone who was not her late husband.

However would she face him come tomorrow?

Deandra strode into her library and skidded to a stop at the sight of her sister asleep on the settee. A book lay slumped upon her breast and partially covered her mouth.

“Dorothy,” she said, kneeling beside her and shaking her shoulder. “Dorothy, wake up. You’ve fallen asleep on my settee.”

Her sister mumbled something about Lord’s Ponsonby before her eyes fluttered open, and comprehension flooded her sister’s face. “Oh, Dee Dee, you’re home. I waited for hours.” Sitting up caused her book to fall to the floor with a thump.

Deandra picked it up and placed it on the small table before them. “I do not think it’s been hours. I only left the ball half an hour ago, and you were still there. Did you follow me to be here so quickly and fall asleep? Are you well? It’s not like you to collapse as you have without something wrong with your health.”

“Oh no,” her sister said, smiling. “I ... that is, my evening before I was out late, and I’m still not caught up on my sleep. But yes, I saw you leave, and since the ball was a bit of a bore, I requested my carriage to come here for a cup of tea, only to find you were not home. Where have you been?” Dorothy asked, her piercing blue eyes brooking no lie, not that Deandra could think of one.

She decided someone needed to hear her sordid tale and help guide her out of the predicament she had found herself. Not that she would usually confide in her sister, she had been known to meddle, but nor could she keep what happened bottled up inside. “You know how Arthur and I have been friends since childhood? He’s my best friend, and I love him dearly.”

“Of course,” Dorothy said, a small smile playing about her lips. “Does not everyone in the *ton* know that you two adore each other but will not act on devotion?”

“Act on it?” Deandra gasped, having never heard this rumor before. “What do you mean, ‘act on it’? We’re childhood friends. There is no need to act on anything.”

Her sister scoffed and shook her head. “All I’m saying is that he looks at you as if the sun and the moon shine out of your *derrière*, and you cherish him. More than you ever did your husband, which society has not ignored.”

“Well,” she fumbled, trying to find the words. “Of course, I did not look at Lord Coleridge the same way as I do Arthur. My marriage, if you have not forgotten, was arranged by our parents, against my will, and his for that matter. It did not make for happy nuptials or a life.”

“Maybe you ought to look to the duke and have a life with him. I think you could be happy with His Grace, Dee Dee.”

“I could never,” she said, even though the idea, she had to admit, had been something she had thought herself in the dead of night when she was alone and missing someone to talk to, to love with her body, to share her hopes for the future long taken from her.

“Of course, you could. Rumor has it he’s finally ready to settle down and marry, but as we all know, he’s the least romantic man in London. Do you even suppose he knows how to talk to a woman? Other than you, he seems to struggle to form a sentence without blundering some part of it.”

“Do not be so mean to Arthur. He’s shy, nothing more. And believe me, he’s quite capable of seducing a woman.”

Her sister’s mouth gaped, and quick with her wit, she did not miss the meaning behind Deandra’s words. “Oh ho ho, sister, what do you mean by that? Did something happen between you both? Was it this evening when you left with him?”

Deandra stood and poured herself a hefty glass of whisky from the crystal decanter. “I’ve made a wretched mistake, and I do not know how to fix it,” she admitted, downing the amber liquid quicker than she ought, making her head spin more than it did with Arthur in the carriage.

“What did you do, Dee Dee? Did you kiss the duke?”

She nodded without turning to her sister, unable to face her just yet. “I agreed to help him win the hand of Lady Mabel Ryder.”

“That cold fish?” Dorothy spat. “He would be as miserable as you were with Lord Coleridge should he marry her. I hope you are not in earnest in saying such things. It would be best if you married the duke and no one else. Neither of you will be happy if you’re not together, everyone knows this, and most do not understand how you both seem oblivious to the notion that you’re made for each other.”

Deandra turned and gaped at her sister. “That cannot be true. I will have you know,” she continued, needing a moment to think straight. “Men and women can be friends, you know. The *ton* needs to understand that when a man and woman form a friendship, it does not always mean that they’re in love or suited to one another for the marriage act.”

“Except in the case of you and the duke, you are. Why can you not see that, sister?”

“Arthur is my friend. I could never marry him.” Deandra thought about her words, and yet, after their kiss, maybe she could and did see him in a romantic light. How odd that she had never done so before this evening, but that kiss changed everything.

She had never been so hungry for another person’s touch, wanted them with such a need that it had almost made her reach out, take his hand, and place it on her breast, or other places she could not voice.

Even now, she burned with a desire for him to be near her again. However would she act indifferent after this evening and what transpired in the carriage?

“What were his kisses like? I cannot help but think as much as he appears to be a man who had not one speck of a clue on how to seduce a woman, he achieved it well and truly with you.”

Deandra poured herself another whisky and downed it as quickly as the first. “His kiss ... oh dear, however could I describe it to give it the worth that it deserves.” She closed her eyes, remembering every delicious moment of her time in his arms. “The kiss started like any other, slow, tentative, coaxing, but something happened, hastier than I thought it would, and one moment I was guiding him, giving him tutelage on how to kiss, and then he did not need it anymore. He kissed me with such an expert ability that I lost myself. I forgot myself, more like, and the kiss morphed into something hungry, desperate, and all too consuming that I did not know where I was or who I was with.

“All I knew was that I wanted Arthur with every ounce of myself. I threw myself into his arms, and he accepted with far too much eagerness to quell my wayward thoughts. We lost ourselves within each other’s arms, did things ...” she said, remembering how she all but straddled him, rocking against him, wanting release like a woman starved of touch. “Wicked things that no unmarried woman ought, and I cannot take it back. Not that I wish to, if I’m being honest; if anything, I think I want to kiss him again. I want to teach him far more than we did tonight.”

“But you do not wish to marry him?” Dorothy asked, a smirk on her lips. “Oh dear sister, if you continue this game, that is where you shall end. Do not let the duke marry another. He has always been yours; you must win his love and make him see that the woman he wants has always been before him, not across the room in the form of the debutante Mabel.”

Deandra took in her sister's words, knowing they were true but understanding they were also a dream that would never come to fruition. "Even if I wanted to move our friendship to lovers, it is impossible. He desires children, Dorothy. And that is something I cannot give him."

CHAPTER
FIVE

Awkward was not a word that Deandra would normally associate when around Arthur, but the following evening at the Smither's ball, that was precisely how she felt. Not that she was transferring that emotion outwardly or letting it get the better of her features, but her stomach was in knots, and her heart raced each time Arthur bent down and spoke to her.

Was he not at all discombobulated as she was after their kiss last evening? Or had he thought that this was what his lessons would entail the whole time he was kissing her? That such a kiss was what he ought to do with Lady Mabel when the time came to entice her to be his bride.

Oh dear Lord, whatever would she do. However would she tell him that what had transpired between them had not been typical at all. Had, in fact, been quite the opposite. It had been transpiring, life-changing, enlightening like nothing had been before in her nine and twenty years.

Not that Arthur would know, of course. A man who had yet to sleep with a woman or kiss one up until their shared embrace would not know that their shared passion had been extraordinary.

"I've been thinking about what you suggested the other evening about not appearing so desperate for Lady Mabel's

attention. I thought this evening I may try dancing with other women to see if that helps with my suit.”

His words pulled Deandra from her musings, and sipping her drink she almost dripped some of the wine down her chin. “Oh, of course, Your Grace. I think that would be best,” she said, hoping her voice did not sound as brittle as it felt.

Their kiss must not have affected him at all. Not if he was still so keen on marrying Lady Mabel.

He threw her a confident smile and excused himself. Deandra watched as it did not take him long to find a willing partner and escort her onto the ballroom floor. She took in the room, the people milling about the floor, and happened upon Lady Mabel, but she was not watching the duke. Instead, her glare was centered on Deandra, her mouth missing her normal smile but pulled tight into a displeased pout.

Did the lady suspect something more between her and the duke? Impossible, since no one knew of their agreement or what had happened in the carriage. Perhaps the young lady disapproved of their friendship. If the duke should marry Lady Mabel, Deandra hoped it would not affect their friendship, but then she supposed it would in the end. He would put his wife’s needs first, and if Lady Mabel did not like their close relationship, Deandra would soon be required to find alternate friends to enjoy her nights out with.

But she would miss Arthur. There was not a day in her life that she could not remember them being friends. Just as her memories were filled with her sister and her growing up, so was Arthur in those. Always present, a constant and protective confidante.

Deandra moved her gaze back to Arthur and watched him dance with Lady Miller, recently married to a mutual friend

and perhaps not who Deandra would have chosen him to dance with. Not if he intended to make Lady Mabel jealous. The poor, unknowing soul really was clueless sometimes.

“I see everything seems to be back to rights between you and the duke. I’ve been watching you, and he appears his usual, jovial self.”

“Yes,” Deandra replied to her sister, who’d joined her. “He does not seem affected at all by what happened in the carriage. I think it is best that I, too, forget and stop thinking more about what transpired or reading further into the situation than I need to.”

“Maybe it’s a front on his behalf. Maybe he is hiding his true feelings also. I know you are,” her sister blurted, raising one skeptical eyebrow.

“I think because I’ve been married and I’m a woman, I see and feel things that I should not. Women are not like men, I suppose, who can slake their lust and not have any emotional attachment.”

“Well, you may not, but others may disagree with your notion.”

Deandra cast a sharp look at her sister and, about to ask what she meant, was interrupted by the duke.

“Dorothy, how good to see you. Would you like to dance the minuet with me? We have not had a turn about the floor for some time.”

Dorothy dipped into a pretty curtsy, far too low for Deandra’s liking, and agreed with a mischievous light in her eyes. “Why, that would be lovely, Your Grace. I should enjoy that immensely.”

Deandra could not voice a word of disapproval. How could she? Dorothy was her sister, and Arthur her friend. There was nothing wrong with them dancing. Except for the fact her sister liked to meddle, and most especially now, she knew more history sat between the duke and herself than it ever had before.

Arthur smiled down at Dorothy and could see the resemblance to her sister. But unlike the sight of Dee Dee, Dorothy did not cause a knot of hunger in him simply from gazing upon her.

Of course, he cared for Dorothy and had known her too since childhood, but it had always been different with Dee Dee.

More so than ever after their kiss last night.

This evening it had taken every ounce of his ability to keep his cool, to appear disaffected and indifferent to what occurred in the carriage, but even he knew, as naïve as he was and untutored, that their kiss had been anything but ordinary.

Extraordinary came to mind.

Having Dee Dee in his arms, his to kiss, to devour, just as he had long wondered about, had been a dream come to fruition. Not that his plan to learn how to court a woman, woo her to be in favor of his suit, had been a way for him to kiss his lifelong friend. But now that he had, little else occupied his mind.

Last evening, when he had returned home, his body had lain awake for hours, burning, hungering for a release he did not want to find on his own. He wanted Dee Dee's hands on

him, wanted her lips drawing him into a world of pleasure, and nothing else would do.

“Are you well, Your Grace? You appear a little flushed,” Dorothy said, a small, knowing grin on her lips, lips so similar to Dee Dee’s but perhaps a little less full.

“The room is quite warm, do you not agree? I think I shall take the air afterward or partake in wine.” Satisfied he had answered her question without giving his true thoughts away, he swept her into a turn and wracked his brain for what else they could speak of.

“You do not fool me, Your Grace. You are preoccupied. Care to tell me who fills your every thought?”

He fumbled for words, hoping Dee Dee had yet to tell Dorothy of their agreement. He would never live down the embarrassment. “I assure you, nothing but our dance occupies my thoughts and hope that I do not tread on your pretty slippered feet.”

“Liar.” She chuckled. “But I shall allow you to fool me with your words, and I shall drop the subject, but know this, Your Grace. Do not make the mistake of deceiving yourself regarding anything you want in this life. Do not settle just because you think you must due to your station.”

He met Dorothy’s eyes and nodded, hoping he would never do so. But then, was he not doing so by wishing to court Lady Mabel? A woman who had yet to appear more interested in him than any other gentleman present. Yes, she had a substantial dowry, was beautiful, and from nobility, but was that what he wanted? Was having the perfect duchess on parchment worth it when married to her for the rest of his life? Without friendship, affection ... love even, could a marriage sustain a lifetime?

Lady Mabel was not as true or as beautiful, inside and out, as Dee Dee, who stood at the side of the room, watching him dance with her sister.

She smiled across the sea of heads, and the gesture thumped him in the gut like a punch at Gentleman Jackson's.

Dear God in heaven, how could he make Dee Dee see that maybe he was more than a friend to her? That they could be so much happier together than apart.

CHAPTER
SIX

Arthur returned to Dee Dee after his dance with Dorothy. She stood alone, a position he had become accustomed to seeing her occupy the last few years since becoming a widow. He schooled his features, hoping that his intruding, discombobulated thoughts did not appear on his expression. He did not want to alarm her, nor want her to think that he had transferred his thoughts of marriage to her instead of Lady Mabel after one kiss.

Which, if he were being truthful with himself, was exactly what he had done.

A fickle man he was not, or a man who was versed in changing his mind on a whim. But that kiss ...

Dear Lord in Heaven, even he knew that her teaching of such a gesture was not ordinary or commonplace. It had rocked him to his core, sent his wits spiraling, and caused his cock to remain hard the rest of the evening.

He wanted her in his bed. His best friend in all the world. A woman who had married the wrong man many years ago and now refused to consider the union again. However would he gain her as his duchess? Or better yet, convince her his feelings were honest and true.

“Did you enjoy your dance?” she asked without meeting his eyes.

He took the opportunity to observe her, drink in her beauty, and store it in his memory forever. “Your sister is always amusing and insightful. I enjoyed the dance very much.”

“Let us hope that Lady Mabel did not,” she mentioned, and he frowned, not caring if the young debutante was put out by his dancing with anyone at the ball. In truth, Lady Mabel was vain and aware of her popularity within the *ton*. It did not make for a woman who was empathetic or graceful to those less fortunate than herself.

Dee Dee was right in that opinion. Just because Lady Mabel was perfect on parchment did not make her ideal for him.

“Yes, let us hope,” he agreed so that he did not let on that his position had changed. “What else would you suggest you teach me, Dee Dee? Surely there is more to your lessons that I ought to know.”

Her eyes widened as she stared up at him like a fox being chased by a hound. “Well, I think,” she answered in a whisper, “that you’re well-versed in kissing, I do not think there is much more I can teach you there.”

Pride filled him, and he could not wipe the grin from his lips. “Are you telling me that I’m a good kisser?” he asked, his tone teasing.

Her cheeks brightened to a rosy hue, and he chuckled. “You are, are you not? Tell me the kiss we shared last evening made your head swim as much as mine.” He had not thought to convey to her that his soul had practically left his human

form after their kiss, but it had. She had pitched his world off its axis, and there was no hiding that fact.

She bit her lip, and he almost groaned, wanting to retake those sweet lips and make her senseless with desire.

“It was just a kiss, Arthur. Do not make more of it than is necessary.”

Her words tampered his hope somewhat, but he would not be swayed, not when she would not meet his eyes. Was she trying to fool him as well as herself? He could persuade her to his way of thinking. Get her to see that as friends, it made perfect sense that they would make an excellent partnership as husband and wife.

“Of course,” he agreed, “and therefore, more tutelage will be necessary, yes?” He needed to hear her say that they could continue his lessons. He could not go another day without kissing her again. As it was, it was already too many hours.

She took a fortifying breath which, God help his soul, made her breasts push against her empire silk gown and give him a delightful view of her bosom. Breasts that last night had been pressing against his chest, teasing him unmercifully. Dee Dee did not know how desirable she was or how many men turned to ogle and admire her whenever she passed them by.

But Arthur noticed, far too often this evening alone, and he did not like it one iota.

“I suppose the next lesson would depend on how far you wish your lessons to go. I’m not a maid and have been married before, so the act of bedding a man does not frighten me as it would a debutante. But you’re still innocent, and I fear that if we continue these lessons, you may not be by the time you’re married.”

He could only hope that was the case, not that it mattered, for he was now determined to marry her and no one else. “Then what would you suggest?”

“Well, mayhap we could waltz this evening, and during the dance, I shall instruct you on how you could seduce a woman without any heavy petting or kissing such as last evening.”

He thought over her suggestion a moment. Was such a way possible? He shrugged, happy to oblige and see what she meant. “I shall do whatever the master tells me.”

She scoffed. “Very good, now go and mingle with the *ton*, do not monopolize my time, you have a lady to make jealous and others to chase you until you declare yourself. Standing beside your widowed best friend will not score you points with the debutantes.”

He bowed and did as she asked, not that he cared what the debutantes or Lady Mabel thought of his friendship with Dee Dee or how much time they spent together. For an hour or so, he joined conversations about the rooms, even sat down in the gaming room, and had a game of whist. But Dee Dee was never far from his thoughts, and not often out of sight.

Before long, the first notes of a waltz floated through the room, and he made his way toward Dee Dee, holding out his hand and bowing before her. She clasped his hand, and a bolt of energy sizzled up his arm and through his body.

Would it always be like this between them, this fire and need that he had never dreamed of, especially with his oldest and most-loved friend?

He did not think he could be more fortunate or desperate to make her his.

Deandra all but floated into Arthur's arms as the waltz began. He was tall for a man with broad shoulders. A fine specimen of a gentleman who enjoyed the outdoors and horse riding. A man that, after one kiss, she knew would be as good in bed as he was at everything else.

His hand settled against her waist, his fingers tightening, flexing against her flesh through the silk of her gown, and she fought not to shiver. But it was no use; his mere proximity to her left her reeling. Her mind at sixes and sevens.

She looked up and met his gaze and could not glance away. His deep-blue, stormy eyes watched her with a raptness she had never seen. Deandra swallowed her nerves, hoping she would not misstep and give away how thrown she was by what was happening between them.

After all, she was supposed to be the master of seduction. Be the one teaching him how to go about getting a wife. Not have him seduce her, only to leave her to marry another, longing for a future that she could only dream about.

“How is this?” he asked, pulling her closer still.

The hem of her gown brushed his Hessions, her breasts but a breath from his chest. They were too close by society's standards, anyone would know that, but the crush of dancers on the floor meant very few would notice ... this time.

“Adequate.” Her fingers moved farther on his shoulder, and she could not help but take the opportunity to feel the corded muscles in his back as they flexed during the dance. Warmth pooled at her core, and she had the urge to throw herself at his head, having him hold her as he had last evening and give her what she wanted.

Release.

His hand moved from her waist to her back, his touch too familiar as his thumb brushed her spine. “I’ve never noticed before, and to my detriment, but you dance like a queen and are as beautiful this evening as I’ve ever known you.”

Deandra fought not to sigh at his delightful words. The man was far too accomplished for his own good. How had he become so well-versed in seduction with no prior training? It would not take much for any woman being held in his arms to become a puddle of liquid at his feet.

“You flatter, but it is not me you need to seduce Arthur,” she replied, her tone light and teasing, wanting to make a jest out of his words instead of believing them. Allowing herself to be carried away by them.

There was no future for her with him. He wanted things in life she could not give him, even if she desperately wanted to.

“But for this to work, I’m to seduce you before anyone else.” He paused, dipping his head far too close for propriety. “Is it working, my darling Dee Dee?”

Her gaze, damn herself, dipped to his lips, and she nodded without thinking. “You are a master already.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Arthur did not think he could control the pent-up desire that rioted within him a moment longer. Thankfully the waltz came to an end, and without thought as to who may be watching him and Dee Dee, he dragged her off the dance floor and through a nearby door, away from the crushing throng of guests.

He closed the door, and the muffled sounds of the ball floated through into the space, but he only had one purpose, one thing that he needed to do before worrying about who surrounded them.

“Arthur, what are you ...”

He didn't give Dee Dee a chance to finish her question before his lips slammed against hers. For a moment, she stilled in his arms before her fingers spiked through his hair, pulling him against her with a wantonness that roused him further.

He walked her backward until her back hit the wall. Their mouths fused. The kiss was heavy, wet, and demanding, everything new and wonderful, a replay of last night when he'd first kissed the woman in his arms.

Without heed of where they were or who could come across them, he stooped to clasp her gown, needing to feel her, wanting to touch her in the most private way a woman could

be touched. She did not flinch from his hand running along her silk-stockinged leg.

Oh no, she did not, but perhaps she ought to have.

“Arthur, touch me. Feel me,” she urged him, clasping his hand and lifting it higher on her person.

He did as she asked, needing to learn every part of her as much as she appeared to want him to. His fingers brushed against her pantalets. He cupped her mons through the slit in the fabric, sliding his fingers between her wet core, rubbing, teasing her flesh.

The guttural sound of liberation she made would be one he would never forget. “Yes, Arthur, like that,” she purred in his ear, her fingers clawing against his back, holding him close.

His cock spiked and ached, release imminent, but he could not take her here. Not this close to society. As it was, anyone could come through the door and catch them in the most compromising position of his life.

Never had he touched a woman so intimately, and that it was his friend, his Dee Dee, that writhed, begged, ached, and undulated in his arms at his touch made the moment the most memorable and delightful of his existence.

“Is this how I’ll make you come?” he asked, sliding his fingers against her wet core, the lubrication making his contact easy.

“Yes, yes, just like this.” Her breathless answer spurred him on, and at that moment, even should they be caught, he would continue. Needing to see her shatter in his arms, to find release.

Her hand dipped down his chest and cupped his balls, her palm pressing against his cock. He moaned, pushed into her

hold, and undulated like a man starved of touch.

“I want you to feel as I do,” she declared.

He nodded, closing his eyes and savoring the moment her nimble fingers ripped his falls open, and her hand clasped his cock, stroking him, pulling him toward a release in the middle of a shared passageway.

“I want to fuck you,” he admitted, hoping she did not shy away from the truth becoming clearer each moment they were alone.

She bit her lip, her hips rocking into his hand. With instinct, he slipped a finger into her warm core. “Another, I need more, Arthur,” she begged him, lifting her leg against his hip to give him more access to her.

He did as she beseeched. It would be impossible not to do as she asked. He would do anything she wished, so lost in her arms was he.

His balls hardened as she pulled him toward discharge, her hand firm but gentle.

The door handle at their side rattled, and he ripped away from her and stole into a nearby room, leaving Dee Dee alone in the passage.

He stood in the darkness, his cock upright and out of his breeches. Thankfully the room was dark and empty, even though he could hear Dee Dee quickly right her clothing before a feminine voice joined hers in the passageway.

“Oh, Lady Coleridge, I thought I saw you steal away in here. I wanted to ensure you were not lost. The retiring room is out through the entranceway passage, not this one,” a woman stated, her voice innocent, but a note of censure

coursed through her airy tone as if she suspected Dee Dee was up to something.

Which, of course, they were. In fact, should have Dee Dee allowed it, he was certain he would have lifted her skirts and impaled her on his cock and let her ride him, ride them both, to release right there in the passage.

“Lady Pitt,” he heard Dee Dee answer, her tone calm and not at all breathless, as he experienced right at this moment.

He clasped his cock, the sound of Dee Dee making it ache and thrum, close to release. Arthur stepped deeper into the room, allowing the darkness to swallow him before he righted his clothes and forced his dick back where it would not be on public display.

They had been so close to being caught. He supposed one consolation to being seen together in such a position would mean marriage, whether Dee Dee wished it or not.

“Thank you, I am aware, I was merely taking a moment to myself. The waltz was more taxing than I thought.”

“Perhaps your dance partner ought to fetch you a glass of wine,” he heard Lady Mabel’s voice break into the conversation, and he realized there was more than one woman who had come to see what Dee Dee and he were up to. Had they seen him steal her away to the passageway and hoped to catch them in a compromising position?

If only they knew how close they had come to doing so ...

Knowing that Lady Mabel had come seeking them out left a sour taste in his mouth regarding his previous choice of bride. Was she a scheming, troublemaking miss who had nothing better to do than try to ruin other people’s reputations? No one else would do now that he’d been with Dee Dee. He

would marry her and convince her he would not be like her departed husband. That he could make her happy, give her children, and everything she ever hoped for in life.

“The Duke of Beaufort, I believe he has departed the ball and therefore could not fetch me a beverage, but I shall mention his lapse of gentlemanly behavior the next time I see him,” Dee Dee answered Lady Mabel. “I thank you for your concern, however, and I believe I’m ready to return to the ball.”

Arthur heard their slippers move along the stone floor before the door to the ballroom closed, muffling the sound of the entertainment beyond once again.

He supposed now that Dee Dee had stated he had already left, he better do just that and sneak away without being seen. Arthur quickly checked his attire, ensured his cravat was in place, and his falls were buttoned before striding from the room and heading for another that would allow him into the gardens. Best to avoid the entrance hall, just in case.

But come tomorrow, he would call on Dee Dee first thing, speak to her, and promise her everything if only she would agree to be his wife. The fire between them was too scorching to ignore and live without, and he would not. He had spent enough years alone, and so too had she.

It was time they were happy, and he could not see them any happier unless they were together. He had watched her marry before, he would not do so again.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

As planned, Arthur left his town house on Grosvenor Square and rode toward Dee Dee's home, determined to discuss what was happening between them and ensure their future was together and not apart as it had been up to this Season.

His horse trotted onto Curzon Street and he pulled his mount up at the sight of Dee Dee cantering out of the mews at the back of her home. He frowned and called out her name, but this far away and with the noise of early-morning coal carts and street cleaners going about their business, she did not hear.

Not deterred, he followed and was soon alarmed by the direction of her travel and the hastiness of it since she seemed to be heading out of the city through areas where no lady ought to ride alone without a chaperone or armed carriage driver.

What on earth was she about?

"Dee Dee?" he called again. Something about her determination and severe expression told him that wherever she was going, she wanted to leave without fuss or warning. "Lady Coleridge, wait."

She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening at his presence before pulling her mount to a stop. “Your Grace? What ... what on earth are you doing? Are you following me?” she asked in an accusatory tone, and not one he was used to her speaking to him with.

He pulled his horse up beside hers, shaking his head. “Of course not. I was coming to call on you this morning and watched you leave the mews. You were alone, and I wanted to speak to you, so I followed.”

She sighed and pushed her mount forward, her pursed lips telling him she was far from pleased. “You ought not to have. I do not need a man protecting me from assailants who do not exist in Mayfair.”

“Ah, but you’re no longer in Mayfair. You do realize you’re on the road leading out of London.”

“Of course, I know,” she all but bit out. “If you must know, I’m heading to Loxley Hall in Cambridgeshire.”

“Lord Coleridge’s country estate? On horseback? Where is your carriage? Why are you leaving London without a by-your-leave, I should mention.”

She shook her head, stubbornly looking ahead and not at him. “Because I have to go. Last evening,” she started, a blush stealing across her cheeks before she glared at him. “We should not have done what we did. Not just because we’re friends and I agreed to help you learn the ways of flirtation for another lady, but because we could have been caught. We’re far too close to having been ruined for my liking.”

“But we were not caught, Dee Dee. There is no harm done, and you cannot ride a horse all the way to Cambridgeshire.

That is too far, even for a competent horsewoman such as yourself.”

“You ride to Surrey and no one ever says a word about it. Why should it be different for me? Are you saying I cannot do so because I’m a woman?”

Arthur raised his hands in surrender, not wishing to die on that particular hill today, there were other, more critical, and impertinent matters to discuss. “Of course not, but it will not be an easy journey. I’m just concerned for you, that is all.”

“You need not be. I intend to stay the night at the Hogs Breath Inn.”

“But that is ten miles out of London.” A rumbling from the sky appeared at that moment, and Arthur glanced toward the heavens and cringed at the darkening atmosphere. “It’s going to rain, and with some degree of force, I fear. We ought to turn back to London. We may get a little wet, but we should be able to dry off without too much trouble if we go no farther now.”

“I will do no such thing. I’m for Loxley Hall, and that is where I’ll continue, thank you very much, Your Grace. You’re more than welcome to return to London.” As headstrong as she was, she kicked her mount forward, and, taking a deep, calming breath of patience that Arthur needed right at this moment, he followed.

He would not leave her to travel the north road alone. If only he had brought his penknife, flintlock, or packed attire for a night or two away from London. He studied the determined set of Dee Dee’s shoulders and her visage that brooked no argument and couldn’t help but debate why she was fleeing London at all.

The Season had not long started, and it was too early to leave town. No, she was running away, possibly because of him and what had happened. They rode for several miles before he could not stand the silence a moment longer. “My sincerest apologies for last evening. My emotions got the better of me, Dee Dee. I shall not molest you in such a way again should you just come back to town with me and not carry on in this ridiculous farce.”

“What is ridiculous was what happened between us. I should never have allowed myself to teach you anything, you seem quite capable of flirting and learning the art of lovemaking without any of my input. We should have kept our friendship as it was, platonic, and not confuse it as we have. I can offer you nothing, and do not forget you wish to marry another. The whole situation is outrageous.”

No, he would not hear such words, not anymore. So much had changed between them, and she needed to realize that as much as he had. “That is why I came to see you this morning. I wanted to talk about ...”

The heavens chose that moment to open upon them, and with torrential force, the rain fell. Within minutes, their clothes hung on them, soaked and heavy, dripping with water. If that were not bad enough, along with the rainstorm came a fierce wind as chilled as the air was from the Artic Circle’s icy caps.

“We’re closer to the Hogs Breath Inn, than London. I do not wish to speak again about what happened at Lady Pitt’s ball. We should count ourselves fortunate we were not caught,” she repeated, her nose turning red and her lips blue.

“I will not let you continue on your own. I’m coming with you, whether you want me to or not,” he said, determined to push through her anger and get her to see sense. Have her

realize that he did not want Lady Mabel, but her. And he would, as soon as they were out of this blasted tempest.

Deandra wanted to scream. All she had wanted was to escape London and all the complications she had added to her life since arriving for the Season. How could she have allowed herself to become involved with Arthur's absurd scheme?

Her riding gown clung to her, soaked down to her shift and stays, and a shiver stole over her, along with a sense of unease that she should not have been so hasty and should have waited for the carriage instead of traveling by horseback.

Not that she would admit to such foolishness, and certainly not in front of Arthur, who would never let her forget her folly. "Do you realize how close we came to being forced to marry? The idea sickens me," she barked at him, even though she had just said she did not wish to speak of their kiss. But when her mind refused to stop churning the memory, what option did she have?

"Would marriage to me be so horrendous, Dee Dee?" he asked. The question sent a spike of warmth through her chest, as short-lived as it was.

"I should imagine I could stomach it well enough, but it would not be long until you could not. I'm not suited to marriage and have endured one that was far from pleasant, as you well know. I do not wish to be beholden to another again." Not to mention she could not give Arthur children, and as the Duke of Beaufort, he required an heir to continue the line. Should she marry him and be barren as she suspected she was, he would never become a father, and she could not do that to him, no matter how much the thought of being his wife drew her like a moth to a flame.

“Do you not think that is up to me to decide? You must admit, what has occurred between us these past days has been marvelous and all-consuming. I do not think I could imagine being with anyone else but you, Dee Dee.”

“Well, you must,” she stated, shivering and pushing her mount into a canter, needing to get to the inn before she froze in the saddle. Her bonnet sat limp about her face, and steam came out of her horse’s nostrils with each breath.

“We will discuss the situation further at the inn, but come,” he urged. “Push your mount harder still, or we’ll both be ill if not on death’s door by the time we arrive.”

Deandra did as he advised, regretting her choice tenfold now and hoping the inn’s welcoming lights soon materialize before them, especially when the weather looked as determined to remain near her as Arthur.

CHAPTER
NINE

The rainstorm became torrential and would not relent. By the time the inn came into view, Arthur was seriously concerned for Dee Dee. Even after he had slipped his coat about her shoulders many miles before, her pale features and trembling were getting worse.

A young stable lad ran out to greet them, and Arthur dismounted, stumbling himself when his cold legs refused to work correctly. He righted himself and went to Dee Dee. She reached for him without dispute, and he helped her from her horse, lifting her into his arms when she started to sink to the muddy ground. The innkeeper came out to greet them, his warm smile fading when he noticed their condition.

“Your best room and hot bath if you please, and quickly,” Arthur ordered, entering the inn which was quiet, save for two laborers who sat at the bar, a tankard of ale in their hands.

“Of course, my lord.”

“Beaufort, and I shall pay you handsomely if you expedite the bath and have the room warmed posthaste.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Right away.” The innkeeper shouted orders, and soon, two maids and a male worker were hurrying up and down the stairs, carrying wood and a bath.

Arthur followed them upstairs, the innkeeper not far behind, asking if he would like a hot meal and mulled wine.

“Yes, and please bring them up directly.” Arthur sat Dee Dee before the roaring fire and reached for a nearby drying cloth. She took it, her fingers blue, and wiped her face. He bit back his annoyance at her for being so stubborn as not to have turned back to London before the storm.

What if she caught a chill or some horrid ague? He would never forgive himself if anything happened to her, and he had not been demanding enough for her to listen to reason.

Bucket after bucket of hot, steaming water filled the sizable tub, and he dipped his hand within it and found it the perfect temperature. The room was soon warm, and food was delivered as promised.

“Will there be anything else, Your Grace?” a young maid asked at the door.

“No, we shall manage from here, thank you for your assistance.”

She nodded and closed the door. Arthur went and locked it immediately and then strode back to Dee Dee. “Right, stand, and let us get you out of this gown. You need to warm up, and quickly. A bath will assist with that.”

“I cannot bathe with you in the room,” she said aghast, but her attempt to be intimidating failed by her chattering teeth.

“You will because you have no choice. Now turn around so I can undo your buttons. I will not ogle you,” he lied, knowing he would probably sneak a look at her delectable form a time or two before the night was over.

She huffed out an annoyed breath but did as he asked.

It took them several minutes to discard her gown and stockings, ruined boots, and a corset that was as wet as if it had been laundered. She stood with her back to him in nothing but her shift, and the outline of the globes of her bottom teased him before he forced himself to give her his back.

“Right, I’ve turned around, you may now get into the bath.”

He swallowed hard as he heard the shift slap down on the floorboards before sloshing water, and a welcome sigh of delight filled the room. “I’m in the tub now, Arthur, and covered enough that I do not think you could see me even if you tried,” she said.

He did not try, as much as his gaze wanted to move to where she bathed. Instead, he started to discard his clothes, hanging them close to the fire with hers. If her gown were not dry by morning, he would send a female servant to fetch her some new clothing. Surely, the small village had a modiste of some kind.

“I’m feeling better already,” she said.

He did look at her then, and he was thankful her cheeks were rosy, and the chattering of her teeth had stopped. “You will stay in that bath until you’re warmed through. I will not have you fall ill.”

He rubbed his hands, placing them closer to the fire, the chill down his back telling him he should remove his trousers and shirt.

“Arthur?” he heard her call.

He turned and met her eyes and fought not to lose his head at the sight she made. The one woman he desired above all

others, his best friend, the love of his life ... “Deandra,” he replied.

She bit her lip, and fire ignited in his soul, burning away the residual cold thrumming through his blood.

“You should probably bathe as well. I would not wish for you to succumb to the ague either.”

“I will, once you’ve concluded yours.” He turned and stared at the flames, her concern for him giving him some hope he could still win her to his side and she would be his future wife.

“No, Arthur,” he heard her state. “I do not mean later. I mean ... maybe ... you ought to join me while the water is hot.”

His gaze flew to hers, and he could see by the determined light in her eyes she meant every word she uttered. He frowned. “A bath? Together?”

She chuckled and leaned back, the sight of her breasts floating to the surface and giving a view of her nipples almost made him groan aloud.

“Of course, together,” she answered.

Arthur’s mouth dried, and before she could change her mind, he ripped the shirt from his back and shucked down his trousers, as naked as she was but without the curtain of water covering him from her view. He strode toward her, not trying to hide his cock or save her modesty.

He stepped into the water, the heat prickling his chilled skin. He sank into the tub and sighed, but before he could say a word, she was in his arms, her warm body pressing against his chest, and he was lost, heart and soul.

Deandra did not know what came over her, but watching Arthur stand by the fire, trying to warm his body after their arduous morning ride out to the inn caused a longing, an unwavering, deep love for the man whose only concern was her, to overwhelm her, and she could not push him away.

She embraced his jaw and kissed him deep and long, settling on his lap and knowing there was no other place in the world she would rather be. His hands clasped the globes of her bottom, pulling her against his rigid cock, and she moaned, wanting him with a need that surpassed common sense.

Without thinking, she clasped his manhood and guided him into her. It had been years since she had been intimate with a man, and Arthur was rigid, longer and thicker than her departed husband.

“Deandra,” he groaned as she impaled herself to the hilt. He filled her, her body thrumming with excitement and expectation. Already she could feel herself at the crux of an orgasm. She lifted herself, rocked onto him, and their moans of delight mingled through their kiss.

His arms wrapped around her back, holding her against him. He sat forward, taking her lips in a kiss as searing as the water. Their coming together was frantic, desperate, and long overdue. Water sloshed over the tub’s edges, their chilled skin burning with desire.

Not that either of them cared, their entire focus on each other and the pleasure they wrought, not just here in a bath as they made love, but in society too, as best friends.

“This will not change anything, Arthur,” she gasped, moaning when her words elicited a hard thrust into her from

him.

“This changes everything, Deandra,” he replied, using her given name in full, his eyes heavy with need and determination. “Even if I have to fuck you into submission, you will be mine.”

His words, unlike anything she had ever heard him state before, pushed her ever closer to release. Where was her meek and gentlemanly friend? The virginal duke who needed schooling? Certainly, the man who thrust into her cunny with an expertise she did not know he possessed was not who she knew like the back of her hand.

Not that she did not adore this new side of Arthur. He was magnificent and with stamina she had never encountered before. How would she adhere to her own rules when such a man was at her disposal?

No, not disposal. She could not use him so. They could have this one night, then he needed to marry a woman who would give him what he wanted. A future, children. A woman who was not her.

“That may take some time, and you have a wife to lure,” she said, reminding him.

He shook his head. “No, I do not.” He lifted her from him and stood, before reaching for her and swooping her into his arms, more water spilling about the wooden floors. Without a by-your-leave, he carried her to the bed and tossed her onto the mattress.

“You will say yes to me before morning, or you’re the worst teacher in seduction, and I know you’ll dislike having that title.”

She ground her teeth, disliking the sound of it already. Her skin thrummed in expectation as his eyes lit with determination. He clasped her ankles and wrenched her to the side of the bed, knelt before her cunny, and licked his lips.

“Now I’m going to taste you, eat your sweet quim. The time for talking is later.”

She gasped as he dipped his head, swiping between her legs with an expertise she had not taught him. “Where did you learn such a thing was possible?” she asked.

“Virtuous and virginal duke I may have been, but there are books, and my library has an extensive assortment. You know how much I liked to read,” he stated.

She slumped back on the bedding, so glad her book-loving friend found those tomes. Something told her she would enjoy what he had in store for her next.

CHAPTER
TEN

Deandra tasted as sweet as a sugared plum. He devoured her notch, suckled, and kissed her sweet lips until she undulated on his face, telling him what she liked without words.

She was wet, coating his mouth with her delicious nectar. He fucked her with his fingers and reveled in her squirming, her breathless cries for more.

“Oh, Arthur.” Never had a sweeter sound been heard than his name on her lips, begging him to take her, to make her come, give her what she wanted.

He stood and stroked his cock, pushing it between her wet, glistening folds, and watched as he stretched and filled her to the brim. His balls tightened, and he knew he was close to coming.

“Arthur,” she moaned again, her hands coming up to her breasts and pinching both her nipples with her thumbs and forefingers. He thrust hard, taking her, wanting her to shatter on him, to pull his release forward.

He'd never imagined a woman touching herself so intimately was possible, and seeing Deandra engaged in such a practice ripped his control from him. The feel of her, the warmth and tight core that caressed his cock with every stroke,

was a man's dream. He never wanted to do anything else in his life than make love to the woman before him.

"You're so damn sweet." He settled atop her, kissing her deeply, their tongues twisting as he pumped into her like a man without sense. Her legs wrapped about his hips, the heels of her feet digging into his back. He clasped her ass, held her still so he could go deeper, force her orgasm to rip through her.

He did not have to wait long.

"Arthur, I'm coming. Oh God, I'm coming," she screamed, her fingers biting into the skin on his shoulders.

He steadied his pace, the contractions of her release tightening about his cock. He enjoyed wringing every ounce of her pleasure before his orgasm tore through him. "Deandra," he gasped, meeting her eyes as he came. "I love you so much," he admitted, and the realization in her gaze told him she understood it was not in the friendship way they usually declared.

No. The friendship was still there, of course, but the love was far more profound and deep, everlasting and eternal.

She shook her head, a tear flowing down her cheek. "No, Arthur, you cannot. We cannot do this. We have this night and no more."

"No, you're wrong, Dee Dee. We will have this night and every night until the last breath leaves my body. I will not marry another, nor have I wanted to, not since our first kiss. You have my heart and soul, you must know this." He slipped from her and came to rest at her side. He observed her and watched as she studied the raftered ceiling.

"I was married for years and was not suitable to the union, you know this. I was miserable and ..."

“You were miserable because you did not love him. I believe you love me more than a friend, and I am not Lord Coleridge. I adore you and have always cherished the ground your slippered feet walk on. You know a marriage with me will differ from the one you had before.”

She rolled toward him, reaching up to clasp his jaw. “Arthur, I was married some years and never fell pregnant. You told me at the beginning of the Season that you require a bride and wife to procure an heir. There is a possibility that I cannot give you that, and I will not take that opportunity from you. That would be selfish of me.”

Her words caught him off guard, and he stilled, having never thought that was why she had not birthed a child with Lord Coleridge.

“You tried for a child, and nothing ever came to fruition?”

Her lips pulled into a sad smile, and his heart broke for the pain he read in her features. Had she lost children? Or never carried one at all?

“We tried, he was desperate for an heir, and I bled on time each month. Never was I late once. My courses were like clockwork, and so was Lord Coleridge’s disappointment until he was on me again, trying the next month like a grunting pig.”

Arthur pulled her into his arms, hating that she had endured so many years in such a loveless marriage. He could not imagine being forced into a union he held no desire for. “I have male cousins who are in line to the dukedom, Deandra. Let them beget the heirs if we cannot. I do not want something that does not exist to stop our happiness. Not when what I do want is alive and well, loving and beautiful, and in my arms

right now. I want you. I have always wanted you. I merely needed you to kiss me to remind me of such things.”

She grinned up at him. “You lie. You were not interested in me at all, admit it. You were determined to marry Lady Mabel, the perfect debutante, and I was merely your teacher.”

He chuckled and knew he could not lie to her. “Very well, yes, that was correct. However, the moment I kissed you in the carriage, I knew nothing would be the same for us again. I could not sleep for the need of you. I could only count down the hours until I saw you again. Please tell me that you will marry me. Tell me that I have a chance of winning you, for I cannot go another day without you being my duchess, my wife, my life.”

“But the babies, Arthur,” she stated again.

“There is a chance it could have been Lord Coleridge’s fault you could not conceive,” he said, thinking aloud.

“No, his lordship’s doctor told me the fault lay with me.”

Arthur scoffed, not believing that for a moment. “No doubt to soothe your husband’s fear that he was infertile, and not his wife. The man was always worried about his appearance and what people thought of him. Easier to lay blame elsewhere than admit to himself that he could be the issue.”

Deandra thought about Arthur’s words and, oddly enough, had never considered such a possibility when married to Lord Coleridge. Maybe it was her late husband’s difficulty and not hers. The idea sparked hope through her, and she prayed that the seed Arthur had gifted her would take root and blossom into a child of their own. Married or not.

“But if I never fall pregnant, you will not hold it against me?” She could not endure another row with a husband who shouted and screamed at her about her failings in the one thing she was supposed to do as a wife.

“Of course I will not. I hope you know me better than that to believe me capable of such cruelty. The dukedom, whether through my line or my cousin’s, is secure. But my heart will not be, not unless you’re my wife and my duchess. Nothing will make me happier than to call you mine.”

Deandra came over to him, lying partway on his chest. She studied his profile, so handsome, aristocratic, and hers. Hers from this day forward. However had she become so fortunate to have her friend, her lover, soon to be her husband? “Very well, Your Grace. I shall marry you so long as you promise to honor me every day through sickness and in health, so long as we both shall live.”

“I do,” he answered, his wicked grin making her chuckle.

“Well then, we’re already on the north road. Shall we continue and marry at Gretna?” she suggested, the idea, now that it had taken root, one that would not abate.

“I shall order my carriage from London, and we will travel directly from here as soon as it arrives, and before we return to town, there will be a new Duchess of Beaufort.”

“I shall adore having your name, Arthur. I have so long admired it.”

“I wish I could say the same for your name. However, now that I can change it to mine, it shall never be anything other than duchess ever again.”

“Promise?” she asked.

“Oh, I vow,” he stated, rolling her onto her back and sealing their pledge with a kiss that, once again, sent both their wits spiraling long into the night.

EPILOGUE

Two months later, London

Arthur sat up with a jolt as the sound of his wife's hurried footsteps across the bedroom floor startled him awake, along with the heaving that followed.

He threw back the bedding and started toward the privacy screen she stood behind, coming up to rub her back. "Darling, are you ill again? Do you not think it is time to call the doctor?" he asked. He tried to keep the overwhelming fear from his voice that something serious was awry with Deandra and that he could lose her so close to having just won her, but he knew he had failed miserably.

She reached out and squeezed his hand in an attempt to comfort him. "I sent a missive yesterday, and he'll be here this morning. In fact, he's probably downstairs already since we've slept later than we ought."

"Do you wish for me to ring for your maid?" He poured her a small glass of water and handed it to her.

"Yes, thank you, I shall see the doctor here. I do not feel up to getting dressed and going downstairs. Have Jane send him up if he should be waiting already."

“Very well.” Arthur did as she bade, and sure enough, Dr. Otamot was waiting downstairs and promptly came to their bedchamber to look over Deandra.

Arthur sat beside Dee Dee, not bothering to dress, merely throwing on a robe to protect the doctor’s discomfiture. But if Deandra was ill, he did not wish to leave her side.

The doctor opened his bag on the bedside cabinet after greeting them both and wishing them a good morning. “Please lie down, Your Grace, and if you’re willing, I shall inspect you.”

“Of course,” she answered, doing as the doctor bade, her hand reaching for Arthur’s. He clasped her small hand and held tight.

The doctor rubbed his hands together, apologizing to Dee Dee that they were cold, and started to press on Deandra’s body. “Any pain here?” he asked, pressing on her abdomen.

Deandra shook her head. “No, but I’ve been unwell for several days, and the illness lasts most of the day, Doctor,” she mentioned.

The doctor felt Deandra’s neck, near her shoulder blades, and then under her arms. “Any unusual lumps in the breasts?”

Deandra frowned, thinking upon the question. “No, but they’re uncomfortable and ache. Do you think there is something seriously wrong with me?” Her eyes snapped to his, and Arthur shook his head, hoping to dispel her fears. “I hoped perhaps I may be with child, but I know that cannot be the case for a previous doctor informed me I cannot have them.”

“There is nothing of concern, darling,” he answered, which she promptly ignored.

“Doctor, what do you think is wrong with me?”

The doctor continued his examination, pressing down on her abdomen toward her groin. The doctor's frown deepened, and for several minutes, he palpitated her lower stomach before he stood back and smiled.

"No, there is nothing wrong with you, Your Grace. Tell me, have you been lightheaded at times, and do certain scents and food make you nauseated?"

"Yes," she answered, agreeing to all the doctor said. "I used to love a cup of tea each morning, and now the very thought makes my stomach stir. What do you think it is?" she asked again.

Arthur sat beside Deandra on the bed, helping her sit upright when the doctor started packing his medical bag. "I think that congratulations are in order, Your Graces. You're going to be parents."

For a moment, Arthur thought he was afflicted with the same issue as Deandra as the room spun. He looked at Dee Dee and recognized the shock on her features that matched the emotions rioting within him.

"Pregnant?" they said in unison.

The doctor laughed. "Well, it is often in married couples, and I can feel the hardening of your uterus, telling me a child is growing in your womb. Along with your other conditions, sickness in the morning, sore breasts, aversion to certain foods and scents, yes, I'm certain that in seven or so months, you'll welcome the next Duke of Beaufort or a little lady." The doctor smiled, picked up his bag, and slipped on his hat that he had left on a chair near the door. "I shall leave you to enjoy this exciting news. I shall call in a week and see how you are, Your Grace."

“Thank you,” Deandra called after the doctor before gaping at Arthur. “I cannot believe it. I did not think it was possible ...” she murmured. “Arthur, a baby!”

“Our baby.” Arthur wrenched her into an embrace. His eyes burned with emotion, and he fought not to lose control of his sentiment. Not because deep down he had wanted a child, but because he knew Deandra had. Over the last few months of their marriage, he had seen her with children and had not missed the pain that had filled her eyes, believing she could never have one of her own.

“I’m beyond words.” A laugh bubbled out of her, and he chuckled.

“Believe it, darling, for it has been confirmed. You’re pregnant, and we’re to be parents. I suppose we ought to redecorate the nursery. It has not been used since I was a babe.”

Her eyes filled with excitement as the truth began to sink in regarding their situation. “After all this time, it was never me, Arthur. I was never the problem. For all these years, I thought myself barren, held myself away from the hope of another marriage for fear of disappointing another husband, and all for nothing. It was Lord Coleridge’s fault the entire time.”

Arthur fought not to hate the late Lord Coleridge more than he already did, but he could not forgive the earl for making Deandra feel worthless by not conceiving a child with him. How she must have suffered with her secret. “When such affliction prevents a person from having a child, it is cruel to make them feel valueless. Especially when there is little one can do on the matter. Lord Coleridge was wrong for reminding you of a flaw that did not lie with you. But no longer. The

strength of our love has given us this gift, and I shall be forever in your debt. I love you so much, Deandra. You are the best of everything in my world.”

She reached for him, holding him tight. “As are you to me. I love you so very much, Arthur, and our baby,” she said, cradling her stomach. “What do you think it will be? A boy or a girl?”

He covered her hand with his, thinking about her question. “I think the child is already full of mischief, and so I think she will be a girl, just like her mama.”

Deandra grinned. “Or a future duke.” She sighed, the sound of utter happiness. “Thank you for marrying me, for loving me, and giving me a baby. I love my life and you so very much.”

Arthur laid her back onto the pillows and took her lips in a searing kiss. “Well, I was determined to have you at my side after that first kiss. I had no other option, and I would not have given up.”

“I’m glad you did not relent, even though I was difficult to convince.”

He chuckled. “Well, there is a first time for everything,” he teased, closing the space between them and losing himself in her, his friend, lover, wife, and duchess.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tamara Gill is an Australian author who grew up in an old mining town in country South Australia, where her love of history was founded. Tamara loves to write romance novels in an array of genres, including regency, medieval, and time travel.

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OH. MY. GOD, BECKY,
LOOK AT HER DUKE

CAROLINE LEE

Lady Amelia Kincaid, isn't the sort of duke's daughter accepted in Society. She's more of the sort who rescues squirrels and raises boa constrictors and incubates eggs in her corset. (What? She has small bosoms. There's plenty of room.) But when it comes to her brother's best friend, she's always wished she was a bit more ladylike.

Because Kipling is back in Town as the newly minted Duke of Bestingbum, and to Amelia's eternal sorrow, appears to already be betrothed. If Amelia wants to force someone as perfect as Kip to notice her after all these years, she's going to need some help from her best friend, Becky. Who happens to be a chicken.

Warning: Just as wonderfully silly and perfectly spicy as the rest of the Surprise! Dukes series. You're going to have a lot of fun!

Dearest reader,

Hopefully you know me well enough not to take my stories too seriously. These things are pure, unadulterated fun, after all! When it comes to names, you're in for a treat with the hero's...and I promise you, there's absolutely a reason he's been given the name he has. No, I didn't misspell "Manchester," don't be silly. There's a reason for most of my nonsense.

After all, as some famous person or another said: Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. Taylor Swift, I think? Yeah, pretty sure it was her.

Now get ready for some fun!

Caroline!

CHAPTER
ONE

Kipling Mancheste, newly made duke and just as gorgeous as he'd always been, was currently laughing as he backed out of Amelia's brother's study.

Speaking of bad timing.

Amelia's back was pressed against the wall of the corridor, cradling a chicken. As one does.

"I'll see ye tonight, then, Alistair? *Tell* me ye're no' leaving me high and dry at my first Society event!"

Her brother must have responded without words—he still only spoke in short sentences and only when necessary—because Kipling laughed again and made a rude gesture. Amelia clamped her hand around the hen's beak and tried to back around the corner, praying he wouldn't see her.

It had been two years since she'd last seen Kipling Mancheste, and although he likely remembered her only as his best friend's youngest sister—gangly and awkward in her unceasing championing of God's creatures, if he remembered her at all—Amelia remembered him as the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

The intervening years hadn't changed that.

She'd only learned he was back in London—having unexpectedly inherited the Duchy of Bestingbum—earlier this year, and despite her loitering outside her brother's study, she hadn't seen him yet. There were only so many times one can claim to be studying this portrait, or picking out the location for her new aquarium, or—in a pinch—reapplying the wallpaper, before the butler would get suspicious.

And wasn't it just like Fate that the day she actually *did* see Kipling Mancheste, she was taking her little darling for a walk?

It was too much to hope he hadn't seen her.

“Amanda?”

Amelia squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her back against the wall, the squirming hen clamped firmly under one arm.

“Lass, I can see yer skirts peeking around the corner. Are ye Alistair's new wife, Olivia? I've been looking forward to meeting the lass who stole my best friend's heart.”

Amelia held her breath, praying he'd give up and walk toward the foyer. She wanted to see Kipling after all these years...but she wasn't exactly ready for him to see *her*.

Long moments passed, during which she heard nothing from the man. Praying he'd given up and left, she peeked open one eye.

And promptly closed it again.

He was *standing right there*.

“Amelia,” he said, in that warm caramelly voice of his. She'd been rather hoping the years apart had changed it, so it

would become scratchy or gravelly. Different in any way. Oh, why hadn't he taken up smoking in the interim?

Because hearing that voice she'd always loved, saying her name like that? His lips, caressing the M, his tongue wrapping around the L?

She was lost.

“Amelia, ye ken I can see ye?”

She was going to have to speak to him. Outrageous.

“I do not know anything about the state of your eyesight, Kip—sir. Your Grace.”

“Well, as far as I'm aware, it's perfect. I'm standing right in front of ye, looking at ye.”

Her eyes were beginning to ache from how hard she was squeezing them shut. “Could you...not?”

“No' look at ye?”

Inspiration struck. “I am practicing hiding from raptors.”

“Raptors?”

Oh God, she could *hear* the amusement in his voice.

“Raptors. Eagles, falcons, that sort of thing. They have remarkable eyesight, but rely mainly on watching for prey's movement. If the prey remains very still while the raptor is soaring above, they can remain safe.”

He hummed. “And are they a frequent danger here in Effinghell House? Is that why ye're carrying a chicken, wee Mellie? As a distraction?”

She gasped, eyes popping open, less at the childhood nickname and more at the thought of using one of her babies as a distraction. “Whatever do you—”

Amelia bit her tongue. Really, when confronted with the fact the man had his hand splayed against the wall near her head, and he was leaning toward her—close enough to smell whatever soap his valet used to trim his beard—it seemed safest.

When Kipling grinned, her knees went weak. Oh Lord in Heaven, how had she forgotten The Grin? It was even better than The Voice. It took his normally craggy face and shaped it into a work of pure Art.

“I mean, wee Mellie, that if attacked from above by a raptor, ye could always toss yer chicken at it as a distraction. The raptor could attack the chicken, and ye could get away safely.” By studying his lips, Amelia was able to ignore his offensive words. “My uncle used to tell me that was why he brought dogs along on bear hunts in the wilds of Canada.”

How horrific. “I do not think your uncle sounds like a very nice man,” she sniffed.

His eyes—so blue, so very blue—flicked across her visage. “Nay, he wasnae.”

Oh.

The Grin was nice, The Voice was even nicer...but when he *agreed* with her?

Be still my heart.

It was possible her childish infatuation with her brother’s best friend was not quite out of her system.

“So, wee Mellie...”

“Amelia,” she corrected primly, trying to maintain *some* dignity while pressed to a wall, cradling a chicken. “I have not gone by *Mellie* in many years, Your Grace.”

He winced, which looked wrong on such a beautiful face. “I’ll make ye a deal. Ye dinnae call me *Yer Grace*, and I will try to remember no’ to call ye *Mellie*. It’ll be hard, since that’s how I thought of ye all these years.”

If Amelia needed proof that the man remembered her as the skinny lass with the skinned knees and torn hem, she need look no further.

But he was still staring expectantly. “Deal,” she managed to croak out.

Abruptly, Kipling straightened. “So, *Lady Amelia*, are ye going to tell me why ye’re cradling a chicken?”

“A chicken?”

His lips twitched. “Surely ye havenae forgotten yer passenger? The one ye’re no’ using as raptor bait-slash-distractor?”

“Oh, *Becky*.” She lifted the bird, cradling her in her palms.

Kipling blinked. “Becky?”

Becky obligingly squawked.

“This is Becky. I raised her from an egg.”

Some people—*Let us be honest*, most *people*—would flinch away in surprise at such an announcement. Kipling, bless him, merely smiled. “Did ye now? Ye must be verra proud.”

And then the man reached out his hand, and *petted her chicken*.

Oh, her heart!

Petting your chicken sounds a bit like a metaphor. Is that one listed in the Harlot’s Guide?

It was difficult to ignore her chattering subconscious, but it was necessary, because Kipling Mancheste was currently cooing happily at Becky. At *her* Becky.

“Ye’re a pretty girl, are ye no’? I’ve never seen a hen so fluffy and white. Those little black feathers make her look as if she’s wearing a lacy necklace, aye?”

Amelia could admit that not everyone was as animal-obsessed as she was, but she couldn’t imagine a more perfect response. She had to swallow and force herself to focus. “Aye—I mean, yes. Becky—short for Lady Rebecca Marie Skye Kincaid, by the way—is a Shanghai white. She is a fancy breed, and a brilliant layer.” She scratched beneath Becky’s chin. “Yes you are.” Grinning impishly, she met Kipling’s amused gaze once more. “And she’s *much* better company than her brother Charles.”

“As evidenced by the fact *he’s* no’ here, tucked beneath yer arm as ye go strolling.”

Strolling, indeed. As if she hadn’t heard from the upstairs maid, who heard it from Rocky, who’d heard it from the butler, that Kipling would be visiting today, and thus had been lingering here in the hall all morning.

But he was staring at her expectantly, and Amelia was at a loss for words. How to explain she’d been stalking the corridor of her brother’s study for a month, hoping for a glimpse of the man she’d once been so in love with she thought she’d explode from it?

Oh, to be a seventeen-year-old, angst-driven, silly lass again.

She’d doodled “Mrs. Kipling Mancheste” all over one of her books of poetry until her sister had discovered it and

tossed it in the waste bin.

He is looking at you. Clearly he is waiting for you to say something. Anything!

“Becky requires daily exercise!” she blurted, finally, then expounded, extemporizing as she went. “I often allow her and Charles out in the cook’s garden in the mews. To hunt for—for insects and such.”

The Grin arrived again. “Sounds idyllic,” he murmured, his gaze caressing her face once more.

Was it her imagination, or was he leaning toward her a bit? How much effort would it be to press up on her toes? To stretch toward his lips? To give into the urges which had bedeviled her for two long years?

To squish a chicken between you.

Oh, yes. Becky.

With horrible—or perhaps impeccable—timing, Rocky the footman chose that moment to wander by. “Morning, Your Grace. Morning, Lady Whichever. Need me to pick up anything?”

Amelia cleared her throat and straightened her spine. “No, thank you, Rocky. Carry on.”

“Ta, cheers.” The huge oaf tugged his forelock—or where he likely thought his forelock was—and strolled on.

She had to stifle her giggle.

“Lady Whichever?” Kipling murmured, clearly noticing the attempted giggle.

“He cannot keep Amanda and me straight. We have found it’s easier not to task his few braincells.”

Kipling had stepped away from her—and Becky—when Rocky had come into sight, and now he straightened his cuffs. “And he regularly picks things up for ye?”

Ah. Amelia felt her cheeks heating. “It is...mainly a game Amanda plays to irritate the butler, Hiro.” She played it too, but she wasn’t going to admit that right now. “She...drops things.”

“For Rocky to pick up? Does he no’ have better things to do?”

Oh Lord. Rather be hanged for a sheep than a lamb. Cheeks blazing, Amelia pretended great interest in smoothing down the ruff of black feathers behind Becky’s head. “Rocky has a remarkably toned rear end, Your—*sir*.”

To her surprise, Kipling burst into laughter.

She peeked up at him and couldn’t help her smile. Kipling’s laughter was whole-hearted, coming not just from his mouth, but from his chest and his heart as well. He was the kind of man who made you want to laugh with him.

So really, how *could* she help her smile?

“Lady Amelia,” he suddenly said, scooping up her free hand, chuckles still shaking his shoulders. “Thank ye.” As he bent over her hand, his gaze twinkled up at her. “I’ve convinced yer brother to attend the Stallings’ ball tonight, which my—well, it doesnae matter. I’ll be there, and I need some troops at my back. Alistair, Fawkes, Thorne...and ye?”

He was holding her gaze, his thumb rubbing the back of her hand.

Was he...asking her to attend a ball? With him?

Oh Heavens.

Oh, Heavens and angels and archangels and all the Heavenly choir and clouds and the Pearly Gates and whatever else went on up there.

Stop being silly. If Alistair and Olivia are going, you would just attend with them.

Well, yes. But *Kipling* would be there. And he clearly wanted to see her.

“Would—would it be permissible to dance?”

Good Lord, when had she grown so bold?

When you met him holding a chicken, likely.

His Grin was blinding. “I wouldnae have it any other way, milady. Save a dance for me?”

When he placed a hand on her knuckles, she made an embarrassing little sound like *meep*.

And then, still grinning, with one glance over his shoulder at her...Kipling Mancheste sauntered out of her life once again.

CHAPTER
TWO

“D arling, ye could at least *pretend* to smile.”

Kipling stifled his sigh and forced his lips to curl as he patted his mother’s hand on his arm and watched the dancers floating about in circles. It wasn’t that he didn’t normally enjoy balls and social events like this one...it was what tonight represented.

His first appearance in Society as the Duke of Bestingbum.

A title he’d never expected would be his.

“Mother, are ye certain I cannae escort ye to the gambling tables?” Since he’d gained the title, she’d proven that she had no qualms helping to spend the Bestingbum fortune. “Or to visit with some of yer friends?”

“And miss yer official debut?” She scoffed, swatting at his arm. “I am right where I want to be, darling.”

Debut. As if he were some kind of young miss, being presented to the vultures. Kip stifled another sigh.

Mother meant well, he knew. She’d married a younger son of a duke, and Kip remembered his parents being very much in love before Father’s unexpected death. Then her first son—Kip’s older brother—had passed on as well, a few years later.

Mother had turned her undaunted affections to him, and he did his best to fill what he assumed were several holes in her heart.

It was just the two of them now, against the world, and of course he did what he could to keep her happy. She'd even spent some time with him on the Continent during the last two years, since he'd fled in desperation.

“Could I at least convince ye to go make polite conversation with Lady Stallings?” Kip murmured.

“I plan on it. If I am standing here with ye, pretending I am *no*' getting dizzy, watching these people spin in circles, then she will have to come to me. And once she does...”

She'd bring her daughter, aye.

Mother's light brogue was layered atop a crisp finishing school tone, one she shared with her oldest and dearest friend, Lady Stallings, tonight's hostess. Kip couldn't be sure, but he suspected the ball itself was a scheme concocted by the two women, not just to introduce the new Duke of Bestingbum, but to link his name to Lady Emma, youngest daughter of the Earl and his wife.

And Kip's almost-fiancée.

His *engaged-to-be-engaged* wife.

His mother and Lady Stallings had already arranged it, deciding Emma would be the first partner to help usher him through Society in his new role...and were just waiting on him to make it official.

And up until today, Kip would've gone along with their scheming. What difference would it make? They were all the same.

Up until today, he'd assumed his lust for his best friend's sister had finally dissipated. Then he'd discovered she was still unmarried, still living under Alistair's roof, still a beautiful lass of—what? Almost twenty, she had to be. Still just as lovely, just as impassioned, just as hoydenish as he'd remembered.

Standing there, staring down at a lass with a chicken, he'd fallen right back in love with Lady Amelia Kincaid.

“Oh look, darling, here they come! Och, try to look like ye are enjoying yerself.”

He didn't want to marry Lady Emma Iverson.

But Kip also didn't want to hurt his mother, so he attempted a credible smile, and when Lady Stallings and her daughter swanned over, he made a show of fawning over them as Mother expected.

They made small talk about his time on the Continent and he tried to be as charming as possible, while all the while his gaze swept the gathered masses, looking for Alistair and his youngest sister.

Would she come?

If she didn't, what would he do?

Tonight he was expected to dance with Emma, and if they spent enough time together, the Great Gossip Machine that was the matrons of Society would start humming. Kip would be linked to Emma before he could even formally ask for her hand.

Not that he wanted to, not anymore.

After seeing Amelia today, realizing he was still completely enthralled by her zest for life, he knew he wouldn't

be satisfied with the icy blonde woman who currently clutched his arm after Mother had drifted aside to chat with her friend.

Emma was pretty enough, but in a sort of porcelain doll way; it was clear *she'd* never scraped her knee chasing after a baby goat, or soaked her skirts while she caught frogs in the estate pond.

Of course, Alistair spent his days in London lately, so Kip assumed his sisters did as well. He'd expected refinements, an aloof air, a forgetting of who she was. But today's encounter proved Amelia was the same lass he remembered.

Just all grown up.

Very, very all grown up. And out. Perfectly out.

Just the memory of her curves made his palms itch.

“Oh, listen, Your Grace! The music is starting up again.” Emma fluttered her lashes, about as subtle as a locomotive engine.

He'd only known her a month, and already disliked the way she was used to getting what she wanted. It never occurred to her that she wouldn't, in fact.

“Oh yes, darling! Ye should dance,” Mother urged.

When Kip glanced at her, she lowered her brows and darted a furious glance toward Emma, then back to him.

Ah, well, he could pick up on a hint. Especially when laid down with a shovel.

“Lady Emma,” he began stiffly. “Would ye do me the honor of joining me?”

“Oh, *Your Grace*,” she tittered in mock surprise. “I would be delighted!”

And stifling yet another sigh, Kipling led her out to the dance floor.

“Are you well, Amelia?” murmured Olivia, her new sister-in-law. “I expected Alistair to look ill at such an event, but I would’ve guessed you’d be excited.”

The two of them stood on either side of Amelia’s brother, the Duke of Effinghell. Earlier this year, he’d made quite the splash by not only contracting marriage to a completely unsuitable newspaper reporter, he’d been so disgraceful as to go and fall in love with her.

But Amelia loved Olivia, and knew her sister Amanda did as well. Olivia had drawn Alistair from the darkness he’d inhabited for so many years, and brought him back to his family.

So Amelia forced a smile. “Attending balls is still somewhat new to me.” Her brother, despite his enormous influence, had hidden from Society and contented himself with written correspondence. “This is only my third such event which Alistair did not himself host.”

Her large, mostly silent brother, harumphed slightly. But when she peeked up at him, his lips twitched.

He hated Society events as she herself loved them. Or at least, she had *thought* she loved them; she had little experience. But years of tutoring and lessons had prepared her for this, at least.

“Well, I promised Alistair I wouldn’t nag him into dancing with me,” Olivia murmured, pretending interest in the crowd.

“But that doesn’t mean *you* shouldn’t dance.”

“Do you think I might convince Alistair to dance with *me*?”

As Olivia swallowed her giggle, Alistair turned a horrified expression on Amelia, who also had to press her lips together to keep from laughing.

Of course Alistair wouldn’t dance with her. It was hard enough for him to be here, surrounded by people who were neither friends nor family. At least when *he* hosted an event, he could be certain none of his guests would mock his voice, or the fact he preferred not to speak at all.

Here, his only chance was to hope no one would talk to them.

“Alistair, thank Christ ye came!”

It was apparently a vain hope.

Amelia’s heart started to beat double-time before she even *saw* Kipling; just his delicious-sounding voice could do that to her.

But as her brother’s lips curled into a wry grin—he was tall enough to see over the heads of everyone around them—Amelia turned to see a distinctly hunted-looking Kipling slide through the crowds.

“Quick, pretend I’m saying something fascinating,” the new Duke of Bestingbum commanded, stationing himself with his back to the room. “So nae one interrupts us.”

“Not enjoying yourself, Your Grace?” Olivia asked, laughter not far from her tone.

Kipling groaned and tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. “No’ ye too! I need *someone* here who willnae suck up

to me.”

“I dinnae...suck,” croaked Alistair, who looked as if he was trying not to laugh as well.

“Well, no’ in a long time.” Kipling winked. “Do ye remember the time ye bought that barrel of ale, and we couldnae fit it through the window? But we had the tubing—”

Alistair shook his head. “That was ye.”

Amelia couldn’t help smiling, for several reasons:

1. Despite his raspy voice, it was obvious her brother was delighted to be reunited with his best friend. After all, that was the only reason he’d agreed to attend this ball tonight, in order to support Kipling.
2. She’d heard there would be chocolate for dessert.
3. Becky had laid another perfect egg only that afternoon.
4. Kipling Mancheste was standing in front of her, looking divine, sounding divine, and yes, even smelling divine.
5. And he was sneaking peeks at her. Peeks! At her!

Why *wouldn’t* she be smiling?

“So, *Kip*,” Olivia teased, “You *are* hiding? There’s some nice curtains over there.”

“I cannae hide in the curtains. My mother and Lady Stallings planned this whole thing so I can be seen, which I dinnae love.”

“Liar,” croaked Alistair.

“I dinnae love being seen as the Duke of Bestingbum,” Kip quickly corrected. “I was never supposed to become a *duke*.”

Blue eyes flicked toward Amelia, then away again. “I wish there was a manual.”

He sounded strangely...vulnerable. And Amelia felt for him.

“I am certain you will do wonderful things, Your Grace.” When he turned his full attention to her, a touch of hurt in the cant of his brows, she winced. “Apologies. *Kipling*.”

The tension around his eyes eased slowly as he studied her. Just as it had earlier that day, his gaze made her... Not uncomfortable, but...breathless?

Yes. Breathless. That was a good way to describe this feeling. The way her heart pounded in her chest, matching the throbbing between her thighs.

“Lady Amelia,” he said finally. “Would ye be willing to help me hide from the masses?”

Her answer was immediate. Certain. “Of course. What do you need?”

The Grin flashed. “That promised dance?” he asked as he held out his hand.

She didn’t even stop to think before she put her hand in his.

Only then did something like worry flash across Kip’s visage, and he flicked a glance toward Alistair. “That is, assuming ye dinnae mind?”

Amelia turned her attention to her brother as well, and realized she was holding her breath. Alistair studied the two of them—his gaze lingering where her gloved hand rested in Kipling’s—before his lips twitched and he shook his head.

When she exhaled, she heard Kipling echo it.

Which was strange in itself. Why would *he* also be nervous around Alistair?

And it wasn't quite nerves flickering in her chest... Amelia was just worried about what her brother would think if he ever realized her feelings for one of his oldest friends.

She'd grown up with Kipling coming to the estate and later to their townhouse to visit Alistair, since he rarely left home, even back then. Amelia was so much younger than her brother, she hadn't paid attention to his company when the young men had returned from university. But as she'd grown...

She'd gone from a gangly, awkward girl to an even more gangly, even more awkward young lady. And all the while, she was watching Kipling Mancheste laugh and charm. But it wasn't until he'd seemed genuinely interested in *her* interests that she lost her heart.

And even after two years away, he still seemed... interested.

He'd asked her to *dance*. Not just out of politeness, but out of a genuine desire to do so? Even now, he was sweeping her onto the dance floor, positioning her among the other couples.

He was taking her hand in his.

He was placing his gloved hand on her back.

He was enfolding her in his hold.

He was overwhelming her, with his scent and his charm and his perfection.

I swear, if you faint right now and cause us to miss this, I will never forgive you.

Right. She couldn't faint, not if she wanted to remember this dance for the rest of her life. Because she was certain she

would.

“Thank ye,” murmured Kipling, as the music began and they launched into movement.

It was likely a waltz, but it could’ve been a jig, or a hula for all the attention Amelia was paying. Years of dancing lessons at Mother’s insistence, and it all flew right out the window the moment Kipling Manchestere held her?

“I-My pleasure.” *Make polite conversation, any conversation, you ninny.* “It is certainly warm in here, is it not?”

“Oh?” Kip had been studying her the whole time, seeming able to dance without looking at his own feet *or* those around him; clearly a miracle worker. “Should I take ye over to the window for some air?”

And give him an excuse to cease the incredible experience of being *in his arms*? Amelia would sooner eat red meat. “No! I mean, no, thank you, I am perfectly content.”

He watched her a moment longer, as if not certain he believed her. Then, “Ye’ve left Becky at home?”

He remembered her chicken’s name? *Le Sigh.*

Focus. Focus!

“I know enough about Society to know they would frown upon my—my pets. My family teases me, but they also indulge me. When we have company, I have learned to hide my little friends.”

“That’s a shame,” Kip murmured as he swept her through a turn. “They are important to ye.”

“Yes, but they are not important to others. At tonight’s dinner, for example, I will likely not eat the main meat dish,

and I will be mocked if anyone notices.”

Was it her imagination, or did his hold on her tighten momentarily, as if he was reacting to that pronouncement? Eventually, however, Kip offered a relaxed, “Ye should no’ be mocked for what ye believe in. After meeting Becky today, I ken *I’ll* have to think twice before eating chicken again. They might be a relative.”

Amelia caught her breath, staring up at him. It was...

“No one has ever said that—I mean, felt that way.” She swallowed, blinking rapidly as she dropped her gaze to his chin. “Thank you.”

He was silent another few turns, then cleared his throat. “Ye said ye raised her from an egg?”

“Yes.” Amelia’s lips twitched at the memory. “My mother has a cockatoo named Hamish who once belonged to my grandfather. He is a brilliant old bird, although he is a bit vulgar.” An understatement. “I wanted to try to raise a similar bird, training him or her from infancy, to understand the process. So I procured a dozen eggs and incubated them.”

“Really? How?”

He seemed genuinely interested.

“I had a device which reflected heat. But I learned that my own body heat was most effective. I was hoping the eggs would turn out to be peacocks or parrots, I was promised exotic birds, but instead I got Becky and Charles.”

“Chickens,” he chuckled. “Albeit lovely chickens.” Before she could correct him, he asked, “So ye what? Stuck the eggs in yer pocket for the time it took for them to incubate?”

She felt her cheeks heating. Well. Not *exactly* her pocket. Amelia glanced down at her chest, where her breasts were pushed over the edge of her lovely pink gown, remembering the feel of the eggs nestled snug in there.

“Something like that,” she managed.

When she glanced up, Kipling’s gaze was locked on her bosoms.

The blush, which had climbed up her cheekbones, now turned around and took a direct dive back down to her chest. She *felt* it crawling across her skin, simultaneously hot *and* cold. Or at least, she told herself that’s why she was shivering.

Or perhaps it is because he is starting at your breasts.

Yes. Well. That too.

“Are ye well?” Kip’s tone was raspy, not at all its usual smooth self.

“I—” Amelia halted her instinct to assure him everything was fine, and instead, swallowed and did something scandalous. She told the truth. “I *am* feeling a little odd.”

“Dizzy, nae doubt.”

And before she could respond, he’d spun her out of the group of dancers. Perhaps he’d planned it, or perhaps it was a grand coincidence; whatever the case, they halted in front of the set of double doors which led out onto the balcony.

He tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and led her sedately out the door.

Once outside, Amelia *should* have been able to take a deep breath. She’d always preferred the fresh air outdoors to being cooped up inside...but she was finding it hard to breathe while being pressed against Kipling’s scalding side.

They halted by the balustrade, which he propped a hip against and turned to face her. “Better?”

Her hands were in his. Granted, they were both gloved, but she could absolutely feel his warmth, and in the best way possible. How could she *not* be better?

But what she actually said was, “Should you be out here with me?”

His shrug, his grin, was easy. Charming. Utterly sure of himself. “I’m the Duke of Bestingbum, have ye no’ heard? And yer brother is my best friend.”

Contrary to his smile, his tone sounded a little...bitter.

“You are not excited to become a duke?”

He sighed and glanced down at their hands. He started, as if he’d forgotten their palms were pressed together, but he didn’t release her. “I wasnae supposed to be. My father and my older brother both had to die before me.”

She hadn’t thought of that. *Oh, hell.* “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Both of them passed a while ago. My uncle—the last Duke—died in a hunting accident earlier this year.”

A memory surfaced of the newspaper article. “In Canada?” she asked slowly.

“In America.” His lip curled wryly. “This was the no’-so-nice uncle I mentioned. He and his oldest son were avid hunters, and saw nothing wrong with shooting buffalo from a moving train and leaving their carcasses to rot. Uncle was after more excitement, however, so he convinced *both* his sons to ride untrained horses into the herd itself.”

She winced, remembering the newspaper story. “There was a stampede, correct?”

Kip didn't answer for a long moment, even as his thumb began to caress her palm while he stared down. "I suppose wild animals were just trying to protect themselves. I dinnae blame them, but I ken my younger cousin Jerry wouldnae have chosen to be there. He lingered with his injuries, which he didnae deserve either. He was a good lad. Would've made a better duke than me."

Instinctively, Amelia flipped her hands over in his hold, until she could lace her fingers through his. "That is not true, Kipling. You are smart. You are compassionate." His comment about not blaming the buffalo proved that. "You will make a fine Duke."

He studied her face for a long moment, his gaze flicking between her eyes, as if searching for the truth.

Finally, he admitted, "I am a coward."

What to say to something like that?

Nothing. Just squeeze his hand.

Ah, that seemed to work, because his lips curled wryly. Self-deprecating.

"I ran away to Europe because I was afraid."

She opened her mouth to ask *Afraid of what*, but instead sucked in a gasp as a disoriented moth—likely attracted by the glittering lights of the ballroom, fluttered from the gardens past her face.

Her "Oh!" changed to a happy sigh as the poor thing alighted on her collarbone. Smiling, she glanced up at Kipling to see his gaze had followed the moth.

"A peppered moth," she whispered. "See how beautifully it is camouflaged? I once collected the caterpillars just to

watch them pupate, then I released them into the wild.”

His gaze lifted to hers. “Perhaps this is one of them.”

He was whispering as well. Was it in awe? Or only because she was?

Either way, Amelia’s smile was bright. “Perhaps,” she agreed, even though she knew the moth’s lifespan made such a thing impossible. Look at her, ignoring science all for a handsome man. “A descendent, at least.”

“Then we must keep it safe,” he whispered.

Before she realized his intent, Kipling had dropped one of her hands and reached for her chest. His fingertips skimmed across her skin as he scooped up the moth and then gently—so gently—placed the poor confused thing on the balustrade beside them.

“Go on, then. Go.”

Kip was looking at the moth, but Amelia was looking at him.

Her entire body had shuddered at his touch, and her stomach was knotted from his sweetness. She found herself leaning toward him—as if *he* were the flame and she was the helpless moth—because whatever infatuation she’d thought herself in the midst of two years ago?

Oh, it was so much worse now.

Or better. Possibly better. Much, much better.

“Kipling?” she breathed, and when he lifted his gaze to hers, she forced herself to be brave. To speak the unspeakable. “Why did you leave?”

For a moment, she thought he wasn't going to answer. In the light from the ballroom over her shoulder, his blue eyes glittered with a fierceness she didn't recognize.

Finally, he took a deep breath. "Ye, Mellie. I left because of ye."

Her knees weakened, chest tightening in horror. *Her?* She'd been the one to chase away her brother's dear friend? She'd been the one to cause Alistair such loneliness, and Kipling such homesickness?

"What did I do wrong?" she croaked.

"Nothing." Kip's whisper was feather-light, a caress. "Everything."

Staring up at him, she tried to make sense of what he was saying. His hand lifted, reaching to cup her cheek, but he hesitated, hand hovering.

This was bad. This was very bad. He couldn't even touch her?

Amelia's eyes were burning. *Do not cry, do not cry, do not cry.* "Kipling?" she whispered again.

"Och, Mellie."

When he said her name like that, full of yearning, like it was a curse and a blessing, she didn't hate it.

"I left because of ye." Finally Kip's fingertips rested against her cheek. "For so long, ye were just wee Mellie, Alistair's youngest sister. Passionate and stubborn and outspoken. I thought of ye as a younger sister—always there, and even when ye were being annoying, I cared for ye."

He...cared for her?

Cared for you like a little sister! Pay attention! That is not what we were going for!

“And then...” He took a deep breath and dropped his hand. “And then ye grew. I came to visit Alistair one day, and ye were suddenly no’ a lass any longer, but a young lady. A *beautiful* young lady. Almost eighteen, a lady grown... But I kenned I could no’ lust after ye. No’ after I saw what ye’d become.”

“What I had become?”

His gaze was almost sad. “Perfection. I couldnae stop thinking of ye, Mellie. It was *wrong*, to lust after Alistair’s younger sister, to desire ye, to need ye—particularly having nae title, nae prospects. I was a coward. I couldnae handle the guilt and temptation and anger at myself. So I left. I ran away, and I’ve stayed away.”

Her heart was pounding in her chest and her lips parted, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

He’d...lusted after her? Kip thought she was beautiful? *Perfect?*

He’d known her for most of her life, known her eccentricities, known her hoyden behavior, known her outspoken beliefs, known her nonsense...and he still thought she was perfect?

Tears were absolutely prickling at the backs of her eyes.

“Mellie?” Kip’s eyes looked sad. “I’m sorry to frighten ye like this. I hadnae intended on telling ye, truly. I thought I’d come home and ye’d be married and I could forget my obsession.”

Obsession.

Amelia swallowed. “I am...glad you told me,” she whispered. “Because...”

“Because?” Kip prompted when she trailed off.

She found herself leaning toward him again, unconsciously pushing herself up onto the balls of her feet, balancing herself in her dancing slippers, reaching for him with her lips, her breath, her very *being*.

“Because I felt the same way about you,” she breathed. “I have spent two years missing you as much as Alistair has, though differently, I’ll admit. I knew I had no claim to you, but I used to *live* for your visits, your smiles, your voice. Even if it was just a glimpse.”

Kipling’s eyes closed on a whispered curse, and then he was pulling her against him. “Mellie—” he began.

“*What* is going on out here?”

The new voice—strident, shrill—cut through the peace of the balcony. Before Amelia could suck in a breath, Kipling had set her apart from him and was doing his best to appear nonchalant.

“I asked a question!”

The woman was stomping up beside them, and Amelia tried to gain control of her breathing as she turned to face the vision in blue beside her. The woman was blonde and poised, her eyes shooting angry darts, the jewels at her neck and in her hair sparkling almost as much as she herself.

Kipling cleared his throat. “Lady Amelia had an insect—a moth—land on her shoulder. I was assisting her.”

“That is *disgusting*,” the woman spat out, shivering. “An *insect* touched her? Did you kill it?”

Amelia was trying desperately to regain her equilibrium. Kipling wisely ignored the question.

“Lady Amelia Kincaid, may I introduce Lady Emma Iverson?”

The newcomer smiled nastily and reached out her hand. “His *betrothed*.”

CHAPTER
THREE

Kip told himself he wasn't hiding. Not really. Hiding was such a strong word.

Aye, he was spending a lot of time in his study, and aye, he was avoiding his mother, and aye, he was having his butler turn away visitors, but he wasn't *hiding*. Not exactly.

Dinnae lie to yerself, ye dobber. Ye're absolutely hiding.

"I cannae believe ye actually *admitted* it to her," Fawkes Mackenzie mused, staring into the depths of the whisky he hadn't sipped. "Are ye daft? Did ye forget ye were engaged?"

"I'm no' *actually* engaged," Kip snapped, sagging back in his chair. "Fine, if our mothers had their way we'd be engaged, but I havenae asked her."

"Ye danced with her—Emma, I mean—a few times at that ball."

With a grunt, Kip lifted his booted heels to the large desk in front of him. How did Fawkes always seem to know so much of what was going on? For that matter, how had the man found his way in here?

The butler wouldn't have let him in, especially not so early in the morning. But this morning Kip had come downstairs, settled himself behind the big desk with the piles and piles of

paperwork...and nearly shat himself when Fawkes had unfolded himself from one of the chairs by the hearth.

Had one of his oldest friends taken to house-breaking?

Still, it had been a nice distraction, and the pair had spent several hours catching up and reminiscing. His friend had even proven a steady hand when it came to transcribing the columns of acreage Kip had been wrestling with, and a keen mind when it came to devising a solution to the problem with the retaining wall along the river at Bestingbum.

They'd taken luncheon together, and eventually Fawkes had steered the conversation toward what he clearly wanted to know and perhaps why he had crept around the butler in the first place; what had happened at the ball between Kip and Amelia.

It hadn't seemed disloyal at the time, to tell the man Kip had known since they were in school together. But now he was second-guessing himself.

"I dinnae love Emma," he pointed out. "I didnae ken I was expected to marry her until I returned home."

"As a duke. She likely wouldnae have looked at ye twice, without the title." Fawkes's lips curled bitterly as he swirled his drink, but didn't lift it. "Luckily, ye have made nae public insinuation of a match. But being caught on the balcony with Mellie..."

Amelia.

She preferred to be called Amelia now. But Kip had fallen back on that nickname because to him, that's who she would always be; Mellie, wild and free and exuberant. He'd admired her as a lassie, and as she'd grown, that admiration had turned to something else. Something delicious.

“Do ye love her?”

Fawkes’s sudden question had Kip’s head jerking up. “What?”

“Ye said ye dinnae love Emma. Do ye love Amelia?”

“I—Christ, Fawkes.” Dragging his hand through his dark hair, Kip glowered at his friend. “What kind of question is that?”

“The kind Alistair is going to be asking, if he finds out ye compromised his sister.”

Kip’s boots slammed into the floor. “I didnae *compromise* her!” Of course he’d thought about it enough over the years—tasting those lips, touching that skin—but he cared too much for her and her family to try such a thing. And yes, he’d only not compromised her because they had been so rudely interrupted... “We were just...talking.”

“And ye told her ye left England because of her. That’s the truth?”

Kip winced. “Aye. I’m sorry.”

His lithe friend studied him a few heartbeats too long to be comfortable, then shrugged. “Dinnae fash. I figured it out ages ago, and I suspect Alistair has as well. We’re no’ fools. Mellie was the only one in the dark.”

Until *he’d* opened his big mouth.

“So, Kip...do ye love her?”

Yet again, Kip took the coward’s way out. “I dinnae ken.”

He didn’t *know* her. Not the Lady Amelia he’d discovered in that corridor. Did he?

Was she the same person he'd loved all those years ago? The strength of his feelings had been what had caused him to flee to the Continent, after all.

“Well, friend, I think ye ought to figure that out.” When Kip raised a brow, his friend shrugged and placed the untouched whisky on the desk between them. “Emma—yer mother's choice for ye—has already started declaring herself yer fiancée, aye? But clearly ye have stronger feelings for Amelia than ye expected. Is it that ye dinnae want to marry at all? I can understand that.”

Kip's denial was immediate. “Nay, and I ken I *must* marry. My uncle's demise—me inheriting this title—has proven there's nae guarantee of tomorrow. Bestingbum needs an heir, and—”

“And ye want to be happy,” Fawkes finished.

Well...aye. Of course. Didn't everyone want that?

“I dinnae ken what to do,” he sighed.

“First of all, decide on yer feelings for Amelia. If ye're no' going to marry her, ye might as well match with Emma. She's wealthy, she's beautiful, and ye've said ye need heirs.” He shrugged, his body language communicating nonchalance, belied by his intense study of Kip. “It wouldnae be a hardship, would it? So why no' marry her?”

Marry Lady Emma? A week ago, Kip hadn't objected to the plan. He might not have agreed whole-heartedly, but he'd been willing to get to know the young woman. Now, however, the thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

He didn't want Emma.

Not for the rest of his life. Not *ever*.

Not since he'd held Amelia in his arms.

Groaning, he dropped his head back on the chair, wincing at the dull *thud*.

Why had he asked Mellie to dance? Why had he looked into her eyes, inhaled her scent, felt how *perfectly* she fit? He'd been better off not knowing. Just imagining.

This is why ye left for so long. To protect her from yer lust.

It was a good thing she hadn't pressed herself against him that night on the balcony, or she would've felt exactly *how* strongly his body was reacting to her.

There was a polite knock at the door, then the butler opened it. "A visitor, Your Grace," he intoned.

Without opening his eyes, Kip groaned, "Nay. Nae visitors."

The butler ignored him. "It is the Duke of Effinghell."

"Fooking hell."

"Nay," Fawkes quipped dryly, "Effinghell."

Alistair nudged the butler aside and stepped through the door, then closed the door in the old man's face.

"What the shite, Alistair." Kip gaped at his friend. "I thought ye never left yer house!"

"He does sometimes," murmured Fawkes, as if he knew something Kip didn't.

"Dinner," croaked Alistair, folding his huge frame into the second chair across the desk from Kip. "Tomorrow."

Kip's brow twitched. "Was that an invitation, or a command?"

“Yes,” his friend rasped.

But the man’s eyes were scrunched with humor, and now he pulled from his breast pocket one of those little cheap notebooks a reporter might carry. That’s right, his wife owned a newspaper, did she not?

Alistair’s writing was bold as the small pencil scratched across the paper. “*Amelia told us you danced. Talked. You are engaged to be married?*”

“No’ quite,” Fawkes murmured.

“No’ at all,” Kip countered. “Ah—what else did she say?”

“*Nothing much.*” Alistair’s lips twitched upward as he wrote. “*But she blushed often. Are you sweet on my sister?*”

Fawkes broke out into guffaws as Kip groaned again and sunk down into his chair.

“*Sweet on her? Christ, Alistair, ye make me sound like I’m a young lad.*”

Alistair didn’t correct the assumption, just watched Kip expectantly, one brow raised. There was no judgement in his gaze, but faint amusement.

Damn. He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Christ,” murmured Kip again, scrubbing a hand over his face. “*Aye! There, are ye happy? Aye, I’m sweet on yer sister. I have been for years.*”

It took a minute to figure out the noise Alistair was making was supposed to be *laughter*. Even when they’d been in school together, Alistair had rarely allowed himself to *laugh*, because the sound was even odder than his ruined voice.

What in the effing hell?

“I’m sorry,” Kip admitted stiffly. “I dinnae mean to overstep the boundaries of our friendship. It was why I left.”

Abruptly, his friend’s strange laughter ceased. “*Why?*” came the scratch on the paper. “*She is a good lass woman. Smart. Funny. Bold. A bit strange when it comes to animals. You’d have to take Becky. Is she not worth having your admiration ‘sweet’?*”

Fawkes snorted. “A bit?”

But Kip held Alistair’s gaze. He...wasn’t angry?

All these years, Kip had kept his feelings a secret because he didn’t want to offend his best friend. He was no lout, to break a friendship over a woman. But...

“Ye...dinnae mind me...*admiring* yer sister?”

Alistair slowly shook his head, holding Kip’s gaze.

Letting out a *whoosh* of breath, Kip sat forward in his chair. “I ken she’s worth *any* man’s admiration. But she’s the sister of a Duke, and I couldnae hope ye would consent...”

When he trailed off, Fawkes—rather unhelpfully—pointed out, “Ye’re a duke, Kipling.”

“Well *now* I am. Then I was just a—”

Alistair held up a hand, palm out, to stop him, then reached for his pencil. “*A hard worker, a moral man, and a good friend.*” Before Kip had a chance to decide if he should be flattered or embarrassed, his friend wrote, “*My only concern is if you plan to marry her, or just dally.*”

Dally? Sweet on? Good Lord, was the man stuck in the last century?

But Alistair was watching him closely, and Kip found he couldn't give the man the answer he immediately needed. That he deserved. That Mellie deserved.

“That’s what we were talking about when ye came in,” Fawkes explained, shifting a booted foot across the opposite knee. “He’s *supposed* to marry a lass his mother’s picked out for him, but he doesnae want to, now he’s set eyes on Amelia again. He’s gone all sweet and melty on her.” He glanced at Kip. “Is that a fair summary?”

But Kip was still watching Alistair, an idea clawing at his brain, uncertain if he should actually give it voice. But...if he didn't ask, he'd never know.

“Are ye saying...if I offered for Amelia, ye wouldnae object?”

Another slow shake of the head from Alistair, this time accompanied by a slight smirk.

Kipling exhaled.

“I’ve no’ dallied with her, nae matter how much I *wished* to. I’d rather court her. Proper, like. As she deserves.”

“Nae need,” croaked Alistair. Then, grinning, he wrote, “*Amelia has always fancied ye. Come to dinner tomorrow evening, and plead your case there.*”

The thought was terrifying and exciting and incredibly arousing, all at once.

Could he do it? Could he convince Amelia to marry him? She said, the other night at the ball, that she'd cared for him before he'd run away. It had been two years, two years apart, perhaps two years wasted. Kip had had no idea, but now that he was here, and *she* was here...could they start a future together?

With no secrets?

But then reality began to drizzle on his excitement.

His shoulders slumped. “I—I cannae. Mother has been talking about a dinner tomorrow evening with Lady Stallings and her daughter. I’m supposed to escort all three of them out to a fine meal somewhere where we can all be seen.”

Alistair frowned but Fawkes just grinned. “I can think of nae place finer than Effinghell House. Why no’ bring them too?”

“Because, ye great git, Alistair doesnae like too much company,” Kip shot back.

But Alistair shrugged. “Perhaps...worth it.” When they turned their attention to him, he shrugged again and wrote, *“Stallings would not pass up an invitation to my house. I would not mind meeting the woman you are throwing over my sister for.”*

“I—I’m no’—” sputtered Kip, but when Alistair began to grin, it was obvious he was teasing. *Teasing?* Marriage certainly had mellowed this friend of his.

“Look, Alistair, Emma was my mother’s choice. I care nothing for the lass, but I dinnae want to hurt my mother, or her friendship with Lady Stallings. Or Emma herself, I s’pose. Perhaps this is a bad idea, to have them all together when I set out to woo Amelia.”

“*Or*—hear me out—it’s a brilliant idea,” Fawkes grinned lazily. “Get it all out in the open. Clear the air. Cause a scene.”

“I had nae idea ye were such a fan of chaos and drama,” muttered Kip.

His friend shrugged. “I’m bored. And I’m going to invite myself, if ye dinnae.”

“Ye’re invited,” croaked Alistair.

“Excellent.”

Kip’s gaze swung from one friend to the other. “We’re really doing this? Inviting my almost-fiancée and her family to the dinner where I hope to woo yer sister? It sounds like a bad dime novel, or one of those torrid romances ye used to read, Alistair.”

Instead of being insulted, Alistair’s grin grew. “Still read. So...eight tomorrow?”

Kipling blew out a breath.

The thought of being able to finally confess his feelings for Amelia, his *true* feelings, and doing it with her brother’s blessing...aye, that was exciting. But doing it in front of Mother and her friend—and Lady Emma...was daunting. He had no wish to hurt any of them.

But he couldn’t pass up the opportunity.

“Aye,” he sighed, his heart already pounding. “Aye, dinner tomorrow.”

One way or the other, his life would change shortly after eight the following evening.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Amelia wasn't certain if she was giddy with excitement, or on the verge of vomiting. Perhaps both.

Kipling would be joining them for dinner! Tonight! Mother had announced it that morning, and Alistair had confirmed it.

But he'd also said the Earl of Stallings' family would be joining them. Which meant Kipling was bringing his betrothed.

Almost betrothed.

The distinction didn't exactly help.

That night on the balcony, when the other woman had introduced herself so boldly, Amelia's heart had dropped into her stomach. Then Kipling had grinned—a sickly grin, not his usual one—and assured her the betrothal wasn't official yet. Lady Emma had merely clucked her tongue, slipped her arm through Kipling's, and laughed.

“A mere formality, darling!” she'd declared.

And Amelia might have sunk into the floor in a puddle of embarrassment, or slapped Kipling for making her think he had feelings for her.

But what stopped her was the look on his face; he looked awkward and uncomfortable yes, but more than that...he'd looked sad. Like it wasn't what he'd intended.

So unlike the brilliant, beautiful expression on his face when he'd told her he'd cared for her, that *she* was the reason he'd fled.

So he used to care for you. Two years is a long time, especially when he has been abroad flirting with gorgeous mademoiselles in France, and returned home a duke. Just because he once cared for you does not mean he still does.

Yes, well. The argument was nothing new.

Amelia frowned at her reflection in the mirror.

Her subconscious had been reminding her of this approximately every twelve minutes for the last several days. She woke up thinking of Kipling, and went to bed thinking of Kipling.

In fact...

Amelia's eyes cut to the side, resting on the small bookshelf. There, hidden between a treatise on the feeding habits of goats and volumes one through thirty-seven of *Birds of Britain* by Ava Ian, her battered copy of *A Harlot's Guide to the Forbidden and Delightful Arts* was hidden.

How many times over the years had she pulled out the book, hidden beneath her covers, and touched herself breathless, thinking of Kipling Manchestere?

Well, last night, she'd done it again—only this time, it was with the knowledge that at one point, he'd cared for her. Wanted her. *Lusted* after her.

Could he care for her again? Could he *still* care for her?

Not if he is bringing his betrothed to your home for dinner tonight.

Ah, yes, there was that.

Amelia sighed, stomach in knots. She had no idea what tonight would bring, but she was ready. As ready as she would ever be, she supposed. Tucking one last strand of hair behind her ears, she heard a distinctive cluck behind her.

“I know, I know. I am being silly.” She twisted in her chair to see Becky pecking at the fringe on the bottom of her curtains. “He either cares for me, or he does not, and worrying will not change that.”

When she crossed the room, her dear pet lifted her head, gave a happy little cheep just as she had when she’d been tiny, and toddled across the room toward Amelia. She scooped up Becky and cuddled her under her chin.

“You are a good little friend, are you not?” she murmured, stroking the hen’s feathers. “So beautiful. So sweet.”

Dumb as a bowl of corn, but still, sweet.

Becky tried to gobble at her pearls.

“Come along, dearest. Let us get you out to the garden with your brother before the guests arrive.”

But as she stepped onto the landing, the bird tucked up against her chest, she realized she was too late. Had she really lingered in her room so long? The butler was accepting wraps from Lady Stallings and Lady Emma, while Olivia urged them to join her and Mother in the parlor.

Drat.

Amelia shrank back against the wall.

Perhaps they wouldn't see her. Perhaps she could hide here, and once they all retired to the parlor for a visit before dinner, she could sneak Becky out to the garden, then join them.

As she watched, Kipling stepped up and offered Emma his arm. Amelia wanted it to be perfunctory, cold...but he was incapable of being impolite, she knew.

And Emma simpered happily as she slid her arm through his proprietarily. As if she owned him already.

Amelia felt her chest clench. Perhaps it was the truth. Perhaps Kipling had chosen that woman for good by now. Emma said something, and Kipling's lips twitched. Yes, as Amelia watched, he turned down to the beautiful blonde woman at his side, and quipped something in return, which caused Emma to laugh—a tinkling laugh as beautiful as she was.

Amelia hated it as much as she hated the crushing weight in her chest, the knowledge Kipling Manchestre would never be hers...and now she was going to have to pretend to be polite all through dinner.

Perhaps she could feign a headache and stay in her room.

In her arms the hen shifted, and Amelia knew she needed to get the bird to the garden, lest she risk chicken shite on her pink gown.

“Shh,” she murmured, stroking the hen as below Emma tossed her head back and laughed gaily yet again. Anger spiked in Amelia's throat. “Oh my God, Becky. Look at *her* duke.”

Becky, showing all the social nuances of a brain the size of its eyeball, squawked loudly.

Lord and Lady Stallings had already entered the parlor, but Emma swung around, taking Kipling with her, as her gaze went unerringly to the landing.

“Why, it is little Lady Amelia, our favorite animal lover! Amelia, darling, are you feeling quite well? Your throat is paining you?”

The mockery in her tone made it clear she knew Amelia’s reputation, so there was nothing to do but lift her chin, gather her skirts—and chicken—and march down the stairs. “Lady Emma,” she acknowledged coolly. “Your Grace.”

Emma *tsked*. “You should greet His Grace first, you know. He is a *Duke*.”

As if Amelia could forget. She turned her full attention to the man standing stiffly beside Emma. “Kipling,” she managed, past a lump in her throat.

Something flashed in those beautiful blue eyes, something like...gratitude? “Taking Becky out for a walk?” he asked nonchalantly.

Amelia hefted the chicken slightly. This was an easier conversation if she pretended Emma wasn’t here. “She helped me get ready. Now I need to deposit her in the garden with Charles.”

It was clear Emma was irritated at being left out of the conversation. “Charles?” She laughed shrilly. “A servant?”

Kipling stiffly explained, “Charles is Becky’s brother. Another Shanghai white.”

He...remembered Becky’s breed?

Amelia felt the band around her heart loosen a little.

“You have *chickens*,” Emma stated, as if she couldn’t quite comprehend something so ridiculous. “Which you carry around? As if they were...reticules?” She burst into laughter. “Oh, how delightful. I knew you were eccentric, Lady Amelia, but this is preposterous!”

Before she could give *anyone* a chance to answer, she’d tugged Kipling toward the parlor. “Come along, Your Grace. You must introduce me formally to the Duke of Effinghell!”

Over his shoulder, Kipling shot Amelia an apologetic glance, but it didn’t help, not really.

Sighing, Amelia turned toward the back of the house and the kitchen gardens. This was going to be a truly terrible dinner.

Dinner was truly terrible.

Oh, Emma was polite enough, and Mother and Lady Stallings dominated the conversation, sharing stories of their time in school. Their shenanigans kept Alistair’s wife, mother, and sister Amanda giggling throughout, which was a bit of relief.

But Kipling was incredibly uncomfortable. It just seemed like such bad form to have invited the Stallingses to Alistair’s home, when the man was so reclusive.

Remember, Alistair suggested it.

In fact, the man seemed completely oblivious to any sort of tension. He ate his *chicken à la King*, he sipped his wine, he watched indulgently as his new wife Olivia kept the conversation moving...but he didn’t participate.

The other person at the table who didn't participate was Amelia. In fact, she hadn't looked his way since they'd all been seated. She took an occasional sip of water, she pushed her rice around her plate, and she occasionally picked out a mushroom or two...but she absolutely wasn't enjoying herself.

Anyone could see that.

Anyone who could be bothered to *really see* her, that was.

Every once in a while, Alistair would catch Kip's eye and dart a gaze toward Amelia, and Kip would have to press his lips together and study his own dinner. He didn't know what to say to her...how to engage her in conversation after that stunningly awkward encounter in the hall.

How to engage her *at all*.

She thinks ye're betrothed to Emma, and ye've really done nothing to disabuse her of that. Especially the way she saw ye follow Emma like a dog with yer tail between yer legs.

He'd thought it best to leave Amelia to her chickening alone, but now he wondered if he ought to have gone with her to the gardens, to have the conversation he so desperately wanted to have.

Across from him, Emma was clearly disgruntled by not being the center of attention. She frumped, she frowned, she sighed deeply...but she didn't interrupt.

He should've known she was just waiting for an opening. After a particularly funny story Mother told about Lady Stalling's attempts to sneak into the stables to win a dare by painting a horse red, the laughter had died down and Emma clearly decided it was her time to strike.

"Lady Amelia, are you not hungry?" Her tone was overly sweet, too solicitous. "I notice you are not enjoying this

scrumptious meal. I hope you are not ill?”

Amelia’s head jerked upward, but she seemed confused, surprised at being addressed. What had been occupying her mind?

Before she could decide how to respond—thank goodness—Olivia answered. “My sister-in-law doesn’t eat meat, Lady Emma. Unfortunately this dish can’t really be altered much to suit her tastes.”

“Does not eat *meat*?” Emma sniffed, still staring down her nose at Amelia. “How *freakish*. And such a headache for the rest of you, I am certain.”

As Amelia blinked in surprise, Alistair began to frown, and the others at the table stifled their gasps at the insult. Again, Olivia responded, her tone sharper. “Amelia’s preferences cause no headaches for us. Our cook is supremely talented with cheese and eggs and all sorts of non-meat options. This is her home, after all. We often partake in such fare ourselves.”

It was clear Emma understood when she was being put down, because she offered the hostess a weak smile. “How... delightful.”

“Emma,” murmured her mother, but Emma merely waved away the warning and pierced Amelia with another glare, another too-sweet smile.

“I am surprised, Lady Amelia, that you are not choosing to partake in *this* particular dish, even so.”

Kip watched Amelia swallow. “Oh?”

He wanted to reach for her. To protect her. To block her from Emma’s snide tongue.

“Indeed. While we were *waiting* for you to join us in the parlor—so strange that you were not on hand to greet guests, I thought—I overheard the servants chatting about tonight’s dinner. Apparently the chicken was one the cook caught in her own garden! I assumed, with your interest in animals, you would find that fascinating.”

Amelia had gone suddenly, alarmingly pale. “The garden?” she croaked. “Our garden? Out back?”

Emma tapped a perfect fingernail against the white linen tablecloth. She was trying for thoughtful nonchalance, but her sharp gaze belied the effect. “Yes...yes, I believe that is what they said.”

“Excuse me,” Amelia announced abruptly, shoving her chair away from the table and standing. “I must check... Charles was... Excuse me,” she repeated, as she stumbled away from the table.

Was Kip the only one who’d seen the tears in her eyes? He wanted to call out to her, to tell her this meal had been cooking since long before she’d even deposited Becky in the garden, but he had no idea how long the other chicken had been outside...or not.

As Amelia fled, her sister made to stand, but caught her mother’s eye and slowly sank back down. The responses were mixed; Mother and Lady Stallings hummed in concern, Olivia grabbed Alistair’s hand, and Emma...

Emma smiled a wicked, cruel sort of smile and sat back in her chair, as if pleased with herself.

And Kip finally understood what needed to happen.

Tossing down his napkin, he stood. “Lady Emma,” he began, “I ken our mothers once hoped for a match between us.

But ye have proven yerself to be a cruel, spiteful bitch, and although ye've hurt a beautiful soul, I have to thank ye for doing it in front of our families. Now they'll understand my reasons when I tell ye I would never marry a woman like ye."

Emma had sucked in an offended breath and now watched him, wide-eyed. "Why, I—How *dare* you, sir!"

"That's *Yer Grace* to ye, Lady Emma." Kip planted his fists on the table and leaned closer. "And I *dare*, because Lady Amelia is kind, gentle, passionate about her interests, and wholly without subterfuge. She doesnae deserve the kind of maliciousness ye've heaped upon her."

Emma folded her hands in her lap and sniffed haughtily. "Well, after the way you were cozying up with her at *my* ball, it suddenly makes sense why you would defend her in such a way, *Your Grace*. You might think it fine to dally with an Earl's daughter, but surely even a savage Scot like yourself understands there are consequences from ruining a Duke's sister?"

There were more gasps around the table, and Emma's father, the Earl of Stallings, blustered, "I say, gel, shut your mouth."

Kip's eyes narrowed. "If ye're implying I've *ruined* Amelia in any way—"

"It is obvious, is it not?"

Abruptly, he straightened, his mind made up. "I've no' dallied with ye, Lady Emma, any more than was required of me to satisfy my mother." He turned to the two ladies. "I will no' be offering for Emma, Lady Stallings. I ken my mother values yer friendship, so I'll no' tell ye what I think of the way ye've spoiled yer youngest daughter." His gaze swept the

table. “I’ll no’ spread any stories about her hateful tongue, but I make nae promises of others here tonight.”

Emma was sputtering. “*Hateful!* How dare you! Everyone knows Amelia is an oddity, and you have clearly been having your fun with her!”

Kip’s smile was slow, wicked. “No’ yet.” He nodded to Alistair. “Effinghell,” he acknowledged. “Ladies.”

When he shoved his chair away from the table, Amanda was the one to ask meekly, “And where are you going, Your Grace?”

Kip smiled at Emma when he answered. “To the gardens. To find that *odd* woman, and beg her to marry me.”

Alistair grinned, and Kip felt his heart lighten.

This is what he’d been looking for.

Amelia.

CHAPTER
FIVE

“Charles!” Amelia had never been so happy to see a chicken in her life. “Oh, Charles, there you are!”

She threw herself forward, not caring that the autumn dirt caked her gown as she fell to her knees, reaching for the white cock. “You naughty boy, I have been looking for you everywhere!” she declared as she cuddled the bird to her chest.

Well, fine, not *really*. The garden wasn’t that big. Effinghell House was larger than most Town homes, but the garden was still only tucked back near the mews. The cook used it for herbs, and Becky and Charles used it to peck for insects.

And for one, horrible moment, Amelia had believed that the cook had used it to scoop up poor Charles and serve him for dinner.

Do not be silly. Of course that would not happen! Charles and Becky are family!

Charles, and Becky, and Amelia’s collection of sea urchins, and the white mice she had to breed to keep her python fed, and the lemurs...

All family. *Her family*, at least.

The frantic tears which had threatened during her mad rush toward the garden now spilled, even as she felt Becky pecking mindlessly at her slippers.

Her family.

She had Mother, and Amanda, and Alistair and Olivia... and one day, those two would have children and she would become an aunt. Her family, and her animals...

And that was it.

Tonight proved she never had a chance with Kipling. He might have claimed he wasn't officially engaged to Lady Emma Iverson, but he hadn't stood up to Emma's cruelty, had he?

"Come here, Becky," she ordered, and reached around to scoop up the hen. When she buried her nose in the fancy ruff of feathers, Becky squawked in what Emma chose to believe was comfort. "You are a good girl, are you not? And you, Charles. I am so pleased you are safe."

"I am too."

Amelia stiffened. For half a heartbeat, she'd thought *Charles* had responded to her—thought she was going mad—until the sound of the voice registered.

That soft caramel tone. The Voice. *The Voice.*

Kipling.

She froze, even as she felt him moving behind her.

"Safe from the cook's chopping block," he murmured as he lowered himself to the dirt beside her.

"Yes," she rasped, staring down at the birds in her arms because that was easier than looking at him. "I should have

known they would both be safe.”

“Are they?” Kipling reached out to brush a fingertip over Becky’s head. “Because, love, I hate to tell ye...but ye’re choking yer chicken.”

A startled laugh burst out of her lips, and she loosened her hold on the birds as she settled back on her heels.

Both of them turned in her arms. Charles jumped down, oblivious to her worry—*Men!*—but Becky settled into Amelia’s lap.

Her gaze was locked on the hen, her breathing shallow. Why was he here? Why had he come to the garden?

Was it possible he’d chosen her over Emma?

“Amelia, I...”

He began, but when he trailed off, she held her breath.

When his hand covered hers—where it rested atop the chicken—she startled and darted a glance at him.

“There ye are,” he murmured, his lips curling softly. “This is easier with ye looking at me.”

“What is?” she whispered.

“Me telling ye my feelings.”

Oh.

He shifted until he was kneeling in front of her, his back to the rosemary, his gaze intense. “Amelia, ye ken I cared for ye before I left, aye? I told ye the reason I ran, because I didnae want to besmirched yer honor—or my friendship with Alistair—by acting upon any of my feelings.”

She swallowed, now unable to look away.

“What I didnae tell ye,” he whispered, “was that my feelings havenae changed.”

It took a moment for his words to sink in, and her lips formed a little “oh” of surprise. “They...have not?”

Kip shook his head. “I love ye, Lady Amelia Kincaid. I have for so many years, and I thought I’d go mad from it. I wasnae worthy of loving ye, no’ then—”

She squeezed his hand. “You are the worthiest, Kipling. You are the same person you have always been.”

The silence lasted a dozen heartbeats, before The Grin slowly arrived.

“Ye’re the only one who can see that,” he murmured, his blue gaze caressing her face. “Ye and Alistair and Fawkes, I guess. To everyone else, I’m a duke.”

“Well, yes.” Amelia shrugged a little awkwardly, what with the chicken in her lap. “You *are* a duke. But you are also still Kipling...the man I used to spy on when he visited my brother, because I thought him the most handsome man in the world.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her fingertips without dropping her gaze. “And now?”

Amelia forced herself to take a deep breath. “I still think you the most handsome man in the world. But...”

When he nipped at the skin on the back of her knuckles, a jolt of something shot through her body, and her eyes opened wide.

“But?” Kip prompted.

“But I also think you are...kind...and supportive and-and-and—”

“Ye’re having trouble concentrating, love?”

He’d flipped her hand over, and his lips were now pressed against her wrist. Each kiss was a brand against her soul.

“And you see *me*,” she gasped out, pressing her thighs together and squirming a bit. “You always have.”

“And I always will,” he promised.

That vow seemed...*important*. It probably was. But Amelia was having trouble concentrating.

“Amelia, ye have my sincere apologies for everything that bitch has ever said to ye.”

She gasped, half horrified, half delighted. “Emma?”

“I wasnae going to speak her name.” There was a sparkle in his eyes as he brushed his lips across her wrist again, then reached for her other hand. “But aye, her. My association with her—my mother’s friendship with her mother—brought her into yer orbit. Thus her cruelty is my fault.”

“N-nay.” The man had turned his attention to her other wrist, and without dropping the first one. “She is—*oh*.”

“Ye told me that ye once cared for me.” He watched her over the top of her knuckles. “Do ye think ye might learn to love me again, Mellie?”

Oh, my heart.

“I-I do,” she gasped, delighted by the sensations coursing through her body, and the look of *promise* in his eyes.

He grinned. “I like the sound of those words on yer lips. If ye ask me the same...?”

“Could you—could you love me again, Kipling?” Amelia whispered, eyes wide.

“Och, darling, I already do. I’ve loved ye for years. I still love ye. I’ll love ye forever.”

She melted.

That was the only explanation.

Between the heat of his gaze, and his teasing kisses, and the whole sitting-on-the-damp-ground thing...she melted.

Right into his arms.

One moment, she was upright, the next she was clasped to Kip’s chest, her arms around his neck, and he was beaming down at her.

And Becky the chicken was still in her lap, somehow.

“Can I kiss ye, Mellie?” he murmured.

“If you do not, I shall likely perish posthaste.”

The Grin flashed, and then his lips claimed hers.

Finally.

Part of Amelia was singing in joy, knowing that after so many long years, she was finally able to taste Kipling Mancheste. Another part of her was telling the first part to shut up and pay attention, because this was a truly remarkable experience.

And *all* of her was melting again.

His lips were remarkable. Soft and determined all at once, his beard a delightful sensation against her skin. He showed her how to tease, how to play. When he nibbled at her lower lip, she gasped, and he used the opportunity to drag his tongue along the crease of her lips.

Well, *that* was even more delightful, wasn’t it?

Their tongues caressed one another, playfully at first, then intensely. The kiss grew too large to contain, and exploded into a dozen smaller kisses, each of which was placed along her jaw, and her throat, and once, the tip of her nose, which made her smile.

Amelia was still smiling when they finally broke apart, breathing heavily. His palm cupped the side of her neck and he rested his forehead against hers, looking as if he was desperately fighting for control.

“Marry me, Mellie?” Kip murmured.

She thought her heart had been full.

It turned out, it *could* take a bit more shock. “Marry...?”

Kip straightened, pulling away just enough to look into her eyes, but not so much that it broke their connection.

“Marry me, Mellie,” he repeated. “I swear to ye, I’ll make ye a fine husband. I’ll spend the rest of my days loving ye, and proving how much I love ye. I’ll support ye in all yer endeavors, whether that’s raising prize ornamental chicken breeds or reform charities. I’ll be more than happy to find space at Bestingbum for all of yer—*our*—pets. I’ll even give up eating meat, if that’s what ye want.”

She was crying, wasn’t she? She was absolutely crying.

“Kipling,” she choked out, her palm cupping his cheek. “You mean it?”

“Aye.” He winced. “I’ll miss bacon desperately, but if it means so much to ye—”

“No!” She was laughing through her tears now. “I would not separate a man from his bacon. The rest? About loving me forever and wanting to marry me?”

His lips found hers once more. “I meant all of it, love. *All of it.*” In between kisses, he murmured, “Marry me, Mellie. Make me the happiest man in Britain, and I swear I’ll spend the rest of my life making *ye* happy.”

“Oh, Kipling!” She tightened her hold on him. “You already do. You always have.”

His lips were trailing down her throat now. “So?”

“Yes! I would be honored to be your wife!”

“The Duchess of Bestingbum?”

“No.” She stopped him by brushing a kiss against *his* lips this time, remembering what he’d taught her of kissing just moments before. “Not a duchess. I mean, not especially. Just...your wife. Mrs. Kipling Mancheste. It is all I have ever wanted.”

That beloved grin grew. “Ye mean it, Mellie?”

“Forever,” Amelia whispered, just before his lips claimed hers.

CHAPTER
SIX

“I ’m happy for ye, Kip,” Fawkes murmured, standing in his formal kilt at the altar beside Kipling. “Took ye long enough to realize the truth.”

Kip glanced sideways. “The truth?”

His friend grinned, his gaze still on the doors at the back of the church. “The rest of us could see yer feelings for Lady Amelia, even if ye couldnae.”

“I *could*.” Kip cleared his throat, rolled his shoulders, and settled back on the balls of his feet. Why in the hell did this have to take so *long*? Where was Alistair? “I just didnae think I...”

“Had a chance with her? She’s loved ye just as long.”

Kip refused to look at his friend when he admitted, “I didnae think I was worthy of her,” in a low voice.

“Ah.”

A moment passed, then Fawkes blew out a breath. “Well, I cannae pretend to understand that. Ye are the same man ye’ve always been. A title doesnae make ye *more* worthy, and she loves ye for ye. Always did. Ye did hear me say that bit?”

Kipling’s heart stuttered for a moment, and he turned an incredulous expression toward the man at his side.

A title doesnae make ye more worthy. She loves ye for ye.

Well...*hell.*

Fawkes was right, wasn't he? Mellie had hinted as much, on the balcony, before Emma's interruption.

The last two years on the Continent...wasted? He should have stayed in London and wooed Amelia as soon as he knew he loved her. And Alistair was approving, wouldn't have stood in the way of the match?

Fook.

His friend caught his eye and grinned. "Dinnae fash, Kip. Ye needed some time to grow, same as she did. The fact neither of ye found love while apart just proves this match was the truth."

Truth.

It really was, wasn't it?

"I owe Mellie an apology, I suppose," Kip murmured.

"I dinnae think so." Fawkes shrugged. "She's an intelligent lady, and seems thrilled with how things turned out." He jammed an elbow in Kip's side. "Even if that means she has to marry *ye.*"

Refusing to rise to the bait, Kip merely grinned, turning back to the church filled with his friends and family as he rubbed his side. "And I'll spend the rest of my days making her the happiest woman in the world."

In the front row, his mother sat, beaming. Viscount Thornebury lounged beside her, one arm resting entirely too close to her; the man couldn't *not* flirt, could he? As Kip watched, Thorne lifted his hand and waggled his fingers in greeting, a smirk curving his lips.

Behind them, Alistair's wife Olivia sat with Amelia's mother and sister, Amanda. Amelia's sister was grinning hugely, as if she was thrilled with Amelia's match. Perhaps the sisters had shared secrets. Perhaps Amelia had wanted this match for as long as Kip himself had.

This wedding felt as if it had taken forever to plan, but Kip's mother and Amelia's mother had risen to the occasion. A mere three weeks after Amelia had agreed to marry him, today they would be joined forever. Twenty one long days...and very empty nights.

"Are ye ready?" Fawkes murmured as the music swelled and Kip's heart began to beat double-time.

The doors at the back of the church opened, and Alistair stepped through with Amelia on his arm.

Kip's heartbeat calmed as he exhaled. There she was. *Here* she was. With him. For him. By him. Where she was meant to be.

His lips curled into a slow smile as she began to walk down the aisle toward him, head held high under her veil.

Things were perfect. He was ready.

"Aye," he whispered. "I'm ready."

The sun was still high in the sky when Amelia—breathless with laughter and anticipation—pulled Kipling into their chambers and slammed the door shut. She'd thought the wedding celebrations would *never* end!

Well, actually, it was likely the celebrations were continuing, but she'd been delighted to sneak away with her

new *husband*. What an exciting word!

“Eager, are ye, lass?” Kip was chuckling as he pulled her against him. “Perhaps we should call back yer maid to help ye with yer gown?”

She plastered a fierce frown on her face. “Are you saying you cannot undo a few buttons? I shall vow to help you undress if you return the favor.”

“Och, wife, ye drive a *hard* bargain.” With twinkling eyes, Kipling thrust his hips forward, so she could feel his arousal.

As if she wasn't *already* aching with need?

Over the last weeks, they'd managed to sneak away plenty of times to be together. They'd explored one another with kisses and touches, and on two delightful, *extremely* memorable occasions, Kipling's hand had found its way into her bloomers and brought her ecstasy.

But today was their wedding night—day?

Today she'd have *all* of him. Finally.

Luckily, Kipling was really quite good at tiny buttons.

As her wedding gown fell from her shoulders, he reached around to cup her breasts through her corset. “*Delicious*,” he murmured against the sensitive skin on the back of her neck.

She shivered, even as he pressed together the sides of her corset to pop it free, leaving only her chemise between her skin and his hands. “What—you have not *tasted* me yet,” she managed.

“*Yet*,” Kip growled, then he nipped at her earlobe.

It should have been funny. It should have been disgusting. So why did it make her shudder and lean back against him,

reveling in the hard length of his arousal pressed along the cleft of her rear end?

Really, it was a miracle the man could manage to undress himself, she was useless.

They fell, naked now, into bed, her arms around his neck. When Amelia murmured his name, Kip's lips trailed hot kisses down her throat. Tasting her, as promised.

His mouth closed around one nipple and she gasped, thrusting herself up against his hold. She could *feel* him smile, even as his other hand caressed and stroked and loved in the most wonderful way.

Oh Heavens, the sensations he was causing!

...and then his lips moved lower, and before she could object—*did she want to object? She could barely form coherent thoughts right now!*—they were brushing over her curls.

“Kipling?” she gasped.

“Hush, wife,” he murmured. “I said I would taste ye, aye?”

“Wh—what are you doing—*oh.*”

His tongue touched her core, and she flopped—boneless—back against the pillows. *Oh Heavens, indeed!*

How had he become such an expert at—*No, do not ask that.* She didn't want to know more about her now-husband's past. She just wanted to be able to appreciate his practice now.

Finally.

Kipling licked, and suckled, and kissed and stroked, as the pressure built. And built. And built.

She might be innocent, but she wasn't ignorant of her body; she'd nearly worn out her copy of *A Harlot's Guide to the Forbidden and Delightful Arts*, and knew what to expect from a man's body. She'd explored her own often enough over the years.

But her touch *never* felt like Kipling's!

He slid one thick finger into her core, and when her hips pressed upward to meet him, he chuckled against her skin and slipped another in to join it.

She was so very close, on a precipice...

His lips closed around the pearl of her pleasure, hidden in her curls...

And she gasped something incoherent as ecstasy burst over her.

"Aye, that's a good lass," Kip murmured, continuing to stroke her as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through her. He lifted his head to meet her eyes, and he was grinning.

"That—*Oh*, Kipling!" She flopped back down. "What was *that*?"

"That, wife, was me showing ye how much I love ye," he declared as he crawled back up her body to lie beside her, his fingers deep within her. "It's my duty to make ye ready on our wedding night."

"And that was—" Heavens, she was having trouble controlling her breathing, wasn't she? "That was you getting me *ready*?"

His smile turned wicked. "Almost."

When he curled his fingers, still inside her, she gasped, her eyes widening as she met his gaze.

“Ye feel that, lass? Ye feel how wet ye are for me?”

Mutely, she nodded, her hips wriggling slightly, reveling in the sensation.

“Ye came for me like a good lass, did ye no’?”

“Please Kipling,” she whispered, reaching for him. “*Please* make me yours.”

He didn’t answer, but when his lips found hers, she could taste herself on him. That was answer enough.

His fingers continued to tease her, and the pressure built once more—or perhaps it had never really left her.

When he rolled atop her and spread her legs, Amelia eagerly welcomed him. Kipling didn’t pause, but pulled his fingers from her wetness, gripped his cock, and slid into her.

Then he froze, lifted his face from hers and watched her.

She knew he was doing it for her benefit, but he needn’t have worried. She’d experimented enough over the years that the minor discomfort was already receding. So she shifted slightly, arching her back and thrusting her hips toward his.

“Christ, Amelia.” His eyes squeezed shut on his harsh whisper. “I’m trying to-to give ye time...”

“No more time, please.” It was amazing how prim and proper she could sound when she *wanted* to shout *fook me please!* She planted her heels on his buttocks. “Take me, Kipling,” she whispered.

His eyes opened and when his gaze met hers, it was full of heat. She smiled, and he returned it.

The first time he moved, she gasped out loud. The sensation was...different. Fascinating. Wonderful. He did it

again, sinking a little farther into her, then again. Each thrust felt as if it brought her closer to him, closer to that pleasure he'd given her only a short time ago.

But soon it was impossible to judge where one thrust stopped and the next started. She was being lifted higher and higher, closer and closer...

He was growling with each push, the sound of need as delicious as the feeling of him. Amelia wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, seeking his lips.

And as she did so, she felt her inner muscles begin to squeeze.

Yes. "Yes," she whispered against his mouth.

"Amelia."

As her pleasure burst over her, she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist which allowed her to lift her rear end off the bed. He pounded into her twice, thrice more, and then he froze.

For one moment, they were both suspended, her orgasm crashing over her...then he roared her name and spilled his seed against her womb.

"Amelia!"

Her core milked him, and she squeezed his hips with her thighs, trying to get even closer to him. Impossible, but she wanted to try.

It felt like forever—and then, too soon—before they both collapsed, exhausted, tangled together in the bed. They didn't speak, but her husband pulled her against his chest and kissed the top of her head, stroking her back with such gentleness she wanted to shiver.

Kipling was *hers* now. After so long, so much waiting, he belonged to her and she belonged to him.

“I love you,” she whispered.

She *heard* him smile.

“And I love ye, lass. *Wife*. God Almighty, I’ve waited a long time to say that.” He kissed her again.

“Not as long as *I* have waited. I think I loved you back when I was just a gangly little girl, and you followed my brother home from school.”

“Och, well, ye *were* quite gangly.”

When she giggled, he pinched her, and she retaliated by rolling over. He followed, of course, and soon they were kissing again.

This kiss was slow, sensual. Not desperate, not yet.

Amelia was enjoying the way the hair on his calves tickled her toes when Kipling’s head suddenly lifted.

“Did ye hear that?”

She stilled. “Hear what?”

“There it is again!”

Amelia began to chuckle. “I do not believe it. Really, Becky?”

With a third cluck and a frantic flapping of wings, the chicken hopped atop the foot of the bed. She bobbed her head unconcernedly.

Kipling mock-glared. “Ye brought yer hen into our bedroom?”

“Well, why not?” she quipped back, feeling wicked. “*You* brought a cock!”

As he began to laugh, Amelia lifted herself on her elbows. “Oh my God, Becky, look at my duke. Laughing at a naughty joke?”

In response, Becky decided to check to see if Kipling’s toes were edible. They were not, but his subsequent hiss and curse made Amelia laugh.

Kipling joined in, wrapping his arms around her and rolling them both to safety, out of reach of the hen’s beak. Pinning her beneath him, he smiled down at her.

“I love ye, Amelia Kincaid Mancheste.”

Her heart swelled. All those years, pining after her older brother’s best friend, and now she was finally married to him. She wrapped her arms around him once more. “And I love *you*, husband.”

AUTHORS NOTE

On Historical Accuracy

If you're new to my particular brand of historical romcom, I'm pleased you enjoyed my antics enough to stick around! This story is part of my *Surprise! Dukes* series (yes, you have to pronounce the exclamation mark. *Surprise! Dukes*), and follows the romance of Alistair and Olivia in [*The Duke's Daring Bride*](#).

Yep, all of the books in this series are about hot Scots who unexpectedly inherit dukedoms (yes, the unlikelihood of this is part of the humor), and Kipling Mancheste had to join their ranks. If you're interested in checking out the series (free in KU!), pick up *The Duke's Deceitful Governess*.

Speaking of Mancheste...

My critics sometimes roll their eyes at my choice of names. Alistair is the Duke of Effinghell, and Kipling is the Duke of Bestingbum. Here's the thing, though: I didn't make those names up.

Well, okay, I did a bit.

But what I do, when it comes to titles, is take the first part of an existing British title or place name, and combine it with the last part of a different one, to get something which causes

me to snicker. Effinghell was, of course, based on Effingham...only funnier.

That's how we got Tuckinroll, Lickering, and Morningwood, as well.

As for Mancheste...

Look, sometimes I just like inside jokes.

If you look up the origin of the name "Manchester" (as in the place in England), one of the prevailing theories is that it came from the Latin name "*Mamucium*", combined with the Anglo-Saxon word "caster," meaning "camp."

Yes, in this case, the "*Mam-*" part of that place name is the same root word as *mammary*... Meaning it was likely named after hills in the shape of a pair of boobs.

Manchester = Tits Town.

You're welcome.

Well, anyhow, after learning that, *and* knowing how much romance readers love a gorgeous man chest on our covers, I knew I had to remove the "R" from Manchester as a hat-tip to our love of man chests... Of course, without the E, it looked a little too on the nose, so I left it in there.

This way, the name looks fancier!

I mean, as fancy as a guy named "Mancheste" can be.

See? I *told* you at the beginning there was a method to my madness!

Anyhow, let's talk more history.

In Victorian England, several chicken breeds were considered fancy, rare, or ornamental due to their unique characteristics and aesthetics. These breeds were often kept by

poultry enthusiasts and the upper classes as show birds or for ornamental purposes rather than for practical egg or meat production.

Becky (and we'll talk about her in a second) is an ornamental breed of chicken today called Brahma chickens. Brahma chickens, known as "Shanghai" in the Victorian era, were known for their massive size, feathered legs, and calm demeanor. They possessed distinctive feather patterns, including a dark-colored base with contrasting light-colored markings.

I'll bet you didn't pick up a story in an anthology called *I Like Big Dukes and I Cannot Lie* and expect to get a lesson on fancy chicken farming in Victorian England. But Lady Amelia has long been established as a quirky animal collector and lover (you'll have to read the other books for more examples), so it was perfect.

Last year, when I was approached and offered a spot in this anthology, I laughingly threw out the title as a suggestion. I knew *my* particular brand of comedy would do well with a title like that...but I didn't expect all the other authors to love it too!

I had to come up with a title for my story, but unfortunately, I knew nothing about the story yet. That was, after all, almost a year before I was actually going to write it! But, with the refrain of the Sir Mix-A-Lot song *Baby Got Back* running through my head, I grabbed the opening line of the song as the title of my story.

...and then, months later, had to figure out who in the hell Becky was, and why she was looking at another woman's duke.

(In [*The Duke's Daring Bride*](#), you can read all about Amelia incubating the eggs in her corset. Hilarity ensues.)

Well, there you go. A bit of history and a *lot* of fun. If you're new to my stories, welcome, there's plenty more to keep you laughing and swooning (in joy, I promise). Why not join my [newsletter](#) for updates, or follow me on BookBub or Amazon, or even join my reader group, [Caroline's Cohort](#). Enjoy!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Lee writes historical comedies, and believes it's important for her heroines to be strong, capable and more than a little feisty. If you love to laugh, pick up any of her stories-all of them with plenty of spice! Her medieval Scottish books are action-packed, and her Victorians (featuring the descendants of those same delicious Highlanders) are hilarious!

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**THE DUKE SHE
DEFIED**

CARRIE LOMAX

A spinster of illegitimate birth, Emma Willis is accustomed to being unwanted. She stays out of sight and out of mind, far away from her legal guardian, the arrogant Duke of Ardennes. When he summons her to London to search for a husband, Emma vows to defy him.

Yet the more she resists, the more he realizes the truth: there is only one man he will allow her to marry. Himself. Six long years of acrimony and neglect, however, have built a fortress around her heart. Winning Emma's trust is no easy task...

CHAPTER
ONE

London, Spring of 1882

You shall endeavor to find a husband at the earliest opportunity, read the letter from her guardian.

“I will do no such thing,” Emma muttered, and tossed the crumpled ball into the fire. A pity that her thoughts could not reduce its author to ash along with it. Lord Maximus Aloysius Tremaine, the sixth Duke of Ardennes, deserved to burn for eternity.

Or longer.

Unfortunately, Emma had no power to send her cursed guardian anywhere. He, however, had the authority to order her anywhere he wished, and the duke was not afraid to wield it.

Where he wanted her right now was in London for her first Season. He couldn't have been more insulting about it if he'd tried.

I have neglected your situation long enough. Between your piddling dowry and your advanced age, you will be lucky to attract any suitor at all. Leaving it for another year won't do.

As if she were some sort of fancy lady instead of the illegitimate daughter of an earl's second son.

Emma was accustomed to being unwanted. At least the previous Duke of Ardennes had been a kindly man. His son, the current duke, was a different story. Max had treated her with arrogance and disdain from the moment they first met. Until now, he'd been content to let her molder away in the countryside, out of sight and out of mind.

Summoning her away from school in the middle of the spring term would impact her students. As if her teaching didn't matter.

To the Duke of Ardennes, it didn't. Nothing mattered except his whims. Inexplicably, he'd decided now was the time to divest himself of responsibility for her welfare. No doubt he would hand-select London's most loathsome toad for her husband. On purpose.

Why?

She wasn't a troublesome ward. They rarely interacted.

Clearly, the duke despised her more than she'd ever imagined.

"Likewise," Emma muttered, watching the paper crumble into ash. "I certainly won't be shackling myself to the first man who asks, simply to appease His Gracelessness."

While she didn't want a Season, she did want to be free from her pompous, arrogant guardian forever, ideally before she was legally emancipated at the age of twenty-five. On this point, they were in profound agreement.

Unless...

What if she could frustrate him into granting her control over her inheritance early?

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. A diabolical plan unfolded in her mind. Max's desperation to be rid of her presented Emma with an opportunity.

She felt certain she was up to the challenge of annoying Max into granting her freedom on a much quicker timeline than the four years she would otherwise have to wait. Matrimony was out of the question. Emma was done with being a perpetual burden to others. She had no intention of locking herself into a loveless marriage for the duke's convenience.

"Miss Willis, your carriage is here," the headmaster informed her.

"I am ready."

Ready to wage war.

CHAPTER
TWO

Max eyed Miss Willis' plain gown and unflattering bonnet with skepticism. He'd sent her funds for adequate clothing before the school year started, but she hadn't spent a farthing of it, apparently.

Marrying off Willful Miss Willis might be harder than he'd anticipated, and he hadn't expected marrying off his vexing ward to be easy. He'd already put it off until the Season was well underway.

"An appointment with a dressmaker is the first order of business."

"Is that how you welcome visitors these days?" she asked acerbically.

"Men like pretty women, not dowdy vipers." Emma's features were delicate; whenever she wasn't scowling, she wasn't unappealing. Still, her appearance could be improved with a decent dress and a bit of deft hairstyling...

"Thank you for that scathing assessment. I don't have much need for evening gowns at Mrs. Quarrie's School for the Improvement of Young Ladies. Did you need me for anything other than as a target for your insults, Your Graceless...erm, Your Grace? Or may I be excused? I am quite fatigued."

Max sighed. Miss Willis' head barely came to his shoulder. Kissing her would involve craning one's neck at an uncomfortable angle—

Inwardly, he groaned. *Not this, again.*

Max couldn't stop his physical reaction to his ward. He'd never been able to tamp it down, a fact that had befuddled him for the entirety of their acquaintance.

Her lilting voice tumbled around in his mind for several seconds before her words clicked into place.

“Did you just call me Your Graceless?”

Pink stained Emma's creamy cheeks. There was a small mark near the left side of her mouth. He couldn't stop staring at it. Max often found himself distracted by the lush shape and color of her lips.

When Miss Willis was around, he couldn't bloody *think*.

“What if I did?” she asked bluntly.

Max rubbed his temples.

“It's actually, ‘Your Gracelessness,’” she informed him.

“Pot, meet kettle.” Max had the absurd impulse to laugh.

“I am no duchess. I am therefore not expected to display any grace, Your Gracelessness.”

“Grace is inherent to the female sex. The exception proves the rule, I suppose.” Seeing the protest form on her rosebud lips, he cut her off by saying, “I reckon you're wondering why I called you home.”

“Ardennes House isn't my home.”

Max's headache abruptly worsened. “Away from the school, then.”

“You were rather blunt in stating your reasons. Shall I repeat them?”

“Not necessary, I remember them perfectly—”

“Miss Willis, the occasion of your recent birthday reminds me how your marital prospects decline with each passing day. Already, you are sufficiently aged that finding a suitor will be no easy feat, particularly given your deficient personal charms—”

“Did you memorize my entire letter?” he demanded, aghast. He felt certain that wasn’t what he’d actually written. The *deficient personal charms* bit did sound disturbingly familiar, though.

Max hadn’t considered what it might feel like to receive such a letter. He was a duke, and unaccustomed to considering anyone else’s feelings about anything at all.

“Every. Word.” Miss Willis took two steps forward. Her extended index finger prodded him in the sternum. Max flinched. “Before I burned it.”

She crossed her arms over her chest.

“At least you’ve done me the courtesy of destroying the evidence of my poor manners.” He stood stiffly, flexing his hands so as not to make fists.

Emma smirked.

He wanted to...to...*do something* to make it stop. His immediate impulse was to kiss her, but that would earn him a slapped cheek, so he imagined throttling her instead.

“I burn all your letters, Your Grace.”

He sighed. “Funnily enough, I save all of yours.”

She frowned. A matching expression stole over his face. Why would he admit such a thing? To her, of all people?

“This guardianship business must end.”

“I concur. Grant me my inheritance and let me go my own way,” Emma said brightly.

Max snorted. “No. However, since neither of us finds joy in each other’s company, let us find a way to quit this arrangement.”

“The fastest way to do that would be to give me what’s mine and let me go.”

“You’re a woman.”

“You noticed!”

Max’s jaw tightened. Yes, he had noticed she was a woman from their very first encounter. Technically, Emma was no beauty. No individual aspect stood out as an exceptional trait. Taken together, though, the whole of her composition tempted him more than any other woman he’d ever met.

Her small frame was well-proportioned, though her torso was regrettably concealed by a high neckline. Max did enjoy a nice bosom, and he’d been curious about hers for six long, frustrating years.

Her hair might be an unremarkable shade of brown, but it was sleek and thick, like a mink’s fur. His hand lifted involuntarily as if to stroke it. Horrified, Max clasped his hands behind his back to prevent them from wandering.

“I have no doubt you, like any woman, would fritter away your inheritance within weeks, thus forcing me to rescue you from your own folly. No ward of mine ends up in the

workhouse, no matter how irresponsible she is. I won't have your behavior reflecting poorly upon me."

An outraged gasp. For once, Miss Willis' quick tongue appeared to be momentarily tied. Max pressed the advantage.

"You shall therefore endeavor to find a husband at the earliest available opportunity. Understood?"

"Or what?"

"What do you mean, what?" Max thought he'd been perfectly clear on this point.

"What if I don't wish to marry? What will you do to me if I defy you?"

He laughed. Emma's cheeks flushed red.

"You have no hold over me besides money," she said. "Give me what's mine and let me go. I'll never darken your doorstep again."

His laughter ebbed. A strange feeling twisted in his stomach. He should do it. There was no one stopping him from handing her a small pile of banknotes and being rid of her for good.

But if he did, he'd never see her pale blue eyes light up with mischief again.

A lump lodged painfully behind his sternum.

"Money, Miss Willis, is the only thing standing between you and destitution. I think you'll find that living without it is highly uncomfortable."

"You wouldn't know."

"No. Nor do I intend to find out. I have no appetite for bed lice, thin gruel and holes in the soles of my boots, which is

what you would find in a workhouse. I enjoy being comfortable. Believe it or not, I want the same comforts for you. My father promised to provide for you and protect you until your twenty-fifth birthday or marriage, whichever came first. I do not wish to endure four more years of guardianship any more than you do.”

She stiffened as if he’d struck her.

“Since I am so odious to Your Gracelessness, I shall remove myself from your exalted presence forthwith.”

Emma stormed away in a swirl of skirts. Max blew out a breath. That had gone even worse than expected, and his expectations had not been high.

One thing was certain: he had no control where Miss Willis was concerned. None. The sooner she was out of his life, the better.

For both of them.

CHAPTER
THREE

C arriage rides were the worst part of Emma's thus-far unspectacular season, for the sole reason that they forced her into proximity with her loathsome guardian. Tonight, he was taking her to a soiree to meet a widowed judge.

"Try smiling," Max commanded.

Emma bared her teeth in a wolfish snarl.

"Not like that."

She let her face relax, then nearly toppled off the seat when her guardian mumbled, "You're pretty when you smile," while staring determinedly out the window of the coach. He shifted uncomfortably. "Prettier, I mean."

"Was that a compliment?"

"An unintentional one, I assure you."

She didn't know what to do with a compliment falling from his lips. Since when had he thought her even marginally attractive?

Since never. It was another joke. That's all.

Several tense minutes passed in silence. Emma kept glancing at Max, trying to make sense of what he'd said. Why did nature bless the most devilish men with the most angelic

faces? She could hardly tear her gaze away from the sculpted angularity of his features, even though it pinched her heart to look at him.

A small, stupid part of her preened to think that a man like Max thought her pretty. Emma knew better. She'd seen the kind of women who fawned over him. Dazzling beauties dripping in gemstone jewelry. A duke was a rare catch indeed.

Looking closer at her guardian now, Emma frowned. His Gracelessness appeared pained and faintly green.

“Are you alright?”

“I dislike facing backward in a carriage.” He pressed a fist to his lips. “It makes me ill.”

“Oh.” Emma gasped, startled that her nemesis would admit such frailty. “Switch seats with me. I don't mind facing the rear.”

“No.” The duke sat straighter. “It isn't done.”

“Why not?” Emma demanded.

“Because I'm a gentleman. I ride this way. You're a lady. You ride that way.”

“For pity's sake.” *Lord, save me from stubborn men.* “Is this why you've refused to accompany me anywhere? Because you get motion sickness riding backward in a carriage?”

Apart from brief excursions, he'd mostly left Emma to her own devices. Sparring with him at mealtimes, oddly enough, had become the highlight of her day.

“I do not get motion sickness. I get...queasy. That's all.”

“Fine. Molder over there like a turnip, then. Whatever you wish to call it, if you must be sick, please at least do so out the

window.”

Beads of sweat broke out on his brow. Oh, dear. He really was feeling ill. Emma experienced a bewildering pang of sympathy for him.

“I insist upon trading places, Your Grace. I promise no one will ever know how your manhood has been compromised by exchanging seats with a woman for a single carriage ride.”

Still, he didn’t move, the obstinate arse.

“Oh, do get up.” Emma seized his hand and tugged. It was like yanking on a piece of meat. The one time she’d been asked to assist in the kitchen at the school, she’d been sent to fetch a ham from storage. She couldn’t figure out how to heft the thing, forcing her to return in shame and admit defeat. Imagine the indignity of losing to a dead pig.

She felt the same things now. When the duke didn’t move, Emma dropped his hand.

“Fine. Be that way. I’m going to make space for you to sit on this side, whether you like it or not.” Emma crouched to keep her balance on the swaying floor and wedged herself onto the seat beside him. Max jerked away.

Of all the awkward silences that had ever existed, this had to be the longest. Heat from his body seeped into her side. He really was an enormous man. Easily a foot taller than she, and muscular beneath the layers of fine silk, cotton, and wool that indicated a man in possession of immense wealth.

Emma had never thought about a man’s shape before it was pressed against her.

“You are...” The duke’s voice sounded strained. Probably from nausea.

“Yes?”

“Too close.”

He lurched into the opposite seat. Emma couldn't help but feel slighted. Was being close to her truly so off-putting?

This was the outcome you intended.

“I'll open the window.” She fumbled with the latch. “I'm quite fond of this new dress; I wouldn't like to see it ruined if you cast up your accounts.”

“I won't do that,” he insisted gruffly. The air wafting in carried odors of manure, soot, and dead animals. Still, it helped. The gray-green pallor gradually receded from the duke's skin.

“I'm glad you like the dress,” he said after a long silence.

“I don't, particularly.” Emma did, but she wasn't about to admit it.

Wear this, do that, act like a lady at all times. Be quiet and forgettable, but memorable enough to attract a decent suitor.

What an impossible balancing act was expected of women.

If I had my own money—my rightful money—I wouldn't have to pretend to be something I'm not.

But she didn't, and so she did.

“You literally said you didn't want me to ruin it because you liked it.”

“Just because I don't want you to soil my new dress doesn't mean I enjoy wearing said garment.”

He stared out the window for several moments. Emma had the sinking sense that she'd been the bigger asshole during this particular skirmish.

“We’re here,” he declared stiffly after a long silence.

“I have eyes, Your Grace.”

Her guardian sighed. Emma couldn’t blame him. She was, after all, being intentionally difficult. That was her plan. Why, then, did she feel bad that it was working?

The more he hated her, the sooner he would release her. She just had to grit her teeth and continue being as obnoxious to him as possible.

But tonight, he wasn’t making it easy. He wasn’t being his usual controlling self. He was almost being...nice.

It was very upsetting.

When the carriage halted, Max snapped, “See that you don’t embarrass me this evening, Miss Willis. We are here to introduce you to a man I believe would be an appropriate match for a lady of your station. He is a man of good character.”

“Judge Adkins.”

“Yes. You are to smile, laugh, and most importantly, do not insult him. If you can manage to go fifteen minutes without saying anything inappropriate. I confess I have my doubts.” Max glanced out the window. “Once that task is accomplished, we shall depart before you can ruin your chances by sharpening your rapier wit on the poor man, or any other potential suitors. Understood?”

“You’re optimistic to think there will be one suitor, much less a second.”

She stepped down from the carriage without taking his proffered hand.

CHAPTER
FOUR

There was no reason whatsoever to feel put out—however mildly—that Emma had captivated The Honorable Mr. Adkins, a high court judge. Yes, he had children who were older than Miss Willis, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. The man was well settled and could afford to overlook her illegitimate birth and pathetic dowry.

Miss Willis tipped her face up and laughed. Jealousy spiked within him.

Max tried to remember a time when he'd ever heard Emma laugh before. He couldn't. Not once in all the years of their acquaintance. She wasn't humorless. She just never smiled when he was around.

Tonight, her smile lit up the entire room. *Pretty* didn't begin to describe it. He hadn't meant for that compliment to slip out, but it was true. When she wasn't sulking like a surly adolescent, Emma was captivating.

Her maid's hairstyling helped. As did the satin gown trimmed with green and pink silk roses.

This was a version of Miss Willis he didn't know. At all.

Come to think of it, he hadn't made any real effort to get to know her. She was, understandably, wary of him. But if she

genuinely hated him, she wouldn't have made him switch places with her in the carriage. Would she?

A strange feeling he couldn't name roiled within him. Whether it was hope or lingering indigestion, Max couldn't be certain.

"Where have you been hiding your ward all these years?" A man's voice startled Max out of his reverie. "I thought you said she was a plain little mouse."

"She is. Look at her, Pindell."

"I am. You've undersold her beauty by a wide margin. You might not find her charming, but I'd quite like an introduction, if you'd be so obliging."

Competition is good, Max reminded himself. Two suitors meant a better chance of finding one who would take Emma off his hands. Max had already inquired about obtaining a special license on behalf of his ward. Theoretically, he could be free of Miss Willis by next week.

Pindell was a far better match than a girl like Emma could expect to make. Max ought to be delighted to introduce them.

He wasn't.

A ball of misgiving lodged behind his sternum as he reluctantly led his friend over to where Emma and Adkins were conversing, heads bowed as if they were old friends, despite having met all of ten minutes ago.

"A sensible man in your position ought to seek an heiress, not an illegitimate nobody," Max grumbled.

Emma's smile faltered.

Pindell cut him a glance. "I am in the fortunate position of being able to choose a wife for non-mercenary considerations.

Besides, it's rather presumptuous of you to assume I intend to propose before even having met her."

"Marriages have been based upon less acquaintance."

The way Emma's expression darkened at his approach, then brightened the instant he presented Pindell, twisted knifelike in Max's gut.

Emma

"Did he actually say that?" Adkins asked in a low tone of astonishment.

"Indeed," Emma said tightly. "His Grace does not think highly of me."

"I have never known Ardennes to be deliberately cruel. A little too convinced of his own righteousness at times, like most men of his class, but to speak so bluntly of your parentage..."

"He speaks the truth," Emma shrugged. It hurt, but she couldn't deny that she was *an illegitimate nobody*.

"Lord Pindell," Adkins said affably, greeting the newcomer. Pindell's ginger curls and eager, open face were a sharp contrast to Max's glower and looming posture. Emma ignored the duke and gave the newcomer a welcoming smile. A viscount, she was informed.

"Miss Willis. I understand you were a teacher until recently?"

"Yes, at Mrs. Quarrie's School for the Improvement Young Ladies. Working with the girls was such a pleasure," she

fibbed. There had been moments of joy while teaching, just not many of them. Emma deliberately shifted to a more neutral subject. “Mr. Adkins was telling me about his new grandson.”

“I’m surprised you indulged him,” Max interjected. “I didn’t think you liked children.”

A beat of stunned silence passed.

“Of course I like children. I’m not a monster, Your Grace.”

“Only a hoyden.”

Prickly anger crawled up her spine. She was going to lose her temper if her guardian didn’t shut up. Right now.

Max was deliberately sabotaging her already dubious marital prospects. What was *wrong* with him?

“With all due respect, Ardennes, I haven’t witnessed any hoydenish behavior from Miss Willis this evening,” Adkins said, tilting his head. “You, on the other hand...”

The effect on Max was almost comical. At first, his scowl deepened. Then he shook himself, like a great bear emerging from a winter hibernation, and the scowl disappeared.

“I suppose that means you wish to marry the girl.”

“I daresay I have never met a man so obsessed with the matrimonial state as you are.” Pindell grinned and slapped Maximus on the back. “It’s almost as if you can’t wait to get yourself leg-shackled.”

Adkins grimaced.

Emma didn’t know where to look, or how to make sense of her guardian’s appalling behavior. Technically, she had done everything he asked of her this evening. Smiling hadn’t been too difficult, either, once she was out of Max’s earshot. She’d

even been enjoying herself. Adkins took no offense when she confessed that she wasn't seeking a husband. He then confided that neither was he looking to begin a new family, having just married off his youngest daughter. While Emma seemed like a lovely young woman, the judge had a new grandchild to enjoy, and did not wish to become a father again himself.

His honesty won her favor instantly. From there, they'd chatted amiably until Max and Pindell interrupted them.

Naturally, Max couldn't stand seeing her happy.

He stiffened at Pindell's insinuation of marriage as if it were a great insult. "We're leaving. Miss Willis is tired."

"I have expressed no such complaint," Emma protested.

"You've only just arrived." Adkins had confusion written on his craggy features.

"I've hardly had a chance to speak with her." Pindell flashed her a smile.

"If you wish to speak with her, come to my townhome at half-past two tomorrow precisely. Let's go, Emma." He took her arm, trying to haul her out of the chair, and half succeeded before she shook him off. Max glared at her, then at Pindell. "Only visit *if* your intentions are sincere."

Emma's skin prickled with fury.

Adkins' bushy brows rose. "Intentions? We've only just met Miss Willis—"

"You've seen enough to make up your mind about her," Max snapped. "Any further acquaintance will undoubtedly spoil the illusion."

He seized her hand and hauled her to her feet. This time, Emma didn't dare resist.

“You’re embarrassing me,” she hissed as he dragged her toward the exit.

“*You* are the one embarrassing *me*.”

“How?”

“By...by encouraging those rakehells.”

“Adkins isn’t a rakehell; he’s nearly sixty years old! And it was your idea to introduce us in the first place!”

If she thought he’d glowered before, Emma was disabused of that notion now. *This* was a glower of terrifying proportions. Max said nothing, not even a cursory goodbye to their hostess.

“Aren’t you going to take leave properly?” she demanded.

“No,” he bit out.

“I suppose one of the many perks of being a duke was that one can storm out and not risk being ostracized for your rudeness, but I do wish you’d consider how your behavior reflects upon me.”

Acid burned her innards. How could he do this to her? The entire point of this Season she’d never asked for was to look for a husband, and now that one man had expressed the tiniest crumb of interest, His Gracelessness dragged her forcibly away.

Emma had never been so confused in her life.

Outside, while they were waiting on the steps for his carriage to arrive, Max finally released her. Emma lurched back several steps, tripping over the hem of her skirt. He caught her before she could fall.

“What. Are. You. Doing?” Emma hissed. “Are you insane?”

“You’re not going to marry Adkins,” the duke ground out. “You’re not marrying anyone, except me.”

Then he tugged her close and kissed her breathless.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Emma's inner turmoil calmed instantly. Rooted to the spot, she could only tip her face up to meet his warm lips. Her tiny gasp offered him an opening, and he pressed the advantage, sweeping his tongue between her teeth in a shockingly intimate caress. Were it not for his arm around the small of her back, her knees would have given out.

How could a man who made her feel bad every time he opened his mouth, make her feel this good with those same lips?

Emma twined her arms around his neck. She'd never realized how much she needed this. Touch. Intimacy.

Never realized how much her prickliness toward him had been driven by her hurt at feeling unwanted.

"Sweet Emma," he murmured against her temple. "You have tormented and tempted me from the first moment we met. There's no help for it. I must have you for my duchess."

Emma's heartbeats thundered inside her skull. He *wanted her*.

Reality intruded, like hitting the ground after jumping off a roof and thinking for a few exhilarating seconds that she could fly.

This was *Max*. Her nemesis. Handsome, rich, never wanted anything to do with her. *That* Max.

She wasn't about to tie herself to his capricious carelessness forever. Not for all the money in the world.

Gathering her wits, she pressed both hands against his chest and pushed.

"It's always the same with you, Maximus Aloysius Tremaine. You say 'I want' and expect the world to drop everything and give it to you."

"I am a duke, after all."

Emma fought not to laugh. He wore his title so casually, sometimes. She hated to admit she liked anything about Max, but she did enjoy that singular aspect of him.

"That does not give you leave to order me around. You interrupted my perfectly content life at the school and brought me to London, with the stated purpose of washing your hands of me. Now, when your plan to marry me off was poised to work, you change course? Has it ever occurred to you to ask what *I* want?"

They both knew he'd never contemplated what she wanted for a single second.

"Perfectly content?" he scoffed. "You were miserable at that damned school."

Her mouth fell open. "I was not!"

"You absolutely were," he insisted. "Waiting for me to rescue you."

Emma gaped. "You do not honestly believe that."

The carriage arrived then, preventing any further discussion. When she glanced up, Emma was dismayed to find the party guests leaning out the window above, pointing at them and gossiping.

There would be no salvaging her reputation after this. Conniving man.

Emma had no intention of tying herself permanently to Max, dukedom or no. He might think he wanted her hand in marriage, but she knew better.

“You, sir, are the last man I would ever consider marrying.”

Max

Emma’s declaration crushed him.

He’d earned her refusal. He had no rational explanation for his actions this evening. Only a swirl of emotions he could barely make sense of. Taken together, the facts added up to one inescapable conclusion: he was in love with his ward, and had been for some time.

Everything clicked into place.

The moment he’d laid eyes on her during that first Christmas visit, he’d been ready to compose bad poetry about Emma’s crystalline blue eyes. Their ages at the time—Emma had been a mere fifteen, he not yet turned twenty-two—precluded any genuine expression of interest, and so he treated her as he might a younger cousin. Or tried to. She’d bristled at his teasing, he’d taken umbrage, and things had spiraled downward from there.

Tonight, he'd seen that his ward wasn't a dowdy shrew, but a beautiful young woman who would have no difficulty finding a husband.

He'd almost squandered his chance with her.

Max handed her into the carriage. When Emma pointedly took the rear-facing seat, he resigned himself to accepting her charity.

"I realize my actions tonight come as a surprise," he began. "To both of us. The truth is, Miss Willis, I have admired you for quite some time. Years, even. But I did not understand the depth of my feelings for you until this evening. The only remedy for my agony is for us to marry as soon as humanly possible."

Only then could he take her to bed and relieve his nigh-unbearable need to strip her naked, taste every inch of her delicious skin, touch her the way he'd imagined doing for so many years. She wouldn't refuse him. Emma was sensible, if more prideful than warranted.

Emma crossed her arms over her chest. "Is this a joke, Ardennes?"

Trick question. "Please call me Max. I prefer it. And no, I am utterly serious."

Please say yes.

"Allow me to be clear," said Emma. "I will not marry you, or anyone else, unless it is for mutual affection and respect. You have demonstrated neither of those qualities toward me at any point in the course of our acquaintance."

"A kiss is not affection?"

Her cheeks turned rosy. “Apart from one single, unexpected kiss.”

“I propose you permit me to further demonstrate my affections—” Max leaned forward.

“Absolutely not!”

He halted, bent forward with one elbow on his knee. The color staining her cheeks turned crimson as she recoiled. Not the effect he was going for.

“You don’t even like me, Max. Whatever brought this on, I am certain you’ll think better of it by morning. Whereas I shall have to contend with the repercussions of your behavior this evening.”

Frustration felt like shattered glass in his chest. He *had* been ungracious. Perhaps he’d earned his nickname after all.

“Do you recall the first Christmas we brought you to Gracepoint?” The Ardennes country estate, where his father preferred to live year-round.

Warily, she nodded. “The time you compared me to pudding? Yes. I remember it vividly. I am not often called stupid.”

“I meant that you were sweet and soft.”

“It did not come across that way at the time.”

He blew out a breath. “I was trying to make you laugh.”

“By teasing me.”

“Yes. Instead, you turned all spiky at me like an affronted hedgehog.”

Emma’s lips twitched into a faint smile before flattening again.

“It was an unkind thing to say to a girl who was spending her first holiday season alone. Your teasing was so bad that I begged to return to school early, even though it was only the headmaster’s family and me until the next term started.”

Max rocked back on his heels, remembering. “I didn’t think you’d take it as a personal insult.”

Emma’s eyebrow arched skeptically.

“I know I have spent the past six years sparring with you when I should have told you how I thought about you every hour of every day. Give me a chance to prove how much I care about you.” Seeing her resistance waver, he leaned in closer and feathered his blunt fingertips along her jaw. Emma flinched slightly but didn’t pull away. He wanted to kiss her again, but decided she probably wouldn’t let him get away with it a second time.

“Two weeks. Give me fourteen days to prove things can be different between us. By the end, you’ll see how right we are for one another.”

Emma blinked as if coming out of a daze. Her gaze dropped briefly to his lips, then back up to his eyes, then shyly away. Triumph surged through him. She would have let him kiss her, after all.

Let her initiate the next one. He could be patient. For a while. If he must.

He would win her heart. Max felt confident that this heady mix of hope and lust and fear affected her, too.

“If you cannot convince me that your affections are genuine, you’ll grant me my inheritance? And you’ll leave my mornings free of interference? I refuse to let you monopolize

my time for two entire weeks. You're rarely awake before mid-morning anyway."

Max hesitated, then lifted his chin and agreed. He would do anything to win her trust.

CHAPTER
SIX

Max's unexpected proposal made finding work Emma's topmost priority. Under the pretext of shopping, she spent the morning inquiring after positions as a telegraph clerk and a bookkeeper. Finding no success with either—she was too inexperienced for the former and the latter wanted too many hours—her hopes were raised by the sight of a hand-written sign in the window of Kiefer's Fine Books.

Perfect. If she could convince them to hire her, she could use the excuse that she was a bibliophile to an obsessive degree. Max would never get suspicious, despite there being a well-stocked library at his opulent townhouse for her to raid. In fact, Emma had deliberately chosen books she thought would irritate her guardian.

If Max noticed, he said nothing about her taste in reading. Defiance wasn't as easy as she'd hoped, when he ignored her misbehavior.

“May I help you, Miss?”

“Emma Willis. I wish to inquire after employment.”

The clerk's bushy eyebrows rose.

“There is a sign in the window offering a part-time position. I meet the listed qualifications. My facility with

numbers is excellent. I am well-read in a variety of subjects. I can assist customers with appropriate literary recommendations. I am not above performing menial tasks such as light dusting and tidying up.”

She knew she was babbling. Emma had never tried to find a job before. The school had kept her on after matriculation, in exchange for board and pin money.

The shop clerk eyed her skeptically. “Does your husband know you’re looking for work?”

How grating, that she couldn’t sell her own labor for a fair price without the permission of a man.

“I have no husband, Mr...”

“Gill. I manage the shop for my uncle, who owns it.” The clerk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. There were streaks of gray threaded through his dark hair. She guessed he was in his mid-thirties. “I’ll have to speak with my uncle about hiring a woman. He won’t pay the full advertised wage.”

“Why not?” she demanded indignantly. Emma knew why. She wanted him to state the reason out loud.

“You’re not a man. I can’t pay you a man’s wage.”

“Twelve shillings a week is hardly a man’s wage.”

Don’t argue, Emma scolded herself. Her teeth clamped lightly on her tongue—an internal rebuke that came too late.

“True, which is why we haven’t been able to fill the position. If you’ll leave your contact details and references, Miss Willis, I shall send word if the owner approves.”

“Thank you.” Emma took her time, writing carefully so there could be no mistake. The address was far too grand, so she listed a vague description of her presence at a duke’s

townhouse that one could interpret as her being a servant, instead of an unwanted guest.

If His Gracelessness ever found out what she was doing, he would undoubtedly force her to stop. Therefore, Max must never know.

Once she had her independence, she would no longer need to rely upon other people's grudging generosity. She wouldn't be a burden to anyone, ever again.

When she was done, she handed the sheet to the clerk and said, "I shall check back in a week if I haven't heard from you."

"There's no need, Miss Willis. I'll send word if we can offer you the position."

Emma held her head high as she exited the shop, even as she imagined her application being deposited into the wastebin.

Max stood when she entered the dining room at Ardennes House for lunch. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him dressed in shirtsleeves and a waistcoat. No jacket.

"Where were you this morning, Miss Willis—"

She raised one finger.

"We agreed. My mornings are mine to do with as I please. I am not obligated to report my whereabouts to you."

His lips parted as if to protest. She suddenly remembered the feeling of them pressed to her own. Flutters in her stomach. Still, Emma held her ground. Max's mouth flattened

fractionally before he tipped his head to one side, indicating concession.

“What adventure do you have planned for us today, Miss Willis, that requires such a hearty meal?” He held out a dish of fresh fruit and scooped several spoonfuls onto her plate. Apparently, His Grace didn’t mind her eating like a glutton. Emma was famished after rushing around all morning on her secret mission to find a job.

“I wish to compete in a regatta,” she declared, around a mouthful of ham and cheese sandwich. “Do you happen to know any boaters?”

“As in, rowing?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “All those strong men, pulling in unison. Not to mention those shirts they wear.”

Max choked.

“Henley. The shirt is called a Henley.” He sat straighter. “It’s early in the season yet. Regattas aren’t held until July. I do have a few chums from my school days who maintain their boating club access for practice. I suppose I could call in a favor. Are there any other unfeminine pursuits you’d like to experience?”

“Polo,” Emma said. She might as well use the opportunity to try as many things as possible while he was feeling indulgent. “I wouldn’t mind trying my hand at gambling, although I couldn’t afford to lose any money. You’d have to bankroll me.”

“And here I was hoping you might settle for riding astride.” He sighed. “I should’ve known you’d choose outlandish activities.”

“Do you think I could?” she asked with interest. “Ride astride?”

“You’ll have to if you’re serious about learning to play polo.”

Emma *hmmmed* thoughtfully. “What about a horse race?”

“We can race in Hyde Park if you give up your secret morning activity.”

“Not like that, Max. I want to race on a proper track.”

“I admit, that does sound interesting.”

“Does that mean you’ve never tried it before?”

“Of course not. I cannot risk my neck before I’ve secured an heir. I refuse to be the man who breaks eight generations of primogeniture.”

“You anticipate becoming a father, then,” Emma asked. A piece of ham lodged uncomfortably in her throat.

“It is expected of a duke.”

“Yes, but you’re more than a duke. You’re also a man.”

When Emma lifted her gaze to his, sparks might as well have flashed at the contact.

“You noticed.”

Heat steamed her face.

“Finish up, darling. Before I can take you boating, you have an appointment.”

“I do?”

“Remember my instructions to Adkins and Pindell yesterday evening?”

“To visit at half-past two if their intentions were sincere?”

“Indeed.”

“But you said...” she trailed off in confusion. A shiver worked down her spine at the memory of his growled, *You’re not marrying anyone but me.*

“I know what I said, Emma. They, however, do not.” He held out one hand. “Come. Let’s disabuse Pindell of any notion that he’ll ever lay a hand on your delectable person.”

Emma made a face. “And you think you will?”

Max’s self-assured half-grin twisted her insides. Feelings were stupid things. She wasn’t letting him seduce her this easily. He’d switched from antagonism to charm, and he could switch right back again at any time.

“The way you look at me, Emma, tells me you’ve wanted me as badly as I did you all these years. You’re as eager for me to touch you as I am to oblige you.”

She snorted in derision, but Emma was afraid he might be right.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“I’ve never had to turn down a suitor before,” Emma mused. “Never mind two offers in a single afternoon.”

“Third proposal’s the charm,” Max said cheerfully. Thirteen days to win her heart. He ought to have begun years ago, instead of getting so flustered in Emma’s presence that he parried her rapier wit with barbs of his own. They’d both been too proud to stand down.

Emma propped her chin on her hand and said, “What if I turn down the third proposal, too?”

“Then you’re a fool.”

Max let his mouth quirk up in a half-grin. She blushed and glanced away. “Honest question, Emma. Why wouldn’t you want to be my duchess?”

“We both know I’m not fit for such a role,” she hedged.

“If you’re my wife, you’re fit. Full stop.” He unlocked the boat house doors. The odor of damp wood took him back to his university days. “A duchess defines her role. Not the other way around.” Max found the device he was looking for and held it out. “Here. Put this on.”

“What is it?”

“A life jacket. The interior is cork. I’ll indulge your sense of adventure, but I won’t risk your life, Emma. I assume you can’t swim.”

“Not well. Is that something we can add to our agenda?”

Her enthusiasm tugged his lips into a smile. She must have felt so stifled at that stuffy finishing school.

“Getting to Brighton and back would consume more time than we have allotted. I promise you, though, that if you want to learn how to swim, I shall find a way to make it happen.” Max tightened the straps so the life jacket fit snugly around her torso. Perhaps he could prevail upon someone to use a private pool. They could swim without bathing costumes...

Possibilities whirled through his mind.

“Is the river cold this time of year?” Emma asked, interrupting his daydream of swimming naked with her.

“It’s cold year-round. If you’re not a strong swimmer and weighted down with skirts and shoes, this jacket could mean the difference between survival and drowning.”

“I wasn’t proposing to leave it off, Max. I want to try rowing, not die in the process.”

Emma twirled to show off the awkward flotation device. Her skirt belled out. Everything between her waist and her shoulders was padded with cork-stuffed cotton twill. When she stopped spinning, she frowned.

“Where is your life jacket?”

“I don’t need one. I’m a strong swimmer, and I’m not wearing a skirt.” He stripped off his knit jersey and tossed it aside, standing in that shirt she liked so much. The Henley.

Emma rested her chin on her fist while her gaze skimmed down the row of buttons marching straight down his sternum. She caught herself staring and jerked her gaze away, saying, “Perhaps I ought to start wearing trousers, for ease of mobility.”

Max’s loins tightened. Heaven help them both if she adopted men’s fashion. He wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her.

“We’ll use this boat.” He gestured to a low-slung shell tethered to the pier, stepped into the flat bottom and offered Emma his hand. She placed one delicate palm into his. Max’s pulse quickened at the contact.

He rolled up his sleeves and placed the oars into the oarlocks. Emma perched on the bench opposite him. Even with his legs bent, his knees pressed into the fabric of her dress. She shifted away, her cheeks pinkening.

Max untied the rope from the cleat and deftly maneuvered them into the river’s middle, where the current was stronger.

“May I try?”

Max had taken them into the center of the river where the water ran smoothest. He showed her how to grip the oars, then covered her gloved hands with his ungloved ones and demonstrated the circular motion used to paddle forward.

“Like this.”

Emma glanced at him, then away, then back again. Her glossy brown hair was pinned up, but tendrils escaped and floated around her face. How had he ever thought her mousy? Her pale blue eyes sparkled with excitement. Her lips were the color of spring roses, and the bulky life jacket couldn’t conceal the elegant line of her neck.

“May I ask you something?”

Emma inclined her head. “As long as it isn’t a proposal. I have disappointed quite enough men for one day. It’s a tiring business.”

“I won’t. Not yet, although you must admit this makes for as romantic a setting as one could hope for. Sunset on the water. A gentle breeze. Bucolic scenery as far as the eye can see.”

Emma yawned discreetly, dashing Max’s hopes of using their close proximity as an excuse for a kiss.

“Am I boring you?”

“No!” She looked horrified. “I’ve had a long and exciting day, that’s all. I’m enjoying this experience very much.”

“Where did you go this morning?”

Emma held up one finger. “We agreed. Mornings are my time to do as I wish without interference. You have my afternoons for thirteen more days.” Seizing the oars, she rowed with vigor. “Let’s see how fast we can make this boat go!”

“I had no idea you had such a sense of adventure,” Max said once they’d locked up the boathouse and were sitting on the grassy bank to watch the fading sunset. The remains of their picnic were in the hamper a few feet away. He’d never experienced a quiet interlude with a woman that felt so intimate.

“Well, I haven’t had much opportunity to explore my interests, have I?” Emma asked, shifting her balance onto one hip, propped up on one arm. With her free hand, she stifled a

yawn. “Adventuring was frowned upon at Mrs. Quarrie’s. I had to be on my best behavior, lest I lose my place.”

“You could have come to Gracepoint. No one forced you to return to the school.”

Except...hadn’t he?

Max sat straighter, kicking his long legs out and leaning back on his hands. Their shoulders brushed. Emma didn’t move away.

“Looking back, I can understand how that might not have been an appealing option for you,” he said after a few moments.

“I don’t like feeling unwanted. Or useless.”

“Did I make you feel that way?” Max’s heart sank. Emma shrugged.

“I’d have stayed out of your way if you’d given me something productive to do.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Anything.”

“You’re my ward, not my servant. When you’re my wife, you won’t need to lift a finger.”

He dared to drop a kiss on the top of her head. Emma’s sleek dark hair was warm from the fading sun, her hat unpinned and set aside.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Confounding woman.

“Tell me. What would you do with your inheritance if you had the entire sum right now? Spend it all on hats and horse racing?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “As implausible as it may seem to a man who’s incapable of dressing himself without assistance from a valet, my needs are modest. My inheritance is more than sufficient to secure safe housing and, when combined with satisfactory employment—”

“You cannot intend to *work*,” he interjected, aghast. “For *money*.”

“What do you have against honest labor?”

“You’re a lady, Emma. Ladies do not work. I forbid it. Besides,” he bent to whisper, “I intend to occupy all your time.” Max plucked the last strawberry and touched it to her lips.

Emma brushed his hand away, so he popped the fruit into his own mouth instead. “What if I want to work?”

Max chortled. “You can’t mean it. Why would anyone engage in toil if they could avoid it?”

“Because not everyone is a lazy snob like you?” Emma said sweetly, although he detected an implacable edge beneath her syrupy tone.

“Such a Puritan ethic.” He clucked his tongue. “Unnecessary, dearest Emma. Nothing but the finest things in life for the mother of my children.”

His comment made her turn away and blush prettily. He’d flustered her.

“Then I shall step aside while ladies stampede to volunteer for the position.”

“Even my Henley isn’t enticement enough?” He clutched his chest, miming a wound. Emma laughed.

“The shirt was a blatant excuse to display your manly assets, and you know it.”

“Did it work?”

She swatted his arm instead of answering, then leaned her head on his shoulder. Max’s heart swelled. A similar sensation visibly tented his trousers. He couldn’t tell whether she noticed. Did Emma know what effect she had on him?

After a few minutes, her slight weight turned heavy. His wrists ached. His cock, too, for different reasons. He slipped one arm around her waist. Emma listed forward, and for one heart-stopping moment, he thought she was going to kiss him. Then she toppled, boneless, and Max had to scramble to catch her.

“Asleep,” he mused ruefully. “I suppose this truly was a taxing day for you.”

With his free hand, he scooped his arm beneath her knees and carefully rose to his feet. Emma’s head rested against his shoulder, her arms crossed over her stomach, her lips gently parted. In this fashion, he carried her to his coach and set her on his lap. Max held her for the entire ride back to his townhouse.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Emma awoke slowly, to the unfamiliar but delicious feeling of a person lying next to her. Being held felt so nice...

She froze, too shocked to breathe.

Max.

What was he doing in her bed?

“What time is it?” she gasped. The clock read a quarter to eight. She sagged with relief. There was plenty of time for her to go inquire after employment.

Yet that did not explain why Max was sleeping in her room. Nor did it present a solution for getting him out of there before they were caught together.

Emma rummaged her memories of last night and concluded that nothing untoward had happened, despite how good he'd looked in that Henley shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Briefly, she wondered what it would be like to live knowing she could wake up in the same bed every morning for the rest of her life.

“You're awake early,” Max said in a rough voice, startling her.

“It’s late, actually. I’m usually up with the sun.”

“Mmm. You’ll have to become accustomed to sleeping in once we’re married.”

“We’re not getting married, Max.”

“Yesterday wasn’t enough to convince you? I shall have to try harder today.”

He tugged her close to his front, his arm draped over her waist. Even fully clothed, the bulge of his erection pressed against her bottom. She must be dreaming. Emma interwove her unsteady fingers with his and wondered what the protocol was for signaling, *please touch me*.

Helpfully, Max read her mind. His thumb brushed the underside of her breast.

“Did you remove my corset?” she asked in a voice throatier than normal. She didn’t recognize herself. Needing things she didn’t know how to articulate. Max had awakened a part of her Emma had spent the entirety of her adulthood ignoring, and now her body clamored for his touch.

“Someone had to. Why?”

He nuzzled her nape. The scrape of his stubble reverberated pleasantly through her body. An insistent ache settled between her legs. Impatient with his slow teasing, she craned her neck for a kiss and at the same time guided his palm down her abdomen.

Max needed no further encouragement. He rolled her to her back, laying half on top of her as he palmed her breast through her chemise. Her petticoat and pantalets were twisted around her waist. Greedily, Emma cupped his face and opened to his deepening kiss. His weight pressed her into the bedclothes. His cock pressed insistently against the apex of her

thighs. Experimentally, Emma tilted her hips fractionally upward and was rewarded with a grunt of surprise.

“Your curiosity extends beyond rowboats,” he murmured. “Shall I indulge you, my sweet?”

Emma nodded. She skimmed her hands up his back, delighting in the play of muscle beneath the thin cotton of his Henley shirt. He’d not taken it off. Daringly, she tugged the hem up just far enough to glide the tips of her fingers along the bare skin above his waistband.

Propping himself on his elbows, Max reached behind his head and tugged the garment up and off. It should have been an awkward move, but he performed it so smoothly she couldn’t help but imagine he’d practiced it hundreds of times, with hundreds of other women.

Well, if he could experience lovemaking without commitment, so could she. Her reputation was already in tatters after his outburst, and she didn’t care what people in his social circle thought of her anyway. Less than two weeks from now, she would be an independent woman—and Max would be on to his next conquest.

The sad thought scattered when he sat back, indicating she should take off her chemise. Shyly, Emma crossed her arms over her chest.

“Let me see you,” he pleaded. She wanted the exhilaration of her first experience to be with him. For years, even in her deepest moments of loathing, part of her had yearned for him to see her as a woman instead of a girl. Emma was helpless against the desire burning in his eyes.

Part of her—most of her, if she was being honest—actually liked him. When he wasn’t being a pompous arse, Max was a

lot of fun to be around. If they'd been born as different people, they might have sparked in a different way.

Emma huffed and crossed over her chest, torn between embarrassment and wanting to please him. Wanting to please Max was a novel experience, to be sure. She didn't entirely trust him not to laugh at her modest bosom.

"Go on," he said encouragingly.

With trembling hands, she slipped shell buttons at her bodice free and pulled the fabric over her head.

The sound he made at the sight of her bare breasts broke all remnants of her resistance.

"Beautiful," he said wonderingly.

"It's nothing you haven't seen before."

"I've never seen *you* like this before."

"No one has. Besides, I'm sure I can't measure up to all your courtesans and paramours."

"You vastly overestimate my interest in other women." Gently, he moved her hands away, holding her by the wrists as he looked his fill. "Ladies making themselves available made the chase rather boring. You, by contrast, were always off-limits, first by my father's orders, then due to my own clumsy attempts to treat you like a little sister, when what I felt toward you was anything but sisterly."

"It's too early for revelations, Max."

"Weren't you claiming to be a lark just minutes ago?"

She couldn't help but laugh.

He released her arms and skimmed callused palms up her ribs, squeezing her breasts before he moved forward, pressing

her into the bedclothes with his weight, his breath hot at her neck. Emma writhed against him, trying to take it all in: the heat of his kisses at her throat, the rough scrape of his hands on her sensitized skin, the feel of his body on hers. Nothing she'd imagined in her most feverish dreams compared to the reality of being with him.

“You're so soft,” he murmured against her skin. Emma didn't feel soft; her body felt wanton and desperate, needing him in places he hadn't yet explored.

Yet she wanted to draw this out, too. The feeling of him on her. The intimacy.

“You...aren't.” She worked one hand between their bodies to squeeze his cock lightly. “Quite the opposite.”

“If only you knew how often your presence puts me in this condition. It has been the most vexing thing to want you so badly, despite your constant abuse—” He nuzzled her neck. Emma giggled.

“I wasn't that bad!”

“I have never been likened to a turnip before.”

“Nor I to a pudding.” Relenting, Emma added, “Perhaps I was too eager to take you down a peg.”

“Finally, she admits it.”

Her grin wavered.

“I cannot fathom why you, a handsome, titled, obscenely wealthy lord, would take the slightest interest in an illegitimate nobody like me.”

If this was all an elaborate joke to humiliate and ruin her, Emma would change her name, move to the Continent, and never return to England again.

“I should never have said that. I’m sorry, darling.” His expression darkened. He rucked her petticoat up far enough to get his hand beneath the layers of cotton and murmured, “What can I do to demonstrate my remorse?”

For once, Emma had no words. How alarming to realize she already believed his sincerity. It was written in the worshipful way he looked at her, in the slight unsteadiness of his hands as he touched her in ways she’d never imagined.

Max made quick work of the tiny buttons, hooks, and ribbons holding closed her petticoats and pantalettes. He stripped them down her hips, leaving her naked on the bed. He knelt between her thighs, his hot gaze snagging on her stomach as he skimmed down her body.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

He traced one finger up her center. Emma gasped. All thoughts evaporated from her head when he slid two digits inside her. Her fingers curled around his forearm, clenching in time with each stroke as he pumped in and out.

She hadn’t known she needed this. Emma gave in, tilting to meet his rhythm. Little frantic wails burst out of her.

“Shh, someone will hear us.”

Oh, God, everyone in the household would know where Max slept last night and what they were doing now. Emma couldn’t bring herself to care. This was the biggest adventure she’d ever dared to imagine, and she wasn’t about to back out of it now. She’d deal with the consequences later.

Even if it meant marrying Max.

He lay beside her, half on top of her, curling his fingers to hit a spot inside her that made Emma’s back arch off the bed.

“Like that?” he growled.

She moaned against his shoulder. The climax hit hard, stiffening her muscles and dragging a low wail from her throat. Max grunted and delved deep, keeping a steady rhythm that drew out her pleasure for so long that it left her gasping when it finally subsided.

He chuckled with evident satisfaction and pressed a kiss to her forehead, then rolled away. His cock tented his trousers, visibly. Emma frowned. “Wait. What about you?”

“Another time, darling.”

Emma lay there, stunned, while Max shrugged into his shirt and sneaked out of her room like a common thief. She never would have expected her arrogant duke to give pleasure so generously, and then deny himself the same.

Clearly, she had misjudged him.

Or had she?

CHAPTER
NINE

“A -choo!”

Emma’s nose itched. It ached on the inside before each dust-induced sneeze. Had she known her first day at Kiefer’s Fine Books would involve climbing onto step stools, balancing while she leaned out to reach the books at the end of the shelf, and bending down to get to the bottom row, she would not have had her maid lace her corset so tightly. Not that she exactly wore her lacings tight in the first place.

Worse, her new day dress was covered in gray smudges. As much as she resisted being too invested in clothing, she was dismayed to realize what she’d done to a brand-new dress. Though she’d never gone wanting, it was a rare treat to have nice things.

“Are you ill, Miss Willis?”

Mr. Gill hovered nervously nearby, his spectacles slipping down the bridge of his narrow nose. He poked them back up.

“The dust is getting to me,” she confessed. “I might step outside for some air—”

“No breaks are permitted, I’m afraid. You work such a short shift. I would have to dock your pay for the time.”

Emma scratched the side of her nose and sighed. She'd been so excited to start her new position that she'd arrived half an hour before opening, but there had been no mention of additional pay for her time, then.

She wasn't sure what to do about the owner's request for written permission to work from her father (impossible, as he was deceased). Admitting she was the ward of a prominent duke was out of the question. Yet, if she did not produce a signed letter of approval from her male guardian, she would not be able to continue working.

Emma knew how that conversation would go.

Max, I'd like to work in a bookshop.

Emma, be serious.

I am serious.

Commence exaggerated sighs followed by an outright refusal.

Max would never understand her reasons for wanting to work. Her pin money could be revoked. Her meager savings from teaching at the school weren't sufficient to secure housing for more than a month or two. Without funds, she would be forever dependent upon people who were indifferent to her welfare.

A duke never had to learn the hard lesson that obligation bred resentment.

Her mother never wanted her in the first place, depositing her with Emma's grandmother as soon as she was weaned. Gran turned increasingly resentful of having to raise a child in her declining years—despite it being Emma who did most of the chores.

Her father had promptly shipped her off to a cold, rigid finishing school without bothering to meet her first. Emma carved out a place for herself through diligent study, but she never made many friends. She'd only stayed on because she had nowhere else to go except Gracepoint, where there was nothing for her to do but rattle around trying to avoid its owner.

If she wasn't useful, no one wanted her around.

And there was no way for her to be useful to a duke.

Max had a dizzying number of servants in his employ. She could hardly turn without tripping over a maid offering to relieve her of a shawl, or assist her with a trivial task. He did not need her.

Kiefer's Fine Books did. Even if it was only to dust tomes that obviously hadn't been touched by a customer in months.

"Mr. Gill," she ventured. "Have you considered placing some of these books on a shelf out front for a reduced price?"

"No. Why on earth would I do that?" he asked absently, poring over the sales ledger.

"To attract customers passing by the shop."

He glanced up.

"They might stop to browse the books, and come inside to purchase one. You'll have a better opportunity to show them more expensive options than if they never come into the store at all."

"But I'd have to reduce the price on the ones I put out. They might get stolen or damaged."

"They aren't doing much for the shop down here gathering dust, now, are they?"

“A sensible suggestion, Miss Willis. I shall speak with my uncle and perhaps give it a try.”

Pleased, Emma finished her shift and hurried home just in time to change her soiled dress before meeting Max for lunch.

Emma eyed the ball she was meant to hit where it lay on the bright green field and hefted the rubber mallet with which she was meant to do it. Her horse shifted beneath her. Polo seemed like a simple enough sport from the ground. Ride a horse around a field. Hit the ball in the direction of the net. Hope it goes in. Repeat until it does or your team loses.

Perhaps it was a simple game for accomplished equestrians. Emma was not remotely accomplished. She nudged her bay mare's sides.

“Give her a solid kick!”

Emma tried. The horse trotted a short distance, then halted. She lost her grip on the mallet. Again.

“Better,” Max called out. He, of course, was maddeningly competent at getting recalcitrant herbivores to do his bidding.

“I can't do this!” Her wail ended in a giggle, though. “I've been trying all afternoon, yet my horse has barely traveled halfway down the field. She just wants to eat grass.” Emma patted the mare's neck. “Some polo pony you are.”

“She's a fine pony. Gentle temperament. You're not being firm enough with her.”

“I don't want to hurt her.”

“You won't.”

Max held out the mallet she'd dropped, but Emma shook her head. "I'm getting down."

Her legs didn't work properly. She had, in fact, donned trousers for this excursion. It felt strange to be out in public dressed so scandalously. She'd attracted more than a few second looks.

Her foot wouldn't come free of the stirrup. Max caught her by the waist while she kicked free, sliding her brazenly down his chest, and he didn't let go once her feet were securely on the grass.

"Steady on."

"You can let go now."

Max chuckled. She didn't want to acknowledge the pang of loss when his hands slipped away from her hips.

Each morning for the past week, she'd awakened early to his sleeping form curled around hers. She'd fallen asleep after every single outing. Between the exertion of her job at Kiefer's and the busy afternoons Max planned for her, which on several occasions extended into the night, she kept dozing off during the coach rides home. He would carry her to her room, remove her outer garments and corset, and climb into the narrow bed wearing his trousers and undershirt.

Scandalous.

She knew he was doing it, at least in part, because he expected her to say yes to his upcoming marriage proposal. Any whispers of impropriety would be papered over by their subsequent nuptials. Despite this, Max was always careful to slip out of her room and return to his own chambers before her maid arrived with Emma's breakfast tray.

In between, they kissed and touched and talked, laughing about their adventures of the day before and dreaming up new ones.

Imagine waking up like that every day for the rest of your life.

She could. All too well.

Emma had never been so happy. She didn't trust this feeling. He was a duke. There would be nothing to stop him from seeking out a paramour once he tired of spending time with his mousy little ward.

She was still an *illegitimate nobody*, even if he'd apologized for saying that to her face.

A week ago, she'd been certain they wouldn't make it through their negotiated courtship period without murdering one another. Now, Emma was starting to worry she wouldn't be able to muster the courage to resist him once the week was up.

"Are you ready to watch a real game?" He took the reins to lead her recalcitrant pony off the field.

"I can't keep abusing this poor animal." Emma winced with each step. The first time she'd tried riding astride was two days ago, during their race at a private track where one of Max's fancy friends bred thoroughbreds. He'd let her win. Twice. She'd thought the soreness would fade, but if anything, it was worse two days later.

She changed into a skirt and returned to the field, where eight men on horseback had assembled. They wore colored uniforms to indicate who belonged to which team.

All of this was new to her. Polo was not an activity she'd ever had an opportunity to participate in, even as a spectator.

After each seven-minute playing period, or chukka, the players changed horses. He played in the third position, which, he'd explained with evident pride, was the most demanding role.

Her gaze flicked to his tall, broad form. His horse was necessarily the largest, which put him at a disadvantage when it came to making quick turns. He had to anticipate the other players and guide his mount accordingly by making split-second decisions. Emma couldn't ignore the flutter in her midsection every time he scored a goal and flashed her a grin.

At the midpoint of the game, she and other spectators were invited onto the field to push divots of grass back into place. Max, breathing hard, strode over to her.

“Are you enjoying the spectacle?”

“Very much. You're an excellent player.” Self-consciously, she examined the sod and toed another clump of grass into place. “I see now why I struggled to manage the horse and the mallet. You make it look easy, but it's quite a trick to put it all together.”

“Tiring, too. I've reserved places for us to eat supper at the clubhouse dining room this evening. I may be the one who falls asleep during the ride home tonight.”

She sensed his hesitation. He wanted to ask where she spent her mornings. But Emma wasn't going to tell him. Working at the bookshop was a much-needed reminder that she was not, in fact, a future duchess. This interlude would end, and soon.

The more she could keep that fact foremost in her mind, the less it would hurt to let go.

Or so she hoped.

“I believe that’s your signal,” she said. To her great surprise, Max bent to press a quick kiss to her lips before striding away.

CHAPTER
TEN

That night, they both fell asleep during the ride home. Emma, as usual, nodded off first, with her head on his shoulder. Max scooped her in close, and before he knew it, he was jolted awake by the footman putting down the step.

Emma barely stirred when he scooped her up and carried her into the house.

What the devil was she doing every morning?

He was half inclined to follow her, but that would be an invasion of her privacy. He was trying very hard to earn her trust after having spent years undermining it with sarcasm and insults, and he felt certain his efforts were working. He could restrain his curiosity for a few more days.

Max laid her on the bed, carefully undid her buttons, and wrestled the confounded corset off without waking her. This time, he went one step further than usual and removed everything except her chemise. Then he stripped down to his underwear and crawled under the covers beside her.

So much better than wearing his trousers to bed.

With less fabric between their bodies, a new problem presented itself the next morning. Pale light filtered in through the drapes he'd yet again forgotten to close. Max slowly

registered the warm weight of a sleeping woman, her back tucked fully against his front. His erection nestled beneath her delectable arse. With any other woman, he would rouse her with kisses to the nape of her neck, and after a decent amount of foreplay, hike up her chemise and slide inside her.

But this was Emma.

Innocent, prickly, wary Emma. He'd been slowly introducing her to the delights of the flesh each morning. It required every ounce of his willpower to walk away unsatisfied each morning.

Removing his clothing had been a mistake.

Her calves whispered against his legs. He stroked the underside of her breast. Emma stirred.

He waited with bated breath.

Emma squirmed and covered his hand with her warm, soft, small one.

To his utter delight—and a rush of blood to his loins—she pushed his hand down.

“Stop teasing me and get on with it,” she ordered. Apparently, she'd been more awake than he thought.

Max rocked his erection against her bottom, rucking up her hem and finding her slick with desire. He sank two fingers inside her and began a steady stroking. Emma rocked with him, her pants turning into moans.

He wasn't going to be able to summon the will to walk away. Not today.

Her back stiffened. Max smiled into her hair and worked her until his hand ached, reveling as he took her through the climax. “That's it, sweetheart. Come for me.”

She pulsed around him, panting wordlessly, her hand clamped around his forearm. He would never think of forearms the same way again, after the way she'd stared and squirmed when he rolled up his sleeves in the rowing shell, and now the way she clutched at him in mindless desperation.

What was he going to do about his own torrid state?

Max pondered his options for returning to his own quarters while sporting a raging erection, without embarrassment, and quickly concluded there weren't any good ones. Even the most discreet servants whispered about the scandal of a grown man and his grown but legally dependent ward sharing a bed every night.

Beside him, Emma twisted. She sat up, her luscious hair tangled and eyes bright. To his shock and delight, she straddled his thighs and said, "It's my turn to try pleasuring you."

Heaven help him, Max couldn't bring himself to refuse.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Emma stared at the swell of Max's cock beneath his linen drawers. The close-fitting garment delineated the heavy round base and tented at a slight angle toward his left hip bone. Muscles honed by rowing and riding rippled upward along his stomach. Above that expanse, she found defined pectorals dusted with dark hair, dotted with flat nipples. Farther up, his sharp clavicles framed a strong throat leading to a chiseled chin and sensuous lips.

She inhaled, steeling herself to meet his eyes. What if he didn't want to be the recipient of her fumbling first attempt to pleasure a man?

Max's gaze bore into hers. Thank goodness it was still dim in her room. She wasn't sure she could withstand the intensity of his unfettered emotions in the full light of day.

"Go on," he said in a rough voice.

Experimentally, she traced the shape of his cock. It was longer than her hand, and looked too big to fit in her mouth—never mind elsewhere. Still. She had the strange impulse to try licking it, so she unfastened the button holding his drawers closed and skimmed them down his narrow hips. He shifted to help her.

“Is this alright?” she asked, running the tip of her finger down the underside.

“More,” he ground out. “Touch me like this.”

He demonstrated, covering her hand with his large one. Her fingers couldn't quite close around him. Max showed her how to move up and down. A single droplet beaded on the slit at the center of the rounded head. Fascinated, she scooted back and ran her tongue over it.

Max's abdomen rippled. He covered his face with both hands and groaned.

“Should I stop?”

“God, no. Do that more.”

Ah, she was starting to understand now. He liked it when she touched him with confidence.

Apparently, he wasn't put off by her inexperience, so Emma spent the next several minutes discovering what made his abdomen do that fascinating ripple again. He liked it when she ran firm strokes up and down his shaft. It happened again when she gently squeezed the heavy orb at his base, too. When she opened her mouth wide and took him inside that way, his stomach muscles tensed gratifyingly and Max spiked his hands into her hair with a low groan.

This was going so well, she decided it was time to take things further.

She released him, her jaw aching, and slid upward along his torso. To her astonishment, Max drew her to him and kissed her hungrily. Pleasuring him with her mouth hadn't put him off from kissing her. She had so much to learn, and he was an unexpectedly patient instructor.

Until the moment he flipped her onto her back and kissed his way down to her breasts, palming one and sucking the other into his hot mouth. He'd done this twice before. The first time, the shock had been so intense she'd shoved him away. The second time, she'd moaned and clutched him to her, seeking more, until Max had been the one to stop, panting raggedly as he pulled on his clothing and made a hasty departure. He left her there, confused about what she'd done wrong and stewing in her own want.

Would he do the same thing this time?

No. Instead, he continued kissing his way down her stomach and draped her leg over one shoulder, leaving her exposed and breathless with anticipation.

Surely, he wouldn't...

Max bent his head and licked her.

Emma gasped.

Correctly interpreting this as encouragement, he spread her open and kept licking her until she couldn't hold still. Meaningless sounds bubbled out of her. Tension built within her core. So close.

"Like this, sweetheart?"

She could only nod. His chuckle tickled her sensitive thighs. He nipped her there, a startling counterpoint to the glide of his tongue through her wet folds. She yelped, then exhaled raggedly when he continued to suck her most sensitive place.

When he'd driven her to the brink, Max thrust his fingers inside her and bore down on the sensitive nub with the flat of his tongue, sending her hurtling blindly through the climax.

Slowly, Emma's eyes fluttered open. Max was crawling up her body, his cock rampant at her hip.

"We should stop here."

She shook her head, hair sliding along the pillowcase.

"I want to do this with you."

His eyes darkened. She held her breath.

"What about our wedding night?"

For the first time, she seriously considered saying yes at the end of their two weeks. If that was the only way he'd finish this, instead of taking her over the precipice again and again, in every conceivable way but the expected one, so be it. She'd marry him and deal with the consequences later.

But Emma wasn't ready to capitulate quite yet.

"What about it?" she countered. "We'd still have one. It would still be our first time together as a married couple."

If they married.

"You won't regret it not being special?"

"It would still be special," she insisted. "Besides, what if we aren't compatible that way? Wouldn't you rather know before we make things permanent?"

"Not...compatible?" he said with evident confusion.

"You are very large. I am not."

As she said this, Emma hooked one leg around the backs of his thighs. It wouldn't take very much. A slight shift of his hips, alignment, a single thrust, and her aching curiosity would be satisfied. Perhaps painfully.

Max's shoulders shook with his chuckle.

“You know how to break a man’s resistance.”

She grinned. “I’m not sensing much resistance, Max.”

He kissed her. She tasted herself on his lips. It wasn’t bad at all. In fact, the intimacy of that kiss sent a thrill through her. The unfamiliar stroke of his head against her sex heightened her anticipation. A strange pressure, a pinch of pain, and then a fullness the likes of which she’d never experienced before. Emma gasped and clutched him. Max grunted.

“I love the way you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Cling to me. Whatever you can grab onto.” He brushed a kiss against her temple, cradling her in his arms. “Are you alright?”

She’d never felt so treasured.

“Mmm. Fine. This is nice, but surely this isn’t all there is to the process?”

His helpless chuckle rumbled through his chest. Emma instantly regretted teasing him, for he slipped out. A protest rose to her lips, but before she could give it voice, he thrust again, and it became a mindless gasp of *yes*.

This was so much better than she’d imagined. Max repeated the process, still slow, still gentle, even as he picked up speed. Emma’s thighs twinged. Between riding a polo pony and now him, muscles she’d never been aware of before were complaining loudly of soreness.

No matter. She wouldn’t stop this for the world.

“Emma,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “Emma, you don’t know how badly I’ve wanted you.”

She did, though. She'd wanted him the same way, though her pride wouldn't let her admit it, even to herself. Emma gripped his hips between her thighs, tensing in anticipation of the oncoming climax. She could feel it building with each stroke. The wet, rhythmic slapping sound of his body on hers echoed in her ears.

When it hit, she grabbed his buttocks as if to drive him as deep inside her as he could go. Max's rhythm broke as she shattered around him. He ground out her name through clenched teeth, followed by a litany of filthy words.

"Emma. Emma. Fuck, Emma. Fuck, you're so good, so tight, so perfect. It feels so good to be inside you. You like coming on my cock, don't you, my sweet girl."

Boneless and trembling, Emma inhaled the scent of his skin, memorizing the moment. Yes, she would marry for this.

But would it be like this ever again? Or was it only because it was her first time that it had been so intense?

Max rolled onto his back, threw one arm over his eyes, and tucked her close to his body. Emma pushed up onto her elbow. "Aren't you going to leave?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No. I'd rather you stayed."

He grinned and pulled her onto his chest. Together, they again fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Hours later, dressed in a plain gray wool dress, Emma burst into the bookshop. The tattletale bell over the door loudly announced her late arrival.

“Miss Willis. You’re eight minutes tardy.”

Mr. Gill snapped his pocket watch closed.

“I do apologize, sir. I was delayed by traffic.”

“I expect promptness. I shall have to dock your pay by a quarter-hour.”

“But I’m only eight minutes late!” Emma tied the apron around her waist and tucked a dusting rag into the pocket.

“Had you been seven minutes late, I would have rounded down and paid you. Since you were delayed more than halfway through the quarter hour, I am obligated in the name of fairness to dock your pay for the full fifteen minutes. If you ensure you are on time in the future, you will not suffer the consequences of lateness. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Fairness, Emma wondered, to whom?

She set about updating the display in the window. The books’ covers had faded with sun exposure, so she put them

on the cart to sell at a discount.

“Not this one, Miss Willis.” Mr. Gill selected one volume. “Don’t you recognize a rare edition when you see one? It’s too valuable to risk putting it outside.”

“Personally, I wouldn’t have placed it in the window where it could be sun damaged.”

He squinted at her over the rims of his spectacles and sighed. Emma held her breath, expecting to be let go for her impertinence. Why couldn’t she curb her tongue?

“We’re fortunate to have your keen eye.” The shop clerk gave her a rare smile. “Why don’t you try putting together a display to attract more customers?”

Emma’s eyes watered, and not because of all the dust. In spite of his grumpiness and her outspokenness, here, she was wanted. Needed. And she intended to create the best bookshop window the world had ever seen.

Designing the new display took several mornings of work, between scrubbing the glass until it sparkled and creating paper cutouts of characters from children’s stories. There was a white rabbit and a little girl in a blue dress, and a boy with a top hat and gold foil coins to advertise Pip from *Great Expectations*.

“Fanciful,” Mr. Gill commented, eyeing her handiwork. “Miss Willis, you have not yet returned your signed permission for employment. I am afraid I cannot pay you for your labor until you’ve done so.”

Emma's heart sank. She couldn't ask Max to sign it. He would demand that she quit. She might not need this job for the paltry pay, but she needed it for her pride. It would be so easy to become accustomed to the luxury Max took for granted—and difficult to adjust her expectations once she no longer had access to it.

Nothing in life was permanent. She'd learned that lesson long ago. Best to keep her expectations in line with her likely future.

This job was a stepping stone to whatever would get her through the next bout of turmoil that would inevitably upend her life. She could not lose it.

Which meant one thing: she must forge a man's signature to grant herself permission to work. Ideally, Max's notoriously recognizable scrawl. If only she hadn't burned every single letter he'd sent, immediately after reading it, she would have had an example to copy.

She sighed. As long as it didn't look like her own feminine script, it would be believable. But revealing her guardian's identity posed an entirely different set of problems.

Emma didn't like to lie. In this case, she didn't have a choice.

M*aximus Aloysius Tremaine*

Maximus A. Tremaine

M.A. Tremaine

Emma threw down her pen. Even her punctuation looked like a woman's writing. Neat, curving, precise.

Making up a story wholesale on the fly would only expose her as a liar. She needed to stay as close to the truth as possible without revealing her guardian's identity.

“Emma?”

She hastily shoved the papers under a stack.

“There you are. I thought you were resting?”

Was it her imagination, or was there a suggestive undertone to his question? Emma's stomach fluttered. She was tired, but too anxious to sleep. Tonight, Max wanted to take her to an actual ball, filled with aristocrats like him.

That meant close physical proximity with him on a public dance floor. Everyone would be watching her. Emma didn't trust herself not to trip over the hem of her own skirt, tread on his toes and spin in the wrong direction. Possibly in quick succession.

Emma could never be Max's duchess. His wife would be expected to be social and gracious, witty and confident under any circumstances. Not awkward and bluntly outspoken like she was. Literally any other woman on Earth would make a better duchess than an illegitimate nobody like her.

Her throat tightened at the thought of Max married to someone else.

“I was.” Her mind whirled with excuses. “I couldn't rest, so I thought I'd write...”

“A letter?” he prompted.

“Yes!”

“To whom?”

Emma had no one. He knew full well she had few acquaintances from the school, all of whom had graduated, married, and no longer had time for their odd spinster friend. Her family was all dead.

“Never mind.” Max raised both hands, palms outward. “It’s not my affair. If you are awake, would you like to come with me to see an art exhibition? A friend of a friend of a friend’s gallery is opening tomorrow at Kew.” Wryly, he added, “I wouldn’t otherwise consider going, but you might like the subject. Botanical prints and landscapes.”

“Yes!” Emma leaped up, clapping her hands with delight. He was willing to associate his name with an artist he might not otherwise care for, simply because she might like it. “I’d love to meet him.”

“Her,” Max corrected, smiling. “Marianne North. She’s quite the world traveler. I think you’d get along splendidly.”

Her heart did a funny flop in her chest.

He wasn’t supposed to be charming. Or thoughtful. Or fun.

Max was supposed to be an arrogant, insufferable asshole. Sometimes, he still was. But ever since he’d put his mind to courting her, Emma didn’t have a single complaint about him.

That made him dangerous. Max had the capacity to devastate her so deeply she would never recover from the loss. She could not afford to let that happen.

“What’s this?”

She’d covered up her attempts to practice forgery, but Emma had left the damned request from Kiefer’s Fine Books sitting out on her desk. Max picked it up and read it quickly.

“That’s mine!”

Panic surged through her.

“Your debts are mine. If you owe money to a shop, I won’t have you paying it out of your own funds.” He frowned. “This is the secret you’ve been hiding? You’re employed? In a bookstore?”

The amusement in his voice cut Emma to the quick.

“What’s wrong with that, Max?”

“You’re to be a duchess. My duchess. Why on earth would you want to tire yourself out lugging around dusty books, when you could have a life of leisure with me?”

Beneath his laughter, Emma heard a note of confusion. She’d trod on grass divots that had more insight than Maximus Assimus Tremaine. Her heart cracked.

He didn’t get it. He did not understand her, even after all the time they’d spent together.

Suddenly, Emma felt very alone in the world. It was a bitter reminder that she had no place in his life. He’d brought her here to get rid of her, after all. Courting her had been nothing but one of his temporary whims.

“I cannot spend my days in idleness, Max, no matter how entertaining. I need to feel useful. If I’m not working, I don’t...I’ll be...”

She couldn’t bring herself to say the word *worthless*.

“Free to entertain your husband?”

Max waggled his eyebrows, turning the moment into a joke. Except that nothing about this was funny to her.

Feelings faded. She would never be anything more than a rich man’s unwanted daughter. Emma could not bear the

thought of becoming another entitled rich man's equally unwanted wife.

"I'm sorry, Max. I can't." The words stuck in her throat. "We had a nice time together. I shall treasure the memories."

"You don't mean..." He hesitated. "I see. I haven't changed your mind at all. You want me to sign this letter, write you a bank draft for the sum of your inheritance, and let you walk away."

Emma could only nod. It wasn't that she wanted it; she needed it. For her own sanity.

There was nothing more precious than independence.

"Very well."

Max strode to the desk, took up his pen and scrawled his name in florid script at the bottom of her drafted letter. Did he read the words she'd crafted so carefully in an attempt to sound like him, expressing her deepest desires?

He didn't bother to sit down. Tears stung her eyes. He wanted her gone as soon as humanly possible.

Their fingertips brushed when he passed her the papers. "I'll have your dowry transferred to a bank account in your name. Here is a hundred pounds to get you started. It is a gift. I know you'll manage your inheritance well, but it isn't a great deal of money. If you do find yourself in difficulty..." He inhaled. "Please be careful out there."

"My needs are simple, Max. I'm not used to all this." She gestured vaguely to their opulent surroundings. "I don't deserve such luxuries. I wouldn't have the slightest idea what to do, and we both know I can't hold my tongue. I'd be a disaster of a duchess."

He stroked her cheek fondly. “You’d be my defiant wife, and I’d adore every moment spent clashing with you,” Max said wistfully. “But if this is what you want, little bird, then fly. I won’t try to cage you anymore.”

With that, Emma’s heart shattered completely. She stood rooted to the spot as Max brushed past her, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

Only then did she let the tears fall.

Her worst suspicions had been correct. He’d never truly wanted her. Not enough to fight for her. It was time for her to go.

Where, she didn’t know.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

The second morning she awoke alone in her musty bed, with an aching back from where the springs sagged in the middle, Emma truly regretted her decision to leave Max.

At Ardennes House, she could have had a permanent bed, instead of renting this inferior, temporary one.

She'd been a fool to turn down such luxury. Soft cotton sheets wound around Max's naked torso—

Don't think about it.

If she focused on what she'd given up, Emma would lose the courage to continue moving toward what she needed. Yes, this was grim, but it wasn't forever.

She tugged on her woolen dress, fastening the skirt around her waist and buttoning the jacket to her throat. Smudges of dust still darkened the hem in places, where she'd attempted to clean it yesterday. Despite washing herself with a cloth and soap wetted with water from the chipped pitcher and basin, Emma felt as if a film of dirt clung to her skin.

A pang of longing for a hot bath whenever she wanted one caught her off-guard.

“To think, I could have been a duchess,” she muttered, surveying her cramped room. “Yet, I chose this.”

There was no time to rue what might have been.

Her throat closed around a tangle of emotions. Regret. Envy. Pride. Emma shook it off and bent to check that her money was well hidden below the loose floorboard she'd found the day she moved in, then went down to a disappointing breakfast of a single egg and stale bread. The ladies' boarding house was a respectable establishment, but no more comfortable than Mrs. Quarrie's had been.

"Good morning, Mr. Gill," she said with determined cheer upon entering the shop, dropping her umbrella into the holder.

"Morning, Miss Willis. Would you mind restocking the cart? Once the weather clears, we'll try putting it out again."

Emma took a steadying breath. If she must live with the consequences of her decision, she needed a higher wage to support herself.

"Now that I've demonstrated my reliability and value to the store, Mr. Gill, I was hoping for a wage increase. You see, my financial circumstances have changed, and I cannot make ends meet on three hours of work each day."

"The owner won't countenance it," he said without looking up from the ledger where he was reviewing the previous day's sales. "Moreover, the shop can't financially support a second full-time employee. Perhaps in a few months my uncle would consider it."

"But I know the trick of putting out this cart helped to boost our receipts," she protested. Not to mention how her clever window display had increased the number of curious customers drawn inside to browse. "I can prove it."

"Yes, but it isn't as though we're going to give you all the profits, Miss Willis." He placed his hat upon his head and

thrust his arms into the sleeves of a weatherproof coat. “I am off to evaluate a collection. Some toff selling off his grandfather’s library. I expect there to be a number of interesting rare books to acquire. I’ll be back before your shift ends. If the weather clears, remember to put the cart outside.”

The bell jingled merrily, a striking counterpart to Mr. Gill’s dismissiveness.

Emma busied herself by taking the opportunity to examine the accounts book in her employer’s absence. What she discovered made her see red.

“What a lying cheat!”

She slammed the leather-bound ledger closed. “An eight-per-cent average daily sales increase would more than pay for a few more hours each week. The greedy git.”

If she were the Duchess of Ardennes, no one would dare to take advantage of her this way.

There was being useful, and there was being used. This was the latter.

Teaching hadn’t been fulfilling, and dusting books was even less so. Mr. Gill didn’t need her; anyone could wield a duster. The sense of belonging she’d felt while working here wasn’t real.

Remembering Max’s crestfallen confusion when she turned down his proposal brought tears to her eyes now. For years, she’d wanted him to notice her—but when he did, she panicked and ran away. Emma had been so dedicated to protecting herself from rejection that she’d inflicted the same pain on the man she...

...*loved.*

Emma would not cry. She was angry and aching and all she wanted to do was fling herself into Max's arms and hear him say, *Everything will be alright, darling*. She missed his teasing. He'd have cracked a joke about stingy shopkeepers and made the whole situation moot by buying the entire bookstore for her, purely out of spite.

Max supported her dreams, no matter how outlandish or expensive, yet she'd been too blind to see that he expressed his love lavishly. He was simply too shy to say it with words.

As soon as Mr. Gill returned, she would go find Max and tell him how sorry she was for being such a stubborn fool.

One o'clock came and went. Her stomach rumbled. The bell over the door rang only a handful of times. She recorded two modest sales. There simply weren't many people out shopping on a soggy spring day.

By midafternoon, Emma was so hungry she thought she might faint.

She found a board on a string with a clock painted on it, set the moveable hands to indicate she would return within a quarter-hour, and hung it in the window facing outward. There was a tea house across the street where she could procure a sandwich.

Outside, she realized she had no way to lock the shop. Tears scalded her eyelids. Cold rain dripped down the back of her neck. Emma had never been so hungry in her life, but she couldn't leave the store standing open and unguarded.

What was she going to do?

"Miss Willis?"

"Max?" Emma whirled. Sure enough, there was her beloved duke, striding down the street, a full head taller than

any other man around. Unforgettable. Her heart skipped a beat.

“I wondered if I would find you here. I meant to come earlier, but...” He trailed off, looking as if he was torn between scooping her into his arms and turning back the way he’d come. “I was unsure of my welcome.”

“I am so happy to see you, Max,” she said in a rush. He scooped her into his arms. “This business of making my way in the world is hard,” she mumbled into his shoulder, breathing in the damp wool scent of his clothes. She didn’t want to be alone. She wanted to be loved.

His chest moved in what had to be a chuckle.

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.” But then again, so was she. Emma locked her arms around his waist and buried her face in his jacket to hide it. With a rueful snuffle, she said, “I’m ridiculous, Max. I’ve been so afraid that you would send me away that I chose to remove myself before you could reject me.”

“Why would you think I’d send you anywhere, Em? Isn’t marriage a rather permanent condition?”

“So was motherhood, in theory, yet my mum left me with my grandmother as soon as I was weaned. She needed the work, but she also didn’t want a baby.” She shrugged. “My father only took responsibility for me after I was orphaned and there was no one else to care for me. His pride wouldn’t let him be the kind of man who let his by-blow go to the workhouse, but he didn’t exactly want me. Nor did your father want me for his ward, and definitely not you.”

His arms tightened around her.

“Not as a ward, darling.” Max lowered his lips to hers in a gentle, reassuring kiss so soft and sweet that Emma melted. “As a woman, yes. From the very beginning, though you were too young when we initially met, and I was too stupid to understand what I felt for you then.” Another kiss, this one sensual enough to curl her toes. “I didn’t mean to chase you away, then or now. I love you. I came looking for you to tell you that, in hopes it might change your mind. I respect your decision, but I wasn’t ready to give up and let you walk away that easily.”

Emma sniffed. The world blurred. “Oh, Max. I was locking up the shop with every intention of coming home. Well, I admit I was going to get lunch first. I’m starving. I’ve missed you. I want to wake up in your arms every morning for the rest of my life—”

He cut her off with another kiss.

“Miss Willis! What the devil are you doing?”

She and Max turned to find Mr. Gill hastening up the street, his coattails flapping at his knees and an angry red tinge on his scowling face.

“This is why women make terrible employees! Such wanton behavior reflects poorly on the shop. What will people think?”

“Perhaps had you returned before my shift ended, as promised, I might not have felt compelled to close the shop and seek my long-overdue lunch!” Emma declared.

“Since when does kissing a strange man in broad daylight qualify as sustenance?”

“You misunderstand the situation, Mr...”

“Gill. I manage the store.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Gill. You may address me as Lord Tremaine, Duke of Ardennes and you will address my future wife with the utmost respect.”

“Duke?” He glanced nervously at Emma and gulped. “Wife?”

“I wish to receive the money I’ve earned and exit your employment immediately, Mr. Gill. While I have enjoyed working in a bookshop, I find a different future beckons. His Grace will be occupying all of my time for the foreseeable future.”

She looped her arm through Max’s elbow and smiled up at him. Max patted her arm.

“Perhaps you should start your own bookshop, my sweet.” A shaft of sunlight cut across his face, highlighting his handsome features. The clouds overhead cleared, and a rainbow suddenly brightened the entire street. “Since we’re already here, I propose we visit the modiste and have you fitted for a wedding gown. If you’ll do me the honor of marrying me as soon as the banns can be posted.”

“Yes, Max. But first, food!” Emma exclaimed, pressing her free hand over her stomach.

Max laughed.

“I know just the place.”

They sauntered away, arm-in-arm, leaving Mr. Gill sputtering in outraged astonishment.

EPILOGUE

Emma, three years later

“Do you have a copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*?”

“Indeed, we do, Lady Pindell.” Emma crooked her finger. “Emma’s Literary Emporium carries all the classics, both educational and entertaining. That particular book sells quickly, which is probably why you didn’t see it on the shelf. Let me check the stock room.”

The lady in question followed her closely.

“Aren’t you worried you’ll spoil the children with entertainment, rather than emphasizing education?”

Emma whirled on her heel.

“No. I firmly believe that children learn best through storytelling. Have you ever listened to a young child? They are full of imagination and curiosity. If we can harness that to the dull mechanics of literacy, we shall raise generations of enthusiastic readers. After all, a child who never opens a book can’t learn anything from its contents.”

Mrs. Pindell’s eyebrows rose. Emma tried to rein in her enthusiasm.

“Allow me to rephrase. If I did not believe books were an enriching experience for children, I wouldn’t have opened a bookshop dedicated to literature specifically for them. I could spend my time on any other pursuit I fancied, but this one is dear to my heart. For what it’s worth, the Queen herself agrees with me.”

Emma had never expected to become friendly with Victoria, but it turned out that Society was far more forgiving of her outspokenness than she’d ever dared to hope.

Across the noisy, crowded store, she spied her very tall husband as he chased after their very small, very quick, eighteen-month-old daughter.

“Samantha Tremaine, get back here, you scamp!”

A squeal of delight echoed through the room. Emma bent awkwardly to scoop up her daughter and bussed a kiss to her chubby cheeks. Samantha kicked her burgeoning stomach. Wincing, Emma handed the little girl off to her father.

“Oof. Getting kicked fore and aft is not nice.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “That one is going to run circles around the gents one day.”

“And us.”

“Your Grace, if you don’t mind, I’ve a gift to choose and I’m in a hurry.” Lady Pindell’s lips twitched in an indulgent smile.

“Yes, of course. Mr. Gill will assist you.”

Emma brought the expensively bound volume to the front counter, where she handed it to her former boss to ring up and wrap in paper. After his uncle’s bookstore closed due to low

sales, she'd leased the space and hired him to run her bookstore.

What she originally intended to be a charity shop partially supported by sales had succeeded beyond her wildest expectations. The dusty, dour leather volumes waiting futilely to find homes among aspiring erudites had been replaced with shelves full of colorful children's literature, toys, and an eclectic selection of books Emma happened to enjoy. Works by Jane Austen sat alongside more adventurous fare by Henrik Ibsen and Elizabeth Gaskell.

The combination of playful items for children and adults alike had proven to be a winning business. Even if Max were to go bankrupt tomorrow, Emma would still be able to support her family. Her work was a source of pride and purpose, and Max never complained about how much of her time it absorbed. If anything, he liked to embarrass her by bragging about her success.

Mostly, she left the day-to-day management to Gill, for she had more important priorities—such as keeping Samantha's wiggly little body from toppling off the counter where her father had placed her.

“No testing the gravity,” she scolded.

“Only her papa's patience,” Max grumbled affectionately. “Are you ready for lunch?”

“More than ready.” She was always hungry during this stage of pregnancy, although she could rarely eat very much. “The afternoon clerk will be here at one to relieve you for your midday break.”

Emma, having experienced the unfairness of poor management, ensured that she always had sufficient, well-paid

staff to cover the store during its operating hours.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And stop with the ‘your grace’ nonsense,” she ordered, not that he would listen. Not once since her marriage had he failed to address her formally.

“I have found just the place,” Max said with pride, tucking Samantha into the crook of his arm. “You’ll love it. Last time we were there, I believe you declared it the best ham sandwich in all of London.”

Emma laughed. Max loved to tease her by making a reservation at the tea shop where she’d wolfed down her lunch that day after confronting Mr. Gill on the street. Every time he made this joke, she claimed it was the best she’d ever eaten, despite the fare being rather mediocre. Unexciting food served both of their stomachs better than finer dining whenever they were obliged to ride in the carriage.

He drew her close and kissed her brazenly, in full view of anyone who cared to look. She threaded her hands through his hair and smiled against his mouth when Max whispered, “And I shall have you for dessert.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Lomax is the bestselling author of historical & contemporary romance. She also writes angsty new adult fantasy romance under the pen name Joline Pearce.

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THE DUKE'S ARTFUL DILEMMA

BEVERLEY OAKLEY

Selina's charade as her brother's artistic front takes a dangerous turn when the enigmatic Duke of Chauncy commissions a portrait of himself, leading Selina down a treacherous path of intrigue and forbidden love.

CHAPTER
ONE

So *this* was the artist whose ability to render an exceptional likeness underpinned Chauncy’s plan to protect the Prince Regent?

Angus Conway, Duke of Chauncy, hid his reservations as he welcomed Edward Boothe to his grand ancestral home. “You have a reputation as an artist of exceptional accuracy, Mr. Boothe—”

“You are too kind, Your Grace.”

Chauncy narrowed his eyes. He disliked being interrupted, and he disliked being taken advantage of, for the young man had seen fit to *bring his wife*?

“But speed is as important as accuracy,” he went on grimly as two footmen carried Mr. and Mrs. Boothe’s trunk upstairs.

Chauncy had expected a vibrant, energetic young man, but Edward Boothe’s myopic blue eyes, straw-colored curls in need of barbering, and weak chin seemed just the physical manifestations of his lackluster bearing.

Suddenly, Chauncy was filled with foreboding. In two weeks, Chauncy, and the nation, would depend upon Edward Boothe—with his ability to wield his pencil like a saber—to

identify three plotters suspected of the recent failed assassination attempt upon the future king George IV.

Hopefully, it would happen in time to foil the villains' next outrage.

“Naturally, Your Grace,” murmured the young man, his pale face flushing.

“And Mrs. Boothe, I hope you will be comfortable. Please don't feel the need to stay amongst us if you—er—feel the need to retire.” Chauncy's frown deepened. What had his cousin Beth told him? That Mrs. Boothe had not been seen in public for some years due to an affliction that kept her confined to her chambers.

Locked up, Beth had said, her kind-heartedness preventing her from calling the woman a lunatic.

And Boothe had brought his mad wife to Chauncy House when such important work was to be done?

Not that Chauncy had divulged to the artist the real reason for this commission.

“You are kind, Your Grace,” Mrs. Boothe murmured. With her head lowered demurely, it was impossible to see her face. Chauncy imagined she was trying to conceal the glint of madness in her eyes and hoped he would not encounter her wandering the corridors at odd times.

He wondered if he should charge one of the servants with keeping her under surveillance.

“When would you like the first sitting, Your Grace?”

“Midday tomorrow.”

Mr. Boothe nodded. “Where will I set up my easel?”

“In the long saloon. Delves, my butler, will show you.”

“Perhaps the conservatory would offer better light.”

Chauncy jerked his head to the right. The little wife was offering an opinion on a matter that did not concern her? He sent her a quelling look, which was wasted, for she barely raised her head. All he could see was her chin and mouth. Not deformed, by any means, but there must be some reason she would not look at him. He was about to respond when Mr. Boothe said hurriedly, “The better the light, the better the portrait, Your Grace.”

Chauncy raised his shoulders in a gesture of concession. “I wish the portrait to be as truthful as possible so, if the better light of the conservatory will facilitate this, the conservatory it is.”

When the door of the suite to which they'd been escorted closed behind them, Selina smiled for the first time.

“We've done it, Edward. The Duke has allowed me to stay.” She threw her arms wide and breathed out, all the tension that had built up over the six hours of their carriage journey through the flat Norfolk fens draining away. “All will be well, now, for with the duke's patronage, our future is assured.”

Edward turned on his sister. “Why must you always speak out of turn, Selina?” he demanded. “The duke did not like having his plans altered. Certainly not by a *woman*.”

Selina ignored him, placing her reticule on the single iron bed in the antechamber before turning back to her brother.

Edward would, of course, occupy the sumptuous canopied four-poster in the adjoining room.

“And why must you always look so hangdog, Edward?” she returned, her enthusiasm dented. “I thought you might be a little more charming to His Grace than you are at home with me and poor Anna. Lord Chauncy’s commission could be the first of a string of requests for likenesses from wealthy patrons.”

“Freedom from financial worry... Wouldn’t that be a blessing?” Edward muttered before returning his glower to her. “But, Selina, it was clear Lord Chauncy did not take kindly to being told where he was to be painted. I’m sure there’s just as much light in the saloon as will be needed.”

“Possibly, Edward. But not the opportunity for me to observe the duke at close quarters from the other side of the conservatory glass if something goes amiss.” Selina bent to pull from their trunk her single fine evening gown. “If I cannot be by your side for some reason, of course, there has to be an alternative plan.” Holding the beaded pink overdress against herself, she did a twirl. “And, if all does go to plan and you find yourself more rich patrons amongst the company tonight, perhaps I’ll find a rich husband.” She smiled, anticipating her brother’s lack of humor as she added, “I’m not yet quite beyond the pale, Edward, even if you like to pretend I am.”

Edward merely harrumphed as he set out his painting equipment. “You damned any chance of a respectable marriage, my dear Selina, when you ran away with the gamekeeper and disgraced the family name. No one will marry a widow with that kind of scandal hanging about her. A penniless widow, at that.”

“The footman, Edward,” Selina corrected him, folding her gown carefully and putting it in the wardrobe. “Samuel was a footman, as you well know, God rest his sinning soul. And, as you also know, it is the talent of *this* penniless widow that kept a roof over his head, and now yours, Edward.” Selina stood beside her brother to examine the paints and brushes he’d laid out on the bed. She would need just pencil and paper to render the initial sketch while Edward pretended to do the preliminary work on the likeness. While Edward was an adept painter, and his watercolors and landscapes were sought after, it was Selina’s quick likenesses, done on paper with pencil or graphite, that had started to bring in the real money.

And that had led to the Duke of Chauncy’s invitation.

“Who do you suppose is the recipient of this likeness of our handsome duke? Do you think he is negotiating a magnificent marriage with a foreign princess?” Selina contemplated the duke’s handsome, saturnine features, adding, “Or do you think he’s in the market for a wife here on English soil?”

Her brother sent her a narrow look. “You forget yourself, Selina. You are decidedly out of the market. Since everyone believes you are Anna, not only are you supposedly mad, you are also supposedly married.”

CHAPTER
TWO

Chauncy hadn't realized he'd been day-dreaming until he was jerked back to the present by his cousin, Beth, who suddenly declared from her position by the fireplace, "I have tatted nearly one half of a collar, Chauncy, while you've been staring into the fireplace. If you're having second thoughts about going ahead with this marriage contract, then just say so."

His marriage?

Of course, Beth thought the entire reason for commissioning his portrait was to send it to Miss Harriet Blenkinthorpe.

Chauncy straightened. "It makes sense. Our northern estates lie side by side. And in thirty-two years, I've not found someone I'd rather wed."

"But has she? Could that be why Miss Blenkinthorpe is prevaricating, asking for your likeness instead of leaping at the chance of a title though, no doubt, that's what her mama is angling for."

"Miss Blenkinthorpe's request is entirely reasonable since we've not seen one another since we were children."

Beth laid down her handiwork and looked at her cousin. “If Miss Blenkinthorpe’s mama is pushing her into something she’s unsure about, it will prove most *impractical* when you fall madly in love with some other worthy—”

“Enough, Beth.” Chauncy ameliorated the interruption with a smile. “I’m more than ready to wed some nice, respectable young lady like Miss Blenkinthorpe, considering the number of times I’ve thought myself in love with damsels I could not marry. Now *that* was impractical.” He raised an eyebrow. “Not that I should hint at such things to you.”

“No, not to poor on-the-shelf-Beth who, at twenty-eight, knows nothing of life.” There was a surprisingly defensive edge to Beth’s tone as she went on, “And...it certainly *is* impractical to fall in love with women one is unable to marry.” Looking at him from above her handiwork, she went on, more urgently, “Oh, Chauncy, I do wonder if it was wise of you to invite Lord and Lady Saunders to this house party.”

Chauncy’s mouth dropped open. Beth was the sweetest, most demure and obedient young lady he knew. Could she really be hinting that she understood the relationship between himself and Catherine, Lady Saunders?

Past relationship, he amended.

He swallowed and said, carefully, “Lord Saunders has been my friend for more than a decade. He... knows everything there is to know about me, for I would keep no secrets from him.” He hesitated, then added brusquely, “Let us talk no more about the complicated relationships between men and women of which you clearly have no knowledge, Beth.”

Beth lowered her eyes. “Of course, Chauncy. I had no wish to overstep the bounds of propriety. It’s just—”

Chauncy didn't want to encourage her so said nothing, until his cousin whispered, "It's just that Lady Saunders asked me to give this to you."

Reluctantly, Chauncy took the wax-sealed paper Beth held out.

Another request to pay Catherine's gambling debts? Chauncy had studiously avoided being alone with Catherine since she and Saunders had arrived the previous day.

"So, perhaps there *are* merits to marriage with Miss Blenkinthorpe," Beth said, more brightly this time, but with an incisive look at Chauncy. "Though I do wish you'd marry someone on the basis of love. However, since your mind is clearly made up, no doubt you'd rather talk of matters other than marriage."

Chauncy offered his cousin a bland smile.

As he'd been considering whether to divulge to Catherine's husband the extent of her gambling addiction, which Chauncy had financed for more than a year, talk of marriage *was* a welcome diversion.

It was certainly a diversion from his preoccupation these past weeks to thwart a feared upcoming attempt on the Prince Regent's life.

Miss Harriet Blenkinthorpe's request for a likeness had been auspicious.

For it had come the very day Chauncy's colleague, Sir Simeon, had lamented the difficulty of positively identifying three primary suspects he'd learned had been invited to Lady Rushworth's August Ball.

A ball which the Prince Regent was also attending.

If Mr. Boothe proved quick and accurate in drawing Chauncy's likeness, the young artist would also be included on the guest list.

If he could draw Chauncy to his satisfaction during this house party, then he could draw the three suspects. Quickly and discreetly. That was all that was required.

Chauncy stirred himself for Beth had spoken once more and he'd only just caught the last of her words, causing him to say with great affection, if not complete truth, "Why, Beth, of course someone will want your portrait painted. I think you're the most beautiful woman in all of East Anglia."

"Well, I've caught you out in a lie, my dear Chauncy, since that is what you used to tell Gwyneth."

"I did?" Chauncy paused to reflect on Beth's late older sister. Gwyneth had not been a beauty, but her sweet eccentricity had endeared her to him. While she'd scandalized her family for speaking without thought, Chauncy had admired his unconventional cousin's candor. "Poor Gwyneth. If the gentlemen had only been able to see past her birthmark—"

"Her dowry compensated for that, and you know it, Chauncy!" Beth retorted. "It was the fact she spoke her mind. That's what the gentlemen couldn't see past. Anyway, it's too late now." She sighed. "But it's not too late for you to reconsider this marriage to Miss Blenkinthorpe. No, Chauncy, Miss Blenkinthorpe is too bland for you." She regarded her cousin thoughtfully. "You need to find a wife who will keep you on your toes. Someone who is sufficiently beautiful to please your discerning eye, but who is quick-witted and who won't allow themselves to be dictated to."

"A recalcitrant wife? Oh, I don't think so, Beth."

His cousin grinned. “Semantics, Chauncy! Recalcitrant? Disobedient? It doesn’t matter what she is or isn’t. Just as long as she isn’t dull. For I can assure you that’s my greatest fear regarding you taking Miss Blenkinthorpe as your wife. That she will obediently keep her mouth shut and, quite frankly, bore you to death.”

CHAPTER
THREE

Slowly Selina circumnavigated the light-filled conservatory as if she were admiring the exotic fruits and flowers.

“A little to the right, Edward,” she murmured. “Yes, two inches more. And angle the easel. That’s right. When I am at your side, pretending interest, His Grace mustn’t see my hands. Then, if anyone else enters, I can leave and observe from outside.” She pointed to a tree behind which she could conceal herself. At the very worst, she could stand and peer through the fork between two branches while she sketched.

Not that that was likely to happen, but one had to be prepared. Selina had always pretended to mix Edward’s paints at his side—and Samuel’s when he’d been alive and parading, also, as an artist—while quickly drawing, but the only reason the men in Selina’s life had prospered was because she factored in all contingencies.

“And is there anything else I can do that would satisfy madam?”

“No need for the sarcasm. I was not the one who got themselves into hot water by promising something I could not deliver. You just assumed I’d come to your rescue when you accepted this commission.”

Edward glared. “You want commissions as much as I do. And my reputation as a painter does not depend on you, Selina.”

“As a landscape painter, Edward; no, it does not. But as a portraitist, you cannot capture a likeness as I can, and that is why I am here. No need to snap. Oh, Lord Chauncy!”

Caught by surprise, Selina dipped a curtsy, wishing she’d left a few minutes earlier, as planned. She hoped the duke had heard nothing of their exchange.

Besides which, the less the duke observed her, the better. With Edward’s real wife not having been seen in public in five years, there was bound to be speculation over what Anna Boothe was like.

How mad she really was.

Edward had tried to persuade Selina not to attend the small dinner party the duke was holding tonight. He’d begged her to plead a megrim. If people saw that Selina, his supposed wife, was adept at table talk, he said, then Edward would be criticized for continuing to keep his real wife supposedly under lock and key. Not that Anna really was under lock and key, though her freedom was limited.

As was Selina’s. But this visit to Lord Chauncy was going to change all that. Selina wasn’t going to squander her one opportunity to wear the lovely gown she’d been refashioning each of these last three years since her widowhood. She intended to ensure Edward’s commission was the first of many. Edward would realize her worth and Selina would no longer be forced to molder away in the country like poor Anna.

Of course, Selina would also be wise to balance expectations and appear ‘just sufficiently mad enough’ that she’d not be considered an outright threat but could still go out and about with Edward. Still, that shouldn’t be hard. Being a little outspoken was enough to concern society. Ladies who spoke their minds were—quite frankly, Selina had realized to her cost—a danger to themselves.

“Mrs. Boothe.”

She rose slowly. Lord Chauncy eyed her cautiously. As if she were a creature as strange and exotic as the pineapple he was attempting to cultivate in his hothouse. Despite his striking looks, the breadth of his shoulders, and his disconcerting magnetism, Selina supposed he was little different from her late husband and her brother. He would tolerate an opinionated, outspoken woman as little as they.

“Your Grace.” She held his gaze because he was, to her surprise, still looking at her, a small furrow between his eyes, as if she did not match what he was expecting.

And Selina responded with a small thrill at his interest. Not interest that suggested he perhaps found her comely. But that he found her interesting.

Interesting, she supposed, because he thought her mad.

She felt Edward’s concerned stare and wavered between doing something that poor Anna might have done before Edward decided to entirely deny her any involvement in society—or whether to keep her head down.

She chose the latter, but not before matching his Grace’s stare with a long, hard look of her own.

Why not? If he could stare, so could she, and he’d not think anything of it other than that he was looking into the

eyes of a woman whose mind was with the fairies.

But, as she lowered her gaze, she could not resist a remark that not only came surprisingly from the heart but was indeed something poor Anna would have said.

“You have eyes I could drown in, Your Grace,” Selina murmured, staring pointedly now at the ground so that she could hide her smile as she felt Edward’s horror and embarrassment scorch her from a full three feet away.

CHAPTER
FOUR

“If I am to be seated opposite a mad woman and must make small talk, at least suggest how I might begin,” Beth said as they waited for their guests to gather in the drawing room prior to going in to dinner.

They were to be a table of eight, including Chauncy’s old friend, Lord Saunders, his wife, Catherine, and Catherine’s sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Piggott.

Chauncy frowned. “I cannot say, Beth, since she spoke barely ten words to me.”

“Ten? So more than simply, “Your Grace”? What exactly *did* she say?”

Chauncy’s mouth turned up as he told her, and Beth repeated the odd compliment with a giggle before saying, “I do think your eyes are your best feature, Chauncy, so I would hope Mr. Boothe does them justice. I think it must be very difficult to produce a likeness quite so true that one can recognize it as the person being drawn. Painters always have to flatter the subject.”

“Mr. Boothe’s honesty and accuracy is, apparently, what sets him apart. While I find him not particularly prepossessing, I am told that, as a portraitist, he is a master.”

“I daresay he doesn’t feel like smiling very often with a mad wife who says embarrassing things in public,” replied Beth. “He’d not know what she was going to come out with next, which is why I’m so interested in seeing how she conducts herself at dinner.”

“She’s not one of the Prince Regent’s menagerie to gawk at, Beth.”

“That is usually the caution I would make, Chauncy.” Beth’s eyes danced. “Don’t tell me you are not as intrigued as I to know what she will say when she is not ruled by convention like the rest of us. She will say what she thinks, I daresay. And does that make her mad? Or honest?”

It didn’t take long to find out.

Seated between Edward and Mr. Piggott, Selina was conscious of all eyes upon her. There was a nervous anticipation, as if word had gone around that she was some strange, wild creature who might say or do something to bring down the sky.

She was also conscious of Edward’s seething anger, which had not abated since her impulsive words of earlier. He’d taken her to task when they’d dressed for dinner. In fact, he’d tried outright to forbid her from making an appearance until she reminded him that her opportunities of observing the duke close up were rare enough. At the table, he’d be only three seats away.

“I promise I will speak only when spoken to, Edward, and I will use my few snatched opportunities to study the duke’s interesting physiognomy to commit to the paper you know I

carry at all times, which I will hide beneath the table,” she’d assured him.

“Meaning, you will be looking down; demure and compliant?”

“Whenever I am not being directly addressed, Edward. Yes! Now, I’m perfectly respectable, but I will need your help with the buttons at the back.”

Her earlier frustration with her brother was now replaced by sheer pleasure at feeling the weight and soft, silken texture of her exquisite gown as she stroked the pale pink overdress. It was the gown she was to have worn for her debut. Running away with Samuel had put paid to any opportunity to ever wear it.

By the time Samuel’s fortunes had been at their zenith—thanks to Selina’s efforts—he’d started to gamble away any of the funds his hardworking wife might have used to clothe herself in the manner to which she’d been born: the eighth child of a viscount of modest fortune but good social standing.

Samuel had not an artistic bone in his body, but he had charm. He knew how to draw the customers—vain women who desired a likeness. And Selina could whip up that likeness in an instant as she pretended to mix the paints at Samuel’s side. What Selina hadn’t realized for quite some time was the extent of Samuel’s charm, and how many of these women came back for ‘touch-ups’ when Selina was out.

Or perhaps Selina had been willfully blind. Yes, Selina had given up too much to accept that Samuel was straying, so it was only when she returned home one day to find screaming Mrs. Wylie half dressed, and Samuel dead in the bed of what the physician put down as apoplexy, that Selina accepted the extent of his philandering.

So, while Selina was now determined to do a marvelous job of the duke's likeness, which meant sufficient close observations, she did concede Edward's concerns. And, although she wouldn't admit it to Edward's face, she knew she had been too bold to have spoken to their host as she had. What woman would speak their admiration on a first acquaintance in such a bold manner?

But Selina had always found it easier to speak the truth. Easier, certainly, than to lie.

And the Duke of Chauncy truly was a magnificent specimen.

Nevertheless, tonight she would please her brother. She'd keep her head down, her eyes lowered, and her mouth shut.

"Mrs. Boothe, what do you think of Chauncy House?"

Selina blinked in surprise. They'd barely begun the first course and hard-eyed Lady Saunders was quizzing her in a surprisingly direct manner. Although well past her first flush of youth, the woman was still a beauty. But a scornful one with a hard mouth.

Selina raised her head and sent a serene smile around the table. "It is a magnificent testament to the many generations that have transformed a draughty castle into an impressive ancestral home." She caught Edward's look of relief before she lowered her eyes once more. Yes, she'd executed her duties, as promised. The tense expectation that had gripped the company had not been lost on her. Perhaps fame of her uncertain temperament had preceded her and they were eagerly waiting for her to disgrace her 'husband'. Well, she would not do that. Lady Saunders would be disappointed if she'd hoped for a colorful response.

Conversation resumed with various topics being discussed before Selina heard herself being addressed once again.

“Mrs. Boothe, might I compliment you on your evening dress? I’d love to know your opinion on mine? It was made for me in London for this season though, like you, I am fond of the flounces of five seasons ago.” Mrs. Piggott, a pale, freckled, though not entirely unattractive redhead, sent a pointed look at Selina’s clearly outmoded gown.

Selina frowned at the veiled insult. Mrs. Piggott was Lady Saunders’ sister; and Lord Saunders was a friend of the duke. Selina must temper her responses so as not to offend their host; despite Selina being highly offended by Mrs. Piggott’s unkind remark.

And it was prompted by malice, she knew. Selina had seen Mrs. Piggott and Lady Saunders sniggering in the corner of the drawing room earlier, in between glancing at Selina. At the time, Selina had dismissed the idea that they’d been gossiping about her, but now she knew they’d not only been talking behind her back, they’d been disparaging her.

Selina glanced at Edward, but he did not even appear to notice that Mrs. Piggott had blatantly insulted her by insinuating that her gown was five seasons old. Which it was.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled as she murmured, “You are very kind, Mrs. Piggott. And as for your lovely gown, rose sarsenet will compliment most women,” before she lowered her head, adding as she carefully carved a piece of beef, “unless they are a redhead.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

The silence was immediate. Selina pretended not to notice, finishing her mouthful and then murmuring to Edward, “With all the compliments flying about the table, I think His Grace’s cook deserves special congratulations, don’t you?”

Edward stared at her, not replying, as if he wished to obliterate her. Then the silence was broken by Lady Saunders, clearing her throat and saying, as the pudding was brought in, “Mrs. Boothe, you must be honored that Lord Chauncy has chosen your husband to paint his portrait. And I applaud you for your bravery in accompanying him when I believe you haven’t left your home in five years. You must find the world a strange place.”

Selina caught the look of concern Lord Saunders directed at his wife, as if wishing to caution her against playing with something dangerous. She noticed, also, that a rather manic smile was playing about Mrs. Piggott’s lips.

Selina shook her head and widened her eyes. “Not the world,” she said, slowly, “but the people in it.”

“And I believe you rarely step outside your—”

“Caroline, that’s enough.”

Mr. Piggott muttered the admonition to his wife before quiet Miss White, His Grace's cousin, changed the subject in a bright tone of voice, saying, "Mr. Boothe, Chauncy has been painted by better-known painters but had heard you are especially gifted. I wonder if I might observe you at work. I believe you will paint Chauncy tomorrow in the conservatory. Would you consider me a terrible burden if I sit quietly in a corner? I promise I'll not say a word to distract you."

What could Edward do but accept?

Meaning Selina would have to do her best at rendering His Grace's likeness from outside the conservatory.

But she would manage. Yes, Selina always found a way around every difficulty.

"Mr. Boothe, I believe you are not the only painter in the family. Your sister's late husband was a painter, was he not?" Mrs. Piggott was at it again.

Selina put down her knife and fork and sent her brother a considered look. How would he answer this one? How would he refer to the sister who'd caused the family such scandal?

And did Mrs. Piggott mean to cause Edward embarrassment?

Oh, Selina was not embarrassed by her poor adolescent judgement for what was done was done.

"He did paint, that is true, Mrs. Piggott." Edward bent his head to concentrate on his food, but Lady Saunders asked, "Was he a painter of likenesses, like you?"

"I taught him what I knew when he showed promise."

Selina cleared her throat. "But Samuel had no real talent," she cut in. "Not like my husband. What delicious syllabub!"

Her efforts to deflect the conversation were unsuccessful, for Mrs. Piggott remarked, “Samuel? Ah, yes, that was his name. The footman.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Selina glanced up to see His Grace regarding Mrs. Piggott with fascination before focusing his stare upon Edward.

Her indignation rose. Edward came of aristocratic stock, but their saturnine host clearly did not see fit to spare the embarrassment of a mere sixth son of a viscount. He was observing proceedings as if they were a sideshow.

Selina had to stifle the urge to hurl her plate at his handsome face.

Though that would probably amuse him even more.

However, since everyone considered Selina mad, she supposed she could do what she wished.

“Your sister, Miss Selina Boothe, was about to be presented, too, was she not?” Mrs. Piggott dabbed at her mouth with a smug little smile before adding, “But we should change the subject, shouldn’t we?”

She glanced around the table while Selina, seething, wondered how such a woman felt she could get away with saying such poisonous things.

She cleared her throat. If Edward wasn’t going to stand up for her, Selina had no choice but to do it herself. “My sister-in-law, Miss Selina Boothe, was such a gifted, winning young woman,” she said, sweetly, “that her parents quickly forgave her. And it was not long before her husband—yes, the footman—soon made his fortune,” she dipped her head, adding unwisely, “eclipsing the talent of Miss Selina’s brother.”

Selina patted Edward's hand, then said, "But he is dead, and your star has risen, my love."

Lord Saunders jerked forward. "You think this footman was a better painter than your husband?"

Selina heard the contempt in Lord Saunders' tone and realized she'd miscalculated. Glancing about the room, she said ingenuously, "Of course, they were both enormously gifted in their own way and my dear husband's extraordinary ability to render a likeness is the reason he is here. What a lovely ruby necklace you are wearing, Mrs. Piggott." Selina grasped at whatever she could to ameliorate her brother's seething rage.

But a glance at Mrs. Piggott suggested she was the one who needed ameliorating. And, lowering her eyes to her lap, Selina realized why. Hastily she tucked the excoriating likeness she'd sketched of the dreadful woman beneath her napkin, but it was too late.

"Ladies, shall we retire to the drawing room and leave the gentlemen to their port?" It was Miss White who had risen and, with her characteristically sweet smile, was signaling to the other three women to follow her.

With trembling fingers, Selina surreptitiously turned Mrs. Piggott's likeness face down upon the other drawing she'd effected during dinner: a very admirable likeness of the duke.

Then, avoiding eye contact with anyone, she followed the group up the corridor, alert for any opportunity to conceal the drawings somewhere she could retrieve them later.

But then Miss White was at her side, talking to Selina in a tone that suggested overdone calm, and Selina wondered if

she'd gone too far in pretending to be the madwoman they all thought her.

Little wonder that Miss White was now treating Selina with kid gloves.

Or perhaps that was because she sensed the bully in Mrs. Piggott who kept sending Selina glances of pure vitriol from her protuberant blue eyes.

For if Selina had a gift for committing a likeness, she also had a gift for a savage parody of a likeness, honing in on a large mouth or, in Mrs. Piggott's case, eyes like a confused sheep.

The few seconds of satisfaction Selina had felt when she'd executed the sketch were now swept away by concern. What if Mrs. Piggott demanded that Selina brandish the likeness for all to see?

Having Mrs. Piggott's likeness bandied about might be bearable. Embarrassing, certainly, but not a catastrophe. However, it would be disastrous if Selina's likeness of His Grace was put on public display amongst the ladies. Then the game really would be up, as Edward would phrase it.

"Mrs. Boothe, I hear you are gifted on the pianoforte. Would you be so kind as to play something for us?"

Selina was not as gifted as Anna, but her playing was passable.

With a smile, she nodded. In the few seconds that she'd been preparing to seat herself in a commodious chair with a cushion, she'd found the ideal hiding place to tuck away her three precious pieces of paper.

Hopefully, her playing would deflect the attention of Mrs. Piggott and Lady Saunders.

Selina enjoyed playing the pianoforte and could play from memory, which meant she could look out into the audience to check that her drawings were safe.

Music also calmed her—which she sorely needed right now. So she ignored Lady Saunders and Mrs. Piggott's impoliteness and instead focused on Schubert's lyrical, romantic melodies.

They transported her to a time when she'd been happy.

She hadn't regretted running away with Samuel in the beginning. Despite being barred from Boothe Hall, she and Samuel found a cottage and, thanks to Selina, he soon got painting commissions. That had made Edward jealous.

And, as news of 'Samuel's' talent had spread, a carriage had followed.

But Selina was only a woman, so the talent had to be advertised as Samuel's.

After Samuel died, having squandered the money Selina had earned, Selina had been forced to move in with Edward and Anna.

Edward had quickly advertised to the local neighborhood his 'charity' towards his sister in taking her in when she had nothing.

He had, just as quickly, taken advantage of both Selina's business mind as well as her talent.

But even though he relied on Selina, Selina was still dependent upon his goodwill.

Just as they were now both dependent upon the duke's goodwill.

So, would Edward forgive her for embarrassing him in front of so important and influential a person as His Grace? Edward was hoping for many more commissions to result from his work here and if word went around that his wife was a liability, then Selina's plan to accompany her brother on future commissions might not come to fruition.

By the time the final notes of her piece died away, the room was silent and Selina looked up.

Miss White was clapping politely, a smile of appreciation upon her pretty countenance.

Lady Saunders and Mrs. Piggott were also clapping politely.

A smile of satisfaction upon theirs.

And it took only a shift of perspective as Selina's gaze encompassed the smoking fireplace for her to understand why.

With a gasp she rose, her hand to her breast, causing Miss White to ask in concern, "Mrs. Boothe, are you all right?"

Selina forced her gaze away from the sight of her sketches now smoldering in the drawing room fireplace and managed a shaky smile.

"Music always touches me deeply," she replied, taking a seat, determined not to look at the evil sisters who'd managed to slip under their hostess's gaze. Not only had they destroyed the wickedly good sketch of Mrs. Piggott, they'd also destroyed Selina's preliminary sketch of the duke.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Boothe, I understand the sentiment only too well," said Miss White with touching sincerity before adding with concern, "Why, Mrs. Boothe, you're crying!"

CHAPTER
SIX

The tears were real, but they did not signify weakness.

Indeed, they'd proved a useful excuse for Selina to slip out of the room to compose herself. If she could locate His Grace's library, perhaps she'd find more paper to furnish Edward with the drawing of His Grace that was needed to shore up Edward's reputation and consequently their fortunes.

With a rapidly beating heart, Selina quietly turned the doorknob to the second room on the right. This, she had gleaned in casual conversation, was an annexe that led off the library.

Raising her candle high, she surveyed the room. All she needed was one sheet. Two would be preferable, but if Lord Chauncy had writing implements laid out on his desk, he'd surely not notice the absence of one sheet?

To her relief, not only had his lordship laid out writing implements, he'd set aside four sheets of paper for the correspondence he'd just begun.

Selina hurried across to the desk and glanced at the letter.

"Dear Sir Simeon,

I write to you with regard to Lady Rushworth's ball on August 14.

Rest assured that the plan to identify the three men currently under suspicion—

Selina felt a momentary pang. How wonderful it would be to attend an event such as Lady Rushworth's ball. Had Selina not been so impetuous and instead married a man of whom her parents approved, she might well have.

She could have made a fine marriage with 'Lady' prefixing her name. She could have had a wardrobe finer than Lady Saunders' or Mrs. Piggott's.

But it was too late for regrets. She'd made her bed... And right now, time was of the essence.

So, taking the two sheets of paper below the letter in progress, Selina carefully rolled them up and tucked them into her reticule before turning back to the door.

She would have been gone less than three minutes. No one would remark upon her absence or, hopefully, miss the paper.

Tomorrow, she would hide herself in the shrubs beside the conservatory, execute a hasty sketch of Lord Chauncy, finish the finer details that evening, and then the following morning, Edward could present his perfect likeness to his Grace.

Lord Chauncy would be delighted, Edward would be mollified—though of course he should be delighted, also—and Selina would be...

Well, Selina would simply return home to take up the mantle of scandalous widow, pestering Edward to take her with him whenever he had a sketch to execute.

“Is anyone there?”

Horrified to see the doorknob turn, Selina blew out the candle and froze in the center of the room.

The moon was under a cloud and in the inky darkness she could not see whoever approached, though she could hear the stealthy tread across the carpet and the faint protest of a floorboard.

But she had been in this situation before. Hiding. She knew what to do.

So, she regulated her breathing as best she could. Soft and shallow. He wouldn't hear her; for she knew it was a man.

And she knew exactly which man it was. She could smell the sandalwood and citrus overtones unique to Lord Chauncy and which she'd noted when she first met him. Selina's senses were highly attuned to a handsome man.

Just as Lord Chauncy's senses seemed attuned to a foreign presence in the room.

Yet he said nothing as he advanced slowly, stopping when he was within a hair's breadth of Selina. She could hear his breathing now. Louder than hers. She could feel the faint tickle of his breath against the top of her head.

Selina swallowed. She would not run and she would not declare herself. Perhaps His Grace would simply turn about and leave the room.

It was possible.

But of course, it was improbable. He knew someone was in his study and he would investigate.

In a moment, she would be exposed. Embarrassed, humiliated, and no doubt lambasted when he learned that

she'd stolen from their host. He might even order Edward to leave his home, with Selina in tow.

Selina had heard that his Lordship had a volatile temper on occasion.

But he would decide.

So she waited.

Tensing when she felt his hand brush across the top of her head before it contoured her cheek.

Slowly.

Exploring.

With interest.

She drew in her breath, about to swat his hand away in indignation.

Until it touched her breast.

Now she did gasp.

But she did not move.

In the inky darkness, he had no more idea what part of her he was touching than she had of anything.

She only knew that the brush of his hand upon the swell of flesh above her bodice created an extraordinary sensory delight that communicated itself to the core of her being.

She bent slightly to increase the contact, not caring that her breathing was louder and more labored. That it communicated her enjoyment.

But despite her slight shift in position, she remained still.

And he remained standing slightly away from her. An alien being in the darkness with a touch that seemed to infuse her

parched soul with the lifeblood it had lacked these long years of widowhood.

And then suddenly she was alone.

His hands no longer roamed, and she felt his withdrawal like an icy chill across her skin, leaving her yearning for an intimacy that was now a distant memory.

He stepped back; the floorboard registering his shift in weight.

Selina didn't move. She barely dared breathe.

But she felt devastation as his soft tread towards the door indicated that his exploration was at an end.

When the door clicked shut, Selina slowly exhaled.

After another minute had passed, she drew in one long, sustaining lungful of air, pushed her shoulders back, and forced courage into her return to the drawing room.

The warmth and chatter hit her like something physical as she entered, but no one registered her return.

She wove amongst the furniture, past Lord Chauncy's chair, to find her own.

He did not look up from his conversation with Lord Saunders.

And as Selina joined a desultory conversation between her brother and Mr. and Mrs. Piggott, she noted that Lord Chauncy did not glance in her direction for even a moment.

It was as if the episode in his study had been a mere figment of her imagination.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Selina spent a restless night tormented by fears of failure.

If she failed to create a perfect likeness of Lord Chauncy there may be no more commissions.

But chiefly, her restlessness was over what Lord Chauncy might do about the woman who had breached his private sanctuary.

Would he demand to know her intentions?

Cast her from his house?

However, nothing in his look at breakfast the following morning suggested Lord Chauncy had wasted a moment thinking about Selina or what her presence in his study might mean.

Until.

One split second across a platter of steaming haddock was all it took.

One fleeting, barely intercepted look of smoldering interest before His Grace responded to Lord Saunders' question regarding their expedition later that day.

Had Selina really been gazing at him, and if so, what might have been written on her features?

She was not a lovelorn miss out for adventure.

But how strange that since that brush of his hand upon her breast, her body had felt so full of longing.

Selina hadn't felt longing in years. Oh yes, she'd longed to leave Boothe House which felt more like a prison.

But Selina had felt little physical yearning since she'd been seventeen and her body had been on fire for handsome Samuel. He'd eagerly encouraged her interest by suggesting the wicked assignations behind the stables that had led to her ruin.

After Edward had caught them and threatened to tell their father, Selina had agreed—against her better judgement—to run away with Samuel the following night.

However, during her widowhood, Selina's conduct had been impeccable.

Samuel had died with a reputation as a man of great talent who'd squandered his wealth, but since many in the district had benefited from his profligacy, Selina had been accorded a modicum of respect she worked hard to safeguard.

And she was not about to risk that by throwing either herself—or longing looks—at any handsome eligible gentleman who crossed her orbit.

Not that Lord Chauncy was eligible. He was an aristocrat far above her on the social ladder. Selina was a daughter of a mere viscount. And a somewhat scandalous widow, at that.

Besides, Lord Chauncy was in the midst of contracting a match. The likeness he'd commissioned was for that very purpose.

But the look he sent her over that plate of steaming haddock made her throat dry and her breath race as she held it for just a split second longer than she ought.

And then Miss White was rising, pushing back her chair, and saying brightly to the ladies, "Shall we take a turn about the gardens?"

Selina thought this an excellent idea. Not only would it quell her agitation, it would afford her the opportunity to solidify her plan of concealment for when her brother set up his easel in the conservatory to paint His Grace.

Though perhaps it would be sensible to plead a megrim so she could slip away with her purloined paper and pencil and leave the ladies to their walk.

Selina would be less constrained if she was alone.

Smiling at Miss White, she offered her excuses and headed toward her bedchamber.

A little later, glad of the good weather, Selina nestled against the trunk of a plane tree and a border of shrubs.

His Grace sat upon a bench inside the glass walled conservatory with Edward angled to the left, affording Selina clear access to do her work.

Not just to run her pencil over the paper, but to really observe his lordship in repose with him none the wiser.

Starting from the faintly curling dark hair at his crown, following the line of his forehead above clear, intelligent eyes, and then his straight, Roman nose, and his slightly full lips,

Selina felt the intimacy of her project like she never had before.

Now she was the one exploring Lord Chauncy, as he had explored Selina the night before. But she could do it at leisure and in depth.

She swallowed as her pencil shadowed the hollows of his cheeks, tracing the delicacy of his mouth.

He carried himself with an air of entitlement. His look communicated the same.

And she reminded herself that he was a man who would be denied nothing.

And that men like that were dangerous, for they took with impunity, and what had occurred last night was nothing more than a duke's passing whim.

And that's all Selina was. The duke's passing fancy.

Selina paused, her pencil just above the firm jawline she'd sketched. She had to cast aside thoughts like that to focus on the task at hand which was to render as realistic a likeness of their host in as short a time frame as possible so that she could slip back to her room and then re-emerge for luncheon as someone who really had been suffering an indisposition.

As her eyes returned to the scene in the conservatory, she caught Edward's stern look and remembered her duty. Speed was of the essence.

There was no time for daydreaming. The duke was to be married. He had no more real interest in her than if she'd been some wild creature from the menagerie at the Tower of London. She had to remind herself of this. Again.

Quickly, Selina communicated what she saw through the glass to the paper that was resting flat and steady on a book of poetry she'd brought along for the task.

Then she held it away from herself to compare the real man with the picture she'd drawn.

And was satisfied.

Lord Chauncy looked every bit the handsome nobleman.

Yes, she would need to make slight alterations when under less duress, but she was satisfied.

Carefully, she rolled up the drawing, securing it with a stone exactly where she and Edward had agreed. He could access it with an arm stretched through the partly open conservatory window, which was much safer than if Selina was detained with it in her possession on her return to the house.

Selina must have been successful at convincing everyone that her absence was due to a megrim, for as she made her way along a corridor towards the guest wing, Lord Chauncy himself questioned Selina on the state of her health with a look of sympathy.

But her suspicions were on alert.

Was he afraid she might fly into a bout of insanity if his cousin had communicated the fact Selina had pleaded a megrim?

She stopped, while Mrs. Piggott and her sister passed by, noses in the air, obviously believing they had put her firmly in her place by burning her drawings. They halted a little distance

away, pretending to talk while darting barbed looks in her direction.

“My bed was the restorative I needed,” Selina told Lord Chauncy. “Other than a short bout of pain in my head, I have never felt better and am greatly looking forward to this evening.”

She sent a suspicious look at Mrs. Piggott, who was, no doubt, eager to point out any suggestion of insanity displayed by Selina. However, Selina suspected Mrs. Piggott’s pride would prevent her telling His Grace explicitly about the offensive likeness she’d drawn of her.

Lord Chauncy smiled, his eyes raking her appreciatively from the top of her head to the tips of her slippers. “In that case,” he said, “we are in for some lively conversation.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Selina's heart was full of happy expectation as she dressed for dinner in her one beautiful evening gown, which she'd artfully trimmed with pink and cream bows.

Edward would have collected the likeness she had drawn of Lord Chauncy from the agreed hiding place. He might even smile and compliment her work. That would be a welcome change.

At least he, like Selina, must be feeling similarly light-hearted with relief, she thought.

Until Edward entered the room.

Focusing a troubled gaze upon her, her brother asked, "Where is the portrait, Selina? I asked you to leave it for me beneath the stone we agreed upon in the shrubbery so I could set my mind at rest that you had indeed done what was asked of you."

Edward always used that accusatory tone when he was anxious.

"I put it exactly where I said I would, so you could collect it when you finished your sketching session."

"It was not there."

Selina frowned, not yet worried. Edward had obviously not conducted a proper search.

“No, Selina, it was not there. I scoured the area. Were you careless? Could the wind have carried it away?”

Selina stared at her brother. Her breath came faster and then she had to support herself with a hand on the back of the chair by the little writing desk as she whispered, “We agreed on the spot, Edward. I put it just beyond the partly open conservatory window. I put a rock on it to hold it, but it was exactly where we *both* agreed I would leave it.”

“Well, I do not have my drawing of Lord Chauncy.” His nostrils flared, and he closed his eyes a moment as he said, “A foraging animal or the wind has carried it away. Without this commission we are done for, Selina.”

Selina hurried back to the conservatory. It was madness to be outdoors in her evening gown, but nothing mattered except finding her sketch.

Edward couldn't have looked properly. He must have mistaken her instructions.

She was confident of finding it where she'd left it.

Except it wasn't there.

A thorough search of the shrubbery and the near location yielded nothing, and now she would have to return to her brother empty-handed.

“Mrs. Boothe, you look distressed.”

Selina jerked her head up at the mellifluous tones of her host.

“Your Grace,” she said, inclining her head. “I...I needed a little air before spending the evening indoors. It's a lovely

day.”

It was not, in fact, a lovely day, as a spatter of fine rain drops gave the lie to her incautious statement.

Lord Chauncy took her elbow and shepherded her to shelter beneath a large oak tree.

“A lovely day, indeed,” he remarked, a smile playing about his lips. “And you chafe at being indoors, I take it. Even when dressed for dinner.”

“It is a chore to remain seated for very long.”

“I noticed you had a restless disposition.”

Selina blinked. For a moment she thought she saw something like sympathy cross his features, then supposed she must have imagined it. What was she to a man like this?

A man who believed she was nothing more than his servant’s mad wife.

But he had not made his excuses to move on. He seemed to wait for an answer.

“Restless?” Her mind shifted from the sketch to her need for activity. Always. She smiled suddenly. “It is true. For as long as I can remember, I was the one who wanted to be out of doors, running across the lawn and climbing trees and exploring the woods. My brother was the quiet one. We used to wish we could swap places.”

He considered this. “No doubt you were forever being punished for your exuberance.”

“Oh yes, I was considered wild—” She paused. She was speaking of herself, but the same could have been applied to her sister-in-law. Poor Anna, while perfectly charming and

delightful, was completely unable to filter her thoughts or desires.

However, the duke, of course, thought he *was* speaking to Anna. And he assumed, of course, that there had been some reprieve. Selina wondered fleetingly if Anna would ever be reprieved. She might be unpredictable, but sweetly so; and never dangerous.

But she must stop reviewing the past. Selina would be wise to remember that Edward was the one who decided if her conduct warranted her being allowed out of Boothe Hall again.

So, talking to the duke, she was careful with her words. This man's charm might encourage her to speak unwisely.

And if he caught her out in her lie, Edward's reputation—and his pride—would be irrevocably damaged.

“Wild?” He quirked a brow.

Selina really should not have taken his silence as encouragement. However, it was so rare to have the attention of someone even mildly interested, much less the attention of a handsome man. A handsome, titled, influential man.

Despite her best intentions, her tongue had a habit of running away with her, as did her impulses.

“I suppose my first really defiant act was when I ran away when I was ten.”

“Ran away? From home?”

“Yes, I'd been chastised by my governess one too many times. A very charming guest of my parents visited with his mother, so I hid in their carriage when I was supposed to be locked up in my room.”

“How did you escape the confines of your room?”

“I climbed out of my window and when I saw the carriage, it seemed like providence.” Selina smiled. “I was discovered when these people had reached home, and it was nearly midnight. I received quite a hiding when I was returned. I suppose I deserved it.”

“Yes, your parents would have been concerned, I imagine. When I ran away from home, I was praised for my bravado. I, too, was objecting to authority—in my case, my tutor. But my parents disliked the man, and they used my rebellion as an excuse for why he could not exert necessary control, so he was dismissed. I remember feeling bad about that. To be truthful, I didn’t mind my tutor. I was just responding to a surge of childish pique at being told what to do. You, Mrs. Boothe, clearly don’t enjoy having to conform.”

Selina shrugged. “I’m not very good at it, no. And I don’t suffer fools gladly.”

The moment the words were out, she clapped her hand to her mouth, for the inference didn’t reflect well on Edward. “Of course, my husband is another matter. His talent is prodigious, and I would do whatever I could to see it recognized.”

“How many times have you trotted out that line, Mrs. Boothe?”

“I am very dutiful when I remember to be,” she replied with a smile.

“And...do you chafe at being dutiful?”

Selina was relieved she didn’t have to answer for a voice from the house, calling his name, brought them back to the present. Selina hadn’t imagined Lord Chauncy could be remotely interested in someone as insignificant as herself.

Well, he had seemed interested during thirty seconds of darkness the night before when she had allowed him to run his hands over her body.

Not that there was any acknowledgement of that, though of course the recollection should have made her convulse with shame under his gaze.

Or, she reflected, he should have been shamed and full of apology.

Instead, as they prepared to part, the look in his eye suggested that the reminiscence of this was front of mind.

“You are being dutiful now, in refraining from answering—truthfully—my question.” There was an odd look in his eye, Selina noted; for not only was she an artist, she was attuned to the interest of interesting men. “And you remind me very much of someone of whom I was once very fond.”

He offered her a bow. “I must not detain you, Mrs. Boothe, when you are expected for dinner shortly and ladies like plenty of time to make the most of their natural attributes....though you, perhaps, need less time for that than most.”

CHAPTER
NINE

With his compliment ringing in her ears, Selina returned to her bedchamber, determined to keep from Edward the fact that she still did not have the sketch. Edward would fly into an incoherent fever of despair.

It was a tragedy, for it had been an excellent likeness. Still, she must have been careless. The wind must indeed have carried it away.

But Selina was confident she could do another in a fraction of the time now that she had committed His Grace's features to memory. She just needed access to their handsome host for a few minutes when he was not aware that she was observing him.

Surely she could manage that?

Edward was already in the drawing room when she arrived.

"Did you find it?" he asked in a low, anxious voice.

"Yes, I found it," she lied, smiling at him and at the rest of the party over his shoulder as she left his side to answer a question Miss White directed at her.

She noticed His Grace's eyes on her. They lingered, and she returned his interest for a brief second longer than she

should have.

His interest and the sympathy he had shown during their brief conversation made her feel understood in a way that was rare.

She thought of Samuel.

She'd sacrificed everything to run away with him.

Thanks to her, the mere footman had been elevated.

Yet rather than be grateful, he'd soon come to behave as the men of the circles to which he'd always wished to belong behaved.

A woman was expected to be quiet and obedient.

Unless she was mad.

Throughout dinner, and the conversation and cards that followed, Selina continued to feel His Grace's attention upon her. Occasionally, she would raise her head and meet his eye.

Boldly.

Edward didn't notice, of course. Edward noticed little about Selina unless she actively embarrassed him.

Or did not do as he stipulated.

And there was Selina's difficulty. She did not have a sketch of the duke to give to her brother.

So, when she rose from the card table at the conclusion of a rubber of whist, saying she wished for an early night, she was not surprised that Edward followed her to the drawing-room door.

"I need that sketch, Selina. His Grace is asking for it." There was the glint of desperation in his eye. "Where is it so I can see you have done something that won't embarrass me?"

Selina bridled. Her work was far superior to Edward's, and he knew it.

"When have I ever produced something inferior?" she asked. "I have a mind not to give it to you at all if you speak to me like that." And with a toss of her head, she turned and swept from the room, uncaring whether their altercation might have been witnessed by others.

Back in her own chamber, she considered her prospects as she looked at the quick sketch she'd just done on the flyleaf of her book of poetry. She had managed what she felt was a fair likeness of the duke, purely from memory. But memory was fallible.

No, she needed to draw the duke when he was directly in front of her.

And all she had was tonight.

She contemplated going outside the hide in the dark and look through the drawing-room window, except that the shrubbery was ill suited, as was the window angle. She'd already dismissed this option the day before.

As she changed into her night rail, her mind swirled with her ever-decreasing options.

She glanced at the clock. Edward would be another couple of hours if she knew him. After a third brandy, it would be well after midnight before he stumbled into their room.

He'd not even miss her if she wasn't in her own bed.

Because...

Selina now knew what she had to do.

If the only way to sketch the duke was when he was unaware, then the only option to do this was when he was in

his bedchamber.

Asleep.

And the best way of accessing his bedchamber without him realizing his defenses had been breached was if she was already there.

She rose, drew her shawl about her, and, picking up her candle, went to the door.

But as she half opened it, she saw Mrs. Piggott in the corridor returning to her room.

Selina and Edward had been accommodated in a busy guest wing, replete with serving staff traipsing up and down the stairs with copper jugs of steaming water. And who knew when Lady Saunders was going to appear?

She thought quickly.

The best place to access His Grace's room from the least likely place to be observed would be through his window, in the dark.

And there was a large climbable tree outside his window. Selina had noted this when returning from the conservatory.

A sound in the corridor by her room halted Selina in her tracks as she made her way to the window.

This was madness. What was she thinking?

And then she thought of having no drawing for Edward to present to His Grace in the morning.

The consequences were unthinkable.

He would be embarrassed. Publicly. Possibly ruined, even if word got about and commissions dried up.

There was no alternative. Selina simply had to gain access for literally five minutes so she could capture the quirks of His Grace's face. It would have been better if he was not sleeping, so she could imbue the likeness with character.

But, as she opened the sash window, she told herself there was no other way when time was running out.

First, though, she'd have to find her way safely to the ground.

It was a chilly night, and rain had made the tree trunk slippery. But it hadn't been so long before since Selina had climbed a tree. And it was easier to do it in a nightgown that afforded ease of movement than a morning gown, which was what she'd worn the last time she'd climbed a tree to rescue a kitten.

Soon, she was safely on the ground and hurrying across the lawn.

Just the feeling of the fresh, icy air against her skin, and the sense of liberty—even though her heart was racing with fear and her mind was alert to the dangers of her mission—made her feel alive.

She couldn't remember feeling this infused with purpose. It wasn't just that she was doing what she ought not—and Selina had forever been chastised for her unladylike choices—but she was courting danger as their very future hinged upon Selina successfully executing her mission.

For the first time since she'd finished her first drawing for Samuel, to replace his inferior effort, she felt filled with pride and purpose.

She was not just the useless hanger-on her menfolk painted her.

She was important.

Though shivering beneath Lord Chauncy's bed, she felt more cold and doubtful than important and purposeful.

For what if her plan went horribly wrong? What if Lord Chauncy slept with his face buried in his pillow?

What if he locked his bedroom door and window?

Selina's initial hopes were that he'd be delayed long enough for her to get her breathing and teeth chattering under control. But as more time went by, Selina feared she might drift off to sleep—even cold and damp as she was on a hard, albeit rug-strew floor.

CHAPTER
TEN

In fact, Selina did drift off to sleep. But voices in the corridor just outside the door woke her.

She tensed, gripping her drawing implements, praying there were no telltale signs of her presence as she heard Lord Chauncy's soft tread upon the floorboards as he prepared for bed.

After a quick knock, his valet entered the room, and Selina heard the desultory male chatter as the man, Stevens, undressed his master, folded his clothing.

Just the usual exchange between master and servant.

Until Stevens asked, "The drawing will be ready for courier tomorrow, my lord? Is it a fair likeness?"

"I have not seen it, but I trust it will be. I wanted it tonight."

Selina held her breath. Lord Chauncy must be very anxious to prove to his intended bride he was every bit as handsome as renowned. Perhaps his future wife was a lady of sceptical tendencies?

Stevens was speaking again. "This portraitist? Can he be trusted?"

This made her tense, frowning as she tried to make sense of the words. Trusted?

“He is hardly heroic material, but his speed with a pencil is all that’s required. Tomorrow I shall see what he is capable of, though I am a little concerned that he is perhaps not as quick as I’d been led to believe.”

Selina tensed even more. Surely His Grace would not be looking over Edward’s shoulder? And why was speed important? Good art took time.

Though not when the pencil was in Selina’s hands.

The valet was speaking once more. “You have it on good authority that he can render a perfect likeness in seconds. Remember, he is likely to be daunted when in the presence of such a great man as you. He’ll be striving for perfection over speed.”

Lord Chauncy grunted. “I need both. Well, it was always going to be an imperfect solution, but the idea was as good as I could come up with, given the situation.”

Selina was still puzzling over his words as the valet departed and she heard Lord Chauncy climb into the large four-poster.

She was wide awake now, fully alert to the sounds that would indicate sleep.

No, fully alert to what Lord Chauncy might look like in repose.

For the last two days, she’d studied his every expression. She was familiar with the dilation of his eyes when he was curious or animated, though he kept his other responses contained. She’d learned to decipher the subtle cues of his expressions. A faint lift of the right corner of his mouth

denoted amusement, while the slight flattening of his lips revealed his contemplative state.

But what about the rest of him?

What might he feel like if she ran her hands down him, just as he'd done to her the previous night?

She cut the thought off at the root and might have berated herself for her unmaidenly thinking had another noise not intruded.

The soft opening of the door.

Not preceded by any knock.

“Chauncy?”

The breathy voice was difficult to place, but it was not a servant, as no servant would address their master in such a manner, and the tone was well bred.

“Catherine.”

She heard His Grace sit up, and then something like a sigh before he murmured, “Not tonight.”

“If it's my husband, he—”

“No, Catherine. It's over.” His tone gentled before he added, “Go back to your husband. He loves you, don't you know?”

“But not as I love *you*. How can you deny all that we have shared?”

“I deny none of it, Catherine. But our time together is at an end.”

“Then why did you invite me here?”

“I invited you to Chauncy House because your husband is my friend and we had business. Not because we were once lovers, Catherine. That was a long time ago.”

Lady Saunders. Selina stifled her shock. How could she have missed the clandestine looks that would have indicated such a relationship when she prided herself on being so observant?

She heard a soft sob, then the sound of Lord Chauncy getting out of bed, gently reminding Lady Saunders of her proposed dawn ride with her husband in just a few hours as he escorted his visitor to the door.

When it clicked behind him, his soft footsteps indicated he was returning to the bed.

Selina could see the faint halo of light from his candlestick, which illuminated his ankles beneath his banyan. She studied the elegant feet, the well-muscled calves lightly covered with dark hair, and her heart did strange things as she tried to ward off the accompanying wicked thoughts.

She should have realized that the legs remained too long where they were.

That the fact he didn't climb into bed indicated something had alerted his senses.

“You can come out now, whoever you are,” came his voice, soft but harsh. “I have a pistol pointed at the floor, so do not think you can surprise me. I am prepared.”

Selina gasped, immediately affirming her presence.

What else could she do?

Dry-mouthed, she inched her way from beneath the bed and straightened before him. Now Edward would be exposed.

He would never forgive Selina for revealing their ruse. He would never—

“Good God! Mrs. Boothe?”

Sheepishly, Selina straightened before him.

“You *are* bold. Were you planning to insinuate yourself into my bed but were frightened away by my former lover?”

There was amusement in his tone as he placed the pistol on the side table together with the candlestick, which bathed the bed in a soft light. He chuckled when he saw her horror.

“For all I knew, you could have been intending to do me harm.” He regarded her in silence for a moment, as if deciding what to do. Then his smile broadened. “I hope no one saw you, for you are courting danger in this household on a night where the corridors are overrun with visitors and servants. I don’t worry for myself, but I do for—”

“I climbed in through the window,” whispered Selina, her teeth chattering from the chill wind blowing against her damp night rail.

“Not just bold, but determined, I see.” He took a step towards her and rested his hands on her shoulders. “Why, you’re as cold as ice. Your nightrail is damp. You need to get warm.”

He smiled down at her with a nod to indicate the bed, and a suggestive note crept into his voice as he added, “That is, I presume, why you are here.”

Selina was struck dumb. What possible reason could she have for hiding in His Grace’s room?

She couldn’t tell him the truth. That was the last thing she could tell him.

She couldn't possibly accede to his invitation to climb into his bed.

Or agree that she was here to...

Seduce him?

What kind of woman would that make her? Why, he'd think her insane—?

A strange acceptance washed over her at this thought.

He did think her insane.

And now Selina was Anna. At least, in the eyes and mind of the duke who considered that 'Anna's' wild impulses were the reason she was here.

And Anna was, apparently, a woman who spoke her mind and took her pleasures as she wished.

"You are wavering, Mrs. Boothe. Have you changed your mind?"

"No..." Selina drew out the word the moment it appeared he was about to offer her a reprieve. "No, I was prepared to wait for you as long as it took, Your Grace." She shivered even more as she added, "I just didn't think I would get quite so cold waiting."

"Then, as a gentleman, let me warm you while you gather yourself and can tell me what wild impulses you were acting on that brought you here, madam."

"You're very welcome to call me—"

"Anna?"

Lord, what a reprieve. She'd almost said Selina. But Anna would do. Mrs. Boothe was cold and wrong.

“First, let us remove your night rail. I’d not have you die of a chill if I can prevent it. Allow me.”

Selina swallowed. Gazing up at him, she saw the duke’s mouth quirk at her apparent show of modesty.

But he said nothing as she obediently raised her arms, and he drew the linen garment up and over her head.

Revealing Selina from head to foot with not a stitch of clothing.

He took a step back to admire her.

At least, the look in his eye suggested that was what he was doing.

Then he reached forward and gently stroked her nipple.

Selina gasped as a rush of desire overwhelmed her, as thoroughly as a bucket of warm water might have in her current cold but needy state.

For she was being reminded of what she had missed for so many years.

Of what she had missed forever.

Before her thoughts could crystalize, the duke’s mouth was on hers as he pulled her closer. His hands roamed over her sensitive skin, their warmth sparking tendrils of desire when they cupped her breasts, kneading them gently before contouring her curves; then, when reaching the heated moisture at the juncture of her thigh, finding the true extent of her longing.

It was all the encouragement he needed, it seemed, for with a soft chuckle he whisked Selina up into his arms and dropped her onto his bed.

As she heard the soft sound of his banyan slithering to the floor, Selina found herself enfolded by the large, soft, comfortable feather mattress, already warmed by the duke's body from earlier.

And now that lean, muscled body was fitting very nicely into her curves as he tucked her against him with what sounded like a sigh of satisfaction.

“And now, dear Anna, reassure me that your bravado has not been misplaced and you're not already regretting your wild impulses?” He drew back to look at her while his hands gently caressed her skin.

Selina smiled. She'd already thrown caution to the wind. She'd already lied and taken on the persona of her sister-in-law to—?

She stopped as guilt tugged at her before the justification came to her rescue.

Selina was doing this so that Edward could help keep a roof over not just his and Selina's head, but so that Anna could be housed in comfort rather than being sent away to the lunatic asylum, as Edward had threatened on more than one occasion.

“Why, you, of course, Your Grace.” She sent an appreciative look at his chest.

“I am not in the habit of taking other men's wives into my bed, madam, and your husband may not take too kindly to being cuckolded.”

“Pah!” Selina made the derisive noise as her expression kindled. “A husband who has shown no husbandly attention in years has no right to take exception to his wife seeking husbandly attention where she can.”

My, that was bold, but suddenly Selina was fired up by the excitement of being someone other than herself.

Poor Anna was hardly going to be affected, and Selina could enjoy one small exploratory foray for both of them.

“You do realize the world believes I am mad, Your Grace? Are you not afraid you will be tainted by me?”

He considered this. “My definition of mad is perhaps a little more lenient than most. I once had a cousin called Gwyneth. You remind me of her. She chafed at being constrained and was called mad. Or have you tried to burn the house down?”

“No.” Selina considered whether either she or Anna had committed violence. “Beyond cutting up a letter in anger that my husband received cautioning him to restrain me from offering my unwanted opinion on certain matters, I have wielded no sharp instruments nor lit any fires. I have a temper, on occasion, and an opinion. These, apparently, can constitute madness.”

“But right now, as you lie in my bed, I can see no signs of madness.” Leaning over her with a smile, he touched her nose. “What is it you want from me, Anna?” His mouth curved. “I am your host. Your husband’s host. We could lie here, skin against skin, and you could drive me wild, but we could do no more than talk. I am an honorable man. Your husband is my guest. In fact, I depend upon your husband for something I want very much. Something I need very much. I would not alienate him.”

“You ask what I want from you? What brought me here?” Selina snuggled against him. She should have recoiled and accepted the reprieve he offered. But when her fingers were drawn, as if by an invisible chord, to explore the warmth and

hardness of him, the discovery that he was tense and clearly ready for action was thrilling. She trailed her hand down his flank to cup his manhood and when it sprang to attention, she whispered, “I want excitement, though perhaps I should not be here in deference to your future wife.”

“Ah, yes, my future wife.” His voice was hoarse.

Selina raised her head and little. She saw his eyes shift evasively and wondered at the conversation she’d overheard as she prompted, “That *is* the reason you wish this likeness, is it not?”

But his thoughts appeared to be elsewhere as he murmured, “It is not a love match. Not a match based on desire.” He shivered and his breath caught as he caressed her breast, murmuring, “Not, I think, like this, which is very much rooted in desire.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Chauncy didn't question Mrs. Boothe's arrival in his bed. What had she invited him to call her?

Anna. That's right.

It wasn't unusual for beautiful women to throw themselves at him.

And this one was particularly intriguing.

Her honesty was refreshing. And she was undeniably lovely. The line of her nose was charming, as was the curl of her chestnut hair and the sweep of her neck to that luscious bosom he was now enjoying. Pert but still soft and full, it was just the kind of bosom—like the rest of her—that drove him wild.

She'd obviously been obedient enough—for long enough—to have been granted a reprieve.

And she'd taken a great risk to be here. He would never forget that his beloved cousin Gwyneth, with whom he'd grown up and whose capacity for devilish plans had awed him as a child, had met her premature death by climbing out of a window.

But Gwyneth had been trying to escape the man her father had insisted she wed.

Anna had been escaping her husband to come to the man who fired her senses.

Yes, Anna had been hiding beneath his bed, waiting to seduce him.

But should Chauncy take advantage of her desire? Of her impulsiveness in throwing herself at him?

Edward Boothe was not the kind to run him through with a rapier, but he was painting his likeness. Chauncy relied upon him more than he would ever know. It would be disastrous—and idiocy—for Chauncy to lose the man's expertise merely because Chauncy had been unable to resist the tasty morsel in his arms right now.

Boothe's wife.

“Tell me why I shouldn't send you right back to your own bedchamber? The bedchamber you share with your husband?” He stiffened with resolve and rose on one elbow. “I think I should.”

She shrugged as she ran her hands up and down his flanks, skimming his buttocks with her soft, elegant hands.

He swallowed again.

Cupping his manhood, making him groan once more, she whispered, “My husband hasn't shared my bed in years. Right now, he is sleeping in the dressing room. Edward has no interest in the wife he took six years ago. And I am lonely. That is why I am here.” She arched against him, exhaling on a soft, ecstatic sigh as his fingers tickled the top of her thighs before plunging, gently, deeply inside her.

For as her hands had gently squeezed his shaft once more, any good intentions he'd had finally dissolved.

“Oh, yes!” she whispered, opening up to him. “That is *exactly* why I am here. Because it has been years since my husband made any attempt to make me feel a woman.” She shivered as his fingers began to stroke the nub of her desire. “I do like that. Please don’t stop.”

Chauncy didn’t need to be invited twice.

“If you promise not to stop what you are doing,” he managed. “Then I think, madam, we have a bargain.”

He moved to cage her body, staring down at her lovely face, all light and shadows in the flickering candlelight. She looked like an elfin creature with her hair framing her pale skin, her eyes luminous as they gazed up at him. The desire in their depths hit a chord, and he responded with a surge of longing.

He wanted a woman whose actions came unfiltered from the heart. This woman’s reputation was tainted because she didn’t conform to society’s requirement that she conduct herself with ladylike restraint.

But if that lack of restraint was the reason she was in Chauncy’s bed, then that was exactly why he wanted her.

And it was why he wanted to extend her pleasure rather than taking his own pleasure right now.

Shifting down the bed, he took her right nipple in his mouth, grinning up at her as she squeaked with surprise, though she clearly enjoyed the sensation.

“Your Grace—!”

“I can stop any time you wish.”

“Oh, please don’t.”

Chauncy chuckled, as he trailed kisses down her smooth, soft belly, delighted by the response, as if he were the first to introduce her to such sensations.

He was glad that the breeze from the window had failed to extinguish the flickering candlelight.

He wanted to see every part of this lovely woman.

Of course, it was one thing to enjoy a night of stolen passion. That had been deeply satisfying, and Selina regretted nothing.

She had been careful, mitigating the risks of a child just as she had done during her years as Samuel's wife. Having realised she'd made an error of judgement in her choice of husband, and not wanting his children when he'd slid so quickly into vice and profligacy, Selina had consulted a wise woman on the subject.

She knew what herbs and other precautions to take.

And now, not only was Selina's body thrumming from satisfaction thanks to Lord Chauncy's expert lovemaking, that gorgeous gentleman had slipped into a deep sleep, affording her the opportunity to do exactly what she'd come here to do.

Draw his handsome visage.

Beneath the bed was paper and a pencil, while through the curtains streamed just enough moonlight which, in addition to the flickering candlelight, allowed Selina to do her work.

It took only a few moments. During their energetic lovemaking, Selina had traced the contours of his face, giving

her an advantage she'd not realized would be so beneficial when it came to communicating his features to the page.

As Selina looked from her handiwork to the handsome, sleeping duke, her nipples and her fingers tingling, she'd never felt more satisfied.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Edward was snoring loudly when Selina crept into her own bed that night, and he was still asleep when dawn broke.

At first Selina had restlessly tossed and turned, her heart almost bursting with excitement as she relived her sensuous adventure with surely the most handsome man in all England. Certainly, he was the most handsome *duke* in all England.

But as dawn broke, other thoughts pushed away her shivers of delicious euphoria.

What was the truth behind the disappearance of her drawing?

Did she have an enemy? Had someone been watching her?

For there was no doubt that someone had taken the duke's likeness from beneath the rock where she had left it outside the conservatory. She was certain of it. It hadn't been the work of the wind. Someone had been watching her and had known of its importance.

And, Selina suspected, that someone was Lady Saunders or her sister, Mrs. Pigott, though what motivation they had, she could only surmise.

Perhaps there was a marital contender in the wings they wished to push, so were bent on thwarting the duke's marriage

to his intended.

Or perhaps they had simply been waiting for an opportunity to thwart Mr. and Mrs. Boothe in an act of petty malice for Selina's unkind drawing of Mrs. Piggott.

Another fear intruded. Did whoever took it know that it was Selina's work, and not that of her supposed husband?

As sleep continued to elude her, and remembering mention of Lord and Lady Saunders's dawn ride, Selina decided that perhaps she should use their absence to search their bedchamber.

That is, if they had indeed gone riding which, fortuitously, she confirmed with a glance through the bedroom window.

After dressing quickly, she hurried from her room and down the corridor toward theirs which, she was relieved to discover, was unlocked.

Entering quietly, holding her candlestick aloft, she took stock of her surroundings.

It didn't take long to prove her suspicions correct. Whatever Lady Saunders' reason for snatching the drawing, she had tucked it away in the writing desk by the window.

Selina snatched it up in triumph. She could brandish this in front of Edward and tell him that he had falsely accused his sister of carelessness.

But as she was about to leave with the drawing, she hesitated. Was it wise to make it clear she'd been in Lady Saunders' chamber when Selina didn't know the reason for the theft of the painting?

Selina had formed an instant dislike for the woman and her sister. Even more so, having discovered that Lady Saunders

had been the duke's previous lover.

By the light from the window, she studied her work as she contemplated her options.

On the writing desk were more paper and a pencil. Selina could do another drawing that was identical, which would mean she could leave the stolen drawing in Lady Saunders' possession. Selina would then have two drawings, one of she could keep for herself.

One to remind her of this night she'd treasure her entire life. Closing her eyes, she touched her heart. It was beneath her breast and perhaps it had been her breast, really, that had interested Lord Chauncy. But for Selina, it was her heart that had been touched. The sensations Lord Chauncy had evoked had, at first, been familiar: the lust-charged desire, the physical yearning followed by spectacular satisfaction, then satiation.

His Grace had shown kindness and consideration, both earlier and during their lovemaking.

He'd also spoken of his fondness for a cousin whose wildness had caused her downfall. He'd actually sympathized with this female cousin and, furthermore, now housed her unmarried sister who acted as his hostess and whom he treated with respect.

Not like Selina had been treated by the men in her life.

And their encounter hadn't only been based on lust and circumstance, even though Selina had at the time thrown herself into it from a purely physical sense as an excuse to justify why she was in Lord Chauncy's room.

A slight wind stirred the papers on the desk and brought Selina back to the present.

Her ruminations should be on whether to leave the drawing in Lady Saunders' possession, not whether the duke had felt anything deeper for Selina than raw, transient desire—which he surely would not have, she told herself.

With a sigh, Selina replaced the drawing that had been stolen. Far better to let her assume she'd got away with her theft.

But Selina would mark the drawing in some way to make it clear that Lady Saunders had falsely acquired the likeness. Yes, that would give Selina some satisfaction.

Quickly, she worked at her art, the pencil racing over the page as she again considered how much easier it was to do the likeness having felt the man's lovely contours in the flesh.

Her original drawing had been excellent, as had the one she'd whipped up by his bedside in her shaking, frenzied haste, but her new drawing brought to life something that had been missing. Some elusive quality in Lord Chauncy's gaze. In her new drawing, Selina had caught a certain thoughtfulness, a depth of intelligence that her original drawing lacked. The second, she now decided, was far too influenced by the physical delights that had just taken place.

She held the two up to the light, side by side. Yes, the first was good, but this latest one was excellent.

Footsteps sounded in the passage, and she tilted her head, alert. It was too early for Lady Saunders and her husband to return in view of how recently they'd gone riding.

No doubt the voices were those of other guests or servants who would pass by in the corridor.

Her most important task, now, was to find a means of marking the drawing to distinguish it from the one she'd give to Lord Chauncy.

Or rather, that Edward would give to Lord Chauncy.

She frowned. Her drawing featured only his Grace's face and clothing. There was very little room to add further details.

Selina bent her head closer to the work. Of course, she could manage it. She was the best artist in the country. In all the galleries she'd visited, she'd never seen work that surpassed her attention to detail.

Until now, this reflection had compensated for the fact that she was relegated to the country, denied the freedom to do as she would like.

But now she'd tasted freedom.

And enjoyed pleasure like she never had before.

Selina squinted. There was the high collar. Amongst the shading and shadows beneath his Grace's neck, perhaps she could mark out in tiny lettering the words: *Stolen by Lady Saunders*.

Selina's eyesight was exceptional. She knew it was better than most people's and so was her ability to render the most minute details. In this case, without detection.

Smiling, as she bent to her work, she carefully drew in the words.

But perhaps the shadowing needed to be reflected on the other side of the collar. Perhaps it was an opportunity for Selina to claim her work. Not that anyone would know.

So, very carefully, she pencilled in: "*Original artist: Selina Boothe*." She'd not take her husband's name. And if any words

could be deciphered, Boothe was, after all, the artist.

Not that it was likely anyone would seize up eyeglasses or magnifying glass to study the shadowed collar of the drawing, which was, as anyone could see, an excellent rendition of the man himself.

And it was stolen, besides. It would remain in Lady Saunders' keeping, no doubt, for her to brandish to the marital hopeful she had lined up. For what other reason could she have for wanting to steal the portrait of the duke, supposedly done by Edward?

And which Edward would claim, no doubt, with little thanks, she thought resentfully.

But her satisfaction at claiming her own work—albeit in a way that was almost undecipherable—was quickly replaced by horror as she heard more voices approach, and then the sound of the doorknob being turned.

How had she been so careless? she berated herself as she dived for the only place she could hide, having hidden in a similar place not long before.

But before secreting herself beneath the four poster, its valance reaching the floor, she'd had the presence of mind to replace the drawing exactly where she'd found it, and to snatch up her new drawing.

Lady Saunders would not notice. And there'd be some satisfaction in hearing Lady Saunders crow over her supposed cleverness in acquiring a drawing she had no right to have. Selina might even hear what her intention had been in taking it.

“Help me with the back of my habit, Saunders. I told Jenny I didn't need assistance.”

As Selina listened to the clipped orders of Lady Saunders, she decided she liked the woman even less. Her poor, cuckolded husband. Selina felt outrage on the gentleman's behalf.

Then immediately she felt awash with guilt. Not three hours earlier, she'd insinuated herself beneath the bedcovers of a man who was soon to be married.

But Lord Saunders was Chauncy's friend. Chauncy had double reason to be ashamed of himself.

And yet, Selina couldn't help herself by offering complete exoneration as fingers of memory stroked her. Just as Chauncy's fingers had stroked her hours before.

She supposed men of high standing were used to taking whatever they liked and told herself it was a good thing she'd soon leave this house, and Lord Chauncy with his disreputable friends and tendencies. These were people whose morals took account of little more than satisfying themselves, whereas Selina could justify her actions in going to bed with the duke.

Her body flamed at the memory and her mind was drifting in this direction until something in Lord Saunders' tone made Selina pay attention.

"Did you ascertain from your erstwhile lover his intentions regarding the Rushworth visit?"

What? Lord Saunders knew that his wife had been having an affair with his friend?

"You know I was reluctant to go, Saunders. I told you matters had cooled between us." Lady Saunders sighed. "No, he's said nothing about attending Lady Rushworth's August ball."

Lady Rushworth's ball? Selina tensed. She remembered Lord Chauncy had begun writing something about it. She recalled the unfinished sentence in the letter beneath which she'd stolen the paper.

"He has been maddeningly noncommittal." Lord Saunders sounded peevish. "He promised me—"

"Do stop, Saunders. I told you it was pushing it too far if I tried to petition him in his bed last night."

Lord Saunders sighed again. "You should have pushed it when Chauncy was still mad for you and feeling guilty for cuckolding me."

"Oh, do stop. He feels no guilt. He knows your proclivities, Saunders, and that his philandering is nothing compared with yours. But he is still good for a loan and I will approach him..." She hesitated, then added, "When the time is right."

Selina could see Lord Saunders' ankles as he walked to the desk. After a moment, he said in a tone of surprise, "Why have you got this? I say, Boothe has done a more than tolerable job. I could pick out the man in a crowd if I just had this."

Craning her neck, Selina could see Lord Saunders holding the drawing up to the light while his wife said, "I found it in the shrubbery. It must have blown from his easel in the sharp wind yesterday. Lord knows how, but I saw that madwoman of a wife of his rushing about searching for it."

"You must return it—"

"Must I, Saunders?" Lady Saunders' voice was smooth. "Boothe can make another. He'll feel too foolish to do anything else."

Lord Saunders chuckled. “So, you’re not going to forgive his wife for the drawing she did of your sister. I wish I could have seen it.”

“Best that it be destroyed, Saunders.”

Selina held her breath in the long silence before her husband answered thoughtfully, “Just as you will destroy anyone who thwarts you, Catherine, dearest.”

Selina’s mouth was dry and her breathing sharp by the time the pair left their bedchamber.

She felt indignant, concerned, and outraged.

Cautiously, she dragged herself out from under the bed and went to the desk.

What good fortune that Selina hadn’t, out of pique, taken the original.

Selina returned to her bedchamber to find Edward in a rage.

“Good God, I’ve been at my wits’ end, not knowing what had become of you and what we are to do!” he cried. “Where have you been...looking like that? You truly do look like a madwoman with your hair not even brushed.”

Selina put her hand to her hair, which had perhaps suffered in her tumbling with Lord Chauncy, followed by her lengthy waiting beneath Lord and Lady Saunders’ bed. It might be disordered, but not more than her thoughts.

She’d planned to tell Edward everything she’d overheard but when she saw that he was concerned only with his

reputation, she realised her most important task was furnishing her brother with the object that had brought them here: the drawing of his patron.

“It’s a fair enough likeness,” Edward now said as he examined it. “He’ll be satisfied with it, don’t you think?”

Selina shrugged. She’d hoped for a little praise, at least. Or some acknowledgement that she’d been clever to have done such an excellent likeness.

Edward seemed to realize the reason for her lackluster spirits, for he said in a jollying tone, “Well done, old girl, your work is up to the mark, as usual. We shall be well rewarded, and I shall buy you a new dress from the proceeds.”

Selina blinked and was about to offer the fiery retort she realized would be ill-advised at this juncture.

“That would be very generous, Edward,” she murmured, then turning towards the window, said on a sigh while thinking longingly of Lady Rushworth’s ball, “Though where would I wear it?”

With painful resignation, she realised she might never see Lord Chauncy again.

But at least she’d have something to remember him by: the drawing she’d whipped up on the flyleaf of her poetry book.

And the kindling look in his eye when he’d dismissed his future marriage before assuring Selina how much their unexpected coupling had been rooted in desire.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Lady Rushworth's Ball

Two weeks later

Two weeks was too long, Chauncy decided as he turned to see Anna Boothe smiling at him from across the room.

Of course, the only reason the Boothes had been invited was because of Edward Boothe's skill with a pencil or charcoal. At least, that's what he told himself.

But how delightful that his wife provided such additional pleasure to their visit.

A cluster of newly arrived guests, and powdered footmen bringing in their trunks, criss-crossed the lobby, their chatter mingling with the string quartet tuning up in the distant ballroom, ready for this evening's event.

As he watched Anna and her husband divest themselves of their cloaks, Chauncy congratulated himself on his timing. Five minutes before, he'd been in the tower room with Sir Simeon, orchestrating a plan of action for the several scenarios they believed might play out tonight.

Anna Boothe provided the welcome distraction he needed. Not that he hadn't been distracted by thoughts of her for the

past two weeks, when he really had more important matters with which to concern himself.

The intelligence he'd received from London weighed heavily on Chauncy.

Could the Prince Regent *really* be at risk from the three unlikely suspects named?

Chauncy couldn't see how any of these men, known vaguely to him, might pose a threat, but he was duty bound to follow instructions: Keep the three men under surveillance the entire evening, and have Boothe draw their likenesses.

It was now a pleasure to put aside weighty concerns and say, with complete sincerity, "Mrs. Boothe, you are a vision in Pomona green," just as her husband left her side.

Anna's smile was like a breath of sunshine as she replied, "It's not often I go about in society. Edward was most gratified to receive an invitation."

"I made sure of it." Chauncy felt himself grinning like a schoolboy. Let her think that he was entirely motivated by wishing for a repeat of the pleasures he'd experienced when she'd come to his bed two weeks ago. Since then, he'd been unable to get her out of his mind.

He brought her hand to his lips, surprising both himself, and clearly Anna, as he said, "Lady Rushworth wishes to sit for her likeness in her ballgown just before the ball, for of course your husband's speed in executing his skill is prodigious. I was mightily impressed with the likeness he produced of me... Anna." He lowered his voice so the familiarity would not be remarked upon. *Anna*. He would soon be calling her that, beneath the sheets, and he couldn't wait.

“Indeed?” Anna’s raised eyebrow indicated that she understood the subtext. For when Edward was occupied with drawing Lady Rushworth, Anna would be free to indulge in an afternoon of sensual delights with Chauncy.

Desire radiated through him. It dispelled the nervousness with which he had approached tonight.

It could all go so horribly wrong.

Or it could pass off without incident.

In the meantime, a delightful hour of sensual delights would be just the tonic Chauncy needed to shore up his reserves before it was time to square his shoulders and face the night ahead.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

“**S**elina, where are you going?”

Selina paused as she was about to leave the room and sent an enquiring look at her brother. “For a walk.”

“Lady Rushworth has her sitting in five minutes.”

“And you can do an admirable job on the preliminaries. You don’t need me for that.”

“I do.”

Selina tensed at the belligerence in his tone. Carefully, she said, “It will look odd if I am there when you begin. Far better that I pretend to pass by to see you at work. That way, while you and she are engaged in conversation during which she is more relaxed, I can rustle up a likeness. You know I work better when the subject is animated.”

Fortunately, her suggestion found fertile ground, and Selina managed to get away with a heavily beating heart and increasing excitement.

For soon she would be in bed with the duke. A handsome, commanding man who excited her senses.

The sun was creeping through the window and dappling the rich Aubusson carpet when Selina slipped into Lord Chauncy’s lavish bedchamber.

Selina and Edward, by contrast, had been allotted a tiny room at the end of a dim corridor, which Selina suspected had belonged to the governess. The lowly Boothes had, after all, been invited only because of Lady Rushworth's sudden fancy to have her likeness drawn.

Not that Selina cared where they were accommodated. Edward had said he would carouse for most of the night as it was only chivalrous to allow his sister the bed. However, Selina knew she was just as likely to find him passed out and snoring on the uninviting iron bed, meaning she'd be allotted the chair. Well, what did that matter? She had a far more comfortable bed in which to spend the night.

And this afternoon was just the preliminary.

Selina had barely time to observe her surroundings before she was seized by the hand and jerked into Lord Chauncy's tight embrace.

"Do you know how much I've been looking forward to this?" he murmured against her lips before he rained kisses along her jawline.

"Careful of my hair," she whispered. She was unwilling to drag her mouth from his but needed to remind him that she had little time between their tryst to get herself ready for the grand ball.

And to do her sketch of Lady Rushworth. Not that he would ever know that.

"My tender—and respectful—ministrations shall imbue you with such a golden glow, my love, that no one will notice a hair out of place."

They both chuckled at his salacious tone as he worked quickly to undo the buttons at the back of her pink net gown

which he quickly and expertly whipped off her while she obediently raised her arms.

Selina already had her stays unlaced by the time he'd removed his breeches, bending to seize the hem of her chemise and raise that up and over her head.

"Oh my," he murmured, as his eyes raked her naked form from head to toe. "I carried about a vision of your loveliness during the past fortnight, but I have not done justice to the reality. No, don't move."

Selina hesitated. No man had ever looked at her with such raw desire. Her nipples tingled, and she closed her eyes in ecstasy as he kissed her, reverently at first, before his ardor brought them tumbling onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and hot desire.

"By God, you are a tasty morsel, my darling Anna." His mouth was against her ear as he held her tightly, his manhood pressed against her side.

The clock on the landing chimed the hour, and Selina tensed as she whispered, "And yours for but twenty minutes, Your Grace, before other considerations intrude."

She'd thought her words would spur him into a bout of much anticipated, heady lovemaking, but instead he stilled, regarding her thoughtfully as he bent his elbow and rested his head on one hand.

"Perhaps for now, Anna. But what about later?"

"Later?" The air seemed to disappear from her lungs. He wanted more of her? Not just the opportune pleasures he could snatch now?

Lord Chauncy nodded, a twist to his lips that did not make him look sardonic or assessing. No, he looked kind. And fond.

And full of genuine wanting.

Selina's heart beat faster. Her mouth felt dry.

"I take it there is little affection between you and your husband, else you'd not be here now."

Selina nodded. "That is painfully true, Your Grace," she said, thinking not only of her own lonely life, but of the contempt with which Edward treated all the women of whom he was custodian.

"But your husband is in demand for his truly remarkable skill." The duke bit his lip, thinking. "I could secure him commissions to homes I frequent. You and I could see one another—" he drew out the words with relish—"quite frequently...if you should desire it, Anna."

"Oh, yes!" She wished she hadn't said it with so much yearning, but then was glad, for it seemed to resonate with this handsome, desirable, virile man.

He grinned suddenly as he snatched her up into his arms, before caging her body as he angled himself over her. "That is the best response I could have asked for, my dearest Anna," he whispered.

Selina arched up beneath him, inviting him with a thrust of her hips that he was at liberty to take what she offered him.

But he was clearly intent on ensuring she was well lubricated and close to climax before he entered her, his mouth on hers, as he murmured, "Lord, you feel divine! Next time, I'll give you the most earth-shattering climax you've ever experienced, but for now—"

"I am well satisfied, Your Grace," Selina whispered, her words truncated with a gasp as his thrusts intensified and she

felt her own body flowering with answering sensation, while her heart sang at his reference to ‘next time’.

When their bout of heady lovemaking had come to an end, he held her against him as they lay side by side, Selina’s cheek resting against the soft, downy hair of his chest.

For a long time they snuggled, before Selina raised her head to ask, “Did your intended like the portrait?”

“The portrait?” He frowned. “Yes, your husband did me such justice that my potential intended was suitably impressed.”

“So, the wedding will go ahead?”

He raised an eyebrow. “It changes nothing between us, Anna. I haven’t seen the lady in question for twenty years. This marriage is for expediency only. Not to enjoy such delights as this.”

“Remind me why you are marrying, your Grace?”

He stilled before he replied. “For the very same reason you married, I would imagine. Security. Practicality.” He shrugged. “Not for love.”

“Have you ever felt love, your Grace?” Lord, what had possessed Selina to ask the first question that came to mind? Obviously because he made her feel secure and desired—the very pre-conditions that made her forget to filter herself.

In the afternoon light, his face was half in shadow, but she saw his energy turn in on itself. Then he smiled as he took her right nipple into his mouth and gently sucked, murmuring, “I daresay this is as close as it comes.”

“This is lust, your Grace,” whispered Selina, nevertheless enjoying the sensation, and surprised when he stopped and sat

up, looking at her with a frown.

He scratched his stubbled jaw. "I'm not sure *what* it is. Lust is what I thought it, I'll admit. But then, I have found myself thinking about more than just your body." He smiled. "In fact, during these past two weeks, I thought of you rather a lot."

Selina was ridiculously gratified, though she told herself she shouldn't care. She'd seduced him accidentally so that Edward's reputation would not be imperiled by the missing painting.

If anything, she should feel even less than those feelings to which he admitted.

But right now, her heart felt very full.

She was about to go, but conscience made her hesitate. "Your Grace, I should tell you I overheard something you should know about." She'd been putting it off, afraid of being quizzed, but concern had needled her since she'd farewelled the duke without having found an opportunity to relay Lord and Lady Saunders' conversation.

"And what is that, dear heart?"

It was as much the look in his eye as the endearment that made her insides feel warm and moist with pleasure.

"I don't know quite how to explain it, except that I heard Lady Saunders speak of you to her husband about tonight in a manner that sounded...concerning."

Chauncy stiffened amid stroking her. "Lady Saunders? She and her husband are good friends of mine."

"I know, which is why it's hard for me to explain. But I just thought I should say something."

“And where, exactly, were you when you overheard whatever it is that is so difficult for you to explain?”

Selina sensed the change in his mood and wished she'd not spoken.

“Where are you going?” His arm shot out to stop her as she flung her legs over the side of the bed.

He pulled her back to him, and Selina turned in his embrace. “Your Grace, you have a ball to attend. I would not be the reason you are late.”

Edward would be furious with her for not coming by, as promised, to help him with the preliminary sketch of Lady Rushworth, but Selina could do a far better one, on her own, from the shadows during an opportune couple of minutes.

“Don't go quite so quickly, Anna.” He ran his hand the length of her thigh before cupping her breast and Selina nearly acceded, her want for him was so great.

But there would be future opportunities. He'd said so.

She closed her eyes, smiling, her heart soaring with... she was going to put it down to lust, but it *was* more than that.

“We will be together again before we go our separate ways, Your Grace,” she whispered, feeling ridiculously pleased that this was true.

And ridiculously gratified by his smile as he said, softly, “You don't know how happy that makes me, Anna... dearest.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Chauncy would have preferred to have spent the evening in bed with the delicious Anna. But duty called.

“Lord Chauncy! You are here!”

“Sir Simeon.” Chauncy turned at the harsh greeting, nodding, before he sent a quick glance down the corridor.

Sir Simeon advanced. A short-necked, stocky man, he resembled a bulldog. “Your Grace, the Prince Regent will enter from the eastern door within the hour, I am told. Meanwhile, the three suspects are currently in the ballroom.”

Chauncy considered the battle-scarred man before him. Sir Simeon had seen action at Waterloo and was an able strategist. But the man was inclined to see trouble when there was none. “I highly doubt our three suspects are capable of an assassination attempt,” said Chauncy. “Extreme measures for a rear admiral, a country baron and a viscount who prefers his dogs to anyone else, don’t you think?”

Sir Simeon’s brow darkened. “While everything seems in order for now, we cannot let down our guard. It is always those we suspect the least who are capable of the vilest actions.” Sir Simeon stroked his chin. “Take, for example, the mad creature that has been allowed here because her husband is painting Lady Rushworth.”

Chauncy stiffened. “The mad creature? I’m not sure I understand you.”

“Indeed, looking at her this evening, she seems quite unlike the stories that filtered through to us of the Mrs. Boothe who is kept under lock and key in a draughty house in Norfolk.”

Chauncy splayed his hands. “Is it not possible that she has been maligned merely for a forcefulness of spirit that prompts her to speak her mind?” Chauncy knew he defended her too hotly. But as he said the words, he also knew that Anna displayed no signs of madness. She was too like Gwyneth: misunderstood, and consequently mistreated and misdiagnosed by the men in her life. He suspected cruel treatment at the hands of Anna’s husband, a far more likely explanation behind any rumors of her so-called madness.

Sir Simeon sent him a considered look. “But did our esteemed painter *really* marry the Mrs. Boothe we see here this evening? It seems Admiral Pocock and his wife made the acquaintance of Mrs. Boothe some years ago.”

“Did they, indeed?”

“Yes, and the Mrs. Boothe of their acquaintance was taller and slighter of build, with blonde, curling hair, and a mole on her right cheek.”

Chauncy hesitated. “I think they are mistaken.” What was Sir Simeon suggesting? That Anna was a spy? An assassin?

Sir Simeon shook his head. “I made enquiries and am satisfied by their insistence that the woman who calls herself Mrs. Boothe is *not* the painter’s wife.”

Chauncy stilled while his companion gave a derisive laugh. “Perhaps that obsequious little artist has bought himself

a female companion to accompany him here, and is merely parading her as his wife.” He touched his nose and winked. “For she certainly isn’t that.”

Selina hesitated on the threshold to the ballroom, her hand upon Edward’s forearm.

The room was ablaze with light, from the glittering chandeliers overhead to the shimmering gowns of the ladies.

The sounds of the orchestra tuning their instruments mingled with the subdued chatter of the guests as they exchanged greetings and compliments.

Selina had never felt so excited—and daunted—in her life.

Sheathed in her favorite shade of Pomona Green, heron feathers mitigating the slight disarray of her hair, she reminded herself that she was every bit as worthy and beautiful.

It’s what Chauncy had called her, his eyes glowing with warmth as they’d lingered upon her when he’d passed her in the ballroom.

Now, as she and Edward paid their addresses to the host and hostess, Selina could see how much competition she really had, for the seemingly hundreds of women seemed so much better dressed and far more beautiful than Selina.

But she’d been gratified by Chauncy’s words which had made her self-conscious in a way she couldn’t remember since first noticing Samuel’s sly admiration when she’d been an impressionable sixteen-year-old.

The moment they’d done their duty, Edward took her to task. “Where were you, Selina, when you were supposed to

meet me to do your sketch of Lady Rushworth? Your organizational skills are deplorable. Why is it always me who has to—”

The look Selina turned upon him had him closing his mouth. Lord Chauncy’s admiration had made her confidence rebound.

Just in the short walk across the room, Edward could see the interest she garnered.

It was Selina who had the talent, together with a beauty and confidence that was certainly appreciated by the gentlemen here this evening. She could feel it and the knowledge strengthened her.

“Apologies, Edward,” she replied. “Lord Chauncy detained me. He was so taken with the portrait I painted for him and ... one thing led to another.”

That seemed to put her brother in his place.

Or so she thought; until, after a moment of considered silence, he said, “Be wary of making a fool of yourself, Selina. Lord Chauncy, I fear, is toying with you.”

She was indignant. What did he know of the extent of Chauncy’s interest? But then he added, “You think Chauncy fancies you, but a man like that will take his pleasure wherever it is offered. I think you know what I mean? Do not repeat the mistake you made with Samuel. You could have been here, Selina, as a woman of standing, in your own right, and not as my substitute wife in subterfuge.”

Selina was silent, for what he said was too close to the truth.

A few minutes later, her excuse to repair to the ladies’ mending room offered little in the way of comfort when she

found herself locking eyes with Mrs. Piggott.

The flare of disdain her erstwhile fellow houseguest directed at her was replaced by what could only be termed the cut direct.

Mrs. Piggott was a nobody, Selina comforted herself. The sister of Lady Saunders, she was a commoner who looked like a costermonger dressed in silk and feathers. She had none of the address of her elegant sibling who, Selina now noticed, was standing near a doorway that opened into a rear saloon.

Lady Saunders was speaking to Lord Chauncy, and the intimacy of their brief exchange nearly took Selina's breath away.

He turned, and catching her eyes upon him, raised an eyebrow before crossing the room. Taking her by the elbow in a public display of ownership that was certain to make tongues wag, he drew Selina to an alcove hung with a fringed curtain where they were hidden from the rest of the guests.

Excitement skittered across her skin as, in the shadows, Chauncy encircled her waist with his hands.

"You are like a flower," he murmured as his lips touched her ear, making her wilt.

He tightened his embrace while he covered her lips with his. "Come to me tonight?" His hands roamed over her back, cupping her bottom, and Selina moaned softly as she moved against him.

She traced the planes of his cheeks with her thumbs, her eyes closed as she relived the frenzied moments when, with a pencil, she'd worked to shade and shadow the bones of his cheeks, contrasting the hollows and shadows.

She could have sketched his likeness blindfolded.

Which meant the intimacy of the real man was intoxicating.

Of course, she'd come to him tonight. Not the greatest calamity would keep her away; not even if Edward barged into Lord Chauncy's bedchamber in a fury.

"And you'll stay with me until the morning? I want to wake up beside you."

Selina blinked open her eyes and found that his look was dark, as if he really hung on her response.

She nodded.

"You are an enigma, Mrs. Boothe," he murmured, adding after a long pause, "if you are indeed Mrs. Boothe."

Was it her intake of breath that gave her away? Selina jerked her head up to find him studying her.

He sighed, though his look didn't register the rage or suspicion she might have feared. "You admit it then?"

He took her silence for affirmation before going on, "Yes, Anna, I was disappointed to learn from someone else that you are not the Mrs. Boothe they recall from some years ago. Very disappointed... at first."

"Please, your Grace, I can explain—"

"Explain what? That you are not married to the gentleman whom you would have the world believe is your husband?"

Miserably, Selina shook her head. "Please, your Grace, I ___"

He cut her off. "But then I realized that if you were not respectably pledged to that little artist, why, you might be willing to come to an understanding with me."

Selina gasped again as realization dawned.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “You are a remarkably competent actress, Anna, and I shall enjoy learning more about you in due course, my dear. But—”

“Chauncy!”

Selina stepped back as a stocky, scarred gentleman intruded. “Excuse me, madam,” he said, bowing, “but I have something of importance to discuss with His Grace.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Chauncy wasn't sure how he felt at having Sir Simeon's suspicions confirmed. So, the gentlewoman whom he'd believed to be Edward Boothe's wife was in fact Boothe's mistress? Or, at least a woman Boothe paid to parade as his wife during the occasions he could leave his remote country estate.

Well, she was lovely, and Chauncy would happily make her *his* mistress.

All in all, he supposed, it was a good solution. He'd marry Miss Harriet Blenkinthorpe, who was well placed to be his wife.

And he'd enjoy the carnal pleasures of the woman pretending to be Mrs. Boothe.

Nevertheless, there was an edge of dismay to his reflections. How could he have been so easily taken in? The woman to whom he'd been in danger of losing his heart was an imposter?

A woman who gave herself to men for money.

The orchestra was playing at the far end of the ballroom, but the dancing had not yet begun, though most of Lady Rushworth's guests appeared to be here.

Including the three men whom Sir Simeon considered of interest in the plot to harm their monarch-in-waiting.

Now Chauncy must seek out Boothe for the sole reason he'd summoned him here tonight.

He found him near the supper table in company with Anna, who sent him a troubled look; and a moment's distraction on Boothe's part as he accepted a glass of champagne from a passing footman, gave Chauncy the opportunity to whisper, "Your secret is safe with me, Anna. When the dancing is finished, we have much to discuss. But, please, will you leave us a moment as I have private business with your... husband?"

Once Anna had left, Boothe nodded at Chauncy, saying in his usual obsequious manner, "I trust your Grace's intended was happy with her likeness."

Chauncy regarded him a moment. Boothe was a dark horse. But then, an impecunious painter, saddled with a mad wife, had his needs like any red-blooded man. Still, Chauncy had not picked the ruse, though what did it matter?

All that mattered was that Boothe could recreate a person's facial characteristics in an instant.

And that Anna—or whatever her name was—was available should Chauncy feel the need for feminine companionship.

Would Chauncy make her his mistress? Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed her in the shadows, looking at him proudly.

Yes, she was beautiful and beguiling.

And she was enthusiastic beneath the sheets. That's all he wanted in a woman whose services he could hire on a whim.

Still, he had to admit to some disappointment.

She was not the lady he had thought.

He returned his attention to Edward Boothe's question. "My intended was very pleased. And the quality of the work is the reason you have been asked here tonight." With a nod of his head, he indicated three gentlemen conversing nearby, but out of earshot. "You see those men? I want you to draw them as quickly and as unobtrusively as you can. You completed your likeness of me in a timely enough manner, but right now, I need instant results."

Chauncy saw that Boothe looked shaken and tried to moderate his tone. Perhaps Boothe did not work well under pressure. So he said, as reassuringly as he could, "The materials are in the study. A servant will take you there so you can select what you need."

Still, Boothe could only stare at him while his Adam's Apple rose and dropped.

Trying to keep the irritation from his tone, Chauncy tried a different gambit. "You will be well recompensed and you will be in no danger because you will do your drawings here in the ballroom, quickly, quietly. Discreetly."

"I...I don't understand."

"You don't need to understand. This is a commission. A commission that's been requested by His Majesty's Government in the interests of safeguarding the crown."

Boothe's eyes were bulbous. "And these men—?"

"Draw their likenesses this evening. That is all I ask of you. You've proved yourself up to the task and your reputation precedes you. As I said, you will be handsomely paid for your services." Chauncy was losing patience. "You've already

proved an adept painter. Now you need to prove your loyalty.”
He nodded at the door. “The earlier this can be done, the greater my peace of mind. I do not want those men leaving this house before you have committed their likenesses to paper.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Selina was sipping lemonade when her brother hurried over.

She'd watched the exchange from the shadows, her dismay growing as the shock on her brother's face had deepened while Chauncy spoke in an unusually serious fashion to him.

Nausea swept over her, and she closed her eyes.

The game was up. Not with Selina having been revealed as the artist.

But with her having been revealed as someone other than Edward's wife.

Oh dear Lord, had Chauncy called Selina out as Edward's *mistress*?

Had he gone so far as to propose a financial transaction to secure Selina's 'attentions'?

Whatever he'd said, Edward had reacted with silent but palpable horror.

Selina tried not to let her terror show. Edward would disown her. Her good name would be dragged through the mud. She'd never—

“Selina! Come with me! Quickly!” Selina opened her eyes to find Edward gripping her elbow as he hissed his demands; and Selina had no choice but to follow him out of the drawing room and along the corridor.

A servant thrust open the door to what she saw was a library with floor-to-ceiling bookcases and a large desk near the window.

“The duke has just asked me to draw the likeness of three gentlemen in the ballroom.” He sounded panicked. “The drawings are to be executed without delay and we’re to find materials here.”

Selina nearly sagged against the wall with relief. “He... didn’t say anything else?”

“What’s more important than this?” Edward thrust paper and pencil into her hands. “Discretion is everything. He cannot know the artist is not me. He named a figure that would astonish you. Selina! You cannot fail me this time.”

Selina’s hands closed over the artist’s materials while her mind revolted. “Why can he not know that it is *me*?”

Edward’s mouth turned down. “Now is not the time for quibbling. I have an important job to do. On behalf of His Majesty’s Government. This is a matter of grave importance and I suspect the safety of the Prince Regent is at stake and that the three men I’m to draw are all under suspicion. Obey me this instant, Selina!”

There was little else she could do for Selina was already compromised. She needed to mitigate her guilt.

But she was resentful as she tucked the drawing tools into her reticule and followed her brother back into the stone passage of the draughty house.

They made their way towards the ballroom, the distant muted chatter of the guests a welcoming sound, Selina thought, shivering. She wanted to return to the light and warmth of the festivities with chandeliers of beeswax candles, and hundreds of fabulously garbed bodies pressed together.

Behind them, the dark, unlit corridors led into oblivion.

Yet suddenly *that's* where Selina wanted to go. Not the ballroom. Not a public place where she was open to humiliation.

She didn't want to draw anyone—especially on Edward's behalf—ever again.

She'd taken a great risk, and she had miscalculated.

Just as she had miscalculated seven years ago when she'd let her heart rule her head and succumbed to Samuel's lures.

She hung back and Edward turned, his voice a snarl in the darkness as he took her wrist and pulled her after him to the ballroom.

The warmth, as she crossed the threshold, hit her forcibly.

“There are the men you are to draw.” Her brother pointed. “Now do as I say. I will not tolerate your intransigence! Do you realize how important this is? And if you don't start to draw quickly, I will—”

But Selina didn't hear the rest of his threat, for it was cut short by a loud crack.

A sound like a pistol.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Chauncy had just observed Boothe leave the ballroom in the wake of the servant and was turning to locate Anna when he saw that she was accompanying her ...lover?

Well, Boothe was not her husband, so Boothe should not be involving a woman of whom he knew nothing.

Chauncy hesitated. *Was* Boothe trustworthy? Would he be sufficiently discreet?

Doubt beset him as he recalled the man's patent fear when Chauncy had hinted at the reasons behind his commission.

If Boothe was a coward and loose-lipped, involving his mistress, then he only endangered their cause.

After a moment's hesitation, Chauncy put down his drink and wove his way through the knots of guests crowding the ballroom towards the door through which the pair had left. Perhaps the caveat had not been made clear enough: discretion at all costs.

Somehow he would have to make this clear to Boothe without involving his companion. Anna.

Near the door, he was halted by the syrupy tones of his former mistress. "Your Grace?"

Chauncy glanced into Catherine's warm eyes, halting reluctantly. She smiled at him, then whispered, "I fear you will be lonely tonight."

Chauncy shook his head. "We've had this conversation, Catherine. I'm sorry."

Only the tightening of her mouth indicated her anger.

He wished he had the time to spare that might ameliorate her sense of grievance, for, during the eight months she'd been his mistress, Chauncy had learned the nuances of her temper. Catherine did not like being thwarted and could cause trouble. It was one of the reasons he'd tired of her.

She nodded. "Very well, Chauncy. Then I wish you the very best."

Chauncy was surprised by her apparent gracious acceptance. He watched as she disappeared into the crowd and was about to continue when one of the powdered footmen attending to the guests stopped before him.

"Your Grace, Lord Kenilworth has asked me to pass on a message that he wishes to speak to you," he said, pointing through the doorway. "He is on the balcony at the end of the corridor if you turn left. Apparently, it's a matter of some urgency."

Chauncy stepped into the corridor, hesitating by the half open library door before staring into the darkness beyond. Lord Kenilworth was a friend of Sir Simeon and if it was a matter of some urgency, he presumed this should be his priority.

Boothe would surely do what was asked of him with no one the wiser.

But Chauncy was troubled. He'd not known Kenilworth was associated with tonight's mission to safeguard the Prince who was due any moment. Was Sir Simeon being indiscreet by involving too many people whose loyalty might be questionable? Just like Boothe?

After traversing the darkened corridor, a pair of candle sconces in the far distance gave him enough light to see towards the end.

Beyond that, all was inky darkness, making the indistinct figure in the shadows in the distance impossible to identify.

"Lord Kenilworth?" he called softly when he reached the junction of two stone passages, his ears attuned to movement ahead of him. Here the corridor was brightly lit, but the figure he now saw standing on the balcony on the other side of an open doorway was impossible to identify.

Silhouetted against the night sky, Chauncy could not make him out, though he thought the man more portly than Lord Kenilworth.

"Lord Chauncy?" The voice was hoarse. "Is that you?" The figure put his hand to eyes. "Raise your candlestick so I can identify you."

Chauncy did as he was bid. There was the faintest trace of an accent he could not place. Had Sir Simeon discovered something of which he needed to apprise Chauncy and he'd petitioned Lord Kenilworth, or some other man, to summon Chauncy? "Lord Kenilworth, I received the message that you wished to—"

Still squinting, Chauncy watched the man in the distance appear to consult a piece of paper or parchment, before he

raised his right arm, which he then appeared to point towards Chauncy.

And in that final horrifying moment, Chauncy realized what it was.

Just before he heard the explosion of a pistol.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Chauncy put his hands to his ringing ears as he doubled over.

Had he been shot? He ran an experimental hand over himself as he became aware that the terrible screams were not his.

Then they must be—

He recalled the portly silhouette, and horror swept over him.

Not the Prince Regent! thought Chauncy as he ran towards the figure writhing on the flagstones of the small balcony just beyond the open doors.

And not Lord Kenilworth, either, he soon realized as he found Sir Simeon, who had emerged from the darkness of the corridor to the right, now bending over the screaming unidentified man.

“Sir Simeon—” He truncated his words with a cry of pained surprise, jerking back his hand, which had been burned by the muzzle of the pistol Sir Simeon held.

“It was *you*? *You* shot this man? Who is he?”

“I intend to find out,” replied Sir Simeon grimly, tucking away his pistol so he could grip the man’s lapels and haul him

into a sitting position.

Suddenly, the corridor was very quiet. The man had stopped writhing. He'd also stopped screaming.

And now his eyes stared blankly ahead.

"He's dead!" Sir Simeon's tone dripped with disgust. "Now he can't talk, but this is what he had trained on you, Your Grace." He extricated the pistol from the man's fingers and thrust it at Chauncy. "You were lured here, weren't you? This man, whoever he is, had you in his sights when I saw him raise his pistol and take aim."

"Me? He wanted to shoot *me*?" Chauncy shook his head in confusion. "I've never seen this man in my life. I thought the Prince Regent was his quarry."

The sound had obviously caused some alarm and been heard as far afield as the ballroom, for when Chauncy glanced up, he found a small gathering exclaiming as they stared in horror at the dead man.

Ignoring them, Sir Simeon continued his investigation of the would-be assassin's clothing.

"No pocket book. Nothing to identify him," he muttered, before holding up a sheet of paper, which he brandished with an air of triumph. "See here!"

"Good God!" cried Chauncy as he took in what was now being displayed to the world for all to see. "My likeness."

"Indeed," replied Sir Simeon. He held the drawing up to the light of the candle sconces above his head. "And apparently drawn by the artist himself."

"Boothe?" Chauncy took the picture, frowning as he observed slight differences in the likeness from the one he had

commissioned. Boothe had clearly done two copies and given one to this man who'd been assigned to kill him. To kill Chauncy.

He stared over the heads of the cluster of guests. "Bring Edward Boothe to me, now!" he demanded. Identifying one of his servants amongst the crowd, he barked, "Chivers, find him in the ballroom and bring him here! Make sure no one leaves the castle. All doors and windows must be closed this instant."

There were gasps but also the sound of footsteps as Chivers ran to do Chauncy's bidding.

And chasing itself round Chauncy's head was the question of why?

Why would *Boothe* want Chauncy dead?

Had Chauncy jumped to conclusions about Anna? Had Sir Simeon been wrong and Anna really was his wife? Was this a crime of passion whereby Boothe would wreak vengeance on the man who had cuckolded him?

No, surely too extreme.

But not if Boothe was as insane as his wife was rumored to be.

Or perhaps Boothe was not about to let a mistress as lovely as Anna be lured away?

A rise in the chatter from the encircling crowd indicated that Chauncy's wishes had been expedited, for soon he heard the querulous tones of the artist.

"Your Grace, you wished to see me," began Boothe before breaking off in terror when he beheld the dead man in a pool of blood at Chauncy's feet.

Chauncy waved the portrait in front of his face. “What can you tell me about this?” he demanded.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Ten minutes earlier, Edward had been explaining to Selina Lord Chauncy's requirements when a noise, like a pistol shot, had caused several knots of people to look up.

However, the music from the orchestra had drowned out the sound to most of the guests.

"That sounded very odd," Selina said, before dismissing it. Too much of today felt as if it had been a dream: her clandestine tryst with the duke, followed by his suspicion that she was not Edward's wife, leading to his assumption she must therefore be Edward's mistress.

Tears stung the back of her eyes. Now the duke insinuated he'd like to make her *his* mistress.

And now Edward wanted her to draw three men. No, he was demanding that she do so, and yet again, Selina was to simply obey, because she had no choice when a man wanted something from her.

Her brother gripped her elbow and pointed to the three gray-haired, ordinary looking guests. "There they are. Be discreet, Selina. And be fast. I don't know when the duke will return."

"Edward Boothe!"

The cry from the doorway had everyone turning their heads to stare at the panting footman who'd clearly come running from the depths of the castle. Not even the music of the orchestra could drown the urgency in his voice.

Selina thrust the pencil and paper into her reticule as her brother jerked up his head at the sound of his name.

“Edward Boothe, His Grace orders that you are to come with me.” The footman strode through the room, his gaze fixed on Edward.

Selina stepped aside. What was happening? Why was this man staring so angrily at her brother?

A myriad of fears crowded out her earlier worries.

Had her deception had greater ramifications than she could have imagined?

She watched Edward depart under what looked like the custody of the footman and another gentleman. A group of guests, curious and no doubt looking for scandal, followed them.

Selina didn't know what to do? Was it better to stay away, or to follow her brother as a mark of solidarity? It seemed that whatever she did, it was the wrong thing.

Finally, familial loyalty won out and with a great sense of trepidation mixed with resignation, she stepped into the corridor, catching sight of the stragglers whom she saw had turned right at the end of the corridor.

Where was Edward being led? And why?

When she turned into a connecting passage, she saw the crowd gathered by the balcony, the open doors letting in the balmy summer night air.

“What has your husband done to have caused the duke such displeasure?”

Selina jerked her head up to see Mrs. Piggott’s sheep-like eyes regarding her with bulbous intensity. Ignoring the woman, she approached the gathering in time to see the duke brandishing a piece of paper on which something indistinguishable—from this distance—was drawn.

She took two more steps and as the crowd jostled a bit more, she saw through a gap the figure of a prone man on the flagstones.

Another step and she saw the pool of blood that surrounded him.

She gasped as she heard the duke’s accusing tones. “What was *my* likeness doing in this dead man’s possession, Boothe? Since he just tried to kill me, I shall find your answer very illuminating!”

Coming face to face with the portrait Selina had done of the duke was as confronting as facing the duke’s anger in person.

Lord Chauncy obviously didn’t see her in the crowd as he looked accusingly at brother who stammered, “I...don’t know, your Grace.”

“Sir Simeon!” Lord Chauncy petitioned a stocky, scarred man to his right. “Explain to everyone what has happened.”

“A terrible crime—and we’re not talking about this man’s death, for he is the would-be murderer.” Sir Simeon pointed first at the dead man before snatching the paper from the duke’s grasp and waving it before him.

Selina was still reeling when his next words cut through: “And His Grace was his quarry. *You* drew the likeness of the

Duke of Chauncy, Mr. Boothe, and gave it to the man who has just tried to kill the duke. This drawing was to furnish the murderer with the means of identification.”

Selina gasped and brought her hands to her mouth.

So *that* was the reason the picture had been stolen? To furnish a would-be assassin with an accurate likeness of his target?

And the Duke of Chauncy was to be assassinated?

Well, for all Edward’s failings, her brother was not a murderer. And he certainly bore no grudge against His Grace.

Selina pushed her way through the crowd, not thinking as she hotly defended Edward.

“My brother knows nothing of all this, for it was Lady Saunders who stole the original drawing I made of His Grace because I found it on her desk!”

A second’s silence was followed by a collective murmur as the crowd glared at Selina. They did not know her. She was not one of them, whereas Lady Saunders was—

“Take her away! The woman is mad!”

Of course! It was Mrs. Piggott who squealed the accusation, backed up immediately by Lord and Lady Saunders, who materialized by the duke’s side.

“Remove her!” barked Lord Saunders and Selina was only able to keep her balance because she thrust out her hands to grip Lord Chauncy’s coat tail.

He regarded her a moment, clearly unsure. But there was no warmth in his expression as he murmured, “And why should I believe you now, *Anna*, when everything else you’ve

told me is a lie? No, your Edward Boothe drew and signed this copy which was used by this assassin to murder me!”

“Stop! I can prove I’m telling the truth!” Selina cried, swinging round to intervene as Lord Saunders and another man seized her brother. “There’s proof on the drawing that *I* drew the picture and that Lady Saunders stole it! *She* was the one who gave it to the assassin. You can see it in the wording on Lord Chauncy’s collar. *Stolen by Lady Saunders*, it says! Find a looking glass! Drawn by Selina Boothe! That’s *my* name! Find a looking glass and see for yourself, Your Grace. I beg of you!”

But she managed no more before Lord Saunders clapped a hand over her mouth, saying, “Mad Mrs. Boothe is merely complicating matters with her ravings. I shall take her away!”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Chauncy was deeply shaken.

Anna had nearly fooled him. First, by being convincing enough that he'd thought she was a neglected wife seeking pleasure in his bed for no return other than pleasure.

She'd satisfied him that her so-called madness had been overblown by a lackluster husband and he'd fallen for the alluring, elfin creature who'd reveled in his attentions.

But was she Boothe's wife? Or his doxy? Was she truly mad as he'd first been led to believe, and which Lady Saunders was now declaring loudly as she paced in front of the fire in the drawing room?

Mrs. Boothe had been locked in an antechamber, he'd been told.

She'd paid money to an assassin to murder Chauncy, furnishing him with the drawing he'd done of her.

But why?

"Because she is insane," Lady Saunders told him.

Really, it made no sense. "Bring the drawing to me," Chauncy now demanded of Sir Simeon, who'd just entered the room.

Obediently, the baron handed him the rolled paper.

“And a looking glass.”

“Good lord, Chauncy! You surely don’t believe that insane creature? Why, of course, she’d say the first nonsense she could to deflect blame from her husband, who is clearly behind this terrible attempt upon your life.”

“I recall her saying she was his sister. And why would this unknown Boothe wish me dead?” Chauncy frowned as he took the looking glass offered to him and held it over the drawing. He hoped Sir Simeon wasn’t about to add his suspicions that she was in fact Boothe’s mistress.

“Even greater proof that she’s completely lost her mind!” declared Catherine.

Chauncy moved closer. “Then why is she right in claiming the existence of the very words she said were there, in handwriting that is too small to discern with the naked eye?” He tapped the drawing and rose to confront his former lover. “*Stolen by Lady Saunders!* That’s what it says.”

Catherine drew back, horror marring her lovely face before she said slowly, “She was trying to frame *me*? So, it is not her husband—or brother—who was behind an attempt on your life.” She hesitated, searching Chauncy’s face. “This is proof that it *was* mad Mrs. Boothe, or whatever her name is. She has tried to get close to you, Chauncy, using whatever means she can. Clearly, she is...the instrument of someone who wishes you dead!”

Chauncy frowned as he tried to puzzle it out.

Then he said to Sir Simeon, “I think that Mrs. Boothe should be brought here so that you and she, between you, can

tell me what really are the facts behind why this drawing was found on the person of the dead man who tried to kill me.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Selina shifted position on the small hard chair in what appeared to be a tiny storeroom.

The gossip had quickly spread that an assassination attempt had been made on the Prince Regent. Selina heard whispers as she'd been escorted through the castle corridors by Lord Saunders before being thrust into the airless room she now occupied.

She'd heard this refuted by others along the way. "No! The artist did it!" And "No, it was the artist's wife!"

With time to think, in the darkness, Selina realized her plea of innocence may not hold up.

Lady Saunders was cunning. She'd claim that Selina had deliberately written the incriminating words on the likeness of Lord Chauncy *before* she'd given it to the assassin in order to deflect blame.

Selina presumed the dead man was the assassin, but she was confused over what had happened.

Had Lord Chauncy really been the intended victim before Sir Simeon had shot the man supposedly intending to kill him?

And who would want Lord Chauncy dead?

She put her head in her hands and tried to think. Lady Saunders accused Selina of hiring the assassin.

But surely it could only have been either Lord or Lady Saunders?

They had stolen the drawing of Lord Chauncy that had been found on the assassin's body.

She tried to recall what she'd heard of their conversation when she'd been hiding in their room. Lady Saunders had said something about waiting until Lady Rushworth's ball to ask for a loan. Lady Saunders had also been rejected by Chauncy.

Bile rose up her throat. But who would believe Selina over Lady Saunders?

The door opened suddenly and Sir Simeon barked, "His Grace is asking for you."

He took Selina's arm as if suspecting she'd run and marched her down several corridors and into the drawing room, where a cluster of people turned to stare at her as Sir Simeon pushed her in front of Lord Chauncy.

He seemed taller and more commanding, but there was no tenderness in his expression as he waved her to a seat while he stood with his back to the fireplace.

"This likeness," he said, holding up the very first drawing Selina had done of Lord Chauncy, "was found on the person of the man who tried to kill me. With the aid of a looking glass, Mrs. Boothe, it does, indeed, bear the words you claim. Therefore, there were *two* likenesses—the other being the one given to me." He stopped, sent her a long, considered look, then asked, "But, first of all, who *is* Mrs. Boothe? And, if you are not she...who are *you*?"

Selina shifted on her seat as she drew upon her courage.

“I am Selina Boothe,” she finally replied. “At least, that was the name I was born with.”

Lord Chauncy nodded slowly. “Selina Boothe, eighth child of Francis Boothe, Viscount Boothe. Widow of Samuel Martin. Footman.” He drew out the pause. “*Sister* of Edward Boothe. The artist who drew my likeness. Supposedly.”

Selina said nothing. Clearly, he had done his research.

“So, Selina Boothe, *you* claim to have done this drawing; an excellent likeness, I might add.” He glanced at Edward, who lowered his head.

“Then please prove it.” Lord Chauncy passed her pencil and paper.

“Whom shall I draw?” asked Selina.

Lord Chauncy shrugged. “You choose. I only want to see for myself how fast and accomplished—and accurate—you are.”

Lady Saunders, after a quick word to her sister, interjected. “Really, Chauncy, what does it matter who drew the likeness? The mere fact that it says in writing that I *apparently* stole it is clear evidence that I have been falsely maligned. There can be no other explanation other than that this woman is behind the attempt on your life. All that needs to be teased out is... *why?*”

Chauncy ignored her, watching intently as Selina’s pencil raced across the paper, outlining, drawing, shading.

“There!” Selina thrust the paper at Lord Chauncy.

He stared at it a moment, a look of surprise dawning before he let out a short shout of laughter which he immediately quelled, saying in serious tones, “I think you have established that you *are* the artist though I think I also should

have asked you to draw my likeness rather than that of Mrs. Piggott.”

A gasp of outrage shook Mrs. Piggott out of her seat as she declared, “Do I have to destroy another of this woman’s vile parodies? Why, she drew me the night she falsely claimed to be the *wife* of the so-called artist. Such malice in her rendition. So upsetting. I had no choice but to burn it.”

Selina threw wide her arms as she declared hotly, “But at the same time you also burned the drawing I’d done of His Grace, meaning I had to find another opportunity to draw him, which I did, looking through the conservatory glass from the outside. But when I hid the picture under a stone, Lady Saunders stole it. Of course, I didn’t know it was Lady Saunders at the time, though I suspected it was one of you seeking revenge for the picture I’d drawn of you, Mrs. Piggott, and I was right, for I found my picture of His Grace on Lady Saunders’ desk. I resolved to make another copy in a hurry, but to mark Lady Saunders’ as stolen as indeed it was.” Selina glared at the two women while Edward sat quietly on a chair, glowering at her as she told her side of the story.

But what could Selina do? She had to tell the truth. Right now, she was being accused of not just madness but of hiring an assassin.

Lord Chauncy considered her words.

Selina wished he would speak. Instead, it was Sir Simeon who said, “Petty revenge appears to be your motive...*Miss* Boothe? I’ve seen it before with your kind. Your drawing of Mrs. Piggott proves that you are quick to resort to petty revenge. Clearly, you wished revenge on Lord Chauncy, too. Why? Because he scorned you?”

Selina glanced at Lord Chauncy and, for the first time since Selina had been accused of murder, his expression was not harsh and unflinching. Instead, he looked thoughtful. No, perhaps that was doubtful.

She seized her moment. “I have been accused of many things in my life, but murder is not one of them. I did not hire an assassin to kill Lord Chauncy!” Selina said hotly. “Why would I? He has proved a ... a kind benefactor to my ... brother and me. He promised to help us find other painting commissions. Why would either of us have any desire to kill him? He’s not scorned us. He’s *helped* us.” She hesitated, knowing she couldn’t accuse Lady Saunders directly but needing to plant the seed of doubt in the minds of her interrogators as she suggested, “Perhaps Lord Chauncy scorned someone *else* who then hired an assassin to have their revenge? Perhaps Lord Chauncy scorned... Lady Saunders?”

Lady Saunders’ mouth dropped open but Sir Simeon interjected, his tone surprised as if he were discovering something for the first time, “I now see, on the back of the likeness, that someone has written the words: *This is the man I want*—” He squinted as he deciphered the writing. “Is that sentence complete? Or is there a word missing? “This is the man I *want*—” Or, should it read: “This is the man I *want dead*?” He looked about him. “Or do both sentiments hold true, and if that is the case, then whoever commissioned the assassin was someone who wanted Lord Chauncy; someone who—when he displeased her—wanted him dead. Miss Boothe, did you write this?”

Selina shook her head. “There was nothing written on the back when I found it in Lady Saunders’ chamber.”

“Perhaps someone recognizes the handwriting?” Sir Simeon handed the drawing to Lord Chauncy who studied it a moment, before he looked at Lady Saunders, though he said nothing as he handed it to her husband, asking, “Familiar?”

Lord Saunders thrust it away from him. “It means nothing!” he snarled. “Only that this is another attempt to smear my good wife’s name.”

Sir Simeon conceded this with a nod. “Indeed. For what possible motivation could Lady Saunders have had for wanting His Grace dead?”

Just as Selina expected Lord Chauncy to direct an appropriately accusatory look at Lady Saunders, the door was thrust open and a breathless footman announced, “His Royal Highness The Prince Regent has arrived.”

The gathering rose as one, Sir Simeon leading the way towards the corridor.

Instinct had Chauncy following in his wake, but at the doorway, he turned.

Anna. Or, rather, Selina, remained by the fire with her brother.

She stepped forward. “Your Grace, I have what you asked for.”

Chauncy frowned, confused by her words. This evening’s events had him deeply rattled.

What was she implying? Was she alluding to a hope for more trysts?

But the knowledge that she'd hidden beneath his bed, not because she desired Chauncy but because she had to capture his likeness after Catherine had stolen the original drawing, cut deep. Everything was now quite clear.

Selina Boothe had done what she had to save her skin.

Was she now trying to salvage what she could of her reputation having lied to everyone?

By seeking Chauncy's protection, having made a fool of him?

He sent her a level look. "You don't have anything I want... madam."

Her trembling lip and damp lashes left him unmoved. She was clearly an adept actress.

"I have the drawing you asked for, Your Grace," she persisted. He saw she was brandishing a piece of paper upon what he could now see was a drawing of the three suspects. Even from this distance, he could see the drawing was well executed.

Efficient.

That's what Selina Boothe was. Clever and efficient.

A woman who didn't care what she had to do in order to get what she wanted.

Chauncy took the drawing. He tried to keep the emotion from his voice, which meant he had to turn his head away from her gaze, or he'd be undone. "I'll see you are properly remunerated." He didn't mean to sound so abrasive when she began to question him.

But it was the only way to wield the upper hand when he was so dangerously close to capitulating and giving her his

heart.

How could he trust her after she had lied to him?

Catherine had tried to have him killed. Catherine, who'd pretended to love him so long as he gave her what she wanted.

He stared at the beautiful, seductive, irresistible Selina Boothe, hardening his resolve to resist the yearning in her large, pleading eyes.

“Is that... everything...you have to say to me, Your Grace?” she whispered. Her voice shook, and she really did look as if her heart was broken.

But, like Catherine, Selina was trying to play upon his emotions.

He nodded. “That is everything I have to say to you... madam.”

No, Chauncy didn't need another Catherine in his life.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Four Months Later

Chauncy tethered his horse to a tree a little way from the house rather than riding into the stable yard.

The short walk down the hill would enable him to observe his surroundings.

It would also give him the chance to change his mind, return to his mount, and ride back the way he'd come.

Even before he'd begun his journey, he told himself he was a fool to succumb to sentiment. Chauncy never did that.

But it was Beth who'd unwittingly instigated this madcap expedition. Three nights previously, she'd looked up from her tatting after dinner and said, "My dear Chauncy, I had not thought you were so attached to the idea of marrying Miss Blenkinthorpe. Ever since she decided not to go through with the arrangement, a dark cloud has been hanging over you."

Still staring at the book he was reading, of which he'd digested not one word, Chauncy had said flatly, "It was I who decided not to go ahead with it."

Beth's expression had revealed her surprise, and she'd asked without thinking, "So, there's someone else, then?"

before blushing as if it were not her place to question her cousin.

He'd sent her a long, level stare, before muttering, "Am I such an ogre that you can't say what you think, Beth?"

And then he'd thought briefly of dear, eccentric, misunderstood Gwyneth whose sad fate must surely have acted as a cautionary tale for Beth.

Now, three minutes' walk from Boothe House, he was once again questioning his motivation in coming here.

Selina was the same woman she'd been when she'd deceived him. *She* hadn't changed.

No, it was he who had changed.

She had changed something in *him*.

With distance, he'd come to view what they'd had in a different light.

Or was he being a sentimental fool?

He was still deciding whether to turn back when a sweet, lilting voice hailed him.

"A visitor! Oh, my sir! Aren't you handsome?" The long pause that followed was truncated by a soft exclamation; then, "My, don't you have eyes I could drown in?"

Chauncy bowed. "Good afternoon, madam. You must be ... the *real* Mrs. Boothe."

The young woman did a twirl before dropping into a deep curtsy. "How did you know? Why, of course! Because you must be Lord Chauncy! I do hope you've come to see my sister-in-law, who would so welcome you. My husband

doesn't want to see anyone, and certainly not you. But Selina has been waiting for you, don't you know?"

Chauncy inclined his head. "Perhaps you would take me to her, then? And, while we walk, indulge me with some answers. How do you know she's been waiting for me?"

Mrs. Boothe clapped her hands together, clearly delighted with his response, before indicating a path down a long, gentle incline. The landscape was calming, with just the house in the distance, and all around it, fields of green through which ran a bubbling stream. "This way, Your Grace," said Anna. She seemed too much a wood sprite for him to think of her as Mrs. Boothe.

No, a fairy, he amended, as she raised her graceful, naked arms, and appeared to take flight, weaving about beside him as she chattered. "How do I know she's been waiting for you?" Anna repeated, before she amended the statement. "She's been *hoping* for you. I knew, though she didn't say it. She didn't have to. Indeed, Selina said your eyes were your best feature, Your Grace. Except for your smile. But then she said that—even nicer—was your whole expression when you looked at her. She said when you looked at her, she felt like you meant what you said—a most uncommon trait in a gentleman." Anna, who'd now been skipping by his side, stopped by a gnarled apple tree and pointed into the distance. "See! There's my sister-in-law over by the stream. She's painting, though she's not very good at painting. My husband is very good at painting but not at drawing. But Selina can draw a likeness so that it's just like looking at a person. Though you know that. She drew your likeness when you wanted to get married to some other lady. But now that you're here, I hope you've changed your mind about *that*. Follow me and I'll take you to her."

Chauncy hesitated. “Now that you’ve pointed her out, I won’t need your company, though I’d very much appreciate it a little later when it’s time to say goodbye, Anna.”

“You’re going to say *goodbye* when you’ve only just come to say good day?” Anna clapped her hand to her mouth and her look was tragic. “Perhaps you shouldn’t see Selina, after all, if you’ve already decided you’re going to say goodbye.”

Chauncy regarded her in silence. Anna Boothe was lovely. Not as lovely as Selina, but with her elfin features and her bubbling happiness interspersed with unfiltered dismay, she reminded him eerily of Gwyneth.

“I want to see your sister-in-law because I need to know if I really will want to say goodbye after we meet again,” he said.

“Ah.” Anna nodded sagely. “Then I think you are perhaps as wise and kind as Selina said you were. Now, go, Your Grace, and don’t let me detain you.”

Chauncy watched Anna skip and dance away in the pale sunlight.

When he returned his attention to the path, he found he was suddenly dry-mouthed, and his palms were sweating.

If this had begun as an undertaking to discover exactly what he really felt about the woman who had overtaken his senses in such a short time, and whose hold over his thoughts was both powerful and irrational, the physical manifestations were impossible to ignore.

Still, he hesitated. Selina was about a minute’s walk away, sitting on a stool with her back to him, a large canvas on an easel in front of her. Dressed in a white muslin gown, her chestnut hair tied loosely so that escaped ringlets cascaded

down her back, Chauncy was overcome by emotion. Remorse, desire, and confusion were an odd combination.

What would be the culmination of their conversation? Anna indicated her sister-in-law spoke of him kindly, when the truth was that Chauncy had farewelled her the day following the ball with nothing more than a gruff apology for having had her unfairly detained, and thanking her for the quality of her work.

At the time, she'd merely offered a small curtsy and said, "And I apologise for lying to you. We both have said and done things we regret, Your Grace."

Their parting had felt final.

And he'd taken her words to indicate that she regretted not only deceiving him, but the intimacy between them.

Chauncy resumed his halting journey through the lush grass.

Reflecting on Lady Rushworth's ball was to remember the deception displayed towards him by both Selina and Catherine.

But, the last month, sweeping away his anger, a new emotion had taken root, occasioned by memories of the sweetness that had infused his soul caused by Selina's frank and unfettered enthusiasm for him.

Surely that could not have been feigned?

To Chauncy's surprise, he found that the closer he got to the figure so thoroughly immersed in her painting, the more oddly his heart began to behave.

Quite erratically, in fact.

Like when he'd been a schoolboy; not yet in control of his manliness and unable to conceal his feelings.

A few yards away, he stopped and studied the back of her neck.

It was a very elegant neck. Graceful and swan-like before it reached her luscious bosom.

Not that he could see that from here, since he was behind her.

No, he was just remembering.

Like he did so often.

He remembered her smile, her laugh, her caresses, her honesty, and pleasure in him.

No, they had *not* been feigned, he told himself, even if she was pretending to be someone else.

Perhaps she was more like Anna—free and unfettered in her emotions—than she realized.

“Selina.”

She turned with a gasp, as if she knew immediately who had spoken.

“Your Grace,” she whispered, rising. Then, after an awkward pause, nodding towards the easel, added unnecessarily, “I was painting.”

He inclined his head. “I think you are more skillful at likenesses.”

She sighed. “Commissions have dried up. My brother’s landscapes pay the bills these days. He is hoping I will improve.”

“And why have commissions dried up when you are so adept at them?”

She slid her eyes towards the house as if afraid of her brother appearing before she whispered, “There was a scandal a few months ago in which I played a central role. I’m sure in time it will be forgotten. But not yet.”

Chauncy cleared his throat. “Sometimes it takes time for ... things to be forgotten and for ... rumors that were ill-founded to disappear.”

“And for the truth to be revealed?” She sent him an inquiring look.

Chauncy was uncomfortably aware of the roiling in his belly as she asked, suddenly, “Why are you here, Your Grace?”

He frowned. “I don’t know.” Holding her gaze, he said softly, “I suppose I wanted to know what it would feel like here,” he touched the left side of his chest, “when I saw you again.”

She nodded, unsmiling. “I wondered the same thing.” She put her hand to her breast.

He took a step forward, still uncertain. “You see,” he went on, “I wasn’t sure that—if I saw you again—I *would* want more to do with you.”

She nodded. “I wondered the same...” She hitched in a breath, then whispered, “You see, the man you were when you loved me did not accord with the man who accused me.”

He had to concede this was the truth. Slowly he reached out a hand as he said, “But when I couldn’t get you out of my mind, I thought seeing you would help determine if I wanted to—”

She was within an arm's breadth, but she'd not stepped closer. It seemed Chauncy must make that decision.

He did so unconsciously, the need to touch her overpowering his natural caution.

And when her slight body nestled against him, memory and sensation sparked into life. Not the dramatic last few hours of their association when deception, drama, and her possible involvement in his attempted murder were at the forefront.

Yet that's all he'd been able to think about for a long time.

These last few months had been grueling as Catherine's murderous intentions towards him had been revealed, dissected, and reflected back at him as a man who took with impunity, as Catherine had.

Catherine was not a woman whose pride could withstand rejection from the man she'd consciously seduced several years before; the man who then had not only ceased to love her, but who'd ceased to pay her gambling debts and those of her husband.

Oh, Lady Saunders had made sure the whole world knew every real and perceived failing of the Duke of Chauncy.

It had been a painful, humbling few months.

But that was the past. And Catherine's murderous intent had been thoroughly revealed—though without sufficient evidence to see her face justice.

Now it was time to live in the present.

“What did you want, Your Grace?”

“For you to stop calling me Your Grace.”

“But that wasn’t all, was it...Chauncy?” Slowly she raised her arms and twined her hands behind his neck, but they remained there, exerting no pressure, as if she were waiting for what he had to say next.

Yes, she knew him. And maybe in years to come, she would know him more than he knew himself, for the curiously strong connection he felt with this woman had returned with a vengeance.

He shook his head, ever so slightly, for fear of breaking that connection: both of her hands twined behind his neck, and that invisible chord between their hearts.

“No, that was not all,” he managed hoarsely, as he cupped her cheek with one hand, his other contouring her achingly well-remembered curves. “I did have one very momentous question to ask you. But before that, I would like to kiss you.”

She didn’t reply, but her hands tightened behind his neck as she brought his face down to hers.

And as her mouth flowered beneath his, flooding him with memories of his happiest moments, Chauncy knew that of all the decisions he’d made, going after Selina was his best.

She felt as he did, he could tell, as he drank in her sweetness, and reveled in the feel of her, while she made so clear her delight in him.

A delight so transparent that he was quietly confident about her response to the question of which he’d forewarned her.

The most important question he would ever ask.

For if—when—Selina agreed to be his wife, he knew he’d never be bored again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beverley Oakley writes wicked historicals dripping with scandal, mystery and suspense. An avid knitter and historical costume-maker, she crafts her second-chance Regency, Victorian and Georgian romances with unexpected twists and turns.

Beverley loves writing surprising and satisfying endings – and granting happily-ever-afters to those often overlooked by society – orphans, widows, and the illegitimate by-blows of London’s High Society.

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DUKE AROUND AND FIND OUT

EBONY OATEN

A wallflower and a lord engage in season of increasingly bold bets.

Wallflower Thomasina Burke is all too happy to entertain Lord Taunton during an otherwise dull season, with a series of increasingly bold wagers to add some fun to the evenings. There's no harm, and no likelihood of them making a firm attachment. Alas, a terrible accident catapults Taunton into new responsibilities - he's now a duke, and way out of Thomasina's league. But Taunton has other ideas about what it means to be a duke, and what it means to have courage. Love is worth raising the stakes.

CHAPTER
ONE

November, 1817

There was an art to being the perfect wallflower. Just ask Thomasina Burke, this season's willing (but never wilting) happily unmarried young woman.

The reason for her reduced-but-welcome status was dancing only a few feet away. Catherine Burke, Thomasina's younger sister was the one earning praise and admiring attention this year. Along with the veiled scrutiny that came with it. The scrutiny Thomasina no longer had to bear.

Dare she believe it, being a wallflower was ... *liberating*.

However, Thomasina wasn't at full liberty yet.

Appearances still mattered, even if nobody would see her keeping to herself in the shadows.

Appearances such as making sure she looked the part of a woman in the marriage mart. Therefore, her dark hair was curled in the latest mode and tied with green ribbon. Her dress, although not so modish, had several new ribbons tied in pretty bows across her décolletage. These were the same shade of green as the threads in her hair.

Perfectly acceptable. No white or pale lemon for Thomasina. Those shades belonged to Catherine.

Thomasina had promised her mother she would endure one last season, for Catherine's sake, but she had not promised her mother she would find a husband. That would be taking things too far.

Having been in this particular ballroom several times before, Thomasina knew the best places to remain inconspicuous.

She stood beside a decorative table near the hall, where she could pretend to admire an enormous Grecian-style vase, filled with whatever flora remained green at this time of year. Spruce branches aplenty, along with holly and Rosemary.

Standing in the shadows of the vase, she helped herself to the soft tip of the spruce. A quick pinch between her fingers, then she inhaled the outdoors scent.

The outdoors was where she would much rather be. Rugged up against the cold, steam pouring from her nose, feet crunching on frosted grass. There was something so deliciously quiet in the outdoors at this time of year.

A stark contrast to this ballroom filled with heated bodies and music.

She would endure it, though.

After this season, if she were not betrothed, mother would not pressure her any more. She would no longer be a drain on the family finances either, as father had agreed to allow her to remove to Brighton. That's where a cousin had asked Thomasina to take on the role of governess to her growing brood.

Sweeping the broken spruce needles off her hands, Thomasina noticed a hole forming on her laced glove. She tried loosening the stitching around the hole to cover the gap.

It was too dark to see properly, so she stepped out of the shadows into the glow of the chandelier.

She bumped directly into a stranger.

“Please excuse me -” They both said at once.

And then an, “I’m so sorry,” followed in unison.

The stranger’s dark eyes, fanned with equally dark, inviting lashes, locked on to hers. His mouth quirked, then he made an elegant bow. “Dreadfully clumsy of me. I trust you are unhurt?”

“Perfectly unharmed,” Thomasina confirmed, taking a step back from the heat radiating off him.

Or perhaps it was her own body making that warmth?

No. It couldn’t be the latter. She was too many seasons in, too jaded and wilted to believe any more in that kind of instant reaction from a chance encounter.

A pause, then his mouth quirked. “As there is nobody to introduce us,” he bowed once more. The lock of mahogany curls at his temples covered one eye as he stood back again. “Gerard Taunton, at your service, Lady ...?”

“Burke,” Thomasina replied, then quickly corrected, “*Miss* Thomasina Burke.”

Taunton merely quirked his mouth again in an unreadable way. Was this delight, or was he playing with her?

How odd that they had not crossed paths before, considering Thomasina’s very many balls over so many years.

The name Taunton found its place in her memory. “You are the younger brother of the Duke of Wolster?”

“Alas, that is correct.”

Why would he say ‘alas’? How odd. “Are you recently arrived in London, Lord Taunton?” She may be a humble Miss from the gentry, but she knew how to address the nobility.

“Yes and no,” he gifted her with a smile and added. “The family came last year, when my brother took our late father’s seat in the House of Lords. I assisted him as much as possible. I found it all rather illuminating. Alas, it left me no time for pleasurable activities, so I am making up for that now.”

“Will his grace be joining us?” Thomasina only wanted to avoid crossing paths with the elder brother. If her mother discovered a duke joining them for the season, she’d have a conniption from excitement.

“Alas,” Gerard began. He used that word a lot. “He’s found his feet in parliament, and prefers to spend his time with the political set. I guess you could surmise I am filling his shoes. Ever the dutiful spare.”

“One must do one’s duty,” she said in agreement.

“Of course!” He delivered another smile her way.

Her shoulders relaxed faster than if she’d been drinking wine. What a refreshingly odd conversation they were having, here on the edges of the ballroom. Not dancing, but not hiding. Not properly introduced, but breaking no rules as such.

They’d skipped straight past awkward, artificial small talk of music and weather. (There were only so many ways to describe rain before she felt like screaming.) This was chatter best reserved for old friends, and yet they’d only just met.

She quickly offered, “All the very best of luck with that endeavor. Ordinarily I would suggest introducing you to my sister, Miss Burke, who is a diamond of the first water.

However, she has recently formed an attachment with Mr Reevesby, of the Chirnside Reevesbys.”

Thomasina’s focus drifted over Taunton’s shoulder, so she could see Catherine.

Taunton followed her direction and looked at the couple. Then he declared, “Your description is utterly justified.”

A glowing exemplar of beauty and grace, Catherine was dancing in formation with her beau. Their gazes were locked, the epitome of love.

Thomasina was happy for Catherine, truly. If only their birth order were reversed, there would be nothing preventing their marriage and she would not be enduring yet another fruitless season.

“You are the eldest, though?” Lord Taunton said as he turned back to Thomasina.

“That is correct. It is all rather Shakespearean; my parents cannot abide us marrying out of order. I suppose that makes me the family shrew, of sorts. This is my fif- no fourth season.” She corrected. “The last one didn’t count.”

“You don’t strike me as a blushing young lady,” he said. “If I may confess, I saw you hiding behind the vase and thought it was an excellent place in which to observe proceedings. I deliberately ventured this way in order to meet you.”

Had he now? Thomasina made a little smile of her own. “You are correct that I am not a blushing young lady. For one, I am far from young, and secondly I *never* blush.”

His gaze locked on hers. “You *never* blush?”

This man was such good fun. “Can’t remember the last time. I’m far too jaded.”

Without missing a beat, he declared, “Care to make a wager on that?”

He held his hand out to shake hers.

She accepted it, and said, “This will be an interesting way to pass the season.”

He shook her hand, then kissed the air above her lace-covered knuckles. “Challenge accepted.”

CHAPTER
TWO

Two weeks later

Thomasina impatiently flicked her dance card across the tips of her fingers as she counted down the last few beats of the quadrille. The next dance would be a waltz. Her mind sharpened on the task ahead. There were delicate steps to follow. Of much higher importance; there was an innocent blue button to discover.

That blue button was hidden somewhere about the person of the criminally handsome Lord Taunton.

In the absence of his brother making an appearance this year, the tabbies of the *ton* had declared Taunton to be this season's prize catch.

Quite why a second son should be so esteemed puzzled Thomasina. If Catherine were not already pre-occupied with Reevesby, she would have steered Taunton her way. Their children would be utterly divine!

Even Thomasina had not failed to notice how handsome he was. She may be a wallflower, but she was also very human!

Everybody noticed how handsome Taunton was.

And didn't Lord Taunton know it!

He also came with panache for miles. He could metaphorically charm the birds from the trees. But fortune? He had none.

Yet here he was, dazzling the maidens and their Mammias in equal measure. Not a care in the world.

Perhaps the ladies were hoping to lure his unmarried brother to a ball?

Taunton had written his name against four dances with Thomasina tonight, the brazen cad.

Any onlookers seeing them dancing so often together might think this exemplar of men and wilting wallflower were forming an attachment. Nothing could be further from the truth.

However, their overt togetherness created a covert distraction from the activities the two of them had concocted.

Thomasina glided directly to Lord Taunton and produced her card.

“My Lord, I do believe I have the honor,” she said.

Ordinarily, a lady should wait for the gentleman to approach her to claim his dance. Thomasina was tired of polite society and everyone else knowing what would be best for her. Which is why the wagers with Lord Taunton had appealed to her. The evenings became ever so endurable when she could have some silly, harmless fun with a fellow who had no intention of courting her.

Her family - especially her mother - would be happy that she had all the appearances of making an effort rather than being missing from the dance floor.

Thomasina and Lord Taunton's gazes locked in challenge. His left brow - definitely the more handsome of the two most handsome brows to ever grace a forehead - arched.

The ladies nearby made soft murmurs of disappointment as she claimed him. Her overly-laced reticule dangling from her right wrist provided cover as Thomasina's left hand slipped into Taunton's waistcoat pocket.

Her fingers found her prize - the little blue button he'd tucked in there, not ten minutes earlier.

It should have been an easy extraction, yet the heat of his body scorched Thomasina's fingers.

Sparks of joy flickered along her skin as everybody watched her close interaction with Taunton, while seeing nothing inappropriate at all.

That button was her ticket to winning this wager.

As he led her to the dance floor to assume their positions, she tucked the button into her reticule and drew the strings tightly.

Taunton's voice was warm honey. "Clever move, taking the button while I was otherwise distracted. If I'd been rude to the ladies, I might have noticed."

"But you would never be rude to ladies, simply to win a bet."

"Pon rep!" His arm came around her waist and he gifted her with a saucy smile. "The mere suggestion!"

Ripples of warmth spread through Thomasina from the contact. It had to be this latest victory sending her body into such strange reactions. Surely not his touch. Perhaps, in her first season, or even her second, she might have entertained

such thoughts and sensations. Given them a name and pinned them on hope.

But not now, so many seasons later.

She placed her palm on his shoulder to begin the waltz. Another little buzz. She mentally shook the sensation away. This had to be some kind of triumphant, ‘winning feeling’ that she’d read about in books.

Thomasina’s seasons had never been like this. Not only was she dancing with a handsome gentleman, she was enjoying herself into the bargain.

This was *fun*!

“I am rather pleased with myself,” Thomasina admitted. “Although I daresay my pickpocketing skills leave a great deal to be desired.”

The music began and they stepped in time, bodies moving around the ballroom in formation. He danced magnificently. The dratted rogue!

“Everybody is looking at us, making assumptions,” he whispered into her ear.

Such a convenient dance, the waltz. It gave couples the chance to be close. Too close, some thought. In Thomasina’s first time out, there had been no official waltzes that she could remember. Back then, the German waltz was declared obscene.

Now it was merely risqué. That too proved to Thomasina that she had endured too many seasons. The dances she’d learned for the first one were out of vogue now, and she’d had to learn new steps.

Thomasina batted his comment away. “They are only concerned that you are dancing with an old maid instead of their young diamonds.”

He chuckled, a low dirty sound that might have scandalized Thomasina in years past.

Dancing this close with a duke’s brother in her first season would have sent her into paroxysms of wonder and joy. Now she could hardly muster a blush. Which was excellent, all things considered. Not blushing guaranteed she’d win *that* part of their wager at least. And now, with the button safely in her reticule, she’d win the other.

Whoever had the button at the end of tonight’s Bermondsey Ball, would be the winner.

Dare she admit to enjoying herself?

The music came to an end. Lord Taunton bowed over her hand and said, “What’s say we up the ante?”

She curtseyed. “Should we?” This could get *very* silly.

“The person who does *not* have the item at the end of the evening not only loses the wager, but they must host a ball in the other’s honor.”

A broad smile broke free. Knowing the button was safely in her reticule, Thomasina would be winning tonight. That meant he would host a ball in her honor, which sounded farcical. Who was she to be honored anyway? It sounded suspiciously like he wanted to keep wagering, and find another excuse to dance together.

If it made the rest of her season endurable, she was in favor.

“I accept,” she said, noting the gleam in his eye. Something stirred low in her belly. Could this be *excitement*?

Taunton walked her to the lemonade table for refreshment. She appreciated the gallant touch after the exertion of their dance.

Was it getting warmer in here? Were there more people? It felt so.

The lemonade hit the spot.

His eyes were fixed on hers as she finished her drink.

“Thank you for the dance,” she made another curtsy to him as a gesture that his obligations to her were concluded.

He bowed and moved away, probably to find his next dance partner.

With her own dance card free for the next little while, Thomasina followed the waft of cool air and ventured to the balcony.

Here, some young women were enjoying the evening air and as they made amiable small talk.

In this vantage point, she could keep an eye on Catherine, for the sake of propriety. Not that she expected Catherine to do anything remotely scandal-worthy. She was dancing again with Reevesby. They made such a lovely couple.

Thomasina reached into her reticule for a handkerchief ... only to find it empty.

Turning the bag inside out revealed the unraveled stitching along the base.

Had her contents fallen out over the dance floor? It was lucky nobody had tripped if that was the case.

The button was gone, obviously. So was everything else!

Her breathing hitched in worry. Retracing her steps to check for lost items, she made her way back to the lemonade table. There she found a neat pile of her belongings.

A handkerchief, two hair clips and a pencil stub for her dance card.

However, no blue button.

Drat the man!

She'd been so confident the button had been safe in her reticule. He must have taken advantage while she was sipping lemonade. That the contents had fallen on the table and not the floor meant less chance of making noise.

And something else, too. The items were neatly stacked, not left where somebody might trip on them. Rather thoughtful, for a rogue.

A little voice in Thomasina's head scolded her. *Just because he's handsome doesn't mean he's good. Remember that.*

Gazing across at the dancers, she spied Taunton. He was dancing with a young lady, who was looking adoringly into his eyes every time they passed each other, or touched gloved hands.

Coldness hit Thomasina's core.

Jealousy? Surely not! That wasn't possible. She was a wallflower, ready for retirement and genteel obsolescence, not some simpering ingenue throwing herself into the marriage market.

At that very moment, Taunton looked in Thomasina's direction and grinned at her. He held the button aloft to show

off his sleight-of-hand skills, then slipped the prize into the deep pocket of his breeches.

Thomasina huffed out a breath. A warm ripple of anticipation spread through her system. They still had another dance together this evening. She would get that button back!

The human body had countless nerves. Every single one of Thomasina's strained to breaking point as she joined Taunton for the country dance. Their bodies swayed closer for a few steps, then twirled apart, then together again as they moved down the line. No chance she'd get close to that button, let alone be able to slip her hand unnoticed into his breeches pocket.

The prize she sought would be sitting at the very bottom of that pocket. Somehow, she would have to slip her palm all the way down his thigh to retrieve it, in order to win this wager.

Without anyone else seeing.

All while skipping and bouncing along to the jaunty music.

Impossible!

But it simply had to be done, and she had to find a way to do it. Thomasina would not give Taunton the satisfaction of winning.

Step, hop, step again; show a little ankle from under her hem.

His steps were so gracious and light; the perfect partner for such an occasion.

And didn't he know it!

The music eventually concluded and they made ready to farewell each other.

That smile, so warm and affectionate as he took her hand and bowed over it. She curtsied and reached toward his pocket, but the gap between them was too far, and her position all wrong.

“You appear a little light headed,” he said as he returned to his full height and stepped back, still holding her hand.

He angled his leg - with the pocket containing the button - away from her. Farther out of reach than ever before, yet so tantalizingly close.

“I may need another lemonade,” she admitted, wondering if they could somehow ‘crush’ together near the table. That way, nobody would see her hand slip pocket-wards

“I shall get us both a refreshment,” he said. The next heartbeat, he spun away from her and moved in a lithe yet determined way, to retrieve two glasses of lemonade.

His body from the rear was magnificent.

It was as if he could read her mind; at that moment, he appeared to rock his hip to the side.

Of course, he knew she wanted that button, and he’d know she’d do whatever she could to get it.

“Wait!” she charged after him, throwing caution to the wind. He turned and they abruptly collided. With a lurch, she tumbled over his form.

Splayed across his body, her skirts covered the edge of his breeches as she fell. In the mayhem (somebody nearby gasped, another made a ‘hoy’ noise of alarm) her hand dove into his

pocket. The heat of his thigh tore through her in shock, as his muscles tensed underneath her.

“I’m so dreadfully sorry,” she said, but made no effort to stop. She pressed against fabric and taut skin, searching for that blasted button. Her fingers touched something hotter and incredibly private through the cloth. Her hand sprang away at the shock of it.

That should not have happened!

Heat set in her chest and moved up her neck. Any moment now, she’d be doing that horrible thing she swore she’d never do.

Blush!

They had an audience, various people assisting them to regain their footing. Taunton laughed a good deal and kept reassuring anyone within hearing distance of, “no harm done.”

Once back on his feet, he quickly walked away, with some of his gentlemen friends, to a gaming room.

Oh dear. She’d made a scene and done something unforgivable to Taunton in breaching his privacy.

Worst of all, he *still* had that button.

CHAPTER
THREE

Another week later

Taunton fidgeted with his cuffs as he listened to his chums regale each other with their latest conquests. They were in a line of guests attending the Valderness Ball, the latest event this season. The Valderness family had three daughters who were all out at the same time. Miss (Violet) Valderness, and her two younger siblings, Miss Rose and Miss Hyacinth. The family had no history that he could ascertain, but they had plenty of blunt.

He bowed as his name was announced. As he chatted amiably to the Valderness patriarch, he let slip that the honorable Jonathan Drake had also arrived. He stood to inherit an earldom in the very near future, and would they like to be properly introduced?

They immediately accepted and he called Drake over to make introductions.

As he extricated himself from the family, he came face-to-face with Thomasina Burke.

His heart beat double as he took in the vision of her.

Glorious woman, dark tresses in those adorable curls, a green ribbon through her hair again. He did love that color on

her.

“Good evening, Miss Burke.” He made a generous bow.

“Lord Taunton,” Thomasina curtsied.

Dash it if he didn't catch a delicious curve of bosom as she dipped down before him.

“I am looking forward to the ball you shall throw in my honor,” he said, reminding her of their wager, which she had so valiantly lost.

What a delightful way to spend the evening *that* had been.

He was sure she'd blushed when she'd rammed her hand deeply into his pocket.

“About that,” she said, taking on a coy expression. “How about best of three?”

Lightness filled his lungs. More fun and games. How could he refuse? “My dear Miss Burke, I'm all for giving someone a sporting chance.” He'd hoped his voice was low enough to make her blush, but her beautiful expression remained angelic and fresh as a peach. “What do you have in mind?”

“A similar jape, but perhaps this time, whoever has the button at the end of the night is the loser, instead of the winner?”

“Interesting,” he said, imagining slipping a button between those jiggly half-globes of hers at some point during the evening. His groin pulsed and he quickly motioned to the refreshments table. He needed something a lot stronger than lemonade all of a sudden.

“It will be quite the crush tonight,” Thomasina said, “I believe they've invited everyone who attended the

Bermondsey Ball and then some. But the rooms here are far smaller.”

He tried to sound slightly bored and offered a simple, “Oh.” All the while he relished the idea of the place teeming with people. A crush would be the perfect cover for sneaking a button into her dress without her noticing.

Thomasina presented her dance card and pencil to him, and he claimed four dances. He thought about claiming a fifth, but people really would start talking if they danced so often together.

Would that be so terrible?

He gave himself a mental shake. Having fun was one thing, dragging an innocent woman down to his level was simply not his style.

“May I have the button?” She asked as she slipped the loop of green ribbon holding her dance card over her wrist.

“Ah,” now it was his turn to lose his words. After the Bermondsey Ball, he’d put the winning button in a bowl on the mantelpiece in his study. Every time he’d looked at it since, it had warmed his blood. “I, ah, did not think to bring it. We shall need something else.”

Perhaps they should call a truce for tonight instead, and simply enjoy the evening? That would be novel.

Her face fell. Oh dear, he must have upset her. “No mind, I shall find something presently.” He cast his gaze about for something small they could use. Pencils and dance cards were within reach. But pencils had pointy ends, and one of those in the wrong place might cause an injury.

He fidgeted with the ring on his pinkie finger with the stress of it all. *Think, you clod, think!*

Thomasina's face shone with happiness as she looked upon his fingers. She touched his hand, making his soul lighter.

"Excellent," she said. "That ring will be perfect!"

Despite the glove on her hand, heat crossed over to his.

The ring? "Oh, this?" He pulled it off his finger. A family trinket. His brother had the Ducal jewels. This was from his mother's side of the family.

He handed it to her. "Do your best."

The smile she gifted him stalled his breath.

Thomasina's heart danced. She grinned so broadly her face hurt. She'd won the wager with Lord Taunton tonight. Huzzah!

A short while before leaving the Valderness Ball, she'd slipped the ring into Taunton's waistcoat pocket. That was the last she'd seen of the ring or Taunton this evening.

Departing had been difficult. It was something of a jostle to get to the front door with such a press of bodies.

They were one-all now, and as her maid undressed her, she fantasized about what the deciding wager might entail.

Her body thrummed in excitement; not that she was able to share any of this with anybody else. If she told Catherine, her sister would begin planning a double wedding with Mamma. Not even her maid would understand.

The maid finished unbuttoning the back of Thomasina's dress and the fabric fell to the floor at her feet.

Loosening her stays herself, she pulled the cloth away.

Taunton's ring fell out onto the floor.

"Damn and blast!"

That rogue had somehow won again!

How had he managed to slip the ring into her bosom without her feeling a thing? That thought sent flurries through her spine. Such intimate contact, and she hadn't noticed.

Maybe she was the cold fish Harold Learmonth had-

She shook her head and reminded herself that Harold was not worth thinking about, as the memory of him only made her miserable. And that season with him hadn't counted.

Taunton, on the other hand, was ... delightful.

She would always think fondly of him in years to come, as the man who had made her final season so bearable.

Bearable? No. Taunton was bringing *joy* to her final season.

She picked up the ring and examined it, shaking her head in wonder at how he'd managed to outfox her once again.

Asking for a best of five would be utterly desperate at this point.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Three afternoons later, Thomasina was failing to organize a ball in honor of Lord Taunton.

A ball primarily required a ballroom. The Burke family townhouse lacked one.

Mamma hummed and fanned herself excitedly in the sitting room. Every time footsteps sounded outside, the matron sat bolt upright, listening out. After each minute that failed to produce the desired result, she slumped and resumed fanning and humming.

Thomasina pressed her lips together, doing her best to ignore Mamma's agitation. It was brought on by Catherine taking a walk in the nearby park with her paramour, Reevesby. The family had sent their trusty footman in tow, as chaperone.

Thomasina had volunteered to chaperone them, but Mamma had put her foot down. "You have a ball to plan, so plan it you will."

Her brothers were out somewhere, doing whatever it was elder brothers did these days.

Thomasina's younger sister, Sarah, examined the guest list. She pointed to the names on the paper and said, "You can't invite Mrs Thaker. She died two summers ago."

“Oh, gosh!” Thomasina put a line through her first cousin once removed’s name. Thank goodness for young Sarah’s excellent memory.

“Mister Thaker can come,” Sarah suggested. “He might be in need of a new wife.”

Mamma interjected. “He spent all my dear cousin Margaret’s dowry and will be on the hunt for more. No thank you. Cross him off too.”

Four guests, not including Thomasina’s immediate family. Hardly an auspicious beginning for a ball.

Perhaps she should approach the patronesses of Fixington’s to dedicate an evening in Taunton’s honor? That would be convenient for all concerned.

Drat that pesky ring. At one point in the evening, it had been safely in his pocket. She’d put it there while he’d been distracted signing another woman’s dance card. How he’d managed to notice it, and then get it into her stays without Thomasina feeling it against her skin, baffled her.

With a deep sigh, she called for the maid and had her deliver a note asking for an audience with Papa.

In a few minutes the maid returned and said her father would grant the audience.

“Courage, my little wren,” Mamma said from the sofa.

A wren was far preferable to the Shakespearean shrew.

Thomasina took a steadying breath and went to her father.

“Thank you, Papa, for seeing me at such short notice.”

“Have you received a proposal?” he said, tapping his pipe against the edge of an ashtray.

“No, Papa, that is unlikely.”

Her father grunted. “Why is it unlikely? Are you avoiding men all together?”

Thomasina took the bait in one gulp. “Quite the opposite. In fact, I’ve been dancing with one man in particular.”

Her father’s greying brows shot up.

“I know Mamma already told you that. It’s why I’m organizing a ball in Lord Taunton’s honor.”

“Yes, she did.” He fiddled with the pipe and tapped it again. “But Lord Taunton has not proposed to you? In which case, why are you so keen to entertain him? Or do you believe he will propose to you at this ball. Before you answer, don’t get your mother’s hopes up like this. Or mine for that matter.”

She had to be careful how she proceeded. “I am sure he will not. That is why I think arranging such an evening *away* from our family home would be best. If it were in our town home, people would expect a proposal.”

Papa gave a hint of a smile. “I cannot believe my still-unwed eldest daughter is making wagers with unmarried men.”

He’d slipped a family heirloom into her bosom. If she told him that, he’d be demanding they marry immediately. “Papa, I was hoping we could open the family purse just that little more and hire an evening at Fixington’s?”

Her father made a long show of tamping tobacco into his pipe, then he lit a flame and puffed it into life.

Through the fragrant but somewhat cloying smoke, he said, “It’s not the done thing to have the younger daughter

marry before the eldest. Is there any chance this Taunton might ask for your hand? It would please your mother and I so.”

“I am not trying to vex you in any way. Or Mamma.” She sighed and then breathed in too fast. Smoke got in her lungs and she spent the next little while coughing.

Father put the pipe down and folded his hands on his desk. “If Taunton, or any man for that matter, makes you an offer, I’ll throw the biggest ball London has ever seen. This goes against my better judgement, and I’m inclined to refuse.”

Thomasina’s heart sank.

“However...”

Her heart rallied.

“This seems to be the only way you’re likely to find a husband, so I give my permission, and shall open my pocket book.”

Thomasina threw herself across the desk and hugged her father.

“Thank you, Papa, thank you so much!”

“Just promise me you are trying, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Papa,” she replied. “We both know I am *very* trying.”

Father rolled his eyes.

The rooms at Fixington’s were splendid. Fit for a duke, or the brother of one at any rate. This evening Thomasina would fulfil her side of the bargain and show what a good sport she was.

She also promised herself the next daring strategy with Taunton would not involve retrieving buttons or rings. Clearly, Taunton had the upper hand in that respect. Their next challenge would be something she excelled at, in order to give her a sporting chance for the next round of wagers.

But exactly what she excelled at was not immediately apparent.

Organizing a ball was not one of her skills. She had talked her father into seeing the advantages of hosting the event off-site, so that the family house, and more importantly, his study, would remain undisturbed.

A thought popped into her head. She had negotiated rather well with Papa. Perhaps that's where her skills lay?

Mid-afternoon, the band arrived and she showed them to where they would be playing. Trays of produce arrived, along with kitchen and cleaning staff. Everything was running smoothly. Nothing could possibly go wrong.

As she turned to leave for home, to rest a while and prepare for the evening, she saw a familiar, handsome face.

“Lord Taunton, have you arrived to inspect the preparations?” It didn't matter that she'd lost their wager, they were bound to have some fun this evening.

“- No time for that my dear. I come with terrible news.”

He'd called her 'my dear', which sent her pulse spinning.

Only now did she take in his distressed appearance. “You look pale, my lord.”

He took her hands in his, his face the very image of contrition and ... something else. A new and welcome

sensation of his hands enveloping hers took hold. Henceforth, he could hold her hands any time he liked.

He cleared his throat. "I am so dreadfully sorry."

Coldness suddenly filled her.

"My brother Matthew, His Grace, has been shot and is not expected to survive the day. I must rush to his side at once."

Her body froze in shock. No fresh words coalesced in her mind. All she could do was replay to herself the tremendously awful news as he'd spoken it. Eventually she managed, "Shot by whom?"

"I am not sure, but I believe he was involved in a ... a duel."

What hideous timing! How dare the duke do something so stupid that would affect his entire family like this! The other man involved in the duel must have cheated in some way. That was the only thing that could possibly make sense. Weren't dukes a crack shot? Gasping at the enormity of everything, Thomasina could only manage, a thready, "You must go to him."

He set her hands free and she keenly felt the loss of contact.

"Thank you, for your understanding. I will take care of ..."

he gestured in the direction of the rooms around them, "...this on my return."

"Take care, my lord."

"Thank you, Thomasina."

He leaned forward and placed a light kiss on her cheek, then turned and dashed away.

The kiss faded as soon as he turned, but the memory burned into her soul.

He'd called her by her first name.

That had to be the stress of the occasion. She must not read too much into the rushed moment. The man was under a great deal of strain.

Everything was tumbled into chaos.

With a deep sigh, she gazed at the magnificent decorations, the flowers in the vases, the beeswax candles ready for lighting, the polished floors and tables.

There would be so many people attending this evening.

Except the man of the moment.

She would have to face the ton on her own. Not that she'd explain the details of the situation, but she would have to make some kind of speech about why the guest of honor was not in attendance.

On the positive side, perhaps this would be such a great failure, hosting an evening at Fixington's for a guest who did not show, and at such great expense ... perhaps her father would send her to Brighton on the next mail stagecoach?

Her evening gown, which she had worn many times before, was refreshed for the event. She and Sarah had stitched new ribbons to the neckline and arm cuffs, adding playful rosettes to the center of each little bow.

Arriving at Fixington's, any chance she had of making a quiet entrance evaporated. The wall of humanity in here nearly

pushed her back onto the street.

Every single person they'd invited had turned up. And she would have to face them all and explain that the reason they'd come ... would not be showing himself.

She'd heard nothing more from Taunton in the hours since he'd delivered his awful news, and she dared not ask her father if he knew anything. Papa might want to call the evening off and demand his funds returned. That would be more than a poor showing. It would be a scandal. Brighton would not be far enough away to outrun that.

No, she simply had to go through with the humiliation of the evening, conducting a gala for a man who would not be there. Even though he had an exemplary reason for his absence.

The urge to flee took hold, but as she thought about it, someone called out her name.

"Miss Burke, as the host you should be in the hall greeting guests, not hiding back here."

"Lady Darling," Thomasina made a quick curtsy. Lady Darling was one of the patronesses of Fixington's and had the reputation of being able to ruin anyone's social standing with one withering look. "I was ... ah ... merely checking my ribbons were affixed ..."

Doubts niggled at her.

Had there even been a duel? Was Taunton merely doing this to publicly embarrass her?

The thought he was playing an elaborate ruse curdled her stomach. She would never again be granted entry to Fixington's if that was the case. Well, that would be for the best, but her sisters would never forgive her.

Lady Darling said, “Don’t be nervous. Come and stand by me and we shall make sure to greet every guest.”

A whiny, “Why are you being so kind?” slipped out.

Lady Darling smiled. “Merely because I have a reputation, doesn’t mean I always use it.” She extended the crook of her arm to Thomasina and she took it.

Perhaps she may endure the evening after all ... or for as long as it took for guests to realize Taunton wasn’t coming.

Perhaps she should enjoy herself? After all, how many other young women were able to book a Thursday evening at Fixington’s?

A few more steadying breaths, Thomasina began to hope the evening would not be a such a horrible failure. Lady Darling knew everybody’s names and made the introductions with such a relaxed mien she made it look easy.

They glided from group to group, making an appearance and greeting each other, then leaving before anyone could ask questions about where Taunton might be, or what time he would arrive.

Thomasina did not believe her hostess was unaware of events. The woman seemed to know everything.

As they reached a quiet corner, she asked, “I take it you have heard that Taunton is not attending?”

The patroness smiled. “Indeed, word travels fast. Wolster was in a duel and is not expected to live.”

“I am so terribly sorry that this could reflect badly on Fixington’s. To throw a party for somebody who does not attend.”

Lady Darling patted her hand. “To the contrary, Miss Burke, this is an opportunity. Lord Taunton will soon be His Grace the Duke of Wolster, and tonight will be the making of Fixington’s.”

The side doors opened and a man dashed forth.

Lord Taunton himself!

“You made it!” Thomasina blurted. Her pulse roared in her ears at his presence.

He announced flatly, “My brother Matthew is dead.”

She mentally shook herself. “My deepest condolences to you and your family on his passing.”

Lady Darling performed a deep curtsy to the newly-made duke. Thomasina followed suit. What an utterly bizarre series of events.

That the first thing he’d done, after the death of his brother, was to attend a party? Surely, everyone would understand should he not be here, or now that he was, should he leave early?

Ahh, that must be what he was doing here. He would show his face, then depart. That seemed sensible.

Respectable even.

Her estimation of him rose. She’d thought only that he was a man inclined to make silly wagers for entertainment. Quietly she admonished herself for not believing his earlier bad news when he’d told her. He truly was a man of honor.

He looked changed since she'd danced with him a few evenings ago. The carefree brow had a new furrow.

"Your Grace," she managed, "Would you care to claim a dance on my card?"

"I'll claim as many as you'll allow. The moment the Mammas find out my title, I'm a doomed man."

He looked utterly miserable as he wrote his name against several dances on her card. As he handed the pencil back, he turned to Lady Darling and pleaded, "I don't suppose there's any way to avoid letting people know my circumstances, just yet?"

"I am afraid that may be beyond even *my* skills, your grace," she said with a quick bob. "Gossip travels faster than lightning."

He grimaced.

Thomasina's heart softened for him. "I would be honored to dance with you as many times as needed," she said.

He delivered a smile of relief her way, then the smile turned a little saucy. "What shall we wager tonight?"

CHAPTER
FIVE

T aunton's skin didn't fit his body any more. He was the same man as yesterday, yet he was not. How exactly did a duke behave? He had not the faintest idea. The course of his life, of his entire family tree, was in charge now.

If Matthew had died in childhood, he would have adapted to the role. He would have had time. He would have been *trained*. Well, he hoped somebody would have trained him in his future life as a duke. As Matthew had been.

Surely part of that training would have included honing one's aim with a pistol?

Yet now, here he was. Titled but with no training.

Floundering.

That's what he was doing. Floundering, with Thomasina Burke in his arms, using her as a layer of protection; a shield against the rest of the world as they danced in public.

His footing slipped.

Concern filled her face. "Is everything all right, your grace?"

"Nothing to worry about," the lie came easily. "I appear to have forgotten the steps."

He'd been a duke for a matter of hours and was already terrible at it.

Thomasina threw him a lifeline. "You may leave, if you wish. Nobody would think any less of you for doing so."

His throat knotted with emotion. "Kind of you to say. But that would mean we had not yet settled on a wager."

Her lips turned down, then righted themselves. Was she going to back out of their bet?

"Your grace, I shall entertain a wager, if that's what you wish."

"Why so formal, all of a sudden?"

She blinked rapidly.

"I am here," he explained, "I did not damage your reputation by failing to show. Why are you so stilted and formal with me now? Where has carefree Thomasina gone?"

Too late, he'd called her by her first name. It was far too intimate, and yet that's how he thought of her. Should he admit as much?

The dance was coming to an end. He maneuvered them closer to the refreshment area where he could get something stronger than lemonade.

Thomasina said, "I am thinking upon the wager. What do you have in mind, your grace?"

"Well," a smile crept over his face. He hoped it wasn't too wolfish. "I would still like to see you blush."

She paused in thought. "I see. And what will be the mechanism for that?"

He handed her a glass of lemonade. Retrieving the hipflask from his pocket, he poured in a belt of stronger stuff into his. “I shall throw a ball in *your* honor. At that ball I will make you blush.”

The hesitation on her part filled him with warmth. The glass of lemonade was almost at her lips. The urge to plunder those lips took hold, and he nearly gave into it there and then.

That would make her blush, but it would make her a target for gossip and scorn. It would ruin her reputation. That would be very poor sport.

He had to work out the best way to have her, without raising suspicion or concern. This would create an excellent distraction from the chaotic mess of his new station in life.

Was he imagining it, or were her lips darkening the more he looked.

She still had not blushed, and he knew as much as he wanted to take his next breath, that he would die if he could not make her do so.

Her lips quirked, and she sipped some more. When she swallowed, it looked like it took a little more effort than usual. Was he having an effect on her? She was more than having an effect on him.

Under his intense gaze, Thomasina found it difficult to swallow. The man she'd had a few nights of fun with, for no other reason than to pass the time, was now a duke. She had to respect his new title. If he wanted to dance with her, she'd dance. If he wanted to throw her a ball, she'd obviously let

him. He was a duke now, not a found toy with which to pass the time.

But she was still a wallflower, so far beneath him it was a wonder he remembered her name.

Everything was different now, and yet he still wanted to wager with her and act as if nothing had changed at all.

She may have been dancing with a duke, but Thomasina only saw uncertainty in her dance partner's expression the whole time they were in the ballroom. Should she call him Wolster now? 'Your grace' was the easiest, but people would overhear and notice. Everybody noticed everything at these evenings.

She ventured, "It's different now, is it not?"

"What?" he locked his gaze to hers and mentally came back to her. "I was wool gathering."

"I can imagine you have a great deal of concerns," she left off the 'now'. It remained unspoken. She'd barely acquainted herself with Taunton, and now he was a very different man. Duke of Wolster."

"Thomasina, I don't want to change," he said.

He'd used her first name again, which felt far too intimate. Something flipped low in her belly as he kept gazing at her lips. If he wanted to kiss her, how could she refuse?

Would she even want to?

Perhaps ... perhaps she should let him? But that was assuming he wanted to.

He was a duke, after all.

Letting someone kiss her was bound to end in heartache, just as it had last time.

He gifted her a smile. "I have just the thing. How good are you at keeping still?"

CHAPTER
SIX

It wasn't as if Thomasina had never felt embarrassed or overwhelmed in the past. Or that she was incapable of blushing. Heaven knows she'd blushed furiously enough during various moments of her first season. A few in her second, but then the novelty had well and truly worn off.

As she'd matured and paid more attention to how seasons worked, and the fact she'd had so many of them, the blushing had come to a stop.

The puzzling nature of Taunton's request to 'keep still' for their wager became clear on the night of the ball Taunton held in Thomasina's honor. Quite why a duke would hold a ball for a plain miss was still beyond her comprehension, but when a duke makes a request, one is hardly likely to refuse.

If the number of visitor's cards she'd received in the past few days was any indication, word was getting out about her association with Wolster. A whirlwind of activity tilted her world.

Now here she was, sitting in place, being absolutely still.

As he'd asked.

She could hardly believe how daring Wolster had made her this evening. Being a favorite of a duke had her feeling as if

nothing were too much or too bold.

Her hard-won confidence grew as the curtains parted.

Everybody in attendance looked their way. Thomasina focused on a spot on the ceiling at the back of the room, rendering a soft blur across all faces in attendance.

Everyone was looking at her, but she also hoped they would be looking more closely at the duke sitting beside her.

A voice to the side of their make-do stage said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, may we present, Demeter and Poseidon!”

The crowd applauded, but Thomasina could not even smile to acknowledge them. The charade required her to remain as still as a statue. To move or act in any way would spoil the effect, and bring an accusation of ‘performing’ on stage. Instead, she sat in her ensemble of long sheets turned into a toga, in something that vaguely represented a pastoral scene. She held a basket of fruit in her arms, to represent the harvest. The basket also rested atop her right leg, so that the weight over time would not put too much strain on her.

Heat burned her muscles as she held rigid. Surely Thornton ... no, he was *Wolster* now, was also feeling the strain? She could not move her eyes to see him clearly. He held a trident, playing the role of Poseidon, pretending to rise from the water.

Rippled bed sheets covered the floor, in an attempt to create a foamy sea. Wolster had the far easier role, lying on the floor. His gaze, however, was fixed her way, giving the impression he was about to lure her into the ocean with him. That’s what he told her he’d be doing, but to turn and look at him now would ruin everything.

Thomasina wasn't full versed in Greek mythology, but he'd chosen a daring moment in the lives of these two. Demeter was married to Zeus, but she had a child with Poseidon. The scene they were portraying was the moment prior to Demeter eloping with the sea god.

Their audience applauded them again. Catherine, near the front, slipped her tongue out the side of her mouth. Thomasina's face burned with the effort to school her features.

Not a moment too soon, somebody beside the stage announced their farewell and closed the curtains on their scene.

Her muscles slumped and she rolled her shoulders.

"I detected a blush," Thornton/Wolster said.

"You're close to breaking the rules of this charade. Requesting my sister to poke her tongue out is tantamount to cheating!" Thomasina delivered the last few words with a wink, to let him know she bore no injury. She'd never had so much fun.

"I encouraged no such thing. That was spontaneous," he insisted.

"Of course, because she's never poked her tongue out before in her life, and she is terribly bad at it, but I believe you, your grace."

"I will make you blush." He declared.

She raised her chin. "Do your best."

They changed positions and some of the props, in order to become new characters.

"I will double my efforts," Wolster said as they assumed their new place settings and made ready for the curtain to open

again.

Confidence filled Thomasina. “You could quadruple your efforts and I shall still not blush.”

He replied with a low chuckle and said, “Challenge accepted.”

Taunton lay at her feet, his hands positioned in such a way that he appeared to hold her aloft.

They were the embodiment of classical sculpture.

With a nod to a servant, the curtains parted again.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, presenting Aprodite and Eros!”

Gasps and *oohs* and *ahhs* spread through the gathering. The crowd applauded their presentation.

Internally, Thomasina smiled to herself, but otherwise made no outward expression.

Wolster’s hand slipped unseen under her toga.

Why was he moving? The entire point of this act was to not move at all.

His hand crept higher. Her thighs burned at his touch as his fingers moved higher and higher.

Was he going to ... oh dear heavens, he was.

Everybody at the ball looked directly at them. Safely obscured from view, Wolster’s hand crept higher, his fingers teasing the curls at the base of her sex.

Desire pulsed low as she held still, making no indication to those in attendance that anything was out of the ordinary. Meanwhile, Thomasina steadied her breathing in opposition to the crashing of her heartbeat.

Her only weapon was to keep looking straight ahead. Heat spread low in her belly, then gradually climbed the rest of her body. His fingers flicked between the folds of her lips, sending the most delicious tendrils of passion through her entire system.

Intoxicating and wondrous. How could she tell him to keep going without moving?

Moisture built. Heat began to radiate over her face. Her skin, powdered to appear like marble, must be glowing pink at this point, if not outright red.

At the sides of the stage, the announcement was made a second time of the two characters. Their audience clapped and cheered again.

Thomasina couldn't breathe as his fingers spread moisture back and forth.

The curtains closed.

She gasped and sucked in a huge breath, then turned to him.

"So you do blush, after all," he said with a saucy wink.

Everything in her body thrummed at the incredible sensations of his hands on her, in her most intimate place. Mouth opening and closing like a fish on a hook. Chaos stole the air from her lungs. Pride soared through her at how well she'd remained unmoved, despite how much her body had reacted to his touch.

Such incredible pleasure.

"I may have lost the wager, but that was worth it," she said. The shock of his actions on her were starting to wear off,

but the thrill of knowing it had happened sent ripples through her all the same.

“I did take a shocking liberty with you,” he said, as they reached for dressing robes to stay warm.

“Yes, you did,” Thomasina admitted, then added with a grin, “You appalling man.”

“Excellent,” he delivered a beaming smile, “You’ll stop calling me *your grace* then.”

“La! Nothing *grace-ious* about you at all.”

Dressed again in her ballgown, Thomasina’s mind no longer functioned as she danced a waltz with Tobias Ronolds, esquire. An otherwise lovely man, he danced well, directed her around the floor in a convenient manner and was amiable to gaze upon.

Even more conveniently, she could glance over his shoulder and see the ladies swooning and gasping at Wolster. Nobody could argue Wolster wasn’t worth swooning over. Now that he’d inherited a duchy, the younger women were drawn to him as iron filings to a magnet. It gave Thomasina a perverse pleasure to see him looking so discomfited at this moment, as the blushing young ladies pressed their dance cards his way and pleaded with him to sign them. The eyelids fluttered, the dimples dimpled. The smiles spread. In some cases, the hands grasped his to put a pencil in them.

“... after my Grand Tour?” Ronolds said.

Thomasina tilted her head back to Ronolds. “I’m dreadfully sorry, sir, I missed the beginning of that.”

“I rather thought I might be talking to myself.” He said. “The ladies only have eyes for Wolster, it appears.”

No matter what travails she might be going through, she should not treat her dance partner to such disdain. “I do apologize, Mister Ronolds. Your suspicions are correct, I was distracted by the young ladies throwing themselves at Wolster’s feet.”

“Are you not figuratively throwing your card into the ring as well? You appear to be well known to each other, based on your charades earlier this eve? He has thrown this ball in your honor, after all.

The memory of charades sent a burst of heat through her system again. “Goodness, no. I am far too old for that. Now, what was it you were asking me, just before?”

“I was asking if there was any understanding between yourself and Wolster, and inquiring as to whether you might ... still be here after I return from The Grand Tour.”

“Of course, where else would I be?” Thomasina answered without a moment’s thought. As soon as her words reached his ears, Ronolds delivered a warm smile and pressed her closer.

Coldness seeped into her bones and she fought to extricate herself from his misunderstanding and her mis-chosen words. “I’m dreadfully sorry, I did not explain myself fully. Yes, I’ll still be here, because I am never going to marry. The only understanding Wolster and I have is that he needs protecting from the young ladies throwing themselves in his path, and I am something of a convenient shield. I will still be here because I am a confirmed wallflower and resigned to spinsterhood. I would not wish to mislead you in any way.”

He straightened and cleared his throat a little. “Well, that’s ... well and good. I wasn’t asking you to marry me, so don’t be under any claim whatsoever.”

“I’m relieved we could clear this,” Thomasina said on a deep sigh.

“Hold up, it’s not that bad, is it?” He asked.

“Not at all, honestly. This is on me, for not listening to you in the first place. I’m full of terrible faults like that, which is why I’ll make such a terrible wife and have excluded myself from that, for the sake of all concerned.”

She was blathering. Her palms were sweating and her spine grew cold. All the while her neck heated at the thought of playing charades again with Wolster.

“I believe you,” he said. “And I appreciate your honesty.” They twirled some more in the waltz and relaxed into the flow. “On the other hand, I don’t believe you’re being honest enough with yourself. You are not so old. You make a stunning Aphrodite. Your blush is your most attractive feature.”

“My what?” She looked at him directly, unsure of her ears.

“Your blush. Your cheeks took on the most delightful rosy hue as Aphrodite, and you blushed just then, when I caught you looking at Taunton.”

“I did?”

“You most certainly did. I may not be a worldly person, but I know when someone is carrying a flame for another.”

Words did not come. A few thoughts did, but they weren’t going to be very helpful.

Ronolds’s words had landed true. “Thank you, kindly for the waltz, Mr Ronolds. Have a lovely evening.”

He gave her a curt bow, she delivered a perfunctory curtsy. Then she made her way to the nearest door that would take her outside.

Thank heavens she found a small portico where she could be alone. It was cooler here, but not cool enough. Even as she rested her back against the stone wall, her body burned with ... with what exactly?

She didn't know, for she'd never felt like this before. As if her whole being were made of lemonade. Any moment now she'd pour out onto the flagstones and become a puddle of nothing.

The truth of Ronolds's comments - as flippant as he might have tried to make them - hit hard. She was in thrall to Thornton now known as Wolster. A man so terrifically out of reach she may as well give her heart to the moon. Her feelings for him, her admiration and enjoyment of his company, had crept up on her so slightly, she hadn't noticed it herself. Now the accusation of carrying a flame for him had been spoken by another, she had to admit it was true.

Body and soul, she belonged to Wolster.

In their charade, he was swooning at her feet, for all to see. He may have been playing Poseidon, but he was all Wolster.

The charade and the choice of characters had been his idea. She'd chosen to go along with it. Then they'd become synonymous with love and passion, as Aphrodite and Eros, and his hands had been on her sex.

A tremor rippled through her body as the memories flooded her. The way his fingers had teasingly parted her lips. The way her body had internally quivered.

Oh, how she'd enjoyed it.

And oh, how she wanted to do it again!

The cool air brought her back to something resembling reality. If this had been her first season, she would have thought herself the luckiest woman in the world to have the attentions of a man such as Wolster.

Now she chastised herself for losing her heart and head so easily, all over again.

For he wasn't simply Thornton any more, he was the Duke of Wolster.

And she was well on her way to confirmed spinsterhood.

Perhaps ... the little voice of hope said.

The thought, *don't get your hopes up* swiftly followed. He was a duke, he'd marry someone younger and far more connected than she. That was a certainty.

But the little voice of hope became a little louder. *There might be a little more you and Wolster could do.*

One last wager, before she left London for good? She was already more than a little in love with him. Leaving him at the end of the season would tear her emotions to shreds. She may as well have some fun ahead of the heartbreak.

Who better to have some fun with than a duke?

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Wolster's ball continued long into the morning. Tired faces filled every room, but nobody was leaving. Perhaps they were waiting for permission? He wasn't sure how these things were supposed to play out. He certainly couldn't leave, it was his house.

He found Thomasina standing in a quiet alcove.

"I thought you could use some refreshment," he said, handing her glass of lemonade.

"You are too kind, but I fear this will feed the tabbies even more gossip."

Then they shouldn't dabble around in the alcoves talking.

Once she finished her drink, he held his arm, bent at the elbow. "Let us take a turn in the gardens. The fresh air will revive us."

Relief he didn't recognize spread through him as she touched his arm. Thank heavens fate had thrown Thomasina Burke his way.

They stepped through the doors to the terrace and found a crushed shell path on which to walk. The adjacent rows of grass, although beautiful, were sodden from recent rain.

The sky had the softest pink of first light. In half an hour, the sun would be up. “Goodness, it is late!” he said.

“Yet, I do not feel tired,” Thomasina said.

Past the duck pond were a row of fir trees, and beyond that, a Grecian-style rotunda. Once out of sight of most of the other guests, he lifted her hand off his sleeve, then kissed the tips of her fingers.

She gifted him the softest glow in her cheeks. He didn’t imagine it. She’d blushed, only for him. She delivered a coy smile. “We do not have a big enough audience for my blushes. Shall we return indoors?”

Not likely, not with how much his body shook with longing for her. “I thought we might walk to the folly, where we might not be observed.”

“Is this another wager, your grace?”

“No. How about we put a pause on the wagers for a day or so? And the ‘your graces’.”

She nodded. A knot in his gut unfurled.

“I have rather come to enjoy your company.”

“You have?” She stopped and her mouth dropped open.

Her face *really* colored this time. He wanted to plunder her mouth this very instant.

A smattering of rain fell about them. He tilted his head to the covered rotunda where they could seek shelter. And privacy.

“You knew me before my ... circumstances ... changed. We had some fun. It was enormously diverting. I have noticed a creeping *formality* on your part since my title came to me.”

“It is the right thing to do, your grace.”

“Please stop calling me that. I’m fine with strangers saying it, obviously, but ...”

“Not me?”

She sounded bruised.

He had to fix this before he ruined everything that was pleasant and good between them. “I don’t mean to dictate terms of our association. Gosh, I am making a hash of this. You see, I am terribly fond of your company.”

She presented the most delightful blush over her bosom, neck and face. He yearned to kiss every *pinkening* inch of her.

He would. Before the day truly began. First was the gloved hand. He held it to his lips and asked, “May I?”

“You may,” she replied with a cool smile.

He kissed the back of her fingers and felt the heat of her hands through the lacy fabric. Then he moved to her wrist and tugged the cuff away. Again, he asked, “May I?”

She swallowed and changed her posture a little, then replied, “You may.”

The fabric came away, revealing her naked wrist. He kissed the skin. The heat of it shot to his gut. Her pulse flickered under his lips.

“Why are you asking my permission now, for something so mild?” She asked.

Mild? Holy hell, he was losing his mind.

Somehow, they reached the domed roof of the garden shelter and Thomasina's legs were still working. The view across the pond and gardens would be stunning in the early morning light, but her focus was only for Wolster.

Every step of the way, he would pause and ask. She granted each enquiry, as if daring herself to accept the enjoyment he offered. There was something so empowering about being asked, and him waiting for her approval before he did anything.

He may have a title, but she felt like a queen.

A queen who could command her subject to obey her every whim.

And what whims she had!

“Your Grace, I want I want you to know th-”

“-Please call me Gerard.”

“Gerard.” She tested the feel of his name on her tongue; loved the sound it made in her ears. It was his private, personal name. He'd gifted it to her.

His face was utter sincerity as he listened intently to her.

“Gerard, I need to be unguarded with you, for a moment.” She wanted more of whatever it was that made her feel so empowered. It had begun with their dares and wagers, but his fingers strumming her core had awoken something primal in her. “Please know this. I will not hold you to anything after this evening. There need not be any *understanding* or obligation between us, once this season is complete. I will not make any demands of you.”

He shifted a little and squeezed her hand a little more tightly. “Where is this leading?”

Honesty time. “It’s leading to a confession. I have seen my sister and her paramour holding hands and making calf-eyes at each other. It is a wondrous thing to behold, if a little nauseating at the same time. But... and here’s where I must truly confess. I believe I am a little jealous of her happiness.”

“You have affection for her gentleman?” His face looked stricken.

Reality dawned on Thomasina. “Goodness no. He only has eyes for my sister. And she him. They are perfectly matched and I believe they are besotted with each other. I’m jealous of what they have, and although I know I will never be in the same position, it is not that I long for marriage ... at least, I do not believe that is the case... but it’s rather the experiences that I ...” courage filled her as his face displayed pure safety. She could tell him anything, there was nothing to fear. “I am missing out. I did not previously believe this was the case, and yet this must be the truth. You have stirred something in me I want to explore, if that is convenient for you.”

He spluttered. “Convenient?”

“If you’re not too busy. Because you do have new and serious responsibilities. But my point is, as we are such friends, and as we have been honest and up front with each other from the beginning, we are unlikely to change our minds and make demands of the other. At least I am not, and I shall make no demands of you. Only a request, that... would you please kiss me? So that I may know what that is like? Before I retire from society and settle into senescence.”

She’d blathered so much, heat rose across her neck and face and she knew she must be blushing like fury. He did not smile or mock her. Instead, he squeezed her hand again, the hand he’d been holding this entire time. He lifted it toward his

lips. Warmth radiated across her skin from his slow breath. He peeled the cuffs away from her skin again and kissed the inside of her wrist once more.

Something staggered behind her ribs. Her breath puffed steam into the air.

With a slow blink and a steady inhale, heady warmth moved low in her belly. “I do believe you’re making me blush.” She said, allowing herself some humor at her own expense.

“At last,” Lord Taunton said, peeling the rest of her glove away and kissing the center of her palm. “Truly a dazzling sight. I’m honored to be so rewarded.”

He wasn’t boasting that he’d achieved this feat. If anything, he sounded ... grateful?

Something twisted in her belly at his blatant honesty at such a time. There was more to it than simple honesty though. She couldn’t quite name the change in him, or herself, as he kissed her palm again, then her wrist, then the inside of her forearm.

Something quivered down low and she lost her balance.

He held her as she swayed into his body. Vision blurred around the edges. It had to be the drizzle filling the air. She couldn’t possibly be ... swooning?

There was something happening to her, and from the Gerard’s expression as he held her so tenderly, something was happening to him as well. The pupils of his eyes grew larger and darker with every passing second.

His voice cracked as he asked, “May I kiss you, on the lips?”

So formal, so ... tentative. As if the people who had partaken in such daring, personal wagers for the past few weeks were total strangers.

Something deliciously naughty took hold, and despite the drizzle, Thomasina thought she might burst into flames.

“Which lips?”

Gerard, Duke of Wolster, turned bright red. Then he gave a dirty chuckle. She joined in. It broke the simmering tension growing between them. Feeling safe and adored, she stepped into his body and pressed her lips against his.

The bliss of it sent her pulse soaring. The plump cushions of his mouth fit across hers with delicious precision. He canted his mouth open and she followed. A soft moan escaped her throat and vanished into his.

Dear heavens, to think she might have gone to Brighton and never experienced such a wonderful moment. Determined to enjoy every morsel, she committed the sensations to memory.

His arms wrapped around her torso, holding her steady into his. Their chests pressed together, their legs partly entwined.

Something ached so heavily where her *other* lips were, where he'd played with her under the toga during the charade.

The sun might be rising, but her lids remained closed as sensations took hold. It didn't matter that the rain grew heavier and the air around them colder in the dawn; Thomasina was ready to burst into flames.

Her hands sought purchase across his shoulders, her fingers began playing in the curls at the nape of his neck. She wanted to cry for the magnificence of this wonderful kiss.

Sensations sparked through her body. Aftershocks rocked in her belly, rippling out like a stone landing in a pond. How could this all-encompassing response be caused from merely a kiss? This was beyond anything she'd experienced.

"I want you," he growled as his hand spread down her back and across her bottom. He held one buttock firmly in hand and pressed her against his groin. The strong shape of his erection branded her through her skirts. Slowly, he gathered the fabric in his hands, bunching it upwards.

The cool air played across the back of her calves, then her knees. As the material gathered higher, cool wind and rain tickled her bare thighs like water drops dancing on a hot skillet.

"You may have me," she said. It was all in the way he lifted her skirts so slowly, pausing every now and then to make sure he wasn't moving too fast. Asking every step of the way and waiting for approval before advancing further.

Not fast enough, yet at the same time, she sought to luxuriate in the minutiae.

With her lower half now exposed to the elements, her skin puckered with cold. His fingers slid between her thighs and she burned for him.

He touched her.

There.

A gasp shook her body. Her knees buckled, she lost her footing. He followed her onto the ground, protecting her from the hard surface.

Being down low also protected them from any stray gazes of anyone silly enough to be walking out in this inclemency.

Not that Thomasina cared if they should be seen. All that mattered was continuing these incredible eruptions taking hold. “I promise I will make no demands of you.” she said, to reassure him that he could keep doing such magical things to her.

Gerard repositioned himself over her. There was no mistaking the hot shaft pressing into her belly. His warm fingers found her lower lips again and he strummed them in worship.

Her breath came in gasps and her hand moved of its own volition to her breast. She pulled the bodice down and freed herself. In a moment his lips were on her, kissing one nipple, then the other. The whole time he kept up the pleasure of his fingers back and forth over her wet folds, playing and teasing her, making her back arch. He kept right on pleasuring her breasts, licking and sucking and worshipping her.

Body now buckling, she gasped, “Yes,” then curled her fingers into his hair to hold on. This utter maelstrom of pleasure was at once too much and not enough for her uninitiated body.

His voice, when he spoke, was breathy and thin. “May I kiss your other lips?”

She answered immediately, “Yes.”

He shifted down low, both of them panting with anticipation and excitement. He pressed his face into her sex and she screamed.

What intensity! Her body buckled again and she fell into a whirl of sensations. The closest thing she could compare it to was falling off an unbroken horse, yet feeling only glorious pleasure and safety.

“Gerard!” She cried out as he found an especially sensitive part of her and sucked hard. “Oh God!” Something made her scream and blaspheme, as her body bucked and spasmed. Her heart crashed against her ribs. Sparks danced behind her eyes. Everything kept building and building between her legs, where he kept kissing her lips and sucking and also pressing his fingers inside her.

Glory!

She cried out his name again as waves of pleasure crashed over her and took her into a whirlpool of ecstasy.

Pulse thumping in her ears, she fought to catch her breath. Gerard too was flushed; his breathing unsteady.

Panting and trying to recover, she took a moment to lock the sensations into memory.

“That was truly wonderful,” she managed. She stared at the rafters of their little shelter. “For a moment there, I thought my heart would leap out of my body!”

A few more breaths helped steady her pulse, but she was also in no rush to recover.

He said, “That is why the French call it ‘le petit mort’.”

A laugh escaped, and he joined her. The little death indeed. Thomasina had never felt so alive.

Each breath brought her closer to reality. “Thank you, that was ... I had no idea bodies could do that.”

“Bodies are remarkable things,” he said, tucking her clothes back over her. “Yours is a credit to the creator. But, you will catch a chill if we stay out here.”

Oh yes, that. “How should we get back to the ballroom? I fear my clothes are ruined and would give away our activities

and lead to embarrassment for you” She noticed the front of his breeches. There was a damp stain on them. “You certainly cannot return inside in your condition either.”

He looked down to confirm her observation. “I have lost control, like a young buck having his first tumble. Let’s use the servants’ entrance. We can dry by the kitchen fire.”

He took his jacket off and put it over her shoulders, to keep her warm. “Stay here for the moment, I’ll be right back.”

She inhaled his scent. Warmth returned to those secret places. She would take her memories of tonight and lock them inside her forever.

Gerard leaned back to face the heavens. The rain doused his inflamed body and disguised the mess at his placket.

He’d burst into his own breeches, like a randy yearling. Thomasina Burke had made him lose control. He didn’t care. He wanted to bury himself into her body and surrender to the insanity.

After he stole inside, he took some dry linen from a cupboard and ran back to Thomasina, who would surely catch a chill if he left her much longer.

At some point in their acquaintance, she’d gone from casual accomplice helping him through a confusing season, to a daily essential in his life. He had come to rely on her. Need her. Everything else in his life was going to the very devil, yet Thomasina remained a steady constant.

In the confusion of his life, she was his one certainty. His rock against the ebb and tide of fate, which had truly been

cruel to him these past few years. He reached her in the folly, where she had very little shelter as the rain became heavier and drifted sideways on the wind. He shouldn't have left her there, even with his coat. He should have brought her back into the ballroom on his arm. Propriety be damned, he wanted to let the world know he wanted her. If they were seen, then all the better - they'd have to marry.

He handed her a cloth for her face, then wrapped her shoulders in another. Even as these thoughts of claiming Thomasina fired his heart, deep down he knew it wasn't up to him to tell the world of their tryst.

It had to be her decision. After all, she was the one with the most to lose.

His life, his very sanity, rested in Thomasina's hands. Forcing her hand via public scandal would ruin this very precious thing they had. They'd established a gossamer bond of his asking, and her answer. He'd be a fool to test that too soon.

He would need to ask, and he would prepare himself to accept her answer, which could very well be no.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

The kitchen servants added to the fire, supplied a tray of vittles and warm wine, then left them alone.

Thomasina caught sight of herself in the reflection of a polished kettle. The delicate ringlets of hair were now rats' tails. There was no chance they could disguise her state.

"Your staff are exceptionally tactful," she said as she attempted to re-curl a wet lock. The hair dropped away from her finger, completely bedraggled.

"It is my fault you are in such a state," Gerard said. "If I'd brought you back with me earlier, you would not be so wet. I should not have left you to the elements."

She made a shrug. "You were trying to protect me. The weather had other ideas."

He dabbed at her forehead with a soft towel. "I have rather made a hash of things. Being near you drives my good sense away."

Thomasina shook her head. "Impossible. You are a duke, that means you are always in the right frame of mind."

"I've asked you to stop that," he moved the towel to her hair and squeezed each dripping lock. "My brother and father

had no good sense to share between them, why should I suddenly have that quality now they are dead?”

Thomasina sobered. A duke was tending to her needs, by the kitchen fire, drying her bedraggled hair. Unheard of!

“Please, your grace, I can do that. You have party guests to attend.”

He shook his head. “You willingly give me your body on request, and yet cannot stop with these silly honorifics despite me begging you. I was Gerard for my whole life before any of this,” he waved his hand around to indicate the estate and all it entailed, “landed on my head. Please. When it is just the two of us, call me ‘Gerard’.”

It was the hardest thing to grant him, yet it should be so easy. Why could she not see past his station to the man he was? They were alone in the folly and she granted him carte blanche. “Perhaps it is the light. We are inside your house now, back to reality?”

He found a seat and dragged it nearer the fire, then he found a stool and sat it in front of her. “I am Gerard, the second son of a duke. That may have opened more doors that are closed to many, but I lacked the training my father or my brother Matthew had for their roles. They knew from birth what was expected of them. Just as I knew I would need to make my way in the world. Which I had been doing, until ... recently. Of course, our father wasn’t well, we knew he would go at some point. That’s how inheritances work. My brother, should have been more prepared to inherit, he was the one who had all the training for it. But he apparently wasn’t ready. What should have been a smooth transition caused intense upheavals.”

He paused a little. Thomasina wasn't sure what she should say, or if she should say anything at all. In the end she settled for, "You have my deepest sympathies for your loss." Then quickly corrected that to, "Losses."

He was bearing his heart to her in the hope she'd see him as a real person, instead of a title. All Thornton knew was he could not lose Thomasina Burke. The one good thing in his life.

"I appreciate that, thank you. Mother was in hysterics. My sister, Adelaide, was close to forming an attachment, but she's now cast in deep mourning and must delay what might have been a happy occasion. I am still no wiser on what was going on with her. My brother was, apparently, having a great deal of fun, being the eldest son of a duke. He suddenly had to stop that and become the duke himself. I should have been the one having some fun ... or something ... but Matthew said he needed me. He said he was so overwhelmed with grief for our father and responsibilities he needed me by his side. I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but all work and no play made me a very dull boy. I rather think this was Matthew's plan all along - second me into the workload of a duchy, while he played at being the duke."

Thomasina leaned forward and placed her hands in his, a show of comfort and deep sympathy.

Gerard took in a deep breath and then sighed heavily. "Matthew played a little too much and his friends multiplied. They were the ones instantly calling him 'your grace' the moment our father died. I think it went to my head. That's why

I can't stand it. I think it went to Matthew's head, and that's why he called on the duel."

"At least," Thomasina was looking for something positive to come from this. "Once the family is out of mourning, you have your sister's wedding to look forward to."

His face dropped. "Oh no, that's the worst part. I forgot to explain about Mister Learmonth. Adelaide's lover, Learmonth, was Matthew's adversary in the duel."

Thomasina's mouth slackened in shock. What a tangled mess Gerard's life had become!

"L-l..." her tongue became too thick to speak. "Not Harold Learmonth?"

"I think that was his Christian name. Have you heard of him?"

Every muscle in Thomasina's both made ready for flight at the sound of his name. The man who had come so close to ruining her and her entire family. Words would not form in her brain, such was her tumult. Her mouth must have opened and closed many times and still nothing emerged.

Emotions roiled hard. She nodded as if about to say something. He looked so pleadingly towards her, encouraging her to speak. But still it was too difficult.

"I take it you know this man, and the mention of his name is causing you severed distress?"

At least she could nod. Answer in the affirmative, although he'd already deduced that.

"He was wooing our sister, Adelaide, but Matthew had another man lined up for her. Because he was the head of the

household now. Matthew declared Learmonth had compromised Adelaide and demanded satisfaction.”

“Oh no!”

Gerard opened his arms and Thomasina fell into his warm, comforting embrace. “Such a mess,” she managed to splutter, before bursting into tears.

He held her, rocked her, all while her thoughts swirled and dissolved. Could a dead duke be her fault? If she’d handled herself better with Harold Learmonth, perhaps he might not have been able to cause such further distress to others?

“What’s that?” Gerard held her back a little, “I couldn’t make it out, your voice muffled into my arm somewhat.”

She’d spoken aloud? Oh blast and damnation. “I too have had ... an altercation with Harold Learmonth. I do not doubt we are speaking of the same man. Adelaide is the eldest of your sisters, yes?”

Gerard nodded.

“Gerard, I am so sorry. I fear this is Learmonth’s modus operandi. He compromises women and relies on the family paying him off. Poor Adelaide, she must be grief stricken at her loss, and she will be even more distraught to learn of Learmonth’s nature.”

Gerard nodded slowly. “And ... may I ask ... how you came to this knowledge about Learmonth?”

It was Thomasina’s turn to breathe heavily and sigh heartily. “Because, he did the same thing to me. I suppose I should be grateful I had no brothers to challenge him to a duel. I am also, sadly, coming to the realization I was most likely not alone in his targets.”

Gerard wrapped his arms around her in a comforting embrace. “Did he hurt you?”

With a shake of her head, she confessed, “He bruised my pride, but that is all.”

“I would challenge him to a duel if I knew where he was.”

“Gerard, you mustn’t!”

He grinned. “You’ve called me Gerard a few times now. Thank you, Thomasina.” Leaning his head forward, he pressed his lips to hers and she melted into him.

This contact, this shared intimacy, became all encompassing. Pressing her body into his, Thomasina dared fill her senses with Gerard. The protective feel of him, his intoxicating scent, the comforting sound of his voice and the delicious taste of his lips.

How did someone make her feel so close to abandon, and yet so safe?

“I need you,” sounded in her ears. Who had said it, though? She’d certainly thought it.

She pulled back. Despite the strong fire light, his pupils were dark and enlarged. Hers refused to focus.

She needed this. She needed him.

They were alone, but anybody could walk through the kitchen door.

“Is there somewhere private ... and dry ... we could go?” The heavy rain made the outdoors utterly unsuitable.

He leaned his forehead onto hers. “People will notice our absence, if they have not already. I need you, but compromising you is not the way to do things.”

He shifted her to take his place on the seat, then he knelt before her.

No, he wasn't –

“Thomasina Burke –”

Oh good heavens, he was!

“Will you do me the honor of –”

“– No, stop!”

“– what?”

“Get up, this is foolish.”

“Now you say ‘no’?”

“This is beneath a man of your station.” Moments before she was savoring every sensory morsel he had to offer. Then he'd gone and ruined it by declaring for her hand. The only thing that could make this situation worse would be if someone –

Reevesby and Catherine walked into the kitchen with a maid.

The room filled with exclamations of ‘I say,’ and ‘What is this?’ Reevesby said something about Catherine needing her hem stitched and he thought he was bringing her to the ladies’ dressing room.

The maid immediately left.

Reevesby appeared affronted. “I say,” he said again. Perhaps he was taking on the role of elder brother, considering they would be related after he married Catherine.

The penny dropped for Thomasina. Reevesby wanted to scold the gentleman for compromising his soon-to-be-sister,

until he'd realized it was a duke he'd be berating, and that wasn't the done thing.

Gerard cleared his throat. "We took a turn in the garden, and became caught in the rain. The kitchen has the warmest fire. I was checking the condition of To- Miss Burke's slippers."

His calm tone and description of events satisfied Reevesby. Catherine, on the other hand, displayed only suspicion on her face.

"The servants could have seen to that," she offered.

"Just as the maid could have tended to your sleeve," Thomasina shot back.

Catherine looked at her left sleeve and said, "It doesn't seem so bad after all. Perhaps we were over-reacting, Reevesby?"

"Ah, yes," he agreed, and reached for Catherine's hand.

"Especially as Reevesby said it was your hem that needed mending, not your sleeve" Thomasina said.

Reevesby and Catherine closed the door behind them and they were alone again.

Thomasina rounded on him, "Did you arrange that?"

"Excuse me? If I had it would have been far better done than that. Give me some credit!"

"I'm sorry," Thomasina became caught up in the overwhelming nature of the evening. "That was badly done on my part. I rebuffed your generous offer. But that was for a very good reason. The last thing in the world I wanted was for you to feel obligated to ask. We have both had such fun this

season, despite the difficulties thrown our way. I am glad I could offer you some ... comfort during a difficult time.”

“I do know my own mind, and heart.” He countered.

“In the heat of the moment, I doubt either of us could count to ten. Now we are dry and warm and I hope, a little more sensible for narrowly escaping a scandal.”

“How is it a scandal to be in love?”

“Don’t say that word. I cannot be the right one. It is merely propinquity.”

“But I am in love. With you. Do you not love me back?”

By the saints, how could she possibly reply anything other than the affirmative. “It doesn’t matter if I do. We both know we are not meant for each other. You are destined for far greater things. I thank you for your ... playfulness and friendship and caresses ... I will never forget our time together. But we are not destined to remain this way.”

She may have lost her head in the moment, but he didn’t need to lose his. This foolishness had to stop. She remembered her plans. “I am leaving for Brighton tomorrow. In a few days you will realize better things await you.”

“A few days? Is that all you think of my love? That I will forget you so easily?”

“Weeks then.”

“You will see.” He declared, straightening himself and checking his messy hair in the reflection of polished copper pots. “I do love you, and I will prove it. And then I will ask you again. I only ask that you not entertain any other suitors for at least the next month.”

“A month!” Burst out of Thomasina’s mouth.

“What? You can’t go that long?”

“I can go for a year. Two years. Did you not listen to me when we first met? I am not marrying.”

He sized her up and made a curt nod. She replied with a curtsy.

“You say you aren’t marrying, but it is not from lack of opportunity. I asked you to marry me, with deep sincerity, and you accuse me of being out of my wits. The fault is not with me, Miss Burke, but with you. You are afraid of marriage and cannot grasp a wonderful situation when it presents itself. I bid you farewell.”

With that, he turned and left the kitchen, closing the door quietly behind him.

Thomasina slumped into the chair and stared at the flames.

He’d called her Miss Burke again.

He’d accused her of being scared.

How dare he think she was scared of marriage. She scoffed. He was scared of being a duke.

She was only refusing him to protect him from making a terrible mistake.

He should *thank* her.

When he eventually recovered his wits, she told herself, he would. She was sure of it.

Thomasina Burke, scared of marriage? Pshaw!

CHAPTER
NINE

December, 1817

Brighton was not the most glorious place in the world, as her cousin had promised. Thomasina wondered if it was the blustery, salty air or the gloomy grey clouds that fouled her mood. Considering she used to love the outdoors, especially a little wild weather, but these days everything seemed designed to frustrate her.

Except the children. Her young charges were adorable. Amon's cheeks pinked cherubically in the cool winds coming off the sea. Henrietta's hair curled into dark swirls, giving her the aura of a fallen angel. It would take forever to comb her curls out before dinner, but that was part of the charm of Thomasina's position. Sitting with the little ones and reading them stories. Combing their hair into respectableness. Helping them with spelling.

Today, she was taking them for a walk in the sea air - which her cousin promised was 'so invigorating'.

It was exhausting!

Having only two hands, she had to hold onto a child in each one, and they wriggled with excitement far too much. She had no spare hand to pull strips of hair from her face when the wind dashed at her.

After much buffeting from the elements, they turned into a side street. The wind died down, and Thomasina dared let the children's hands loose for a moment to tuck her hair back into her bonnet.

"You should leave your hair out, Aunt 'Sina," Henrietta said.

"Ladies don't show their hair," Amon said, with the confidence of a six-year-old who knew the way of the world.

Henrietta stuck her tongue out at him in rebuttal. "When I'm a lady, I shall leave my hair out."

Thomasina grinned and clasped their hands again. They wanted to grow up far too quickly. "Shall we get some buns to take home?"

"Yeses" erupted from both, so they made their way down another street to a bakery that sold their favorites.

A pang suddenly stole her breath as none other than Gerard Thornton, Duke of Wolster stepped out of another shopfront near the bakery. The timing was extraordinary.

Lost for words, she could only stare at him in bewilderment.

Gerard doffed his hat and greeted her. "Miss Burke."

Remembering her wits, she bobbed a curtsey. Amon and Henrietta quickly bobbed their own versions of a bow and a curtsey. They'd need better lessons, and soon.

"Your Grace," she said. "May I introduce Master Amon Wilds and Miss Henrietta Wilds."

"Amon Wilds, you say?" He stammered.

Young Amon said, "Named after my uncle."

“How extraordinary!” Gerard said. “I’ve just now been speaking with an Amon Wilds about the new square he’s developing, well, nearly finished in fact. I was about to walk around and peruse the grounds.”

“I’m Henrietta!” Henrietta announced.

“A delight to meet you, Miss Henrietta,” he said, doffing his hat once more.

Henrietta kept chatting. “Aunt ‘Sina called you ‘your grace’. Does that mean you’re a duke?”

Gerard made a whimsical grin, ‘It does, but don’t let uncle Wild know, he’ll put the price up.’”

Henrietta beamed at this shared secret, and replied in a loud whisper. “I’ve never met a duke before. Can I hold your hand please, your grace?”

Thomasina held on to Amon’s hand, but soon he too wanted to hold the other hand of the Duke. They prattled along as if old friends, giving Thomasina a reprieve from having to say anything at all.

She should have known the relief would not last, as Henrietta spoke up. “Do you have any children, your grace?”

“I’m afraid not, as I am not married.”

Amon challenged, “It’s rude to ask personal questions.”

“I wasn’t being rude, I just want someone to play with who’s somewhere around my age. Betsy doesn’t count, she’s only a baby. Anyway, Aunt ‘Sina isn’t married either, so you two should get married and have babies so I can have a friend to play with.”

A furnace roared inside Thomasina and her entire body could have set fire to the front of the bakery.

Amon was scolding his sister for being immature and rude.

“I’ll stay and mind the children if you like,” Gerard offered.

Thomasina dashed into the sanctuary of the bakery. Not that the children deserved their buns for putting her into such an embarrassing situation. Why on earth was Ger- his grace even in Brighton? Looking at property as if ... oh who cared why he was here. The fact was, he *was* here and there wasn’t much she could do about that. By the time she returned to them outside, Gerard was sitting at a bench, holding court with the two young Wilds, who had very much earned their surname this day. He looked so comfortable with them, she found it hard to swallow.

Her discomfort did not end there, however. Gerard accepted Henrietta’s hand in his and accepted the unspoken invitation to keep walking with them. Considering Thomasina did have the buns to carry, she had one hand free to hold Amon’s.

“You don’t need to hold my hand all the time,” Amon announced. “I’m not an infant.”

Bless the little *wildling*. “Master Amon,” she said, with a trace of mischief. “Did you consider that the two of us holding hands might be to make sure *I* do not escape?”

The thought had crossed her mind, but she’d determined not to scarper until she returned the children safely home. The moment her duties were fulfilled, she was free to flee.

Meanwhile, Henrietta’s prattling to Gerard meant she did not have to speak to him at all. She couldn’t get a word in, even if she’d wanted to.

At last they arrived at the Wild family's town house and she took them towards the front door.

Amon piped up, "Would you care to take tea with us, your grace? We can share the buns."

It stunned Thomasina how grown-up Amon sounded. She'd never heard him so well spoken or deferential. Pride beamed through her at his display of manners.

"I'd be delighted, but it might need to be another day. I should rather like to speak with Miss Burke, if that is acceptable to you?"

Amon seemed to grow taller than possible. "It is," he said. "Have her back in an hour for stor- *Henrietta's story time*, and don't be late."

Thomasina had to look away so that she didn't burst out laughing.

Gerard bowed sincerely to Amon, then bowed over Henrietta's hand. The maid appeared at the door and ushered the children in.

Gerard turned and walked towards Thomasina, pure seriousness on his face. A look that crumpled into laughter the moment the door closed behind him.

"They are a delight!" he said, as he burst into laughter. He reached for a nearby wall to steady himself. Then he surrendered to mirth.

Thomasina joined in. She leaned back and laughed heartily. "They are delightful. Some days more than others."

When they eventually regained equilibrium, Thomasina asked, "Are you thinking of moving to Brighton, your grace?"

The look he gave her sent pulses of longing through her core. “We have both collapsed in childish giggles, now all of a sudden you’re so formal? All it does is place distance between us. Call me Gerard, please.”

“Are you thinking of moving to Brighton, *Gerard*?”

“Yes. I need a townhouse where I can bring my wife in summer.”

Despite the chill in the air, Thomasina’s torso heated and her breath caught.

He said, “I would get down on one knee right here, but the mud would ruin my breeches. And your clothes.”

“Why would my cl-”

He answered her unfinished question with a fierce kiss that sent heat all the way to her toes. It left her in no doubt of his intentions to have her, heart and soul. Her body responded in kind, propriety be damned.

“I have missed you so much,” he said, between kisses.

When Thomasina came up for air she said, “I thought of you every day, cursing myself for turning down your proposal. I was afraid. I can admit that now. I thought I was protecting you but-”

He stopped her with more kisses.

All rational thought ended. There was only Gerard and his caresses that she cared about. Her true fear was in facing a life without him.

“You were right,” she tried again, but he kissed the rest of her sentence away.

Eventually he pulled back, his pupils dilated into glowing black orbs. “*You* were right all along. I was afraid of being a duke, of all it entailed. I still don’t much care for it. But Thomasina, may I call you Thomasina? I can be a duke, as long as you are my duchess beside me.”

Tears spritzed free, warm at first, then evaporating on her hot face. She must be as red as a radish by now. “Gosh,” she said, then a broad grin broke free. “You have made me blush so furiously now, I might never recover.”

“I hope to make you blush, and often,” he said, kissing her again with such sincerity her heart staggered behind her ribs.

“May I call on you tomorrow, formally?”

“Yes, but my father isn’t here. Who would you ask for permission?”

He tilted his head to the side and grinned. “Amon, of course!”

Within the hour, Thomasina was back at the Wild town house, changing her walking clothes for afternoon dress.

As she removed her pelisse, something dropped out. It clanked onto the floor and sparkled.

A ring.

A gorgeous ring which Gerard had secured onto her person without her even noticing. Heat soared up her neck and over her face, a feeling she might need to get used to in the years to come.

CHAPTER
TEN

Waiting for Gerard to call the next afternoon created the most exquisite torture. Thomasina bore it as best she could, but it was an altogether unpleasant experience. She kept dropping things during the morning. She brought Henrietta to the verge of tears when she brushed her tangled hair too quickly. Amon demanded more lessons in the order of nobility and how one should greet them. Beginning with the king, she worked down the ranks. A stutter on dukes gave her thoughts away.

Amon asked, “How do I become a duke?”

“You have to be born into it,” Thomasina replied. “Your father has to be a duke, and his father before him.”

Amon’s posture slumped as he realized how slim his chances were of ever gaining a title.

Thomasina continued, “Or you can do something incredibly brave, and lead the army to a gallant win in battle. Then the prince regent can make you a duke. Just as he made Arthur Wellesley Duke of Wellington.”

He rallied at that and sat a little taller. “What battle did your duke win?”

Thomasina lost her train of thought at that. Was he ‘her duke’? “Ah, not the current duke, but at some point in history one of his ancestors would have been given the title by whoever the king was at- ”

“We should ask him,” Henrietta said, then giggled into her hand.

Suddenly Amon stood up, as if somebody had walked into their room.

Somebody had!

Amon made a gracious bow. “Your Grace!”

With a squeak of excitement, Henrietta jumped out of her seat and made a dainty curtsy.

Thomasina turned, hardly daring to believe he could be here, already. At the last moment, she got over her shock and remembered to curtsy as well.

The words ‘what are you doing here?’ were on her lips, but they would be rude to speak, so she kept them to herself. All the same, what *was* he doing here?

“Forgive my early appearance.” He started. “I know house visits should be in the afternoons...” He trailed off, his face an expression of wonder. Then he seemed to realize he was in a classroom with two small children. “If you’re busy I can return later.”

Thomasina said, “The children’s lessons are not yet finished for the day.”

Amon said, “We were talking about Kings and Dukes. I wanted to know which battle your ancestor won to become a duke in the first place?”

“Ahh. Goodness.” Gerard chewed the inside of his mouth for a short while. “I was never taught that. But I really should know. I’m the seventh Duke of Wolster, so it was a very long time ago.”

Attempting to salvage the situation, Thomasina said, “I see Nanny in the garden with little Betsy and young Toby. Why don’t you both go down and ask if she needs anything?”

That ought to get them out of the room, if only for a couple of minutes.

“Your grace,” she suggested to Gerard. “Let’s move to the sitting room and I’ll ring the bell for some tea.”

She simply could not be entertaining a gentleman caller, even if he was a duke, in the children’s classroom.

The moment the children left the room, Gerard turned to her, his eyes glittering with mischief. “They are adorable! Can we adopt them?”

“That would devastate their parents,” she replied.

“Well then, let’s not waste any time creating a brood of our own.”

That familiar, all-encompassing heat charged through her body. “Your grace!”

“If we are to marry, please call me Gerard?”

She ushered him to the staircase, where he embraced her for a quick kiss before descending. “Please say yes?”

Thomasina reluctantly extracted herself from him. “Sitting room, presently.”

As they descended the stairs, he held her hand and kissed her wrist. Heated flurries spread through her body. If it weren’t

for the fact the house was full of people, including her young charges, she might very well not make it to the sitting room at all.

Pulses of need made breathing difficult. How was Wol-Gerard keeping his equilibrium?

At last they made it to the sitting room where she pulled the bell for tea. Knowing the maid would enter soon kept her from making a scandalous situation worse.

The it occurred to her. “Who let you in?”

“One of the footmen I suppose.”

“And he let you walk up to the children’s room?”

“He did.”

“That’s highly unusual to allow a visitor to do that.”

“It is, but then, as it turns out, people do things for you when they know you’re a duke.”

There was no sign of the maid.

“Don’t bother,” he said. “I’ve paid them all to stay in the kitchens, so we may have privacy.”

Her mouth dropped open involuntarily. She needed to kiss him more than she needed breath. “You are very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” How flustered she sounded. How hard it was to focus!

“My darling Thomasina, I take it you found the ring?”

Playfulness took hold. “What ring?”

“The one I slipped into your pelisse?”

“You did?” She hoped her expression looked as stricken as the one taking hold of him.

“Dear God, it was a family heirloom!”

Laughter burst free. “It’s all right. I did get the ring.”

He laughed heartily at that. “Thank heavens for that. My heart nearly stopped!” He pulled her into his arms and thoroughly kissed her. Need pulsed through her body at the onslaught.

He pulled back for a moment, his eyes glazed with desire. His voice was low and serious. “I want to see you wearing it.”

“It’s in my trinket box,” she managed. Her voice sounded alarmingly husky as well.

“Where,” he started, kissing her again, “is the trinket box?”

Mind fogged with lust, she managed, “My room. Upstairs.”

He lifted her into his arms and climbed the stairs. Her body felt so perfect in his arms. They made it past the door to the children’s room. She offered course corrections to find her small room. He set her down gently on her feet and she turned the handle. Once inside, he pushed the low chest of drawers that also served as a table against the door to make sure they couldn’t be disturbed.

She retrieved the trinket box from underneath her cot and took out the ring.

“Please marry me, Thomasina?” He was back to kissing her; her lips, her cheeks, her neck, the rise of her chest as her breath sawed in and out.

“I am scared,” she admitted. “I’ll make a terrible duchess and an even worse wife. You were right to say that, you know.”

But he either didn't hear her, or he wasn't listening, as his hands lifted her skirts and he pushed her towards the bed.

“Did you hear me? I said you were right- ”

“I don't care. I'm hardly a very good duke. I might be a horrible husband as well.” His hands slid up her thighs, scorching her skin along the way. “I want to do craven things with you, right here in this pokey room, instead of in a lavish bed on our wedding night.”

“What ... sort of things?”

He found her wet lips and slicked his fingers back and forth, toying and playing with her. Two fingers pressed in, while his thumb traced back and forth over her clit.

Jagged shocks stole through her. Her knees buckled as he intensified the momentum in her core. Places she didn't know burst into life. Muscles spasmed. She howled her pleasure into his shoulder

They stumbled onto the bed and Thomasina pulled her skirts up as frenzied urgency took hold. She had to have him, here and now. It didn't matter where they were or the circumstances. All she knew was she wanted him. Needed him. What a fool she'd been to think their last evening at the ball would be enough to sustain her.

“Please,” she begged, her heels pressing into the bed covers to get better purchase. Knees up, back arching, she let instinct and desire guide her.

His hands stopped worshipping her for a moment, as he freed himself from his breeches.

“Yes,” leapt out. Her hand reached for him, wanting to know him in every way. “May I?” she remembered just in

time. He was there for the taking, but there was something so delicious in asking and receiving.

“Please,” he said, supporting his body above her.

He kissed her lips and plundered her mouth as she took hold of his fiery cock. It was hot and hard in her palm, as she caressed it up and down. Her thumb flicked over the sensitive top, feeling the bead of moisture there.

“I must have you,” he said into her neck, his body trembling with restraint.

Her knees fell open and she guided him to her entrance. “I love you,” she said, pressing the tip of him to her.

He stopped, and lifted his face to focus on her. “You do?”

“Of course, I do. You goose.”

He laughed. “That’s an odd way of saying ‘your grace’.”

Ripples of love spread over her. “*Your grace*, if you don’t complete the act, I am going to combust,” she confessed.

“I love you as well,” he said, pressing himself partly into her entrance.

She was going to lose her mind if he slowed down any further. Her legs wrapped around his bottom and she pushed against him.

Still he extended the torture, ever so slowly. Teasing, testing, taunting.

Thomasina wanted to scream with impatience, but at the same time she luxuriated in the delayed gratification.

He pushed in a little more, making her gasp at the stretching sensation. He withdrew again and for a moment confusion reigned. That ... that *couldn't* be it, could it?

Her body wanted more. Needed more.

He pressed in again, this time gently pushing further in, but still not enough.

“More,” she said, not caring that it sounded like pathetic begging. There had to be more.

There suddenly was. He filled her, all the way, and it was glorious. This was what she’d been missing all this time. Heavens, what wonders there were in the act. He withdrew and shifted a little, then plunged again, sending hard pulses through her core.

“I really, *really* love you,” she said again.

His body stilled momentarily. “I need to concentrate.”

With her free hand, she moved her fingers to where his thumb had been. As he withdrew a little, she flicked herself. Bursts of heat shuddered through her core. Gerard drove in and out, his rhythm building and building. It felt so good, so right, so perfect. Bliss, passion and need built with alarming ferocity. The universe narrowed into only the two of them, joined in vibrant, delicious love. It was hard to know who screamed first, as they cried out each other’s names, their bodies joined completely.

He shuddered again, her body rippling softly in the most wonderful afterglow.

“I really do love you,” she said again. “I promise to be the best wife I can be, if this is what’s in our future.”

“My darling,” he said, covering her with kisses of adoration. “I will devote the rest of my life to keeping you happy, and making you blush.”

EPILOGUE

Thomasina and her younger sister Catherine married their husbands in the same church, on the same day. Their parents were delighted that Thomasina and Gerard were married ahead of Catherine. It might have only been by a few minutes, but order was restored.

Gerard and Thomasina accepted the well wishes from the crowd as they kissed for the first time as husband and wife.

Catherine and Reevesby blushed furiously when it was their turn to kiss for the congregation. Soon they boarded a carriage drawn by four bay horses and waved their farewells.

“Thank you for arranging that,” Thomasina said, as she waved them off. “It was so thoughtful of you.”

“Ours is better,” he said, guiding her to the sight of a carriage now coming into view. Four gray horses with enormous feathers in their harnesses, pulled an open carriage, decorated with boughs of flowers on the side.

“Good gracious,” Thomasina gasped.

“Nothing but the best for my duchess,” he said with a wink.

Their wedding guests cheered again for their happiness, as she bid farewell to her parents, little sister, Sarah, other

relatives and friends. She gave Gerard's sister, Adelaide, a warm embrace and begged her to come visit, once they were settled in Brighton. Gerard shook hands with as many as he could manage. Then he claimed Thomasina's hand and walked her toward their carriage. He guided her up the step and she took her seat. He climbed in and waved again to the congregation, which had grown with the sudden influx of passers-by and some street urchins. As expected of a Duke, he tossed coins into the crowd for good luck and prosperity, making sure to aim plenty towards those who looked like they needed it most.

Thomasina tossed her bouquet into the audience.

She and Gerard both laughed in delight to see Adelaide catch it.

"You're next, sister!" Gerard called out.

They took their seats and Gerard placed a rug over their laps, and a fur across Thomasina's shoulders.

He indicated to the driver, "Take us home, John Coachman."

Home. How grand that sounded.

They snuggled together and stayed warm in each other's arms for the journey home.

Once they were home, Gerard set about making Thomasina blush.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ebony Oaten loves reading and writing about the Regency and other historical eras. She has always loved history, but hates living through it.

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THE DUKE EXPERIMENT

EVE PENDLE

The Duke is awful. The worst. And possibly her only hope?

Widow Emma Hanover is this close to achieving her academic dreams when an accident forces her to accept help from her nemesis, the Duke of Newton.

Matthew fell utterly in love with Emma the moment they met. Now he has one chance to make her see that they're perfect for each other. So he proposes an experiment...

CHAPTER
ONE

14 March, 1874

Doctor Matthew Calder, Duke of Eastfield, angled the slither of glass to the window and held his scalpel steady. He needed just the upper dermis of the petal and it was a painstakingly delicate job. The pretty pink petal seemed to shrink under the fine line of the knife. One clean cut. He needed to get this under the microscope and get on. Breathing in, he slid the blade along the petal.

Laughter rang out, then light footsteps.

His blade slipped, jarring across the petal, ruining the specimen. But he didn't swear. He remained still, mesmerized by the sound of the feminine laughter from the hallway. There were all the clichés about what women's mirth sounded like, but Matthew had never felt any appropriate. Bubbling champagne, or tinkling bells. Not for him. He liked rational things that could be measured, drawn, selected and ranked. He was fond of numbers and accurate descriptions and precision.

He did not usually become entranced by a woman's laughter. But this woman... Warm, light, sparkling. Like a sun-kissed brook tumbling downhill in his home county of Yorkshire.

Muffled voices followed, but that laughter had soaked him inside and out. He eased up and knew he wanted that laughter in his life. However he could get the owner of that laugh, he'd have her, on any terms.

Before he could move to find the source, the door flew open. The dean of the women's college, Doctor Reagan, strode in wearing her signature black dress. For a second Matthew thought he'd lost his mind. He'd heard Doctor Reagan laugh plenty of times and hadn't been attracted to the, admittedly still handsome, woman who was a little older than him.

Doctor Reagan stepped aside and the doorway was filled with *her*.

Not physically. She was petite, probably the top of her head only coming up to his chin. But her presence seemed to illuminate the room. The brightest green eyes he'd ever seen, framed by pale lashes. Her strawberry-blond hair was swept into what he assumed was a fashionable style, with a strand that curved over her cheekbones and under her ear. Her lips were cherry red, and a smattering of freckles covered her nose and cheeks like brown sugar. So pretty and cute he wanted to kiss each and every one.

Her deep green dress matched her eyes. It hugged her curves then flared out into a smaller-than-usual skirt. It shone in the sunlight, a vivid arsenic green that made him frown.

He was staring. She was beautiful. He opened his mouth and for the time equivalent to a single layer of cells, he thought he'd propose to her right then. She'd say yes, they'd be married. He'd bathe in that laugh every morning and night until the end of time. He'd take that dress off her. They'd be lovers.

“Your Grace, sorry for the interruption. This is Mrs. Hanover.”

His brain stuttered.

Mrs. Hanover. She was already married. He looked down at his ruined petal specimen, unreasonable anger coursing through him. Naturally someone had already found her. He was an idiot to think otherwise. Some lucky bastard had beat him to it. Matthew would cheerfully throttle—no. No he was better than that, surely? He wouldn't wish ill upon the man this woman presumably loved.

Doctor Reagan continued talking. She'd sent a note about Mrs. Hanover having to move universities because of a change of circumstances, and there was a lack of other appropriate space for her to work. Matthew had replied in the affirmative. Apparently.

Mrs. Hanover. When he'd read that name in Doctor Reagan's note, he'd imagined a woman like the doctor herself. A woman of a similar age as himself, who would be neat and efficient and quiet. Boring.

Mrs. Hanover was none of those things. She was youthful and light and pretty as a bunch of spring wildflowers. Far too young and sweet for a grumpy old man like him.

More things were said, and he didn't pay attention, focusing on not staring at Mrs. Hanover.

“I'll leave you to get unpacked, Emma. Don't hesitate to come and find me if you need anything. Though I'm sure the Duke will be able to help.”

“Yes,” he ground out, not looking up. *Emma*. Her name was Emma. It was small and musical. It suited her much better than Mrs. Hanover.

“Don’t worry.” He looked up to find his new laboratory companion smiling, wide and nervous. “All I want to do is do my experiments and get my doctorate. You’ll hardly realize I’m here.”

Hardly know she was here? That did not seem likely.

The Duke scowling at her was not helping with the anxious nausea that had been building in her tummy all day. When Doctor Reagan had said a duke, Emma had thought of an old man with white hair and an oval face. Possibly still wearing the tailcoats that had been fashionable in his youth. She had imagined a man who had a plump wife and a refined sense of self-importance and a pompous attitude. Naturally, she had assumed he would disapprove of her. But he had agreed to share the laboratory, which had the benefit of excellent light and running water which were both essential for the work that she did studying plants under microscopes.

What she had not been prepared for was that the Duke wouldn’t be sixty. No, he was very much in the prime of his life, maybe a decade older than her own twenty-eight years. And he would be handsome. That she had not expected. The thought that her belly would flip over at the sight of him had been unthinkable when she’d dressed at seven this morning.

The Duke of Eastfield, whom she would be spending long days with working in the same space, was as devastatingly, bleakly, ruggedly beautiful as a moorland. He was all hard granite edges and dark gleams in the deepest water of a lake. His shock of black hair was held back with macassar and the beard on his square jaw was so short as to be ambiguous as to whether it was intentional or just that he had forgotten to

shave. If he wasn't so severe, Emma suspected the Duke would be attractive. Because although he was lovely in appearance, he was so forbidding as to dissuade any movement toward him. A blackthorn tree on a storm-blown ridge, he was prickly and his blue-black eyes would no doubt be sour. His clothes were in the height of fashion and perfectly tailored, which she found rather absurd for a man as obviously lacking social skills as he was. Every part of him from the snow-white shirt to the charcoal gray wool coat and trousers spoke of power and money.

Whereas she had one good dress.

She tried not to look at him as she unpacked her meager belongings onto the matching scrupulously clear bench opposite his. He was not only precise in his clothing, but, casting her gaze surreptitiously around, everything had a place in his world, a precisely lined up location. As though there were invisible cubby holes containing magnets for each of his possessions and he merely slid them in.

“Are you going to leave that there?” he asked as she finished piling her notebooks up at the side of the desk.

“Yes.” The stack was haphazard, at the back of her bench. Not a neat pile like everything on his bench. She liked to use different books for different things, and have them all handy. What was his problem?

The Duke scowled. “It can't stay that way.”

“Yes, it can.”

He clenched his jaw. Chin tilted up, he leaned over and stretched out one elegant arm. His blunt fingers on big rectangular wrists reached to her notebook stack. With his forefinger, he pushed the books away. Toward her.

“What was that about?” she demanded.

“They were over my side of the bench,” he muttered.

“By an inch?!” Infuriating man.

He straightened, tugged down his waistcoat and cuffs, and pushed his shoulders down as he stood to his full—impressive—height.

“Boundaries are important, Mrs. Hanover.”

Indeed. She gritted her teeth. Mainly against the annoyance of the Duke, but also from the feeling of faintness that kept pushing at her head and numbing her belly. Lifting her precious microscope from its wooden box, she put it together piece by piece. She slotted a sample slide onto the stage under the lens and held it in place with the clips. Peering in, calm descended over her.

She picked up her pencil and lost herself in work. Drawing the detailed specimen with accuracy told her she was doing this right. She was enough as a scientist even if she was a failure as a woman, as her husband had impressed on her so many times. Couldn't even nurse him well enough to keep him alive. But she could prepare excellent slides and draw precisely so that you could see every detail. That was a skill she could be proud of.

It was a while before she looked up, blinking happily, even if she was a little unsteady as she stood and stretched.

The Duke sat back and when his eyes glittered for a moment she forgot that she disliked him in how her body trembled as he scraped his gaze down her.

“You shouldn't be wearing that dress.” The Duke of Eastfield leveled an assessing gaze on her skirts. Or possibly her person. “I'm surprised your husband bought it for you.”

Oh. Her mistake.

“I bought it.” Prick. Why would a duke imagine a husband had any say in what his wife wore? Except that he was a duke, used to having his decrees followed, even if they were over something as trivial as a woman’s perfectly modest and appropriate clothes.

“Then your husband shouldn’t have allowed you to buy that dress,” he growled, looking away.

She prickled like a hedgehog. *Allowed*. The sheer arrogance. “I make my own choices.”

“They’re bad choices. They’re killing you.”

“They’re killing me,” she replied with deadpan disbelief. She had a headache, admittedly, but that was because of *him*. Yet another man with firm ideas about women’s health because of their dresses. She’d saved up for this dress, and it was beautiful. There was embroidery around the hem in black thread and the silk had been soft as it brushed against her cheek when she put it on this morning. She had breathed in the scent of the modiste’s shop and her favorite color: a deep but vivid green that the modiste’s assistant had said matched her eyes. Her little oval looking glass had said the same thing this morning. Though the nerves of starting the next stage of her doctorate had made her skin seem a little paler than usual and she’d swayed before the chest of drawers.

“I’d be obliged if you could keep your opinions on my sartorial choices to yourself, Your Grace.”

“The green dye. It’s made with arsenic. It’s poisonous.”

“Arsenic isn’t harmful unless you ingest a lot.” Admittedly she had heard someone say the green wasn’t healthy. “Mr. William Morris sells the best green wallpaper and he says it’s

perfectly safe.” It was absolutely the most beautiful wallpaper, made in the Arts and Crafts style, by hand. Not with a machine or any modern forced labor. Mr. Morris was practically a socialist. The idea that he would sell a dangerous product was absurd. Besides, she refused to believe anything so pretty could be harmful.

“Oh, well, if some so-called philanthropist making money like Croesus is fine with killing his customers and employees with arsenic, it must be perfectly safe,” he replied, the sarcasm heavy in his deep voice. “Never mind me.”

“You, a duke and a scientist, are skeptical of the good intentions of a man renowned for workers’ rights, craftsmanship, and beauty.” The balance of arguments spoke for themselves. He was part of the old order. Mr. Morris was bringing back traditional crafts in new ways.

“He owns an arsenic mine that supplies half the world. His beloved nature-inspired wallpapers are full of rich greens.” The Duke gripped the edge of the dark wooden bench, his knuckles turning white. “Of course he thinks it’s safe. It would be a pain in his pocket to say otherwise.”

Oh. She hadn’t known that. Well. Be it as it may, that didn’t mean her dress was anything other than lovely. They’d gone off topic. The point was, her dress was entirely perfect and she wouldn’t hear anything against it. “It doesn’t hurt anyone, me wearing my new dress.”

“It literally hurts everyone you see, and you especially.” His voice was as hard and immovable as the college building itself. “The dress sheds tiny fragments of cloth into the air and we breathe them in, and seeps that dye into your skin.”

God but this argument was making her sick. So much so, she was feeling...

“Mrs. Hanover?” he said, sounding alarmed.

“I’m quite alright,” she gritted out.

She wasn’t. She might deposit her breakfast onto the floor along with anything else that happened to be in her stomach. A combination of rocks and broken glass slides, it felt like.

Then everything swayed.

She reached for her bench but missed, grasping at air. As she crashed to the floor, she knew this was the worst, most humiliating day of her life.

CHAPTER
TWO

“Mrs. Hanover!” Matthew dove and missed by a mile. He threw himself onto the floor next to her. She was out cold. Before he could think of the propriety, he had pushed her chin to open her mouth and clasped the back of her neck, where there was a faint pulse.

“Mrs. Hanover,” he tried again, grasping her shoulder and shaking.

This woman wasn’t going to arrive, turn his heart upside down and inside out, then leave. He wouldn’t allow that.

He shook her again, more firmly. Her face was deathly pale.

“Emma.” He used her given name, his heart pounding at the taboo. Maybe she’d respond to that name?

Nothing.

The toxic dress. He wasn’t going to allow her to die on his watch. If he got it off her and it stopped poisoning her, maybe she’d regain consciousness. A spring to his feet and he snatched the scalpel from his bench. He didn’t allow himself to think about the consequences or the respectability of what he was doing. Just saving her life. Having that bubbling bright laughter ripple around him again.

The green jade buttons down the front of the dress popped off as he scraped the blade down the fabric, scattering the little round gems across the floor with tinkling bounces. Wrenching the bodice open like a coat, he tugged it off her torso.

It was only slightly better off her, not touching her skin. He needed to get it away from her. Far away. The window? Ah, wait. His gaze snagged on the cylindrical metal stove. Installed only a couple of years ago, it was supposed to be a safer alternative to the usual open fireplace. Right now, it was a godsend, as the deadly fumes would be dispelled by the chimney and not seep into the room.

He stuffed the fabric into the little belly of the metal beast and the flame flared and smoke drifted up from green as it turned black.

Kneeling back at her side, he cut away her skirt. The next piece of green fabric went the same way, into the stove. Then the next.

The crinoline cage that covered her legs stuck out obscenely as he peeled the covering of the dress away revealing its skeleton, like the walls of a plant cell laid bare.

There was no time for anything but getting that fabric that was killing her away from her body. It was only when he had crammed the last piece of toxic silk into the fire that he realized she was exposed. The hard floorboards on her back.

His coat was off his shoulders in a second and he cupped her upper arms, and leaning her slight body against his chest, slid the garment over her.

A stray hair from her coiffure tickled his chin and despite his panic and need to see her well again, he couldn't bring himself to return her to the hard floor.

“Mrs. Hanover,” he whispered, stroking his hand over her shoulder. “Wake up.”

Louder. He needed to get through to her. “Mrs. Hanover.”

He refused to look at her soft creamy skin or chemise or the swell of her breasts as he loosened her corset. Front fastening so she must not have a maid. He did not allow himself to notice that she had a sweet little flat mole on the curve of her right breast. This was not the time.

“Emma.” It came out as a snap. She would not die.

A physician. She needed a physician. He opened his mouth to yell for help, though he knew this laboratory was on its own, away from most of the others. And ah.

She was half undressed in his arms.

The extensive drilling of social decorum he’d suffered as a child reared its ugly head. Everything about this situation was totally inappropriate. While, in general, scientific rationalism was his only doctrine and he was proud of that, medical men and the rest of the world seemed to think differently.

He was caught between a multitude of bad options. Remain here and try to treat her himself, minimizing the number of people who saw her undressed? Bad. Fetching the closest doctor and exposing her to ridicule and censure, possibly even her being considered compromised? Very bad. Unless of course she died while he was gone to get help. Should he carry her? But then she’d be the talk of the college. Her reputation might never recover such a slight. Worse.

But at least she’d live to see worse.

The medical doctor in training at the Ladies’ College. What was her name? Miss Patterson, he thought? He’d fetch her, just as soon as he laid Mrs. Hanover down. Not as easy as

he'd expected, because she was stationary and vulnerable and the urge to keep holding her and protect her was almost insurmountable.

A moan.

"Emma?" Relief coursed through him.

"Uuuuhhh." She blinked up at him, for a moment so exposed and trusting. Oh thank god. She wasn't going to die. This was going to work out.

She stiffened. "What are you doing?!"

As she jerked away from him, for a space of time thinner than a cell wall, he held on. Then his brain was functional again, and he let her go and she scrambled away, clumsy, his coat falling off her shoulders.

"What happened?" she hissed.

Admittedly, he hadn't actually thought through what he'd say, but he was certain that the usual etiquette for someone waking from swooning was to be grateful for the person caring for them. But his new laboratory companion hadn't understood this. "Your dress."

And that was not the right thing to say, because she sat up, looked down at her lap, and shrieked when she saw the white cotton of her petticoats.

"You!" She tried to cover herself with her hands, as though her slim fingers could replace a whole dress. "You monster! That was my best dress!" Her voice hitched up like it might break. "It was new!"

"It was the reason you fainted." Picking his coat from the floor, he smothered the twinge of guilt with the bare facts. "Removing that dress probably saved your life."

He went to put his coat over her, but she flinched away. Ouch. He sat back and tried to control the panic in his chest.

“You’re a pervert.”

“Wear that.” The accusation hurt, but he tossed his coat into her lap. “Give me your address and I’ll send someone to get your husband to pick you up.”

“He can’t, because he’s been dead for two years,” she snapped.

The world stood still. A widow.

That changed everything.

And nothing. He’d still have cut that dress from her and made her hate him. He was still too old for her. He wouldn’t have magically been a man capable of being charming and easy with anyone. The de facto situation would probably be exactly the same, but he allowed himself the space of two breaths to acknowledge that what he’d thought was utterly impossible had merely been very improbable. There had been a whisper of a chance. An anomaly could have happened and since she no longer had a husband, she could technically have fallen in love and married him.

Until, that was, hatred blazed in her green eyes and pink cheeks because he’d destroyed her best dress.

“I’ll call my carriage to take you home,” he replied in a voice so brittle even he didn’t recognize his real self in it. Just the Duke. The formal, cold man everyone thought him. No good as an aristocrat, as his mother mentioned in every letter and conversation, since he hadn’t married or taken up his place in the House of Lords. And never fitting in as a scientist either, as he was too awkward. More at home with his plants than

with people. He strode to the door. The best thing he could do was get her safely home. “Stay here.”

“As though I can go anywhere like this,” she muttered as he closed the door behind him.

It didn't take him long to find a boy willing to run the mile to his house and instruct his carriage to come. After that, he left a message with the porter at the women's college for Doctor Hopewell, since she was out seeing a patient, explaining that Mrs. Hanover was unwell, and he would pay any fees for her treatment if the doctor would attend to her at her home.

By the time he knocked on the door to the laboratory—a strange sensation for a room he usually walked straight into—he felt a little calmer.

“Come in,” her tight low voice replied.

She was standing before the stove, her back to him, swamped by the big black form of his coat. It reached far down her dress, making her a black shapeless pillar with a white frilled base.

“You burned my dress,” she accused. “I can't even remake it.”

“Only right thing for it.” Not being able to wear that poison really was rather the point.

She turned and glowered at him. “It was my best dress and you stole and destroyed it.”

He was struck anew by the unfairness of life. He'd met this amazing woman who he respected and admired, after a lifetime of feeling like he'd never find someone he felt strongly about enough to want to marry them, and she was already married. She fainted at his feet, and he had removed

the source of her illness, and she was angry with him. About a damn dress, when it was poisoning her.

“I’ll pay for a replacement,” he ground out. “Not green.”

“I’m not taking your charity.” Her chin tilted up proudly and he was distressed to find he liked her defiance even more. Especially after she’d been limp and lifeless in his arms.

“As you wish. The carriage will be here momentarily.”

They stood in tense silence. He didn’t know what to do and feared anything he said would make it worse. Apologies for destroying her dress were out of the question. He didn’t say sorry for situations where he was in the right.

“I’m sorry it was an expensive dress,” he said eventually, because that he could say honestly.

“Thank you for your concern. If it was cheap you wouldn’t have cared?” Mrs. Hanover snarled. She crossed her arms and huddled in on herself. Matthew had to clench his fists to prevent himself from dragging her to him to tell her that, yes, he cared. He cared a lot.

“No, I’m sorry this was bad for both your purse and your health.”

“Meeting you, you mean.”

“That was merely unlucky. I doubt Doctor Reagan realized just what a terrible partner she was inflicting you with.” There was a reason he had been alone in this otherwise desirable laboratory for years.

“She did warn me about you being a disagreeable man. She did not warn me that you were going to unclothe me without my permission.”

“I’m sorry it’s so offensive to you that I acted to save your life.” He wasn’t sorry for saving her life. But by slight of speech he could offer that apology and she probably wouldn’t notice the—

“You’re sorry for the offense caused, are you? But not the invasion of my privacy or the defilement of my person?” Her cheeks were rising with pink and despite everything, that sign of vigor made him smile.

“It’s not funny!” The pink bloomed to red as she became angrier.

“My mistake, next time I’ll allow you to die.” Everything about that sentence was wrong, and a lie.

“I wasn’t—”

A knock at the door and a call of, “Your Grace”, thankfully ended whatever Mrs. Hanover had been about to say.

“Come.” He strode to the door, checked abruptly with his tiger that the carriage had been brought as close as possible, and ushered Mrs. Hanover out of the back door, his heart thwacking against his ribs at the thought she might be seen.

Curt instructions to his groom. A nod to Mrs. Hanover that wasn’t returned.

Only when he shut the carriage door emblazoned with his coat of arms and watched as it drew away into the street did he unblock his ears and the birds chirping, hooves clopping, and the rumble of the city returned.

Back in the laboratory, where he thought he could lose himself in work, she was there. A chaos of her experimental work. There was no order to it.

Then the ultimate insult. A reminder of the utter mess that he'd made. A single green button caught his eye on the floor. He knelt and picked it up. It must have pinged from her dress when he cut it open. Round and similar to moss, but set in stone, he rolled the little gem button between his fingers.

A mess he had to clear up.

One by one, he found the buttons on the floor, sweeping up dust on the wool of his trousers and stretching under the cupboards. Each little piece of jade. Not knowing how many there would be, he did four rounds of the room, searching in a methodical way. Left to right, front to back.

Eventually, his knees began to ache from being on the floor, and he stood, frowning at the little smooth pieces of jade.

They would be a memory of when he'd been so awful to her—exposed her—and he almost threw them all away in an attempt to forget the whole incident. But jade buttons would have been an extra she paid more for at the modiste. She'd want to keep them to sell, even if she didn't wear them again.

He swiped the buttons off the edge of the desk into his waiting palm, and tipped them into a petri dish on her desk. But when the last button lodged between his fingers, stuck, he closed his fist around it.

This one was *his*.

A reminder of what an idiot he was, and how everything he tried to do ended up fouled. Of how the things he wanted most were destined to be failures.

He'd screwed everything up. For a moment earlier he'd been convinced they'd be lovers and he'd have all of her. That musical laughter that shivered down his spine to his groin and

the smile that went with it. Touches and possession and hunger.

But although he knew now she was widowed, after this incident there was no resurrecting any friendship, never mind more. Instead, he'd have the torture of her dislike as they worked alongside each other day after day, until she was a doctor, or his duke duties finally dragged him away from his vocation. If all he could have of her was this slide of time, her attention unwillingly given, and a green button that matched her eyes, he'd take that.

Today he'd sealed his fate. He loved her.

He'd scoffed yesterday at anyone who suggested he would fall in love in the span of one day, with a woman who loathed him. Irrational sentiment had no place in a scientific man's mind. But it was undeniable, and one thing that he always did was believe the evidence before him. This ache in his chest? The need to take care of her, the admiration for her bravery, talent, beauty and the overwhelming desire to have her as his? Love. He could try to call it a dozen other things, but that intangible, indefinable emotion fit best.

She wouldn't forgive him for this, even though his motivation had only been to save her from harm. He loved her with the futility that a mortal loved a deity.

They couldn't be lovers. Out of the question. After today, they wouldn't be friends. What was left?

Enemies.

CHAPTER
THREE

21 June, 1874

“**G**ood morning, Duke of Destruction.” Emma swept into the laboratory just after five in the morning.

“Good morning, Duchess of Chaos,” came the rumbling, low reply from the Duke of Eastfield.

Bright sunshine already bathed the room in the most perfect light. It was all shining and reflecting white, except for the pit of blackness that she shared the space with. The Duke of Eastfield was already at his bench, hard at work, wearing his customary dark suit. He did not compromise for the hot weather with a light linen suit, oh no. Not the Duke. Though as the day warmed up, she knew he would remove that black coat, revealing the white shirt and a tantalizing hint of the body beneath.

Which she did not look at. Ever.

“Chaos today, eh?” She undid the buttons of her cloak and shrugged it off, revealing a muslin gown. It was cool in the dawn of morning, but in this room with a glass ceiling it would warm up quickly. “Low-hanging fruit, that one. Your insults for me are becoming plebian, Duke.”

They'd slipped into these silly insults months ago when he'd heard her calling him the Duke of Darkness when he'd been still working by candlelight when she was leaving for the day. He'd called her Duchess of Dynamite, after the explosive discovered by Nobel. Subsequently it had become a point of honor to think up more and more excessive names for each other.

"My apologies," he replied, gaze lingering on her dress for a second before his head jerked down to his work. He already had a slide prepared and was viewing it through his microscope.

"You don't like my dress? I thought it appropriate."

"It's fine." He didn't look back up. "It's not poison green."

It was a maidenly white, in fact. How ironic. Cool muslin for the sweltering summer days, with a hoop that kept the fabric away from her legs. It was the longest day of the year today, and Emma intended to get a substantial amount of work done toward the thesis work which would eventually make her a doctor of Botany.

Though the light in the laboratory was excellent, the heat was less welcome. The Duke never seemed to mind it, never complained, though she saw sweat trickle down his neck sometimes.

She hopped onto the stool at her bench and proceeded to have two hours of excellent work before she came upon a problem. The leaf she was making samples of wasn't quite clear enough. The stomata weren't responding as she had thought they would to the presence of water, and she was struggling to show it correctly in her drawing.

This was a problem she had anticipated and been putting off. She needed more information about this technique, and the book she needed wasn't in the library.

“What's the matter?”

The Duke was cutting the petal of a flower with the utmost care. She always thought it ironic that he worked with flowers when he himself was so dour. Or perhaps she was right earlier. The Duke of Destruction. She'd been thinking of her dress, but it could just as easily be the flowers he dissected.

“Nothing,” she replied. Could she go without dinner for a few weeks and afford to buy the book?

“It's not nothing,” he grumbled as he continued his work. “You sighed.”

Indeed. What a terrible sin. But since he asked, she told him, “I need a book on a method of chemical enhancement of the stomata. The little holes on leaves that take in air so the plant can grow.”

“Yes, I'm aware of what a stomata is, thank you. Just go to the library.”

This sigh was inward. So like a man. “There isn't a book on it in the library.”

He scowled. “Yes. There is.”

“No, there isn't.”

He looked up then, spearing her with those blue eyes that always made her feel like she was looking too close to the sun. Maybe that was why he wore so much black? To offset those extraordinary eyes.

He shrugged back into the coat he'd shed at some point in the morning.

“Come,” he said when he’d reached the door and she hadn’t moved.

“I’m not your servant,” she said, but got up and followed. He was so very tall, the Duke, but as they walked across the quad together in the blaze of summer sunlight, he must have shortened his stride to accommodate her as he didn’t get ahead and she wasn’t hurrying to keep up.

The library was three floors high, with ladders for each one and central tables to take books to read. Everything was meticulously labeled, and the hushed silence of the room with soft footsteps and page turns always made Emma feel as reverent as if this was a cathedral.

“I’ve looked there,” she whispered as the Duke led her to the latter part of the alphabet. “There’s nothing useful under ‘Plant’.”

“Never said there was.” He turned into the section further on and stopped by “M” and began to browse. It only took two minutes before he pulled out a book and handed it to her casually.

Oh. There it was, as he had said. How would she have ever found this book, listed as it was under “methods”.

“I can’t believe it’s here,” she muttered furiously.

“Knowledge,” he said dryly. “In a library. Who would possibly have thought it?”

“Are you teasing me?” she demanded. The Duke? Teasing?

He straightened his cuffs and didn’t reply. Emma really hated the way her tummy fluttered when he drew her attention to his hands. Such strong, capable hands, with that smattering of dark hair.

“We need a better system of cataloging books,” she grumbled. “It makes it an old boy’s club if there is no better way to find something than ask a Duke.”

“Good thing you have a duke on hand, then.”

She looked up to say he wasn’t her personal duke, but he arched one brow. Yes. Well. It was true that he kept even longer hours than she did. It was vanishingly rare that she was in the laboratory and he was not.

“I won’t always, that’s the point. And I shouldn’t have to.”

“A good system should not require everyone to have their own personal duke. Enormous though the number of dukes in London is, that is probably untenable.”

She almost smiled, but held it back. An enormous number of dukes, ha. “You are the aggrieved party here. Why don’t you come up with something?”

“Because I am a duke, not a librarian.” He leaned down to speak in her ear as he led her back to the librarian’s desk. “I’m sure someone will think of a better system than this alphabetical nonsense.”

They were all the way back in their laboratory before Emma managed to swallow her pride.

“Thank you.” As he went to pass her bench, she impulsively clasped his arm. His gaze went right to where her hand put a dent into the fine cloth of his coat sleeve.

A second ticked past. Was he affected by her slight gesture of friendship?

The Duke nodded, swallowed, and looked away from where they touched.

She withdrew her hand. “Sorry, I—”

“This is wrong,” he interrupted her.

She followed to where he pointed at a picture of a leaf detail she'd painted yesterday. “The color isn't quite right and the skill of the rest shows up this mistake. It needs more blue.”

Not affected by her touching him after all was he? Embarrassment flushed into her.

“Why don't you just screw up the whole thing, since it's so bad, Duke of Destruction.” She boiled over with frustration. Why did he never say anything nice about her work?

“That's not what I said.”

“It is! You're just the Duke of Destruction, that's all you do!” The heat of the summer day must be getting to her. She didn't normally say these things aloud. “To your flowers and everything else.”

He started, as though she'd hit him. “I don't destroy them, I preserve them.”

“You clearly do not keep them in one piece.” She waved her hand at the ruined bits of flower that were lined up on his bench. Always lined up.

“The Duke of Dissection, not Destruction.”

“I think I called you that two weeks ago.”

“You did. More appropriate than destruction.”

She made an unladylike snort and looked at him askance.

Heaving a sigh, the Duke stepped back to his bench and, brows low, he slowly picked up the specimen drawing he'd been working on.

“That flower.” He pointed at the one in the glass of water on his bench. “Will never last more than a few days, even left

on the plant. But this.” He shook the image he’d been making. “This might last a hundred years, or more. People might still have facsimiles of the image for even longer. I’m the Duke of Protection, not destruction.”

“It might take people that long to recognize you as such, since you insist on being awful at every turn.”

He shrugged. “Clever ladies might recognize my good points sooner.”

“Are you calling me stupid?” Sitting up straighter, all her outrage was ready to explode.

“Not at all.” He put down the drawing. “But you have a microscope. You might use it to find what others cannot see.”

“Your good features are that small, they’d need a microscope to see them.”

“I assure you, I am not known for being small. Quite the opposite.”

Their eyes met and for a second something hotter than the midsummer’s day sizzled between them.

“Tall,” he amended. “I am known for being tall.”

But his expression as he took in the length of her didn’t say height. It said... Well. Gently bred ladies didn’t speak of such things, but Emma was a widow and a scientist, so in her own head she allowed herself to think that perhaps his implement was indeed big. Her cheeks heated and she looked away.

Sometimes he was...

“Unlike you. Being so short, it’s no wonder you like plants. So close to the ground you have a better view of them.”

And just like that, he had returned to being an awful person. “Why can’t you be nice?”

“Nice as in the real meaning of the word? Correct, orderly?” He looked down at his clothes. “I believe I am.”

“Nice, as in, kind and unobjectionable.”

“No, I can’t be that.”

“Clearly,” she snipped. “I have work to do.”

The Duke returned to his work too, and they settled back into amicably hostile silence for the rest of the day. He brought her a glass of water in the afternoon, and they conversed briefly and politely about the temperature.

It was a long, hot day, and when the university corridors around them quietened, she ought to have left with the student and other researchers to enjoy the sunshine.

She didn’t.

She didn’t want to go home. It was—and this was a painful confession even in her head—lonely. And however pitiful it was that she spent all her time with a stuffy man who called her names, being with him was not lonely.

So she stayed in the laboratory until the light faded, and then a little longer. The Duke lit candles and placed them carefully between them during the winter, but on this, the longest day of the year, she had every excuse to stay late and she relished it. Not just for the opportunity to work more, but to not go back to her unfortunate little room. Shabby.

She wondered sometimes where the Duke lived and why he was here in the laboratory for even more hours than she was. It was dusk and almost ten at night before she gathered her cloak around her.

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Mrs. Hanover.”

“Yes.” She paused at the door.

“If you need a duke—for anything—I’m at your service, Mrs. Hanover.” The words seemed forced out of his lips, his countenance dark and foreboding, almost pained.

“Do not trouble yourself, Your Grace. I don’t need *you*.” But as she left the laboratory she’d spent all day in with him, she feared that was a lie.

CHAPTER
FOUR

10 March, 1875

“**G**ood morning, Duke of Depravity.” Mrs. Hanover swept into the room in her customary plain dark blue skirt and crisp white blouse, a smile playing around her mouth as she shot him a saucy, challenging look as she removed her long coat and scarf to reveal that inch of her neck that he ought not to be as entranced by as he was. Her cheeks were rosy with the cold and her walk to the university and the wind had toyed with her strawberry-blond hair, snatching tendrils of fire to lay softly on her collar and forehead.

“Good morning, little witch.”

“I’m not little.” She hopped up onto her stool and busied herself with the first tasks of the day.

It always made him want to smile that that was what she took umbrage with. And he hid that smile as always, because she was a witch who’d cast a spell on him and he couldn’t let her know. “You are.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m above average height for a woman.”

“You’re still short.” And more to the point she was slim and delicate.

“No, you’re just a monster, as we’ve discussed before.”

Well, there was no argument about that. At over six feet tall, he towered above most people. Combined with being a duke, and his reserved nature and lack of patience for social niceties, the vast majority of the population avoided him or feared him.

Mrs. Hanover did neither. She hated him, true, but he was fairly sure she enjoyed despising him, or surely she would have asked for a new laboratory by now. A space had come up a couple of months ago in a room on the other side of the building and she hadn’t moved. Ridiculous, but he’d been heartened at that. If she genuinely disliked him she wouldn’t spend so much time with him.

“How are your terrible experiments going today?” she asked lightly.

“Well, thank you. And are you continuing with yesterday’s monstrous task, Doctor Frankenstein?”

“I’m not a doctor, Doctor Calder.” She didn’t understand his joke today any more than she had any day he made it. Because she called him a monster, and he called her Doctor Frankenstein, and obviously that made him Frankenstein’s monster. Her monster.

But he’d take what he could. He longed to hear her call him Matthew, but no one called him that anymore. Even his mother called him Your Grace.

“But you’re right to practice, because I will be Doctor Hanover soon.”

“Oh?” He kept his voice studiously neutral so she wouldn’t know that he worried on long lonely nights that their current arrangement couldn’t last forever.

“No need to sound so skeptical, Your Grace, that is what I have been working toward for the past year. And now I have an added incentive. Professor Rath and Professor Cooper have agreed to set a date for my viva to get my doctorate before the summer, and Professor Nevin over at Oxford has offered me a role in his laboratory as a junior assistant.” She glowed with pleasure and pride.

The bottom dropped out of the floor. Or his chest. Or something. Maybe he’d disintegrated into dry sand because he was falling apart. She couldn’t leave him.

“Are you certain you’re ready to defend your thesis?” She was absolutely at the point she ought to be a qualified scientist, with a stamp of approval. The only reason she didn’t have that title was she was a woman, and many of the clever idiots in this building had antiquated notions of a woman’s capabilities and place in the world.

“Yes,” she snapped. “And I’m leaving in June for a new role. You might not rate my abilities, but Professor Nevin does.”

“I rate your abilities,” he muttered.

“Yes, low. I have been listening for the past year, Your Grace.”

Her work was so near perfect, so insightful and definite, it pained him to see her make any minor error because she was such a whirlwind of energy. He could see how that striving for perfection—for her perfection no less—might feel like criticism. But that wasn’t how he meant it.

He’d messed everything up for a whole year, always assuming he had more time to make reparations. Suddenly

there was ticking inside his head, like he was trapped in a longcase clock.

“You don’t want to stay at Banton?”

“No.” She looked up and across their benches, as she had hundreds or thousands of times before. “There’s really nothing for me here.”

He was *nothing* to her.

She was leaving. After a whole year of spending all his time in this room with her, he couldn’t bear that she would fly off without him. He ought to let her go without a murmur, but he found he couldn’t.

Doomed as the attempt was, he would try to show that he loved her.

Once she graduated, and moved to her new work position, everything would be better. Emma stole a look at the Duke from under her lashes. She spent so much time with him. Seven days a week mostly. Then home to whatever dinner her landlady had left on top of the cooling stove, now tepid and too salty.

The Duke was her companion. And however much she told herself that it wasn’t the case, a secret part of her heart knew: he was her friend.

Not just her friend—her *only* friend. Yes, she laughed and chatted with the other women at Banton University Women’s College. Yes, she smiled at her landlady and sometimes had a cup of tea with her in the evening, or listened with all the

appearance of enjoyment, chuckling at the right moments at her stories. But the Duke was different.

With him there were long days of comfortable silence. There were hidden, secret smiles. She had the sometimes unnerving feeling that he knew her better than anyone in the world. He certainly knew all her mistakes. And while he was taciturn and grumpy, he was also, in his own way, kind. It might be grudging, or sometimes critical, but he helped her with her work. An imperious glance at what she was doing and he'd point out the issue with a long blunt masculine finger. Those big square hands sometimes featured in her nighttime daydreams during the hazy moments between wakefulness and sleep. How they'd feel on her skin. Whether they'd be demanding or giving. Those moments made her warm and achy, even though she knew from experience with her late husband that the reality would be a disappointment.

After reading a pamphlet written by prominent fern enthusiast Lady Markshall, she had to admit, the dress had been a mistake. He'd been right to burn it. He'd been right to take it from her body, and God knew what might have happened if he hadn't. She would probably have come to and recovered from that one episode, but she'd have worn that beautiful dress until it had killed her.

A bargain indeed. Such "luck" that she'd found it.

The real luck had been allocated laboratory space with a man so arrogant and certain of his opinions that he would disregard all propriety and remove the item that would have killed her slowly, day by day, if she'd continued to wear it and relish the gorgeous color.

She snuck a look at the Duke. He had his head bowed, and no macassar in his hair today, leaving it soft-looking and in

blue-black waves over his forehead. What would it be like to touch...?

Ugh. This was not the right thing to focus on if she wanted to get her doctorate and that job, and live happily ever after. Or at least, reasonably financially stable, content enough with her work, and without the constant chafing of the Duke's presence. She glanced down. She needed another drawing of *Tricuspidaria hookerianum*. The samples were all in the windowless pitch-black storage room down the hall.

Not her favorite task, going to that cramped room full of boxes on high shelves. But she was brave. Grabbing up the nearest candlestick, she strode out of the laboratory. At the door to the storeroom, she lit the candle, breathing in the acid tang of the phosphorus match as the flame burst into being and touching it to the wick of the plain paraffin wax candle. Quicker and easier than a lamp with all the fussy latches and priming. Cheap too. It didn't smell delicious... Except this one did. She tilted her head as she examined it. Not discolored, but originally yellow. This was a beeswax candle. How had she ended up with a beeswax candle? She couldn't afford such treats.

Perhaps somehow her candles had become mixed up with the Duke's. Very naughty. She smiled to herself. He'd probably be cross if he knew. But there was no reason for him to know.

It took her a couple of minutes to find her most important samples box. The wooden boxes full of small rectangular glass slides that represented hours of painstaking work were heavy and she slid it off the shelf carefully. An accident now would be a disaster. Placing the box onto the table that was provided for this purpose, she was halfway to the door, as she couldn't

carry it and manage the door when it opened. The Duke entered and she jumped back with a surprised gasp.

“Mrs. Hanover.” His face was in shadow.

“Your Grace. I was just leaving.”

“No.” He closed the door behind them and she took a step backward.

What was going on? A protest was on her lips as he reached around her and extinguished the candle with his thumb and forefinger. “Stay with me here for a moment.”

Light still spilled in from the open crack of the door, but there wasn't the warm glow of candles now, just the black and the white of daylight from under the door. She huffed. “Why do you want me to stay with you in the storeroom?”

“Because I can't see you,” he replied calmly.

Inky blackness, and the sounds of the university had quietened with the closed door. The tap-tap of footsteps, the swoop and rumble of voices in discussion, and the clink of apparatus dulled to nothing compared to the intense silence and darkness between them.

So he couldn't see her.

“I'm hideous.” She'd never thought he would actually come out and say so. Her heart twanged uncomfortably. Obviously his opinion didn't matter to her, except that it did. However much she wished otherwise, she wanted his approval. He was the finest scientist she'd ever known and it hurt when his scathing blue eyes skimmed disapprovingly over her and her work.

“Because I can't say this when you're watching me,” he replied.

“Say what?” she snapped back. “Other than that you think I’m ugly.”

He sighed like she was the most obtuse person in the world. Stupid. He thought she was stupid. He indicated so with every exasperated huff when he saw her messy bench.

“There’s an experiment I’ve been wanting to try for a while now.” His voice was low and rough.

His hand touched her waist and the air went hot and thick like over-sweetened tea.

Then he was lifting her onto the table, pushing her samples box to the back. A squeak of surprise escaped her. Yet when her bottom was firm on the wood, her knees fell apart and he stepped into the gap.

His actions were so baffling, Emma didn’t know what to say, or do. Her mind refused to comprehend that he was going to hurt her. Though that was the most rational hypothesis, it was rejected without further research. He hated her, yes. But enough to kill her in the supplies cupboard? Surely not. He wouldn’t be so *close* if that was his aim. His exhalation was soft on her cheek and though uncompromising, his hands were just secure, holding comfortably firm. Not tight enough to hurt.

But what on earth was he going to do?

An experiment. She ought to object. But his touch said, trust me. I’m an organized scientist. I put things in rows. You’ll see the logic of this experiment as it happens, and the results will be clear and easy in a neat table.

Then his hand cupped her jaw and his lips brushed over hers.

Her usually analytical mind went numb. It was broken open. A silky caress of his lips over hers had made her lose her marbles, the sensation too much and not enough. It felt good. More than good actually. Electrifying.

He brushed his lips over hers again, a strange combination of tentative and confident. No demands, just a simple question that compelled an answer. One curious mind asking another: is this it? Is this right? What about more? He pressed his lips to hers, a roll, then the softest of nips.

And that was when she realized what was happening.

A kiss.

The Duke of Eastfield was kissing her.

It wasn't real. The dark was making her crazy. Or she'd died and gone to heaven because this kiss was *so lovely*. Her mouth had fallen open and he took the unconscious invitation to lick along the sensitive inner lip. Then his tongue was seeking entry and she was allowing it. Her heart raced and her own tongue went to meet his, a touch, quickly withdrawn as it bit like fire. But tempting fire, and immediately she returned.

Then his kiss was smooth and luxurious and thick like Cornish clotted cream. At the same time it was Champagne. It was light and bubbly, sweet and heady. He tasted fresh, and drugged her sense of wrong and right while every sensitive place on her body flared with light and heat like a struck phosphorus match. His hand was gentle, his fingers making curved lines over her nape where her pale hair gave way to skin before the neckline of her sensible dress. Those rough fingertips didn't stop moving or touching her skin, like there was a flexible glue between them. It felt like now he'd started touching her, he wouldn't be able to stop. There would always

be his hands on her and his lips luring a response. Teasing and stroking.

The Duke of Eastfield. Of all the things that could surprise her, surely this was the most shocking.

No. The most shocking thing was that she hadn't pushed him away. In fact, she was pulling him closer. She was kissing him back, angling her head and deepening the kiss. When he withdrew his lips and swallowed, his breath catching, she lunged forward. Into the darkness she bridged the tiny gap he'd created between their mouths. Because he tasted sweet and heady and right.

Kissing the Duke was like looking into a microscope at a leaf. A whole new world was opened up that she had never realized was here. The Duke kissed like a god. Without her volition, she leaned closer into him. Were her nipples usually so *there*? She'd gone for months without thinking about her breasts in the slightest. They usually just lay under her corset, strapped in and well-behaved. They'd never threatened to burst out, demanding to be pushed against the strong muscled male chest of her grumpy laboratory partner.

And between her legs too felt different. Her hips shifted and the core of her had gone achy and warm. She was full in that secret place between her legs. The area hidden by acres of petticoat to prevent any man from seeing it or touching it was heavy and needy. For the first time ever Emma thought—a little hazily—that it would be nice to press that portion of her to a solid, smooth, hot part of a man's body.

The Duke went about kissing with the same diligence as he did everything. He kissed her gently and thoroughly, with a barrier between his passion and her. But she could sense it, just beyond. Out of reach.

He plunged his fingers into her hair and as she let out a whimper at the sensation of being stroked and held, he groaned her name.

“Emma.”

What would it be like if he lost all his inhibitions? If he allowed himself to let go and unleash himself? She had a feeling it would be the difference between the sea on a mirror-flat summer’s day and a raging winter storm with crashing waves and air thick with salty spray. The same, but so different to be almost unrecognizable.

The long dormant, wild part of herself longed to stir him up until he showed her his power, and to match it with desire of her own. It had been years since she’d felt anything for a man. But this kiss... It shimmered down her skin.

The Duke let out a growl, gripped her hip and dragged her flush with him. For a second, they were pressed together intimately, only the inconvenient layers of their clothing preventing them from being joined, skin to skin.

And one fact was undeniable. The icy, controlled Duke? He wanted her. Badly. He was a hot steel rod against her.

“What is that?” The question echoed from the corridor.

They jumped apart. Emma’s heart bounced into her throat and lodged itself there, preventing any speech.

“The mathematical basis of the differences between the cells we were talking about,” another voice said.

Relief flowed through her like a river, washing away all the fear and all the longing too. Cleansing her.

What had she been thinking? Kissing the Duke of Eastfield? Was she mad? Twenty-nine rational years on this

earth, then the moment she'd met him she'd started acting like a Bedlamite. An experiment. Seriously? Why had she allowed him to do that?

She smoothed her hands down her dress and tried to order her thoughts at the same time. Calm. She had to be calm, but it was pitch black.

"I'll leave first. You follow in a few minutes." Yes, that was a good plan.

"Emma." His voice was hoarse, a rough caress.

"Don't," she hissed. "Don't even start." She groped for the door handle, yanked it open, and picking up her samples box, stepped gracefully out into the corridor. Normal. Totally normal. One step. Two.

The short distance between the store cupboard and the laboratory was miles. Between every step there were two dozen heartbeats and a score of breaths. So far. What if she was caught? Her face would say "I've been kissing a duke, and my colleague, and my nemesis". Surely her heated cheeks and wobbly knees would give her away if anyone saw her?

This would be the end of all her credibility as a scientist and her reputation as a woman if anyone knew she'd been in the cupboard with a man. Even as a widow.

She'd be forced to marry him. To plead with him to save her.

Not going to happen. Six yards. Five. A hundred heartbeats.

There was the door to their laboratory, then she was inside, pushing her precious heavy box onto her bench then pressing her back against the solid wooden wall panels and closing her

eyes as her lips pulsed with awareness. They throbbed from the Duke's kiss.

What had happened? Was that even real? A dream?

She raised her fingers to her lips. They were slick and smooth.

It had definitely happened. The Duke of Eastfield had kissed her.

Here in this bright room they quarreled and bickered. And in the dark of that cupboard, it had been something else entirely. A transformative kiss. Her body hummed in a way she'd never felt before. She was alive and alight. Like this room bleached out and made brittle all their potential and it was only in the dark they could be their true selves. Which was ridiculous. Light was always better. Wasn't it? Surely a lightless cupboard was not the only place they could reveal their true feelings to each other?

Perhaps it was just that all cats were black in the dark. She hadn't been anything more than a woman, a warm body. *An experiment*, he'd said. That could mean anything.

How long had she been working with the scientific method? Too long to deceive herself about causality and correlation. Just because he'd said he wanted to try an experiment, and at the same time she'd discovered all these feelings in her chest, unruly and inconvenient and beautiful, that didn't mean one had caused the other. It didn't mean that he felt them too. They occurred at the same time, but they didn't necessarily mean anything. It could be coincidence. It could mean something totally different.

Without repeated experiments that were the same each time, you couldn't be certain one was causing the other.

Repeated experiments. The thought thrilled down her spine and sent heat into the place between her legs. Her tummy fluttered like a butterfly in a jar.

Except that she had a chance. A good chance to get out of a situation that she'd been chafing at for a whole year. Yes, Banton University was lovely, the women's college welcoming. But she could forge a path at a new department, away from the infuriating presence of the Duke of Eastfield.

The sound of a door in the corridor opening sent her flying for her bench. Confident long strides on the wooden floor echoed.

The Duke.

Busy. She mustn't let him know that she had been analyzing and mooning over their kiss. It had been a little experiment. That was all. Nothing. How like the cold, heartless Duke to use her as an *experiment*.

Her box of slides from storage—little rectangles of glass containing the work of weeks and months—sat on her workbench in the sunshine. Darn. She ought not to have left them there. They'd be colorless and wrecked if left in the sun too long. She lifted the box, which was heavy and, tucking it against her chest, staggered to the drawers. She was just balancing the box on one hip when the Duke barreled into the room, head down, and straight into her.

Several things happened at once. Emma screamed. The Duke caught her forearms in a tight grip, his blue eyes finding hers. And the box of slides tipped forward between them.

It poured onto the floor. A cascade of glass that Emma was already trying to right before the first slide hit the floor with a

sickening crunch, and shattered. A tinkling wave of slides came forth and his hands found hers, jerking the box upright.

Emma clutched the box to her belly as shock ricocheted in her chest.

No. No. This could not be happening.

At her feet were the broken remains of her thesis work. In chipped and fractured disarray, her chance of finishing her PhD early and getting away from the Duke and this laboratory lay broken.

A few seconds for this disaster. Not even as long as their kiss.

A sob rose through her chest. From stomach to throat, and out of her closed lips.

“Emma,” he rumbled, guiding her to the side. “Are you hurt?” The heavy box was pried from her grasp and set on the table.

“I have not given you permission to call me by my given name,” she said stiffly as he pushed her onto her stool and the wooden edge of the bench pressed into her sacral dips. That was the point right now. Of course. Not her broken slides or ruined hopes or the heat of the duke’s hand on her arm.

“After a year it’s Mrs. Hanover, then.” Frustration in every line of his body, he dragged his hand through his thick dark hair, leaving it rumpled and sticking up. “What did you lose in those slides? That wasn’t Box A, was it?”

For a second she was going to ask how he knew which of her boxes were important. But as he pointed out, they spent all their time in this laboratory. Even when they weren’t talking, which was often, she could have picked out his most important samples blindfolded in a coal cellar. She hadn’t really been

aware that he did anything other than point out her mistakes, but apparently he had been paying attention. She nodded, not trusting her voice not to wobble.

The Duke swore under his breath, huffed a sigh, then turned agitatedly, and swore again, louder.

That understanding cut through. She screwed her eyes shut, but the tears came anyway.

“Do you need them to graduate?”

“Of course I...” She swallowed the last words.

“Emma.” Big warm hands clasped her upper arms and she looked up his expression was brimming with concern. “We’ll fix this.”

“I can’t,” she said woodenly, giving in to the silent tears streaming down her cheeks. “Without those samples, I can’t prove this is all my work. If I were a man, the professors examining me in my viva might take it on trust. But...”

“I’ll vouch for you.” Then as soon as he said that, he seemed to understand what a terrible idea it was. “Or we’ll remake the slides.”

He was trying to help in a genuine way and that was somehow worse. “We can’t. There aren’t any of those plants in flower now. These are the set which, inspired by your terrible work, I looked at how the stomata are affected by whether the plant is flowering. There won’t be for months until it’s much warmer.”

Everything was ruined. No graduation. No job. It wasn’t even that she’d be stuck here at Banton forever, which she could cope with. Without a job, she wouldn’t be able to continue indefinitely. She’d been relying on being able to fund her interests with work, since her widow’s pension was fast

running dry. There would be nothing for it. A dreary life in a boarding house with nothing to engage her brain but re-reading penny dreadfuls and regretting all her life decisions.

Now this end was imminent and there wasn't a new role to tell herself she was looking forward to, she could admit to herself—only when she lowered her gaze to his cravat—that she would miss the Duke.

“Don't cry.” His hands were still on her arms as though he were reluctant to let her go and his voice was hoarse.

Sobbing. Not just crying, she was shaking with grief. So much so, that when the Duke pulled her in to rest against his firm chest, she didn't notice particularly, because everything became as stationary as it ought.

“Emma.” Her name rumbled into her cheek. “The samples in Box A. They're from your *Tricuspidaria hookerianum*?”

“What?” she stammered against the warm cotton of his shirt.

“The Chile lantern tree?”

“I...” She'd been crying against the chest of the Duke of Eastfield. This was beyond humiliation. She tried to pull away, but he didn't allow her to.

“The one with the hanging red flowers? Is that right? They look like hundreds of tiny lanterns hanging on the dark green stems?”

“Yes.” They were so pretty. If she only had a garden of her own, as she'd used to when Joseph was alive, she'd have a dozen of the bushes just for the joy of them rather than taking samples from Kew Gardens to study.

“I have one.”

That made her bolt upright. He was smiling down at her and she almost smiled back in wondering relief. But then... “It’s pointless. It won’t be in flower for months.” She felt her shoulders slump again. Everything was a disaster.

“I think it will be. It’s in my glasshouse.”

Her mouth fell open in shock.

“I sent a few cuttings that I’d grown on to my head gardener last year.”

“You took cuttings of my plants?!” Those plants were *rare* and *hers*!

“Yes.” He had the decency to look chagrined and a tint of color blushed his cheeks. “Sorry about that. But there should be plants available for you at Royston House. My estate in the country.”

“You have an estate?” He could not have visited it in a year.

“Quite a large one.”

“With a glasshouse?” Because if they were in a glasshouse where it was warmer, they would flower earlier. They might be in flower now.

“More than one.”

Her head spun. It was a good thing he was holding her, or she might have fallen.

“We’ll leave today. As soon as possible. Do you need to fetch anything or tell anyone before we go?”

“You’d really help me get new samples?” Put all his work aside for a mercy mission to achieve something purely for her,

when he'd seemed so annoyed by her plans when she'd told him about them mere hours ago.

No smile now, and a line appeared between his brows. He blinked, and there was the irritation back. He'd come to his senses and tell her she didn't deserve to graduate with such poor standards—

“I would. Anything.”

“Thank you,” would probably be the right words, but she was as eloquent as a cut flower, staring into the Duke's face. They had watched each other for so many days, snipping and arguing. It had never occurred to her that he would have any real interest in her work, or that he would try to help her.

He took a step back. “I'll call my carriage—”

“I haven't got any money,” she blurted out. She couldn't travel halfway across the country without any money. There would be train fares and food and tips and all sorts of unexpected expenses that a widow couldn't afford.

“That's not a problem, I'll cover everything. It's my fault you dropped the samples.” Guilt twisted his mouth. “If I hadn't...”

If he hadn't kissed her, she wouldn't have been out of sorts. If he hadn't kissed her, she wouldn't be about to embark on a trip with him. If he hadn't kissed her, she wouldn't know what his hard jaw and rough stubble felt like, and how his lips moved on hers, and how every place on her body from toes to fingertips responded with delicious tingles when he touched her.

“You don't have to...”

“I do.” He took a deep breath, his chest rising and reminding her how broad that chest was and how it had felt

when he'd crushed her to him. "Gather up anything you need to take samples, and meet me at the main entrance in fifteen minutes." Scooping up his hat and greatcoat, he was gone before her baffled brain could think to say a word in reply.

She was going to Royston House with the Duke of Eastfield.

She'd need scalpels and slides and... Pausing, one obvious thing occurred to her. She'd need a backup plan. So many things could go wrong. The Duke might change his mind. The plants might not be in flower.

Grabbing up a piece of paper and a pen, she dipped into the inkwell and began a letter. One simple letter to Doctor Reagan, the head of the women's college, explaining what had happened, where she was going and with whom, and begging her to help. What Emma really needed was for the professors to accept her thesis and agree to do her viva without those samples.

She needed a miracle.

CHAPTER
FIVE

He'd dreamed of spending hours with Emma, alone, outside of the confines of Banton University, but the rattling of a train carriage and the pervading scent of coal smoke on their private first-class carriage wasn't exactly what he had in mind. She was sitting opposite him on a plush green velvet-covered bench.

"What are we going to do for many hours?"

"Nothing." She stared out of the window. "We spend whole days and weeks in the laboratory alone."

"Working," he pointed out. "We haven't got any work to do in the carriage." Though he wouldn't mind laboring over her.

"What do you suggest?"

"A truth for a truth." This might be his only chance to nudge their relationship into what he'd longed for. A last-ditch attempt to win her before she left Banton, and him, forever.

She made a skeptical noise in the back of her throat.

"I'll keep your secrets if you keep mine. Tell me something no one else knows." He wanted her to give him something to remember that was more intimate than their work.

“You. Tell *you*.” Those liquid green eyes of hers blinked at him in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Absolutely not. You’d use it against me.”

“How would I? And why? Would I tell my many rakish friends? Oh no. I forgot, I don’t have any. Maybe I’d tell my plants.”

“You’d tease me,” she muttered, looking down at where her hands were clasped in her lap, pale against the navy of her skirts.

“Oh no,” he said, deadpan. “Not teasing. Anything but that.”

“Yes, exactly,” she snapped. “You tease me all the time.”

“I wouldn’t tease you about anything that would really embarrass you.” He cared far too much to cause her real discomfort.

“I’m sure you would.” That passion and certainty in his bad character. He would have found it funny if it weren’t so tragic.

“Would I? Or would I keep your secrets? I know you have a mole on your right breast and I’ve never told a soul. I’ve never even mentioned it, to you or anyone else.”

Her shock was palpable. It was a physical presence, a miasma. She straightened and he could see her brain working through the paradox. He’d just proven her point, and also his.

“You... you shouldn’t have looked,” she said eventually.

“I wasn’t looking. I was saving your life.”

He'd half expected that to cause more rancor, but instead she looked a bit sheepish as she caught his eye then looked away. "I've never thanked you for that."

"You don't need to." He would do the same over and over, as many times as she needed.

"Well." She took a deep breath in and found her usual fire. "I definitely won't if you were staring at my breasts."

He shook his head wearily. The train slowed to a stop at a small station. The platform was bedecked with planters stuffed with cheerful yellow daffodils leaning in the spring breeze. There was a bustle of people finding their places on the train, inquiring gazes flicking into their carriage. Ugh. In the full year since he'd been to Royston House, he'd forgotten how he disliked being a fern in a Wardian case for his fellow man. The curious second- and third-class passengers he could understand wanting to see what their carriage looked like. It was the well-dressed first-class ladies peering in at his clothes and judging the lack of macassar taming his hair that he disliked. Abruptly he pulled down the blinds.

"We'll count that mole as a truth for you, shall we?" Emma brushed an invisible fleck of dust from her skirts. "And I'll start with my own question."

His breath caught in his throat. She wanted to talk with him after all? "If you wish."

"Why do you spend every day at the laboratory?"

"Because there's nowhere I'd rather be."

"Seven days a week? You're a duke and you don't have anything you'd rather do?"

"No," he replied simply. "Why do you spend every day at the laboratory?" Was there a chance it was to spend time with

him?

“Because I am trying to finish up my work so I can achieve my doctorate,” she said primly, as though that was what she told herself.

“You didn’t use to come in on a Sunday.” He arched a brow and pink tinted her cheeks.

“Yes. Well. It’s more comfortable than my lodgings. You don’t have that excuse. I imagine your house is very comfortable.”

“It is.” Denying that was pointless. His townhouse was nothing compared to his country estate, but it was richly furnished and with every convenience. It had everything he needed, even if he wanted to work. But it didn’t have her.

“Sometimes I feel so alone. Being on my own, it’s a list of responsibilities a mile long.” She paused.

He knew this feeling. “But you don’t feel alone when you’re in the laboratory.” With him.

“There’s too much else to focus on.”

Ah. Not with him then.

“You come into the laboratory instead of going to church or seeing friends or looking for a new husband.”

“I don’t want another husband. One was bad enough.”

She’d never told him anything about her marriage. “How did he die?”

“In Africa on the Gold Coast. He fought in the Ashanti Expedition,” she said without emotion. Just a statement of facts.

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. "I've never been as upset about it as I ought. I thought I was clever marrying a soldier who would be abroad all the time."

"Did your parents push you into the marriage?"

She shook her head. "They're both passed. Poverty pushed me into marriage."

"But you could marry again for love and companionship."

She shook her head again and an expression settled on her face, so tragic it shattered his heart. "I couldn't. I'm not suitable."

"Not suitable," he repeated in disbelief. "You're young and beautiful and amusing and clever. But you're not suitable for marriage?"

She blinked and stared at him like he was an unknown specimen of a plant. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"I don't *think* you're beautiful. It's an established fact."

"It's not a fact," she scoffed. "No one has written a peer-reviewed journal article on my being beautiful. It is not confirmed and scientifically proven."

"My neglect knows no bounds. I am sorry. I would write the paper immediately, except that it is as unnecessary as a treatise on the sky being blue. Everyone can see it."

"You're ridiculous." But she flicked her gaze to him with new interest, biting her lip.

"Not as ridiculous as you for thinking you're unsuitable for marriage when you are clearly eminently suitable." Far more so than him, with his grumpy disposition and advanced age of forty. "So why do you think you're not suitable? This is some nonsense about children, isn't it?"

“No. The doctor thinks I can have children but we were unlucky with the timing when Joseph was home from abroad.”

“What is it then?”

“I can’t...” She trailed off, pink staining her cheeks. “Orgasm with a man.” Her mouth twisted.

For shame. Her terrible husband. It was a good thing he was dead, because otherwise Matthew would have murdered him.

“But you can on your own?”

She looked as though she was holding in her answer for a second, her lips pressed together to keep it back.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“But you couldn’t with your husband. That doesn’t mean you can’t with any man.”

She huffed. “I’m just not good at that sort of thing. The marital act.”

“And your sample size?”

“Plenty! He tried plenty of times, believe me!” The frustration and hurt boiled in her voice and his heart ached for her.

“I meant of men.” Because although he’d happily break the legs of any man who’d touched her, because she was *his*, this was a relevant point.

“Well.” She fidgeted. “One.”

He raised an eyebrow in unspoken skepticism, even while he was glad there hadn’t been anyone recently. He hadn’t been

able to get relief with anything other than his fist since they'd met.

"Of course only one," she added with a hint of impatience, having thought about it.

"I didn't mean to doubt your honor. Plenty of widows take lovers." Some of them, in fact, had taken him as a lover in years past. A small number, admittedly, but not zero. Over the last year he'd tortured himself that she could have been the last of that number, if only he was an entirely different person.

"I'm a respectable widow, Your Grace. And it's not like I want to repeat that humiliation," she added under her breath.

"Humiliation?" Fuck.

"Yes. Humiliation." The proud tilt of her chin as she said that. Daring him to contradict her.

"Just seems like a poor experimental procedure, to me."

"Sometimes one replicant is enough if one party is obviously faulty."

"I don't think you're faulty. You don't look faulty to me." Far from it. She looked perfect to him. Ripe and soft and delicious as a plump peach.

"And you're an expert on women, are you?" she snapped. Then blushed.

"What about an experiment?" He held his breath tight in his chest as she bit her lip and thought.

"What sort of experiment? Like the one in the cupboard?"

"Yes. You think you can't climax with a man. I think you can. If you'd like to correct your misunderstanding, or reject my hypothesis, just come over here. Sit on my lap, and I

promise I'll make you orgasm." He made the offer lightly, as though he wasn't putting his whole heart behind it.

Her eyes went wide. "I never thought I'd hear you say anything so improper."

"I don't know what made you think I was proper."

"The 'Your Grace' title, to begin with."

He made a disbelieving sound. "That's not me."

"And the obsession with a clean bench."

"That's the only sensible way to work." The chaos of her workbench made him itch, however much he loved her as a woman and respected her as a scientist.

"And you don't like me." She finished the list with triumph. As though these were unassailable truths.

No. He didn't like her. He loved her with his entire body and soul. Not that she wanted that from him. But if she would accept pleasure, he'd do that. He'd give and give and relish the opportunity to make her feel good. He'd show her that a man could be kind and bring more than a name or protection. "The offer stands."

He didn't think she'd do it.

"It would only be an experiment?" she checked, shifting in her seat and his breath tripped over itself in his lungs.

"Yes." No, it was all a dream about to be fulfilled. Just one: that she would be in his arms and he'd see her face when she was overwhelmed by pleasure *he'd* given her. He wouldn't think about all the other things he wanted. If he could get just this one piece of her, he'd take it and be grateful.

"What if I don't like the experiment? What if it hurts?"

Anger flamed anew in his chest, around his heart and all the way to his sick stomach. That bastard had hurt her? *Hurt* Matthew's sweetheart. It didn't matter that he hadn't known her then, and couldn't do anything about it now, the possessive creature that dwelled in his chest and *wanted* her couldn't bear the thought of her being in pain at any time.

"If you want to stop the experiment, for any reason, you just say. And I won't question it, I'll just stop. Like if there's an accident in the laboratory."

She flicked her gaze down him, her brow furrowed.

"If I make a mistake with our experiment, it wouldn't be your fault any more than it was when all your samples were smashed because I'm a big clumsy oaf."

"You're not clumsy."

"But I am an oaf?"

That coaxed a smile from her. "You are big."

"Not too big. I think you'd find I'm just right for you."

She sucked in a breath and for a second he thought he'd pushed her too far. But she seemed to take the comments as encouragement, as she stood and took the single pace across the carriage toward him.

It was all he could do not to groan with relief as she allowed him to take her waist and draw her to sit astride him. Her skirts—totally impractical, he would never understand women's fashion—took some arranging. It should have been awkward, but when he caught her eye as her petticoat rucked up over her breasts and she smiled, it was all perfect again. Absurd and gorgeous and he knew this was going to be magic, even though they were in a bloody carriage, not a four-poster bed with a feather mattress and silk coverlet, as she deserved.

He had the royal chamber at Royston House. Maybe she'd sleep there. A bed fit for a queen. *His* queen, not Victoria.

Although he'd rather have Emma in his bed.

Her finding her place on his lap, her plump bottom on his thighs, was the most exquisite torture. His cock was hard and it wasn't likely to get relief any time soon. He just had to not embarrass himself by spending in his trousers. Or scare her off.

Leaving one hand at the small of her back, keeping her stable even as the carriage rumbled and rattled over holes, he combed his fingers into her hair and cupped the back of her head. So slowly, he stroked his thumb over her cheekbone. "You are so beautiful."

She scoffed, but her expression was intrigued.

"You are. I always thought so."

The shake of her head said she didn't believe him, but she would—she had to—because it was the truth. He slid his fingers down her silky red hair and to her neck. Then he kept his hands moving softly over innocent parts of her body. Her waist. Up her back. Over her shoulders. So many layers of fabric between them. He wanted them gone, but she wasn't ready for that. Yet.

"I can't wait to feel you on my fingers," he whispered. "Will you be wet for me already, or make me work for that too? Will you writhe and beg, or be still and contained?"

Her breathing accelerated.

"I'd love to see you. All of you. Your breasts, the curve of your hip. I would take out your hair pins one by one until all this strawberry-blond hair was spread on my pillows." Up and down, he stroked her like he would a skittish animal. He didn't

know how long they sat like that. Minutes or maybe hours before he even pressed his palm into the back of her neck and brought her mouth to his. He was making progress. She moved easily, and her mouth was open when their lips touched.

He couldn't hold in a groan. This lovely creature was in his arms, kissing him back, moving slow as a plant leaf turning to the light.

It was she who got impatient. She tried to deepen their kiss, going from his little nibbles and licks to full open-mouthed need.

"You're not touching me," she protested as he continued to refuse to progress the kiss.

"Not yet." God but he loved having her so close. "I will."

"How am I going to orgasm without stimulation?"

"You're such a scientist," he teased as he leaned back into the seat, creating space between them. "And so surely you've guessed by now. You're far too clever to be seduced by mere physical touch. No, for you, arousal is built here." He tapped her temple with the pad of his forefinger. Her eyebrows pinched together. "Before it can be built..." He dragged his fingertip down before stopping at her clavicle. He left her breasts untouched. For now. Let her work herself up a little. "Anywhere else."

"Physical pleasure is built in the mind," she paraphrased, narrowing her eyes.

"You have the finest critical mind of anyone I've ever met." She liked that, infinitesimally leaning in toward him. "You think it just quietly goes to sleep when a man is touching you? Of course it doesn't. It keeps up a running commentary

of what you should or shouldn't be doing. It assesses whether something is good or not and judges your body for liking it."

Her sharp intake of breath told him he was on the right lines here.

"Or not liking it."

Her mouth flattened. Hmm. He thought as much. She'd told herself she was bad for wanting pleasure, that it wasn't womanly or scientific or some such nonsense. The walls she'd built up were high and strong, but he was patient and earthquakes could bring down the most solid of lies people told themselves.

"I imagine I could distract you by making you do long division while I pleased you, and maybe you'd come while you didn't even realize, your body creeping it up on your mind like a mouse scuttling out of its hole while a cat is being petted in front of the fire. What is twenty-seven divided by forty-two?"

While he said all this he'd slowly bunched up the copious layers of her skirt, until finally, finally, his calloused fingertips touched her soft leg. A brush at first, but she gasped and stiffened. Yes, a shock, of course. He kept his hand in the same place by her knee as he waited for her to get used to his touch. It didn't take long. Only a minute of the carriage rumbling and the squawking of crows.

"Zero point six four." Her breath caught. "And a bit."

"And while you did that, you allowed me to touch your leg and yourself to enjoy it because you were doing something else with your brain. So clever." He nodded approvingly. "Whereas my mind is buttercream from the feel of your skin."

“It’s just a leg,” she protested, but there was no heat or rancor in it and her eyelids fluttered.

Only a leg indeed. It was *her* leg, and him, and nothing had ever been this right. “So distraction could work. But I’ll wager that there is a better way.”

“A better way?”

“Yes.” He slipped his hand slowly up her thigh and held her in place with his other palm at her waist, securing her to him as the carriage swayed and jolted on the road. “I think we’ll try to get your mind engaged too.”

His cock was impossibly hard just from holding her, touching her leg, listening to her breathing hitch as he spoke, and seeing her pulse quicken at her creamy white throat.

Her skin was so soft here, on her inner thigh when he reached it at this tortoise pace. Incredibly delicious. He’d like to bite it.

“I think if I tell you you’re a good girl for accepting my touch, your mind will take that praise and not just ignore the sweet sensations coursing through your body. I think your mind will embrace them. *Double them*. With the knowledge you’re doing the right thing, I think your brain will enhance everything I do to you so it’s sweeter and hotter than anything you’ve ever experienced before.”

He skimmed his fingers over her mons and she gasped. Yes. That was what he was talking about. Brought onboard with the idea that pleasure could be good and intimacy enjoyed and not scary, he’d bet that she would be wildfire.

“You’re so good at this,” he told her as he brushed his fingers over her sex. Wet. He’d thought he couldn’t be any harder but she was soaking wet for him. “All that wetness,

sweetheart. It's you doing this just right. You're such a good girl."

He slipped his fingers into her folds and she writhed. Her hands gripped his shoulders.

"Yes. That's it. Cling onto me."

This was a bit of a risk, but he wanted to taste her and she needed to be entirely accepted. Whole. He brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked the sweet tang of her cream from them.

Her mouth opened in shock. "You didn't just..."

"Mmm. Delicious." It was true. He'd wanted to taste her for so long the sweet-salt musk of her arousal was nectar.

"You don't mean that."

"I do. I'd like to lick up every drop of you. I will, if you allow." He sucked his fingers obscenely. Excessive. Aiming to tip her into understanding that nothing about this was shameful. Everything could be good between the two of them. And she watched with blinking fascination, unable to look away.

He slipped his hand back underneath her skirts. "And now there's my saliva down there too, mixing with your cream. Can you feel it?"

She let out a squeak that could be a yes, or just her responding to his finger pushing over her clit. He did it again and she shuddered in his arms. Yes, then.

"You're so soft here." He circled slowly around and over the swollen nub of her clit. She moaned and her head fell forward, breaking their gazes. And it was alright. He'd

manage with that. He kept up a gentle but increasing barrage of stroking to the center of her pleasure.

“So brave and hard with your words and your mind,” he whispered into her ear. The bouncing of the carriage dislodged a tendril of her hair and it tickled his nose. “But here you’re soft and you taste sweet. You think you’re not feminine enough because of your enormous brain, but believe me, you feel perfect. Every part of you is lovely and feminine, and this bit especially. Here you were made to feel all these good things.”

The shake began gently under his other hand, and he couldn’t help but smile. He wished to hell and back that she wasn’t wearing a corset. He wanted them skin to skin. But he’d take what he could, and having his fingers soaking wet with her arousal between her legs was far more than he ever imagined he’d have.

This would be a memory to cherish. It was fruitless to pine for her naked on top of him, riding him with abandon, her breasts bouncing and him thrusting up into her. That would never happen.

“You’re close aren’t you? My good girl. You’re going to come from hardly any touching because you’re so responsive. The perfect subject for my experiment. Ideal. I couldn’t ask for anything better than you. You feel so silky on my fingers. Your cream is overflowing. It’s all over my knuckles and I love that.”

She did feel good, but he wanted to feel more. And again, he was hoping, betting all his chips that indulging himself would work for her too. He shifted his hand down, seamlessly moving his thumb to rub her clit. That left his fingers over her entrance.

He pressed and it was too easy. A tiny wet pop and he thrust his fingers into her velvet softness. At last, claiming her. Not all that he wanted, but inside her. *Finally* inside this woman who had stolen all his thoughts. He worked his finger in and out of her soaking-wet passage, hard against the area closest to the center of her pleasure. Rhythmic and unrelenting, he thrust his finger into her and rubbed the pad of his thumb over her clit even as his hand cramped with the repetition.

It pushed her over. Suddenly, she was clenching his fingers, her whole body shaking, and making a keening cry like the pleasure was almost too much.

He continued to stroke his fingers into her and rubbed her back, easing her through it. He whispered onto her cheek that she was doing well and he was proud of her.

Ridiculous, but he was proud, not of himself, but of her. She had done it. Orgasmed with another person when she'd thought she couldn't. She'd trusted him when she thought he was against her.

Eventually, she slumped against him, his fingers still after he sensed she couldn't take anymore. His cock was an aching rod. So hard it was almost painful now his brain was noticing anything but her again.

“And that is how you orgasm with a man.” He sounded smug even to his own ears.

“With you,” she whispered. She lifted her head and mossy green eyes blinked at him, befuddled with pleasure. “The experiment worked with you.”

“Yes. You do it with me.” He couldn't help a self-satisfied smile. Only with him, if he had his way.

He eased his hand from between her legs and she wasn't as shocked this time when he licked his fingers clean of her honey. No, she watched him suck the taste of her with something like rekindled arousal as he traced his fingers over his lips.

The train slowed and she sat upright, then scrambled off his lap and onto the seat opposite. An excuse, or because she was worried someone might come into the carriage?

He didn't stop her, instead providing a steadying hand at her side, then drying his fingers with a plain cotton handkerchief as the carriage clunked to a stop. There was still a year of antagonism, those broken samples, and all her reservations between them. She might have trusted him with her body, but he was still a long way from winning her heart.

“Train leaves in twenty minutes, ladies and gentlemen!” The conductor's voice boomed up the platform.

“Lunch?”

For a second, she hesitated.

“My treat.”

“Oh, well if you're paying...” And a playful smile curled around her mouth.

CHAPTER
SIX

She took his proffered hand as she stepped off the train, but when she'd have naturally withdrawn, he enveloped it in his, giving her fingers a light squeeze of reassurance as he led her to the little booth further down the platform that was already doing brisk trade with the men in flat caps and woolen trousers that Matthew, with his tall figure, top hat and fine coat should have looked out of place amongst. But he was so contained and confident, it was as though he was part of the machinery of the train rather than a flesh and bloody person.

And he'd made her come.

"You don't have to hold my hand," she felt beholden to say.

"I do." The Duke had a slight, secretive smile on his face as he turned back to her. "There's a crowd. I don't want to lose you."

There were perhaps twenty other people from the train around them. Hardly a risk. But she didn't say anything because the warmth of his big hand clasped around hers was lovely. He was big and secure in a way that she hadn't had near her and looking after her for years. Maybe since she was a child.

He ordered food for them both without consulting her, and normally she'd have complained, but telling herself he was paying made it possible to simply accept the paper bags he passed her. Leading her away from the throng, he found a reasonably dry bench at the front of the train. Thankfully the wind was blowing the sooty train exhaust away from the station, leaving the gleaming green-painted engine puffing to itself without choking them. The sun peeked out from between the white clouds and there was the scent of rain and budding trees in the air.

“That is a Melton Mobray pork pie, and you won't taste better anywhere in the country,” Matthew said as they sat by mutual agreement, close to each other because the bench wasn't big. “You also have Buxton pudding. It's jam and sponge cake and delicious. And no trip home would be complete without Bournville chocolate. It's dark and creamy and the very best.”

“You're well versed in local northern food then.” She unwrapped the pie and found a perfectly golden crispy hot water pastry top with a delicate crimp around the sides. Taking a bite, the buttery taste with salty meat and jelly made her give a little whimper of delight.

It was only when brushed a crumb from the side of her mouth that she found him watching her. Hungrily.

“I've been up and down this line many times,” he said, bringing his own pie to his lips.

“What made you choose Banton University?” she asked, and he replied as though this was a normal thing they talked about without animosity or weird tension between them and she allowed herself to relax into the conversation and the delicious food. When the conductor shepherded everyone back

onto the train, there was a moment she thought they'd lose the familiarity as the bench where he touched her was right there. But Matthew just pulled her around to sit next to him and continued where they'd left off and it was like they'd always been best friends.

In York, with the ease of one who'd been through that station a hundred times, Matthew ordered a carriage to *Harker's Hotel*. Explaining to her that he'd send a message and his driver would pick them up in the morning, as it was two hours of bad roads to his estate and he always stayed the night in York.

The Duke, or should she think of him as Matthew now that he'd touched her most intimate place, ushered her through into a reception with his hand a comforting warmth at the small of her back. She probably couldn't really feel his heat through the layers of chemise and corset and dress. But her unruly brain thought it could and imagined that it was protective.

"This way."

He'd touched her, and it hadn't hurt.

Quite the reverse. It had been wonderful. Far better than what she could achieve on her own. Worlds different from when Thomas had begrudgingly tried. Her late husband had touched her as though she was dirty, and shameful. Apparently that had made all the difference, because seeing Matthew relish touching her, with no seeming intent to have a return, had been night and day.

And the truth was, it made her wonder immediately about further experiments. True, the marital act had been... bad. Very well, honesty was necessary within her own thoughts. It had been painful. As she'd said to Matthew, humiliating. But if him putting his fingers between her legs could be so good, and

there was a fluttering, squirmy feeling in her tummy, surely...? Because she was a scientist who looked for the unbiased, unvarnished truth. And that, in this case, seemed to be that even if Matthew was wrong and that excessive wetness was unwomanly, *he* didn't think so. And who else's opinion mattered in the privacy of a relationship between two people? The world would never know. And all the slipperiness would ease his way inside her, and she felt so ludicrously empty. She'd sworn that she would never marry again, and never put herself through the trial of marital relations. Intercourse, her scientific mind insisted. But no, neither of those phrases was right for what she and Matthew might do together.

Fuck, a little voice suggested. *Fornicate. Fuck. Screw.*

An act so distinct from marital relations deserved another word.

Fuck.

She didn't want *marital relations* with Matthew Calder, Duke of Eastfield. She wanted to *fuck* him.

She was jolted from her reverie by Matthew's smooth low voice and his guiding hand leading her toward the modest stairs.

"What..." Her throat was dry as a decade-old leaf sample left on a sunny shelf. Crunchy and disused. "What did you say?"

"They've given me my usual rooms," Matthew said with a smile and a shrug. "And you have the room adjoining. It will be perfectly comfortable."

"You didn't pretend I was your sister? Or cousin? Or give them a false name? Something to save my reputation?" He could have said they were married, then they'd have to share a

bedroom. She wasn't going to examine why she was disappointed he hadn't.

"This is the only decent hotel in York, and where my driver knows to come and pick us up. Christopher Harker has known me since I was ten," he said with a wry smile. "I wouldn't have much credibility on the cousin thing. The only other option was to say you were my wife."

The word wife seemed to reverberate in the air. There was a very pregnant pause.

"Oh." There were plenty of rooms. She wasn't pretending to be his wife and there was no reason to do anything but have a polite parting where they discussed what time they would resume traveling in the morning.

But somehow she'd become accustomed to the idea of being with him for this trip. Pretending they were something to each other. "Well."

Matthew quirked a dark eyebrow as he unlocked a room and invited her inside with a slight bow. "Is there a problem?"

"No, of course not." Liar.

"This is the suite I usually have," he said. "It has this antechamber with it for dining and relaxing."

The room was modern, light and warm, and hospitable. White paint and Wedgwood blue accents covered the walls and dark floorboards creaked under a surprisingly plush Turkish carpet that stretched the width of the room. There was a small table and chairs with many-times laundered cushions. The bed—she couldn't not notice the bed—was huge. A four-poster with heavy curtains to shut out the rest of the world and make a snug dark hideaway big enough for two.

Either side of the large fireplace were padded armchairs in shiny maroon velvet. She could imagine the two of them, suddenly, in those chairs. His long legs outstretched before him, taking up the whole seat. Her curled into the one opposite, sharing her attention between the flickering of the fire and the warmth of his gaze. Then she would sit up, creep across the distance, and straddle him like she had in the carriage. Or perhaps she would kneel at his feet, yanking one of those cushions from the bed and making herself comfortable between his knees before—

“There’s also a simple bedroom through this door if you’d rather.” Matthew gestured to a door that adjoined the room. “I appreciate you might be more comfortable with a room you don’t feel obliged to share with me for dining. Though of course, I’m happy to eat downstairs if you prefer to be alone. You must be tired.”

There was no suggestive inflection in his tone, but her mind supplied it.

She could be tired from traveling, yes. She could also be exhausted from digging her fingers into his shoulders as the unknown core of her had throbbed and pulsed.

“We should do the experiment again.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

The words were out of her in a rush before she could stop them. The idea that she would sit in this room alone this evening, in the dark while he was finding solace elsewhere in the inn, either downstairs or in a bed, was unthinkable. “Extend it,” she clarified when he went still. “The experiment.”

“Which experiment were you referring to?” he asked with preternatural calm.

Really. This man. “I thought we’d find some grass and put the leaves on slides, look at the cells that everyone has already investigated to the end of the earth and have nothing to show for it original enough to publish.”

The corner of his mouth tugged up. “Right.”

“Obviously not that. You know what I mean.”

“Yes.” His voice was hoarse.

Neither of them moved. She couldn’t. She’d said this enormous thing. Thrown everything down and now she waited to see what he would do. Maybe he’d just say that he’d rather not do any more experiments. Perhaps she’d misread this entirely. She wrung her hands when he didn’t answer immediately or laugh at her poor excuse for a joke.

He didn't want to repeat the experiment. What had she been thinking?

"It's just an experiment," she muttered and looked away, even as his blue eyes remained focused on her, unnaturally still. "It doesn't have to be..." She didn't know what she was trying to say exactly. "Because I'm a widow and you're a duke, it can't be anything..."

Anything other than an experiment was impossible, but they had this hairbrained trip before she achieved her doctorate, moved university and would never see the Duke of Eastfield again.

Once upon a time, oooh, about three days ago, she'd thought that was everything she wanted. Then an infuriating, beautiful man had shown her that he kissed like a god and knew how to touch her like no other, and she wasn't so sure. Not that her opinion changed anything.

"We can talk about the results of the experiment later." He sank into one of the seats by the fire, folding his large body in. After a moment she slunk into the other.

He stared into the flames.

This wasn't what she'd envisaged at all. In as much as she had thought about it, she'd assumed he would pull her into his arms and seduce her with his words as he had earlier.

"I think it's a good idea to discuss the remit of our experiments beforehand, so I do not get... Carried away. So tell me, Emma, what experiments would you like to do?"

"I don't know." An instinctive response. Modesty prevented her from saying the things she'd been imagining. "What do you want?"

“Ah no.” A half smile, a little sad was there and gone from his face in an instant. “None of that, sweet one.”

“I’m not sweet.” She really wasn’t.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Tell me. Does this experiment involve marriage?”

“No-no!” She threw up her hands in protest. “No, nothing like that.”

“Hmm.” He looked down, and there was something like disappointment around his mouth. “Would you like the pleasure I gave you earlier? In the train carriage?”

Oh god how could he just ask a question like that? She squirmed, and somehow that made everything worse. More. More excruciating to say that was what she wanted, and more essential that she did because she was shivery and achy in the best way. She clasped her hands in her lap and tried to stop rubbing her thighs together. When had being a restrained, controlled lady become so impossible?

Around him, it always had been impossible. Ever since he’d removed her dress that first day. So somehow she managed to jerk out a nod. “If you’d like...” she tagged on.

“I’d very much like to do that again.” He leaned back into his chair, relaxing, a cunning smile beginning to play around his mouth. “Except I’d prefer to use my mouth.”

She squeaked. With shock or arousal or disbelief, she didn’t even know.

“What about fornication?”

This time she gaped. “How can you just say these things?”

“We are both scientists, are we not?” Something in his demeanor had changed. He was enjoying this. “I can use the

correct terminology for what I'd like to do, and be specific. I can say I'd like to eat your soft pink flesh in nibbles and licks. I'd like to feast on your pussy until you quake underneath me. Then I'd slide my achingly hard cock between your soaking folds as you descend from that peak, making you gasp and pushing you toward another orgasm."

Her cheeks flamed.

So, in fact, did the rest of her body, from her curling toes to her hungry fingertips and pebbled nipples that jutted into her corset.

He regarded her calmly. "We can do all of that, if you'd like to. Or not. It's your choice, of course. Your experiment."

Was it that simple? All she had to do was ask and the Duke would use his mouth—his mouth. She'd known he had no respect for social niceties, but his mouth!—to make her feel good. But yes. If it really was as straightforward as agreeing to what he suggested, she wanted that. Her heart raced as she envisaged what he described—

A knock sounded at the door and the Duke rose far more languorously than any man as tall as him should have been capable of after spending the whole afternoon in a coach.

"That'll be the food I ordered. Are you agreeable to dining in here?"

She stammered out an affirmative as he opened the door and the waft of fragrant stew came into the room with a platter covered in food.

The bustling maid was gone within a few moments, having placed a cornucopia of items on the table.

"Shall we eat? The food at this hotel is very decent." The Duke invited her as though he hadn't only moments ago been

suggesting he lick between her legs. *Eat*, as he'd put it.

She joined him at the table in a daze. The scent of the stew in bowls, warm and fragrant with herbs, tickled her nose and she realized that for all she'd been distracted, she was hungry. There was crusty tin-baked white bread in chunky slices, a slab of yellow butter, and chunks of cheddar cheese. The Duke was already dipping a piece of bread into the stew in a very un-aristocratic way. As he brought it to his mouth, she watched, entranced. His hands. Big, angular, strong, and with a sprinkling of dark hair. Those blunt, dexterous fingers had been *inside* her. Her knees practically gave way, ditching her into the chair heavily and Matthew quirked an eyebrow at her as he chewed thoughtfully.

Making herself pick up a spoon she dipped it into the stew. He watched with undisguised longing as she opened her mouth and slipped the warm scented food onto her tongue. When had the hot, firm metal of a spoon been so lewd? Never. Obviously. It was Matthew's gaze that did that, making her think of other hot hardnesses she could slide her lips over.

This was insanity, but she couldn't stop and neither, apparently, could he. They watched each other eat in taut silence, every movement made heavy with significance. Every part of her body tingled under his regard.

Her mouth watered whenever there was no delicious food in it, but not for everything on the table. No. For everything *across* the table. Him. She'd seen him deftly prepare cell samples and take the utmost care to lift only the merest slither from a leaf. Every day for a year she'd observed the care and attention he took with things he deemed to be important. And while she'd sometimes caught herself noticing that his dark hair shot through with silver was attractive, or his height

imposing, she'd never imagined he'd have any interest in her. The thought of all that careful scrutiny on her, all that attention dedicated to her pleasure as it had been when they'd been in the carriage earlier heated her blood far more than the food did.

He was waiting for her, she could tell. Eating slowly and methodically, with no hurry to finish, he was as patient now as when he set a timer and waited for the dye to sink in on a leaf. There was an inevitability about it. She sent a sideways glance to the enormous bed.

Only bravery would get her what she was beginning to think she wanted more than anything else: him, his weight on her and hard length inside her. She thought about doing something reckless, like sweeping all the food off the table and laying herself on it. But in the end, that seemed like a silly waste of good food that maybe they'd want later.

Afterward. The thought made her blush.

"Have you eaten enough?" Matthew's words made her jolt. She'd been sitting with her spoon in her hand, woolgathering instead of eating.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes. I..."

Then metal clattered on china, there was the sharp scrape of chair legs on floorboards and in less than an eyeblink, he was there, towering above her. His expression was that of a man pushed beyond. Dark and a little scary in a way that thrilled down her spine.

"Emma." His voice was a sultry threat of thunder on a summer night. "We've had dinner. I've tried to be polite, though God knows you're aware of how impossible that is for me. Now."

Stormy eyes, she thought vaguely.

“You need to go if you don’t want this. Because I am a hair’s breadth from throwing you onto that bed and ravishing you until neither of us has sufficient energy to move and you fall asleep in my arms.”

Her mouth fell open and all she could do was make a shuddering nod. Yes. Yes, that.

“Good.” Reaching down, he grasped her waist. But instead of picking her up and tossing her onto the bed as she expected, he brought her to her feet and dragged her into the center of the room. He stroked his thumbs over the curve of her hip and let out a low sound like a wounded animal as he looked down into her eyes.

“Are you really going to let me...?” An expression of half hope, half fear flickered on his face, picked up in relief by the candlelight.

That uncertainty in him fed her bravery. This was the right thing. Boosting onto tiptoes, she tilted her face up to his. “Not unless you kiss me soon.”

She felt the ghost of a smile on his lips as he pressed his mouth to hers. A second of sweetness before he was devouring her, far hungrier for her lips than he had been for dinner. Snaking her arms over his lapels tentatively, she tried to feel the shape of him through the layers of fabric. Pressing over the warm cotton, she thought she could discern—

“You can take it off,” he murmured. “Because I’m going to remove your dress.”

“Do you promise not to destroy it this time?”

He growled at her attempt at a joke. “I can’t ever promise not to destroy anything that harms you. I’d rip up a thousand

dresses and bear your wrath if it kept you safe.”

Oh. Ohhhh. She'd had no idea he felt like that. But she didn't have space to analyze the thought because his hands found the buttons of her blouse and she felt his impatience as he undid each of the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons with his blunt fingers.

“As it is, I'm merely going to unwrap you like a present I've been anticipating for years.” A lesser man would have sworn, broken them, or ripped the whole garment off. But Matthew was used to precise movements and must have been aware that she had no other clothing with her. The exacting attention he paid to his work he mirrored with her, removing her clothes layer by layer. Ties and buttons and bows all undone, petticoats and skirts and her blouse all falling to the floor between long drugging kisses and open-mouthed brushes of his lips over her neck and jawline. His hands were reverent and everywhere until she was down to her chemise and he was still fully dressed, having thoroughly distracted her from the mission she'd started.

“I want to see you,” she protested as his mouth hit hers and he backed her toward the bed.

“You will.” He crowded her, picking her up and pushing her to lie back on the bed, nudging up the hem of her chemise. “You will, I promise. My sweet one, my Emma, I have to taste you first.”

Her mind couldn't take it all in. Not his words: *sweet one, my*. Even her given name that she'd never said he had permission to use. He'd just taken it along with her wits. Then his hands were sending sparks across her skin as he revealed it by dragging up her chemise. And the next thing she knew, he was releasing the tie of her chemise and pulling it down until it

was just a rucked lot of fabric at her waist and he sucked one of her nipples into his mouth.

She fell back onto the soft coverlet with a moan as he laved and devoured first one nipple then the other. Splendid mischief. Never had it ever been like this. He cupped one breast and squeezed as he took the other in his mouth.

“I’ve been wondering how your nipples would taste,” he said gruffly against her skin, and she wasn’t sure whether he was talking to her or thinking aloud.

Even as his teasing of her breasts felt so good, her hips moved restlessly, her thighs trying to rub together despite the hindrance of one of his knees between hers. He must have noticed, as he gave a low chuckle and his stubble rubbed as he nodded.

“So impatient,” he teased. “But beautiful with it, and you only want what you deserve for being such a good girl.” And he continued to whisper compliments and praise, so soft and deep it was as though he was telling each limb.

Knowing that he would lift the hem of her chemise and see her naked was one thing. Of course she’d been aware of that. But as he dragged the linen up, bunching at her knee, she couldn’t help but tense up.

Matthew knew what to do, though, continuing to kiss her breasts and stroking her thighs until she was writhing once again. Her eyes closed and that helped focus her on only her body and his words. She was so caught up, she hardly noticed when his touches became kisses. Then her imperious duke returned, slinging her thighs over his solid shoulders, still covered by his shirt. The touch of his mouth to her slit should have felt unnatural, but he hummed with approval and that was all she needed. A long lick up her seam made her cry out. The

second was less of a shock, but just as intense, sending pleasure spiraling through her.

“See, I said you were sweet, and I was right. Delicious,” he said in pleased tones.

He wanted this. If this was an experiment, she wasn't the scientist, she was the subject. And that knowledge unleashed her to rock her hips toward his mouth. The reward was better than she could have expected. He took the bead that was the center of her and sucked.

“Shhh.” He smoothed a hand across her stomach. “Can you be a good quiet girl for me?”

The echo of her scream and surprised voices from amongst the chatter that seeped through the walls and floor of the inn broke into her consciousness. She'd... Her cheeks flushed even as another moan rose from her chest as he licked her again.

“Sorry, sorry,” she panted out in a shaking undertone. “We can stop.” Her rational brain was at least alive enough to offer what her body rebelled at, even as she writhed under the strokes of his tongue.

“I can't stop.” He sucked her again. “When we're at my house, you can be a good loud girl, and scream as I eat you.”

His house? They were going to do this again?

“But here I need you to be my sweet quiet girl so we're not interrupted.”

Then he made it impossible. Because he escalated the licks, foregoing the pauses for comment and chasing her pleasure. One of his hands snuck up and teased her nipple with pinches and rubs while the other held her hips down.

Lying and taking it, accepting that he was the one leading, should have been difficult. But her body sang utterly in tune with him, and she gave herself up to it.

She wasn't surprised when she was shoved off the precipice this time. There was something about his absolute confidence, in her and himself and *them*, that made it easy.

"My good girl. You took that so well," he murmured, cupping her mons as though to keep her orgasm inside her. "You were quiet too. I almost want to make you scream just to see your cheeks flush."

She opened her eyes to find him sitting back on his heels. Around his parted lips was shiny with moisture, as though he'd been gorging. Indulging. His dark hair was askew and she realized with an awkward pang that her fingers had done that while he was licking her. That out-of-place hair made him seem younger and more vulnerable, and there was a hint of uncertainty in his expression as he looked back at her, focus steadily on her face as though it would be rude to look at the rest of her body which he'd relished putting on display and touching.

He didn't move. He was still fully dressed apart from his coat and cravat.

"What is it?"

For a second she thought he wasn't going to tell her. Then that wry smile appeared again. "You know when you're nearly finished with a drawing, and it's really good? It's near to perfect and precisely as the reality. It shows the sample to its best light. It reveals all its inner beauty."

She nodded but honestly, had having his head between her legs addled her mind? Because she had definitely been

offering him intercourse, and he appeared to be talking about drawing plant cells.

“I get this moment of fear that I’m going to spoil it all. I’ll slip and draw a big black line across the whole picture. I think I’m going to make a mistake that undoes days of careful work with one unthinking gesture. “

The arrogant Duke of Eastfield worried about his drawings? She’d never seen that fallibility in him and her heart ached for that slice of himself he’d revealed, even if she had no clue why he was telling her this now. So she said what was on her mind.

“Take off your clothes, and come here. Please.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, tortured.

“Yes.” This was what she wanted. Him. She was more certain now than when she’d married. More confident than in any of the scientific discoveries she’d made. They had this moment together and she was not going to allow it to wilt away.

He stood and tugged his shirt over his head, revealing a muscled chest, all firm lines and a trail of dark hair across the top and leading down to where he undid the fall on his breeches. Emma scrambled to her knees and reached for him, her chemise slipping all the way off. And as the dark fabric fell from his waist, her mouth fell open.

She hadn’t imagined herself as being particularly sheltered, but he was a different type of man altogether from any she’d ever seen. His... Cock, that was the most appropriate word out of a poor selection her brain provided, was beautiful. Big, skin taut and a bead of moisture at the tip that her mouth watered to taste. He was magnificent.

And a little intimidating as he stepped toward her, urging her further onto the bed to make space for him. His knee nudged hers apart, and when her back sank into the cover, her hands went to his shoulders and pulled him down on top of her without her knowing approval. Because oh, the feeling of him over her was delicious.

“Is this really happening?” he whispered as his arms bracketed either side of her head. She explored him with disbelief. Heated skin and hard muscles, the texture of the hair on his chest was softer than she expected. And then his cock notched at her entrance, a hard heated length, solid on the slippery folds of her center.

“Be certain,” he whispered. “Because I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop. Definitely not until I’ve felt you be a good girl and pulse around me when you come.”

“Arrogant even in this, aren’t you?” she said, and rolled her hips up.

He groaned and the tip of him pushed in, slowly, aching slowly. And although he’d said he couldn’t stop, the way he watched her eyes said differently. That gaze said he was monitoring her reaction as inch by inch they slipped together. She’d bet if it was anything less than bliss, he would stop before she even asked. But his body into hers was not an invasion, but a joining.

He thrust into her so carefully, his hand slipping through her hair. He nudged her nose with his, almost animalistic in a sweet way, and somehow that was the best feeling. Her heart was enormous. Bursting with him as he filled her between the legs and all the way up to her belly button. He was all around and above her. But not just that, inside her.

She'd never felt so protected and loved. Yes, aroused too. Yes, on the cusp of breaking apart. But she'd let him in, and all he'd done was make her want him more. Of him, of herself with him.

An experiment. This? An experiment? As the pleasure built, she gripped his shoulders and hung on. And just like he'd done with everything else, he took charge and made things better. Like her dress, or the way she'd been cutting the stem samples, he fixed broken parts of herself she hadn't even realized needed fixing.

If it was an experiment, the results were clear.

She was in love with the Duke.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

After a year in love with Emma, he'd thought that probably this ailment couldn't get any worse. He'd certainly imagined what it would be like to make love to her. But nowhere in any of his fantasies—the ones where she felt so perfect—had he thought she'd be responsive. From the moment he'd slipped into the wet welcoming heat of her body, he'd been lost.

No notes or experience to guide him, everything he'd done with women up until this point was nothing compared to being with Emma.

He'd always assumed he'd have to coax her around on every little touch, that perhaps she'd tolerate him. Or even that if he was lucky enough to seduce her, that she would hiss insults at him.

But no. None of that was true except that she felt like heaven.

“You feel so perfect,” he whispered into her mouth, and she seemed to like that, writhing beneath him, pushing upward to meet his every thrust and arching into his hand when he reached down to stroke her nipple. She wanted this as much as he did.

The reason was so improbable he couldn't allow himself to dream of it. Because the answer lay not in her body, which was overflowing with need for him, but in her mind. He'd said it earlier: if her mind wasn't engaged with this act, her body couldn't enjoy it. The only logical reason, then, for his every touch setting her alight and his whispered professions that she was lovely, felt perfect and was made for him, was that she liked that.

She liked him.

How could it be otherwise?

On the other hand, how could a miracle like Emma wanting him have happened after four long seasons of antipathy? Did she care for him?

“Yes.” As though she could hear his thought, she urged him with her legs around his waist. “More.”

Through the fog of dawning hope and baffling pleasure, he thought to make it better for her. Hitching her thigh higher so he went deeper between their bodies, cramming his hand down to reach the center of her pleasure.

“Sometimes I touch myself and think of you.” The confession was out before he could second-guess whether she would want to hear it.

A whimper escaped her lips as his hand went over her belly. Was anticipation or his words responsible for that? He wasn't sure he minded. It was him making her feel good. There was no doubt that she was enjoying their intercourse now, even if later she might regret it.

And maybe that was why, as he kept up a steady rhythm of sliding into her unimaginably tight and slippery wet heat and circled over the little nub of her pleasure and she cried out,

that he whispered truths into her soft skin, lost amongst kisses to her neck. “I’ve wanted you from the beginning. I’ve dreamed of sinking into you.”

She tightened around him and oh god he couldn’t bear how good they were together. He’d always known she’d be his match in every way.

If this was all there ever was, it would have to be everything. He’d know he’d left his heart and soul with her on this bed this night.

“You were sweeter than I even imagined on my tongue, and I’ve wondered what you’d taste like so many times. I’ve imagined your mouth over my cock, too.”

“Yes.” A gasped plea, or an agreement? It didn’t matter. He wasn’t stopping.

“Come again.” He sped up his thrusts as the demands of his body became impossible to deny. “I want to feel you come around my cock.” He pressed more firmly on her clit to try to push her over. Before him, even though his pleasure was coiling in the base of his spine, his balls pulling up in readiness to spill into her. But he couldn’t until she found her pleasure too. This would be good for her, he’d sworn to himself and her. It was her experiment, after all. Him? He didn’t need this to be a trial. There had never been any doubt in his mind that this would be good.

He’d sometimes allowed himself to envision feeding his cock into her mouth, through the red lips that were grazing his jawline as he breathed in her scent at her neck. The idea that she might allow him to use her mouth, and perhaps even willingly suck him, spearing him with those green eyes as she did so, had been the fodder for many harsh jerks on his cock. But tonight wasn’t for that, and if the consequence was that

particular fantasy was always only that—a fantasy—he'd still be well pleased. Delighted. Overwhelmed by a cornucopia of blessings like a reverse Pandora's box.

“Emma, my beautiful good girl.” His voice was hoarse and deep, like it was being dragged up from the bottom of his soul. He felt her shiver underneath him and tighten around where he was pushing into her and dragging himself back only as a necessity to the joy of feeling her close around him again. His fingers were cramping as he stroked her, his shoulder protesting at the angle and work of holding himself above her and thrusting. None of that mattered. “Come for me like I know you can.”

Before he'd even finished the sentence, she was pulsing and shuddering, racked with pleasure.

It tipped him over as he kept up what he thought she needed, the hard length of him rubbing on that place inside her. He broke, pleasure coursing up his cock as he pumped his seed into her.

It was only several minutes later, with her hair tickling his nose and a muffled, breathless giggle coming from her and a tap to his shoulder that his destroyed brain comprehended that he had collapsed on top of her. Squashing the woman he loved into the mattress.

He rolled onto his back and brought her with him, and her cutest of all laughs was louder in his ear. He reveled in it.

“I've waited a whole year to hear that laugh again.” He ran his hand down her naked back.

“Have you?” Her question stopped the laughter, which was hardly the effect he'd wanted. And now she wasn't distracted by their lovemaking, it felt much more risky to make these

confessions. So he plunged his fingers into her hair and brought her face to his, taking her mouth in a deep kiss that tempted and teased until she was rolling her hips again.

This time, he didn't ask if she wanted another experiment. He dragged her up his body until she was wobbly and confused, protesting in an undertone and sitting across the top of his chest. Then he grasped her bottom, and pulled the core of her to his mouth.

“Y our Grace!” A knock sounded at the door, jerking him from slumber.

Simultaneously, three things occurred to him. One. Emma had slept in his arms. Even now she was blinking sleepily, nestled into his chest, warm and naked and her strawberry-blond hair unpinned, spread over the pillow. Two. He'd never had such a good night of not sleeping in his life. They'd made love over and over again. When they'd fallen asleep, there had been no awkwardness. No hesitation as she'd accepted that she was staying with him. Three. They were about to be discovered.

“One moment! I'll come to the door!” He dragged his arm from under her and leaped out of bed, scrambling to find his breeches and pull them on before answering the door with only a crack open. “Yes?”

A neatly dressed bellboy with straggly blond hair took in the two inches of him that were revealed with ill-concealed shock. “The lady traveling with you has a letter, Your Grace. Mrs. Hanover, that is, Your Grace. I tried her door but there was no answer, and she isn't in her bed.”

A soft gasp came from behind him. He swore internally. This wasn't the beginning of the rest of their life together he'd been aiming for.

"I'll pass it on to her," he reassured the boy, who while wide-eyed at meeting a *real duke*, showed no sign of giving up the expensive letter clasped in his hand.

"Your Grace, the desk clerk told me—"

"Are you doubting my honor as a duke?" He held out his hand for it, and only belatedly remembered his naked arm would reveal more than he'd like.

"No sir. Your Grace." The bellboy gulped.

"The letter shall be given to her with all haste," Matthew reassured the boy as he gave him the letter.

Shoving the door closed, he turned with trepidation. And Emma, efficiently slipping her chemise over her head told him all he needed to know.

His heart sank as she approached with all business-like calm. He could still see her nipples, dark shadows through the thin cotton. His mouth watered and cock went heavy even as fear bit at his naked extremities.

"Thank you," she said under her breath as she took the proffered thin paper envelope.

It was rude to watch, but he couldn't conceal his apprehension. What could possibly be important enough for someone to send a costly telegram to Emma on the off chance she was still in York?

Her little hands shook as she ripped open the envelope, yanked out the paper and read.

His heart jumped up to his throat and lodged there. Stuck fast. He couldn't breathe past it as conflicted expressions flitted across Emma's face. Disbelief, worry, wry amusement, sadness.

"Well." She nodded and looked away. "That's good news."

It didn't look like she'd received a message that pleased her, but his windpipe was still incapable of speech because his heart was not budging from its attempt to throw itself out of his body and toward her.

"We don't have to go to your estate."

Wonderful. And now his lungs had joined his heart.

"Doctor Reagan says she has convinced the university that it's not necessary for me to show them the samples to graduate, given I have drawings." She'd schooled her expression by the time she looked back at him. "We can go back. No crisis. All sorted and no extra work."

Except, there was a crisis happening somewhere between where all his internal organs ought to be, and her. Because she didn't look like she'd just been told she didn't have to do a tedious chore, she looked like she'd had her heart broken.

"Emma." He couldn't let them return to Banton without saying more. She'd leave and work with that arse, and he'd be left alone and as broken as those slides they'd tipped onto the floor. "I know you said an experiment, but Emma, if..." He dragged in breath like it was broken glass, cutting his throat and lungs. Please God give him the strength and eloquence. He had to get one message across right.

He wanted her in his bed every night from now on. During the days, he wanted to work with her and squabble about the

best way to prepare a slide or draw a sample. He wanted to be her husband. Days and nights.

“Emma, if an experiment is successful, we continue it. Correct?”

“Yes,” she replied doubtfully.

“If the new methodology is better than the old one, we adopt that permanently.”

“Well, of course.” But she didn’t understand. Or maybe that wary look meant she did and was afraid of him.

He should wait. He should bite his tongue, and when they were safely back in Banton where she was comfortable and not beholden to him, she would be able to make clearer decisions.

And what if being back where they’d had so many fights slipped them both into the misunderstandings and antagonism? They had this one slice of time. He wouldn’t risk it slipping away.

“Emma. I liked our experiment. A lot. I’d like to continue it.” There. That was clear, wasn’t it?

Her face registered shock. “I’m not going to be your mistress.”

He was ruining this like he did every conversation where he didn’t touch her. He had to get her to understand, without taking advantage of their explosive chemistry. He needed her whole clever mind as well as her body committed to their relationship. “I’m not asking that. I’m asking you to be my duchess.”

A laugh burst out of her. “I’d be a terrible duchess.”

“What? And you think I’m such a dedicated duke? I spend all my time in a laboratory with you and plants.”

“You can’t marry on the basis of one experiment.”

“I can, because it’s not just one experiment. It’s a year of spending every day with you. It’s a year of admiring your dedication as a scientist and your beauty as a woman. It’s a year of wishing I had the words to fix what went wrong between us on the first day. It’s been a year of longing to take you in my arms and whisper sweet words.”

“Sweet words are they now?”

Hope bloomed in his chest. If she could be sarcastic, surely she wasn’t going to say no. Surely?

“Filthy words,” he acknowledged. “But sweet too. I want you to be my good girl every day and night.” He took a deep breath. This was more difficult than any speech he’d done at The Royal Society. Worse than his viva where two begowned, bespectacled, scowling owls had interrogated him for hours. “I want you to marry me.”

“Really?” She bit her lip.

“Yes. I love you. I’ve loved you so deeply and so long it feels like a tangle of brambles and bindweed so deep and impenetrable that I’ll never escape it.”

“Loving me is like brambles?” She made a disapproving noise in the back of her throat, but her eyes were bright with amusement.

“Yes.” It was exactly like a bramble. “The flowers are so delicate and pretty and sweet scented. The blackberry fruit is tart and sweet and compulsive, making me long to stuff more and more into my mouth until purple juice stains my lips permanently and runs down my chin. And your thorns. They

ensnare me. Those thorns dig into my skin whenever I think I'll walk away. They catch me at unexpected times, and the tug of pain makes me feel alive.”

One of them had to move soon. A foot between them, the air vibrated with his words and the transition between one form and the next.

They'd been antagonists for so long. They'd been friends of a sort, and lovers. Now he could feel the shift to be life partners. A couple. Husband and wife, soon.

“I didn't know,” she said, a little wonderingly.

“I am quite secretive about the results of my experiments.”

She took a step forward, and then she was within reach and he gave in and grabbed her. Pulled her into his arms and crushed to his chest. “Emma. I swear.”

Her hands stole up to his neck and then she was on tiptoes and her green eyes were looking into his face.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“For pity's sake, say yes,” he said as he leaned in to kiss her.

The music of her laughter, that laughter that had entranced him from the first, was even better felt through his chest as heard.

“Yes. Yes to all your experiments.”

EPILOGUE

She hadn't thought about what his estate would be like, but as the carriage pulled through the gatehouse with thick stone walls to either side, she lifted her head from his shoulder where he'd tucked her under his arm and leaned out of the window, eager for her first glimpse.

They'd decided—very well she'd insisted—that they visit Royston House despite not needing to. Somehow it seemed fitting. She wanted to see where her soon-to-be husband had grown up and become the extraordinary individual she now knew. And he seemed happy enough to comply.

Matthew's hand gravitated to her waist, a gentle support as the carriage turned. He had touched her constantly since they'd become engaged. It was as though he couldn't believe she wouldn't be taken away.

Ha. She'd like to see someone try.

“Where does your land begin?” she asked.

“A couple of miles back.”

“You're joking.” That would make the estate huge.

“Emma.” His serious scientist and cold Duke voice resumed.

Of course he wasn't joking. The drive wended down a shallow hill, the grassy rolling landscape spotted with fluffy white sheep munching away in apparent contentment. She'd lived her whole life in a town. By comparison to little rows of adjoined terraced houses with long thin gardens, this expanse was unfathomable. It was a bucolic idyll.

Then they entered a copse of trees, the shadow making dappled light fly past. Another corner, and the vista opened out and there was the house.

She gasped. An enormous cream stone building, with a glasshouse covering the whole of one side towered before them.

"Do you like it?" Matthew's voice held an edge of tension.

"I love it." She flopped backward and he pulled her onto his lap, pressing their bodies together to the best of his ability given the number of layers between them. "What's the line from *Pride and Prejudice*? If only you'd shown me this earlier I would have fallen in love with it—I mean you—immediately."

His chuckle vibrated through her and his arms tightened at her waist as he stroked up and down her side. "Is that so? I would have broken all your slides on the second day if I'd known." He pressed a kiss to the sensitive skin behind her ear, then nipped her lobe playfully. His rough stubble scraped her skin. She leaned into him closer, reveling in his heat and affection.

How had she not noticed for twelve months how sweet—if grumpy—this man was?

Because she'd been determined to see the worst in him, even as he helped her and cared for her.

The carriage stopped and there was ungainly shuffling as she allowed him past, so he could offer his hand so she alighted with poised grace from the carriage. The household was lined up, and though there was only a modest staff, a tremor went through her. A dozen servants were waiting outside the house, the spring breeze tugging at the women's starched white aprons and caps, and ruffling the butler's gray wig. This house was as large as the whole Botany wing of Banton University.

And oddly, where he was formal and grumpy with almost everyone, Matthew was warm and natural with the old housekeeper and the severe butler. He didn't let go of her hand though, lacing his fingers with hers and bringing her with him as they climbed the few wide stone steps into the house.

Emma was certain most women would have been awed by the marble floors and the paintings of ancestors on the richly patterned wallpaper walls.

But Matthew knew without her asking what she wanted to see, leading her through the house wordlessly until they reached a set of French doors.

These he opened and released her hand, standing back to invite her through.

And just as she might have expected, the Duke of Eastfield did not do things by halves.

She stepped into a lush wonderland. Pineapples, banana plants, vines. He joined her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as they walked through the perfectly tended glasshouse.

“This is your tropical one, then. It’s heated?” She felt him nod and smiled. He’d never been uneconomic with his words. “But you promised me my plant. You stole it. I want it back.” She looked up into his blue eyes, so full of love she couldn’t believe it.

He steered her through a door and into an adjoining glasshouse that was instantly cooler. Pulling her closer to him, he led her through, with a muttered, “I don’t actually know where Mr. Harris put it.”

“There.” She stopped and pointed. “You were right.” Because the plant she’d been studying was indeed thriving in his glasshouse. That one cutting he’d sent here had grown into a bush two yards around.

And it was in flower. The delicate red lanterns hung from the branches all around. Even in this, her laboratory companion had been looking out for her. She turned in his arms and stretched onto tiptoes, grasping his shoulder. He leaned down willingly.

“How soon can we get married?”

“Bans will take three weeks. Why?”

“You don’t need any special duke things?”

He snorted then took her mouth in a tender kiss.

She smiled and something eased in her chest to perfect happiness. In a month, they’d be married. When long minutes of languorous kissing resulted in Matthew half-dragging her to a bench sat against the warm stone wall, she whispered, “When I become a doctor, I want to be Doctor Calder from the beginning. I want your name.”

He hummed his agreement like a contented cat. “Our name. And you’ll be my duchess. Mine.”

“Always.” She closed the gap between their lips again.
“Yours.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eve Pendle writes snarky, angsty and passionate historical romance. She loves dresses, chocolate, equality, liberty, her husband, and her dog (not necessarily in that order).

Thank you for reading *The Duke Experiment*, I hope you enjoyed it. I love writing heroes who are all-in from the beginning for their quirky heroines. Need more Duke Experiments? Get the exclusive, five years later extended epilogue straight into your inbox: [HERE](#)

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HER DARING DUKE

A SECOND-TIME BRIDES SPIN- OFF

SKY PURINGTON

How daring will her duke be in a game of forbidden love?

Lady Isabella Stanton wants nothing to do with marriage yet desires a dalliance with a certain unattainable duke. With that in mind, hoping he might participate, she creates a game of dares that challenges pre-selected acquaintances to compete for an entire day of her company.

The Duke of Leinster is committed to a prearranged marriage but cannot stop thinking about his lovely friend, Isabella. So, when she writes to him about a precarious game she intends to play, he heads to MacLauchlin Castle to protect her good name. Yet, instead, he ends up participating not just in her game of dares but in a challenge that very much tempts him with forbidden love.

CHAPTER
ONE

MacLauchlin Castle, Scotland

25 September 1819

“**Y**ou did *not*, dear friend.” Maude’s cinnamon-colored eyes flashed with merriment, and she clasped her hands in delight. “*Truly?*”

“Truly.” Isabella grinned and held up her latest letter from Joseph, the Duke of Leinster. “And I believe my Oh So Formal Irishman might *actually* see things through.”

Isabella had met Joseph last autumn when they were visiting MacLauchlin Castle at the same time. Just out of mourning a man she’d never loved, she noticed him straight away. How could she not? Title aside, he was unattached and distractingly handsome with thick ebony hair and the palest green eyes she had ever seen.

Suffice it to say, despite him being a tad stiff for her taste, they had struck up a friendship for no other reason than she suspected there was more to him than met the eye. As it were, he had pretended to be a commoner in a tavern last year with his friend, Laurence, just to see what it would be like. So, she had a feeling, *hoped*, he craved excitement beyond the stuffy confines of his Irish dukedom.

That in mind, he had become a bit of a mission for her.

How daring could he be?

“Do tell us how Joseph responded when you wrote about this Game of Dares you intend to play leading up to our Feast of St. Michael Ball. Spare no detail, darling.” Maude sipped her tea as Isabella’s maid, Penelope, put the finishing touches on Isabella’s hair. “Do you imagine he will participate?”

“It is hard to know.” She could only pray. If he did, he would be competing against two other pre-selected candidates to be her sole escort on the Feast of St. Michael, also known as Michaelmas. “Yet I had to mention it just to see if it might tempt him because what a sight that would be.”

“Indeed.” Maude looked at her a little too knowingly. “Although, watching you two waltzing together when last he was here was quite the sight too.”

“Was it then?” she said absently, even though she often thought of the two dances they had shared at Martinmas last year. Her heart had raced as he swirled her on the dance floor, and everything faded but him and those precious moments together. Without a doubt, she’d become aware of him in a way she never had her late husband, Bernard. Far more aware, but then, truth be told, her late husband, may he rest in peace, was the dullest man she’d ever met.

Since his passing, she had vowed two things. First, she would never agree to a prearranged marriage again. Second, she would henceforth remain unattached but still enjoy dalliances with exciting, interesting men.

Where Joseph was very interesting, as she enjoyed talking and writing with him, she had yet to see how exciting he could be. All she had to go off were those dances, which had indeed

been extraordinarily thrilling. More exciting than any dance she'd had with another since.

So, yes, she had to at least make him aware of her Game of Dares.

“What do you think, Penelope?” Maude wondered of Isabella's maid. “Do you imagine those dances Isabella shared with the Duke of Leinster were as dull as she leads us to believe?”

Relatively young but talented at her job, Penelope had been with Isabella for a few years. While painfully shy with anyone but Isabella and now Maude as her friend had a way of drawing people out, her maid released a little giggle. Her round cheeks turned rosy, and she shook her head adamantly. “Oh no, my lady, my mistress is quite—”

“Interested in seeing if Joseph is as formal as one thinks.” She shot her maid a look that she keep quiet. “Nothing more and nothing less.”

“Indeed.” Maude smirked. “Because becoming a duchess would be so terribly awful.”

“If married to a dull duke, it most certainly would.”

“Yet still interesting enough to correspond with while he travels on business,” Maude pointed out. “So, really, how dull can he be?”

“Not so much dull as formal,” she clarified.

“Something he has no choice but to be given his station,” Maude reminded.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Isabella shrugged. “Either way, it is just for fun, as he's obligated to marry a fellow Irish royal.”

Maude's eyes grew merry again. "So you *have* talked of marriage?"

"Only in the sense where one mentions what is expected of them in their particular station," she made clear. "So on and so forth."

They had talked of much in their letters over the past ten months. He had felt the need to let her know about his prearranged marriage up front, which was understandable. In truth, it was for the best, considering she had no intention of remarrying, even if something did develop with him beyond friendship.

"So, tell me more about this Game of Dares." Matchmaker that she was, Maude, surprisingly enough, focused less on Joseph for a moment. "You have said so little about who you are targeting and what they must do."

"It is but a game of doing what I dare to ask of them." Quite looking forward to it, she grinned. "Accomplish said task, and they draw closer to the finish line."

Maude tilted her head in question. "What if they all accomplish everything?"

"Then it is down to one dare that they must race one another to accomplish."

"Ah." Maude eyed her curiously. "And who are your designated contestants outside of our Irish duke?" Her eyes narrowed a little, and her smirk grew. "Though I suspect I can already guess them."

She perked an eyebrow at her friend. "And?"

"I would say English-born Ernest, Lord of Cumbria, and his cousin, Scottish-born Duncan, Lord of Perthshire," Maude said. "As they are clearly smitten with you."

“Clearly friendly with me,” Isabella corrected. “As we have become good friends. Dear friends, to be certain.”

“Be that as it may, they *are* without a doubt smitten with you as well,” Maude said. “Yet, I suspect, despite their infatuation, they are but a means to secure your duke.” She chuckled. “And while I applaud your creativity, I cannot help but wonder if you are going about this correctly.”

“I have no interest in becoming an Irish duchess.” While frustrated with her friend’s assumption, she certainly would not show it. Instead, she chuckled as well. “As to a dalliance with an Irish duke?” She slid Maude a saucy smile. “Well, anything is possible.”

Or was it, she wondered later that evening as she enjoyed dancing with Ernest and Duncan. MacLauchlin Castle’s ballroom had a way of making everything seem that much more enchanting with its numerous candlelit chandeliers and old-world feel. Both men had been formally invited to participate in her Game of Dares, under the stipulation, she’d said gaily, that they would not turn against one another if one lost to the other.

“Have you *any* idea how many times we have competed against each other over the years, darling?” Ernest said as the three of them enjoyed a cocktail between dances. His blue eyes flashed with amusement. “This shall be great fun.”

“Indeed.” Duncan’s light brown eyes twinkled when he made things clear to Ernest. “Especially when you lose, cousin.”

“You mean when *you* lose.” Ernest grinned at Isabella. “Tell him, sweetheart. Tell him his battle is lost before it has even begun.”

“As if he would listen, love.” Adoring the freedom of flirting shamelessly, she rested a hand on each of their forearms and batted her lashes first at the Scotsman, then the Englishman. “Any more than you would, I believe.”

While both were handsome—Duncan with his fairer looks and Ernest with his darker complexion—she enjoyed them most for their lighthearted manners. Their love of having fun rather than embracing their society’s stuffy, overly formal ways. Instead, they were free spirits like her. Men who, despite the impression the three of them gave one another, would likely never be more than dalliances, if that.

She might be wrong, but she doubted it. The three were widowers eager to enjoy life and remain on the outskirts of marriage. So, whatever might come of their friendship, she could not imagine it ever being anything substantial, nor would she desire such.

Although they could not hear Joseph being announced from their corner of the ballroom, she was not surprised to hear rumors of his arrival tittered about behind fans in record time. A wave of interest tended to ripple through the crowd when dukes, in particular, arrived, no matter their nationality. To be expected, the Duke of Leinster caused an extra stir among those looking for a husband.

While tempted to roll her eyes at their antics, she merely smiled because he was here when his last letter had not been as promising as she’d led Maude to believe. If anything, he had hinted at heading back to Ireland. And the truth was, his words had made her chest tighten. Would she not see him one last time? Have no chance to say a final goodbye in person before he returned home and married?

That, naturally, had been the real reason for telling him about her game. Anything to see him one last time. She might have painted it one way for Maude, but in reality, she had requested he become a mediator she could trust. After all, Maude and her husband, Blake, would have undoubtedly become matchmakers once again and tried to make a marriage out of the winner.

“Excuse me, darlings,” she said to Ernest and Duncan. “I must go greet my dear duke before he is lost to his admirers for the remainder of the night.”

“So soon?” Seeming to think she might be gone longer, Ernest sighed. “Why not let him get acclimated to his surroundings first, my dear? As I am sure he is weary from a long day of traveling.”

“I could not agree more.” Duncan grinned at her. “Trust me, we will make the wait worth your while.”

“No doubt you would, but alas, I must be off.” She smiled winningly at them before she drifted through the crowd toward the ballroom door. Would she still feel that same odd flutter in her stomach when she laid eyes on Joseph? Still feel the same sensual warmth curl through her when their gazes connected?

As it happened, she felt something to be sure when he appeared in the doorway moments later, and his steady gaze locked on her almost immediately. A feeling that caught her more than a little off guard.

CHAPTER
TWO

Joseph had meant to stay away, but the moment he read what Isabella intended to do with her Game of Dares, followed by a letter from Maude that she did not like it one bit, he had no choice but to come. What was Isabella *thinking*? Did she not realize how quickly something like this could ruin her good name?

So rather than seek out his friend and laird of the castle, Blake, upon arrival, he sought out Isabella lest she had already done something foolish. While granted, her letters were always lighthearted, and her mind seemed sound, this was over the top. Too much. So, he'd once again put off going home and came at her request.

Ireland could wait a few more weeks while he ensured she was all right.

He had just reached the ballroom door when Isabella appeared out of the crowd, much like she had the first night they waltzed. And just like she had then, she took his breath away. A stunning beauty in a sky-blue silk dress with hair like finely spun gold, she possessed flawless, delicate features and a lush body that made him imagine all sorts of things. Her almond-shaped eyes were the color of sunlight sparkling on the Irish Sea, and her plush lips were made to be kissed.

Not by him, of course, even though he would be lying if he said he had not fantasized about it a time or two. Perhaps many times. Either way, she was not to be kissed but adored from afar. Or at least that had been his intention until she raved about how she'd always longed to travel to Ireland and demanded they become friends at once so he might tell her all about his isle.

Seeing nothing but trouble engaging in a friendship with her, he had tried to keep her at arm's length but found it impossible. Then more impossible still not to correspond with her over the past several months while he'd been traveling.

"I cannot tell you how good it is to see you again, Your Grace." Genuine warmth lit Isabella's eyes as she curtsied and acted quite proper. "I was not so sure you would be able to join us for the festivities."

"Where else would I be?" Although he need not, considering his elevated station, he bowed from the waist. "Given the circumstances?"

While tempted to kiss the back of her gloved hand, he refrained lest he enjoyed pressing his lips against any part of her too much.

She smiled. "Well, I *did* fear you might return to Ireland."

"Did you?" He offered his elbow so they might stroll someplace less busy and stop this proper charade. "Despite how precarious events at the Feast of St. Michael Ball might be?"

"How was I to know if you would receive my letter in time?" she countered as he received a glass of whisky from a servant. "Though I am so glad you did, as the ball should be interesting rather than precarious, I imagine."

The conversation lingered there for several minutes because he had no choice but to stop and chat with people along the way. Even so, he kept her on his arm until they eventually made it into a quieter corridor lined with MacLauchlin ancestors peering down from their gilded paintings. Candlelight flickered here and there, and torches burned beyond the windows, lending a medieval feel to their elegant surroundings.

“Dear me, you were pushing your limits back there, keeping me on your arm through all that.” A practiced flirt indeed, Isabella batted her lashes at him. “You *do* realize tongues will likely wag now, Your Grace?”

“Joseph, when we are alone, and you know it,” he muttered under his breath. “And I could care less about wagging tongues.” While not entirely true, he had refused to let her out of his sight until they talked. That in mind, he stopped and frowned at her. “Tell me you have decided against this foolish Michaelmas game of yours, Isabella.”

“Game of Dares,” she corrected, offering a dainty shrug. “And, of course, I have not. Why would I?”

“Because you could ruin your good name,” he exclaimed. “Surely you realize that.”

“With Ernest and Duncan?” She released the sort of throaty, feminine chuckle that invited a man to take advantage. “They would *never*.”

“How can you be so sure?” Aware of how taken with her they were, he tensed. “What you intend to do could easily welcome untoward behavior, Isabella.”

Her finely arched brows pinched, and her delectable lips pursed. “You make me sound *quite* indecent, Your Grace.”

“Joseph,” he muttered again. While tempted to down his entire whisky at her antics, he sipped instead. “This is an indecent game you play, and you know it.”

“How could you possibly know that when I have not presented my dares yet?”

“Because I know you long for excitement.” He gave her a pointed look. “Or have you forgotten everything you shared with me over the past ten months? How bored you were with your late husband and strive to *live again*, as you call it?”

“I remember every word we have exchanged.” She tried to look at him most seriously, but there was no missing the mirth in her luminous eyes. “Yet I cannot see how my having a tad bit of fun need be indecent.” The corner of her mouth curled up ever-so-slightly. “Although I do quite like that you think me that bold.”

“And *that*, my dear, is half the problem.” To hell with decorum. He downed his whisky and set aside the glass. “I think it because you are. Most especially by pulling this stunt. Honestly, I am surprised by how naïve you are being, Isabella.”

“*Naïve?*” Her eyebrows lowered sharply, yet her humor remained intact. “Indecent is one thing and naïve quite another, Joseph. I imagine many might find them contradictory. So, which am I, darling? Naïve or indecent?”

Relieved to hear his name on her lips again, he countered her smoothly enough.

“Naïve as it pertains to your lack of judgment rather than your innocence in this case.” He waved over a servant with a tray of drinks and eyed her warily. “And I hazard to say you

should aim to be naïve rather than indecent at the moment as nothing good will come of this Michaelmas game of yours.”

“It actually leads up to Michaelmas,” Isabella reminded. “After all is finished, the winner shall remain on my arm for the Feast of St. Michael itself.” She shrugged and thanked the servant when he replaced their drinks. Once they were alone again, she narrowed her eyes at him. “As to the game itself, shame on you for thinking it anything but pure fun.”

“And once again, therein lies my concern.” He narrowed his eyes in return. “Your definition of fun is open to debate.”

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked innocently as they continued strolling further out of earshot of others. “Goodness, you are making me sound like a harlot, dearest, when I am no such thing.”

One could only hope not because the truth of the matter was her obvious flirtations with her current contestants had already, frustratingly enough, made him jealous. He would never admit it, but the envy was there when last he saw her. A sensation he had since tried to set aside as it had no room in his world any more than she could have a place in his life.

“I do not think you a harlot,” he said. “I do, however, worry where your winner’s mind might go after having won such a prize. What they will think of you in general after all this.”

He frowned and tried not to envision what winning her for a day entailed. Was it merely her company? Or was there a peck on the cheek involved? A kiss on the mouth? Because his imagination went so far as to how she might look writhing in pleasure beneath him. The feel of her warm skin against his.

“But then,” he went on, “I suppose opinions of your character would begin with the context of your dares.”

“Am I such a prize then?” she said softly. Her gaze lingered on his face before she sipped her claret and thought about it. “I have made it clear to both contestants that their prize is my company for Michaelmas and nothing more. Did I not also make that clear to you in my letter?”

“Actually, I found your talk about this whole affair rather vague and open to interpretation.”

Isabella eyed him with amusement. “Ah, so you are here to protect my honor rather than be a mere mediator, is it?”

“As I have come to consider you a friend, I think it safe to say yes.” As always, he became overly aware of her sweet scent and the comforting warmth of her on his arm. “There is a way around all this, however. A means to put my mind at ease.”

She eyed him demurely while sipping her claret. “And what might that be?”

“Tell me the dares you intend to lay out for Ernest and Duncan,” he said. “If I know what you intend, then I will also know how they will perceive things.”

“Is that right?” The corners of her mouth inched up a mere fraction. “And how exactly will you know how they perceive things as you are not them? In fact, I would have to say they are their own men.”

“But men regardless, and aristocrats at that.” He would not back down from this. Not if it meant protecting her. “To that end, I suggest, given I’m to be your mediator, you let me know what you intend. That way, I can better protect your good name.”

“But of course, that makes sense.”

Good that she understood. “Then you will tell me?”

“Absolutely not.”

He frowned again. “Whyever not?”

“Because only the contestants will know what the dare is when it is revealed at a time of my choosing.”

“Good God, Isabella.” He shook his head. “That is not recommended in the least.”

“Yet it is how things shall be.”

He could tell she would not budge an inch by the stubborn notch of her chin. “Then how am I to mediate?”

“You are not because such a position has become unavailable.”

Come again? “So, you led me here under false pretenses?”

Isabella tapped her glass, narrowed an eye in thought, and considered it. “If we are to be most specific, I believe I wrote I was *considering* you as a mediator if you came.” She shook her head. “Not that my mind was made up, which, as it happens, given you possess a rather glum opinion of my contest, I think the position better left unfilled.”

Hell and damnation. More frustrated than ever, he scowled and said more than he probably should. “Then how am I to protect you because, quite frankly, Isabella, you are putting yourself in a precarious position, to be sure.”

“I do *not* need protecting.” Nor did she seem all that offended. “Truth be told, I cannot see you being more than a friendly bystander.” Her eyebrows edged together as she

thought about it. “Wait, that is not entirely true. I suppose there *is* a way, but...”

“But what?” he prompted when she trailed off.

“Oh, you would not like it, dear friend.” She waved it off. “So do forget I mentioned it.”

“Yet you *did* mention it,” he said dryly, wondering what she was up to.

“Well, I would think it obvious.”

“Yet it is not.”

“Of course it is.” She issued a charming smile. “In order to watch over me and screen my dares, you would have to enter the contest as well.”

CHAPTER
THREE

Isabella waited with bated breath after she told Joseph he would need to enter her contest if he hoped to know what her dares would be and, therefore, to his way of thinking, protect her.

How would he answer?

Would he, as always, keep her at arm's length?

Because she knew he did. She felt it in how careful he was with her. How even though the desire in his eyes mirrored how she felt, he never dared too close. Never said anything that might be misconstrued.

Yet she wanted him to on all fronts.

While she had certainly felt that way since meeting him, when she'd laid eyes on him at the ballroom entrance, everything she wanted from him intensified. He was more handsome than ever with his tall, broad-shouldered build. Dressed impeccably in black breeches and a black tailcoat with chiseled, masculine features, he drew many a female eye.

Seeing him again made her feel tremendous relief and wild anticipation. In fact, when she'd had to blink back tears and force a smile, she realized just how much she had come to care for her unattainable duke.

What she could not figure out was why precisely outside the obvious. Yes, he was a catch indeed and most definitely a friend at this point, but it seemed there was even more to it. Something addictive that felt like a punch to the gut when she laid eyes on him again. Truth told, seeing him again had knocked the wind right out of her, and she had not been able to breathe quite right since.

So, when she realized just how concerned about her he was because of the contest, she knew she made the right decision telling him about it. Knew she would do anything to have more time with him in order to see what this was between them. To understand why she felt so strongly. Yes, they obviously got on well, and there was most certainly an attraction between them, but again there was more, too, and she intended, *needed*, to get to the bottom of it. That being the case, she had made things clear.

He could have a hand in her contest if he wanted it.

“So, what say you, darling?” Sure to keep things light when her chest tightened in unexpected fear that he might say no, she kept smiling winningly and cocked her head. “Will you join my contest?”

“Although I should not,” he grumbled, his Irish lilt a tad stronger than usual, “I have no choice.”

Her heart soared. While not the eager “Yes,” she had hoped for, it would do.

Yet, she had to go about things just right.

“Are you quite sure?” She remained playful and teasing. “As you implied, these dares might be risqué indeed.”

His gorgeous green eyes darkened. “But you assured me they were on the up and up.”

“And they are.” She chuckled and urged him to stroll with her back toward the ballroom. “I promise you there will be no scandal involved, as we do have our good names to consider.”

“We do,” he said studiously, yet she swore she saw a flash of quickly disguised excitement in his eyes. A glimmer she had caught on more than one occasion when they first met.

“So now I have agreed to be part of this contest,” he continued, “tell me the details.”

Naturally, he had thought it would be that easy.

“Whatever for?” She kept on smiling. “Haven’t I made it quite clear you will learn everything when the time is right? Which will be simultaneously.”

He sighed. “And when will that be?”

“As I told you in my letter, starting tomorrow,” she said. “Day one of three leading up to the Feast of St. Michael.”

“I see,” he said uneasily.

“Do you?”

His gaze remained straight ahead versus on her where it so often was. “I do.”

“Then why so stern?”

“Because I wish you had not put me in this position,” he said bluntly.

“Did I then?” she could not help but say, *prompt*, as surely, she was not alone in whatever this was between them? “Because I am relatively certain you put yourself in this position, Joseph. One you can back out of at any time. At this very moment, if you like.”

Rather than answer, he steered them into a busy room, and they were once again amongst the crowd. This time, however, he did not stop to chat with others but led her back into the ballroom that had been their beginning.

Swept her onto the dance floor as though they had never left it.

He made her feel all the same things she felt the first time they waltzed, but this time, the simmering heat between them was much stronger. A sinful attraction she swore he felt every bit as much as her. Unfortunately, they shared but the one dance during which they never looked away from each other before he was summoned to greet one aristocrat or another.

Either way, she had accomplished her goal and knew Joseph would live up to it. Or at least be part of it now. She feared how much she wanted him to win, but there was no denying she did. The thought of him going back to Ireland without whatever this was between them being further explored made her heart hurt.

“Are you well, my lady?” Penelope asked her the next day as she prepared Isabella for a lovely afternoon of socializing. Her maid rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You seem quite unsettled where I thought you would be excited about this game of yours.”

“And I am.” She rested her hand over her maid’s and smiled at her in the mirror in reassurance. “Quite excited, indeed.”

“You need not worry that his grace will see your contest through, my lady,” Penelope said gently, knowing her well indeed. She glanced at the numerous letters from Joseph that Isabella kept in a keepsake box. “If nothing else is clear, you are dear to the Duke of Leinster.”

“Dear is one thing,” she whispered, struggling to find her voice. “But what is this I feel now?”

Because whatever it was, it had not existed with her late husband, and it made her more than a little uneasy. Granted, she and Joseph had talked often, then written a great deal, but did that explain the heated flush that overcame her every time she thought of him? An ever-growing need to be around him always when it could never be?

“Whatever it may be, my lady, he is here and means to see this through.” Penelope urged her to stand and looked her over. “And I must say, you are finely presented for the task at hand.” Her maid squeezed her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. “Remember why you did this and know you have accomplished your goals thus far.”

“I did this for him, and now I wonder,” she managed softly, second-guessing herself. “How foolish have I been? Can he ever...would he ever...” She shook her head. “What was I expecting when I want marriage no more than he?”

“If I were to guess?” Penelope offered a gentle smile. “You want more than you might think, my lady. Furthermore, the duke returning when he was supposed to go home says that he might too.”

“Or—” she theorized, ignoring the leap of her heart— “it says he merely feared for my safety.”

“Indeed.” Quite wise for her age, Penelope gave her shoulders one last squeeze and stepped back. “Yet I assume these dares will not put your reputation in such peril, so he need not fear, right?”

“Goodness no,” she replied, albeit hesitantly because she was still trying to figure out that part. “Or at least I hope

not...”

Her maid stared at her in confusion before she realized the truth, and her eyes went wide.

“My lady,” Penelope admonished. “Surely you had *some* idea of what you intended?”

“I did.” She scrunched her nose. “*Do.*” In truth, she had not planned much beyond getting Joseph back here. “I have it all worked out, indeed.”

Free to say and act as she would, Penelope’s mouth dropped. “Good gracious, you do not at all, do you?”

“But of course, I do.” Isabella wrung her hands and bit the corner of her lip. “Mostly, anyway.”

“Which I imagine means not at all.”

To be sure yet she *had* gotten Joseph here, so that was something. *Now* what? One would have thought she’d have this figured out in advance, but honestly, she had been unsure he would even come and mostly just prayed she would be able to convince him to join her contest.

Seeing she was unprepared and growing upset, Penelope urged her to sit at a small table and poured her a glass of wine. “Never fear, my lady, we shall figure this out straight away.”

Could such be figured out that quickly? She supposed there was only one way to find out.

“Perhaps you are right.” Grateful for such a wonderful friend and even more thankful there were two glasses, she poured Penelope wine as well and urged her to sit. This was not the first time she had enjoyed a cocktail with her maid and would not be the last. “Come, join me, dear Penelope, as I suspect you might have some ideas.”

“Are you sure, my lady?”

“Indeed.” She slid the glass across the table until it rested in front of the opposite chair. “Let us chat and see if we cannot come up with a good Game of Dares.”

“But of course.” Penelope sat, tucked a wisp of deep auburn hair behind her ear, and gave Isabella a most direct look. “First off, we must discuss the outcome you truly want from your Game of Dares.”

“I could not agree more.” *Only ever her Irishman.* She perked a brow. “And that is?”

Penelope tilted her head in consideration. “Are you sure you wish me to speak freely?”

“I would not have asked for your thoughts otherwise.” She gestured at her maid’s glass. “Nor asked you to drink with me.”

“Indeed.” Penelope took a dainty sip and rested her hands around the glass when she gently set it down. “That said, I would go about this in a way that makes you the happiest rather than needing to be as daring as your contest implies.”

“Well, that sounds rather boring.” She sipped her wine and thought about it. “Darling, the whole point of this contest is to stimulate my life, not do the opposite.”

“Precisely.” Penelope eyed her for a moment, then spoke plainly. “But perhaps the best way to do that is to focus on what you did and did not enjoy about your late husband and go from there.”

“Enjoyed about him?” she said. “Very little, as you know.”

“Yet, while not a love match, you cared for him, did you not?”

“Yes,” she conceded. “He was a decent man, and we were comfortable. *Too* comfortable as it were, and that, dear friend, is what I do not want to repeat.” She expanded her hands and then clenched her fists as if grasping an exciting future. “I want so much more.”

“Then start with that, my lady.” Penelope took a small sip of wine and rubbed her lips together as if savoring the taste. “Keep in mind both the decent aspects of your late husband and what he lacked, to create your dares.” She shrugged. “It could be as simple as you liked when he wanted to be around you but hated how he always seemed distracted. That his mind seemed elsewhere, which made you feel quite ignored.”

“It did.” Isabella sighed. “Despite years together, he hardly knew what I liked and disliked.” She fingered her necklace absently. “I do not think I received one gift from him in all that time that was to my taste.”

“Exactly,” Penelope said softly. Respectfully. “So perhaps focusing on things like that would be beneficial. A means to find out how well these contestants have paid attention since you met them.”

“Hmm.” She nodded slowly as she thought about it. “I believe you might be on to something.”

To that end, they got down to business and came up with three perfect dares.

Now, let the games begin, and her winner be the man she hoped for.

CHAPTER
FOUR

While not pleased Isabella had swindled him into her contest, Joseph could admit to being both intrigued by and wary of her intentions. Especially when a brief note with her seal was delivered to him shortly before he went downstairs the next day.

Dearest Contestant,

Herein lies your first dare.

At some point today, I dare you to give me what I most desire and do so for all to see.

Best of Luck.

Isabella

This was exactly what he had feared because it sounded very much open to interpretation.

“Based on your troubled expression, I take it that is the first of Lady Stanton’s dares?” his valet, Shamus, said. His bushy salt and pepper eyebrows furrowed as he saw to Joseph’s attire with a clinical eye.

Shamus had been with him for years and was a good friend, indeed. In fact, he had been with him so long that he was not only a friend but somewhat of a father figure.

“It is Isabella’s first dare,” he confirmed and shared said dare with a sigh. “She is going to ruin her good name. I am certain of it.”

“Then perhaps you best focus on eliminating your competition.” Shamus’s merry blue eyes twinkled. “Not that I imagine you have much to worry about.”

Even though Joseph was unavailable, Shamus had championed Isabella from the beginning. He thought her a fine catch and had not been shy about saying so.

“Nothing to worry about?” He shook his head. “I tend to disagree, considering one of those fools could very well misinterpret her question.”

“As much as I agree that this contest is a bit bold, I cannot see either of the other two gentlemen in question doing anything disrespectful.” Shamus gave him a look. “So says what we learned about them.”

The moment Joseph discovered Isabella had targeted Duncan and Ernest as dear acquaintances over the past ten months, he had researched them only to discover both were purportedly upstanding men with good reputations.

“Nevertheless,” he muttered. “Even good men are capable of bad things.”

“Mayhap, but doubtful with those two,” Shamus reassured. “Even so, you now have a hand in the game, so I imagine you will eliminate both as competition in no time. Then you and Lady Stanton can enjoy Michaelmas together, as that has undoubtedly been her goal all along.”

“You have no proof of that.” He cursed how much he hoped his valet was right. “And even if it were her goal, she knows nothing can ever come of it.”

“Or so you keep telling yourself when we both know that might not be entirely true,” Shamus said. “There is every chance the woman you were supposed to marry may soon be unavailable. Also, it has become more and more acceptable for Irish peers to marry English or even Scottish royals.” He adjusted Joseph’s cravat. “Better still, you are your own man now and capable of making your own decisions.”

A reminder his overbearing late father no longer had a say in anything he did.

“I think, however—” Shamus met him square in the eyes — “your general discontent lies in how strongly you already care about Lady Stanton. Therefore, entering this competition has less to do with protecting her and more to do with keeping her as close as possible for as long as you can.”

“I cannot imagine what you mean,” he denied but feared his friend was right.

“You can and do.” Shamus looked him over one last time and nodded with approval. “Now go see Lady Stanton’s contest through, Your Grace, and do away with the riffraff.”

He hoped it would be that easy because said riffraff rarely left her side.

As expected, when he spied Isabella downstairs later, Ernest and Duncan were flirting with her as usual. Lucky for them, neither needed to socialize with others and see to business, so they had all the time in the world to woo her. Fortunately, however, thanks to Blake and Maude insisting

they sit near them during dinner, he was finally given a chance at her company without the other two around.

“I feared you might have bowed out of the contest before it barely had a chance to begin.” Isabella eyed him with speculation as fricassee chicken and asparagus with butter were served. “Assuming you are still playing?”

“But of course,” he assured. “In answer to your dare, what you desire most is to be truly heard, Isabella. Paid attention to. That said, know you have been by me always.”

“Have I, then?” she wondered, especially stunning in a burgundy dress complimented by a simple pearl necklace and earrings. Her thickly lashed eyes looked particularly captivating in the candlelight, and her plump cleavage was more difficult to keep his eyes off of than usual.

“Always, as I am not your late husband and care about the things you have shared with me,” he said. “So, I can tell you your favorite color is pink, but only certain shades of it. That any one color is too much, be it worn or part of furnishings. Jewelry is best understated rather than flashy. Whether they share your opinions or not, overly opinionated people are best avoided. You prefer fish to poultry, lightly flavored side dishes to heavy cream bases, and sweets only on occasion.”

“That is quite right,” Isabella admitted.

“And yet, I am not nearly finished.”

“No?”

“Not at all.” Because he quite liked talking about her. “Despite your late husband loathing animals, you would not be opposed to having a dog. Springtime is your favorite season because everything gets a new chance at life, and the smell of fresh flowers, specifically lavender, is preferable to any

perfume you have encountered thus far. Your favorite thing is random acts of kindness. Your least favorite, cruel gossip. You enjoy writing letters as much as talking because you can revisit written words in your old age where spoken words might be lost to a poor memory.” He arched his eyebrow. “Shall I go on?”

Her cheeks had grown charmingly rosy. “I dare say you have covered quite a bit.”

“Yet I know far more.” He sipped his wine. “Might I assume I made good on today’s dare?”

“You may.”

He ignored the triumphant leap of his heart. “And the others?”

“They did as well.”

His heart sank. *Really?* It seemed he might have underestimated the competition. “They knew you that well, too?”

“I did not say that,” Isabella returned. “I said they completed today’s dare when they told me what I desire most for all to see.” She shrugged a shoulder. “Which they did, so all three of you will move on to dare number two tomorrow.”

“I see.” *Blast it.* “And the other two were quite appropriate with their responses?”

“Of course, given it was for all to see.” She nibbled daintily on her cabbage and spinach cake before a wicked gleam lit her eyes. “As to tomorrow’s dare, one never knows.”

“You are quite enjoying this, are you not?” he could not help but say when he realized she teased him. “Perhaps a tad too much?”

Amusement lit her eyes. “Would you loathe me if I said yes?”

“It would be impossible to loathe you or even mildly dislike you,” he said because it was true. Painfully true. “And you very well know it.”

“I suppose I do,” she said softly, offering one of those smiles he had been unable to get out of his mind since meeting her.

“And that is why I cannot help but be grateful you joined my contest, Joseph,” she went on. “If for no other reason than to know I have a dear friend in the race who only has my best interests at heart.” She flinched a little and sipped her claret. “Or at least I hope you still do after tomorrow.”

By God, what did she mean by that? “Is something happening tomorrow that I should be aware of?”

“Just, and I say this knowing you equally well—” she rested her hand on his forearm as though dealing a hard blow indeed— “it may be more than you are capable of, darling, and for that, I will not fault you.”

“There is little of which I am incapable,” he made clear, even though they both knew there was. “Within reason, of course.”

“Indeed.” Isabella squeezed his arm gently, trying to comfort rather than incite him. “Then may you think my next dare within reason.”

“I am sure I will,” he nearly growled but spoke civilly. “Of that, you may rest assured.”

Or so he hoped because, however much Isabella might have assured him otherwise, and his own research said Duncan and Ernest were upstanding fellows, he did not trust them or

any man for that matter when it came to her. Not just because of them but because he understood Isabella in a way she might not fully realize. Understood how very much she craved excitement and attention.

Specifically, from the opposite sex.

Her late husband had not been a good fit for her, and her boredom had built over the years. Maude told Blake that Isabella had been quite vivacious before her arranged marriage. Where for some, a boring spouse might have dampened their spirits, it had not adversely affected Isabella. Rather her lively spirit had been suppressed until, when given the opportunity upon his passing, it now bubbled over.

More than that, he saw the woman beneath.

From the moment he met Isabella, he knew she was a more sensual creature than most. Once he got to know her better, he understood why. Her letters had conveyed both boredom and loneliness in her late marriage. So, whatever intimacy she'd shared with her late husband was unfulfilling. Did he think she had enjoyed risqué dalliances since Bernard passed? It was impossible to know and even harder to think about because he hated picturing her lying with another man.

Better still, another man bringing her pleasure.

Something he tried his best to put from his mind as they left talk of dares behind over dinner and fell into the easy camaraderie they had shared since meeting. A matching of the minds he had never enjoyed with a woman and quite liked. All aside, he considered her a close friend, and while he was eager to be back home in Ireland, he'd never dreaded anything more because of the renewed distance it would put between them.

“I must say you seem quite outside yourself, old chap,” Blake mentioned later that evening as they enjoyed an after-dinner port together. His friend’s gaze went to where Joseph’s rarely left. How could it when Isabella flirted with Ernest and Duncan once again as they played cards. “Have you told her how you feel yet?”

“Whatever do you mean?” he said absently.

“Have you told Lady Stanton how much you have come to care for her?” Blake said bluntly. “That you have fallen in love with her?”

“Love?” Caught off guard, he blinked and looked at his friend. “While I have grown fond of Isabella, love is not part of what we share.” He forced amusement he did not feel. “I think perhaps you and Maude are letting your matchmaking ways go to your head.”

“Yet we did not pursue a match for you.” The corner of Blake’s mouth hitched. “It seems you two found love all on your own.”

“I fear you are mistaken.” *Or was he?* “I am taken, and Isabella—” he tried not to scowl at Ernest and Duncan fawning over her— “is very much preoccupied.”

“Indeed, she is, but not by the other hopefuls in her contest, my friend.” Blake sipped his drink and eyed him curiously. “Surely you see that despite the show she puts on for you?”

He ignored his elation at the off chance she might feel as strongly about him as he did her, even though nothing could come of it. “Lady Stanton and I are merely good friends.”

“Perhaps right now.” Blake chuckled. “But I cannot see that lasting much longer, considering you joined her Game of

Dares.”

But, of course, Blake knew things Joseph had not shared.

“Why am I not surprised you know about that?” he muttered.

“I tend to make it my business to know what’s happening under my own roof.” Blake continued looking amused. “That aside, I must say I find it unusual and out of character for you to join a competition like this. Especially given you never embark on anything you do not fully intend to win.”

“And win, I will, in order to see Lady Stanton’s stellar reputation remains intact,” he made clear lest his friend over speculated.

Something that would be a trial indeed, mainly because Blake was right.

Joseph *would* do whatever it took to win.

CHAPTER
FIVE

“So, all three contestants passed day one, I take it?” Maude asked the next morning as she and Isabella sat with their needlework before a crackling fire.

“They did no thanks to you and Blake.” Isabella had spent most of the previous evening waiting for Joseph to finally approach her. “I was beginning to think the Duke of Leinster had bowed out, but fortunately, when you ensured we sat together at dinner, he saw through his end of things.”

“Such lovely news.” Maude pouted. “Though I dare say, however kind your other competitors are, I do wish they had failed.”

So did she, but it seemed Ernest and Duncan had been paying attention as well.

“I will admit, I had rather hoped they would fail too,” she confessed, biting back a sigh because neither deserved her feelings, however true they may be. “Yet without them, there would be no contest, and I would have no hope of drawing Joseph out a tad more. As your Scots would say, just a wee bit, so I might...” She struggled to keep her voice even and blinked back tears before they had a chance to fall. “We might...”

“Oh, dear, I *knew* you felt strongly for our Irishman, and here it is.” Maude put a hand to her mouth and shook her head before she set aside her needlework and looked at Isabella most seriously. “You have fallen quite in love with your duke, have you not, dear friend?”

She bit back emotion. *Had she?*

To be expected, Joseph paid attention to all the things she had said since they met. It was one of the reasons their friendship had flourished. Yet she’d not realized just how much he had remembered about her or that he would recite it with such intensity in his eyes last night. With a fondness in his voice that made it seem as though he cherished every last word. Every little tidbit about her. Moreover, that he would enjoy talking about her all night if given half the chance.

Something the other two did not do.

Instead, they had given her the correct answer and resumed flirting rather than elaborating.

“Oh, my,” Maude said softly, bringing her back to the present as she saw Isabella’s emotions all too clearly. “You truly *are* madly in love with him, aren’t you, dearest?”

“As I am not familiar with the sensation, I cannot say,” she murmured and set aside her needlework as well. “What I *can* say is I fear my draw to Joseph has grown considerably and...”

“What?” Maude wondered when she trailed off.

“And it is in ways I did not fear before.” She worked to keep her breathing even. “Fear that he will not take the next dare. That I have pushed things one step too far, and it will be left to Duncan and Ernest to fill shoes I know they never can.” She shook her head. “Not when it comes to me.”

“I see,” Maude said softly, resting her hand over Isabella’s. “Can you not call off your Game of Dares?”

“I could, but...” She thought about it and knew she could not when this was her best chance of finding out what this was between her and Joseph. “Unfortunately, the second dare has already been sent to them, so it is best we press on.”

“Why not simply tell Joseph how you feel?” Maude squeezed her hand. “Tell him how invested your heart has become?”

“Because I cannot say with any certainty that it has.” What did she know of love? She and Bernard had certainly never shared it. “All I know is the situation is too unpredictable between us to chance it.”

“Yet you play a game of chance to expose it?” Maude pointed out.

“Even so, play we must,” she said softly, praying she was right but at the same time hoping she was wrong. After all, what would happen if they *had* found love? Love they would have to abandon because he was destined for another. She could only imagine the pain. The anguish she feared she might feel anyway at this point.

Suffice it to say, more people arrived that evening as they grew closer to the MacLauchlin’s Feast of St. Michael Ball, including Isabella’s friend and Maude’s sister, Lady Prudence, and her husband Jacob, the Duke of Argyll.

“What a delight to see you, darling,” Isabella exclaimed, smiling. “This is quite the surprise.”

“As if I would miss this,” Prudence said discreetly enough not to be overheard. Clearly in the know, thanks to Maude, she scanned their surroundings until she locked eyes on Joseph

standing on the opposite side of the room. “So, how does our Irish duke fare so far?” She grinned at Isabella. “Has he won your contest yet? Because he most certainly should.”

“He has not, nor should he necessarily, as the other two contestants have done well thus far,” she said. “And lucky for you, none of them have carried out their second dare tonight, which should, I imagine, be clear for all to see when it happens.”

“Oh, do tell.” Prudence’s eyes rounded. “What was your second dare?”

“That they do something they have never done before that I find exciting with at least one witness present besides myself,” she revealed. “Naturally, they may choose their witness if it is not something they wish for all to see.”

“Why the witness?” Prudence wondered.

“Quite simple, my dear,” she said, grateful to Penelope for coming up with this one. “I need to see if they can be daring in the least or if they are like Bernard and would never step foot outside the lines. Even if their witness is a friend, doing such in front of someone else other than me shows a tad more boldness.”

“I see.” Not nearly as condescending as she once was, Prudence grinned. “You *do* understand that could also, witness present or not, invite dubious behavior?” The corners of her mouth curled up. “Or were you counting on such from your Irish duke?”

“I imagine she was,” Maude said, appearing out of what seemed like thin air, as she had a tendency to do.

Isabella was about to respond when Duncan, who had been making his way toward her, stopped in front of the drawing

room fireplace and tapped his glass so those present quieted.

“My dear friends and acquaintances,” he announced, winking at Isabella before turning his attention to everyone else. “I do hope you don’t mind me interrupting your evening, but it has come to my attention that my dear friend, the lovely Lady Stanton, has never been sung to.” He grinned. “Nor have I ever sung in front of people even though I have wished to on occasion.”

“Goodness,” Prudence said out of the corner of her mouth. “Exciting, *indeed*.”

“We can only hope,” Maude said quietly. “As he hums often and quite out of tune.”

That might be the case, but as it happened, Duncan did relatively well, singing to Isabella while grinning the whole time. Granted, his voice cracked some, and he *was* off-key occasionally, but at least he was daring enough to give it a go. So much so, he dropped to a knee in front of her and gazed endearingly into her eyes during his final notes. He gave it his best despite the song not being one with which to woo a woman nor written for her by any means.

All the while, she was fully aware of Joseph’s lowered brow as he took in the spectacle from across the room. *What was he thinking? Could he be so daring?* She could hardly imagine. Either way, she applauded Duncan’s effort and offered him a broad smile because he had very much earned it.

“Well done, darling,” she exclaimed when he finished, and everyone clapped. “Well done, indeed!”

Delighted, Duncan kissed the back of her hand and stood, beaming. “I must say that felt good.”

“How happy I am to hear that.” Isabella bid her friends farewell and slipped her arm into Duncan’s when he held out his elbow and urged her to walk with him. “If you enjoy such, you should do it more often.”

“I should.” He grinned from ear to ear. “Lord knows, I *am* enjoying this game of yours, Isabella.”

“I can see that.” She could also see he was more taken with doing something he had longed to do rather than worried about winning her over, which was fine. Preferable, all things considered. “So you will do it more often?”

“I just might.” Duncan thought about it. “In the privacy of my own home, of course, as that is more proper.”

“Pish-posh, who cares what is *proper*.” She waved off his viewpoint. “You must do what makes you happy wherever you may be and nothing less.”

“Perhaps.” He eyed her and kept on grinning. “So, am I still in your game?”

“I cannot say.” Lighthearted as always, she met his smile. “If you receive a third dare tomorrow, yes. If you do not, no hard feelings?”

“Never with you, dearest.” He steered her a bit closer and lowered his voice most seductively. “Though I admit I hope I am not lost yet.”

“One can only hope, darling.” She smiled at him as gaily as she always had. “But as you know, time will tell.”

He met her smile. “Then I shall hope for the best.”

She could admit she was more charmed than ever by her Scottish friend as they mingled with others after that. But was

it for the right reasons, or did it, as she suspected, feel more like a mere friendship than anything else now?

“So, what do you imagine Ernest has up his sleeve?” she wondered as they strolled together through the great hall with its massive tapestries and large welcoming fireplace later that evening. “I have hardly seen him tonight. Should I assume he has given up so soon?”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” Duncan nodded toward Ernest, who strode her way with a determined look on his face. “Rather, I think it quite the opposite.”

“Darling.” She smiled when Ernest joined them with Maude in tow. “How are you?” Taking note of his tense features, she looked between the two. “Is all well?”

“It is,” he said a little too quickly, clearly nervous. “I was hoping you might join me and Lady MacLauchlin for a private moment, as she will be my witness.”

“Ah.” When she looked at her friend, thinking she might know more, Maude merely shrugged and shook her head, indicating she was as clueless as Isabella. “But, of course, dear Ernest.” She wished Duncan a good eve and linked elbows with the Englishman, eager to comfort him. “You realize you do not need to do whatever this is? That it is all right if—”

“No, I *do*,” he said firmly as they headed toward a less busy hallway. “Moreover, I *want* to, love.”

“Naturally, dear friend.” She smiled from Maude back to him. “I look forward to seeing what you present.”

As it turned out, it was the last thing she expected when they stopped in the hallway minutes later, and he handed her a scroll tied neatly with a pink ribbon. “This is for you...well, not precisely for you as I wrote it years ago, but for you to see

for the first time—” he cleared his throat— “what I mean to say is read, of course.”

“Goodness,” she said softly, worried. “Are you quite well? You seem flushed. Perhaps we should—”

“No.” Usually such a confident fellow, he swallowed hard and gestured at the scroll. “I admit I wish I were brave enough to read it aloud, so if you would?”

“Indeed, I will.” She squeezed his hand and ensured he truly understood he need not do this. “Again, are you *quite* sure?”

“I am.” He gestured at it once more. “This is, naturally, to fulfill your dare that I—”

“I know what it is, and so I shall read it,” she assured, keeping her voice gentle.

As this was clearly important to him, she set aside the ribbon and unrolled the scroll with the utmost care. Then, she read it just loud enough that it remained between the three of them. Read a poem so utterly beautiful it brought tears to both her and Maude’s eyes. A love poem of sorts but more than that somehow. More than he could ever possibly feel for her.

“Oh, dearest,” she murmured, looking from the poem to him when finished. “You wrote this? Truly?”

“I did,” he admitted, seeming quite tentative. “So, you like it?” He looked from Maude to her. “It was not...poor in quality?”

“Not in the least, but very beautiful.”

“I could not agree more.” Maude wiped away a tear. “Really, very lovely.”

“Thank you.” Ernest sighed with relief. “I cannot tell you how much that means to me.”

“You should share this, sweet friend.” Isabella looked from the poem to Ernest and wiped away a tear as well. “You should publish this immediately so all might read it.”

“Yet, I will not,” he said, obviously uncomfortable going on about it. “I write poems and short stories for my descendants and no one else but now you, of course.”

“Well, I am honored, as is Maude,” she said as Maude nodded in agreement. Careful to roll it up gently, she smiled at him. “I see you signed it, E. Hemingway. Whatever for?”

“It is a family name and a means to be discreet,” he explained. “A pseudonym of sorts. May my descendants make of it what they will. Especially if any of them love the written word as I do.”

“May they indeed, for such talent should live on.” She linked arms with him and headed back toward the great hall. “Thank you so much for the courage you showed tonight, Ernest. For being so wonderfully daring indeed.”

She was about to go on when piano music drifting from the opposite direction caught her attention. Music that made it hard to focus on what she was going to say next.

“What *is* that?” she murmured, ensnared by it in a way she could not explain.

“That, dear friend—” Maude said, replacing Ernest’s arm with hers— “is, I believe, yet another dare being fulfilled.”

CHAPTER
SIX

Joseph could admit he was relieved and also aggravated by Duncan and Ernest's dares. Relieved because it turned out, they were, in fact, both noble sorts who had thus far done nothing untoward when it came to Isabella. Aggravated because from what he could tell, thanks to his own eyes with Duncan and ears in the shadows when it came to Ernest, they were giving him more competition than he'd expected.

Nonetheless, outside of ravishing Isabella in front of a witness or the whole damn crowd, as he'd never taken a woman in plain sight, he only had one thing to offer her that he had never offered another. Something she may or may not find exciting, yet something he'd put his whole heart into over the past ten months.

"I did not know you could play the pianoforte," Blake exclaimed after confirming Isabella was still down the hall with Maude and Ernest. His friend frowned as Joseph tested the keys for sound. "How did I not know that?"

"Because it is something I have kept to myself." It had become an escape when he'd realized how little say he would have over his own life.

"And you wrote your own music?" Blake tried to peer closer at the sheets in front of Joseph, but he shot his friend a

look and shook his head sharply.

Before Blake could continue prying, he placed his hands on the keys, released a deep breath, closed his eyes, and played from memory rather than reading the music.

Played for Isabella and Isabella alone.

He traveled within his mind from conversation to conversation. Letter to letter. From sad moments to happy ones. Followed the things she had shared about herself to the things he imagined them doing together.

He had no idea whether the music was good or not, only that it felt like her. *Them*. What he imagined they would be together if things had been different. If he had been allowed to love her in all the ways he wanted to.

Not just her flesh but her heart.

He envisioned bringing her home to Ireland. Having her on his arm as his wife. In his bed as his lover. Pressing deep inside her until he lost himself. Until they drowned in one another, and the world and all its obligations faded away until there was only her.

Only ever her always.

Her until the notes faded away, and he opened his eyes to find his fantasy come to life in front of him. Isabella's eyes were damp, and her cheeks flushed. Neither said a word at first. Rather, caught in the strange place his song had taken them, they merely stared at each other, trying to understand what it was that simmered between them.

While tempted to leave immediately lest this moment grow more profound than it already was, he felt frozen in place. Unable to flee her every bit as much now as when he'd first

laid eyes on her. She had a way of ensnaring him and holding him to her no matter how hard he tried to run.

“What *was* that, Joseph?” she finally whispered hoarsely. “It felt...” She shook her head as though searching for the right words. “*Familiar*. So very familiar.”

“It was a song I wrote years ago,” he lied, finally able to move enough to gather up his sheet music. “Something I have never shared.” Keeping things brisk, he gestured at Blake and Maude. “As requested, here are my witnesses.”

“Don’t you *dare* leave yet,” Isabella said when he went to stand. She gave Blake and Maude a cordial enough smile as she came around the pianoforte. “If you two would not mind, I would like a moment alone with Joseph?”

Predictably, they gave no argument and vanished, leaving him alone with Isabella, who was far more formidable than anyone gave her credit for. She was undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with when flirting, but there was more to her than that. Something Ernest and Duncan obviously saw clearly, too, given they had felt emboldened and comfortable enough to share what they had.

“Again,” Isabella said softly, sitting beside him on the piano bench. “What *was* that?”

“I told you it was—”

“You are lying.” Their eyes held as she shook her head. “That was *not* something you wrote years ago, and I have no idea how I know other than I’m right, so tell me. What *was* that, Joseph?”

“It was as I said.” Unsure how to explain the extent of it, he shook his head as well. “It was—”

“Enough.” She snatched the sheets of music from his hand and darted away before he could recapture them. “If you will not be honest, then I have no choice but to...”

She trailed off when she started reading what was not only musical notes but small notations above them.

“Good Lord,” she whispered. Her eyes welled even more as she looked from the music, then back to him. “Is this...did you really...”

“Did I what, Isabella?” he asked softly, trying to keep things simple when he suspected they were far beyond that. “Write a song for you?”

“This is so much more than a song,” she murmured, sinking into a chair before the fire. She glanced from him to the sheet music again. “This is like nothing I have ever seen before.”

Despite knowing better, he turned on the bench and watched her reaction. Again, he should leave now and end any further contact, be it because of a foolish contest or otherwise, but could not seem to budge quite yet.

“Joseph, you wrote things above these notes.” Isabella sifted through the pages in awe. “From the moment we met to our first waltz to so many other little moments.” She shook her head and kept reading. “Then bits and pieces from my letters...and your letters. We are both in here.” Her gaze rose to his face. “So much of *us*.”

Having no idea how to respond, he remained silent.

“That fun, high note in between was from my attempt at sliding on ice when I was a girl.” A soft smile turned to a sad sigh as she kept staring at what he had written. “That low note was when I lost my mother in a carriage accident years ago.

Then that sweet melody in between was when I met Maude and, through her, her sisters. When my sister Margaret and I found such good friendships when we were both so lonely.”

Still lacking his voice and feeling like he had been laid bare, he downed the glass of whisky Blake had left and stood. Then, rather than pull her into his arms like he wanted to, he kept her at a distance because that’s where she needed to be now more than ever. “I do hope you enjoyed it, Lady Stanton.”

“I did, and well, you know it.” Isabella stood as well and shook her head. “Yet now—” she clenched the papers, then relaxed her white-knuckled fist as though she feared harming them— “you run when you have said so much. Run, I suspect, *because* you have said so much.”

“I am not running,” he said tightly, even though he very much was. He started for the door, hoping she would leave this be. “The hour grows late, so we should not linger in here alone lest your good name gets smeared.”

“Hogwash.” She caught up with him and grabbed his hand before he got too far. “Please do not...”

Before she could utter another word and he made an even bigger mistake than he already had, he pulled her against him and cupped her head so she rested her cheek against his chest. Did all he could to keep their eyes from connecting again because if that happened right now, he may never be able to look away. He might throw obligations to his dukedom to the wind and never look back. Yet almost immediately, he realized the threat of simply gazing into her eyes might have been the better option.

“No, Isabella,” he said gruffly, trying to ignore how she felt against him, from her full breasts to her trembling body. Tried to ignore how much he wanted to rip away her clothes,

kiss her hard and make love to her until the end of time. “I never should have done any of this because it cannot be.”

“Yet it already is,” she whispered, her voice as strangled sounding as his. “It’s too late...it has been for some time...”

He rested his chin on the top of Isabella’s head and breathed in the flowery scent of her hair. Like everything about her, he could not get enough of it. How she felt in his arms and the bliss that came from inhaling her sweet scent. The inherent comfort he felt every time she was near.

Now this.

The way her lush body felt pressed against his. So perfect.

Too perfect.

He didn’t realize he had pulled back and cupped her cheek until their lips hovered close to one another’s. Close enough, he could feel her warm breath. So close he heard her breathing switch along with his and felt her trembling increase. Keeping his eyes closed, he moved even closer without actually kissing her, imagining for but a moment what it might be like.

“Joseph,” she gasped and went to close the distance, but somehow, he found the strength to pull back before it was too late.

“No.” He gripped her shoulders gently and shook his head without meeting her eyes. “I cannot... I would never forgive myself.”

“For what?” she said softly. “Kissing me when it is clear you want to? Or not kissing me and regretting it?”

“I am obligated elsewhere, Isabella,” he ground out.

“Then, why are you participating in my game?” Isabella cupped his cheek and steered his gaze back to her tear-ridden

eyes. Forced him to see all the same profound emotions he felt reflected in her tender gaze. “Why are you part of this foolish game when surely you have figured out it is all for you?”

“Because I fear I am in love with you,” he nearly said, but understanding those words would only lead to more pain for them both, he bit his tongue.

“Your contest should not solely be for me,” he managed and set her aside, forcing the words. “As I said, I am part of your game to protect you, Isabella.” He shook his head and pushed more false words past his lips. “Nothing more.”

“Yet I do not need your protection,” she said. “But something...different...more...”

He could tell by the confusion in her eyes she was as baffled and caught up in all this as him. Even so, one thing remained a truth neither could deny.

He was committed to another.

To that end, best he end this foolishness now.

“I will keep an eye on things, but I will no longer participate in your contest, Isabella.” He backed away. “I will continue watching over you as best I can, but this has to stop now, and we both know it.”

“What *is* this, Joseph?” Isabella shook her head but did not pursue him. Her eyes never left his face. “Because I have been unable to free you from my mind since the moment we met in this castle’s great hall. Unable to stop thinking about you.” Her gaze dropped to the papers still clutched in her hand. “And it is clear you suffer the same plight. It is—”

“I bid you goodnight, my lady.” He bowed from the waist and left without a backward glance because if he did, he would

have yanked her against him again and had his way with her without taking another damn step.

He would have hoisted her up until her glorious legs were wrapped around his waist. Then, after kissing her so long and hard her lips were swollen, and she squirmed against him with need, he would have freed himself and thrust deep inside her. Finally felt what he had fantasized about for every hour of every day since meeting her.

While every step he put between them as he headed up to his room felt more difficult than the last, he made it up cleanly and shut the door. He should ring for Shamus but would rather let his valet rest. Yet it seemed his friend had seen to things regardless because a candle burned low alongside a celebratory bottle of wine, a note from his valet, and something that made him freeze.

“Devil’s teeth,” he cursed, closing in on the note left by Shamus.

It seems you did well tonight, indeed, Your Grace.

Congratulations on remaining in the contest. Do not hesitate to ring me if you need me no matter how late the hour.

Shamus

When he read the second letter, he had but one fuming thought. This would happen with Ernest and Duncan over Joseph’s dead body.

Dear Contestant,

Congratulations on making it to the next level because it is quite the level, indeed. My dare this time? Kiss me when we are alone.

Nearly Yours,

Isabella

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Isabella wondered if she would ever sleep again as she stared up at the canopy above her bed later that night. How could she when she would only ever hear, see, and feel Joseph? The way he had played the pianoforte for her. How the music he'd written had so touchingly woven her life together yet somehow included him all at once.

She wiped away yet another tear and tried to even her breathing when she remembered what she had felt when she first heard his music. How she'd had no choice but to drift toward it.

“Who’s playing that?” she had murmured even though she already knew and could hardly believe it.

“As I said,” Maude had replied from what seemed a great distance away despite strolling arm-in-arm with her. “Your next contestant.”

“Impossible.” Yet somehow, some way, she'd felt Joseph in those beautiful notes. He was undeniably her friend, but there had been something beyond that in the heartfelt music he created. Notes that urged her to go to him. Be with him.

So, she had.

Then, she'd lost herself in the way he had lost himself as he played. She might have imagined a lot about him because he'd shared a great deal, yet this side of him was new to her. The sheer pleasure he clearly felt when playing a pianoforte. She could never have imagined his fingers flying over the keys so elegantly, nor that they could create such poignant music.

God's truth, reflecting upon the entirety of the evening, the night had been astounding on every level, from Duncan singing to Ernest's poem to Joseph's music. She had gone into this contest hoping for a bit of fun and found courage and talent in all three.

Above all, though, she could now say with confidence Joseph felt just as strongly about her as she did him. If she had not heard it in his music, she had certainly felt it when he'd pulled her close. When she experienced such incredible heat between them.

How she had longed for his kiss. Just one kiss before she lost him.

Yet it seemed he was stronger than her because he'd pulled away when he had been *so* close. If that were not heart-wrenching enough, he had then swiftly backed out of her contest as well.

So she could just imagine what he would make of her final dare.

A final challenge her maid had delivered to all three men before Isabella had a chance to tell her not to deliver Joseph's. Yet it had been done, so that was that. He could still just as easily bow out, yet she prayed he would not. That his competitive, perhaps even jealous, nature got the better of him.

“This is going to be *so* exciting,” Maude exclaimed the next day as she, Isabella, and Prudence strolled outside, enjoying the pine-scented brisk air and warm sunshine. Preparations were well underway for the ball and bonfire the next night. Her friend slid Isabella a knowing smile. “And how eager I am to see who will be your official escort.”

“As am I.” Prudence grinned. “Moreover, I shall be interested to see if the duke stays in the game.”

Naturally, she had told them what happened.

“Need you even wonder?” Maude tossed Prudence a knowing look. “Especially given how out of sorts the Duke of Leinster seemed at breakfast? How unsettled he appeared the many times he glanced our Isabella’s way, thinking himself most discreet?”

Had he been casting her such looks? Could he be, as she’d hoped, staying in the game?

“He did indeed,” Prudence agreed. “And can you blame him, considering the woman he is madly in love with intends to kiss two other men today? And very worthy contenders, from what I hear.” She eyed Isabella with amusement. “Quite daring of you, to be sure, darling.”

It felt daring, too, but necessary because if one thing had been lacking above all with her late husband, it was passion. Their kisses had been wooden, and their lovemaking even worse. She had felt obligation rather than desire during their intimate moments and suspected he had too. That in mind, she was determined whatever dalliances she enjoyed going forward *must* include genuine passion.

“Well, this *is* a game of dares.” Maude shrugged at Prudence. “So why should Isabella not be just as daring as her

would-be suitors?”

“Daring indeed,” Prudence remarked as Ernest, who had been leaning against the side of the castle ahead, smiled and tipped his hat in greeting. “And I suspect the time has come for the games to resume.”

“So it seems.” Both excited and a tad nervous, Isabella wished her friends a good day and joined him. “There you are, darling.” She smiled. “I missed you over breakfast.”

“And for that, I apologize.” He offered his elbow so they might stroll. “My darling Isabella, I fear I have rather unfortunate news.”

“Oh, dear.” She looked at him with concern as they linked arms and walked. “I do hope everything is all right?”

“All is well enough, but I’m afraid I must attend to business back at my estate.”

“So soon?” He sounded a tad off, so she stopped and eyed him curiously. “What is it, Ernest? What troubles you?” When he hesitated, she urged him on. “Please, if nothing else, we are good friends, yes? So please share.”

“I fear you may think less of me if I do.”

“I doubt such is possible, darling, so carry on if you will.”

Ernest hesitated a moment before he sighed and looked down in shame. “I must confess I ended up following you after we went our separate ways last night.”

“I see.” Though not entirely yet. “And?”

“And I fear I might have seen things that were not mine to see,” he said softly, honorable enough to meet her gaze again. “Between you and the Duke of Leinster.”

What to say? Just how much had he seen? Not that she owed him an explanation. Yet still, he was a friend, if nothing else, and deserved a response.

“I assure you, whatever you think you saw was—”

“More than I shall ever get from you, darling,” Ernest said, cutting her off. The sadness in his eyes surprised her. “Enough to know this Games of Dares was lost to me before I even began. Enough to know it is best I not invest my heart any further.”

“Oh, my,” she said softly when she realized she was not just a dalliance, but he had come to care for her. “I had no idea.”

“I thought not.”

While tempted to deny how she felt about Joseph, she would not do that to Ernest. He deserved better. “I am so sorry, my friend. I never meant to—”

He put a finger to her lips and shook his head. “You need never apologize for following your heart, Isabella. Especially if it leads you to a better place than your last marriage, for you deserve that at the very least.”

Isabella rested her cheek against his palm and closed her eyes for a moment. “What a truly dear friend you are, Ernest.” She opened her eyes and looked at him affectionately. “I trust that no matter what happens, we will not lose what we share now?”

“We will not,” he assured, tentative. “Yet I wonder if I might still take my kiss before we part ways? In the vein of friendship, of course.”

“Of course,” she said softly.

As it turned out, the kiss was on the lips rather than her cheek but very brief. More of a peck before he stepped back, bowed at the waist, implored her to write often, then climbed into his waiting carriage.

She remained there until he vanished over the drawbridge, then headed up the castle steps but not before she swore, she saw Joseph standing in a window. Had he been watching her? If so, he vanished as quickly as he appeared, and there was no sign of him in the great hall.

“Ah, there you are, darling.” Duncan, who had been chatting with a group of gentlemen, headed her way, smiling. “I wondered if I would see you before dinner and dancing this eve.” He held out his elbow. “I hear several games of cribbage have begun in the gaming room. Shall we join them?”

“That would be lovely.” She met his smile and linked arms. “So, should I assume you are still participating in my Game of Dares?”

“Without a shred of doubt, love.” The devil was in his eyes, and his smile more charming than ever. “Do you think me driven off as easily as Ernest?”

He and Ernest were not just cousins but close friends, so she was not surprised he was aware of what happened. “So, you know he left?”

“I do.” Not daunted in the least, Duncan shrugged. “Now I compete with just one.” He gestured at their surroundings. “And he is nowhere to be found, is he?”

“He is not,” she agreed, meeting his smile despite not being in the mood. What if Joseph really had stepped away from her contest? If he’d chosen to ignore the invitation he was not supposed to have received?

While difficult, she did her best to set him from her mind and enjoyed a pleasant afternoon with Duncan playing cards. The Scotsman made no move to steal her away for a kiss but flirted as ruthlessly as ever, which was, as always, great fun. While she missed Ernest's company, as they tended to be a joyful threesome, she appreciated his honesty and intended to hold him to the friendship he had promised.

"So, you did not see the duke once today?" Penelope asked later that evening as she put the final touches on Isabella's hair. Feeling unusually frisky, she had opted to wear a sage green muslin dress that highlighted her cleavage even more than her other gowns.

"I did not." And she had done her very best not to let it bother her. "He must have been busy seeing to whatever it is he sees to."

Which some might say was business and diplomacy, but she knew better. He had turned cowardly and avoided her.

"No doubt," her maid said dutifully, sounding a tad off as she draped a delicate emerald necklace around Isabella's neck.

"What is it?" She glanced up at Penelope over her shoulder and narrowed her eyes at her friend's tentative expression. "What are you not telling me?"

"It is just...well, it seems..."

"What?" Isabella prompted, not liking the look on Penelope's face. "Tell me."

"Well, according to gossip below stairs, the Duke of Leinster is preparing to travel back to Ireland soon," her maid confessed. "By the sounds of it, he will be leaving first thing tomorrow."

“Is that right?” she managed, biting back a sharp surge of emotion at that news. “Are you quite sure?”

“So they say.” Penelope rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. “What shall you do?”

“What *can* I do?” she said weakly. “He made it clear last night where he stands. He will remain devoted to his arranged marriage.”

“Perhaps if you simply tell him everything in your heart and—”

“No.” She shook her head. “I barely understand what it is my heart in the first place, let alone risk it being broken by...” While tempted to give in to all the emotions rushing through her, she fought tears and kept shaking her head. “No.” She stood and squared her shoulders with determination. “If Joseph is duty-bound, I cannot fault him for that, nor do I intend to make him feel guilty. He must do what is right for him and his dukedom.”

A thought she kept firmly in place as she made her way downstairs soon after.

One she kept more firmly in mind still when Duncan greeted her soon thereafter, told her how ravishing she looked, and begged a moment alone with her so he might see through his third dare.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

“**Y**ou will wear out the MacLauchlin’s carpet if you continue pacing like that,” Shamus commented as he carefully laid clothing in one of Joseph’s trunks. He gestured at the side table. “Sit and have a wee dram to calm your nerves.” Then he muttered under his breath, “A wee dram to clear your mind and see how foolish you are being.”

“Foolish?” he muttered right back, yet poured himself a glass of whisky regardless. “I am being loyal and nothing less.”

Loyal despite being unable to get Isabella out of his head.

Where he had meant to put a stop to her kissing Duncan or Ernest, he had fought the urge. Swore he would stay away. Yet he had not turned his gaze from her endearing interaction with Ernest outside earlier. Rather, he had ground his jaw in frustration when the Englishman, however fleetingly, had kissed her before leaving. Then he did his best not to grow more aggravated when she’d spent the rest of the day flirting with Duncan.

“You are being loyal to what, laddie?” Shamus wondered, pulling him back to the present. “Better still, *who*?” His man scowled as he kept packing. “Because it is certainly not to yourself.”

“Nor should it be,” he reminded. “As I was committed to marriage and another long ago.”

Unfortunately, and like always, that did nothing to alleviate his restless heart. Nothing to keep him from lying awake the night before imagining what it would have felt like had he kissed Isabella after he’d played the pianoforte. If he had at long last given in to what he really wanted. In truth, kissing her might have alleviated so much confusion. Might have made them realize they were not a good fit.

Or it might have done the opposite.

It may have been so good between them their separation would have been much more bittersweet. Might have led to a lifetime of heartache.

Shamus kept muttering in dismay before he crossed his arms over his chest, frowned, and pointed out the obvious. “If you are so determined to see things through back in Ireland, why are we spending one more night here?” His brow furrowed. “Why not just shove off now?”

Joseph downed half his whisky. “Because it would be rude to leave so abruptly.”

“Liar.”

He arched his eyebrows at Shamus. “*Excuse me?*”

“No, I will *not* because this is inexcusable.” Shamus spoke plainly. “Whether you have figured it out yet or not, let me tell you what I know. You love Lady Stanton with every fiber of your being, and that is more important than anything else.” He topped off Joseph’s glass. “It is worth more than a promise to a da who only ever saw you as a pawn. Worth more than a commitment to a girl not yet sixteen whom you have never even met. One who is over a decade your junior.”

“Age means nothing in matters such as these,” he reminded. “And it is my fault that I haven’t met her yet.”

“It is indeed, considering we should have long been home.” Shamus poured himself a glass as well and shrugged. “Yet what could you do once you met Isabella but put off the inevitable?” He cocked his head and considered him. “An inevitability I assume she is aware of?”

“She knows of my impending marriage,” he grunted, downing half his whisky again.

“That much I know.” Shamus downed half of his as well. “But does she know all the fine details? That you should have been home months ago? Does she know what you are avoiding? Better still, what you truly long for?”

Rather than answer, he downed the rest of his drink and squeezed Shamus’ shoulder in reassurance. “She knows all she needs to, my friend.” He gestured at the bottle of whisky. “Have all you like but still see things are ready for travel first thing in the morn.”

Not waiting for a response, he headed downstairs and scanned the great hall but saw no sign of Isabella. Perhaps she had not made it downstairs yet? The night was relatively young, and more people arrived by the moment for tomorrow’s festivities, so she might be somewhere amongst them.

“Ah, there you are, Your Grace.” Maude melted out of the crowd and smiled gaily at him before she took in his immediate surroundings, and her eyebrows pinched together. “I have not been able to locate my dear friend, Isabella, and thought she would surely be with you.”

“Why me when she spent nearly the whole day with that bloody Scotsman?” he nearly said but refrained.

“I’m afraid she is not.” Fighting envy that Isabella might be with Duncan again, he scanned the crowd once more. “Perhaps she has not rejoined the festivities yet?”

“Oh, no, she has.” Maude eyed the room as curiously and raised her voice a tad as if trying to speak over the room’s chatter. “I was speaking with Lady Stanton not all that long ago, so she could not have gone far.”

“Not far at all,” a done-up young woman nearby assured, edging her way into the conversation. She curtsied and lowered her head while batting her lashes at him. “It is *such* a pleasure to finally meet you, Your Grace. I am Lady Rockersfield and—”

“His Grace is so very pleased to meet you as well,” Maude assured, steering the conversation right along. She smiled at Lady Rockersfield, who had started fanning herself while staring at him. “And how kind of you to speak up. Might I assume you know where Lady Stanton is?”

“Lady Stanton?” the woman said absently. She smiled and eyed him coyly from behind her fan as if she thought the two of them, although having just met, already shared some great hidden passion.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Rockersfield,” he said when it was clear Maude would have no luck getting a direct answer. In no mood to encourage this woman but curious what she knew, he managed a warm enough smile. “As you are enjoying Lord and Lady MacLauchlin’s hospitality this evening, I would very much appreciate you answering Lady MacLauchlin’s question.”

“Oh, dear me, yes.” Her eyes rounded from him to Maude, and she curtsied again. “What is it you wish to know, my lady?”

“Where you last saw Lady Stanton.”

“But of *course*, that’s right.” Her doe-eyed gaze returned to Joseph, and she gestured loosely over her shoulder with her fan. “She was heading down the corridor leading to the piano room with the Viscount of Perthshire, I believe.” She glanced between them knowingly and lowered her voice. “As I am sure you have heard, the two of them are becoming *quite* the item. In fact, rumor has it they may even marry.”

“*Marry?*” he said more sharply than intended, ignoring how much that news affected him.

“Wh-why yes, Your Grace.” While startled at his intense response, Lady Rockersfield was also clearly an opportunist. So said the way she shifted closer to him, rested her hand on his forearm, and spoke softly while continuing to eye him for the prestigious opportunity he might offer her. “I know you count Lady Stanton as a friend, so I *must* say I am shocked you have not heard yet. It seems the viscount has won her heart as of late, and she intends to accept his offer when it arrives.”

“So, it has not arrived yet?” he wanted to ground out but kept his voice civil. He would frown, though, and did so directly at her. “Then you but gossip right now, I assume? Speak of things you know not?”

“I...I,” the blasted woman stuttered, her cheeks flaming. In no mood to suffer more of her babble, he said, “My lady,” to Maude rather than the gossip hound to whom he spoke and made his way through the crowd without a backward glance.

He knew he should be elated Isabella had found someone she was fond enough to marry, yet he was baffled. Beyond confused. How could they have shared everything they did last night if she was entertaining marrying another? Because surely, she had not just decided this? Surely if she had even been contemplating it, she would have told him because, if nothing else, were they not dear friends?

Ever more confused by his conflicting thoughts, he went down the corridor where Isabella had last been seen, but there was no sign of her. He could only pray Lady Rockersfield had been wrong. Surely, she had been. Yet he kept walking and praying, more relieved by the moment when those mingling became less and less, and there was still no sign of her.

It seemed gossip really was just gossip.

Or so he thought until he heard Isabella's gentle laughter ahead and spied movement in a darkened corner.

Specifically, the silhouette of two people.

Although he should leave it alone, leave *Isabella* alone as it had to be her and Duncan, he strode in their direction. Strode quicker still when their heads came together in the shadows.

"Isabella," he said sharply before he could stop himself, but was glad he did because it turned out it *was* her and Duncan.

Startled, her head snapped back, and she glanced his way in confusion, clearly unable to see him in the shadows between candles. "Joseph?"

"Yes, *Joseph*." Although tempted to rip her from Duncan's arms, he knew better. Not until he figured out if she truly wanted to be where she was and of her own volition. He

glanced from Duncan, who stood too close to Isabella for his liking, back to her. “Is everything all right?”

Duncan went to reply, but Isabella spoke before he could. “Everything is perfectly fine.” Glorious and far too tempting in a dress cut sinfully low in the front, she rested her hand on the Scotsman’s chest and perked a brow at Joseph. “Better than fine, actually, Your Grace.” She smiled knowingly at Duncan before she glanced dismissively at Joseph again. “So, if you would not mind being on your way?”

“Actually, I *do* mind.” While remarkably difficult, he forced himself to push past his jealousy to see things clearly. “As promised, I’m protecting your good name, Isabella.” Never so envious of anyone in his life, he clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes at the Scotsman. “And will continue to do so as this is most inappropriate until, at the very least, you make your intentions known.”

Duncan looked from Isabella to Joseph with a crooked grin. “And what intentions would those be, old chap?”

While tempted to drag Duncan straight out the front door and give him a swift kick in the arse, he refrained. He had long been trained in proper manners, so he remained perfectly calm. “If you intend to marry Lady Stanton, then go about things appropriately rather than sneak off into darkened corners and try to—”

“Stop right there.” Isabella frowned. “You are both ill-informed and quite out of line, Your Grace. *Quite* out of line.”

When she held out her elbow to Duncan, they linked arms and headed his way. Her cheeks were especially rosy, and her eyes afire with defiance when they stopped in front of him.

“Although it is none of your business,” she went on, “Duncan and I have no intention of marrying.” She glanced from the Scotsman to Joseph and notched her chin in indignation. “Furthermore, although you seem to believe otherwise, what Duncan and I do or do not do together in our spare time is *none* of your concern, so I bid you a good night.”

He clenched his fists in frustration but did not stop them when they strolled past him. Instead, he spoke impulsively and said the very last thing he should have.

CHAPTER
NINE

“Despite intending to leave tomorrow, I have decided to resume being a contestant in your Game of Dares until the end, Lady Stanton,” Joseph said loud enough so she and Duncan, who strolled back the way they had come, could hear him. “That said, I *will* be seeking you out later.”

When Isabella tensed and slowed, Duncan leaned a tad closer and said what she needed to hear. “If you really want the bloke, the worst thing you can do is race into his arms.”

“I never said I *really* wanted him,” she muttered but took his advice and kept walking away, forever grateful such a dear friend was on her arm right now. “Besides, I cannot say I am all that fond of how he just acted. That was not him at all.”

“Ah.” Duncan thought about that. “Are you quite sure?” The corner of his mouth shot up. “Because I would say his actions were appropriate for a dear friend plus, wonderfully enough, someone who is completely and utterly in love with you.” He shrugged a shoulder. “To the point of nearly doing something foolish back there when he thought we had kissed, yet alas,” he sighed and kept grinning, “you were beyond being even mildly available to me.”

“Yet I *was*,” she argued.

“No.”

“At least initially.”

He looked at her ruefully. “Again, no, and to that end, I should not have even attempted it when Ernest warned me I was but a prop in a much bigger game.”

“But you were not,” she denied.

“Yet I was.”

As it happened, when Duncan went to close his lips over hers to see through her third dare, she had allowed a kiss on the cheek instead. More pointedly, she kept him from kissing her lips before it was too late. Stopped him because she knew it was wrong to let her foolish game continue.

Stopped him because she did not want to hurt another friend.

Isabella wanted to deny she had used Duncan to her advantage, but suddenly overwhelmed by emotion, she could not utter another lie. Not to someone she cared so very much about. So she blinked back tears, bit her lower lip, and nodded, then shook her head, unsure what she was trying to say.

“None of that, my lass.” Duncan snagged a glass of claret off a passing tray and glanced over his shoulder. “The Irish beast stalks us, so let us take another route and see if we can turn him around some.”

He steered them into a busy room, then into a side hall she had been unaware of, but not before he raised his glass and toasted everyone, wishing them a brilliant evening. It was just enough to rally them and cause a distraction before she and Duncan slipped away.

They were not far down their private hall before Duncan slowed, looked at her seriously, and shook his head. “Why are you doing this to yourself, Isabella?”

“Doing what?” She kept blinking back tears. “Being horrible to my dearest friends? Such an awful person to those who care about me most?”

Clearly, she did not need to elaborate for him to understand.

“You did what you needed to do.” Not nearly as upset as her, Duncan offered a comforting smile. “And while Ernest might have found himself quite caught up, rest assured, he understood every bit as much as me that there was little hope here.”

“Then why play?” she exclaimed, confused. “Why allow me to—”

“Because we adore you, darling,” he said before she finished. “Since the moment we met you until this very moment.”

“So, you feel the same way as Ernest?” she said tentatively, feeling awful.

“Always,” he assured before he realized what she meant and shook his head with a genuine downturn of his lips. “Mayhap not quite so intensely as Ernest, if I were to be honest.” His brow furrowed, and he looked most apologetic. “Me? I had rather hoped we would enjoy a spectacular affair as I have little intention of remarrying.”

“Truly?” The tension in her shoulders eased. “That was all you ever wanted from me?”

“That—” he admitted, eyeing her fondly— “and if I could, your unfailing friendship until we breathe our last breath, lass.”

Quite liking the sound of that, she bit back emotion and nodded. “Of course, darling. I would like that more than you

know.” She embraced him and murmured in his ear, “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“Are you quite done then?” came a voice close enough to startle them both.

Joseph leaned sideways against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. Stood there not like a proper lord but like a man who cared little for decorum. His Irish lilt was thicker than ever when he addressed Duncan. “Did you not think I knew all the less-traveled halls here? The laird of this castle is a longtime friend, Scotsman.”

“Aye, I *am* a Scotsman.” Duncan gave her an affectionate look and winked before he backed away slowly, then gestured at his surroundings when he looked at Joseph again. “In a *Scottish* castle, no less.” He bowed just enough to be respectable. “And on my way now, *Your Grace*, in hopes you Irish can, I pray—” he glanced from Isabella to Joseph— “be as grateful for a true treasure as we Scots are.”

“Good God, Joseph,” she exclaimed the moment Duncan was gone. Incredulous, she frowned at him. “I cannot say I much like this side of you.”

“Which side?” His expression did not waver, nor did his steady gaze leave her. “Because I am fairly certain I continue to do what I told you I would when you decided to make a game out of genuine affection.” He perked a brow at her. “Because one way or another, with both of your contestants, it turned out to be just that, did it not, Isabella? Turned out to be less fun and games but a tad more heartfelt?”

“On the contrary.” Not about to run, she leaned against the wall and kept her gaze on his face too. “As it happens, I chose my contestants wisely indeed.”

“And how is that?” he wondered. “What did you tell them in the end?”

She held her ground when he shifted a bit closer. “I told them I was grateful for them.”

She tried to ignore how his presence made her heart speed up and her throat turn dry. How every little part of her seemed aware of him. While tempted to be obtuse, Joseph knew full well how she felt about him. Knew it better than she suspected she did herself based on the conflicted yet all-consuming way he looked at her. Even so. As much as she might want to fall into his arms, how he had behaved was unacceptable. “You have been a bully tonight, Joseph, and that is not for me.”

He edged closer still, and his eyebrows shot up. “A bully?”

“Indeed.” She cocked her head, thinking about it. “Not to mention, a bit of a stalker.”

“Now, *that* I will agree to within reason,” he said readily enough. “Though I rather meant my presence to be less threatening as the word stalker by definition means obsessed and relentless.”

“Yet I feel threatened by you,” she whispered when she could not quite find her voice. Her heart fluttered into her throat, and her emotions were at his mercy. “You are, by far, my closest friend and worst enemy all at once.”

“I feel the same.” Joseph’s voice sounded just as ragged as hers. Just as choppy. “What did you feel when you kissed them, Isabella?” He edged closer still. “What did you feel when you kissed Ernest and Duncan?”

How much had he seen? What did he really know?

“What does it matter?” she managed, once again trying to make sense of what was happening between them. “What I felt

when other men kissed me should be irrelevant to you. Especially considering you not only made it clear where you stood last night but bowed out of my contest.” She debated whether to go on but could not seem to stop herself. “And given your circumstances, that was wise of you.”

Hesitating a moment because she finally realized the enormity of what she had wanted from him, *needed* from him, she cleared her throat and stopped dancing around.

“More than that, I was wrong to have ever invited you.” She pressed a hand to her heart and kept forcing the words out. “It was wrong of me to put you in a position that made you feel like you needed to protect my good name in the first place.”

Joseph considered her momentarily, making her think he might agree and walk away but did the opposite when he closed the distance and leaned against the wall beside her. He gazed into her eyes for a stretched moment before he finally nodded. “You are right, Isabella. You put me in a difficult position, and I’m unhappy about it.”

“And here I thought you might be less blunt, all things considered.”

“Why when we are frank with each other always?”

“Are we?”

“I always thought so.”

“Yet you hid a song you had written for me. One so incredibly beautiful and meaningful.” She searched his eyes and wished she was wrapped up in his arms. “Why?”

“You know why.”

“Do I?”

“You do.” His pained gaze never left her face. “You have known since the moment we first looked at one another and knew whatever this was between us could never be. That I would have to leave.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Yet here I am,” he echoed softly, his voice still not quite right. “When I should not be.”

“And what am I to make of that?” she said just as softly. “What am I to make of you being here when you are promised to another? Destined to marry some woman you will not even tell me about?”

“I cannot say,” he murmured. “All I know is I can not stay away from you.”

She went perfectly still when he moved closer and cupped her cheek.

“I tried.” His voice thickened with desire. “But, as you can clearly see, you make it impossible, love.”

While she had certainly thought kissing him for the first time would be notable, she had not expected what she felt when he finally closed his lips over hers. Never imagined she could feel so much from such a simple act. Or at least she had thought it simple until now. While soft at first, it intensified when he pulled her against him, their tongues tangled, and she lost herself.

She should pull away and end this now because he could never be hers, but nothing was more impossible. Rather, she twisted her hand in his shirt and pulled him closer. Held onto him for dear life when a sharp ache blossomed between her thighs. Something he seemed to understand because he

gripped her backside and squeezed her against the hard ridge straining against his breeches.

Searing heat ignited beneath her skin, and she moaned with approval when he hoisted her up against the wall enough to compensate for their height differences, settled more firmly between her thighs, and moved just enough to intensify her pleasure. Enough to fan the flames of an ache that grew sharper by the moment. She bit her lower lip as he kissed his way down the side of her neck, still moving his arousal against the juncture between her thighs to the point of distraction.

Her eyes drifted shut at the deliciously sinful sensations he wrung from her. At the ever-growing wave swelling inside her. Shockingly enough, a wave that crested right there in the hallway before she knew what hit her. She gasped, arched against him, then clamped down hard on her lower lip and shuddered when untouchable pleasure washed over her. Fortunately, he held her up because she was certain she would have melted into a puddle of useless limbs at his feet otherwise.

Something that was, alarmingly enough, put to the test moments later when they realized their little hallway was not so private after all, and she ended up just where she feared she might.

CHAPTER
TEN

Joseph knew the moment he closed his lips over Isabella's that he was past the point of no return. He had suspected kissing her would be profound, and he was right. Terribly, wonderfully, unforgettably right. So right, he could not imagine never feeling this again. Never experiencing how perfect and arousing kissing her could be.

Then there was how intensely she had reacted to his kisses.

He'd never experienced such an open, responsive woman and wanted more.

Far more.

It had taken everything in him not to free himself right then and there and plunge into her welcoming heat. At long last experience what he had craved endlessly for nearly a year. Yet alas, he had no choice but to settle for relishing her trembling release against him. The look on her lovely features as she let go. Outside of when he'd first laid eyes on her, it was the most unforgettable moment of his life.

A moment nearly witnessed by others.

Aware that keeping afoot might be difficult for Isabella, he scooped her up, sat her on the floor against the wall, crouched, and fanned her face with his hand.

When she realized someone was coming and her eyes rounded, he winked. “Just play along, darling.”

“Oh, *my*,” an elderly, finely dressed woman on the arm of a rosy-cheeked senior fellow exclaimed when they came upon them. She looked at Isabella with concern. “Are you quite all right, my dear?”

“She is, thank you.” Joseph fanned away while willing his damnable erection away. “I fear she grew a tad overheated and swooned, but her color is already much improved.”

“Goodness.” The woman handed him her fan. “Here, Your Grace. Use this. I insist.” She looked at the man on her arm. “Love, do go fetch some cold water for her straight away.”

He cocked his head, straining to hear. “What was that, dearest?”

“Water,” she said a tad louder and nudged him along gently. “Go retrieve water, my love.”

“Indeed, yes, of course,” he exclaimed, moving quite fast, considering his age.

“Again, many thanks.” Joseph used the woman’s fan and bit back a smile as he eyed Isabella with concern and teased her discreetly. “How are you feeling, my lady? Has the sensation passed yet?”

“I think so,” Isabella managed a tad breathlessly, playing along when she smiled softly at him. “Goodness knows I rarely get overheated like that. Thank you dearly, Your Grace, for taking such good care of me.”

“Indeed, my lady.” She looked so beautiful, with her soft skin dewy and flushed, that it took everything not to pull her back into his arms. “It was, *is*, very much my pleasure.”

As tended to happen with them, their gazes lingered on one another, making everything around him fade away until there was only her. Only ever her. Yet again, he wondered how he would ever leave her. How he would say goodbye in the end.

“Here we go,” the older man said, pulling Joseph away from the moment when he returned with a cup of water.

“How does she fare?” the man said, handing the water to Joseph. “Will she be all right?”

“Oh, I think she will be,” the older woman said softly. Having clearly spied the intimate way Joseph and Isabella gazed at one another, a knowing twinkle lit her eyes. “Do keep the fan, darlings. I have plenty of them.” She linked arms with her man and urged him to keep strolling with her. “Come, dear husband, let the young ones recover.”

“Is she recovered, then?” they heard him ask as the two drifted down the hall. “Are you quite sure, darling? Perhaps we should—”

“*Quite* recovered,” the woman assured, clearly amused and no fool. “Until the next time, I imagine.”

“Time for what, my love?” he asked. “I did not quite catch that.”

“Time for you and me to retire,” the woman replied. “And perhaps share a room tonight?”

It seems he did catch that because he exclaimed, “Oh, my, yes, quite right,” before they vanished from earshot.

Isabella put a hand over her mouth to muffle her chuckle and looked at him merrily. He, in turn, could not help chuckling, too, then outright laughing when she did.

“Well, as concerned as I might have been, I cannot say you are a boring man, Joseph,” she finally said, wiping happy tears away as he helped her up. “Rather, I see you are very much the opposite when given half the chance.”

“I’m glad you think so.” He steadied her and eyed her with concern. “Really, though, how do you feel, Isabella?”

“That is open to debate,” she said softly, eyeing him with as much confusion, pain, and desire as he felt. “Can I stand on my own two feet now? Yes. Do I feel certain where I stand in general? Not at all.”

In my heart and with me always. Never anywhere else.

But, of course, he voiced none of that.

“Nor do I.” Having no answer for her other than things he did not want to say, he offered his elbow when they heard others coming. “Though I hope, at the very least, I have won this contest of yours. That I—”

“You won the contest long before it started, Joseph.” She swallowed hard and linked her arm with his. “However, I fear the contest still lost in a way I cannot yet put words to.” Her sad gaze flickered to his face. “Then, all talk of contests aside, there is the matter of you leaving tomorrow.”

He wanted to tell her neither the contest nor he was lost, but the hallway ended too soon, and once again, people wished to speak with him. While Isabella stayed with him for a time, she eventually drifted off to be with her friends. Even though they crossed paths here and there over the remainder of the evening, it was not nearly enough.

Nothing was enough but having her by his side and in his arms always.

“Everything is ready to go, and everyone knows we are set to leave first thing in the morn,” Shamus said later that night as he helped him out of his evening clothes. Once again, the corners of his mouth tugged down. “Assuming, of course, we are still leaving.”

He should. It was long past time. Yet he could not seem to say the blasted words. Instead, he said the same thing he had been saying all along. “We should send word ahead. Let them know I will be there...eventually.”

When he trailed off, Shamus snorted. “*Eventually* has passed, laddie. At this point, the message to your betrothed and her kin could very well fall on deaf ears, and you know it.”

“Nevertheless,” he said, never so torn. “I need to act rather than avoid. Be the duke my father intended me to be.”

“And you are.” Shamus clasped his shoulders and nodded with pride. “You might not have returned to Ireland when scheduled, but you *have* put your time to good use, Joseph. You have worked tirelessly to make more connections for your kin, not just in Scotland, England, and Wales but in France and several other countries. You have had a wildly productive time away from home, and I, for one, am grateful for your new alliances.”

“All while avoiding the most important alliance,” he murmured, unable to shed his guilt. A constant weight he had carried since meeting Isabella. One he’d tried to cast aside time and time again and go home but could not seem to do it.

Not yet.

Rather, the next morning, like every morn since she had come into his life, he woke knowing he could not leave her

that day. Maybe the next. Time would tell. Until then, he had won her contest, so she owed him this one.

Owed him a day that was all his.

She was all his.

With that in mind, he made sure Shamus saw a note delivered to her bedroom, then waited patiently in front of the great hall fire for her to come downstairs. As always, she was stunning in a lovely fur-trimmed mauve pelisse dress and matching bonnet suited for the outdoors at this time of year.

“Wishing you a very good morn, Lady Stanton.” He bowed at the waist, smiled, and held out his elbow when she reached the bottom of the stairs. “Might you join me for breakfast?”

He did not miss the slight redness at the corners of her eyes from a night he suspected was as sleepless as his nor her brief hesitation before she curtsied and slipped her arm into his. “Of course, Your Grace.”

Was it him, or had she sounded lackluster about that?

“How are you this morning, Isabella?” he said softly. “I saw you so rarely last night after our—”

“I am well,” she assured. “Although I will admit to wishing I had seen more of you. That you might have taken a few brief moments here and there so that we...”

“What?” he urged when she trailed off.

“That is the thing,” she murmured on a sigh. “I do not know what those moments would have been, only that I wanted more of them.” Her gaze drifted to him. “More of you.”

“As did I you.” More than she could possibly imagine.

“Yet I wanted more because I was under the impression you were leaving today,” she reminded. “Which, as I am sure you understand, made every moment apart all that much more excruciating.”

“I understand.” As he had felt the same.

“Do you?” Isabella slowed and looked at him. “Really, Joseph?”

“More than you might imagine.” So much more.

“Yet, still,” she said softly, shaking her head. “You did not tell me with any certainty that you were staying after all.”

“Even so—” he grew more and more uneasy by the look on her face— “I won this day, did I not?”

“You did.” Isabella stopped altogether and removed her arm from his. “But not by any means in the fashion it should have been yours, and that is just as much my fault as yours.” She blinked back tears. “I’m afraid due to a contest that was ill-planned indeed and contestants who never got to fully participate, I declare my Game of Dares forfeit, including its grand prize.” She curtsied. “That said, I wish you a good day and a happy Michaelmas, Your Grace.”

He went to stop her, but friends of hers had just entered the great hall and called her over. Surely, Isabella did not mean what he thought because it very much felt like she had ended things entirely between them. Not just possible love but a friendship that meant everything to him. The best he’d ever had.

Yet it seemed, as the day wore on, that was exactly what Isabella meant because she barely glanced his way nor acknowledged him when they were in the same circles, and nothing felt worse. In fact, nothing felt lonelier, even though

he was surrounded by friends and acquaintances. Without her by his side, it all seemed pointless. Not part of the life he was supposed to lead but meaningless.

“Oh, how very *lovely*,” Maude exclaimed that evening during what had seemed a truly endless day.

Isabella had just come downstairs in a light pink satin dress that, yet again, revealed her tempting cleavage to perfection. A gold-laced back skirt accentuated the gown, as did the gold satin ribbon wrapped around her slender waist. Her silky hair was swept back, exposing her delicate neck, and her beauty was, as always, impossible to look away from.

“Lovely indeed,” he agreed, wishing he were escorting Isabella down. That she was his for everyone to admire but never have. His to pleasure until she flowered before him like she had last night every night. And morning. Then several times in the afternoon if he had his way. As much as they could manage as they grew old together.

Yet, he would not have his way nor grow old with her, would he? She had made that more and more clear as the day wore on, then more so as the night progressed. While it was, without a doubt, distressing, he had not expected it to feel so tragic. As though he had lost everything that mattered most in one fell swoop.

“And despite all that, here you are,” Shamus said, sighing as he helped Joseph remove his waistcoat later that evening. Naturally, he had given his man a recap of the evening’s events, which had been terribly boring without Isabella.

“Here you are without Isabella for no other reason,” his valet continued, “than a sense of loyalty to a father who has not only passed on but never had much loyalty to you other than for the family ties you could make on his behalf.”

“I am here because I saw Isabella return to her room rather early and worried about her,” he corrected. “Here because—”

“You worried about the lassie you love,” Shamus said, cutting him off as he removed Joseph’s cravat. Yet all the while, his man’s steady gaze remained on Joseph’s face. An unrelenting gaze that made clear just how much his valet cared about him, yet a hard, pointed, exasperated gaze all the same. “A lassie, I do not doubt, loves you every bit as much. One, I imagine, who hurts just as deeply when you are apart.”

“What if she does not, though?” he said before he could stop himself, but he meant it. “What if she will not remain in my life when—”

“When *what?*” Shamus frowned. “You marry a girl out of obligation when you could marry a woman out of love?” He cupped Joseph’s cheeks and looked at him with his heart in his eyes. “*Think* about that, laddie. Really, for the love of God, give that a good hard look already. See what your life will be if you go through with this prearranged marriage and what it could be like if you do not.”

“Do you have any idea how often I have done that for the better part of a year?” he said hoarsely.

“Indeed, my boy.” Shamus pulled back and nodded. “*Indeed.*” He dared Joseph. “Now, what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing, because what can I do?” he nearly said but found it impossible. For that matter, standing there with nothing but Isabella firmly entrenched not just in his mind but his heart, he suddenly felt the fool. Suddenly understood with blinding clarity, this feeling would never fade as the years passed.

She would never fade.

More than that, he saw something else with absolute clarity.

Something he had to act on because, as Shamus had said, it was time for him to be his own man. Time that he, at last, set aside the stipulations of a deceased father and stopped running his estate the way his da would have wanted but the way he had always envisioned doing things.

Better yet, he should do so alongside a wife he truly loved.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Desperate to flee the longest day of her life, Isabella finally made her way upstairs without anyone stopping her. When Joseph had seemed to ignore her last night after what they had shared in the hallway, her spirits had sunken lower than ever.

How could he repeatedly bring her up so high only to let her down once more?

Yes, she had known better when she'd orchestrated her Game of Dares, but it made no difference in the end. She had spent most of last night restless and unable to sleep, not eager for the day with him on her arm but dreading it instead. The idea of only growing closer to him, then watching him walk away was too much to bear.

So she had ended whatever this was between them and spent the day somewhat outside of herself even as she smiled and chatted with the others. Outside of herself yet still acutely aware of Joseph's presence when they were near one another. When they were not, she was helpless to do anything but wonder where he was. Worse yet, she was defenseless against craving his close proximity once more.

Eventually, it became too unbearable, and she retired early.

Eager to crawl under her blankets and weep yet again, she went to ring Penelope when a light rap came at her door. Expecting it to be Maude or Prudence checking on her, she opened the door to discover Joseph on the other side. His hair looked like he had run his hand through it one too many times, and he wore nothing but tan breeches and a white tunic buttoned down enough to reveal a light smattering of chest hair.

“I was wrong, Isabella,” he said, his voice strained. He shook his head. “I have been wrong about *everything*.”

When she shook her head as well and started to close the door, he put his hand against it. “Please let me explain because I owe you that much. I have owed it to you since the moment we first met.”

“You do not owe me anything.” She ignored a surge of hope and frowned at his hand. “We are well past that, so please —”

“We are not well past anything, and you know it.” His voice sounded guttural now. “Rather, I would say we are more deeply immersed in this, *us*, than ever before, which says something as I have utterly adored you since the moment I laid eyes on you, Isabella. Loved you with a ferociousness that has not waned in the least.”

Loved her? Really? She dared not hope because what good would it do?

While she should tell him to be on his way before someone overheard and ruined her good name, her foolish heart was at the helm, and she told him to come in and shut the door instead. Then she went to the small bureau against the wall at the end of her bed as if busy doing something so he would not see the pain on her face.

“What are you hoping for?” she said absently, determined not to seem wrapped up in his every word. “Because I will not be your mistress the rare times we see each other in life, Joseph.”

“Nor would I expect that.”

“Then what would you expect?” She rallied her courage and glanced over her shoulder at him rather daringly. “What could I *ever* offer you that you could not find in the arms of your wife?”

“Precisely that, darling,” he said softly, edging closer like he had the night before. “Because no one could offer me what my future wife could now that I know, without a doubt, who she is.”

Her heart pounded at the look in his eyes. At his implication. Was he saying what she thought he was? Dare she hope? She turned and braced her hands against the bureau as he moved closer still. “I do not understand.”

“No, because I have not been clear when I should have been, and I’m sorry for that.” He seemed to gather himself. “Sight unseen to this day, I was promised to a five-year-old girl when I was seventeen. We were to marry when she came of age, which is today, I’m afraid. Moreover, I was to have returned to Ireland months ago to ensure I would stay true to my father’s agreement.”

“Yet you are not there,” she said softly, trying to grasp what that meant. “Which means what exactly?”

“I cannot say.” Joseph moved closer still. “All I know is the arrangement never made me comfortable...then I met you...” He seemed to struggle for the right words. “When that happened, I ran, for lack of a better way to put it. Ran from

you. From returning to Ireland and my obligations. From marrying a perfect stranger who is still but a child.” He closed the short distance left between them and cupped her cheek. “But in the end, I had no choice but to run right back to you, Isabella.”

“Yet I cannot be your mistress,” she managed weakly, shaking her head. “I will not—”

“Nor would I ask it of you.” Joseph dropped to a knee, clasped her hand, and looked at her so tenderly her breath caught. “Please, for all that is holy, marry me, Isabella, because I love you beyond reason. Love you so much it hurts. So much I cannot imagine a life without you. You are the reason I traveled and put off returning home.” He shook his head. “The reason I will never marry another, no matter what.”

“Yet there *is* a what,” she reminded, not bothering to wipe away the tear trickling down her cheek. “A young woman just coming out who expects to be married to a duke.”

“Or, because we Irish tend to have a backup plan,” he countered, “a young woman who, when I was in breach of a contract I never wanted anything to do with, will marry a man much closer to her age and nearly as well titled.”

“And what of *your* plan?” she wondered breathlessly. “I am but the widow of an English viscount. What value will that bring you?”

“More value than you can possibly imagine.” Joseph pressed his warm lips to the back of her hand, then stood and tenderly wiped away her tear. “It brings me *you*. Better still, a lifetime of love with my dearest friend.” He cupped her cheek again. “Say yes, Isabella. Tell me you will become my wife and make me—”

“Yes,” she managed hoarsely, not needing to hear another word because she loved him just as dearly. “So very much, yes, Joseph. So very much that—”

He stole her words before she had a chance to say them when he cupped her other cheek and closed his lips over hers. Kissed her not just passionately but hungrily, reigniting the rabid desire that had sprung to life between them last night. Desperate to touch him, feel him, she pulled at his shirt only for him to yank it over his head and whip it aside without hardly losing contact with her mouth.

“You cannot imagine what you do to me,” he said gruffly between kisses as he swiped aside the few scant items on the bureau behind her, hiked up her skirts, hoisted her onto the cool surface, and came between her thighs. “How aroused you have made me since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

She tried to tell him she felt the same but only managed a gasped, “Yes,” when he yanked down the top of her dress and peppered kisses along her vulnerable cleavage while working at the ties on her stays. Meanwhile, that same sharp ache between her thighs from last night made her beyond eager to feel his rigid, straining arousal, so she tugged at the strings on his breeches.

“I cannot wait,” she gasped, fumbling with the strings as this was certainly something she and her late husband had never done. Yet her need for Joseph had become unbearable. “I cannot—”

“Nor I.” He took matters out of her hands when he cupped the side of her neck, then, having freed himself, rubbed his hot, hard length against her sensitive, swollen flesh. Groaning in pleasure, she wrapped her legs around him when he cupped her bare backside and finally eased his way inside her.

Joseph was considerably larger than her late husband as he stretched and filled her, so he gave her time to adjust to his girth as he ignited all sorts of new sensations. Such incredible pleasure, she nearly wept when he fully seated himself, and they started moving together.

He wrapped one arm around her waist and braced his free hand against the wall as easy movements soon became desperate, frantic thrusts. In. Out. Over and over as they screamed toward a near-crippling pinnacle that, when it hit, made her cry out in ecstasy. As if in response to her letting go, he locked up against her, released a long, low, ragged groan of pleasure, and pulsed deep inside her.

“Good God,” he eventually managed as their hearts slammed against each other, and they struggled to catch their breath.

He didn't say anything after that but kissed her again so passionately it was not long before he swelled inside her again. This time, rather than ravishing her where they were, he carried her to bed and undressed her slowly, clearly cherishing every bit of flesh he uncovered.

Sweat-slicked limbs slid along each other as he stroked and kissed nearly every inch of her, pulling her pebbled nipples into his hot talented mouth until she nearly came undone. Eventually, their passion grew too great, and she took him inside her again. Her thighs quivered as he thrust long, slow, and deep this time, drawing her to the edge, only to slow even more and keep her hovering.

Whimpering in need.

Painfully desperate for him.

“Joseph,” she gasped against his lips, digging her heels into his backside. “*Please...*”

Right there with her, he thrust once, twice, then pressed deep, taking them over the edge together with mingled moans. Took them to a place that felt so good they stayed that way, trembling against each other before he eventually kissed her again, and they continued to make love all night.

In fact, they made love so passionately and so often they were aware of little else until later the next afternoon when they woke to covered food left on a nearby table and a small silver tray at their bedside on which several letters rested.

“You are popular, wife,” Joseph murmured, eyeing the stack warily between kisses.

“I am.” She smiled against his lips. “But fortunately, in case you misunderstood, all from good friends rather than casual lovers.”

“Indeed.” When he glanced at the letters again, Joseph went to say more but hesitated and frowned. “The seal on that top one looks familiar.” He looked from her to it. “May I?”

“Of course.” She lay on her side and braced up on her elbow as he eyed it and frowned. “What is it, love?”

“This is the seal of the family I was to marry into,” he said softly, opening it. His brows rose as he read it. “It seems, upon my extended absence, my intended will instead be betrothed to another.”

She smiled when he smiled. “That is good, yes?”

“Very good.” He nodded and refolded the letter. “As I mentioned last night, she will marry a well-titled man two years her senior rather than twelve.”

“While I cannot say that might be better for her—” she trailed her fingers languidly up his arm— “I am glad it gives you a sense of closure and makes you mine all that much more.” Her gaze fell to the envelope in which the letter had been sealed. “But how curious the date it was sent?”

As it turned out, the letter had arrived at MacLauchlin Castle months ago, then tucked away by a certain Irish valet until the time was right for his duke to receive it.

“Not to be meddlesome, of course,” Shamus claimed years later with a twinkle in his eyes as he told their children about how their parents had ended up together. “But to simply nudge fate along.”

And so, it surely had because Joseph and Isabella went on to enjoy a long, loving life together. He gave her a wee dog named Shelby soon after their wedding, then two girls and two boys over the next few years. There was never a dull moment or a regret during their years together. How could there be when Joseph had decided to love her rather than flee?

Better still when he very much became her daring duke when it mattered most.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author of over seventy books, Sky Purington married her hero, has an amazing son who inspires her daily, one ultra-lovable husky shepherd mix, and two Siberian huskies full of wanderlust. Her stories run scorching hot, teeming with protective alpha heroes and strong-minded heroines. Passionate for variety, Sky's vivid imagination spans several romance genres, including historical, time travel, paranormal, and fantasy.

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HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DUKE

AMY QUINTON

He tries to be her perfect Duke. Somehow, everything just keeps getting worse.

Lady Arabella Finch—I didn't expect to see my best friend's brother the morning I marched over to Westbury house to inform my friend of the impending marriage proposal coming my way. Last I heard, the Duke of Westbury had been off enjoying his Grand Tour, so imagine my surprise when I walked into my friend's library and was greeted with surprisingly broad shoulders, an unexpectedly masculine voice, and an all too familiar greeting of, "Hello, Brat."

Oh. I suppose someone I really hadn't expected to see was back after all and in desperate need of training.

CHAPTER
ONE

Lady Arabella Finch

I, Lady Arabella Finch, marched up the front steps to Westbury House feeling determined and confident. I had good news to share with my best friend Margie. I *did*.

The Baron...Francis...would be a good husband. Kind. Devoted. Sweet.

I winced when I realized I'd essentially described my mother's favorite Cocker Spaniel.

The door to Westbury house opened before I could knock, and I pasted on a bright smile as the Westbury's longtime butler, Brooks, stepped aside saying, "Good Morning, Lady Arabella. Lady Marjorie is in the Library."

Of course, she was. Lady Marjorie was always in the library. Usually, we both were.

"Thank you, Brooks," I said, adding, "I can find my way," as I handed over my bonnet, gloves, and cloak, chuckling openly at the sight of my maid's retreating back as she dashed off with all due haste towards the kitchens, eager to catch up with her sister who worked at Westbury House.

As for the library, it was at the rear of the house, on the ground floor, two stories in height, and massive. Perhaps, not

as large as Chetham's Library, a public library in Manchester, but still, there were rows and rows of bookshelves, with thousands of books tucked away behind narrow gated doors, and multiple seating areas where one could sit comfortably, curled up in a chair, or upright at a table to read or research until one's heart was content or one's mind suitably inspired. Over the years, Marjorie and I had spent many hours within these walls, dreaming of adventure. And love.

Despite its size, it was comfortable to my mind, perhaps *because* of the many pleasant hours I'd spent here. Not to mention the cozy seating areas scattered about the place.

I lifted my chin and ensuring my brightest, most confident smile was firmly in place, I opened the double doors wide...

Only to be greeted by the last person on earth I expected to see despite it being his house.

Marjorie's brother. The Duke of Westbury.

Or at least someone who looked remarkably like the young, gangly man I once knew, before the onset of remarkably broad shoulders, another six inches of added height, and a hard, stubbled jaw. Had his shoulders always been so broad?

"Hello, Brat."

"Ah. Yes. It *is* you, Natty." *Blast*. It was definitely him, albeit with a roughened voice a good half-stave deeper in pitch at least. I shoved aside such an unhelpful observation and lifted my chin, which had dipped rather unexpectedly. "I see you haven't changed since last I saw you. How long has it been? A few months?" I patted his arm as if in commiseration as I passed, adding, "I thought young men took at least a year for their Grand Tours, I do apologize for your misfortune."

I could barely control my smug grin, but I felt *extremely* pleased by the telltale flex of muscle as Hudson Nathaniel Dawson, the 8th Duke of Westbury, clenched his jaw. The man had a reputation as a known rake, who never took anything seriously, but I'd always had a knack for bringing out the irritated, less jovial side of him, and I did so with absolute precision. And, perhaps, more than a little delight.

I also knew he'd been away on his Grand Tour for five years and a few months, give or take.

Not that I was counting or anything.

“Bella!”

I smiled, this time for real, and hugged my best friend Lady Marjorie Dawson, who wore a smile of wry amusement. I suppose *someone* might look upon my interaction with Natty with a touch of nostalgia. Thankfully, that person wasn't me.

Margie kissed my cheek and said, “I see you still excel at aggravating my most amiable brother.” She winked as we pulled apart, but our hands remained clasped as together, we settled on a nearby settee. “So, tell me. Did your baron propose?”

I tried to ignore the sensation of Natty listening impatiently for my answer. But the back of my neck felt like someone held a lit taper far too close to it for comfort, and thus, I found him rather difficult to ignore. “N-not yet, but he indicated he would call on my brother tomorrow morning.”

I tried not to blush over the unexpected catch in my voice.

As far as Natty was concerned, I couldn't actually see him—he'd remained behind when I'd wandered over to join my friend, but I could *feel* his scrutiny as if the intensity of his regard was a physical touch.

Margie squeezed my hands, bringing my attention back into proper focus. “Oh, how exciting.”

I shook my head. “Er...yes.”

“Bella? It *is* exciting, right?”

I disliked how her answer sounded like a question, and judging by how my friend’s brow nearly kissed her hairline, Margie wasn’t fooled by anything.

I waved away her concern, never mind my own confusing behavior. “Of course.”

But then my nemesis approached while chuckling darkly. “Someone wants to marry *you*, Brat? Will wonders never cease...”

Margie scoffed. “Of course, someone does. What man would be so foolish as to *not* wish to marry her? Our Bella is brilliant, delightful, beautiful. What is *wrong* with you, Huds? You’re never usually so...churlish.”

I could have supplied an entire litany of adjectives to describe Margie’s brother, none of them a positive reflection of his character, his looks...or, well, anything. But bless Margie for always standing by my side, even against her own brother, a man I knew Margie adored.

I squared my shoulders and glanced up (and up) to face my far-too-beautiful-for-his-own-good nemesis. “I only know one man so foolish.”

I narrowed my eyes intentionally, making it absolutely clear I meant *him*.

The duke narrowed his own in response, and I felt giddy in anticipation of the battle ahead; the one promised by his vexed expression.

“Foolish, aye?” he asked.

I merely raised one brow in response.

Once again, he mirrored my expression.

In that moment, somehow—and I would only realize this much, much later—but *somehow*, both of us had forgotten the very real presence of his sister.

Thus began a silent battle of wills. And despite the lack of words, or action, really, the result was no less powerful than had an actual battle ensued. Goodness, I almost *wanted* that to happen.

The intensity on the air felt physical. More so by the second.

The air was heavy, hot, and unmoving—as if even the air was afraid to be the tipping point that launched our silent but no less lethal war into an actual physical confrontation.

I wasn't even sure I *breathed*.

I was quite sure he hadn't either. I stared at him so hard, I would have noticed.

So, yes, lethal. Explosive. Final.

In the end, all it took was one miniscule twitch. Almost insignificant. A move so subtle, I would have missed it if I hadn't been watching him so closely. It was nothing more than the slightest softening of one broad shoulder.

But it was enough to release me. To end this nonsense, whatever was actually happening. I didn't even know what to call all—I mentally gestured broadly—this.

So perhaps not so insignificant after all.

I stood. Touched my toes to his booted feet. And with words of the strongest conviction, jabbed my finger in his chest, saying, “I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last duke...nay, the last *person*...in London.”

Then, I whirled on my heel and left.

I didn’t run. I didn’t even slam the door; though I closed it with a satisfying, solid finality that held far more power behind it than a harsh slam ever could.

It stood for exactly how I felt about His Grace, Hudson Nathaniel Dawson, 8th Duke of Westbury.

CHAPTER
TWO

*Hudson Nathaniel Dawson,
8th Duke of Westbury*

She'd marched out. Head held high. Perfect in her absolute fury.

I deserved it.

"I am done," I whispered out loud to no one in particular.

But I'd forgotten my sister stood somewhere behind me... until she slid one slender hand onto my shoulder and squeezed gently. Out of habit, I reached up and softly grasped her hand in thanks.

But she didn't stop there. Of course, she didn't.

Her face held genuine concern as she stepped around to face me. I almost couldn't bear to see it.

"Huds? What happened just then?"

I snorted my answer and turned to walk away, one hand gripping the back of my neck. I could have answered her in so many ways. My first instinct had been to deny, deny, deny. But, in the end, all I had been able to manage was a snort, a half-hearted one at best.

My sister halted my retreat with a soft touch to my arm. “Where is my normally jovial brother?”

I wanted to respond with something trivial. Something designed to disarm and distract a person, even my sister, from anything even resembling something *real*.

But for once, I couldn't. I felt far too desperate.

Bella was getting married.

However, my first attempt at speaking the truth was pitiable. I only managed to growl out, “The buffoon is awful. He'll spend her dowry inside of a week.”

I spoke barely above a whisper, as if saying the words any louder would somehow give my sister the power to see inside my soul.

I dared a glance at her.

Ah.

It was too late. She saw everything. Perhaps, even more clearly than I.

Her eyes noticeably softened. She didn't mention Lady Arabella Finch or worse, Baron France Kavanagh by name. She didn't have to; she knew exactly to whom I referred.

Knew, too, without my saying it, that I was in love with Arabella Finch.

I was glad I didn't have to admit it for her to know. Somehow, even then, I understood it was important to tell the lady herself *first*.

Perhaps, that was the thought that had me spilling out the truth for once. It was a fleeting thought as I turned to face my sister full on. “I need your help.”

She rolled her eyes, wordlessly saying, ‘Naturally,’ and I could feel an answering scowl all but crawl across my face before settling in place. She wanted to be flippant now? When I was *finally* taking something seriously?

She just shook her head and laughed lightly under the force of my best glower.

“I’m relieved you find the situation amusing, sister dear.”

This just made her laugh harder and my glare darken.

“Relax Huds. I am on your side, brother.”

“I’m reasonably sure if it came down to it, you’d be on hers, actually.” I wasn’t bothered by this fact. We both knew it to be true.

My sister settled two hands on her hips, one brow raised. “Fortunately, in this instance, I feel confident I’m acting in both your best interests...”

And with one statement, she swept away all the irritation inflaming my fit of pique. Hesitantly, I asked, “I take it you have a plan and a set of rules for me to follow?”

With a playful smirk, she closed the distance between us and patted my cheek. “You really are cleverer than you act at times. In fact, you just might be brilliant enough to do pull this off.”

I crossed my arms stoically. “Thanks,” I grumbled.

And I knew in that moment, this was going to be painful.

But I also knew Arabella was worth every torturous second of misery.

After that, we spent two hours going over what my sister called “How to Train Your Duke,” which was ironic since I

was the Duke in this scenario, but then my sister approached everything from the female perspective, as she should.

In sum, I had to...

1. Be truthful and upfront, but not too much truth all at once in the beginning.
2. Demonstrate I can take things seriously when it matters.
3. Convince her no other woman exists for me; that I *see* her.
4. Grovel when I make a mistake. Not if, to be clear, but when. But not too much groveling.
5. Show her you pay attention and listen. But don't smother her with attention.
6. Prove I trust her and value her for more than her beauty or dowry.
7. Demonstrate the advantages of taming a rake. When the time is right.

That last one was my contribution to this endeavor and something I couldn't *wait* to get to. My sister added the "when the time is right" part of that one, however.

I desperately wanted to go to Arabella now, and my sister just shook her head at my masculine drivel.

As she was leaving, I suddenly recalled the Baron's forthcoming proposal. "What about—"

"The Baron's proposal? I have advised you...and I am definitely in your corner...but brother dear, you're going have to do everything else on your own. And since the Baron intends to speak to Arabella's brother in the morning, I suggest you figure out what that is sooner rather than later."

“But—”

She shook her head but waved her support as she left.

Sisters.

CHAPTER
THREE

Hudson

I stepped onto the front stoop of Lady Arabella's home at precisely eleven; the exact start of her calling hours.

But this wasn't my first appointment so far this morning, and I smiled at the fond memory of my previous task as Arabella's butler took my calling card and led me inside. I recalled how I confidently strode around to the back of a certain Baron's home. I wasn't there to visit the man himself, but to discuss important matters with the man in charge of the Baron's transportation. A chuckle escaped when I recalled the small fortune I paid to ensure the Baron would be slightly behind schedule in seeing to his own errands this morning. Oh, he would make it here eventually. I was a sporting man, after all. Besides, I would never take away Lady Arabella's choice. But I also wanted to make sure she knew she had another choice. Me.

My confidence threatened to slip away completely the moment Bella's butler announced my arrival and stepped aside to allow my entry.

My gaze found Bella's beautiful face immediately.

She wore the same strong look of contempt as yesterday.

But it rapidly transformed into one of shock.

Then, absolute hilarity.

Which reminded me how ridiculous I looked.

Sisters were the worst sometimes, especially mine. Particularly, when I knew well enough she was right. But this time? I don't know how she'd managed to convince me to wear...what I was wearing...but she had sworn it would advance my suit, and so against my better judgement, here I stood in Lady Arabella's morning room wearing a too tight cravat and looking like some sort of clown dressed in 18th century clothing.

“What in the *he*—in all of London—are you wearing?” Lady Arabella asked between bouts of unnecessary mirth.

I made a leg and bowed with an extra amount of flourish which only meant the excessive lace around my wrists slapped me in the face as I gestured with a roll of my hand.

With a straight face, I stood and asked, “Do you like it?”

She bit her lip. “My mother would have liked it, certainly.”

I briefly recalled the mischievous sparkle in my sister's eye as she'd offered her assurance regarding the outfit, and in that moment, I vowed she would pay for her little prank later.

I handed over the flowers I'd brought for Arabella, and even that was an *event*. For the lace at my wrists became entangled with the stems and leaves of my bouquet and refused to release the lilacs into Bella's care.

After a few tugs, Lady Arabella gave a mighty pull, and with an ominous *rip*, she fell back into the settee, bouquet in hand, a section of exceedingly familiar lace tangled about the stems.

For a moment, she simply looked at the dangling lace in her grasp, and before I knew it, one hand was holding her stomach as she laughed and laughed and laughed some more.

I felt my own lips twitch as I tried to retain my composure. I had serious matters to discuss with her. Besides, what was wrong with pink velvet and excessive lace anyway? I didn't think her baron would have been able to pull off such outdated fashion with so much aplomb. Maybe, I'd start a new trend in men's fashion.

I rocked back on my heels and glanced at her through my lashes, waiting patiently for her to regain her composure. Though she laughed *at* me; I didn't mind. She was stunning when she laughed and suddenly, I realized I missed the gift that was the sight of her filled with mirth.

Eventually, she said, "Oh, do sit down, duke, and tell me why you're here."

I settled carefully into the chair next to her settee. Or as carefully as too-tight pink silk knee breeches would allow a man to settle, which meant I kept my oversized frame carefully perched on the edge of the seat and prayed last century's seams would hold.

I cleared my throat. "I was wondering if you would like to go on a drive. With me."

This immediately sent her back into fits of laughter, and I waited patiently for her to finish, which didn't take long.

Ultimately, she straightened. "Oh, you're serious, aren't you?"

I dipped my head. "I am."

She wore a look of absolute confusion, and I hated it. I found her scowls preferable for some reason. At the same

time, I was surprised to realize I could read every thought that raced across her mind as she tried to make sense of my presence here...*is he serious? He is. Why would I ever? Maybe, I should find out? He is my best friend's brother. Perhaps, just to satisfy my curiosity? What could be the harm?*

Out loud, she asked, "Now?"

I met her eye and said with all seriousness. "Yes. Right now."

She dipped her head once. "I'll fetch my wrap."

We didn't say much of anything on our drive to Rotten Row, as if by unspoken accord we'd agreed to leave conversation of weighty matters for libraries. I held the reins loosely in my hands and concentrated on driving while ignoring the obvious stares from passerby regarding my questionable taste in fashion.

The sky was clear for once, the ever-present fog over London seemingly less present than usual. It was warm with a slight breeze; I couldn't have prayed for better weather for our drive.

Despite keeping my eyes trained ahead, my entire awareness was firmly affixed on the woman beside me. I wanted desperately to remove my eyes from the road, too, so I could bask in Arabella's beauty as she tilted her head back and captured a moment of sunshine on the apples of her cheeks.

Alas, I wanted to marry her, not kill her.

We turned onto rotten row, and I was relieved we weren't here during the fashionable hour because it meant we had

more privacy to discuss the aforementioned weightier matters. Despite the fact that Arabella had agreed to this drive, I knew she wouldn't allow us to complete our outing without understanding precisely what I was about.

She did not disappoint.

“Why are we here, Natty?”

I chuckled lowly. I always had appreciated her forthrightness. “Can't a man just want to enjoy a beautiful day with an equally beautiful lady by his side?”

I risked a glance and smiled at the look of disbelief I expected to see.

She turned more towards me and raised a brow in question.

“Alright, let me pull out of traffic.”

Not that there was any traffic to speak of at this hour, but I wanted to be able to give her my full attention for this conversation. Arabella seemed to accept my answer and turned to face forward again.

Eventually, I drove our carriage off the main path and into the shade of a towering tree, set the brake, then turned to face the woman beside me. “Would you like to take a stroll?”

She mirrored my posture, saying, “I would like you to answer my question.”

I nodded my head absently as I worked up the courage to speak plainly, surprised by my sudden drop in confidence. For a moment, I fiddled with the lace at my wrists as I gathered my thoughts, then faced her directly.

“I would like to court you.”

Arabella pulled back in horror. Had I been a less confident man, I might have taken insult. Instead, I waited patiently for her to process my words. Besides being unable to imagine such a thing, she clearly tried to make sense of what must have seemed completely out of the blue. Or more specifically, make sense of such words coming from *me*.

After a moment, she wonderingly said, “You’re serious.”

I sighed. “I am.”

“Natty...wait. Is this some sort of arrogant need to challenge me because I said I wouldn’t marry you?”

I shook my head. “No. Though I don’t blame you for thinking it.”

Her brow all but slid up into her hairline in patent disbelief.

I chuckled. “Inconceivable, I know.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Is this one of those situations where now that someone else wants me, you—”

“No!” I drew in a deep breath. “I apologize.” I knew better than to interrupt; I just couldn’t let her think it even for a moment. “My intentions are honorable.”

“But why, Natty? And why now? I don’t understand.”

How did I tell her that I’d loved her forever without scaring her away? My sister had warned me that if I tried to burden her with too much truth; things would not end well. Somehow, I had to find the balance between being open and upfront without being too open and too upfront or not open enough nor upfront enough. It was a balance women were always trying to navigate, but as a man, I was unused to such a paradoxical way of being. It was painful.

One thing I did know. I must speak the truth. Just not too much truth. So, I said, “For one, I think we would suit.”

She scoffed, and I knew I’d already erred. To anyone who’d known us, we’d never gotten along; thus, it would sound absurd to anyone with a modicum of intelligence to suggest two people who never seemed to get on would, in fact, suit. And in suggesting we’d suit, I inherently called into question her reasoning and aptitude. I only just refrained from dragging one hand down my face in frustration. I needed to think swiftly.

I knew not to start with something superficial, so I chose, “I admire your cleverness...”

She laughed, and I nearly groaned in frustration...with myself. *I am an idiot*. Someone, should just put me out of my misery. God, why was this so difficult?

I suppose I could take hope in the fact that she was laughing and not tearing me to pieces with her wicked wit. And God, she was so stunning when she laughed so freely.

So stunning, in fact, that it was the only logical explanation for why I made everything infinitely worse with my next course of action.

I kissed her. Or tried to.

Worse, I hadn’t asked. Just leaned in, drawn to her radiance and confidence and intelligence...and general remarkableness...and for a moment, I was sure, she wanted the same.

I would never know.

For before, my lips ever made contact with hers, the heavens saved me from making a colossal mistake by opening up and drenching us instantly.

So, that went...well.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Arabella

Today was the worse day ever. No, really. 15 July would go down in history as the worst date in the history of dates. October 1347, when the black plague started, had nothing on 15 July.

“For one, I think we would suit,” he’d said.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling so hard, my eyeballs threatened to fall back inside my head and settle somewhere in the back of my skull. Worse, I was beginning to develop a headache.

The headache fit nicely alongside the strange ache in my heart. I should probably see a doctor about the ache, but I hadn’t the time. I had a ball to attend this evening. A certain best friend to speak to.

Deranged men to sort out, apparently.

I suppose if I thought about it, the day wasn’t a complete wash. Seeing Natty in that ridiculous outfit had been worth every second of suffering his presence. By the time we’d returned to my house, his jacket had shrunk several sizes, leaving the bottom half of his lace encased forearms exposed to the elements. By then, the jacket was so tight around his

forearms, the shirt sleeves seemed to have exploded out of his jacket. I was sure blood no longer made it to the tips of his fingers, and I genuinely hoped, for his sake, that they got the jacket off before he lost a few digits.

I still couldn't believe he'd opted to forgo the appropriate outerwear that would have saved him from such a comedic disaster, but I could not find it in myself to be disappointed he had.

Because there was also the silk. *Ahem.*

I might not like the man, but there was no doubt this new version of the Duke of Westbury was one hell of a specimen of manhood. Wet silk did *not* lie. As I very much discovered.

Yes. Definitely worth the drenching. The suffering. Everything.

My brother met me in the foyer as I removed my soggy outerwear, a smile on his face. "So you had a nice outing, then?"

I slammed my hands on my hips in pretend outrage and faced him as my maid ran off to see to the drenched things I'd handed over. "Did the baron stop by, by chance?"

My brother nodded. "He did."

"And did he ask for my hand?"

"He did."

"And you said?"

My brother sighed. "I gave my blessing but told him the matter was entirely up to you."

I nodded. "Is he still here?"

"No."

I relaxed then. “Good,” I said and rubbed at the growing ache in my temples. I wasn’t ready to supply the baron with an answer just yet. Not because of the duke. Or not entirely because of him. I had already questioned the advisability of this match before Natty and I had...reacquainted ourselves.

I glanced at my brother. “Did the Baron indicate when he would return?”

“He did not. Likely tomorrow, though.”

It’s what I expected, to be honest. The Baron was first and foremost proper. He would not presume to call upon me outside my normal calling hours, so the earliest he could be sure to call upon me would be tomorrow. Even tonight, at the annual Stonebridge Ball, he would never attempt it. He would find it unseemly to pull me aside in a crowd just to ask such an important question.

I had a little more time.

Once upstairs, I jotted off a note summoning my best friend, and I was dressed in dry clothes, my hair drying by the fire, when Margie entered my bed chamber with a laugh. “Oh dear, you should have seen Hudson when he got home. He was a veritable *beast* in ripped clothing.”

I chuckled. “I can well imagine.” A little *too* much.

“I’m reasonably sure his valet is still attempting to cut him out of what remained of those hideous clothes.”

We laughed all the harder at the image of his valet doing just that, and so long as I didn’t allow myself to think of what such an action would ultimately reveal beneath all those

ridiculous clothes, I was fine. I fanned myself, pretending it was the fire overheating me and *not* the idea of his bared, broad chest.

Was his chest covered in hair beneath all that lace?

I cleared my throat and forced a scolding tone. “What were you thinking, Margie?”

My friend tried to look innocent, but the tell tale twitch of her lips gave her away. “I must say the clothes were inspired. I’m proud of that part.”

I knew she’d had a role in her brother’s arrival at my home. “I admit, the sight of all that lace *did* brighten my day.” And perhaps, just a lit bit, I admired a man confident enough to wear something like that in public. And perhaps, I had a smidgeon of esteem for a man who would unquestionably follow his sister’s advice on certain matters. I didn’t for a moment believe he was unintelligent... It was more that he willingly put his trust in a woman he very much should trust. Oh, I was sure he was angry as a bear. And I couldn’t blame him. But a man who could trust the women in his life when everything else was telling him not to, said a lot about his character, and it made me wonder, if only briefly, what else I might have gotten wrong about Hudson Nathaniel Dawson.

Not much I was positively sure.

Perhaps.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Hudson

The Stonebridge Ball was a well attended event with at least five hundred of London's elite packed a little too-tightly inside a massive ballroom. I watched my sister twirl across the dance floor in the arms of a suitor while I waited at the edge of the room, eager for the announcement that Lady Arabella Finch had arrived. Normally, I would be dancing; I loved to dance, and I was certainly not without company nor eligible partners. I was surrounded by all sorts of people vying for my attention, and I replied to their questions rather absently while inside I argued whether to first ask Lady Arabella to dance or take a turn about the room.

My unexpected return to London had certainly not gone unnoticed, which was expected, but I really didn't like it. I didn't like anything that might get between me and my pursuit of Arabella Finch.

When the announcement of her arrival came, I all but burned from a fervent rush of sexual desire at my first glimpse of her. There was no question Lady Arabella had grown into a stunning woman in the years I'd been away. She always had been beautiful, but now... she took my breath away.

I had no awareness of how I rudely pushed through the crowd of people who'd surrounded me for the last hour. I only know that I must have done so in order to find myself directly in front of her before she'd scarcely had time to cross the room's threshold.

My sister had warned me not to be *too* eager, but apparently, there were times I couldn't help myself where Arabella was concerned.

I bowed deeply before her. "Lady Arabella."

She smirked as she said, "Your Grace."

I turned to her brother and held out my hand. "Cressley."

"Westbury."

Her brother was more than ten years my senior, so we weren't friends, *per se*, but we definitely knew each other, obviously, and though I was well aware that having the higher rank, he should have addressed me first, I was a little too nervous to follow all the rules precisely. Besides, I found far too many of the rules of rank rather ridiculous to be honest. I wasn't any more or less of a man than her brother, and I'd essentially known him my entire life. My rank really should not factor into anything in this moment.

I turned back to Arabella, still unsure of the best course of action, which is unquestionably why I blurted out, "Would you like to take a turn about the dancing with me?"

To my credit, I managed to suppress my groan of self-directed frustration.

Lady Arabella laughed delicately. "I would love to take a turn about the dancing with you."

In our past—perhaps, even yesterday—this moment would have sparked an argument. Instead, she slid her arm through mine, and when we turned to walk the edge of the room, it *felt* as if it were *us* united in laughter against the rest of the world. Or at least, the rest of the room. I couldn't explain it, but it was a moment.

From that point on, conversation flowed easily between us. Almost as if by sharing a laugh, even one at my expense, I could keep myself from overthinking what I *should* be saying, and instead could let our friendly banter emerge naturally. It was...nice.

By the time we made it back to her brother, only thirty minutes had passed, and I desperately wanted to take another turn, but I knew better. Still, I wasn't about to leave without securing at least one dance. “May I have the honor of a dance, Lady Arabella?”

She dipped her head in acceptance and held out her dance card.

She watched as I signed my name by the first waltz. Then, I slowly but deliberately moved my hand down the list and held the pencil poised over a second one. I didn't automatically take it. Instead, I glanced up at her, one brow raised in question. We both knew that my taking two dances would be akin to a declaration not a soul in this room would miss. And I was torn between boldly claiming that second dance without giving her the opportunity to deny me and giving her the choice.

But I truly never wanted to actually take her choice from her, no matter how badly I wanted to just claim her as mine. So, I settled on making it very clear I was serious...while leaving her the choice.

I held my pencil poised and waited. I would wait as long as it took to get an answer one way or the other. And though I desperately wanted a yes, I prepared myself to accept the disappointment of a no.

The dip of her head, when it came, was almost imperceptible, but it was enough, and I swiftly jotted my name down by the last waltz of the evening...the supper waltz...lest she come to her senses and change her mind.

With a smile, I handed over her card and left her to the queue of men lining up to greet her and claim her remaining dances. I hated it, but I did it anyway, and when I finally installed myself in a shadowy corner to take a deep breath, my sister sidled up to me and whispered, "Well done, Huds."

I dipped my head in acknowledgement, and pulled at my too tight cravat.

"Now, brother dear, go ask someone else to dance. You cannot only do so with Arabella."

I all but growled in frustration. I didn't like the words my sister spoke, but, dammit, I knew she was right. Didn't mean I had to like it.

I danced with three other women, one of them I thought was a cousin to Bella and who seemed to be a little too smitten with me, before it was time for my waltz with Arabella. The wait hadn't been as horrible as I'd imagined. The women were all pleasant, lovely, and wonderful dancers. I could find no complaint, and I did appreciate the conversation. Besides, I realized it all helped the time pass more quickly.

I had to force my steps to slow as I made my way over to claim the dance I'd been anticipating all evening.

CHAPTER
SIX

Arabella

I usually enjoyed dancing. And yet tonight, every dance leading up to my waltz with Natty seemed interminable. My usual smile was absent. My partners kept asking me if everything was all right. And for some reason, I kept catching sight of the duke laughing and clearly enjoying himself immensely as he danced with women who were not me, and I discovered I didn't like it at all.

I also felt that the fault here should lay squarely on the duke's overly broad shoulders.

By the time, he bowed before me to claim his dance, I was in *quite* a state of pique.

It took no more than two seconds for the duke to, wisely, realize this, and adjust accordingly.

I very nearly laughed at the sudden look of hunted concern that overtook his face. I could tell he understood that my ire was directed solely at him, but it was also clear he didn't quite know what to do about it.

For some reason, I enjoyed this immensely and it actually, oddly, helped to soothe my ruffled feathers the tiniest bit.

The tiniest.

He proceeded with obvious caution when he asked, “Are you enjoying your evening, Lady Arabella?”

I could have replied in so many delicious ways. Sarcastic. Biting. Humorous. Honest. Dry. The choices seemed endless. I almost said, “Fine,” but I didn’t want to cause him justifiable terror, so I settled on, “I am having a *marvelous* time.” My sarcasm was obvious. “I see you have been having quite the time as well.”

Most men would have sought some source of outside help just then. Or perhaps fled, screaming. I imagined Hudson seeking his sister’s sage advice. To his credit, he did none of those things. In fact, he never once removed his attention from me as he thought carefully for a suitable reply.

I was impressed. A man who could think before he spoke? It was a rare but beautiful thing. But that didn’t mean what would ultimately come out of his mouth held any measure of intelligence.

But oh, in that moment, I wanted badly for Natty to get it right. To prove me wrong about him again.

I actually anticipated hearing a reasoned response.

And it started off rather well. “Yes, I have been,” he said, “I was looking forward to our waltz so much, I couldn’t possibly have had a bad time.”

But then he ruined it with, “Those other women meant nothing to me.”

To his credit, he knew immediately he had erred and badly. His wince was an obvious giveaway. He also didn’t try to overcorrect by casting up a bunch of paltry excuses or apologies.

I imagined the musicians stopping at once with a discordant screech across their respective instruments. As it was, I slowed to a stop in the middle of the dance floor.

He'd always been a known rake. And his careless remark reminded me of that fact quite pointedly. Other dancers tried swirling wildly to avoid us; everyone watched intently, hoping to catch wind of the matter. I was causing a *scene*. And for a moment, I thought I might laugh at the absurdity of it all.

Before I could, the duke grabbed ahold of my hand and pulled me off the dance floor, out the open ballroom doors, and into the cool night air.

For once, I appreciated how he took control of the situation. I had already caused a scene, so him grabbing me by the hand and dragging me out the room really hadn't made matters much worse. And I was glad for the respite the darkness afforded us as we walked deep into the shadows of the back terrace where we could have some semblance of privacy.

I leaned against the balustrade in the far right corner, while Natty took a few moments to pace out his frustrations before me.

After several passes, he finally drew to a stop directly in front of me and said, "I'm sorry."

"For?" I always thought it important that a person know what he or she actually apologized for, else the gesture seemed meaningless.

The duke laughed in self-deprecation. "Where to begin? For not knowing the right words to tell you how I truly feel.

For never giving you a good reason to trust me. For how every single time we've ever been in each other's presence, things always seem to end in disaster with most of it being my own damn fault."

"The rain yesterday wasn't your fault."

He snorted. "No, but I think it safe to say things might have fared far worse if it hadn't rained, aye?"

"How is that?"

I could tell he wanted to pull at the ends of his hair; instead he kept his arms at his sides, his fists clenched. "I tried to kiss you without gaining your consent. Only the worst sort of reprobate would do such a thing."

His words made my heart flutter and lift just the tiniest bit. It was everything to know a man valued your consent.

He stepped closer; his voice softening; his gaze locked with mine. "I want so badly to kiss you, very much. I find you nigh on irresistible." His voice was wrapped in gravel, sinful, seductive.

When I could speak, my reply was barely audible. "And if I give you my consent..."

I let my words deliberately trail off. Had it been light out, I'm sure his eyes would be flooded with passion. As it was, he froze in place, but only for a moment. Then, he closed the distance between us with one final step, settled each hand on the balustrade behind me, and leaned in, caging me within the space of his arms. My heart began to hammer inside my chest.

His voice was low and rough and the warm breath I felt when he leaned in to whisper in my ear had me shivering deliciously. "Do you? Do you want my kiss, love?"

My breath caught on the word love, and I was nearly breathless when I answered, “Yes.”

He paused; I think he did so to give me a moment to change my mind. I appreciated that as much as I appreciated he didn't question if I was sure. Then before it registered he'd moved, his large hands cupped my cheeks while both thumbs lightly feathered my skin. “So soft,” he whispered; his voice filled with wonder.

His hands slid down my neck and across my shoulders, then he leaned in and nuzzled me. I had thought he would go direct to the kissing, but this was oh so much better. Better than I ever could have anticipated. He drew his lips across my skin; his tongue darting out from time to time, tasting me. I was going to be a puddle of molten lava on the ground at his feet before I ever got the chance to feel the press of his mouth against mine.

Or I might have been if a figurative bucket of water hadn't been virtually tossed on my head to effectively put out the fire threatening to consume me.

“Lady Arabella!”

My first, albeit foggy, thought was, ‘*Why did that voice remind me of a cocker spaniel?*’

My second, less foggy thought was, ‘*Why has Natty gone all stiff of a sudden? And not in the fun, sensual, promise-of-mischievous-delights sort of way he was a few seconds ago.*’

And then reality intruded alongside my very next breath, and I blurted out, “Francis! Er, Baron.”

I was vaguely aware of Natty's deep sigh and how he discreetly stepped out of my space, but not far enough to leave

me open to vulnerability. I knew *that* much even as my brain scrambled to make sense of how the three of us ended up *here*.

The Baron cleared it up quite, er, crystal-ly with his next statement. “I received word you were out here with a known-rogue...”

Whatever else the Baron said, I didn’t hear, because I instantly looked to the duke for confirmation as to whether or not he intentionally set us up to be discovered.

In hindsight, I would come to realize I wasn’t in the right frame of mind to accurately read my old ‘friend’ particularly given the dim lighting and a lifetime lived as constant adversaries...but that understanding would only come much, much later.

In that moment, I *expected* his guilt. So, when I saw in the dip of his shoulders, I received the confirmation I expected, and in my righteous fury, I didn’t stop to determine the actual source of his guilt.

Instead, I said nothing. But I made it clear my feelings on the matter when I walked away on the arm of the baron without a backwards glance.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Hudson

After the disastrous ending to the Stonebridge Ball, my instinct had been to drink myself into oblivion for a week, minimum. But I knew I didn't have the luxury of time and despite the misunderstanding, I still fully believed in my future with Arabella.

Therefore, two days later, Lady Arabella and I met for an early morning ride through Hyde Park, and though she agreed to my suggested outing, she also didn't take it easy on me.

"Did you arrange to have us discovered in a compromising situation in order to force my hand?"

God, I loved how she didn't mince her words.

"Neither." Because really, that could be seen as two different questions.

"Then why did you let me believe in your guilt? And I know I did not misread your air of guilt."

I nodded. "You are correct. I felt guilty, just not for the reason you thought. I felt guilty because I knew our past coupled with my reputation and my contribution towards both meant there was nothing I could do to correct this misunderstanding. So, though I was not guilty of conspiring to

have you compromised, I certainly was guilty in a way that would lead you to, understandably, reach the conclusion you did.”

“I see.”

I was relieved she wasn't the type to try to absolve me of my guilt for the misunderstanding.

“And you didn't fear my reputation was ruined I take it?”

I slowed my mount so I could look her steadily in the eye when I made this point. “Not for a moment. I know the baron well enough to know he wouldn't have risked your reputation, and I know you well enough to know you would never do something rash.”

I could see she appreciated the honest compliment.

“And you didn't fear you'd lost your opportunity with me?”

“Oh, love, I'd be lying if I didn't say I'd feared that very thing. You're too important...”

I couldn't finish the rest. My throat felt too tight in that moment.

The tension grew thick, and I knew we both felt it. Arabella alleviated the strain with a simple uplifted sigh and, “So, did you find out who sent the Baron to discover us?”

I winced internally. “Would it make me seem less of a man to admit I had not because I spent the last two days wallowing in a little bout of self-pity.”

Arabella laughed delightfully at that. “Actually, no. A man recklessly investigating such a thing would likely cause more trouble. Give me a man who can own up to having feelings any day.”

“In that case—”

She held up a hand to stop me. “To a point, duke. To a point.”

“Shall we exercise our mounts instead?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Arabella

Thank God Hudson Nathaniel Dawson had no idea how that charming grin of his threatened to unseat me, an avid horsewoman, every time he subjected me to that most fascinating twist of his lips. And then there was the dimple that flashed every time he did it. I began to wonder if I should start carrying smelling salts with me everywhere though I'd never been prone to fainting. Follow all that with the questions and conversation about politics, likes, dislikes, dreams... A lady could certainly find herself flattered by a man who didn't want to discuss *himself* all the time and seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say.

Moments like this, not just our conversation, but the companionable way we could also spend the time simply silently exercising our mounts made me somewhat frustrated by all the years we wasted arguing and trading insults, when we could have had *this*.

And for at least an hour, my heart all but soared with delight over this new understanding of just how companionable we could be.

If I were a gracious woman, I might even say we made it an entire hour and a half...

...before the nincompoop had to ruin everything.

The downfall began with a simple, barely audible, “Be careful.”

I could scarcely discern the touch of anxiety coloring his tone.

Still, I very clearly conveyed with a *sharp* look that I knew precisely what I was about, thank you very much, Sirrah.

But alas, my look promising Dire Consequences wasn't enough. Perhaps, the blood flow had left his head for other more interesting parts of his anatomy. We might never know the truth. I didn't care. All I knew was after that, his ability to trust I knew my own capabilities as a horse woman fell away with every stride and turn of our mounts.

Therefore, I considered it his entire fault for how his actions, driven by doubt, saw the pair of us soaring arses up and over the head of our mounts and into the Serpentine for a thorough drenching.

Through pure happenstance we landed in a tangled mess of clothes and flailing limbs and when we surfaced, I somehow managed to do so with my arms around his neck and my legs wrapped around his waist.

And at first, we both sputtered and coughed and grumbled, and I was incandescent with rage. Then he held me up, hands cupping my backside, as I swiped the hair from my eyes, while he shook the water from his with one hard flick of his head, an impressive feat to be honest, and something only men seemed able to do.

It took entirely too long for awareness of our compromising position to penetrate our shocked minds, but when it did...

We froze for numerous seconds, our eyes searching the other's for some indication that everything was alright.

I watched, frozen, as he lifted a hand and slowly, not-quite-steadily reached for my face, but he halted a hairs-breadth before making contact. *Gracious*, my stomach fluttered wildly, and I held my breath as I wondered what he would do; his eyes revealed only fathomless *need*.

Only.

There was nothing simple about any of it.

The almost touch of his fingers remained so close to the apple of my cheek and simply held, that I was on the verge of leaning in the slightest bit, desperate to complete the connection, to feel the press of his fingers against me. I'd never felt such desire, such longing, in my life, and I seized his shoulders, my fingers biting into his skin lest I reach up and force his hand against me.

I stared at him the entire time, only able to sense the heat of his hand as it hovered near me. Then, he slowly traced the contours of my face without so much as a suggestion of contact. And, so help me God, I *craved* his elusive touch.

Then, finally...*finally*...his warm hand landed alongside my jaw and his thumb reached up to rub softly against my cheek.

His voice was low, raspy, as he said, "There, now, love. All tidy."

I found it difficult to find words at first, but eventually I whispered, "Thank you," while inside I shouted and begged for *more*.

For an eternity but more likely only a few seconds, he held his hand against the side of my face, cupping me, his thumb

resting innocently against my cheek. I sensed a tremor deep within him through the light contact, and I nearly closed my eyes to contain a ground swell of emotion. But, without warning, he shifted, his fingers whispering across my sensitive skin as he released me.

Only then was I able to draw in a deep, purifying breath of air.

And with that inhalation, reality returned in stages. I dropped my eyes like a coward, then felt around my body, convinced I was littered with a plethora of aquatic plants, my gaze landing anywhere but on the man beneath me, which led me to recall our compromising position, and I nearly turned an ankle as I sought to separate our clinging bodies. Somehow, we managed, and eventually made it to the shore. Thankfully, our horses remained nearby.

In the end, he said, "I'm sorry."

And I could only nod my head in reply, though I knew he genuinely meant it.

I don't recall much of the return trip home, but somehow, I made it, though I suspected I wasn't quite the same woman who had left several hours earlier.

It was a remarkable feeling.

CHAPTER
NINE

Hudson

The glass of scotch whisky I held worked miracles to steady my hand as the burn of fiery alcohol hit the back of my throat and made me feel alive, though not quite as *thrivingly* aware as I had been that morning when I held the most remarkable woman in my arms. The entire experience had left me *shaken* in all the best ways.

And yet, I could only imagine how much *more* it all would have been had we not been near to drowning in the middle of the damn Serpentine when it happened.

I swallowed a growl and downed another finger of Scotch.

Still, I amazed even myself at the steadiness of my hand and just how remarkably calm I was when Margie slid into the empty chair in front of my desk. Perhaps, I remained in a state of shock. Not because I flipped over a horse and into a large body of water...courtesy of my own stupidity...but because it was becoming absolutely clear that every effort I made towards courting Lady Arabella Finch ended in disaster. At this point, I considered finding a wise woman and bargaining for some sort of lucky talisman...or something to break what was beginning to feel like a very real cursed state, if not destiny, to never capture the heart of the woman I loved.

“Do you want to talk about it?” My sister asked.

I swallowed. “No.”

“That bad?”

Snort.

After my ungentlemanly snort, there was a lengthy pause. But I’d forgotten how no one could outwait my sister. Even I. “Bad doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

So, perhaps, not all bad. We had definitely had a *moment*. It had just occurred at the worst possible time...whilst water-logged in a very chilly, very public lake.

My sister’s look of sympathy was in no way convincing. “Look at it this way, brother dear, two drenchings in a week must be some sort of unprecedented achievement.”

I knew my sister was trying to cheer me. It wasn’t working. But then I glanced at her face, and couldn’t stop the slight curve of my lip, followed by a slow chuckle. I never could stay angry for long.

“Any new advice, oh wise woman?”

“I suggest groveling. Flowers might work.”

“Enough flowers but not too many flowers?”

“And not the wrong flowers.”

“Naturally. And if she sends back the very first bouquet?”

My sister winced. “Too bad, old chap?”

“Wonderful.” I murmured.

“I would say sorry, but...”

“I know. Even I can’t escape the consequences of my own actions.”

My sister nodded her head in agreement. “Hopefully, she can see you’re smarter than the average gentleman.”

“And you’re still disinclined to help your poor old brother in his moment of need.”

This made my sister laugh a little too loudly as she stood. “Firstly, you are neither poor nor needy. And secondly, if I have to *tell* her you’re brilliant; I’m not sure you deserve her because then you certainly didn’t convey the message appropriately...and if she hasn’t figured it out on her own by now, I’m not sure she deserves *you*.”

“I’m certain there’s a compliment in there somewhere,” I teased. But inside, I had hope because even if I did doubt Bella’s intelligence—which I didn’t—but even if I did, my sister definitely didn’t. Which meant she was saying there was a chance.

And that was good enough for me because Lady Arabella Finch was worth every effort if there was even the smallest possibility we could have a future.

CHAPTER
TEN

Arabella

The day after my unplanned swim in the Serpentine, I met with the baron and politely declined his offer of marriage. It was an easy decision to make once I realized he would never be the right gentleman for me, and so I announced my decision firmly, yet as gently and as kindly as possible. The baron took my rejection with remarkable aplomb, though I had to admit his large, liquid eyes merely made me want to hand him a bone and tickle him by the ear. So, yes, pain free, albeit perhaps, just for me.

My muscles were another matter. I woke up sore in places I didn't even know I could get sore. And though I winced when I sat and offered the occasional unexpected grunt, the pain merely reminded me of that *moment*.

Oh, I was marginally angry at Natty, never doubt it. We never would have investigated the bottom of the Serpentine if he had only trusted my skills as a horsewoman, and we *would* have words about that eventually. But I wasn't completely angry with him. How could I be? I might not have discovered certain...er, cravings...for him had we not had our *moment*, and considering Hudson was, well *Hudson*, I doubted he had too many regrets either.

So, perhaps, I didn't fully believe we wouldn't have eventually had a *moment*, but regardless, my interest was definitely peaked.

Therefore, a week later, I finally agreed to another outing with the duke. He'd sent me flowers all week in apology, and I enjoyed the light groveling. He never delivered them in person, which I understood he did in order to not force me to suffer his presence unnecessarily while I was put out with him. I heartily approved of his efforts to grovel. He had been at fault for our accident, which could have ended very badly, and he needed to know his actions leading up to our unexpected flight and subsequent near-drowning were not all right.

But I well knew, I couldn't make him grovel forever. Besides, I missed him. And I wanted to investigate further what a future with him might look like.

So, today, when he made his odd request, a nighttime outing to an undisclosed location, I accepted without hesitation. He promised I would not regret it, which I absolutely believed for he should know me well after all these years, and if he didn't...it did not bode well for our future.

When the time of our...appointment...arrived, his sister helped me escape my brother's watchful eye, and before I knew it, I was happily bouncing along the streets of London in the duke's town carriage, eager to discover our destination, yet not wanting to unravel the mystery too soon.

The air that evening did not feel damp, and the moon was visible such that I could see the clouds over London were scattered and not particularly heavy, despite the city's ever present fog. By the time we pulled up discreetly before a very closed, but very real, Kew Gardens, I discovered I had been

gripping Hudson's hand for some time now and hadn't even *noticed*.

Questions flooded my mind, climbing over each other to be heard, and one after another they practically exploded out of my mouth.

"Are we truly going inside?"

"We are."

"Do you know what they have in there?"

A low chuckle, "I do."

"But they're closed..."

"Not to us."

"How did you know?"

"I sometimes do pay attention."

This time I chuckled. "But since you returned I haven't mentioned anything..."

"Nevertheless... and no, my sister did not tell me."

Suddenly, my questions died off as if someone physical shut off the appropriate valve in my mind, and for a moment, I could only stare at him, stunned. No, not just stunned. A wealth of emotions flooded my insides. Feelings like flattered, thrilled, happy...*seen*.

I don't know how long I sat there, seeing Hudson Dawson, the duke of Westbury with fresh eyes, but eventually, he prodded me, "Do you want to talk about the specific flower I know you're dying to see, or shall we go see it—in bloom for once—for ourselves?"

He didn't need to ask me twice.

I all but pulled him out of the carriage and dragged him by the arm towards the infamous greenhouse and our specific destination. I barely registered the man who opened the gate to allow us to slip inside; I was simply too excited. I had wanted to see this particular night-blooming flower for years, and I had known it was set to bloom tonight. There was even a special showing of it earlier in the evening, and I was devastated I couldn't attend, but this.... this was so much better.

Before I knew it, we were standing in front of *Selenicereus grandiflorus*, a night-blooming cereus that bloomed once a year for a single night. The last time the gardens were open to show the blooming of this flower was several years ago...they often did not hold such events for a variety of reasons, and the vine was far too big for me to possibly grow one at home, which could only be done in a greenhouse the size of the one here.

“She’s even more beautiful in person than I could ever have imagined.”

“I agree.”

Hudson’s voice sounded near, but not too close, and his tone was almost reverent. I appreciated, how he didn’t crowd me though we were both well aware that we were entirely alone, and I suspected he truly wanted to draw as near as he could. But I sensed he wanted me to have my moment to enjoy this rare flower without his own needs interfering with that pleasure.

And my word, I took my time relishing every minute of this flower while I could. I didn’t know when I would ever be able to see it again, and knowing Hudson made this happen for me was *life-changing*.

Even if nothing else went right for the rest of the evening, which seemed to be our destiny of late, this entire outing was an unqualified success.

Eventually, I turned to him, and before I could thank him, he said, “Don’t thank me. Why don’t we see the rest of the gardens while we have the place to ourselves?”

I dipped my head. “Yes, let’s do that.”

We talked companionably as we walked the aisles of the greenhouse and commented on the variety of plants to be found there, and then we proceeded outside, where we pretended we could actually see the plants around us in the dark.

“That one there is mighty fine,” I exclaimed.

“I like how perfect a blue it’s flowers are...”

“Oh dear, have you gone blind?” I challenged as I waved a hand in front of his face as if to check his sight. “That flower is red, I’m afraid.”

The duke chuckled lightly, and merely said, “My mistake. I suppose you shall have to be my guide since I can no longer see properly where to set my feet.”

I shook my head in amusement, surprised at our easy camaraderie after so many years of experiencing the opposite. I refused to allow myself to question whether it was real, though, or consider how long it might last. Perhaps, my desperate attempt to face reality was the reason I failed to notice the change in the weather?

Until the heavens opened, and once again, we found ourselves drenched.

“We’re starting to make a habit of this,” Natty yelled over the sound of pouring rain.

“You think so?” I quipped, my hands held out as if I were trying to catch water with my hands.

Natty didn’t reply, he merely clasped my hand in his as we raced along darkened pathways, thankful the moon and lightning were enough for us to see by, headed towards the place where we’d arrived and our very dry carriage.

But when we got there; there was no carriage, dry or otherwise.

Nor an employee waiting to let us out.

Hudson cursed and pulled on the gate, but as I had begun to suspect, it was locked.

Natty dragged a hand through his wet hair, I had no idea where his hat had run off to, but it mattered not. I simply grabbed his hand again and pulled him towards the greenhouse, all the while trying not to think about the fact that we were alone, trapped for the night, in a warm, cozy place.

Had I mentioned alone?

A shiver raced down my spine at the thought, and it was entirely a tremble of delight. Of anticipation.

Of possibilities.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Hudson

“Tell me you didn’t do this on purpose just to get me alone, Natty?”

“I didn’t do this on purpose just to get you alone, Bella.”

The words were automatic, but no less truthful. Besides, I knew by her familiar tone, she was only teasing.

Still, I was definitely frustrated. It was like the heavens conspired against us, and I grew weary of their attempts. Even if the rake in me well understood how this time, I could easily turn this disadvantage into a pleasurable outcome for both of us.

I appreciated Bella’s no nonsense practicality. I always had, and as we both stripped to our skin in front of one of the numerous stoves installed to keep the greenhouse warm, I valued the fact that she didn’t argue whyever would we need to do such a thing. In truth, neither of us actually said anything about the practical need to remove our soaked garments; we simply walked to the nearest stove and began undressing.

And it was her pragmatism as much as anything...and everything...else that had me revealing a cock as hard as the steel making up our shelter as I shucked my trousers and

prepared to hang them to dry using a useful spool of garden twine and a little ingenuity.

I didn't shove my aching cock in her face, though I didn't attempt to hide the state of my arousal either. If nothing else happened, and don't get me wrong, I very much wanted something else to happen, I was determined we would both leave this place with no regrets.

I refused to let the heavens win.

I turned from my task to find a very *naked* Lady Arabella Finch, her cheeks lightly dusted with a becoming shade of pink, laying blankets out upon the floor.

All other thoughts and intensions, well-meaning and otherwise, disintegrated as if set aflame, and I helplessly fell to my knees, lost to her splendor. I didn't even have it in me to beg for a crumb of affection because my brain was no longer capable of forming words.

Arabella glanced over her shoulder wearing nothing more than a mischievous smile. "Something the matter, Natty?"

I made some manner of nod *and* shake of my head; it was impossible to tell, I was sure. Maybe. I didn't even know how to begin to answer that question, so naturally I offered a confusing reply.

Bella sighed, "Rumor has it you're a silver-tongued rake..."

"Nghtykj," was my charismatic and witty rejoinder.

Bella's laugh was husky, and my rod *throbbed* with delight at the sound.

Lady Arabella didn't miss the slight leap of my manhood, and I nearly burst into flames when she glanced down and

said, “I’m relieved to see rumor didn’t get *everything* wrong.”

After that, I was so taut with sexual tension, I half expected numerous muscles to begin cramping. Bella seemed to take pity on me, for in that moment, she dropped to her own knees right before me and boldly met my gaze.

Fuck me...this woman...

I was afraid I’d already caught fire and all it would take was a light breeze to send me crumbling to a pile of ash.

So, when Bella touched her forehead gently to mine, I thanked *all* the Gods that that wasn’t the case after all.

Her careful touch also grounded me, as did the press of her hands as she slid them down my arms until she twined her fingers with mine, which seemed to unlock my powers of speech.

“Mine.” I growled out.

So, speech, yes, but perhaps, not so charismatic in its delivery.

“Yours, Natty?” Fortunately, she chuckled. “I am an independent woman, but I must say, I rather like this beastly side of you, my love.”

She followed this pronouncement with a quick nip of her teeth on my shoulder, and right then, I knew I was forever hers, whether she accepted me or not.

I squeezed our entwined hands. “Bella. Tell me you want this. I need your words, love.”

She looked me directly in the eyes when she spoke. “I want you to show me precisely why your reputation is well earned. I want you to use this—” She squeezed my aching cock, and I nearly erupted in her hand, but I never broke our

gaze. “—your cock, your fingers—” she squeezed the hand still entwined with hers. “...your mouth...,” she dropped a quick kiss on my lips. “...to pleasure me until the sexual tension in me releases, and I shoot to the stars.”

“Nghtns.”

Yes, I was back to speaking the Queen’s English in carefully enunciated words.

“I take it that is a yes?”

I nodded, then somehow managed, “Yes,” with a tongue as dry as a desert sand.

“Are my words clear enough for you?”

I swallowed. “Yessss...*damn*...” She’d given my cock another firm squeeze.

I was not proud of my showing thus far, but Bella definitely didn’t appear to mind, and that was what truly mattered to me.

No. That was a lie. I wanted her feeling much, much more than ‘didn’t appear to mind.’ I wanted her *mindless* with ecstasy. And it was that thought which gave me the Herculean strength to pull myself together and tend to the love of my life.

“Lie down.” I commanded.

It pleased me to see her eyes flare with desire at the unexpected command. She obeyed and reclined across our pallet of blankets with absolute grace, and though she heeded me, I had no doubt she was really in charge of this moment.

I crawled over her, starting at her feet, using every bit of hard won self-control not to fall on her like a slavering beast... we could save that bit of fun for another time. This time, I dropped kiss after delicate kiss—sometimes quick, sometimes

a slow glide of my opened mouth—in random places across her body as I slowly made my way, mapping her every curve with my hands, my teeth, my tongue; all the while, I watched and listened for every cue she offered as to her wants and desires. She was so unbelievably responsive to my touch, I felt as if I could read her desire as easily as I could read the written word. I stayed when she wanted more; I moved on when she grew anxious for more, and I smiled in genuine delight when I reached one puckered nipple and felt her grip me by the hair and press my head to her breast.

Who was I to deny her what she wanted?

So I sucked and licked and lathed and bathed her nipple as if I had never feasted on such a succulent morsel before...I *hadn't* before now.

She tasted of sin and love and sweetness and passion, and I would never tire of the taste of her, which made me all the more anxious to devour her core for I knew nothing would ever compare.

Alas, for now, my lady was vigorously directing my attention towards her other breast, which had been woefully and sorely neglected. “My apologies,” I whispered before I gave the cherry red bud a light nip, then I went to work tormenting her with pleasure all over again.

“Naaatty...”

I chuckled at her desperate plea. Delighted she was now the one incapable of speech.

I paused, my control momentarily in hand, and rested my chin between her delightful breasts. “Yes, my love.” I was all innocence in my query.

She lifted her head and glared at me. “I will kill you if you stop.”

“Oh?”

She growled.

I started to crawl further up her body. She stopped me with her hand pressed squarely over my entire face and shoved me down...in the opposite direction...directly where she wanted me to go.

“You want me to leave?” I teased.

Her eyes narrowed. “Now is not the time for Playful Natty. Nor Idiot Natty. I need Competent, Pleasure-Inducing Natty or Engorged Cock Natty is going to find himself sleeping outside; I don’t care if it is still raining out.”

“God. I love how you never mince your words.”

She opened her mouth to reprimand me further, but thankfully my Idiot Natty side had left the building, and I stopped her with a long, drawn out lick right up the center of her quim.

“Oh, God, that is *divine*.”

“My sentiments exactly,” I whispered as I latched onto her engorged nub and began to draw on her as if my life depended on it. Which, to be honest, it appeared it did.

When her groans seemed to subside the tiniest bit, I slid my middle finger deep inside her drenched sheath, then curled the digit making her hips snap off our makeshift pallet. A few more thrusts, and I added a second finger while I continued to lap and suck at her, chasing her as she shifted in mindless pleasure. It took every bit of my control to keep from falling into my own mindless pleasure. Her earthy, womanly smell,

her decadent taste, and the erotic sounds she made worked in concert against me, and I began to pray for her release lest I succumb before I ever get my cock inside her as requested.

Aye, she'd asked for that.

I meant to deliver.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Arabella

The man had a tongue made of pure magic.

There was simply no other explanation for the feelings and sensations that not-quite innocent looking organ managed to drag out of me. I didn't recognize the sounds coming out of my own mouth, and my voice had taken on a lustful quality I had never made in my life.

And then there was his mouth. His searching gaze. His thrusting fingers. *Gracious*. I was seconds away from what I suspected would be the defining orgasm of my existence to date, and I wasn't sure I was *ready*.

Goodness, I hadn't known.

But I was well on my way to knowing.

I was well on my way to knowing very much.

It was my last thought before Hudson Nathaniel Dawson latched onto my throbbing clitoris like a man starving, and I was launched to the heavens.

For a million moments it felt as if I bounced from star to star with no hope of ever finding my way back down. I barely had the presence of mind to note how Natty did everything in his power to keep me shooting through the stars. While there, I

swore I saw a glimpse of a future—our future—one I wanted with my entire being.

But then everything became incredibly sharp, and before I knew it, I was pushing at Natty's broad shoulders and damp hair and groaning while proclaiming, "It's too much...too much. So good, but too, too much. Oh, *God*."

The man dared to chuckle at that, but I was far too boneless and senseless to care, much less do anything about it.

"Shall, I continue?"

"...Kill you if you don't."

Another low laugh. "There's my blood-thirsty goddess..."

I rather liked being called a goddess. I could get used to such terms of endearment.

"I'll take care, love, yes?"

I nodded, adding a respectable, "Mmmhmmm" to help make my wishes unquestionably clear.

"Bella?"

"Hmmm?"

"I need you to look at me, love, if you wish me to continue."

Had my eyes closed? Huh. Best not give him a reason to stop then.

I managed to open them. Just. And gave him my best glare in the process lest he think for a minute about stopping now.

Despite his teasing, I could barely discern the color of his irises for his pupils were wide with absolute need. Thus, I felt completely justified in waving my hand in the air and proclaiming, "Do carry on."

My words might have sounded imperious if it weren't for the husky undertone even I could discern.

And that needy undertone, I thought, was likely what had him suddenly sucking in a deep breath as he gripped his impressive cock by the root, and slowly...*painstakingly slow*...drilled inside my still-pulsing sheath.

My eyes flared wide, though not in pain, but in that momentary connection of our souls through locked gazes where my mind met his on a level we would have never achieved without this moment between us. I saw respect, high regard, intelligence, desire, and love swimming in the depths of his eyes, and I knew, right then, I echoed every single sentiment at the very core of who I was.

And then he seated himself all the way inside, and suddenly I was launched to the stars all over again, too far away to even notice if there'd been any pain. And yet, as he began to establish a steady rhythm, he also, somehow, kept me grounded and in the moment and unable to ignore the absolute pleasure of the core of him sliding through the core of me. The sensation sent sparks dancing along my spine and the bottoms of my feet, winding up the sexual tension I was growing desperate to release again.

I lifted my hips, giving him something more solid to push against.

I could tell he wasn't silent, but my mind was too caught up in experiencing every other sensation going on inside of my body to make sense of the sounds around me.

He picked up the pace, and I clung to him as we frantically raced to the end. When it happened, it was like the world froze for just a blinding second, before we exploded with relief, our

cries of passion wrapping around each other and echoing about the heavens.

I thought I had been transformed after our swim in the Serpentine.

But as my beloved Natty pulled me into his arms, the two of us spent, I knew that transformation had merely been a glimpse. This. This was the new world and the new woman I was always meant to become.

I had just never expected Hudson Nathaniel Dawson, the Duke of Westbury, to be the catalyst to launch my metamorphosis.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Hudson

I, Hudson Nathaniel Dawson...affectionately known as Natty to one very special lady in my life, marched up the front steps to Finch House feeling determined and confident...and perhaps, a little bit nervous. I hoped what I had to say...or I should say ask...would be met with a positive response, but I couldn't honestly be sure.

It was both a torment and an endearment, Bella's ability to keep me wondering. Still, she remained worth every moment of curious speculation.

In the end, I thought I would make a grand husband. Loving. Devoted. Attentive...

I winced when I realized I'd essentially described her mother's favorite Cocker Spaniel.

It didn't matter. Together, I thought we made a brilliant match. I thought she thought so, too. And for my part, I rather suspected she made me a better man. Despite all the blunders and disasters which might have suggested otherwise.

I straightened my perfectly straight cravat as I crossed the threshold, a bouquet of lilacs firmly in hand, and followed the Finch butler through the house, and into the library, a fitting

location to, hopefully, take a step towards our future together. I had already talked to her brother, taken all the appropriate steps. Now, it was a matter of securing the lady's agreement.

Like my own library, the Finch library, though slightly smaller, was also at the rear of the house, and on the ground floor. Despite the differences in scale, the Finch library evoked the same sense of comfort and warmth as my own, and I relaxed as I crossed the room to meet the remarkable woman awaiting me there.

I bowed deeply. "Hello, Brat."

Bella's lips twitched. "Ah. Yes. It *is* you, Natty. I see you haven't changed since last I saw you. How long has it been? A few months?"

I could barely control my grin, but I felt *extremely* pleased by the dance of mischief in her eyes as we recalled the last time we met.

"So, tell me. Do you plan to propose?"

I dipped my head, but did not say anything. I knew better, and I was enjoying our little game immensely.

I followed her with my eyes as she walked nonchalantly to my right, though I stiffened with desire when she surprised me by drawing one finger slowly down my arm before she drifted away behind me. I turned to my left in time to meet her eyes as she came back around. Then, she tossed me a wink before she turned to face me head on. "Well, get on with it, darling, and please do provide me with all the details of why you think we would suit."

She could barely keep a straight face as she tried to speak with such hauteur.

But I was serious when I finally spoke the words I'd been dying to say. "I love you, Bella. And I have for a very, very long time. I simply had too much arrogance, too much idiocy, too much to account for to muster up the courage to show you, much less tell you. But I cannot imagine a life without you in it. I find your brilliance remarkable, your wit desirable, your humor, well, debatable," she laughed at that, "and then there's your honesty, your way with words, your beauty, your sensuality...Bella, I don't think there are enough days left in my life to adequately catalogue all the things I love about you. But I do know that I will spend the rest of those days reminding you whenever either one of needs it, how very much I love you. You, Bella, make me a better man, and I will always love you, whether you accept my proposal or not. I am forever yours."

I took a deep breath, wanting to say so much more, but really needing to ask her the question I came here to ask, and I dropped to one knee before her, while taking her hand and saying, "Lady Arabella Adelia Finch. Will you marry me?"

Thankfully, she did not prolong my torment with a long wait.

"Yes, I absolutely will marry you, Natty. I wouldn't marry anyone else even if they were the last person in London. You highlight the best in me in ways I hadn't anticipated, and I look forward to carving out a future together; I love you so very much."

Her words were exactly what *I* needed to hear, and together we laughed as I added, "I'm so very glad you knew all along exactly how to train your duke."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling Author Amy Quinton writes humorous fantasy and historical romance, often from her back porch in Summerville, South Carolina, but only when her dog and two cats allow.

She's susceptible to shiny things, soft things, leather, trips to the thrift store, Whisky, tattoos, witchy things, and men in kilts (particularly her husband)-but not necessarily in that order.

She adores her children (most of the time), finds a lot of humor being married to a Brit (usually), cusses (probably more than she should), and loves to read and write romance (always).

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A DUKE OF HER
OWN

A WEDDED BY SCANDAL
NOVELLA

STACY REID

Lady Francie dodges scandal by retreating to the countryside, where she's captivated by the enigmatic Mr. Crawford. As sparks fly between them, the shadow of her tarnished reputation looms larger, forcing her to question whether the price of love is too risky to pay.

DEDICATION

*To everyone who messaged and asked for Francie's
book, this sensually sweet novella is for you!*

CHAPTER
ONE

Basket gripped in her hand, Lady Francie Walcott walked along the woodland path leading to a cottage and the enigmatic gentleman she had been friends with these last thirteen months. *Mr. Alexander Crawford*. The mere thought that she would see him soon quickened her heart. He was a friend, and she treasured the connection they had formed.

The letter from her mother, the Dowager Countess of Blade, summoning Francie to London and an uncertain future burned a hole in the deep pockets of her day gown. Unsurprisingly, the letter had upset her so much that she sought Mr. Crawford's company despite the threat of imminent rains and heavy winds. Her mother was a lady of uncertain temper. She was indifferent to Francie's torment, but Francie still missed her fiercely and longed to be back with her family. The isolation she endured buried in the countryside was half self-imposed and half punishment from her mother. This loneliness was terrifying to someone who had grown amongst love and laughter.

She was starting to feel threads of anxiety building up in her heart, and she shoved the feelings away. *Not today*. Francie inhaled deeply and smiled. She rather loved the forest and tranquil nature of the countryside. The glittering world of the

ton and their harsh judgment was a place beyond these woods and seemed but a distant memory.

Sunlight filtered through the dark clouds, the interwoven canopy of ancient oaks and sycamores, casting warm light on the beaten path. The air was tinged with the perfume of blooming wildflowers intermingled with an aroma of the damp earth. Francie had always loved this boundless feeling of nature—the endless green, refreshing air, the scent of rain, and the birds that occasionally flew overhead. She hastened her footsteps as thunder rumbled. It would not do to be caught in the rain.

What if he is not at home? It was not only the dread of receiving that letter from her mother that pushed her to seek out Mr. Crawford in the hopes she would not have to be alone today.

My three and twentieth birthday. I am to celebrate another birth celebration without my family.

Painful and familiar grief twisted through her. Francie had not seen her family in almost a year. Despite the many letters written to her mother asking for understanding and forgiveness, they remained unanswered. Only her brother, Tobias, the Earl of Blade and his darling wife, Lizzie, the Countess of Blade, sent frequent letters to Francie. A lump formed in her throat. There was no communication from her mama, who remained deeply disappointed and infuriated with Francie.

Because of a foolish mistake made in the name of rebellion and love.

That awful ache rose inside Francie's chest, and she forcefully shoved them aside, hating to recall the whimsical notions that had once filled her heart and led her to irrevocable

ruin. She did not wish to endure the sting of pain and regret today. They would be awaiting her tomorrow, and that was enough. Beyond the large cusp of trees ahead lay the promise of laughter, warm conversation, and a presence that would assuage her loneliness. Francie frowned, for she did not like the notion she might rely on seeing her neighbor to feel a measure of contentment. Their friendship was quite unorthodox because whenever they encountered each other, they did not speak of their past or futures, solely living within the present. Those rare instances always existed within these surrounding woodlands and the lake. Mr. Crawford had never invited her into his cottage, and Francie had never invited him into hers.

Her steps slowed as she emerged in the clearing, and the cottage came into view. Nestled amid towering trees, the large cottage exuded rustic charm. Its wooden facade and stone chimney blend seamlessly with the surrounding forest. Expansive windows overlook a tranquil lake, reflecting the ever-changing skies. There was an air of stillness about the area that suggested Mr. Crawford might not be in residence. Francie glanced toward the lake. It was empty. She canted her head and keenly listened for the sound of his dog, Samson.

Disappointment lodged against her heart. That she felt it so keenly shook Francie. *I've missed him terribly.* Despite all the reservations in her heart about getting too close to Mr. Crawford, she still felt herself pulled toward him. It had been a month since they sat in that small boat on the lake, laughing and chatting. She had wanted to tell him so much but was afraid to reveal her connections and the terrible scandal she had left behind in London.

A most peculiar sensation rippled over her skin.

He is close!

Whenever Mr. Crawford was near, Francie felt different, certainly more aware of herself. Though she did not trust this odd reaction to him, she enjoyed his company immensely.

Oh, why does this feel dangerous?

At this moment, she knew it was a mistake to have come. The comfort and conversation she hungered for would have to be delayed until her good senses reasserted themselves. Gripping the basket, Francie whirled around, intending to return to her cottage.

“Why do you leave?”

Her heart clenched with unexpected yearning at that query. Without glancing over her shoulder or turning around, Francie said, “I merely intended to strengthen my constitution with a bracing walk. However, rain seems to be imminent. I should return home.”

A fat drop of rain landed on her forehead as if to support her excuse.

“I see.”

Had he moved closer?

“I have never seen you stroll with a basket before.” An audible inhalation sounded. “Whatever it holds smells divine, Miss Walcott.”

She swallowed, gripping the basket even tighter. “It is a cake.”

“Coated with lemon frosting?”

Startled, she smiled. “No.”

“Must you keep me in suspense? Very wretched of you.”

Amusement rushed through her. “It has sweetened chocolate frosting.”

A small silence fell. “I thought the lemon frosting was your favorite?”

It is, she silently thought, but chocolate was his. *Oh dear*. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling as if this situation had grown beyond perilous. How had she baked a cake with Mr. Crawford’s preference in mind? “I must go,” Francie said in a desperate rush.

“You will not make it back in time. The walk is at least two miles. The rain will be here in minutes. Stay with me, please.”

Shocked, she turned around at this. “I beg your pardon?”

Mr. Crawford was indecently dressed only in trousers and a shirt that was rolled to his elbows, revealing muscled forearms. His dark silver eyes stared at her with unswerving intensity. His raven black hair appeared windswept and in need of a trim. Mr. Crawford was a handsome gentleman with sculpted cheekbones, a strong patrician nose, and a sensual mouth. A mouth she had guiltily thought about kissing more than once. Flushing, she briefly glanced away from him.

“I am inviting you inside, Francie.”

The intimate use of her name provoked that infuriating shiver in her heart. They had stopped being formal with their greetings several months ago. Still, somehow, they avoided using each other’s intimate names. It felt imperative to try and keep a measure of formality at the moment. It was also undoubtedly silly, given the existence of their friendship had shattered all bounds of pretension and propriety. “You have never invited me into your home before, Mr. Crawford.”

A shadow fell over his silver eyes, and his gaze grew unfathomable. A deceptively sensual smile played about his mouth. “Forgive my lapse. However, the situation had never called for it before. Permit me to mention you have never invited me to your cottage either.”

They were woodland neighbors who had only met here in the opening, by the lake, or along the path he often bird-watched with his dog. Occurrences that had seemed coincidental now felt deliberate. Had they somehow realized the perilous nature of being alone together and instinctively met outdoors? Francie bit into her lower lip. She was presuming Mr. Crawford lived alone. They never seemed to discuss anything remarkably intimate or personal. However, she felt as if she knew him well.

Oh, Francie, do not be deceived.

She had already fooled herself once by falling in love with a man who had revealed himself to be a liar and a disloyal libertine. And Francie had believed she knew everything about him. She lowered her gaze, holding back her smile as she stared at Mr. Crawford’s bare toes. *I cannot stay.* For a beat, she was completely despondent. “Regrettably, I cannot stay. I will hasten—”

“I baked a lemon cake,” he said gruffly.

She snapped her gaze to his, pressing her palm against her chest as if that small pressure would suppress her suddenly fiercely beating heart. “You *remembered?*”

“Yes.”

The knowledge had a most disturbing effect on her heart. Memories of sitting by the lake, picnicking alone on her birthday last year, floated through Francie’s thoughts.

“May I join you?”

Then, they had only known each other for a month. *“Your company would be delightful, Mr. Crawford.”*

“Good God, what do you eat?”

“A cake ... with lemon frosting.”

“That is not a cake. It is ... a ghastly mess. Who baked it?”

“I did.”

They had stared at each other, and then she had laughed, feeling the sadness leeching from her heart. A pleasant warmth had suffused her entire being when he bravely ate a slice of her cake. It had tasted awful. Francie looked beyond his shoulder at the cottage and the waiting lemon cake. “I presumed you baked it for me?”

He smiled, a lopsided quirk of his mouth, but his handsomeness fairly stole her breath. Mr. Crawford padded over, and she almost expired from shock when he reached out and tucked a wisp of hair behind her ears. The fleeting brush of his fingertip against her skin had her pulse skittering.

“A blessed and happy birthday to you, Francie. After baking your cake, Samson and I had planned to call upon you at your cottage and boldly invite ourselves in for afternoon tea.”

An indescribable feeling rose in her heart. “I would have allowed you inside.”

An unknown emotion flashed in his eyes before his expression veiled. Francie allowed him to take the basket and did not protest when he clasped her other hand within his. Mr. Crawford tugged her forward, and they silently walked toward his cottage.

It did not feel companionable. There was a seething undertone of something she did not understand. Perhaps it was in her imagination, but her belly knotted with tension, and her heart pounded with each step that took her closer to Mr. Crawford's abode. They went up the steps, and he released her hand to open the front door.

He stepped back, allowing her to enter before him. The quality of the furniture and space of the front room informed her that Mr. Crawford was a man of some means. A few sofas were artfully arranged, the hearth kept a fire going, and a large walnut table with two chairs was positioned by the window overlooking the lake. On that table was a cake, two small plates with knives, forks, and a decanter of amber liquid. An empty picnic basket was at the side of the arrangement. Something savory lingered in the air, and she inhaled deeply.

"It is a stew," he murmured. "It is on a low simmer and will be ready in a few hours."

"*You* are cooking?" she asked incredulously.

"After witnessing the tragedy of what you baked last year, I learned. How could I not?"

Delighted, she lightly laughed, glancing over her shoulders at him. Mr. Crawford watched her with an air of awareness never before present in their interactions. His silver gaze was far too piercing. He fascinated Francie and made her nervous in the same breath. What was he thinking?

"Please," he murmured, waving his hand to the table.

Francie walked over, and he pulled out the chair for her to sit. Lowering herself, she untied her bonnet and casually tossed it on the sofa to the side. Mr. Crawford sat and cut a

slice of cake for her and himself. She glanced at her basket. “Perhaps we shall have both?”

He arched a brow. “Living dangerously, I see.”

She choked back her laugh, recalling when she had mentioned her mother berating her for eating more than one slice of cake for the week. Those moments when she had prepared for her debut on the marriage mart felt like a lifetime instead of three years ago. Once she had two pieces of cake on her plate, Francie took up her fork and broke off a piece. Her eyes widened at the flavors that exploded on her tongue.

“Is it good?” he asked.

She nodded, unable to speak. Mr. Crawford smiled, pouring a generous splash of liquid in her glass. Francie spluttered a bit at the first sip, but she liked the heat that traveled through her body, relaxing her. “I cannot credit that you baked this. It is wonderful.”

“Ah, I knew number eleven would have done the trick somehow.”

The fork froze in midair. “You attempted to bake this ten times before?”

“Hmm,” he said around a mouthful of chocolate cake. “How many times before you perfected this divine treat?”

She lowered her gaze to the dark cake layered with rich chocolate frosting. “I wish I could take the credit. Mrs. Benton assisted me.”

“I might have to ask her to marry me.”

“Mr. Benton would gladly chase you with his broom.”

Mr. Crawford chuckled, the sound low and sensual. That peculiar flutter went off inside her heart, and she looked away

from his smiling mouth. Francie felt like a wonderful glutton as she ate the two large pieces of cake and drank three glasses of brandy. Her body felt flushed, and she felt a sense of happiness missing from her life for so long.

Thunder rumbled, and lightning forked in the sky in a spectacular display. The sun fought valiantly, but darkened clouds scuttled over its rays. Fat drops of rain slapped against the windows. Francie rose from the chair and tumbled onto the sofa, toeing off her walking boots to curl her stocking legs beneath her shin. Mr. Crawford arched a brow when she unpinned her hair, but he made no pithy reply at this shocking level of impropriety.

That they were alone and visited each other in privacy was scandalous enough that all other actions were deemed unshockable. If her mother saw her now, perhaps she would excise Francie from her heart, more so than she already did. The sole piece of communication from her mother resurfaced in her heart. She was summoned to town to remarry an earl to render herself respectable.

“Where did you go just now?” Mr. Crawford murmured, rising from the table to sit on the sofa facing her.

“I ...” her throat closed. “I merely thought of my mother.”

He stilled, then pinned her with a palpable stare. “Your mother?”

“Yes.”

“Does your father also live?”

They had never spoken of their respective families, and she could not help wondering what they each hid from, considering they barely shared the true matters of their hearts.

“No, my father died several years ago,” she said softly. “However, I have an older brother ... and a younger.”

Though her mother did not accept Grayson in their lives, as he was the son of her husband’s mistress, Francie loved her brothers wholeheartedly.

“I, too, have a younger brother, William and a sister, Henrietta,” Alexander said with a small smile, his silver eyes gleaming. “My father died two years ago.”

“I am deeply sorry,” Francie said, recalling that the lost look she had seen in his eyes when she first met him had been from grief. “Is that why you retreated to this cottage?”

The shadow of grief flashed in his gaze, and his body stilled. “Yes. My father enjoyed coming here. That lake ... that is where he taught me and my siblings to swim. Right by that fireplace on the rug, he taught us how to play chess and whist.”

There were times when Alexander had left for a few weeks, and she had wondered where he had gone but had not asked, given she was also very private.

“Somehow I believed this cottage was your only home.”

Though he had an elegance to his speech and mannerisms, Alexander always appeared simple and not given to the excess of many gentlemen of wealth and leisure. His small cottage was tastefully furnished, neat and tidy, and had no servants living there. Francie suspected he tended to this private space himself.

A small smile touched his mouth. “This is just a small slice of my world. I feel here is one of the only places I can exist and be true to myself.”

And so it is for me, she silently said. How odd that they also shared this love of nature between themselves. The fierce sense that she would miss Alexander once she departed Derbyshire lodged against her heart. Would she ever see this man again once she left? This was unsettling. They were gradually revealing more of their inner selves to each other. This was particularly significant because they had maintained such a cautious stance for a lengthy period, carefully guarding this aspect of their lives. She felt peculiarly uncertain and vulnerable. A massive bark sounded from outside.

“Ah, it seems Samson is ready to return inside.”

Alexander stood and went to open the door, and his dog enthusiastically dashed into the cottage. Without missing a beat, Samson made a beeline for Francie. Almost as if propelled by sheer joy, the dog used his sizable frame to nudge against her and the sofa with a playful bounce. She laughed, patting his head. “How are you, Samson? I have missed you, too.”

Samson let out a low, contented chuff before ambling away from Francie. He moved gracefully toward the hearth, where he lay down, stretching his body out in front of the warm, crackling fire. He lowered his head onto his front paw and closed his eyes, surrendering to the comforting heat.

“Is he sleeping?” Francie asked, her eyes widening in amazement.

Alexander chuckled softly as he returned to his seat on the sofa, which faced the one Francie occupied. “He had a busy morning, chasing several hares across the fields. I could hardly keep up with him.”

“I have always dreamed of having a dog.”

Alexander raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “What stopped you?”

Caught off guard, Francie hesitated. “I ...” She tilted her head to the side, her lips curving into a wistful smile. “I guess I was not brave enough to defy my mother’s strong disapproval.”

“Ah,” Alexander nodded understandingly.

“My older brother, Tobias, however, did not have such qualms,” Francie continued with a smile. “He went against my mother’s wishes and has two magnificent wolfhounds. Unsurprisingly, Mama’s allergy seemed to have disappeared even though dogs were present.”

Alexander’s lips curved in a small smile. “Tobias sounds like quite the rebel.”

“In the best way,” Francie agreed, her mouth softening as she thought about her brother. “He has a son ... I hardly see my nephew, and though I receive frequent updates about his progress through letters, I wish I was there to see the first steps his mother wrote about.”

The awful ache for her own family echoed in her words, and she looked away from Alexander’s intent stare. Francie felt she was sharing too much. Samson let out a soft, sleep-infused *woof* from his warm spot by the fire, almost as if punctuating their conversation about the joys and challenges of canine companionship.

“Why are you not with your family, Francie? Why do you live in a cottage by yourself?”

She froze, her heart pounding. He had never before enquired why she lived alone. Many of their neighbors

presumed she was a young widow. “Perhaps it was simply too risky.”

He arched a questioning brow. “Sometimes, taking the risk brings its own rewards.”

“Yes,” Francie whispered, meeting his gaze. “Sometimes, it really does.” As she stared at the mysterious yet compelling gentleman before her, Francie could not help silently asking ..., *Dare I take another step toward you? What are your innermost secrets, and why do I even want to know them?*

CHAPTER
TWO

Miss Walcott's eyes held the depth of dark emeralds, catching glints of sunlight as she stared at him with that deplorable hint of sadness. Her beautiful eyes should only shine with delight, laughter, passion, and love. He wanted to wipe that sadness from her eyes. This awareness no longer shocked Alexander. Any such reaction to Miss Francie Walcott had faded several months ago. Alexander had simply accepted his extraordinary reaction to her lovely amiability. Still, he had done nothing to pursue the interest she stroke within his body and heart.

A fine tremor went through her elegant frame. Her eyes held too much pain, and Alexander himself grieved the death of his father and sought solace in the woodlands of Derbyshire. She had felt like a kindred soul when they first met. Someone in her life had injured her, and despite not knowing the situation, Alexander wanted to find that person and bury them. Earlier, when he had watched her walking through the woodlands dressed in an elegant yellow gown, Francie seemed like a creature born of the forest itself as she came toward him. His unwitting tormentor had tested his self-restraints these last few months.

A sense of surety overcame him as he watched her casually lean against the sofa. According to the multiple letters

his mother sent him, he needed to secure an heir, and Miss Walcott could be that lady if she would have him. She unexpectedly entered his life at a time when he was least prepared for it, leaving an indelible mark on his heart. Her kindness resonated with him, a soothing balm to the rough edges of his life. Her compassion seemed almost boundless. Her wit was invigorating, spurring conversations that lingered in his thoughts long after they were over. And then there was her smile—effortless and genuine and filled with sparkling allure.

Every interaction with her pulled Alexander deeper. It was as if she cast a spell on him—one woven from strands of grace, good-natures amiability, intelligence, and warmth.

Now, the only thing he needed to confirm was her connections to his world. Instinct warned him he would have to tread carefully. The lady may not be aware of it, but there were times she stared at him with wounded wariness. That very gaze regarded him now with a hint of fright and determination.

“You have a very expressive face, Francie. Please, speak whatever you are in doubt about.”

Her eyes widened, and she laughed, sheepishly tucking a wisp of hair behind her hair. “Some musings are just too mortifying to disclose,” she remarked, punctuating her words with a delicate chuckle. “Only a friend would be privy to such secrets.”

Alexander feigned a wounded expression. “That cuts deep. Are you implying that we aren’t friends?”

She wrinkled her nose endearingly as she responded, “Well, I could confide in a female friend, but sharing those particular secrets with you? That’s a different story!”

Alexander raised an eyebrow in bemusement. “Why the distinction? A friend is a friend, regardless of their gender. Surely the essence of friendship isn’t defined by whether one is male or female.”

She narrowed her gaze contemplatively on him. “I shared something very private and heartbreaking with a good friend ... and she betrayed my confidence.”

There was no mistaking the echoes of remembered pain in her tone.

“I’ll not urge you then,” he said softly. “Know that I would never betray your trust.”

She stared at him for several beats then her expression softened. “I was merely thinking about risks and the rewards that come with it. I also considered the heartache that could follow.” She blew out a sharp breath. “I received a letter from my mother today, summoning me to London.”

What an odd choice of word, as if she had no will to refuse this summons. “You do not seem happy to return. Do you not long for your family?”

“I do,” she said softly. “I know I *must* do what my mother asks to atone for all the hurt I’ve caused.”

Alexander found himself puzzling over what sort of anguish someone as compassionate and tender-hearted as Miss Walcott could possibly inflict upon her family. He was tempted to delve deeper into the matter, but he could sense the emotional barriers beginning to rise in her demeanor, making further inquiry seem intrusive. Francie leaned forward and

plucked the decanter from the walnut table, and took a sip. Her eyes sparkled with such sadness he felt as if he wanted to slay the world. Inside he chuckled ruefully, though he accepted his reaction to her, that he could feel so deeply about a lady still had the power to astonish his senses.

She began to nibble on her lower lip, a behavior Alexander had come to recognize as a telltale sign of her nervousness. Over time, he had noticed this subtle gesture manifesting whenever she felt uneasy or uncertain, and it struck him once again how this simple act revealed a deeper layer of her emotions.

“Tell me what worries you, Francie.”

“There is something I want to do before ... before I commit to the task my mother sets before me.”

Francie pinned him with a fierce stare, and he got the feeling she was afraid.

“Why are you scared?”

“I’m terrified of making reckless decisions once more, yet equally frightened that if I do not act on my feelings, I’ll be haunted by a lifetime of regret.”

“Ah, that’s quite the dilemma you’re in.”

A pained grimace crossed her face. “Yes! It feels wretched and dreadful.”

“What is it that you want to do?”

She laced her fingers together and squeezed. Alexander arched a brow, noting the rising rosy pink in her softly rounded cheeks. He’d not think her a lady given to blushes so readily.

“Tell me,” he said, leaning forward, his heart jerking a harder rhythm.

Her throat worked on a tight swallow, and her entire body stilled. “Do not judge me, *please*.”

“Never would I judge you, Francie.”

For a breath of a moment, they stared at each other, then her mouth gently curved. That smile contained a sense of elegance and passion. Her green eyes sparkled, and she murmured, “I want to have a night of passion with a lover ... only a night.”

She held her breath as she waited for his response. Only silence lingered. Alexander was simply too damn shocked. This was the last thing he had expected. Had he squandered his opportunity to win her affections by proceeding too cautiously. Over the past several weeks, he had aimed to convey his feelings through attentive gestures and meaningful conversations, hoping Francie would recognize his intentions as extending beyond mere friendship. But had he been too subtle, leaving her unaware of the deeper regard he held for her?

“You wish for an affair?” he asked, a bit hoarsely. Alexander forcefully pried open his fingers from the death grip it had on his armchair.

“No,” she exclaimed, catching her breath as she spoke. “An affair suggests an ongoing series of encounters. What I desire is just a single experience of true passion. I want to seize that one moment for myself, to claim something that’s exclusively mine and not given because of duty and obligation. Have I appalled you?”

“Never.”

Relief flushed her cheeks with an even rosier glow. “I know it is very wicked and scandalous of me ... but I have been thinking about this for a few weeks. I know this want came from a place born of loneliness and forgotten dreams, but I pushed it away, determined to never be reckless again. Resisting my natural inclinations has been akin to a slow, torturous demise of my true self. Yet, I know that I must exercise restraint; otherwise, I risk plunging myself into a state of even more irrevocable ruin.”

Bloody hell. What experience had she lived through?
“Francie—”

“I want to experience ... passion ... and desire!” A whimsical sigh left her, and she took another sip from the decanter before setting it down forcefully on the walnut table.

“Eventually, you would experience this with your husband,” he said cautiously.

Her eyes widened, and a brittle laugh escaped her. “While I have no desire to subject myself to that horrid snare, it seems I have little choice but to endure it. Nonetheless, I am acutely aware that I will not discover any genuine passion within my marriage. I would only be fulfilling a duty and obligation.”

Horrid? *By God, who hurt you?* “Loving your husband is a possibility; it does not have to be solely a matter of duty or obligation. Marriage can offer much more than just a contractual agreement or a social expectation. It can be a sanctuary of genuine affection, emotional support, and deeply rooted companionship. I know this because I witnessed it with my sister’s union and the love my father and mother shared. While fulfilling your duty as a wife is important, it’s worth considering that you could also find joy, love, fidelity, and passion within the bonds of matrimony.”

Her mouth trembled with the force of her emotions. Francie tipped her head back and stared at the ceiling for a brief moment. When she looked at Alexander again, doubt and pain glared from her eyes. “I would be a fool to ever think of loving someone again or expecting such a connection that you describe.”

“Again?”

“I loved someone once ... and I thought he loved me.”

He devastated me, remained unsaid, but glared from her eyes. “I am sorry he proved himself to be insincere,” he said gruffly.

Her brows drew together in an agonized expression. There was a sorrow that carried a sense of reluctance in her gaze then her lashes lowered, hiding her emotions from him. “It was three years ago. I do not think of him anymore. Nor do I care to foolishly yearn after love.”

Her revelation had implications for his planned courtship that Alexander couldn't ignore. Francie was not the kind of woman who would readily lower her emotional defenses. She had clearly constructed barriers around her heart from her past experiences and an innate sense of caution. His courtship would need to be crafted with patience and understanding, a gradual dismantling of her defenses rather than ruthlessly pursuing her as was his nature. He would have to show her that his feelings were both serious and sincere.

Moreover, he would need to be attuned to her vulnerabilities, recognizing the moments when she might be willing to take a small risk in opening up to him. It was a delicate balance: pushing too hard could cause her to retreat further behind her walls, yet failing to act decisively might mean missing opportunities to deepen their connection.

There were many ladies on the marriage mart who would readily marry Alexander. But it was this lady before him who seemed to like and appreciate him without knowing of his wealth and power in the *ton* that he wanted. What if she knew he was a duke? Would Francie still speak so frankly and endearingly with him? His gut said yes. She was too genuine to act with artifice. “I never suspected you would feel like this, Francie.”

Her expression grew stark, and their gazes collided. “You would not know of it, would you? Have we not been very careful to only speak about mundane things? Do we truly know each other?”

Alexander stared at her, wondering if she realized the wall had been fortified by her. Each instance when he had probed for more details about her, Francie would retreat and stare at him with pained wariness. She would then change the conversation to impersonal matters, and he had allowed it. Could he stand to continue doing so when she spoke of taking a damn lover? Something harsh burned at the back of his throat. “We do not speak of many things, but I know you.”

A complicated look and a dash of pain flashed across Francie’s eyes, “I—”

“I have seen you many times in the woods walking with your face buried in a book. You delight in the written words, and you do own to a romantic nature, for I have seen you twirling and laughing when something good happens in your story.”

Her entire body faltered into stillness.

“You have a yearning for travel, do not you?”

Something tender and shockingly vulnerable settled on her face. “I have never said so!”

“Does this not reveal the tacit understanding we seem to have of each other? I sense a yearning within you, a deep-rooted desire for exploration and adventure that I hear whenever you speak about the untouched beauty of the Aegean Sea, a place you’ve yet to see. Your eyes widen in wonder as you contemplate the ancient monuments of Egypt and the historic ruins of Rome. You read many travel books even though they are not as exciting as the gothic romances you like to devour. It’s as if your soul is restless, curious, and longing for the unfamiliar. Each travel book you read, you read as if you envision the possibilities for yourself, and each destination represents a unique story yet to be explored. You’re captivated by the idea of standing on soil you’ve never touched, breathing in air tinged with the scents of foreign lands. You fantasize about bustling markets in distant cities and discovering cultures rich in history and complexity. You close your eyes, Francie, and see yourself sailing aboard a ship, trekking through vast wilderness, or finding solace on a secluded ocean at the edge of the world. You have never said these words to me, Francie and I ask you now, am I wrong in my assessment?”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “No,” she said huskily, pressing her fingers over her mouth.

And I vow once you are my wife, I will show you the world, he silently promised her.

“Your compassion is evident, too. When little Tommy twisted his ankle and was terrified of being left alone in the dark forest, you did not hesitate. You carried him on your back for miles, straight to his mother’s doorstep.”

“Tommy is only six years old,” she responded, her eyes shining with emotion. “He wasn’t heavy.”

“Yet you were so exhausted by the ordeal that you did not stir when I carried you back to your home,” Alexander said.

He noticed her pulse quicken, her eyes betraying a rush of memories. She had only extricated herself from his arms when they had reached the threshold of her cottage, her cheeks flushed as she thanked him and retreated into her home.

“You trust me,” he said, his voice tinged with a bold assurance. “You rely on me. You consider me a friend—perhaps even more. When you were worn out and emotionally drained, you asked Mrs. Benton to summon me. The moment you saw me, your eyes sparkled with a sense of relief, and when I held you, you immediately fell asleep. The chocolate cake you baked for your birthday told me more about your selflessness than words ever could. And when Mrs. Portman was in labor, you stayed by her side for three sleepless days and nights. Even though you were emotionally overwhelmed—you broke down more than she did—you stayed because she needed you. We may never discuss our pasts or articulate our hopes for the future, Francie, but we know each other. We understand one another.”

Alexander’s words hung in the air, letting her realize their attachment went beyond mere acquaintance or friendship—they truly had a bond built on trust and a deep understanding of each other’s true selves. As if she could not bear his stare, Francie lurched to her feet and rushed to the large windows. The sky had darkened, and the winds and rains raged outside. Even if she felt the urge to run away from this encounter, the storm would not allow it. And by God, nor would Alexander allow it.

A fine tremor cascaded down her back, and she leaned her forehead against the cool windows. Alexander rose and walked over, standing a mere breath behind her.

“Would you take a lover with no cares for your reputation?”

“What reputation?” she murmured wretchedly. “I planned to be discreet.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

Her shoulders shook with her shaky inhalation. “I ... I thought about Sir Hanley. He called upon me a few times, and I have detected his interest. I must return to London in a few days, and I ... I wanted this moment before I departed because once I am there ... I can never think of doing something so reckless again.”

Something cold and savage moved through Alexander’s heart. He closed his eyes, shuddering inside, holding back the tide of feeling. “Look at me.”

“No,” she said softly.

“Why not?”

“I am afraid of what I will see in your eyes.”

He peered at her nape, leaning so close he was certain she felt the warmth of his breath on her skin. Her elusive fragrance of lavender filled his lungs. “I would not judge you for wanting to take a lover, Francie.”

“Most would think me a wanton, ungovernable tart for admitting it.”

How vulnerable she sounded. Her delicate body was still trembling faintly.

“I am not most,” he said, just as softly. “Nor do I ascribe to the hypocritical notions many hold. You confided in me your desire for a lover, knowing full well I would never betray your trust. Now, look at me.”

She lifted her forehead from the window and turned to face him. Francie leaned against the windows, tilting her face upward to meet his stare. Her mouth quivered, and her gaze seemed uncertain. Her eyes searched his face for long moments, and whatever she saw eased the tension from her shoulders and the wounded look in her eyes.

The arch of her eyebrows, the color of her eyes, the shape of her lips, and the gentle curve of her cheeks—each detail of her had been imprinted in his mind and heart this past year. Unable to resist, Alexander reached out to touch her. His thumb gently traced the delicate curve of her lower lip, and as if responding to his caress, a captivating blush spread across her face, reaching down to her neck.

He moved his thumb up to rest against the tender curve of her throat, where he could feel the frenzied rhythm of her heartbeat pulsing beneath his touch. He pressed a kiss to her brow, and her lashes fluttered close for a long moment. Slightly lowering his lips to the corner of her mouth, he said, “If you are to have a lover, that man will only be me.”

CHAPTER
THREE

I *f you are to have a lover, that man will only be me.*

Those shocking words settled between them, and Francie dazedly wondered if *this* was the outcome she had secretly hoped. When she read the letter from her mother urging her to marry a gentleman willing to overlook her scandal and ruined reputation, Francie felt a keen sense of loss, even though she would gain from her mother's machination.

Marrying Earl of Beresford, a gentleman who was thirty-five years her senior, would help Francie reclaim her position in society and grant her the comfort of children. But she would lose this attachment with Mr. Crawford. The delightful walks in the woodlands, rowing on the lake, playing with Samson and birdwatching would be no more. Such a friendship would not be tolerated by her new husband. That sense of loss had driven Francie here while thoughts of a passionate night before submitting to duty had whirled in her thoughts.

If you are to have a lover, that man will only be me.

Another never-before-felt delicate tendril of heat spun through Francie's body, and her heart shuddered in warning. A helpless feeling of desire coursed through her body, and she stared at him helplessly. He kissed the corner of her mouth, and his rousing scent invaded her lungs. Unfamiliar emotions

twisted through Francie, and she pressed a hand against the cool glass of the windows. She was sharply aware of him in a manner she had never felt before.

You trust me ... you rely on me ...

The truth of his words had petrified her. Francie never wanted to be vulnerable with another man again, especially one who provoked new and unexplored feelings. She forced another breath into her lungs. Alexander's eyes were exceptionally focused and burned with passion as he stared at her.

There was a shocking surety in his gaze, and her heart started beating more unevenly.

He wants me. How did I not see this desire before? Or had she not wanted to see it?

Humor and tenderness darkened his silver eyes. "I will not let you return to your cottage tonight. Stay with me, and I will keep you warm while the storm rages outside."

A heady feeling rushed through her, a hot and delicious tingle low down in her body. Her throat tight, she whispered, "Yes."

He cupped her chin and lifted her face up to his regard. "Why do you still look scared?"

Oddly, she could not bear lying to him, so she confessed, "Because I have realized how much I have wanted you, and that deep in my heart I wanted this one stolen moment to be with you ... someone I foolishly trust though I know I should not."

A rough, low, and hungry sound spilled from him. The warm, strong hands cupping her cheeks trembled. "I'll prove to you that you can trust me without fear, Francie."

She wanted this one night to fill all the places that had longed for so many things but had remained unfulfilled. Then, the warm memory of it will keep her contented for many years to come.

Please ... let this moment forever live within my heart.

Alexander lowered his head slightly and pressed his mouth to hers. Her stomach fluttered with nerves, but her heart ached with passionate desire. A nip at her lower lip, then she parted her lips in a soft moan of complete surrender, and his tongue slipped into the depths of her mouth. A small noise of shock and pleasure broke from her throat.

This kiss felt indecent ... lascivious ... yet so perfect. Francie accepted the sweet carnal glide of his tongue against hers. She had been kissed several times before by the gentleman she had eloped with to marry and only met with heartbreak. Francie thought desire had felt warm and pleasant with a heady feeling of anticipating the unknown.

How wrong I have been.

Alexander tasted like a summer storm and dark passion. Her dazed thoughts burned away under the lash of desire. He kissed her with scorching expertise, sucking on her tongue before releasing her mouth from his provocative assault. His lips seared a path down her neck and her shoulders. She arched her neck, allowing him to suck at the skin right above her pounding pulse. Alexander stepped away from her, and she held his gaze. His cheekbones were flushed, and the primal look in his eyes had her heart thumping. Francie felt weak with longing for this man.

He stooped and reached under her dress. She pressed the flat of her palms against the cool windows as if the feel of the

glass would center her against the sensations coursing through her veins.

Can he hear my heartbeat?

She bit her lower lip harder, moaning softly at the decadent heat his fingers evoked as they trailed up her legs to her shin and higher to unpin her garters. He rolled down her stockings, slowly and sensually, and tugged them from her feet. Her knee-length drawers were removed next and tossed to the side. Alexander lifted one of her feet and kissed the spot right behind her knee. Francie was painfully aware of their wanton pose against the windows. Her body blushed brightly when he pushed her dress upward and kissed her quivering belly. He nudged her legs open, dragged his mouth down and kissed her sex. Her body responded violently with a shudder of alarmed delight.

Is this possible?

How wicked it felt ... that slow, hot glide of his tongue over her folds. Unbearable heat twisted low in her belly, and the very place he licked *ached*. His teeth scraped against that secret spot before he tenderly sucked it. Francie cried out, pressing her back against the glass as if to escape the piercing sensations in her clitoris. His fiendishly clever tongue pleased her until she convulsed, waves of pleasure tearing her body apart.

I never knew it would be like this ...

He did not let up his carnal ministrations, skimming his fingers up her thighs to touch the intimate core of her before slipping that finger deep inside. It felt strange yet so wonderful. He moved that finger, and something twisted low in her belly. A second finger joined the first, stretching her

almost painfully. His mouth moved over her clitoris in tandem with his fingers, wreaking delightful havoc in her body.

“Alexander,” she gasped, her entire body shaking.

The pleasure was too much. The sensations burst over her—bliss so intense that she wildly cried out. Francie distantly became aware he stood and removed her dress and chemise. They fell away from her body. He lifted her into his arms; she gripped his shoulders and buried her blushing face against his throat as he walked with her a few paces to the next room. Alexander carried her to the bed flush against the corner wall opposite the low burning fireplace. It was a little darker there, but she could see the possessive glint in his beautiful eyes and feel the thrum of lust surrounding her like a caged storm waiting to be unleashed.

He set her down gently in the center of the bed, then retreated to remove his clothes. She stared at him with increasing wonder as he took off each article. His body was lean but corded with such beautiful muscles. His manhood appeared flushed and thick, stirring uncertainty they would fit together comfortably.

Alexander padded over, and she reached for him as he came onto the bed, his powerful body coming down on hers. He braced his weight on an elbow and, with the other hand, cupped her cheek, kissing her with passionate tenderness.

She gripped his shoulders, and instincts made her hitch her legs around his thighs, returning his kiss with breathless fervor. He reached between them, and a hard pressure entered where the ache of want was most terrible. His hips pushed, and her body was wet and yielding to his slow but deep invasion.

She pulled her mouth from his, gasping at the sharp pain.

“I am sorry,” he murmured against her mouth, kissing her and distracting her from the awful sting.

Francie’s flesh burned as she adjusted to the thick invasion of his body into hers. Her lover started to move, and she moaned at the pressure. He reached between their bodies and rubbed his thumb over her clitoris. The pleasure was striking. Her body grew even more pliant and accepting of his manhood within her body. His hips withdrew and thrust forward repeatedly. She rocked against him, breathless cries echoing from her lips.

Francie lifted her legs and wrapped them higher around his hips, unintentionally driving him even deeper. She moaned, her nails biting into his sweat-slicked shoulders as he moved deeper and faster within her. Sensuality hazed through her mind, and she kissed him with more passion, eager for the sweet delight whispering through every part of her. They moved to a beautiful carnal rhythm, his manhood drawing out, then plunging deep. Again. And again. And again until she lost even the ability to moan.

Relentless waves of pleasure engulfed her entire body. Francie wrapped her hands tightly around his neck. Each deep thrust ignited a burst of fire deep down in her stomach until sweet, mind-shattering ecstasy crested, and she unraveled with a sharp cry. With a deep groan, Alexander pulled from her before releasing on her quivering stomach. Panting, he dropped his forehead to hers, pressing a kiss to the bridge of her nose.

Unknown emotions swelled within Francie’s heart.

So this is pleasure and lust and madness ...

Never had she dreamed this was possible with two people coming together in intimacy. She lifted trembling fingers to

touch the corner of his mouth. “Thank you, Alexander. This ... it was wonderful.”

“You speak as if it is over,” he murmured tenderly.

Francie blinked. “It isn’t?”

“No.” Then he kissed her until her mouth felt bruised.

After several moments, he climbed off the bed, and the flickering fire cast dancing shadows over his naked form. He left the room and returned rather quickly with a damp washcloth and cleaned her gently. A fiery blush covered Francie’s entire body, and he smiled. Alexander left the room once more, and when he returned, he held the decanter of brandy. A harsh rumble of thunder sounded, and she jerked. He came down on the bed and assumed a sitting position with his back pressed against the headboard, tugging her into the curve of his arms. The emotions tearing through her were wholly unexpected. A part of her heart that had been closed felt as if it had been forcefully wrenched open.

“You are shaking,” he murmured. “What are you thinking about?”

How could she reveal the weight of her thoughts—that she was on the brink of marrying a man she felt no love for, merely to salvage her tarnished reputation and restore her mother’s good opinion and support? The notion gnawed at her, especially in the wake of the intimacy they had just shared, a connection that had felt as genuine as it was electrifying.

Feeling frustrated yet eager to be closer to Alexander, Francie shifted her position within the comforting yet confining embrace of his arms. She maneuvered herself so that she was sitting on his lap, her knees flanking his hips in a posture that felt simultaneously vulnerable and assertive. It

was as if she wanted to physically hold on to the moment, to keep them both locked in this ephemeral bubble of closeness before reality shattered it.

She gently cupped his cheeks, her fingers lightly touching him as though she were holding something fragile. *Why does it feel like I'm falling ... in love with you?* The awareness reverberated in her heart, and a rush of confusion assailed her. Francie had been here before—she'd felt the stirrings of love in the past, the sense of being emotionally tethered to another. But this was different. The emotions coursing through her now seemed to possess a depth and intensity she'd never experienced before.

She found herself doubting, questioning the authenticity of her own feelings. Could this really be love when it felt so vastly different from what she'd known before? The connection with Alexander felt as if it touched unexplored facets of her heart. It was bewildering and exhilarating all at once.

This wasn't just an emotional flutter, a temporary liking that would eventually wane and settle into something more mundane. No, this felt like something far more profound, something that had the power to upend her life and redefine her understanding of love itself. And that knowledge also petrified her.

"I can feel your heart beating faster and faster, Francie," he murmured.

Her eyes met his, and she hesitated, seeking the courage to voice her own truths. Could she find the strength to be honest, not just with him but also with herself, in this critical moment?

"Alexander," she began tremulously.

His thumb gently brushed against her mouth, which trembled.

“Yes?”

“I know you as well,” she said softly. Her lips met his in a tender kiss, and as she pulled back, her words brushed gently against his mouth. “You are a man filled with compassion, humor, and an extraordinary capacity to love. Yet, you also possess a steely resolve when the situation demands it.”

Another deep kiss before she continued, “I was there when you confronted that unpleasant lord who almost ran over Mr. Merton with his carriage. The viscount might have considered the butcher beneath him, but you defended him without hesitation. Not only did you admonish a lord, but you also helped Mr. Merton back into his shop.”

“So you’ve been watching me outside of the forest, hmm?”

She laughed lightly and kissed him deeply for several seconds. Breaking their embrace, she blushed when she felt the sudden hardness of his manhood brushing against her inner thigh. She continued, her voice tinged with admiration, “And then there was the time Mr. Jackson fell ill and could not work his fields. You discreetly covered their rent for an entire year and made sure their larder was never empty. His eldest daughter couldn’t stop talking about your kindness. She adored you and made your kindness known to everyone who would listen. Whenever I ventured into the woods and wished for company, you would drop whatever you were doing and join me without a second thought. Your selflessness and attention have never been lost on me.”

A slight blush tinged her cheeks as she concluded, “And as a lover, you are simply sublime.”

He plunged his fingers into the silkiness of her hair, pulling her toward him with a blend of urgency and tenderness until their lips met in a fiery kiss. Francie's heart pounded against her ribcage like a frenzied drum. A sense of vulnerability filled her, and it felt as though her heart had cracked open, spilling forth a torrent of pent-up longing for him.

How many nights had she lain alone in her cottage, denying the feelings creeping upon her for this man? How many nights had she wished she was a young lady of society with a good reputation and he was a gentleman who could court her? A yearning so powerful opened, and it felt like an almost physical ache coursing through her veins, flooding her senses.

Somehow, her lover reached between the tight fits of their bodies and positioned his length at her opening. Once he was tucked at her sex, he moved his hand in a warming caress to her hips, gripped her flesh and urged her downward. The penetration was deep and immediate. Francie moaned into his mouth at the erotic bite of pain swirling within the deep pleasure. She instinctively lifted her hips and glided back down on his manhood. His groan vibrated inside her, and she broke their kiss to gasp at the sensation.

“Ride me,” he growled.

“Help me,” she whispered achingly.

He wrapped his arms around her, caging her into his embrace, and used his strength to rock her hard and deep onto his cock. He did so over and over until Francie trembled with the force of passion sweeping her upward. They burned with raw passion for several minutes before another powerful wave of pleasure shattered her senses. Alexander moved, spinning

her so that her back pressed into the bed, thrusting deep a few times before pulling from her to release his seed.

Their harsh breaths sounded faint in the background of the rain that still sleeted down outside. He rolled and hugged her against his chest, and she contentedly listened to his heart.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Francie and Alexander lay sprawled on a blanket, surrounded by the natural beauty of the lakeside setting. The sun painted the sky with warm hues while the lake shimmered as if sprinkled with diamonds. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees, and the occasional chirp of birds created a peaceful symphony.

Between them lay Alexander's sketchbook, its pages filled with detailed drawings of birds he had observed in the surrounding woodlands.

"These sketches are absolutely stunning, Alexander," Francie said, her eyes widening in admiration as she flipped through the pages of his sketchbook. "This one is my favorite." She stared at the lifelike drawing of a pair of birds huddled together. "I cannot explain it, but it seems as if they are connected."

"A love story between birds," he murmured, his eyes gleaming.

"A love story?"

"When it comes to courtship, birds go to great lengths, employing intricate and flamboyant displays to both allure a prospective partner and outshine their rivals. Some are very

loyal to each other when they get together to mate and build their nests.”

Francie smiled and turned the page. “There are dozens of different birds here. I would not think there are so many in England.”

“In my travels, I also take time to visit nature and engage in birdwatching. I sketch and paint as much as I can,” Alexander said, a note of fond remembrance entering his voice. “This right here is a pair of swans, and these are goldfinches.”

Francie turned her head slightly to give him a sidelong glance, her interest piqued. “Have you ... traveled to many places?”

“Oh, a fair number, I’d say,” Alexander said, his mouth curving in a smile. “From the cloud forests of Costa Rica to the rugged landscapes of Australia, and even the tranquil shores of the Mediterranean. Each place offers a unique backdrop for observing different species of birds.”

Francie’s eyes widened. Somehow, she had never thought he would be so capable in his traveling? He has always seemed a very simple and straightforward country gentleman, even if he owned to elegant manners. She wondered at Alexander’s background and connections. It hovered on her tongue to query, but the fear that he might query about hers stopped Francie. Instead, she asked, “What is the most exotic bird you’ve ever seen on your travels?”

Alexander chuckled softly. “That’s a tough question. But if I had to pick one, I’d probably say the Resplendent Quetzal. I saw it in Guatemala. The vibrant colors and long tail feathers

are lovely. It's as if someone dipped a bird in a palette of greens, blues, and reds."

She could almost picture it in her mind, a dazzling bird set against the backdrop of a lush forest. "That must've been an incredible sight to witness."

"It was," he confirmed. "Look at it here." Alexander reached over and turned his book several pages.

Francie stared in breathless wonder at the image depicted. It was just as he described. "Your talent is beautiful," she whispered, awed. "I wish I could have seen this myself."

"The beauty of birdwatching is that you don't always have to go to far-off places to find something remarkable. Even local woods and parks can be treasure troves for bird enthusiasts. I will show you one day."

Francie smiled. *If only this could be true.* "It sounds like a beautiful way to interact with nature and a chance to find something extraordinary every day."

"Precisely so," Alexander said, his eyes meeting hers. "And sometimes, the most extraordinary experiences come when you least expect them, like stumbling upon a rare bird—or meeting someone your heart constantly longs for."

Her heart stuttered, and they stared at each other for a few beats. Memories of the long hours loving each other rose in her thoughts. The wicked gleam in his silver gaze assured Francie he thought of the same. Blushing, she glanced down at the book, turned the page, and arched a brow. "Why does this one have a fish in its mouth?"

"Ah, that is a kingfisher. He is trying to entice a mate."

She laughed. "Truly?"

Alexander reached out to tuck a wisp of her hair behind her ears. “The courtship among kingfishers is notably straightforward and devoid of extravagant displays. When a female kingfisher lands on a perch within a male’s designated area, the male assesses her presence. If he finds her a suitable mate, he embarks on a succinct yet poignant courtship gesture. He takes to the air, skillfully catches a fish, and then flies back to present his catch to her. The offering of the fish serves as both a gift and a testament to his hunting prowess—a promise of reliable sustenance for the potential offspring. If the female is receptive to his advances, she makes her intentions known by inching closer to him along the perch. If she is disinterested in his efforts, she will not move. Once the female takes the fish from the male’s beak, she is accepting his courtship.”

“I wish I could make these observations myself.”

“One day you will.”

The promise in his tone shocked her, and for a moment, she did not know what to say. Feeling suddenly nervous and uncertain, she directed her attention to the book. He said nothing at her sudden fluster, merely smiled, and shifted closer to flip the pages.

Alexander pointed at one sketch. “This is the Northern Flicker. And over here,” he turned the page, “is a Black-capped Chickadee.”

Francie listened intently, enchanted both by the intricate sketches and the way Alexander’s face lit up as he talked about them.

He picked up a pair of binoculars from beside the blanket. “Would you like to do some birdwatching? The late afternoon is a great time to spot some interesting species.”

“Is that the reason your cottage is so far from everyone else? I am your closest neighbor, and I am a few miles away.”

“I’ve always found solace in observing the natural world, and birds, in particular, fascinate me. I also enjoy being alone. Usually, I am very busy and have an active social life. The pace of the countryside is a soothing balm.”

An active social life? “Are you a businessman?”

“Of sorts.”

Why was his response so mysterious?

He handed her the binoculars, and as she took them, their fingers brushed. As if he had been waiting for this moment, he tugged her closer and kissed her. It was shockingly tender and sweet. Tears burned the backs of her eyes at the awful longing she felt for him. She broke their kiss. “Alexander?”

“Yes?”

“I ...” Do you plan to ever marry? Francie wanted to ask, even if it was pointless to wonder. She had to marry a man of reputable connections and wealth. Her mother had already made arrangements that she could not disappoint. Francie felt as if she had been too long out in the cold, and she wanted to be with her family without worrying about wagging tongues and condemning stares. Her chest hurt with the effort to keep her thoughts private. Instead of asking, she kissed him deeply and passionately.

“Are we to have more than one moment then?” he murmured against her mouth.

Francie nodded enthusiastically, and he chuckled, dragged her onto his chest, and kissed her again.

I am foolish enough to want forever with you.

The realization shocked her, and inside, she grew angry at herself. As if he sensed the shift of her emotions, he ended their kiss and peered into her gaze.

“Let’s find those birds,” he said gruffly.

They took turns using the binoculars, and Alexander pointed out various birds perched on the branches of distant trees or soaring high above the lake. Every now and then, Francie would spot a bird, and Alexander would identify the species.

After some time, Alexander locked eyes with Francie. “I want to do something; will you join me?”

Francie raised her eyebrows, curious. “What’s that?”

“A swim,” he declared, a sensual glint in his eyes.

“In our clothes?”

“We are alone for miles. Naked will do.”

Though she blushed, Francie laughed at the audacious suggestion. Alexander sprang to his feet and extended his hand toward her. With a laugh, Francie took it, and together, they ran toward the lake. Without a moment’s hesitation, they leaped into the water.

The lake welcomed them with a refreshing embrace, and she allowed the water to close over her head for several beats before she surfaced.

“Who taught you to swim?”

“My brother, Tobias. Mama disapproved, but he finally gave in to my wheedling.”

“As all older brothers should.”

As they swam, Francie laughed and chatted with him, feeling as if the outside world had paused just for them, allowing her one night of passion to stretch on indefinitely.

“I will be leaving tomorrow,” she said softly. *I might never come back.* However, she could not bring herself to say so.

“To London?”

She swallowed tightly. “Yes.”

“I have business there in the upcoming weeks.”

Her heart lurched. “Please do not suggest that we might see each other there!”

Alexander stared at her intently before he drew her into his arms. “I do not like this look of fright and sadness that enters your eyes, Francie.”

Oh!

“I do not like to feel it in my heart either,” she said, wrapping her arms around his nape.

“Will you tell me what it is that hurts you so?”

She stiffened and tried to move away, but he held her hips, anchoring her in place. Her heart tumbled over painfully inside his chest. “Perhaps one day,” she said.

Alexander cupped her face and brushed his mouth against hers. He did not use words to tell her she could trust him even with her darkest secrets, only kisses and gentle touches. She melted against him, flowing with his direction to wrap her legs around his waist. One of his hands brushed lightly over the curve of her hips, then delved underneath the water and the space between her thighs, finding a spot so sensitive that she gasped. He notched his cock at her already slick entrance.

“Hold me tight, and do not let me go, Francie,” he whispered roughly against her well-kissed and swollen lips.

Why did she feel as if he spoke beyond this moment? She tightened her arms around his nape and held on when he gripped her hips and dragged her down even as his hips surged upward. His hard and deep possession made her sex ache, but it also felt glorious. They moved passionately, the water lapping around their bodies. Each desperate stroke pushed Francie closer and closer to bliss. She sank her teeth into the muscle of his shoulder as exquisite sensations sliced through her body, and the tight coil in her belly broke as waves of pleasure shook her. He groaned, thrusting his fingers through her wet hair to slant his mouth over hers with lustful greed. Alexander kissed her deeply, his other hand wrapped tightly around her back as he poured his release deep inside her body.

Their coupling was fast and wild, very different from the leisurely way he had taken her to pleasure in the cottage. He broke their kiss and stared at her. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she said softly, her cheeks heating.

He eased from her body, and she leaned against his chest. Francie laughed when he dropped back into the water, floating with her laying atop him. They stayed like that for a long time before a yawn caught her by surprise.

“Let’s go back inside. I will cook for you,” he murmured.

“Another stew?”

“I will roast a quail.”

Finally, they swam back to the banking, and he helped her from the water. Alexander clasped their fingers together and tugged her toward the cottage.

“I ... I must go home,” she said.

He peered down at her. “Stay with me for another night. Or I can stay with you at your cottage.”

She was suddenly filled with a desperate longing that threatened to overwhelm her good sense. “I have a cook and a maid.”

“Ah, the dreaded fear of servants’ gossip. Even so buried in the countryside, they have such powers.”

Francie bit into her lower lip. “Yes.”

“Stay with me.”

“It was meant to be one night,” she whispered.

“Is that enough for you?”

Her heart jerked, and something hot and turbulent went through her body. “No.”

A slow, lazy smile swept across his face. “It is not enough for me either, Francie.”

He laced his fingers through hers, his thumb stroking across her palm. Her throat tight with emotions, she held his hands as they went inside his cottage. One more night, she promised herself, and then she would leave for London and resolve never to see him again.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Francie's stray strands of hair had somehow made their way into Alexander's mouth. With a smile, he delicately removed the few errant locks, taking care not to wake her as he gently shifted her off his shoulders. Despite his caution, she stirred, muttering a vague protest as though aggrieved by the disruption of her peaceful slumber.

For a long moment, Alexander found himself captivated by her sleeping form. His heart pounded in his chest, fueled by an awareness so intense it felt almost like physical heat. It was her, and the realization washed over him with the finality of an irrefutable truth—it could be no one else.

Sure, there were mysteries yet to unravel, depths of personality and layers of experience that they had yet to explore in one another. But as he watched her sleep, he was consumed by a comforting thought—they had an entire lifetime ahead to dig deep, to learn, to challenge, and to grow together with shared moments of passion and laughter. He would not allow her to leave without knowing his feelings and his family's background. Perhaps then she would open up to him about the sadness in her eyes.

The distant clatter of carriage wheels grew increasingly louder, causing Alexander to frown. He wasn't expecting any

visitors, and only a select few—primarily his family—were privy to the fact that he occasionally sought refuge in this secluded cottage to escape the clamor and demands of his daily life.

Careful not to disturb Francie, who lay entangled in the sheets, her face a portrait of serene sleep, Alexander eased himself out of the bed. He swiftly pulled on his trousers and moved stealthily, his feet making minimal contact with the wooden floor as he approached the front door of his rustic hideaway.

As he opened the door, he was greeted by the sight of a grand carriage parked just beyond the threshold. The vehicle bore his family's emblem, and a team of four strong horses stood at the ready, their breath visible in the cool air. Almost immediately, his brother descended from the carriage, alighting onto the ground with an air of urgency.

The unexpected arrival of his brother signaled that something significant was afoot. While part of him was annoyed at the intrusion into this time with Francie, another part couldn't help but feel a surge of curiosity and concern. What could be so important as to warrant such an abrupt visit? Thankfully, his brother did not seem overly worried.

Alexander closed the door. "What are you doing here, James? Is all well with Mother and Henrietta?"

His brother arched a brow and pointedly stared at the door Alexander closed behind him. Of course, he would not allow his brother inside the cottage, especially when Francie still deeply slept, exhausted from their night of glorious excess. His brother reached into a satchel he carried on his shoulder and removed a folded piece of paper. He came forward and held them out to Alexander.

“What is this?”

“The report you wanted on Lady Francie Walcott.”

Alexander stiffened. “*Lady?*”

“Yes,” his brother said tightly. “A lady.”

Naturally, Alexander should have recognized that she was a lady. It had been evident in the very fabric of her behavior. Her manners were impeccable, each gesture executed with a grace that spoke volumes. And then there was her walk—a unique blend of poise and sensuality that commanded his attention without demanding it.

Silver eyes, very much like his own, narrowed. “I thought it a mere slip when you asked for information on Miss Francie Walcott. She is the daughter of an earl. Her brother is the current Earl of Blade.”

Alexander looked behind him at the door. She was the daughter of an earl. A wide smile touched his mouth.

“Do not think it,” his younger brother warned. “There is a reason I traveled to meet you instead of waiting for you to come to town and see this report. The lady is not suitable!”

“You do not know what I think in regard to her,” he said icily. “Do not be presumptuous.”

“I will damn well be presumptuous. Clearly, you did not re-read the letter you sent. You extolled her beauty and wit and smiles for the entire damn page. I had to hasten here to warn you that her reputation is sullied beyond repair, and you cannot associate with such a lady.”

A cold feeling lodged inside his chest. “What did you say?”

“She is damn well ruined. She left a huge scandal in town and—”

A sound from beyond the door froze him and cut off James’s words.

“Someone is here?” James said, his expression a mask of astonishment. “This cottage is your treasured space. You have never taken anyone here ...”

“Wait here,” Alexander commanded, opened the door, and went inside.

His lover stood there, her bare toes curled onto the wooden floor. Francie’s lips were delightfully swollen from his kisses, and her dress seemed as if it was hastily put on.

“You are awake,” he said gruffly.

“Yes. Who were you speaking with just now?”

Alexander stilled and stared at her. Her eyes were wide and had a vulnerable and heartbreaking look. They also burned with unshed tears and mistrust. *Bloody hell*. She heard their conversation. Alexander raked his fingers through his hair. “It is my brother, James. Francie—”

“He was speaking about me.”

“Yes.”

“You investigated me?”

He took a steady breath. He would not lie to her. “Yes.”

She clasped her arms across her middle as if they were the only things holding her together. He could see the curl of fright in her eyes and something more unfathomable. “You know about my scandal and that I am irrevocably ruined in society’s eyes.”

“Yes.”

A low sound of hurt came from her, and he closed his eyes.
“Francie—”

“If you wanted to know something about me, Mr. Crawford, you only needed to ask! Not pry into my private life.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “The information gathered was mostly public knowledge. My man would not have deeply intruded in your life.”

She flinched, and he silently cursed. He was making a mess. “Allow me to explain—”

She tossed him a glare of such anger and hurt that his words died away. Francie rushed to pluck up her shoes, then hurtled by him as if the devil chased her. Once outside, without acknowledging his shocked brother, she ran down the few steps and into the woods like a gazelle.

“Francie!” Alexander chased after her.

“Xander,” his brother shouted, calling him by his monicker.

Alexander ignored his brother, sprinting down the muddy path toward his lover. He slipped, virulently cursing when he dropped on his arse into the mud, splatters landing on his naked chest.

Francie froze, glancing over her shoulder, indecision flashing in her eyes.

“Please do not chase me,” she said, her voice carrying clearly to him. “It does not matter if you investigated me. Now you know about my disgrace. This ... whatever we shared has happened, and I must move on. Thank you for all our

incredible moments. I ... they were wonderful, and I would not trade them for anything.”

“Do not leave.”

Her expression crumbled for a moment. “I am going to London because I am to marry soon.”

Shock stabbed his heart. “You are engaged?”

“Yes,” she said after a moment’s hesitation, whirled around and rushed away.

I received a letter from my mother today, summoning me to London. Understanding of why she chose those words dawned on him. It was the way of society to render ruined young ladies respectable with arranged marriages. Francie’s family had arranged her marriage, and now their time of bliss had come to an end. Anger and denial roared through Alexander, and he pushed to his feet. *Francie.* Her name was a silent whisper of hunger in his thoughts. Though he wanted to, he did not chase her any further. His heart drummed as he went back to his brother, who watched him with a stupefied expression in his eyes.

“You were just chasing a lady,” James said incredulously.

“Tell me everything you learned about Lady Francie,” Alexander said tightly, ignoring everything else.

James’s eyes widened, and he looked off into the woodland. “Was that *her*?”

“James!”

His brother’s eyes flashed with blatant disapproval. “I do hope it is not her.”

“Why the hell does it matter?” he snapped.

“Because I have never seen you look at a lady like that before, much less chase after her. And if that woman is Lady Francie, let me assure you, brother, you absolutely cannot marry her. Our mother would faint at the very notion.”

Everything inside him stilled. “Are you presuming to tell me what I can do?”

His brother sighed. “The rumor says the lady is already married.”

The shock of those words was like a punch in Alexander’s gut. Instantly, he dismissed those assertions. He clenched his jaw tightly and did his damndest to retain his composure. “She is not.”

“I tell you that she is!” James waved the sheaf of paper. “It is all here from what I have gathered. Read it.”

Alexander took the papers, but instead of looking through them, he tore them into several small pieces.

“What are you doing?”

“I should not have damn well asked you to pry into her life. Whatever is there is clearly painful, and I should have been more patient. I wanted to know her background, to see if she was suitable to be my wife, and that is why I foolishly asked you to have her investigated. I should have damn well waited and allowed for her to tell me what she wants me to know.”

“Most of what is there is all public knowledge,” James said tightly. “Her brother is the powerful Earl of Blade. Even with his influence, he has not been able to suppress the rumors and scandal attached to her name. You did nothing wrong, and now you know she cannot become your duchess. The rumor is that no one would have her, even with her brother’s connections.”

Now he understood the wistfulness, hunger, and sadness he saw in her eyes when she watched the children playing in the village square. Almost all young ladies of society entered the marriage mart to find a husband and build their own family. His sister Henrietta often dreamed about her debut in society and the match she would one day make. How it must have pained Francie's heart to have that future ripped away in a cloud of scandal. The *ton* could be ridiculous in how they examined and dissected those they believed offended their sensibilities.

He recalled that she said a friend betrayed her, and Alexander suspected it had to do with her ruination. By God, how she must have been deeply wounded. A tight feeling twisted in his chest, and an odd sense of urgency pushed Alexander. "I need to return to London right away. There can be no delays."

"By God, do not say you are still chasing her!" James said. "Who are you? Where is the cold, proud fellow that I know and love?"

Ignoring his brother, Alexander rushed inside to dress properly for the journey ahead. He did not care about her scandal. He only cared that he did not lose this woman from his life.

Only an hour after reaching back to her cottage, Francie had asked for the carriage her brother provided for her use to be ready. After a hasty bath, she departed from the small, idyllic village she had been obscurely living in for almost two years. Her throat burning with unshed tears, she lowered the carriage curtains and stopped looking behind her. While her presence

had been somewhat of a mystery to the residents, Francie had lived without undue scrutiny and speculation into her life. She had even formed a few odd friendships.

Francie had always kept back a part of herself, fearing to reveal she was the daughter of an earl and had powerful connections to high society.

Well, now he knows ... and that I am considered a disgrace.

Several times she had grappled with telling Alexander and Mrs. Benton and a few others. It was likely that her neighbors would have grasped the circumstances of her situation, as it was a common practice for daughters of high society who had faced scandal to be exiled to the countryside until their indiscretions faded from public memory. Alternatively, they might regain their standing by marrying someone influential, compelling society to reluctantly overlook their past errors.

Perhaps she would never have told Alexander about the scandal. After all, they were not from the same world. She frowned. Then how had he learned about it? Francie leaned against the squabs, wondering why she felt so wretched and mortified that Alexander had learned about her past. Why did she feel this sense of betrayal that he had pried into her privacy? Worse, why did she feel so mortified that he knew she was ruined? She swiped the tears that ran down her cheeks, hating the sense of hollowness creeping through her heart.

Was I silly to run away without hearing his explanation? What if

Francie bit into her lower lip. What would be the use of wishing for things that were impossible? It was already a miracle the Earl of Beresford was willing to overlook her

tarnished reputation. Her brother had expended great effort to restore the honor of the Blade title after the multiple scandals the previous earls created. Many had wagered among themselves that Tobias would also be a disgrace to the title. But he had surprised everyone, and soon their respect had grown.

It was Francie who had disappointed his hard work and created a scandal of such magnitude it felt as if she could never recover from it.

Oh, why had I been so foolish to elope?

CHAPTER
SIX

The grand ballroom of Marchioness Darnley was a dazzling tableau of splendor and sophistication. A sea of glittering gowns and finely tailored suits filled the expansive space, moving in intricate patterns around the polished marble floor as couples danced. The evening would undoubtedly be hailed as a crowning success for the Marchioness. Her standing as a premier hostess would be cemented, and invitations to her future events would become even more coveted.

This was Francie's first ball since her return to London. As she navigated through the throng of people, she couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the sensory overload. The air had grown thick and oppressive, almost as if the atmosphere was saturated with the weight of luxury and excess. The mingling fragrances of lavender, rose, and bergamot. A dozen other scents swirled around her, each perfume vying for dominance in a battle that seemed to materialize at the back of her nostrils, threatening an imminent sneeze.

The press of bodies made the room uncomfortably warm, and she felt a thin layer of perspiration forming on her back and temples. Occasionally, she caught snippets of conversation that were as perfumed as the air—polite platitudes, social

niceties, and rehearsed flattery that seldom veered toward genuine sentiment.

Francie stood on the sidelines, wishing she was back in Derbyshire with Alexander and Samson. At his cottage, she had felt unburdened by social pretense. She felt oddly disconnected amidst all the glamour and extravagance—like a spectator in a theatre, watching a grand spectacle unfold but not feeling part of it.

This was all a part of her mother's plan to assimilate back into society's fold. A place Francie had hungered to be since her reckless elopement was leaked to gossipmongers. Yet this life ... it did not feel like it belonged to her anymore.

A good number of her erstwhile friends now conspicuously snubbed her, going out of their way to publicly display their disapproval to invite gossip from onlookers. The experience was both wearying and irksome, made all the more painful by the memory of how these women had once greeted her with genuine warmth, only to now turn their backs in frosty disdain.

“You are sad,” a soft voice murmured.

Smiling, Francie turned to face her sister-in-law, Lizzie, the Countess of Blade. She was resplendent in a dark golden gown, her red hair piled atop her head in a riot of becoming curls.

“Oh, Lizzie, I have missed you,” she murmured.

“You need not have missed us,” Lizzie said in her forthright manner. “Tobias and I invited you to live with us, and you refused!”

Francie sighed. “The scandal—”

“Hang the scandal! Have you forgotten that Tobias once tossed me over his shoulders and walked with me that way from a crowded ballroom? We are already infamous.”

Francie smiled and did not bother to protest that a scandal attached to a gentleman in comparison to one attached to a lady carried vastly different consequences.

“The Duke of Merrick!”

The announcement echoed through the ballroom, eliciting a buzz of excited whispers among the attendees. The men straightened their posture while the ladies fluttered their fans more vigorously, each speculating what could have brought the duke to this event.

“Why is everyone suddenly restless?” Francie asked.

“Hmm,” Lizzie said, elegantly unfurling her fan to hide a knowing smile. “Society’s most elusive and sought-after duke has decided to grace us with his presence, has he?”

“Why is he reclusive?” Francie inquired, her eyebrows arching with curiosity.

“The duke is a complicated man, it seems, or so the whispers say,” Lizzie explained, leaning in as if sharing a secret. “You’ve been in Derbyshire, so you would not be familiar with him. He’s an incredibly handsome man, the kind that has young ladies practically hurling their handkerchiefs at his feet in hopes he might retrieve them and grant them a dance. But he’s notoriously cold and aloof; the man rarely, if ever, dances at these events. So, one does have to wonder—what brings him here tonight?”

Just as Lizzie finished her sentence, a tangible ripple of gossip surged through the crowd. As much as she wanted to consider herself above such idle chatter, Francie couldn’t resist

the temptation. She craned her neck subtly, trying to get a glimpse of the man who had stirred such excitement. And there he was, stepping into the room as if he owned it, capturing the attention of every eye yet seemingly indifferent to the collective gaze. His clothes were faultlessly tailored to his lean, graceful physique, and he cut quite a dashing figure in his black trousers, well-fitted matching jacket, and an exquisitely designed silver and blue waistcoat. Midnight black hair complimented his lean, strong features, and unfathomable silver eyes scanned the crowd.

“Oh my,” a lady Francie recognized as Lady Clara murmured admiringly, “He is quite handsome, isn’t he?”

A wave of confusion swept over Francie, momentarily clouding her thoughts. It took several heartbeats for her to accept that Mr. Alexander Crawford, the man she’d given her body and love, was none other than the elusive Duke of Merrick. Emotions swirled within her—alarm and hurt being the most prominent, burning in her chest like hot coals.

Why would he hide his identity?

Before she could spiral further into her thoughts, she caught herself.

Have I not done the same? Have I not kept my own secrets?

Yes, she had withheld parts of herself from him for reasons she considered valid. Could she then blame him for doing the same? Perhaps Alexander had his reasons, just as she had hers. And yet, despite this rational line of thought, a lingering sense of hurt refused to dissipate entirely.

Francie realized everything she thought she knew about Mr. Crawford—or should she say, the Duke of Merrick—had

irrevocably changed in just a few moments. The ground beneath her seemed to shift, throwing into question everything Francie thought she understood about Alexander.

I know you, she had said to him. But did she really?

A duke lived in grand townhouses and country estates with grand halls, gilded mirrors, elaborate tapestries, and a battalion of servants ready to cater to every whim. His cottage appeared like a humble dwelling, the interior adorned with simple yet elegant rustic furniture and rugs. It was cozy and inviting but startlingly simple for a duke.

Even there in the country, in her modest cottage, she maintained a staff—a cook, a housemaid, and a footman. The duke and his loyal companion, Samson, appeared to manage everything themselves.

He even cooked and baked for me.

Her heart pounded so hard she felt faint. Francie knew firsthand that nobility carried its share of responsibilities. Estates had to be managed, tithes collected, and workers paid. Then there was the matter of politics—the never-ending game of alliances, rivalries, and appearances that needed to be maintained. As a member of the House of Lords, the duke would be involved in legislative affairs, drafting and voting on various bills and motions. The demands on his time should have been unyielding.

So how could he afford to sequester himself away in a secluded corner of Derbyshire, far removed from the hustle and bustle of London?

And he cooked for me.

Francie simply could not recover from her astonishment. Perhaps it was Alexander's capacity to live humbly, to

distance himself from the distractions of high society, that made him seem so shockingly fascinating, more so than usual. She did not know this cold, arrogant gentleman Lizzie mentioned. Only the tender and passionate lover and friend. Suddenly Francie wanted to know *everything* about him. Sorrow clutched her throat, for she knew it would be impossible.

“You are shaking, Francie,” Lizzie said worriedly.

“I need to leave,” she said.

At that moment, her gaze collided with the duke, and Francie squeezed the champagne glass tightly.

“Good heavens, I will take this,” her sister-in-law muttered, prying the champagne glass from her hand.

The gentleman beside the duke Francie recognized as his brother. Their resemblance was striking. She swallowed tightly. Now that he knew the full damage to her reputation, what would he think? Francie bit her lower lip until it ached when he turned away. There had been nothing tender or familiar in his gaze.

“Are you well?” her mother asked sharply, walking over to stand beside her. “You’ve gone pale.”

“A slight headache, Mama,” she murmured.

“Stiffen your spine and bear it,” the dowager countess said. “Lord Beresford will arrive soon. You are to dance two dances with him. This will signal to society there is something more there, and you are not totally ruined.”

Lizzie’s eyes flashed with anger, and Francie subtly shook her head. Her sister-in-law was fiery and outspoken, but Francie wanted to fight her own battles. She would also choose the ones she would fight. Francie felt brittle as if the

slightest motion would cause her to shatter. She could not understand why her heart ached in this manner.

“The duke is coming over,” Lizzie gasped, her eyes widening.

“Why?” Francie choked out, anxiousness searing her entire body.

The dowager duchess’s lips pursed, and she frowned. As he drew closer, Francie became painfully aware that his gaze was wholly on her. Alexander stared at her with such naked longing and tenderness that she felt faint. The stutter of her heart drowned out the ballroom noise.

The duke stopped before them, his presence drawing much attention in the bustling ballroom. With an air of smooth elegance, he executed a flawless bow before Francie’s mother and Lizzie.

“Lady Blade,” he said, directing his courteous salutation to her mother. Turning to Lizzie, he continued, “Countess Blade.”

Formalities were smoothly reciprocated, and then his gaze fell solely upon Francie, capturing her attention as if they were the only two people in the room.

“Lady Francie,” he began, his voice resonant yet intimate, “would you do me the honor of sharing the next dance with me? I have heard from reliable sources that it will be a waltz.”

A collective murmur rippled through the crowd, punctuated by a few audible gasps. In the backdrop of this social theater, Francie saw her mother’s eyes widen momentarily, her brows lifting in silent inquiry. How could her daughter be acquainted with a duke, her expression seemed to ask.

However, Francie could only stare at Alexander's unfathomable expression. Was it mere kindness or more? Francie knew she couldn't decline a dance with a man of his rank, not without causing a stir. More importantly, she didn't want to. His invitation presented an unexpected but fortuitous opportunity. Accepting it would not only silence the wagging tongues but also confer upon her a kind of social vindication that was desperately needed at this juncture.

With a heart pounding both from anticipation and the weight of the moment, Francie dipped into a curtsy and rose on unsteady legs. "Your Grace, it would be my pleasure to join you for the waltz."

Her mother recovered from her surprise and beamed approvingly. The duke held out his arms. Her fingers, which were lightly resting on his sleeve, trembled. As they made their way to the dance floor, the gaze of the *ton* crawled over her skin like ants, but at this moment, Francie did not care. The waltz started, and they started to soar across the expanse of the ballroom. His touch was warm, reassuring, and felt so right.

"You are a duke," she said.

"You are a lady."

Was there anymore to say?"

"You look beautiful, Francie."

She snapped her gaze to his, her heart shaking at the emotions brightening his silver gaze.

"My brother mentioned that you are married."

She jerked.

“I did not believe it for a moment because the woman you are is loyal and values trust and fidelity. You would not break your vows.”

Francie trembled, but he kept her moving, and the *ton* who looked so determinedly at her waiting for a mistake did not see.

The strength of his trust in her humbled her, and her eyes pricked with tears. “Thank you, Alexander.”

“Never thank me for trusting you. You are my treasure, and it is what I should do. I love you, Francie.”

This time the sob tore from her, and she struggled to keep a calm composure.

“I knew it months ago, but you seem so wounded I wanted to give you time. I was wrong for investigating you. I was too impatient, and in my haste, I wounded you. I did not read the report my brother brought, and I do not know the full truth of your scandal. It does not matter because it has no bearing on how I feel about you or what I want more than anything else, which is to marry you.”

Shocking tears coursed down her cheeks, and from the frantic look on her mother’s face, it was evident for everyone to see and speculate upon. Even Lizzie, who watched from the sidelines, seemed worried.

“If you will permit me to announce our engagement tonight, I will make a request of the marchioness.”

“That will start a scandal,” she said shakily.

“I am a duke,” he said arrogantly. “I can shelter us from any scandal. They will merely wonder where we met, and any fool can see that I am damn well in love with you.”

“I love you, too, Alexander, so very much,” she said shakily. “I want ... I want a courtship for a few weeks. Then I want a grand wedding in Hanover Square.”

His silver eyes gleamed with pleasure. “Done. However, I ask that you marry me by special license in a couple days. We will keep it secret from the world, and then we will have a grand wedding.”

Francie smiled as he twirled her around. “Why?” she asked when he drew her close again.

“I do not want you to slip from me.”

Her heart twisted. “I promise you it is not possible. I love you. But I want you to wait ... for you to woo me and understand my scandal so you do not regret choosing me.”

“Have you murdered someone?”

Horrified, she said, “No.”

“I would still marry you even if you were a murderess, so that is solved.”

Francie giggled, then sobered. “I ... a few years ago, I ran away with my brother’s steward to Gretna Green. We got married over the anvil ... and I thought we were married. I spent a night alone with him in a cottage before my brother found us.”

He lifted a brow. “You were a virgin, my love.”

She blushed and glared at him, to which he ruefully smiled.

“That I spent the night alone with him under the same roof was enough to ruin me. I truly cared for him and was excited at the notion of being his wife. Luckily, I was not very passionate about our few kisses to consummate our marriage. I

wanted to wait until after a proper wedding before a priest. He hurt his ankle and was not very persistent in seduction hence our union was not consummated. My brother found us ... and ...”

Her words broke off, and they danced for a few beats in silence.

“You do not have to speak about it, Francie.”

“I just feel mortified about how silly I was and the mess I created,” she said softly. “The man I eloped with was already married, and the marriage was fake.”

“That cowardly snake,” Alexander snapped.

“What devastated me was knowing I could have been so wrong about his character. I thought he was smart and compassionate, but a kind man could not have left his sick wife alone to care for their children while he pretended to wed another.”

“Ah, Francie, I am so damn sorry.”

“What hurt more was that I shared these pains with a friend ... and within a few days, the whispers started. She betrayed my confidence and gossiped about me. The scandal was so terrible there was even a mention in the scandal sheets. Though my brother rallied around me, the wagging tongues would not cease, and I grew discomfited whenever I ventured out. My mother had no choice but to send me away.”

“Wrong,” he said, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “She should have used the force of her reputation and influence to protect you at all costs. I will not forgive those who hurt you.”

She smiled tenderly at him. “Would you have fallen in love with me if we met in society?”

He frowned, then he smiled down at her. “Yes.”

His surety shocked her, and happiness swelled inside Francie’s chest.

“I am sorry I did not tell you of my background.”

“I did not tell you of mine either, Alexander. How can there be sorrows between us? We have a lifetime to learn everything about each other.”

“By God, I want to kiss you so badly.”

Francie laughed.

“Finally,” Alexander said.

“What?”

“There are no more shadows in your eyes.

A lump grew in her throat. “I love you so.”

Their dance ended, and he escorted her over to her mother’s side.

“Lady Blade, your daughter has made me the happiest man by consenting to be my duchess. I wanted to importune on the marchioness to make an announcement of our recent engagement; however, Lady Francie would much prefer a public show of wooing. I shall call upon her brother tomorrow to make the necessary arrangements.”

Her mother’s lips parted in shock, and no words emerged. A light, airy laugh escaped Lizzie, and she winked at Francie, leaned close and whispered, “You must call upon me tomorrow and tell me how you both met.”

Biting back her smile, she nodded enthusiastically, wanting to scream her happiness.

The orchestra began the opening strains of another waltz. Taking Alexander's proffered hand, she stepped onto the dance floor, her eyes lifting to meet his. What she found there mirrored the depth of her own feelings—tenderness and deep love. They began to move, and it was as though Francie was floating. Their connection did not go unnoticed. An unmistakable murmur spread across the ballroom. Eyes widened, eyebrows lifted, and several fans fluttered faster in the hands of astonished ladies. Even without a formal declaration, the room seemed to grasp a startling but increasingly obvious reality—the elusive Duke of Merrick, long considered one of society's most elusive catches, had found his match.

Francie was acutely aware of the stir they had caused, yet she found that she cared very little for the speculation and the gossip. For once, public opinion held no sway over her happiness. All that mattered was the man whose arms were securely around her, whose eyes spoke volumes, and whose presence filled her world. As the final chords of the waltz filled the air, she felt a sense of completeness she had never thought possible, knowing deep down that her life had just turned an irrevocably wonderful corner.

Thank you for reading Alexander and Francie's journey to Happy Ever After. If you enjoyed their story, please add to my pot of gold by leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Love,

Stacy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Stacy Reid writes sensual Historical and Paranormal Romances and is the published author of over twenty books.

Stacy lives a lot in the worlds she creates and actively speaks to her characters (aloud). She has a warrior way “Never give up on dreams!” When she’s not writing, Stacy spends a copious amount of time binge-watching TV, and playing video games with her love. She also has a weakness for ice cream and will have it as her main course.

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ONE SEASON WITH THE DUKE

LILY REYNARD

Will a fake engagement give Dominic, the newly minted Duke of Warbury, and unexpected heiress Philippa a second chance to rekindle their youthful romance?

Dominic, a newly minted duke, and his childhood friend Philippa, an unexpected heiress, navigate London's glittering Season with a fake engagement. As they fend off fortune hunters and scandal, their faux betrothal sparks genuine passion, leading to love, danger, and a dramatic duel.

CHAPTER
ONE

“I wager I’ll make a fine sight tonight, staggering through a quadrille with this game leg of mine,” Dominic said dryly as he stared out the window into the velvet darkness of the spring night.

His fingers tightened around the silver head of his walking stick as the carriage rolled through the outskirts of London towards Warbury House.

His left leg ached abominably tonight, courtesy of the *HMS Bucephalus*’ encounter last spring with a French warship. He continued, “Perhaps we should just halt at the nearest pub and pretend that our delay lasted longer than it did.”

“Absolutely not.” Dominic’s longtime friend, Geoffrey, the Marquess of Avedon, sighed, raking a hand through his already tousled hair. “Warbury, your mother will mount both our heads on pikes outside the gates if we don’t make an appearance tonight. She is determined to present you to society.”

“I never wanted the title.” Dominic’s words scraped his throat raw. “This was supposed to be Edmund’s role. I was happy enough serving in His Majesty’s navy. Now I feel like a dancing bear in the bloody limelight.”

“I know.” Avedon’s voice was gentle. “But your brother is gone, and you are now the Duke of Warbury. You have responsibilities to your family, regardless of whether you wanted them.”

Responsibilities. The word felt like a prison door slamming shut.

Since his father and older brother’s deaths last summer, Dominic had done his best to uphold those responsibilities. He’d reluctantly agreed to leave his Wiltshire estate to take his seat in the House of Lords when the new session of Parliament began next week.

The dukedom’s complicated business affairs had fallen into disarray during the months it took for Dominic to recuperate from his injury, resign his commission and make his slow way home after news of the deaths finally reached him.

But he knew Avedon wasn’t referring to *those* responsibilities. No, Mother had finally emerged from mourning her husband and eldest son. She was currently hell-bent on finding her remaining son a suitable wife and duchess as quickly as possible.

A bachelor duke could sire no legitimate heirs. And without heirs, the dukedom now rested entirely on Dominic’s shoulders.

Tonight, his mother’s ball at Warbury House would celebrate his elevation to the title. But celebration was the last thing on his mind. Even after all these months, he still grappled with the deep ache of loss and this new, unwanted position.

Suddenly, the carriage shuddered to a halt. The coachman swore loudly. Dominic grabbed for his pistol, then stuck his head out the window.

Heedless of the traffic, a one-legged beggar in tattered breeches and raggedy shirt hobbled across the road, supporting himself on a wooden crutch.

With a shock, Dominic recognized the man. It was Seth Adams, a sailor who'd served under him aboard the *Bucephalus*. Adams had shown him the ropes when Dominic was still a green ensign.

Anger tightened Dominic's chest as he saw the loyal, hard-working man reduced to begging.

He threw open the carriage door and climbed out, stiff after hours of travel. "Mr. Adams!"

The beggar's eyes widened in shock. "Commander Townsend, sir?"

Adams scrutinized Dominic from head to toe, his gaze lingering on Dominic's left leg as Dominic limped forward.

Then his eyes crinkled in a good-humored expression that Dominic remembered well. "I heard they made you a duke or some such, and damn my eyes if you don't look the part! Uh, Your Grace," he added quickly.

Then Adams caught sight of Avedon, emerging from the carriage behind Dominic. "Lieutenant!"

"Adams," Avedon acknowledged. "If you don't mind me saying so, you appear to be somewhat worse for wear."

"Tried to kick a French cannon ball, sir—I mean, milord. A one-legged man's no use to the navy, so here I am." Adams' face twisted.

“Mr. Adams, I hate to see one of my men in dire straits,” Dominic said. “What can I do for you?”

The former sailor drew himself up proudly. “Have ye a job for me, sir? I’d be willing to take any kind o’ honest labor.”

“I seem to recall that you have a fair hand with sums.” Aboard ship, Adams had been the purser’s assistant, ordering supplies and keeping accounts.

“Yes, sir,” Adams said, looking like a man trying to suppress hope.

“Well, as it just so happens, I’m in need of a manager at the home farm on my estate, someone I can trust and who’s good with figures. Could I convince you to swap London for Wiltshire?”

Adams’ eyes widened in surprise. He swallowed hard, then bobbed his head. “Gladly, sir,” he managed. “I’d be honored to work for you.”

Without hesitation, Dominic reached into his pocket and pulled out several gold guineas and silver shillings.

“Here. Consider this an advance on your salary,” he said gruffly, handing over the coins. “Call on me at Warbury House in Grosvenor Square tomorrow morning, and we’ll discuss the terms of your employment. I’m stuck in London until the end of the Season, and it would ease me to know that the farm is in your expert hands.”

“Thank you, sir. And God bless you.” Adams balanced precariously on his wooden crutch and managed a smart salute.

Dominic and Avedon took their leave and re-entered the carriage.

It rattled to a stop before the white-columned entrance to Warbury House a half-hour later.

A footman promptly opened the carriage door. Then Dominic and Avedon ascended the wide marble stairs to the front door.

A sea of voices and music washed over him as they entered the house. Silver needles of pain stabbed Dominic's leg with every step as he limped through the grand entrance hall towards the din of conversation and music.

He paused in the ballroom's doorway and scanned for familiar faces among the swirl of gauzy ballgowns and glittering jewels. He hadn't attended a ball in years. The gaiety and frivolity of the ton went against his grain.

Avedon clapped his hand on Dominic's shoulder. "Steady on, old man. You'll get used to it."

It was the same thing Dominic had told Avedon before his friend's first naval engagement.

Dominic nodded. Taking a fortifying breath, he limped forward, Avedon at his shoulder.

The ball's Master of Ceremonies spotted the pair. "His Grace, the Duke of Warbury! And the Most Honorable Geoffrey, Marquess of Avedon," he bellowed.

As everyone turned to stare at them, a wave of bows and curtsies rippled through the crowd.

Dominic gave the assembled company a curt nod of acknowledgement and forced a smile, hoping it reached his eyes.

Then he finally caught sight of his mother.

Murmurs of “It’s the new Duke!” and “Warbury has finally come!” followed him as he moved stiffly toward her. Tonight, the duchess wore a magnificent silk half-mourning gown with a ruffled hem.

His walking-stick, more than mere accessory, beat out a steady rhythm on the ballroom’s parquet floor.

“Dominic!” Mother swept forward in a cloud of expensive rose scent and black-dyed ostrich plumes. “You’re late, my darling! I feared you were going to leave me in the lurch!”

He gave her a stiff bow. “My most sincere apologies, Mother. The roads were dreadful as always, and the axle broke on the carriage. We had to stop at an inn for several hours while someone fixed it.”

“Well, you are here now, and that’s all that matters, I suppose.” Mouth pursed in disapproval, she surveyed his clothing.

Dominic said nothing. He’d put his time at the inn to good use, changing into his new suit and hiring a barber to shave him and dress his hair. He knew his clothes were perfectly appropriate for the occasion, if not quite the height of male fashion.

Not for him the frilled shirts and other fripperies of a London dandy. He was a navy man and a country gentleman, by God!

“Mother, have you met my good friend, the Marquess of Avedon?” he asked. “Avedon, may I present the Duchess of Warbury?”

As Avedon made his bows, Dominic glimpsed a familiar face surrounded by chestnut curls on the other side of the ballroom.

Philippa. Here. In my house. His heart stumbled, then thudded into a gallop. He had not expected Mother to invite their former neighbor.

She looked even lovelier than she had ten years ago.

Back then, as the daughter of a penniless country vicar, Philippa had worn simple gowns, many of them hand-me-downs from her mother.

Tonight, she looked like a dream in a blue robe over a white silk slip trimmed with lace at neckline and hem. Tall white ostrich feathers fastened to a wide blue bandeau waved gently above her chestnut curls.

Her gaze locked with his from across the room. Time seemed to stop as a flurry of emotions crossed her face—shock, warmth, longing... and anger.

Heat flooded Dominic's face. Suddenly, he was sixteen again, racked with love, desire, guilt, and shame. Memories surged in a painful tide. Their first meeting in the vicarage garden. Her hand, soft in his, as they walked by the river. The sweetness of his first kiss... and the agony of their abrupt parting.

Then her expression shuttered. She dipped into a brief curtsy before vanishing into the crowd.

Avedon's voice seemed to come from far away. "Is that your Miss Bowerchalke, Warbury?"

"Yes, and she's quite the heiress now, or hadn't you heard?" Mother answered for him.

"Well, if Warbury doesn't want her, I'll be happy to call upon her!" Avedon said cheerfully.

Dominic growled low in his throat. He wanted to glare at his friend, but he couldn't tear his gaze from the ostrich plumes, which was all he could glimpse of Philippa, now standing behind a pair of much taller guests.

He hadn't seen her since the fateful morning he'd informed Father that he wished to marry her. Philippa might've been of respectable birth, a vicar's daughter and the grandniece of the Baroness Starkley, but she had no dowry to speak of.

And that had been unacceptable, even for a duke's second son.

When he finally returned to Wiltshire last autumn, Dominic had hoped to call upon Philippa and offer his apologies. But Mrs. Bowerchalke, Philippa, and Philippa's younger sisters, Lucy, Georgiana, and Amanda, had all been away in Yorkshire, tending to Baroness Starkley in what proved to be her terminal illness.

In gratitude, the baroness had willed a considerable percentage of her fortune to her nephew, the Reverend Bowerchalke, with each of his daughters also receiving a generous portion.

Immediately following the baroness' January funeral, Mrs. Bowerchalke and her four daughters had traveled straight from Yorkshire down to London, so that Mrs. Bowerchalke could launch her two oldest daughters into Society.

"So, my darling, you still care for her?" Mother broke into his thoughts. She could still read Dominic like a book. "Well, she's quite eligible now. And you need a bride, and quickly. The family line rests on you."

He turned to stare at her in disbelief. Mother was actually *encouraging* him to court Philippa? After all his parents had

done to prevent the match ten years ago?

“I doubt she’d have me,” he said hoarsely, “after I promised her the world, and then went to sea.” He shook his head. “She’ll never forgive me, and I don’t blame her one bit.”

“Well, you need an heir,” Mother told him now in her usual forthright manner. “If not Miss Bowerchalke, then another eligible miss. Be sensible, my son, and don’t squander the opportunities this Season brings you.”

Dominic’s gaze swept around a line of unmarried young ladies staring hopefully at him, along with their chaperones. His gut twisted at the thought of courting and marrying any of them.

And in that moment, he knew. No matter the cost, he had to win Philippa back. Even if she gave him the cut direct for the hurt he’d inflicted as a callow youth.

“I’ll do my best,” he said.

He would do better than that, he vowed silently. He would seize this second chance granted him by Fortune, and make Philippa his duchess.

CHAPTER
TWO

U pon entering Warbury House's opulent ballroom in the company of her mother and younger sister, the sight of a dozen large crystal chandeliers suspended from the coffered ceiling struck Miss Philippa Bowerchalke. The massed candles cast a warm glow over the glittering assembly below.

Before the abrupt change in their family's fortunes a few months ago, Philippa had spent many an evening straining her eyes in the dim light of a smoky tallow candle as she read aloud to her parents and three sisters in the family's humble parlor. The expensive beeswax candles that gave such a clear, steady light had been unaffordable on a vicar's humble salary.

And now she saw hundreds of them, with even more candles set along in rows of golden wall-sconces with mirrored backs.

Philippa's sister Lucy breathed, "Isn't it marvelous, Pippa?"

"I never dreamed we would be here, among all these fine people of the ton!" Mama added, clutching her gauzy wrap.

"Indeed, it is quite unbelievable," Philippa agreed, then couldn't help adding, "Think of how many beggars we could feed for the cost of all these beeswax candles alone!"

She'd been wrestling with the sting of guilt ever since arriving in London two months ago. The multitude of unfortunates crowding the city's streets, either begging or desperately peddling shoddy items, had shocked her.

Her feelings had only intensified when Mama had employed a small army of dressmakers to make Philippa and Lucy a set of fine gowns for every occasion. Then she had taken both girls shopping for all the accessories necessary for two young ladies making their debuts in London Society.

In short order, their rented house was awash in gloves, fine kid slippers, expensive shawls, bonnets, fashionable hats, and jewelry—though most of it was good-quality paste, rather than diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

“*Candles*, Pippa? Is that all you can think about?” Lucy shook her head and sighed loudly. She continued, “Amanda and Georgiana will be so jealous when we tell them about dancing with earls and dukes, and maybe even a prince!”

Philippa's two youngest sisters were not yet old enough to take part in social events. They had reluctantly remained behind in the family's rented house along with Papa, who was the bookish sort and more than happy to absent himself from Society.

“Come along, girls.” Mama's gloved hand descended on Philippa's shoulder, gently urging her forward. “We mustn't linger by the doors. There are so many people to meet!”

Philippa glanced around and saw no familiar faces among the assembled guests. Many of them were studying her in return with varying expressions of curiosity and disdain. Despite her fashionable ensemble with matching kid slippers, she suddenly felt very much a country bumpkin.

“Oh, there’s the duchess!” Mama exclaimed, sinking into a curtsey as Duchess Warbury approached them, a vision in gray silk half-mourning.

Despite the Bowerchalke family’s long acquaintance with the duchess, Mama had worked herself into a frenzy of excitement this afternoon over her daughters’ debut at the ball.

Philippa and Lucy followed Mama’s lead. When they rose, the widowed duchess greeted them warmly. Despite the difference in their stations, she had always been kind to Mama and Papa, and had treated Philippa and her sisters with the kindly indulgence of an aunt.

But where is the new duke? Philippa wondered. Isn’t he the guest of honor at this ball?

Her stomach clenched at the prospect of seeing Dominic again after all these years.

“Mrs. Bowerchalke, come. Let me introduce you to some of my friends... and their sons,” the duchess said after exchanging a few pleasantries with Mama.

As they followed their hostess through the crowd, Philippa couldn’t help but notice the glances and whispers that followed them.

Philippa forced a smile, trying to ignore the unease that coiled in her stomach as the duchess introduced Mama to several grand ladies. As they moved from one group to the next, Duchess Warbury offered a low-voiced running commentary about each eligible bachelor at the ball.

After they’d completed a turn around the ballroom, the Master of Ceremonies announced the next titled guest.

With a gracious smile and a wave, the duchess took her leave and glided away to greet the new arrival.

“Look at that dress!” Lucy whispered, gesturing towards a woman dressed in a scarlet crepe robe over a white muslin underdress. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Indeed, I’d wager she’s wearing half the lace in London,” Philippa murmured, her lips quirking into a genuine smile at her sister’s wonderment.

“Girls, remember your manners,” Mama scolded, though there was an indulgent twinkle in her eye. “We must make a good impression if you want to make a good match.”

Philippa winced, then told herself sternly she ought to be grateful that her unexpected fortune now made her an eligible bridal prospect.

But having resigned herself to a spinsterhood dedicated to charitable endeavors, she now found it impossible to envision herself married with children.

Philippa repressed a sigh as she looked around the crowd of strangers. Back home, she’d always enjoyed balls and loved dancing, but she’d been among friends and acquaintances there.

Tonight, she dreaded an evening of standing awkwardly to the side. To her relief and bemusement, she and Lucy were both immediately asked to dance.

Mama examined the young men, smiled, and nodded approval.

Philippa and her partner, Mr. Danforth, the younger son of Baron Danforth, took their places in a set of four couples. As a fiddle began a lively reel, Philippa found her thoughts drifting back towards Dominic, and the last ball they’d attended together back in Warbury-on-Till.

Ever since his mother's invitation to this ball arrived, she'd both longed and dreaded to see him again.

Had time changed him as much as it had changed her? Did he even remember their youthful romance, or had his adventures at sea driven all thought of her out of his head?

She would never forget the excitement and heated feelings his youthful kisses had stirred up in her... or the injury he'd inflicted upon her heart and her self-esteem when he'd abruptly departed Warbury Castle without even saying goodbye.

And where was he right now?

Dominic ought to be the center of attention here, in his own house, at the ball thrown in his honor. But as she wove her way through the reel's figures, she couldn't spot him anywhere.

Had he taken refuge in the library, just like in the old days? In contrast to his older brother Edmund, Dom had always shied away from the limelight.

She wondered what kind of man he'd grown into. Over the years, she'd heard that he'd done well in the navy. Before unexpectedly inheriting the dukedom, he'd been on track to becoming the captain of a ship of the line.

When the dance ended, Philippa curtsied to her partner. Then she and Lucy began making their way back to Mama.

The Earl of Everholt intercepted Philippa before she got very far. "Miss Bowerchalke, may I have this waltz?"

Lord Everholt was approximately ten years Philippa's senior, with thinning blond hair swept back from a high forehead, a nose and cheeks marked with the permanent flush of a heavy imbibor, and pale, watery eyes.

The duchess had introduced them earlier and described him as a widower with an addiction to strong drink and heavy gambling debts.

“If he asks you, you may grant him one dance, but no more,” Mama had warned her and Lucy earlier. “He has a reputation as a fortune hunter.”

“I would be honored,” Philippa lied now, because refusing his request to dance without good reason would give great insult.

He took her hand and led her back to the center of the ballroom.

As the music began, Philippa decided she didn’t like how his fingers spread at her waist while his other hand gripped hers too tightly. Or that his eyes never rose higher than her décolletage, as if he were mentally peeling away the layers of her gown, stays, and chemise.

It was nothing overt, nothing she could take public offense at... but his proximity made her skin crawl.

Just one dance, she promised herself as she waited for the music to end. The waltz seemed to stretch on endlessly.

She gritted her teeth and smiled as pleasantly as she could while exchanging vapid pleasantries with the man. When the dance finally ended, Philippa escaped back to her mother and sister.

“Perhaps something to drink while we wait for someone else to ask you girls to dance?” Mama asked, patting her arm in silent sympathy.

They had just reached the entrance to the refreshment room when the music halted.

A hush descended over the room as conversation ceased and all eyes turned towards the entrance of the ballroom.

“Look, it’s Dominic!” Lucy exclaimed, halting in the wide doorway. “He’s finally here!”

The guests standing closest to them turned to stare at the girl who had just referred to the new duke by his Christian name.

“Dearest, you can’t refer to him so familiarly now,” Mama chided under her breath. “You must call him by his title.”

“His Grace, the Duke of Warbury!” shouted the Master of Ceremonies. “And the Most Honorable Geoffrey, Marquess of Avedon.”

“Lord Avedon is quite handsome, don’t you think?” Lucy whispered.

Philippa nodded mechanically, but all her attention was on the dark-haired man standing next to the golden-haired Lord Avedon.

The tall, gangly boy she’d fallen in love with was now impressively broad-shouldered under his formal black coat and gold-embroidered gray waistcoat. His sharply sculpted features were as breathtaking as an ancient Greek statue and deeply tanned from a life at sea. His expression was stern as he surveyed the crowded ballroom like a general reviewing his troops.

Though separated from him by half the length of the ballroom, a shock of heat drove through Philippa as his gaze met hers. His deep blue eyes widened slightly, as if he, too, felt something.

Her heart began pounding, beating so loudly that she felt deafened by it.

Blast it all, this is too much! After all the hurt he'd inflicted upon her, it was unfair that all of her feelings for him now returned in a dizzying rush.

Philippa yielded to an uncharacteristic cowardly impulse and broke Dominic's gaze by stepping behind a pair of tall gentlemen.

As the new Duke of Warbury turned away to greet his mother, Mama's searching gaze found Philippa's hiding place.

These ridiculous ostrich plumes were like a flag, betraying her position behind a wall of bodies.

An instant later, Mama's hand closed around Philippa's elbow. "Oh, darling Pippa, did you see the way he *looked* at you?" she cooed. "He's still smitten, I'll warrant!"

Philippa winced. The last thing she needed was her mother playing matchmaker *again*.

At fifteen, she'd believed Mama's assurances that her lack of a dowry would prove no obstacle to true love, especially since Dominic was just the duke's younger son, and not the heir.

Besides, Mama had argued, the Duchess of Warbury was extremely amiable, and frequently invited Mama to the castle for tea! Why, they were practically friends! Surely, the duke and duchess would not object to the match, especially considering Papa was Baroness Starkley's nephew.

Philippa knew better now.

"Oh, look!" whispered Lucy, her eyes wide. "Dominic—I mean the duke—and Lord Avedon are coming towards us!"

CHAPTER
THREE

Philippa did not want to talk to Dominic. Not yet. Not before she'd had the chance to collect her thoughts and bring her racing pulse under control.

Philippa tried to step back, but Mama's hand tightened on her arm, preventing her escape.

Feeling like a trapped gazelle watching a hungry lion's advance, she watched him approach. He moved stiffly, favoring his left leg. As he drew closer, she saw fine lines of pain engraved around his mouth and across his forehead.

What on earth had happened to her sweet, happy summer love?

Then he was there, standing before her. And the eyes of every guest suddenly fastened upon her with avid interest.

"Good evening, Philippa," he rumbled. "It's been a long time."

She couldn't meet his gaze again. Not if she wanted to keep the shreds of her composure.

"Yes, it has, Your Grace," she murmured, sinking into a curtsy.

She sensed rather than saw him stiffen at her cool formality. She carefully kept her eyes on the floor as she rose.

He's a stranger to me now, she reminded herself. This impressive personage was the Duke of Warbury, one of the richest peers of the realm.

Not her sweet, shy Dom.

Not the boy who'd carelessly captured her heart, eagerly promised her the world, then thoughtlessly abandoned her.

He frowned down at her. "I am delighted to renew our acquaintance," he said.

Outraged, she sucked in a breath. *Acquaintance! Is that how he thinks of me?*

Forgetting her decision not to meet his gaze, she glared up at him.

And he smiled—actually *smiled*—at her in return as a ripple of whispered speculation ran through the assembled crowd.

Another shock of heat ran through her treacherous body.

Then Dominic turned to Mama. Still smiling, he took her gloved hand and bowed over it.

"Mrs. Bowerchalke," he said with genuine warmth. "I'm delighted to see you again after all these years. You are looking more radiant than ever."

Sheer flattery, Philippa thought in disgust. She'd known young Dominic Townsend very well, but she didn't recognize this new, rather intimidating Duke of Warbury.

Mama beamed at the compliment, much to Philippa's consternation. "Your Grace, you're too kind!" Then her expression sobered. "My sincerest condolences on the deaths of your father and brother."

“Thank you,” he replied, his smile vanishing. Philippa saw raw pain flash across his expression. “They were taken far too soon.”

“The vicar and I pray for them every day,” she assured him.

Then he turned to Lucy, and his lips crooked into a familiar grin. It took years off his face. “Miss Lucy, will you be cross with me if I remark that you’ve grown into a young lady since last we met?”

Lucy giggled as she extended her hand. He took it and bowed over it, just like Mama’s hand. “Of course not, Dom—I mean, Your Grace. It’s been *years* since we last saw you. Did you like the navy?”

He smiled wryly. “One does not exactly *enjoy* the navy. One survives it as best as one can.”

“Especially the terrible food and worse drink,” Dominic’s companion said, his bright hazel eyes resting on Lucy. “Warbury, won’t you introduce me to these charming ladies?”

“Of course,” Dominic said. “Lord Avedon, I have the honor of presenting my childhood neighbors, Mrs. Bowerchalke and her daughters, the Misses Bowerchalke.”

The Marquess of Avedon bowed. “A pleasure to meet all of you.” He gave Philippa a brief but searching gaze, then his attention slid to Lucy.

Philippa noticed that Lord Avedon had a smile that displayed a dimple in one tanned cheek.

Lucy’s blush stained her throat and cheeks as the marquess boldly kissed her gloved knuckles.

“Lord Avedon and I met as junior officers aboard the *HMS Bucephalus* and quickly became fast friends,” Dominic said.

“He showed me the ropes... literally,” Avedon added, slapping the duke on the shoulder, as if this were a long-running jest between them. He continued, “I’ve heard so much about your family over the years, Mrs. Bowerchalke. Warbury tells me you used to feed him scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam in your parlor whenever he escaped his father and that dreary castle of his.”

Mama turned pink. “It was nothing,” she said, her hands fluttering. “A mere trifle.”

“But it meant a lot to me,” Dominic countered. “Especially when I was smarting under one of my tutor’s reprimands. Your home was always very welcoming.”

“Oh, you’re too kind, Your Grace!” Mama protested.

Then Dominic turned to Philippa. “Might I have the pleasure of your company for the next dance?”

Drat, she thought helplessly, hearing the musicians striking up a waltz.

When she hesitated, Mama nudged her.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Philippa said as coolly as she could, fervently hoping that her unsteady legs wouldn’t betray her as they took their positions.

As the music swelled around them, Philippa found herself swept up in the whirl of dancers, her hand securely clasped in Dominic’s.

The warmth of his touch seeped through her glove and the thin layers of silk and cotton at her waist, a reminder of the stolen moments they’d once shared.

His movements were halting as he led her through the steps. She longed to ask him what had happened in the years since they'd last seen each other.

But, no. She reminded herself they weren't friends. Not any longer. She must be polite to him, and nothing more.

"Tell me, Philippa," Dominic murmured, as if reading her mind. She shivered as she felt his breath warm against her ear. "Did you receive the letter I sent you right after I enlisted?"

"Yes," she admitted, her voice barely audible above the strains of the waltz. "And I burned it without reading it, Your Grace."

"Ah, and all the other letters, too?" His gaze bore into hers, searching for something she couldn't quite fathom.

She nodded. There had been three more letters before he gave up writing to her.

"I wondered why I never received a reply." He frowned down at her. "You weren't willing to give me the chance to explain myself?"

The temerity of the man! Indignation heated her cheeks.

"Your Grace, what difference could any explanation possibly have made to the *facts*?" she hissed, pierced by the sting of renewed betrayal. "Papa always says that actions speak louder than words. And he is right. You asked me to marry you. You swore you could convince your father to consent to the match. And then, without so much as a word of farewell, you left and enlisted in the navy!"

He winced and looked away.

Blast it. She hadn't intended to let her pain and betrayal spill out like this! *Too late.* Now he knew how badly he'd hurt

her.

She pressed her lips together and looked away, angry with herself.

They danced the next few steps in heavy silence.

“Perhaps you’re right about the futility of explanations,” he conceded finally, his eyes never leaving hers. “But I certainly owe you a heartfelt apology, Philippa, even if it does not excuse my inexcusable betrayal. And I assure you, I have changed in the years since.”

“For the better, I hope,” she snapped.

“I should like to think so,” he responded gravely. “I am most sincerely sorry for misleading you and hurting you. Will you accept my apology?”

She couldn’t help looking up at him. She found only regret and sincerity in his expression.

Resentment is a poison that festers, Papa always said. When you forgive a wrong done you, it cleanses the wound.

“Very well, Your Grace,” she said. “I accept your apology.”

Strangely, she felt better almost immediately.

Then he went and ruined the moment. “Excellent! Will you permit me to call upon you tomorrow morning for a ride in the park?”

He’d been the one to teach her how to ride, and had lent her Buttercup, a gentle mare from the duke’s stables.

“I don’t think that would be appropriate, Your Grace,” she said, astonished at her cool tone and steady voice when her

heart was once again pounding so loudly in her own ears that she could scarcely hear the music.

“For God’s sake, Philippa, will you not at least call me Dominic in private, as you once did?” His fingers curled at her waist.

“No, Your Grace,” Philippa retorted. “And I would very much appreciate it if you addressed me as Miss Bowerchalke in public.” She gave him her frostiest smile. “I wouldn’t want undue familiarity to give the wrong impression to your friends and your guests.”

The music ended, and he released her with a slight bow.

“Very well, Miss Bowerchalke. But I still intend to call upon you in the morning,” he said in a firm tone as he escorted her back to where Mama stood. “We have a great deal to discuss.”

Before she could protest, he turned and strode away stiffly.

Blast it all, she thought, looking after him as he joined a small group of other gentlemen. She thought ten years had dulled the ache of losing him. But one waltz had proven her wrong.

Mama’s eyes were bright with excitement as she handed Philippa a glass of punch. “Well? What did you two discuss? Isn’t he even more handsome than you remembered? And so distinguished now!”

Philippa pressed her lips together. “He apologized for jilting me and running away. I accepted his apology. That is all.”

“How wonderful that you cleared the air between you, dearest! I saw the way you looked at each other.” Mama sighed dreamily. “Just like old times. Now, the duke is making

his rounds, but he'll want to dance with you again tonight. Make sure you leave space on your dance card."

Philippa frowned, scanning the room for any escape from this conversation.

As much as her treacherous heart wished it, her head vowed there would be no rekindling her relationship with Dominic. He had shown his true colors years ago, and she had no intention of pandering to his desire to ease his conscience.

Another country dance began. Lord Avedon led Lucy to join the other dancers, and Philippa saw how her sister glowed under the handsome marquess' attention.

Across the room, Dominic was engaged in conversation with his friends, but his gaze kept straying to Philippa. She did her best to ignore it, though she couldn't stop her own eyes from seeking him out.

Blast. How am I to endure an entire evening with Dominic nearby, reawakening all the pain I've tried so hard to bury?

As the country dance ended and the musicians began the opening strains of another waltz, Dominic said something to his friends and started purposefully toward her. Philippa's heart lodged in her throat.

"Oh dear," murmured Mama, looking past Philippa. "Here comes Lord Everholt. Whatever shall we do?"

Philippa tore her gaze away from Dominic and saw the earl advancing on them.

The predatory gleam in his eye was unmistakable, and it made her stomach churn with dread.

"Excuse me, Mama," she said hastily, setting her punch cup on a passing servant's tray. "I must visit the necessary."

“The privies are in the wing at the rear of the gardens, miss,” the servant murmured discreetly.

“Thank you,” Philippa replied as she turned and hastened away.

The cool night air greeted her like a balm, soothing her frazzled nerves as she stepped out onto the wide terrace overlooking Warbury House’s darkened gardens.

Rows of torches lit a graveled path that began at the base of the terrace, lighting the way to the far wing of the house. The warm firelight illuminated blooming tulip beds, and the chilly breeze brought the mingled perfumes of hyacinth and lily of the valley to her nose.

Philippa descended the steps into the garden, but then turned away from the lighted path. She hurried along a branching path until she found the solitude she craved in the shelter of a marble bench backed by a tall hedge.

There, she sat and drew in a deep breath, trying to repair her tattered composure. But it was difficult not to think about Dominic’s large hand on her waist. Or his warm breath brushing her ear and cheek. Or the faint, lemony fragrance of his cologne.

If he called upon her tomorrow, she would pretend to have a headache and send him away, she decided.

Her forgiveness had been sincere. But by extending it, she did not intend to open her heart to a fresh round of injuries.

“Why, Miss Bowerchalke, whatever are you doing out here all alone?” Everholt’s voice purred. “A ravishing young creature like yourself should be inside, dancing.”

Startled, she looked up to see him looming over her. Lost in thought, she hadn’t noticed his approach.

He reeked of stale tobacco smoke overlaid with his cologne, an overpowering mix of musk and arrogance.

“Lord Everholt,” she said stiffly as unease coiled through her gut. “I was feeling unwell and simply desired some fresh air.”

“They say love is the best medicine.” He paused, and she saw his smirk in the flickering torchlight. “I would be happy to assist you in whatever way I can.”

The weight of his pale, lecherous gaze on her was like a heavy chain she desperately wanted to shake off.

She rose from the bench. “Please excuse me, my lord. I must return to my mother and sister.”

Philippa took a step forward, and he deliberately blocked her path. Alarm jolted through her.

“Oh, please don’t run away, Miss Bowerchalke,” he said, his smirk widening into a leer. “I wish to further our acquaintance.”

“Please let me pass,” she said in her firmest tone, and tried to scurry around him.

He caught her by the arm. “Not so fast. You came out here hoping for an assignation, did you not?”

Her pulse quickened, and she grew more alarmed by the moment. “Of course not! Please let me go, Lord Everholt.”

His fingers only tightened. He drew her close. His breath smelled of wine underlaid with rot. “Tell me, Miss Bowerchalke, have you ever been kissed?”

Terror sang through her veins and congealed like ice in her stomach.

“How dare you!” She tried to wrench herself free. But his fingers held on with merciless, bruising strength.

“Roger? Wherever did you disappear to, brother?” a husky female voice called out from somewhere nearby, followed by the sound of excited whispers.

A moment later, a small group of women came into view. The faint light revealed Lord Everholt’s sister, Lady Eliza, along with several other young ladies Philippa didn’t recognize.

Philippa felt a rush of relief, but Lord Everholt’s painful grip on her arm didn’t loosen.

His sister was a short, rather stocky woman about the same age as Philippa, with blond ringlets framing her round cheeks. Her eyes widened in surprise as she saw Philippa and her brother standing close together.

Her companions gasped in exaggerated shock, gloved hands flying up to cover their mouths. Someone giggled.

“Oh! Miss Bowerchalke!” exclaimed Lady Eliza in a loud voice. “What on earth are you doing out here all alone with my brother?”

Then she smiled knowingly. Philippa realized that Lady Eliza’s arrival was no coincidence, but rather the jaws of a trap.

“Oh dear, it seems we’ve been caught in a compromising situation, Miss Bowerchalke,” Everholt said, sounding smug.

His grip on her loosened long enough to slide down her arm before he captured her hand.

“I will of course restore your honor immediately with a proposal of marriage.” His triumphant grin sickened Philippa

as he went down on one knee, his eyes glittering. “Miss Bowerchalke, will you do me the honor of becoming my countess?”

Philippa stared down at him in disbelief and growing anger. Was this how a rabbit in a snare felt?

How could I have been so foolish?

CHAPTER
FOUR

I *f only I hadn't been so preoccupied with thoughts of Dominic, perhaps I might've avoided this nightmare!*

Philippa's panicked thoughts spiraled like the intricate patterns on Everholt's embroidered scarlet waistcoat as she faced an impossible decision: either accept Everholt's proposal and bind herself to this loathsome man for life or face the ruin of her reputation.

"Get up, my lord," she hissed through clenched teeth, trying to mask her desperation with indignation. "Please."

Begging him for anything made her skin crawl, but she had no choice.

"Not until you reply to my proposal," he said, still smiling.

Lady Eliza laughed huskily. "Oh, my, this is better than any play at the Drury Lane theater!"

Her companions tittered, as if they found Philippa's dreadful situation entertaining.

Trapped and cornered, her mind raced, searching for an escape.

"Come now, Miss Bowerchalke, why the hesitation?" Lord Everholt said, his voice dripping with satisfaction. "Don't you want to be a countess?"

His words were like a poker stirring the smoldering coals of her temper to fiery life. The choking tendrils of fear burned to ash as Philippa decided she would rather face the consequences of refusing him than submit to a lifetime of misery at his despicable hands.

She looked down and met his smug gaze with defiance. “No, Lord Everholt. I will *never* marry you.”

His expression of shock was almost comical. And his fingers slackened their hold at last. She yanked herself free of his grasp and stumbled backwards, out of range.

Lady Eliza’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“But Miss Bowerchalke,” she protested, her slightly protuberant eyes gleaming with malice. “You really have no choice! You *must* accept my brother’s proposal or face ruin for your reckless and scandalous behavior.”

One of her friends giggled. “She’s such a lightskirt, coming out here without her chaperone!”

Philippa’s anger flared higher.

“No,” she said, her voice rising. “I refuse to yield to his wicked scheming. I will *not* marry him.”

Lord Everholt’s expression morphed from shock to fury as he scrambled to his feet. “You insolent chit!” he spat. “You’ll regret refusing me, mark my words!”

He lunged forward, hand outstretched, but Philippa was ready this time. She sidestepped him and turned to run.

Then a commanding voice rang out. “Stop, Lord Everholt! That’s enough!”

Philippa—and everyone else—turned to see Dominic striding towards them. He held one of the garden’s torches in

one hand. Its light revealed his mouth set in a grim line and his eyes blazing with fury.

Even the hitch in his step failed to detract from his imposing splendor. A shiver ran down her spine at the sight, and she couldn't deny the relief that swept over her.

Lord Everholt wasn't deterred. He took advantage of the distraction to grab hold of her once again.

"Release Miss Bowerchalke at once," Dominic ordered.

"Your Grace, you're interfering in a private matter. I am proposing honorable marriage to this lady," Everholt protested.

"Didn't I just hear the lady refuse your proposal?" Dominic's questioning gaze flew to her.

She nodded her head frantically and tried once again to pull away from her captor.

"Besides, Miss Bowerchalke is already engaged to be married," Dominic added, to Philippa's astonishment.

"Engaged?" Lord Everholt snorted in disbelief. "To whom?"

Philippa wanted to know that, too. Especially given her resolution to spend her London Season avoiding a leg-shackle.

"To *me*," Dominic stated.

She choked in astonishment and tried to disguise her reaction by coughing.

Dominic's intense gaze never left Philippa's as he approached her. He continued, "Miss Bowerchalke accepted my proposal during our waltz together."

Lord Everholt's pale eyes bulged as his mouth opened and closed. But no sound emerged. But he finally released his hold

on her.

Dominic immediately put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side. He was very solid and very warm.

“Is that really true, Miss Bowerchalke?” inquired Lady Eliza. Her blond ringlets quivered as she stared at Philippa with wide, astonished eyes.

Philippa realized Dominic had just offered her the perfect solution to her dilemma. If she went along with his brazen fabrication, then she could escape Lord Everholt’s clutches while keeping her reputation intact.

“Yes,” she lied. She tilted her head and attempted a fond smile in Dominic’s direction, but she suddenly trembled from head to toe in the aftermath of terror.

He squeezed her shoulders, and she found comfort in his strength.

Philippa followed her lie with a truthful statement. “We have only just reconciled after a long estrangement. I came to the garden seeking solitude to recover from the intensity of our reunion.”

“Preposterous!” Lord Everholt snarled, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. “Warbury, you can’t simply steal her from right under my nose!”

“Steal me? Lord Everholt, you speak of me as if I’m a horse or a farm wagon!” Philippa protested. “And I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man on earth.”

“Lord Everholt,” Dominic growled. He stepped between Philippa and the irate earl. “Leave my house at once. Or I’ll take more drastic action.”

Lady Eliza's gloved hands flew to her mouth as she gasped in dismay.

Lord Everholt looked Dominic up and down, as if assessing his chances in a brawl against a man half a head taller and in considerably better shape.

"Very well, Your Grace," he spat, his pale eyes narrowing to slits. He regarded Philippa with pure hatred. "I suppose I must offer you my congratulations, Miss Bowerchalke," he bit out. Then his baleful gaze returned to Dominic. "But rest assured, I won't forget this humiliation."

Then he turned on his heel and stormed away, leaving behind a stunned silence that was broken only by the rapid beating of Philippa's heart.

"Roger—wait!" Lady Eliza scurried after her brother.

As they vanished down the path, their angry, low-voiced conversation trailed behind them like an unpleasant odor.

Lady Eliza's small group of friends offered Philippa and Dominic hasty congratulations before setting off for the ballroom. With a sinking heart, Philippa wondered what kind of gossip they intended to spread.

Alone at last with Dominic, she shook violently with the aftermath of terror and rage. The weight of Dominic's arm around her was strangely comforting.

"Are you all right, Phil—I mean, Miss Bowerchalke?" he asked softly. "I apologize for my brazen lie, but I could not stand by idly while that scoundrel shamelessly sought to compromise you."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Philippa replied, her voice wavering despite her best efforts to keep it steady. "Your

arrival was most timely, and I am grateful for your intervention. I—”

To her horror, a sob interrupted her. She hardly ever wept, but now she couldn't control the tears that abruptly cascaded down her cheeks in a hot, stinging torrent.

In response, Dominic set down the torch and took her in his arms. She buried her face in his chest and felt him gently stroke her back while sobs racked her.

“Oh, Philippa, I ought to have challenged that vile scoundrel to a duel,” he growled.

She inhaled deeply as he held her close. He smelled of sandalwood and lemon, and beneath that, his own clean scent, so dear and familiar to her. His firm embrace felt like a fortress, offering safety.

As her storm of tears finally passed, Philippa relaxed against him, feeling as if she belonged in his arms.

She was suddenly aware of how intimate this embrace was, and a strange thrill raced through her veins at the thought. She tried to push away her dangerous feelings but found herself unable to do so. The steady beating of his heart against her cheek stirred something deep within her.

“I've soaked the front of your coat,” she said, her voice muffled.

“Never mind, I have a dozen just like this one.” Dominic pulled back slightly, keeping his hands on her shoulders as he looked into her eyes with concern. “Are you all right now?”

Philippa nodded mutely, still trying to process what had just happened—and what it meant for them both going forward. She shuddered at the memory of Everholt's malevolent stare and his threats.

“I must return to Mama and Lucy,” she said. “I—I just need a moment to collect myself.”

“Of course,” Dominic said. He reached into his pocket and produced a clean handkerchief, which he presented to her.

As she mopped her wet face and dabbed at her eyes, he said, “But before we return to the ball, there is a matter we must discuss—our supposed betrothal.”

“What is there to discuss?” she asked. “It was a gallant falsehood, no more.”

“A falsehood with multiple witnesses,” he pointed out. “Or do you think that Lady Eliza’s friends will refrain from spreading the tale of how we thwarted Lord Everholt’s marital schemes?” His lips quirked. “It will make for some prime scuttlebutt in the ballroom tonight and in drawing rooms all over London tomorrow.”

Philippa blew her nose and tried futilely to gather her shattered composure. Dominic was right. The tale of tonight’s unfortunate confrontation in the Warbury House gardens would spread like wildfire through the city.

“Oh, dear,” she murmured. “It seems we have entangled ourselves in a web of deceit.”

“Indeed.” Dominic stepped closer, his broad frame casting a protective shadow over her. “Given the circumstances, I propose we maintain this ruse for the rest of your London Season. By putting yourself under my protection, you can enjoy yourself without worrying about fortune hunters like Lord Everholt.”

Philippa considered his proposition. A pretend engagement would solve her two most pressing problems—maintaining her

reputation in the wake of Lord Everholt's attempt to compromise her and fending off Mama's marital schemes.

"Unless you have already decided in favor of another suitor?" Dominic asked after a few moments of silence.

"There are no other suitors," Philippa said. "Not yet, anyway. And even if there are, I do not intend to encourage them. I have resolved not to marry at all, and to use my inheritance for charitable purposes instead."

Dominic's dark brows rose. "A beautiful woman like you wishes to remain a spinster? Truly?"

His compliment warmed her like sunlight on her skin. She tried to suppress her reaction. "At my age, I am already firmly on the shelf, Your Grace. And I find I prefer it thus. When the time comes for my sisters to wed, I intend to be a fond aunt to my future nieces or nephews."

"Then it's decided," Dominic stated. "You shall pose as my fiancée for the rest of the Season."

But something about his proposal troubled her. "Your generosity is commendable, Your Grace. But why are you doing this?"

Dominic blinked, and for the first time, she saw his air of complete confidence waver. "I, ah..." he paused.

Then he recovered his poise and lifted one dark brow. "You were kind enough to forgive me earlier, but I feel I still owe you a debt for having done you such a great wrong. Allow me to pay that debt by protecting you, Philippa. For the sake of my honor and my conscience, if nothing else."

"Very well," she said. She hadn't missed his use of her Christian name, but if they were going to pretend to be

affianced... “But I can’t go around addressing my fiancé as ‘Your Grace’!”

He nodded. “Yes, that would be absurd. Call me Dominic, like you used to.”

As she opened her mouth to protest, he added, “Or ‘my dearest Warbury.’” He grinned at her and suddenly became her old Dominic again. “It will be especially convincing if you can sigh a little and smile dreamily when you say it.”

She smacked his arm lightly. “If you remember anything about me at all,” she retorted, “you know I never sighed or mooned over *anything*.”

Except you. But she could never say that part out loud.

His grin only widened. “Oh, I remember perfectly. I only wondered if perhaps time had worked some changes.”

She shook her head wryly. “I believe I shall refer to you as ‘my dear Warbury,’ without a single sigh. Now, I think it wise to establish some rules for our little charade.”

His brows rose again. “Oh? What did you have in mind? Do you think I should kiss you at least once an hour?”

Philippa swallowed hard as heat raced down every nerve, exploding in the pit of her belly. Trying to conceal her reaction, she crossed her arms and frowned at him. “Don’t tease me, Your Grace. We will not kiss unless absolutely necessary to maintain appearances. Nothing more than what is required to prove our affection.”

“Very well.” Was that disappointment in his expression? “But it is vital that we maintain the illusion of having fallen madly back in love at our reunion, lest the truth damage your reputation and my own.”

He was right. If anyone suspected that their engagement was a charade, then it wouldn't just be Philippa who suffered the blow to her reputation. Mama and Lucy would find themselves besmirched, as well.

"Very well," she agreed. "In public, we shall endeavor to be the most convincing of lovebirds."

"Then it's settled." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Even through her gloves, the pressure of his lips made another hot jolt race through her like a lightning strike. "Philippa, I promise I will do everything within my power to protect you, both from the likes of Lord Everholt and the pitfalls of high society."

"Thank you," she whispered. Then an imp of mischief prodded her. Smiling, she sighed loudly and clasped her hands under her bosom with dramatic flair. "My *dearest* Warbury."

He chuckled. "You'll have to be more convincing than *that*, my darling Pippa."

Her heart skipped a beat at his revival of a long-ago endearment.

"Now, shall we rejoin the festivities? I believe Mother will be eager to celebrate the news of our engagement, however false it may be."

As Philippa took his offered arm and allowed him to lead her back to the ballroom, she wondered whether Mama would faint dead away at the news.

CHAPTER
FIVE

A hush fell over the gathered crowd of guests the moment Philippa and Dominic stepped into the ballroom.

The weight of their stares bore down upon her, and she realized everyone had already heard about Lord Everholt's failed proposal.

"Chin up, darling Pippa," Dominic murmured reassuringly. "Let them stare. Let them whisper. You are the Duke of Warbury's betrothed—at least for the next few months."

She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, acutely aware of the tear stains on her cheeks. A mixture of excitement and fear swirled within her chest as she prepared to play the part of Dominic's devoted fiancée in front of everyone.

"Lead the way, Your Grace—I mean, my dear Warbury." She squeezed his forearm as he guided her through the ballroom to where the duchess stood.

Philippa heard the whispers and speculation swirling around them like a malevolent fog. But Dominic, every inch the unyielding naval commander, stared down the whisperers with an unwavering gaze.

Philippa saw the duchess take in her blotchy complexion and reddened eyes as they halted before her.

“My dear Miss Bowerchalke, what happened?” The duchess sounded distressed. “I just heard the most outrageous story about Lord Everholt! He certainly seemed in a hurry to depart, and he took his dreadful sister with him.” Her blue eyes, so like her son’s, searched Philippa’s face. “Are you well?”

“Oh, yes. These were tears of joy, Your Grace,” Philippa fibbed.

Her heart sank as she realized that tonight was just the beginning. She had always prided herself on never lying. But thanks to the outrageous bargain she had just struck with Dominic, she would spend the next three months doing nothing but fibbing.

Even worse, Mama, Lucy, and the rest of her family could never learn the truth.

“Mother,” Dominic began, his voice steady and confident. “Philippa has done me the very great honor of agreeing to become my wife.”

The duchess’ eyes widened in surprise, and Philippa braced herself for the reaction.

“So, it’s true?” The duchess smiled with genuine delight and captured Philippa’s free hand in hers. “I am overjoyed, my dear! I was so hoping that you and Dominic would reunite now that all of our circumstances have altered so very greatly.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Philippa replied, touched by her sincerity and unable to shake the guilt gnawing at her conscience. “Your kind words mean more to me than I can express.”

“I am relieved my son took my advice to heart,” the duchess continued, her gaze sweeping over Dominic with an air of satisfaction. “It is high time he secured the next generation of our line, and I could not have chosen a better match myself.”

“Your guidance was invaluable, Mother,” Dominic agreed, allowing the slightest hint of a smile to play around his lips.

Philippa tried to mask her guilt at the deception with a quick curtsey of acknowledgment. “You’re too kind, Your Grace.”

“As for Lord Everholt,” Dominic said in a severe tone. “Because of his ungentlemanly conduct just now, he is no longer welcome under our roof. Please strike his name from our invitation lists.”

The duchess’ gaze fell on the arm Lord Everholt had seized so cruelly. Her eyes narrowed. “I see. Of course. And I shall spread the word to all of my friends.”

Philippa glanced down and saw five purplish-red fingermarks on her upper arm between the top of her elbow-length glove and the bottom of her short, puffed sleeve. She would be sporting a fine set of bruises there in the morning.

“And what of his sister?” inquired the duchess. “Shall I strike Lady Eliza’s name as well?”

Philippa stiffened. She knew, though she could never prove it, that Lady Eliza’s convenient appearance in the garden had been no coincidence. But she and her friends had also saved Philippa from an unthinkable assault at Lord Everholt’s hands.

Dominic felt her tense, and snapped, “Yes.”

“No!” Philippa protested at the same moment, wanting to give Lady Eliza the benefit of the doubt. “Your Grace, please

don't punish Lady Eliza for her brother's misbehavior. She *did* try to rein him in."

"Very well, my dear," said the duchess. Then her smile returned. "And I am so delighted and happy for both of you. Now, Miss Bowerchalke—may I call you Philippa?" she interrupted herself.

"Of course, Your Grace," Philippa responded.

"Excellent. And I hope you will call me 'Mother' once you and Dominic are wed. Now, as I was saying, you ought to go inform your mama and sister of your joyful news before we make the announcement."

Philippa drew a deep breath, attempting to quell the fluttering in her chest as she and Dominic turned to where her mother and sister stood, eagerly observing Philippa's conversation with the duchess.

As Dominic and Philippa approached, still arm in arm, Mama rushed forward to envelop her in a tight embrace.

"Pippa!" she exclaimed. "So, it's really *true*? You're to marry His Grace?"

"Indeed, Mama," she confirmed, and saw the nearby guests lean in shamelessly to eavesdrop. "My dear Warbury asked for my hand just now."

"Ah, my dearest girl!" Mama beamed, tears of joy pooling in her eyes. "I always knew that love would prevail. I told you so, did I not?"

"Indeed you did, Mama," Philippa admitted, guilt stabbing her as she did her best to glance fondly up at Dominic.

"Congratulations, sister!" Lucy chimed in, her face aglow with happiness. "And I'm so happy you'll truly be part of our

family now, Your Grace!”

“Thank you, Miss Bowerchalke,” Dominic replied, his smile warm. “Your family’s friendship and support meant the world to me when I was younger.”

As Lucy embraced her and kissed her cheek, Philippa felt the weight of their ruse pressing down upon her conscience. Each word of congratulations reminded her she was deceiving the people she loved.

Then Dominic cleared his throat and looked down at Philippa. “My dear, shall I make the announcement now?”

She swallowed nervously. But there was no going back now. She nodded.

“Everyone, may I have your attention?” Dominic boomed.

As the ballroom fell silent and everyone turned to stare at them, Philippa wondered if he’d used that same commanding voice aboard his ship.

“I am delighted to announce my engagement to Miss Philippa Bowerchalke,” he continued. “We hope you will join us in celebrating this joyous occasion.”

A smattering of applause filled the air, along with murmurs of surprise and curiosity.

For the next few minutes, Philippa armed herself with her widest smile against the flood of well-wishes and congratulations. She tried to soothe the prick of her conscience by reminding herself that this was all a necessary part of their deception.

“Now, shall we dance, my darling?” Dominic asked when the torrent had dried to a trickle. He lifted her hands to his lips

with a smile that set her heart aflutter. “I hope you saved the next dance for me.”

In fact, the rest of her dance card was quite empty, thanks to her prolonged absence from the ball.

Aware that they were being keenly observed, she fluttered her eyelashes at him in what she hoped was a coquettish gesture. “No one has yet claimed this waltz, my dear Warbury.”

As the music swelled around them, Dominic led her onto the dance floor.

“Come now, let us put on a show for our adoring audience,” he whispered, drawing her close.

Dominic’s fingers brushed against the small of Philippa’s back, his touch lingering with an intimacy that sent a shiver down her spine. His intense blue eyes made her heart race and her cheeks flush. His proximity was intoxicating, and she leaned into him, craving the warmth of his embrace like a sailor longing for the shore.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Dominic asked for the benefit of the onlookers as they spun around the ballroom.

“Immensely so, my dear Warbury,” she replied, surprised by the sincerity in her words. “After all these years, I had forgotten how wonderfully you dance.”

It was true. She couldn’t help but marvel at how natural it felt to be in Dominic’s arms again, and how easily they fell into step with one another, even with his halting gait. Their bodies moved in perfect synchrony as though they had been dancing together for a lifetime.

“Ah, but it is your presence, dearest Philippa, that provides the magic. I’m merely a poor limping fool,” he countered with

a charmingly self-deprecating smile.

It made her heart flutter despite her best efforts to remain composed.

“Your flattery, sir, knows no bounds,” she retorted playfully, allowing herself to be drawn into their familiar banter.

“Flattery, my darling? I assure you, every word I speak is heartfelt,” he insisted, his gaze never leaving hers as they continued to glide around the floor together.

Part of her desperately wanted to believe that his compliments, the heat in his eyes, and the warmth of his hands were all real.

The longing frightened her. Over the next weeks and months, she would have to be on her guard to remember that this was all pretense, and that they would part ways once the Season ended in July. She would return home to Warbury-on-Till then and settle into the quiet life she had planned for herself.

After that, she would probably only see Dominic occasionally in his role as the Duke of Warbury. His many responsibilities were bound to keep him extremely busy.

The sensible thing to do would be to squeeze every drop of enjoyment out of her one season with her duke, then relegate her London experiences to memory like shining jewels in a casket.

“Darling Pippa, I can hear the hum of your thoughts over the music,” Dominic said, unexpectedly perceptive. “Care to share them?”

“Warbury,” she muttered, “are you absolutely certain we can maintain this charade?”

He chuckled. “Of course,” he said confidently. “You needn’t worry. After all, you must admit we have quite the compelling story. Youthful lovers parted too soon, then brought together again by a turn of Fortune’s wheel. Now reunited, we have vowed not to waste a single moment uniting ourselves in wedded bliss.”

His tone held no hint of cynicism. But his words struck home. It was a cruel reminder that he was simply doing this out of his sense of honor, and possibly also guilt for having abandoned her. Nothing more.

“Yes, of course,” she replied with a brittle laugh. “Ours is quite the fairy tale romance, isn’t it? Why, Your Grace, you quite swept me off my feet when you proposed to me scarcely two hours after our reunion!”

He frowned down at her, and she realized she hadn’t quite managed the light tone she’d aimed for.

“Forgive me,” she murmured, forcing a smile. “It’s only that I’m overwhelmed by the support we have received tonight. It feels wrong to deceive our closest and dearest relations.”

“Yes,” he agreed, his own eyes clouded with an emotion she could not decipher. “In the heat of the moment, I did not consider the strain that our plan might put upon your sense of honor.”

“Indeed,” she replied, the word catching in her throat.

Dominic thinks I have a sense of honor? Unexpected warmth bloomed in her chest.

Most men considered honor a purely masculine trait. To women, they only ascribed chastity and virtue.

For the next few hours, Philippa moved as if in a dream. She danced every dance—reels, quadrilles, country dances—with a succession of partners.

But Dominic insisted on claiming every waltz.

As the evening progressed, Philippa found herself both captivated and unnerved by his convincing display of affection. With each stolen glance and tender touch, the line between reality and pretense blurred further, leaving her unsure of where his heart truly lay.

Philippa gave herself a stern talking-to, but she found it impossible to deny the yearning that threatened to consume her. She realized that her greatest peril didn't lie in convincing other people they were deeply in love.

No, it lay in keeping her traitorous heart under control.

When distant church bells struck midnight, Dominic appeared in front of her. "Come with me," he ordered. "I need to show you something." He bowed to Mama and Lucy. "If you will excuse us?"

Then he pulled her away with a determined glint in his eye. She found herself in the small refreshment room adjoining the ballroom.

Dominic briskly shooed away the servants and a lingering guest or two, then closed the doors firmly behind them.

"What on earth did you need to show me in here?" Philippa's heart was pounding again.

"Nothing. I only wanted some privacy."

The look in his eyes made the breath catch in her throat. He trailed a fingertip down her cheek, then traced the line of her lips.

The heat in the room rose to an almost unbearable level—or was that simply her own skin burning? Dominic’s touch was like a spark against her skin, igniting a flame within her that refused to be quenched.

“Dominic,” she whispered, her heart pounding in her chest, and realized too late that she’d used his Christian name. “What are you doing?”

“Something I’ve wanted to do all evening,” he rumbled, pushing her against the nearest wall.

And then, without another word, he bent and captured her lips in a searing kiss.

CHAPTER
SIX

As their lips met, passion ignited between them like a wildfire, consuming everything in its path. Philippa's thoughts scattered, until all that remained was Dominic's touch, the taste of his mouth, and the desperate desire that throbbed with almost painful heat between her legs.

"Oh, sweet Pippa, how I've missed you," Dominic breathed against her lips.

His hard body pressed her against the unyielding wall, covering her from chest to thighs. They fit together as if made for each other.

"Dominic," she sighed. Her hands rose to bury themselves in his thick, dark hair.

She felt a hard ridge against her belly as he ground his hips against her. Distantly, she realized they should not be behaving so recklessly.

Was Dominic speaking the truth about having missed her? After all, there was no one around to witness their charade.

A whirlwind of emotions churned wildly inside her, scattering her thoughts like chaff.

Then the door to the refreshment room opened.

“Philippa!” Mama’s shocked exclamation made Dominic freeze against her. “What on earth are you doing?”

Her sudden appearance was like an icy bucket of water over Philippa’s heated senses.

She frantically shoved Dominic away. He stepped back from her, hastily pulling his halves of his coat forward to cover the front of his breeches.

Philippa’s cheeks flamed as she stared at her mother in mortification.

Dominic, however, stood tall. A roguish smile played upon his lips, and he looked unapologetically pleased with himself.

“Mama,” she stammered, trying to regain her composure. “We were just—”

“Taking a moment to yourselves, I see,” her mother interjected, raising her brows at the two of them. Her cheeks looked pinker than usual, but she didn’t seem angry.

The silence that followed was thick with tension. Finally Philippa whispered, “Please forgive me, Mama. My reunion with the duke overwhelmed me somewhat.”

“Indeed,” her mother replied dryly. “I understand the excitement of seeing each other again, but we must uphold certain standards. You are lucky that I was the one who discovered you, and not one of your other guests.”

She gave Philippa a pointed look. She nodded fervently, eager to end the awkward situation.

“Of course, Mama,” she agreed quickly. “It won’t happen again.”

Dominic merely inclined his head in agreement, a smug smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Seeing him so

unperturbed by their near-discovery only irritated Philippa.

Had he *wanted* someone to catch them like this?

And if so... why? What purpose could a scandalous embrace like the one they'd just shared serve their ruse? They had already announced their engagement and played the part of besotted lovebirds while dancing.

Dominic bowed his head. "My sincerest apologies, Mrs. Bowerchalke. Seeing your daughter again is a dream come true. I found myself quite overcome."

In past years, her mother had never hesitated to reprimand Mr. Dominic Townsend, youngest son of the Duke of Warbury, as if he were one of her own children.

But now, she hesitated for a moment before responding, as if unsure of how to chide a duke.

Finally, she said, "While I appreciate your candor, Your Grace, I must beg you to observe the proprieties, even if you *are* engaged to be married."

"Of course, Mama. I apologize for causing you any distress," Philippa said meekly, her gaze flicking to Dominic.

"You needn't worry, Mrs. Bowerchalke," Dominic agreed, his voice smooth as silk. "I will endeavor to comport myself with the utmost decorum in the future."

"Thank you, Your Grace." Mama dipped into a curtsy. "Now, if you will excuse me, I came to find my daughter because it is time to take our leave."

"So soon?" Dominic sounded surprised. "Why, it's barely after midnight!"

Mama nodded. "Lucy is quite disappointed, of course." She shook her head wryly. "Ah, youth! Philippa and her sister

may have the energy to dance all night, but I need my rest.”

“It was truly a joy to see all of you again,” Dominic said, smiling warmly at Mama. “But most especially Philippa.”

“Until tomorrow, my dear.” He took Philippa’s hand and pressed a gentle kiss to her glove. “I shall call on you at eight o’clock for our ride in the park.”

“Oh, but I don’t have a horse,” she responded, thinking it was the perfect excuse to put some distance between them while her head cleared of dangerous notions. “Our London house doesn’t have an attached stable, so we hired a carriage and driver for the Season.”

“No matter,” Dominic said with a dismissive wave. “I will order my groom to saddle Jasper and bring him with me.”

Drat. Dominic wasn’t going to make it easy to wriggle out of his invitation. “That’s very generous of you, my dear Warbury. But I confess I haven’t ridden in years.”

“Jasper is a gelding and the gentlest horse in our stable,” he countered, his gaze burning into hers with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine. “I look forward to our ride. We have a great deal to discuss and catch up on.” He bowed. “Until tomorrow, darling Pippa.”

“Until tomorrow, Your Grace,” she echoed, her voice barely audible. She curtsied and followed her mother out of the refreshments room.

As she and Mama returned to the crowded ballroom to find Lucy, Philippa’s heart continued to race. The ghostly sensation of Dominic’s lips on hers refused to fade away, leaving her feeling breathless and disoriented.

A thousand questions swirled through her mind, each more troubling than the last.

Why had Dominic kissed her so passionately? Was it merely part of their deception, or did he still harbor feelings for her after all these years? And why did the thought of him still desiring her send such a powerful surge of longing through her veins?

Get hold of yourself, Philippa, she told herself fiercely, as she had several times already this evening. It was play-acting on Dominic's part, and nothing more. Don't be a ninny and fall in love with him... again.

The next morning, the sun illuminated the parlor of the Bowerchalke's rented townhouse as Philippa anxiously awaited Dominic's arrival.

She had spent a sleepless night tortured by the memories of his kiss, and of happier days when they'd been young and foolishly in love. Now, she sat in an armchair, reading out loud to Mama, Lucy, and her two youngest sisters, Amanda and Georgiana.

At fifteen, the twins bitterly resented being barred from the exciting round of the Season's social events, since they were too young for their come-outs. Over breakfast, they had demanded a detailed recounting of the Duchess of Warbury's ball, and had pestered Philippa with an uncomfortable number of questions about Dominic, who they scarcely remembered since they'd only been five years old when he left to join the navy.

Papa had departed the house shortly after breakfast to meet with a couple of gentlemen who shared his antiquarian interests. He was currently writing a book about the life and

times of the notorious Julian, a Roman emperor who had tried to return the empire to paganism after the establishment of Christianity as the official state religion. The family's sojourn in London was providing Papa with plenty of opportunities to pursue his research in various private libraries.

At long last, a knock sounded at the front door.

"Mrs. Bowerchalke," the maidservant announced a moment later. "His Grace, the Duke of Warbury, is here to call upon Miss Bowerchalke."

Philippa's treacherous heart leaped as Dominic strode into the room.

Today, he wore a gentleman's riding attire: tan buckskin breeches that hugged his long, muscular legs, a black clawhammer coat over a dark violet waistcoat and white shirt with neatly tied cravat, and tall, polished black riding boots.

As he entered, Philippa saw he held a tall black beaver hat in one hand and an enormous bouquet of lovely tulips and daffodils in the other. He also had a small, paper-wrapped package tucked under the arm holding the flowers.

"Good morning, my dear Warbury," Philippa greeted, trying to mask her anticipatory flutter with a polite smile as she rose to curtsy.

"Good morning, Pippa," he replied, his eyes sparkling with mischief before turning to address the parlor's other occupants. "Mrs. Bowerchalke, Miss Bowerchalke, Miss Amanda, and Miss Georgiana, I've brought you these spring flowers as a small token of my affection for all of you."

With a flourish, he presented the bouquet to Mama, causing her to blush with delight. "Why, thank you, Your Grace! They are lovely."

Dominic turned his attention back to Philippa. He handed her the package, which proved to be heavy for its size.

She eagerly unwrapped it to find two volumes, both elegantly bound in leather with gilt stamping.

“I thought you might prefer them to flowers,” Dominic said.

“Oh, Mrs. Grant’s *Memoirs of an American Lady* and Monsieur Lamarck’s *Philosophie zoologique!*” Philippa exclaimed in delight. “I’ve been wanting to read these, but haven’t had the chance to make it to a bookseller yet!”

Dominic grinned boyishly down at her, an expression that erased years from his rather saturnine features. “The man at Hatchard’s bookshop recommended these when I told him of your tastes. And I recall your French was always much better than mine.”

“Thank you, Warbury,” she replied, pleasantly surprised that he’d remembered she preferred books to either flowers or jewelry. “I look forward to starting Mrs. Grant’s memoirs after we return from our ride.”

Amanda and Georgiana bounced eagerly on the sofa.

“Will you read it aloud to us?” Amanda demanded.

“Are there Indians in the book?” Georgiana asked, her face alight with interest.

“We shall see,” Philippa promised. “I’ve heard that Mrs. Grant lived in America for many years, and writes vividly of her experiences. I’m sure there will be Indians and many other fascinating tidbits about life in our former colonies.”

“Shall we be on our way, then?” Dominic asked.

“Of course,” Philippa answered, taking his offered arm as they left the house together.

As promised, he’d brought Jasper, a sweet-tempered gray gelding, with him. He quickly checked the girth and straps, then helped Philippa mount by giving her a boost into the sidesaddle when she stepped into his cupped hands.

A short time later, they were riding side by side through nearby Hyde Park, doing their best to present the picture of a well-bred couple deeply in love.

In between exchanging greetings with acquaintances also out for a morning ride, he flirted shamelessly with her.

“You were absolutely enchanting last night, my darling Pippa,” he began. “It’s no wonder that you drew every eye in the ballroom to you.”

“I was hardly the sole object of admiration,” she demurred as her cheeks heated. “In fact, I wager, if anyone looked at me, it was out of curiosity.”

“Nonsense. It was most definitely admiration,” he conceded. “And if you were not the sole object, you were certainly the most captivating.”

“My dear Warbury, you flatter me excessively,” Philippa countered with a smile as they rode side by side. She continued truthfully, “But if anyone really was looking at me last night, it was only because I was on the arm of the new Duke of Warbury.”

“Ah, well, I suppose that may have had something to do with it,” Dominic conceded in a playful tone. “But don’t underestimate your own charms, especially when you look so lovely and poised in the saddle.”

“And here I thought Mama was being foolishly extravagant to order me a riding habit,” she said. “I didn’t think I’d ever wear it.”

Philippa knew this banter was all just part of their game. But deep down, she could not help but wonder what it would be like if their engagement were real, and if the love they pretended to share could truly blossom once more.

To distract herself from her dangerous train of thought and to divert him from flirting with her so shamelessly, she cast about for a subject.

“Will you tell me about your adventures at sea?” she asked, genuinely curious to learn what his life had been like during the years they’d been apart.

“There isn’t much to tell, I’m afraid,” he replied. “My naval career comprised weeks of shipboard monotony and terrible food, punctuated by brief intervals of sheer terror.”

“Terror?” she asked, studying the confident, commanding man riding next to her. “I can’t imagine you fear *anything*.”

“On dry land, perhaps not,” he countered with a crooked grin. “But in the middle of the ocean, when the cannons boom and splinters fly, they stupefy every living soul with fear!”

“Good heavens,” she murmured, imagining the harrowing scene. “Is that how you injured your leg?”

“Indirectly.” Dominic shrugged. “It was my fault, really. I was too focused on watching the enemy ship’s movements and not enough on my surroundings.” He shifted in his saddle, his posture momentarily betraying a hint of discomfort. “When a cannonball struck our mast, I gaped at it like a fool instead of dodging. The impact sent a spar tumbling down onto the deck, and unfortunately, it broke my leg in two places.”

“How dreadful!” Philippa exclaimed, her eyes widening in shock at the graphic image his words conjured. “Were you able to receive proper medical attention?”

Her question elicited another shrug. “The ship’s surgeon set my bone quite serviceably under the circumstances. I can still walk and dance and ride, after all.”

“Dear me,” Philippa murmured, her hand instinctively reaching out to touch his arm in sympathy. She quickly withdrew it, realizing the impropriety of her action.

But Dominic noticed, of course.

“My darling Pippa,” he said, his eyes locked on hers. “Your concern is touching, truly. But better men than I ended their naval service short a limb or two. Or found themselves discharged from His Majesty’s navy on account of having died.” His grin returned. “Despite my clumsiness, I’m happy to report that my ship, the *HMS Bucephalus*, triumphed in the encounter. We captured that French ship and took her surviving officers and crew prisoner. And she carried a nice cargo of payroll chests filled with gold and silver coin, so all the officers and crew received a generous share of prize money afterwards.”

Dominic suddenly appeared to remember something. He consulted his watch and frowned.

“Blast it, I forgot all about Mr. Adams,” he muttered. He grimaced apologetically. “Philippa, please forgive me for escorting you home now. I have forgotten I was supposed to meet with someone this morning.”

“That’s quite all right,” she assured him. “We accomplished what we set out to do, did we not? And

presented the very picture of happy amiability to all who saw us.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Dominic frowned. “Still, I would have enjoyed continuing our conversation. Promise you’ll tell me about Mrs. Grant’s memoir when I see you at the Grensted’s ball tonight.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

As they returned to the Bowerchalke's townhouse in companionable silence, Philippa reflected on the changes in the man riding beside her. And yet, she felt the same sense of rightness in his company.

"My dear Pippa," Dominic said as they approached her family's rented townhouse. "Despite the unfortunate brevity of our outing today, I thoroughly enjoyed your company. Your presence brought a lightness to my heart that I have not felt in quite some time."

Philippa stared at him in surprise. They were in public, so she couldn't decide whether he was sincere or merely continuing the pretense they had embarked upon yesterday evening.

"My dear Warbury," she replied at last, "I, too, have found our time together most delightful. I confess I was curious about your life these past ten years."

"I'm pleased to hear you enjoy my company," he murmured, bringing his mount to a halt before the townhouse and dismounting with practiced ease.

As she carefully freed her right leg from the saddle's leaping, swung it over to join her left leg, and smoothed her skirts before sliding down, he reached up to assist her, putting

his hands around her waist and guiding her down off the patiently waiting gelding.

“Thank you,” she whispered as her feet touched the ground.

His hands lingered on her hips. Their eyes locked, and Dominic leaned in to capture her lips.

Once more, the world around them seemed to dissolve into nothingness as they lost themselves in the intoxicating taste of one another. The heat and passion of his kiss rolled over Philippa’s senses, leaving her breathless and aching for more.

But all too soon, reality intruded upon their stolen moment of bliss. Reluctantly, they broke apart. Dominic’s gaze lingered on her flushed cheeks and swollen lips as if he wanted to memorize the image.

“Until this evening, darling Pippa,” he murmured, his voice husky with desire. “I will count down the hours until we meet again.”

“Until then, Warbury,” she replied, her own voice barely audible as her heart raced and desire burned, hot and aching, in the pit of her belly.

She watched as he swung effortlessly back into the saddle and rode off, leading Jasper behind him.

Back inside the house, Philippa closed the door behind her. Her back pressed against the painted wood as she tried to catch her breath.

The memory of Dominic’s lips searing against hers still lingered, along with the heated throb of desire.

An insidious thought took root in her mind. What if this engagement turned into something more than just a

masquerade? After all, it seemed they'd rekindled the spark that had once burned between them. Could love also bloom anew?

Then she caught herself before she drifted too far into fantasies and daydreams.

She had to ignore her heated response to his kiss and consider the situation rationally. After all, he had made it abundantly clear last night that he was only flirting and pretending affection to protect her reputation and repay the debt of honor he felt he owed her.

She could not allow herself to be ensnared by the dangerous allure of his kisses.

Deluding herself that their mutual pretense was real would only leave her with a broken heart once more.

"Pippa, are you all right?" Lucy's concerned voice brought her back to reality, and Philippa opened her eyes to see her sister standing in the parlor doorway.

"Y-yes, I'm fine," she stammered, attempting to regain her composure. "Just a bit... overwhelmed."

"Overwhelmed? By what, pray tell?" Lucy asked, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"By *everything*." Philippa sighed. "Dominic—I mean Warbury—has changed so much. And yet, not at all."

"Indeed," Lucy agreed. "He is far more confident and assured than I remember. And more romantic, too. I saw him kissing you from the parlor window, you know. It looked quite thrilling."

"Lucy!" Philippa gasped, scandalized. "You were spying on us?"

“Only by accident,” Lucy confessed. “And before you ask—I won’t breathe a word to Mama. But truly, sister, you are so lucky! I can only hope that I find someone who looks at me the way he looks at you. And you seem besotted as well.”

Philippa sternly repressed the warmth that flowered at Lucy’s speech. While she was happy that she and Dominic were playing their roles convincingly, she hated lying to her family. Lucy’s raptures over Dominic’s play-acting only added to Philippa’s burden of guilt.

“I’m sure you will find someone worthy of your affections, my dear,” she told her sister.

She added silently, *And when you do, I hope he doesn’t break your heart like Dominic did mine.*

Dominic remembered little of his ride back to Warbury House. His cock ached with frustrated desire as his thoughts endlessly replayed how Philippa’s soft lips had moved eagerly against his, the heat of her mouth, and just how her body had melted into his embrace, both last night and just now.

His darling Pippa was a prime article, indeed, and a devilishly tempting one. Best of all, she clearly still felt something for him. Her response to his kisses attested to that.

Triumph sang in his veins. He was certain he was one step closer to winning her back and making her his fiancée for real.

A short while later, Dominic strode into Warbury House’s richly-appointed library.

The morning light streamed through the tall windows, illuminating the green silk wallpaper, the molded plaster

garlands on the ceiling, and the sets of gleaming mahogany bookshelves housing rows of leather-bound tomes.

The library's familiar mixture of scents—beeswax furniture polish, old leather, and spiced hot chocolate—instantly transported him back to his boyhood, invoking vivid memories of his father.

This room had been the duke's exclusive domain whenever the family came to London. Dominic treasured the memories of those rare mornings when Father permitted him and his older brother Edmund to join him here for breakfast. There was always a large, steaming pot of chocolate on the table, perfuming the library with delectable odors.

“Ah, there you are, Warbury,” a familiar voice called out, jolting Dominic from his nostalgic reverie. “I've been waiting for you.”

He spotted the Marquess of Avedon sitting at a small table set for two, next to one of the library's tall windows. A steaming plate of sausages and fried eggs with toast sat before his unexpected but welcome guest.

Avedon set down his fork and flashed Dominic a warm smile. “Good morning! I trust your morning ride with Miss Bowerchalke was a pleasant one?”

“Good morning, Avedon. Indeed, it was most invigorating,” Dominic replied, his mind instantly replaying the memory of the fiery parting kiss he'd just shared with Philippa.

He took a seat across from his friend.

The attentive footman turned to a sideboard and promptly dished up a plate laden with toast, eggs, and a thick slice of

fried ham, then poured Dominic a cup of frothy, spiced hot chocolate from a steaming porcelain pot.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this fine morning?” Dominic asked.

“Vulgar curiosity, my friend,” Avedon declared, a mischievous grin on his handsome face. “I’ve been dying to ask you: how on earth did you win back Miss Bowerchalke so quickly? One moment, she looked like she wanted to stomp on your feet each time you spun her around the room. And then, not an hour later, she agreed to marry you and now gazes at you worshipfully! Do share your secret, won’t you?”

Dominic glanced up at the hovering footman. This was a conversation that demanded privacy. “That will be all, Jones, thank you. Leave the chocolate pot.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” the man responded.

He promptly withdrew and closed the library door behind him, affording Dominic and Avedon privacy.

“So, Miss Bowerchalke?” Avedon prompted. “What sweet words of enchantment swayed her heart in your favor once more?”

“Ah.” Dominic chuckled, striving to maintain his composure under Avedon’s probing gaze. “That, my friend, is an *interesting* story.”

Avedon waited, clearly hoping for more. When Dominic didn’t continue, his friend scowled.

“Come now, Warbury,” he pressed, “surely you can divulge a few details to me? You know I’m not the type of fellow who spouts all he knows.”

“Let’s just say,” Dominic evaded, “that I am quite pleased with how things are progressing in my courtship of Miss Bowerchalke. I look forward to the happy day when she becomes my wife and duchess.”

“Very well,” Avedon conceded with a sigh. “I see you are determined to remain silent on the matter of your miraculous reconciliation with your lady-love. But tell me this: have you yet explained to her the circumstances of your departure all those years ago?”

Dominic’s expression darkened. The memory of how he’d been forced to abandon Philippa still haunted him. “I offered her my heartfelt apology, and she has graciously forgiven me.”

“But she doesn’t know the whole story?” the other man pressed.

Dominic shook his head. “I had no wish to dredge up the unpleasant past.”

“Really, Warbury,” Avedon sighed, shaking his head with a look of disapproval. “You offered the lady an apology without a word of explanation? That’s hardly sufficient to mend the wound you inflicted upon her heart.”

Dominic’s jaw tightened at the mention of Philippa’s past suffering, but he held Avedon’s gaze. “I am deeply aware of the pain I caused her, and I have every intention of making it right.”

“Then why not share the truth with her?” Avedon pressed, leaning forward in his chair, his hands clasped before him. “She deserves to know why you left her, why you enlisted in the navy, and what truly transpired.” He paused and sipped from his own cup. “After all, you told *me*.”

“I was only sixteen, newly come aboard ship, feeling homesick and very low,” Dominic reminded him. He shifted his shoulders uncomfortably, feeling the agonizing burn of stripes long since healed. “And I have spouted to no one else since. Now that Father and Captain Richards are both gone, only you and my mother know what really happened.” He shook his head. “And I have no wish to speak ill of my late father.”

Avedon looked surprised. “Why ever not? He was a proper tyrant, was he not?”

Dominic clenched his fists beneath the polished surface of the table, his knuckles turning white with the effort. “I *cannot* sully my father’s memory by casting him as the villain in this tale,” he gritted. “Looking back now, I can understand his actions, harsh and painful as they were.”

“But you must also consider the tender feelings of the living—namely, Miss Bowerchalke,” Avedon countered. “If you want her to yoke herself to you, she has the right to know the true circumstances of your departure.”

“Damn it, man!” Dominic burst out, rising from his seat and pacing restlessly about the room. The sunlight cast long glowing rectangles on the Aubusson carpet beneath his riding boots. “Don’t you think I’ve considered that? But how can I speak ill of the dead, even if it is to clear my name?”

Dominic returned to the table and threw himself into the delicate chair, which creaked alarmingly under his tall frame. He drained his cup of thick chocolate, fragrant with cinnamon, cardamom, and bittersweet memories.

Avedon blew out a frustrated breath. “Keeping the truth from her will only cause more harm in the long run,” he warned. “Mark my words, Warbury, you’re sailing with a

cannon hole in the side of your ship. You need to plug and repair the damage if you intend this vessel of matrimony to stay afloat.”

“Ever the master of tortured metaphors, aren’t you?” Dominic forced a chuckle, though Avedon’s warning weighed heavily on him. “I appreciate your concern, my friend, but I believe I have matters well in hand.”

“Very well,” Avedon sighed, clearly not convinced. “But just remember: secrets have a way of resurfacing at the most inopportune times. Do not let them sink your ship before it has even set sail.”

“Enough!” Dominic snapped as his patience frayed. “I apologized most sincerely. Philippa forgave me. You need not concern yourself with this matter any further, Avedon.”

He saw hurt flash across the other man’s expression. Dominic closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

When Dominic looked at his friend again, it was with contrition. “And now I must offer *you* my most sincere apologies. I appreciate your wise counsel, even if I reacted churlishly. Rest assured, my matrimonial ship is seaworthy and prepared for any storms that may come.”

“I hope you’re right.” Mercifully, Avedon let the topic go.

As they finished their breakfast in companionable silence, each man lost in his own thoughts, a knock sounded on the library door.

“Enter,” Dominic called, and Jones reappeared.

“Your Grace, Mr. Seth Adams just arrived. He says that you requested him to call upon you this morning.”

“Indeed,” Dominic said, rising from his chair and straightening his waistcoat. “Show him to my study. I shall join him there shortly.”

“And on that note, I shall take my leave.” Avedon said, rising as well. “We’ll meet at the club later this afternoon, yes?”

Dominic nodded. “Until then, my friend. And thank you.”

As he watched Avedon depart, he wondered if the other man was right. Would Philippa truly consider his suit without knowing the truth about what had happened to them a decade ago?

He *had* to win her back. He’d never stopped thinking about her during all the long years of their separation. Now, he imagined lying beside her on their wedding night, her soft sighs and moans filling his bedchamber as he made love to her with tender passion.

It was a vision that both tantalized and tormented him. What if he failed to succeed in his clever courtship strategy? Would he never experience such bliss?

“Get a hold of yourself, Dominic,” he muttered under his breath, forcing his mind back to the present. “There is work to be done, and you cannot afford to be distracted by windmills in your head.”

As he entered his study, he found Seth Adams awaiting him.

The former sailor had clearly spent some of the money that Dominic had advanced him on a barber and a set of new, clean clothes. The trials of his amputation and its aftermath had etched lines of hardship on his face, but there was a quiet

dignity in his bearing that spoke to his resilience and determination.

“Mr. Adams,” Dominic greeted him warmly, extending his hand. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Your Grace,” Adams replied, clasping Dominic’s hand. “Thank you for granting me this opportunity.”

“Think nothing of it,” Dominic said, gesturing for Adams to take a seat. “Now, let us talk about your new role. As I mentioned when last we met, I wish to improve the beef cattle at the estate’s home farm...”

As they discussed Dominic’s plans, he found himself impressed by Adams’ knowledge and skills. He already knew the man had a good head for figures, as well as an unwavering commitment to hard work and duty.

But Dominic found it difficult to focus on the conversation at hand. His thoughts kept drifting back to Philippa. Where else would he find a duchess with her wit, her intelligence, her beauty?

No matter what obstacles stood in his way, he needed to make her his fiancée in truth as well as in name. No other woman would do.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

A few mornings later, Philippa found herself once again riding alongside Dominic through Hyde Park. Heavily overcast gray skies promised rain later in the day. But for now, the cool, humid air carried the sweet perfume of blooming hyacinths and cherry blossoms.

“Philippa, I must tell you about a rather intriguing encounter I had recently with a man named Mr. Adams,” Dominic began, his voice filled with a mixture of empathy and determination.

“Mr. Adams?” she inquired, her curiosity piqued. “Pray tell, who is he?”

“He was one of the sailors under my command. He was gravely wounded during a battle after I resigned my commission. The surgeon amputated his leg,” he explained, his eyes darkening with pain. “When I encountered Adams again a few days ago, he had been discharged from service and reduced to begging on the streets.” He shook his head. “And his fate is not unique. It grieves me to see so many noble fighting men reduced to such circumstances.”

“Indeed,” she agreed solemnly, her heart aching for those who had sacrificed so much for their country. “It is a great injustice.”

As they continued their ride, Philippa's thoughts turned inward. She had spent the past few months pondering how she might use her unexpected inheritance from her Great-Aunt Starkley to do good.

Now, an idea burst, brilliant as a firework, in her mind.

However, its scope required more than her modest fortune. She had to convince the man riding at her side, now one of the wealthiest peers in England, to join his considerable resources to hers.

"My dear Warbury," she said, turning to him. "I have a proposition for you that may ease some of these brave men's suffering."

"Go on," he urged, clearly intrigued.

"Let us work together to establish a charitable hospital and housing for crippled military veterans. We could thus provide them with the care and support they deserve, and in doing so, perhaps use our resources for the general betterment of England's brave soldiers and sailors."

For a moment, Dominic simply stared at her, his dark blue eyes wide with surprise.

Oh, dear, she thought. He must receive requests like this all the time.

Her hopes deflated as he frowned. She couldn't tell if it stemmed from annoyance or deep consideration of her proposal.

She added, "In case you're wondering, I wouldn't expect you to be the sole backer. I'm certain that Papa would favor this project and allow me to use my portion towards it."

A smile spread across Dominic's face.

“My darling Pippa, I think you’ve come up with an absolutely splendid idea!” he exclaimed with genuine enthusiasm.

“So, you favor my proposition?” Her apprehension vanished as excitement raced through her, as heady as brandy.

“Indeed!” His grin widened. “And my ducal estate in Wiltshire has ample land and resources to contribute to this worthy cause. Perhaps we could establish a self-sustaining farm to provide not only food and a perpetual income for the hospital but also jobs for the people of Warbury-on-Till and the other towns in our area.”

“Yes, that would be perfect!” Philippa felt thrilled to have found a purpose for her inheritance, beyond snaring a titled husband. “Together, we shall create something truly remarkable.”

In the back of her mind, a tiny, selfish voice commented that if she and Dominic embarked on this project together, then she would have an excuse to continue their association after the Season ended and they dissolved their fake engagement.

She pushed the notion firmly aside. She told herself she only proposed this project because there was a burning need for it. *Not* because she sought an excuse to spend more time in his company.

“By the by, Warbury,” she added in her firmest tone, “I intend to be fully involved in every aspect of this venture.”

“Wouldn’t dream of shutting you out, dearest Pippa,” he replied gravely. “I’ve always admired your intelligence and talent for organization. We shall make an excellent team.”

“Indeed, we shall,” she agreed, her pulse quickening at the thought of working so closely with him.

“I should like to introduce Mr. Adams to you,” Dominic said. “He is a man of considerable intelligence and resourcefulness, and he was very well-respected aboard the *HMS Bucephalus*. I believe he would make an excellent overseer for the farm attached to the veterans’ home. His first-hand experiences will no doubt prove invaluable in its operation.”

“An excellent idea,” she concurred, already envisioning the difference they could make in the lives of so many.

As they continued their ride, discussing the intricacies of their newly hatched charitable endeavor, Philippa marveled at how easily they fell back into step with one another.

Despite the years and the distance that had separated them, their shared values and desires seemed as perfectly aligned as ever. Dominic treated her with the utmost respect and deference, allowing her ideas and opinions to hold equal weight with his own.

“Now that we’ve agreed on the scope of our project, the next step is to secure an architect,” Dominic said as they left the park. “I have a particular property in mind for our project, but someone will need to survey it and assess it for our needs.”

“You are most generous,” Philippa responded, pleased by his thoughtfulness. “I had hoped you would contribute towards the cost of construction, but you have already exceeded my expectations.”

“Ah, but I’m well-acquainted with your tastes, darling Pippa.” Dominic grinned at her. “Some ladies require flowers and diamonds. You are partial to good books and good works.”

She laughed.

When they reached the Bowerchalke's rented townhouse, Dominic helped her dismount.

As had become his custom over the past week, he claimed his reward with a kiss that left her dizzy with need.

“Until tonight,” he said, when their lips parted.

She nodded eagerly.

He had invited her, Mama, and Lucy to the Lyceum Theater for a performance of *The Clandestine Marriage*, a comedy that had remained popular since its premiere over forty years ago.

The following week, Dominic sent a note, inviting Philippa to join him for a meeting with the renowned architect Mr. John Soane in Chelsea, a village located just outside London.

At the appointed hour, a grand carriage with the Warbury coat of arms emblazoned on its lacquered black doors arrived to fetch her. As she emerged from the townhouse, a footman hurried to open the carriage door and place the portable steps.

“Philippa,” Dominic greeted her warmly, his intense blue eyes never leaving her face, “you look absolutely radiant today.”

She was glad she had allowed Mama to talk her into wearing this outfit.

It was an elegant walking dress in pale green silk, over which she wore a long, dark-green pelisse trimmed with gold

ribbon. A matching hat accented with an elegant spray of yellow and red pheasant tail feathers completed her ensemble.

“Thank you, my dear Warbury,” she replied, blushing at his compliment. “I am eager to hear what Mr. Soane has to say about our plans.”

Philippa settled herself in the carriage, taking the luxuriously cushioned and upholstered seat across from Dominic. She couldn't help but steal glances at Dominic, marveling at how handsome and distinguished he appeared in his perfectly tailored dark gray coat and intricately knotted cravat.

She felt a magnetic pull towards him, a desire to tuck herself against his side, so that they touched. Instead, she forced herself to fold her hands primly in her lap.

Dominic rapped on the ceiling with his walking-stick to signal the driver, and they set off.

“So, tell me about Mr. Soane,” she said when they were well underway.

“He holds the post of Clerk of Works at Royal Hospital Chelsea. King Charles II founded the hospital a hundred and thirty years ago as a retirement home for British Army veterans.”

Philippa nodded. “Go on.”

“Mr. Soane designed the hospital's new infirmary. He appears to be very interested in our commission,” Dominic continued. “When I wrote him requesting this meeting, he replied immediately that the prospect of designing a new hospital from the ground up interested him greatly. His tenure at Royal Hospital Chelsea has given him some thoughts on how to improve upon the present design there.”

“Oh, you’ve found the perfect architect for our project!” Impulsively, she leaned forward and pressed a tender kiss to Dominic’s clean-shaven cheek.

His ardent gaze locked onto hers. In a swift movement, he caught her and pulled her onto his lap. Then he captured her lips in a searing kiss that left her breathless.

In the privacy of the swaying carriage, they explored each other’s mouths with fervent abandon. Philippa clung to him, unable to resist the desire that overwhelmed her.

Dominic’s skilled fingers deftly dipped into her bodice, stroking her bare skin with a heated touch. His mouth traced a path down her neck, eliciting gasps and shivers of pleasure as he reached down further and tenderly cupped her breast.

Philippa whimpered with desire and squirmed helplessly on his hard thighs as his thumb stroked the sensitive peak, teasing it into a tight bud. Every wicked caress sent fire racing down her nerves.

I shouldn’t be doing this, she thought, desperately trying to regain control over her treacherous desires. *It’s highly improper. Dangerous.*

Then Dominic shattered her self-control with his next words.

“My dearest Pippa,” he murmured against her mouth, “I never stopped thinking about you all these years we were apart.”

“Nor I you,” she replied, overwhelmed by the intensity of his words and the sensations coursing through her body.

Her hands slipped under his coat to explore the hard planes of his shoulders and chest through the fine cotton of his shirt.

Each time he had kissed her over the past few days, the place between her legs had awakened to hot, pulsing life. Now, her arousal roared up like a bonfire, consuming her with flames and a vast, throbbing ache of sensual desire.

She needed more from him, but she didn't know how to ask.

No matter. He seemed to know exactly what she needed.

Philippa gasped with pleasure as Dominic bent his dark head and kissed his way hungrily down her neck. When he reached her breasts, he lifted them out of her corset and replaced his fingers with his lips.

He devoured her with his hot, wet mouth, nipping, licking, and sucking until she was moaning and arching, shamelessly offering herself to him.

His own desire pressed eagerly against her thigh, hard even through the layers of silk and wool that separated them.

“Dominic, please...” she begged.

“Of course, my darling,” he breathed, reaching down and drawing up the hem of her skirt.

He ran his hand over her stocking-clad calf, then up to her knee and over the ribbon that tied her stocking. She whimpered with need as his hand arrived at the bare skin of her inner thigh.

“Open your legs for me,” he ordered.

Dazed with desire, she obeyed without thinking. An instant later, his fingertips circled her swollen nether lips, then dipped coyly between them in a maddening caress.

She whimpered loudly.

“Ah, so wet for me. I know exactly what you need,” he rumbled, his breath tickling her wet nipple. “Have you ever experienced *la petite mort*, Philippa?”

“No—” she began.

He stroked her folds. A sudden, intense burst of pleasure jolted through her as he grazed the small bud at the apex of her thighs. “Oh!”

This was what she needed from him. Quite desperately so.

He grinned up at her with predatory eyes before resuming his caresses. His fingers teased and stroked between her legs with a practiced touch, while his mouth continued working rough magic on her breasts.

“Are you ready for more?” he asked when she was panting and pushing herself against his deliciously tormenting hand and lips.

Captive to the wonderful sensations he was summoning from her body like a magician, Philippa nodded vigorously.

“Good,” Dominic said, his voice rough-edged with desire. “I want you to ride my hand with your sweet quim. I want to feel the moment you experience the little death for the first time.”

She ought to be shocked by his vulgar language, she thought dimly.

Instead, her body responded to his words with an embarrassing rush of moisture as her arousal ratcheted up another level.

As he spoke, he slid a finger into her, penetrating her in a surprising but delightful way.

“Good?” he asked. “Ready for more?”

“Yes, oh yes, Dominic!” she exclaimed, forgetting herself and addressing him by his Christian name.

He obliged her by adding a second finger, then a third, filling and stretching her.

After giving her virgin flesh a few moments to adjust to his invasion, he slid his fingers in and out of her, caressing her in the most intimate way imaginable. Meanwhile, he stroked her bud in a dizzying rhythm, sending fresh jolts of pleasure singing through her with every sweep of his broad thumb.

Dominic’s mouth moved to hers, muffling her cries of pleasure as he relentlessly drove her higher and higher, until she balanced trembling on the edge of ecstasy.

“Let go for me,” he whispered against her lips. “Surrender to the little death.”

Then his teeth closed on her lower lip in a sharp caress. Philippa cried out as she plunged over a waterfall made of stars. Wave after wave of almost unbearable pleasure crashed over her in stormy succession, battering her with sensation.

She had never experienced something so powerful, so ecstatic. It left her feeling simultaneously shaken and blissful.

Dominic’s talented fingers continued skillfully stroking her most intimate places until the long pulses of her release slowly subsided.

At last, she curled, spent and trembling on his lap as he held her, slowly stroking her back.

“Oh, my sweet girl, you are perfect in every way.” Dominic kissed her, his lips gentle now.

As she wound her arms languidly around his neck and returned the kiss, she realized he remained hard and

unsatisfied.

“How may I return the favor?” she whispered shyly.

Her cheeks heated despite everything she'd just permitted him to do to her.

Wordlessly, he reached between them and unbuttoned the fall at the front of his trousers. Then he removed her glove and guided her hand to his thick member. Together, they freed it from its cramped confines.

“Stroke me,” he commanded.

Philippa felt a thrill of anticipation as her bare fingers closed around him for the first time.

During their ill-fated romance a decade ago, they'd gone no further than kissing and a few shy fumbles through their clothing.

Now, they were both older, and on Dominic's part at least, clearly more experienced.

His member felt velvety, yet hard as steel beneath her fingers.

Dominic inhaled sharply at the contact.

As Philippa drew her hand slowly up and down his length, he let his head roll back against the high cushioned seat back and closed his eyes with a blissful sigh. She marveled that with each stroke of her hand, he grew harder still. His breath rasped in his throat.

Dominic let out a deep groan of pleasure as Philippa bent and tentatively kissed the broad tip of his member.

His lips and tongue had worked such magic on her breasts earlier. She wondered if she could produce a similar effect.

“Take me into your mouth,” he growled.

At his words, her arousal came roaring back as if she'd never been satisfied at all. She slid to her knees before him, braced her hands on his thighs, and licked her lips, contemplating the impressive size of the member now rearing up at eye level.

Her breath puffed across his glistening tip. His thigh muscles turned to steel under her palms as she bent forward.

Then the carriage came to an abrupt halt.

“Royal Hospital Chelsea, Your Grace,” came a voice from outside the carriage.

Dominic swore viciously. Flushed and disheveled, Philippa scrambled up from her knees and hastened to put herself back together. She crammed her exposed breasts back down into her corset with shaking hands and straightened her gown and hat. Meanwhile, a scowling Dominic swiftly buttoned up his trousers.

He had regained his composure by the time they left the carriage a few moments later. Only a slight flush over his high cheekbones betrayed their passionate—and incomplete—interlude.

Her knees felt weak and a golden glow suffused her innards as they walked across a large open courtyard of green lawns crossed by wide gravel paths. Ahead of her, a columned portico topped with a triangular pediment marked the hospital's main entrance. The long brick wings of the hospital enclosed the courtyard on three sides.

As they entered the hospital's main building, Philippa's mind raced with unanswered questions.

What did Dominic's words and actions mean?

Had he truly changed his mind about their relationship being merely a pretense?

And if so, could she really trust him with her heart once more?

Mr. Soane's appearance cut short any further conversation on the matter. A tall man with a long, rather melancholy face and curling brown hair, he greeted them with a warm smile and a bow.

"Your Grace, Miss Bowerchalke, it's a pleasure to meet you both," he said as he led them down a long corridor to his office. "I've been eagerly awaiting our discussion about your new hospital."

As they spent the next hour poring over Mr. Soane's preliminary sketches and discussing architectural details, Philippa struggled to focus entirely on the task at hand.

The memory of her passionate encounter with Dominic continued to haunt her, causing her heart to race with each stolen glance exchanged between them.

Finally, the meeting ended. Despite her lamentable state of distraction, the decisions they'd made pleased Philippa. As had the architect's recommendations.

"Your Grace, Miss Bowerchalke," Mr. Soane said as they took their leave, "I shall have a preliminary set of plans ready for your review within a fortnight."

"Thank you, Mr. Soane," Dominic replied, shaking the architect's hand.

"We look forward to seeing your designs," Philippa said, smiling.

As they left Soane's office, an uneasy silence settled over them. Philippa couldn't help but notice the longing in Dominic's eyes as he stole glances at her.

Her heart began beating with anticipation as they returned to the waiting carriage. Where they would be alone again, in complete privacy.

She had just climbed inside when a panting messenger boy came dashing up.

He handed a Dominic a sealed note. Dominic tipped him a silver half-crown, then opened the note.

Philippa saw him frown as he read it.

Then he looked at her. "Philippa, my most sincere apologies. An old shipboard comrade requires my help. I will have Gareth drive you home while I hail a hackney."

"I—I was hoping we might talk," she ventured, disappointed. "About what happened earlier."

He nodded. "Yes, we have much to discuss. I will see you tonight, at Lord and Lady Poole's ball. We will talk then, I promise."

CHAPTER
NINE

Lord and Lady Poole's residence, Curzon Hall, was a magnificent riverside brick mansion built during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The décor was old-fashioned, with carved linenfold wood paneling on the walls instead of more modern wallpaper, but still very elegant.

Tonight's ball was being held in the sixteenth-century Long Gallery. The wide hall blazed with candles, and the polished marble floors had been cleared of furniture to make space for musicians and dancers. Facing a bank of diamond-paned windows, rows of ancestral portraits depicting solemn lords and ladies in the finery of past centuries stared down at the merrymakers.

"Look, there's Lady Eliza," Lucy whispered excitedly to Philippa. "But no sign of her odious brother."

"Thank goodness," Philippa murmured.

Her gaze followed Lady Eliza down the length of the packed gallery.

Tonight, Lord Everholt's sister wore a semi-transparent robe of pale blue netting over a white satin slip. A turban set with pearls and crowned with a pair of long white egret feathers confined her blonde curls.

As their gazes met, Lady Eliza turned away abruptly, pointedly ignoring Philippa. It was more of a relief than an insult.

“Shall we dance?” Lucy asked, her eyes gleaming as she glanced around in search of partners.

“Of course, dear sister,” Philippa replied, smiling warmly.

She took Lucy’s arm, and together they joined the fray on the dance floor. As the orchestra struck up a lively country dance, the sisters wove their way through the sets, laughing and exchanging witty banter with their fellow dancers.

“The Duke of Warbury hasn’t yet arrived?” Lucy queried during a pause in the dancing.

Philippa had been wondering about that, as well. She desperately needed to talk to him. After returning home this afternoon, she had spent hours tormented by vivid recollections of that wickedly sensual interlude in Dominic’s carriage, and racked by speculation about what it might mean for their future relationship.

The only way out of her misery of ignorance was to confront him directly and ask him why. She tried not to get her hopes up regarding his reply.

“His Grace, the Duke of Warbury,” the Master of Ceremonies announced at last.

Dominic looked dashing in his black tailcoat and matching breeches with silver buckles. His dark blue silk waistcoat matched his eyes perfectly. The sight of him striding across Lord and Lady Poole’s ballroom towards her ignited heat in the pit of her belly.

“May I have this dance?” he asked, after greeting her and bowing over her hand.

“Of course,” she replied, trying to suppress the blush that heated her cheeks.

They took their places for the next dance, a Scottish reel, and followed the intricate steps of the dance with practiced ease.

“Your gown is exquisite,” Dominic murmured as they briefly came together during the pattern of the dance.

Philippa felt her heart swell with pride at the compliment. Her long white silk slip with a robe of pale lavender crepe hugged her body, emphasizing her curves while remaining demurely modest. She wore a fashionable silk-and-lace cap over her braided and curled hair.

“Thank you,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. As they clasped hands briefly and circled each other, she found herself lost in Dominic’s gaze.

“Are we ready for our discussion, my dear?” he inquired when the reel ended. His expression looked concerned. “I apologize for leaving you in the lurch this afternoon, but my summons was urgent. Luckily, I could resolve the matter with no great difficulty.”

“I am glad to hear that,” she said. “But I was hoping we could converse privately.”

“I have just the place in mind,” he agreed, offering his arm. “Lord Poole is very proud of his orangery and has opened it to guests. Perhaps you would like to tour it?”

“I would.” An orangery sounded peaceful and conveniently far from the music and chatter filling the Long Gallery.

Philippa took his arm. Dominic led her down the length of the gallery toward a pair of ornate French doors that opened

onto the vast gardens.

As they made their way through the crowd of richly dressed guests, Philippa caught snatches of gossip.

“—cut from all invitations since the Duchess of Warbury’s ball,” one woman said, eyes gleaming with malicious delight.

Her friend tutted sympathetically. “Oh, poor Lady Eliza, suffering so for her brother’s misdeeds. It was generous of Lady Poole to invite her tonight, don’t you think?”

Philippa felt a momentary stab of pity for Lord Everholt’s sister as Dominic ushered her outside.

Lord Poole’s orangery proved to be at the far end of the gently sloping garden, near the bank of the Thames. It was an elegant neoclassical building dressed in honey-colored local stone. Grand arching windows stretched almost to the high ceilings, each framed by elaborate stone pillars and intricate carvings almost hidden by century-old climbing roses on the exterior.

As Philippa stepped through the doors, the brisk chill of the April evening immediately transformed into tropical warmth.

“Shall we take a turn around this lovely sanctuary?” Dominic suggested.

Philippa nodded, glad of a momentary reprieve. Her stomach fluttered uneasily as she gathered the courage to broach the subject of their encounter in his carriage.

They walked further into the building.

High above, moonlight streamed through the glass ceiling, imbuing the room with an ethereal silver light that danced upon the leaves of the orange and lemon trees standing in

ordered lines. Here and there, strategically placed marble statues of nymphs and fauns gazed serenely from between the trees.

At the far end of the building, Dominic halted. He looked about, clearly impressed by their surroundings. “Private enough for you, my dear?”

She nodded.

A faint click and a soft rustle somewhere behind her made her jump. Had someone else entered the orangery?

But no sounds of footsteps or voices followed. After a tense moment, she decided they were still alone.

Dominic inclined his head, signaling her to begin.

Philippa took a deep breath, inhaling the heady scents, and tried to steady herself.

“This morning, in your carriage...” she began, her voice barely audible. “I find myself unable to stop thinking about it.”

“You’re not alone in that,” Dominic said in a husky voice.

“Considering our arrangement is one of pure convenience, I am confused by your actions,” she confessed, her eyes searching his for any hint of his true intentions. “What am I to make of—of what transpired between us?”

Her face heated.

He studied her for a moment before responding, as if weighing his words carefully. “That is a question I have been pondering myself.” His voice was low and intense. “May I ask whether you’ve had second thoughts regarding our present arrangement?”

The air seemed to grow heavy between them as Philippa tried to discern his motive for asking the question.

“Yes,” she began hesitantly, “I cannot help but dwell upon it. Our arrangement dictates that we are to be engaged for a single season and then part ways. Yet your words and actions—especially this morning—have left me questioning everything.”

“Philippa,” Dominic replied softly, his blue eyes searching hers, “I understand your confusion, and I apologize if my actions have caused you any distress.”

“Distress?” she echoed, her voice rising despite her best efforts to remain composed. “Warbury, I am not *distressed*. I am utterly bewildered! What am I to make of your intentions when you treat me with such intimacy?”

“Is it possible,” he ventured cautiously, “that we may both be feeling something deeper than we initially expected? That perhaps our hearts refuse to adhere to the constraints we’ve placed upon them?”

“Are you suggesting that you genuinely wish to court me, Dominic?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper as she struggled to keep her soaring hopes in check.

He hesitated for a moment before confessing, “Yes, Philippa. Since meeting you again, I have come to realize that my previous feelings for you remain unchanged. I hope you feel the same way.”

Philippa’s heart swelled with a mixture of joy and trepidation as she took in his admission. Could it truly be possible?

Yet even as she longed to surrender to her feelings, a part of her stubbornly clung to caution.

“Then why did you not reveal this sooner?” she demanded. “Why allow me to believe that you intended our engagement as nothing more than a charade?”

“Because I was afraid,” he answered, his gaze never leaving hers. “Afraid that the painful events of our past would prove insurmountable and you would not welcome my advances.” His lips quirked. “When we were first reunited at Mother’s ball, you forgave me my past transgression, but wished nothing further to do with me. Isn’t that correct?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. “But how can we move forward when so much uncertainty lingers between us?”

Dominic turned and took her in his arms, clasping her so tightly she could scarcely breathe.

“Philippa,” he breathed, his voice heavy with emotion. “I must confess something to you.”

“Confess?” She looked up at him, searching his face for a hint of what he might say next.

“One of my aims in proposing this arrangement,” he said slowly, “was the hope that I could court you and win you back. That I might turn Lord Everholt’s offensive behavior to my advantage and create a situation where we might spend a great deal of time together.”

Philippa’s heart skipped a beat at his words, and something squeezed painfully inside her chest, cutting off her breath. She felt dizzy and sick as his meaning sank in.

“You... you coldly planned this... my *seduction*? You schemed to manipulate me into resuming our old relationship after leaving me without warning or explanation ten years ago?”

Dominic hesitated. “Philippa, forgive me. I came to realize just how much I lost when I left you. I only wanted a chance to make things right between us.”

“Make things *right*?” she scoffed, her temper flaring. “How *dare* you think you can waltz back into my life and toy with me like a puppet on a string!”

“Philippa, *please*—” he began, reaching for her, but she recoiled from his touch.

“No!” she snapped, shaking her head so vehemently she dislodged her hairpins. Her cap came loose, and her braids tumbled around her flushed cheeks. “If you had truly wanted to make things right, you wouldn’t have lied to me about debts of honor and such nonsense. And you would have explained why you left me in the first place!”

He closed his eyes, as if she’d struck a mortal blow.

“Our pretense of an engagement is over, Dominic,” she continued furiously. “I cannot bear to look upon your dishonest countenance right now. And I no longer wish to associate with you.”

“Philippa, please, you *must* understand—” he implored, desperation etching itself upon his handsome features.

“Understand what? That I was a fool to trust you after you ran away and broke my heart? Oh, I understand that all too well!” Her voice cracked with raw emotion.

“I only wanted...” He stopped speaking and gazed at her, his eyes dark with pain.

She steeled herself and turned her face away. “I no longer care what you want. Go! Leave me alone!”

Too late, she knew she'd been right to worry about him breaking her heart. And yet, she'd let herself fall for him again. *I am such a fool!*

Looking devastated, Dominic bowed his head and strode away, leaving Philippa alone in the orangery.

As soon as the door slammed behind him, she sank onto the flagstones and broke down in tears. *Why, oh why, did I let him hurt me again? And why do I still love him despite everything he's done to me?*

"Damn you, Dominic Townsend," she whispered between wrenching sobs, feeling the jagged edges of her broken heart piercing her chest. "Why must I love a man who brings me nothing but pain?"

"Oh, what a pitiful sight," someone commented in a voice that dripped with malicious glee. "A fallen woman, weeping for the man who ruined her."

Philippa's heart clenched in dread as she recognized Lady Eliza's voice coming from behind her. She fought to control her weeping and quickly wiped her tears away with her fingers. Heartbreak made her clumsy as she struggled to her feet..

"Lady Eliza, what do you want?" she demanded hoarsely.

"I've been dreaming of an opportunity like this, Miss Bowerchalke," Lady Eliza said. She surveyed Philippa's wet cheeks with a smug smile. "You see, I overheard everything just now about your little charade—the fake engagement, your tortured emotions...and the liberties you permitted the duke to take this morning. Seduction in his carriage, was it?" She giggled nastily. "It seems you're nothing but a common game pullet, after all."

“How dare you, Lady Eliza!” Philippa snapped, her anger flaring once more. “This is none of your concern.”

“Ah, but it is,” Lady Eliza replied, her smile widening. “You see, you’ve made my life pure torment since the Duchess of Warbury’s ball, when you so boldly rejected my dear brother in front of everyone and ruined my chances for a good marriage this Season. You thought you could play us for fools and ruin our standing? Well, now it’s *your* reputation that will lie in tatters, and deservedly so.”

“Is that what you want?” Philippa asked incredulously. Anger spurred her tongue. “Revenge? Because your brother is a boorish lout who drinks too much and gambled his fortune away?”

“Indeed,” said Lady Eliza, savoring the word as if it were a delicacy. “And how sweet it will be to watch the Season’s most eligible heiress fall from grace.”

With that, she turned and swept out of the orangery.

As the door closed behind Lady Eliza, the weight of her impending doom settled on Philippa like a shroud, suffocating her with fear and regret.

“Dear God, what have I done?” she whispered to herself, feeling as if the very foundations of her life had crumbled beneath her feet.

“Please, let there be a way to salvage what remains,” she prayed in a broken voice.

But she knew some mistakes could never be undone. Just as some deeds could never be forgotten.

Like a coward, Philippa lingered in the orangery's solitude for a long time. When she finally gathered the courage to return to the ball, her heart hammered in her chest.

As she slipped through the French doors, she found the Long Gallery thick with whispers and excited murmurs, as if an invisible storm had swept through the room, stirring up chaos in its wake.

"There she is!" Lady Eliza exclaimed, pointing at Philippa. "The lying lightskirt herself!"

Philippa tried to close her ears to the questions and comments rising all around her. She pushed blindly through the crowd until she reached her mother and sister.

Looking bewildered, they stood near the fireplace, apart from the other guests.

"Ah, there you are!" Mama said, her voice strained. Concern etched on her features as she studied Philippa's face. "Dearest, I just heard the most disturbing news about you and the duke!"

"That dreadful woman Lady Eliza is telling everyone that you and Warbury were never actually engaged at all. And that you've been carrying on scandalously under a pretense of respectability," Lucy added, her normally bright eyes dimmed with worry. "Oh, Pippa, what's happening? Why did the duke depart so abruptly?"

The shame and fear festering in Philippa's heart now threatened to overwhelm her completely.

"Please, Mama, can we please leave and return home?" she pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper. Everyone was watching them and listening avidly. "I shall tell you everything at home."

“Very well,” Mama agreed, her expression grim.

As they made their way toward the exit, Philippa felt the weight of a hundred pairs of eyes on her, judging her and finding her wanting.

Her once-sterling reputation now lay in ruins, shattered by a single, devastating revelation like a cannon ball hitting a ship’s mast.

“Come along, my darlings,” Mama said softly, guiding her daughters through Curzon Hall’s grand foyer, and out to the front steps. “Let us leave this place behind and face whatever consequences await us together.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Philippa whispered, her heart aching with gratitude and regret.

As they climbed into their waiting carriage, she couldn’t help but wonder what might have happened had she chosen a different path that night at the Duchess of Warbury’s ball.

I would have been forced to marry Lord Everholt. She shuddered.

She tried to comfort herself with the thought that no one would want to marry her now, no matter the size of her dowry.

“Promise us one thing, Philippa,” Mama said quietly as the carriage jolted into motion. “Promise you will tell the truth about what happened, no matter how painful it may be.”

“I promise,” Philippa replied, her voice trembling with emotion.

God only knew the truth, though harsh and unforgiving, was all she had left to offer her family.

As the carriage rolled away from Lord and Lady Poole’s fine manor, leaving behind a whirlwind of scandal and

heartache, Philippa steeled herself for the difficult reckoning that lay ahead.

CHAPTER
TEN

When they arrived back in their rented townhouse, Mama summoned the family to the parlor.

The servants had laid a fire and the room would have been quite cozy if Philippa was not facing a wrenching confession to her parents and sisters.

She stood by the parlor window as she waited for her father to arrive, gazing out at the darkened street, her stomach churning with dread.

“My dear child,” Papa said as he entered the parlor. He came to her and gently kissed her forehead. “Come. Sit. Your mother told me that Lady Eliza was spreading vile gossip about you at tonight’s ball.”

She glanced back at her parents and sister. Mama and Lucy sat on one of the pair of sofas, with Georgiana and Amanda on the other. They all studied Philippa with a mix of concern and curiosity.

“I’d prefer to stand, Papa.” She swallowed hard and looked down at the carpet, with its cheerful pattern of climbing roses. “There’s—there’s something I must confess to all of you.”

“Very well.” He gave her a long, searching look, then settled himself in his favorite armchair.

“Is it about that nasty story Lady Eliza spouted?” Lucy asked, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” Philippa replied, her voice trembling. “I’m afraid so.”

Oh, how she wished herself a thousand miles away right now!

“What happened tonight?” her mother inquired. Her brow furrowed in concern. “We saw His Grace leaving shortly after you and he stepped outside for some air, and then that dreadful woman, Lady Eliza, began spreading the most outrageous slander about the two of you!”

“Lucy, Mama, Papa,” Philippa began, taking a deep breath. “It wasn’t slander. Not exactly. Warbury and I never intended to carry through with the marriage. It—it began as a ruse, to spare me Lord Everholt’s unwelcome attentions.”

“A ruse?” her father repeated, his voice heavy with disbelief. “You mean you were never truly engaged to His Grace?”

“But *why*, Pippa?” Mama broke in, her soft features crumpling with distress. “Why take things to such an extreme?”

“I felt I had no choice.” Philippa hesitated for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “You see, Lord Everholt attempted to compromise me at the Duchess of Warbury’s ball. He intended to extort my hand in marriage and get his hands on my inheritance.”

Her mother’s face paled with shock, while her father’s expression darkened with rage.

“Lord Everholt did *what*?” Papa demanded. “The scoundrel!”

“He did not succeed in doing more than frightening me,” Philippa hastened to assure him.

“Everyone warned me Lord Everholt is the worst sort of fortune hunter!” Mama wrung her lace-trimmed handkerchief between her hands until the delicate fabric began fraying. “But I never dreamed that an earl would stoop to such unsavory depths!”

Her parents’ unexpected reaction astonished Philippa. She’d expected them to condemn her despicable lie and foolish actions out of hand.

Her sisters were listening, wide-eyed.

“Those bruises on your arm!” Lucy exclaimed. “Lord Everholt gave you those, didn’t he?”

Philippa nodded. “When I refused Lord Everholt’s proposal, he threatened to ruin me. That was when Warbury stepped in and declared himself my fiancé to save my reputation. I thought he was being very gallant.” She bit her lip as renewed anger shot through her. “Then, because he knew that the witnesses to this sordid adventure would gossip about what they’d just seen, he proposed we continue the ruse until the end of the Season. I agreed, not thinking it would cause the trouble it did! I am so sorry!”

“Philippa, why didn’t you tell us about this immediately?” Papa asked. “Especially considering Lord Everholt’s outrageous actions.”

“Because I was afraid,” Philippa admitted, her cheeks heating with shame. “Lord Everholt was furious when I refused his suit. I believed he would carry out his threats.” She sighed. “In the end, I only delayed my ruin by a fortnight. And

I fear that my actions have ruined any chance of happiness for Lucy.”

“Never mind that,” Lucy said stoutly. “Except for Lord Avedon, I haven’t met anyone I would consider as a husband. “And Lord Avedon, while a perfect gentleman, seems indifferent to my charms. I shall have to wish for better luck next Season.”

“But what happened with His Grace tonight?” Mama asked. “If your engagement was only a ruse, why end it?” She studied Philippa’s face, and added softly, “Seeing the two of you together, I could swear he was head over heels in love with you, and you with him!”

“I *do* have feelings for him. In fact, I’ve never stopped having feelings for him.” Philippa squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her hands. “Tonight, he asked me whether I wanted to stop pretending and make our engagement a real one.”

Mama’s mouth opened in an “o.”

“But I discovered he lied to me about something very important, and I—I lost my temper, Mama!” Philippa shook her head.

“Oh, my darling girl,” Mama said, her voice filled with sympathy. “And Lady Eliza just *happened* to be near enough to overhear?” Her tone conveyed that she guessed this had been no accident.

Philippa nodded.

Papa said, “You’ve always had a rather short fuse, Pippa.”

“I know.” Renewed misery swamped Philippa. “I told Warbury I couldn’t bear to look upon him, much less marry him, and ordered him to leave.” She sighed.

A long, heavy silence followed, broken only by the clatter of wheeled traffic on the cobbled street outside.

“I am so very sorry!” Philippa exclaimed, when she couldn’t bear it any longer. “At first, I only wanted to escape Lord Everholt’s clutches. Then matters became complicated.”

“Pippa, this trouble is not your fault,” Mama said softly, rising from the sofa and placing a hand on her shoulder. “Not entirely. You found yourself in a terrible situation, tried to remedy it rather foolishly, and then you lost your heart to the duke. Is that not so?”

Philippa turned and buried her face in her mother’s soft shoulder. “I should have known better! I am so ashamed!”

Mama’s arms came around her. “My dear girl, everything will be all right. Even if we have to leave London and return home to escape this scandal.”

“We don’t like the city, anyway!” Georgiana piped up. “It’s so sooty and dirty here!”

“And I miss my friends back home,” Amanda said.

For the second time that night, Philippa wept like a child.

The next morning, Philippa toyed listlessly with her food. In the aftermath of a sleepless night, her eyes felt gritty and her head ached.

She’d spent the long hours of darkness tossing and turning, re-examining every decision she had made since attending the Duchess of Warbury’s ball.

Would society forever brand her a fallen woman? Or could she find some way to restore her reputation and protect her family from Lord Everholt and Lady Eliza's malice?

Worse yet, she realized she'd also scuttled the plans for the veterans' hospital. Without Dominic's support and his generous donation of a farm and a building site, the project could not proceed.

"Don't punish yourself," Mama chided her from the other side of the breakfast table. "Your face betrays your thoughts, dearest."

"But Mama, I can't help feeling responsible for the pain and scandal I've brought upon our family." Philippa glanced at her sister as guilt burned through her. "Especially poor Lucy! I fear my ruin will drive away her suitors, too."

"It is no matter," Lucy insisted, though the delicate skin under her eyes also showed the dark shadows of a restless night. "No one speaks well of Lord Everholt or his awful sister! Perhaps no one will believe them."

Philippa thought that Lady Eliza's juicy tale of scandal had probably reached every parlor and breakfast room in London by now.

"Perhaps some fresh air will clear your head," Lucy suggested, her brown eyes filled with concern for her older sister. "We could go for a walk together."

"An excellent idea, Lucy," Mama agreed. "Let us take a stroll and discuss how best to handle this unfortunate matter. We must present a united front at all costs."

A short time later, attired in her green walking dress and long, warm pelisse with a fashionable bonnet and gloves, Philippa joined her mother and sisters in the entrance hall.

Philippa felt deeply grateful for her family. She did not deserve their unwavering support and affection, but they were a balm to her troubled soul.

They left the townhouse and set out towards the nearby park, walking briskly like the country lasses they were. It was a sunny but windy spring morning. Overhead, fluffy white clouds scudded across the pale blue sky.

As they walked, Philippa's thoughts continued to revolve around finding a solution to the scandal that now surrounded her family.

"Oh, if only I could call out Lord Everholt and challenge him to clear my name!" she muttered.

"What was that, dear?" Mama asked, squeezing Philippa's arm gently.

"Just a silly notion," Philippa murmured, her eyes stinging with foolish tears. "I wish sometimes that I was a man and could act with a man's freedom."

The rumble and clatter of an approaching carriage caught their attention. As it pulled up and halted beside them, the door swung open to reveal none other than Lord Everholt himself.

"Speak of the devil," Mama whispered.

"Miss Bowerchalke," the earl sneered, "what a fortuitous encounter." His watery blue eyes fixed on her with a predatory gleam.

"Lord Everholt," Philippa replied coldly. Her heart pounded as she made the most minimal curtsy she could. "What do you want?"

"Is it not obvious?" His mouth stretched in a mocking smile. "The news of your ruin has spread far and wide. I've

come to save you by offering you my hand in marriage once more.”

“Your proposal is as unwelcome now as it was before, my lord,” Philippa retorted, gripping her mother’s arm for support.

“Is it now?” Lord Everholt asked, his voice dripping with disdain. “But surely you realize that I am your only chance at redemption.”

“Redemption?” Philippa scoffed. “You and your sister were the ones who instigated this entire scandal! I would sooner die than marry you!”

Lord Everholt’s face flushed nearly purple. “You insolent little drab!”

“Ruined or not, I will never—*never*,” she repeated, her voice shaking with fury, “consent to become your wife, Lord Everholt. Truth be told, if my choices are you or eternal spinsterhood, I happily choose spinsterhood!”

“Is that so?” he sneered, his watery blue eyes narrowing dangerously. “You could have been my countess. But now, you’ll be nothing but a whore!”

In a sudden movement, Everholt lunged at Philippa and grabbed her by the arm. Then he attempted to haul her towards his waiting carriage.

“Release me!” she shouted, clawing at his hand and trying to wrench herself free.

“You opened your legs for a duke, and now you refuse an earl?” Everholt snarled, his grip tightening painfully around her arm.

“Help!” Philippa screamed, her mind racing as she tried to figure out how to escape from his grasp.

“By Jove, how dare you play the innocent when you’ve already lost any claim to virtue!”

“Let her go!” Lucy shouted, dashing forward and pulling at his imprisoning arm.

“Stay out of this, girl!” Everholt snapped.

His booted foot lashed out and caught Lucy squarely on her shin, leaving a dusty imprint on her dark blue pelisse. She cried out in pain and stumbled backwards as she tried to regain her footing.

While he was distracted, Philippa drew on every ounce of her strength and tried to pull herself free from his grasp.

But he hung on with an iron grip, even when she punched his face, curling her fist and drawing back her arm, just like Dominic had taught her all those years ago.

The onlookers laughed and jeered as her blow landed squarely on his nose. Something cracked beneath her knuckles, and blood flowed from his nostrils.

Instead of releasing her, Everholt cuffed her hard with his free hand, an open-handed blow that numbed the side of her face and sent her head snapping back. Fiery stars raced across her vision. “Try that again, you little strumpet, and I’ll cut your nose off!”

“Help!” she screamed as he dragged her towards the open door of his carriage.

Mama grabbed Philippa around the waist and dug in her heels, stopping his progress.

“Stop this at once!” Mama demanded, her voice trembling with fear and fury. “You have no right to assault my daughters!”

“She’s nothing but a whore!” Everholt spat, his face twisted with rage and malice. “She brought this upon herself!”

“Help us!” Philippa cried out again, her gaze landing on the passers-by who had gathered around them, drawn by the commotion. “Someone, please!”

But instead of coming to their aid, the onlookers merely laughed and pointed.

“Look, it’s Warbury’s whore!” one woman exclaimed with a sneer. “Getting what she deserves for duping the Quality, isn’t she?”

“Pretending an engagement! Who does she think she is?” another chimed in, scowling and waving a paper with some kind of drawing on it.

“Please,” Philippa pleaded, tears streaming down her cheeks as she struggled against Everholt’s relentless grasp. “I beg you, help me!”

“Sorry, miss,” a man drawled, his gaze full of scorn. “You’ve made your bed, and now you must lie in it.”

“Alongside an earl, no less,” another sniggered, earning raucous laughter from the gathering crowd.

“Enough!” Mama shouted, her face flushed with anger and shame. “Have you no decency? This man is assaulting and kidnapping my daughter in broad daylight! How can you all stand by and do nothing?”

“Your daughter’s ruin is her own doing,” the first woman replied haughtily, crossing her arms. “We have no sympathy for a fallen woman.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“D ominic, what on earth happened at the Poole’s yesterday evening?” Mother demanded. “This vile cartoon is hanging in the window of every print shop in the city!”

She approached the table where he and Avedon were enjoying their customary breakfast, and thrust a sheet of paper in his hand.

“Damn it all!” Dominic growled as he saw the crudely drawn cartoon of a man in a naval uniform labeled the D— of W— sitting inside a carriage with a fashionably dressed young lady labeled Miss B—.

In the cartoon’s captions, the two figures chortled about pulling the wool over the Quality’s eyes by faking an engagement to do away with the need for Miss B—’s chaperone.

Sickened, he crumpled the offending paper into a ball and tossed it aside. “I shouldn’t have left the ball at Curzon Hall last night! If only I’d stayed by Philippa’s side, then we could have refuted Lady Eliza’s accusations!”

“Oh, that dreadful woman!” exclaimed the duchess. “Is she responsible for this?”

“Don’t worry, Mother,” Dominic assured her. “I’ll handle it.”

After she departed, Dominic paced the length of the Warbury House library, stewing with frustration and helpless anger.

“Regret is a bitter pill to swallow, my friend,” Avedon commented. “But you cannot change what happened, either last night or earlier. What you *can* do is make amends for it.”

“Hellfire and brimstone, Avedon, I thought myself so clever to foist this scheme upon Philippa in her moment of greatest need!” Dominic’s throat felt raw with emotion. “How can I possibly make amends for *that*?”

Avedon stared at him, clearly appalled. “Scheme? Are you telling me that this—” He pointed at the balled-up cartoon. “—is *true*?”

Dominic heaved a gusty sigh and confessed the entire sorry tale. He concluded, “How on earth can I repair this?”

“By telling her the truth about why you left ten years ago,” Avedon advised. “Explain what happened. Perhaps she will understand and forgive you.”

“You truly believe she might forgive me?” Dominic asked skeptically.

Avedon crossed his arms and fixed Dominic with a stern look. “Even if she does not, don’t you think you owe her that much?” He shook his head. “That poor girl is ruined now.”

“Yes, and it’s all my fault!” Dominic snarled in self-loathing. “Damn it all to hell!”

“If you truly are sincere in your feelings for her and come clean about the past, perhaps she may find it in her heart to

forgive you.” Avedon’s words offered a lifeline to Dominic as he drowned in a sea of despair.

“Then I shall tell her everything,” Dominic decided. “I will go to her immediately and see if I can shield her from this vile affront.”

He turned and strode out of the library, his limp scarcely affecting the speed of his rapid steps.

As his carriage hastened through the bustling streets of Mayfair, Dominic couldn’t shake his memory of the hurt and betrayal in Philippa’s expression last night. She’d been right to condemn him for his attempt to worm his way back into her affections.

“My word, is that Lord Everholt?” Avedon suddenly exclaimed.

Dominic’s heart seized as he caught sight of Philippa struggling in Everholt’s grasp, her pale cheek marred by an ugly red splotch and her eyes wild with terror.

Mrs. Bowerchalke hung onto her daughter’s waist for dear life, and Lucy was attempting to break the earl’s hold on her sister’s arm.

Lord Everholt looked the worse for wear. Someone had broken his nose, and blood smeared his upper lip and trickled down his chin.

Dominic rapped to halt the carriage, flung open the door, and leaped out of the carriage. He staggered momentarily as a spike of pain shot through his game leg.

“Lord Everholt, unhand her!” he roared, startling the throng of onlookers who had gathered to watch the spectacle. “By all that’s holy, you’ve gone too far!”

Lord Everholt’s face blanched as he recognized Dominic. “You!”

Dominic stormed through the crowd, ruthlessly shoving people aside when they didn’t move out of his way quickly enough.

As he closed the distance between himself and Lord Everholt, the other man released his captive with a violent shove that sent all three women tumbling to the pavement.

The onlookers laughed and jeered crudely as Philippa and Lucy regained their feet, then helped their mother up.

Meanwhile, Everholt rapidly backpedaled towards his carriage.

Dominic advanced on him, then halted an arm’s length away. He desperately wanted to kill the scoundrel with his bare hands, but doing so wouldn’t help Philippa.

There was only one remedy that could restore her honor in the eyes of the world.

As the small crowd of onlookers murmured excitedly, Dominic locked eyes with her.

Her clear gray eyes burned with anger... and relief at seeing him. Hope blossomed in his chest alongside the determination to save her from disgrace.

“My lord Everholt,” Dominic said, his words clipped. “I find myself compelled by my unwavering duty to protect and defend the honor of the lady whose name and virtue you have besmirched.”

“You can’t be serious!” Everholt exclaimed.

Dominic ignored him and continued with the required formal phrases. “My lord, your accusations and slanderous utterances against Miss Bowerchalke’s character, coupled with your audacious act of laying hands upon her person, have deeply wounded her honor and caused untold distress to the lady and her family. Such an affront cannot be allowed to stand unanswered. It falls upon my own honor, as her staunch defender, to extend a challenge to you, sir, in the manner befitting gentlemen of our station.”

“What?” sputtered Everholt. His face darkened and his eyes bulged. “You’re actually challenging me over the honor of this—this—”

“For the sake of Miss Bowerchalke’s good name, yes.” Dominic gritted his teeth and grimly forged ahead with the last part of the challenge’s formalities. “Lord Everholt, meet me upon the field of honor where the demands of justice and rectitude may find their resolution.”

Everholt gaped like a fish out of water for a few moments. Finally, he managed, “Very well, Your Grace. I accept your challenge.” His gaze fixed on Dominic’s game leg. “I choose swords.”

Dominic suppressed a grimace at the choice, all too aware of the disadvantage his stiff leg presented. But as the challenged party, it was Everholt’s right to choose the weapons.

Then Dominic wondered if his opponent had ever wielded a sword in combat.

He had a brief, vivid recollection of boarding a French ship, a naked blade in his hand, and a crew of fearless sailors

at his heels.

“Very well, Lord Everholt,” he replied resolutely. “Swords it shall be.”

“And I shall stand as His Grace’s second,” Avedon said from behind Dominic. “My lord, come with your second and meet us tomorrow at dawn.”

The crowd was silent now, enthralled by this drama.

“W-where?” Everholt’s gaze darted between Dominic and Avedon like a trapped beast.

“In Hyde Park,” Dominic answered. “I know of a secluded corner near the Serpentine where we can settle this affair.”

“Very well. Until tomorrow, Your Grace, Lord Avedon.” Everholt inclined his head stiffly, then all but fled into his carriage.

As the crowd murmured excitedly about the upcoming duel, Philippa hurried to Dominic’s side, her eyes wide with worry. He ached to pull her into his arms.

“You needn’t do this for my sake, Warbury,” she protested. “He’s a dangerous man, and with your leg...”

“My dear Miss Bowerchalke,” he interrupted firmly. “On the contrary. I *must* do this. Not only for you, but for every woman whom he might target in the future. He is a scoundrel and a disgrace to all gentlemen.”

“What brought you here this morning?” She frowned, as if suddenly remembering she was angry with him.

“I couldn’t leave you to face this scandal alone,” Dominic said. “Especially since the fault is mine for ruining your good name.”

Her chin went up. “I’m not a helpless child, Your Grace. I acted of my own free will. If you’re to blame for this scandal, then so am I.” Her full lips trembled as she fought to smile. “At least I am free of Mama’s marital schemes now.”

Mrs. Bowerchalke, busy dusting off her skirts, huffed at this. Lucy giggled.

The confrontation with Everholt had clearly left the three Bowerchalke women shaken but unbroken.

Dominic was once more reminded he’d been a fool to bungle his courtship of his courageous, intelligent, witty, and breathtakingly beautiful Philippa.

“Miss Bowerchalke, I had a second purpose in coming to see you,” he confessed. “I wanted to apologize for trying to manipulate you into marriage. It was a low and dishonorable stratagem, and I am so very sorry to have hurt you once again.”

Her wide gray eyes met his, searching for sincerity. He held her gaze steadily, pouring every ounce of his love and regret into his expression.

“I accept your apology,” she whispered.

She turned to join her mother and sister.

“Wait!” Dominic said. “There was one more reason I sought you out this morning.”

Her mouth curled into an exasperated smile. “Of course. You never have just *one* reason for doing anything.”

If she was joking with him, perhaps she did not hate him, after all.

“Philippa, I came to tell you the truth about why I left home—and you—all those years ago.” He hesitated, feeling

the weight of the memories bearing down upon him. “It’s a painful tale, but one I owe you.”

Her fine brows rose in surprise. “Yes,” she agreed. Then her lips twitched. “I occasionally regret burning your letters unread.”

The sun vanished behind a thick cloud. Moments later, rain began falling.

“Your Grace, Lord Avedon, come inside and have some tea,” Mrs. Bowerchalke urged, approaching them.

“You can tell me everything once we’re out of this weather,” Philippa added.

Dominic shook his head. “I regret I cannot accept your kind invitation, Mrs. Bowerchalke. I have pressing business to attend to before tomorrow’s duel.”

He did not specify he intended to call on his family’s solicitor and draw up his will, in case the worst happened tomorrow.

“Please permit my explanation to wait until after the duel.” He didn’t want the raw emotions his story would evoke to render him vulnerable to Everholt. “I promise, as soon as it’s over, I will tell you everything.”

She nodded gravely. “Very well. Come and breakfast with us after you’ve won your duel against Lord Everholt.”

Her confidence in his victory felt like a shaft of sunlight piercing through deep gloom.

He took her hand and bowed over it. “I do not share my story in expectation of your forgiveness. But I hope that hearing it may ease some old pain.”

“Until tomorrow,” she murmured, squeezing his fingers.
“Good luck. Be safe.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“Are you certain you wish to proceed, Lord Everholt?” Dominic asked the next morning. “There is still time to withdraw your slanderous accusations against Miss Bowerchalke and apologize.”

The wet grass of Hyde Park glistened under his boots, and his breath was visible in the gray light of dawn. He’d stripped to his waistcoat and shirt, and fought to keep from shivering.

His opponent had refused to remove his long riding coat. Apparently, Lord Everholt cared more for his comfort than his freedom of movement.

The earl sneered in response. “My sister spoke the truth about your precious Miss Bowerchalke, Your Grace.” His speech sounded nasal and slightly slurred, thanks to his swollen, crooked nose. He also sported a black eye. “I will see this through.”

“Very well,” Dominic said, his blood singing in anticipation. “If I win, Lord Everholt, I require you to apologize to Miss Bowerchalke for your actions and to withdraw your vile slander.”

He turned to his second, Avedon, who handed him a rapier.

“Agreed,” Lord Everholt muttered, his gaze flicking briefly to the small crowd of onlookers, then to the gleaming length of steel in Dominic’s hand.

With the lengthy formalities concluded, Dominic and Everholt took their positions facing each other ten paces apart.

“Are you ready, gentlemen?” Avedon inquired, his gaze shifting from one man to the other.

Both Dominic and Everholt nodded, their faces set with grim determination.

“Then you may proceed,” Everholt’s second, an elderly gentleman named Sir Peter Wayre said solemnly.

Dominic and Everholt exchanged perfunctory bows before commencing. They circled one another warily for a few moments, each analyzing the other’s footwork, reach, and reaction time.

A familiar surge of anticipatory energy coursed through Dominic, sharpening his senses and heightening his focus. Despite the stiffness plaguing his leg, he moved with precision, a testament to his years of training and military service.

Then Everholt lunged forward, his blade flashing in the pale light.

Dominic easily parried the blow, then countered with a feint.

The less experienced Everholt reacted precisely as Dominic intended.

Dominic executed a swift parry, then maneuvered to bind his opponent’s sword by sliding his blade along Everholt’s,

exerting leverage and control. A quick rotation of Dominic's wrist forced Everholt's weapon out of his grip.

"Damn your foul tricks, Warbury!" Everholt spat as his rapier tumbled to the dewy grass.

Then he reached beneath his long coat and drew out a loaded pistol. He aimed it squarely at Dominic.

"Cheater!" Avedon shouted.

"My lord, what are you doing?" Sir Peter protested at the same time.

The onlookers booed and hissed, and joined in the invective. "Bubblers!" "Captain Sharp!" "Scoundrel!"

Dominic dived to the side just as Everholt squeezed the trigger.

As a deafening report shattered the air, agony slashed across Dominic's upper arm. "You dishonorable coward!" he snarled.

Everholt's expression twisted. He tossed the spent pistol aside and reached beneath his coat again.

With lightning speed, Dominic lunged forward before Everholt could aim, and slashed at Everholt's wrist.

The earl grunted in pain as the second gun fell to the grass. Dominic held the blade to his throat.

Everholt clutched his wounded wrist, blood seeping through his fingers. His eyes darted around the small crowd, as if seeking escape.

"Yield, Everholt," Dominic commanded, his voice steady but laced with contempt. "You have lost. It is time to face the consequences of your actions."

“Everyone will hear about your craven tactics,” Avedon added, his tone laced with contempt. “And know you for a dishonorable coward!”

“No! I won’t have it!” Everholt flung himself down on the grass. As he moved, the edge of Dominic’s blade opened a thin red line on his throat.

Before Dominic could stop him, Everholt snatched up the fallen pistol, then rolled to his feet.

He raised the gun, and Dominic braced himself.

But instead of aiming the gun at him, Everholt pressed the barrel to his own chest.

“My lord, don’t!” Sir Peter shouted.

Everholt ignored him. As Dominic watched, horrified, the disgraced earl pulled the trigger.

The gun fired with a loud report and belch of smoke. Everholt staggered backward and collapsed. A large scarlet stain spread rapidly across the front of his waistcoat and shirt.

“My lord Everholt!” The surgeon ran forward to aid the fallen man.

Philippa’s heart hammered in her chest as she raced through the park, her family close on her heels.

As they waited with breakfast, one of the maidservants had burst into the dining room and reported that His Grace had been badly wounded in the duel. In an instant, all Philippa’s lingering resentment washed away. She couldn’t bear to lose him. Not again!

She had rushed out the door without a second thought.

Now, terror stabbed her as she spotted Dominic sitting under a tree, coatless, his right sleeve torn and soaked with fresh blood.

Beyond him, Lord Everholt lay sprawled on the grass. Two men kneeled next to him, frantically trying to stanch his bleeding chest as a group of men surrounded them, craning their necks at the spectacle.

“Papa, hurry!” she cried.

Reverend Bowerchalke hastened past her. “I will tend to that poor gentleman’s soul,” he assured her.

“Warbury!” Philippa raced to the tree and fell to her knees by Dominic’s side. “You’re bleeding!”

“Only a graze, Miss Bowerchalke,” he assured her. “I failed to dodge quickly enough.”

Immense relief washed through her at the news.

Lord Avedon joined them. “Lord Everholt is dying,” he reported. “And good riddance to the scoundrel.”

She gasped at this callous statement, and Avedon raised his hand in protest. “Miss Bowerchalke, he cheated and tried to shoot Warbury! When his cowardly attempt failed, Lord Everholt then turned his gun on himself.” He shook his head.

“Lord Everholt brought a *gun* to the duel?” Philippa asked, appalled. “But he was the one who insisted on swords!”

“He was determined to kill Warbury at any cost,” Avedon said. “There is no place for such dishonor among gentlemen.”

Philippa reached for Dominic’s hand. “I wish you had not risked yourself for my sake.”

Sometime later, the man who had been attending Lord Everholt came over and introduced himself as Dr. Pinker. “Your Grace, let me look at where that bullet nicked you.”

Philippa watched anxiously as the surgeon swiftly unbuttoned the front of Dominic’s shirt and waistcoat and pushed them off his shoulders, carefully peeling the sodden sleeve away from his upper arm.

As he began cleansing the long, ugly wound, Philippa noticed something that sent a shiver down her spine. The jagged white scars of a brutal whipping stretched across Dominic’s broad shoulders and down his upper back, disappearing beneath the drooping fabric of his shirt.

“My dear Warbury, what happened to you?” she asked, horrified.

Dominic sighed. “It’s part of the story I promised you.” He glanced at the surgeon, who had withdrawn a roll of bandages from his medical case.

“Nearly done, Your Grace,” the doctor assured him. “The wound is shallow. No sutures needed.”

Later, after Dominic and Lord Avedon had returned to the Bowerchalke’s townhouse for the promised breakfast, Mama and Papa allowed Philippa to meet privately with Dominic in the parlor.

Now, Philippa and Dominic sat side by side on the sofa, their fingers firmly entwined. He had not released her hand except to pull on his coat after the surgeon finished treating him.

Hope and apprehension swirled inside him in equal measures as he braced himself to confess all to her.

“And now my sorry tale, dearest Pippa,” he began. “Because you deserve to know the truth.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “When I was sixteen, I asked you to marry me because I was desperately in love with you.”

Philippa nodded.

“Unfortunately,” Dominic continued, “you didn’t know that my father disapproved of our courtship. He said you were a penniless vicar’s daughter, with no dowry, and your connection to Baroness Starkley too slight to signify. When he realized the depths of my feelings for you, he forbade me from seeing you again. I foolishly declared I had already asked for your hand.”

“He must have really taken snuff at that!” Philippa exclaimed.

“Yes,” Dominic replied, his voice tight with emotion. “He went into a towering rage and horsewhipped me, swearing he’d teach me to obey him. But it did not end there.”

Philippa’s eyes were wide with horror. “Oh, Dominic!”

“Once he had vented his anger, Father forced me to accompany him to Portsmouth. He said some time away from Warbury Castle might bring me to my senses,” Dominic continued, old bitterness flooding him. “Then he forcibly enlisted me in the Royal Navy.”

Philippa gasped. “He gave you no choice?”

Dominic shook his head. “I protested, of course, but my entreaties fell on deaf ears. In wartime, the navy always needs sailors and officers. And on account of my age, Father had

complete authority over me.” His mouth twisted. “And, of course, he was the Duke of Warbury.”

“My dearest, I had no idea,” Philippa whispered, leaning into him. The endearment warmed his soul. “All these years, I wrongly believed you had abandoned me. I never knew the truth!”

“Nor did I wish you to know,” Dominic admitted, his voice thick with regret. “I wanted to be a good and dutiful son and not blame Father for doing as he thought best. But I should have told you the truth when we met again.”

“And I shouldn’t have burned your letters,” Philippa said, her eyes brimming with tears. “Can we put the past behind us and move forward together?”

“It is my dearest wish,” Dominic said, hope surging high inside him. “Now I’ll tell you another truth, but a far more pleasant one, I hope: I have never desired to marry anyone but you. I love you, and I always will. Whether you become my wife or remain simply my dearest friend, I vow to protect you forever.”

A myriad of emotions flickered across Philippa’s face at his heartfelt declaration.

Then she put her hand to his cheek, and drew him down for a kiss. “I’ve never stopped loving you, even when I was utterly furious,” she confessed. “Now that I know the truth about why you joined the navy—well, it changes everything.”

“Truly?” Dominic asked, gazing down at her.

She nodded, her face shining with affection, and happiness burst through him like fireworks over Vauxhall Gardens.

He released her hand and slid off the sofa to kneel before her.

“Dearest Pippa,” he began, his voice steady despite the flood of emotions racing through him, “I have loved you since we were children, playing together in the fields at Warbury. I vow I will never leave you again, and I will always tell you the truth. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife and duchess?”

Philippa’s smile was radiant. “Yes, Dominic. A thousand times, yes!”

“Thank God,” Dominic breathed. Rising to his feet, he drew her up into his arms and kissed her fervently.

When they parted at long last, he declared, “We have wasted enough time apart, my love, and I intend to make up for every moment. I shall get a special license so that we may be married as soon as possible.” He smiled down at her, hardly able to believe his luck after the muddle he’d made of things. “Now, let us go share our joyful news with your parents.”

Philippa’s sisters squealed with excitement when they heard.

“You’re really and truly engaged this time?” Mrs. Bowerchalke was beaming through happy tears. “Now no one will dare repeat those awful stories! Will you two wed here, or in our church back home?”

Dominic exchanged a look with Philippa. “It would mean the world to me to have Papa perform the ceremony,” she breathed.

“Home it is,” Dominic said.

Reverend Bowerchalke beamed at them paternally. “It would be an honor to officiate at your wedding, Your Grace.”

“Then it’s settled,” Dominic declared. After so many years without Philippa, he couldn’t wait to make her his lawful wife.

“An excellent plan, if I do say so myself,” said Lord Avedon, grinning widely. “Congratulations to both of you!”

EPILOGUE

Warbury Castle Wiltshire.

Two weeks later

Philippa stood before the grand mirror in the duke's bedroom, her heart pounding fiercely in her chest. Her thin, lacy wedding-night chemise clung to her body, leaving little to the imagination as she waited for her bridegroom. Music and laughter drifted up from the wedding banquet still in full swing downstairs.

Dominic didn't keep her waiting long.

"Darling wife, I am thunderstruck by your beauty," he murmured as he closed his dressing room door behind him. His dark blue gaze swept hotly across her body.

He looked larger than usual, clad only in his long shirt, open to the chest. His legs below the hem were darkly furred and powerful. She shivered with anticipation as he crossed the bedroom and took her in his arms.

He kissed her, his mouth hard and hungry on her. As always, her body responded instantly to his touch. A heated pulse of arousal sprang to life between her legs.

"Don't worry, my love," he reassured her between kisses. "I shall be as gentle as you need me to be. I want you to enjoy

our marital congress.”

She recalled the magic he had worked with just his mouth and fingers during their memorable carriage ride, and her nervousness eased. “I’m sure I will. I love you, Dominic.”

He swept her up and carried her to his large, canopied bed. Laying her down, he took possession of her mouth once more. Meanwhile, his hands caressed her through the gauzy fabric of her shift, his fingers cupping and stroking her breasts, teasing her nipples to stiff, yearning points and skillfully igniting her senses.

“Tell me what you want, my love,” he murmured, his lips brushing against her ear as he spoke, sending shivers down her spine.

“You,” she whispered, her voice barely audible, “I want you. All of you, Dominic.”

“Your wish is my command,” he growled, his eyes darkening with desire as he raised up to look at her. With one swift, shocking movement, he grabbed the neck of her chemise and tore the delicate fabric in half, leaving her naked body completely exposed to his heated gaze.

“Beautiful,” he breathed.

“I want to see you,” she begged, her voice thick with need. She reached out and brushed her knuckles against the erection proudly tenting the front of his shirt.

He drew in a sharp breath. “Soon.”

Then he leaned down and captured her lips in a searing kiss. His hand slipped between their bodies, stroking and teasing her until she was writhing and panting with need.

He moved down her body, inflicting the most delightful torture as he nipped, licked, and kissed every inch of her bared skin, until his face was level with the top of her thighs.

“Open your legs,” he commanded, his voice rough.

She obeyed eagerly. He wasted no time employing his mouth on the pulsing bundle of nerves between her legs, and a moan tore from her throat. His tongue danced an intricate pattern over her sensitive flesh, sending wave after wave of pleasure coursing through her body.

His fingers soon joined in, thrusting and stroking inside her as his mouth continued to work its sensual magic on her.

“Don’t stop,” she begged him breathlessly as she neared the edge.

He chuckled and redoubled his efforts. His wicked tongue and thrusting fingers sent her soaring off the cliff. She screamed and convulsed beneath him, racked with spasms of unbearable pleasure that went on and on.

When the ripples finally subsided, Dominic rose on his knees with a smug smile and pulled his shirt off.

Her breath caught as he took his thick, proudly jutting member in hand. He positioned himself between her legs.

“Are you ready to consummate our marriage now, my darling?” His voice was thick with desire as he feasted his eyes on her naked form, taking in the swell of her breasts and the gentle curve of her hips.

“More than ready,” she replied, feeling both relaxed and eager.

Mama had warned her that the first time hurt. But Dominic had just summoned such overwhelming pleasure that she

believed joining with him would not be painful. She had faith in him.

With infinite care, Dominic positioned himself at her entrance, then pushed slowly inside her, filling and stretching her. Philippa winced at the initial burn of his invasion, but the discomfort quickly eased, replaced by a satisfying fullness, as if they were two halves of the same whole, finally rejoined.

“Pippa,” Dominic groaned when he was fully seated. His jaw clenched with the effort of holding back, and his heavily muscled body trembled against hers as he pressed her into the soft mattress. “My only love.”

“Move, Dominic,” she urged him, winding her arms and legs around him. “Please.”

He growled, and his hips drove forward. She cried out at a sudden jolt of pleasure, and her fingers scrabbled on the ridged scars covering his back.

He took her hard and fast, each thrust shuddering through her until she once again teetered on the edge of climax. They tumbled over together, gasping and groaning with pleasure, and lay entwined in the blissful aftermath.

“I love you, my duchess,” Dominic panted, resting against her.

“I love you, my duke.” She kissed him tenderly, still unable to believe she would share the rest of her life with the man she loved.

Warbury Hospital for Naval Veterans, Warbury-on-Till.

Two Years Later

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“Come, my love, let us take a moment to appreciate the garden,” Dominic suggested, offering his arm to his heavily pregnant duchess.

He led her away from the Opening Day celebration in the new hospital’s dining hall towards the large French doors that opened onto the grounds.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she whispered, her eyes shining as she gazed over the wide paths and blooming flowerbeds.

Dominic nodded his agreement. Mr. Soane had truly outdone himself with this magnificent building and beautiful gardens, designed to offer fresh air and respite for the hospital’s residents.

“Indeed, my dear,” he agreed. “Our vision has truly come to life.”

The new hospital could house three hundred aged or crippled sailors. The infirmary was spacious and airy, and the small but comfortable apartments in the long, three-story wings all boasted views over the gardens.

As they strolled arm in arm along a path lined with roses, Philippa suddenly halted and gasped.

“My love?” Dominic asked, concerned.

In reply, she guided his hand to the taut curve of her belly.

He felt a gentle flutter beneath his palm and stared at her in awe. “The baby?” His throat felt thick with emotion.

His duchess beamed at him. “As energetic as its father.”

He chuckled and bent to kiss her. “My darling Pippa, I am eternally grateful for all that we have accomplished together—and for the life we share.”

“Likewise, my dearest Warbury,” she replied, her eyes shining. “You have made me the happiest woman in the world, and I am eager to see what the future holds for us.”

“Whatever happens,” he vowed, his eyes locked with hers, “we shall face it together.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily Reynard is an international woman of mystery spotted in locations as wide-ranging as San Francisco, Paris, Madrid, Istanbul, and Tokyo. When friends and family inquire about her globe-trotting adventures, she smiles mysteriously and makes vague references to being an “IT professional.”

While writing, Lily uses her history degree in ways that would make her professors blush, if they only knew! You can find a complete list of her sizzling historical romances: [HERE](#)

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THE DUKE'S TREASURE

ELLIE ST. CLAIR

A duke intent on finding a treasure. A Spanish woman with nothing to lose. A legacy in the making.

The Duke of Sheffield resists finding a bride and taking on the duties of his noble title. His mission to uncover a legendary treasure faces one obstacle — a Spanish woman with nothing to lose. When he begins to feel something for her, can he convince her to trust him enough to reveal her secrets — and her heart?

CHAPTER
ONE

England, 1735

The walls of Castleton were closing in on him.

At least, that was what it felt like, with the weight of his responsibilities pressing him into the very ground he tread, and the life he had been doomed to from birth stretching out before him.

And there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it.

He had considered whether he should fake his own death. Allow his brother to become the Duke of Sheffield. He was far better suited for the position. Edward's entire childhood might have been preparing him to become one of the most powerful men in England, but that didn't change the fact that Arthur was the one who possessed the temperament for the role.

"If only we were twins," Edward said aloud now, causing his brother to look up from where he was bent over a ledger in the corner of the study. A study that was now Edward's, but it was Arthur who made sense of it all.

"Why would you desire such a thing?" Arthur murmured, pushing his spectacles up his nose.

"If we were identical, we could switch positions and no one would ever be the wiser. How unfortunate that we look so

different.”

Arthur snorted and turned back around. “How would you capture the attentions of all your women if you looked like me?”

“I never said we should look like you,” Edward countered with a chuckle, “but you know that if you actually looked a woman in the eye, they would be far more interested than with this standoffish air you have about you. Besides, it’s not my dashing good looks that entice the young ladies. It’s my title and fortune.”

“You’ll have to choose a wife eventually,” Arthur said, ignoring Edward’s analysis of his inability to speak to women.

“Not necessarily,” Edward said with a shrug. “You can also carry on the line.”

“Do not pass those responsibilities onto me,” Arthur said. “Besides, Mother intends for you to marry Lady Jane.”

Edward snorted. “I have no intentions of marrying *her*.”

“Why not?” Arthur asked in a strangled voice.

“Because she practically flees when she sees me,” Edward said, before pointing a snide gaze toward Arthur. “Besides, how could I marry her when you are in love with her?”

Arthur’s jaw dropped open. “I am not.”

“No need to lie,” Edward said. “It is not your words. It is how you look at her, how you act around her. You should tell her how you feel.”

“No thank you. She is your betrothed.”

“She is not my betrothed. That is a scheme of another’s doing.” Time to change the subject. “You would make a much

better father than I ever would.”

“You would be a fine father if you ever stayed in one place.” Arthur set his pen back within the inkwell now, turning around and giving Edward his full attention. “You do know that you can no longer go running about the world. You have responsibilities here now.”

“Do I really, though?” Edward said, winging up one of his generous eyebrows. “Why do I have to stay when you enjoy all of this so much?”

Arthur sighed, folding his arms across his chest. “I cannot take your seat in Parliament. I cannot make final decisions for you. And I will not be the one responsible for all who are under your authority. I will, however, help you as I have been doing. But only if you stop all of your nonsense.”

“Arthur, don’t be like that,” Edward said, tilting his head and looking at his brother imploringly from his seat on the corner chaise lounge, where he had been resting his head. Edward leaned back against it now, closing his eyes. “I can bring the family much fortune.”

“We already have a fortune,” Arthur said, exasperation evident in his tone. “Do not insult me by thinking I would fall for that. I know you far too well.”

“Very well,” Edward said, his hand falling to the side, and he opened his eyes, meeting his brother’s gaze. “But you know why I do what I do. It is the excitement that drives me. The thrill of discovery. Who would I be if I was not on the hunt of my next treasure?”

“You are Edward Sutcliffe, Duke of Sheffield. That is who you are. Nearly every other man in this country would give anything to take your place.”

“They can have it.”

Arthur snorted. “And you would take the life of a working man? Tied to one place without means to travel a few towns over, let alone across the continent?”

Edward bit his lip contritely. “I see what you are saying, Arthur, and I do know the privilege I possess.” He pulled out the piece of paper that had been in his pocket but primarily on his mind, twirling it around in his fingers.

“What do you have there?” Arthur asked, always perceptive.

“Nothing.”

“Edward.”

“Very well. I received some information.”

“From whom?” Arthur asked with suspicion he had every right to hold.

“From a friend high in the Spanish ranks.”

“And what does this *friend* have to say?”

“Oh, you are curious,” Edward said with a grin.

“Not really.”

“Come now. Admit it.”

“I will not.”

“Arthur,” Edward said. “Confess that you want to know, and I will tell you.”

Arthur pressed his thumb and forefinger against his temples. “Very well. I am curious about what the note holds. Happy?”

“Yes, actually,” Edward said, enjoying needling his brother far too much. “The note was sent to me about a rumor of a sunken Spanish ship. Apparently, however, before the ship went down, it was boarded by pirates.”

“And?”

“And,” Edward said, leaning forward in excitement, “the pirates absconded with the one million four-doubloons the ship was carrying, along with a shipment of silver.”

Arthur stilled, greatly satisfying Edward that he had shocked even his brother.

“Why was a ship carrying such a great fortune?”

“The silver and gold was being transported to Spain from mines in Potosí, Bolivia. At first it was thought the treasure went down with the ship, but apparently that is not so.”

Arthur sat back, tenting his fingertips together.

“Then where is it?”

“Somewhere in Spain. My friend said there are suspicions of a betrayal – that the pirates were working for a man who kept it for himself.”

“It would need quite a hiding spot.”

“So it would.”

“Let me guess – you intend to find it?”

Edward leaned forward. “It has been almost an entire year since Father died, and I can no longer hide behind mourning his loss. I will take that few months, find this treasure, and then I will be done with that life, Arthur. I swear it. I just need you to cover for me while I search for this. It should be straightforward. One last time, Arthur. I promise.”

Arthur eyed him with a look that told him he didn't entirely believe him, but Edward hoped his earnestness that this would be the last time was evident. He just needed his brother's help. His heart beat as he waited for his answer, the thrill of excitement of the chase already building.

When Arthur sighed and ran his hand through his hair, Edward's heart jumped. He had him.

"Very well," Arthur said, shaking his head as though already upset with himself. "One last time."

"Thank you!" Edward said, jumping from the chaise as new life filled him, and he skipped over to Arthur and took his head between his hands before laying a smacking kiss on his forehead, causing Arthur to flinch. "You will not regret this."

"I already do," was all Edward heard as he practically ran from the study.

He had packing to do.

Mariana strolled out to the balcony, allowing the sun to wash over her and warm her through as she leaned against the stone to look out at the Bay of Biscay. It was a clear, calm day and, finally, Mariana felt as at peace as the scene before her.

It was hard to fathom that she lived in this palatial estate alone, but her husband's family preferred Madrid – which was perfectly fine with her. She had no wish to spend time with any of them.

She was free of Javier. That was all that mattered. There was nothing his family could do to control her again, she told herself, setting her jaw. She would be sure of it.

She had endured enough in the short years they had been married. Now, as terrible as it was, Mariana couldn't help the relief that he was gone.

“Mariana!”

She turned, her loose hair flying in the wind as she heard her name called from below. That was odd – she wasn't expecting anyone.

“Raquel?”

Her friend was the only person her staff would allow entrance without alerting her.

“I'm sorry,” her friend said, her chest rising and falling hard when she appeared after her quick ascent of the stairs. “I have surprised you.”

“Perhaps, but you are always the most wonderful of surprises,” Mariana said with a smile. “Where are the children?”

Raquel was the wife of one of the wealthiest local merchants. Keeping herself so far from the capital, there were few people Mariana was in contact with who were of similar station to herself. She and Raquel had quickly noted their kinship when they had met, and she enjoyed spending time with her friend's young family.

Javier had been horrified when he had discovered their friendship, but it no longer mattered what Javier thought.

“With the tutor,” she said with a smile. “I thought I would steal away some time with you.”

“Please do,” Mariana said, leading Raquel to the balcony. “I was just wondering what I was going to do with myself all day.”

Raquel took a seat and lay back, closing her eyes in the sun, taking what would likely be one of the few moments of peace in her day. “Have you heard from the brother?”

“I have not,” Mariana said, taking a seat across from her friend. “For months now, I have been told that he would arrive any day to begin overseeing this estate, but fortunately for me, he seems to prefer the city. Perhaps I shall be able to live the rest of my days here in San Sebastian without interference.”

“That would be wonderful, would it not?”

“It would.”

Mariana tapped her foot impatiently against the stone floor of the balcony, and after a moment she could feel Raquel’s gaze upon her.

She turned her way. “What is it?”

“Are you happy, Mariana?”

“Of course,” Mariana said quickly.

“But are you *truly* happy? Now that you have had time to live without Javier, are you able to find joy in your day?”

Mariana didn’t immediately answer, instead turning her head to look back out over the sea. The pale blue sky melded into the blue-green of the ocean in the distance, the beach stretching out to meet the tide.

She knew to what Raquel was referring, and the truth was, she *had* felt the stirrings deep within herself. Stirrings for something... more. She just didn’t know what that more was.

“I have everything I could ever ask for,” she began slowly, cautiously. “A beautiful home. Wonderful friends. Enough funds at my disposal that I can do as I please.”

“But?”

“But, for one, it could all be taken away from me in a moment if Javier’s brother so chooses. I would have the inheritance from my father to live off of should it be necessary, but nothing here is permanent.”

“Is that all?”

“And I am alone,” Mariana said, dropping her head. She hadn’t wanted to admit it, even to herself, but Raquel’s probing brought out the truth. “While I will admit to you and to you alone that I am happy to be rid of my husband, I do not have any children with him, although truth be told, perhaps that is a good thing for I have no further ties to his family. My parents have passed, and my sisters are happily married with their families on opposite sides of Spain. I do not want to be a burden upon them. I was the one who married a marqués – I was the one who was supposed to take care of the family.”

Raquel pushed herself back and forth in the rocking chair as she studied Mariana.

“Your sisters have their own families. The only person you must look after now is yourself.”

Mariana hated that Raquel was seeing this side of her, but, if she was going to open herself up to anyone, it would be her closest of friends.

“So what do I do now?” she asked, her voice just above a whisper.

“I suppose you look for any opportunities that come your way.”

“I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“It means that you never know what you’re going to find.”

“I do not venture far from here.”

“Well,” Raquel said with a shrug. “Just maybe something will find *you* instead.”

CHAPTER
TWO

Mariana's eyes were just beginning to close when she heard the knock on her door. She sat up quickly, pushing her hair back away from her eyes, disoriented for a moment until she realized that she had fallen asleep in the drawing room while reading after dinner.

She lifted the book off of her chest and threw it to the side. It was obviously not worth reading if it had put her right to sleep.

"Abello?" she called out to her butler. "Who is there?"

He appeared in the doorway, his hands drawn together.

"*Doña* Palencia? A... gentleman is here to see you."

Rather than appearing judgemental, the servant seemed confused, which made sense, for Mariana never entertained men of any sort – except those who visited with their wives and even that was a rare occurrence.

"Who is this gentleman?"

"An Englishman. He says he is a duke."

"An English duke?" She pushed herself off of the sofa and took to her feet in surprise.

"Yes."

“What does he want?”

“To see *Don* Palencia.”

“Oh,” she said, running her hands over her dress in an attempt to smooth out the wrinkles. Her paniers were rather flat, but what did she care what this English duke thought of her? She was sure he would be on his way once he realized her husband was no longer in this world. “I suppose I best see what his business is.”

She looked around the room. “Can you please send in a couple of maids to prepare the room for a visitor? And perhaps a tray. I am rather hungry myself.”

“Of course.”

“Once the room is ready, please show him in.”

The butler nodded and then left. Abello had always seemed a trustworthy sort since Mariana had taken up residence here a few years ago, and she only hoped that he wouldn't inform any of Javier's family that she was entertaining a man – even if he wasn't an invited one.

An Englishman. What could an Englishman want with her husband? She wasn't sure that she wanted to know. Javier had not always been the most... upright of men.

It wasn't long before the drawing room was ready, and Mariana pushed her mass of dark curls behind her back. She was perhaps far too casual to entertain, but it was of no matter.

She was waiting in the middle of the room when he entered, and she had to blink a few times when he filled the doorway.

She had quite a few expectations of what an English duke might look like – and none of them were standing in front of

her right now.

“*Doña Palencia?*”

“Yes, that is me,” she responded in English. She had a feeling he wouldn’t have a wonderful grasp of the Spanish language, but he surprised her when he answered in her own tongue with only a touch of an accent.

“Forgive me for the intrusion. I was seeking an audience with your husband.”

“Then you will be waiting a long time,” she said, and his eyes widened.

“Is he not in residence?”

“You could say that,” she replied, deciding that until she knew whether or not she could trust this man, it would be better not to share the truth with him, but instead allow him to think that her husband was still alive. “There is no point in waiting for him, as he isn’t due to return anytime soon.”

“Is he in Spain?”

“No.”

“I see,” he said, rocking back and forth from his toes to his heels as though he wasn’t sure what his next action should be. “Perhaps I will ask you a few questions then.”

“I suppose,” she said, finally shaking herself out of her stupor. The English were far from their allies, but this man had taken time to travel all the way here, so she supposed she should at least do what would be expected of her. “Would you like to sit?”

She swept a hand out toward the furniture that surrounded the small table in the middle, and he nodded, though his large form with broad shoulders and thick thighs did not seem likely

to fit in the small chair that he chose. She half expected it to break beneath his weight and watched him with bated breath.

Fortunately, it held.

“My husband’s brother would likely now be the man you are seeking in Spain. You do, however, have a way to journey, for he resides in Madrid,” she said. “Is there anything I can help you with before you go?”

“I suppose that depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you know of the fortune of the *San Juan*.”

“The *San Juan*?” she repeated. “Are you referring to the ship?”

“Yes,” he said. “Are you aware of its fate?”

“Of course. It is lost to the sea somewhere between Bolivia and Spain.”

“Perhaps,” the duke said. “But I believe there is far more to the story than most realize.”

“I must admit that you are intriguing, but before we continue any further, I must know – just what does my husband have to do with this?”

“You do not know?”

“No,” she said truthfully, although her interest was considerably piqued.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he surprised her by answering.

“Like what?”

“As though you are studying me.”

Mariana raised her brows, surprised that he would call attention to her scrutiny, for she guessed that he would not have been raised to be so forward with a lady. But perhaps it was only the fair Englishwomen he would be delicate with.

“You are not what I would expect,” she said truthfully, not sure why she admitted such a thing, but she found herself unable to look away from him.

“And what *did* you expect?” he asked, his plush lips curving into a smile.

“I suppose I expected a tall, thin man with a dour face and lack of humor,” she said, eliciting a loud, booming laugh from him.

“I possess none of those things?”

“Not that I have witnessed so far,” she said with a shrug. “You are a large man with a quick smile. Not what I expected from an Englishman.”

“While you are exactly what I would expect from a Spanish woman.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked, her spine straightening. She knew she shouldn’t be offended when she had been just as quick to make suppositions based on his heritage, but somehow it seemed different.

“It *means* that you are a beautiful woman unafraid to speak the truth.”

Mariana lifted her chin. “That does not sound like a trait an Englishman would admire.”

“I am not like most Englishmen.”

“So it seems.”

She leaned forward, staring him in the eye.

“What is it that you want, Englishman?”

“I am usually referred to as ‘your grace’.”

“You are not in England anymore.”

“So it would seem,” he said, mimicking her by leaning even closer toward her, his lips curling into a smile that could only be described as sultry. He was close enough now that were she to move forward any more, their bodies would be touching, if not their lips. “So it would seem.”

He might not have been what the Spanish woman had expected, but when Edward had planned this visit, he most certainly wasn't expecting a beauty such as she to greet him.

He had been expecting a man who would slam the door in his face.

This woman possessed more than beauty, however. She had a quick wit about her, the words that rolled past her red lips as enticing as her mouth itself.

He reminded himself that even if she was not faithful to her husband, she was still a married woman, and he did not entangle himself with married women – no matter how alluring she might be. His pulse raced slightly as he shifted to adjust his pants, telling himself to calm down. This was not what had brought him here and certainly any advances would only serve to put him further behind in his quest.

“You haven't answered me,” she said, the breathiness of her voice giving away the fact that she was equally affected. “What is it that you want from me?”

Edward could think of many answers to that particular question, and he wondered if she was aware that when she leaned forward as she was, her breasts strained against the fabric of her gown, her stomacher gaping enough that he could see the round, soft curves beneath.

He had never been particularly enamored with the young debutants who were thrown his way back home. At his age of five-and-thirty, he far preferred a woman with curves that could fill his hands, who was not afraid to tell him exactly what she wanted, what she thought, and had the grace that age brought with it.

This woman was all of that and more.

“I want...” He paused, allowing the words to roll off his tongue as he met her eyes, seeing the desire reflecting back. “I want to know what your husband was doing about a year ago.”

He saw the flash of annoyance cross her face, although she quickly hid it.

“My husband was doing what any nobleman does. Paid a man to look after his affairs, made investments, gambled, and bedded his mistresses.”

Edward’s nostrils flared in anger on behalf of the woman sitting before him. How a man could have her waiting at home for him while he went out and found another was beyond him.

“I see,” he said, controlling his tone. “Did he leave for any extended periods of time?”

Her dark gaze bore into him, and he was mesmerized by the brown eyes with flecks of gold that seemed to drink him in.

“I do not believe I have any reason to tell you, a stranger, any more about my marriage than I already have,” she said,

setting her jaw, and Edward knew then that he had gone wrong, had broken whatever it was that had been building between them. “You say you are an English duke, but how could I possibly know that to be true? And even if it is, how do I know that you are not using this information for some nefarious purpose?”

She took a breath, and while Edward did allow some guilt to seep through that he watched the rise and fall of her chest, he still didn't tear his gaze away.

“Unless you speak plainly and tell me what has brought you to Spain, most specifically here to question my husband, I believe it would be best if you left.”

“Very well,” Edward said, realizing that he was going to have to try a different tactic than his usual charm. This woman seemed far too perceptive, apparently able to see right through him. Perhaps he would simply do exactly as she asked and tell her the truth.

“I believe that your husband stole the gold doubloons the *San Juan* was carrying and has hidden them here in his home on the coast. I came to find the treasure.”

The most alluring woman he had ever seen paused, staring at him with shock and disbelief all over her features.

Then she opened her mouth, doubled over – and laughed so hard she nearly fell over.

CHAPTER
THREE

It took Mariana more than a moment to compose herself. It wasn't lost on her that when she was finally able to rein in her laughter, the Englishman standing in front of her remained straight-faced.

“And here I thought you had a sense of humor,” she quipped.

“Only when I'm joking,” he returned. “And I most certainly am not joking about this.”

“What reason could you possibly have to assume that my husband would even know anything about this ship's treasure, let alone be in possession of it?” she said.

“I have my ways,” he said evasively. “Now, are you going to help me or not?”

“I most certainly will not help you on a pointless quest,” she said, standing up straight, needing him to understand that she was not a woman to attempt to convince with sweet words. “Someone has sent you on a fool's errand, *your grace*, and is having a good laugh at your expense. My husband may be a man of loose morals who wouldn't have turned away from a treasure, it's true. However, he did not possess the wiles to steal such a thing, and besides that, he is loyal to Spain – as

loyal as a man like him could be, I suppose. He would not steal from his country.”

Edward leaned forward. “Be that as it may, I believe that he had pirates steal the treasure and sink the ship, then return the fortune here to Spain for himself.”

“And did what? Hide it?” she said incredulously, raising a finger in the air and pointing it at him. “If he had come into such money, he most certainly would have spent it, and I never saw any excess. Now, your grace, you are in my home after dark, and we are unescorted. I wouldn’t want the neighbours to talk.”

By his quick grin and the gleam in his eyes, she had a feeling that he was well aware that she did not care what her neighbors might think, but she most certainly wasn’t going to go jump into bed with a man that she hardly knew.

“Are not the ‘neighbors’ people who live on your land?”

“It’s not mine.”

“Your husband’s then. Same thing.”

“Not really.”

He let out a sigh as he began to leave.

“Very well, *Doña* Palencia. I will respect your wishes and go. But please know that I am staying at the inn not far away. If you think of anything, please do let me know.”

“Of course,” she said, though she didn’t hide the fact that she didn’t really mean it. “Why would I not want to give any information to an Englishman who showed up here with no announcement, who should be the last man to have any claim to such a treasure, if it is true that it is even on land somewhere and not in some watery grave? This matter does not concern

you, your grace. Please go back to where you came from and forget all about my husband and the *San Juan*.”

“*Doña Pal*—”

“Go home. Not to the inn, but to England. And do leave this be.”

Edward nearly kicked the stool in front of him when he returned to the inn. Now sitting in the tavern, he had a sangria before him, even though he would desperately love a whiskey right about now. He had found, however, that when in a foreign land it was best to order the local drink.

“You look like you have some troubles,” said a man from the table next to him.

Edward shook his head, lifting his glass to his lips. “Nothing overly concerning,” he said after he swallowed. “Some business to take care of, is all.”

“You’re English,” the man said, leaning in toward him. He was about twenty years Edward’s senior, with a long grey beard and unreadable dark eyes.

“I am,” Edward admitted. “My accent is not as good as I thought it was, apparently.”

“Not bad for a foreigner,” the man said, holding out his hand. “Pablo Sánchez García.”

“Nice to meet you,” Edward said with a nod.

“Heard you had business at the Palencia manor,” García said nonchalantly, causing Edward to start in surprise, although he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“It seems news travels as fast here as it does in an English town.”

“Perhaps faster,” García said with a snort. “You saw the widow?”

“The widow?” Edward put his drink down. “What widow?”

“*Doña* Palencia. I know I shouldn’t be saying it, but she is a beauty, is she not? Even an Englishman must think so, though she is likely far too much for a man used to an English rose.”

García laughed at himself, but Edward had already sat back in his chair, processing what he had heard. She had lied to him, pretending that her husband was just away, when in reality he was dead. Edward wondered for how long, and what she thought she had to gain by making him think the man was still alive – or what secrets she was keeping.

It seemed he had to pay another visit to the fiery *Doña* Palencia.

He hated how much he was looking forward to doing so.

Edward knew better today than to knock on the front door. Getting past the butler yesterday had taken a nearly Herculean effort.

His visit yesterday had, however, provided him with a better understanding of the layout of the manor, and his glimpse of the immense grounds with its layers of foliage told him that there would be ample opportunity for him to sneak

around to the back, and hopefully enter through the terrace doors.

The tropical climate of San Sebastian meant that the grounds of this manor were much lusher than anything one would ever find in England, and here at the Palencia Manor it seemed that while nothing had been left to disorder, the garden had been allowed to grow in its natural state.

As he tried to decide how best to approach the lady this time without being removed from the building at his surprise appearance, a melodic trill met his ears, and he realized that he wasn't going to have to break into the manor to find her after all.

He opened his mouth to call out to her, but as he rounded the corner of a bank of trees, he stopped, stilling when she came into sight.

She was walking along a small body of water that ran through the grounds, her hand running over the pink flowers that were growing on the row of trees next to it. She stopped for a moment, arm outstretched while she waited, and Edward couldn't stop watching her, his jaw dropping open when a bird flew down and perched on her finger. It was like something out of a fairy tale.

She laughed, continuing her song, the tune echoing softly behind her.

It was in Spanish, the words soft and melodic.

“Mi amor, has llenado mi corazón. Me ha dejado tan ligero y sintiendo calor...” she sang, and Edward translated it to himself as quickly as he could.

My love has filled my heart. He has left me so light and feeling warmth, he murmured. He hadn't heard it before, but

then, it wasn't likely that Spanish songs would be in the parlors of English homes.

Now he found himself caught between not wanting to startle her but needing to make her aware of his presence.

The choice was taken away from him, however, when he stepped on a twig and it snapped, causing the bird to fly away and the woman to whirl around quickly toward him with a gasp.

"You," she said accusingly, her face narrowing when she saw him. "What are you doing here? How did you get back here?"

"I walked," he said. "Didn't want to face your scary butler again."

"Abello?" she said with raised brows. "There is nothing scary about Abello."

"I have the sense that no one scares you very much."

She tilted her head, a slight smile curling her lips, although emotion flashed in her eyes.

"I suppose you are right about that. Why are you here?"

Edward took his chances then, stepping closer toward her.

"Because I discovered something last night."

"Oh?"

"You lied to me."

She lifted a slender shoulder. "Not that it makes any difference, but what is it you believed I lied about?"

"Ah, did you spin more than one tale, then?"

“I owe you no truths nor anything else, your grace,” she said. “You showed up here, to my home, uninvited with some ridiculous tale. Why should I give you anything, including the truth?”

“Because if your husband did steal such a fortune from King Philip and his deception was ever discovered, *you* would be in a great deal of trouble.”

She crossed her arms over her chest as though she didn’t care, but Edward had the feeling that his words had gotten through to her – to cause her some worry, at least.

“I have done nothing wrong,” she said. “Nor has my husband.”

“Nor *did* your husband, you mean,” Edward corrected. “I hear that he is no longer with us.”

“I never lied to you,” she said with a sly smile now. “I told you he wasn’t in residence and confirmed that he wasn’t in Spain. His spirit isn’t, at least. I have a pretty good idea of where that ended up.”

He smirked then, unable to help himself, as annoyed as he was at her half-truths.

“Tell me, your grace,” she said, her hips swaying in their panniers as she walked toward him through the grass, “if such a treasure was findable, and you did discover it, what would you do with it?”

“It depends what the treasure is,” he said. “It would not be the first that I have discovered. If I knew who the rightful owners were, then I would return it to them. If, however, there was no rightful owner, then I would donate the funds to someone who could use them.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “Then why go to all of this trouble?”

“Isn’t that the question?” he said cheekily. “I have a feeling that you would get along well with my brother.”

“Is he anything like you?” she asked with a snort.

“Nothing at all like me,” he said in response.

“Then maybe we would get along after all,” she mused aloud. “I am not sure why you are back here aside from a desire to accuse me of lying to you.”

“If you lied to me about this, then what else are you hiding?” he asked, advancing on her now, but she held her ground, tilting her chin up toward him as he neared.

“I am hiding nothing,” she said. “I am simply a widow, living out my life in peace here in San Sebastian. I didn’t lie when I said that my husband’s brother is in Madrid. He is the marqués now.”

“My answers do not lie in Madrid,” Edward said shaking his head. “They are here in San Sebastian. This is where I’m told the trail ends.”

“I know this manor better than anyone,” she said. “If there was a fortune in doubloons here, I would certainly know about it.”

“Let me search,” he said, hating that he was practically begging but he wasn’t sure how else to go about it. “Let me search the grounds and give me your backing so that the townspeople will allow me in places they otherwise wouldn’t.”

“Why would I do that?”

“If you do, I promise you that you can use the treasure for whatever means you see fit. If that means returning it to the

Spanish government so they don't come after you, then so be it."

She paused a beat, and he thought he had her, before she shook her head.

"No. That is not a good enough reason. I need proof."

"Proof?"

"Evidence that supports your claims. Bring it to me and then perhaps we can make a deal."

"But I have nothing."

"Then it's your loss." She lifted her shoulders before turning around and continuing on her walk. "You can see yourself out now, your grace. Unless you want the scary Abello to do it for you."

He couldn't help but grin as he turned and left, her laughter following along behind him.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Edward knew where to begin to try to find the proof Mariana needed – he just wasn't sure if he would get anywhere with it.

Sitting in his small room at the inn, he pulled out the paper that had started him on this course. An old friend, one he had met years ago on one of his very first treasure hunts, had sent him news that there was a treasure to be located. He had told Arthur it was from a man high in the navy, for he knew he would be more apt to believe in the quest that way, but the truth was slightly altered.

He cast a suspicious look around the room before shaking his head at himself. He was in a private chamber – there was no one about who would be able to see what he was reading. The room was one far from fit for a duke, but he had chosen it on purpose so as to not draw attention to himself, although it seemed he had failed in that regard, judging by his conversation in the tavern.

He smoothed out the creased paper, reading it over once more, knowing the painstaking labor it would have taken the man to write each word, having learned his letters not long before.

Edward,

A treasure has been lost. The San Juan sunk after pirates attacked and made off with a fortune in doubloons. They returned it to Spain to Don Palencia.

Rodrigo

It had been sent from this very town. He imagined that his old friend Rodrigo had tried to find the treasure himself first and written to him only when he came up short. Edward wondered how hard it would be to find the man, but after a few minutes of contemplation, he smiled. He knew exactly where to go.

Edward paused on the steps, wondering if he would be allowed in. He supposed if he kept his mouth shut, no one would guess he was English. He stepped through the doors, finding that the building was mostly empty, but for a man at the front. Edward quickly made the sign of the cross, hoping he was doing it right, before continuing down the aisle between the pews, intent on speaking with the man who seemed to be the priest – until a figure bent over on a kneeler caught his eye.

“Rodrigo?” he called out in a whisper, and the man’s head snapped up, his eyes meeting Edward’s – and then a grin, one matching Edward’s own, lit his face.

“Edward!” he said, quietly but joyfully, standing before making his way out of the pew toward Edward, not hesitating to wrap his arms around the Englishman when he reached him. “It has been too long. How many years now?”

“Five, at least.”

“*Sí, sí.* What brings you here?”

Edward fixed him with a look.

“I believe you know very well what brings me here.”

The man nodded, before gesturing beyond the doorway of the church. “Perhaps we should go elsewhere to talk.”

“A fine idea,” Edward said, following him out of the building and into the sunlight, making the sign of the cross as he exited. Rodrigo laughed at him as he did the same although with much more conviction, before they emerged through the doors and made their way down the street toward the inn’s tavern.

Rodrigo appeared at ease, and Edward was actually quite happy to see him.

“You received my letter, then?” Rodrigo said, sinking back into the shadows in the corner table they had selected, well away from anyone who might overhear them, accidentally or on purpose.

“I did,” Edward said. “You know how to capture a man’s attention.”

Rodrigo chuckled. “You could never pass up a good hunt, now, could you?”

“I could not,” Edward said. “Now, tell me what else you know and why you were not able to locate the treasure yourself.”

Rodrigo’s eyebrows shot up as he appeared insulted. “Why would you think I tried myself first?”

A half-grin tugged Edward’s lips to one side. “I know you. You would never have asked me to join you if you could have done it alone – no matter how good of friends we are.”

“Very well, very well,” Rodrigo said with a chuckle, waving a hand in the air. “You are correct. I couldn’t find the treasure.”

“How do you know it is here?”

“Because,” Rodrigo said, leaning forward, “I was on the *San Juan* when it was attacked.”

“How is that possible?” Edward asked, mouth agape.

“I had gone home to Bolivia,” Rodrigo explained. “I intended to stay there, at least for a time, but home wasn’t exactly... how I expected it would be. When the opportunity arose to return to Spain, I took it,” he said with a shrug. “The gold from which the doubloons were forged was mined in Bolivia, and I believe that is where they should stay. I figured I would go along with them for safekeeping.”

“The Spaniards let you?”

“Of course,” Rodrigo said. “They needed men to work aboard the ship, and I was just what they were looking for. When the pirates boarded us, I managed to hide until I was discovered after the battle. I pleaded my case and was able to join them. That’s how I ended up here, for when the treasure was unloaded, I made my escape as well.”

“But you never saw where the treasure was hidden?”

“I did not,” Rodrigo said regretfully. “But I *did* see the Marqués de Palencia shake hands with the pirate captain. They made everyone leave the ship and spend the night in the town. I don’t know where the treasure went from there. When I returned, it was gone. I’ve searched everywhere, but I can’t find any trace of it.”

Edward leaned forward. “Do you know the marquis is dead?”

He nodded. "I do."

"What happened to him?"

"He drowned, apparently. Washed up on shore."

"My, my," Edward said, taking a sip of his drink as the widow became more and more intriguing. "Rodrigo, I have an important question. Do you have any proof that this treasure exists?"

Rodrigo dipped a hand in his pocket, pulling out a couple of doubloons. "Will this do?"

Mariana hoped that she had seen the last of the Duke of Sheffield, but for the third day in a row, he appeared at her house – this time, through her front door. She had to admit that as much as she thought his story was ridiculous, she enjoyed the banter with him. He challenged her, as she hadn't been challenged in some time.

"Your grace," she said when he entered the drawing room, "to what do I owe the pleasure today?"

"Did you tell Abello I am allowed entrance?" he asked with a smile, taking a seat. He was much more welcoming today.

"You amuse me, your grace," she said wryly. "I am interested in what tales you have to spin today."

"Tales," he said, shaking his head. "Hardly. Do you believe I would travel here all the way from England if my story wasn't true?"

"I couldn't say for I do not even know you."

“Well, now is your chance to know me better.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of coins. “Your proof – doubloons.”

She reached out, jarring when her fingers brushed against his palm, surprised at the shock that it brought. Their eyes caught and held, and she had to swallow away an odd lump in her throat at the strangeness of the connection she felt with him.

“Doubloons,” she said, breaking their eye contact when she looked down and turned the coin over in her hand. “Where did you get these?”

“A friend.”

“A friend,” she repeated. “That is some friend.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Do you trust said friend?”

“I do.”

“What did he have to say about this treasure that made you believe him?”

The story he told her was a fanciful one, and her eyes widened when he came to the part about her husband’s involvement. She had no idea whether or not to believe him, but she figured at this point, what harm would it bring to allow him to search the grounds? She had nothing to hide.

“Fine,” she said. “You may search. But I decide what happens to the treasure.”

“With my advice.”

“I will listen to it.”

He reached out, taking her bare palm in his, and this time she welcomed the sizzle that it brought.

“We must come up with a story as to why you are here.”

“I could be your lover,” he said, his lips curling seductively, and she laughed.

“Hardly. My cousin.”

“A steward.”

“A relation.”

“Trust me, my lady, I would not be believable as your relation,” he said in a low voice, causing a delicious swirl of warmth in her belly.

“Very well,” she said, sitting up straight, ignoring her traitorous body. “You are here to do business.”

“The truth then,” he said, a look in his eyes telling her that he wanted to do much more than business, but she had no time for an English duke. She might be a widow who no longer had to worry about her reputation for propriety’s sake, but she had no wish to endanger herself with ties to a man again.

“When shall we begin?”

She paused, considering the options. The sooner he realized that what he was looking for was not here, the better.

“Whenever you like. You have free rein to search the grounds.”

He held her gaze. “Are you concerned what people may think of my coming and going?”

“I am no young lady waiting for marriage any longer,” she said. “All that matters to me is that I am able to live the life

that I choose – and at the moment that means being done with you and this ridiculous tale that you have spun.”

“That may be true,” he said, shifting forward, his lips curling upward ever so slightly. “But part of you believes me.”

“I do not.”

“You do,” he said confidently. “Or you never would give me an invitation at all.”

“I believe that you have some alternate motive for being here, but I have not yet determined just what that might be.”

“Think what you will,” he said. “I will go get my things.”

“Your things?”

“Would it not be best if I take a bedroom here? I am a visiting English duke. I do not think I can stay at that inn another day.”

Mariana rose from her chair, enjoying the stature she had over him as he remained seated.

“You made your choice when you decided to come to Spain,” she said. “You haven’t proven that I can trust you yet. Until then, you will have to remain at the inn. As for your search, well, I suppose you can start today if you’d like.”

“Splendid,” he said, standing himself and holding out his elbow. “Will you join me?”

She looked down at his proffered arm. She didn’t want to give him any inkling that she had an interest in this, but at the same time, she truly had nothing else to do. Then there was the fact that he was one of the most charming, attractive men she had ever laid eyes on – although that should be reason to avoid him altogether.

“Very well,” she said, giving in. “Let us begin our tour.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

Edward nearly crowed in triumph. He had gotten under her skin – he knew he had – even if she refused to acknowledge it.

The more he saw her, the more he was captivated by her spirit just as much as he was by her beauty. It seemed she did not have to put much effort into her appearance – whether her hair was down and wild around her shoulders or tamed upon her head, she had a natural grace and elegance that he was sure had only been ripened by her maturity. He supposed she was likely about thirty, although he knew far better than to ever ask such a thing.

“Are you not in mourning?” he asked as she led him into what appeared to be a ballroom. She was pointing out the artistry of the paintings upon the ceilings and the marble columns, all angels and religious motifs, when he interrupted her.

She paused with her mouth open, mid-sentence. “In mourning?” she repeated.

“Your husband died what, six months ago?” he said. “Should you not be wearing black?” He gestured up and down at her brilliant red gown. He hoped he did not come across as judgemental, but rather, he was truly curious.

“I should be, yes,” she said with a small smile. “And when I am out in public, I do wear black, as is expected. But the truth is, your grace, I do not often do what is expected of me. And the fact is, I hated my husband. So why should I spend an entire year clad in mournful black clothing when I am, in fact, glad that he is dead?”

Edward knew that many a man would be put off by her words, and he could see the defiance in her eyes, as though she was waiting for him to respond critically.

Instead, he grinned. “You are much smarter than most, my lady.”

“I know.”

He laughed then, a laugh that echoed over the harsh surfaces of the ballroom, and when she joined in with a throaty chuckle, a tingle ran through him that he had been the one to bring out such emotion in her.

“This home is beautiful,” he said as they continued on through drawing rooms and parlors, rooms that would have been found in a manor in England but here had slightly different styles and motifs, “but we know that there is nothing to be found here. Would it be possible to see the marqués’ chambers?”

“Why?” she asked dryly. “Do you believe he hid a shipful of treasure in it?”

“No,” he said with a snort. “I believe there might be a clue within as to *where* the shipful of treasure might be.”

“Very well,” she said, leading him up the stairs, stopping in front of the door that must have been her husband’s. It caused his eyes to slide over to the door next to it, as he was certain

that was where she must sleep. “Here we are,” she said, pushing open the door, and he followed in after her.

The marqués’ chamber was styled in deep reds and navies, befitting the lord of a manor. Edward couldn’t help but wonder if the marqués had spent much time within.

“Go ahead,” she said, gesturing toward the room. “Look as you wish. If my husband had any secrets, I have no desire to keep them hidden.”

“Very well,” he said, walking over to the small writing desk and beginning to look through papers.

“What does your wife think about this adventure of yours?” she asked, her question said with apparent nonchalance, causing him to smile, for it showed him that she was not as unaffected by him as she tried to be.

“I do not have a wife,” he said.

Her brows rose, as she was obviously shocked by his answer.

“An English duke of your age without a wife?” she said. “What about heirs?”

“I will have them, eventually.”

“Best get on it quickly,” she said, amusement in her tone, and he turned around to look at her.

“How old you think I am, anyway?”

“Past the age when a man of your ilk should be having children,” she said.

“A man can have children at any age,” he countered, and she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, I have been told, but you never know what could happen to you. Especially when you are intent on following any small clue that might lead to a ridiculous treasure hunt.”

“I have a brother.”

“Right, the one I would like,” she said with a smile.

“And you?” he said, turning the conversation around.
“Will you marry again?”

“No,” she said so swiftly that it caused his head to snap up in order to gauge her expression.

“Why not?”

“My one marriage was more than enough,” she said bitterly. “I have no wish to go through that again.”

“Not every man is like your husband was.”

“I have no wish to find out,” she said, leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed as she watched him. He wondered if she knew how her stance pushed up her cleavage. “When I met my husband, he appeared to be a wonderful man, loving and kind. That is what everyone believed, including me.” She shuddered, her eyes taking on a glazed, faraway look. “How wrong I was,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely, wondering just how cruel her husband had been to her.

She waved a hand in the air. “Do not pity for me. Many women have it much worse than I did. He never laid a hand on me. Not really. It was his words that were... well, shall we say, most unkind.”

“That can be nearly as hard.”

“I’m sure not quite so much.”

A tense silence filled the air, and Edward continued his search, finding nothing out of the ordinary so far, just what one would expect of a man's grooming essentials.

"I am sure you must have women lined up at your door, waiting for you to pick one of them," the marquesa said, to which Edward couldn't help but snort, so right she was.

"Yes," he said. "One of these days I'll have to. Although —"

He stopped, oddly not wanting to speak of it.

"Although what?"

"I am all but promised to a woman."

"I see," she said with a small nod. "The poor thing."

Her joke cleared the tension, and just when he was about to explain that he wasn't sure he actually wanted to marry the woman, that she was so meek and mild he couldn't imagine how they could ever match, his eyes caught something in the desk drawer.

"Here," he said, his word coming out on a hiss as he studied the paper he held.

"What is it?" she asked.

He looked up, a smile on his face. "The plan of the *San Juan's* last journey."

The evidence seemed so perfectly placed and found that Mariana eyed the duke with suspicion, wondering if he had, in fact, placed it there herself. But for what reason, she wasn't

sure, and so she accepted it, albeit with a great deal of skepticism.

“It might be proof, yes, but it doesn’t give you any idea of where a treasure might be, does it?” she remarked, and he shook his head, such apparent sadness in his eyes that she nearly laughed.

“No, it does not,” he said morosely. “I think I will venture into the town, do a walk around, see if there are any areas near where the *San Juan* docked that might be of interest. Perhaps I could also try to determine if anyone saw anything.”

“They are not going to trust you, strange Englishman,” she said, and he grinned.

“I know. That’s why you are going to come with me.”

“I am, am I?”

“You want me out of your life? Then let’s get this done.”

“Very well,” she said, wondering just what Raquel was going to have to say about this. She had told Mariana to be open to whatever came her way, had she not? Little could she have ever imagined that it would be an English duke who would find her.

“What’s so funny?” the duke asked, and Mariana realized she had worn her emotion on her face.

“Nothing,” she said brusquely. “Let me collect my hat.”

“Do you need a maid?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I am a widow. If there is one advantage to my marriage, it is that I can now do as I please.”

With that, she led him out the door.

“We shall walk,” she said decisively. “It is a beautiful day, and the town isn’t far.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, and she fixed him with a stare.

“Of course,” she said. “I wouldn’t have said otherwise if I wasn’t. Besides,” she lifted the hem of her dress ever so slightly to show him her footwear. “I am already wearing my boots.”

“Should you be dressed for mourning?” he asked, and she shook her head.

“You know what? I think I’ve mourned enough.”

Mariana asked him of home as they walked into San Sebastian, and she wasn’t surprised that he told stories with surprising ease, his words flowing and his expressions intriguing. He told her of his brother, the loss of his father, and freely described how unenamoured he was with taking on the role of duke.

“You do not enjoy being one of the most powerful men in the country?” she asked with an arched brow, and he shook his head.

“I do not like having people rely on me,” he said. “I would far rather simply look out for myself. A life of duty, responsibility... It holds no attraction for me. Adventure and a thrilling chase are what captivate me.”

“Which is also likely why you have no wish to marry,” she remarked, and he looked at her quizzically. She laughed, wondering why he had never seen it for himself.

“If you enjoy the adventure and chasing things, what interest would you have in settling with one woman for the rest of your life?”

“I never quite thought of it that way,” he said, looking her over. “But I suppose if it was the right woman...”

She laughed out loud then. “I hope that was not an invitation to me, your grace.”

“What, you wouldn’t want to come brave England’s winters?”

“Absolutely not,” she said with a snort. “Besides, I already told you. I have no wish to settle down again with one man.”

“I can appreciate that,” he said, his teasing subsiding. “Although something can be said for opening yourself up to some fun, can it not?”

Mariana felt the heat spread through her body, seeming to emanate from the very place her hand was resting lightly on his arm. She closed her eyes for a moment, wondering what it would be like to allow a man to touch her again, to invite him to her bed. As much as she played the part of wealthy widow, she had not been with another man since her husband, nor did she have any wish to.

Especially with an English duke.

Except... he fired something within her, something that no other man had, including her husband in the days before she had realized just what sort of person he truly was.

She shook her head, ridding it of those thoughts. No men, she reminded herself.

Including – and most especially – this one.

CHAPTER
SIX

While the colors, the dress, and the weather might be different, it was apparent that a Spanish town was not so different from an English one. People called to one another from across the way, knew each other's lives, had a familiarity that wasn't there in a city like London.

Edward watched the reaction of the townspeople as *Doña Palencia* passed by them. They all stopped for a moment, pausing in deference with a respectful nod or curtsy. But, unlike what Edward had often seen when persons of noble blood walked through a London town, it was not with any ill intent. No, the people here respected their lady – that much was apparent. Their gestures were made with smiles on their faces, and they seemed actually quite pleased to see her.

She, in turn, knew each of them, calling to them by name, asking how their families were, what their children were doing, what was new in their places of work.

Despite her dress, which, while large, was not nearly as grandiose as some of the styles Edward had seen in the ballrooms of London on the occasions he had gone into them, she crouched down in front of a child, holding out a hand and surprising him with sweets. Edward himself couldn't quite figure out from where she had magically produced the candies,

but he was impressed. The child thanked her profusely while his mother smiled upon the marquesa.

She rose, giving her attention back to him, and he could understand how appreciated each person was when the majesty of her smile came upon him.

“The docks are this way,” she said in that husky voice of hers, and he could only nod as the truth washed over him in a wave. He wanted this woman. Whether or not she had any interest in having him in turn remained to be seen.

The salty spray of the water hit him before the ocean came into view, and Edward lifted his face to welcome it. He had always enjoyed the sea and the freedom it provided. In another life, he would have spent all of his days exploring the ocean’s waterways, seeing what treasure path they could lead to, but of course those days were over now.

They had just begun to walk toward where the boats were docked when he heard his name being called, and *Doña* Palencia looked around them in confusion, as no one here should know who he is.

“Rodrigo!” he called out, lifting an arm to the man, and then looked toward the lady. “Do you recall the friend I told you about?”

“Yes.”

“Here he is.”

The Bolivian reached them, and Edward made the introductions. Rodrigo bowed low over the marquesa’s hand, and Edward felt a strange stirring of jealousy, which made no sense whatsoever as he had no hold, no say over this woman.

She, in turn, eyed Rodrigo with some interest.

“I hear you have spun some tales.”

“No tales, my lady. Simply truth.”

He proceeded to tell the same story he had to Edward, and this time, when she heard it from the man’s mouth himself, she seemed to believe it.

“You didn’t trust me?” Edward said, leaning back and away from her, affronted.

“He seems more credible,” she said with a shrug, and Edward couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I will change your mind about me,” he said, projecting confidence.

A subtle smile tipped up her lips. “We shall see.”

“I assume you are here to see if there is anything to discover near the docks,” Rodrigo said, and Edward nodded.

“There is nowhere that I could find, but perhaps the lady knows the land better than I do,” he said. “Would you like to come with us?”

Rodrigo shook his head. “I have found work for a time, and I must report in. I shall see you again soon, I hope?”

“Of course.”

They continued walking, and Edward couldn’t prevent his gaze from returning to *Doña* Palencia.

“You treated him with a great deal of respect.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Edward shrugged. “Many don’t. He came here as a servant on the *San Juan*.”

“He is still a person. I am not so high on myself that I cannot see that. Do you not feel the same?”

“I do, but not many of my station would agree.”

“It is their loss, then, for they are missing out on all of the goodness that people of all walks of life have to offer.”

They shared a smile and continued walking along the docks.

“Your friend is right, you know.”

“About what?”

“There is nothing to be found here by the docks. I cannot imagine any area that might provide space for a treasure of great size to be stored. If anything, I would guess that it was taken away somewhere inland, toward the hills and mountains where it might have been hidden away.”

He grinned at her. “You believe me, then.”

She shot him a look that told him he was right, although she wasn't entirely happy about it herself.

“How are your boots holding up?” he asked her, quirking a brow, and she lifted her chin.

“Just fine. And yours?”

“Wonderfully,” he said jovially. “I always did appreciate a good walk. This one time, through the jungle of the—”

She held up a hand, effectively stopping him. “I have no wish to hear your tales of past heroics. Experience has taught me that tales are just that – tales.”

“Tales can be true.”

“Or an utter lie,” she said, bitterness in her tone, telling him just how much she had been hurt in the past. He doubted

he would ever earn her trust, as in the time it would take for him to do so he would likely be far gone from here.

“What’s the fastest way to get to the hills?”

“It would likely be best to ride,” she said after thinking for a moment.

“You ride?”

“Of course.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

Mariana paced the foyer the next day as she waited for the duke to arrive. It was an odd relationship they had begun to build. Were they friends? She wasn’t entirely sure, but what she did know was that she looked forward to their time together, even though she knew she should be distancing herself from him.

It was not that she didn’t have time for him – no, she had far too much time on her hands. But instead, it was the fact that he was from a country that most of her people hated, and if her brother-in-law found out about the time she was spending with the duke, it would give him far too much reason to return to San Sebastian and take back the house he had allowed her to live in unquestioned for so long.

It was time she made a plan for her future. But at the moment, the only option she had was to find another husband – which was completely opposed to her vow to never marry again.

She was at a crossroads. She had some decisions to make, decisions that would change her path forward forever.

But first, she was going on a ridiculous treasure hunt that she knew would result in nothing more than a nice day of riding.

“Ah, there you are,” she said in relief when the duke knocked on the front door. He appeared surprised to find her waiting for him, but she had grown so sick of her own thoughts that she welcomed his.

“Eager, are we?” he said with a sly smile, and she ignored him as she pushed past him out the door, leading him toward the stables.

She had told him yesterday that she could lend him a horse, and she debated between sending him out with either the feistiest of the bunch or the slowest.

She paused in the doorway of the stable, hands on her hips as she looked down the stalls, but he took the decision out of her hands when he started wandering down the aisle, stopping when he saw the beautiful brown Galician. He was one of the two horses that Mariana often rode, and the choice was surprising given its small stature compared to some of the others.

“I’ll take him,” the duke said, and at the conviction in his tone, Mariana chose not to question him, instead finding her usual mare who possessed both speed and patience.

Mariana signalled to the stablemaster to saddle the horses, as a maid emerged from the house with the lunch Mariana had requested be packed for them.

“If you would like, I can ask one of the local men to show us around the hills,” Mariana offered, and the duke eyed her.

“How well do you know the hills?”

“I would like to think as well as any other guide.”

“Then you can show me,” he said, and she nodded as her horse was brought out. He eyed it with confusion.

“You do not ride side-saddle?”

“I do – when required,” she said, pausing before continuing, hoping he would understand the importance of what she was about to tell him. “But when I am with certain people, who I know will not share the secret, I prefer to ride astride – even if my riding habit prevents it from being completely desirable.”

Understanding dawned on his face as he nodded, accepting the trust, and then they started out.

At first they said nothing at all, but Mariana actually enjoyed the comfortable silence. Of course, the sounds around them filled the air, providing its own melodic backdrop, and Mariana sensed a closeness with him that was akin to what she felt with some of her friends, such as Raquel, but this was different. This was a... *charged* closeness, and finally it became too much. She began to point out the landscape as they rode, their horses keeping a quick but leisurely pace.

They had ridden for what must have been just over an hour when the hills became closer, and Mariana began to actually think about the duke’s question and what he was searching for. The truth was, she wasn’t sure where her husband would hide something so substantial — if he did actually have anything to do with this — but the only place she could think of was near the mountainous areas.

“How would one get there?” the duke asked when she told him.

She shrugged. “Wagon, likely. I’m sure we would have something in the stables that could have managed it, but Javier

would never have been so stupid. At least, I don't *think* he would have. If he was actually part of this, then I question everything I ever knew about him."

"You don't think he had it in him to do something like this?"

"Was he vindictive, traitorous enough? Yes, most likely. His only allegiance was to himself," she said. "But while he was many things, I would never have called him a stupid man."

"He was if he ever made you feel anything less than worthy," Edward murmured, causing Mariana's head to snap around and look toward him.

"What did you just say?"

"You heard me," he said, his eyes daring her to accept this longing hovering in the air between them. "You deserve the world, and your husband was a fool for making you feel anything less than the prize you are."

Her eyes met and held his intense blue stare, and Mariana couldn't have said for certain what would have happened had their gazes remained locked as they were.

But she would never know, for that was when the first drop fell.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“Is this common?” Edward called out, unsure if she would even be able to hear him over the pounding horse’s hooves, the rain falling in torrents around them, or the thunder that crashed through the air at alarmingly more frequent intervals.

“Yes,” she yelled back. “Especially in spring. Follow me, I know a place we can go.”

He put his trust in her and allowed her to lead. It wasn’t long before they were riding beneath a rocky overhang, a hollowed-out cave in the hills beyond.

The noise didn’t disappear, but it did become more muted, as the rain hit the rock above and the thunder was slightly muffled.

“How long will this last, do you suppose?” Edward asked.

“Likely no more than an hour,” she said. “The storms leave as quickly as they come upon us. Not to worry. We will have ourselves a quick lunch and then continue.”

He nodded, even as he wanted to say what was truly on his mind – that he was hungry, but not for food. Seeing her wet garments clinging to her, her hair now down around her face in

unruly curls, he was having difficulty keeping his thoughts under control.

They slid off of the horses, tying them underneath the overhang so they wouldn't get soaked in the rain before wandering slightly farther back in the cave themselves. Mariana opened the saddlebag on her horse and pulled out a blanket and then a bag, which Edward could only guess was filled with food.

She whipped open the blanket, letting it fall on the rocky ground, and Edward sat first, pleased to find it was thicker than he had imagined.

He held out a hand to help her down, and she sank beside him in a pile of skirts. She wore a green waistcoat today, fully enclosed over her generous green skirt below, yet somehow, despite the multitudes of wet fabric, she managed to sit rather gracefully.

She shivered slightly, and he became much more attuned to the slight trembling of her lips.

“Are you cold?” he asked, and she bit her lip.

“Somewhat,” she said, and he could tell she was trying not to shake. “I know it's warm, but the rain has seeped beneath all of my layers.”

“You could...” he swallowed thickly as he realized just what he was about to say, “take some off.”

She looked up slowly, her eyes finally meeting his, before she nodded almost imperceptibly. “Very well,” she said, turning around, pushing the food to the side as it no longer seemed necessary. She tilted her head and began to loosen each button on the front of her waistcoat. Even though Edward couldn't see the front of her body, he couldn't help but close

his eyes and imagine her long, slender fingers slipping each button through its hole.

He tried to look away, but he couldn't tear his eyes from her. His desperation for her had grown to an overwhelming ache, even though he knew that not only did she seem to want nothing to do with him in turn, but he had no time to give to her. He was here for one thing and one thing only. The riches of the *San Juan*. Except, somewhere along the way, his aim had changed. For the more time he spent with this woman, the more he began to think that even if he never located the treasure, he would be happy just to have her.

She began to shake out of her jacket, and when she appeared to be struggling, he reached out, just inches away from helping her when he paused.

“Do you want help?” he asked, needing to clear the thickness in his throat. When she nodded, he tugged on the sleeves of her jacket, sliding it off her arms to show the waistcoat and shirt underneath. She seemed inclined to remove the waistcoat as well, and the time it took her to undo each of the buttons on the front seemed torturously long. She finally slid that off, leaving her in her shirt which was plastered to her skin, translucent enough that he could see the stays beneath.

“That's better,” she said with a sigh, and Edward had to shift slightly so that she didn't see what she was doing to him.

When she turned her head over her shoulder to look at him, there was an impish mischievousness in her eye, and she tilted her head back, leaning awfully close to him. All he had to do was incline his head ever so slightly and his lips would touch hers – but whether she wanted that or not was hard to say.

But when she leaned her back against his chest and her eyes remained locked on his, he took a chance and lifted a hand, allowing his fingers to lightly trail over her neck.

“Mariana,” he said softly, testing, waiting, and she closed her eyes for just a moment.

“Kiss me,” she whispered, and that was all Edward needed to hear as he bent his neck and his lips landed upon hers. As much as he wanted to take her with the fiery passion she usually met him with, he was slow, tender, until she lifted her hand and sank her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer.

That was when he lost any restraint he had started with.

Leaving behind the gentle and uncertain kiss, his tongue demanded entrance into her mouth, finding her tongue ready to tangle with his. He drank in the moan that emerged from her throat, his hand sliding up the softness of her shirt, brushing over her generous bosom before rising to hold her head against his, exploring every part of her mouth with his tongue before finally lifting and breaking away from her, meeting her stare, knowing, deep within him, that this was going to be more than some tryst that would never again be repeated.

She spoke to something within him, a place that he hadn't known existed, but suddenly he wanted to explore it further.

“You're exquisite,” he found himself muttering. “Is this what you want? I'm not sure I can take this slowly with you.”

Her lips curled up into a smile, her eyes dark and smoky. “I am not scared of you, your grace,” she said. “You have no need to be gentle. In fact, I'd rather you weren't.”

He lifted her in his arms then, to which she responded with a gasp of delight, before he turned her around and had her lying back on the blanket beneath them. He removed his

jacket, lifting her to place it beneath her back for softness, before lying her back down, shifting so that he was between her legs, which were now solidly wrapped around his waist. He held himself up above her, pausing, not kissing her but allowing their breaths to intermingle.

His fingers found her ankle, pushing back her skirts as they crept up her leg, until her dress was pooled around her waist, her body shaking again. But instead of her trembles being due to the cold, it seemed she was just as affected as he was.

Edward gazed down, finding her bare before him, and he groaned aloud before looking up at her instead, catching her eye as he slowly circled his thumb over her center. She moaned and he leaned in, capturing the sound with his mouth as he rubbed against her while she arched up into him in a rhythm that nearly had him replacing his fingers – but he couldn't. Not yet. He wanted to make sure she was ready and sated first.

She tilted her head to the side and, understanding what she wanted, Edward rained kisses down over her neck, smiling as she continued to lift her hips up against him, seeking more. He squeezed her bottom between his hands, pulling her in, closer toward him, but not giving in just yet.

He followed the path he had kissed back up until he came to her ear, and when he nipped the lobe, she hissed, and he brought his lips to the shell of her ear.

“You are mine now,” he found himself growling, surprised at his own possession, but she wrinkled her nose at him as she shook her head, her eyes fierce.

“I am no man's,” she countered, but he continued to play with her, showing her that wasn't entirely true.

“You are mine in this moment,” he said. “Admit it.”

She kept her lips clamped shut, and he removed his hand, waiting for her to give in.

But of course, she didn't. Instead, she held his gaze, her jaw firm, until she said, “Is that all you have to offer?”

Mariana knew she was playing with fire. A man like the duke was used to getting what he wanted, and here she was, taunting him. But she would give in to no man, would never again allow herself to be possessed by another.

It seemed that her risk was worth it, for he paused only a moment before he growled and replaced his hand between her legs, as his other lifted her shirt from her skirt and trailed it up until it covered her breast, filling it as he caressed her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Touch me again,” she commanded, and when he slipped one finger inside her, she had to reach out and clasp his shoulders to hold on to any control she had left.

“Fuck,” he groaned, before adding another finger inside, beginning to thrust into her, harder, faster. Mariana didn't want this to be over yet, but never before had a man taken any time to ensure that she had her fill first. When his mouth came down upon hers once more, her world came apart, the pleasure that had built inside spilling over.

“Your—”

“Edward,” he said roughly. “Call me Edward.”

“Edward,” she repeated, even as it caused her heart to turn over in her chest. As much as she had wanted this, a bit of

worry began to creep in. Worry because as much as she knew this would be a one-time event, she couldn't help but want to do it again, and knew that feelings for this man were invading her heart, feelings that she had promised herself would never enter her chest. But there they were, anyway.

His hand grazed over her cheek, bringing her attention back toward him, and she blinked, remembering where she was.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concern in his eyes. “I’m sorry if I—”

“I am fine,” she said, smiling at him. “Wonderful, really.”

“Good,” he said, relief covering his face. “I must ask you something.”

“Of course.”

“Why do you smell like oranges?”

She laughed then, thinking of the soaps that she used, made by one of the women in the village.

“It is my own scent,” she teased, and he rolled his eyes but didn't question her.

“You're impossible.”

“It's part of my charm.”

“Well, it makes me want to eat you up,” he said, a gleam in his eye. “All of you.”

Her breath caught in her throat. He couldn't mean—

But apparently, he did.

Mariana had thought she was finished, that now she was sated, that would be all for her. But then he began to kiss his way down her body, finding bits of skin through her

dishevelled clothing. His mouth landed on her breast, her hip, the inside of her thigh, before he pressed his tongue against the core of her and licked her to the top, his tongue doing dangerous things to her, tasting, swirling, sucking, and all she could do was hold on to the light waves of his hair as he lifted her legs over his shoulders while he relentlessly brought her back to the edge once more.

When she wasn't sure she could take any more, she finally decided that she would just have to show him what she wanted from him. She used her legs to kick him off her, shoving him down so that he was the one on the blanket. He looked up at her in surprise as she climbed up his body, before finding the fastening of his breeches.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his breath coming in a pant, and she grinned wickedly.

“You are taking too long,” she said as she freed him and straddled his hips. Intent on seeing more of him, she helped him undress the rest of the way, until she could see the solid, firm muscles that had been hidden beneath the fabric.

“I was right. You certainly do not look like a duke,” she managed again, and he laughed.

“I do not act like one either.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

She trailed her finger over his muscles until she followed the path of soft curls beneath his waistband.

“You have a beautiful body,” she said, and he choked out a chuckle.

“Cannot say I have ever been called beautiful before,” he said, but still, there was an amazement in his eyes that told her

he was not unaffected by her words. “You are the one who is perfection, Mariana.”

He watched her with hooded lids as her hand moved lower, wrapping around his cock, and heat went straight to her thighs. Even so, as much as she wanted him, she paused for a moment, and he lifted a hand to cradle her cheek.

“It’s all right, Mariana,” he said. “Nothing more needs to happen here.”

She hated that he could see this indecision in her, the brief lapse of confidence, and she squeezed her eyes tight for a moment.

“I want to,” she said. “I truly do. It’s just... I’ve only ever done this with my husband and he... well... it wasn’t exactly enjoyable with him.”

Understanding filled his eyes, and he nodded. “I am fine with whatever you want to do, love, understand?”

She nodded, her chest constricting at the care he was showing her, a man who had only known her for less than a week. Somehow, it was hard to believe that she hadn’t had knowledge of him beyond that, for it seemed that she had known him for a lifetime.

He gave himself up entirely to her, allowing her to move at the speed she wanted to – and at first, she was slow, unsure, as she wrapped her legs around him again, rubbing herself against him. He groaned, and she continued until she lifted herself up and then sank down upon him.

He hissed as she moved up and down, shallowly at first, until her need for him overcame her hesitation and she began to move with purpose, finding that she was brushing against him just perfectly to cause her desire to build all over again.

He reached up, his hands wrapping around her hips, and he began to move her harder, faster, up and down as she threw her head back and enjoyed all that he was doing to her.

She leaned over, her nails digging into his muscular upper arms as she rolled against him, and then he reached up and brought her head down to his once more, his mouth finding hers, his tongue plundering inside, and their connection caused her to lose hold on all of the control that remained as she plunged down on him harder, faster, until she exploded around him.

He lifted her up, coming overtop of her once again, and held her still as he thrust into her deeper and harder, her body seemingly on fire while she floated down from the high he had taken her to. Mariana liked to be in control, enjoyed the power she now had over her own life, but in this, for this period of time, she was happy to allow Edward to do as he wished with her. Her hands slid over his back as his muscles spasmed beneath her palms, until she flattened them over his bottom, squeezing and holding him tight.

Finally, just as his face contorted into ecstasy, he pulled himself from her and spent onto the rocky floor beside them before he returned to the blanket, lying down next to her, his breath coming fast.

Mariana closed her eyes, wondering what would happen now. What did she say to him after this? Thank you for the fun time, now goodbye and good luck on your fruitless treasure hunt?

He surprised her by reaching out and taking her hand in his, holding it tightly on his chest.

“Mariana.”

“Yes?”

“I think we have a problem.”

She turned her head to look at him, holding his gaze.

“What’s that?”

“I am never going to be able to let you go now.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Edward couldn't stop staring at Mariana. *Mariana*. He allowed her name to wash over him, knowing he would never be able to think of her as *Doña* Palencia again.

He couldn't believe he had told her aloud how he felt, but it was true. He had been falling for her before this, but what now? Now he couldn't imagine leaving Spain and never seeing her again.

He watched her, waiting for her to voice her objections.

"I also... enjoyed that," she said finally, and he raised his brows, dismay unfurling in his stomach.

"But?" he said, keeping his tone light despite the heaviness within him.

"But what are we doing? You are an English duke. My life is here, in Spain."

"What do you have here?" he asked, knowing he was likely being insensitive but unable to help himself. "Your husband is dead. You have no family."

"I have friends."

"With families of their own."

She was silent, looking down as she buttoned her waistcoat, which had dried over the past few minutes. She peered outside.

“The rain has stopped.”

“Mariana—”

She turned to him, her face balled up in anguish. “I have known you a week, your grace.”

“Edward.”

“Edward. What I do know of you in that short time is that you are not a man intent on settling down any time soon. Look where you are! On the coast of Spain hunting for a treasure that likely isn’t here when you should be at home, looking after a dukedom.”

“My brother is doing that for me.”

She stopped, raising her hands to her hair, wrapping her silky curls around them. “This is insanity.”

“I have been accused of that a time or two before.”

“I—” She paused suddenly, and he followed her gaze, which was fixed on the floor. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” he asked.

“That,” she said, pointing to the wall, and he walked over to where she pointed, bending when he saw something glinting in the sunlight that was beginning to pour through the overhang. The clouds must be clearing.

His heart began to beat harder when he picked it up.

“I believe it’s a doubloon.”

“What is it doing *here*?”

He stared at her intently. “How did you know about this cave?”

“When my husband was courting me, he brought me here once while we were out for a ride.”

“So he knew of it.”

“Yes,” she said drawing out the word.

“How far back do these caves go?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” she said. “I’ve only been here a time or two.”

He started back, walking deeper into the cave, eager to find what could be within. He could hear her following, and he paused, holding out his arm.

“We should have brought a lantern,” he said with a frown.

“There are holes in the rock above for a ways,” she said, pointing overhead. “I’m sure they will stop when we move farther back but should help us see for now.”

He nodded, stepping in front of her. “Follow me.”

“But—”

“Mariana,” he said, reaching his arm behind him and clasping her hand, squeezing it tightly. “Please, follow along behind me so that I can keep you safe.”

“Very well,” she said with a sigh of resignation that made him smile.

When they turned a corner, the cave became darker, and then Edward came to a stop so suddenly that Mariana ran into him. He turned around instinctively to catch her, but he couldn’t completely tear his eyes from what was spread out in front of him.

“Is that...” Mariana asked, her voice trailing off as she looked around them wide eyes.

For the cave opened up into one large room, which was full of about eight chests. Edward walked over to one of them, knowing what he was going to find as he lifted the lid. Gold doubloons, so many that a few spilled over the edge. He looked up, meeting Mariana’s eyes, but it seemed she had lost her voice as she stared around her, walking over and opening another lid, finding more coins within.

“It was true,” she said wondrously.

He nodded.

“But that means my husband... he stole all of this?”

“From what I know... yes,” he said, hesitating, but Mariana didn’t seem particularly upset. Just surprised.

“What do we do with it now?” she asked, looking at him, and he sat down on one of the chests and tugged her toward him, seating her on his lap. He liked how she seemed to belong there.

“Now, it’s up to you. I promised you that if you helped me, you could decide what we should do with it.”

“When we made that agreement, I didn’t think we would actually find anything,” she admitted. “I was only trying to see how sincere you were.”

He laughed. “As I imagined. But still, I honor my agreements. You have a few choices. You could keep it.”

“No.” She shook her head, her nose scrunching. “It’s stolen. I would not feel right about that.”

“Or you could give it back to the Spanish King. Although then you would have to admit that you had it and you or your

husband could be labelled a traitor.”

“I’m not sure I altogether like that suggestion. Did the King not steal it himself?”

“He wouldn’t see it that way,” Edward said. “But the Bolivians who mined the gold might. We could return it to where it came from.”

She obviously heard the hesitation in his tone. “But?”

“Spain would only take it once more, unless it went to the right people. It might take some time to determine just who that is, though.”

She nodded. “Perhaps your friend might have some ideas.”

“Perhaps.”

“I suppose we best return now, before the sun goes down.” She slid off his lap but kept her hand in his as they retraced their footsteps toward where the horses awaited them. “I feel as though leaving it here unattended is asking for it to be stolen.”

“It has been safe here so far, though, has it not?”

“True.”

They gathered up the meal and blanket that had been lying on the cave floor and returned it all to the saddlebags. Quickly they donned the remainder of their clothing and then Edward cupped his hands together to help Mariana climb up onto her horse. They rode in companionable silence for a time.

“Edward?” she said as Castillo de la Luna came into view.

“Yes?”

“Perhaps you should move to the manor for the remainder of your time here.”

His heart jumped a bit as he grinned, looking over at her, speaking in a slow drawl. “But what will people think?”

She waved a hand in the air. “I don’t really care anymore,” she said. “Let them talk. This is the most fun I’ve had in my entire life. Why would I give it all up for what a few people might say?”

“That’s the spirit,” he said with a grin, realizing that he liked this woman more and more every time she opened her mouth. Which made him worry once more – for just what was he going to do once he had to return to England?

“Edward?” Mariana said as they crested the last rise before entering the grounds. “This might sound ridiculous.”

“I love ridiculous.”

“I believe someone is following us.”

“Yes.” He kept his gaze ahead, not looking back over their shoulders at the figures in the distance. “Someone *is* following us.”

“You knew?”

“I did. I noticed them a while ago. It could be nothing, but —”

“But it’s like they were waiting for us to come out of the cave,” she said, her heart beating faster. “Do you think they know about the treasure?”

“It’s possible,” he said. “Someone stole it for your husband, did they not? And now that he’s gone—”

“They could have decided to come back for it themselves,” she said, her worry growing. “It is not as though it means anything to me, but somehow the thought of such a fortune going to thieves is not exactly pleasing.”

“No,” Edward said grimly. “It certainly is not.”

“We must move it, and quickly,” she said. “Hopefully, before they take it themselves.”

“It would have to be tonight,” he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“I have access to wagons we could use,” she said. “But where would we take it? Castillo de la Luna would be too obvious.”

“I could hire a ship,” he suggested. “Then sail home with it, for now. If you trust me to look after it.”

“Of course I do,” she said, realizing what she meant. She trusted him as she hadn’t trusted anyone in some time. Sending the treasure to England was certainly a risk, but somehow, she knew that he wouldn’t betray her.

“I could have Rodrigo help me. He has friends who could also assist. I’m sure some of them would even accompany me back to England.”

“When should we go?” she asked eagerly, but he was already shaking his head.

“You cannot come back to the cave.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

“Because we might meet those men again if they come searching, and I cannot allow anything to happen to you, do you understand?” he said, heat in his voice that nearly made her stop arguing.

Nearly.

“I am as involved in this as you. In fact, I would say it is my responsibility.”

“Do you take the blame for all of your husband’s actions?”

She thought of all Javier had done in the past.

“No.”

“Then don’t start now.” He set his jaw firmly as they rode in through the gates. He stopped, and she reined in her horse, looking at him with question.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to go set things in motion,” he said, his lips pressed firmly together. “I will see you shortly.”

“But—”

“Mariana, I got you into this mess, perhaps when I should not have done so,” he said. “Let me fix it and keep you safe while doing so.”

“Very well,” she said, unable to ignore the supplication in his gaze. “Stay safe, do you hear me?”

He nodded, but as he rode away, she couldn’t ignore the fact that it felt like her heart had gone with him.

When Edward found Rodrigo, it didn’t take much to convince the Bolivian to help him. In fact, the man was eager to assist Edward, and already promised to sail with him and the treasure to England.

“Just for now,” Edward assured him. “Until we figure out how we can return it to your people. Mariana wants it to go back to where it belongs.”

“Mariana?” Rodrigo said, his eyebrows lifting as he sent a knowing look Edward’s way, and Edward waved him off. They discussed their plan for that night, and Rodrigo promised to find the number of men necessary while Edward hired a ship.

“Tell the men I will pay them handsomely,” Edward said, and Rodrigo nodded.

“Of course, your grace.”

“No need for that between us,” Edward said, and Rodrigo nodded but didn’t correct himself as he left to find friends to help.

Edward couldn’t help but continue to look behind him as he hired a ship, along with a captain who agreed, for a price, that Edward could put what he wished in the hold with no questions asked. Edward could only imagine what the captain thought he was stashing, but if he told the truth, it was far more likely word would get out.

As he made all the arrangements, however, he couldn’t push the one thought, the one question from his mind – when it was time to return to England, just how was he going to leave Mariana behind?

CHAPTER
NINE

Mariana paced back and forth in the front room of her house, unable to tear her gaze from the window. Edward had left hours ago, and he should have returned by now. There was a great amount of treasure, and Edward had taken all of the horses and wagons that she had in her stables, but even still it had been quite some time since he had left.

He was loading the ship tonight, and she wondered how soon he would be leaving. Selfishly, she wanted him to stay for a time, but of course, it made no sense for him to pay for a ship to remain in the harbour while he enjoyed himself with her.

She wished she had someone to wait with her. She knew if she asked Raquel, she would do all she could to help her, but it was as Edward had said. Raquel had a family of her own. She didn't need to leave them to spend time with Mariana and her worries.

And truthfully? All Mariana wanted was to be with Edward himself.

After what seemed like hours, she saw a lone lantern held up by a rider come piercing through the darkness, and she breathed a heavy sigh of relief as he neared.

“Edward,” she called out as she let herself out the front door, running toward his horse, which he pulled up shortly right before he reached her.

“Mariana,” he greeted her. Sweat lined his brow in the heat of the evening, and she could only imagine the physical labour moving such a treasure had taken.

“Is it done?”

“It is,” he said, a tired but satisfied smile crossing his face.

“Did anyone see you?”

“I do not believe so,” he said, dropping down from his horse. The stable hands were ready for the rest of the horses and carts as they appeared from behind Edward. After they ensured all would be well, Edward thanked Rodrigo, who told them that the rest of the men had retired for the night but would be prepared when Edward was ready to depart.

“They are going with you?” Mariana asked as they walked up to the house.

“They are,” he said. “They are good men, without roots at the moment. They can choose if they would like to remain in England in my employ or eventually find their way home.”

Mariana swallowed, not wanting to ask the next question but needing to anyway.

“When will you go?”

“Tomorrow,” he said, the moonlight reflected off of his angular cheekbones. “If you’d like to come with me—”

“I can’t,” she said instinctively, shaking her head. “What would I do there? I am sure your family would not exactly welcome a Spanish noblewoman, and nor would I likely be comfortable.”

“I understand,” he said wistfully. “If I could stay, I would. But—”

“I know,” she said with a sad smile, interlacing her fingers through his as they stepped through the door. “Well, since this is going to be our last night together...”

“Then let’s make it worth it,” he said, finishing her sentence, his lips fused upon hers before they could even start up the stairs.

He stepped into her until her back hit the wall, his hands running up her arms, pushing them up so that they were overhead, leaving her stretched out before him. As his lips tasted and his tongue plundered, he wedged his knee between her legs, smiling into her mouth when she began to rub against him, feeling the wanton for doing so but unable to help herself.

“Edward,” she said, breaking away, his name coming on panting gasps.

“Yes?”

“We should go upstairs.”

“Of course,” he responded, although he couldn’t seem to tear himself away from her as he trailed kisses over her neck. Finally, it was Mariana who drew away, although she tugged on his hand as she pulled him up the stairs after her, not wanting to let him go far.

She led him down the hallway, opening the door to her room, surprising her lady’s maid, who let out a gasp at seeing that her lady was not alone.

“My lady—”

“I will not be needing you tonight, Rosa. You may retire.”

“Of course, my lady,” she said, rushing out the door, her mouth agape.

“Rosa?” she called after her.

“Yes?”

“Please be discreet.”

“Of course.”

“Can you trust her?” Edward asked as she closed the door behind her, to which Mariana shrugged.

“I don’t overly care at the moment.”

He let out a low growl, pushing her backward, but she practically fought him as she wanted too badly to remove his clothing, to see all of him without covering, for his body to be hers to do with as she wished.

Soon enough they both got what they wanted, and they were skin against skin, slick and hard against supple and soft as Edward backed Mariana up until she was lying on the bed and he was holding himself up over top of her.

His lips fell upon hers, and he kissed her with all the passion that had been building between them, assaulting her mouth with his tongue as she took all he had to give and returned it in equal measure.

His hand came to her hip, holding her against him as she began to rock her hips up and into him, the friction enticing and yet not quite as satisfying as she would have liked it to be.

He left her mouth, raining kisses down her neck, and she arched for him as she wrapped her leg around him, trying to draw him closer, needing him inside of her again.

“Would you like something, my lady?” he asked, and she swatted him when she heard the chuckle in his voice.

“You’re toying with me,” she accused him.

“Never.”

“Teasing me, then.”

“Perhaps.”

“How can you stand it?” she gasped as she rubbed against him in just the right way.

“Patience. Have you none?”

“Agh!” she said, before flattening her palms against his chest and pushing him backward so that he was lying beneath her on the bed.

His startled expression quickly turned dark as his pupils dilated while she climbed over him and straddled him, taking his girth between her hands.

“We will do this my way,” she said now. “No more teasing.”

With that she sank down on him, throwing her head back in pleasure as he filled her. She let out a low moan as she began to move, amazed at how he seemed to thrust against her in exactly the place she needed him. His hands encircled her hips as he ground her down against him while he thrust up into her, and it wasn’t long before she was spiralling close again.

“Edward,” she moaned. “Don’t stop.”

“Never,” he grunted.

“Yes... there...”

He reached up and began to roll her nipples between his thumbs and index fingers. Seconds later, she came undone. As

she pulsed around him, her world blew apart, and when she sank down onto him, her lips finding his, he thrust hard into her twice more before he lay his head back down on the bed, holding her body close against his. As much as he brought her to highs that she had never felt before, she couldn't deny that he made her feel treasured, more than she had ever been.

Their limbs intertwined, Mariana kept her eyes closed, wondering how she could hold this moment forever in her mind. Edward's fingers were stroking her hair, a heavenly feeling as she sighed into him.

"I assume your marriage was not a love match?" he said quietly, and Mariana shook her head, her hair moving across his chest.

"No. Our families thought it would be a strong match, although I was not opposed. Javier seemed a good man."

"But?"

"After we married, he showed himself to be cruel. Always criticizing me, harsh and threatening."

"He never struck you?"

"Just once," she said softly, and her heart jumped at his growl of protectiveness.

"That is once too often," he muttered.

"I know," she said with a nod. "When I heard the words that he had been found dead... I felt so guilty for how relieved I was, not having to worry about him threatening me ever again. Does that make me a horrible person?"

"Not at all," he said. "It only makes you human."

"Now that I know of what he did with the treasure, I assume that his drowning was part of that," she said. "He was

likely trying to do as we are – preparing to sail the treasure away from here. Or he was killed.”

“Most likely,” he said, stretching his arms overhead as he yawned.

“You can sleep now,” she said softly. “I know you have a big day tomorrow.”

“I would rather stay awake and present here with you, in this bed.”

“As would I,” she said with a soft laugh. “I do wonder, however, if it is me that you will miss, or if you are concerned about returning to the life that awaits you in England.”

“Can I say both?”

“Of course.”

“I will admit to you, Mariana, that I am scared of the responsibility that I must take on.” He paused before looking down, his eyes caressing her skin. “I’ve never told anyone that before.”

“I am glad you can trust me to share it,” she said softly. “And I do understand. But I’m sure you will do a wonderful job, and I know that your brother will help you.”

“I certainly hope he does,” he said fervently.

“You are a good man, Edward,” she said, running a finger over his lips, and just when she leaned up to kiss him again, there was a shout from outside the window, and Edward was jumping from the bed to see just what the commotion was.

“Your grace! We must go!”

Mariana’s heart began to beat in fear at what the call could mean. Certainly whoever was outside would know just what

Edward was doing in here, but Mariana didn't altogether care at the moment.

“Rodrigo, what has happened?” Edward yelled down, out of the window.

“The pirates have heard where the ship is docked. The captain has agreed to depart, but we must go now, before they can prepare their own ship and chase us down. Are you coming?”

“Of course!” he shouted. “I'll meet you there as quickly as I can.”

He moved gracefully around the room as he collected his clothing, shoving his arms through sleeves and pulling on his pants. Likewise, Mariana was donning her most simple of undergarments and dresses on over her body.

“Mariana,” he said, breathing heavily. “I am so sorry. I had hoped we would have more time.”

“We do.”

“But—”

She looked up at him, meeting his eyes as they both paused for a moment, so many unsaid words filling the air between them.

“I am going with you.”

CHAPTER
TEN

He lifted his own valise as well as the small one she had packed in but a few minutes as they ran out into the night. Edward asked Mariana for the fourth time if she was sure of her decision.

“Yes,” she said, setting her jaw as they climbed on the prepared horses, a servant following behind. Little did he know he would be returning with all three animals.

“We can return, I’m sure, but if you come with me now, you will be leaving all that you knew behind.”

“I know,” she repeated again, turning to him, her dark brown eyes intent upon him. “I thought my home was here, Edward, but the moment you began to prepare to walk through that door, I realized something.”

“What’s that?”

“That, as ludicrous as it sounds, *you* are my home now. When you left for the caves earlier, I couldn’t sit down, I was so concerned about you, wondering if I would ever see you again. But the truth is, if I let you leave for England without me, that will be the case regardless of what actually happens to you. Which leaves me only one choice. To accompany you.”

He looked over at her while still pushing his horse ever faster. “Will you marry me?”

“You’re asking me this now?” she said incredulously.

“Yes,” he said, his words nearly breathless as they pushed the horses, his words just in hearing before they were lost to the night air. “If you are intent on accompanying me, then I am intent on having you as my wife.”

“I...”

He waited breathlessly. He had always been a man set on the next treasure, the next chase, but he knew that all he needed now was Mariana. He just needed her to agree.

“Yes.”

He let out a whoop of joy, even though he knew now was not the time to be celebrating, for they had far greater concerns – such as being chased by pirates.

But right now, pirates, the British nobles, none of that mattered – Mariana was his.

And his first order of business was keeping her safe. They arrived at the docks to find the captain pacing as he waited for them. As they approached, one of his large eyebrows lifted in question, but he did not seem altogether too surprised by the two of them showing up, breathless on horseback for a last-minute sailing. It was likely the man had seen much untoward activity in his lifetime. He accepted them onboard, and as Mariana turned to speak with her servant, he stopped Edward.

“Best keep an eye on your woman,” he said. “I can trust most of my men, but one never knows for certain when temptation is possible.”

“Of course,” Edward said fervently. “She won’t leave my sight. How soon can we set sail?”

“Any minute. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Good,” Edward said, his voice low. “If you sail as fast as you can, there will be extra for you, understood?”

“Absolutely,” the captain said, and Edward had to appreciate working with a man who understood the communication of coin as he knew how best to motivate him.

Rodrigo was waiting for him, his arms crossed as he leaned back against the rail of the ship.

“She’s coming with us?” he asked, tipping his head toward Mariana.

“She is,” Edward nodded, and while he could tell his friend had additional opinions, he knew their time was short. The few sailors on the small ship rushed around to finish their preparations, and when Edward turned to Mariana, he found that she didn’t seem worried, but rather interested in all that was happening around her.

“Mariana?”

Edward watched as Mariana turned to the woman who had called her name. She was of similar age, standing on the docks with three children surrounding her. Mariana rushed toward her, and Edward followed, although kept enough distance to give her time without him.

“Where are you going?” the woman asked.

“It’s a long story,” Mariana responded. “I wish I had more time to explain, although I am so glad that I am able to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?”

“I am leaving. I will write you, I promise, and explain all, but for this moment, please know, Raquel, that I value your friendship more than any other I have ever had. You are the only thing here that I know I will truly miss.”

She bent now, kissing the children, before wrapping her arms around her astonished friend. “I love you. And I will write to you soon.”

She turned, wiping tears from her cheeks, and Edward nodded to the woman who obviously meant so much to Mariana.

Edward held out his hand to help Mariana aboard, her large skirts seeming out of place among the men who surrounded them. She leaned slightly into him while the boat lurched as it left the dock, and he held on tightly around her waist to steady her.

“Are you ready?” he asked, leaning down so that his mouth was next to her ear, and she nodded.

“If you’re here with me,” she said, “then of course.”

Mariana and Edward could hardly believe it, but somehow, they had lost the pirates at sea. It seemed their hasty departure had been worth it, for outside of one sighting not long after leaving San Sebastian, they hadn’t had any glimpse of the ship. Mariana had been worried at first, wondering if it was hiding just out of sight, but both Edward and the captain assured her that their boat was smaller and nimbler than the larger ship that was giving chase. As long as they stayed out of reach of the other ship’s guns – as this boat had no way to defend itself – they would be just fine.

All in all, it took just under a week to reach England, a time that the captain was particularly proud of.

Mariana had asked why they didn't make for the shore when England came into sight, and Edward had explained that they would continue sailing until they reached Harwich, which he said was another day or two of sailing around the coast of England.

"I have friends there," he explained. "They will provide us with transportation to Castleton."

"That is your home?" she asked, her heart beginning to beat slightly faster. She had been aware of the impact of her decision, made in a matter of moments, but only now as the land was coming into sight did she truly realize that by choosing to come with him, she had changed the entire course of her life.

But when she met his trusting grey eyes, took his hand which was stretched out toward her, she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she had made the right decision.

"That is our home now," he answered her. "Arthur – my brother – and my mother also live there, but there is plenty of space."

"What is your mother going to think of a Catholic Spanish woman as your wife?" she asked.

"I think she is going to be rather surprised," he said with a chuckle. "But somehow, I believe that if there was ever a woman who could stand up to her, it would be you."

She didn't like what his words insinuated. She might have backbone, but she had just recently left a life in which she had to continually stand up for herself. She didn't like the idea of

having to do so again. She wrinkled her nose at him. “I’m not entirely sure what that is supposed to mean.”

“My mother is not the warmest of women to people she doesn’t know well,” he said, squeezing her hand. “But once she knows you, I know she will love you. How could she not?”

“Hmm,” was all Mariana said, but before she could continue, the ship rounded a finger of land and a tall manor came into view.

“This is Newfield House,” he said, waving at the building in front of them. “It belongs to a friend of mine.”

Once the ship docked, the captain and crew agreed to wait onboard until preparations could be made to unload all of the goods. Rodrigo agreed to stay with the ship to help look after the treasure in the hold, despite the captain’s insistence that his men were happy to do so – likely a wise decision as a man who could so easily be bought was a risk when such a treasure was at stake. Mariana and Edward had barely reached the dock when a tall figure appeared before them.

“Do my eyes deceive me?” a voice boomed out, “Or is that the Duke of Sheffield on my shore?”

“William!” Edward called. “Good to see you.”

They clasped hands once they reached one another, and Mariana could see the man’s eyes flitting toward her. He was of similar age to her and Edward, and from what Edward had told her, was a man to be trusted.

“This is my friend, Lord Embury,” he said, introducing the man before Edward beamed at Mariana. “And this is my soon-to-be bride, Lady Palencia.”

“You might as well call me Mariana,” she murmured in greeting.

Lord Embury’s eyes widened in shock at Edward’s words.

“When you said you were hunting treasure, I didn’t realize that this is the sort of treasure you were looking for,” he said, making Edward laugh.

“You are right, my friend, but trust me when I say there is no greater treasure,” he said, causing a smile to light Lord Embury’s face.

“I understand completely,” he said, beginning to lead them away from the dock and up toward the house. “Mariana, you must meet my wife. She will be quite eager to get to know you, I am sure. I assume you will be staying overnight?”

“If you will have us,” Edward said, accepting the offer as they walked up the rise toward the towering house in the distance.

A lovely blond woman greeted them at the front door, a smile brightening her face when she was introduced to Mariana.

“How wonderful!” she said, her words quite genuine. “I didn’t think Edward would ever settle down. You must be as intriguing as you are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Mariana said with a smile. “If all the English are as welcoming as you, perhaps I do not need to be as nervous as I am.”

“Charity is friendlier than most,” Edward murmured. “However, she is a wonderful ally to have on our side and will be a great friend to you, I am sure.”

Edward followed Lord Embury into his study, likely to discuss transporting the treasure. Mariana noticed that his eyes kept returning to the window, likely hopeful that Rodrigo was able to keep everything safe.

Meanwhile, Lady Embury continued to talk in her low, comforting voice as she showed Mariana up the stairs to her chamber.

“I shall put you in this room here,” she said, a twinkle in her eye as she spoke. “Edward shall be just down the hall.”

“You must know him well if you call one another by your Christian names,” Mariana couldn’t help but remark, and Lady Embury nodded.

“We have all known one another since we were children,” she said. “He and my husband have been the closest of friends. It was always understood that William and I were to marry, and I spent a great deal of time with them as well. Edward is like a brother to me.”

Mariana reached out and placed a hand on hers. “I hope you and I can also be great friends.”

“I do not doubt it.”

“Might I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Edward himself told me how much he loves adventure, the hunt for the next thing. I know he has his responsibilities here now, but I worry...”

“About whether or not he might be content to stay in one place with a wife?”

“Yes,” Mariana said in a rush.

Lady Embury paused for a moment as she considered it. “I must admit that we had a difficult time picturing Edward settling down. He was always looking for the next adventure, the next hunt. He has traveled more than any other person I have met. And yet... when he looks at you, it is not with the same expression of excitement.”

Mariana didn't succeed in hiding her shock – and disappointment – at Lady Embury's words, causing the woman to laugh.

“There is *more* in his expression,” she said quickly. “There is contentment. As though, at long last, he has finally found what he was so desperately searching for.”

Mariana nodded, tears rushing to her eyes. She was not a woman to show such emotion in front of others – most especially a near-stranger – but she couldn't help wrapping her arms around Lady Embury.

“Thank you,” she said, and Lady Embury said a muffled “of course” into her shoulder.

The four of them enjoyed a companionable dinner, becoming acquainted with one another, and Mariana felt quite at ease with the Lord and Lady Embury. It was a great relief after all of her concerns, although she knew she had yet to meet Edward's family.

“What will you do with this great treasure?” Lord Embury asked.

Edward and Mariana exchanged a look.

“Hide it for now,” Edward said. “At least, until we can find a way to return it to where it belongs.”

Mariana nodded. “Whenever that might be.”

“If you need any help, know that we are here for you,” Lord Embury pledged.

“We just might take you up on that,” Edward said. “Thank you.”

Once they retired, Mariana didn’t wait long after her maid had departed to slip into the corridor and knock lightly on Edward’s door. He opened it quickly, taking her hand and tugging her inside.

“Do you think our hosts would be scandalized if they discovered that I am here?” she asked, and he laughed loud and long.

“On the contrary,” he said. “I think they expected it.”

“Once we are at Castleton, we shall have to wait until we are married to be together.”

“Why?” he demanded, and she playfully hit his arm.

“Because your mother and brother will be there.”

“You do know that *I* am the duke?”

“Still,” she said. “I should not like to make a bad impression.”

“We shall see,” he said, leaning down, his lips sliding over hers. “However, I am not sure how long I shall ever be able to wait.”

As for tonight, he most certainly took no time in showing her just exactly how he felt.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

The journey to Castleton was not a particularly long one.

Edward told Mariana that it usually took but a half day, although with the weighted-down wagons, travel was slower and took closer to a full day. Castleton was visible in the distance, just beside the lowering sun, however, Edward stopped them, shaking his head.

“Before we go home, we will see that the treasure is stashed away,” he said, climbing down from the wagon he was driving and going back to speak to Rodrigo. When he returned, he led them off the well-trodden road onto a side path, taking them deeper into what appeared to be a forest.

“Are those ruins?” Mariana asked, looking at the remnants of brick and stone next to the crossing as they continued on.

Edward nodded. “They are. That was where the original house stood before the current one was built. We played in there quite often as children, although I don’t suppose anyone else has entered them in years.”

“Perhaps no one will until the next children are playing among them,” she murmured, and his eye caught hers, a telling gleam in it.

“Perhaps.”

They continued down the path until Mariana swore she could hear water lapping against a shore.

“Am I hearing things, already missing home and the sea?” she asked, looking to Edward, “Or is there water near here?”

He smiled, although a bit sadly. “I hope you do not miss it so much that you do not wish to remain here with me,” he said. “But you are right. There is a lake behind us. We are following the river it is attached to. We found this treasure in a cave, and we are going to put it back into a cave of sorts.”

He led them around a few twisting turns, until they finally emerged into a clearing. A wide river stretched out in front of them, with the lake pouring into a tiny waterfall, allowing water to trickle downward.

“This is beautiful,” Mariana breathed, and Edward smiled proudly.

“It is my favorite part of the estate,” he said. “It has always brought me a sense of peace. We shall have to return when we have more time to enjoy it.” He looked behind him and laughed. “And not so many other men to enjoy it with.”

She smiled as Rodrigo entered the clearing with them.

“Where are we going?” he asked, looking around them.

“Over here,” Edward said, ducking underneath a tall tree, and Mariana’s mouth opened in surprise when she saw what was within.

There was a cave – although not a cave as she would have called it where anyone could fit in, but rather a crawl space that, while they wouldn’t be able to stand tall in, would give them enough room to push the chests inside.

“How far back does it go?” Mariana asked, and Edward rubbed his chin, which was now covered with stubble that looked rather dapper on him. She would have liked to reach out and feel it beneath her fingers, but she would wait until they were alone – whenever that might be.

“Far enough that this will be well hidden, especially if we move rocks and brush in front of it. No one else knows of this space, except my brother.”

Mariana nodded, even as his words reminded her that this was the easy part. Now she had to go meet his family. It was not that she was nervous of what they would think of her. Mariana didn't overly care what anyone thought of her anymore at this point in her life. No, her worry was what would happen if they didn't accept her, if she didn't get along with them – how would she ever create a life here in England if she was basically alone? Even if she had Edward, if everyone else was against them...

But perhaps that would all come to naught, she reminded herself, squaring her shoulders. Best to see how this meeting would go first.

“Are you going to tell your family about the treasure?” she asked him as they climbed back upon the wagon. Once they made it to Castleton, Rodrigo would return the vehicles to Newfield Manor.

“I will tell my brother,” he said. “I trust him with my life. My mother doesn't need to know. She would only develop ideas as to just what we should do with it, ideas that I do not need nor desire to entertain.”

“Very well,” she said, and now when Castleton came into view, she knew there would be no detours, nothing to keep her from the next leg of this journey.

“This is impressive,” she said as they drove through the grounds. The gardens were beautiful, well-kept with ornamental statues and a fountain in the middle.

“Thank you,” he said. “My family is very proud of Castleton.”

She caught the way he said it. “And you?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t build this. I didn’t do anything to earn this. Perhaps in due time I will prove that I have added to its value, but for now, I remain unaffected.”

“That is an interesting way to look at it,” she murmured, but they were at the front doors before he could respond.

He held out a hand to help her down from the wagon seat just as the front doors of the mansion opened, and a tall, studious-looking man stepped out, followed by servants she guessed to be the butler and housekeeper.

“My brother, Arthur,” Edward murmured as they climbed up the steps, Arthur saying nothing until they approached and Edward introduced Mariana as his future bride.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said, peering down over his glasses, “but did you just say that you will be *married*?”

“I did.”

“Oh,” Arthur said, looking back and forth from one of them to the other. “You should have written.”

“Why—”

“Edward!” A woman who looked very much like an older, feminine version of Arthur stood on the other side of the doors. Edward must look like his father had. His mother stepped out into the early evening, her hands cupping Edward’s shoulders as she kissed him lightly on one cheek and

then the other. “You are finally home. What wonderful timing. I have a surprise for you.”

“Edward has a surprise for you, too, Mother,” Arthur said softly, but she waved him away, apparently still not recognizing Mariana’s presence or perhaps not, at least, the *significance* of her presence.

“Lady Jane is here,” she said.

Edward suddenly looked pained. “Lord Melton’s daughter?”

“Yes,” his mother said, clapping her hands together in delight. “She is here!”

“Here?”

“At Castleton. Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why?” his mother repeated, looking at Edward askance. “For you, my dear.”

“Mother,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, “I really wish you hadn’t done that. All you have done is set the woman up for disappointment.”

“Edward, I know you have no wish to marry, but it is time. You promised that—”

“Mother,” he interrupted her. “This is Mariana. Lady Palencia. And I am incredibly pleased that she has agreed to be my wife.”

The familiar strain had crossed Edward’s shoulders the moment he had stepped through Castleton’s doors. It was as

though just being here added the weight of responsibility that he so enjoyed shrugging off when he took on another adventure. Suddenly he realized, in a moment of clarity, that it wasn't so much the adventure that he sought, but rather, being free and elsewhere, away from here.

Despite all of that, however, this time was different than it had ever been before.

For this time, he didn't have to do it alone.

He reached out, taking Mariana's hand as his mother stared at him in shock, until finally, her good breeding took over.

"Lady Palencia," she said, "It is lovely to meet you."

She took a step back in the foyer, before motioning to the housekeeper. "I'm sure you are tired after your journey. Mrs. Cooper will prepare a chamber for you and show you to it. In the meantime, Edward, perhaps we could have a word – alone?"

He leaned down, murmuring in Mariana's ear. "I'll handle her, not to worry."

She nodded, stiffly following Mrs. Cooper, and he could only hope to put a quick finish to this, for he had a fairly good idea of just what Mariana was thinking – that this was exactly what she had feared, that his mother wouldn't accept her, that she would be fighting for her position here in England after leaving behind everything she knew.

He watched her go, wanting nothing more than to follow her, to lose himself in what they shared.

But then his brother elbowed him, leaning in to speak quietly to him. "Sometimes, Edward, you must live in the life you were born to."

He nodded, remembering, knowing that he should be grateful for what he had been given and all that his brother had done for him – and that wishing things were different was not going to help anything.

“Let us go to my study,” he said to his mother, already walking toward it.

“I was thinking the drawing room,” she said.

He shook his head, wanting to be in his own space. “The study.”

His brother accompanied them, taking one of the seats before the desk while their mother arranged herself as best she could on the opposing chair, the volume of her skirts making it difficult for her to do so. Perhaps that would prevent her from prolonging this conversation.

“Edward,” she began in that voice of hers that told him she was trying to compliment him so that he would see her side of things, “Lady Palencia is a beautiful woman, and I know how much the exotic appeals to you.”

He lifted his brows at her description. “I would stop there, Mother.”

She didn’t listen. “However, you are an English duke. And an English duke should marry a well-bred Englishwoman. A Protestant Englishwoman. Do you understand me? Lady Jane is here, awaiting your arrival, and what am I supposed to tell her and her mother now?”

“That you made a mistake? That you invited her here without my knowledge and I am marrying someone else?”

She scoffed in horror. “I could never say that.”

“This is not my mess. It is yours,” he said simply. “I have something I must make clear.”

“Yes?” she said warily.

“I expect you to be welcoming to Mariana. She was already apprehensive about coming here and agreeing to my marriage proposal. It will be all the worse if she feels she is not wanted.”

“But—”

“She is the woman I am going to marry. If you want grandchildren, this is your only option.”

“They must be raised Protestant, in English traditions.”

“Mariana and I have not discussed that yet.”

“She has been married before?”

“She has.”

“And she did not have any children?”

Edward paused. He saw where she was going, and truthfully, he hadn't considered it before, but then, he realized, he didn't overly care.

“If she cannot have children, then Arthur can have them.”

Arthur began to sputter.

“Perhaps Arthur should marry Lady Jane,” he said, immediately liking the idea. “They could have the English children you so desire.”

“Oh, for goodness' sake,” his mother snapped, pushing herself out of the chair in which she had been struggling to sit and rearranging her skirts around her. “You are the duke, Edward. It is a privilege to be born to such a role, and it is about time you began to appreciate it, do you understand me?”

Now, this nonsense with the Spanish woman. Keep her as a mistress if you'd like, but you will marry Lady Jane."

Iciness began to climb up Edward's spine. He loved his mother, he did, but sometimes she forgot that he was no longer a young man who had to do as his parents told him.

"Mariana will be no one's mistress," he said, his voice even but firm. "She will be my *wife*. The sooner you realize that, the better. Now, I am going to go speak with her so she doesn't think she has been cast aside the moment she walked through the doors. Arthur..." He turned to his brother, ignoring his mother's attempts to argue with him. "Will you please make the arrangements with the church for the banns to be read? I shall marry her in three weeks' time."

"Of course," Arthur murmured, although his face was slightly green. "But Edward, I cannot marry Lady Jane."

"Why not? She seems agreeable."

Arthur looked over at his mother, then back at him. "We will speak of this later," he said meaningfully, and Edward nodded. "Very well."

He strode toward the door, opening it up just in time to see a flurry of red skirts whisking around the corner. Damn it all. Mariana had been listening.

He started after her, practically chasing her down the hall, not caring of what the servants would think or even Lady Jane and her mother if they were to see him.

"Mariana," he called out, closing in on her as she rounded the corner. "Mariana!" he called again, but before he could reach her, she was slipping through the terrace doors of the library, pushing out into the garden, where night had already begun to settle.

He caught her just before she reached the fountain, and she whirled around, batting his arm away.

“Let me go, Edward, please,” she said, desperation in her voice.

“Never,” he said, meaning it with all of his heart.

“I should not have been eavesdropping, I know that,” she said, setting her shoulders back, and he knew she was likely trying to be strong. “I am sorry Edward, but this was foolish. I never should have come here.”

His heart began to drop as he knew what she was about to say before she even said it.

“I am going to go home.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“**Y**ou are being impulsive,” he said to her revelation, and her heart broke at the thought of leaving him, but what had she been thinking in accompanying him here?

“I was being impulsive when I made the decision to come with you,” she said, waving her hands out to the side. “Your mother is right. You are one of the most powerful men in the country, and I know nothing of English politics nor what would be expected of me. Our countries do not even get along. I will be an outcast, especially without your mother’s backing.”

“She’ll come around,” he said, urgency in his voice. “She has all of these ideas in place from her upbringing, but she’s actually a good sort, deep down. Once she gets to know you, all will be fine. Mariana,” he stepped closer to her. “I need you. Please don’t leave me.”

His eyes were so desperate, his voice breaking, but Mariana told herself to keep her will strong.

“What if she is right?” she said. “What if I cannot have children? It is not as though I laid with my husband often, but...” she trailed off. “You could have no heirs.”

“If you were listening, then you know what I said. Arthur could have them.”

“It doesn’t sound like your brother wants to marry.”

“He will, in time,” Edward said with confidence. “Arthur always does what is right.”

She shook her head. “As should we. Like it or not, Edward, we are not the sort of people who can simply do as we please. That is not the life we were born into. I want to be with you, I do, but I am clearly not welcome, and I do not have a life here without you. You have a woman waiting for you, a woman who would do much better in the role. It is best I let you go – that I let *us* go.”

“Then I will come after you,” he said fiercely, stepping toward you. “I will not let you go so easily.”

“If you care for me,” she said, staring at him meaningfully, even as her heart was breaking, “then you will.”

She saw the indecision on his face, knew how much she was hurting him – but she also knew that in the end, it would be better this way. It would only hurt all the more if they did marry and he came to resent her when she couldn’t be the woman he needed.

“I wish our lives were different,” he said, swallowing, looking off into the dark gardens in the distance.

“As do I,” she said softly, reaching her hand out toward him. “I will never forget you and this time we had together.”

She didn’t tell him what she was really feeling in that moment – that she knew, deep within her soul, she would never have another man, would never allow another in. For she loved him, thoroughly, but to stay would only make his life more difficult, and she wasn’t about to do that to him. He said he wanted her, and she knew that he did, but in time, once

he saw how a Spanish wife made his life more difficult, he would wish it were otherwise.

Mariana had already suffered through one marriage with a husband who did not love her, who treated her cruelly. While she knew that Edward would never be that way, she also did not want to have any regrets. She had told herself that she would live without a man, and now she realized that she must honor that promise to herself.

“I will leave tomorrow, if you can help me,” she said, and he nodded, still not speaking, his jaw tense and his face turned away from her. She wished he would say something, would shout at her, or show any emotion, instead of just standing there, staring out with despair on his face.

“Very well,” he finally said, dropping her hand. “If that is what you wish.”

And with that, he walked off into the night.

That night was one of the longest of Mariana’s life. It killed her that she had hurt Edward as she did, but she didn’t know what else to do. She was adrift, unsure of herself, not a situation she enjoyed. They couldn’t change the life they were born into. It was as simple as that.

Finally, after tossing and turning for hours, she pushed herself out of bed, picking up a lantern and starting down the corridor, not knowing what she was searching for but knowing she couldn’t lie there in her bed for another minute.

She let herself out into the night, into the crisp, cold air, present here in England even in summer, so different from the

lush, humid tropics of Spain that she was used to.

She let out a sigh as she sat down on one of the benches near the house, not wanting to venture too far onto the grounds alone at this hour, but needing the peace the outdoors brought her. She pulled her wrapper tighter around herself, wishing for warmth – in the form of the climate or Edward’s arms. But that was never to be again.

“Lady Palencia?”

She started, turning at her name, her hand coming to her breast in surprise.

“I apologize. I did not mean to surprise you.” Rodrigo walked closer toward her, his hands clasped behind his back. “May I sit with you?”

“Of course,” she said, sliding over on the bench to make room. “What has you awake at this time of night?”

“I have never been able to sleep well when I am away from home,” he said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Away from Bolivia?” she clarified, enjoying the opportunity to speak her native tongue with the man.

He smiled as he shook his head. “Not necessarily Bolivia,” he said, and she watched him, waiting for his explanation. “I have lived in many places throughout my life,” he said. “And I have travelled many places. Home has meant different places at different times of my life, but it is the place where I settle, where I decide to make my base, for a time at least. Does that make sense?”

“I suppose,” she said slowly.

“Home is where you make it,” he said simply. “And sometimes, who you make it with.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?” she asked suspiciously, wondering if Edward had asked Rodrigo to speak to her, but he shook his head.

“No. I know that you have decided to return to Spain. I know that the duke is miserable due to your decision. I have seen the two of you together, the way you speak to one another, look at one another. Is this what you truly want?”

“I do not want to have to fight for who I am,” she said. “And I do not want to make his life difficult. After a time, he will wish he had a proper English bride.”

“Will he, though?” the Bolivian said, lifting a brow. “He has had many years to find a proper English bride. It is not until he met you that he even considered marriage. I have known the duke for a long time – known him as a man, not as the duke. If he feels for you as I suspect he does, then I would say his life will be more difficult *not* having you in it.” He pressed his palms into his thighs as he stood. “What do I know, though? I have no title, no responsibility. I go where I wish and do what I’d like, changing my home as it suits me. You must do what makes you happy. From the sounds of it, you deserve it.”

“You make it sound so simple,” she murmured, even as his words resonated with her.

“Sometimes it’s simpler than we think,” he said. “Well, thank you for listening to my ramblings. Goodnight, Lady Palencia.”

“Goodnight, Rodrigo,” she said, watching him walk off, considering his words and just what she was going to do with

them.

Edward had spent all night trying to decide how to stop her.

In the end, he did what he always did when it came to such decisions, and went to his brother, although he waited until the next morning, just after Arthur had broken his fast, which happened at the same time as it did every day.

“Arthur,” he began, the two of them sitting alone in the study. This time, Edward made sure the door was firmly closed and no one was listening in the hall. “I need to speak to you.”

Arthur lifted a hand.

“I will stop you before you begin,” he said. “I know what you are going to say, and there is something you need to know before you say it.”

“Very well,” Edward said cautiously.

“I am not going to marry.”

“I said the same thing,” Edward responded. “But, eventually you will find the right woman—”

“That is just it,” Arthur said, his voice dropping and his face softening. “I have found her. You were right about Lady Jane.”

“Then it’s perfect.”

“It’s far from perfect,” Arthur said. “She wants to marry you, not me. And to have her settle for me... it would kill me to know she didn’t truly want me.”

“But Arthur—”

“No,” Arthur said firmly. “I will not be the consolation prize. The truth is, Edward, neither of us have to settle for what is expected. So there isn’t a line of succession. They’ll find another duke somewhere down the line. Really, what does it matter to us? We will not care any longer when the issue comes to pass. You haven’t cared much about the dukedom before – why start now?”

Edward stroked his chin. “You are the last person I ever thought would say such a thing, but you most certainly have a point.”

“Of course I do,” Arthur said with so much certainty that Edward chuckled. “I believe you should marry your Spanish woman.”

Edward’s mirth evaporated. “She doesn’t want me.”

“She thinks you wouldn’t be happy together,” Arthur corrected him. “You must show her that it is possible to be together *and* to be happy.”

“How?” Edward asked, throwing up his hands. He had been trying to determine how to do so all night.

“I have an idea,” Arthur said. And then he smiled.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Mariana sat on her bed, staring at her small valise in front of her. She hadn't brought much with her, and she wouldn't be leaving with much either – in fact, she was leaving behind more than she would ever have imagined. A piece of herself. Her heart. That would remain with Edward.

She stared up at the ceiling. Was she making the right decision? Should she stay? Where was her home now?

Then there was the treasure. While she didn't feel that she had any claim over it, she did have a responsibility to ensure that it was returned to its rightful owners, although, she realized, she trusted Edward to do the right thing with it. That, she had no issue with.

She donned her hat and her walking cloak, even though pulling it around her shoulders made her feel as though she was putting on a façade that belonged to someone else, a cloak of dread for what awaited her.

When she returned home, it would be familiar, yes, but what did she do with herself now? None of her circumstances at home had changed. In fact, she was most likely to no longer have a home if the new *Don* Palencia discovered she had abandoned it.

She could understand now why Edward continued to seek one adventure after another. Because once one finished, he longed for the thrill of the next.

She opened her door, lifted her own bag and carried it downstairs, before waiting by the front entrance for the carriage. When it pulled up, however, she was surprised when it was not a footman who emerged to help her, but Edward himself.

“Edward?” she said tentatively, surprised when she saw a slight, though hesitant, smile on his face. She would have expected him to be cross, or at the very least, upset. “You do not have to accompany me.”

“I know,” he said, tilting his head. “I would ask one thing before you go.”

“Yes?”

“Come with me to see something?”

She studied him, trying to decide if he had an ulterior motive, but she didn’t sense anything.

“Very well.”

She took his outstretched hand, but instead of helping her into the carriage, he led her to walk away from the house.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said, leading her down the path, silence stretching between them as they continued until they passed the ruins she had seen on their way to the caves.

Finally, he rounded a copse of trees, and she saw where they had emerged.

“A lake,” she murmured, surprised at the sizable body of water before her. “I didn’t realize there was so much water near Castleton.”

“The other pond leads here through a very small river,” he said. “It’s one of my favorite places. I wanted to bring you here, to show you the parts of my estate that are worth visiting, that are reasons why I am happy to call this place home – even if I enjoy my adventures.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “I can certainly say that.”

He stepped forward so that he was standing in front of her, facing her, and took her hands in his.

“Mariana, I know this might not be what you expected when you agreed to come with me. I seek adventure constantly, and I feel you have an adventurous spirit as well, or you never would have agreed to accompany me, or even marry me. Arthur and I have come to an agreement. While I might be the duke in name, he is happy to carry on and see to many of my responsibilities. I will have to be present in certain circumstances when required, but he will act in my stead when possible. Which will provide us with plenty of time to return to Spain whenever you wish.”

Her eyes widened as he spoke. “You would do that?”

“Of course!” he said. “I love your country, even if our countries don’t love one another. And I love spending time at sea.”

“But what if I cannot give you heirs?”

“If Arthur never marries, then someone else will inherit.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t overly matter to me.”

“But your mother—”

“She will come around. She’s not as bad as she seems at first. She knows only the ways of the British nobility and she speaks what she thinks, but often her honesty is actually refreshing in this world. And I know that Charity is ever so pleased at the thought of being your friend. You can have any place in this estate as your own. If you want another estate entirely, I can find one for you.”

He paused and released a soft sigh. “If you still want to return, however, I completely understand. You can do as you please with the treasure, and I will see you home.”

“Not all the way.”

“Of course I will. I couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to you.”

“But then I would be worried about you on your return.”

He grinned, a twinkle coming to his eye. “It seems we have a problem.”

She tightened her grip on his hand.

“Why would you do all of this for me?” she couldn’t help but ask.

He looked at her, his face inviting and open. “Because I love you.”

Mariana had to blink back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks at his words.

“Oh, Edward,” she said softly. “I love you too.”

He lifted their hands so that their bodies came closer to one another, his lips pressing against the knuckles of first one of her hands and then the next.

“Does this mean you want to stay, or am I going to have to spend the rest of my life returning to Spain to see you?”

“I like the idea of returning to Spain now and again,” she said, finally allowing all of the reservations she had been holding onto to fade away, allowing her heart to finally tell her what it wanted. “But I think I have found home.”

“At Castleton?” he said hopefully, although his smile dropped when she shook her head and said, “No.”

But then it lit his face again when she added, “With you – wherever you are.”

He let out a whoop of glee and lifted her up, swinging her around in his arms before pressing his lips to hers, holding her close against his body.

“Have I told you that I love you yet?” he said when they finally came up for air.

“You have, actually.”

“Well, allow me to tell you again. I love you, Mariana.”

“And I love you, Edward.”

“You will stay and marry me, then?”

“I will,” she said. “I apologize, Edward, for not believing in you nor in us. I thought... well, I thought that I would make life difficult for you. I still am worried about that.”

“Life would be far more difficult without you in it,” he responded.

“I realize that now,” she said with a smile.

They began walking, hand in hand, back toward Castleton, lost in one another and the future they had to look forward to, when suddenly Edward came to an abrupt halt.

“What is it?” she asked, and he nodded his head forward, his mouth set in a grim line. There were uniformed men standing at his front entrance – in uniforms she well recognized. “It seems that Spain has come to you.”

Edward kept Mariana behind him as he walked up toward Castleton. Arthur and his butler, Scrivens, were standing at the front door, trying to prevent the Spanish soldiers from entering.

“What is the meaning of this?” Edward demanded, hurrying up the stairs. “What are you doing on my estate?”

One of the men stepped forward. “Are you the Duke of Sheffield?”

“I am.”

“We believe that you have stolen from the Spanish King.”

“Just what do you believe I have stolen?”

“Chests of doubloons.”

“And just why would you believe that?”

Two of the soldiers exchanged a glance. “We were provided the information.”

“By whom?”

“It does not matter.”

“I—”

Edward stopped when Mariana stepped forward, beginning to speak in rapid Spanish, although he caught most of it.

“I can tell you who stole from the Spanish King,” she said, continuing before Edward could stop her. “My husband.”

“And you are—”

“*Doña* Palencia. My late husband apparently hired a group of mercenaries, who are likely those who told you about the treasure. He hid it back in Spain. If they have told you about it, it is only because they lost it. I accompanied the duke here, and I can assure you, he has no treasure.”

The solider seemed uncertain.

“Do you wish to start another war?” Edward said, stepping forward, and the solider started slightly.

“No,” he said, although there was doubt in his expression now. “But we have orders.”

“To do what?”

“To search for it.”

“Very well,” Edward said, stretching his arms out. “Search.”

“Edward,” Arthur said in a warning tone, but Edward waved them forward.

“If this is what it will take to convince you, go ahead. You have my leave to search the house and the grounds.”

“Thank you, your grace,” the solider said with a nod, and as they continued on, Mariana looked up at him with a frown.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“I just want peace. If they want to search, then so be it.” His eyes roamed over her face, his voice dropping. “It is very unlikely that they will ever find it, but if they do, I do not care. I have the only treasure I need.”

“How romantic,” she said with a slight laugh.

“I do believe, however, that we are not going to be able to return this treasure anytime soon,” he murmured. “Until then, what do you think?”

“I think we wait until the time comes when we can return the treasure to where it belongs.”

“What if that day never comes?”

“It will,” she said, tilting her head to look up at him. “Even if we are not here to see it.”

She bit her lip. “Are there people in your life who you trust more than any others in the world?”

He nodded. “There are.”

“I think we ask them to help us look after it, until it can once again be entrusted to someone worthy.”

“But how—”

“I have an idea,” she said, her lips curling up. “When I was a girl, my father loved to create treasure hunts for me. Riddles, puzzles – he enjoyed setting up these games.”

Edward nodded. “I have seen many artifacts that provide such games on my travels,” he said. “What are you thinking? That we create a treasure hunt?”

“Precisely,” she said with a mischievous grin. “One that is not only complex, but requires both intellect and tenacity to solve.”

“That sounds like it could be fun,” he said slowly as the idea began to grow on him. “Have you any ideas?”

“More than we would ever need,” she said with a laugh, although she sobered when one of the Spaniards reappeared.

“Is this yours?” he asked, holding out a hand, a ruby necklace dangling from his fingers.

Edward’s mouth formed a firm line.

“You’ve ruined my surprise.”

Mariana turned to him.

“A surprise for me?”

“Yes,” Edward said. “I bought this for you while we were still in Spain. I was going to give it to you as a farewell gift, but when you agreed to accompany me – to marry me – I decided it would be a wedding gift instead.”

“It’s beautiful,” Mariana said, her eyes practically glowing. “And the sentiment is lovely.”

He reached out, plucking it from the soldier’s hands and then rounding behind Mariana and fastening the clasp around her neck.

“There we are,” he said. “Perfect.”

She lifted a hand, her fingers stroking the jewels. “This feels nearly too ostentatious to wear.”

“It suits you beautifully,” he said with a smile, before looking up at the soldier. “I can tell you precisely when and where I bought it,” he said. “It is not from some treasure stash.”

“Very well,” the soldier said. “I will collect that information.”

He returned to the house just as a shriek came from within, and Edward suddenly remembered that he had another issue.

“I forgot to warn my mother,” he cringed. “I best go ensure she is well.” He looked at Mariana. “You will not go

anywhere?”

“No,” she said. “You are here. And my home is with you.”

“I’m ever so glad to hear it,” he said, and then winked at her before slipping inside.

EPILOGUE

Mariana closed her eyes, collapsing her head back on the pillow behind her.

Edward ran a hand over her forehead, pushing her hair back. “You did it,” he whispered in her ear.

“We did it,” she said, turning her head toward him, not caring that sweat covered her brow. “Can I see him?”

“Of course,” he said, gesturing to one of the midwives to bring the baby over. She placed the tiny bundle in Mariana’s arms, and tears filled her eyes as she stared down at him. Finally, she looked at Edward, although she could barely see him through her blurry eyes.

“He is beautiful,” she choked out. “I can hardly believe he is here.”

“I know,” he said, shocking her by the tears that stained his own face. “Oh, Mariana, I cannot believe how strong you are.”

“Thank you for being here,” she said, gripping his hand.

“Of course,” he said, before stealing a glance over at Mariana’s midwife. “Even though I nearly wasn’t allowed in.”

“You were helpful after all,” the midwife acknowledged. “More so than most men would be.”

“You hear that?” he said to Mariana with a grin. “I am better than most men.”

She couldn't help a small chuckle. “I already knew that.”

“What shall we call him?” she asked. “Must he also be Edward?”

“No,” Edward said, shaking his head. “How about Luis?”

“My father's name?” she said, shocked.

“Why not?” Edward said. “He will be carrying on both of our family's legacies. Might as well have names from both of us.”

“I would love that,” she said with a small smile, looking down at him.

“Oh, little Luis,” she said. “Just what will you become?”

He was so tiny and innocent, yet she knew that he was destined for great things one day. He was the beginning of a long line of ancestors, who she knew would do her proud. She wouldn't see it all, of course, but she knew that if the love she and Edward shared was any indication, they would be well served.

“He will become the duke, of course,” Edward said, running his hand over the baby. “But I'm sure, like us, he will be so much more than that.”

“He's a treasure,” she said.

“Just like you are mine,” he responded, placing a kiss on her forehead and then the baby's. “You know something?”

“What's that?”

“The urge to chase the next adventure, the one that was always calling at me? It was not what I assumed. I thought I

was chasing adventure. But what I was chasing was happiness. Happiness that you have brought me now.”

“As you have me,” she said. “Thank you for showing me the true meaning of home.”

“Thank you for being my home,” he said, softly kissing her lips again. “I love you. My treasure.”

Wondering if Mariana and Edward’s descendants will find the treasure — The Reckless Rogues series tells the story, beginning with their great-granddaughter Cassandra. Start with The Earl’s Secret [HERE](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellie St. Clair has always loved reading, writing, and history. For many years she has written short stories, non-fiction, and has worked on her true love and passion — romance novels. Ellie enjoys exploring many different time periods, cultures, and geographic locations. No matter when or where, love can always prevail. She has a particular soft spot for the bad boys of history, and loves a strong heroine in her stories.

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WHEN THE DUKE
BOUGHT A WIFE

MARIAH STONE

Rebellious rake. Brooding duke. Escaping an arranged engagement, he buys a wife he never intended to love... but loses his heart.

Sold at auction, a lady hides her true identity. But the brooding duke who bought her is stripping her bare—body and soul. Will she run or stay with the rake who is bidding on her heart...and winning?

*To Dezi... who loves peonies and who inspired me to write
about dukes.*

CHAPTER
ONE

September 1812

“I will bed you tonight.”

The baronet’s voice was rough, commanding, and stern, and Emma squeezed her folded hands so tight her knuckles hurt.

Determination hardened her husband Sir Jasper Bardsley’s puffy face in the semidarkness of the carriage, the bright light of the warm September day never reaching his features. The floor of the shabby carriage rattled and dipped under her feet, then rose again sharply, making Emma’s stomach drop and causing a momentary onslaught of nausea. The upholstery on the ceiling was torn and hanging, sheep’s wool protruded from holes in the seats, and the brown paint on the door was chipped.

“I’m not feeling well,” she said.

It was true. The thought of having her husband of one year touch her intimately or otherwise made her feel ill.

“Let me guess.” He crossed his arms over his round stomach and stretched his thin, buckskin-covered legs until his fashionable riding boots touched the bench she sat on. “You have your courses?”

She inhaled sharply, worry making her chest rise and fall quickly. When had she used that excuse previously? Could it have been a month ago?

“I do,” she said.

His boots hit the floor with a thump, and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His expression was menacing. “My dear, you said the same thing just two weeks ago.”

He’d caught her. They both knew her excuses for refusing him into her bed the past six months were just that...excuses.

As a small girl, the eldest daughter of a poor but perfectly respectable gentleman, she had dreamed about a happy marriage. She didn’t need a rich man or a man with a title. All she wanted was a home full of children with a husband she loved and respected.

Instead, she’d married Sir Jasper Bardsley.

“I need an heir, Emma,” he said. “You must give me one. That is your *duty* as my wife. And so far, you have not been a good one. You disobey, disrespect, and defy me. The entire week we spent at Cross Manor, you never paid me a moment of attention, and yet you happily chatted with every person in Sir Lionell’s company.”

Helpless frustration boiled in Emma’s stomach. The walls of the carriage shrank around her, and it felt tiny. Like a dark prison cell with no way out. Her chest constricted as she struggled to breathe.

Craving air, and needing a moment to compose herself, she looked out of the window. They were passing through a small village with a lively market square called Clovham. Cows,

goats, horses, chickens, geese, and even dogs were being sold. Booths were bursting with vegetables and other produce.

In about four more hours, she'd be back in the prison of her domestic life in Bardsley House, and she'd be able to wash the grime of the road off herself together with the humiliation she'd experienced the whole week they had spent at the house party at Cross Manor.

"You are not a great husband, *either*, Sir Jasper," she said without looking at him.

He scoffed. "That is so unfair. I give everything to you. You have a good house, an income, and I am the one suggesting you renew your wardrobe according to the latest London fashion."

She glared at him, feeling her chest heave, barely able to contain her anger. Of course she'd refused renewing her wardrobe. He was happy to frivolously spend money on his clothes while their estate crumbled around them from lack of funds. She grasped the edge of the upholstered bench, her fingernails scraping the fraying textile.

"That means you want to parade me with my breasts out there for everyone to see."

"Why not? Lady Kinlea does it, and you have almost as pretty a bosom as she does."

Emma's cheeks blazed. She had never felt as small and insignificant in her life.

She had a lot to say about Lady Kinlea, a pretty and elegant member of fashionable London society, who had three beautiful children Emma had adored. Lady Kinlea couldn't stop flirting with Sir Jasper, right in front of her own husband

and Emma. Though why Lady Kinlea would want Sir Jasper's attention, Emma had no notion.

"Women tell each other things they don't tell men," he said. "I asked you to make friends with her and find out the latest London gossip so that I can make useful connections and invest wisely. Instead, you ran around with her children. You embarrassed me."

Emma stopped a gasp. "I embarrassed *you*?"

Just three days ago, Emma had seen a disheveled and flustered Sir Jasper and Lady Kinlea leaving a rosebush. She wasn't surprised Sir Jasper had a lover. He probably had more than one. But she didn't feel a stab of jealousy. Or a pinch of hurt. On the contrary, she was light with relief. If he found his satisfaction elsewhere, chances were he wouldn't bother her for some time.

But Sir Jasper ignored her question. His round, perfectly shaved cheeks reddened with anger, his small gray eyes glistening with malice. "Will you let me into your bed tonight, madam? Yes or no?"

She'd be damned if she let him ever touch her. She looked out of the window again. In the midst of crop stubble, farmers and their children worked the fields, collecting the hay and throwing it onto stacks. Occasional bushes and trees split fields. Sheep and cows grazed on pastures, and the scent of manure and freshly cut grass reached Emma. She would happily give up her station and work in those fields to escape her brute of a husband.

She'd married him to help her family, of course. Her papa's small estate brought barely enough income to make ends meet, and none of the four daughters had much of a dowry to speak of. When Sir Jasper Bardsley expressed his

interest in Emma at one of the country balls, despite her poor prospects, Emma saw hope bloom in her mama's and papa's eyes for the first time in years. Quite unusually, instead of expecting a dowry, Sir Jasper had offered her father ownership of some of his lands, which would bring income and better marriage prospects to her sisters.

How could she refuse such an offer, even if it meant giving up her dreams of marrying for love?

When would another gentleman with a good name make an offer that would actually add income instead of demanding a dowry?

But one year later, she cringed at the thought of her husband's touch, and her father was yet to see the deeds to the land owed to him. She knew now that he never would...

Her husband expected her to cower. To submit. To let him dictate everything about her. Legally, as a wife, she was his property.

Only, she'd never let him crush her, never show him the hurt his words caused.

Therefore, she smiled. "As I told you, I have my courses. You cannot bed me tonight."

She saw the exact moment Sir Jasper snapped. He snarled in a helpless rage. His teeth bared, then he stared out of the window.

"Even they look happier than you make me," he said, and Emma followed his gaze. They were approaching a pigsty where a swineherd and his wife were chatting as they shoveled manure out of the hog pen.

Sir Jasper kept talking. "You are a bad wife. You fail to do your duty—obey and make your husband happy. You're

ungrateful. You're also, no doubt, frigid. Why else would you deny something so many women are more than happy to indulge in with me? I bet a hundred pounds you would come to value your husband if you tried that life!" He pointed at the couple and grew silent, his eyes alight.

"In fact, that is what you need," he said with a spiteful grin. "A lesson."

With his walking stick, he knocked on the wall behind Emma, and the carriage stopped right in front of the pigsty.

Emma's stomach churned with nerves. "Whatever can you mean, Sir Jasper?"

He got out and threw over his shoulder, "Come with me."

He headed towards the swineherd and his wife.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Emma followed him. She had no reason to be alarmed, not yet. The grass was soft under her shoes as she walked, and she laid her hand over her bonnet as a strong, cool breeze blew, bringing a pungent stink of pigs and manure. She suppressed a gag.

An unassuming dwelling house with walls of rough stone and a thatched roof stood a few feet away, with small windows and a weather-battered door. There was a wooden shed twenty or so feet away next to another stone building with a large gate, clearly for animals. The whole farm was surrounded by a wooden fence. The grunting and oinking of two dozen pigs was loud in the air.

As she approached Sir Jasper, he talked to the couple. They were both in their forties, and their tired, weathered faces were dark from being exposed to the sun and had dirty smudges. The woman's cap was old and patched, and her uncombed, grayish hair was blown about by the wind.

“How much would you like for your clothes?” asked Sir Jasper.

“Why do you need their—” started Emma, but Sir Jasper interrupted her.

“Would two pennies be sufficient?” Sir Jasper asked.

Two pennies would buy them two pints of milk. That couldn't be all that those clothes were worth. Sir Jasper was a miser.

“Beg your pardon, my lord, whatever for?” asked the man, scratching his uneven beard.

Emma clasped at her neck. Sir Jasper had said something about a lesson...and now he wanted to buy their clothes, stinking of manure and caked in dirt.

“It is for the market in Clovham,” said Sir Jasper. “We just passed it by and I saw they sell cattle.” Sir Jasper looked her over and grinned nastily. “Do they hold to the old English tradition and sell wives there, too?”

A chill ran through Emma's limbs.

“Sometimes,” said the swineherd, narrowing his eyes in confusion. “The farm folk does. Three years ago, the cowherd sold his wife to the blacksmith. He'd been unhappy with her and found her sinning with the blacksmith. The children stayed with the cowherd, of course.”

A look of triumph had Sir Jasper straightening his shoulders as he looked at her. “Excellent. Lady Bardsley, you don't find your happiness with me. Perhaps you'll find it with a blacksmith.”

The mouths of the swineherd and his wife fell open. Emma's skin tingled, and cold hit her core. The most

unladylike bark of laughter escaped her throat. “You are not serious, Sir Jasper.”

“I assure you, I am.”

She held the gaze of his pallid, rodent-like eyes. She saw it then. The bluff. The fear behind his triumph and contempt. He’d never really sell her. He was a baronet, not a peer, but his title was hereditary. He needed her, a properly raised gentleman’s daughter, to give him an heir.

His threat was empty. He simply wanted to teach her a lesson. It was quite an effective method, she thought, as her stomach sank with worry. “Very well, Sir Jasper. Sell me to a blacksmith, then.”

Sir Jasper nodded, and then everything was a blur. The woman, who introduced herself as Harriet, led Emma and Sir Jasper to the house.

“Would you like something clean, my lady?” Harriet asked, eyeing her sideways.

“No,” Sir Jasper answered for her. “I want her to smell as foul as you do.”

Emma changed inside the house, the underdress and the dress and apron feeling dusty and hard against her skin, the smell of pig’s manure clinging to her so that she struggled to inhale fully. For a complete disguise, Sir Jasper donned Freddie the farmer’s clothes.

Standing in front of Freddie’s horse and cart, which Sir Jasper had rented so that they might arrive to Clovham like a real farmer and his wife, he put a rope around Emma’s neck.

“Tradition,” he said, tying the noose. “A wife must be led for sale like cattle. Serves you right.”

Her chemise itched. It was too short for her height, and her bare ankles were exposed. The rope scratched her neck, a suffocating reminder of her husband's ownership over her.

The evil triumph on his face made bile rise in her stomach. "This will show you what an excellent husband I have been. Try the life of a real swineherd's wife, Lady Bardsley."

Looking satisfied at her humiliation, Sir Jasper told her to hop onto the cart, then sat on the driver's seat and drove her to Clovham. When he stopped near the market square, he jumped off the cart and came to fetch her. As he helped her to descend, a look of excitement was added to his triumphant expression.

He pulled her after him by the rope. "Sir Jasper, would you finally stop?" she asked.

Without replying, he tugged harder, and she practically fell forward.

They walked among a few booths with bundles of herbs, jars of honey, jams, and jellies, as well as candles, cakes of soap, and beeswax. Other merchants placed crates with carrots, parsnips, potatoes, cabbages, fish, fresh game, and meat right on the dirt-packed ground of the marketplace. There were also cows and sheep and donkeys for sale. The market was by surrounded by neat stone cottages with white-paned windows where various shops tempted townsfolk and those who had come from nearby farms and villages; ribbons, hats, and gloves could be seen through the glass, as well as fabrics, porcelain cups and plates, and other goods.

The square was loud with merchants calling, people negotiating, laughing, chatting. Sheep bleated, cows mooed, donkeys brayed. It smelled like manure, herbs and vegetables, and fish. As Emma walked, her stomach squeezed as curious

glances landed on her. Some people stepped aside as she passed by, their faces wincing in disgust. No wonder. She stank.

An empty cart stood in the middle of the square, and Sir Jasper climbed onto it and pulled Emma up behind him. They stood taller than everyone else, for the whole market to see.

Sir Jasper turned to her and said, “Say you will take me back to your bed, and all this will be over.”

She straightened her back. She refused to be coerced into sexual relations with anyone, even her husband.

When she said nothing, he filled his lungs with air and yelled, “Wife sale! Wife sale! Bidding starts at one penny. For the cost of a pint of milk you can have her!”

Embarrassment heated her cheeks as dozens of pairs of male eyes landed on her. And then it turned to cold horror when a crowd of butchers, farmers, herdsman, fishermen, and laborers gathered around the cart, interested and agitated.

And the bids began.

CHAPTER
TWO

“Wife sale! Wife sale!”

Sebastian Rockliffe, Duke of Loxchester, sipped cordial from a cup as he stood next to the tavern where he and his company, two Seaton brothers, had stopped for lunch and refreshments on their way to London. He looked around the busy market square, but couldn't see the strange auction that appeared to be underway.

His best friend, Lord Preston Seaton, cocked a single dark eyebrow, craning his neck to see past the booth selling wax candles.

“Spencer, any interest?” he asked his older brother, the Duke of Grandhampton, a glimmer of humor in his black eyes.

The duke glared at Preston. Both brothers were tall, dark-haired, and olive-skinned after their deceased mother, who was a Spanish heiress with blood ties to the Spanish royal family. Grandhampton, who enjoyed regular boxing, was bigger and bulkier than Preston, who preferred fencing.

“I haven't yet fallen so low as to needing to buy a wife, have I?” Grandhampton said, folding his massive arms across his chest. “Besides, I already have someone in mind, and you know it.”

Preston's humor disappeared and his smoothly shaven jaw worked. "I am aware of your interest in Miss Beckett. That is exactly why I asked. At least a farmer's wife wouldn't be a fortune hunter."

"Miss Beckett is not a fortune hunter," said Grandhampton through gritted teeth.

Sebastian knew this argument had been going on for several months. Lord Richard, their younger brother, would have found a way to dissipate the heated discussion, but Sebastian had no capacity for it. He had his own conflict to resolve back in London.

Being an only child and the heir to his father's title, he was bound by obligation.

His mother had summoned him to London, even though the whole ton had left the capital for autumn and winter. The reason for his summons made his stomach churn and his entire being fill with dread.

Marriage.

Both brothers were now clenching their fists, eyes locked.

"Wife sale is an old English tradition," said Sebastian in a pathetic attempt to quell the glaring duel. "Why don't we go and see it?"

"Quite," said Grandhampton, taking a deep breath, "a barbaric notion."

Preston raised both eyebrows. "How is it different from what our kind does? The price is a gentleman's name and wealth. The highest bidder wins."

This was why Sebastian had been best friends with Preston since Oxford. He liked Preston's direct manner, and they were

both grumps who had no patience for cheerful chatter and preferred to engage in debauchery with more sophisticated ladies than most young men.

“Like you, my poor old friend,” said Preston, looking at Sebastian. “You won Lady Isabella Greene, didn’t you?”

Sebastian’s jaw tightened. His waistcoat and tailcoat were suddenly too tight around his chest, and it was hard to breathe in the beautiful, sunlit English day.

“That is what my mother wants, yes,” Sebastian said.

“Do not sound as if you’re going to your own execution,” said Grandhampton. “Isn’t Lady Isabella quite pleasant?”

Lady Isabella, with her soft, delicate face, bright blue eyes, and blond, shiny curls, was a perfect English lady. The daughter of the Earl of Whitemouth, with whom Sebastian’s deceased father had had an understanding. There was a dowry attached to her, a large estate in the north of England. The only thing his father had ever wanted was to increase his estate.

But that was all it was between the two families. An understanding. Papa had died two years ago, and now the impatient Earl of Whitemouth insisted it was time to make his daughter a duchess.

“She’s just not for me.”

His gaze wandered, noticing people turning their heads towards the market square and making their way to the center of it.

The booths closest to Sebastian, previously surrounded by people, now stood empty.

“Ten pence!” came a loud cry from the center of the square.

“Just say you won’t marry Lady Isabella,” said Preston.

“Wife sale!” came the voice from behind the booths.
“Come one, come all, bids are still accepted!”

“It doesn’t solve it,” said Sebastian. “Mama will never stop arranging marriages for me. She will keep drilling and drilling until I give in. And in the meanwhile, I’m expected to attend balls and bow and talk politely and dance quadrilles, but God forbid with one lady twice, and tolerate the matchmaking mamas who are eager to present their eligible daughters to me. This will not end until I have a wife.”

Preston and Grandhampton looked at him with empathy. Such an important decision as the choice of a bride was taken out of his control so completely. He was a gentleman, and if he agreed to marry Isabella, he’d never go back on his word, even though she was completely wrong for him.

“Two and twenty pence!” came a cry from behind the booth.

He needed a distraction. And the pitiful glances from the two men didn’t help.

“I’d like to see a wife sale,” he said. “How about it?”

“Come on, brother,” said Preston to Grandhampton. “Perhaps you’ll find a wife to your satisfaction and forget Miss Beckett.”

Grandhampton’s square jaw tightened. He gave a short nod, his mouth straightening in displeasure. “Only if you stop talking about her.”

The three of them left their cups on the small round table and walked towards the center of the market square, turning the corner of the next booth.

Sebastian was getting curious now. People were agitated, laughing, yelling. He could hear insults thrown at the wife in question.

“For those breasts, five and twenty pence!”

Having passed the booth, Sebastian could now see the crowd gathered around a cart in the middle of the square. On top of the cart stood a farmer and his wife. The closer he came, the better he saw that the farmer was as agitated as the crowd around him, his wide eyes quickly darting between the bidders, pointing at whoever offered the bid and repeating it. He had a manic grin on his face.

When Sebastian and his two friends stopped about ten feet away, he could see the woman. She stood next to her husband, a noose around her neck, hands clutched together on top of her poorly fitting, homespun dress, which was clearly sewn for a shorter woman. Her ankles were exposed, and the bust was too tight over her generous bosom.

And her face...proud and calm, as though she didn't think anything of it. Her soft, pink lips were slightly curled in the hint of a smile, but there was no trace of humor in her big green eyes. She looked as pale as a cloud.

He liked her. He'd seen pretty women in his life—he'd bedded quite a few of them. Most London noble ladies, and even the expensive whores he'd visited in Elysium and other gentlemen's clubs, were gentle and exquisite and feminine, charming and excellent socialites. She was pretty, too. Striking, actually, if he disregarded the dirty clothes of an unidentifiable color. With her big, innocent eyes, and her lips, full and sensual, and yet stubbornly and unyieldingly shut.

Sebastian stepped forward, unable to look away from her. Why would her husband sell her at an auction?

Grandhampton addressed a woman watching the sale. “Excuse me, how do these wife sales work exactly?”

The woman curtsied. “Begging your pardon, my lord. The man will sell his wife to the highest bidder. But she must say yes, or the sale will not continue.”

“What about the rope?” asked Sebastian.

The woman looked over the three of them, wide-eyed. Clearly, they did not belong among the crowd of farmers, blacksmiths, manual laborers, merchants, millers, and animal herders. “The rope is just something folk does,” she said. “She’s his property. Like that goat over there.”

Sebastian nodded and thanked the woman, looking at the wife being sold with more attention. Who would she go to? Would she agree? And if not, what would happen to her?

“Three farthings and three shillings!” came another loud offer. “For the pair of those tits!”

Sebastian frowned. He didn’t like anyone talking about her like that.

“You’re better off going to the Golden Sheep! The whores there won’t wrinkle their noses like she does!”

“Ah, who cares, she’ll just be an expensive whore. Pay once and keep fucking her over and over!”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes on the farmer. Someone had just insulted his wife. As a husband, he should defend her honor. Any moment now. Why was Sebastian’s blood boiling with anger and his fists clenching when that woman had nothing to do with him? Her husband only threw a crooked smile at her and looked around the crowd.

“Three shillings and three farthings!” the farmer announced loudly. “Anyone else? Who wants to buy this fine woman?”

“Perhaps if you turn her and show us her arse!” boomed another voice, and the crowd erupted in laughter.

The woman’s face grew as red as a beetroot. But her husband chuckled, satisfied and victorious.

That was it. Sebastian pushed through the crowd, shouldering the bystanders.

“Seb!” Preston called after him. “Where are you going?”

Sebastian ignored his best friend and kept going. When he stood in front of the cart, he saw how pretty the wife actually was, with her high cheekbones and dimples at the sides of her mouth. The sight of her big eyes glistening with unshed tears had his chest contracting with pity for her. No woman deserved this, farmer or not.

He turned around and raised both arms. “Silence!” he roared, and the crowd shut up.

Dozens of pairs of eyes watched him, with frowns, curiosity, confusion. He was clearly a lord. What did he want involving himself with the farmer’s wife?

Indeed. What the devil had come over him? He wasn’t typically one calling for attention. He avoided company unless it was the Seatons, whores, or sometimes Mama when she didn’t pester him.

And yet, the attention of all these people was on him. He looked over his shoulder at the woman, and his eyes locked with hers, wide and glistening. Something pinched at his heart.

He turned to the crowd. “There is no need to insult the woman. She did nothing to deserve any of your foul comments.”

“Why, Lord, do you want to buy her, then?” asked someone with a chuckle.

He opened his mouth to say no, of course he didn’t.

But the words simply would not come out.

What if he could buy her? The idea sent lightness through his entire body. If he returned to London with her and told Mama and everyone in the ton that they were already married, he wouldn’t have to marry Isabella.

He’d have control over his life. He’d have the final say over what he could do.

Not his mother. Not the Earl and Countess of Whitemouth, and not the swarms marriage-mart mamas swarming over him like wasps.

This woman was a farmer. She didn’t know the ton. She wouldn’t bother him. He’d come to an easy agreement with her. She’d enjoy being a duchess—the security, the money, the clothes. She wouldn’t need to work another day in her life.

This would be a scandal, no doubt. But she wouldn’t care about the opinion of a bunch of London snobs. She’d be living in Mayfair. She’d have a cook, a butler, footmen, and a lady’s maid. She’d have gowns made by the best modiste in town.

And he couldn’t care less what London thought. Actually, he’d enjoy rubbing it in their faces. A duke married a farmer’s wife, rejecting all the eligible noble ladies. His muscles quivered with a hot elation. He felt awake, light, and young.

Was this what freedom felt like?

He'd be able to keep living his life the way he wanted. No one would bother him about marriage anymore.

"Yes!" he called out loudly, and a surprised mutter went through the crowd. "I do want to buy her."

He turned to the farmer, whose amused smile was completely washed from his face. In fact, he stared at Sebastian with concern.

"Fifteen hundred pounds," Sebastian said to him, and a loud gasp went through the market square.

The farmer blinked, no doubt in shock. Sebastian's bid equaled the average yearly income of a landed gentleman.

Someone clasped Sebastian's shoulder. "What the devil are you doing?" Preston growled into his ear. "You cannot make a jest out of this."

"I am quite serious," said Sebastian.

Lightness swirled in his stomach, making him feel weightless. The woman breathed hard. The mask of a stoic beauty fell off, and she looked both surprised and hopeful.

The farmer didn't reply for a while, then he turned to her. "For that amount of money, I don't care if you get sold to the devil himself. I say yes!"

Sebastian nodded. Now the woman still needed to agree.

He stared at her. The whole square did. It was so quiet, he could hear his own pulse drumming in his ears. A chicken squawked and a sheep bleated.

The woman's green eyes never left his. He felt like he was made of wax and the sun shone straight at him, heating him from inside, making his muscles melt and droop.

He found himself wishing she said yes. He liked the idea of taking her by the hand, leading her to his carriage, and shoving her into his mama's face.

Moments ticked by, and she didn't move. It seemed she didn't even breathe.

She'd say no. Of course she'd say no. She wouldn't leave with a stranger who bought her.

Would she?

A year must have passed before she finally opened her mouth.

In her sweet, melodic voice, she said a single word: "Yes."

And how three letters would make something burst with an odd sort of joy in his body, he didn't know.

CHAPTER
THREE

The most gorgeous man Emma had ever seen removed the noose from her neck. His fingers brushed her skin briefly as he did, sending a thrill through her. The scratchy, itchy hell that had rubbed her neck for hours was finally gone and the air was a blessed relief on her skin.

The voices, laughing, birdsong, and animal sounds in the market square became a muffled, gurgling river of sound around her. She stood in front of someone she could describe only as her savior, and even through the stench of her clothes, she could smell him—a good soap and the scent of shaving foam.

He'd saved her, not only from those men insulting her like she was a common whore, but also from Sir Jasper. That must be why she'd said yes.

Everything around her was a blur of the reds, browns, and blues of clothing as the crowd dissolved, going on with their activities.

And even among all that, she couldn't look away from his beautiful eyes. There ought to be some sort of a rule in the world against having men like him roam free...high-cheekboned and with a mane of thick hair the color of old gold. He was towering over her, broad-shouldered and more

muscular than any gentleman had the right to be. His features were stark and chiseled, with a classic Roman nose, a square jaw, and a broad mouth with sensual lips. Long, thick eyebrows furrowed above his pretty, surprisingly long-lashed eyes the color of amber in the sun. Having them stare at her with that intensity felt like licking the first honey of the year. Fresh. Delicious. Decadent.

When he offered her his elbow, like a true gentleman, she stared at it without understanding at first. It must be the shock. This odd numbness in her limbs, like she wasn't standing on the ground at all but floating in the air, melting under his gaze. That, along with the tingling all over her body. And the strange sensation that a hole had been cut right through her middle.

The shock was not just from the notion that someone would pay a fortune for her.

But that she had said yes.

She had believed all along that either Sir Jasper or she would stop it at any minute.

And yet, there was something about the idea of leaving Sir Jasper. And going with this handsome man with an intense stare that brought chills down her body made excitement spread through her in warm tingles.

The man, however, clearly didn't share her enthusiasm nor her tingles. His frown should have told her everything.

"I'm the Duke of Loxchester," he said.

He was a duke! She swallowed hard, licking her lips. A duke had bought her at an auction. A new wave of shock added to her previous one.

She'd just exchanged Sir Jasper for a duke! He was the first one she'd ever met. And she was dressed in this? She

smelled like a pigsty and looked like a farmer's wife.

So...why would a duke buy someone like her?

"What is your name?" he asked softly.

Through her dry, parched throat she said, "Emma." Not Lady Bardsley, like she should have. Just Emma, like a swineherd's wife, indeed.

His eyebrow cocked and he continued to offer her his elbow. Nearby, a man as tall and muscular as him, but with much darker hair, lingered with a terrible frown. "Well, Emma," the duke said. "I left your husband my steward's address to arrange payment. Would you please come with me? I believe you're now mine."

As she wrapped her hand through his bent elbow and they began walking, the words thundered in her head... *You're now mine...*

Why that would make her knees weak the way Sir Jasper never could, she didn't know.

Then the Duke of Loxchester stopped to introduce her to the Duke of Grandhampton, a large, tall man of incredible beauty, and his brother Lord Preston Seaton, who had followed them from the auction. It must have been her shock, because she barely remembered their reactions except for their wide eyes and their tense manners. They must be in shock, too.

The only one who appeared to be unaffected was her new husband.

The Duke of Loxchester.

And then, minutes, or perhaps years, later, she and the duke were alone in his carriage.

The carriage was so much bigger and richer than anything she'd ever seen. Real leather covered the seats, which were soft like velvet under the tips of her fingers.

The rumble of the road under the wheels and the hooves of four fresh horses powerfully tugging the carriage were muffled. The walls of the duke's carriage were covered in dark velvet with the patterns of golden birds drinking from lilies and vines. There were two gas lamps secured above each of the seats. Despite it being September, warmers under their feet gave a pleasant heat. It was such a stark contrast to Sir Jasper's old carriage, which felt like it was about to fall apart. And unlike Sir Jasper's carriage, this one smelled fresh and delicious...like vanilla and sandalwood—exotics reserved for the very wealthy—and something male that one could never buy. This was a world she'd never imagined she would enter.

The second carriage with the Duke of Grandhampton and his brother drove somewhere ahead of them.

The world shrank around her. The countryside passing by in the two windows was nothing but an illustration in a book. All that existed were the four carriage walls and the rattling floor under her, and this man, long and muscular and as present as a tiger in a cage.

His scent, the bulge of his thigh muscles under the buckskins that stretched over every ridge. Her whole being tingled with nerves, the meaning of her life unraveling into the unknown. And it wasn't just him.

The pig farmer's wife's clothes, rough and coarse and too short and too tight, smelled like animals and like a different life.

As the carriage shook and bounced, he picked up a newspaper from the seat. Once there was a wall of paper

between them, he said, “You will do fine.”

Could he have been any more dismissive of her? Yes, she was dressed poorly...so what? He'd bought her for some reason she didn't know.

Arrogant aristocrats. Arrogant, good-looking aristocrats! Where were his manners? Even though he thought she was working class, he couldn't just behave as though she was an object he was satisfied with purchasing.

She needed to know more. She straightened her shoulders. “What are your intentions with me, Duke?”

He lowered his newspaper, and his eyes narrowed on her with suspicion. His amber stare brought warmth into her whole body. “Forgive me, you sound too educated for a swineherd's wife. Why is that?”

She gulped. Was that a good thing or not? Making an attempt at a Bedfordshire accent, she said, “Must have picked it up from my mother. She was a lady's maid.”

He frowned, looking her over with a grunt that sent anger through her, and returned to his paper. She studied the long, masculine fingers holding the paper, the muscular crossed legs stretched across the small space between their opposite seats.

She wouldn't take him ignoring her like that. No. This was her life, and she needed to know what he had in mind.

“What do you want with me, Your Grace?” she asked. “A good-looking, rich man like you surely doesn't need to buy a wife. Can't you have any woman you want?”

He lowered his newspaper, his amber eyes as dark as chestnuts, watching her. “Like I said, you will do fine.”

“For what, my lord?”

“For what I have in mind.”

She rolled her eyes. “And what’s that?”

“To put you in silks and the latest fashions and tell the whole ton you’re my wife.”

With that, he reopened his newspaper and buried his nose in it as though she didn’t exist.

The charm he’d had over her evaporated. He couldn’t be the gallant protector she’d thought he was. He had bought her for his own purposes, whatever they were. They had nothing to do with him being kind to her or his valor. He was as arrogant and selfish as any aristocrat. He may be even worse than her husband.

She couldn’t see his face behind the double sheet of paper. It was perfectly ironed, like any gentleman’s, and it was like a slap in her face. She deserved more than that. Swineherd’s wife or not, she had the right to know what he had planned for her.

And if he was going to ignore her like that, as though she were a piece of furniture he had just purchased, she’d annoy him. She’d dig information out of him whatever it took. After all, this was her future, and it was quite unfair that he was not giving her the information that would define her whole life.

She lifted herself from the seat and shifted her bottom to the opposite seat and plumped herself right next to him. His profile was like a Roman statue against the backdrop of the sunlit window.

“But why do you need *me* for that? To put someone in silks and the latest fashions and tell the whole ton she’s your wife, you don’t need a swineherd’s wife.”

From behind the newspaper came a lazy, cold reply. “I fail to see why it concerns you. Please let me read in peace.”

She scoffed. Quite unladylike. Perfect for a farmer’s wife. “It concerns me because it’s my life.”

He lowered the newspaper to his lap and looked at her, his amber glare as sharp as shards. “Please return to the opposite seat, madam.”

“Not until you tell me the whole truth. And where are your manners?”

“My manners?” His upper lip crawled to his nose. “My manners are being suffocated by your horrendous stink.”

Ah! Finally, she’d gotten him with something. She’d roused some sort of feeling from the cold, unyielding duke. Pig’s shit—that was what had him react! A smile blossomed on her lips.

Giving him a wee bit of a break, she returned to the opposite seat and looked out the window. They drove through the woods now, trees and bushes passing by.

Completely uninterested in the landscape outside, the duke opened his newspaper again. “Please refrain from speaking to me again until we arrive and you have bathed.”

“No,” she said. “I will not let you scare me with your gorgeous, handsome demeanor until you tell me your reason for buying me. What if you’re a murderer?”

He raised his brows at her over the newspaper. “You think I’d tell you if I were a murderer?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Well, I’m not one. I’m also trying not to breathe too much.”

She was not trying to breathe, either. She hid her smile. “So tell me, then. Why?”

His eyes became so murderous she wondered if he’d lied just now. “You will be dressed in the best dresses. You will be fed dishes you’ve never tried. You will sleep in a feather bed. You will be safe, protected, and, I daresay, bathed. What you will not do is get into my business.”

“Your Grace, Duke of Cheerfulton, aren’t you?” she said. “You seem like a good man with your manners, but deep down, you despise everyone that’s beneath your rank, don’t you?”

He jerked his head up as though to say something but stopped himself. His jaw muscles jumped up and down.

“Just tell me why!” she yelled.

“I am very much starting to regret buying you,” he said through gritted teeth. “And understand why your husband couldn’t tolerate a day more being married to you! You’re a devil in a woman’s form, aren’t you?”

Like Sir Jasper’s words, these jabbed her in the chest. Sir Jasper bickered, criticized her, and tried to control her. He’d even told her she ate her breakfast wrong. *One does not butter the toast with such a thick layer. It’s unladylike and will make you fat.*

But just as with Sir Jasper, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. And just as with Sir Jasper, she’d be fine. Somehow, everything would be all right as long as she maintained a positive attitude. She squared her shoulders.

Until she could find a way to escape him without returning to Sir Jasper, she needed to let him know the boundaries she would not permit him to cross.

“Do not dare to hope you will lay with me as my husband,” she said.

His darkening eyes traveled over her body.

“I need you to be my wife in every way, Duchess. It may take time to end your marriage and to legally marry you, but we will tell everyone we’re already wed. In the eyes of society, you will be my wife. And I expect you to be—in every way.”

It sounded like another cage. Every marriage was a prison. She’d always be a husband’s property.

He looked her up and down.

She swallowed hard. The way he affected her was incredible. A dark, dangerous desire boiled in her stomach.

No. That was wrong. What she wanted was not a husband. Not another jailor like Sir Jasper.

What she wanted was to get away. Now that she had escaped her horrible marriage, she didn’t want to go back. But she’d need to get away from the duke, too. They weren’t really married. They hadn’t signed a church register. Selling a wife was just a silly tradition.

As soon as she was in London, she’d run away. She wanted to be free and strong and independent so that no one could hurt her or manipulate her like Sir Jasper had.

But, just for now, she needed to keep pretending to be a swineherd’s wife.

Surely, a duke wouldn’t want to bed a swineherd’s wife.

She narrowed her eyes. “What are you not telling me?”

His face hardened into a grim expression. “My mother will not find it agreeable.”

“But I am not your true duchess, am I? You bought me. We’re not wed.”

He leaned his head back against the glimmering wall of the carriage. “Not yet.”

“Then let me go, Your Grace,” she pleaded, realizing her accent was slipping back into an educated one, but not caring. “I just want to get away from my husband. I will serve you as your servant until I repay you my price.”

There was now a pained and a dangerous look on his face. “I bought you, and you said yes. There’s no running away from me now, wife.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

It was already dark when the carriage stopped in a small yard in front of a grand house. While the duke climbed out of the carriage on the other side, one of the footmen opened the door for her.

She climbed down and looked around. Through the tall, wrought iron fence, she could see a town square on all sides of which were terraced houses and several mansions, all illuminated with gas lamps. None of them were as grand as this one.

Gas lamps flanked the wide stairs leading up to a large portico with four columns three stories high supporting a triangular roof structure with Greek statues on top. The mansion was perfectly symmetrical, and it spanned the entire length of the square. Grand rounded windows were lit on the ground floor, and she could see a curtain shift as a figure moved.

The courtyard in front of the house had perfectly cut grass on both sides of the semicircle driveway. And rosebushes bloomed along the length of the mansion.

This mansion could fit five of Bardsley House, a modest redbrick, two-story cottage with a leaking roof, sinking wooden floor, and crumbling brickwork. Bedfordshire...a

sudden wave of homesickness hit her. She had no clothes, no luggage with her. Could she have imagined this morning when she'd packed to return home that she'd never arrive there, and instead would come to London, a city she'd never visited before, and to a duke's mansion?

The butler and other servants hurried down the stairs to line up before the duke, who nodded to Emma and stretched his arm out in a silent invitation. She swallowed under questioning glances from the servants.

"May I introduce," he said, "the Duchess of Loxchester. My new wife."

The servants widened their eyes, but at least there were no open mouths. He introduced the butler, Standen, and the housekeeper, Mrs. Eastbrook.

"Welcome to Longton Place, Your Grace," said Standen.

"Mrs. Eastbrook, please put the duchess in the bedchamber adjacent to mine and assign her a lady's maid. Please ensure the duchess gets cleaned up before dinner. Find her suitable clothing, perhaps from my mother's wardrobe, until the modiste can be engaged."

Clean, fresh clothes... Emma practically sagged in relief. She could still smell her own stink and wondered how the duke had tolerated it the entire way here.

And through all that, Emma couldn't shake the feeling she was dreaming. That this could not be real. One simply wasn't bought by a duke. And they could not be married, not legally, even if he had just introduced her as his duchess.

What did she get herself into? And how would she get out of this?

Inside the mansion was a large hall lit with gas lamps and candles. A grand chandelier hung from the tall ceiling, light sparkling as it was reflected by the crystals. Large landscape paintings decorated bright turquoise-green walls. Mahogany sideboards had gilded metal mounts of lion faces and the legs had paw-shaped feet. Vases of red roses stood on the sideboards, giving the room a pleasant flowery scent.

The duke had been silent for most of the journey. She had tried to talk to him, but he had been brooding and grumpily replied with hmms.

As Mrs. Eastbrook and three maids led her up a grand staircase with a gilded railing with leaves and flowers, they passed more beautiful paintings, no doubt of previous Dukes and Duchesses of Loxchester. Emma's chest tightened, her middle sank, and, just as with Sir Jasper in that poor brick cottage back in Bedfordshire, she felt trapped.

Only, in a golden cage this time.

She was led to a lovely bedroom with pale lilac wallpaper made of silk, with patterns of leaves and birds and flowers. A mahogany bed with a lilac and golden canopy stood against one of the walls. Violet silk curtains with fringes decorated three large windows. The fireplace had a black grate with intricately wrought ornaments of vines. Coal crackled softly inside, making the room wonderfully warm. There was a mahogany wardrobe, a chest of drawers, an elegant desk and a chair. A soft Axminster carpet covered the floor.

The bedroom was as large as her whole drawing room back home.

She hated how much she liked it. How much she craved to lie back in that undoubtedly soft bed and listen to the quiet of this large house and know that she was safe and free.

Something she had wanted so desperately ever since she'd married Sir Jasper.

Something she would never be.

The maids hurried to give her a sponge bath as Mrs. Eastbrook explained that dinner was about to be served and there was no time for a proper bath. She promised Emma would have one after dinner and left.

Removing the swineherd's wife's clothes felt divine. So did washing off the grime. Another maid brought in a beautiful dress of a gentle white silk with a layer of transparent gauze. The bodice, which ended just below the bust, had tiny pearls sewn onto the embroidered patterns of vines and flowers. The skirt was gathered under the bust and was light and floaty.

She'd never worn or seen such a pretty, and no doubt expensive, dress. When the maid put it on, it wasn't quite her size—a little too large in the bust and too short, but the maid quickly adjusted it right on her.

“It's Her Grace's last year's gown,” said the maid through tight lips that held a needle, “so she said you can have it, Your Grace.”

After the maid combed and arranged her hair, Mrs. Eastbrook knocked on the door and came in, asking her to come downstairs as the duke and the duchess were awaiting her presence.

She truly didn't want to. His mother would never be pleased about this. And seeing the grumpy duke once again, trying to claw the reason for his actions out of him, felt like a struggle, and she was exhausted.

But maybe she'd finally learn the truth and find a way out.

As she descended the stairs following Mrs. Eastbrook, the duke stood next to a shorter, elegant, and beautiful woman in her fifties, who glared at Emma with disapproval. The duke's eyes widened, his mouth opening in surprise. Her knees weakened under his dark, smoldering gaze as he slowly looked her over from head to toe. When she reached the floor, the duke offered her his hand and she took it, the heat of his body scalding her even through her glove.

“Mama,” he said, turning towards his mother, “allow me to present my new wife. Lady Emma Rockliffe, Duchess of Loxchester.”

Emma met the stern, amber eyes of the duchess. She could see where Sebastian got his good looks from. Her hair was pale gold, a mixture of white and blond, and she had high cheekbones and few wrinkles. Her mouth straightened into a line, and Emma held her breath. Would the dowager duchess acknowledge her or not? It would be clear in the order of precedence leading into the dining room.

The duchess cocked one eyebrow. “I do not know where you came from and how you managed to steal my son. But because of you, Sebastian refused a very eligible match with an earl's daughter and a proper lady. A match that had been arranged between his late father and the lady's father, who were friends. And now...”

Emma opened her mouth to contradict her, to say she'd never intended to break any matches, but the duchess didn't allow her to speak.

“I will never call you Your Grace, I will never call you Duchess, because I refuse to allow my son to be entangled with a swineherd's daughter.”

Daughter? Is that what the duke had told her? Of course, she supposed, he couldn't say Emma had a husband.

But the duke shook his head. "Mother, do not dare to talk to the duchess in this fashion. Who are you to teach anyone about morals?"

The duchess pursed her lips, and without sparing another glance to Emma, walked to the dining room.

As they followed her and took their places, Emma's mind raced, planning how to act. She couldn't stay here. She didn't know what the duke was playing at, but it was clear to her that she was only a pawn in his games. She needed to leave and hide so that Sir Jasper wouldn't find her. She was an educated woman and could look for a governess's post somewhere far away where no one knew her.

The first course was brought, French chestnut soup. Through the tense silence, utensils clanked against the china. When it was cleared, the next course was brought—a salad and cheese were put in front of her.

"I'm surprised a farmer's daughter knows how to eat properly," said the duchess, eyeing her coolly.

"Mama, where are your manners?" said the duke.

"I suppose they left the building the moment I learned of your escapade."

The duke appeared to be suppressing a smug smile. "Please."

"What do you intend, my dear?" The duchess leaned forward, seeking Emma's gaze. "You are not seriously intending to be a duchess? You were never prepared for it. You were prepared for a life of animal husbandry, to cook and to

clean and to raise children. Not to dance in ballrooms and lead conversations with diplomats and noblemen.”

Emma straightened her shoulders. She didn't care to be intimidated, nor did she think the duchess had any right to judge her, even if she thought she was a simple woman.

“I do know manners because my mother was a lady's maid. Although I'm not sure how that's any of your concern, nor the reason your son chose me. Had you not bullied him to marry someone he did not want, he would not have felt the need to do something drastic.”

She felt the duke's hot gaze on her and met his eyes. They were surprised and warm and full of respect. No, that was not at all what she wanted. She needed him to despise her. To get rid of her. To let her go. Not to be interested in her.

The duchess's eyes narrowed at her. “It speaks. And quite eloquently. Could a lady's maid really teach a farmer's daughter to speak so well?”

Emma didn't let herself lower her gaze or cower. “I'm a good imitator.”

The duchess sighed, picked up her fork, and stabbed a piece of cheese. Then she leaned to the duke and said, “I see it is useless to try and convince her to leave you. But you and I will have a proper conversation. I will not let you keep her. This is a scandal!”

A smirk spread across the duke's lips, and he never stopped watching Emma. “A scandal. Yes, I suppose so.”

After two excruciating hours, the evening was over, and Emma was allowed to go upstairs. When the door closed behind her, she sagged against it with relief. She hadn't even

tasted the food on her plate. There was a bathtub waiting for her with steaming water.

There was a knock at the door behind her. “The bath is ready, Your Grace,” she heard the maid’s voice. “May I help you?”

The maid came in, helped her to undress and slide into the bathtub. She asked the maid to leave, and finally, blessedly, she was alone and it was quiet. She listened to the fire crackling and let her body melt in the hot water, laying her head against the back of the tub.

There were footsteps from behind the mahogany door that connected her and the duke’s bedrooms, then the door swung open. She sat up, drawing her knees to her chest and hugging herself, staring at the figure in the opened door.

His feet and his muscular chest peeking from beneath a dressing gown, the duke stood gazing at her, heat in his amber eyes.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Sebastian slowly made his way closer to the naked, wet woman in the bathtub staring at him with wide eyes.

As far as he was concerned, he had a wife now, and a very pretty one.

“Good evening, Duchess,” he said, slowly walking towards her.

“Please leave,” she said.

He stopped in front of the bathtub and leaned his hip against it. “Why should I?”

Indeed, why? When she’d come down earlier, she was all grace and silks, no traces of grime and pig excrement. She’d taken his breath away. Her head had been free of that ridiculous cap that made her appear ten years older, and her thick brown hair had been done in a fashionable updo that would not have been out of place in the poshest London ballrooms. The farm clothes that had looked like a burlap sack around her were gone. And in their place was a dress that made her look like a Greek goddess descending from Olympus... He didn’t even care that it was a little too short at the ankles; it didn’t do anything to hide the length of her beautiful legs. Besides that, it had fit her figure perfectly. It highlighted her generous bosom with that tiny little fold

between her breasts that drove him mad. The way her body moved under that floaty skirt, which demonstrated in a quite decadent way her round hips and thin waist.

Heavens, how could a piece of perfectly acceptable social clothing be so revealing? So arousing?

Or was it just she who brought this burning into his blood. Into the very center of him. He didn't remember any other woman having this effect. Not in the ton. Not in brothels. Not in the country house parties.

She was just a farmer's wife.

How could she be so...delicious? So desirable?

And especially now, with her skin bare and glistening, her hair still in the updo but already damp and curling up around her face. He craved to trace her delicate face with a knuckle.

It wasn't just her beauty, though. She had annoyed him in the carriage with her constant chirping, but he liked that she was so lively, so strong. She was generous with her smiles, and not even a grumpy duke nor his grumpy mama intimidated her. On the contrary, she looked at everything with wide eyes and admiration. There was so much spirit in her, it made him feel a little more alive just being next to her.

"You're mine now," he said. "I bought you."

How different she was from Lady Isabella.

As pretty and as perfect as Lady Isabella was, Sebastian could count the times they'd talked on his fingers. And every time Sebastian had the most suffocating feeling of boredom. They were like oil and water. She cared about appearances. About bloodlines. About reputation.

He did not.

She talked about what flowers and fabrics were fashionable this Season. How many debutantes had entered the marriage mart. The extent of this or that gentleman's fortune.

He did not.

She gossiped, just like her mother.

He did not.

But this woman...

The way she had defended him against his own mother, the way she didn't let Mama intimidate her showed him she had more grit than he had believed.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub, his hand dipping into the warm water next to her leg. The air was a little damp and smelled of lavender soap. It was herbal and sweet, like her. He raised his hand and let water droplets drip on her naked knee and roll down her skin. Such a pretty, glistening knee. She was flushed—perhaps from the heat or, he hoped, from his presence.

“That doesn't mean you have the right—” she began, but he didn't let her finish.

“And you said yes,” he said. “Yes to be mine. You agreed.”

“Your Grace...”

She had such gorgeous, big eyes. Long eyelashes, high cheekbones. Those lips, dark and full and sensual. A seductive image appeared in his head, of her white teeth biting her lower lip as she moaned in pleasure...pleasure he'd bring her.

He rolled his sleeves to his elbows, and her eyes dropped to his forearms, widening farther. She must like what she saw; her lips parted just a little.

Perhaps she needed a little encouragement. A little care. He could give her that. He knew well how to soothe women in distress, how to make them feel safe.

He just needed to play with her a little. Make sure she knew she was safe and that he'd take a good care of her.

He dipped his hand into the bathtub to his sleeve. She gasped and shifted away. "What are you doing?"

One corner of his mouth rose in amusement. "I'm searching."

He moved his hand along the bottom of the dark tub, water splashing softly. He gently brushed his knuckles against her thigh, and she jerked.

"Duke!" she cried out.

Ah. He liked this game. A crooked smile tugged at his lips, but he hid it. He dipped his arm even deeper and felt a cake of soap at the bottom of the tub. He picked it up and took the sea sponge from a little plate attached to the bathtub.

Very slowly, he moved the soap against the sponge, foaming it. A pleasant scent of lavender and orange oil filled his nostrils. Her thighs were dark, round silhouettes under the water. He itched to feel them wrapped around his waist.

"You cannot be a virgin, madam," he said as he kept rubbing the soap against the sponge over and over. "You were married already. And I told you this is a real marriage for me, in every way. Why not enjoy this?"

She opened her mouth, but no words came. Good. She had no objections.

He chuckled and laid the soap on the plate, then leaned over and lazily dragged the sponge up her ankle towards her

knee. Her eyelashes fluttered, her eyes darkening, her mouth opening slightly. Ah. She liked it.

He liked it, too. Desire brought blood to his cock as he watched her chest rising and falling quickly. He could see the pretty little dip between her breasts. Her shoulders were round and delicate. The soft line of her collarbone so lovely. Her neck was elegant. How he wished to run his tongue up that neck, licking droplets of water off, inhaling her clean, feminine scent. How he longed to sink both of his hands down into the soapy water and slide them along her curves, which were blurry in the cloudy water.

“You like my touch,” he said as he slowly brushed the sponge from her knee and down the side of her thigh. “I can see. If you like this, you’ll love it when I touch you in all the right places.”

She swallowed hard, her breath accelerating even more. “You’re mistaken, I’m simply cold.”

“Cold?” He smirked as he removed the sponge and foamed it again. Then he stood up and walked behind her. He leaned down and ran the sponge over her feminine shoulders, his other hand slowly massaging them as he went. Such soft skin. She wasn’t muscular for a pig farmer’s wife. Not that he knew, but weren’t farm folk supposed to be strong and sturdy from all the manual work?

“You’re not cold, Duchess,” he said. “You’re about to get very, very hot.”

He dipped the sponge into the water, rinsing the soap out. As he squeezed water from the sponge onto her shoulders, he imagined pulling her out of the bath and picking her up, having her wet legs wrap around his waist. Desire licked at his cock, bringing heat and hardening him almost beyond bearing.

He stepped in front of her, leaned down, hands braced on either edge of the tub, and kissed her. She tasted like she looked. Sweet. Forbidden. So delicious, he didn't think he'd ever be able to stop.

As he dipped his tongue into her mouth, stroking her tongue, he felt her melt and sag into his lips. A small, sensual whimper escaped her throat, setting his blood to boil. Ah, the minx. She wanted him like he wanted her. He craved to explore her, to see if she was as soft and smooth down there, if her breasts felt as amazing as the rest of her skin.

He'd never wanted a woman like he wanted her. His erection throbbed and stood ready.

He glided his hand down her cheek, down her neck, and farther down... But once his hand reached her chest, she shivered and froze and pulled away, wide eyes blinking fast.

He pulled back, too, still aroused, still wanting her. But he wasn't going to take anything she wasn't willing to give.

"What would it take for you to let me go?" she asked, her voice firm.

He pulled in a long breath. He felt anger grazing against his nerves. Why was she so eager to leave? Was he so disagreeable to her? "I do not know that I want to let you go, Duchess. I promise not to hurt you and not to do anything against your will. I want you. You're my wife, and I want to lay you on that bed and make you mine and bring you your release." She blinked at that, her cheeks reddening to the color of ripe apples. Good. "Over and over, madam. But I will not force you nor will I ask again. Say just one word and I will retreat."

She straightened her shoulders and raised her chin. “Do retreat, Duke.”

He stepped back and nodded, his erection still stubbornly lifting his robe. Her fear...her concern... She behaved like a virgin even though she clearly wasn't one.

Then he remembered her husband...and the way he had looked at her with such malice. A thought struck him dead. “Wait...did the bastard hurt you? Your former husband?”

She shook her head. “No. Not like that.”

“How then?”

She released a quick, shaky breath and pressed out a smile. “He shouldn't be any of your concern, Your Grace. As I said, I will gladly work off the price you paid or leave your home and not bother you again.”

His chest tightened, and his stomach twisted. He understood her wish to protect her body. But he was willing to give her, a woman of a lower class, the best life. He thought he would rescue her. Help her.

And yet, despite his status and his money, he couldn't even convince a woman who needed him, to stay with him.

Of course she wouldn't want to stay with him. Why would she?

He was the product of a marriage that was full of resentment and lies. His mama and papa had despised each other. They had both been unfaithful and didn't hide it.

And what was worse, it was all his fault. He was the reason for their unhappiness.

Well, he still needed her, no matter how much she despised him. “Not bother me again?” He scoffed. “We'll see about

that. We have a ball to attend in a few days, and I intend to bring you as my new wife and introduce you to Lady Isabella and all of polite society. Be ready.”

The look of shock on her face didn't stop him. He couldn't bear looking at her a moment longer.

He hurried out of her bedchamber faster than if he was chased by wild dogs. And all he could think was, what was wrong with him?

Even a swineherd's wife would rather be poor and with a man who treated her badly than married to him.

But what did he expect? Just like his father, he'd make his wife unhappy, and sooner or later she'd be driven to escape.

CHAPTER
SIX

The next day, the modiste, Madame Dubois, who was, apparently, the most expensive and sought-after modiste in Mayfair, came with a swarm of helpers and managed to make two gowns that very day. She also promised to have five more delivered in two days' time.

If she was so sought after, Emma wondered, how had Sebastian convinced her to put aside her other commitments and make seven gowns for a new client? Could it simply be a matter of money? Emma couldn't deny how generous Sebastian was.

Or, perhaps it was not generosity so much as his desire to flaunt his new wife to the ton. The duchess had mentioned a match that had fallen apart because of her. Perhaps, it was the Lady Isabella mentioned last night that he wanted to show her off to.

Poor woman. That must be quite hard for her, if her whole life she'd believed Sebastian would be her husband, and now suddenly, he was married and she'd see him parading around with another woman...

The next few days passed in preparations, standing in front of the mirror as the modiste and her ladies measured, pinned, cut, and sewed. When she wasn't busy with the modiste, she

went to the library and read. For the first time in her life, she had no house chores to attend to, no garden to take care of, no dinners to supervise, no clothes to mend, and no guests to entertain.

Most of the womanly chores that she had done at her papa's home as well as at Sir Jasper's she could do without.

But she missed her flower garden, even if peonies would never grow there. Growing peonies was something her grandmama had taught her, and they reminded her of the kind woman who had passed a few years before Emma's marriage. They bloomed so well back at Sherbourne Place where she'd grown up. But they had withered and died at Bardsley House as though the soil itself was poisonous.

In the evenings, she descended in her new gowns for very tense dinners, with the Duchess of Loxchester not speaking a word to Emma—not even looking at her—and the duke not even trying to start a polite conversation but just glaring at his food as he ate.

And then the nights... For the past three nights, the duke had come to her, dashing and handsome and broad-shouldered, amber eyes glowing in the candlelight, repeating his offer. To bed her, to bring her pleasure, to make her his true wife. Remembering the sweet agony his touch had brought her in the bathtub, part of her wanted to say yes. And each night, it was harder and harder to say no.

But she did.

When the night of the ball finally arrived, she was dressed in a pastel, golden-green gown that streamed down her body. Her green eyes shone brightly, her cheeks rosy, her complexion looking attractive and healthy. The maid, Erin,

created an elaborate hairdo with lilies of the same golden-green color.

When a dozen women stood around her, frozen and mesmerized, Emma couldn't recognize the goddess in the mirror. That woman belonged in a grand house and with its master. With a lightness in her stomach, she knew that she had never in her life looked or felt so beautiful. She descended the stairs, while the duke stood in the hall, waiting for her. The moment he looked up, the brooding frown evaporated from his face. Instead, his eyes widened in admiration as he slowly looked her over, seemingly not missing any detail. His mouth opened slightly in surprise, and there was, perhaps, even pride in his expression. His darkening, amber eyes stole her breath away.

Sir Jasper had never looked at her this way.

She'd liked seeing the duke's gruff exterior disappear in those rare moments when he let down his guard and was playful with her. And she saw the man behind the surly wall now, when he stood in surprise and in awe, clearly pleased, not a wrinkle between his gorgeous, thick eyebrows.

And the thought that she could do that had heat rush to her face.

For a brief moment, while she descended the stairs towards him, she allowed herself a tiny hope. She imagined that the duke truly was her husband and she was his wife, and that the admiration in his eyes was love. The duke in her head was one she could fall in love with.

Then she reached him, and he offered her his arm. As she slid her arm through his crooked elbow, the touch of him felt solid, warm, and so right.

“Good evening, Duchess,” he said, his voice low and raspy. It felt like a caress against her skin.

“Good evening, Duke,” she said, lost for a moment in the warmth of his amber eyes, feeling like she was floating, weightless.

When they climbed into the carriage, he was still all manners and grace, but he became cold and distant again. He didn’t even look at her. And when they entered the ballroom, her hand wrapped around his elbow, her breath was stolen once again. She’d been to balls before, organized by the neighbors, or when she visited her aunt and uncle in York.

But never this. The room was grand and long. Vines with flowers crawled over the columns shooting two floors high. Low, sparkling chandeliers with what seemed like hundreds of candles illuminated the room. Ladies in the most gorgeous gowns, fashionable gentlemen dressed in tailcoats and breeches. Everything glistened, sparkled, moved. Feathers and flowers in ladies’ hair. Diamonds and jewelry on the necks, ears, and wrists sparkled. Music sounded from a little orchestra of ten people seated on a stage at the other side of the room.

Couples already moved in two long lines in an English country dance. Others talked, drank wine and champagne, walked around the room. Something squeezed in Emma’s stomach. Could she ever have imagined someone like her would one day attend a ball like this?

“Mama is already somewhere here,” he said to her. “She wanted to arrive earlier. Ah, I see Preston and the Seatons.”

He raised his arm in a greeting, and led Emma to the group of five people.

She recognized Spencer, the Duke of Grandhampton, and his brother Preston Seaton.

A young lady with auburn hair and blue eyes stood with them, and the Duke of Loxchester introduced her as Lady Calliope Seaton, their sister. The two Seaton brothers stared at her, eyes round, mouths open in shock, probably not expecting the farmer's wife they thought they had met, to look like this. There was one more tall man, auburn haired and as handsome as the Duke of Grandhampton and his brother, but with a softer expression. The Duke of Loxchester introduced him as Lord Richard Seaton.

A lady in her seventies, dressed in an old-fashioned dress, her silvery-gray hair done in an elegant updo, studied her with big blue eyes.

“My, my,” said the Duke of Grandhampton with the raise of one elegant, dark eyebrow, looking her over. “I wouldn't have recognized you had it not been for you coming with Loxchester.”

“Quite a makeover,” said Lord Preston Seaton, giving Sebastian a long look with his eyebrows raised.

“You couldn't look prettier, Your Grace!” said Lady Calliope with a bright smile. Emma liked her right away and returned the smile. Lady Calliope seemed a little out of place in this grand ballroom, despite being dressed like she belonged. Perhaps, it was her shyness, or the shine in her sharp, intelligent eyes.

“Your Grace?” asked the older lady. “Did you find yourself a new duchess?”

Sebastian nodded. “Emma,” he said to her, and she shuddered at the onslaught of warmth from hearing her given

name on his lips. “Let me introduce to you the Duchess of Grandhampton. She is the grandmother of the Seatons.” He nodded to the old lady.

“How are you adjusting, Duchess?” asked Lady Calliope.

“Adjusting from what?” asked Richard.

“My wife used to live on a hog farm,” said Sebastian.

Silence fell on the five people, and Emma froze, waiting for their reaction. “Ah!” Chuckled the duchess. “You did clean up rather well, Your Grace. I would have never said!”

That must have been one of the easiest receptions she could have. She doubted her introductions would become easier. They talked some more. The Duchess and Lady Calliope were surprisingly kind to her and asked her questions about her life, to which she replied with generic answers, not willing to lie any more than she had to. After all, she truly knew nothing about pigs.

The three brothers were quite different, really. The Duke of Grandhampton and Lord Preston bickered a lot, about nothing. Lord Richard made jokes and attempted to dissipate the tension. Lady Calliope was calm, sweet, and very smart. A wallflower, perhaps, uninterested in socializing, dancing, and being the center of attention.

People gave Emma odd looks, and despite the warm reception of the Seatons, she felt quite out of place. But she ignored the looks and held her head high. She wondered if the odd looks were the Duchess of Loxchester’s doing. Had she told everyone that her son had married a farmer’s daughter? As Sebastian’s friends, the Seatons knew to keep this quiet unless he told them not to, and the only person in London besides them that knew, was his mama.

“Let’s make rounds,” he said to her, offering her his hand. “I’d like to greet some people.”

“Must you?” she asked.

“You’re showing yourself very educated for a hog farmer’s wife, Your Grace,” he said as he walked past some guests to whom he nodded hello. “If I hadn’t seen you being sold by one, I may have thought you were lying.”

Cold crept through her. What would happen if he knew he was right? “I told you. I am observant and good at copying.”

“I suppose. Look at them all,” he grumbled as they walked. “How I despise the rules and the gossip and how important reputations are for the ladies but not as much for the gentlemen. I never wanted the responsibility of being the duke and just want everyone to leave me be.”

She looked at his stern profile and smiled. “It’s not so bad, Duke. If you want to rub me in their noses, you’re succeeding. They all despise me. Look around you.” She beamed. “It’s working.”

He nodded, looking around, catching the odd gazes. But that didn’t seem to please him. “Why, does it not give you some satisfaction? Are you not getting what you wanted?”

“No. I do not like that they look at you so.”

Heat spread through her. Something in his voice made her feel safe and reminded her of the man who had protected her against a crowd of insult-throwing men when her husband had stood there gleeful.

Clearly, he had a kindness in him, but he didn’t like to show it.

During their conversation, the middle of the ballroom cleared and couples lined up. The musicians on the balcony began playing a country dance. Emma noticed Lady Calliope standing by the wall as though hiding from potential suitors, talking to her grandmama. The Duke of Grandhampton danced with a pretty lady with brown hair and gray-blue eyes who gave him the most radiant smile, and he smiled back, looking as happy as an adolescent boy in love.

Seeing him like that made her think she'd never seen the Duke of Loxchester smile. He glared, frowned, barked, or spoke to her in a most seductive voice.

But he never smiled.

They were pushed closer to a large column by the guests who formed a circle and watched the dancing couples.

“Why do you always glower as though a storm cloud sits above your head?”

He glared at her. “Do you think it is your eternal optimism that led you to say yes to be sold as a wife to a total stranger? And how is it working out for you?”

She chuckled. “I like it more than I want to admit.”

He stopped walking and looked into her eyes, and she drowned in that intense amber gaze. Music, chatter, and laughter around her faded away. The place where her hand was hooked through his elbow sent tingles all over her body. She should have kept her silence, not admitted that she was enjoying herself.

“Your Grace,” said a voice, and a shadow appeared next to them.

The magic was broken, and Emma looked away to see that there were two ladies standing before them. The older of the

two had big icy-blue eyes and blond hair streaked with silver. The other looked like a younger version, with shiny blond hair and quite striking blue eyes. She was pretty and graceful in her pristine white gown that flowed over her willowy, feminine body.

Sebastian nodded. “Lady Whitemouth,” he said to the older lady. “Lady Isabella.”

Emma stilled. *Isabella*...this beautiful lady was supposed to marry him... She felt like pulling her hand out of the curve in his arm, as though she had been caught red-handed. Lady Isabella stood with a cool expression, staring somewhere between Emma and Sebastian. Lady Whitemouth’s eyebrows were drawn up, her upper lip rising in a slight mask of disgust.

“This is my new wife, the Duchess of Loxchester.”

Isabella looked pale. Her face remained a polite mask, but hurt glossed her eyes.

The countess nodded, her tight lips pale. “I suppose I had thought it would be my daughter on your arm. Not another woman.”

Emma did remove her hand then, her cheeks blazing hot.

“There was never a promise nor a proposal, Lady Whitemouth. I didn’t break my word, and I apologize if there was a misunderstanding. But I’m married now, and I wish Lady Isabella every happiness.” Lady Isabella blinked.

“As do we, Duke. I suppose I’m just surprised there was nothing in the papers. That’s all. One wonders why there was such a hurry to marry...”

“As to the papers, there was no chance to make an announcement. We married just two days ago. Our love was

too powerful to brook delays.”

The countess raised her eyebrows even farther. “And your family, Duchess?” she asked. “How were you introduced to the duke?”

“Her family raises pigs,” said the duke.

Lady Whitemouth’s bosom heaved heavily as she gasped.

“Pig farmers?” she demanded. “Most unusual! I’ve never heard a peer do such a thing!”

“Well”—an expression of smug satisfaction lit his face—“now a peer did it.”

“Tarnishing the good Loxchester title! Scandalous...” whispered Lady Whitemouth. “Does your mama know, Duke?”

“She does.”

“Does she approve?”

“She does not.”

Emma bit her lower lip. The lie sat heavy in her chest, making her palms sweat. She was a gentleman’s daughter, raised on strong moral principles. She didn’t lie. She didn’t hide her true identity.

She was doing it to break free, she told herself. To escape the prison of marriage. Including this golden one, with the duke...eventually.

Besides, no one present knew who she truly was, and this scandal wouldn’t get back to her family.

For now...

While Lady Whitemouth and Lady Isabella exchanged a few more remarks, the dance ended, and a new line of dancers

filled the space. Lady Isabella excused herself, saying she was engaged for the dance, and both ladies walked away, leaving Emma breathing easier.

But as the music started again and ladies and gentlemen began dancing, there was a sharp movement from the group of people standing nearby, and a man turned around. Emma swallowed a gasp. It was Sir Lionell Cross, whom Sir Jasper and she had visited at Cross Manor. He had said he was going to London right after the house party finished. And here he was, as if her very thoughts had conjured him.

“Ah, Lady Bardsley!” he exclaimed. “Good day!”

“Sir Lionell...” she mumbled. Sweat broke through the skin of her back.

“How do you come to be here?” he asked drunkenly. “I never knew you and Sir Jasper frequented London society.”

Opening and closing her mouth, unable to find any words, she threw a glance at the duke. He glared at Sir Lionell with a furious confusion.

“Wait...” Sir Lionell hiccupped. “I heard a silly rumor... that cannot be true, can it? Something about Sir Jasper selling you at an auction?”

The lie crumbled and fell around her. Her knees wobbled and bile rose in her stomach.

She was caught.

“*Lady* Bardsley?” asked the duke. “You’re not a swineherd’s wife?”

The Duke of Grandhampton appeared next to them, all large and confident and imposing. “What’s going on?” he asked with a frown, looking sharply among the three of them.

Sir Lionell chuckled with a crooked smile. “I wish she were a swineherd’s wife, Your Grace, and truly up for auction. I’d buy her myself. Look at her! I’ve dreamed about you, Lady Bardsley...”

Sebastian threw daggers with his gaze.

“Sir, I kindly demand that you shut your mouth,” said the Duke of Grandhampton.

Emma wished very much that Sir Lionell would—and not just because he was exposing her but for his own sake. Sebastian had mentioned the Duke of Grandhampton boxed regularly in some sort of a boxing club in the bad parts of London.

“And now a duke bought you?” Sir Lionell kept going. “Ha! Didn’t know we can now purchase gentlemen’s wives also. How much for her, Your Grace? I am unmarried and I find your way of getting wives much more convenient than courting and proposing and such.”

Horror crept up Emma’s spine. Now the duke knew. He knew she’d lied to him. Despite her mortification, a part of her realized this must be good because he would throw her out.

But instead of showing disappointment, Sebastian’s face was livid.

“You have offended my wife’s honor, sir,” Sebastian said coldly. “I demand sa—”

With a loud, drunken hiccup, Sir Lionell fell to Emma’s feet.

Sebastian and the Duke of Grandhampton stared at her. Their gazes were physical things on her skin. And yet, it was Sebastian’s opinion that mattered to her the most.

“You’re a lady?” asked her husband. “Is that true?”

This was it. She had made a mistake. Now her real name was out there. She should have left earlier. She should have been more insistent.

Would she be able to find even a governess post now that her reputation would be destroyed?

Sebastian was right. She should have thought through agreeing to marry a stranger better.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I suddenly have a headache.”

She hurried from the ballroom, hearing Sebastian call her name as he ran after her.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“**Y**ou’re Lady Bardsley... Why did you lie to me?” the Duke of Loxchester demanded.

His face was as cold as stone in the yellow glow of the carriage’s gas lamps above their heads. The rattle of the wheels against the cobblestones was loud in Emma’s ears, but it did not drown out the roar of anger inside of her, or lessen the heaviness of her humiliation.

“You wanted me to be a swineherd’s wife, didn’t you?” she said.

His jaw was set, his nostrils flared. “Why were you dressed like one if you’re a lady?”

“It was my husband’s way to punish me for my disobedience.”

“Ah! I can certainly see your disobedience.”

Shock mixed with hurt stabbed through her. “Excuse me?”

He leaned his elbows against his knees, his eyebrows drawn. “He must have had a true reason to try and get rid of you. You’re a liar.”

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. The disdain in his voice, his sharp words. A liar? He had no idea how she hated

pretending the way she had to. All to escape the marriage that had felt like a prison.

Only to land in another one—with him.

And how could she have thought the duke was different? He wasn't.

She must leave now. Surely, now that he thought so little of her, he wouldn't want her anymore. "Please, let me go."

His eyebrows drew even tighter together, and two lines formed around his mouth in a pained expression. "I will not. I told you, you're mine now."

The walls of the carriage shrank around her like a cage. It was hard to breathe. "Why? I am a liar. I'm not a swineherd's wife as you thought I was. What use am I to you now? I do not want to be married at all."

He leaned back against the seat and groaned. "For tonight, you certainly are."

Tears burned her eyes, and she knew if she said another word, she'd cry before him. And she couldn't. She wouldn't show him her weakness. The rest of the trip home they spent in silence, and all she thought about was how she could escape.

When she was in her room, she threw herself on the bed. She refused to cry, even if tears burned her eyes and her chest felt so tight she may suffocate. Instead, Emma stood up and began pacing to calm herself. She went to the dressing table but couldn't even sit down. She clutched at the edge of it as tears won and violent sobs shook her body.

She didn't know how much time passed when someone knocked and the door opened. Emma hastily wiped her tears

and looked over her shoulder. It was the Duchess of Loxchester.

“What happened?” she asked as she froze in the open doorway. Her diamonds sparkled in the candlelight. “I saw you and Sebastian leave the ball so quickly. Are you finally coming to your senses?”

Emma shook her head and took a deep breath in. “Forgive me. You were right. I should not be here. And I do not want to be.”

The duchess nodded, sighed, entered, and softly closed the door behind her. She came to Emma and looked into her eyes with sadness. “He’ll never fall in love with you. Sebastian is the sort of man that will never allow himself to love.” Bitterly, she added, “His father and I gave him a poor example.”

He’d never allow himself to love. That shouldn’t matter to her. He’d just shown her he was just like Sir Jasper, and he still wouldn’t let her leave this golden cage. And why oh why did the thought of leaving make her stomach twist painfully?

“So, why wait?” the duchess said with a sad smile. “Leave now, dear. You tried the fairy-tale life, but you and he simply don’t belong. It was clear to me, as to you, no doubt, that this wouldn’t last. Don’t wait another minute.”

Then she turned around and left.

Why did he still want her to stay? He’d told her she was a liar. He’d told her Sir Jasper was right to have sold her. And now his own mother had told her he didn’t have the ability to love.

And still, that glimpse of hope for love that she’d seen with him... How silly of her.

It was her naive, childish dream that Sir Jasper had shattered. The dream of a happy marriage. She still longed for love, but she should just accept that it would never be. Not with Sir Jasper. Not with the duke.

That was it, Emma decided. The duchess was right. She was going, even though part of her felt strangely sorry to leave Sebastian. She dressed in the day gown that Madame Dubois had made for her. She had no possessions, but she needed money to escape. She felt too ashamed to go to her family. Her reputation was damaged now, but also, she had agreed to the sale knowing Sir Jasper wouldn't give her family the income they were entitled to in her marriage settlement if they were no longer married. Even though the lands that were promised to her father were already sold, Sir Jasper might have been convinced to offer them some other income instead, especially if she'd given him what he wanted.

But that was in the past now. She needed to start a new life. Perhaps she'd go to Scotland or to Canada and become a governess. Her reputation wouldn't be a problem there—she'd come up with a new name.

Sir Jasper would never find her. Sebastian wouldn't care to.

Shame burned her at the thought of stealing something. But what else could she do? And then once she'd start to get some wages, she'd beg Sebastian's forgiveness and would pay him back.

But first, she needed to run.

Sebastian paced, staring at the door between his and Emma's bedrooms.

He felt horrible about the fight in the carriage and how he'd behaved towards her. It must have been awful for her to be married to Sir Jasper.

He remembered now the strange details of their appearance he'd ignored at Clovham. The man had a cleanly shaved chin and fashionable sideburns, and no dirt, no dark circles under his eyes, or weathered skin on his smug, arrogant face. Lady Bardsley did not hunch or hide. Her back was straight and her shoulders down. A white cap covered her dark curls that were quite beautifully arranged. And, of course, she spoke like a lady, not because her mother was a lady's maid and she was good at imitating. That was such a weak explanation.

Sebastian growled. He should have questioned all that. It was all right in front of his nose.

But that aside, what a prig was Sir Jasper. There was no excuse for a man to punish his wife by humiliating her and selling her.

To anyone...

The whole thing reminded him of his childhood.

The only time he'd received any attention from his parents was when he did something wrong. When he did things right, no one acknowledged him. But when he rebelled and made trouble—ran away from his governor, broke and damaged things—Mother stayed with him longer. And even though she chastised him, she at least acknowledged his existence. His father said things like "You're like a punishment from God"

and “Why have I been saddled with such a terrible heir?” And several times, he’d slapped Sebastian.

And although it had made Sebastian feel seen, it had also made him feel despised.

He’d made them so unhappy he’d driven them to cheat on each other. They were always annoyed because of his unruly, childish behavior. Their anger with him was slowly destroying their relationship.

And then everything exploded one day when he was eight years old. The event he didn’t want to remember because he was ashamed of his actions. Of his stupidity.

It was all his fault.

And now, he had behaved like his papa towards Emma, made her feel horrible about herself. But he never wanted her to feel that way.

He needed to tell her that. He opened the door between their bedrooms.

“Forgive me—” he started, but stopped in silence, staring at the empty room.

Where was she? His stomach dropped. He’d seen her come upstairs after they returned.

He ran all the way downstairs, to the kitchens. “Standen!” he yelled from the stairs. “Standen!”

The plain walls of the basement flashed by as he hurried. There was a scraping of the chairs in the servants’ hall as people jumped to their feet.

Astonished, Standen appeared in the hall. “Your Grace?”

“Where’s my wife?”

“Jack drove her. She was in quite a hurry.”

“Damnation!” Sebastian cursed. “Forgive me, Standen. Please tell Oliver to prepare a carriage for me.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

Sebastian nodded and ran back upstairs. Hurried footsteps sounded, and his mother appeared in her dressing gown. “Ah! Sebastian! Where’s Mrs. Eastbrook? One of the maids must be a thief! I’m missing my precious jewelry box, the one with the mother-of-pearl cover... It’s very, very important to me!”

She clutched her hands in distress, panic distorting her features.

“Why is a simple jewelry box so important to you, Mama? I’ve never seen you so distressed in your life.”

“Where’s Mrs. Eastbrook?” she cried.

But he couldn’t bring himself to care about a missing jewelry box. He felt like he couldn’t breathe without Emma nearby. He’d known her for less than one week, and yet without her, it felt like the light had gone out and he was in darkness.

Ignoring his mother, he ran out the front door, ready to hurry after his wife the moment the carriage was ready.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

The carriage rattled and shook on the cobblestones. Emma stuck her head out of the window and looked behind them. Fashionable, grand Mayfair row houses on either side of the road appeared in the light of the gas lamps, then sank into darkness.

A carriage followed behind them, old and shabby.

She thought she'd seen it move out of the shadows in Burlington Square the moment Jack drove out of Longton Place.

They drove for several more minutes. Emma checked again, and the carriage was still there. In fact, it got closer and closer. Uneasiness churned in her stomach.

The next time she turned, the carriage was closer still. In moments, it was so close she could smell their horses and see an eye patch on the coachman's scarred face. His good eye looked straight at her.

Who could this be? No respectable coachman would come so close. Were they robbers, thinking her a duchess and hoping they could take her money and jewelry? The one-eyed driver snapped his reins, urging the horses even closer and bringing his carriage in line with Emma's. Wood scraped against wood, screeching, as it pushed them, driving them off the road.

She looked ahead and cried, “Faster! Faster, please!”

As Jack cracked the whip and her carriage started to pull away from their pursuer, it turned a tight corner and careened. The horses neighed shrilly. The floor tilted under her feet. There was a loud *crack*, and the carriage fell to its side and smashed into the corner of a building.

Emma was thrown against the wall of the carriage, her head ringing. With trembling hands, she shook shards of glass off her dress. Then she pushed the opposite door open and tried to pull herself out.

“Your Grace!” Jack said as he climbed onto the side wall of the carriage and offered his hand. “I beg your pardon! Are you all right?”

She took his hand, and he helped her climb out.

“I am,” she said.

Jack jumped to the ground, then reached up to help her descend to the street. She looked around. Despite all that had happened, they couldn’t have been driving for longer than ten minutes. The street around her was not unlike Mayfair. The buildings were grand three-story homes with long rectangular windows, and gas lamps still illuminated the street.

She heard hooves drumming against the cobblestones. And moments later, a carriage turned the corner and stopped. Emma took two steps back as two men jumped out. The coachman with the eye patch descended, as well.

The three thugs strode closer and looked her over.

Jack stood in front of her, his hands in fists. “Stand back.”

The men’s hands went to their belts, and three knives glistened in the light.

“Seems the lady is in trouble,” said one of them.

She shook her head. “Please, Jack. There’s no need for that.”

They were thugs. They must want to rob her. She went into her reticule and removed the mother-of-pearl box she’d taken from the duchess’s room. “I do not have any money to offer you, but this box will fetch a good price. You can have it if you let me go.”

One of them rushed forward and snatched it from her hand, tucking it inside his jacket.

“Now, please go,” she said.

But the three of them didn’t move.

“This is nice,” said the man who took the box. “But we came for you. Sir Jasper awaits.”

Sir Jasper? No. Not Sir Jasper, please! She couldn’t go back to him.

Jack took one step forward. “Stay away from the mistress!”

One of them launched at Jack and rammed him in the stomach. They landed on the pavement, Jack punching at the man’s head. The thug delivered one purposeful blow after another right into Jack’s face.

To Emma’s horror, Jack went completely still.

Emma stepped back, the ground sinking under her feet. The thug rose, and the three of them stepped closer to her. One of them grabbed her, his strong fingers digging into her flesh. Prickly horror shot through her. She screamed and struggled while he dragged her to their carriage.

No, she wouldn't let them take her. She wouldn't go back to Sir Jasper with his control and his manipulation and his insults. Not when she was so close to freedom.

She tried to jerk her arm away, but her captor held tight, and then another man took her by her other arm. They both dragged her.

"Let me go!" she cried, fighting against their steely grasps. "I won't go back to him!"

Suddenly, hooves drummed and wheels rattled behind them. The thugs stilled but didn't let her go.

The carriage stopped, and a man climbed down from it. She would have recognized him just by his dark silhouette—the broad shoulders, the thick, muscular neck, the square jaw. It was the duke.

Something weightless fluttered in her middle.

"Let my wife go," he demanded coolly, walking into the light.

The Duke of Loxchester's coachman descended from the front seat of the carriage and pointed a pistol at the thugs.

"She isn't your wife," announced the one with the eye patch.

The one who wasn't holding her launched at the duke's coachman, who fired a shot. But the shot went astray. The thug swung his arm and his knife glistened in the light of the streetlamps. The duke's coachman ducked and drove his fist into the man's stomach. The man doubled up but rammed the coachman with his body, driving him into the wall of the building. There was a loud crack of bone.

One of those holding her ran to his associate's aid, and they both turned on the duke. But despite being outnumbered, the duke held both men at bay, delivering one punch after another. The thug who still held her stared, distracted, so she stomped on his foot and drove her elbow into his stomach.

She wrenched her arm free and turned to find the other two thugs lying on the ground.

The thug who had gotten the jewelry box had just recovered from her attack and was about to grab her again, his face vicious in the lamplight, when a tall shadow fell over him. The duke caught the thug's arm and sent his mighty fist into the man's jaw. The man staggered back, then when he got his balance, he backed up even more. He didn't attack again. Instead, he made a large circle as he ran. The duke darted towards him, but the man was faster. He jumped onto the driver's seat, cracked the whip, and his two horses neighed and were off.

Emma only jumped back as the coach darted past her.

She was free.

Free from Sir Jasper.

She caught the duke's eyes. He stood there, looking like a gladiator trapped in the clothes of a duke. He stalked towards her. And she felt her legs carry her to him. Before she could say a word, one arm was around her waist, the other around her neck.

They came together as though they had always belonged together, as though they were truly husband and wife.

He held her in his arms, looking her over.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

“No, I’m just shaken,” she said, melting from his touch.

Her carriage was wrecked, and Jack lay unconscious on the ground. She couldn’t really go. Unless he’d let her. Should she ask him?

But she’d just stolen from him. He wouldn’t want her anyway.

She noticed a light bruise on his cheekbone. “Are you all —” She cut herself off as she felt something warm and wet under the palm of her hand, which lay on his shoulder. She looked at it, and even in the dim light of the gas lamps, she could see it was dark with blood.

“You’re hurt!” she cried as she broke out of his hug and turned him to the side to look at his shoulder. A deep cut oozed blood. She couldn’t leave now. First, she needed to see if he was all right.

“We must get you help,” she said. “Oh, goodness! Jack!”

The duke and his coachman, Oliver, dragged the unconscious Jack into the carriage. Quickly, Oliver unhitched the two horses from the fallen carriage and tied them to the back of the duke’s carriage. It was a miracle neither had broken a leg, and Emma was grateful for that small mercy. With every minute that passed, her stomach churned with worry for the duke and for Jack. Both were hurt because they had protected her.

The duke asked Oliver to come back with a few men to retrieve the broken carriage later, and they were on their way.

CHAPTER
NINE

Sebastian lay on his bed, his shirt off as Emma sat by his side, wiping the blood from his shoulder. The cut throbbed, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered but having this woman safe and by his side. Her eyes were wide; she was probably still in shock from the events of the past hour.

He felt like he might die when he saw her in the clutches of those thugs, being dragged away.

She had run away from him. She had stolen from his mother. But what did he expect? He'd driven her to it with his abhorrent behavior. He'd made her unhappy because that was what he did.

And still, he couldn't help but want her. How pretty she was in the homey, warm light of the burning fireplace. The green of her beautiful eyes was the color of soft moss, a blush colored her high cheekbones, and her rosy lips were slightly parted. Those lips that had felt so good and soft against him, the lips he craved to claim again.

But it wasn't just her beauty that brought lightness into his chest. It was her. She had stood so strong and proud at the market in Clovham. And today, she had just gone through what must have been the most traumatic experience of her life,

and yet here she was, not crying or whining, but calmly and efficiently taking care of him.

“Why did you do it?” he asked. “Steal? Run away?”

She stopped moving and threw a guilty glance at him. “I’m very sorry. I planned to pay you back once I found a position as a governess.”

“A governess?” he asked. “Is being my wife so terrible?”

She chuckled softly and shook her head as she took a clean bandage from the box on his night table. The light of the candle flickered and jumped as she wrapped the cloth around his shoulder. The cut throbbed, but when she touched his skin, the pain felt like it was dissolving.

She tied the wrap. “It’s done.”

She picked up the basin of bloody water and carried it to his writing desk. She moved so gracefully, so easily, her small heels knocking softly against the wooden floor and silencing when she stepped on his Persian carpet. She fit so well into his home, his life, that his heart ached. The dark teal of his bedroom walls brought out the green of her eyes. The mahogany furniture was the same color as her hair. Her new cream dress, the one that Madame Dubois had made for an exorbitant sum he was happy to pay, was the only light spot in the room, and she was like an angel in this darkness that was his life.

As he watched the fabric of her dress move over her feminine body, it occurred to him that he had never before had a woman in this bedroom. Any lovers he took he visited in their lodgings. Elysium, the club with the most expensive prostitutes in London, had nooks right in the main hall.

He never wanted to have another woman here. Just her. The thought brought a heavy, warm longing into the pit of his stomach. Because no matter how much he wanted to keep her, to make her his, she didn't want him.

Without putting his shirt on, he stood up and went to a small round table with two chairs in front of the fireplace. Mrs. Eastbrook had sent a bottle of port and a cheese and charcuterie plate up.

"Would you like a glass?" he asked as he uncorked the bottle.

The fire was warm and pleasant on his skin...or was it her coming closer to him?

"I would," she said, taking a seat in one of the chairs.

He poured a glass for her. The scent of sweet wine filled his nostrils. He handed her the glass and their fingers touched briefly, a jolt of fire spreading through him.

"You scared me," he said. "You are my responsibility."

She licked her lips and drank the port, and he did the same, sweet, tart liquid burning his mouth. "I'm sorry to have put you in danger," she said. "I never meant for you or Jack to be hurt."

Thankfully, Jack had regained consciousness on his way to Longton Place. He had a bump on his head, but he didn't vomit or feel sick. He was now resting, and a physician would come first thing in the morning. Oliver and two footmen had gone to retrieve the broken carriage.

Sebastian took a seat across the table. He stretched his legs out to the black basket grate standing in the middle of the fireplace, the warmth pleasant against his bare feet.

“Do not worry about me,” he said. “This is a small price to pay for your safety. Now, you haven’t told me the truth about yourself. Who are you really? And why did your husband sell you?”

He poured her another glass of port.

“Sir Jasper Bardsley is a baronet in Bedfordshire,” she said. “We’ve been married for about a year.”

The thought of that man, Sir Jasper, being her husband stabbed him through the chest like a fencing sword. He hated the thought of her belonging to anyone but him.

“Right,” he said and threw back the port without tasting it. “Why the sale?”

“We’re very ill-suited, he and I,” she said. “I never loved him. I suppose love is not a requirement for marriage. And perhaps it’s silly, given there are so many loveless marriages, but I always dreamed of being madly in love with my husband. I never felt much for Sir Jasper, but hoped I’d learn to be fond of him.” She sipped her wine and put the glass back on the table. “But I never could love a man that attempts to control me. That suffocates me. He even sent those thugs to get me back.”

Sebastian’s fingers tightened around the thin stem of the glass, the decorative cut edges digging into his skin. Sir Jasper suffocated her? Tried to control her? Sebastian could easily believe that, seeing the absurd behavior of the man at the market square. But Sebastian should also acknowledge his own fault. Hadn’t he behaved just like Sir Jasper earlier tonight? Guilt weighed heavily in his chest.

“I stopped allowing him into my bed months ago. The thought of him touching me became repulsive after a while.

The sale...it was his way of teaching me a lesson. Trying to humiliate me, scare me, bully me into obedience.”

“What a pathetic little man,” said Sebastian. “You did not see any sign of it before the wedding?”

“No. He can be very charming when you first meet him, and I was so hopeful and naive. I couldn’t imagine he could be so... I married him out of obligation to my family. He was supposed to give my father some land that would save my parents financially and open up better marriage prospects for my three younger sisters who had no dowry at all.”

“You are right, there are many loveless matches. I’m sure had my parents had a chance to sell each other at some sort of a husband or wife sale, they’d have done it.”

“Why? Was their marriage as bad as mine, Duke?”

“Please, call me Sebastian.”

She gave him one of her bright smiles, which felt like sunshine on his face. “Then you should call me Emma.”

Sebastian nodded, something warm blooming in his chest. Emma...what a gorgeous, sweet name. Like her.

“And their marriage...” he said. “Yes. I daresay. I was an obligation for my mother, to give my father an heir. They didn’t even manage to get a spare. They cheated on each other constantly. That would be reason for divorce, but getting a divorce would take years. It would be very expensive, as well. But God knows Papa had a big enough fortune. I suppose, neither Mama nor Papa wanted the humiliation of the gossip papers covering every detail so publicly.”

“Oh yes,” said Emma. “*The Criminal Conversation* gazette. Some people live for it.”

Sebastian nodded. “So they didn’t get divorced. And I don’t think I met two people who despised each other as much as they did. And I was at fault.”

She frowned and sat straighter. “What are you talking about, Sebastian?”

Hearing his name on her lips was like tasting honey. He cleared his throat, his chest too tight. Talking about his painful childhood, the misery of being responsible for the failed marriage of his mama and papa... He’d never told this to anyone, not even to Preston.

“I was a naughty little boy. I always cried for their attention, breaking things, running away, refusing to learn Latin and French or read Shakespeare. And when they scolded me, at least they knew I existed.”

“That doesn’t mean they were unhappy because of you.”

“But they were. They were angry with me. Unhappy with me. But it wasn’t until I was eight years old that everything really fell apart.

“It was right here, in Longton Place, that I saw a lady visiting Papa several times. Without thinking anything of it, I asked who the lady in the purple pelisse was that visited Papa so often and whom Papa liked to hug. Was she a relative I didn’t know about?”

He chuckled, pain radiating through his whole chest like a wound. “I just remember color leaving Mama’s face. Her hands shook so violently she spilled her wine. Slowly, she stood up and walked out of the sitting room. I knew then that I had done something terribly, terribly wrong. I ran after her, calling her, but I couldn’t find her. And then my parents’ shouts rang through the house.”

He met Emma's big green eyes that watched him with such empathy and understanding that his throat clenched. She didn't judge him. Didn't proclaim him at fault. She just listened. She understood; he knew that. Warmth spilled through him.

"After that," he continued, "they became even more preoccupied with their own lives, and I always felt lonely. I do not know if the lady in the purple pelisse was his lover or not, but after that, Papa had several affairs that he didn't bother hiding. He even went to balls and social evenings with his lovers. Mama took lovers of her own, and, as I heard later, she had had at least one miscarriage, and everyone knew they weren't of my father."

"Oh, Sebastian." She reached out across the table and covered his hand with hers. It was so warm and soft and delicate, and comfort spread through his veins at her touch. "You were a child. None of that was your fault."

Sebastian sighed deeply and stared into the flame of the candle on the table.

"Look at me and Sir Bardsley. I'm glad I haven't had his child yet. And even if I had, nothing the child would have done would make Sir Bardsley and me any more compatible with each other. Our marriage is pointless. I married him so that he'd give Papa land and income, but later on I found out that he sold the land before he signed the contract."

Sebastian sat straight up in his chair. "He promised your father land that had already been sold and was not his to give?"

Emma sighed. "Indeed. It's farmland with some cottages called Charing Fields. I remember the name from the contract. And then Sir Jasper was quite drunk during a dinner party at

Bardsley House and boasted about what a good price he got for it two years ago.”

“Emma, do you understand that this is called fraud?”

“Is it? No, I hadn’t realized.”

“And it is a legally accepted reason to annul your marriage.”

She went very, very still. “Do not jest with me, please.”

“I am not jesting. Annulment of marriage is rather quick. And it’s possible on the basis of fraud.”

His whole body tingled. Her eyes widened, and she turned to face him, her knuckles going white where she clutched the chair arms.

“I dare not hope...” she said, a smile blossoming on her face.

“Would you like to be free of your marriage?” he asked.

To marry me, to really be my wife, he added in his head.

“Would I...” she said. “Of course I would!”

“Then I’ll help you, if you wish me to. But we’ll need proof. The marriage contract itself. And the deed of sale of the land.”

“I can do that. My father has a copy of the contract. And the deed of sale...is it not registered somewhere?”

“I’ll talk to my solicitor.” He chuckled softly. “You said you wanted a marriage for love. You should not be in an unhappy one. I never knew sentiment was possible between a husband and a wife at all as I couldn’t say what it felt like. And I never imagined I’d be wed.” He looked at her and their eyes met and locked. “Until you.”

“Sebastian...” she whispered. “Your parents may not have appreciated each other, but they should have shown you the affection you deserve. I, for one, think you are a kind and wonderful man who is very much capable of making a woman happy.”

Making a woman happy... The words, coming from her mouth...he was speechless. Dumbstruck. A warmth was born and radiated in the middle of his chest. If he were capable of love, she was the only one he could imagine giving his heart to or marrying. But he didn't want to force her to be tied to him as Sir Jasper had.

Instead, he'd show her what it would be like if they were really married. How life with him would be. He'd bring her pleasure in all the poses in the world. He'd show her how much he adored and wanted her.

“I will protect you, Emma. That is final.”

He stood up and slowly walked to her. Then he dropped to his knees in front of her and laid his hands on her thighs. She blinked, her eyes big and glistening in the firelight.

“I'll set you free,” he said, then took her face in his hands and kissed her.

CHAPTER
TEN

If sin had a flavor, it would be the taste of his mouth. Slow, sensual strokes of his lips, the gliding of his tongue against hers.

She should stop him, came a distant thought. She wasn't this woman.

But her body wouldn't let her. Her skin flushed, burning under his touch. Her very bones melted from the feeling of his lips on hers. The kiss lasted so long her head began to spin. Her breasts ached, and her nipples hardened. She laid her hands on his hard, muscular shoulders, the warmth of his body making her hotter than that fire behind him.

He smelled of manly musk and woodsmoke, of sandalwood and vanilla. She could taste the port on his tongue, and his own delicious taste that she couldn't get enough of.

Soon, she couldn't breathe, and when he pulled back, his own chest rose and fell quickly. His eyes were dark and glistened with hunger...with longing...for her. The thought made the floor slip from under her feet.

"Emma," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Tell me to stop, and I will. But I want very much to show you what it would be like to be with a man that puts you first. Puts your pleasure first."

She swallowed hard. A man who put her pleasure first... That was a novel idea. Sir Jasper never did anything that felt good. His kisses felt like he wanted to perform a medical examination in her mouth with his tongue. And when he was inside her, it hurt more than anything else, and all she could think about was how long it would take until he finished and she could be free.

But with Sebastian...she wanted more. She never wanted that kiss to finish. Her pleasure...she never thought intercourse could be pleasant. Except, the very touch of his fingertips against her skin brought a jolt of sweetness through her. And when he'd washed her with the sponge that first night, his touch was so sensual, she'd felt like leaning her head back against the bathtub, closing her eyes, and moaning.

So she had two choices.

She could keep putting everyone else before her as she'd done when she'd married Sir Jasper. Sir Jasper, who'd trapped her in a fraudulent marriage. Sir Jasper, who slept with other women every chance he got and did not even deny it. Sir Jasper, who'd sold her to a strange man to punish her and teach her a lesson, to control her.

Or, for once in her life, she could be selfish and allow herself one night that would be all about her. She could reclaim the power she had allowed Sir Jasper to take from her. For one night, she could pretend that she could love and be loved and that there was no one to control, manipulate, or punish her.

Sebastian was giving her that choice.

And then she knew what she had to do. She wouldn't have any regrets. Because even though Sir Jasper was her husband on paper, he wasn't in any other sense. He had betrayed her by

selling her, he had betrayed her every time he'd cheated on her, and he'd betrayed her and her family when he had committed fraud in their very marriage contract.

She would start that marriage annulment as soon as she could.

Suddenly, she felt as light as a feather, soaring up from the ground, weightless and free. She felt like she could reach out and hug the whole world.

Like she could hug the handsome man kneeling before her.

"I won't stop you," she said, and he inhaled sharply, closing his eyes, the echo of a smile dancing on his handsome lips. "Under one condition."

"Which is?"

"You cannot get me pregnant."

She couldn't be a ruined governess with an illegitimate child. And any poor baby that resulted from her actions deserved better than a single, ruined mother trying to find a job.

A corner of his mouth twitched upward. "No. There won't be a pregnancy, darling. I promise you that. Now, come here."

He took her by the hands and lifted her to her feet, then picked her up like a groom picked up his bride and carried her to the bed. He laid her on the bed and stretched himself next to her. Then he kissed her again, the lashes of his tongue, long and urgent, made her squirm under him. Some sort of throaty noises started to come out of her mouth, and her skin was so hot, she thought the room was suddenly ablaze.

He broke the kiss. "Emma, you're going to be the death of me..."

He turned her over on her side and expertly undid the hooks of her dress, then unlaced her corset. He was faster than her maid. He let her sit upright and dragged the dress and then the corset up and over her head. She was left in only a petticoat.

She froze as he looked her over, his dark gaze slowly dragging over her skin. His Adam's apple bobbed. "Merciful heavens, you're beautiful," he croaked out.

She was beautiful? No one had ever called her that. Sir Jasper had been pleased with her breasts, but he'd never said anything about her was beautiful.

But this man did. And he himself was the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Muscles corded over his hard torso; the powerful chest had just enough dark blond hair to make him look masculine, and she craved to touch him there, to see if the hairs were soft or coarse. His strong stomach was sculpted like marble. He was in his male prime, a big, hard, hot man, burning for her, calling her beautiful.

"It's you," she said. "You are beautiful, Sebastian."

He chuckled. "I like hearing you call me by my Christian name." His gaze dropped to her petticoat. "Off."

He dragged it down from her body, and there she was, every inch of her bare for him to see. "Magnificent, Emma," he said, his gaze lingering at the apex of her thighs, and, despite herself, she wasn't ashamed or self-conscious. On the contrary, something hot and wet gathered at her very entrance. She breathed harder as he lowered himself to her lips and kissed her again.

One hand cupped her breast and massaged it, circling her nipple around and around. Liquid ache spilled through her as

her nipple hardened. She moaned into his lips and arched herself into his hand.

“Love, what are you doing to me with those sounds?” he murmured.

Then he kissed down her chin, down her neck, his hot mouth leaving burning traces behind. She breathed faster, barely able to take in any air at all. What was this desire, this pleasure he was stirring in her body like an expert chef?

And then he took the nipple in his mouth and sucked. “Ah...” she cried out. Sir Jasper had done this to her, but it always felt strange and somewhat painful when he squeezed too hard, probably trying to elicit any reaction from her. Frigid, he’d called her.

She wasn’t frigid. This couldn’t be frigid at all.

Sebastian gently nibbled on her nipple with his teeth, circling it with his tongue. His other hand worked on her other breast, teasing and tugging and rolling and rubbing... She was on fire. Her entire being became like a succubus, aching and wanting and demanding.

“Do you like this?” he asked, murmuring against her breast.

“Yes, oh heavens, yes!”

He went to her other breast with his mouth, but this time, he used his hand to squeeze her breast as he sucked hard. She cried out as pleasure intensified.

And then, with his free hand, he brushed down her stomach and lower and lower. She squirmed in anticipation, wondering if it would hurt, like with Sir Jasper. But so far, nothing hurt, and nothing was uncomfortable. On the contrary, a burning in her sex made her want to urge him to touch her, to

soothe her need. He spread her folds and dipped his finger between them, and she jerked from the intense pleasure. He moved around there and found...something...a place so sensitive that she froze and moaned.

“By Jupiter, Emma, you’re so wet for me already...” he murmured. “I have to taste you.”

As he moved his lips down her stomach, she sat up, alarmed. “Taste me?”

His face was devilish. “Yes, darling. Taste you. I bet you taste as sweet there as everywhere else.”

He spread her thighs as she watched him with her mouth open. “Are you going to kiss me...there?”

She didn’t know that was possible. Sir Jasper never did anything like that to her.

“Oh, yes, love,” he said and dipped his head right there.

She lay back with a cry, clutching at the silky spread as his mouth claimed her sex. His wicked tongue licked her length, up and down and in circles all over her. Then it found that sweet spot again and started doing something...something that melted her bones. She panted, unable to do anything else but try not to burst as the pleasure built and built.

“Oh, Sebastian,” she cried. “Oh, please...”

“Please what, darling,” he said, his voice low and seductive.

“Oh, what are you doing to me?”

“I told you I’d give you all the pleasure in the world, didn’t I?”

“Oh, dratted man, you did,” she moaned.

“And there will be more,” he said as he rose from the bed, and for the first time, she became aware of the significant bulge between his legs.

She swallowed hard as he pulled down his buckskins and his erection sprang forth and stood at attention. It was long and thick, with veins cording it.

How would it ever fit into her? It was only the second male organ she had seen in her life. She didn't know they could be this big.

She eyed his glorious body, roving from his broad shoulders, one of which was bandaged, to his narrow waist, to the side of his beautiful, round male arse—that she suddenly had an urge to dig her fingers into as he'd drive into her over and over again—to his long, muscular legs and big feet.

“I will not release into you,” he said as he climbed back onto the bed. “To avoid the pregnancy.”

All she could do was nod. She had forgotten all about her request. But he showed his consideration by remembering.

And then he hung over her, glorious and muscular and manly, pushing her thighs to the sides. His hard cock was pressing into her entrance, and he sucked in a loud breath as he moved it.

“Merciful heavens,” he muttered, “you feel so good.”

And then he was pushing into her, deliciously stretching her, and instead of pain like every time before, despite his size, all she felt was pleasure. She grabbed him by his magnificent arse and urged him deeper in as she stretched and accommodated him, wanting all of him.

When he had entered her completely, he didn't move. “Are you all right?” he asked.

His amber eyes were on her, mahogany in the glowing semidarkness of the room. She didn't say anything for a while, sinking in their depths, an emotion she couldn't discern making her throat clench.

"I am very much all right," she said.

"Thank heavens!" he said and started moving without breaking eye contact.

The friction was sweet and aching, and every time he plunged in and out of her, the pleasure he'd brought her with his mouth grew. But it was also deeper, and it built from the inside, and soon he was pounding in and out of her. Without ever looking away.

And she was dissolving into him, this man who was grumpy and yet caring and protective. This man who had saved her from Sir Jasper and his thugs.

She wanted more, so much more with him. She moved her hips with his rhythm, chasing that something, that pleasure, never knowing where it would lead, only that she never wanted for it to end.

And then there was something in her body that went over the edge, right when she was with him, high up and bathing in the sunlight. And she cried out from the burst that radiated from inside of her and spread all over.

He pulled out of her and found his release on her stomach with almost pained grunts. When he finished, he stood kneeling over her, holding on to her knees and panting, his eyes never leaving hers.

Then he cleaned her with a cloth lying on the bedside table, collapsed by her side, pulled her under the cover, and wrapped her into his arms. She sighed into him, inhaling his

delicious, fresh sweat, and his male musk, and the scent of their release.

They breathed together as she melted into his arms. If she'd die tomorrow, this would be one of the greatest nights of her short life.

“I'll have my solicitor work on annulling your marriage,” he said into her hair. “You will be free from him. Until then, you can stay here, with me.”

She swallowed hard, wondering what would become of her name. If there would be more scandal now than she'd bargained for, now that her real name had been pronounced in the ton.

And if Sir Jasper would, indeed, agree to the annulment. Knowing him, he'd do something to stop her and get her back into his clutches.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Three days later, Emma and Sebastian climbed the stairs of Sumhall Place, situated on fashionable Grosvenor Street, one of the best addresses in Mayfair. It was the London residence of the Seaton family, and Emma and Sebastian had been invited for a visit.

On their way here, Emma had noticed a man standing under the trees on Burlington Square, watching Longton Place. With a chill down her spine, she realized Sir Jasper still refused to leave her alone. Sebastian noticed him, too, and sent Benedict, one of his footmen, to shoo him away. As soon as Benedict walked towards him, the man turned and left. But Emma knew he would be back. It would only be a matter of time before Sir Jasper made another attempt to retrieve her. She hoped the annulment would happen quickly.

Sumhall was different from Longton Place. It was newer, built just thirty years ago, Sebastian had told her, for the Seatons' parents, who were newlyweds then. The pristine white walls were freshly painted. Three stories shot into the sky, the first two stories boasting tall, paned windows. The top story was clearly for servants, with small windows and low roofs. There was no garden or yard to ride into, but the entrance was still very beautiful and very chic.

Emma and Sebastian were shown into the sitting room, where all the Seatons were at their leisure. The room had a fresh and stylish air about it, with elegant paper hangings of pastel turquoise stripes. White curtains with embroidered patterns of flowers in the same shade dressed the long windows, and the mahogany furniture had white upholstery. The landscape paintings were full of sunlight and blooms.

The Duke of Grandhampton, Preston, and Lord Richard stood as Emma and Sebastian came in while Calliope and the Duchess of Grandhampton remained seated.

“Ah, there are our newlyweds,” said the duke. “How is your life at Longton Place, Duchess?”

Emma allowed herself a tentative smile, looking into the Duke of Grandhampton’s kind, dark eyes. “Is there anything a duchess could possibly miss?” she said.

“I don’t know.” The Duke of Grandhampton chuckled softly. “Is there?”

“Well, Sebastian is showering me with anything I could ever need.”

“But is there something you *want*?” asked Sebastian, his amber eyes intent on her. How did he have this ability to look at her sometimes so that she felt like there was no one else who existed but him?

“I am a country lady. I have never been to London before. All I know is nature. So yes, I miss gardening. You must all think me so provincial.”

“Not at all.” Lady Calliope beamed at her. “I quite understand.”

“Peonies are my favorite. They remind me of my grandmama, who taught me to garden. When I’m in the

garden, I feel like she's still with me. Back at Sherbourne Place in Staffordshire, my peonies even won our local flower fair three times."

"My, my," said the Duchess of Grandhampton, raising her eyebrows and letting wrinkles gather on her forehead. "Now there's something to look forward to. I'd love to see your peonies next spring, Duchess."

"Of course," said Emma with a bright smile. "I'm sure they'll bloom so well in Loxchester Hall, which Sebastian has told me much about."

Sebastian's eyes were so intense on her, she felt like her skin was burning.

"Well, Loxchester," said Lord Preston softly. "You must build a garden for your duchess in London, as well."

Sebastian nodded without looking away from her. "I will. I'll also take you to Loxchester Hall soon, where you can grow peonies to your heart's delight. But we must first resolve the issue of your marriage."

"How is the ton accepting you, Duchess?" asked the Duke of Grandhampton.

"It must be hard," Calliope added.

Emma smiled as she took a seat next to her. Sebastian stood by Preston's side, still watching her.

"Quite," Emma said. "Well. The rumor mill, miraculously, has not yet caught up."

"And it helps that I'm a duke," added Sebastian.

While the butler served tea to Emma and Sebastian, the Duchess of Grandhampton took a sip from her cup. "Of course

it helps,” she said. “I daresay a duke is forgiven for more things than even a duchess.”

Emma picked up her cup. “Yesterday, we went to a ball, and the hostess all but gnashed her teeth, but she let us in.”

“Because of the duke, of course,” said Preston with an eyebrow raised.

Calliope cleared her throat. “But have you seen *The Society* today?”

The Society was a gossip newspaper that every aristocrat in London read.

“No,” said Sebastian, his eyebrows drawing together. “What is it?”

Calliope sighed. “It says the Duke of Loxchester married a farmer’s daughter. The Loxchester bloodline is tarnished.”

Emma took a sip from her cup while it rattled slightly against the plate. She and Sebastian had spent the last three days in a bliss, like true newlyweds. They’d made love every night, several times. He’d also gone to his solicitor and inquired after an annulment, and, although the man thought there was a good basis for it, he couldn’t say how long it would take and recommended he contact someone who was more familiar with such cases.

She realized now, with a sinking fear, that she cared for this man more than she had ever wanted to.

“Well,” said Sebastian, locking his eyes with hers. “I do not care about my bloodline being tarnished. I care, however, about Emma’s reputation.”

“But how did they even know?” asked Lord Richard.

“How do these things always come out?” asked the Duchess of Grandhampton. “The Countess of Whitemouth is the biggest gossip in the ton. And she’s not kindly disposed to you, Duke, because you left her daughter unmarried. The whole ton must have heard some version of who your duchess really is, and the newspaper must have picked the most scandalous version of the gossip.”

Emma had never been clearer on how close she truly was to ruining her name.

“At least they didn’t publish my real name,” she said. “They don’t yet know I’m a lady and still think I’m a farmer’s daughter. It means a lot to me that you are people who can be trusted.”

The Duke of Grandhampton cocked his head. “Sebastian is family. The fourth brother we never had.”

Emma understood why. Anyone would want an honorable, caring man like Sebastian as a friend or brother. With what Sebastian had told her about how lonely he had been, even while both of his parents had been alive, she understood why these warm and friendly people were like a second family to him.

“Still, the question remains,” said Lord Preston, frowning his dark eyebrows. “How to deal with these rumors and what truth to tell? Only three people heard that man calling the duchess by her real name, all of whom are present here. But sooner or later, the truth shall come out. And even a duke—and especially you, Duchess—is vulnerable.”

“I suppose you can say it was a jest, Your Grace,” said the Duchess of Grandhampton. “Clearly, your wife is not a swineherd. She’s a gentleman’s daughter. That does not tarnish your bloodline, does it?”

Only, they were not truly married. And that information would be out there sooner or later. Unless her marriage with Sir Jasper was annulled quickly.

The only way to save her reputation was to really marry the duke. Only, was she ready to lock herself into another marriage when she would just have escaped her previous one?

Sebastian could set her free.

She wasn't sure anymore that she didn't ever want to be married. For the first time, she admitted the possibility she had simply married the wrong man.

But was Sebastian the right one?

"May I ask your advice, Grandhampton?" asked Sebastian. "It's about the annulment of marriage. You're more connected to solicitors and such. Perhaps you know something I may have overlooked."

The men went off to one corner of the large sitting room, while Emma, Lady Calliope, and the Duchess of Grandhampton were left sitting at the tea table.

"Well, dear," said the duchess, a smile brightening her kind expression. "I can see in the short time since you arrived that you have transformed the duke."

Emma put her cup and saucer back on the table. "Do you truly think so?"

"Oh, yes," said Lady Calliope. "He is different, isn't he, Grandmama? Light has appeared in his eyes. I've never seen him like this."

"Yes," said the duchess with a sigh. "I know he and Preston only met in Oxford, but I knew his mama and papa for a long time. It was hard to watch when I visited Loxchester

Hall, their country seat, for a house party. I remember him, always alone, even when he was with his governor. He appeared so surly, so abandoned. Looking at people with big eyes from under his little eyebrows, like a lonely wolf cub.”

Emma’s heart ached for Sebastian as she imagined him, an abandoned little boy, his bad behavior a desperate cry for attention.

Tiny wrinkles formed in the corners of the Duchess of Grandhampton’s bright blue eyes as she looked at Emma. “I always knew if a woman came to him who could show him love, he’d become the great man he was always meant to be.”

Emma could show him love. She wanted to. He was so wrong about being the reason for his parents’ unhappiness, because she saw what the duchess saw—a great man with a heart of gold.

“He is a wonderful man,” she said. “He forgave me when I stole his mother’s jewelry box.”

He may have, but his mama certainly hadn’t. She hadn’t spoken to Emma much at all, but there was one thing that his mama had said to her when they met by chance in the long hallway of Longton Place. “You’re a thief,” the duchess had whispered hotly into Emma’s face, her bony fingers digging painfully in Emma’s forearm. “You should hang, not march around here like the mistress of the place. It is only the fear of scandal that stops me from charging you with theft. You have no idea what you’ve done, what disaster you may have wrought for the duke and myself!”

“Please, forgive me,” Emma had said, ashamed but also confused by the duchess’s words. How could a mere jewelry box bring disaster? “I’m so sorry. I had intended to pay you back every penny.”

“Money can never repay the loss of that box. The best thing you can do for us now is to leave and never come back!”

Emma’s cheeks burned from shame that the memory brought.

“You stole?” cried Lady Calliope. “You never! Why did you do that?”

Emma looked at her hands that lay neatly on her knees. “I thought I’d spare him the need to throw me out of the house. I wanted my freedom, but I came into his house with nothing. Once I found a governess’s position, I intended to repay him everything. Of course, I regret my actions very much.”

The Duchess of Grandhampton giggled under her breath. “You certainly have a high spirit, dear. What jewelry box was that?”

“It was just a small one, made of mother-of-pearl. I needed some money to buy myself a fare to Scotland. Or to Canada. A name was engraved on the bottom—the Duke of Ashton. That is odd, I suppose.”

Suddenly, all humor disappeared from the duchess’s face and her eyebrows drew together. “Do not tell anyone else about that box.” Then she took a deep breath and smoothed her features, clearly intending to say no more about it.

But Emma couldn’t help wondering—Sebastian had said his mama cheated on his papa. Could the Duke of Ashton have been her lover, and could Sebastian be illegitimate? Would it make a difference to Emma if he was? She looked at Sebastian across the room, and as he caught her eyes, a huge smile spread on his face. Her heart lurched, and it was as though someone lit a candle right in the middle of her chest. She

beamed back at him. It was the first time she'd seen a real smile on his face.

“I've never seen him smile like that in my life,” said Calliope. “He looks radiant.”

The Duchess of Grandhampton looked at Emma, her eyes brightening again. “I told you. All he needed was a good woman to show him love.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Hyde Park was sunny and almost empty as Sebastian and Emma rode their horses two days later. Most of fashionable London society were at their country estates for the autumn and winter, but some of the ton still remained in the city. Rare couples and groups of people walked gravel paths running among the rolling hills and fields of cut grass.

Trees had started losing their leaves. Wind swept reddish, yellowish, and brownish foliage across the ground. The air was pleasant here—away from the stink of the River Thames, which got horrible over the summer—clear and full of the wet scents of fallen leaves, trees, and grass.

With his stomach squeezing, Sebastian watched the wind play with Emma's dark curls, teasing them from under her riding hat, which was covered with silk flowers and long feathers. She sat gracefully on the horse in her sidesaddle, her cheeks rosy, her eyes sparkling from the fresh air and exercise.

She was beautiful, well-bred, and kindhearted. She made his life brighter. He could talk to her for hours. She loved horses as much as he did. Could she be any more perfect for him?

She turned to him and beamed, melting his heart all over. Would he lose her as soon as she got her marriage annulled?

Three familiar female figures walked along the path meandering through the grassy areas. Sebastian recognized his mama right away, her frame delicate in her striking bordeaux pelisse and a bonnet with an intricate, high construction of flowers and feathers.

“It’s the duchess,” said Emma.

One other lady was a bit fuller and wore a dark green pelisse, and the third lady, who was dressed in a blue spencer, was clearly younger. They disappeared behind the rosebushes as the path curved and appeared again, and Sebastian realized who they were.

“And the Countess of Whitemouth...with Lady Isabella...” he muttered.

They stopped in front of the three of them. Mama, as always, stood with her back perfectly straight and her face watching Emma coolly. The Countess of Whitemouth looked at Emma with an open disdain. Isabella, the good woman that Sebastian knew she was, threw a quick glance at him but stayed impassive, her face collected under her fashionable pale blue bonnet.

“Ah,” Mama said. “My son and his duchess.”

“Good day,” said the countess. “We were just talking about my daughter’s marriage prospects for the next Season.”

Lady Isabella blushed, and she looked like she wanted to be elsewhere. She had no fault in this. She was pretty enough and nice enough. She just wasn’t for him. And he’d have resented her for the rest of his life if he’d been forced to marry her.

Emma had given him back control over his life. Just as, he supposed, she wanted to be in charge of her own life—something Sir Jasper had completely taken away from her.

But before he could respond to the countess, Emma opened her mouth. “I’m sure Lady Isabella won’t have any struggles with finding a husband.”

All three ladies stared at her.

“Such an agreeable and accomplished lady as you...” she explained. “I’m sure the ton will compete for you, Lady Isabella.”

There was a genuine, broad smile on Emma’s face. Her kindness shone through her, making Sebastian’s body feel light. Isabella smiled back at her. “You’re very kind, Duchess.”

“Your Grace!” came a loud voice behind him, and he turned his head back.

Benedict ran down the path towards him. His long, thin legs flashed as he pumped them, his young face red with the effort.

Sebastian turned the horse around, his chest hard and painful. “What is it, Benedict?”

The footman came to stop before them, put his arms on his knees, and panted. “Beg your pardon, Your Grace... It’s the Duke of Grandhampton...”

Sebastian’s stomach tightened. Grandhampton? Worry for him shot through Sebastian like a lightning bolt.

Mama moved forward. “What happened to the duke?”

“He’s been killed,” panted Benedict, and Sebastian stopped breathing. “Lord Preston sent you the message, Your Grace,

asking you to come at once.”

“Killed?” said Sebastian, rather stupidly. How could Grandhampton be killed? He’d always been so powerful, charming, and clever. Killed...it sounded so wrong, just like the sun rising in the west. It couldn’t be.

He blinked, frowning, trying to comprehend his life without the man who had always helped with wise advice, including his recent suggestions about the annulment of Emma’s marriage. His stomach burned with anger, with sadness. No, not him. Please, God, not him!

Benedict let out a sharp exhale. “The message said he was killed last night at the docks. Lord Preston is requesting your presence at Sumhall.”

Emma’s gaze reached him, the support and empathy in her eyes making his heart squeeze.

“I must make haste,” he said, not recognizing his own voice.

“I’m coming with you,” Emma said.

They galloped through the streets of London towards Sumhall, winding between the carriages and pedestrians, some of whom shrieked as the two riders flashed by them. It must have taken them fifteen minutes or so, and the news was slowly sinking in. Sebastian’s stomach was twisting with anger, with the unfairness of the loss of someone so young and so loved.

They ran into Sumhall, and Sebastian was immediately shown to the study while Emma was led to the sitting room.

Sebastian entered the study, where Preston stood by the fireplace, supporting himself with one arm lying on the

stonework, staring at the fire. A letter was clutched in his other hand.

“Preston,” said Sebastian, closing the door behind him.

Preston looked at him, his eyes glistening, deep lines of sorrow around his mouth. He was pale, grayish even.

“Is it true?” asked Sebastian, slowly walking to Preston.

Preston exhaled sharply and stood straight.

“I’m afraid so,” he said.

Sebastian squeezed his shoulder. “I am ever so sorry. What happened?”

Preston shook his head slightly. “It’s my fault. It’s all my fault. I never wanted this. I was always supposed to be the spare. I do not want to be duke.”

Sebastian knew exactly how that felt.

“But how is it your fault?” he asked.

Preston showed him to a seat near the writing desk. The room seemed to reflect the somber mood—the long, thick purple curtains were almost fully drawn, casting the room in semidarkness. Shelves with books covered one wall opposite the fireplace, while the other two walls were decorated with oil paintings. On the sideboard, a globe stood next to piles of papers and folders and a round tray with a carafe of transparent liquid.

“Gin?” Preston asked as he went to the sideboard.

“If you’re having any,” said Sebastian.

“Of course I’m having gin,” mumbled Preston as he poured the drink into a carved glass for Sebastian. He handed him the glass, took another one, still full, from the desk and

drank it in one go. Sebastian followed his friend's example, the alcohol burning the back of his throat.

"We argued last night," said Preston as he laid the letter on the desk and leaned against it.

"What about?"

"What have we been arguing about for months now?"

"Ah..." said Sebastian.

He remembered the argument. Notorious ton rake, the Duke of Grandhampton had shown a consistent interest in Miss Penelope Beckett. Though to anyone else it likely appeared nothing more than an attempt at seduction, something he was famous for, he had confessed to his brother that he actually wanted to marry her.

"That fortune hunter," muttered Preston, pouring himself and Sebastian two more drinks. "She led him on. She was never interested in him, only his money. He was too blind to see it. So we argued. Again. I was supposed to go with him to Portside, to see him box. But he went alone because he couldn't stand my company."

He handed Sebastian the glass.

"But that doesn't mean it's your fault, Preston," said Sebastian, accepting the glass.

"Had I been there, had I gone with him, had it not been for Miss Beckett, he wouldn't have died!" roared Preston. "We've always bickered, but I never wanted any harm to come to my brother."

Preston threw back the contents of his glass while Sebastian only sipped his. "It cannot be that simple. You cannot take this blame on yourself."

“I can. And I must. Had I insisted on going with Spencer like I had wanted to, I might have protected him. He was beaten to death.”

Sebastian sat upright. “What? During the match?”

“No. By thugs. Probably for money. Who knows... The coroner sent us his things...the bloodied handkerchief with his initials. His pocket watch.” Preston’s face distorted in a mask of grief and pain, and he cried.

Sebastian stood up and wrapped his arm around his best friend, his own heart breaking for Grandhampton.

Later that night, back at home, he and Emma lay in bed, and she was cuddled in the crook of his arm. He inhaled the clean, feminine scent of her hair, his lips pressed to her head, reveling in her warmth. She was alive. He was alive. That was already so much to be thankful for.

“I think I will go to see my parents tomorrow, Sebastian,” she said. “If you can spare me. I’d rather go and collect Papa’s copy of my marriage contract myself. Besides, I haven’t seen them in a long time.”

The thought of her being away tore him apart. He wanted to say no. He wanted to say he’d go with her, but he couldn’t leave the Seatons in this time of tragedy. And she was right, they needed the contract for the annulment. Her father had refused to send it to Sebastian’s solicitor by post, thinking it too valuable of a document and concerned that it may be lost.

There was nothing Sebastian wouldn’t do for her, even if it meant she was better off without him.

“Will you be back, Emma?” he asked her, swallowing the pain and the fear.

“Of course I will.”

He wished he could be certain she would. He made sure to satisfy her every sexual need, but what if she didn't need him beyond that and she'd see that while she was away?

But he wouldn't lock her in another prison. "Go, darling. I'll send four footmen to accompany you and protect you. And I'll count the days until you return to me."

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Two days later, Emma climbed from the carriage into a stormy, windy day at Sherbourne Place in Staffordshire. The two-story brick cottage in which she had grown up looked smaller. The garden was, as always, overgrown. Ivy covered the left side of the house, and the two white columns at the central entrance were still chipped and cracked.

The door opened, and her mama ran out, a huge smile on her face. She hadn't changed, either. She was the same full-bodied, rosy-cheeked woman with her dark curls bouncing from under her white cap. Emma's chest filled with warmth at the sight of her mama, her eyes tingling with tears.

"Emma!" Mama cried. "Oh, Emma! You came!"

Mama stopped in front of her and took her hands. "Your papa told me he expected you to arrive and collect the contract by yourself, but I do not understand why you and Sir Jasper came separately..."

Emma's smile died on her face, her whole being filling with cold dread. "Sir Jasper is here?"

"Why, of course. Your papa wrote him to ask why you needed your marriage contract to be sent to an address in London, so he came to collect it himself. Oh, my." She looked

Emma up and down. “Sir Jasper is spoiling you, isn’t he? You look like a duchess!”

Foreboding churned in Emma’s stomach as she walked into the house with Mama, wind flapping the skirts of her expensive teal gown. Sir Jasper was here. And he knew about the contract! *Oh, Papa, why did you have to write to him?* Emma understood why, though. Her parents were very traditional. In the eyes of Papa, just as with most of society, a woman was her husband’s property. So, of course, her papa couldn’t imagine Emma managing her own affairs and thought it was safer if Sir Jasper did that.

Mama led her through a short, narrow hallway into the sitting room Emma had known all her life. Papa and Sir Jasper stood up from behind the round tea table. Her three sisters, Rose, Evie, and Sophie, jumped to their feet from a large table covered with needlework as well as boxes of thread, scissors, and other embroidery tools. They surrounded her, exclaiming about how pretty she was and what a beautiful dress she wore.

She inhaled their scent, so dear and homey. The smell of lilacs lingered in the drawing room all year round thanks to Mama hiding linen sachets with dry florets in the cushions on the old yellowing sofa. The fireplace mantel with chipped white paint held three vases, and the grate held faintly glowing coal embers. Yellowish drapes that must be as old as Papa still hung around the window. And the round portrait of Emma’s great-grandmother looked at them from above the fireplace.

And amid everything that she had considered home, Sir Jasper stood glaring at her from his hooded, dangerous eyes. She’d had this silly hope that she would never have to see him again in her life. His upper lip curled in a controlled snarl.

Despite his fierce expression, he looked smaller to her, a sad little man trying to be more powerful than he was.

But he had information that could ruin her family and completely destroy her sisters' chances of a good marriage—of any marriage at all.

His gaze slid slowly over her, and she was afraid she was going to empty the contents of her stomach right in front of them all. The memory of standing in filthy, stinking clothes in front of dozens of men... Men who looked at her like at a cow they might purchase, tossing out comments about her body, things no lady should hear... And all the while, a step away from her, her husband had reveled in delight from her distress. The whole thing sent a hot feeling of humiliation through her.

In a flash, she remembered all the days he'd told her every single thing that was wrong with her as a wife and as a woman. All the nights she'd lain in pain while he pounded in and out of her, not caring if she liked it or how she felt. And she remembered how Sebastian worshipped her. Made her feel special. Took care of her every need—even her need for freedom, even if it meant losing her.

The iron cage of marriage Sir Jasper had locked her in was like an oubliette. While with Sebastian, she felt free. Loved. Respected. Appreciated.

“Wife, dearest,” Sir Jasper said.

Wife...she wasn't his wife anymore. And she wouldn't let him have any power over her. If he'd come here to tell her family what had happened, to shame her, she'd beat him to it.

“I am not your wife,” she said, straightening her back. “You sold me, remember?”

Her family gasped, and the expression of triumph disappeared from Sir Jasper's face.

She looked at Papa and Mama. "Sir Jasper sold me at an auction in Clovham. It was his own idea. So I do not belong to him anymore. And, Papa, please do not give him the contract, because—"

Sir Jasper took a large step towards her and grabbed her by her elbow. "Dearest," he said through gritted teeth. His smell assaulted her—the odor of his skin, the odor of his soap were disgusting to her. "Please, can we talk in private? It is in your best interest, I assure you."

He mumbled an excuse to her family and dragged her out of the sitting room and into the dark hallway. The wind outside howled through the gaps around the windows, and the first heavy raindrops hit the small fanlight above the door.

His fingers dug into her elbow painfully. His lips pursed like a raisin. His eyes glared, dark and small. He looked like the devil himself.

"Let me go!" She jerked her elbow, but he held her like a vise.

"Go back to the sitting room and tell your parents you're going back home with me."

She didn't reply to him for a while, staring into his eyes, not backing up. She wouldn't show him how much he actually was frightening her now. "No."

"You must. You're still married to me."

"No. You committed fraud, Sir Jasper. You sold those lands that you promised in the marriage contract before you signed it. Our contract is void."

He swallowed hard. “Well then. That doesn’t matter because I have something more powerful. If you don’t come back to me, I will write to *The Society* and tell them the Duke of Loxchester is a bastard. I have evidence. And then he will lose everything. His title, his lands, his income.”

Her whole being went cold.

It was one thing that she’d tarnished Sebastian’s reputation already...well, he was happily tarnishing it himself.

It would be another if his legitimacy was questioned. Sir Jasper was right. Sebastian would lose everything.

And as the whole ton knew his parents had cheated on each other, it would be a very believable thing.

“What evidence?” she asked, already suspecting and dreading the answer.

Leisurely, he let go of her, reached into the inner pocket of his tailcoat, and retrieved the mother-of-pearl box that one of his thugs had taken from her. He opened it—something she had never thought to do in her mad dash for freedom—and took out a folded letter.

“This is the evidence,” he said, the sagging skin on his jaw glistening with sweat as he tilted his head back and watched her with his hooded eyes.

“Let me see,” she said, stretching her shaking hand to him.

He cocked his head and handed her the letter. She unfolded it and turned it so that light fell on the writing.

With elegant handwriting, it said,

To His Grace, Duke of Ashton,

Dear Stuart,

You know I am the last woman that should be married to Loxchester. But I have done my duty. I am with child now, the heir or heiress of Loxchester. My husband is not oblivious. He knows he is not the only man who has known my bed. And I have never loved another man as I love you.

Your affectionate Lydia, Duchess of Loxchester

With a heavy feeling of dread, Emma started to reread the letter, but Sir Jasper snatched it out of her fingers.

“This doesn’t prove he’s illegitimate,” she said.

“No. But it hints enough to make others question it. And it also humiliates the duchess.” He grinned, but joy didn’t touch his eyes. “*The Society* will love it.”

He was right. And Emma couldn’t do this to Sebastian. Whatever was between them, however close her freedom, she loved him too much to have him declared a bastard because of her. And she refused to have his mother’s name dragged through the mud, no matter how unwelcoming the woman was.

“You got it when you sent those men after me,” she said.

“Yes. And even though the fools failed, I did get you in the end.”

Her stomach dropped. She was back in her old prison cell, when she could see the light of freedom just beyond her

reach.

“But why do you even want me, Sir Jasper? You are as unhappy with this marriage as I am. Besides, haven’t you already collected the duke’s payment for me?”

“I did. But it’s gone already. And why I want you, dearest, is simple. Because you’re mine. Good or bad. And I do not lose what’s mine.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

One week later...

A beam of sunlight fell through the window onto the paper in Sebastian's hand that deemed Emma Sherbourne and Sir Jasper Bardsley's marriage annulled. In the semidarkness of his study, where he was usually bored, signing papers and talking to his solicitor and his steward, he was excited for the first time in his life. His chest expanded as though there were a hot-air balloon inside of it being warmed up and about to soar.

He had Emma's freedom in his hands.

His solicitor had just brought the annulment papers earlier today. Smart man, he'd managed to find the copy of the deed of sale for the lands mentioned in the contract, and he'd gotten a copy of the marriage contract from Sir Jasper's solicitor in Bedfordshire. It was all correct and quite straightforward. There it was, the decision from the bishop, expedited thanks to the deceased Grandhampton having introduced Sebastian and the bishop a few days before he died.

Sebastian had spent the week following the tragedy with the Seatons, helping Preston and the family with the funeral arrangements and just being at their side. He ached for Emma as if she were a missing limb. As agreed, his carriage and the footmen had returned. They would stay in London until he got

word that she was ready to come back. Seven days, and his very skin ached for her touch.

There was a knock at the door, and Standen came in, concern showing behind his perfectly cool and polite expression.

“What is it?” asked Sebastian.

“Sir Jasper Bardsley and Lady Bardsley have come to see you, Your Grace.”

Sebastian froze, the smile on his face dying. The hot-air balloon in his chest deflating. His stomach dropped. Lady Bardsley.

His Emma.

Not the Duchess of Loxchester.

Sir Jasper couldn't have marked his territory more clearly.

“Please, show them in here,” said Sebastian, helplessly clenching and unclenching his shaking hands.

Standen nodded and left the study. Several excruciating moments later, the door opened again, and he let Emma in accompanied by a man. Sebastian recognized him at once, despite his clean gentleman's clothing—he had the same smug, round face of the farmer selling her in Clovham. And now, triumph showed in his beady eyes.

Emma wasn't wearing one of the dresses he'd had made for her anymore. She was probably dressed in the clothes she'd had in her home—a perfectly appropriate but rather modest dress that did nothing to complement her lovely coloring, her green eyes that were so beautiful he had a hard time breathing, nor the rich color of her shiny mahogany hair.

Sir Jasper Bardsley stood next to her, his arm touching hers in an intimate way that screamed to Sebastian who was her husband here. The sight completely wrenched his stomach apart.

Sebastian's eyes met Emma's, so aloof and distant, and his whole being went cold. Her face was a mask, as though she was devoid of any emotion. As though the days they had spent together...the nights—their talks, their lovemaking, their closeness—meant nothing to her.

He meant nothing.

“Your Grace,” said Sir Jasper with his nose held high, “my wife and I came to pay you a visit and thank you for the hospitality you showed to Lady Bardsley. Our marriage is repaired now, and I'll relieve you of her presence. She won't be a burden to you anymore. And I'll be keeping your money, sir.”

A burden? Emma? She was the opposite of that. She was his treasure, the light in his life of gloom and obligation. Sebastian wanted to punch the man. But he couldn't allow himself to glance away from Emma. He didn't even care about the money.

“Emma, what happened?” he asked, forcing his voice to not shake. He picked up the most precious paper in the world and held it out to her. “I have the annulment of your marriage. All you need to do is sign.”

Her mouth opened, the inner edges of her eyebrows rising. She blinked, her eyes watering, staring at the annulment papers that could be her salvation.

Finally, she swallowed hard. “I won't need them.”

It felt as if someone had punched Sebastian right in the solar plexus. All air left his lungs.

Emma, looking like she was being dragged to a death sentence, said, “I choose Sir Jasper. Not you.”

His heart broke and cracked and grew dead inside, calcifying like an oyster at the bottom of the sea. He had never felt such pain in his entire life. No one had the power to hurt him as she could.

He had known this would happen. That the happiness they’d had together was nothing but an illusion. It wasn’t for him. His way was the way of loneliness and unhappiness, just like his parents’. The mask he’d worn his whole life prior to her hardened the muscles of his face, turning the edges of his mouth downward, setting a crease and painful tension between his eyebrows. His shoulders hurt. It seemed as though the whole world went dim, the sun disappearing behind the curtain and the study falling into semidarkness.

He laid the papers on his desk and nodded. “I never loved you anyway. You were always just a game.”

Was it his imagination, or did something break in her eyes?

“I will destroy the papers. Goodbye, Lady Bardsley. And be well.”

He turned, forever closing himself away from her and breathing hard, trying keep the pieces of his broken heart together.

Only what for, if the happiness that had been at his fingertips had disappeared forever?

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Sir Jasper loomed over Emma as she sewed a white peony in the drawing room of their home in Bardsley House, with its pale beige walls and the yellowing watercolors of local landscapes. The drawing room was always cold, no matter the weather, and there was always this draft from a gap in the window frame that sent gusts over the coals in the grate, making them crackle and spark. It had needed repair long ago, but Sir Jasper didn't want to spend money on it.

The old green sofa where Emma sat was so threadbare that the sheep's wool stuffing poked out in places.

She'd never felt that this place was her home. Sir Jasper had refused any suggestions that she gave to improve or repair it or make it cozier and homier, like she wanted.

His crotch, in his pale beige breeches, was dangerously close to her face. Her fingers tensed around her needle, and she commanded herself to try to think about peonies.

"Two weeks have passed, my dear," said Sir Jasper, one hand on his waist. "And you still haven't allowed me to touch you."

The thought of him touching her brought bile up her throat. Here she was, back in her old prison, when Sebastian and her freedom and happiness had been so close...

She straightened her shoulders and held her head high, but she was dying inside.

“What, Lady Kinlea isn’t available?” she asked without looking at him.

“Shut your mouth,” he growled. “Do not make me use the evidence I have against the Duke of Loxchester to make you allow me into your bed. I will use it if I must.”

“Sir Jasper, you’re not behaving like a gentleman,” she said calmly.

Sir Jasper grasped her hand that held the needle. “Do not dare lecture me about behavior. You’re a common whore. Do you think I don’t know that you gave yourself to the duke while you keep refusing your own husband?”

She jerked her hand away. She couldn’t care less about Sir Jasper’s pestering when all she’d seen in her mind’s eye for the past two weeks was the cold stare Sebastian had given her, the pain in his eyes when she’d said she chose Sir Jasper... She couldn’t bear it.

But he’d be all right. He’d never loved her anyway. She was nothing but a game. A means to break the unwanted marriage arrangement with Lady Isabella Greene. A means to stir scandal. He had never promised her a happily ever after anyway.

He had been clear on his intentions from the beginning.

But, silly her, she had believed in happiness because that was what she was...a naive, overly optimistic woman. She had fallen in love with him.

At least she had kept Sebastian out of danger for now, and she’d keep him and his mother safe for the rest of her life, if she had to.

“I have my courses,” she said, knowing perfectly well she wouldn’t be able to use this excuse for the rest of her miserable life.

Through the window, the rattle of hooves and wheels caught their attention. A big, rich carriage drew up and stopped in the driveway before the house. The footman opened the door, and the Duchess of Grandhampton in her black mourning clothes stepped out.

“Who is that?” asked Sir Jasper.

Emma’s heart ached as she stood up. The duchess would always be a reminder and a connection with Sebastian. But what could she want?

“The Duchess of Grandhampton,” said Emma.

After their housekeeper announced her, the older lady came in, and Sir Jasper closed his gaping mouth.

“Ah. Lady Bardsley. Sir Jasper,” said the duchess. Her expression was somber, but she attempted a smile. “I wonder if I might take a walk with you, Lady Bardsley.”

Emma nodded and put her needlework on the table. As they walked out into the small hallway, she put on her pelisse and her bonnet, and then they went outside.

Emma inhaled the scent of rotting leaves, looking at the golden, red, and orange trees on top of the farthest hill.

“Duchess, you surprised me,” Emma said. “How are your grandchildren?”

The duchess swallowed and pursed her lips. “We all grieve Spencer. My dear boy... Preston is taking it the hardest.”

Emma’s eyes filled with tears. She remembered the shocked, numb expression on Calliope’s face and the

withdrawn, sad mask on Lord Richard's the day Emma and Sebastian had found out about Grandhampton's death.

"But that is not why I came here," said the duchess.

"Why did you?"

"It's the Duke of Loxchester...he's in the worst condition of all."

Emma's chest hurt at the mention of him. "What is the matter?"

"He goes to that ghastly boxing club practically every night and gets himself beaten up nearly to death. If he's not there, he's locked in his study. He's bruised, bloodied, unwashed, sleeps on a little sofa, doesn't eat. All he takes is gin. All shutters are closed, and he doesn't even want to see Preston. He's going to drink himself to death, my dear. Mark my word."

A cold wave of fear went through her as she imagined him, sick and dying from alcohol poisoning... The ground sank under her feet.

He wasn't her jailor like Sir Jasper was. No. He was her freedom. He was her love. He was the happy marriage she'd always dreamed of.

"Oh, no..." she muttered.

The duchess waved her hand with the walking stick in front of her. "What were you thinking leaving the duke for that orangutan?"

"I had no choice. Sir Jasper has evidence... In the duchess's jewelry box was a letter she'd written but, I suppose, never sent to the Duke of Ashton, where she mentions he had been in her bed."

The duchess gasped and stopped, stabbing her walking cane into the gravelly path to support herself. Her eyes were full of panic. The black clothing made her skin sickly pale, but Emma's news had drawn further color from her face.

"Heavens..." said the duchess.

"Yes. Heavens. And he threatened to send it to *The Society* if I didn't come back to him." Emma's eyes watered as she thought once again of how close she and Sebastian had been to a lifetime of happiness. "So I had to protect him. If it becomes known that he may be illegitimate, he may lose everything. His title. His lands. His mother will be disgraced. I can't do that to him."

The duchess sighed deeply and slowly shook her head. "What a vile man that is, to use the information so. This is exactly the sort of thing I feared when the box was taken. But it is utter nonsense. Sebastian is perfectly legitimate and the rightful Duke of Loxchester. Do you remember the date of the letter?"

"It was while she was pregnant with Sebastian," Emma said.

"Ha!" the duchess said triumphantly. "Ashton was away for two years in America. He couldn't have fathered Sebastian because he was simply not here."

Emma sighed with relief. "Still, there would be enough there to stir a scandal if it's published. And while Sebastian claims he doesn't care about his reputation or gossip, I'm sure his mother does. I wouldn't want to put her through anything like that."

"Quite." The duchess turned back to the cottage. "Come with me. I need to see that Sir Jasper of yours."

When they came back into the drawing room, Sir Jasper jumped to his feet from the sofa.

“May I offer you tea, Your Grace?” he said, his hand reaching out for the bell on the tea table.

“No.” The duchess laid both of her hands on her elegant walking stick and narrowed her eyes at him, as though estimating from which angle to shoot an arrow straight into his heart. “Let me be perfectly clear. You committed fraud when you married this lady. Your marriage has no substance according to the bishop. She is no longer your wife—not legally, not on any basis.”

With satisfaction, Emma watched Sir Jasper’s face lengthen in a grimace of panic.

“Therefore, if you keep at your pathetic threats about a good friend of my family, I will have Mr. Sherbourne sue you for fraud, for his losses because the income from the lands you promised was never delivered—and never will be. I will personally pay Mr. Sherbourne’s legal fees and ensure he has the best solicitors in the country, and you will lose everything you have.”

Sir Jasper’s hands shook. “Your Grace—”

“And let me remind you that your possession of the Duchess of Loxchester’s jewelry box proves you ordered an attack and robbery that injured a driver and the duke and destroyed his carriage. Give me the letter you stole and said jewelry box. Sign the annulment papers, which my maid will fetch in a moment from my carriage.”

Emma frowned. Hadn’t Sebastian destroyed them like he had said he would?

“And say goodbye to Miss Sherbourne,” said the duchess. “Because she was never really Lady Bardsley.”

Sir Jasper opened and closed his mouth, trying to say something. Hope bloomed in Emma’s chest. She was ready to kiss the duchess on both cheeks.

“Do you understand me?” the duchess pressed.

“I do,” Sir Jasper said, shaking.

“What do you say?”

His shoulders sank, and he lowered his head, going into the pocket of his tailcoat where he found a folded paper. He stretched it out to the duchess, who snatched it from his fingers.

“Excellent. Go and fetch the box for me, as well,” she ordered Sir Jasper. “Then let’s get those papers signed, and I’ll take you, Emma, back to the duke.”

Sebastian blinked at the sunlight that suddenly flooded the blissful darkness of his study. Only, it wasn’t that blissful, was it? With his head bursting with pain and his stomach burning. He couldn’t see from one eye, which was swollen shut. His face ached in multiple places from cuts and bruises, and he may have a cracked rib.

“Standen, for heaven’s sake...” he muttered as he turned around, facing the back of the tiny sofa he lay on. “Close the curtains and bring me more gin.”

“It’s not Standen,” said a female voice...

Her voice.

Even with his head spinning and his mind fogged, he recognized it. And the figure silhouetted by the light coming in the window was not that of his butler.

It was her figure. In her high-waisted dress, with her straight and confident posture, and her delicate shoulders, her hair...

“Look at you.” She came closer and sank to her knees in front of him. When they were on the same eye level, she said, “What are you doing to yourself?”

“You left me,” he said, blinking the fog away to look at her properly. She seemed thinner than he remembered her. She had those ghastly clothes that didn’t suit her coloring, but her eyes shone, as beautiful and as green as he remembered them. Those long, curled eyelashes and the high cheekbones. And heavens, those plush pink lips. “You left me for him.”

“And you told me you never loved me,” she said, cupping his face gently. He welcomed the slight pain even her feather-soft touch caused. Because it meant she was real, and she was here with him.

He caught her hand, leaning into it with his unshaved face. He turned and kissed her palm, inhaling her usual sweet, flowery aroma mixed with the dusty scent of the road and carriage.

“You hurt me like no one has ever hurt me before,” he said. “Not even when I let them beat me in the boxing ring, hoping for oblivion.”

“But you didn’t destroy the annulment papers.”

“I could never.”

“And so the Duchess of Grandhampton delivered them, and Sir Jasper and I signed them. We’re no longer married.”

He swallowed hard, regretting drinking so much. He couldn't believe he was hearing her right. What he wouldn't give now for a clear head...and a bath.

“Then why did you leave me for Sir Jasper?”

“He found a letter from your mother to the Duke of Ashton that implies they were lovers. And it could question your legitimacy. He threatened to send it to *The Society*. His condition was that I return to him. I had to protect you and your mama. You could have lost everything, and your mother's name would have been destroyed.”

Sebastian sat upright, blinking. Not believing his ears. She had gone back and locked herself in the jail of her terrible marriage for him, to protect him and his mother...

“Emma...you did all of that for me...and for Mama...”

“I love you,” she said. “Of course I protected you. I would do anything to keep you safe.”

She loved him...

Something tight as a fist cracked open within him. He was warm and light. She loved him so much that she was willing to sacrifice her freedom for him.

He stood and she stood with him. He took her face in both of his hands and kissed her lips lightly, his whole being invigorated from that simple touch, so soft and warm and delicious.

“I love you, my Emma,” he said. And there it was, her smile, illuminating her eyes from within. The smile for which he was ready to die.

She shook her head. “And I love you—everything about you, really. Your big, beautiful body. Your kind heart. Your

protectiveness. Your sense of honor. Your care for your mother even if you think she doesn't love you—which you're wrong about, by the way. Your childhood should have been better. You should have always felt loved and valued. But I'm ready to spend the rest of my life making you madly, madly happy."

He was bursting, flying high. This warmth, this expansion inside of him, was it happiness? Was it knowing that he loved and was loved?

"Emma, darling," he said, brushing his knuckles against the soft skin of her face. "What about you not ever wanting to be married? What about marriage feeling like a prison?"

"I realized it wasn't all marriages that are like a prison. It was my marriage to Sir Jasper. Being with you...feels like freedom. Feels like I am where I belong."

He couldn't believe his ears. He felt so warm and so complete. If she rejected him now, he'd be destroyed. But he knew he had to risk that. She was the one for him. She was his duchess.

Wincing but ignoring the pain, he dropped to one knee in front of her and took her hand in his. "Miss Emma Sherbourne, if you let me, I'll spend the rest of my days making you happy. Will you marry me?"

She chuckled, her smile so radiant that, for the first time in over two weeks, he felt a similar smile bloom on his own face.

"Yes," she said. "I will marry you."

The cracks in his old heart glued together, warmth spreading through him. As he kissed her again, her body so dear in his arms, he knew his life was now complete, and every day would be full of sunlight.

As long as he had her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When time travel romance writer Mariah Stone isn't busy writing strong modern women falling back through time into the arms of hot Vikings, Highlanders, and pirates, she chases after her toddler and spends romantic nights on North Sea with her husband. Mariah speaks six languages, loves Outlander, sushi and Thai food, and runs a local writer's group.

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THE DUKE DECEPTION

LAURA TRENTHAM

He pretends to be a duke. She pretends to be a widow. After one unforgettable night, they'll go their separate ways. What could go wrong?

When James "Duke" Barnes, the man she has secretly pined for, approaches her at a masquerade, she is surprised he doesn't recognize her. She is even more surprised when he pretends to be an actual duke. Two can play his game. She can be someone else too, someone James would bed—a widow with a false name. All she wants is to live out her fantasies for one night with no one the wiser. What could go wrong?

CHAPTER
ONE

James “Duke” Barnes trudged down the steps from the large Mayfair house of the Duke of Ralston, feeling both shocked and deflated. His sister—his annoying, funny, brilliant little sister—was married. Of course it shouldn’t be a shock considering Madeline had been banished to England to achieve that exact state. He just hadn’t expected her to submit to the institution with such speed. She had always bucked societal expectations.

Ralston had imparted the news while James tried not to gape at the expanse of polished wood and neat rows of leather-bound tomes lining the study. Had any of the books actually been read? While James’s nickname might be Duke, and the Barnes family was well-off in their social circle in New York, it was clear Ralston was in a different class altogether. A class that looked down their noses at someone like him. It was an uncomfortable, infuriating realization.

A missive had been sent to James’s parents, and Ralston had given the marriage his consent, which meant Maddie would receive her dowry. Or rather, her new husband would. Apparently, the newly wedded pair were traveling through the countryside of France for a month with no word of a return. Ralston had not seemed upset at the match.

The rumors James had heard after leaving Thorn House made him question the man's magnanimity. Maddie and Ralston's son, the Marquess of Thornbury, had been betrothed, and now suddenly Maddie was married to someone else. A mere mister with a penchant for gambling. It was worrying and sent James to seek more information.

The town house Damien Northcutt had let was empty and ready for its next occupants. The butler of the neighboring house had informed James the entire Northcutt household up and moved out of London but he didn't know where.

What if Maddie had been locked away somewhere because of her unorthodox interests so her husband could control her fortune? James would move mountains to protect his little sister. Duels were illegal, but that wasn't his style anyway. He preferred fists over pistols. If necessary, he would track her down, beat her husband into a pulp, and drag her to the nearest magistrate for an annulment.

At sixes and sevens, James retreated to the inn where he had let a room and cooled his heels in the common area, sipping an ale while he pondered his immediate future. There was no use in running straight to the docks for passage. He needed a plan.

A tall brown-haired gentleman around James's age dressed in Hoby boots and a well-cut bottle-green frock coat entered with a jaunty step and an open smile. He ordered an ale and took a long pull before wiping his mouth and looking around. James nodded in greeting and pushed the empty chair out from under the table with his boot as a way of invitation.

The common area of the inn had filled with the strata of society from gentlemen in white stocks to those with black

under their fingernails. This was the type of place James felt at ease.

The man took a seat with a flick of the tails of his frock coat. “*Guten tag*. I am Herr Gustav.”

If James had not been able to place his foreign accent immediately, his greeting and honorific did the trick. Herr Gustav was Germanic.

“Duke,” James offered reflexively. Even though he thought of himself as James, the world and his family had called him Duke since he was a lad.

“Ah, what is a man of your esteem doing here?” Gustav took a long draw on his ale and grinned.

James laughed and shook his head. “I’m sorry to disappoint. I’m American, I’m afraid, and Duke is a nickname, not a title. I’m simply James Barnes.”

Gustav laughed heartily. “Even better. I’ve been considering emigrating to America. Why are you in London, if I may inquire?”

“Looking for my sister, but it seems she married an Englishman. I’m deciding if I should track them to France. Where are you from, Herr Gustav?”

“Lichtenstein. A small but beautiful duchy nestled in a valley at the foot of the alps. I am a nephew of Count Lichtenstein.”

They spent a pleasant half hour discussing their respective homelands, finding kinship in their foreignness. James was of a mind to visit Lichtenstein after he tracked down his sister.

“Before you take your leave of London, you must accompany me to the masquerade at Vauxhall Gardens this

evening. The crowd is rowdier and less pompous than the usual balls held in Mayfair. I can promise you fun with many beautiful women to choose from.” Gustav drained the rest of his ale and plunked the glass down.

A masquerade. For one night, James could be whomever he wished and be with whomever he wished. It was too tempting of an offer to pass up.

“I’ll need a mask,” he said with a sly smile.

The crush in Vauxhall Gardens had a bohemian feel that infected James with the spirit of Puck. He was ready to make mischief. No one knew him, and he knew no one except for Gustav, who apparently had already earned a reputation. He disappeared into the crowd on the arm of a lovely lady dressed as Marie Antoinette.

There was a great variety of costumes. Some, like James, wore their usual tailored evening wear with only an added mask, others wore togas in an homage to Ancient Greece, and others were in pre-Revolutionary French silks and powdered wigs. While Vauxhall demanded an entrance fee, it was not too rich to keep out the demireps hoping to earn back the fee and more. The amount of flesh on display was not something one saw at a London ball. Where else in London did courtesans and the ton mix so freely?

James wanted to leave behind the worry for his sister and make merry. He checked the black mask that concealed the upper half of his face and relaxed into the role he planned to play for the night. It was freeing to be unknown and unfettered by expectations.

He was tired of fielding questions about his American origins. His answers were met by either curiosity or disdain. Tonight would be different. Tonight he would play the part of an Englishman.

He had learned at a young age how to mimic the calls of specific birds. It turned out the same skills could be used to mimic accents. After being in England for two weeks, the cant of an English gentleman came easily. With a little subterfuge, he wouldn't even have to provide his real name.

He procured an ale from a harried-looking barmaid and pressed a coin into her hand. The drinks shared with Gustav still buzzed through him, and he sipped at his ale and studied the crowd. A small orchestra accompanied the hum of frenetic conversation and loud laughter. Skirting the edges of the crush, he let his gaze wander, not sure what he was looking for but, like a hunter, knowing his patience would pay off.

He almost missed her. The woman was hidden in the shadows at the edge of the shrubs. She was tall with chestnut hair piled high on her head. A shimmering gold mask obscured her eyes, but the creamy skin above the rosy pink neckline of her gown was a beacon.

She swayed to the music, smiling as if part of the joke, and yet stood apart from everyone, taking joy in the observation.

Any moment, James expected a man to arrive with a glass of champagne, but she remained alone. The way her body leaned toward the crowd made it clear she longed to join in the revelry.

James inched his way closer to her, wondering at her story. Was she part of the ton? Or was she a member of the demimonde looking for her next sponsor? She might even be a

foreigner, like himself. Whatever her circumstance, he felt drawn to her in a way that was impossible to deny.

As he approached her, she turned her head to watch him but otherwise didn't move. Closer now, he could make out a pert chin and the most kissable lips he had ever encountered. They were plump and red. Her dress was beautifully cut, the fabric a rich satin that glowed in the lantern light. Her bodice was more modest than some, yet the soft curves of her breasts on display were tantalizing.

He sketched a shallow bow while employing his best English accent. "A lady as lovely as yourself shouldn't be without company. May I stand with you?"

Her laugh was husky and set off pangs of desire even as nerves roiled his stomach. Had his pretend accent been terrible? Did he have something unsightly on his face? Had a bird shit on his head? He couldn't resist running a hand through his hair.

"Are you laughing at the offer or at me?" he asked, still playing his part of an English gentleman. He hoped.

Her smile turned quizzical. "Duke...?" she whispered.

He stilled for a moment, but no one, except for Maddie, would have used his nickname in England. Did the lady believe he was a peer? It was too perfect an opening to let it pass. "Indeed, I am the Duke of Barnes, but this sort of night requires given names, don't you agree? Call me James."

She appeared flummoxed.

He winced. He shouldn't have offered his name. The English were particularly stingy and priggish about handing out the honor. To cover his mistake, he asked, "And you are?"

She cleared her throat and rubbed her lips together in a way that made his gaze linger. “I am... Titania.”

He smiled, relieved she had met him with her given name as well. And such a perfect name for a night for mischief. “You aren’t from London.”

“How do you know that?” Her eyes were wide.

“Because you are Titania, queen of the fairies.”

Once again, her laugh made him feel inexplicably warm and comfortable. “You are a duke, and I am a queen. We are quite an esteemed pair, aren’t we?”

Although her accent was English, something set it apart. If he had been more familiar with the various dialects, he might be able to pinpoint exactly where she was from. “Where do you hail from?”

Her hesitation was slight but noticeable. “Near Bath.”

Was she telling him the truth? Did it matter? Reality receded in the midst of the masked revelries. Sunrise would return them to the fickleness of life, so why not enjoy themselves now?

“Bath is lovely.” He assumed this to be the case considering how many peers escaped to the town and the entertainments offered there. “Are you newly arrived to London?”

“My aunt and I have been here a month.”

He looked around him. “Is she here? Should I be fearful a fire-breathing dragon of a chaperone will singe my hair off?”

The twinkle in her eyes behind her mask made his heart pick up speed. “My aunt is a dragon, but I am in no need of a companion.”

A widow then? He didn't want to delve too deeply. "Perhaps you are not in need, but would you like a companion for the evening? I would be pleased to get to know you better."

"Why?" she asked.

James blinked at the blunt question. Why, indeed? Her physical allure certainly played a part, but something else had drawn him toward her. It was the way she held herself apart. They were both outsiders.

"I am lonely, and I think you are too." He surprised himself with the admission. Perhaps the mask he wore made it easier to be honest with himself and her. While he had always longed to travel, he was finding shared adventures to be more satisfying.

He tensed, waiting for her reaction.

She didn't laugh. Instead, her gaze searched what she could see of his face. Finally, she murmured, "You are right. I am lonely."

"Would you keep me company tonight then?" He held out a hand and waited.

CHAPTER
TWO

Was she dreaming? Had she actually stepped into the land of the fae? Was that why the name *Titania* had popped into her head? Prudence Courtright looked down at Duke's—no, James's—hand. She had never heard anyone call him anything but Duke back home. She hadn't even known his given name was James.

Her head was spinning. He didn't recognize her even though she had sat in the church pew behind him for years. She had spent hours staring at the back of his neck where his dark blond hair tended to curl slightly over his collar or at his profile with its straight nose and the sharp line of his jaw.

Only once had he glanced over his shoulder in her direction, and the beauty of his dark blue eyes had caused her to fumble her hymnal to the floor like a ninny. By the time she'd retrieved it and straightened, he had turned his blistering attention elsewhere.

Suddenly, and very unexpectedly, she had what she had dreamed and fantasized about. His undivided focus. She wouldn't squander the chance even if it proved to be brief and heartbreaking in the end. The now was worth the risk.

She slipped her hand into his, glad she had shed her gloves soon after she'd arrived. She hadn't been sure what to expect

from a gathering at Vauxhall Gardens, but the social strictures that ruled the balls and soirees she was used to had loosened in the darkness. The environment was freeing, and recklessness was encouraged. Recklessness she was fully and willingly taking part in.

His hand was large and warm and rough. Candlelight flickered around them. His dark blond hair had been brushed back from what she knew was a perfectly proportioned forehead even though it was hidden under his black velvet mask. As a result, his jaw commanded her full attention.

Wide and mobile, his mouth was usually upturned in a smile even if it was mischievous. His lips were full but not feminine in the least. Rumors purporting great skill with his mouth had reached even her, and she suspected the women who tittered about him were not referring to his eloquence.

His perfect lips were moving, and Prudence had to shake herself back into the moment.

“...a stroll, if you like?” He was continuing to put on a fair attempt at an English gentleman’s accent. Would it fool the more pretentious members of the ton? Probably not, but they were both playing a role and hoping not to get caught.

“That sounds lovely.” Putting an English lilt into her words, she slipped her hand into the crook of his arm.

He led her around the edge of the milling crowd toward the supper boxes. Beyond them lay darkened walks known for improprieties. She would never have ventured into them alone, but on James’s arm, anticipation had her leaning into him. The hard muscle felt decadent against the side of her breast, and she fought the urge to press even closer.

What was ladylike and appropriate seemed meaningless while wearing a mask under the night sky.

“What brought you here this evening?” he asked.

Her mind spun over lies but settled on the truth. After all, why couldn't she be honest? “I wanted to experience something beyond the mundane that society offers to ladies of my station.”

“You can't be a debutante. Are you married or a widow?” He kept their pace slow.

She daubed her suddenly dry lips. Of course he would assume she was one or the other. No unmarried debutante would think of setting foot in Vauxhall Gardens unaccompanied. Especially during one of their notorious masquerades. Such a stupid and unfortunate creature would be ruined.

She had only one choice. “I am a widow.”

“Widows have more freedom than most, don't they?”

“Some widows, I suppose, but my aunt would not approve of my attendance here.”

“What of your mother?”

“She would have an apoplexy if she knew where I was right now. She insists I marry. Again,” she added quickly. With some hesitation, she continued. “If I don't make a good match, she will be disappointed.”

He sent her a serious look. “That sounds ominous. What happens if you don't make a match or don't make a match your mother considers a good one?”

Dare she speak the truth? Her aunt was a difficult woman. Her mother was impossible. “My life will be hellish.”

His hand covered hers and squeezed. “Do you have a desire to marry again?”

“Marriage is a terrible bargain for women.” While her observations had only supported her opinion, she was curious about the physical aspect of relations. Glancing under her lashes at him, she added, “But I do desire to explore certain connections between a man and a woman.”

“You are referring to sex.”

Heat flushed her. Never would he speak to her so bluntly if he knew who she was. *What* she was. A virgin.

“Yes, I am,” she said.

He halted their progress and smiled down at her. “Are you blushing?”

She pressed a hand against her cheek and couldn’t help but laugh a little. “I am not used to speaking with a gentleman with such candor.”

“Surely you and your late husband—”

“It was not a convivial union. He was older.” She said the last a little desperately to keep him from probing further.

“Ah,” he said knowingly, and she wished she could ask him exactly what he understood because she wasn’t sure. “You want to experience passion.”

She blinked up at him. “Yes. That is exactly it. I worry I will never experience passion if I enter into yet another loveless marriage.”

“You don’t need to be married to experience passion.” He tilted his head, but his mask made it impossible to read his expression. Was he doubting her story?

“My aunt keeps a watchful eye on me. The opportunity for a tryst has never presented itself.”

“Until tonight.” There was no mistaking the intent of his words.

“Until tonight,” she said softly.

She half expected—wanted?—him to pick her up and carry her to a shadowy alcove to fulfill the sultry promise in his voice, but he merely tucked her hand back into his arm and strolled on. Her breaths were coming quick and shallow.

“If you had the freedom, what would you do with your life? Where would you go?” he asked.

They stepped between two rows of trees delineating one of the long walks. The branches met overhead. Although lanterns had been lit, they were far enough apart to plunge sections into darkness. Instead of being frightened, she welcomed the solitude as long as James was by her side.

“There are too many places I want to see to name just one. I’ve read travelogues from all over the world.”

“So have I,” he said with surprise in his voice.

It was because of his generosity that their lending library had amassed such a varied collection of travelogues and journals and books set in foreign lands. At first, she had read them to understand James, but soon she had discovered an insatiable curiosity that had nothing to do with him.

Watching him pack up and leave New York to travel had filled her with both envy and devastation. He might never return. It had made the decision to travel to England easier. She had never in her wildest imaginings expected their paths to cross so far from home. Was it luck or fate?

“I have never been to Paris or Rome,” she said. “Those seem at least within my grasp, but I long to see the pyramids of Egypt and the jungles of South America.”

“I have never met a woman who did not crave home and hearth and children,” he said.

“Then you have never truly known a woman’s heart. Many women crave adventure and long to pursue our own passions, but we are rarely offered the opportunity.” Prudence tried and failed to keep a chiding tone from her voice. “Instead, we are bartered off and bred.”

His own sister, Madeline, was a skilled herbalist. If the rumors were to be believed, her new husband had taken her to France in order to further her knowledge. If true, he was a rare man indeed.

He stopped and brought her hand to rest over his heart. “I am chastened. I should know better. I *do* know better. My sister is such a woman.”

Prudence let out a slow breath. It seemed they were both falling back on the truth whenever their ruse allowed. “You are forgiven,” she said lightly.

Her hand crept inside his waistcoat. Only the thin cotton of shirt separated her fingers from his skin. His heart thumped, and his heat somehow sent shivers up her arms. His face was only a few inches from hers. This might be her only chance to steal a kiss. Dare she?

Any other time and place, the answer would be no. But if she could not find the courage at a masquerade in a darkened garden, then she never would. She drew the soft cotton of his shirt into her fist and pulled him closer.

She felt the sharp intake of his breath a moment before their lips met. Although she initiated the kiss, he took control before she could process the feel of his mouth on hers. His arm circled her waist and brought her body flush against his, drawing her to her toes.

She was a tall woman, and it was not uncommon for her to be able to look her dance partners directly in the eyes, but James topped her by at least four inches and was broad in the shoulders and chest. He dominated her, which was thrilling in a way she couldn't explain in the heat of the moment.

The heat. It was indescribable. She skimmed her hand from his chest to wrap around his neck, inside his collar. His hair tickled her hand in an invitation. She speared her other hand through the hair at his nape and held him close. Her breasts were pressed against his hard chest, and her heart banged as if trying to get to his. His hands roved over her back. The pleasure at his touch invaded every nerve.

While she might not have a true widow's experience, Prudence had been kissed before. She had pulled Reginald Atwater behind a tree the summer after she turned seventeen and kissed him. It had been pleasant enough to want to repeat the act with Arnold Johnson. Kissing Arnold had set her stomach squirming in a discomfiting but curious way.

James sucked her bottom lip between his teeth and ran his tongue along the length at the same time his hand curled over her bottom and squeezed. The combination of sensations drew a gasp from her. Her lips parted, and he groaned. His tongue slipped inside her mouth.

She was wrong. She had never truly been kissed. This was the kiss of a man, not the fumbings of boys who knew little more than Prudence had at the time.

He slanted his mouth for greater access. The thrill ripping through her settled in her lower belly. His big hand still cupped her bottom, and he massaged her through the layers of her dress and chemise, fitting her even closer.

A hardness pressed against her belly. Did he have something in his pocket? She rotated her hips to gauge the cause. He grunted in response and bucked into her, bumping against her mons. Could it be his staff? Surely it wouldn't be this hard and large.

“You are a tease, my queen. Do you want me to spend in my breeches?” he murmured before capturing her lips in another kiss.

It *was* his staff. The place between her legs throbbed, and she clenched her muscles to control the feeling, but it only grew worse. She hadn't expected her body to react with such craving.

Her tongue ventured out and flicked his upper lip. His mouth curved into a smile, but he didn't break their kiss, instead urging her tongue to twine with his in a carnal dance she instinctively knew the steps to.

When he finally broke the kiss, her head fell back as she tried to catch her breath. His lips skimmed her jaw and down her neck. He bit lightly at the delicate tendon on the side of her neck, inciting more shivers through the heat. Her bodice felt too tight against her overly sensitive breasts.

He didn't stop at her neck but scooped his arms under hers to offer support as he forced a deeper arch into her back. She clutched his biceps and raised her head enough to watch him map the upper curves of her breasts with his lips. His eyes were closed.

Everywhere his lips touched, her skin tingled. His tongue traced along the low-cut neckline. Her nipples rubbed against her stays in a pleasure-pain that was startling.

Finally, he straightened, laid a chaste kiss on her lips, and drew her into his chest. She wanted to protest, but the sound of approaching laughter stilled her. He was protecting her. Protecting them.

She nuzzled her face into his neck, breathing deeply. He smelled like... home. Clean pine and spice. She tightened her hold on him. A kiss would not be enough. It would never be enough.

The voices faded, and James drew away from her. He cupped and tilted her face to his, looking into her eyes. Had he guessed she was not an experienced widow but an innocent?

“Let’s continue our stroll, shall we?” he murmured.

How could he think of something as mundane as a stroll after the shifting of the earth? Then again, perhaps the earth hadn’t shifted. A kiss was not a novel experience for him, and she could hardly ask if she’d done it correctly.

Yet there was no denying the reaction of his body. He had grown hard against her. As subtly as possible, she glanced toward the front of his breeches, but it was too dark to make out contours. Still, her confidence blossomed like a moonflower.

Their pace was leisurely, and she lost all sense of direction among the hedges.

“Tell me about your family,” he said. “Any brothers or sisters?”

“No. My father died when I was young, and my mother did not remarry. We moved in with my widowed aunt when I was

ten. All their hopes for the future reside with me.” She had lived with the suffocating pressure for as long as she could remember.

“Your aunt is your companion here in London. What of your mother?”

“Her health is fragile. The journey would have been too taxing.”

“Bath is not terribly far away.”

She silently cursed herself. Of course Bath wasn’t far, but America was. “She does not do well with carriage travel. What of you? Have you siblings besides the sister you mentioned?”

“Two younger brothers.” A wistfulness was in his words.

“An heir and two spares for the duchy.” She cast him a mischievous glance, wondering how he would react to her teasing.

He tugged at his collar as if discomfited. “Exactly so.”

“I dreamed of having siblings. Did you have fun growing up?” She had always watched the Barnes family with envy.

“We had the best times. Although, being the eldest, I did feel some responsibility to at least keep my brothers alive.” The humor in his voice wasn’t part of the ruse.

“You were the one preaching caution?” She tossed him a smile.

“Why do you sound surprised?” He grinned back.

“Because a cautious man would not be wandering Vauxhall Gardens in search of...” She stopped and tilted her head to regard him more carefully. “What are you in search of?”

CHAPTER
THREE

W *hat are you in search of?* Her question clanged around his head. If she had asked earlier in the evening, he would have said he merely wanted to be entertained. Drink, laughter, good company. They were all he sought. He might have even believed he was telling the truth.

Now, he wasn't so sure. Titania had opened a door to a restlessness he had only been vaguely aware of. What *was* he searching for? Ostensibly, he was looking for his sister, but there was a yearning inside him that was not so simple to explain.

"Most of the men I know are ready to marry and settle down to have children. Even my brothers seem to have caught the urge. I cannot fathom it." As he spoke, he could feel the truth of the words, and it felt right to finally speak them.

"You make matrimony sound like an illness." There was no disappointment or judgment in her smile.

"Perhaps it will seem less sickening when I've satisfied my wanderlust."

"I'm surprised your family supports your travels, considering you are the eldest."

“They don’t know the extent of it. Once I locate my sister and assure myself she is well, I plan to keep traveling. Maybe circle the globe before returning home.”

She sighed. “How I envy you.”

He had not given enough thought or empathy to the plight of unconventional ladies like his sister and Titania. “I understand your mother is not well, but could your aunt accompany you on a trip to Paris or Rome?”

She shook her head. “Her companionship would make the trip unpleasant. While I appreciate all she has done for my mother and me, she has a disagreeable personality.”

His heart crimped at the despondency in her voice. “You are a widow. You could hire a more aggregable companion and travel.”

“I do not have the funds for such extravagances unless I marry, and once I marry, I will no longer have the freedom.” She shook off the melancholy like shedding a cloak and smiled up at him. “I would rather not discuss the adventures out of reach when I am in the middle of a quite exciting one right now.”

“I will take that as the highest of compliments.” They walked a bit farther until they met another path. This was one narrower and even darker. “Which way should we go?”

The right branch was straight, and the left curved into mystery.

“Left,” she said decisively.

He was not surprised she picked the path that traveled into the unknown. As the darkness enveloped them, he became more aware of her physical presence. The softness of her body

as it brushed his side. The rise and fall of her bosom. Her sweet scent.

“Tell me about your favorite travelogues,” he said.

She proceeded to describe several that were his favorites as well.

“I’ve never had anyone with which to discuss my longing to travel. My brothers don’t have a desire to leave our home.”

“Sometimes I feel as if I haven’t yet discovered my home. Does that sound strange?” she asked.

His steps slowed and his chest grew tight. Never had he admitted such a thing to anyone, and yet his heart expanded with the truth of her declaration. “Not strange at all. I struggle with the same feelings of being unmoored, although it feels like a betrayal of my family.”

“I’m sure they would want you to be happy,”

Would they? He might not be a real duke, but his father had expectations he would take over the family’s shipping concerns. One time he’d broached the idea of being the one to travel and source goods instead of minding the business in New York. His father had quashed the notion and refused to discuss it again.

They reached the bend in the path, and noises had him halting her progress with an arm around her waist.

“What—”

He shushed her, his lips skimming the shell of her ear. Her shiver at the simple touch sent a bolt of satisfaction through him. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

The noises were not laughter or conversation. He recognized them for what they were—the sounds of sex.

Together they peeked around the corner. She gasped, her body going tense against him. A stone bench set in a slight recess was occupied by a man and woman. The man was seated, his pants caught around his knees. A woman sat astride him. Her gown pooled around them, offering some concealment, although her bare breasts bounced with her grinding movements.

The woman's black hair was bound up and feathers bobbed from the crown of her coiffure. The ease with which the lady rode the man in public pointed to her membership in the demimonde.

The man was young and hung on to the bench with both hands. He gaped at the woman's breasts but did not touch or kiss them. An inexperienced buck. Less inexperienced after tonight, James supposed with a grin.

He caught a glimpse of Titania's profile. She looked as stunned as the man, but her bottom wiggled closer to him. She was tall enough to fit against him perfectly. His erection pressed into the crease of her ass.

"We should leave?" Had she meant to pose it as a question?

"Do you want to watch them finish?" he whispered.

Her swallow was audible, but she nodded sharply.

James was more aroused by Titania's reaction than watching a courtesan and a boy who didn't know what he was doing. "He is a fool," James said in her ear before nipping at her lobe.

Her head tilted to allow him greater access. "Why?"

"He stares at her breasts like an imbecile instead of giving her a measure of pleasure she is so obviously giving to him.

“What would you do in his place?”

His heart kicked at his ribs at her invitation. “I would cup and gently squeeze her breasts.”

James ran his hands from her waist to rest just under her breasts. Her breathing ticked up, and her back arched in encouragement. He cupped her breasts, silently cursing the ladylike stays she wore. Her arm rose and circled his neck, offering him greater access.

He trailed his hand higher to the top of her bodice and slipped a finger under the edge to brush over her nipple. It was budded already but grew even more peaked as he continued to caress it. Her skin was like warm silk, and he wanted to explore all of her with his hands and lips. Her breaths grew shuddery.

He nuzzled the sensitive skin behind her ear and whispered, “I would kiss your naked breasts and tweak your nipples until you were begging for more.”

The slap of skin on skin and ragged moans brought his gaze back to the liaison taking place before them. The man finally let go of the bench to grab the woman’s hips to drive her harder.

The young buck spent with a grunt. The lady climbed off him, took the fine kerchief out of his pocket, and cleaned between her legs. She dropped the cloth on the bench next to where the man righted his breeches. Her bodice was still at her waist, and she seemed entirely unconcerned with her partial nakedness.

“Did you enjoy yourself, my lord?” The woman’s voice was refined on the surface, but a common twang could be heard underneath.

“Very much.”

The woman strolled away while righting her bodice. The young man trailed after her like a puppy on a leash. “Then let’s discuss terms, shall we?” Their voices faded into the shadows.

“Will she become his mistress?” Her breathlessness was a reflection of her obvious arousal.

“If he has the coin to keep her.” He managed to give her nipple a gentle pinch. Her intake of breath made his own catch. She was so responsive to his touch. More voices carried on bursts of drunken laughter.

James muttered a curse, removed his hand from her bodice, and led her away. “These gardens are alluring, but I’m not in the mood for a hurried tryst in the shadows.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not a green lad, and you are not a member of the demimonde. I prefer privacy, time to explore, and a soft place to land.” He tried to judge her reaction, but her mask made it impossible.

“What are you saying?”

“I have taken a room at a comfortable, respectable inn and would very much like you to accompany me there.”

She looked up at him, her bottom lip drawn between her teeth. Waiting for her response was torturous. There was every reason for her to deny him. She was a lady. A lady who was being propositioned by a man she had met that very evening. Even widows had reputations to protect.

“One night?” she asked.

In this he had to be honest and forthright. “One night is all I can offer.”

“One night is all I can accept,” she said with a nod.
“Tonight is a night for adventures, is it not?”

He wasn't given to flights of fancy or spouting overly romantic drivel, but he pressed a kiss to the back of her hand and laid it against his heart. His body buzzed with anticipation and arousal. “Then let us find our way out of the gardens in order to continue our adventure.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

James stood at the foot of the hack and offered his hand. Was she actually going to accompany him to his room at the inn? While she was a virgin, she wasn't a ninny. Her innocence would be a memory by morning, but in return, she would receive experience and—dare she hope?—pleasure.

She did not hold with the tradition of keeping a woman in ignorance until she was educated by her husband in their wedding bed. Sex could happen anywhere and anytime and with anyone. Even ladies of good families found themselves in trouble. In those cases, a wedding would take place with haste.

The last thing she wanted was to trap James in a marriage he did not want. If she did this, he could never know her true identity. In fact, there was no reason for anyone to find out about what was about to happen. Her aunt thought her safe and sound in her bed. She had until dawn.

Betraying the meaning of her given name—Prudence—she took his hand and stepped into the hack. Tonight she was Titania, queen of the fairies, and Titania would happily frolic in bed with a handsome masked man.

James gave the driver directions and joined her, sliding his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close. As his thumb

caressed her jaw, he laid a light undemanding kiss at the corner of her mouth. “You’re trembling. Are you frightened?”

Was she? A little. Perhaps more than just a little. But she was also excited. She could imagine no one better than James to reveal the mysteries of the bedchamber.

“I suppose it’s been some time since you’ve been with a man?” he asked.

For a moment, she was perplexed, and then she recalled she was supposed to be a widow, and therefore experienced. “Longer than you might imagine. My late husband was not the most... attentive of men in that regard.” It was a neat way of explaining away any deficiencies of experience she possessed.

“I promise to be very attentive to your needs, my sweet.” He nuzzled his lips against her ear and incited a rush of tantalizing shivers through her body.

After his earlier attention, her nipples were overly sensitive against the constraining fabric of her underthings. His mouth moved to hers, and their kiss was a meeting of equals. His kisses buzzed through her like a glass of the finest champagne, and she twined her arms around his neck, pressing him into the squab.

Prudence was nothing if not a quick learner, and she very much enjoyed kissing James. It was not a battle but a dance, and she appreciated his willingness to let her lead, at least for a time.

Soon enough, she was the one being pressed into the squab with the intensity of his kisses. His tongue darted between her lips, and she opened fully for him. The warmth of his hand encircling her ankle made her start, but he soothed her

skittishness by sucking her lower lip between his teeth and giving it a little nip.

A laugh at his playfulness bubbled up but was lost as his hand moved from her ankle to her knee, drawing her skirts higher.

“I can hardly wait to sample your honey.” His voice was husky, and his fake accent slipped a little. Not enough for anyone else to notice perhaps, but the hint of the real him only increased her longing.

She didn’t want a real duke. She wanted the Duke of her dreams. James Barnes. She didn’t care what he was called, because she *knew* him. She understood him like no one else in this rule-stricken country. He was adventure personified, and this was the greatest, most unexpected adventure of her life.

“You are welcome to all my honey,” she murmured in his ear before biting his lobe.

A groan rumbled from his chest. “Then I will feast between your legs, my fairy queen.”

Between her legs? She had assumed her *honey* referred to her admiration or her desire. Surely he wasn’t being literal.

Her musing came to an abrupt halt along with the hack. They had traveled from Vauxhall Gardens to a sleepier area of London she wasn’t familiar with. Not that she had been allowed to explore the city. Her aunt had kept her social calendar filled in the quest to garner an offer from a gentleman, which was proving difficult without a sizable dowry.

The inn was a prosperous, well-kept place of business. The gleaming brass fixtures and the jolly green paint with white-

washed walls settled her nerves. James guided Prudence to the door.

“It should be sparse inside this time of the evening, but keep your mask in place just in case,” he said.

She adjusted the gold mask slightly. He took her by the hand. She scanned the room, but was only able to discern a few male figures gathered around a table in the corner playing cards before James pulled her up the stairs and out of sight.

The hallway was quiet and deserted. James led her to the last door on the left, unlocked it, and pushed the door open for her to enter. After locking the door behind him, he removed his mask and tossed it next to his shaving basin.

A small fire warmed the room, and James lit three tapers. Seeing him without his mask made her breath catch. Of course she'd known it was him, but with the mask, there was a feeling of anonymity that was now gone. This was the man—the boy then—that had picked her up after she'd torn her skirts and scraped her knees chasing after a puppy. The moment her infatuation was born and one he probably didn't remember.

His thick dark blond hair was mussed in a most attractive way. The fine strong lines of his face were dearly familiar considering the hours she'd stared at him in church. She was moments away from being able to trace every curve and laugh line.

He would expect her to remove her mask as well. When he moved to gather another brace of candles to light, she stayed his hand.

“I prefer it dim. I'm feeling rather shy.” She tried—and failed—to keep the quaver out of her voice.

She was full of fears. Fear of the unknown, yes, but mostly fear she would be unmasked and recognized. Call her a coward, but she was unable to face that fear. If he knew she was virginal Prudence Courtright from home, then he would unceremoniously escort her out the door. The humiliation would be consuming.

A rumbling sound came from James's chest, but it didn't strike her as displeasure. "If we had more nights together, I would have you feeling so comfortable in your lovely skin you would not hesitate to take tea with me naked in the middle of the day."

It was quite the image he planted and one she would no doubt revisit. But they only had one night, and she did not want to waste it. Reaching up, she plucked the pins from her hair, and shook the mass around her shoulders.

She was rather vain about her hair. It had been mousey when she was young, but as she had matured, her hair had thickened and took on a wave. The dull brown had deepened into a walnut with streaks of light brown and auburn.

"Wild and lovely. It's a shame you must bind and bonnet such beauty. Although I am feeling rather special to be privy to your unveiling." His hands moved to the ties of her mask. "May I?"

She had no choice but to allow it. It would be odd if she insisted her mask remain on. She nodded. The ties loosened and the gold mask fell away, leaving her exposed to his gaze. Everything in her body stilled and waited for judgment.

His eyes drifted over her face. Her mouth dried, and she drew her bottom lip between her teeth. His focus landed on her mouth. "You're beautiful," he murmured.

“Were you expecting me to be hiding a disfigurement? A hairy mole perhaps?” Blast, her mouth was forever getting her into trouble. She was nervous and blabbering.

“One can never truly know what secrets lurk underneath.”

Considering they were both pretending to be someone they were not, she wholeheartedly agreed. “This night will be another secret for me to keep.”

His mouth tipped into a smile. “You remind me of...” His gaze dropped away.

“If you name your wife or a mistress, I will be distressed.” She tried to inject a tease into the words to distract him from piecing together who she really was.

“I have neither, if you must know. No, I was thinking of my sister. You look nothing alike, but you have the same strong will.” The worry he held for his sister was in his voice.

Prudence had crossed paths with his sister, Madeline Barnes, over the course of the season. While they had not been close growing up, Prudence admired her very much. Madeline had made her own path and married a man who was deemed unsuitable by many. A gambler with a blackened reputation, Damien Northcutt. By all accounts, she had not settled for less than a love match.

Prudence could not offer assurances as to Madeline’s future, else she would give away the game. Perhaps she could send him a letter later. No. Even that could prove unwise. If James knew the Courtright’s were in London, he might feel obligated to call upon them. She was counting on his wanderlust to lead him on.

“Let’s revel in the night and what lies ahead, not the past or the future.” He ran a hand up her arm and cupped her nape,

his thumb caressing her bottom lip. “And all I can focus on is how delectable your lips are.”

She popped to her tiptoes and kissed him. His lips curled into a smile against hers, but she didn't think for one second he was laughing at her eagerness. He was pleased. Very pleased if the hardness brushing against her belly was any indication.

As their lips and tongues danced and played, he loosened the tapes of her gown. The bodice gaped. The cooler air of the room caressed her bare skin. Her nipples tightened in anticipation. He had given her a taste of what was to come, and she was desperate for more.

He broke their kiss to push the gauzy cap sleeves of her gown down her arms. She wiggled her hips, and the fabric pooled at her feet. His earlier explorations had lifted her breasts higher, and her chemise offered little in the way of modesty. Her nipples were free of her short stays and clearly visible through the thin white fabric.

Heat flushed her, but her embarrassment faded as she noted his hitched breathing. That the sight of her could affect him so was a powerful feeling. She slipped her hands inside his jacket to clutch his shoulders and arched her back.

“You are a temptress, my fairy queen.” He continued to stare at her décolletage while he slipped off his jacket and tore free of his cravat and collar.

Now it was her turn to battle weakness at the sight of the tanned vee of skin revealed. When he whipped off his lawn shirt and tossed it away, she leaned back against the post of the bed, afraid her knees might give way.

She had no brothers. Her father had passed away when she was young. Theirs was a household of women. In short, she had never seen a man's bare chest. The fantasies she had entertained paled in comparison.

She hadn't expected James's chest to be so muscular. Or hairy. She was strangely titillated. Dark blond hair dusted the muscles of his upper chest, coming together to form a narrow line that disappeared into his breeches. Speaking of his breeches, a large visible hardness pressed for release at his fall. It was startling and more than a little intimidating, yet the pulse between her legs became more insistent.

He sat to remove his boots and stockings. His movements held her in thrall, and she remained a voyeur. His feet were large, and his limbs were dusted with the same hair as his arms and chest.

She was tall and strong from walking, yet she felt soft and delicate compared to him. He was masculinity personified. Her arousal ratcheted up, and her core clenched.

With only his breeches left on, he came to where the post was holding her up and twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. When he leaned in to kiss her, she pressed a hand against his bare chest, stopping him.

"Wait." The dusting of hair was rough against her palm, the muscles twitching like a horse ready to gallop. "There is something we must discuss."

"What's that?" His eyes were hooded and hypnotic, stealing her thoughts. His eyebrows rose. "Titania?"

"Oh. I don't want you to plant a babe in my belly. You must take precautions."

“Of course. I would not want to give you any reason to regret this night.”

At his assuring tone, she slid her hand from his chest to his nape to pull him closer. He slipped an arm around her waist and brought her flush with his body. Her chemise was no match for the heat of his skin. She was too hot, and yet his touch inspired shivers. The maelstrom was chaotic and confusing.

He pressed kisses down her neck and herded her to the side, her steps shuffling and unsure. Her bottom bumped into the soft mattress. Trapped between the bed and his body, she felt a sudden urge to run.

What if the night was a disappointment? She had hoped and dreamed of this moment since she was too young to understand what love was. But this wasn't love. This was two strangers coming together in carnal desire.

It would be enough. It would have to be.

His hand slid to tug at her chemise and exposed the top curves of her breasts to his gaze. A rush centered between her legs. He ran his thumb over her pebbled nipple peeping over the top of her stays. Her core throbbed and clenched, needing more.

Any confusion over their combined deceptions evaporated. She wanted a night in his bed more than anything and was willing to make a deal with the devil to have it.

He loosened the laces of her stays, his fingers nimble and knowing. Her stays slipped lower, and he pushed them and her chemise over her hips in one swift motion. She kicked them to the side. Her garters and stockings were next. He knelt in front of her. She fought the urge to cover her mons. An experienced

widow might be hesitant, but she wouldn't cower and hide, would she? Her hands drew into fists but remained at her sides.

With a lack of urgency that only wound the coil tighter in her belly, he unfurled the bows holding up her stockings and eased them down, one at a time, until she was standing naked in front of him. His gaze wandered slowly up her body to meet hers. He rose to standing in one fluid movement, never breaking eye contact. Her breathing hitched.

He ran his hands over her hips through the dip in her waist to fully cup her breasts. With no chemise or stays to impede his touch, she bit the inside of her mouth but couldn't stop a moan from escaping.

"Your breasts are extraordinarily sensitive," he murmured as he brushed his lips above one of her nipples.

Her hands found purchase in his hair. The soft, springy locks weaved through her fingers. His lips trailed ever closer to her nipple.

"What do you want, my queen?" He cast his gaze up with an impish smile.

She didn't know what exactly she wanted, but knew one thing for sure. "I want more."

With their gazes still melded, he swiped his tongue over her nipple. Her knees wobbled, and she half sat on the edge of the mattress. She had thought she understood what occurred between a man and woman in the bedchamber. Apparently, she was only privy to the basics. Never had she imagined a man would put his mouth on her breasts or that it would feel so incredible.

Each time he flicked his tongue over her nipple, pleasure shot through her. Then he swirled his tongue around the areola and closed his mouth over the tip of her breast. Her body quivered at the sensations. He suckled her breast, and her eyes fluttered closed.

The intensity he stoked was bordering on uncomfortable, and she squirmed, not sure if she wanted closer or to put distance between them. There was no room in her thoughts for logic. The arm banded around her waist kept her in place.

He transferred his attention to her other breast, and she cried out. Had anyone heard her? If so, they would have no doubt as to the activities taking place. She tensed and pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” He loomed over her and tilted her face to his.

“What if someone heard me?”

“My room is on the corner. I doubt anyone heard, and if they did, let them imagine the debauchery.” While he spoke, he caressed her breasts and then sighed. “If only I had more time, I would make you climax by just playing with your nipples. So exquisite.”

Her hips bucked forward into his thighs. “It is pleasurable but also torture.”

“Because it makes you ache and feel empty?”

Yes. That was exactly it. It was painful how empty she felt. In this at least she had some knowledge. He would fill her, and she would no longer be empty. That would ease the ache, wouldn’t it?

“Very empty. What are you going to do about it?” Her desperation made her words sound goading.

His lips turned in a slow, sensuous smile. “You are a surprise. Are you ready for me to fuck you already?”

While the word *fuck* was foreign to her, she could guess at its meaning. Was she ready? “I think so.”

“Only think? You will be so ready that you beg for my cock.” His smile had turned feral, and his accent had slipped into one that was more familiar.

She had known this man for years. The fact was both unsettling and comforting. Would their paths cross again? If her aunt had any say in the matter, Prudence would be married to a foppish Englishman by the end of the season. She might never see her home again. She would likely never see James after this night.

She glanced down to the fall of his breeches. She knew what a cock was, and James’s was pressing forcefully against the buttery buckskins. This night was for appeasing her curiosity.

“You think I will beg for this?” She ran her finger from the tip of the hard staff to between his legs, gratified when he jerked at her touch. She sent him a glance under her lashes that she hoped was teasing.

He took her hand and pressed it fully over the bulge in his breeches. His cock pulsed against her hand and seemed to grow even larger. “I know you will.”

She was so far out of her depths, she was drowning, and yet it was exhilarating too. What would his cock look like? Considering he was unexpectedly hairy everywhere else, she could imagine. She fingered one of the disks holding the flap of his fall up. “May I?”

“Indeed, you may.” His voice was husky.

She slid the first disk free and then the second, slowly peeling his fall down as if opening a present. His cock jutted out from a thatch of dark blond hair. It was long and thick and topped with a mushroom-shaped head. It was so unlike anything she had ever seen before, she couldn't hide her amazement.

“Oh my. It's very large, isn't it?” She grasped hold and stroked from the base to the tip. “And smooth. I was expecting it to be hairy like the rest of you.”

His laugh was rough and strained, but held a note of incredulousness. “Did you never see nor handle your husband's cock?”

She must watch her tongue, else she was going to give herself away. Her answer was a simple shake of the head.

“Did the bastard simply rut you with no thought to your pleasure?” His voice turned darker.

She nodded.

“No wonder you are so curious and wanting. Have you ever climaxed?”

Heat fired in her cheeks. “I-I don't know.”

“That means you haven't.” He caressed her cheek and leaned down to brush his lips over hers in a kiss so sweet tears pricked her eyes. “Allow me to rectify the situation immediately.”

He guided her by the hips and moved her farther up on the bed until her head and shoulders were supported on the pillows. He sat on his haunches between her legs, leaving her unable to close them. She was fully exposed, thankful the flickering candles allowed her a modicum of modesty. Even

so, her hand crept toward her mons to offer cover. It never made it.

He took both her hands by the wrists, pressed them into the pillows above her head, and held himself over her. His heat was intoxicating, his scent spicy and masculine. What would the coarse springy hair of his chest feel like against her breasts? She wiggled closer but too many inches separated them.

He moved his hips slightly, and his cock bumped against the sensitive folds between her legs. Her gasp made him give her a devilish smile.

“You will have all of me soon enough, but I fear once inside you, I won’t be able to stop from fucking you senseless.” He leaned down to brush his nose against hers. “You deserve to be worshipped like the queen you are.”

He slid his hands down her arms to cup her breasts. His thumbs brushed her nipples until they were painfully sensitive. She arched her back, offering more of herself to him. He accepted, and the heat of his mouth covered one breast while he pinched her other nipple. She closed her eyes and thrashed her head, a primal need overtaking her.

His torment eased as he kissed down the soft mound of her belly. She raised her head to look down at him. He was lying between her legs now, his gaze fixed at the place that ached intensely for him. Heat flushed her body as if a fever had taken hold. Was she embarrassed at his study?

Maybe. Yes. But she was also unbearably aroused, and instead of trying to close her legs, she spread even wider for him.

“You are lovely and sweet.” Finally, he touched her, his finger stroking and pressing ever so slightly for entrance. “And so very wet.”

She wanted to ask if that was a good or bad thing, but she should know what it meant. He removed his finger, and he threw her a mischievous grin at her breathy “No.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not done with you yet.” A second finger joined the first and pressed deeply inside her. He let out a low groan. “You are magnificently tight. I can hardly wait until you are gripping my cock.”

His double digits were stretching her. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it was difficult to imagine his cock would not be painful. Even so, she wanted him. Ached for him. Needed him more than she needed air. He began to pump his fingers inside her. Before she could catalog the sensations streaking through her, he leaned closer and licked the apex of her folds.

Her entire body tensed. The rush was overwhelming. She fisted her hands in his hair, thinking to pull him away, but instead dug her heels into the mattress and raised her hips for more.

He hummed against her sensitive skin, alternately licking, sucking, and nipping at a place where her pleasure seemed to grow until she thought her body might burst. Her hips circled with a faster rhythm his pumping fingers soon matched.

The pressure was agonizing and then...

Bliss. She was tumbling in pleasure. Her body clenched his fingers until they were replaced with something bigger and hotter.

She forced her eyes open. He had moved to kneel between her legs and rubbed the head of his cock against her opening.

It was a delicious feeling, her body still primed and pulsing.

His hair was mussed where she had grabbed hold, and his face was flushed, his eyes alive and sparkling. “Do you want it?” His accent was his own. The real Duke, not the fake one he was playing.

If he wanted her to beg, then beg she would with absolutely no embarrassment or qualms. “Yes please. I want your cock. I want you. Give me everything.”

She grabbed at his shoulders and scored him with her fingernails. His chesty growl fed the rise of tension between them.

He pressed into her, not stopping until his hips were notched against her like puzzle pieces. Her body tensed at the slight burn of his invasion, but her climax had left her ready to accept him. He moved over her, settling his chest against hers, bearing his weight on his elbows. The crisp hair of his chest teased her nipples, and it was as deliciously arousing as she had imagined.

Instinctively, she raised her legs to cradle his hips between her knees. He cupped a hand under one of her buttocks, tilted her pelvis to press his cock even deeper, and took his first thrust. They moaned in tandem, and he claimed her mouth in a kiss so decadent it stoked a tide of pleasure she now recognized as the beginnings of another climax.

He thrust again and again with increasing harshness and speed. The bed rocked and groaned under them. The entire occupants of the inn could break into their room, and she would beg him to continue.

Before she could recapture the momentous feeling of her climax, he pulled out of her and bucked against her stomach,

his weight heavy on top of her. Warm fluid trickled down her hip. His face was buried in hair, his chest heaving.

She ran her hands over his smoothly muscled back and to the dip where his firm buttocks curved. His weight grew uncomfortable, yet she didn't want him to leave her.

Finally, he levered himself up and brushed her hair back from her face. She wanted him to say something momentous and special. Instead, his smile was the one she loved the most, mischievous and full of laughter. "I made a mess."

She returned his smile, although hers felt tremulous. What had she been expecting him to say? How one time with her had ruined him for all other women, and he must marry her? Ridiculous. She had known what this was and, more importantly, what it wasn't.

It was sex, not love. At least not for him.

CHAPTER
FIVE

James rose from the bed to retrieve a wash cloth, wringing it out in the clean cool water left by the chambermaid. His legs trembled, and he felt weak. It wasn't just because it had been some time since he'd lain with a woman. It was because of the woman he'd lain with.

He could still taste her on his tongue and feel her channel clasped around his fingers. And his cock. The insatiable beast stirred slightly, and he looked down in amazement. He was no longer a green boy, but he felt like one at the moment.

He returned to her side and cleaned his spend from her belly. He wouldn't tell her, but he'd almost forgotten his promise to not release inside her. Her skin was flushed and pretty, and he couldn't stop himself from laying a kiss on one of the most perfect breasts he'd ever had the pleasure to see much less touch.

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and worried the edge of the coverlet she had pulled to her waist. "I must return to my aunt before dawn."

A stab of desperation had him putting on his most convincing tone. The one that had lured his brothers into trouble back home. "Dawn is still hours away. You can stay a little longer surely."

He maneuvered them beneath the sheets and pulled her into his chest. Her laugh was one of resignation. “For just a little longer.”

Her body fit into his perfectly, her pert bottom cradling his cock which had grown semihard. He cupped one breast, his thumb idly brushing over the pert nipple. Her squirm told him she wasn’t unaffected.

“How much longer will you be in London?” she asked. “When will you return home?”

Of course he knew she was referring to his make-believe ducal estate and not his true home across the ocean. Still, an unexpected pang of homesickness hit him. He didn’t miss the mundane days that stringed together his life at home, but he did miss his brothers.

“Not yet,” he said. “I would like to find my sister, but you’ve made me realize I have been myopic.”

Titania had forced him to consider his attitude toward Maddie. He had blown into England ready to drag his sister for an annulment. His protective streak might have bordered on high-handedness. Maddie was a smart, capable woman who could take care of herself. He’d seen to that. So why was he questioning her decision to throw over a duke’s son to marry a gambler instead?

She shifted enough to see his face. “I have?”

“Indeed. My sister is more intelligent than anyone I know. Why shouldn’t I trust her to make decisions regarding her life and future?” He was asking himself as much as Titania. Honestly, he hadn’t thought that deeply about the plight of his sister, or any other woman, which only proved his point about

his sister being smarter than anyone of his acquaintance, himself included.

“That is quite a revolutionary notion. I only wish more men and women thought the same, including my mother and aunt. They are exceedingly old-fashioned.” She smiled, but it was tight and didn’t reach her eyes. “So you will travel to France first to locate your sister?”

“Yes, I suppose I will.” His mind whirred. “Wait, how did you know she was in France?”

“You told me of course. Will you see Paris while you are there?”

Had he told her Maddie was in France? He didn’t think so but couldn’t remember for certain. “Yes, I am looking forward to exploring Paris.”

Her body softened against him. “I will enjoy picturing you in Notre Dame. The sketches I’ve seen are breathtaking.”

What would it be like to explore Paris in her company? Adventures were always more fun when shared. She was a widow, and from what he’d read, Paris was not as strict as London. What if he asked her to accompany him?

Complications clouded his thoughts. He could not pretend to be an English duke forever, and once she discovered the truth, she would never trust him. And rightly so. Guilt gnawed at his conscience. What had started as a lark had turned into a nightmare.

“When do you plan to return to Bath?” he asked.

“Once our business is concluded.” Her tone filled him with disquiet.

He popped to his elbow, and she rolled to her back to look up at him. “But you don’t want to remarry, do you?”

“I don’t have a choice.” She folded and refolded the edge of the sheet, her gaze on her hands. “My aunt is investing what little remains of her money into this venture. I need to make a good marriage in order to support my mother and aunt.”

“Your late husband left you nothing?”

She turned her face away from his. “Nothing.”

“So he was an impoverished old man who was too poor to even offer you an orgasm?”

Her husky laugh did little to dampen his outrage. That a woman as passionate and vibrant as Titania should be forced to marry another idiot was beyond his comprehension.

“Something like that.” Her arms twined around his neck as her gaze flicked to meet his once more. “You’ve given me more in one night than I could ever imagine.”

He could not offer her riches or love or even his true name, but he could lavish her with pleasure. Dawn had not yet broken. They had time.

He cupped her breast and took her smiling mouth in a kiss so true he wanted to confess his lies and secrets. One of her hands slipped down his chest to grasp his cock, and the urge to confess was trumped by the need to worship her. His cock grew ironlike in her tight grip.

“Again?” she asked with amazement.

“Again. I could never get enough of you. And you deserve another orgasm.”

Her gasp was one of delight. “Do you mean I can experience another one so soon?”

He would have happily given her late husband a beating if he wasn't already in the ground. "If I could convince you to stay in my bed all day, I would give you a dozen."

He trailed his lips down her neck to suck at her nipple while his hand moved between her legs to stoke her arousal. Her clit was the focus of his stroking thumb while he speared her with two of his fingers.

"A dozen? I'm not sure I believe you. It's a shame we don't have the time for an attempt." A dreaminess had entered her tone. Her hips began to circle, the rhythm familiar and ancient, and her hands clutched at his shoulders, trying to pull him over her.

He resisted, moving away from her and stroking his cock. "Get on your hands and knees, my queen."

She stared at his hand moving lazily up and down the length of his cock. "Why?"

His Titania was an innocent in so many ways. An innocent he longed to corrupt in the most pleasurable ways possible. "Do you trust me to make you feel good?" At her nod, he said in a firmer tone, "Then get on your hands and knees."

She flipped over with a speed that made him smile. He positioned himself behind her, and she looked over her shoulder at him, her hair cascading over her back in beautiful waves. If he had the time, he would like to feel her hair caress his cock as she took him in her mouth. When he fit himself at her entrance, her eyes widened and her bottom popped higher, offering him a better angle.

He pressed inside her a slow inch at a time. Their gazes still held, and she bit her bottom lip as he filled her

completely. His cock throbbed. This time he wanted to feel her clench around him as she reached her bliss.

Leaning forward, he wrapped his hand in her hair and tugged her back into his chest. He took slow shallow strokes as his fingers worked her clit. Her breathy moans and squirms spurred him on. He pinched her nipple and her clit at the same time, and she climaxed. Her body bathed his cock in wet heat as it throbbed around him.

He closed his eyes and let her grind on him, trying his damndest to hold his own spend in check. He wanted to eke out every ounce of pleasure for her. Only when she went limp against him did he consider his own pursuits.

Pushing her back to all fours, he grabbed her hips and pushed deep. He was neither slow nor gentle in the chase for his climax. The way she met his every thrust with breathy moans and garbled words of encouragement only drove him harder.

As he felt his seed rising, he pulled free of her body and friggged himself, his spend crisscrossing her buttocks in an erotic display. Her arms trembled and her chest collapsed to the mattress, leaving her arse in the air for him to admire.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, rubbing his spend into her skin. If only he could truly mark her as his. The sense of possessiveness shocked him.

He retrieved the washing cloth and once again cleaned himself from her body. She rolled to her side, her expression sultry and satisfied. He collapsed in her arms, face-to-face, their legs twined together. Neither of them spoke. He played in her hair while she traced her fingers down his spine.

It was the most peaceful he'd felt since... forever. The restlessness that plagued him was soothed. He knew it was just the aftermath of the satisfaction he'd reached with her. Twice. He smiled and pulled her closer. Not wanting to miss a second with her, he tried to force his eyes to remain open, but creeping sleep claimed him.

James woke with a start. He reached out but found the bed empty and cold in the weak morning light. The night had been magical, and he should be glad not to face the awkwardness of the dawn.

Instead, disappointment settled heavily on his chest. He had wanted to see her sleepy eyes and disheveled hair as he kissed her awake. He'd wanted to slip inside her wet tight body and rock them into another blinding climax. He... missed her.

How could he miss someone he barely knew?

Even if she tried to look for him, she would only find a duke who didn't exist. The longer he lay in bed, the more questions surfaced. If she was in the market for a new husband, shouldn't she have pressed her suit for him? Why was he feeling slightly put out by her dismissal of him as a candidate? He wasn't even English, much less a duke. But she didn't know that.

It was early, but he would not find sleep again, so he washed and dressed. The smell of fresh baked bread had him following his nose to the common room. Wearing the same clothes as the night before, Gustav sat at a table eating

battered bread and jam. With bleary eyes and a greenish complexion, he raised a hand in greeting.

Stifling a smile, James joined him. The innkeeper's wife brought him his own bread and a cup of steaming coffee. Already she had learned James's preferences. He passed her an extra coin for her thoughtfulness.

“Have you been up all night, Herr Gustav?”

“A long night it had been too. I am never touching the blue ruin again.” Gustav nibbled on his bread and forced it down with a swallow of tea. He sent a speculative look toward James. “You, however, are looking happy and fit. Was the lady I spied sneaking out of the inn the cause?”

“What time was this?”

“At first light. Our paths crossed just as I returned. Quite lovely.” Gustav's voice turned thoughtful. “Although she tried to hide her face, she struck me as familiar. A lady.”

James sat up straighter. “You are acquainted with her?”

“We've been introduced at one of the social events of the season, but I can't place her at the moment. What is her name?”

“Titania.”

Gustav barked a laugh. “Is that the name she gave you? I suppose it is appropriate considering the masquerade.”

“It's not her real name.” It wasn't a question. Heat rushed his face. He was an idiot. His only excuse was that the night had been ripe for the queen of fairies to make an appearance. In the cold light of the morning, it was obvious she had lied.

The pang of anger was unwarranted considering he was just as culpable. He should thank the gods he had been blessed

with a night of bliss with an exceptional lady and move on with his life. The memory would fade to be replaced with other nights and other ladies.

In fact, he would pack his traveling bag and book passage to France that very day. Once he was reassured of his sister's happiness, he would decide where to go next. The possibilities were endless. It was the perfect plan.

Narrowing his eyes on Gustav, he asked, "Will you help me find her?"

CHAPTER
SIX

Prudence stared at the canopy of her bed. She had tarried too long with James. Not only had she bumped into a gentleman that looked frighteningly familiar in the door of the inn, but the lady's maid who had been hired for the season by her aunt had spied her return. Luckily, the gentleman had only given her a vague once-over before tipping his hat and entering the inn.

The maid's eyes, however, had been as big as saucers. Prudence's heart had nearly leaped out of her chest. They had stared at one another for a long moment, neither saying a thing, before Prudence made a run for her room. As her aunt hadn't stomped in preaching about carnal sin and hellfire, Prudence would assume the maid hadn't tattled. Yet.

The night would be a secret she would hold dear to her heart for the rest of her days. No matter what happened, it had been worth it.

After performing ablutions and dressing, during which neither Prudence nor her maid spoke about their dawn run-in, Prudence joined her aunt in the drawing room.

"Are you feeling better, my dear?" Her aunt asked while stabbing a needle through an embroidery hoop.

“Much better, thank you.” She was actually feeling worse. The lack of sleep had a headache brewing at her temples. Not to mention the sadness of knowing all she had left was a memory, no matter how sweet.

“Good, because the Henderson musicale is this evening. I heard there will be an earl in attendance. A friend of the elder Henderson boy. It will be an opportunity to make inroads.”

Her aunt was desperate for them to receive invitations to more exclusive events and rub elbows with a variety of peers. She had hoped their connection, however tenuous, with Madeline Barnes would prove beneficial. Her aunt had been horrified when Madeline had thrown over the Duke of Ralston’s heir for a common gambler. Prudence had silently cheered.

Unfortunately, Prudence couldn’t beg off a second evening in a row even though she anticipated her headache only getting worse while being subjected to the generally poor singing and playing. “A musicale sounds lovely.

It was not lovely. The musicale was crowded and hot and, as predicted, the actual music was to be endured, not enjoyed. She ignored the caustic looks coming from her aunt and remained in the corner of the room sipping her second glass of champagne.

The poor earl who deigned join the event was surrounded on all sides by young marriageable ladies. He had the look of a man hunted, and Prudence spared a moment of sympathy for him.

Wishing she was home in bed—or better yet in James’s bed—Prudence closed her eyes and turned her face toward the cooling breeze snaking its way through the garden doors.

“I’m surprised to find the queen of fairies at a common musicale,” said a deep voice.

Her eyes flew open. James “Duke” Barnes was standing three feet in front of her. She was dreaming. She had to be. Her head felt like it was full of cotton. She swayed and grabbed the lapel of his jacket to steady herself.

A storm brewed in his eyes. His mobile mouth was turned down and his brows drawn in. His evening attire was stark but highlighted the best parts of him—which was everything. He was the most handsome man in the room. Did he know who she was?

“I— You—” Her heart was galloping, and her stays felt like they’d tightened to the point of suffocating her.

His expression softened slightly. With a firm hand on the small of her back, he guided her through the garden doors and to the stone balustrade. “Take deep breaths. I’d rather not have to explain why you’ve swooned in my arms.”

She gulped in the cooler night air and looked at him from the corner of her eye. She managed to speak with a credible English accent. Perhaps she could bluff her way out of the situation. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you of course.”

“But... But, why?”

“You lied to me.” His voice turned harder and colder.

He knew. What could she say? Right now her throat was so dry and tight she couldn’t squeeze out a single word.

“Your name is not Titania. What is it?”

She blinked dumbly at him. He hadn’t discovered her true identity. There was still hope of escaping the situation without being humiliated. “How did you find out?”

“My friend Herr Gustav recognized you this morning.”

Prudence silently cursed her luck.

Something else was niggling at her, and with a gasp, she figured out what it was. Unlike her, he had dropped any pretense of being English. “Your accent!”

His accusing gaze slipped from hers. He cleared his throat. “I might not have been entirely truthful about my identity either.”

“You pretended to be a duke.”

He had the grace to look as discomfited as she was feeling. “It was badly done. However, in my defense, I had no inkling of the connection I would make with you.”

“In *my* defense, I wasn’t expecting to meet you either.” She lowered her voice. “Last night was...” *Bliss. Madness. Unforgettable.* It was too complicated for one emotion.

“It was incredible, and you know it.” Anger still sizzled in his voice.

Her own frustration and anger superseded her guilt. “Why are you angry with me? You lied as well.”

His expression turned abashed. “I did, and I abjectly apologize. Could you find it your heart to forgive me?”

Considering she had known the entire time who he actually was, there was nothing to forgive, but he didn’t know that.

“Why does it matter? We agreed at the outset that it was one night together and nothing more.”

His jaw worked as he stared at her. “What if I want more than one night?”

Her breath caught. “But we can’t— How would we— It’s impossible.”

It was impossible for too many reasons to list. Most of which he wasn’t even aware of.

“Why? I am not without means. You have the freedom of being a widow.” He grasped her hands. “We could travel together. You want to see Paris, don’t you?”

She did. Hope sparked in her heart, but reality snuffed it before it could flame. “I do, but—”

“Duke Barnes. What a surprise!” Her aunt’s voice was Prudence’s nightmare.

James turned slowly. “Mrs. Courtright?”

“I see you have found Prudence. I suppose you are in town because of your poor sister, but it is too late to save her.” Her aunt’s voice dropped as if discussing a tragedy.

James did not move or speak for a long moment. Slowly, he turned back to face Prudence. “I should have recognized you, but... The gardens. The mask. The candlelight. You are not surprised, are you?”

She wanted to deny it. Wanted to pretend she didn’t understand his meaning, but there were already too many lies between them. She whispered, “No.”

“You knew who I was.” He mouthed a curse and shook his head before meeting her gaze once more. “You even called me Duke.”

Her aunt was looking between Prudence and James, her brow scrunched and her mouth pinched. “What is going on here?”

If he told her aunt exactly what had gone on, her situation would be dire. Her reputation would be ruined in England. No one would marry her, and she and her aunt would have to return home with their future in peril. Not to mention, Prudence would prove an even bigger disappointment to her mother than usual.

She begged James with her eyes. His mouth tightened, but when he turned to her aunt, his voice was calm. “If you are receiving tomorrow, I would like to call upon you ladies.”

Her aunt looked flustered. “Of course we would be pleased to receive you, Duke.”

James bowed toward them both, turned on his heel, and disappeared.

Prudence ignored the glare from her aunt. Trying to regulate the shock and distress of her unmasking by James, Prudence forced her lips into the tiniest of smiles. It was all she could manage. “It will be good to catch up with a friend from home, won’t it?”

“I didn’t realize you were on friendly terms at home.” Of course it would be just like her aunt to point out the obvious.

“We were acquainted.” Prudence took a side step to escape, but her aunt matched her movement, keeping her blocked in.

“And you have become reacquainted while in London?” Her aunt was getting worked up, which would be sure to cause a scene and make matters even worse, if that was possible. “Why did you not tell me before now?”

“We can discuss this later, Aunt. You are drawing attention.” Prudence sent a steadier smile at the people who were casting them curious glances.

“You can be sure we will discuss it.” Her aunt smoothed a hand down her dress and took a deep breath. “I believe I feel a headache coming on. We should depart.”

The next morning, Prudence sat on the edge of the settee and sipped a cup of coffee. Her eyes were sandy and her head fuzzy from lack of sleep. She had managed to put her aunt off the night before, but the coming visit from James was sure to prove difficult.

Tears that had flowed into her pillow prickled her eyes once more. She looked to the ceiling and blinked to beat back the emotion. The beautiful night they’d spent together was now tarnished. Her biggest fear was that James would hate her.

Her aunt bustled into the drawing room, her face thunderous. “Are you ready to speak now?”

“I will speak to you after James’s visit.” While Prudence’s voice was calm, her cup rattled on the saucer.

“James? No one calls him that. How intimately acquainted are you and Duke Barnes?” Her aunt was inching toward the truth.

The man who they were employing as a butler-footman stepped into the room. “Mr. Barnes, ma’am.”

“Show him in, Perkins.”

The butler inclined his head and stepped back. James walked in, looking handsome in a navy frock coat and the

same buff-colored buckskins she had unbuttoned with relish. She tore her eyes away from the fall. Knowing what lay underneath was torturous. His dark blond hair was windblown, and his color was high. His masculinity was potent and filled the room with energy.

An ache spread from her heart for what she'd enjoyed so briefly and lost. She stood on wobbly knees. James spared her aunt a brief acknowledgment, but his gaze eviscerated her as if searching for her truths. His anger and shock from the musicale were gone. In their place was something she couldn't name. Speculation? Curiosity?

"I would like to know what is going on," her aunt said stridently into the long silence.

"I would beg your patience, ma'am." With his focus still on Prudence, he said in a voice that brooked no argument, "Your niece and I must talk. Alone. We will take a stroll to the park. A footman or maid can accompany us for appearance's sake."

While her aunt sputtered, he offered his bare hand to Prudence and waited. The same hand had touched her intimately and given her unspeakable pleasure, yet the simple act of slipping her hand into his felt momentous.

The squeeze he gave her hand steadied her nerves as he led her into the foyer of the town house. She asked Perkins to fetch the maid. Prudence and James waited in silence, their hands still joined. She cast her gaze up at his face, but could not predict the direction of the coming conversation.

With protests from her aunt still ringing in their ears, they departed the town house, shoulder to shoulder. He untangled their fingers and offered his arm. She tucked her hand into the crook. It was a short stroll to the small park across from their

town house. Prudence glanced over her shoulder. Her maid trailed them at a distance that afforded them enough privacy to speak plainly.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked with a bolt of emotion.

“As am I.”

“But I knew, and you didn’t.”

“That is true. Which begs the question...” He stopped and faced her. “Why did you accompany me to my room?”

The truth would leave her vulnerable, but she couldn’t add to her lies. “Because I have been in love with you for as long as I can remember. One night with you was more than I ever dreamed to have. And it was worth it, no matter what happens now.” Defiance strengthened her voice.

“I remember you as a girl, but—” His head hung slightly.

She took his hand in hers. “I never put myself in your path. I knew you wanted to travel. I read every journal you passed to the lending library. You allowed me to dream of something more.”

“You want to see the world as well.”

“Yes, well. I’ve seen London, which is more than I ever imagined possible.”

He glanced toward Prudence’s maid who was pretending to examine the flowers and restarted their walk. “You were a virgin?”

Heat flushed into her face. “I was, yes.”

“If I had known, I would have been gentler.” The castigation he had already treated himself to was apparent in

his humorless laugh. “What am I saying? I wouldn’t have dallied with you if I had known.”

“Exactly why I didn’t want you to know, and if you couldn’t tell, I enjoyed being with you. Very much. In fact, our time together was more pleasurable than I ever imagined relations between a man and woman could be. My only regret is that we only had one night together.”

“But what a night it was.” The half smile he gave her sent a bolt of awareness to her belly.

In a soft voice, she said, “You weren’t ever supposed to find me. I thought you’d be on a ship to the Continent seeking adventure by now.”

“Perhaps I discovered a more exciting adventure to pursue.”

She whipped her head around to stare at him, but he remained unperturbed. She had stared at his profile for years, studying every line and expression. Yet he was still a mystery she wanted to solve.

“I am stuck here with my aunt,” she said.

“You don’t have to be stuck. You have a choice.”

She stuttered to a stop. “What do you mean?”

He turned to her. “Marry me.”

Shock left her numb. “You don’t want to marry. You want to travel and see the world.”

“Why can’t I do both?” He took her hands and squeezed. “Why can’t *we* do both?”

“But... But... You don’t love me.”

He pursed his lips and tilted his head. “How much of what we shared was real? Besides your name and accent of course.”

“All of it.”

“Me too. It was easy to be honest with you.”

“Was that because you thought you’d never see me again though?”

“It was a relief to share with you. When I awoke and you were gone, I felt bereft. When Gustav told me he recognized you, I knew instantly I would not stop until I found you. It seems to me marriages are made on less sturdy foundations than what we have already built.”

He was correct. She had seen ton marriages decided after only a dance. Money and connections were what was important. At least she and James had similar passions in and out of bed. Her infatuation had matured into love. Did she have the courage to wait for him to feel the same?

There was another impediment. “My mother and aunt—”

“Will be well taken care of. My wife’s family does not need to worry about their futures.”

Her mind whirled. While Prudence wouldn’t be making a match with an English gentleman, the Barnes family was just as wealthy, if not more so, than most peers. Her mother and aunt would be able to hold their heads high and crow about their connections at home while Prudence could live her life with the man she loved.

“I am too selfish to turn down your offer. I have wanted you for too long.” She was determined to be honest with him.

He cupped her cheek and kissed her so sweetly she sagged into him. “My want might not be as long-lived as yours, but it

is intense.”

“When will we return home to marry?” She already dreaded the long ocean journey and the expectations that would be put upon them by their families and New York society. While not as grand as anything in England, everyone would expect the Barnes to host a large wedding for their eldest son.

“While our families will be displeased, I had something more expedient in mind. I cannot fathom waiting. Let’s begin our adventures by eloping to Gretna Green.”

Her aunt would be shocked, but it was a good match. Her objections would be centered around the speed and lack of fanfare, but Prudence could weather the tears and pleas to wait. “When?”

“How soon can you be packed?” he said with an infectious grin.

EPILOGUE

Four days later...

Hand in hand, James and Prudence climbed the stairs of the inn.

“How are you feeling, Mrs. Barnes?” he asked with a grin.

“Very happy, Mr. Barnes. And you?”

“Ready to take you to bed and give you the dozen orgasms I promised.” At the top of the stairs, he swept her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way to their room.

“A dozen?” she asked on breathless laughter. “What about France and finding your sister?”

“Maddie is a smart, capable woman who can take care of herself. Anyway, you’ve assured me she and her gambler are in love.” He dropped her on the side of the bed.

She propped herself up on her elbows to enjoy the sight of him stripping off his jacket, waistcoat, and shirt. His muscular chest had become familiar but was no less arousing. She had traced every inch with her fingers and most with her lips.

They had discussed taking separate rooms at the inns along the road to Scotland, but had discarded the idea as soon as they were alone together in the hired carriage. They hadn’t even made it out of London before Prudence was astride his lap,

riding him much like the courtesan they had watched along the dark walk.

They had engaged in quick rough sex against the wall and slow gentle sex in the candlelight. She couldn't get enough of him. In between, they had talked about everything from the mundane to the philosophical. It seemed as if the lies at the beginning of their relationship only made them more truthful with one another now.

He pushed her skirts to her waist and pulled her bottom to the edge of the mattress. Eagerly, she wrapped her legs around his hips as he made quick work with his breeches. He was hard, and she was wet. It didn't matter that they had made love just that morning as dawn had broken.

He thrust inside her with a groan of relief. Grinding his hips to get even deeper, he propped himself over her on his hands, gazing into her eyes.

“How do you feel now?” he asked in a rough voice.

“Like I'm home.” The thought popped out without examining it, but it felt truer than anything she had ever felt. It didn't matter she was thousands of miles from where she had been raised. No matter where she was, as long as he was with her, she would be home.

His eyes flared in surprise, but a slow smile crested his lips. “Yes. Home. Wherever we are, you are my home.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An award-winning author, Laura Trentham was born and raised in a small town in Tennessee. She writes sexy, small town contemporaries and smoking hot Regency historicals.

Want to find out why Madeline Barnes throws over a duke's son to marry a rakish gambler? Check out Book 1 of the Laws of Attraction series: [HERE](#)

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