

SHE CAN RUN
FROM HER PAST
BUT NOT HER
HEART.

love
A Lady at
Midnight



CHARLIE LANE

Love a Lady at Midnight

THE CAVENDISH FAMILY

CHARLIE LANE



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Editing by Krista Dapkey

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For Brian, who is as patient with me as Jackson is with Gwendolyn and even more charming.

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Prologue



December 1821, Paris, France

In his dreams, she fled from him always, and tonight proved no different, though he did not dream.

Miss Gwendolyn Smith ran down the narrow hallway, her black-as-night gown flying behind her. The gown folded into the shadows, showed her for what he'd always known her to be—a creature of secrets. But flickering candles ensconced on the wall on either side of her flight transformed her yellow hair to glittering gold, a shade that could never be hid, could only ever throw the sun into shame. Gold and space-deep black blended together as she hitched her skirts and ran. From him.

Jackson Cavendish did not run. He took each step purposefully and with a soft tread, knowing he would catch her. Eventually. Inevitably.

They were inevitable. Always had been. And he'd been patient. But the champagne singing through his blood and buzzing his senses turned patience into tiny bubbles quickly popped.

He was a researcher and an academic and knew the value of a slow rhythm of observation and thought over action and impulse.

Not tonight, though. Usually when she fled, he watched her go. He waited. Tonight, he gave chase. He felt like one of the huge cats he'd once witnessed in the jungles of South America—sleek and dangerous with killer intent.

At the end of the corridor, the masked woman in the midnight gown cut in the previous century's style—a costume for the night's masquerade events, and one that looked damn good on her—encountered a staircase. He'd known she would. She'd likely known it, too. Her fingers pressed into the cold stone of the wall, she paused, glanced at him prowling toward her with hot intent. Through the holes of her plain black domino, her sea-blue eyes glinted. With what emotion?

If only he were close enough to tell. His steps never hitched, his destination her lithe, familiar form. Her foot hovered above the first step, and the closer he strode, the more he could see the details of her body—the tensed muscles and chest heaving with exertion, the sumptuous, parted lips.

He grinned.

She bolted up the staircase.

He followed, taking the spiraling steps slowly. He knew what awaited at the top of the stairs—a single room, and in that room, a bed. And ... *her*. Unless a single glass of champagne had sent her senses and her sense reeling out of control, a heady waltz that demolished time, space, and reason.

No. She knew.

Then why lead him on a chase to where he most wanted to be and where she did not?

Yet ... perhaps he should revise that assumption. She had kissed him in the garden but half an hour ago, chest to chest, lips to lips in the moonlight. He'd poured himself into it, and thought she'd poured back. For an instant only, a breath where she forgot herself and let him in.

Then she'd fled. Always fleeing.

He reached the top step only to see her skirts disappear behind the door.

He followed.

The door handle was cool to the touch, and it gave easily. He knew the hinges creaked. He'd entered the room often enough in the last month to access the trunks of old papers stored there. She had as well. They'd spend hours up here, poring over the observations and longings of the dead, asking questions, taking notes for the next treatise on Saxon-Norman history.

And ignoring the bed.

The squeak of unoiled, ancient metal against wood announced his arrival.

She sat on the bed, turned away from him and looking out the only window. Her shoulders heaved as she caught her breath, and the steel-stiff state of her posture could not entirely be attributed to a corset. She knew he'd

entered.

“Good evening, Mistress Midnight,” he said, sliding the door shut behind him.

“My Lord Mischief. I did not ask for your company.”

“Did you not?” He placed one foot in front of the other, a slow but purposeful trajectory. “That kiss in the garden, then ... was your way of telling me to bugger off?”

She turned swift as a snake about to strike. The domino hid her expression, but he could read her well despite it. Anger fit her as true as that gown, made her eyes glitter. She sighed, the sound of a weary woman. “We are at a masquerade, are we not? Tonight is about ... impulse. The unusual. Besides, your kiss was not the sort to lead to a liaison.”

Like hell it wasn't.

Jackson stepped closer, his thighs now only a few inches away from the bed, from her. “I did not please you. A horrid mistake. You must let me show you I can do better.”

“No. I grow fatigued. Good night, Lord Mischief.”

He'd come so far. He would not give up pursuit now. He sat gently on the side of the bed and dared to lift his knuckles to her cheek.

She stiffened then melted with a sigh into the gentle embrace. “Who are you?” Her inquiry a whispered punch to his gut.

Did she truly not know him? Could a single domino and costume fool her so when he knew the very arch of her neck and bend of her wrist, the slim scar on her jawline, and the way her hair curled oddly over her right ear, looking like a devil's horn. She always tugged at it, attempted to hide it behind her ear, her brows pulled low in disapproval. It always popped back up, and if she could, she'd tame that curl, dominate it, slice it from her head. He remained glad she could not, too vain to butcher a lock so close to her face. Loved that rogue bit of hair, he did.

Right now, he wanted to tweak her nose, though. Rip his mask from his face and ask her if knowing his identity changed her reaction to their kiss.

Fear howled through his every limb.

No. He'd keep the mask in place, remain Lord Mischief for a time. He'd thought she'd known who she kissed in the garden, so he'd clutched her to his heart, thanking God she was finally his.

And she'd not even known whose lips she'd pressed her own to.

Disappointment stabbed, offered a poor replacement for the heaven of her

in his arms.

“Shall I tell you who I am?” he asked, dropping his hand to the bed between them, the air thick with their mingled breath.

She swallowed, turning her profile away from him so all he could see was her slender shoulders, the pale column of her neck, and that gold hair, strands of moonlight shaking it into life.

“Should I tell you?” he said again, his voice deeper, though, desperate with a tremor of fear.

“No.”

Anger rippled like angry ocean waves across his skin. “Coward.”

She stiffened. “I merely cannot be bothered. It is immaterial.”

He leaned close, hissed into her ear. “It is everything, Mistress Midnight.”

He wanted her to know. He suspected she already did yet toyed with him. How could she have not known? Each kiss she’d layered upon kiss in the garden had tasted of desire born of intimacy, of *knowing* a person. And each press of her hands upon his body had felt as urgent as years of wanting and finally having.

So why did she play games with him?

Very well, then. He could play games, too.

He inched closer to her on the bed, pleased when she did not scoot away. “Who we are during daylight hours does not matter. Let us be other people tonight. Impulse you say? Let us give in to it, then, love.”

Love. Yes. He’d felt it for her now going on years. Perhaps since he’d first seen her wet and shivering on his uncle’s ship, a stowaway on their expedition to India. He’d brought her a blanket, and she’d shrugged it away, refusing his help. Prickly from day one was Miss Gwendolyn Smith. And from day one, he’d wished to bare her of her thorns and reveal the soft petals of her deep below the surface. He knew she had them. She showed them readily enough for their employer, famed explorer Baron Eaden. Uncle Henry to Jackson. My lord, always, to Gwendolyn, ever grateful that the older man had scooped her up and handed her a position as his secretary.

They’d traveled together for years, the three of them, all across the world, till homesickness and common sense carried Uncle Henry home and saw him married and dedicated to the London season and finding his daughters husbands.

Gwendolyn looked to him as a father. Jackson knew that.

But how did she look toward Jackson? He had glimpsed insight, fleeting

signs of softness.

But she wore her thorned armor well this night. Except, of course, for in the garden. He'd caught her rose-scent then, her petal-softness, and held it. And by God, he'd have it again.

She inhaled, turning air to a knife's edge, and held it between her teeth. She stood and staccato stepped toward the room's single, narrow window. "I ... I ..." She turned in a whirl of midnight skirts. "All right. A night of impulse, of being someone else. I agree."

"Excellent."

In the past, they'd played one another over chessboards and card tables, in the hull of ships or desert tents. Tonight, they would play with one another on the wide expanse of a century's old bed and leave their pasts behind.



Gwendolyn had known better than to run up the stairs to the single room in the nearly abandoned tower. Trapped herself, she had.

She must have wanted it that way. Fleeing to the tower had allowed her to do what she always did—run—but it had also allowed her to be caught.

And she found she wanted to be caught. Desperately.

Jackson—yes, of course she bloody well knew who he was—never took his eyes off her. His brown eyes darkened, danced with merriment, victory, and something ... darker.

Jackson had never been a creature of the shadows. He joked and grinned and bounced about when he wasn't nose-deep in books or dirt. She adored watching him burrow and bounce. But she hid her adoration well.

She hid nothing tonight. With the domino strapped tightly across her face, she stared her fill—openly, admiringly—enjoying the masculine square of his jaw and the wave of his yellow hair backward from his forehead. His own domino threw his high cheekbones into stark relief and honed her attention on his lips—firm and chiseled and perfect for kissing. She'd always wondered about that. Tonight, she *knew*. Definitely divine for kissing, no matter her previous protestations.

His chin and cheeks were clean-shaven, and she wished it otherwise. How many times had she looked at him across the prow of a boat or over a campfire, seen him shaggy and unshaven, and wanted to rake her fingernails

through the scruff? Too many to count.

He leaned a shoulder against the tall carved bedpost, as if to lure her in that direction. She'd sketched the carving just under his right shoulder yesterday. Over hundred years old, it was. Baron Eaden would want to see it. And she did what he wished because he'd saved her life.

And Jackson had given her life joy.

But she could give him nothing in return.

She did not doubt he knew her. His hand clutching her waist in the garden had felt like *finally*, and she'd seen longing in his eyes for years. For as many years as she'd hid the longing from her own.

She stopped just out of his reach. "Tell me ... why did you come here this evening?"

"Why does anyone come to a masquerade? To be seen yet not seen." He sketched a courtly bow, one leg extended, arms unfolding gracefully wide. When he stood upright, he did so with a slinky step toward her. "To be someone else entirely for an evening."

That's why she'd attended the event. She'd not intended to, despite the duchess's insistence that she enjoy some of her time in Paris. The older woman had worked long and hard on the masquerade, was proud of it, and she'd been kind to Gwendolyn and Jackson as they'd mined the contents of her family's archives. In the end, Gwendolyn had felt not only an obligation to the widow, a kindness, but also a curiosity. She'd never attended such an affair, and she'd thought for a single night, masked and costumed, she could be herself. She played someone else every day of her life—Miss Gwendolyn *Smith*. A lie. But who she lied about being during the daytime did not matter tonight.

"Why did you come?" he asked.

"I came tonight to be me." She could give him a truth. Wanted to, even.

He sauntered toward the window and propped his shoulder on the stone wall beside it. The man knew how to lounge. Did he know how well it set his muscled body off for appreciation? Likely not. He'd always seemed oblivious to every woman who batted her eyes at him, more interested in books and old bits and bobs. His disinterest had made her feel safe. She could not have him. But at least he wanted no one else.

She clutched the bedpost, her legs weak at the thought of wanting and of getting what she wanted. Finally. She searched for something to cut the butter-thick lust surrounding them. "I think I know who you are."

“Oh?” A lift of a golden brow over the domino.

“Oh yes. You are the duchess’s son, Pierre.”

“The half-wit who goes about drunk day in and day out, who dropped his trousers in the ballroom an hour hence? Good God, Mistress Midnight, I’m insulted.”

She chuckled, surprised by her own momentary levity. He did that to her—raised her up when she least expected it. “He’s such an arse, isn’t he? I feel sorry for the duchesse. Do not you?”

“Supremely. It’s why I came tonight. Thought it might cheer her up.”

She couldn’t help it. She grinned. “Me as well.”

“We are alike, you and I. Mischief and Midnight have always gone well together.”

She could not look at him, merely rubbed her sweating palms down her skirts and stared at the dusty darkness before her.

That was her future—a dusty darkness.

Jackson offered light and family. He was Baron Eaden’s nephew and had two much younger brothers—twins. Scamps the both of them. Gwendolyn wanted to run riot with them and laugh till her belly ached at their antics, but she could never let them close. Never let anyone close. She’d spend the rest of her days traveling the world, discovering the secrets the dead had left behind about their lives because the present held nothing for her.

Not even Jackson.

So why not take tonight? What did it matter if sharing a bed with him changed their easy, companionable relationship? She could not have him.

But she could have one night. He held it out to her, a gift more precious than he could understand. Tonight, they could be Mistress Midnight and Lord Mischief, bold and passionate lovers. And tomorrow, when they met over the breakfast table, they could go back to being Gweny and Jack, friends and colleagues.

Quicker than shadows, he moved across the slight space between them and hoisted her into the air, cradling her in his arms as his lips crashed into her. His arms felt like home and his kiss tasted like heaven. The blood rushed through her limbs with lightning violence, pooling at the already-heated apex of her legs, and her fingers found the base of his skull, the silken tangle of his hair, and she used them both to deepen the kiss, to pull him to his home—her.

The certainty made her want to sob, to shatter and transform into a torrent of grief that flooded the duchess’s centuries-old castle.

Because she was his home, and him hers, but they were wanderers and always would be. No home for them, especially not in each other.

One



F ebruary 1822, London, England

It had been nine weeks and three days since Jackson Cavendish had kissed Miss Gwendolyn Smith. And it had been twenty-eight minutes and approximately fifteen seconds since Viscount Albee and his half brother Viscount Cordell had begun their cravat-tying competition. A tradition of sorts for the competitive siblings. An odd one. But distracting, and Jackson needed distraction.

He'd always been a patient man, particularly in regard to Gwendolyn. But nine weeks and three days could change a man, boil impatience in his blood. Doubt too.

The brothers stared into identical oval gilt looking glasses, appearing almost identical themselves with their black wavy hair and tall frames.

Lord Cordell, Bax, stood a bit taller and broader than his brother, and he frowned into the mirror on the wall as he wove the linen slowly yet precisely around his throat. He finished it off with a nod, then unwound the cloth and dropped it into a pile beside him.

Lord Albee, Cass, was married to Jackson's cousin Ada, and he wore a wicked grin his older brother could never achieve, no matter how hard he tried. He wove the linen like a whirlwind, and when he finished off a tangled bow, he cried, "Done!" then unwound the cloth and dropped it into a mangled pile of cravats at his side.

Bax shot him a look of pure frustration and moved his fingers a bit faster, grabbing for the last cravat in his pile.

Jackson tapped the dented case of his pocket watch.

“Are we done yet?” Bax asked. “Jackson, the time please?”

“Oh, yes.” Jackson peered at the watch. “Less than a minute remaining.”

Bax’s fingers flew, but Cass had already moved on. He leaned a shoulder against the fireplace mantel and grinned, arms crossed over his chest just below the most hastily tied cravat in all Christendom.

“Time!” Jackson called.

Bax’s arms dropped to his side, leaving a half-tied cravat dangling around his neck. “How the deuce do you do it, Cass? You wallop me every time.”

“It’s the simple knot, brother. Fancy ones were all well and good when I was a bachelor, but now that I have a bride to keep happy, the simpler ones are best. Undo the easiest. I’d think you’d know all about that.” He winked.

“Next time, Cass, we’re using the same knot, agreed upon beforehand. I’ll look into the matter, see which knot offers the best challenge.”

Cass dropped into a seat near Jackson with a whoosh of breath. “Of course you will, dear brother.” He elbowed Jackson. “Why didn’t you join us?”

“I’m too distracted for play.” He was too distracted for everything. Yet he needed distraction from the thing that distracted him from all else. He could neither work nor eat in the last nine weeks and three days since he’d shared Gwendolyn’s bed.

Bax joined them, crossing an ankle over a knee as he sat. “Distracted by what?”

“Miss Smith is my bet,” Cass said.

Jackson snapped his pocket watch closed and replaced it in his pocket. “No.” Yes. What had begun on a moon-bright midnight had ended in the dusty sunshine of the next day. She’d left the bed before him, and when he’d met her over tea but hours later, she’d pretended the night before had never happened. Every attempt to talk about it locked her further behind her own walls. She kept her distance. Emotionally. They often could not avoid being in the same room together. She’d built a moat between them and filled it with crocodiles. Likely because she knew he could swim.

Nine weeks and three days.

An impossibly long time, no matter how short it truly was.

He stabbed his elbow into the chair arm and propped his chin on his hand.

Two happily married men before him, and he was sick of silence. Why not share? Perhaps they knew a secret to wife catching Jackson did not.

“Very well,” he said. “Yes, I find myself distracted because of Miss Smith.”

“Knew it.” Cass preened. “You two can’t keep your eyes off of one another.”

“Love? Is it?” Bax asked, scratching at his jaw and leaning deep into the back of the chair.

Jackson gave a tight nod. “For me at least.” He was not yet ready to let the word pass his lips. When it did, it would be to caress the soft shell of Gwendolyn’s ear.

Bax made a thoughtful sound in his throat. “Have you told her?”

“No. But we ... shared a night together.” Was it caddish to tell them such a secret? He held his breath, waiting for their reactions.

“That’s promising,” Cass said. “I won’t ask you if she enjoyed herself, but it’s a question you should have an answer to nonetheless.” He grinned. “Look at me, asking the right question. Proud of me, Bax?”

Bax grunted, rolled his eyes. “So very much. My brother has a point.”

“Yes.” Jackson ground the words like meal between his teeth. “We both enjoyed ourselves.”

“Said you didn’t have to answer it out loud,” Cass grumbled.

They *had* enjoyed themselves, despite Jackson’s inexperience. That was not what held them apart. It was Gwendolyn who would not touch him as herself. Once dawn had crept into that little Parisian tower room, she’d fled from him once more, met him only as a friend and research partner from sunrise to sunset.

Bax stood, crossed the room, and opened a cabinet from which he pulled a crystal decanter sloshing with amber liquid. He tossed the contents into three crystal tumblers and took his seat once more, passing Jackson and Cass a glass.

He arched an eyebrow at Jackson. “May I ask you a few questions?”

Jackson nodded. Why not? “You have a precise analytical mind I admire. Perhaps you can help me discover a solution I’ve not yet considered.”

Bax nodded.

Cass groaned, pouring half the brandy down his throat. He stood and began to gather the crumpled cravats from the floor.

Bax ignored his brother. “What is your aim?” he asked Jackson. “What

are your intentions with Miss Smith?"

"Marriage." He'd had one night, and now he wanted all the others. He'd always wanted all the others, but their one night had sparked a fire of impatience inside him that he could not douse.

"Clearly defined goal. Good. And I assume you have not asked her to marry you ... or have you?"

Jackson shook his head. "She would not welcome it."

"Do you know why?"

"I assume it's because she knows her answer will kill me."

"Dramatic," Cass said. "I like it."

"But why are you assured of her negative response?" Bax asked.

Jackson let his head fall back onto the chair. "She has a secret of some import. She speaks of it to no one."

"Curious," Bax said.

"Frustrating," Jackson mumbled.

Cass held a few cravats in their direction. "You could always tie her up. Does she like that sort of thing?"

Bax turned his back on his brother. "Ignore him."

But Jackson made a mental note about the tying up. If she did like that sort of thing, he would not be against it.

"Other than your one night," Bax continued, "has she ever pursued you?"

"No." Not even on their one night. He'd been the one to chase her. He always was.

Cass sat, the cravats piled high in his lap. "When we were in Paris together, you should have seen it, Bax. Jackson here's like a little lost puppy, following her about, teasing her, shooting her longing looks."

"Am not," Jackson said. Although, in the quiet of his own mind, he knew the truth.

"The only way one knows," Cass continued, wrapping a cravat around his fist as if preparing to box, "that Miss Smith is equally sweet on our Mr. Cavendish is that when absolutely no one is looking, or when she thinks they're not, she looks at him as if her gaze alone could strip him bare."

Jackson shot a glance at Cass. "She does?"

Cass nodded, steepled his fingers beneath his chin.

"A conundrum," Bax said. "You cannot solve the problem if you do not know what it is. Whatever ails her, it must be untenable if it keeps her from acting on her feelings for you."

“Perhaps she needs to understand what she would miss if she did not have you always nearby. I say”—Cass stretched halfway out of his chair, reaching for a basket near the door—“you give her exactly what she says she wants.” His fingers caught the edge of the basket, and he pulled it right up against his chair and dumped the contents of his lap inside, then finished off his brandy. “If she says she doesn’t want you, even if you know she does, then don’t chase her. I thought when I told Ada to go off into the world without me that I might never see her again. Here I am, seeing her every night in my very own bed.”

“Hm.” Bax tapped his long fingers on his knee. “Not a terrible idea.”

Jackson shook his head. “We work together. It’s almost impossible to avoid one another. And if I’m around her, I tease, I look, I—”

“You *long*,” Cass said.

“That too.”

“Then take a holiday.” Bax swirled his brandy in the cup then sipped. “You must have interests outside of your uncle’s that can take you in a different direction for a time. It sounds like you’ve been at the same course of action for ages without the desired result. Try something new, and if that does not work, try something else.”

“A scientific process. Of course.”

Cass stood. “The two of you could bore paint drying on the wall. I’m going to find Ada. And disarrange her a bit. If she’ll let me.” He waved and disappeared.

Bax grinned, shaking his head at the empty doorway, at his now long-gone brother. The two of them had been something of ill-willed enemies for ages, and if Jackson believed the stories, Cass had once tried to ... abscond ... with Bax’s fiancée. Jackson couldn’t imagine the good-natured rogue doing anything so nefarious, especially not to the brother he seemed to love dearly. In a competitive sort of way, of course. If he’d been a man adrift, Cass had found his way back home.

Home.

Jackson had one of those. Not that he often thought of it. Yet, in ways, he felt adrift, too. A new location every few months, a new project, digging into other peoples’ pasts, his own life—the type of life that creates trunks of memories for others to discover centuries for now—forever so far in front of him, he could not see it.

Home. Seastorm Manor.

Jackson leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. "It's worth a try, Bax. The whole ... distance experiment."

It would help him clear his head, perhaps help him inch closer to that future he— Did he want it? Or did he like how things were now? The constant travel, always near Gwendolyn but never *with* her. He needed to figure that out too. Seastorm would be the right distraction. His father's unfinished research was there, purposefully ignored, though Jackson knew his father wouldn't have wanted it that way.

Bax finished off his brandy. "Sounds like you have a bevy of questions to answer, my friend. I suggest you write them all down. I have faith you will answer each one."

Jackson sighed, pushed to his feet, and downed the brandy in one swallow. He placed the glass on a nearby table and saluted his friend before leaving.

It was not a long walk between Bax's terrace home and the Cavendish townhome, and the day shone inexplicably lovely considering the dour state of his soul. There should be less sunshine and more rain. A sole clap of thunder perhaps. At the very least, the clouds should hang low and gray, not float gay and fluffy on a blue field of sport.

But he wouldn't give up. Not yet. Giving up was a nail in the coffin of his already coughing heart. His trip to Brighton was no retreat. It was a regrouping. He'd clear his head, form a plan, fulfil his duties as his father's son, and if he were lucky, make progress with Gwendolyn too. Would she miss him when he left?

A question without an answer even as he sauntered through the door of the Cavendish terrace.

Cranston, the Cavendish butler appeared like a wraith in a side door. "May I take your coat, sir?"

"No. Thank you, Cranston. Is my uncle home?" They'd not discussed their next destination in much too long.

"No, sir, but he should return around noon."

Jackson pulled his pocket watch out and flicked it open. His father's watch, shined as always to a golden sheen with a small dent near the top right. It read five to eleven.

The butler disappeared as smoothly as he'd appeared, and Jackson snapped the watch shut but did not replace it safe in his pocket. Dented but

trustworthy, the timepiece ticked the memory of Jackson's father into being. A good man, intelligent and caring, a man for whom family was all.

Jackson wanted what his father had held—family, comfort, a home, love.

All of it with Gwendolyn. Who would not have him.

There it was again, that frustration boiling his patience to a screaming point.

Foolish to continue walking a path that led nowhere.

How long had it been since he'd been home?

At least over a year since he'd stepped foot there. But it was time to return, time to complete his father's old research project. He'd left it unfinished when he'd died. Finding it and finishing it made his stomach turn. Felt right, too.

He rubbed the edge of his pocket watch.

It was time. Time to face his guilt. For his family. And time to push Gwendolyn just a bit. To see if she continued a cold cat or purred and jumped right into his lap.

Two



Lonely as midnight, Gwendolyn walked with sharp steps behind Lord Eaden's daughters. Bond Street streamed around them, loud and crowded, and they chatted to one another as they wove through the passersby, throwing various comments over their shoulders at her, always including her.

But Gwendolyn rarely answered. Best to keep her distance, to remember they were not her friends but her employer's children.

Ahead, the sign for modiste shop rocked in the wind. Marianne would be working today. She was always working.

Gwendolyn tapped Ada Cavendish's shoulder. "I'm going to pop into that shop." She nodded toward the sign, growing larger with each step.

Ada glanced upward. She looked very little like her father. Green eyes instead of brown, dark hair instead of graying gold. But she shared the same stubborn chin and determined gaze of the man who had saved Gwendolyn all those years ago. Like her father, Ada saw easily those things kept deeply hidden.

"Very well," she said. "Are you sure you would not like to come with us to my friend's shop instead? Henrietta's gowns are the best."

"No, thank you. I have given my custom to this shop for years, and I am afraid I cannot change my habits now."

"As you wish," Ada said. "Will you meet us in half an hour, then?"

Gwendolyn nodded, watched Ada and Nora disappear, then slipped into the shop, a bell tingling above the door. She knew Ada's friend designed the best gowns in London, and she coveted them, but she was not here to refresh her wardrobe.

“Pardon me,” she told a shopgirl bustling by, “I am looking for Miss Marianne Crawford.”

The shopgirl nodded. “In the back. But she won’t welcome distractions.”

“I do not plan to stay long. Thank you.”

The shopgirl nodded and swept away, and Gwendolyn quickly found the back door, creaked it open, and slipped through into a large well-lit comfortable room where five women sat at various tables bent over yards of silk.

Marianne sat next to a window, her hair more yellow than gray in the foggy light streaming through the glass, a pin between her teeth. She looked up as the door snicked closed, and the pin dropped to her lap. Her brown eyes widened with welcome. “Gwen! I did not expect you so soon after last time. Come. Sit.” She nodded at a nearby chair.

A command from the woman who’d been her governess, from the only person who’d stood by her side when life had shattered around her.

Gwendolyn sat. “Are you well, Marianne? How have you been?”

The woman bobbed her head from shoulder to shoulder and pushed her gold-rimmed glasses up her nose. “Well enough. Eyesight is going. Fingertips hard as leather these days.” She chuckled. “But I’ve an honest job and a new fellow. A sight to see. Bald as a plate and nose broken three times over. At least. But he looks at me like I’m made of jewels. How’s your fellow?”

“He’s”—Gwendolyn cleared her throat—“not mine.” She set her hand palm up on the table almost touching the folds of amethyst silk.

Marianne snorted. “If you say so. His name is always on your lips. ‘Mr. Cavendish found the most interesting artifact. Mr. Cavendish had a most peculiar joke. Mr. Cavendish was more handsome than the Prince of Denmark.’”

“I cannot help it if it’s true.”

“But is it noteworthy?”

Gwendolyn felt heat rush into her cheeks. Perhaps it wasn’t noteworthy to anyone but herself. She noted everything about him.

“Speaking of notes ...” Marianne’s voice held a hesitation Gwendolyn had not heard there before.

Gwendolyn snapped her gaze to her friend’s “What note?”

“A letter. From the Marquess of Preston.”

Gwendolyn’s hands shook, likely vibrated into movement by the rapid

beating of her heart. Sweat broke out on her palms, and she rubbed it on her skirts. “The Marquess. Are you sure?”

“Yes. The seal is clear enough. I remember it from the first letters you received from him.”

Gwendolyn was glad she had not eaten that morning. She had nothing to lose as her stomach revolted.

Marianne reached across the table and laid a comforting hand on Gwendolyn’s shoulder. “Are you unwell? I would understand.”

Gwendolyn took great gulps of air and pushed the fear down. “I am fine.” She held her hand out. It trembled. “Give me the letter.”

“I don’t think I should. You almost fainted dead away.” She withdrew her hand. “I knew you had not yet recovered, but I did not know it was so bad.”

Gwendolyn twitched her fingers toward her palm. “The letter.”

“Leave it, Gwendolyn. Don’t let that man have any influence over you. What his son did to you ... what the marquess did to you after ... They do not deserve your fear.”

“I am not scared.” Not for herself at least. “The last time that man contacted me, he threatened me, my family, you.”

Marianne rolled her eyes. “Bravado. That’s all it was. A child of a man upset he did not get his way.”

“I would like to read it.” Another flick of her fingers inward.

Marianne grimaced then bent low, disappearing beneath the table’s edge. Gwendolyn peered around the table to see her rummaging in a wicker hamper before popping back up, a square of paper in her hands. She laid it on the table and smoothed it flat.

Gwendolyn peered more carefully at the square with a round, red wax seal at its center. “What’s happened to it?” It was warped and crinkled and stained.

Marianne dropped it flat on the tabletop, tried to smooth it flat. “Dropped in a puddle, I’m afraid.” She glared at a woman across the room. “Sally saw the seal and wanted to know why a toff would be writing me. Snatched it out of my hand, and when I went to snatch it back, she dropped it.”

“Into a puddle.” Was it ruined?

Marianne nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“How’d it come to you?”

“A man in a greatcoat with a face like marble brought it. Looked like a runner. Said he worked for the marquess. Was finding ‘all the wives.’”

Gwendolyn sat up straight as a pin, fighting the fear. Her husband's father was looking for her. Her jaw hardened, and she reached across the table, snapped the letter from Marianne's hand.

The former governess chuckled, held her hands up, palms flat. "Take it, then. Wouldn't think someone so intent on forgetting the past would want a letter from a man straight out of it."

Yes. The letter burned her fingers as if she'd shoved them into flames, as if she held a fiery coal in her hand and not paper. What threats did it hold? What insults?

Marianne's lips softened, and she reached across the table to cup both of her hands around Gwendolyn's rock of a fist. "You didn't have two husbands." Marianne's lip curled into the type of grin best shared in bed on a rainy day. "Might have been fun if you had, though." She winked.

"It is behind me. I'm not that girl anymore." The kind of girl who was bought and sold; the kind so naïve she mistook a scoundrel's hollow words for love.

She outlined the letters of her old name on the pale paper—Lady Mary Lytemore. The running ink, marred by specks of mud, faded and ruined. Like her. "Do you think it's legible?" Gwendolyn asked, turning it over in the light.

Marianne shrugged. "I am terribly sorry."

"It's not your fault."

They both glared at Sally across the room, bent low over her work. The busybody.

She held the letter in both hands, fingers tight against the edges, before her. The script across the letter's front spelled her name, running and imprecise though the ink was. She turned it over. The wax seal, dark as a wound on the other side, bore the crest of the Marquess of Preston, her *husband's* father. *Not* her husband. Not really, though she'd thought she'd married Mr. Daniel Bartlett at the time. Had signed her name Mrs. Mary Bartlett for a little over a year. She could not help but think of him as she'd known him, as her husband, though the law said he was not, had never been. She'd stood before God and man and made her vows.

The appearance of a first wife—*still* his wife—a year later had shred those vows to threads, thin and weightless and quickly lost to the wind. Her marriage null and void, her reputation tattered, her name infamous.

Her damn father-in-law (not legally) had let her know it, too. He'd

propositioned her the night before his son's trial. She still remembered every word and every inflection he'd spoken. *You've been a whore for a year; remain one, sweetling. I'll pleasure you more proper than my son ever could.* She'd said no, ran, his final words—threats against her, her family—chasing after her.

Vile man. She did not want to touch the letter with his name scrawled across it, to trace the knife-slice black of the ink across its folded surface.

Yet, it was a letter, not a snake! Paper, ink, wax, some man's musings, and a man she'd never met at that! She'd not give it power over her. She'd traveled the world. She'd earned her own keep. She'd kept herself alive when few others cared whether she breathed or not. When few others still knew she breathed.

Gwendolyn tore at the seal as if it were the man's eyes, unfolded the wavering, water-warped paper. She tried to read. She *tried*. But few words made sense.

"No. No, no, no."

Marianne took the paper. "Let me have a go. Hm. Is that ... *death*? Ominous, that. And ... *sins*?"

Gwendolyn groaned and dropped her face into her hands. Ominous indeed. "Can you find a word that's not going to fuel my nightmares?" She peeked at her friend.

Who read further, then winced.

"What have you found?"

"I can't be sure. Nothing terrible."

"Then you will not hesitate to tell me."

"*Deceit*. Gwendolyn, these words could mean anything. They could not even be accurate. This letter is next to ruined."

Gwendolyn took the letter back, folded it up, and slipped it into her reticule. "It is of no matter, addressed to a dead woman."

"You're shaking. It *does* matter."

She didn't have to imagine what the old man wanted from her. What everyone had wanted for her. Even her parents. Her father and mother, the man who'd called himself her husband, those she'd thought her friends. They'd all sung the same tune—how foolish you were, how utterly wanton, too, to be a bigamist's third wife. As if she'd *known*. As if she'd complied. What about her father's foolishness for marrying her to a man already married? They'd all said she was lucky the marquess had offered to make her

his doxy. Until he bored of her of course.

Marianne leaned back in her chair. “Must say ... glad it’s out of my hands. Been tempting me. I’ve thought a thousand times over of opening it, seeing what he has to say. And then there’s the guilt for ruining it.”

They shot Sally another glare.

“I wish I knew what it said.” Not knowing clawed at her, opened gaping wounds in her mind and heart.

“Surely it’s nothing bad. What can he do to you, after all?”

“I don’t know. He seemed so powerful back then. I married Daniel not thinking of his father. I had not met him before the wedding. Didn’t meet him till after our names were splashed all over the front pages. Daniel was not the marquess’s heir. He had an older brother. I never met him either. I should have known something was quite wrong. Daniel had been hiding me.”

She’d been naïve. Trusting. Foolish.

No more.

Marianne’s hand stretched out to her once more, begging a connection. “Don’t worry on it. The letter is ruined, so you cannot know how to reply.”

The letter was ruined, which worried Gwendolyn even more. What did the man want after all these years? To renew his entreaties and his threats? To make good on them? To blackmail her in some fashion? The room seemed to lose its air. There was nothing to pull into her lungs. Her arms and legs tingled.

What to do?

Run, Lady Mary Lytemore whispered. *Run!* It’s what she’d done six years ago, and it had saved her. Gwendolyn pulled the thick air into her lungs. She was not that scared girl. She’d traveled the world and become an experienced woman. She rolled her shoulders and banished her fears, as well as Lady Mary, to the farthest reaches of herself.

Then she reached into her reticule. “Thank you. Here.” She slid the small parcel across the table. “For you. I know how you like them.”

Marianne grinned and unwrapped the flat ribbon and brown paper with fleet fingers, pulling forth an iron key. She whistled, held it up. “Look at the intricate work on this one. I love it. Thank you. Where’d you find it?”

“It used to belong to a trunk that held old gowns. The trunk was falling apart, so the woman who owned it all gave me the key when I asked for it. Useless without the trunk, anyway.”

“It will look lovely in my collection.” She placed the key on the table and

studied it, her face filled with fondness.

“Why do you like keys so?” It didn’t matter if Gwendolyn brought her something plain or fancy, Marianne lit up every time.

“Because they hide things. And keep things safe. They’re gifts.”

“Gifts?” Gwendolyn reached out and traced the curling leaves of the design at the head of the key. “To you and you alone, I think.”

“To everyone. We constantly decide who to give keys to. I gave one to my Mr. Thomas, bald of pate and fierce of heart. And you ... you have given yours to no one yet.”

“Ah. Trying to teach me something. I should not be surprised.”

“That *is* my job, Lady—”

“*Miss*. And it *was* your job.”

“Hm.” Marianne sighed. “I suppose my job these days is to make lovely gowns for lovely ladies. Have you painted recently?”

Almost every night, when she could not sleep, turning her sketches for Lord Eaden’s scholarly use into fairy tales of gold and silver. “I have not had time.” Gwendolyn stood. “I’ll distract you no longer. Thank you.”

Marianne grinned, snapped the key up and slipped it into her pocket. Perhaps you should try giving a key to someone other than me, *Miss Smith*. Leave your past in the past, *Miss Smith*.”

“I have,” Gwendolyn hissed, pressing closer to the table. She’d left the past entirely behind her. Buried it deep but for her occasional visits to Marianne. She couldn’t abandon the woman who’d given up her reputation to stand by Gwendolyn’s side. It was only all of London that insisted she remember who she used to be.

Marianne tsked, leaned forward, spoke low enough no one could hear. “You’ve not put that bigamist arse behind you in the least. Nor his father.”

Gwendolyn’s gaze dissected the room. Had anyone heard? She shoved her chin in the air. Let them look. Let them whisper. Her skin had grown thick enough to withstand those arrows.

“That fellow you’ve been pining for,” Marianne said, “Do you mean to tell me your reasons for not having him have nothing to do with the biga—”

“Marianne.” She could not let her say the word aloud again. “I have my reasons, and yes, one of them is that to marry a man, I’d have to sign my own name. But I am not that woman anymore, so signing that name would be a lie.” She took a large step away from the table and managed a smile. “Thank you. I’ll visit soon.” A nod, a wave, and she reached the door before a hand

caught her arm.

“Excuse me?” A small woman with bright eyes peered into Gwendolyn’s face. She dropped her wrist and stepped back but never let her gaze wander from Gwendolyn. “I’ve seen you here before, and I have often wondered ... I hope you do not mind me asking, but are you *that* lady?”

Gwendolyn narrowed her eyes. “I’ve no idea what lady you could mean.”

“I’ve often wondered,” the woman continued, “what happened to you. Are you still married? Do you hear from him often? At all?”

Gwendolyn ripped her arm from the woman’s hold. “I’m not whomever you think I am. The woman you speak of is dead.”

The woman did not follow, and Gwendolyn entered the crush on Bond Street and somehow found her breath once more, hidden in the steady flow of bodies. She arrived at the other modiste shop early and met the Cavendish sisters in silence. She should think of them as Viscountess Albee and Viscountess Woodfeld. They had both married within the last year and a half, leaving the names of their girlhoods behind. But they had the uncompromising courage of their father, so Gwendolyn could not think of them by any name other than Cavendish.

“Did you find what you were after?” Ada asked as they wove their way back down the street toward the waiting carriage. She had the look of her older sister, almost-black hair and eyes green as spring. They were both thriving, living things, gardens gone wild, and Gwendolyn tried not to envy them the state.

“I did. Thank you,” Gwendolyn said. And the thing she had been after sat like a hot coal in her reticule. How did it not burn right through, drop onto the pavement at her feet, and give her away entirely?

“Excellent,” Nora said. “I saw a silk the perfect shade of blue for you in Henrietta’s shop. I know you will not welcome it, but I’ve my eye on it anyway. For you.”

Gwendolyn’s head popped up, her gaze flying wide open and away from her reticule. “Thank you. But you musn’t.”

Nora handed her packages to a footman and lumbered up into the carriage. Ada and Gwendolyn followed, and they settled themselves—the Cavendish sisters on one side, Gwendolyn on the other.

Nora eyed her, tapping her chin. “I’m afraid Ada and I have been gossiping about you.

Ada thinks our cousin Jackson has a *tendre* for you.”

Devil take it. Could no one leave it alone? “I’ve no clue what you’re talking about.”

“It was not kind of us to speak about you,” Ada said, “But I was on a boat with the both of you. I’m fairly certain his heart is terribly involved. What I’d like to know, as a concerned cousin, is if his heart will also end up terribly maimed.”

Nora nodded. “Precisely.”

Gwendolyn leaned backward into the soft squabs but kept her gaze hard and trained on Nora. “The very last thing I want in the entire world is to hurt your cousin.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.” Nora’s voice wavered. She knew she flicked her fingers too close to flames.

“No but. That is the only truth that matters.”

Ada cut across the space between them, laid her hand on Gwendolyn’s where it had settled on her knee. “We do not want you hurt, either. You do not seem to like us—”

“I do.” A clipped answer that would, perhaps, not do much to convince the sisters otherwise.

“But you do not befriend us,” Ada finished. “Not truly.”

“No matter what we try,” Nora said.

Ada’s hand slipped away as she returned fully to her seat. “I suppose we broach the subject to say ... if you need help, we are happy to provide it. Help with Jackson or ... in any other capacity.”

She knew that well, and the truth of it slammed a hammer into her gut each and every time she thought of it. If they knew, they would gather round her, all the Cavendishes—even the ones she’d looked on with suspicion or treated with coldness—they’d think of her as theirs and do everything to protect her.

She’d tried to speak to Henry several times, to tell him. But she’d always gathered the words back in and pressed them deep into silence before she could lay them before him, hurt him. Better that way. Better to move forward with a blank past than to haul it out into the open—an old trunk, molding and filled with bats—to set before all eyes in the harsh light of day. Better to treat their kindnesses with glares and indifference than to hurt them with her scandalous past.

Lonely.

But better.

“Thank you.” The tone of Gwendolyn’s words lacked the gratitude she felt deep in her bones. She would never take them up on their offer, but she would always, *always* appreciate it. They cared for Jackson as she did, and she appreciated that, too.

The sisters smiled, nodded, but the carriage ride to the Cavendish townhouse where they dropped her off remained mostly silent, punctuated with too-chipper observations about their shopping expedition.

Gwendolyn alighted and watched the carriage rumble off to take the women to their happy homes and loving husbands.

Something she’d never have.

She pushed back her cloak as she stepped inside. The Cavendish terrace in Mayfair was clean and new. It’s many rooms piled one on top of the other in the narrow space, and the family within its walls tumbled one over the other day in and day out, sunbeams bouncing off the walls. It was an easy place to shake the winter chill from her bones.

It could do nothing for the hot coal in her reticule, though, the way it had swept the past back into her life, as if the old her had suddenly taken up residence once more in her bones.

Gwendolyn’s likeness had been on every front page. Her name on everyone’s lips. She’d become infamous for an unfortunately unforgettable slice of time. She wished time and distance had wiped her from London’s memory, from the ton’s memory. It mostly had. But there were many who still recognized her, forced her to remember, to relive. It always sent violence into her fists. Made her want to strike out, prove to them she’d changed. London held no peace for her.

She needed to return to work as soon as could be, leave England and put her past behind her. The woman the letter was addressed to, after all, no longer existed. Lady Mary Lytemore may as well have sunk beneath the waves of the Thames, her bones blending with the silt and mud, washing ashore for mud larks to make treasure of.

She needed to speak with Lord Eaden. She needed to move. She required a new task. She’d remind Lord Eaden how pressing his current research was and leave. Soon.

“Ah, Miss Gwendolyn.” Mr. Cranston, the butler, wafted down the stairs on swift feet. “Lady Eaden is taking tea in the drawing room should you like to attend her.”

She snapped her gloves free of her fingers and looked at the clock—

almost noon. “Thank you, Cranston, but I must speak to Lord Eaden. Is he about?”

“No, but he should return any moment now.”

“Thank you. I’ll wait in his study.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Another trip was just the thing. Soon, she’d be safely away from England and the monsters around every corner. Just as she preferred it. Better to live day by day when you had no true future. But first she’d burn the letter that wanted to drag her back into the past. Yes, a perfect plan.

Her stout steps dragged down the hall. While another trip meant another short span of time safe from the sharp teeth of her past, it also meant the constant temptation of the warm, always-waiting arms of her employer’s nephew. And the heart he kept ever ready in his palm, stretched out to her alone. No matter how much she wanted it, no matter how much he saw his desire for it in his eyes, she could no longer pretend they had a future together. Or even a single day. Or even a midnight, brief and silent and soft.

Were his cousins right? Did she hurt him merely by remaining at his side, refusing to take what he held out so willingly? Did the letter in her reticule threaten him? Everyone she loved? What had he written? The dread knifed through with curiosity almost made her stomp up to the Marquess of Preston’s London home to demand answers. But that home held no good memories for her. Only fear. What if he grabbed her and held her captive?

Surely not. A horrid notion straight from Ann Radcliffe’s morbid imagination.

But still, she would not risk it.

Run, Lady Lytemore whispered from deep in Gwendolyn’s mind. *Run*.

Three



Jackson had just reached Uncle Henry's study when he heard the townhouse front door open. He peeked down the hall, caught a glimpse of Gwendolyn, and when she spoke to Cranston, he strained to eavesdrop. Headed here, was she?

He set to work. He may be days away from a strategy of retreat, but he did so love teasing her, watching her eyes light with annoyance and pique. He'd need this moment to fuel his dreams after nights working alone.

Today, he wanted her near. Craved the warmth and scent of her. He'd choose a logistically appropriate seat to put her in a snare, guide her nearer to him. But where? Unfortunately, the room seemed to have bred chairs. They lounged in every corner, inviting distance and isolation instead of intimacy.

He rubbed his hands together and got to work. He could do nothing about Uncle's chair behind his desk, but Gwendolyn wouldn't sit there anyway. The chair by the window, though ... Jackson pulled it toward the circle of chairs and sofas surrounding the fireplace. He dragged the one in the corner by the bookshelves over, too. Oh! The ottoman beside the door and the chair on the other side of Uncle's chair would have to come as well.

Once he had congregated all available sitting surfaces in the same place, he plopped onto a sofa with a grin, the only human in a puddle of furniture. The sofa he sat on offered a large enough invitation with its space for two, and even if she did not wish to sit right next to him—and she would not if the last nine weeks and three days were any indication—she would not be able to sit across the room from him. Excellent. He leaned back, one arm resting on the arm of the sofa, and crossed a booted foot over his knee.

The door opened, and he slammed his boot to the floor once more, sat up

straight as a poker, tried to control his face's slide into a look of puppy-doggish longing.

Miss Gwendolyn Smith, focused and marching, saw none of it.

She strode across the empty space of Uncle's office, bypassing every blasted chair he'd huddled near him, and sat.

On Uncle's desk. Popped herself up and sat still as a statue on its edge, her gaze trained forward so he saw only her profile.

Zeus. That dedicated to avoiding him, was she? Might as well let his cousin Nora shoot a bullet through his heart. She'd hit her mark first time around, end his pain quickly. He massaged the muscle over that organ.

"You do know how to bring a man low, Gweny."

Devil take it, she'd probably not miss him at all when he left for Brighton.

Gwendolyn smoothed her skirts and trained her gaze on the door. "Good afternoon, Mr. Cavendish."

"Mr. Cavendish" today when she'd moaned "Jackson" against his lips only nine weeks and three days ago.

"Good afternoon, Gweny." Best to at least *appear* chipper. "What brings you here?"

"I need to speak with Lord Eaden. We've been too long in London, and I've received a letter—" She inhaled sharply, held it, then licked her lips on an exhale. "From the duchesse in Paris. She began renovating a new wing in her home and found something she thinks we'd be interested in."

Jackson scratched his jaw. "Hm. Back to studying the old families of Europe."

"That's what we do, Jackson. We provide the facts, the evidence, then Lord Eaden writes the books."

"Shouldn't French scholars be doing this work? And Italian ones?"

"The *smartest* scholars should be doing the work." She sniffed, as if that said enough. Idolized Uncle Henry, she did. Jackson found it endearing.

"I just think that perhaps the research might prove more meaningful when the researcher has a direct connection to the past they're studying."

"In that case, the research would lack the required objectivity."

"I'm not so sure."

"What should we do, then, Jackson? Stay here? Study British history?"

He clasped his hands together behind his head. "And why not?" A good enough segue into his announcement of being Brighton bound for a fortnight

of work on his father's research.

She sliced him a look that would cut bread. Brick-hard bread, at that.

The door opened again, and Uncle Henry strode through in a blaze of sun, his gold-white hair a mane around his head, and his dark eyes dancing with curiosity. He stopped in the middle of the room, his brows pulling together like two caterpillars. "Why are all the chairs over there?"

Gwendolyn tried on a frown to match Uncle's.

Jackson grinned, lips stretched wide as if stitched there. Had always seemed the best way to face the ills of life—grin and never give up.

His uncle strode around his desk and dropped into his chair as Gwendolyn slid off the desk to stand before him, hands clasped behind her back.

"Never mind the chairs," Uncle Henry said. "Why are you two here? Cranston said you were both waiting for me."

Jackson nodded at Gwendolyn. "You first."

Her chin twitched up, an imperious ice queen. "I merely wished to know when we are to leave again."

Uncle Henry steeped his hands before him on the desk. "Restless, Miss Smith?"

"Anxious to be of use, as always."

"Hm. And you, Jackson? Do you wish to be off soon as well? Is that why you've come here?"

"Yes and no. I will be off soon, but for my own reasons. I have not been to Seastorm Manor in over a year. And I wish to look into my father's unfinished research."

Uncle Henry rested his chin atop his clasped hands and studied Jackson with an unreadable gaze before shifting the same expression to Gwendolyn. Then back to Jackson. Then he leaned back and slapped a hand to the desk. "Excellent idea, Jackson. You and Miss Smith deserve a break, and she will enjoy Seastorm. I'm positive of it."

"Oh, no." Jackson jumped to his feet. "I wish to do this alone."

Uncle Henry frowned. "Mrs. Limesby will attend as Gwendolyn's chaperone, of course. But you cannot dive into my brother's research alone. You are fully capable, but you lack Miss Smith's eye for textual detail. You are perfection in the field, my boy, but without Miss Smith, your work is incomplete. You complement one another."

Blast it. Hard to argue with the truth, and he'd never begged off

Gwendolyn's company and partnership before. To do so now would look odd. But the entire point of his plan was to gain some distance. For both of them. To find a space free of constant lust and longing, to figure out how to move forward. If they could move forward.

He sighed, a strangled sound. Uncle Henry, Incomparable Plan Ruiner.

Jackson stared out the window, tapping a foot on the floor. If his uncle was set on ruining his plans, he could bloody well help fix them. "Uncle, we all deserve a holiday. Why don't you come along too? And Sarah and the children. That way Mrs. Limesby can have a holiday as well."

"All of us?" He scratched his chin. "Not a terrible idea. And Mrs. Limesby told me just yesterday her sister has had a baby. She wouldn't mind staying in London for a bit to be with her, I'm sure, and she can if Sarah and I are with you and Miss Smith. No need for a formal chaperone in that case. You would not mind?"

"Not at all." Easier to avoid a person if you had others to speak with. "Besides, if I'm going to complete my father's last book, your insight would be invaluable."

"Mm." Uncle Henry's eyes brightened. "Yes. A history of Seastorm Manor and the surrounding area. You've seen the manuscript, then?"

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. He'd left his parents' belongings exactly as they had been. Hadn't touched a thing in six years, not in any of his returns home. "I, um, no. I've not."

"Your father was a suspicious fellow with his research. I never saw it, either. I admit I'm curious."

Jackson had him. And his distraction.

Gwendolyn studied him with narrowed eyes and a tilted head for a mere moment then popped her attention back to Uncle Henry. "Must we all go? Jackson could bring the manuscript back."

"Yes, we must all go." The Uncle Henry of old had returned, the intrepid explorer who organized expeditions and journeys with precise detail and unwavering purpose. "If we're going to finish the book for my brother, we need to be in the place he wrote it, see the sites he wrote about."

"But, Lord Eaden"—Gwendolyn stuttered forward—"you have not traveled to any of the *other* places we've researched recently. Since your marriage, you've left it all up to us. Jackson and I go alone, bring back the research, and you write of it. That is how we have learned to function in the last few years, and it is a process that works well. Look here." She held up a

letter. “The duchesse has asked us to return. I shall go to her, and Jackson shall go to Seastorm, and you can stay here and have all the lovely notes you wish.”

Uncle Henry tapped a finger on the desk. “No. You’ve gleaned all you can from the duchesss trunks and attics. We need something new. And this project has meaning for me. More than the others. Jackson is correct. We must do it as Carlisle would have wanted us to, by immersing ourselves in that which we’re writing of.” He strode across the room and clapped Jackson on the back. “Excellent idea, my boy.”

Jackson smiled, but his mind had caught like cloth on a thorn on *Carlisle*. Jackson had not heard his father’s name in years. He slipped his hand in his pocket to touch the warm metal of the pocket watch, ticking time down as always.

Gwendolyn’s chin dropped to her shoulder, the only acknowledgement of surrender she’d give Uncle Henry. “Of course, Lord Eaden.”

Jackson turned his back to the window. A return to Seastorm. With Gwendolyn in tow. Not the distance he’d hoped to put between them, nor the solitude he’d wanted. He raked a hand through his hair. What would it be like to see her there?

Uncle Henry braced his elbows on the desk and templed his fingers before him. “The twins should see their home. I should have taken them before now.”

Thomas and Nicholas had been five years of age when their parents had died and they’d been forced to make a new home with their cousins. His uncle had the right of it. His brothers deserved to know their home.

Uncle Henry clapped his hands and stood.

“When do we leave?” Gwendolyn asked.

“Jackson? What did you have planned?” Uncle Henry marched for the door, his stride long enough to cross continents.

“I had thought two days, but—”

“We’ll be ready,” Uncle Henry said. “We’ll not take over your holiday and modify your plans.”

“It is no worry, Uncle.”

“Zeus, don’t pretend it’s not a hassle. I am pleased though.” His grin, wide and toothy, showed it, too. “We’ll finally do right by your father’s memory, my boy.”

“Of course.” Jackson managed a smile as he turned and slapped his

thighs. An act of mirth to pacify the only father he'd known for the last six years.

“Quite right. Now”—Uncle Henry rubbed his hands together and backed into the hall—“lets start preparations!”

When Uncle Henry vanished from sight, Gwendolyn cast a glance at Jackson and sauntered closer. Her scent teased him—mint and flowers.

“Seastorm Manor?” Her voice a hesitant sort of question, fine as a hair. “A rather fanciful name.”

“Yes, well, my mother was in a rather fanciful mood when she named it. And before that, my father found himself in an even more fanciful mood when he bought the crumbling castle and land the manor was eventually built upon.” He grabbed a handful of sun to shove between his words, lighten the freeze he knew they carried. He rubbed the outline of the watch in his pocket. He'd left his father and mother buried in the past, unable to confront the enormity of his loss.

It was time. And while he'd wanted to do it alone, perhaps it would be better with family nearby.

“You do not seem entirely pleased about this.”

He grinned, held his arms out wide. “I'm perfectly fine.”

She frowned at his wrist. “You're missing a cuff link. You're always missing a cuff link.”

He lifted his hand. “So I am. Well, if my sleeves aren't fine, *I am* anyway. Why wouldn't I be?”

“I think I have a pair of them in a trunk somewhere. I'll have them sent to your room.” She lifted her gaze, hazy with a concerned preoccupation that she blinked rapidly away. “You've never spoken of your home before. And rarely of your parents.”

“And you've spoken of your past?”

A sharp inhale, a swallow of a sword and a sharp glare to match.

He lurched toward her. “My apologies, Gwendolyn. I—”

She shook her head, backing toward the door. “No. Do not apologize. You're correct. We do not owe one another peeks into the past. I ...” She replaced unsaid words with a smile, tight and tense. “Good afternoon, Jackson.”

He strode after her as she disappeared into the hallway but stopped himself after no more than three steps.

Broken. Everything between them smashed.

Once, in Italy, he'd seen a master artist use fire to shape sand into glass, a fascinating process of great effort and delicacy. After he'd shaped the vessel, pouring his very breath into it, he'd placed it on a nearby table to cool, then clipped the edge of the table with his hip and sent the glasswork crashing to the floor. Gwendolyn had cried out, pulling her hands to her belly as if cut by one of the shards. And Jackson had mourned. Perfection to destruction in the space of a gasp.

In the years since meeting her, he'd tried every way he could think of to win her over—sweet words and teasing, gifts and conversations, chasing and waiting. He'd never tried ... nothing. Even when waiting, he'd been stoking the fire between them, breathing life into the fragile glass sculpture of their relationship.

He needed rest from the heat of creation, from the fire of her rejection.

He needed to go home, finally face what he'd lost, and find out what he wanted other than her.

Four



Gwendolyn lay on her bed, staring into the fire, the warped square of paper, folded, franked, waxed, opened, warming between her fingers. Whatever message it had once held no longer discernable. She should not fear it.

The woman she'd made herself into would not. She'd scoff and storm up to the villain and shake the letter in his face, demanding answers.

Gwendolyn had built a new life, found a purpose, shed her younger, softer self, and become someone harder, less gullible. Lady Mary would have burned it, terrified and trembling. Gwendolyn would not do that, but she could not decide what, if anything, to do with it at all. That the marquess had sent the letter to Marianne meant he did not know where Gwendolyn was. She remained safe. For now. If the runner who called himself the marquess's man could find her nearest friend, the only person from her old life she still had contact with, then he could likely find her sooner or later. Perhaps he already had. He could have waited outside the shop until Gwendolyn stopped by. He could have followed her to the Cavendish townhome.

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms as a shiver raced down her spine. She was not safe. Neither was Marianne. What if the marquess decided to use her to gain Gwendolyn's attention? Even when she'd married his son, she'd heard rumors of the father's reputation for licentiousness, cruelty, and depravity. When she'd married, Daniel had sworn they would not meet, that his father was not accepted into good ton. She never had cause to find out, though, because he'd kept her in a small cottage in the country, visiting only a few times a month.

She'd only met the marquess after the scandal had broken, and she'd

found herself in London as a witness in one of the most talked about trials of the decade.

She stood and strode for the fire, the bookshelf on the right-hand side where she kept her personal sketchbooks, different from the ones she handed Lord Eaden after each trip. She pulled one of the oldest from the shelf and flipped through it. The first several pages depicted, in watercolors, the bright image of a pastoral cottage, roses climbing up the sides, the sun bright above it. The cottage continued on each page, but the sky disappeared, and the roses withered, and soon a wraith of a woman appeared in a window, looking out, alone. The final pages depicted the wraith woman on crowded London streets, pressed on all sides by laughing faces, pointing fingers curled like demon claws. The very final page held the painting of a tower. Roses wrapped round it up to the very top, bloodred and with more thorns than blooms. The sky behind the tower streaked dark and starless, and the wraith woman at the only window stared out, blank and soulless.

Gwendolyn slammed the book closed. Not her. Not any longer. May Lady Mary rest in peace. She replaced it on the shelf, reached for a more recent sketchbook and flipped through it.

Another tower repeated page after page, but this one connected to a French castle. The sky behind it glittered bright with stars, dancing, laughing, sighing, and the wraith woman at the window looked down, her eyes burning with actual fire. A man climbed the tower, a grin on his lips. She waited for him and welcomed him and wanted him. She pressed her fingers to her lips, which felt swollen thinking of that night, then pressed her fingers to the man. She'd painted him so bright he almost glowed, and if one looked close enough, they would see the faint outline of wings at his shoulders, large and strong, and meant for carrying her away.

A fairy tale.

Her paintings were the only place she was able to imagine good for herself.

She snapped the book shut and paced to the window, pressed her forehead against the cold glass to cool her body from her heated memories.

Something caught her eye, though. She peered into the darkness below. A man strode across the street to the garden at the square's center.

Jackson.

She pressed a palm to the glass and closed her eyes, losing herself, once more, in the memories of their night together, what it had felt like to be

Mistress Midnight to his Lord Mischief. Hidden but more fully herself than she'd ever been before or since.

His cousins thought she hurt him just by being near him. But being near him gave her *life*. They could not understand. They had always been loved. She rested her forehead against the glass. She must stop lying to herself. They *did* have the means to understand the complications of the heart and of life. The entire time their father had been exploring the world with Jackson and Gwendolyn, they'd been home. Without him. Unsure of his love, weary and wounded. She'd recognized it in them the first time they'd met. Only they had healed their hearts now, had found their homes.

Gwendolyn had not. Could not see a future in which she would.

She raised the letter, holding the stark-white square against the dark peeking in from outside. Would he always chase her? What did he want?

Below, Jackson creaked open the gate and disappeared into the garden, a shadow of a man as he'd been the only night they'd kissed.

What was he doing? He'd not been at dinner that evening and had seemed distracted in Henry's study. More distracted than she'd ever seen him before. Did the thought of going home so displease him, then? Why?

If he had demons like her own, he never spoke of them, never hinted at them. Did he feel about returning to Seastorm as she felt about returning to London? Did he hate it? Did it sit heavy in his gut and anxious in his feet, telling him to run as far as possible and not look back?

Not Jackson. Surely not him. Sunny, charming, teasing, and sweet. A man like that had no shadows in his soul.

Her boots somehow found their way onto her feet. She pulled her pelisse on over her shift, threw her shawl around her shoulders, and buried her letter beneath her pillow.

The clock's hourly announcement echoed through the halls as she crept toward the door. Midnight. Appropriate that the hour would pull her to him as inexorably as time dragged the sun across the sky. The wind outside swept cold across the night sky, sinking deep past skin and muscle to chill her very bones.

He stood a silent, shadowy sentinel beneath the branches of a tree at the garden's edge. No leaves rustled above, all stolen by winter's skeletal hand.

She did not join him, but stood just beyond the branches, letting the curved sliver of moon spill light onto her. "Jackson," she whispered. She could never call him Mr. Cavendish at midnight, not her Lord Mischief.

He turned, and she could not yet see his face, but the dark oval acquired fuzzy detail as he strode toward her. When he stepped into the moonlight, his face beamed joy.

“Gweny. You came to me.” A note of pleased curiosity wrapped about the warmth of the words. “I saw you in your window as I walked up to the townhouse and wondered if you saw me. If you did, whether or not you cared.”

She expected him to reach for her, but he clasped his hands behind his back.

“I care,” she snapped. “But you do not seem to care for your own well-being. Where is your coat? And why do you never remember to actually wear it?”

He shrugged. “It is not uppermost in my mind at the moment.” An edge to his words.

Reminded her of his cousins’ words of caution from earlier in the day. They felt like glass under her skin. She did not wish to hurt him.

She took a breath to soften her next words, to ease the bite from her tone. “Something weighs heavy on you. Tell me.”

He peered at her, his strong body leaning closer, tall as the tree, it seemed, his limbs lengthened by the shadows. A lock of hair, caught up in moonlight, fell across his eyes.

He dragged in a heavy breath, gave a slow nod. “I will. I think.” The corner of his mouth cocked up, and he turned his face to the sky. “Sharing my concern. Not tried that before. Might as well. Scientific process and all.” Words barely there, possibly not even for her.

The branches danced above them, a safer spectacle than the man before her who made her heart thump with feeling and her belly quiver with desire.

“I am ... apprehensive about returning to Seastorm,” he finally said, speaking up into the starlight.

She swallowed. “Bad memories?”

“The opposite, little moon.”

She heard the odd endearment but chose to ignore it. “You never speak of them—your parents. Or your childhood. I always thought it might pain you.”

“Only because it was everything it should have been. And I did not appreciate it as I should have. My own blindness pains me. And the grief. I miss them. Still.”

“Ah.”

A step, his, brought them closer so that their hearts nearly beat against one another. Only the slightest sliver of space stilled between them.

She knew what would happen next. He would snake his hand behind her neck, demolish that space, and pull her against him. The warmth of his hand at her nape would drive her heart to madness as her shawl slipped from her shoulders, and she'd press her lips to his, tangle her hands in his moonbeam hair and pull him harder against her. The feel of him a glove that fit just right.

But one that had not been made for her despite its perfection.

She waited, her heart beating to the rhythm of the words *yes, please, and finally*.

But he never came to her. His frozen body made lies of her visions, turned what she'd thought to be truth, unstoppable eventuality, into ... mere wishes, easily lost to the wind.

He took a step back, and air made a universe of space between them.

Should she cross through it? Offer physical comfort as well as emotional?

And if she did, would he want more? Would he want more than she knew she should give any man?

She kept her feet firmly rooted to the ground, let the universe of air between them thicken, harden, and separate them even further.

"Thank you," she said, using curt words to fortify her soft wounds. "For telling me. Can I help?" There. Focus on him, helping him, not on her pulsing and denied desires.

He grinned, a flash of straight white teeth in the night. "I fear you know what it is to be chased by ghosts, but I am not in need of help. Thank you for your offer. It is time I returned home. Past time. I'll brave it." A certain tenor made his voice ring in the darkness like a dare. He'd brave it. Would she?

She *was* brave. She'd reinvented herself. Much good it did her days like today. When the past floated up from where she'd drowned it in the Thames, she always became small again. Small and shivering.

He stepped closer, so very close, rested his forehead against hers, eyes closed, breath pushing in and out of his chest with stilted trouble. "Let's try the direct approach. That's a new one. Not really. I was rather direct that night in the tower. Doesn't count, though, does it? We were pretending to be other people. I do not expect positive results, but—"

"Jackson, what have you been mumbling about all night? Results and things not tried before. I'm baffled."

"But," he continued as if she'd never spoke, "needs must. And I most

certainly *need*.”

“Jackson—”

He lifted his head and put distance between them. “It should come as no surprise to you the way I feel. About you. I’m more than a little convinced”—the corner of his lips twitched up—“that you feel similarly for me. But ...” He dragged a gloveless finger down her shoulder, her arm. “You do not trust me. So, what I want—what my cousins have, my uncle, my parents—a life of fulfillment, happiness, family ... eventually. None of that aligns with what you want, ultimately. Whatever that is. I wish you’d tell me, Gweny.”

The desire to tell him she wanted what he did fell upon her like a landslide, almost bringing her to her knees. She could see every year stretched out before her if she gave in, all of them smiling and happy and echoing with laughter. Diligent, passionate work; warm, passionate nights; a companion and partner for every hour; a family to fall back on.

Family. The jewel she would hoard away if she could, keep for herself, a jealous, greedy dragon. She should have been bitter, perhaps. She should have thought the bond that held families tight in one another’s arms false or too fragile. Perhaps if she’d not been saved by two Cavendish men so quickly after her world had fallen apart ... But she had been, and so she’d seen an uncle’s love for a nephew, a father’s love for his children than ran deeper than the Nile. She’d seen how love could run so deep it carved a cavern of pain inside you. Should have scared her. But she wanted it.

She wanted to say yes.

She would not. Precisely because they were her jewels—Jackson and Lord Eaden, his wife and daughters, and the children. She prized them more than anything in the world, and she would face a howling, gnashing threat to keep them whole and sound.

They’d only healed recently, only found love and peace in the last few years. An unbreakable association with her—like the one marriage would forge—would mar that peace, shatter it entirely. It was one thing to say, “Oh, we hired the girl, but had no idea of her background” and quite another to make her an immovable part of the family.

What did the marquess want from her? Whatever it was, she would not let him hurt them.

Jackson’s hand lifted to her cheek, a spring wind sweeping too soon through a winter night. “I wish you wished to marry me, luna.”

And ruin him in the process? She pushed past all his silly endearments and stumbled for a truth to give him, found one, though it wasn't the one Jackson wanted, nor was it the entire truth. "I want to work. Only that."

Birds wheeled out of the branches above them, echoing her words with angry caws.

What to do with her hands when she wanted to lift them to his chest, press her palms into the flat planes of muscle there, and curve her fingers into the linens and wools that smelled like him, smelled of paper and ink and a hint of whisky. What to do with them? Let them fall and harden at her sides.

He made a humming sound in his throat. "Hm. Work. Only that. Well then, you shall."

Her heart became a heavy stone.

He brought his fingers to her chin. Only a very gentle pressure was all it took for him to force her gaze toward his. "When you know what you want from me, tell me. Until then, I shall keep my distance. It's what you wish, anyway, and I'd set the world on fire to give you your desires." A quick, hard kiss—stars falling down from the heavens and into her skin—and then the warmth of his body disappeared.

His voice lifted from the direction of the garden gate in the darkness beyond her closed eyes. "Do not worry I'll repeat my attentions at Seastorm. I'll ask nothing of you there. No teasing or flirtations. I'll follow you into no tower rooms. There are none to retreat to. I'll leave you to work, as you wish."

She crossed her arms over her belly as if protecting herself from a physical blow. Of course she secretly wanted him to follow her, lived on the guarantee he would do so.

But she let him go without a word and ignored the gaping wound in her chest.

The gate creaked open and slammed shut, and he was gone.

He was going home, and she would have to find a new one. She saw that clearly now. She could no longer torture them both as she'd been doing. She did not deserve his patience or his loyalty. Not when a connection to her—the real her—would ruin the perfect family idyll that had given her shelter from the storm six years ago.

For most, going home offered respite, rest from a long journey in a cozy nest of comfort and familiarity.

Not for Miss Gwendolyn Smith.

Mrs. Mary Bartlett.

Lady Mary Gwendolyn Lytemore.

She had no home except the arms of the man who loved her, and those she'd rejected time and again.

The door to the Cavendish townhome opened, spilled faint light, then closed behind him.

He wanted marriage, and so did she. With him. But marriage was a curse, a charade, a nightmare. She'd never enter that dreaded state again, especially since doing so would reveal her true identity. She'd have to sign the register, the certificate, as Lady Mary Lytemore, after all. A woman who died six years ago. It would be that woman who married Jackson, who hung the weight of her scandal around his neck. An excellent reward for his patience and love.

She reached her room, collapsed on the bed, turned her winter-chilled cheek onto her pillow, and slipped her prayer-folded hands beneath it to warm them. But paper crinkled beneath her fingers.

The letter. A snake, a viper waiting to strike.

She could not let it.

She jumped from the bed and stumbled to the writing desk. Quickly, she had a pen prepared, and her hand flew across the paper, leaving splotchy ink in uneven lines behind.

Cursed Sir,

Do not attempt to reach me again. You will not be able to find me. Do not attempt to contact Miss Marianne Crawford again. You will not find her, either.

Go to Hell.

Your Son's Mistake

She pondered the signature. The note was clearly written by Gwendolyn Smith, it had all her thorns and abrasiveness. But the marquess did not know that woman, and she hoped he never would. She had instinctively shied away from writing her new name. But *Lady Mary* had seemed wrong, too, and *Mrs. Bartlett* had never been right, always a lie.

She'd leave it. He'd know whom she meant.

Now to send it. She could not ask Lord Eaden to frank it and give away her safe haven. She'd have to post it herself. Fine. First thing tomorrow.

She called herself from six years ago dead, and this letter was the proof of it. Lady Mary hadn't had the spine. Gwendolyn did. She had the spine for that and the other part of her plan.

She'd leave the Cavendishes and reinvent herself once more. She'd bring Marianne with her, save her friend from the loss of her eyesight to a needle's point, support her as she'd always supported Gwendolyn. She'd saved up most of the money she'd earned while in Lord Eaden's employ, and they could rent a small cottage anywhere they liked. On the Continent preferably, as far from the marquess as possible. Her sketches had often graced the pages of Lord Eaden's books. She could sell her skill to other scholars.

A lonely life, but the only future she could imagine where she saved herself and did not sully the happiness the Cavendishes had earned for themselves. But first she'd visit Jackson's home, help him finish his father's work. A parting gift, a thank you for having given her a heart she could not keep. She'd say proper goodbyes to the others as well, give them her gratitude for their acceptance instead of her thorns. They deserved it, and they deserved to, finally, be free of the powder keg that was her past.

Five



The closer the traveling coach rolled toward Seastorm, the further Jackson lowered his nose into his book. And the louder his brothers became. If he'd been truly reading, they would have proved a distraction, but Jackson had been staring blankly at page 136 for two hours. At least. His thoughts traveling faster than the coach; memory upon memory he usually kept at bay flooded him. His father teaching him to swim in the pond and walking barefoot together on the rocky beach a short ride from the manor. His mother clipping headlines from the papers and nestling them in her journal beside pressed flowers and her own thoughts inked with splatters in uneven lines.

Good memories that laid him flat.

He tried to remember his goals for the next fortnight or so—find the manuscript, spend time with his brothers, make up for his past sins any way he could, and steer clear of Gwendolyn. It was what she wanted, and he could give her that. He should, after all, focus on his father's research, locating it and shining it up. He'd give her the distance she desired and dive into his own work.

He sighed.

The coach slowed, and he put the book aside to look out the window. Thomas and Nicholas looked, too, their curly blond heads curved together over identically sloped shoulders and wiry frames. Still boys at eleven years old, but soon enough, those shoulders would broaden, and their voices would fall deep, and Jackson wanted to be *there* for them, as his parents were for him. He wanted to watch them grow into men, guide them. Well, as much as he could between trips and traveling abroad.

A silence fell over them. A house, no, a castle true to its name rose into view, the red-tiled roof of a small stone turret.

“Is that it?” Nicholas asked, bouncing to his feet to see better over Thomas’s shoulder, his brown eyes glowing darker in the coach shadows.

Jackson laughed. “Sit, Nick. That’s the old castle. It’s not livable, but it’s well-preserved, particularly the gardens. There’s a newer manor house further in. It will soon come into view.”

“Newer?” Thomas’s nose wrinkled. “I like the castle better.”

Jackson winked. “Me too. But I promise you you’d not like to sleep there. New beds are better than moldy ones.”

“Moldy?” The boys spoke the same word in identical tones of disgust.

Jackson nodded, and they settled back into their seats. Nick held a hand out, palm up, to his brother, and Thomas placed his hand, palm down, atop it. They continued the game that had been making them howl with laughter all morning, one pulling his hand from underneath to slap the hand above and either hitting his target, if he was fast enough, or missing it, if he proved too slow.

Then the manor appeared. Jackson’s stomach flipped end over end as they rounded the top of a slight hill and sailed down a long drive toward the manor that was only a quarter of a century old. It always did. The joy of returning to the manor his parents had loved, the slice of finding that house empty. A difficult confusion of emotion that always discomposed him. But this time he returned not to sulk in grief, but to do some good—honor his father’s work and show his brothers their legacy.

The house his father designed and had built from local sandstone, the rooms his mother had made cozy with her own hands—all his, and he wished it wasn’t. The Cavendish family had never wanted. Due to their own talents and their wise investments, they’d accumulated more wealth than rank, and though Jackson’s father had not acquired a title like his older brother, he’d been well enough off, past comfortable. Rank had never mattered but providing for their own had. It was a heritage Jackson was proud of, though he’d not appreciated it in his youth.

The drive rolled up to the very door where a line of servants stood waiting. Behind them, the house rose three floors into the sky, windows glinting in the sunlight, ivy climbing up its corners. Was Gwendolyn looking at it, too? What did she think?

The house gave his soul a tiny tug, reminding him it owned a bit of him.

He shoved at that bit, pushed it down. He lived a traveler's life, and while he gladly took on the familial goals of the next few weeks, the filial obligations he should have discharged years ago, he did not wish to stay, to plant his roots deep.

The coach rolled to a stop and the boys shot out the door before Jackson could corral them into better manners. He followed at a more sedate pace, unfolding into the sunshine, his chest full. Sorrow and joy pressed tight together there, uncomfortable partners.

The second coach stopped behind his own, Uncle Henry, Aunt Sarah, and Gwendolyn descended like ducks in a row.

“Do be careful, boys!” Aunt Sarah called.

Another body popped out of the coach—Henry's youngest daughter, Pansy.

She blinked once in the sun before running after her cousins. She looked like a miniature version of her older sisters, all wild dark curls and sharp green eyes, exactly what Ada and Nora had looked like at nine years old.

Aunt Sarah chuckled, watching the little girl who looked so much like her own even though she was not. Same dark hair and mobile, intelligent face. Only their eyes differed. Uncle Henry called his wife's eyes lapis lazuli. Glittering treasure. Not right now, though. Now, Uncle Henry bellowed directions for unloading the coaches.

Jackson walked a wary line toward the servants. This was his house, though he'd often avoided it, and these servants his, too. It was his job to greet them, to introduce the others, though doing so felt like a sham, as if he attempted to step into his father's shoes when they would never fit.

Perhaps Uncle Henry could do it. He looked over his shoulder, and instead of finding his uncle, he found Gwendolyn. She looked at him as if he could gather stars with his fingertips, plucking them from the heavens and categorizing them one by one. How could she look at him like that one moment and throw every star he'd gathered her away the next?

He turned back to the servants. His servants now, an extended part of his family. He felt ready, finally, to fit into his father's shoes.

He completed his march and bowed low to them all, cleared his throat. “The prodigal has returned.”

Laughter rippled through their ranks.

A woman stepped forward. She was tall with friendly green eyes and steel-gray hair pulled into a stiff coiffure low on her neck. Mrs. Agatha

Whitlock had been housekeeper since the house opened. “Mr. Cavendish, it is good to see you once more.” She wore a grin well, as if she wore it often. “We are pleased you’ve brought a party with you.”

“It will be good to have the house full once more, will it not?” Easier to pretend easiness once he’d begun.

“Quite exciting. If you’ll all come inside, we’ll show everyone to their rooms.”

He led the way.

Mrs. Whitlock followed close behind. “It is late, sir, but we’ve prepared a small dinner if you’ve not filled yourself up at some inn or other.”

“That sounds perfect. Thank you, Mrs. Whitlock.”

She beamed and led him and the others up the stairs. “All the bedrooms are on the second floor, as is yours. We’ve prepared your parents’ old room, as well. Just in case.”

Just in case he wished to use it. He would not.

The hallway grew larger as they rose, and he stopped when the double doors to his parents’ room came into view.

Mrs. Whitlock continued, unaware of his pause. “The other bedrooms are in the opposite wing on this floor.”

His family, climbing the stairs behind him, bumped into him, crowded past him.

Uncle Henry patted him on the shoulder as he passed, Aunt Sarah on his arm. “Good to be home, my boy?”

Yes. Quite. But not without shadows. He smiled, a weak thing that likely looked on the verge of dying.

No one noticed, though. They followed Mrs. Whitlock down the hall and disappeared around a corner as she led them to their rooms.

“Are you well?” Gwendolyn’s voice rang from below with worried softness.

He cleared his throat and lifted a boulder-heavy leg to the top of the landing. “Yes. Of course.”

Steps, almost silent, behind him, then she appeared beside him, looking up, her eyes wide with careful observation. “I do not think I believe you.”

“’Tis neither here nor there.” He strode away from her. “You’d best catch up to Mrs. Whitlock to learn what chamber she’s put you in.” He stopped before his parents’ room.

She stopped right behind him, laid a hand on his shoulder. “If you need

my help, Jackson, I will give you what I can. I would like to do you some good instead of ...” She swallowed her words.

“Only work here, Miss Smith. As you wish.” He tried to make his voice cold, practical.

Then only cold where the warm square of her hand had been, only the ghost of her presence haunted him with the scent of mint and roses. She kept peppermint-flavored treats in her pockets to help her focus while she worked, and something she bathed in soaked her in the heady fragrance of blooming flowers.

He would know the interesting combination anywhere, forever associate it with her.

He snuck his hand into his pocket, finding the warm, curved metal of his pocket watch, taking strength and courage from it, from his father. He stepped forward, pressing fingertips to the oak doors before him. Cold and solid and silken. He’d walked by them once, pressed his ear to them, heard things his parents would likely rather he forget—sounds of laughter and love. They’d loved each other fiercely. They’d loved their children just as well.

And Jackson had failed them.

He’d make it right. He’d come home to do just that before moving on to the next country, the next journey.

He jerked away from the room and found his own, focused on the problem he could solve. He could not resurrect his parents, change the past or his own past actions, but he could find his father’s manuscript and complete his work, an excellent distraction from his Gwendolyn problems.

She’d put a hand on his shoulder. Did it mean something? Her words about wanting to help ... a siren’s song that would lead to destruction or the bit of hope he’d been waiting for?

Six



Gwendolyn stood alone in the middle of a very pretty room. Behind her closed door, the sounds of children exploring bounced about. She smiled and pushed the pink curtains aside to view the garden. A renaissance herb garden just below, then rows of fragrant winter blooms, then simple, symmetrical knots that paved the way to a glassed greenhouse.

A sole gardener dug in the dirt. She ached to explore it all, discover its hidden treasures. Easy to imagine belonging here, in all the sunlight and cheerfulness. A dream only, and a much more difficult one to envision once she told Lord Eaden of her plans to find new employment. She should have told him before now, but the part of her that liked to pretend she belonged with his family had clung to them a little longer. Once she told him, all would be changed.

But she must. It felt dishonest not to. Tomorrow. She'd rise early and speak with him before Jackson dragged himself out of bed, late as usual. She'd make sure he knew, too, how grateful she was. For a brief moment, she'd let down her walls and show him her softness so he knew, *knew*, how utterly wonderful he was.

There. She liked a good decision made. Felt like solid footing.

She looked about the room, as much of a delight as the rest of the manor was proving to be. She had never seen a house she liked as much as this one. Everything new and modern but calling out for a second look with details from the past. Clearly, Jackson's parents had put great passion and attention into the creation of their home. Henry had told her a bit about it on the journey here, and she'd expected it to seem a hodgepodge of eclectic taste, a confusing chaos of different styles and eras, but much like the garden she

looked down at, the house had lovingly balanced all these things. The Renaissance and Classical eras, French and British styles. And everything comfortable.

Her own room especially. The pale-pink curtains glowed in the sunlight streaming through the window, and the friendly fire low in the grate cast cheerful shadows on the walls. Someone had painted a garden all around her, an apple tree in a meadow that rolled toward blooming roses. Made her itch to pull out her own paints. Later. Tonight. When she couldn't sleep. This place was no tower, though, it was a fairy castle. She'd draw the winged creatures hidden in corners and dancing on the breeze, a pleasant distraction from several hard truths.

She would leave Henry's employ soon, and Jackson had done what he'd threatened to do in the nighttime garden in London—give her the distance she pretended to desire. He'd remained charming as usual since then, as they'd packed and prepared to depart, during the journey, and on their arrival. But there had been no secret shared smiles or whispered jokes, no long discussions or amiable arguments. He'd been ... friendly. Plainly so. He'd warned her in the garden. She'd not believed his words a real threat. Until he'd taken away his sun.

It used to be any move she made toward him brightened him like that life-giving star. If she'd laid a hand on him as she had a mere half hour ago, he would have folded it between his, pulled her closer, looked at her lips as if he had a right to do so with such passion and desire, with that little hint of irresistible humor.

Today, he'd shrugged her off, pulled away, shut her out. No insult given. But no interest, either.

For the best. But oh, how she hated it. How it made her want to kick his shins and kiss him senseless to remind him ... to remind him he was *hers*. And she his, and ... and ... useless. Pointless desires.

Bah.

Yet, somehow ... this lovely room made her feel a bit better, made it easier to breathe. She wanted to see more of the house it belonged to.

A scratch at the door.

"Come in," Gwendolyn said.

A maid entered with a bobbing curtsy, precise and agile despite her arms full of packages.

Gwendolyn rushed toward her. "Here. Let me help."

“Oh no, miss.” The maid bustled by her and began arranging the parcels on the dressing table. “They should have been unwrapped and in place before you arrived, but you came much sooner than we expected. By more than an hour.”

Another maid bustled in carrying a vase of flowers, fragrant and blooming despite the February gloom. “Good day, miss. I’ll set these right here.” She placed them atop an armoire, gave a curtsy, and disappeared.

Gwendolyn lingered over the blooms, inhaling deep, taking the misplaced spring deep into her lungs. “Beautiful.”

“From the greenhouse, miss,” the first maid said. “Mr. Cavendish requested you have fresh flowers every day.” She stood back from the table, gathering the brown paper in her arms. “There. Do you need anything else?”

Gwendolyn peered at the now unwrapped packages. “Soap?”

“Rose-scented. Mr. Cavendish had a whole box of the stuff shipped here.”

Gwendolyn picked up a small box carved from rosewood and opened it with a gasp. Mints. Her favorite kind.

“There’s more of those in the kitchen, miss, but Mr. Cavendish suggested you would like some up here for your personal use.”

“Of course he did.” She smiled at the maid. “Thank you. Everything is perfect.” And perfect because Mr. Cavendish had designed it to be that way. And after he’d told her he was done chasing after her. He’d taken away her sun, but it still existed behind the clouds of his hurt. She tamed the grin nipping at the corners of her lips.

“Dinner will be in an hour, Miss Smith. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No. Nothing at all.”

The maid curtsied once more then disappeared.

An hour. That gave her time to explore. Her spirits rose high. Exploration always made her buoyant. And she should find Jackson and thank him for the soap, the mints, for thinking of her even when he must hate her.

She changed into a new gown, shaking out the wrinkles, and avoiding the small pocket on the side of the trunk where she’d hid the marquess’s letter. She’d wanted to leave it in London but had not been able to. What if a maid found it? So she tucked it away tight where she could not see it and tried to pretend it didn’t call out to her in the man’s nasally voice. *I always get what I want, girl, and I want you.*

She swatted the remembered words away and replaced them with her own constant humming as she dressed and freshened up. Once ready, she opened her door and stopped short.

“Well, hello.” She knelt down, wrapped her arms around her knees. “And who are you?”

“Mew.” The small gray tabby cat stared up at her as if it didn’t even know how to blink.

“Can I assist you with something, Miss Tabby? Mr. Tabby?” She bent her neck, her body, trying to ascertain ... impossible. So much fur!

The cat’s tail swished back and forth, wrapping around its body on each side, a slow and curved metronomic movement.

“I was about to depart. Perhaps you could step aside and let me pass?”

No blinking. Only the slow curve to curve of the cat’s tail.

“Very well.” Gwendolyn stood and nodded at the cat. “I’ll step to the side.” Being careful not to touch the feline, Gwendolyn did just that, then leaned forward and shut her door before turning toward the direction she knew Jackson’s room to be in.

A warmth streaked around her ankles.

She stopped, startled, and looked down. “You again?”

The cat stopped too, looked up.

How to read a cat? How to talk to one? She’d never had pets. Her father had not allowed animals of any sort into the house, and she’d not thought to procure one once married. And pets could not be had while traveling.

“You ... stay.” She pointed a finger toward the floor. “You’ll get hair on my gown.”

The cat’s tail swished.

“Very good.” Gwendolyn knocked on Jackson’s door.

It opened. He blinked at her. “Oh. Gwendolyn. Hello.”

“I will not keep you. I merely wished to say thank you.”

His brows shot toward one another, and he scratched the back of his neck. “Thank you? For ...?”

“The soap? The mints. The flowers.”

“Ah. Yes. Well, my mother always insisted that guests at Seastorm be made as comfortable as possible.” He slipped out of the room, cutting a wide swath between them. “I must chat with Mrs. Whitlock now. Make sure there’s nothing requiring my urgent attention. I’ll see you at dinner.”

So polite. So formal. As if she were nothing more than a remote

acquaintance. His steps hitched and almost stopped before he threw his arm in the air and called out, "I hope you enjoy the cat."

She frowned. He knew about the cat? Had he arranged for *that* as well? She turned and swept down the hall.

The cat mewed.

Gwendolyn jerked to a stop, looked down. "Shoo!"

The cat mewed again.

Gwendolyn marched away from it.

It followed.

"Fine," she grumbled. "Follow me if you must. I suppose you'll soon bore of me and turn to other curiosities. Mice and such." If Jackson had meant the cat for her, what in Jove's name were his intentions? Was it a diabolical plot for revenge?

At least the cat distracted from the disaster of her relationship with Jackson. They were like a shipwreck, a once magnificent vessel smashed to sharp bits and useless pieces. The promise of everything they could have been—entirely gone, washed away in a merciless tide of her own stubborn fears.

No one to blame but herself this time.

"For the best," she reminded herself.

"Mew," said the cat in an oddly skeptical tone.

She wandered in the opposite direction of Jackson Cavendish, and the cat, swallowing a sigh. "Oop!" Her feet brought her right up to a pair of double doors at the end of the hallway. From somewhere nearby, the happy cries of children echoed to her. She smiled but felt no joy. She would miss their laughter when she left. She pushed the doors open and froze when her ankles brushed up against a warm body. She looked down.

The gray cat looked up.

"You again? You should seek out other companions. You will not like me. I am not good company." She stepped around it and through the double doors. "Oh!" A music room complete with pianoforte. She could barely play a note, but Jackson ... His fingers flew with feeling across any instrument he encountered. What would a younger Jackson have looked like seated on that bench, playing a private concert for his family?

Like perfection. Of that she had no doubt.

She sat down at the pianoforte bench, a little left of its center and closed her eyes. What if he sat next to her? Teaching her. The corners of her lips

turned up in a smile once more, this one stretched with less sorrow. She plonked out a note then another and another, chuckling at the tuneless melody.

“Miss Smith.”

Gwendolyn whipped open her eyes and stood, almost toppling the bench in her haste. “Lord Eaden. I apologize for disturbing you.”

“Bah. Not at all. I was playing hide-and-seek with the children and heard your playing. Thought to investigate.”

Gwendolyn folded her hands primly in her lap. “And toss the tuneless fiend out on her ear?”

Lord Eaden laughed. “You have other talents. You breathe life into your sketches. And you have a friend.”

Gwendolyn frowned, tilted her head.

Lord Eaden nodded at the floor before the pianoforte, and Gwendolyn stood slowly, peered over its top.

She gasped. “Oh! That. Cat. He won’t leave me alone.”

“He likes you.”

“I am not the type of person to take up with animals.” She sat back down slowly, eyeing the cat until she could no longer see it.

“Hm. Too restless. Yes.”

“I am restless to begin work, to find the manuscript. When shall we commence?”

“Tomorrow. Not too early, though. No reason not to think of this as a holiday. Sleep late. Play a bit. Enjoy yourself.”

Not likely to happen. She traced her finger down the length of the pianoforte and back.

“That’s what Sarah and I plan to do,” Lord Eaden said. “The children wish to explore the grounds. And the castle. We’ve promised to take them tomorrow.” He scratched his chin. “But I see you will not seek out such diversions.”

She managed a smile and shook her head. “Though you must do as you please, Lord Eaden. Jackson and I are used to doing all the work.”

Lord Eaden chuckled. “Are you saying I’ll be in the way? Are you implying I work you two to the bone?”

“Not at all.” She bolted upright, almost spilling off the bench. “It is merely that we have developed a system in the last few years as we’ve worked without you. We’ve learned to cope without your excellent

guidance.”

“Humph.” Lord Eaden leaned against the doorframe.

“Your nephews and Pansy require your presence more than Jackson and I.”

He sighed. “True enough, I suppose. True enough. This is my reward for training the two of you so well. I’m redundant.” But true pride colored his words.

She held her face up to it as if it were the sun. Kind words, proud ones, had rarely fallen on her ears until she’d met Lord Eaden. She saved each one and locked them up safe to keep her from despair when such times inevitably drowned her world with sorrow.

“I’m positive,” Lord Eaden said, always unaware how precious his praise was, “you’ll find my brother’s manuscript quickly, then you can enjoy yourselves as well. Truly, I should be looking for the manuscript while you have a holiday.”

“Unnecessary.”

“That restlessness again.” He chuckled. “You’ve not said so—because you would never say so ... not to me at least—but I’m sure you find a trip to Brighton too tame for your wanderlust.”

She hung her head, avoiding his gaze. What could she say? She did not wish to roam the earth for the rest of her days. It merely seemed the most expedient way to avoid her demons at home. And how could she ever take root and have a home of her own? But she could. In a sort of way.

He folded his arms across his chest. “Do not fret. We’ll find the manuscript soon enough, and I’ll return the two of you to your adventures abroad.”

She would not be returning to those adventures. Not for Lord Eaden, not beside Jackson. She’d planned to tell him tomorrow, but why not today? No reason not to except that it would hurt.

She focused on what she’d be gaining instead of what she’d lose when she left—a friendship less complicated than hers with Jackson, new work, a chance to protect a dream of a family from a threat they neither earned nor deserved.

She cleared her throat. “Lord Eaden, there is something I must say to you.”

He straightened, an abrupt shift upright with almost military precision. “Oh?” He might also have mumbled something resembling *finally*, but the

breathy lowness of his voice kept the truth of his words from her ears. “And what is that?”

Inhale. Exhale. All said and all over in but a sentence. “It is time for me to find new employment.”

“Pardon?” A bark of disbelief followed by the rapid snap of boots against wood flooring. “Say that again.”

She met his gaze fully, kept her spine straight and strong and those hands—wanting to fly up and hide her face, crush the on-rushing tears back where they came from—folded still and prim on her smooth skirts.

“I would like to focus on my drawing, and I had hoped you might put me in contact with other scholars—a naturalist, perhaps—who would appreciate my skills in compiling their publications.”

He stood before her now, almost close enough to touch, his face a study in confusion. She’d had a father, and she hoped to never see the man again. But Lord Eaden, her savior, she’d rather perish than meet that fate.

She wet her lips. “You ... you have been more than an employer to me. You have been a friend, a—”

“I think of you as a daughter, Miss Smith. Why are you even contemplating leaving?”

“It is time.” All she could say. He’d never probed into her private dealings before. Since the day he’d discovered her, a castaway on the ship taking him to France, he’d let her keep her secrets. “A ... daughter cannot always remain home.”

“She damn well can. And you’re never home. You’re always abroad. I thought you enjoyed the tasks I set you about. Digging into the dust of history.”

She stood, nodding quickly. “I do. *I do*. And I can never thank you enough for all you’ve done for me. You’ve never once demanded of me more than I was willing to give. And that has been a blessing. Can you leave me my secrets one final time?”

His scowl took the wild turn of a feral beast, and he swung away from her, anger turning his steps to a volley of bullets. When he turned back around, he wagged his finger at her. “You’ll not disappear. Do you understand? I’ll find you your contacts, though I hate to share your skill with others. But where will you go?”

“Europe.”

“The Continent? Sar far from us all? To family?”

She didn't really have that anymore, but she merely nodded. She'd go where she could sully or harm no one, where the marquess could not discover her.

"Humph. I should not be surprised. I've trained you and Jackson to be wandering souls, unfortunately. But I do understand it. And I do have a contact or two in Europe. I'll send word, but you're not to say please and thank you and disappear on me as you likely did on—" He snapped his mouth shut, dragged in a heavy breath, composed his features. "Sarah and I. Nora and Ada, and ... and Jackson. We would all be ... quite put out to never see you again. Promise you'll visit."

She nodded. She could visit them when Jackson was not there, peek into the life she wanted when what she really wanted—him—was gone.

He exhaled, a rough whoosh that seemed to grate her skin.

"Thank you," she said. "For everything."

He reddened, swatted at her gratitude. "Bah. No need for thanks."

"Uncle! Uncle!" the twins called.

"Papa!" And Pansy.

They rushed through the door and tackled him, pulling him to the floor. He rose off the ground, bringing the three children with him, attached to three of his four limbs. "Worse than the kraken you all are. Come along. Give Miss Smith her privacy." He dragged them from the room, leaving only the echoes of their giggles behind.

And Gwendolyn's battered heart.

And the cat.

She ignored the pesky feline and plonked out a few more notes. Done. Done and done and done, the only word to every note known to man. Done—she'd told him her plans. Done—he'd accepted them. And done—her time of refuge with this family.

She collapsed onto the keys, pressing her eyes tightly closed and laying her head atop her folded arms. A cacophony of sound. Then silence.

She would not cry. She *did not* cry. Not since the night before she'd crept onto that ship that had sailed her into a new life. She—

What in Jove's name was that? She looked up and to the side.

The cat sat beside her, head tilted. It stood and moved toward her in a single elegant sweep of paw and fur and butted its head against her waist. And purred.

"Go away," she muttered.

The cat did not go away. It continued to rub its tiny triangle head against her, purring, a soft vibration that put the tears right back where they'd come from. At least the creature was of some use, then.

"You're a nuisance," she said. But she didn't mean it. Not even a little bit. She reached out and touched tentative fingers to the space between its eyes that looked so very soft. Fluffy. And it was. Startlingly soft. She jerked her hand back as if burned by the fluffiness.

The cat took the opportunity to step onto her lap.

"The effrontery! A gentleman asks a lady first. Are you a gentleman? Or are you a lady?"

She wasn't about to look again. Seemed a breach of propriety. Or perhaps privacy.

The cat curled up into an oval rug of fluff and purr and gray stripes and closed its eyes, pinning her as neatly as a pin would pierce an insect, mooring it eternally in a dish.

"Bother," she muttered, but she stretched her fingers through its fur along its back and closed her eyes, enjoyed the comfort another being could give for the first time since the midnight tower in Paris.

She was doing the right thing. Absolutely. A new life. A new beginning in a place no one knew her. No stares on the streets or being recognized by seamstresses. No Jackson, either ... but Marianne, if she agreed to join her, would keep the loneliness at bay. And Jackson and his family would be better off without her. And she'd do her best while still here to help him find his father's book, complete the man's research. A gift before leaving.

A final connection between severing everything.

Perhaps she could get a cat.

Seven



Jackson woke with the dawn and met Gwendolyn at the study door. He ignored her wide, blue eyes, neat, coiled hair, and mouth still soft from sleep. She had, thrown over one shoulder, her beaten satchel, which he knew held her sketchbook and pencil, some charcoal, usually, and some watercolors too.

They stared awkwardly at one another.

She tilted her head, pressed her lips thin.

He scratched the back of his neck.

“Will we stand here all morning?” she asked.

“Not at all.” He opened the door and ushered her through with a gallant bow. Overdone, but he had to make up for the awkwardness somehow.

“We should break our fast first,” she said, looking around at the book-lined walls, the soft, faded rugs, the small fireplace with chairs and table gathered round, and the large walnut desk dominating the room’s center.

He’d loved this room as a lad. Even when he’d been summoned within its walls for a lecture, the books had seemed to comfort him, the desk had suggested that his father meant business while the thick rugs would soften the blow. As had his father’s smile once the lecture had reached its end.

Odd to be here again and to know he’d never hear that voice, see that smile again. Felt like a wound that had healed but still ached when it rained.

It rained right now.

“I’m not hungry,” Jackson said. “Let’s find the thing and be done with it.” Surely he could open up the desk drawers, rummage around a bit, and find the manuscript, then he could lock himself away with it and get to work completing his father’s legacy while doing his best to avoid the warm woman

beside him. And that ache in his chest from the familiar room, the memory.

She strode to the bellpull and gave it a yank. “You may be fine, but I need coffee. Now sit and be a good little scholar while we wait for the tea and toast.”

He propped a hip against his father’s old desk and raised a brow. “Feeling a tad ... domineering this morning, Gweny?”

She hid a smile. “If you weren’t in need of *constant* guidance, I wouldn’t have to tell you what to do.”

A maid entered, and after Gwendolyn made her request and the maid left again, she said, “You’ve not even shaved today. Do at least remember to wear your glasses.”

He pulled them slowly from his waistcoat pocket, holding her gaze, unfolding them at a glacial pace, and sliding them onto his ears. “Happy, Miss Smith?”

The rise and fall of her chest stopped for one brief moment, and she sucked her lower lip between her teeth.

Liked his glasses, did she? He’d have to wear them more often.

“I suppose,” she said, “I am somewhat appeased.” She dropped her gaze and busied herself running a finger and a studied eye over the shelved books on one side of the room.

So easy to fall into a playful rhythm with her despite the hurt and longing, despite a future of nothing between them.

How the hell could that be? No future between them when they could run together so smoothly and happily in moments like this?

He sauntered forward until he almost pressed against the length of her body from the side. He reached up and flicked that little devil’s horn of a lock of hair that liked to curl up above her ear. “I’m not the only one disheveled this morning.”

She swatted his hand away then paced away from him. “Bah. You know it will not be tamed, no matter my efforts.”

He did not approach her again. He’d promised not to. He must remember.

The tea cart came, and when she sat in a chair at a low table, he did not join her in the chair opposite. Instead, he popped behind the desk. Best to be done with this. Top right drawer first. Not more than two minutes of perusal proved it empty of Jackson’s prize. The top left drawer, though filled with bits and bobbles, proved similarly useless. No manuscript there. He rummaged through the rest of the drawers on the left, then moved back over

to the right. Nothing in any of them. Some of them entirely empty. Did the damn desk have hidden drawers? He looked for them, knew where and how to find them but found nothing.

“Good morning, Miss Smith. Where’s Jackson?”

Jackson popped up from behind a desk. “Uncle.”

“Zeus, what’s happened to you?” He gestured to Jackson’s head.

Jackson reached up—a complete tangle sprinkled liberally in dust. Lovely. He swept his gold-rimmed glasses from his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s not here. It’s not here.” He came to his feet, holding his hands out flat, palm up, empty. “Where the hell is it?”

“We’ll find it, my boy,” Uncle said. “Don’t worry. Sit down and have some tea.” He lounged on a nearby sofa, his feet kicked up onto a low table, a scone slathered with dark jam in one hand, a teacup sloshing cream-lightened tea in the other. “Join Miss Smith and I. Break your fast.” He waved the teacup toward Jackson.

Jackson disappeared into the desk’s drawers again. Had he missed something? It was a desk. His father’s most-used one. Where else was a manuscript of a book meant to be? But a second search proved no more successful.

He strode out from behind the desk and walked with dead steps toward the table and the tea tray. Gwendolyn sat on the edge of a seat near his uncle, no other chairs within arm’s reach. He couldn’t sit near her even if he wanted to, so he dropped into a chair as far from Gwendolyn as it was possible to get and stabbed his fingers through his hair, doing little to smooth it, only more evenly spreading the dust throughout.

“Why wouldn’t he put it in the desk?” he asked to no one in particular. More the ghost of his dead father than anyone else.

Lord Eaden grinned. “Did you expect this to be easy? Your father was superstitious about his work. Didn’t even let me see it unless he thought it complete. Melinda had to wait as well.”

“Melinda?” Gwendolyn asked, reaching for a scone.

“My mother’s given name.”

“Very pretty,” Gwendolyn mumbled, reaching for a pastry.

Jackson reached for a pastry as well, and Gwendolyn poured him a cup of tea and held it out. He almost didn’t take it. If he did, their hands would touch, and he was finding leaving her alone to be a trickier business than he’d imagined. One could not merely snuff out attraction or other deeper emotions

like fingers pinching a candle wick. He managed to take the cup without even coming close to her fingers. He grasped the edge of the cup on his side and slipped it out of her grasp.

He'd never let an opportunity to accidentally caress her pass. *Never*. His muscles jerked to try again, make it right this time by sliding his skin against hers, an intimacy his body screamed for. He grit his teeth instead and poured the scalding beverage down his throat. An excellent reminder—she did not want him.

She refilled her cup and lifted it to her lips. “You’ve only searched this desk so far.”

He nodded, slumped in his chair.

She took a sip of her tea. “Then we’ve an entire manor of possibilities.”

Lord Eaden stood, paced, and chewed his scone at the same time. “True.”

“Do you have your notebook and pencil with you?” she asked Jackson.

“No. But I found one in the desk.” He nodded toward the pile of documents he’d tossed onto the center of the desk. “Somewhere in there.”

“Ah. I see it.” She swept to the desk and opened the notebook to a new page. “I’ll make a list of all the rooms from most to least likely. The kitchen, for instance, would not be a room Mr. Cavendish would have frequented, I assume.”

Lord Eaden bellowed a laugh. “You’d assume wrong. Carlisle loved kitchens. Said they were the heart of home, kept everyone fed. Put the kitchen at the top of the list.”

“No.” Jackson popped to his feet and strode to her side. “Put his bedroom at the top. Then his private study adjacent to the bedroom. I remember he liked to write in different places, and those were two he preferred over all others.” He gave a small chuckle. He’d forgotten about all this for so long. Had wanted to forget. “He insisted on having a writing desk in every room.”

Gwendolyn pressed the pencil tip to the rough paper and added rooms as the two men called them out.

“What about the old castle?” Lord Eaden asked.

Jackson shook his head. “No. He often went there, but he did so to think, not write. Hmm.” He stood and paced. “He did outfit the old banquet hall, near the fireplace where the roof was still intact, with a rug and chair. He liked his comfort while thinking. We could check there, but I doubt he’d hide it where moisture and mildew could destroy it.” He wrinkled his nose. “If the rug’s still there, no doubt it’s succumbed to those very ills.”

Lord Eaden wagged his finger. “Excellent point.”

Gwendolyn pressed her pen into the paper, and Jackson looked over her shoulder, tried not to breathe her in. But he couldn’t very well hold his breath. Man needed air to live. Mint and flowers and *damn. Focus.*

She’d written *chair and rug, banquet hall, and castle* down on the page, at the very bottom of her list.

“Best to be thorough,” she explained. “Do either of you know if he completed it? The manuscript.”

“Unlikely.” Lord Eaden yawned and stretched his arms behind his head. “If he had, he would have shared it with me. Speaking of the castle, I promised Sarah and the children to walk with them to it today. Will the two of you join us? It’s a glorious day, and you should both be out and about, not cooped up inside.”

Jackson plopped into the chair behind his father’s desk. “No. I’ll search this room in its entirety and then a few more rooms as well.”

Gwendolyn peered at the tea cart across the room. “And I’d like to find some more tea and then the library.”

“Very well.” Lord Eaden strode for the door, hovered, giving them a final opportunity to join him. “Suit yourselves.”

She waved his uncle away. “Have fun, Lord Eaden.”

Uncle Henry pointed at them. “Do not tear one another to pieces, children. Behave.”

“I never do anything but, Lord Eaden,” Gwendolyn said.

“I absolutely make no promises,” Jackson assured him.

Uncle Henry’s chuckle echoed down the hallway as he left them alone.

Gwendolyn cocked her head at Jackson, all business. “Show me the library, Mr. Cavendish.”

“This way.” He turned to the bookshelf, pulled a latch, and opened a door in the wall. An entire door-shaped wedge of the bookcase swung inward.

She followed him through into the other room and gasped.

He tried to see what she saw, how she saw it—a large library, its walls lined with books. A long table stretched out in the middle of the room, and shorter bookshelves, on which various artifacts sat, lined either side of the table. He loved it. Did she?

He peered at her.

Her eyes glowed with appreciate, approval, and the corners of her lips hinted at a laugh. “That was easy. And this is ... perfection. A perfect place

to read and concentrate.”

Concentrate. Something he could not do with her so near.

He strode toward another door across the room. “I’ll be on the second floor if you need me.”

“You’re not staying?” They always worked together, books scattered before them, throwing ideas at one another like flat rocks across a lake, watching them skip or sink depending on their worth.

“No. I mean to search my father’s rooms.”

“But we’ll do a more thorough job together.”

He paused in the door frame, his back to her. Don’t turn around, he willed himself, pleased when he didn’t move the muscles that would put her in sight, that would show him if her eyes were worried or clear, angry or curious.

“We’ll do a more thorough job,” he said, “if we divide our attentions between the book work and the practical work. Since I am stronger, I’ll take the practical work in hand while you dive into the books.”

“I wish you’d offered a less logical reason,” she grumbled. “Then I could better point out the flaws in your plan.”

He allowed himself a chuckle, but then he left. If he’d stayed any longer, he’d have turned around, asked her what she thought about the library, the house, and listened to her with damn stars in his eyes.

No. He stomped out the stars under the soles of his boots until he stood before his parents’ bedroom door.

“No nonsense,” Jackson said. “This is why you came here.” He pushed the double doors open, and the room did not bite him. It did not drag him into the past. It did not berate him for being a selfish child. It merely existed, soft and sunny and entirely innocent.

“Right.” He strode into the room, leaving the doors open. “Might as well start at the desk.” He’d begin by examining it for hidden compartments and false drawers.

He did a thorough job of it, too, finding none and moving on to the documents in the desk. Boring stuff. Clipped newspapers and ribbon. His mother likely used this piece of furniture too.

He stood and stretched his back, then placed his palms flat on the desk and stretched it the other way like a cat arching. He hung his head and worked his muscles this way and that.

A sound in the hallway lifted directly from his dreams. Almost exactly like the little mew of desire that had slipped from Gwendolyn’s lips their one

night together. He shot upright and found her in the doorway.

Watching him, hands on her hips and lightning in her eyes.

“Can I do something for you?” he asked. Impossible to keep the chuckle from his voice.

“You’ve ruined my focus.”

“Oh? How so?”

“I found the snuff box,” she said. “The rosewood one. It’s very pretty.”

His gift for her. One of the many he’d been unable to stop himself from ordering for her to make her stay in his home as perfect as possible. “And you discovered its contents?”

“The mints. Thank you.” She frowned. “Stop being so thoughtful. I cannot concentrate with all the kindness.”

He stood, stretched his back. “Trying to stop, Gweny. Hard to break a habit.” And he had more than one habit to break considering her.

She reached into her pocket, pulled forth a small lumpy mint, and popped it into her mouth. “You are too nice for me, Mr. Cavendish. You should not be. I’m a bruised apple.”

“You’re not.” Could she hear the edge in his voice? “And even if you are a bit bruised, what of it? We all are.” He, for example, had barely been able to enter this room.

But now it was not so bad. Not with their voices rising together to fill the void, not with Gwendolyn poised against the window, the garden glowing beyond the glass. Not so bad at all.

“Bruised apples,” he said, “make delicious cider.” He lingered over the word *delicious*, and her gaze flew to his lips.

Then she shook her head snapped her gaze away from him entirely. “I’ve already discovered your father’s system of organization, as well as an entire shelf dedicated to castles of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One includes an entire chapter on Seastorm Castle. I piled them together on the table. We can read them starting with the oldest and then move forward by publication date.”

“A solid plan, as usual. Good work.”

“It is, I admit, a thorough system. One I’ve often used.”

He allowed himself to flash her a grin. “I know.” Two words that actually meant *there is little I don’t know about you, Gweny, except those things you hide deepest*.

She must have heard the implication because she only said, “Humph.”

“Is that all?” he asked. “I must return to my search.”

“Despite your arguments earlier, I’ve decided to help you here. I found the books we’ll need if the manuscript is unfinished, but we cannot know that until we *find* the manuscript. My work is at a standstill and my efforts are better spent helping you.”

Had Cass been ... right? Was forcing distance between them actually bringing her to him? Was it possible she liked distance not at all? Or was this truly all work related?

Fascinating.

“No thank you.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and turned her toward the door.

She dug her heels in. “You brute. I’m not leaving, and you can’t manhandle me into doing so.” She ducked under his arm and strode farther into the room. “So unless you plan to throw me over your shoulder and—”

“Excellent suggestion.”

“And force me from this room, I’m staying.”

He held his palms up. “As you wish, Gweny.” He dropped his palms to the edge of the desk once more and gave a heave. Not because the desk needed moving but because she’d seemed to like the sight of the stretch earlier.

She ignored him now, though, running her slender fingers over random bits of furniture, pulling them away from the walls, peeking behind them.

He straightened from the stretch and sat on the desk. “Odds an entire manuscript has fallen behind a desk or a wardrobe or any bit of furniture are slim.”

“We must be thorough. You know that. Where have you not looked yet?”

“Near the bed, the window, and under the rugs.”

She smiled. “An entire book would give itself away hidden beneath a rug.” But she dropped to the floor anyway, kneeling near one side of the large square carpet and rolling it all the way to the other end.

They’d once discovered a hidden door beneath a rug at an abandoned manor in Italy. The only thing in the small cavity beneath it had been an even smaller bundle of letters tied round with red string. Love letters. They’d offered them to the manor’s owner, but he’d not cared a bit for “moldy paper.” So they’d read them aloud to one another while sitting under an ancient oak tree on the property. A fitting tribute, Jackson had said. Gwendolyn had rolled her eyes but watched him with rapt attention every

time it was his turn to read.

But under this rug—nothing. She stood, and he turned back to his own task.

“The furniture,” she said, kneeling by the bed to have a peek beneath it, “reproductions? Or is it all truly early Baroque?”

“Originals. But the design of the house, you’ll notice, is earlier.”

She nodded. “Elizabethan.”

“My parents wished to match the new manor house to the castle.”

“Does it bother you? Being here without them?”

“My parents, you mean?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He looked about the room, could almost see and hear them. “I admit it does. I ...” He inhaled deeply. “Every corner has a memory.”

She crept closer to him, taking two bold steps until she stood within his reach.

But he’d lost his way in memories. “I haven’t been in this room since they were alive. I locked it up, and yet nothing is dusty. Everything is the same. The servants must keep it clean.” He cleared his throat. “When I walked in, I almost expected to see my mother standing there at the window. Expected to see my father striding in to hand her a bouquet of flowers fresh from the garden.” He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were clear, and his gaze snapped to Gwendolyn. “Everything here is in perfect order, the house immaculate, the garden thriving, and her ... him ... dead. Seems utterly wrong.”

He shook the mists of memory away and offered her a weak smile. “We have not come to tread the path of memory. We should keep looking.” A fever had entered into him to find the missing book. Before this morning, he’d not thought of it as much more than a randomly chosen goal to distract him from the pangs of the heart, inspired by the curve of a dented, golden pocket watch.

But he did love a good mystery. Surely it would be solved before noon.

“You’re right.” She tilted her head toward the bed. “Help me move it?”

He snorted. “Do you think it’s stuck behind the headboard?”

She stepped closer to the bed instead, wrapped her fingers around the bedpost.

He joined her at the foot of the bed on the other side. “One, two, three—” He broke the word off with a grunt and a heave. She added her own exertion

as they both pulled, and the giant piece of furniture skid across the floor with an echoing scrape.

The bed moved perhaps six inches, and they moved to the head of it to peer behind.

“Nothing,” they said together.

“I don’t think we’ll find it here.” Jackson glanced over his shoulder at a door behind him. His father’s personal study. He’d often found his father there, ruffled but happy. Sometimes kissing Jackson’s mother. His father had helped him with sums there when he’d been a young boy, praised him there for this and that as he’d grown older.

Enter it?

Jackson’s feet turned to lead, and his legs went all wobbly, but he’d already done one thing he’d not thought he’d ever do today—walk into this room. He had time and space in his day for another impossibility. He took a deep breath and strode forward. “It’s not in this room. We’ll have to check in there next.”

Gwendolyn followed. “Is this the personal study you spoke of?”

Jackson threw the curtains open with a whoosh, drenching everything in light. He turned to survey the space. “It is. I—” His breath caught in his throat. A square of white paper winked up at him from the middle of his father’s slender writing desk. He had the paper, the letter, in his hands four steps later.

She rushed to his side. “Did you find it? That is ... too small to be a book manuscript.”

He huffed a laugh. “Is it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Is that your handwriting?”

It was. Did his fingers tremble? “This is the last letter I wrote to my father.” At least his voice did not. “Telling him I planned to stay another month. At least. In Germany. I remember. I’d met a philosopher fellow and thrown myself into matters of the universe, of human morality and ethics and —” He snapped the sentence in two, crushing it. “Worthless, all of it.”

She rested a hand on his arm, slipped the paper from his ghost-light grip, and put it back on the desk. “How did they die?”

“A carriage accident. They were driving in the rain up north to view a castle said to be built around the same time as Seastorm.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If I had been here, with them, perhaps I could have done something.”

“You could not have controlled it.”

“I could have been with my brothers when it happened, offered them solace. They were only five years of age.” He walked to the window, placed a palm against the glass. “Look. They’re going out to the castle. Not too late for you to join them.”

She joined him, leaving a few inches of space between them and looked below to see what he did—Pansy and the twins running across the lawn, Lord and Lady Eaden, hands entwined, walking slowly behind the children.

“They are happy here,” he said. “Nicholas and Thomas.”

She nodded. “Truthfully, though, I’ve never seen them unhappy. That is a blessing you can be proud of.”

“It gladdens me to see them well. But also shames me. I did not appreciate what my parents had done for me in my youth, and I have not brought the boys here before now. I should have.”

She turned to face him and lifted a hand. With the light touch of a feather, her fingertips found his temple—stopping his heart and stealing his soul—and trailed down the outline of his face, his jaw, to the very point of his chin. “Too rigid, Mr. Cavendish.” Her hand caressed down the line of his throat, and over the slope of his shoulder. Everywhere she touched, he burned. “And shoulders like cliffs of self-flagellation.” She sighed, dropped her hand, and performed another quarter turn so she could lean the back of her hips against the window ledge. “You should not take so much guilt onto them. They’ll become brittle and crumble.”

He would take every bit of weight if he meant she’d touch him again.

She nodded at the wall across the room. “The painting there. Is that your mother?”

“It is.”

“Very pretty.”

“And very kind. And intelligent.”

“You loved her.”

“I did.” His face brightened a bit. “I do.”

She took a shaky breath. “I’m going to tell you something I never thought to tell you. Because”—she sighed—“I don’t know why. I shouldn’t tell you. None of it matters. But I do not like to see you so doubtful of yourself.” She spoke slowly, but a fire had entered her eye, as if she’d become a forge in which to fashion a sword to swing in his name and for his protection.

He held his breath, ready to handle whatever she offered him with the

utmost care, afraid a single misplaced gust of air might push her back into silence.

“My mother was ... distracted,” she said. “I’m not sure she knew I existed unless she needed something of me. I admit I thought the wet nurse my mother for the first four years of my life. I lived in the village with her. A quiet, sweet little life. But I was sent back to my mother when I was five, and ... ha!” More a gust of wind than a laugh. “I cried myself to sleep for half a year. At least.”

Bloody hell. He’d not know what to expect when she finally started talking, but somehow it wasn’t this. He went stone still. No unnecessary movement on his part would dam up the flow of her words.

“My mama in the village, for that’s what I thought of her as, had seemed to love me,” Gwendolyn continued. “But my mother at the big house seemed put out by my presence. She did not often need anything from me. Except perhaps my absence when I was young. And then, once I’d come of age, for me to ... marry.” Her entire body jerked away from the word.

Such a visceral reaction. What had caused it? Just her mother? No. There was more. There had to be. But she’d turned back to the window, drew circles on its glass, an abrupt end to her unexpected tale. “Do not punish yourself, Jackson. You have better ways to spend your time. You have a brilliant mind, a silly, loyal heart too big and too good for most. If your mother loved you, you should rejoice in that, not heap guilt upon your own head because of it.”

He studied the painting of his mother across the room. Her dark-red hair, patrician nose, and the mouth that rounded so readily into a grin. She *had* loved him, and he her, and what good would his guilt do her? Couldn’t save her. Nor him.

“You are quite right, Gwendolyn,” he said. “It is useless to sit around blaming myself.” He found himself torn between glee she’d shared a hidden bit of herself with him and horror at what that bit entailed. But he grasped at the way she’d defended him, self-forged sword in hand, and clung to it. He’d name her sword Hope.

Silence softened the space between them, and he leaned through, bowed his head toward hers.

“Gwendolyn, I wish you’d had a mother like mine.”

She shrugged, turned to face the window.

“Even though yours was ... less than desirable,” he continued, “thank you

for telling me of her. Especially because visiting memories of her cannot be pleasant.”

“Is it so easy for you?” She spoke so low a breath could dissipate her speech. “So easy to face the things in your past you’d rather lock away?”

“Not easy at all.” He ruffled a hand through his hair. “Ha. I’m finding all this much more difficult, in fact, than I expected it to be.”

She stepped away from the window. “We must continue the search. I’ll tackle this room, and you may take the kitchen.”

He stopped her with an outstretched hand. “No. I’ll stay and finish searching this room.”

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes soft and curious. “It does not pain you too much to be here, in a place so full of them?”

He shrugged. “I do not think so.” Facing his guilt, speaking of it, had lightened the weight of it a bit. His words had blasted the walls he’d placed around his heart to bits, and it lay open and vulnerable now, but ... free. He *wanted* to be here, in this room, remembering.

Odd. He’d spent so much time traveling the world, coming home only when necessary, running from his guilt. And today, when he should be running fastest and farthest, he wanted to stay. In his father’s study, in his father’s chair, and see what he could discover.

Eight



The next morning, Gwendolyn hovered in the doorway of the small parlor on the second floor. Asking forgiveness was no easy task, but it must be done because she would leave soon. She wished to move into her new life knowing she'd given what little she had to the family who had given her more than she could ever repay.

But she'd been so hard to Lady Eaden, the woman sitting before the parlor fire, legs pulled up into her skirts, nose stuck in a book. This final goodbye, these words of gratitude, would be most difficult to grind out.

She stepped silently into the parlor. Jackson expected her in the study, but this came first. She'd known it as soon as she'd finished her story about her mother yesterday in his father's private study. She'd never thought to share so much with him, with anyone, but out it had come. He'd shared his ghosts when he'd never done so before, so she did what she'd never done before and shared hers too. They'd done it together, and it had been less terrifying than she'd expected, less thorny and tangled. As if his venturing into grief had opened up a clear and smooth path for her to do so. He'd stepped so easily onto it, and she'd followed without thought. He'd been brave, and she could not let him outdo her.

She trod it even now, in the parlor. The path was new and still tangled, and she trembled a bit to step foot on it. But it beckoned nonetheless, and it led not only to her mother, but also to Lady Eden, a woman so much better than the one who had brought Gwendolyn into the world then promptly tossed her away.

It had come time to tell Lady Eaden goodbye.

Gwendolyn cleared her throat. "Lady Eaden?"

Sarah lifted her face from the book, tilted her head to the side when she caught sight of Gwendolyn. “Miss Smith. Lovely to see you. How is the search coming along? Henry says the book is missing.” She chuckled.

Gwendolyn nodded and lowered into a chair across from Sarah. The fire crackled merrily in the grate. “It is. But Jackson is interviewing the manor staff this morning, so we may discover some clue to its location today. I must join him soon so we can begin.”

Lady Eaden closed her book and dropped it to her lap. “I’m sure the servants will have some knowledge that proves useful. They always do.”

“I don’t know if Lord Eaden has told you, but I plan to leave his employ. After our work here is done.”

Lady Eaden smiled, a small thing. “He has. I hope you do not mind. We do not withhold information from one another.”

“As it should be.” Those who loved shared themselves, trusted. Gwendolyn could not betray that trust and openness with her bruised-apple past. “I merely wanted to speak with you before I left to apologize. I should have done so before now.”

Lady Eaden tried to bend a growing grin downward. “I suppose you mean for our initial interactions? When I married Henry.”

Gwendolyn nodded. “I was not nice.”

“You were a dragon protecting your lair.”

Gwendolyn winced. “Lord Eaden is not a lair. Nor any sort of gem to be hoarded away.”

Lady Eaden laughed. “Though the man *is* a treasure. And your attacks were merely words, disapproving glances—disapproval in general. They did no harm, and I understand why you wanted to rip me to shreds. I appreciate your protective instincts. You did not know me. Neither did Henry. Our marriage was impulsive and could have gone very wrong. Especially for you. A beautiful young woman traveling with him. Had I been a different woman and thought you a threat to my relationship with him, you may have found yourself put out.”

“I feared that, yes.”

“And I assume you have nowhere to go.”

Gwendolyn forced air through her lungs. “Lord Eaden means to help me with that. I wish to focus on my painting.”

“Ah.” Lady Eaden ran her finger around the outline of the book. “And I hope you know you will always have a home with us.”

“That, Lady Eaden is why I am most sorry for my treatment of you. You were never the woman I feared you would be. I think you’ve been trying to befriend me the last few years, when I’ve done nothing to deserve it.”

“Only now seeing that are you?” A soft, soft smile. “I’m glad you see my extended hand now, but I wish it was not as you’re leaving us. I always saw a bit of myself in you. We have both, I think, known the desperation of survival. Has Jackson or Henry told you my husband was a soldier? He enlisted as a single man after we’d married, after I was with child. I think he wanted to escape me. And escape me he did. In death on the battlefield.”

“I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s no worry. I picked myself up and found my way. As have you.”

Gwendolyn met the older woman’s gaze. “As have I. Thank you for sharing your story with me.”

Lady Eaden nodded, slipped her finger between the pages of her book. “I’m happy to do so.”

Gwendolyn stood. “I will not keep you from your reading any longer.”

“It is no matter. I am happy to finally speak with you like this.”

Like friends. Like a daughter. The kind of talks she’d never had with her own mother.

“If you need anything, Miss Smith,” Lady Eaden said, “you know how to find me.”

Gwendolyn stood. “In some cozy place with book in hand.”

“Precisely. We will miss you. Will you not reconsider?”

“I can’t.” She wanted to give this woman more. She licked her lips and found the words. “Sometimes our own comfort and happiness must be sacrificed for the comfort and happiness of those we love.”

Lady Eaden stood and sliced through the space between them. She wrapped her arms tight around Gwendolyn and hugged her, whispered in her ear, “I understand. I *do*. But what if you hurt those you love most with your sacrifice?”

There had long been a dagger in Gwendolyn’s heart, and Lady Eaden’s words twisted it.

She squeezed her eyes tight, fought against the impulse to melt into the hug. “I’ve been so sharp with you. How can you be so kind?”

“Because you’ve needed it.”

The woman would kill her with kindness because Gwendolyn certainly did not deserve it.

She broke from the lady's embrace and smiled as if the exchange had never happened. "I must find Mr. Cavendish now."

Lady Eaden nodded, returned to her chair. "Good luck."

She knew Lady Eaden spoke of their hunt for the book, but Gwendolyn took the words for herself as well as she left the room.

Work. She'd told him she wished only to focus on their work, and she'd do that now. Just as soon as she found the study.

"Mew."

Gwendolyn stopped, one foot hovering over the floor in the hallway. "Oh. You again. Don't you have mice to catch?"

The cat sat prim and tall in the middle of the hall and appraised her with nary a blink.

"Do you have a name?" She strode around the cat. "When you can speak it to me, then you may visit my chamber. Not before." As if such limits could banish the imperturbable feline. She found the study and swept inside to find Jackson perched on a chair near the window, using a stream of morning light through the glass to read a rather old book.

"Good morning," she said, sounding unflappable if not cheerful.

He lowered the book slowly, closed it, his caramel-brown eyes glued to her as he pulled his full bottom lip through his teeth and released it. Then he grinned, from roguish seduction to boyish charm in a blink.

"Good morning, Gwendolyn." His gaze swept the entire length of her, from slippers to simple coiffure, and she felt it like a physical touch. "Sleep well?"

"Quite." Only word she could choke out through the bewilderment and rising lust. "What is our plan for the day?" She sat in a straight-backed chair across the room near the fireplace and tried not to want to stride to him instead, straddle his lap, and press her lips to his.

A single look that seemed to never end, short as it had been, and he'd completely undone her. She may as well be naked before him. He saw all of her anyway. What purpose did clothes serve?

"I have already asked Mrs. Whitlock to section off time for all the staff so we may interview them without overly inconveniencing them." Practical words but in a tone that made her bones sing. For him.

"Excellent idea. They may have information to shine light on this little mystery."

"Mm-hmm."

Would he never look away from her? The way he leaned back in his chair, one ankle crossed over the other knee, his chin resting on his knuckles, his other arm draped carelessly around the back and arm of the chair—a superb position to showcase the lovely length of his body: the sinewy, ropey muscles, the (she swallowed hard) bulging length of him at the apex of his legs, highlighted to perfection by his tight buckskins.

“Do you know,” he said, his voice a deep drawl. “I did not sleep well last night.” His gaze dipped to his lap, and when it rose back to meet her own, it held a bonfire of heat to match the fire burning her up.

“I am sorry to hear that,” she managed to say. Unflappable.

“Yes. Dreams. Coming home seems to have ignited them in interesting directions.”

“Hardly a useful conversation for productivity, Mr. Cavendish,” she said. Tell me more, she wished to moan.

“Do not sniff so. Not all of them were naughty. But all of them featured you.”

She inhaled, exhaled, tried to scowl.

“I know I said I’d focus on work, but you, striding through my dreams all night, have not let me be enough to do so. You accused me of ruining your focus yesterday, now I return the accusation.”

“Any distraction is not my fault. I stayed nicely put in my bed all night, I assure you.”

“A pity, that. Would you like to hear more? About my dreams?”

“No.” Yes.

“They were merely of this place. And you. Haunting the grounds like a luscious ghost.”

How had he known what she wanted despite her words?

He tapped the book where it rested on his thigh. A lovely thigh, muscle straining against buckskin, other parts straining against it too.

She licked her lips.

He noticed, his eyes blazing to life. “In my dreams, it seemed as if you had been here always, waiting for me to return, to join you here.”

“Silly things, dreams.”

“Perhaps. But then I could not sleep, so I went looking for that damn manuscript again.” The slight, charming smile he’d worn since she entered dissolved, replaced by a mouth bracketed with worry, frustration. “Didn’t find it of course. But I did remember exactly why I love the library at

Seastorm. So comprehensive. A book on every subject your heart desires.”

A subject she could warm to. “It is rather magnificent. Did you see the books I found yesterday? And those large windows with the deep seats. I could study there all day.”

His smile returned. “I could see you there, you know. In exactly the window seat you’re talking about. I swear I saw it by candlelight last night. Your gold hair rolling down your back, your pale chemise shining against the darkness, your nose deep into a book. Had to close my eyes and shake my head to rid myself of the image.” He chuckled. “But after I’d banished that ghost, I went in search of literary distraction and found something quite interesting.”

“Oh? What?” She could not keep the excited curiosity from her voice. “A clue to the manuscript’s location?”

“No. I found my father’s special collection of books. The ones I’m not supposed to know exists.” He tapped the book on his leg again.

Ah. Her belly tightened again. He’d found his father’s naughty books. Quite obviously.

“You may keep such information to yourself, Mr. Cavendish.” But she could not help craning her neck, trying to read the cover on the spine of the book balanced on his muscular leg.

“Have you ever read *Thérèse the Philosopher*?” he asked.

“I ... I am afraid I have not.” Almost impossible to speak with lust thickening her throat and tongue, scattering her focus.

“An excellent book. Most enlightening. Interesting reading after such dreams. This is, by the by, not a seduction. Merely a conversation.” He grinned, so slow and with such intent, and with just one corner of his full, firm lips. “I shall leave it now.”

A knock on the door, as if he’d summoned propriety and focus in physical form. As if she’d summoned relief from whatever had been roiling to a boil between them. A distraction from the needy pulse between her legs and that onslaught of charm. Not a seduction? Ha.

“Come in,” Jackson said, standing. He crossed the room and laid the book on the table closest to Gwendolyn, then sat behind his father’s old desk. “Good morning ... Joshua, is it?”

The young man who entered the room wore a footman’s livery in deep blue and gold. He bowed. “Yes, sir.”

“You worked here when my father was yet alive?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gwendolyn stole a single glance at the plain-looking book before jumping to her feet and setting up a workspace on a small table to the side of Jackson’s desk. Paper, pen, an inkwell, and blotting paper. She’d observe and listen, offer questions if she thought of any, and write it all down to study later for clues, if there were any. Mostly, though, she’d stay silent and watch.

Jackson needed no help making others feel comfortable with him, comfortable enough to spill their secrets.

Jackson gestured the footman to a chair across from him. “Sit! I’d feel awkward if you didn’t.” He gestured to a plate of biscuits that looked fresh. “Please take one.”

With wide eyes and some hesitation, the footman did so, and with each flaky, buttery bite, he relaxed.

Jackson chose a biscuit from the plate and placed it before Gwendolyn, too.

She ignored it and picked up her pen. Time to work. They’d dawdled in the personal long enough.

“Are you aware,” Jackson said, turning back to the footman, “that my father was writing a book before he died?”

Joshua wagged his head up and down. “Everyone knew that. Worked on it constantly, he did.”

Jackson nodded, tapped two fingers on the desktop in a slow rhythm. “You see, the problem is that we cannot locate the book. It has been six years, of course, but we’d hoped it would be snug in a desk drawer somewhere. I know it is not likely, but I am hopeful that you or someone else, may have information about the manuscript that will help us find it.”

Joshua’s hand, rising to his mouth, biscuit in tow for another bite, faltered, lowered as his gaze went deep and distant. “Hm. I remember he had a ... portfolio sort of thing. Leather. Brown. Just for carrying his pages.”

Gwendolyn jotted it down—brown leather portfolio. An excellent discovery, that. She’d been looking for pages, paper and ink. But now she knew better.

“Anything else you can remember?” Jackson asked.

The footman shook his head. “Sorry.”

“Not at all, Joshua. You’ve given us more than we had before. Thank you. Can you send in the next person?”

Joshua stood to leave, a second biscuit in hand, a smile on his face.

“Oh, and ...” Jackson stretched a hand toward the other man.

“Yes, sir?”

“Excellent work here during my long absences. You and the others run the manor with more efficiency than I could ever achieve.”

Joshua grew taller, raised himself up to his full height, and snapped his jacket straight. “Thank you, sir. But we’ll be right glad to have you back in a more permanent capacity.”

Jackson’s grin faltered, and he opened his mouth then closed it. He looked down at the desk for a breath then finally faced the footman once more. “Quite.” He leaned back in his chair, a movement that seemed casual and friendly, but which also signaled the footman’s dismissal.

Joshua bowed and strode from the room.

Gwendolyn added a few more ideas to her notes, questions to ask others. Then she asked without looking up, “Why did Joshua’s comment bother you?” She shouldn’t pry because she wouldn’t want him to. But he was so rarely ruffled. This place seemed to make him uncertain, and she wanted to know and understand flustered Jackson as well as she understood the confident Mr. Cavendish.

Jackson resituated to face her but did not meet her gaze. “I was flirting with you earlier. About my dreams. The library.”

“I’m aware.”

“Apologies. I told you I would not.”

She shrugged, smiled, unable to stop it. “You cannot help yourself.”

“Minx. But you’re correct. I find it hard to stop. I’ll try harder.”

She wished he wouldn’t. Rogue thought. She smooshed it.

“I think I flirted to ease the uneasiness in me. I’ve never dreamed of home so much as I did last night. Restless dreams. And not restless to be gone, but to return.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “And Joshua’s wish for me to make my residence more permanent startled me after all that dreaming. Because since I woke up this morning, I’ve not been able to shake the notion that it might be ... nice to stay still for a while.”

She looked at her hands, the pen idle in them. She’d dreamed similar dreams but would not let herself explore them in the waking hours. Her new work and new life with Marianne would be home enough. Solitude and friendship and obscurity—good soil to settle her own weary roots in.

He sighed. “Disconcerting, all of it. An anomaly, I’m sure. I’ll feel more myself once we’re bound for the Continent again.”

She gave him a smile, reassurance, but it settled shaky on her lips. “Then you will not want the gift I’ve made for you.”

His eyebrows rose high. “A gift? My, Gweny, but you do love sending mixed messages. ‘Stay away, Jackson. Here’s a gift, Jackson.’”

“It is a gift of thanks for *your* gifts, Mr. Cavendish,” she snapped. “And I shan’t give it to you now.”

“Please.”

“No.”

“Please.”

She sighed, reached into her satchel, and pulled forth the painting, slapped it onto the paper. “’Tis nothing valuable.”

He pulled the paper over to him and seemed to stop moving, stop breathing. “Jove, Gwendolyn, it’s perfection.”

It was Seastorm. She’d drawn it yesterday as the sun had set. Used the colors of the sun bleeding across the sky to paint it that night in her room.

“It looks like a fairy castle.”

She peered at it. “Hm. Too much pink, perhaps.”

He snapped it away from her critical gaze. “Just enough pink.”

“But it doesn’t really look like that.”

“You’ve captured its essence. It’s perfection, and I’ll not hear another ill word against it.”

She rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t make you feel uneasy? Because you wish to extend your holiday?”

A knock on the door.

Blast it. She’d not get her answer.

“Come in,” Jackson called out. “Oh, good day, Mrs. Whitlock. I was not expecting you.”

The older woman swept into the room. “I had a moment free, and I thought to answer your questions.”

Jackson gestured to the chair across from him and sat straighter in his own. “It is much appreciated.”

“Is this about the management of the house and grounds? Are you displeased with something?” Her gaze flicked from Jackson to Gwendolyn and back, a bit of hesitation evident in her voice.

“Not at all. I do apologize if you were nervous. I am impressed. The house is impeccable. I wish, merely, to inquire as to what you might know about my father’s research.”

Jackson asked the same questions he'd asked the footman and learned the same information. Gwendolyn added little else to her notes, and good thing. She could not focus on the task at hand because the housekeeper kept ... looking at her, her glance settling more and more often on Gwendolyn's face only to snap away when Gwendolyn met the woman's eyes.

Was she being recognized now? *Truly* recognized? As the woman with a bigamous husband? Not *husband*. Confound it. Not in the eyes of the law or church. The confusion of the terminology yet another reason to avoid his existence entirely. If only she'd avoided that man before she'd married him. Sort-of married him? Though she couldn't have avoided it because her parents had demanded it. And by Jove, the man had charmed her, made the arranged marriage feel more like a real one. Until he'd started disappearing for long stretches at a time.

She almost hissed, spit, feeling like the cat who likely waited for her in the hall.

The housekeeper still looked at her, and Gwendolyn met the woman's gaze and refused to give it back, dared her to make an accusation.

Mrs. Whitlock did not seem to realize the dare was one that came with risk. She smiled and said, "Miss Smith?"

Gwendolyn arched a brow, challenging, cold. "Yes?"

Jackson regarded the two of them with a curious gaze. "We have no more questions, Mrs. Whitlock. Thank you."

Mrs. Whitlock stood but did not leave. "You look so familiar, Miss Smith. Have you ever visited Seastorm before? With Lord Eaden?"

Gwendolyn shook her head. "I have not."

"Brighton, then?" the woman pressed.

"No. Never." She smiled, a hollow expression, cold and hard to hide the trembling inside. "I have a face and figure like many others, I'm afraid. I'm always being mistaken for someone else." Her palms sweated, though she kept her face serene. Serene? No. It was implacable, hard and unmoving.

"Hm," Mrs. Whitlock said. "As you say. I usually have a keen memory for faces."

Why wouldn't the woman just leave? "You are wrong, Mrs. Whitlock." A winter frost in her tone. If the woman knew, she could connect Lady Mary to the Cavendishes, then the marquess's runner could find her. Them, too. No.

Mrs. Whitlock's eyes narrowed. She sniffed. "I *suppose* I can be mistaken." Then she snapped a curtsy and sailed from the room.

Gwendolyn dropped into her chair and clutched its edges with fingers turned claws. Her heart beat outside of her chest, and she tried to breathe, tried to find a calm center.

Jackson appeared before her, crouching on the balls of his feet, hands engulfing her shoulders, eyes, worried, looking into her own. When had he moved? How had he passed so fast through the space between them?

“Gwendolyn, what’s happened?”

His rich honey voice soothed her. His warm hands calmed her racing heart.

“Nothing. I am well.”

“I don’t believe it.”

She stood, brushing him away and made for the door to the library. If she barricaded herself there for the rest of her stay at Seastorm, hid herself behind a wall of books, perhaps she could escape the knowing eyes of those who would reveal her secrets. If they found out after she left ... very well. They deserved the truth, and perhaps it would soften her desertion. But before ... a very rational part of her brain said they would not care, but the howling girl she used to be insisted they would. Everyone, after all, had changed toward her after they’d found out. Except Marianne.

Her mother had called her a whore, and her father had called her useless. The gossip sheets had lovingly lingered over the little detail that she was, after all, an unmarried lady who’d lived with a man she could not call her husband for an entire year. Never mind that she’d thought herself married.

The Cavendishes would never abuse her so. But abuse would be heaped onto their heads if her identity became known, if the association between them became common knowledge.

Jackson strode after her. “Gwen.”

But she slipped through the door like water through fingers and slammed it closed. Locked it. Held her breath.

But his voice never resonated through the wood at her back, and when her body grew warm pressed against the door, she finally heard the slap of his boots against the floor, the opening of a door and its closing. He’d left.

She sank to the floor and wrapped her arms around her legs. This was why she must leave. This very moment proved that not all the flirting and gifts between them in the world, an innumerable number of midnights wrapped around one another in towers—none of it made up for what she might let loose on this family. She was an unwilling Pandora, and the past her

box. The marquess would eventually push his way out.

She inhaled and, with unsteady legs, she stood. She'd made herself strong enough to save the man with worry in his eyes from the dangers of her life.

But she'd had too many blows today, and she needed distraction, a bit of relief. She pushed open the heavy bookshelf door that led into the study. Empty, thankfully.

She knew exactly what she sought here. She found it laying right where Jackson had left it, and she carried it back into the library, locked herself in, and began to read. Surely young Theresa's philosophies would prove a vital distraction from the morning's difficulties. That is, if it did not pale to her own scandals.

Nine



Jackson went in search of Mrs. Whitlock. He knew Gwendolyn would consider it prying, but so be it. He'd endure her wrath to understand what had her locking a door between them and running from his seemingly innocent housekeeper.

He found her in the parlor, discussing something or other with two maids. "Mrs. Whitlock, may I have a moment of your time?" he asked.

"Of course." She bustled over to him. "Can I say, first, that I am sorry if I offended Miss Smith. It was not my intention. I hope you are not cross with me."

Excellent. He'd not had to introduce the topic himself. He smiled to reassure her. "No, I am not. You did not expect to upset her so, I'm sure."

Her face scrunched up. "No. Of course not, but I hope you don't mind me saying, I can't quite shake the look of her. I *know* I've seen her somewhere before, though it displeases her so to hear it."

"I can guarantee you she's never been here before." Couldn't he? "She must look like someone you know or have met somewhere before."

"No. It's not that. I swear, I have a memory for these things. Faces, that is."

A prickle of worry scattered across Jackson's skin. It was possible Mrs. Whitlock had seen Gwendolyn before. He knew nothing of her past, so he could not say with any authority whether Mrs. Whitlock had ever glimpsed her.

"You've been employed here how many years, Mrs. Whitlock?"

"Two decades about." She grinned. "It's been lonely of late, but I do not blame you for wishing to avoid your home."

He offered a grin as well. “That’s magnanimous of you, Mrs. Whitlock. I promise to be more available in the future.” A vain promise. He should not have said it, but it gave her pleasure.

“We would all love that.” She curtsied. “Good evening, sir.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Whitlock.” He turned to leave.

“Oh, Mr. Cavendish. What was it you wished to tell me?”

“I ... quite forgot.” He’d come to make sure the housekeeper was no threat to Gwendolyn, and he could confidently say she was not. At least not in any way he could see.

He slipped from the drawing room and ambled aimlessly back toward the study. More staff to interview, a deuced missing book to find.

“Jackson?” Sarah’s voice floated to him from the stairway. She stood, holding onto the railing, and studied him with a tilt of her head, just the way he’d seen her look at a book she was trying to figure out. “How does it go? With the research?”

“Horrid.” He laughed.

“Shall I tell Henry to work harder?”

“Not at all. Gwendolyn and I can handle the mystery, no matter how opaque it becomes.”

“Of course you can.” She crept closer to him. “I was just in the portrait gallery. To see your parents’ portraits. I am glad I ran into you so I can judge whom you most resemble.”

“My father, assuredly.”

“Hm.” She studied his face. “Yes, in the most obvious ways. But I see your mother in your cheekbones and the slant of your eyes. Am I prying? Peering at you and your family so sternly? I would have liked to meet your parents very much.”

He leaned against the wall with a sigh. “You may certainly pry. It’s what aunts do.”

“Is it? Excellent. Then allow me to say how well you look here at Seastorm. You fit quite perfectly.”

He raised a brow. “Do I?”

“Oh yes. Have you ever considered planting some roots and letting them grow?”

He laughed. “I’m not a gardener, Aunt Sarah. I’m a traveler.” He scrubbed his palms over his face. “Though I’ve been a bit weary of late. And Seastorm is rather rejuvenating. That must account for the bloom you see in

my cheeks.” He patted his cheeks with a grin.

She chuckled. “Weary though so young. Yes. Experience can do that to a person.” She patted his cheek too. “I am glad you are not working too hard here, that you are allowing yourself to rest.”

“Uncle Henry lucked out when he scooped you up, Aunt Sarah.”

Her chuckle turned full laugh. “It was less luck and more calculated premeditation. I was the lucky one. Do you know ... you remind me so very much of him.”

Jackson scoffed, rolled his gaze to the ceiling.

“It’s true. Not just your looks. Or your intelligence. You’re both lions of a sort, you know. Don’t scoff, young man. I say again, it’s true. But more than hair and eyes, you’re alike in soul and heart. You’ve both suffered so you do not like others to suffer. You both crave home but avoid it.”

“Avoid?” He spread his arms wide. “I’m here, am I not? I visit now and again.”

She cupped her hand to his cheek. “You are here, and as I said, I see it is doing you good, as returning home did for Henry. But if you stay, it might do you even better.” She flashed an impish smile.

“I can’t very well do that, or we shall all lose our reputations as explorers. Uncle, Gwendolyn, and I.”

“Explorers of the world, perhaps. But you’ll become even more astute explorers of the heart. An infinitely more complicated topography.” She patted his cheek again, a move that reminded him so much of his mother, his heart crumpled in on itself. “Good night, Jackson.”

“Good night, Aunt Sarah.” Mumbled into the still air as she slipped into the room she shared with his uncle.

He strode back to the study and rested his shoulder against it the door that connected with the library, listening for Gwendolyn inside. Nothing but shuffles of feet and rustling of paper. He sighed and sat at his father’s desk and settled into the chair with a half-sigh, half-groan sound. His gaze fell on the painting Gwendolyn had made for him of Seastorm, saturated in fairy lights, purples and pinks and deep blues, a dawn with stars still bright in the sky, a sun rising but a moon high above.

Perfection.

He lost track of time looking at it and thinking of the wild continent of the heart—dark and unknown, open and bleeding, the home at journey’s end.

Ten



Jackson sat atop a small hill beside the old castle and watched the sun spill yellow low over the horizon. He'd ascended the hill in the dark and watched the dusky blue of the early morning hours bleed into the purples and pinks of dawn. Dangerous, perhaps, to tromp the fields and roads in the dark, but more dreams had driven him to move. Move as he'd always done not because the dreams made him restless to travel, but because they made him ache to *stay*.

Action and exercise had helped nothing because by Jove, he'd never seen a lovelier sunrise. Not in Florence or Spain, not in Paris or Cairo. Only here could a man find such colors.

Had Gwendolyn woken yet? She would have loved to watch the sunrise, would have agreed with him about its perfection. Hopefully she'd have reminded him the world was their home, not this singular, narrow sliver of England.

Felt good, though, knowing he would return to his house and find her safe and warm inside, to imagine he always would find just that just there. These new dreams were changing him. They were changing, too, becoming less nocturnal visions and more the stuff of daytime desiring.

Ridiculous. He was a traveler, not a ... a what? A landowner? He did own land. He just did not abide there. And why not? Because his home held too many ghosts, too much guilt.

But did they? He'd searched every corner of the edifice in the last week and found nothing but dust and sunbeams. Memories, of course, and a bit of forgiveness for himself.

And with that forgiveness, his home had begun to feel like ... home. Hell,

maybe he wasn't a traveler? If not, then what? A scholar, most definitely. But his father had not traveled the world and still done good work.

Now if they could only find it.

That mission in mind, he returned home, climbed the stairs, and changed his clothes. He'd head to the library. To continue their work but also to check on Gwendolyn.

Gwendolyn had not appeared at dinner last night. She'd locked herself in the library all day after their meeting with Mrs. Whitlock, and fear gripped him. What did Mrs. Whitlock possibly know?

He entered the library to find it sun-drenched, as if the sunrise had made its way inside and colored the very walls. She couldn't lock herself away if he was already inside the room she planned to lock up. He didn't know what he could do to make it better, but boxes of mints, fresh flowers, and a cat were not it.

He sank into a chair near a pile of books and rubbed his palms over his face.

When Mrs. Whitlock had unintentionally sent Gwendolyn running, he'd learned an entirely new sort of panic. He'd never worried too much about her past. If she could live without it, so could he. But she'd seemed to lose all life under Mrs. Whitlock's probing gaze, her sharp edges turning brittle and breakable. She'd fled, locked him out. Oh, she'd done that before, but never when she'd clearly needed help, never when he knew wrapping her in his arms might take away some of her pain.

What the hell did she run from? He couldn't defeat it if he didn't know. An old and violent husband? A brothel madam displeased to lose her best girl? Unlikely that. Her accent and knowledge suggested she'd had a privileged upbringing. Abusive parents? Some crime of her own?

He crumpled a bit of loose paper in his hand and sent it sailing across the room where it bounced against the wall. Too little movement to burn away his ire, his damn boiling anger at anyone who would dare touch her. He pressed his palm flat against the table and tried to breathe the steadiness of the wood into his pulse.

He'd considered all the possibilities of her past before. If she said they could not marry, he must accept her word, presume the truth of the statement no matter how much it killed him, no matter how much he wanted her sitting beside him on that hill, watching the sun rise.

The door opened on quiet hinges, and Gwendolyn sailed in, stopped

short, held her breath. “Good morning. Should I work somewhere else today?”

“No. I won’t bite. I promise. Nor speak if you do not desire it. I merely did not wish you to be alone today.”

Carefully, she took the seat across the table from him, holding her hands in her lap. “Why?” Her voice a snap.

“Because you were scared yesterday.”

She stood, her chair screeching across the floor, one hand whipping behind her back. Affronted, was she?

“Sit back down. I won’t ask you about it. I just want to ... be here. We’ll work. That’s all. Still can’t find that damn book, after all. Maybe one of these books holds some detail on the old castle or the grounds that will point us to the manuscript’s hiding place. Unlikely. But hope is hard to kill.” His, especially.

She sat again, revealing the hand she’d held behind her back and tossing a book onto the middle of the table before them. “You may have *your* book back.”

Thérèse the Philosopher winked up at him. Gwendolyn must have returned to the study for it sometime yesterday.

“Did you read it?” he asked.

“I did. I needed a distraction. What an odd book. Do you think she really felt desire at such a young age?”

“Did you not?”

“Not until I was several years older. I am certainly glad my mother never caught me.”

He chuckled. “I believe I was thirteen when I first took myself in hand. With intent, that is.”

A heavy breath whooshed from Gwendolyn’s lungs, her lashes fluttered, and her cheeks turned red. She remained straight as oak, though, her face stern. “The book is rubbish.”

“It delights in physicality, little luna.”

Her cheeks blazed red while her eyes blazed with ire. “That is not what is rubbish about it. It is the *metaphysical* bit.” She pushed the book further away from her, but her gaze riveted there, on its plain brown cloth cover.

“You do not believe in a connection between body and soul?”

“Not particularly.”

“There is another text,” he said.

“I beg you to keep this one to yourself.” But curiosity flicked her eyes toward the towering bookshelves at the back of the room. He knew it was curiosity, had seen the particular emotion light up her eyes on numerous occasions.

Still, he shrugged, opened a book on medieval fortifications sure to dry his eyeballs into sand. “As you wish.”

She opened a book, too, and they read for several ticks and tocks of the hallway clock.

He read until he felt her gaze on him.

Without lifting his attention from his book, he asked, “Yes, Gwendolyn?”

“Should I read this other text you speak of?”

“I cannot give you a copy. I only ever saw a few pages, but the person who shared them with me divulged some very interesting information regarding its contents as well. But you are not interested.”

She waved her hand at him and refocused on her book, a picture of the studious scholar. “It is of no matter.”

More silence in which they pretended to read.

Then ... “What is it called?” A hesitant question pretending not to be.

He lifted his gaze from words he’d not read and found her blue eyes on him. “The text is called *Vatsyayana Kama Sutra*. Sometimes, though there are other names for it as well.”

“Sounds dry.”

“Anything but. It, too, delights in the physical. And the metaphysical. And the interconnection of the two. It is worried, most, with the unity of man and woman.”

“Unity in a physical context is brief. It may offer pleasure, but it never lasts.”

“You’re doing it wrong, then, love.”

“And you would know?”

He almost flinched. She’d been his only lover. Their time together in the Paris tower room, his only night of passion. His lack of practical experience, though, had not seemed to bother her then. He’d made sure his years of research into the amorous arts had guided him, and he’d brought her to screaming pleasure three times that night.

But he’d also heard women could lie about such things. With their bodies. And he’d lay down his pride in service to her pleasure.

“True,” he said, “my practical experience is negligible. Perhaps you

should tell me if I'm doing it wrong."

She licked her lips. "I would be a liar if I suggested you were in any way ... unacceptable. I think you've figured everything out well enough."

He tapped his fingers on the table, drew a slow sensual circle against the grain, tightened it. Her breath tightened as well, and with his gaze fixed on her, he saw where she looked—at his fingers, circling, tightening. She licked her lips.

He should not be doing this. He'd promised her.

But she seemed entirely fearless at the moment, entirely desirous of the one thing he could give her—*distraction*.

"The text," he said, "so I've been told, mind you, teaches that everyone should strive for well-being, delight, a sense of morality, and independence from the actual world. Notice these elements are not physical, but if these elements are in place, the physical ... it reaches new heights."

"Forgive me"—each word a panted breath—"if I find this difficult to believe."

"We might find pleasure in one another's arms for a few minutes or a night, but without those four elements, it will only ever be temporary, incomplete."

She huffed, turned sideways in her seat.

"But the book does mention the physical bits. Sixty-four positions. Also what happens before them."

Her gaze flew to him. "Before? Such as?"

"Kissing. Touching. Tasting."

Her eyes fluttered closed, and her hand dropped off the table's ledge to her lap.

He stood, wandered through the shelves of books. "Gwendolyn, are you in need of distraction still?"

Her voice flew to him on tart wings. "Of course not."

Hm. Did she understand what he offered?

After several seconds, she said, "Jackson." Her voice hoarse. "What are you doing?"

He gathered several books on ancient fortifications into his arms and returned to the table. "Working."

She blinked, the red in her cheeks turning pink. "Yes. Of course." She pulled a notebook and pencil from nearby and opened it up. She leaned over it, but he got the sense whatever she read there did not fully register in her

mind.

He opened one book to a random page and turned it toward her, slid it across the desk. “What do you think of this?”

“Of what?” She frowned at the book.

“That bit about castles near the ocean.” No clue if the page said anything about castles near the sea. But the reality of the words on the page had little to do with his stratagem.

“You’ve lost me, Jackson.”

He rounded the table and stood right behind her chair, leaned low and braced a hand against the table’s edge. His body curved around hers, and the air between them spiked higher, warmer. With his other hand he pointed to the page. Then whispered in her ear, making sure his lips brushed its very tip.

“Right. There.” Not right there on page seventy-two. Right there on *her*, a bit of skin so small and vulnerable and lovely.

Her breath caught, and she turned to look at him, putting their lips so very close together. Kissing if wished. He wished. But he inhaled, exhaled, made sure to hold her gaze, then leaned closer, took the book back and stood, a rush of air freezing him where she’d made him molten heat.

The sound she made was half desire, half disappointment.

He strode for the tall shelves at the back of the room once more, disappearing from her view.

He waited.

There—the sound of a chair scooting across the floor, and lighter, slippered steps nearing him.

Gwendolyn peeked around a row of books. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for more books, of course.” Waiting her out. Seeing if she would come.

“And do you find anything of substance?” She turned her back to him and ran her finger down a row of books. An entire seduction in that single finger, though she did not know it.

“I do. The book I spoke of earlier is full of substance.”

She tossed him a saucy look over her shoulder. “Not what I meant, Mr. Cavendish.”

“Don’t I know it, Miss Smith, and yet ...”

“You’ll not give up the topic?”

He grinned. “The book speaks of delight, Gweny. And joy. Both must be present in coupling. Part of the process and an end result.”

She sighed, wandering farther down the row away from him, her hips swaying with each step. “Sometimes the physical is less about joy and more about ... forgetting.”

“Is that what you need right now? To forget?” His pulse pounded hard against his wrists.

She peeked over her shoulder at him. “I need for us to concentrate on our tasks. You look through that shelf, and I’ll look through this one. See if we’ve missed anything.” She turned her back to him and perused the titles.

He did not. He watched her. She said she did not want a distraction, but she was still wound tight from yesterday, and he would do whatever he must to wipe yesterday’s fear from her mind.

He waited until she’d opened a book, absorbed herself in the ink and paper. Her shoulders had relaxed, and she tilted her head just slightly to the side so he could see her pert chin, its soft underside. Yellow curls had escaped the coiled braid atop her head, and he wanted to tug one then tug the entire braid loose, undo it, undo *her*. Dusty light flooded the windows, but the shadows, the shelves, hid them, hid the likely feral, hungry look on his face.

He stepped nearer her.

She noticed, and her shoulders pulled down as her back and neck lengthened. Her finger caressed a line of ink as she read.

Another step and his front pressed to her back.

She gasped, snapped the book shut, and whirled around.

He braced a hand above her on a high shelf, and it creaked beneath his weight.

Her hands fluttered first at his chest, as if she would push him away, and then at hers, then finally dropped to press against his belly. She looked up at him, her storm-blue eyes glittering with a question she did not let pass her lips.

He dipped to the side of her head and whispered, “During my studies of desire, I heard it said that it takes eight men to satisfy a woman with beautiful eyes. It must take twelve to satisfy you.”

A breathy laugh. Her fingers against his belly turning into feathers and fluttering with the silk of his waistcoat. But not pushing him away.

She turned her head slightly, the smallest of movements, until her lips found his ear. “No. It only takes one.” Her body melted into his, and he wrapped an arm around her waist to haul her close, to keep her standing. “Jackson.” His name a heaven-sent breath. “I shouldn’t do this. We

shouldn't."

"Then don't." A challenge. He continued doing what they shouldn't, though oh-so gently, to let her escape if she truly wished to.

She gripped at his clothes, pulling him closer. "But you've turned me into a flame. That book. I should never have read it. Do you think I could sleep? You cad. After I finished the book, I spent all night painting."

"Scenes from its pages?"

"Painting you. I am determined to stay away from you, but you never leave me, even when we are apart. Infuriating. Arousing."

Hell and heaven in her words.

She placed her nose near his cravat and breathed deeply. "You've barely touched me and ... I'm so very close to falling apart. What could it hurt? Once more, though I fear it will unravel me entirely. But I want it."

"Want what, Gwendolyn?" his voice rasped, hoarse with need.

"It means nothing. Changes nothing."

"Want. What?"

She sighed. "A kiss."

So he kissed her, a hard meeting of lips and tongue.

And chaos broke loose.

The door burst open, wood slamming against wood, and Jackson and Gwendolyn ripped apart from one another.

"Where are you?" Nicholas called out.

"Jackson?" yelled Thomas.

Running footsteps rumbled toward them.

"The twins," Gwendolyn and Jackson said together.

Damn, damn, damn.

With fumbling hands, they straightened themselves. Jackson bit off a curse, and Gwendolyn seemed ready to split with laughter.

"Right here," Jackson said, showing himself.

Gwendolyn appeared beside him, and they shepherded the boys back to the long table at the front of the room. Jackson stood and faced his brothers, hands on hips. "What is this interruption about? You know we're busy."

"Uncle Henry says there's paintings here," Nicholas said, bouncing on his toes.

"Of Mama and Papa." Thomas did not bounce, but his entire body vibrated. "Will you show them to us?"

"You've not seen them already?"

They shook their heads, floppy hair flying.

Jackson looked over his shoulder at Gwendolyn. She looked lovely. And dazed. He likely looked the same way. Dazed, that is. No doubt he looked lust-worn, not lovely. But this interruption was good. Another distraction for her. No one could feel fear when the boys made them laugh.

“Let’s go look at Mama and Papa, then, shall we?” Jackson said. “Would you like to come, too, Miss Smith?”

She frowned at the table then glanced at the corner they’d so recently set aflame. Her fingers touched her neck, as if her body still felt his touch, and her body melted like a candle. Then she snapped up straight and cleared her throat.

“Yes. Let’s leave this room. It’s much too hot. And I would like to spend time with Nicholas and Thomas.” What she meant was that she liked that she and he could not act on their feelings with the twins nearby.

Jackson held Gwendolyn’s hand as he guided them all to the portrait gallery. He would not let go, and she did not seem to wish for him to. He’d never held her hand like this in the bright light of day, and though he knew it could not last, he’d take every second it did last for himself, hoard it close in a tight fist.

The boys ran ahead, and he called to them, “Up all the stairs to the very top.”

Thomas and Nicholas stood still at the bottom of the stairs, looking up, their bodies poised as if to take flight, something holding them back.

Was it sorrow? Fear? He studied them closely, saw only curiosity. Good.

The hand clenched in his own squeezed, and he looked down. Her eyes had simmered with a soft wariness.

Her hand in his—a heaven.

He squeezed back.

“This is a moment for you and the boys together. For family alone to—”

“You *are* family.” He needed her to know that, needed her to know he’d fight for her and live for her and die for her. Needed her to know he would give everything to see her smile and expect nothing in return.

Eleven



Jackson led Gwendolyn and the twins to the east wing of the house and the gallery that spanned its side, looking out onto the gardens and the old castle they'd passed coming in. It was long and sunny, and Thomas and Nicholas ran to its very end as soon as Jackson pushed open the double doors.

Jackson's gaze riveted on the back wall. He'd only been to the gallery once since his parents' death. His first time back after. He'd sat on the floor before their portraits, heaving great sobs that likely terrified everyone in the county.

"How are you doing?" Gwendolyn's hand tightened on his sleeve, the warmth of her worry passing through layers of clothing to brand his forearm.

"I'm well, surprisingly." The truth. He did not feel the deep well of sorrow that had drowned him that last time. He did not feel the skin-ripping dread.

"I am glad. I would not be so well if I were to visit my childhood home, see my parents' portraits, or even my parents."

Anger boiled up in him, clear and hot and not at her. What had she suffered, and why did she insist on bearing those demons on her own? His anger warred with a blooming sense of relief—she'd told him a bit of her past without him having to poke about for it. It felt like progress, like more hope. True, every time she took a step forward, revealed a previously dark corner of herself, she locked herself up again. But she seemed to be able to peek out again after some time had passed, a game of hide-and-seek with much greater consequences than those children played.

They stopped at the gallery's end next to the twins and looked up at the portrait on the wall, larger than life—his mother sitting and his father

standing behind her, their eyes filled with the mirth of loyal love for one another, with the excitement of a new house filled with children, new projects to sharpen their minds.

“They,” Jackson said, the single word stretched over an inhale and an exhale, “are our parents.”

“She’s pretty,” Thomas said.

Gwendolyn tilted her head to the side, studying the portrait. “And your father is terribly handsome.”

Jackson elbowed her. “Don’t drool, Gweny.”

Nicholas looked at them over his shoulder. “Why would she drool, Jack?”

Thomas turned around. “Dogs drool.”

“She’s not a dog,” Nicholas replied. “I drool sometimes. On my pillow.”

Gwendolyn opened her mouth, perhaps to attempt a response, but then she snapped it shut and looked at him. “I see where the three of you get your good looks.”

The boys turned back around to peer at the portrait.

Jackson leaned close, inhaling her scent. Mint and rose. How could a creature of midnight smell like a noon day?

He whispered near her ear. “Excellent maneuvering away from a precarious conversation.”

“I only had to *maneuver* because of your loose tongue.”

He dipped closer, placed his lips hot against her ear and closed his eyes, couldn’t stop a grin. “You like my tongue.” The barest of whispers, hardly alive at all.

She turned her head so their noses brushed and gazes clashed. A kiss. A small one. Nothing more. It would not take much. A mere breath would bring their lips together, and he’d take the smallest sip, the one denied him in the library—

“Look, Tom, she’s got a cat in her lap. We like cats.”

Gwendolyn jolted away. Three backwards steps, a swift turn on her toes, and five forward ones brought her to a window, and she grasped its edge, leaned into it as she’d leaned into him breaths ago. That game of hide-and-seek once more, that dance of flirtation with closeness and return to solitude. Grit at him a bit, it did. Patience. If he could play this game and dance this dance, perhaps he would eventually come out the victor. They both would; the prize—a future together.

Against the window, she was a solitary figure in her blue gown. The sun

filtering through the glass made her a glowing outline with an unseeable center. Appropriate. He saw just enough of her, always, to want more.

He knelt near the boys and pulled them close in a hug, one small set of slender shoulders under each of his arms. “Mama loved animals. We had several dogs and even more cats. Do you remember?”

“A little,” said Thomas.

“Not really,” Nicholas admitted, his voice small and shamed.

Whatever they remembered would be mere dreams compared to the reality of their uncle and Sarah, of Pansy, who was more sister to them than he was brother.

Jackson tightened his grip on them, kissed the top of their heads. “Some of the animals are still about. I think Miss Smith has met one—a descendent of that cat in the portrait. Same gray fur and markings but younger. Have you met her, Miss Smith?”

“I’m not sure how you sent a cat my way, but yes. I’ve met her. It is a her?”

He nodded.

“Good to know,” Gwendolyn grumbled. “She’s become my shadow.”

“Do you hear that, boys? If we follow Miss Smith about, we’ll be sure to find the feline. Shall we, like the cat, play shadows to Miss Smith the rest of the day?”

“Yes!” They ran for her, wrapping arms around her legs. “Where is the kitten, Miss Smith? Where?” A refrain from two voices.

Gwendolyn laughed, plucking their arms from her own limbs. “I do not need two more shadows, thank you very much.”

“Aaawwww.” The twins went limp, their arms sodden ropes at their sides.

“But ... if I see the cat, I’ll scoop it up and bring it to you.”

“Yay!” They jumped up and down.

“Let’s go look for it!” Thomas said, running for the door.

Nicholas followed.

“Be careful!” Jackson shouted, laughing. He looked toward the window, his laughter dying a swift death at the sight of Gwendolyn drenched in sunlight. He joined her and looked out into the garden. Together, their breath fogged the glass.

Tonight, he’d likely dream of her here at this window, looking out as if watching for him to come home, and watching her, the portrait of his mother

and father—his family, all of them. And in the dream, he'd be striding home, no doubt, not having strayed too far.

Should terrify him, a man who'd been traveling for six years straight. More than that, really. Since before their deaths.

But he felt only ... he couldn't describe. Only that it felt like sitting in a sunbeam on a cold day—perfect.

He turned his back to the window and leaned against the wall at its side to study her. "I was up early this morning, walked out to watch the sun rise."

"I've not done that in"—she blushed—"months."

Since the night they spent in the tower together?

"It was more beautiful than I can put in words. Since I can't describe it, I'll have to show you, bring you along so you can watch it with me."

When he received no reply, he continued. "I'd like to see a spring sunset. And a summer one here. I don't remember what they look like." Perhaps he wouldn't stay away so long next time. He'd return after his next trip abroad instead of waiting a year or more. Then he'd return again with each new season to see his home cloaked in different colors. "Which do you think you'll like better? A spring sunset or a summer one?"

She inhaled sharply, shook her head, and turned to him. "Will you kiss me?"

Did he dream?

She tugged on his sleeve, her eyes begging. "Jackson? One final kiss?"

He swept her into his arms and crushed her up against the wall in a slim bit of space between window and some large landscape. He pressed a leg between hers, lifted upward, and she moaned into his slanted mouth, so he parted his lips to catch that moan and taste it better, more fully.

She slipped her tongue between his lips and grasped at his shoulders, deepening the kiss and healing something cracked in his heart. That blown glass that had shattered—glued back together with a kiss, a touch.

"Miss Smith! Miss Smith!"

Feet running down the hall, voices getting louder, closer.

They ripped apart, laughing, just before the twins ran into the gallery.

"We found your cat!" the cried.

"You have?" Gwendolyn said, smoothing her skirts. "Will you take it away for me?"

"No!" Nicholas scowled.

"Come introduce us properly, Miss Smith." Thomas put his small hand in

hers and pulled her out of the room.

Hope fluttered in Jackson's chest. She'd asked him for distraction, then trusted him with a kiss, and now she was running off to be a bit silly with his brothers. It all felt so ... familial. And perfect. And rather like something he'd never known he wanted but absolutely did.



Gwendolyn followed the boys down the hall, her body an inferno, her chest heavy with guilt. She shouldn't have asked for a kiss. She should have told Jackson the truth. He'd set her up so beautifully, had created the perfect opening for her to tell him. She would be leaving soon and would never see a spring sunset here, nor a summer one. Her days near him, flirting and fighting, were numbered.

Twelve



Jackson toyed with his soup, picking it up, tipping the spoon, and letting the thin liquid dribble back into the bowl. He felt ... stuck. Thanks to his father's rather good—and likely oversuspicious protection of his manuscripts—they'd seen not a hair of it.

Not all was cloaked in despair, though. Gwendolyn had gifted yet another bit of herself to him. Not a pretty little memory, but he'd always known her secrets would be bleak.

What had happened for her to unfurl a tentative tendril of trust, an open palm he'd been waiting years for. He snuck a glance at her. She seemed locked up just as tight as usual, each dip of her spoon into her bowl precise, each press of that spoon against her lips more evocative for Jackson than it should be.

"Uncle," Thomas said, "Jack is playing with his food."

Sarah chuckled. "Thomas, do not tattle. Jackson, do not play with your food."

He managed a grin for the dear woman and swallowed a healthy portion to appease her before placing the spoon carefully beside the bowl. "My appetite is not what it could be.

"Is something amiss?" Sarah asked.

"'Tis only the missing manuscript that plagues me, Aunt. We've searched all the usual places. It seems to have"—he fluttered his hand in the air—"disappeared, and I cannot fathom where it may be." He knew his father had not had it with him in the end, during the crash that had killed them. And he would not have given it to anyone. It must be here. But where?

"Perhaps someone stole it," Sarah offered.

“Hmm.” Uncle Henry scratched his jaw, considered his wife. “But why would they wish to do that? The book is destined for a very small niche of readers, and not a particularly lucrative one. “But I’ll write to my old friend Hopkins to see if any books on the subject have been published in the last six or so years.”

Sarah pointed her fork at her husband. “Do be nice in your correspondence with him. You are asking a favor.”

Uncle Henry grinned. “If I don’t tease him a little bit, he won’t believe it’s me.”

His wife rolled her eyes and took a sip of soup then turned her gaze toward Gwendolyn. “How is your portion of this project coming along?”

Gwendolyn sat straighter, wiped her mouth—pink and lush and damn, he wanted to kiss it—with a serviette. “As well as can be while here. Though, Lord Eaden, when you speak with Mr. Hopkins, could you request he send us any recent books published on the subject? It will help our efforts to complete the book, should that be necessary. We will surely wish to update it with the most current material.”

Uncle Henry chewed thoughtfully. “Excellent idea.”

It was an excellent idea, and Jackson wanted to kiss her for that just as much as for her ridiculously seductive method of eating soup.

Pansy peered at Gwendolyn. “Will you be here when the books arrive? Or will you be gone by then? You’ll have to leave your notes for Papa, or he’ll be lost.”

All sound ceased. The table was a symphony of clatters and sips one moment and a howling void of silence the next.

Jackson lowered his wine goblet to the table with the speed of a turtle, his muscles just as confused as his mind. “Why would you leave your notes? Gone ... where?”

“Zeus,” Uncle Henry hissed. “Pansy—”

The little girl turned pink. “Did I do something wrong? I heard you talking in the music room, Papa.”

Gwendolyn’s cheeks turned a bright red. Her ears too. Despite the heat rushing clear and angry across her skin, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms as if cold and studied her plate like it held the answers to the questions of the universe.

“Gwendolyn?” Jackson reached across the table. He needed to touch her. Gwendolyn ... gone?

She pulled both arms off the table and hid them in her lap, looking up at everyone with an air of defiance. "I suppose everyone should know."

A shiver of dread crept up Jackson's spine, spread across his skin like a thousand spiders skittering there. "Know what?"

Silence bound them all together tight.

Jackson lifted his spoon, but tapped it on the rim of his bowl, counting out the length of their wordlessness as his dread crept higher, soaked deeper.

Then Pansy, thank God, spilled her drink, and several footmen jumped to right the wrong, clean up the flood of liquid as the silence could not contain the group's discomfort and curiosity any longer.

"My apologies," Pansy muttered.

Uncle Henry granted his youngest daughter a warm smile. "Thank you for the apology, Pansy, but—"

Pansy beamed. "You're welcome, Papa. I did it on purpose."

"Pansy!" Sarah exclaimed. "Why would you do that?"

The little girl shrugged. "Everyone seemed upset. About Miss Smith. I thought it might prove a jolly distraction."

Uncle Henry dropped his head into his hands. "Everyone advises to keep children away from the dinner table. Perhaps I should have listened. Off to the nursery with the lot of you."

Gwendolyn raised a hand. "No, Lord Eaden. It's fine. It is better this way. Do not send the children away because I have been slow in making my news known to all."

Jackson had not pulled his gaze from Gwendolyn since she'd first spoken up, but she did not meet his eyes.

"Gwendolyn?" he said, "What does Pansy mean? *Gone*?"

She spoke to no one in particular, her gaze focused on a point somewhere over Jackson's shoulder. "I am leaving Lord Eaden's employ."

Jackson jerked to his feet. When everyone looked at him, he sank back down. "Apologies. I was ... startled by Gwendolyn's jest. Not funny, Miss Smith."

She jerked her chin high. "Not a joke, Mr. Cavendish. Lord Eaden is going to find me a new position."

He almost leapt to his feet again. The better to jump across the table, haul her into his arms, and find a tower somewhere to lock her up in.

"Why are you leaving us?" Pansy asked. "Nora left. And Ada. But they got married. Are you getting married?"

“N-no,” Gwendolyn stammered, flashing a glance at Jackson. Pure panic, it was.

As it should be. She was leaving? Leaving, and she’d not told him? He could not form a coherent thought past that one fact.

“Never?” Pansy asked.

“I am not getting married,” Gwendolyn said. “I am merely in need of a change.”

Pansy nodded, then tilted her head. “I thought you would marry Jackson.”

Another silence, this one with the jagged fragility of broken glass.

Pansy looked at Jackson. “Don’t you like her? She’s very pretty.”

Jackson cleared his throat, every inch of him squirming and hot. “I very much like Miss Smith. She is a beautiful woman, of course.” The beauty of her mind, her soul, had long ago settled deep in his bones, become the life of his blood. He swallowed hard, found the right words, though likely there were none. Not truly. “But liking, Pansy, does not always mean marriage.”

The problem was she did not like him enough or did not trust him enough. Glass scratched under his skin, and he pushed his bowl away.

“Hmm.” Pansy studied the ceiling. “Do you want to get married?”

Who they hell had she addressed that to?

Gwendolyn sipped from her wineglass then said, “Women my age do not often wed.”

Sarah scowled. “I was much older than you when I married Henry.”

“See,” said Pansy, eyes lighting brighter than the candles, “you can still wed. You just have to find someone quite, *quite* old. Like Papa.”

Uncle Henry’s wine reappeared in a spit stream across his plate.

Sarah patted his back. “Now, Pansy, I wouldn’t say your Papa is quite, *quite* old. Just old.” She grinned, a look for her husband alone.

“I’ll show you how old I am,” Uncle Henry muttered. “Later. When we’re alone.”

“Are you too old to marry, too, Jackson?” Pansy asked.

He locked his gaze onto Gwendolyn. “I’d say I’m the perfect age to wed, Pansy.”

She nodded. “Then you should.”

He dropped his gaze to his soup, the gold-rimmed edge of his bowl, and the sunken silver of his spoon, and in the murky, lukewarm liquid, despite the anger that colored his vision, he saw a truth that had been creeping up on him for days. He *was* the perfect age, not just for marrying, but for making a

home out of more than ship decks and inn rooms.

“I’d very much like to,” he said, his voice harder than it should be for such a conversation. “I plan to.” All he could say at the moment, his plans still as murky as the soup before him. Plans? He had plans for something other than travelling?

Apparently he did.

Pansy picked up her bowl and sipped the soup from the rim. Where was her spoon? She slurped, set it down, then said, “You’ll find a lady to wed you, cousin. You’re quite good-looking. Don’t you think, Miss Smith?”

More silence, and this one of the let’s-just-expire-because-that-would-be-less-painful kind.

Then, blessedly, the sound of a chair scratching across the floor. Uncle Henry stood, slapping his hands together. “Well, then, enough of that. Let’s retire to the parlor, I think.”

All the chairs made a cacophony of sound, a song of sweet escape, across the floor. For them. For Gwendolyn, who rose and made an exodus with them.

Jackson stayed put, though. Indeed, he could not move. Glued to the spot by every emotion. She was leaving. She’d not told him. She was leaving.

After she’d begun to share the smallest bits of herself she’d kept hidden before, after she’d asked him for a kiss and played with his brothers, after she’d ... made no promise about a sunrise.

Hell.

He rose finally. He’d been fooled. A fool. For she’d fooled him with a kiss. Jove, he’d let that embrace in the portrait gallery give him hope. Hope! For them. Ha. She’d not been softening. She’d been saying goodbye.

He walked right past the parlor where they all gathered, in no mood for mirth or company of any sort. He wandered—down each hall, around each corner, up each flight of stairs.

His home, all of it, and he’d been foolishly imagining her here with him, building the vision up to a state of perfection he should have known to be impossible. With her. What a fool.

“Damn.” Moonlight spilled across his face, and he blinked, looked up for the first time in ... how long? He could have been wandering for a quarter of an hour or a quarter of a century for all he knew. But his steps had taken him to the portrait gallery. Damn them. He didn’t want to be here and have his parents stare down at him, witnessing that kiss, that foolishness.

She was leaving.

“Jackson.” Her voice, wavering like starlight on the water. She’d finally chased him down. Finally. What he’d always wanted. And she’d only done so to say goodbye.

He turned to the window they’d stood at earlier that day. “How long has this been your plan?” He tried to keep his voice calm, but a blade sliced around the edges.

“I decided before we left London and told your uncle the day we arrived here. I was trying to find the right time to tell you. The best way. I am sorry you did not find out from me.”

He pressed a hand against the window glass and leaned his weight into his palm, closing his eyes as if floating in the darkness would make everything right.

“Do you wish to know my plans?” she asked.

“No. Yes.” He cursed. “What I wish to know is why? Are you leaving because of me?”

“In a way, yes.”

He stood slowly, lifting his weight from the glass and turning toward her, as he opened his eyes. She held her hands clasped before her, and her eyes seemed small universes of blue. “Is there anything I can do to keep you?” Because despite it all, he still wanted her. He took a measured pace of a step toward her, slow and loping. “I could, I think, if I put aside your own plans, if I tied you to my bed and drugged your body with pleasure.”

“Jackson.”

Another measured step, bypassing entirely her whisper of his name. “Kissed you and licked you until all your fears broke and dissolved. Impossible to put back together. Then I’d do it all again. A constant state of orgasm.” He settled his knuckles beneath her chin and tipped it up. His face felt like marble, not a charming impulse in sight. “I could keep you. And damn everything holy, but I want to keep you. To hell with gentlemanly restraint. To hell with patience. To hell with your own doubts, that damn dance you’ve got us caught in. Forward and backward, never finding our way out of this cursed circle of wanting and not having. I could keep you.” Those last words a growl ripped from some primal bit of himself hid away behind charm and studiousness.

She shuddered, her eyes falling closed and her shoulders melting as her body waved toward him.

“I could keep you,” he said again, the words as hard and unforgiving as he felt. Then he pushed her away, turned with a snap and strode from her, returning to the window. “You’re lucky I do not wish to keep a woman who does not want me.” False words, but true emotions.

He looked out at the shadows. Too hard. He’d been too damn hard, but his heart felt like stone in his chest, and hardness, coldness ... surely those were better than the anger that threatened to eat him alive.

“I am trying to save you, Jackson. From me. I am leaving to save your family because I am no one good people like yourselves should suffer a connection to. If I stay, I will end up back in your bed, and I will likely one day give in to what you want because whether you believe it or not, I care for you. Too much. And that is why I leave. Because I care and do not wish to see you hurt.”

“You do not trust us to decide that for ourselves?”

“You are too good. Too kind. Too trusting.”

“Better all that than too alone, stubborn, and bitter.”

She gasped. Then she closed her eyes and nodded slowly. “Yes. Perhaps I am all those things. But you cannot understand.”

“Because you do not trust me to. Let us not mince words, Gwendolyn. You are a coward.”

Her eyes flew open, and she lunged toward him, her arm stiff at her side, fingers curled into a fist as if she meant to hit him, but she stopped just short, her arm bent but waiting. For what?

“You have no idea how scared I’ve been. Yet even with my heart beating in my ears, I’ve walked on. I’m no coward.”

“What do you call it, then, when you always flee from what you want?”

She blinked several times, and her chest stilled as her arm dropped through the air so slowly, as if it fell through mud.

“You can prove you’re no coward. Tell me. If you’re such an untenable connection for me, tell me *why*.” He turned and faced her, snagging her gaze and keeping it, demanding through their threaded gazes all the secrets he’d let her keep for so long.

She looked away, snapping the thread stretched between them with the utmost of ease.

“Hah.” His laugh the merest breath of air. “I expected nothing less. But I hoped. I should learn not to.” He looked at his parents’ portraits. “I feel most guilty looking at them right now. They thought me terribly bright and

terribly ... thoughtless. They knew the truth of me but loved me anyway. They'd love me even now, seeing my anger. Perhaps more so. Perhaps the way they taught me to love was foolish."

"No. You are no fool, and you are not thoughtless."

"I certainly was thoughtless before they died. I admit it. That's not my point. Let me be more direct. My point is that they taught me to love past flaws." Would she understand his meaning? Whatever she thought her flaws were, he would love her still. She did not have to leave.

"Some flaws are bigger than others. If you were thoughtless, Jackson, I was ... obedient. Malleable. Naïve. Like wet clay, easily shaped and formed by others' intentions and desires."

Each word drained her of color until she stood pale and bloodless before him.

"We are not our pasts, Gwendolyn."

"Quite right." She pounded a fist to her belly. "And I am forging myself anew, a new future, too, the only one I can have without hurting everyone I care for."

So much pain there. Not a moment of pain, but a lifetime. A pain she likely never stopped feeling. She merely kept others from seeing it.

Jackson's anger washed away in his desire to take all her pain away. He stroked a line down the side of her face, and she closed her eyes, leaned into the touch until he cupped his hand, palmed her cheek.

He closed his own eyes, welcoming the midnight darkness at noonday, and let his lips find home. They did not need sight or sun to do so, only the sound of her breathing and the promise of a kiss like a beacon.

Her breath hitched, and he heard it in the golden dark, used it to find her, to set his lips to hers. He'd read a treatise or five on kissing, had observed others doing it in brothels across Europe, places he frequented for study of the amorous arts. But every word, every image scattered from his mind like a dust in the wind with the reality of Gwendolyn's lips, soft and willing, against his own.

He moved slowly, kept it chaste in order to whisper worships to her with each slant of mouth across mouth. His one hand to her cheek, he curved the other around her neck, and held her softly, telling her with touch how he would hold her all his days—with gentleness and strength, keeping her safe from whatever haunted her, teaching her with each touch and caress the strength she possessed. He admired that strength. With every particle of his

being.

Her hands fisted in his waistcoat, pulled his chest against hers, and her tongue parted his lips with a hiss and a curse. A shock. A delight. She gave him burning need for his quiet worship, and by Jove, he'd show her he could give the same. He swept his hands around her waist, pressing them against her back and making sure no space, not a bit of air, existed between them. Soft curves against hard chest, everything fit, locked into place—belonged together.

Her tongue swept against his own. “More,” she gasped.

He walked her away from the window and pressed her back against the wall. The jolt of their bodies hitting that barrier broke the seal of their lips, and they stared into one another's eyes. Hers glittered cold.

She was going to retreat. He saw the retreat.

Then she didn't. She tangled her hands in his cravat and pulled him to her once more, devouring him. He rucked her skirt up one leg, and cupped the backside of her knee, pulled it up until it wrapped around his waist, held her tight to him.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Her hand found his hair, tugged him down, and her lips found his ear. “Touch me.” She found his hand and placed it on her breast.

Hell. He'd already been hard, but now he knew the aching pain of desire.

He swept his thumb over her breast until her nipple pebbled and she hissed. He continued slanting his mouth across her own, biting her bottom lip with the gentlest tug, nipping her earlobe now and then, invading the cavern of her mouth and claiming her.

He squeezed, and she arched into his hand.

He grinned. He did not need a book to know how to please her. Her reactions—the pulsing movements of her body and the hissing moans from her throat—told him exactly what to do.

He squeezed again and whispered in her ear, “You like that?”

“Yes.”

“And do you like this?” His hand slipped beneath her bodice, lifted her breast. He'd seen it once before, but still, it almost brought him to his knees. “Perfection.” He set his mouth to it.

Her hands in his hair tightened, tugged, and the leg around his waist did, too. He could drop to his knees, slip beneath her skirts, and she would welcome more kisses there. He shuddered, wanting that more than he wanted

air.

But ... he replaced her breast in her gown, nudged her leg off his hip, and offered a final, worshiping sip of her lips before he rested his forehead against hers and let air slip between their bodies.

“Again,” she said, barely a word with every sound melted together. “Again, Jackson, please.”

“Tell me what you did not like.”

“Nothing,” she breathed. “I liked all of it. I like everything *you* do.”

“The truth.” His hand curled into a fist at her waist, gathering the folds of her gown so he could pull the center of her body against the hard center of his own.

“Do it all again.” Her words with the tenuous tremor of almost weeping. “I am selfish, and I want more. Of you.”

He crushed her to him, kissed the top of her head. Again. God, he wanted to. “Will it make you happy?”

“Always.”

But she did not mean it. She thought physical connection fleeting. She found in it no lasting joy.

“Will it help me keep you?”

He held a statue of a woman in his arms, even her lips burned cold.

He released her, stepped backward into a shadow that fell across his parents’ portrait.

She stepped backward, too, into the shadow that fell between windows. The moon sliced through the glass, landing on the floor between them, a space of light where they might meet if they took a step each.

She never would. She was leaving.

“Gwendolyn, I’m done.”

“Wh-what?”

“I cannot chase you any longer. I cannot say I’ll ever stop loving you, but each time I hold you and lose you it’s a killing blow, and I ... I wish to live. For my brothers. For myself. I want to enjoy a sunrise with someone who I can watch a sunset with as well.”

He waited for an answer, any response.

She gave none.

“You are leaving,” he said, “but I have decided that I am staying.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here, at Seastorm.”

“Extend your holiday? Because we have not found the manuscript.”

“I mean to live here. No more travelling. I intend to try my hand at writing. Books about my travels. And to take up my father’s studies. And I plan to do so from Seastorm, from my home. I wish to start a family.” He wanted little girls with golden hair and wicked smiles. But now ... now ... the woman he wanted that with was *leaving*. He’d chosen to leave, too, to leave the life and work they’d shared for six years, but her departure seemed more permanent.

They would both forge new lives without one another. An impossible thought. His legs went weak, and he fought to stay upright, clenching every muscle in his body to do so. He couldn’t accept it.

Not without trying one more time.

“You tell me with ease”—his voice shook, for he did not try to stop it; let her hear his desperation—“where you want my hands on your body. I want you to tell me as easily as you tell me what you like when I touch you—”

“I can tell you nothing.” She snapped at him like lightning.

“You have been telling me. Stories about your cursed parents.”

“Crumbs. You deserve more than that.” She raised her skirts and ran for the door.

He followed, caught her arm, and whirled her around to face him. “This is the last time I chase you, Gwendolyn. Those footsteps the last I set in your direction. At least tell me why you reject me.”

“I am ruined, Jackson.”

“Not good enough. I do not care. My uncle and aunt and cousins will not care. My—”

“I care!” She ripped out of his grasp and stumbled backward toward the door.

“Tell me. Trust me. I dare you. If it ends how you are convinced it will, then you’ve lost nothing. If it ends how I think it will, then we both gain so much.”

“I can’t. You do not understand.”

She kept saying that. A lie she would not let go of. But what did he know? Perhaps he wouldn’t understand. But he couldn’t know if he would or not until she trusted him. He almost laughed.

And that, apparently, she would never do.

“You choose a life alone then,” he said.

“I do.”

He shook his head. "I do not envy you that. I hope you realize it is of your own making. None of us have asked you to sacrifice yourself."

"'Tis no sacrifice."

"I don't believe you." He paced past her, keeping his distance.

"Jackson."

He didn't look back. His steps didn't even falter as he walked into the hallway and away from his heart. Best this way. Their entire relationship had been only clandestine trysts and chases. No more. She did not want him enough to open to him, to trust him. She'd rather run than trust him, and if he knew a damn thing about lovers, it was that trust was a necessity.

His parents had trusted each other entirely, not a single wall between them. And the study Jackson had done of intimacy between lovers had all emphasized the need for trust in an act that made the skin as well as what beat beneath it as vulnerable as possible.

She was leaving? Well, he'd always only wanted to give her exactly what she wanted, so he'd let her go, and start the work of building a new life for himself right here.

He slammed into his bedchamber, expecting to collapse in a heap of anger and regret, sorrow and despair, but a fire blazed in the grate, cheerful and warm, and the rug before his bed looked soft in the moonlight. He kicked off his boots and yanked his legs free of his stockings and wiggled his toes in the thick pile before taking a seat in a welcoming armchair by the fire.

He felt hollow, a large Gwendolyn-shaped chunk of himself missing, but a spark of hope lived in his breast. He'd meant what he'd told her, about staying here and building a good life. It did not fill the gaping wound in his chest, but it felt nice to know that even when wounded, his home would be waiting to heal him.

Thirteen



Gwendolyn slammed the door to her bedchamber and paced the length of the room and back. Over and over and over. Until her lungs ached from lack of breath. And still, other parts of her ached, too. For him. But she clutched her anger to her, her righteousness, her *knowing* that she was right. No matter how willingly he gave himself to her, she could never have him because she was ruined, utterly, and in more ways than she could identify. And he deserved a queen, a woman of perfection to match him in optimism and cheer, to help him build the future he wanted.

Gwendolyn had no future. Words she repeated like an incantation but which he never seemed to hear. She wished she could pick them from the air and hand them to him on a platter so he could *read*—

She could! She raced toward her trunk and flung it open, finding the crinkled, ruined paper in a flash. She'd show him what she ran from so he would know the threat was not an idle one.

Jackson would have no choice but to admit defeat. He could not make her his wife when the whole world laughed at her, disdained her, likely wanted her gone. In the Marquess of Preston's case, dead or in his bed, preferably. If she told Jackson everything, showed him the ruined letter, he'd realize a ruin like her, a woman always running despite her bombastic thorns, could never live in the light.

She could prove how right she was by giving him exactly what he'd asked for and what she'd kept from him for so long—the truth.

She stood with the letter, strode for the door, but each step seemed more difficult than the last.

Coward, he'd called her. *Coward*.

She beat a hand against her belly. “I am no coward.” Why did her feet refuse to move, then, instead of facing Jackson with evidence of her undesirable past? Why did she run from happiness instead of facing the marquess and demanding he leave her be? “Am I a coward?”

Hisss.

She shot a look over her shoulder. The gray tabby sat primly on the middle of her bed.

“How did you get in here?”

The cat stood, circled, then laid down, curling into a ball and closing its eyes.

“Do you think I’m a coward?” she asked because the cat’s hiss had sounded like one of disagreement.

The cat opened one eye and pierced her with it. A challenge?

She looked at the letter in her hands and tried for the thousandth time to read the puddle-ruined writing. But still only those few legible words jumped off the page—*death, fall, deceit*, something that could be *sins* and several words of no import such as *I, see, and his*. Enough ominous language there to strike the heart with fear. Her worry was not unfounded.

A vibration shook the air.

She looked to the bed, tilted her head. “Are you purring?”

The cat was, and it continued to do so, and Gwendolyn crept onto the bed, sat next to the feline, who did not move a muscle when Gwendolyn joined her, curled up into a ball beside her, and laid a hand on the vibrating body. Soft. Warm. Comforting.

“Running is not cowardice,” she told the cat. “I have done it before, and it *saved* me. Brought me to Lord Eaden and Jackson. If I build a new life away from those I love, I hurt no one. The marquess can hurt no one.”

Still the cat purred.

“I suppose it’s not much of a life without ...” She shied away from Jackson’s name and the words that it always curled around it—happiness, joy, fulfillment. She stroked two fingers between the cat’s ears, and it lifted its head, butted it against her hand. “You do not understand, I suppose. Look at you. I’ve shown little friendliness toward you, yet here you are, curled up on my bed like you belong. You take what you want, don’t you? You do not shy from it, tell yourself it can never happen, should never happen. Not for you. You know your worth.” And by Jove it made her like the cat. Stubborn, vain thing. It had claimed her whether she’d wanted to be claimed or not.

A bit like Jackson had.

She rolled onto her back, hand still stuffed in the cat's soft fur. Another lie, that. She had wanted to be claimed. By both cat and man.

Jackson's kiss still lingered on her lips and deeper. Like a dragon, she hoarded the feel and sounds and scents of it away to survive the loneliness later. When she left.

She'd rather have more kisses. She'd give that memory away in a heartbeat if it meant more kisses, everyday kisses. Those you snuck while waking up and those you lingered over in the afternoon. Those you savored through sips of wine and those that ignited in celebration. She wanted them all.

Why couldn't she have them? The woman who made herself anew, who stole aboard a ship and took up with strangers, who visited distant lands and created a new life under a new name. That woman would not fear to *take* them.

She could. She would.

If she could find the courage to face her past, to accept that bits of it were not dead and never would be, and that though she could run to the ends of the earth for the rest of her days, she would never escape it. Running would soon grow weary. It already had. Her feet begged for a home. Her heart agreed.

But more than that, she trusted Lord Eaden and his wife. She trusted his daughters. One had married a rogue with a scandalous name and the other an impoverished viscount who worked for a living. In a *circus*, of all places.

Yet the family did not seem worse than before. They seemed better, actually.

Jackson had said she was sacrificing herself, and she was. She could not deny that. She would rather this family be happy than have her past hurt them. But Jackson would not chase her again. No matter what had happened to her in the last six years, she'd always been able to lean on Jackson. If she needed him, he would be there.

But if she left ... he would not. She'd known that but had not been ready to face his quite justified anger, his prudent decision to move on without her. His jagged and seductive threats to *keep her*.

Still ...

Felt like a fishhook in her cheek. A cannon in her belly. Hot coals beneath her feet.

It felt like falling with nothing to catch her and no end in sight.

Mostly, it felt wrong. She wanted to throw open her door and run to him, to tell him she would not leave, she could not leave. Not him, not this family, not this place.

That life he dreamt of living here now ... she wanted it too.

But she couldn't have it.

She couldn't.

Could she?

It would mean telling him everything she'd locked up tight all these years. It would mean giving him the key to herself when she'd thrown it into a metal-burning fire long ago, watched it twist and curve out of shape so no one could get to her again the way her not-husband had.

She could not refashion another key. She was no Hephaestus.

She peeked at the letter where it burned like a hot coal on the bed beside her. A bit of paper, and she feared it.

But what if she refused to fear it? If she faced the water-logged ink and shared her fears with those who could help her? In the past, no one had helped her, laughing at her fears, calling her ruined, throwing her out, teaching her she could trust no one.

But the Cavendishes had done nothing but earn her trust. Every day and in every situation. The very reason she wanted to protect them. But perhaps telling them would protect them. They could not guard themselves against a threat they did not know existed.

Had she denied them that right, that protection, all these years?

She sat upright and inched toward the edge of the bed. The cat woke up and followed her, butted its head against her arm. She slid her feet toward the floor and reached for the epistle, arm trembling, heart thumping.

The cat crawled into her lap and curled up, purred loudly enough to send her body rocking. Its weight pinned her to the bed. She laughed, despite her dour mood, clutched the letter tight, and placed the cat aside.

Refusing to trust those who had proven themselves worthy. She was not just a coward, but a fool. Everything she claimed not to be.

A foolish coward who had turned away the man she loved.

She wanted to sink to the floor and cry.

But she found her thorns and clung to them. Run, her body screamed, so she did.

Right to Jackson's room.

Dark shadows, a crackling fire, a tidy bedchamber with moonlight sliding

through the window, but no Jackson. She shivered and strode for the window. The man should close the curtains on such a cold night. But he often forgot the practicalities. She stood at the window for several moments, breathing him in, letting the cheery warmth of the fire crackling nearby comfort her. It seemed to be encouraging her, telling her that despite all her worry and reservations, this was the right course—show him the letter. See if he could help. He might not want to love her again. He'd said he always would, but all hearts had a breaking point. Had she finally found his?

She pushed her palm hard into her chest over her own erratically beating organ. *Please no, please no.* She slipped her other hand inside her pocket to stroke the crinkled paper there. She could let him see at least this, give him something of herself, at least, a reason for her actions, for leaving. She left to save him and his family from her unsavory connections. Tonight, she would trust him.

Where would she find him? The library? His father's study? She took one last look at dark outside his window and grasped the edges of the curtains to pull them tight, but movement outside caught her attention. The wind in the trees, likely. But when she looked further, she saw the tall dark outline of a man. Of Jackson. She knew him even in the dark. Especially in the dark.

She ran out of the room and down the stairs and out the door.

Her heart knew she ran right because it thumped with as much joy as dread. Finally, she'd lay herself bare, a small bit of herself, yes, but one that was raw and angry and wounded, one of the most difficult bits of herself to share.

And finally he'd see her. He'd know he had escaped. But what if he didn't? What if he saw her and still wanted her? She lost nothing, now, with trying. He'd already washed his hands of her, after all.

Fourteen



Jackson had once read a treatise on the moon and stars. The author had claimed the ethereal bodies were inhabited by people. A scandalous hypothesis that had caused plenty of scoffing and naysaying in academic and religious circles. Jackson could not be sure, though. Who was he to say what happened on the moon, among the stars, in the heavens? An open mind was necessary in all things.

He looked up at the vast sky this night and hoped it wasn't so. Not because it challenged the church's teachings and not because it sounded farcical. But because surely if the moon housed people, they would be looking down at him and laughing. Look at that poor sod who fell in love with a woman who wouldn't have him. Har-har. Delightful joke, the best entertainment.

He shoved his hands inside his pockets and inhaled deeply. The garden still grew green in some places, but the air smelled more of winter chill than fragrant blossoms.

His warm breath fogged the too-chilly air and everything around him seemed hard and sharp with cold. Branches bare, flowers dormant. But the half-moon bright above. He paced the path again, trying to excise his unrequited love with each stomp into the gravel. Didn't work, but damn if he could find a scalpel and pry the emotion from his chest, he would.

Boots crunched the gravel on the path behind him, and he stopped, planted both feet firmly, and did not turn around. He did not have to. His body seemed to know she'd come to him. The moon beamed brighter and the flower fragrance that had been missing before swirled around him with a hint of mint.

“It’s me,” Gwendolyn said.

Why had she come? To reject him some more?

But he tempered his anger and spoke as flat as he could. “Do you need something?”

A heavy exhale. “I need many things.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Whitlock can help you with most of them. I’m cogitating and do not desire distractions.”

She stepped nearer, the crunch of her boots announcing it, and he ached to turn around because for the second time in a fortnight, she’d come to him, sought him out. The last time had not ended well, and this time was not likely to be any different. *You hear that, heart? Not different. Keep those hopes low, now.*

“Mrs. Whitlock cannot help me with this,” she said. “Only I can. Help myself, that is.”

Finally, he turned. She stood just out of reach, her face one of the many shadows in the garden, the yellow-gold gown she’d worn at dinner a muted brightness in the dark. Her body seemed poised on the edge of something, as if she had wings strapped to her back and intended to take flight. Of course she would take flight, let the wind take her ever away.

“I am a stubborn thing,” she said.

“Oh? I had not noticed, Miss Smith.”

“Call it stubbornness born of necessity. It has served me well. But perhaps it has hurt me too. When I ran away six years ago, I built a wall around myself, grew thorns up its side, and put a dragon before it. But not even sharp teeth could keep you away.”

“I’m stubborn too.”

“And loyal ... and you deserve better than me, and—”

“Let me decide that.”

“And let me speak.” Her dragon’s teeth in her tone. “You deserve better than me, but since I can give you no better, I can at least give you ... something. A reason. I want to tell you. I’m going to try to.” She moved in the shadows, and her arms appeared from behind her back, twisted together like vines before her. “This is difficult because ... because.” Her arms untwined, and she dropped her face into her hands. A muffled sob broke the night, but she ripped her face out of their palm-warm home and stepped forward into a stream of moonlight—pale, but the expected tears did not roll down her cheeks.

Her hands made fists at her side. “If I tell you all, you’ll hate me. And that makes me want to cry when I’ve not cried in six years.”

“Too long, Gweny. The body needs to mourn sometimes.” He knew that well, had cried often and violently after his parents’ death. And felt no shame for it, either. He took a hesitant step forward, his anger dissolving, his hope shivering into weak life. She’d come to him, and not to reject him, but to give him what parts of herself she could. Even though she feared to do so. After so many years of her running, him chasing, he did not quite know what to do. He knew what words came naturally, though.

“I won’t hate you. I couldn’t.”

“Where is your anger?” she demanded. “I deserve it.”

He shrugged. “Seems to have drained away entirely. So perhaps it’s watering the plants. Enriching the soil? Blown away in the breeze?”

She strode away from him, shaking her head. “Too good. Too *nice* for me.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“They all hated me. After—” She roared a growl of frustration, tipping her face to the sky. “Why can’t I say it?” She dropped her head and swung her gaze to him “They blamed me. My parents said I was a fool for not knowing. The scandal sheets called me ruined. And ... my husband called me naive, pitiable.”

The ground swallowed Jackson hole. A single word had dug the pit. “A husband?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No longer.”

Divorce? Death? Jove, she gave him so much she’d never given him before but not enough to paint a complete picture, only glimpses into horror.

She paced the path before her, and her mutterings floated to him. “Tell him all. Tell him everything.” Finally, she stopped before him, snapped her hand into her pocket and brought something white and misshaped out, thrusting it at him. “I think about it every day, but the words will not come lose. It’s as if they’ve calcified inside me, inked into my bones and blood like ... like ... Do you remember the tattoos we saw in the Americas?”

“Yes.”

“That is what it is like inside me. What happened is a part of me, and I can no more rip the words from myself than can pull the bones from my own body. But I can show you this.” She nodded at the something she held out to him. “Take it. It’s a letter. Ruined before I could read it. But it is why I must

leave. It's mostly indecipherable."

He took the letter and held it close to his face. Ink ran, the paper was brittle.

"Looks like it's been dunked in a pond," he said.

"A rain puddle. But how it was ruined does not matter. It is written by a man who wants me. Or wants me dead. Without the specifics of that letter, I cannot know which it is, and the last time we spoke, he was content with either outcome."

"Who? Tell me." A threat. Jackson would nullify it. His hands squeezed, as he imagined they did so around this unknown man's throat. "Who hurt you?"

"I escaped before he could do more than frighten me. Insult me."

"That's when you ran away? Aboard the ship?"

She nodded.

"No one would protect you? Your family? Friends?"

"No. My father told me the man's offer was the best I'd ever receive after ... the scandal." She hissed a curse and gave a huff of exasperation. "And my mother would not speak to me, blamed me for everything. And I had no friends but for Marianne. She gave me money to get to the docks."

"Who is Marianne? A sister?"

"My old governess. A seamstress now. The man who threatened me ... he found her and sent that letter to her. For her to give to me. And I am afraid he will hurt her. And I cannot let that happen. She is happy. And if he can find her, then he can find you. And if he hurts you. Or Lord Eaden. Or Sarah. Or ... any of you ... I will never forgive myself. I would rather give myself over to him than have that happen. So I must leave, and I must take her with me, and I—"

Jackson stepped forward. "No." He took several breaths to control his quickly rising ire. No, not ire, rage—red-hot and violent. But not with her. "He'll not have you or hurt you or anyone you love. Do you understand? I won't let him. You say this Marianne is your only friend, but surely you know, Gwendolyn ... I am your friend too. You have many other friends than me."

"I know. I know." He shoulders slumped. "But I am afraid. I thought I'd run far enough, hid myself well enough ... but still he caught me."

He wrapped his hands around her shoulders. "Look at me." When she did not, he gave her a little shake. "Look at me, Gwendolyn."

She did.

“I will not let him hurt you. It took him six years to find your friend?”

She nodded.

He scoffed. “Not very clever, is he?”

Her shoulders shook as if trying not to laugh. “I suppose he’s not.”

“Men who think they own the world often are not. It took him six years to find your friend, and he’s not yet found you. He’s not yet hurt your friend. Does she know to be careful?”

Another nod.

“Write to her, then. Remind her of the risk, and if you like, we can ask Max to find some very muscular fellows with talented fists to guard her until we can be sure she’s safe.” Nora’s husband, Max, had been a boxer and still had friends among that lot. He’d know exactly the kind of man who would guard a woman well. “When we return to London, we will deal with this man who scares you. I will deal with him. You do not have to worry, and here at Seastorm, you are safe.”

She licked her lips and looked off into the solid shadows of the garden. “I’d like to believe you. To trust you. But it is hard to trust. And there is more to tell.” Her voice quavered. “I know I am taking the coward’s way out, but can I tell you more later? I feel”—she lifted a hand to her chest and rubbed it, hung her head—“heavy. And raw.”

If his life as a scholar had taught him anything, it was that the past could be unearthed, pieced together, and made sense of with patience, one small sliver at a time. She could open every trunk and book of her past life all at once, but it would be a mess, difficult to sift through and make sense of. It was better to have a process, to go slow and be organized. Better to open one book at a time, rummage through one trunk before moving on to the next, one room, one hiding place in succession, and after days, weeks, months of study, pile everything he’d learned bit upon bit until the picture took shape.

He crept closer, and when they were near enough for him to wrap his arms around her, he did. She came to him softly with no hesitation, melting against him as if she needed his strength. He rested his cheek on top of her head and held her tight, crushing the letter to her back.

“What if,” he said, “you tell me slowly. Bit by bit when you feel ready. As long as you promise to tell me eventually, as long as you don’t leave, I can be patient.”

She laughed, and the sound shook into his own body as her arms wrapped

around him, too. “Always so patient. I don’t deserve it.” She pulled in a shuddering breath. “But I will accept it and try to deserve it.”

“Then will you let me be a scholar of Gwendolyn, and dig you up bit by bit? Ease into it, one secret at a time so you can see that with each new bit of yourself you show, I will not run.”

“That ... that sounds bearable, doable.”

“Gwendolyn, I only wish to know ... are you free? To wed?”

“Yes. If I wish to.”

“Then you may take your time telling me all. Just don’t leave.”

“I cannot promise not to leave. I will do what I must to keep you safe.”

Unacceptable. If she left, he could not protect her. She’d sealed her fate showing him that letter. He’d never let her go now. But he’d not push her this moment. Because with Gwendolyn in his arms and her promise to try to trust him on her lips, he wanted more. Greedy man, he was.

He kissed her—firm, decided. No holding back now. She trusted him with a hard truth, a vulnerable pain, and he’d take what she offered, show her his thanks. What use were words when lips could communicate in better ways?

She kissed him back, not even hesitating to pour herself into the mold that was him, her, them together, with confident limbs and eager lips. No hesitation? New, that. He was not fool enough to question it. He accepted it for the gift it was and gave her as much of himself as he could, gave her all.

She curled against him like perfection, her softness pushing him toward hardness—hard body, hard need as well. High above, stars twinkled like gems, gossiping cold flames that could not keep them warm.

She shivered.

“You’re cold.” She wore no pelisse or coat, no scarf or gloves, and when he pressed a palm into her cheek, it was ice. He spit a curse. “You must return indoors.”

“No. I like being here with you under the night sky. It feels ... free. I’ve not felt free in so long. I wish to enjoy it.” She snuggled deeper into his embrace, a miracle. “And I wish to continue kissing you.”

“How convenient. I wish to continue kissing you.” So he kissed her again. And she kissed him back, and they held each other up and gave each other heat and made promises without words even though darkness draped around them like a cloak, even though those gossiping stars twinkled coldly above them, so far away.

She drank from his lips, and he tangled his hands up in her hair so that it fell free and cascaded down her back, a torrent of gold in the dark, lighting up the night, lighting up him, then—

She shivered, and he cursed and broke the kiss, folded her hand in his own, and dragged her out of the garden and a short distance across the lawn to the greenhouse. It rose before them, white marble glowing in the night, a beacon of warmth and privacy.

She went willingly, easily, her feet a soft cadence patting against the ground that matched his own, and when he closed the door behind them, shutting the humid heat of the greenhouse across their shivering skin, he twirled her, pressed her back against the marble, and found his way home.

Fifteen

The cold skittered across Gwendolyn's skin, but heat rushed through her veins. She pressed her palms against Jackson's burning chest as he pressed her against the frigid marble. A riot of hot and cold in the pure midnight air. Despite the glass ceiling, no moonlight encroached, no winking stars. Just windows shuttered to keep in the heat, and vines, branches, and exotic blooms tangled all about.

She felt tangled. Trysts in greenhouses not part of the plan. Only taking hands with Jackson and digging together into the quiet recesses of the heart, who they used to be and who they wanted to be. Together.

Faulty thinking to dive in all at once. She would move into the recitation of her past as if into a pond, one step at a time, and perhaps that way find the means to conquer her fears, find the means to once more reinvent herself. Not to run and hide, but so she could give Jackson the key to herself he deserved.

More importantly, so she could give herself what *she* wanted, what *she* deserved.

She would dig. She would lay bare her past one bit at a time, and she would start finding her courage now. But why not this too? Why not this tangle of limbs and meeting of beating hearts and impatient mouths? A bit of a reward for facing the pain.

She bit his lower lip and sucked it briefly. He moaned, and she'd made it happen, and the knowledge felt like power surging through her. He cupped her face with solid hands, kissed her like she was the final dregs of daylight before an entire winter of darkness. He gasped as he pulled away. She'd thought there no light in this moonless jungle, but his eyes were stars, shining for her. His hands wandered down her neck, her shoulders, and cupped

around her upper arms. He dropped his lips to hers once more and dragged her to the side until the marble fell away. She gasped, but he swallowed it and steadied her, picked her up, and set her back down on a wide, marble window seat. The smooth glass at her back cut cold against her as his hands grasped her thighs, spread them apart, as he stepped between her legs and sank to one knee then the other.

She braced her hands on either side of her hips and melted her body weight into her palms.

The warm velvet of his hands found her ankles, bound them loosely, and followed the curve of her legs upward, raising the hem of her gown up, up, up. Chill even here, the air cut through her stockings and pricked gooseflesh across her bare thighs as he settled her skirts in a puddle over her lap. He stroked her legs from thigh to ankle and back up again. Her breasts ached and her head fell back on her neck with a low moan of his name.

“Almost, Mistress Midnight,” he promised. He kissed the top of each knee, and she wished her stockings to hell. She wanted nothing between her skin and his hands, cupped and warm. Then those hands spread her legs farther apart, and he nipped and licked a path from her knee much, much higher.

She found the muscles to open further for him, and he kissed her at the apex of her legs. Another moan rocked through her, and she felt his grin against her. Not for long though, for he soon found other things to do with those lips—kissing and licking and delving. His hands played along her thighs, banishing the cold, and each touch and taste he took of her curled her tight as the curling vines around them. Her fingernails dug into the marble windowsill, and she closed her eyes, closed out the shadows of the world as he curled a hand around her hip, squeezed, and snuck the other hand to join his mouth between her legs. His thumb, clever digit, found her bud and spiraled soft circles into and around it.

She needed to touch him, to replace cold windowsills with solid flesh, so she did, digging fingernails into his shoulders. The touch sent a jerk of approval through his body. He inhaled and exhaled sharply, his thumb never letting up, his other fingers slipping inside her.

And she shattered, giving in to the sensation of his breath and skin against her. Her muscles locked, and she dragged herself close to his body to keep herself upright when those solid stone muscles gave way to exhausted flesh, and she collapsed. He stood and pulled her into his arms like a babe, but she

wiggled free, finding the energy and strength because they were not done yet. Far from it. She pressed him into the seat she'd just vacated and stepped between his legs, a reversal of their earlier position. She sank to her knees and set her fingers to work about the buttons of his fall.

He spread his legs and cupped the sides of her head, dipped down to take her lips. She tasted what must be herself on his lips, and the thought stole shivers up her spine.

“You do not have to,” he said.

“I want to.”

He gave a small chuckle that roared through her. “Very well then.” He released her and sank the weight of his body into his palms on the ledge behind him.

And she undid the final button and released the long hard length of him into her eager hands, she teased him with curious fingers, licked the length of his shaft, then placed a kiss upon the head. He hissed and bucked, and she wrapped her fingers around him, tugged up and down a few times before taking him into her mouth. She found a rhythm that his hips rocked to, but she could not accommodate his full size.

“Use your hand, too” he said, each word guttural, like sand on skin.

It did not take much thought to know his meaning, and she cupped him, squeezed gently, and then wrapped her hand around his shaft where her teeth and lips could not reach and let it join the rhythm of their bodies. With her other hand, she steadied herself on the hard ledge of his thigh, and the defined cut of his muscle through buckskin brought her own desire screaming back to life. His hands in her hair, the dig of the marble floor in her knees, his scent—paper and ink and earth—all around her, then ... he slid from her grasp, ignoring her mew of displeasure. Jackson lifted her, settled her atop him.

Ah. Her displeasure became its opposite as she guided her body onto the length of his shaft with a hiss. Filled with him, surrounded by him.

His eyes devoured her, roaming from the wild nest of hair falling from her head over her once-shivering shoulders and breasts, bared by the low bodice of her yellow gown, to the pool of that gown around her waist and the straddle of her legs over his hips, riding him, taking him in. She felt like a feast beneath his gaze.

“Perfection,” he moaned.

She devoured him, taking his word with a kiss and giving it back to him.

Perfection.

He locked his arms around her lower back to steady her, hold her up, and she rode him slowly until he took control of the rhythm, pushed it to a more frantic pace. Lowering his lips to taste the bared skin of her neck and shoulders and the upper swell of her breasts, her body climbed once more, reaching past the glass ceiling of the greenhouse to the churning night sky. He released her breast, nipped her nipple between his teeth, and she shattered. Again. With a cry she buried in the slope of his shoulder.

Then his scream rent the air as his body jerked beneath her, and he stilled as the echo of her name against glass and greenery faded.

They sat tangled together, panting, caught up in each other until Jackson parted their bodies from one another, gathered her even closer and angled them together so he could lean against the side of the small window. She perched in his lap and closed her eyes. She wanted to feel the moment, not think of what it meant. She would not let the future scare her, though the letter still taunted her.

“I would like to start now,” she said, eyes still closed, ear pressed to his chest, the better to count the steady beats and rapid jumps of his heart.

“I’m afraid we’ve already finished.” He kissed the top of her head. “For now.”

She chuckled and kissed his chest before settling back into the home of his arms. “Digging, I mean.”

He nodded, and the slight movement brought the tip of his chin to tap her head. “Should I ask a question or—”

“Tell me of your parents.” She took a deep breath that shook her. “What is your last memory of your parents?”

He chuckled. “I thought we were digging into you. Not me.”

“Please? It will help. I seem to be able to open up more naturally when we are treading the same conversational path.”

He went so still his heart almost stopped beating. “Very well, then. We were in the garden, my father and I, on our way here to pull Mama from her plants. I needed to say goodbye. I was off to Germany. But she came running out of the greenhouse before we got there, one hand clutching her other hand. My father sprinted to her. She’d cut her hand, and it was bleeding, and my father would not settle until it was properly cleaned and bandaged. The last thing I remember thinking as the coach took me down the drive was that one day I wanted to love someone like that.”

“That’s lovely.” She did not dare ask him if he’d managed it, if he did currently love someone like that. Not ready for that yet. “Does it bother you to be here?”

“The greenhouse? I thought it would, I admit. I do not come inside here. But it’s ... not horrific. I suppose I thought it would all be dead somehow. Like her. But it’s not. It’s lush and alive, a warm oasis in the dead of winter. And I’m not sad. Not even a little bit. I’m glad I’m sharing it with you.” His chest lifted her with the gentle force of a few silent breaths. A small part of me has always mourned. And perhaps always will. But this trip has helped. Searching for my father’s damnably mysterious manuscript has made me realize I do no honor to their memory by shutting them away. By shutting myself out.”

She’d grown stiff as he spoke, and he shook her a bit, kissed the top of her head. “Are you well? Every time we’ve ended up like this—”

“Like what?”

“Well, naked. Or close to it. Every time—”

“Twice, you mean?”

“Yes, twice, you contrary woman. Now silence, or I’ll kiss you into submission.” He waited.

She glued her lips together.

“Excellent,” he said. “As I was saying, both times, you’ve immediately regretted it. Do you regret it now?”

She bolted up right, inching her chin into the air. “I have never regretted it, Jackson Cavendish. Never.”

“The first time, you pretended like it had never happened. And while you are perched quite comfortably in my lap right now, you’ve grown all stiff. Not a good sign, that. Explain to me, please, how those reactions are not indicative of regret.”

She settled against him. He had the right of it. But she would not bolt this time. “If I’ve regretted anything, it’s hurting you. Something I can’t keep from doing, it seems.”

“Then you do not regret pairing with such an inexperienced lover? You do not wish for a man who can give you more pleasure than I ca—”

She silenced him with a kiss. “No man has ever given me what you have. You light me on fire, and I welcome the burn.”

“Hell,” he whispered as he slid his tongue into her mouth.

She swallowed the curse because it felt like fire in her blood as winter

tried to devour them through the glass and shutters. When they pulled apart to quiet their rapid breathing, she settled into a tighter ball against his chest, and he ran light fingers down her back.

“And you?” he asked finally, disrupting the quiet that had settled around them. “What is your last memory of your parents?” Each word quieter than the last. “I’m sorry. I ... don’t even know if they are living or—”

“Living. I think.” She could not quite be sure. She’d not seen them or even spoken to them in six years. The last time she’d seen them had been in a crowd of curious Londoners and ambitious journalists. She closed her eyes against the memory of bodies pushing against her, trying to get closer, to tear pieces of her and have her scandal for themselves. Not to share its load, but to gawp at it, to make themselves famous through a brief brush up against her infamy. She swallowed the fear as it crawled up her throat. “We were in a crowd, and people were pulling at us. And I ... I reached for them. For help. But they turned away from me.”

He spat out a curse so foul she’d never even attempted it. Then he kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry. I—”

“Do not apologize. I think ... I think it must be done. It’s this or run, and I cannot abide the thought of leaving you. I might as well rip out my own heart.”

He squeezed her tight, held onto her as if some current might sweep her away.

A part of her bristled up thorns, or tried to, a way to put more distance between them. But they would not grow. So she rubbed her temple against his jaw with a satisfied catlike purr and said, “You need to shave, Jackson Cavendish.” She didn’t mean it.

He slanted her a glance that revealed he knew she rather liked his scruff. Then he kissed the top of her head, the last thing she remembered before she fell into the haunted dreams of sleep.

Sixteen



Had Jackson thought winning Gwendolyn's trust would solve everything? Had he truly believed the moment she ran willingly into his arms, the future would open clear as dawn before them?

He had. A little bit. That hope that often made him a fool with her had suggested it, and he'd accepted it with little argument.

Reality proved more complicated.

Messier.

Better than he'd imagined too.

They rode side by side on a mission to speak with the local rector, to pick through his memory for any clue of Jackson's father's manuscript. He liked being in step with her rather than several steps behind. Yesterday's storm between them had broken up the landscape of their relationship and reshaped it.

He rather liked the terrain.

He snuck a glance at her. Her spine was stiff yet elegant perched atop that sidesaddle, and the jauntiest hat sat on her golden hair, deep velvet blue with yellow feathers. Did he want to look at it and appreciate the picture she made or tear it from her head and disarrange that picture entirely? Difficult decisions. She managed the chocolate-brown mare beneath her with a firm kindness she used for all living things, and it responded well to her every command.

One should not find that erotic. He did, though.

Yes, he'd disarrange her.

But first the rector. Not disarranging him. Visiting him. Picking his brain

for information, working together to solve a mystery, as they often had in their years together. Jove, he'd hoped focus on such tasks would cool his rising ardor, but it sped along its rampant heat. He enjoyed watching her work.

Above them, the sun shone high and warm and clear, heating the otherwise cold day, and in his gloves, sweat beaded on his palms. From the sun or from her? She certainly heated him more.

"It is a lovely day," she said, smiling.

He grinned back, a fool's look on his face. What were they doing? A brief affair before goodbye? Or the start of forever? He would not think the latter, except Gwendolyn did everything with purpose.

"Jackson," she said. "'Tis too beautiful a day for woolgathering. What preoccupies you? Is it your notebook? Don't worry. I have it in my satchel."

"Thank you, but that is not it."

"It should be. You're much too absent-minded." She cocked her head and tipped the corner of her mouth up in a jaunty half grin. "But I do not mind. It gives me a way to look after you. I have your spectacles too."

He laughed, feeling light as the clear blue sky. "It is not that, Gwendolyn. It is you who preoccupies me. I enjoy watching you ride." In several senses.

She leaned forward and patted her mare's neck. "She's an excellent mount." The heated look she cast his way suggested Gwendolyn understood multiple senses as well. "As are you." A grin.

"And you are an excellent horsewoman." He winked.

She laughed, throwing her head back and sending cascades of merriment into the sky. "No more naughtiness."

He pressed a hand to his heart. "Naughty? Me? Never. In all seriousness, though, and speaking only in the equestrian sense, you *are* an excellent horsewoman."

Were those roses of pride blooming in her cheeks?

Perhaps time to pry a bit more. "Did you ride often as a young girl?"

The roses shriveled, but she stayed strong in her seat. "I did. It was my favorite form of diversion. I rode every morning upon waking and sometimes in the afternoon as well. My mare's name was Rosalind."

"Truly? From Shakespeare?"

Gwendolyn nodded. "Rosalind is ... overlooked. By Romeo. By readers, and I knew what that felt like."

If he could dip her parents in horse dung and roll them into the Thames,

he would. Perhaps set them on fire in the process.

“Do not feel sorry for me.” She laughed, a bitter sound. “At least not yet.” Hell, the worst had yet to come.

She pressed her personal clouds away and pushed her shoulders back. “Besides, once I met you, Jackson Cavendish, I often wished for a single moment of being overlooked.”

“Ha!” He could hardly deny it. “I wanted to kiss you the very moment I saw you. And that wanting has never stopped.”

She peeked at him. “You want to kiss me now?”

“Is the sky blue?”

She looked up. “Mostly. The clouds make it white in places.” She faced him. “So you only mostly wish to kiss me. At the current moment.”

He nudged his horse closer to hers, and his leg brushed her skirts as he leaned as close as circumstances allowed. “What I wish to do is to drag you onto my lap and ravish you. That is *all* I want. No *mostly* about it.”

Her roses returned, thank Jove, and she focused on the ground before them. “I assume you’ve been riding since you left your mother’s womb, so I shall not return your question. Instead, I should like to know ... did your mother like to ride?”

“A bit. She preferred to stay with her flowers. She’d sit in her greenhouse with all the London papers piled near, and she’d press the news stories she found most fascinating in her notebooks beside the season’s flowers.”

“London news and flowers?”

He nodded. “The London season and the seasons of the year. She often edited my father’s writing. If there was anything good and clever in his sentences, it came from her.”

“I should have liked to know her, if only to pick her mind. And your father.”

“They would both have adored you.”

Her gaze slipped to her lap and did not raise for some moments.

He cleared his throat. “I fear to inquire whether or not your parents would approve of me.”

She unbowed her head. “Indeed they would. They like charming men from good families.”

Nothing wrong with her words, but everything wrong with how she said them. Had the man who’d sent her the letter, who’d threatened her once upon a time, been a charming man her family approved of? He needed to know

more of the enemy but had been afraid to press her. Too much at once might send her running.

“Is that it?” Gwendolyn pointed to the skyline where a house interrupted the organic patterns of sky and trees.

“Yes.” Jackson kicked his heels into his horse’s flanks, and when Gwendolyn saw him speed into a canter, she followed, slanting him a grin of playful competition. Her past forgotten for the moment? He hoped so. He’d give her a little distraction.

“I’ll race you,” he said.

She pulled herself up tall. “You’ll try to, you mean.”

They raced.

The wind whipped against his skin, tearing his lips into a smile. He heard her laughter as she sped past him, and that little hat wavered. He slowed. Better for *him* to snip the thing from her hair than for the wind to do so. She slowed, too, the walls of the rector’s house growing in detail as they approached. She reached a small fence surrounding the house before he did, but not much sooner. He dismounted and reached up to help her do so. She placed her hands on his shoulders and allowed his help, smiling down at him as he lowered her to the ground. He’d rarely seen her smile reach her eyes before, never seen happiness not haunted by shadows in her face.

He’d always been half in love with her, always admired her, always saw she hid something, parts of herself, had always wanted to see those parts shining in the full light of day.

And now he was. And it was better than anything he’d ever imagined. His contrary Miss Smith a confident lady, assured of her place in the world.

Damn, what he wouldn’t do to make that second of confidence her hourly habit. His hands lay still at her waist, but he swept them away, clutched them together behind his back to keep from flinging her up on the horse and taking her back to the greenhouse. Better yet, his room.

She smoothed the shoulder of his jacket. “I can see machinations in your eyes, Jackson. Do focus.”

Right. He cleared his throat, scattered his body’s desires to the wind. “Right. The rector.”

“Do you remember him well?”

“Yes. An intelligent man. A decade or so younger than my father. If he knows anything about my father’s book, he’ll share it.”

“Excellent.” She grinned at him. “We should go in.”

He grinned at her. Walls were crumbling between them, and he wanted only to make use of that fact, to crush her against him, kiss her, and—

“Ahem.” A male voice, a clearing of the throat.

Gwendolyn’s eyes widened, and she whipped around to face the cottage.

Jackson straightened his waistcoat and turned with a bow. “Mr. Stewart. Do you remember me?”

The rector was younger than Jackson remembered him, perhaps in his late thirties. He was rather large, too, and though his clothing hung too loose, the ill fit was obviously not a symptom of a weak frame. He seemed more blacksmith than scholar. He regarded Jackson with suspicious dark eyes, but when he looked at Gwendolyn, his mouth stole into a grin.

“You’re the Cavendish lad.” He spoke without looking at Jackson, his entire gaze riveted on Gwendolyn. “And who are you?”

Jackson stepped closer and thread his arm through Gwendolyn’s. “This is Miss Gwendolyn Smith, my partner.”

Mr. Stewart flashed a look at Jackson then. “Partner?”

“We’re both research assistants to my uncle, Lord Eaden.”

“The explorer, scholar. Yes. I’ve read his books. Your father praised them highly. Of course he would. Family.” He looked back to Gwendolyn. “Do you speak for yourself?”

Gwendolyn bristled and stepped forward, offering the curtest curtsy Jackson had ever seen. “I do.”

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. If Mr. Stewart meant to grant attentions to Gwendolyn, he’d find her an impervious wall. Jackson should know.

“And do you, Mr. Stewart,” Gwendolyn said, “invite visitors inside? Or must they stand about in the cold all afternoon?”

He turned and stomped toward the house. “This way, then.”

Gwendolyn and Jackson stepped into pace with one another side by side.

“He’s ... *charming*,” she said.

“He’s brilliant. At least my father thought so.”

“Let us be direct and be done with him.”

“That is no way to get the information we want, Gweny.” Briefly, he curled his fingers into her palm. Two layers of gloves separated them, but still he felt her. He heard her too, her gasp of an inhale tightening his gut. “We must see if he can be trusted first. Then we must learn if he has any knowledge of the manuscript. Then we must poke quite carefully to discern if

he's willing to share such knowledge with us."

She sniffed. "It's *your father's* book."

"Scholars can be odd. You know that. They may care nothing for a book except for a single idea contained inside, and if they think that idea is theirs, they'll—"

"Knife a fellow for trying to claim it's otherwise."

"Precisely."

They followed Mr. Stewart into the cottage and into a small parlor cluttered with books.

"My," Gwendolyn breathed.

"See something you like?" Mr. Stewart asked, a glitter in his eye and a smirk on his lips.

Did the man want Jackson's fist in his nose?

"I see," Gwendolyn said, "that you are in desperate need of an organization system. Your books have ... exploded."

He shrugged and dropped into a dusty armchair and studied her as if she were a rare text he intended to figure out. He tilted his head, eyes narrow, and let his gaze trail over her face, her body, a moment too long.

Jackson cleared his throat.

Mr. Stewart still did not look away. "Where are you from, Miss Smith?"

She blinked, ducked her head, licked her lips, every movement slow and steady as if to buy time to think through her answer. "I have been, lately, a citizen of the world."

He nodded, ripped his gaze away, and turned to Jackson. "Why are you here? Can't send a note 'round first, Cavendish? Your father always did. That man knew that minds in thought shouldn't be disturbed."

By Jove, they'd discovered a "true scholar."

Gwendolyn groaned but cut it off short. She looked at Jackson from the corner of her eye and raised her brows, a look he knew the meaning of well—*not one of those*.

"Yes, Miss Smith," Jackson said, "one of those."

"Pardon?" Mr. Stewart barked.

Jackson stepped over a pile of books and reached out to move another from the seat of the only other chair in the room.

"Don't touch those!"

Jackson lurched back. "Apologies. I assume you have a ... system."

Mr. Stewart nodded.

“My system is superior,” Gwendolyn said. “You should let me—”

“No,” Mr. Stewart barked. “Here I was, thinking I’d discovered a lovely young thing, but you’re as ignorant as the rest, aren’t you?”

Gwendolyn stiffened. “Pardon me? If anyone is ignorant around here, and *rude*, it is—”

Jackson cleared his throat, suffered the dagger to the belly that was Gwendolyn’s narrowed gaze. “Mr. Stewart, we will not disturb your system. Nor will we keep you long. Both of us do, if you can countenance it, value your uninterrupted thoughts. We are scholars in our own right.”

“Bah. You do the grunt work, which does not always require a great deal of thought.”

Gwendolyn’s fists balled at her sides as she stepped toward the man. Jackson caught her wrist and pulled her back. It was his turn to catch her eye and raise his brows, saying without words, “Please do not kill him; we need him.”

Jackson found the fireplace and leaned against the book-cluttered mantel while Gwendolyn, her murderous impulses currently controlled, wandered next to the dusty window.

“Do you have a reason for your visit, Cavendish?” Mr. Stewart crossed an ankle over his knee and leaned back in his armchair.

The subtle method would not work here. He could not chat Mr. Stewart into giving away information. Mr. Stewart did not *chat*. Nothing clearer than that. But his gaze continued flicking toward Gwendolyn. He fancied her. Or fancied the look of her. Jackson didn’t blame him. Didn’t like it but understood the attraction. Would the scholar more willingly give information to *her*?

“We decided to visit on a whim,” Jackson said. “Miss Smith and I were riding and discussing the history of this geographical location, the castle, the lands. She has a particular fascination with it all, you see. Has read every book in the library during our short stay and has an itch to sketch the most important local sights. Illustrations to enrich the pages of my father’s book.”

Gwendolyn swung away from the window to glower at him, but she kept it a small glower. One a man like Mr. Stewart, king of a dusty parlor, might not notice. Only Jackson would see. She waited to see what path he trod and waited to decide whether she would walk it with him.

“When I mentioned,” Jackson continued, “that you were a foremost mind on the subject, she begged—”

“I hardly think,” Gwendolyn said, her arms crossing in a deadly slow slither over her chest, “*begged* is the correct word, Mr. Cavendish.”

Jackson nodded and hid his smile. “*Begged* to meet with you.”

A low growl rumbled from Gwendolyn’s vicinity.

Mr. Stewart scratched his stubbled chin. Looked like a highwayman or a pirate, he did. “What interests you most, Miss Smith?”

She glared at Jackson then rolled her eyes heavenward. Looking for her next words? A resigned sigh, then, “Truly, Mr. Stewart, what interests me most is Jackson’s father’s book. Illustrating it, especially.”

Mr. Stewart’s thick, slashing brows jumped toward his hairline. “Haven’t thought of that in years. Is it any good?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Gwendolyn admitted. “It appears to be missing.”

Jackson’s jaw dropped. Hell. Hell. *Hell*. Confound it! “Gweny.” Her name a groan as he rubbed his temples.

“I do not see the point in charming the truth out of a man who obviously has no charm himself. He’s impervious to your brand of flattery, Jackson, and I must approach the problem from a different angle.”

She’d been doing that often lately—approaching old problems from new angles. He wanted her to keep doing so, so he held his hands up, palms forward, and leaned back against the mantel, letting her lead the charge.

The scholar’s brows flinched higher. Impossibly high, really. “You’ll excuse me if I entirely ignore whatever interpersonal scuffles you have brewing at the moment. The manuscript is truly missing? I find that difficult to believe.”

“What you find difficult or easy to believe is neither here nor there,” Gwendolyn said. “It is the truth. What we would like to know is if you have any information about the book you can share with us.”

Mr. Stewart shook his head. “Mr. Cavendish”—he nodded toward Jackson—“your father, spoke with me about it. I advised him on a means of organizing the information and suggested he look into the ruins on the beach near Telscombe. But he never shared the manuscript with me. I never read a single word.”

“Did he divulge any information regarding its location to you?” Gwendolyn asked.

“No. He carried it with him sometimes. Bits and pieces of it in that brown folio, and he’d take notes while we talked.”

“Bits and pieces?” Jackson straightened from his lean, and a book

tumbled to the floor.

“Be careful!” Mr. Stewart jerked from his chair to retrieve the book. He placed it back from where it had fallen with a warning glare for Jackson. “Damn your eyes,” he hissed as he resumed his seat.

“The cursed state of my eyes aside,” Jackson said, careful not to dislodge another tome, “you suggest he did not keep the pages of the manuscript together in a single place.” Interesting. And not what they’d been looking for. His father could have been a bit more organized and straightforward concerning his work.

Mr. Stewart shrugged. “At least not all the time. I can understand why he’d not carry the entire thing about. I saw it once—a huge pile. It was going to be a complete history. Your father was quite thorough.”

Gwendolyn clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth as she often did when thinking. “Big. It *should* be in plain sight then!”

He shared her bewilderment, her frustration.

She glanced at Jackson, lifted her skirts, and made her careful way toward the door. “Thank you, Mr. Stewart. You’ve been quite helpful.”

Jackson followed her.

“I’ll help you anytime, young lady. In *any way* you need.”

Mr. Stewart’s farewell stopped Jackson’s progress. He swung around and stood tall, straightened his jacket, lifted a brow as he slugged his gaze like a fist into the scholar’s face. “Do not think we do not hear the untoward invitation in your words, Mr. Stewart. Miss Smith is a lady and will be treated as such.”

The scholar snorted. “She traipses about with you and another man all over the globe, and you expect me to consider her a lady?”

Gwendolyn strode across the room in a flurry and slapped him on the cheek.

He hissed and raised a hand to the spot as she stood above him like a Valkyrie, eyes blazing, fists ready to do more damage. “You are not the first to make assumptions about me, and you will not be the last. But as we may very well have to face one another socially in the future, I want you to be quite clear on where we stand. I am not a whore. I am a scholar. And when I take a man to my bed it is because I give him my heart as well, something you know nothing of because you do not have one.” She turned on her toes and swept from the room.

Jackson stayed a brief moment more. “My uncle has friends in a variety

of surprising places. If you like this living, I suggest you treat Miss Smith with more respect the next time you see her.”

Jackson swung around, knocking over a pile of books, and marched for the door.

“Do you know who she is, boy?”

He stopped, nearly to the doorway.

“Didn’t recognize her at first, but I was in London when it all happened. I wonder what your father would think—”

Jackson left. He didn’t want to hear about her past from any lips other than her own.

She waited outside for him, pacing before the horses, muttering. He could not understand her words, but he knew the tone—pure rage.

He lifted her up to her saddle and helped her fix her skirts then mounted his own horse.

She took off, faster than before and with none of the heart-wrenching joy she’d shown earlier. He followed, leaning low and giving the horse its head. It raced after its companion, across hills and roads, over low bright walls and unexpected ha-has, through trees and out into the open where the crumbling castle rose before them. He stopped right behind her, flinging herself to the ground and reaching up for her. She touched him only enough to dismount the horse and find the ground, then she whipped away from him, out of breath and burning bright.

She stalked away from him, a growing shadow that rolled across the ground as clouds drew heavy and gray across the sun. It would rain, soon. He needed to get her home.

He stretched out a hand toward her. No more. A small offer of comfort. “Gwendolyn—”

She whirled, hands fisted in her skirts. Behind her, the Seastorm Castle tower—ivy-choked with black-eyed windows—rose like a knife into the bleak winter sky. “It is fine. He is not the first man to think such things of me, and he will not be the last.” She stormed into the castle. He followed her inside.

“Have you searched here yet?” she asked. “The castle?”

“No. But it would be a deuced horrid place to hide paper.”

“That is, supposedly, according to two sources, in a leather folio.”

He nodded. “There’s that. I suppose this structure is the source, was the source of my father’s mania, so it makes a certain type of poetic sense that

he'd have kept it here." And Gwendolyn needed the heavy distraction only a challenging problem could provide. "I'll take the banquet hall over there, and you search the other side."

The castle was rather small, and the upper floor long since caved in so that you could look up straight to the roof from the ground floor. And through the holes scattered liberally about there, to the sky. He followed the wall from the left side of the door they'd entered through, poking his fingers at loose stones and looking under rotting furniture for false bottoms. Everything proved empty. The roof in the banquet hall had survived better than in other areas, particularly over the large fireplace where his father, years ago, had placed an armchair and rug. Still there now, well maintained, surprisingly. By the gardener? No trunk or furniture to store papers or writing implements, though. No table for writing. He must have only read there ... or thought.

Gwendolyn skirted round the opposite side of the room, doing the same as he, making her own methodical approach toward him.

They worked in silence but for birds chirping, the horses whinnying now and then or shaking their manes, jingling the bridles and reins.

They met in the tower. The narrow circular space rose above them.

Jackson kicked at a bit of stone. "I should have the roof fixed. All original materials, if possible, of course. And methods, t—"

"Ask me a question." Gwendolyn stood in the very center of the tower, arms limp at her sides, her gaze blue and churning like the sea.

She wished to talk, to reveal a bit of herself, but she needed him to dig for it to help her get it out. Should he poke at the recent wounds opened by Mr. Stewart or slice new entryways into her mysteries? Why was she so used to being propositioned? Was she a widow? Had she walked the streets alone, with only her body to earn her bread? Or more importantly to him, who was the man who'd sent her the letter? He still lived, presumably.

A ray of dim sunlight slid between them through the broken roof, and he chose a less cluttered path to approach her from. "What was, is ... what is your father?"

She nodded, knowing, it seemed, exactly what he meant. "An earl. Not a particularly well-off one."

She gave no names, and he wouldn't push for them.

"Ask another," she demanded.

"Why?"

"Because I cannot keep falling to pieces when my past brushes near, and

the best way I can think to face it and survive is a bit at a time. One question and answer at time. Now, another.”

“Who is the man who wrote the letter?”

Her mouth dropped open, her eyes became dishes of the deepest blue. Then she wrapped her arms around her body and shivered. She seemed so far from him in that moment, he dared not step toward her and hold her warm in his arms.

When she finally pulled in a trembling, silent breath, she shook her head and spoke to the floor, fingers pressed against temples. “My ... husband’s father.”

“Jove.” He wanted to hiss worse words. He tried to piece it all together. “Your husband ... he died, then your father-in-law ... pursued you?”

Her head popped up, and she strode for the exit. “Something like that.” She stopped in the doorway and looked at him, her face hidden in the shadows cast from the sun outside. The dark outline of her form wavered. “Do you wish to know more?”

“Not if you’re done for the day. I can wait.” He wanted her sunshine back, not this wraithlike shimmer of a woman.

She nodded then turned and left.

Jackson gathered up his clues as they mounted their horses. A dead husband (surely dead, though the way she’d acknowledge it created doubts), a lecherous and dangerous father-in-law, uncaring parents strapped for cash. A dour picture indeed. But there was more, and she was close to showing him all. And for the first time in his life, he wasn’t sure he wanted it. All he needed was just enough to keep her safe.

Seventeen



S nuggle with a cat *once*, and it thinks it owns you.

Gwendolyn eyed the offending animal who slouched toward her through the pre-dawn dark like a tiger through the jungle and jumped onto her belly. It purred.

And then she couldn't sleep.

Not that she'd been able to do so all night. Or the night before. At least her sketchbooks were filling up with paintings. And those paintings had a clear theme—Seastorm. No more towers for her. No, entire houses, and none of them ruined or wrapped in thorns, either.

Odd. But pleasantly so.

Not her paintings tonight. Tonight, she painted the rector's house, made it a squat stone of a troll with a large nose ready to gobble up all passersby.

Clearly, the visit to the rector had shaken her. Her spiraling path closer to her past, guiding Jackson oh so slowly there kept her buzzing. Each night since the greenhouse the same. First, sleep had evaded her with sullen stubbornness. Then, when she'd finally strangled it into submission, it was only to drop into desire-edged dreams that woke her aching and panting. And so terribly disappointed her legs were not wrapped around slim hips above muscular thighs, her hands bereft without the silken tangle of golden curls.

The cat curled up on her belly and sent happy vibrations along her body. Not the bed partner she wanted. But if she went to him, she'd want to talk as well. Her past, it seemed was draining more quickly from her than she'd ever thought possible. Perhaps she'd kept her silence so intently and for so long because she'd known, on some level, that once she began to speak, she would never stop.

“Enough.” She swung her legs over the side of the bed and threw her wrapper on, tied it tight. She found the pitch-black hallway on silent, bare feet. The cat followed, weaving in and out of her marching legs and leaving fur-soft trails of heat along her ankles.

Once she stood before Jackson’s door, the cat sat next to her, considering the door as she did.

“Knock? Or will it be open?”

The cat swished its tail.

Knocking might wake others. But how terribly rude to barge into a room and disrupt someone’s sleep. But she’d given him such vague information at the castle. Half-truths. She needed him to know more of her, needed to tell him more.

She tried the knob, and it gave beneath her touch, so she opened the door and slipped into the room that was shadow-bright with candlelight.

“Gweny?” Jackson looked up from his hunched-over position at a small writing desk in the room’s far corner.

“You’re awake. I had not expected that.”

“Why are *you* awake?” He stood and ambled toward her. Shirtless, his buckskins slung low on his hips, and the candlelight limning the grooves of his every muscle. A trim, well-toned scholar who could handle his body as well as his mind, who used both relentlessly in pursuit of truth.

And, quite often, of her.

He sauntered toward her, the single candle illuminating the gray dark behind him, casting his face in shadow. Then he pinned her against the door, forearms bracing his body on either side of her head.

Trapped by lithe muscle and sinew, trapped by the paper-and-ink smell of him, trapped by the golden glint in his eyes, and trapped by the curls she always itched to touch. Trapped by his caring, his patience, his loyalty.

She kissed him. He was her strength, her muscle and bone. She kissed him only with lips, fisting her hands in the thin fabric of her wrapper and chemise. She slipped her tongue into his mouth and tasted Turkish coffee and a bit of sugar. He was her courage and her smile.

She let her hands join in the delight, walking her fingers up his strong torso, over the planes of muscle at his chest, over shoulders that could hold her up, and around a neck she wanted to bite.

So she did, a gentle nip that made him gasp and treat her in kind. But only once before pulling away. “Is this why you came to my room this morning?”

Each word a breath. Each breath a pant.

Yes, if she were being truthful with herself. But not entirely.

“I could not sleep,” she said. “Our earlier conversation—from the castle—plagues me.”

“Ah. Shall we continue it?” His voice smooth and silky as moonlight.

She nodded.

He straightened with a groan, and she missed the prison of his body pressing her against the door.

“Let’s sit,” he said, dropping to a huddle of golden maleness on the rug before the desk, before the single dancing flame.

She joined him with a shiver, pulling her wrapper tighter. “Why do you have no fire?” Just glowing, dying embers.

“It died an hour or so ago, and I did not bother with it.”

“You’re shirtless. It’s cold. Must I take care of your fireplaces, too, as I do your glasses and notes, to ensure you’re warm?”

His eyes blazed. What need had they of fire? “Care to warm me yourself?”

Very much so. Later. She glared. “Focus, Mr. Cavendish.”

He shrugged. “Cold sometimes helps me think.”

“Your mind must be a muddle during summer.”

“I have to do all my work in ice houses.”

She rolled her eyes and hid a grin. She rather liked this odd habit. She liked learning something new about him, liked knowing it was possible to know someone for six years and still stumble upon mysterious corners of them.

They sat facing one another, legs crossed before them, knees kissing, a position both intimate and distant.

“Should I continue the conversation, or will you begin?” he asked, scratching the back of his neck.

She nodded, more than a little distracted by how the tiny act of lifting his arm had sent his muscles rippling.

“Gwendolyn? A nod does not illuminate things.”

“Oh, yes. Quite. I was thinking, perhaps, if you have any questions ... connected to that previous conversation ... you might ask them. I fear I’ve not been precisely direct.”

“Mystery upon mystery you are.” He yawned. “I love a good challenge, though.”

She yawned. Perfect. She finally found something to do with her wakefulness and it disappeared. She could crawl into his lap right now and fall asleep with ease. She wanted to, but ... “Well? Do you? Have questions?”

“As you intuit, there are a few remaining inexplicabilities.”

“Just so.”

“I hesitate to ask them. They may cut too deep.”

“If they do, I will throw up my armor.”

He showed her his palms, soft and curled. “What if I do not wish for that.”

She closed her eyes, swallowed, admitted she must strip herself bare. Just a little. “I ... I will try not to.” She did not count the seconds of silence in the darkness behind her closed eyes. But it stretched out deep and wide.

Finally, he said, “Your father was an earl.” A swallow. “Which one?”

He had no idea what he asked of her, to divulge a name she'd divested herself of years ago. She barely had air to breathe, let alone speak.

“It's only,” he said, his voice light, though she heard an edge there in it, too, “I wish to know whose name to put on my list of people to avoid. He sounds a horrid fellow.”

She laughed, an accident of a sound, but it helped her pull in air. She'd come for this. To tell him more. “My father is the Earl of Hackston. I do not think of him as my father any longer. I have a better man for that.” Lord Eaden had long been her filial figure, had cared for her more than her father ever had.

“Will you tell me,” he asked, “the name of the man who wrote you the letter?”

“Another name for your list?”

He lifted his hand and inspected his nails. “This name is for another list entirely.” The edge that had only hovered around his voice earlier sliced to lethal life.

She could say it. She would say it. She'd come here to do so. She swallowed and spoke. “The Marquess of Preston. Do ... do you know him?”

“Not a bit. But he'll know me.”

“Jackson, I'll not let you do something that ends with your body swinging at the end of a rope.”

“Quite right, little moon.” Jackson tugged on the braid hanging over her shoulder. “I'll be safe. And smart. He'll never see me coming.”

She'd ignore that, pretended he meant it as a joke when she feared he did

not. “‘Little moon’ ... you’ve called me that before. And luna. Should I be insulted?”

“You’re beautiful, bright, and—”

“The moon is so far away and seems so cold.”

“It can seem close enough to pluck from the sky at times. And, as I was about to say, you belong to the shadows of the night. Yet you illuminate them all.”

“I’m not insulted, then, I suppose.” Indeed not, the endearment made her glow just like the moon he called her.

“Excellent. Are there any other questions I should ask?”

She tried to say no, but a yawn escaped instead. She covered her mouth, and he grabbed her wrists and pulled her to her feet in one smooth movement then dragged her toward the door. “You’re tired. Let’s find your bed.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me.”

He sighed, hid his own yawn behind the back of his hand. “Gwendolyn”—he rubbed his face with both palms—“some days it feels as if the only damn thing I’ve ever wanted in my life is to have you by my side.” He held an arm out toward his own bed. “Would you rather find *this* bed? Because there’s only perhaps an hour left till sunrise, and my body, finally, is ready to sleep. Yours, it seems, feels likewise. And if you wish to sleep next to me, I’ll consider it a blessing, a miracle, a—” He snapped his mouth shut, ran a hand through his hair. “Let’s simplify this, shall we? I have a final question, little moon.”

“Yes?”

“My bed or yours?”

She marched to his bed and placed first one knee then the other atop his mattress. Then she marched knee by knee to the top of it and stole beneath the covers. She challenged him from the position.

He seemed to think it no challenge at all. He joined her, nestling his head into the pillow, wrapping an arm around her waist, and turning her, pulling her back against his front and placing a kiss on the slope between shoulder and neck.

Her entire body jolted into wakeful life. What had she done? How could she sleep now?

“You can’t truly intend to sleep,” she said, turning to face him. “You’ve wound my body tighter than a clock.”

Still his arm clenched around her waist, drawing her closer. “I’m

suddenly not sleepy.”

He rolled, his body covering hers, his elbows holding him up on either side of her head, a repetition of his position earlier against the door that sent each nerve in her body singing his name.

She surged up to kiss him and wrapped her arms around his neck, stroked the fine laugh lines at the corner of each of his eyes with her thumbs. The light in the room had shifted as the candle had burned lower, from the complete dark only candles can illuminate to the thick gray that promised dawn.

He nudged her nose with his own. “I have one more question. Are you leaving me?”

She did not think she could answer that. “We’ve not found the manuscript yet.” She still had time to decide, though her heart and body seemed to already know the answer. She could never leave him.

“I should hide the damn book again if I do find it.”

She dipped her head, kissed the hollow at the base of his neck between his collarbones. Maybe she wouldn’t leave. She’d shared more with him since coming here than she’d shared with anyone for six years. And she did not feel any impending doom. He had not shrunk from her as every illogical fear in her body screamed at her he would. With each question he asked, she answered, and they dug together toward her past, toward that girl buried there that, should she choose to remain with him, she’d have to resurrect.

Could she do that? She’d said her father’s name out loud, the marquess’s too. Perhaps she could sigh her own dead name after all. And in this fairy castle of a home, they had time to dig slowly together, the missing book their only ticking clock.

She reached between their bodies and untied her wrapper. “The household will rise shortly. But first ...”

He pulled the shoulder of her wrapper down, bringing with it the loose neckline of her chemise. He drew lines across her skin, and kissed those lines, and she tugged at his earlobe and learned the shape of his arms with curious fingertips.

It did not take much for wetness to pool at her core, and she fumbled for the buttons at his fall, eager and aching. She pushed his pants down his hips as he lifted the hem of her nightclothes up around her waist.

The gray light through the window took on a yellow hue as it fell across his back, tangled with his hair.

He touched her everywhere. Except for where she most wanted his touch. He skimmed that place, brushing up against it but always leaving for other tingling squares of her skin—her nipples, the dip of her waist, the curve of her rear, the slope of her neck, her lips.

She arched against him, begging, then ran her fingers across his nipples and traced the lines of his abdominals. She clenched her fingernails into his muscled backside and thighs and almost drove herself wild with the touch. But he remained controlled above her, giving his pleasure away with small hisses, with the slight clench of his jaw. The candle across the room had flickered out, but its flame had jumped into his eyes, as if her entire body were a tinder box, a bolt of lightning to catch him ablaze.

She'd had enough. She ached and arched. Her nerves screamed and cried and begged. He gave her everything she wanted while denying her exactly what she needed.

She wrapped her hand around his shaft and squeezed, a gentle demand. She lifted her core up and brushed against him, shivering at the contact. "Here. Now."

He surged into her, his hand finally, finally, slipping between their bodies, between her legs to tend to the aching pulse at her center. With almost the first touch, she shattered, wrapping her arms tight around him to control the uncontrollable clenching muscles rippling her body against his.

And he moved slowly still, and though her body lay limp and sated beneath him, more pleasure built. Impossibly, it coiled tight in her belly, and she lifted her legs, dragged them up her body to wrap them round his waist, a dream come to life.

Gray light gave way to yellow. The dawn approached, and he built a dawn inside her, too.

A new day, a new energy, banishing the lethargy that had knit her bones back together after her little death.

She stroked her fingertips up and down the planes of his back and met his gaze above her. Intensity and gentle loving, opposites rolled into the fine body of a single man who concentrated every bit of it on her.

"Shall I continue stroking soft and slow, little moon?"

"No." She wanted a storm, a claiming.

He increased his pace, then slowed. "Shall I sip each inch of your skin before I take my own pleasure? Some of the lovemaking strategies I've studied teach a man to wait, to hold his own pleasure off for as long as it

takes to—”

“No.” Her body pulsed for him, and she pressed her palms flat against his back, pulled him closer and dug her hips upward to meet his. “Go wild, Jackson. No patience, no waiting. Show me the eagerness boiling beneath your skin. Show me how you plan to keep me,” she whimpered.

And he did as the light spilled yellow across their bodies, illuminating whatever lines and corners of themselves had been hidden behind masks before. Harder, faster, the intensity in his gaze wiping out the gentle softness. Hard possessiveness banishing patience.

She screamed as another wave of pure pleasure crashed over her, and he swallowed that scream with a hard kiss of lips and teeth and intent.

Harder, faster, then he turned to stone, shuddered, and she dragged her nails into his skin. He froze, posed above her, for several hard breaths before collapsing atop her, his breathing wild indeed, erratic. Hers too.

When he finally rolled over and gathered her to him, his heart finding a slower pace to dream to, she yawned. Limbs heavy, heart light, with the break of day, finally sleep came.

Then the bed shook.

They bolted upright with identical yelps, arms grasping for each other. Then they went still.

“Is that a cat?” Jackson asked, squinting into the darkness. “Oh, it’s *that* cat. How the hell did she get in here?”

The gray tabby blinked at them from the foot of the bed.

Gwendolyn groaned. “Yes. The cat you sent after me. She seems to have adopted me. And I have no idea how she sneaks in anywhere. I gather she has demonic powers.”

The cat curled up in the space between their feet and went promptly to sleep. Its body made the soft shape of a heart.

“I asked one of the maids if it had a name and she said it did not,” Gwendolyn said, settling against Jackson’s chest.

He drew a line between her breasts with lazy fingers and kissed her temple. “Shall you name it?”

Naming it felt permanent, a bit like staying, like claiming ownership.

“I’ll think on it.”

He burrowed his face in her neck, and in a few soft, almost purring breaths, fell to sleep against her heart. It felt like she’d always thought home would feel—safe and free.

Eighteen



Gwendolyn lifted her nose into the air and breathed deeply. Salt. Water. Sun. A short ledge beneath her feet and a pebbled beach below that extended into an ocean that spread out into eternity. Above, a hot sun that warmed the cold day, but on the horizon a storm brewed. She liked the contrast of it, the sun warm on her skin and the clouds heavy over the sea. There was always a storm somewhere whether you lived through it presently or it remained to come. She could only tip her face up and enjoy the calm and warm moment.

The specter of an old castle wavered a bit down the beach, and she studied it for a moment. A pile of brittle-looking angles in sandy browns, a building that once would have been a proud guardian, strong and stout, but which had been reduced to a crumbling pile. She'd paint it as an old man with rocky sand for wispy hair. It looked older than Seastorm, not of the same era. Few of its walls still stood, and its roof had probably washed away ages ago. Its deteriorated state could likely be attributed to its position up against the sea. It would have been ravaged by the elements, not protected from them. A more useful castle for guarding England's shores, and less likely to survive.

"Take my hand." Standing below her, Jackson offered his arm for support as she joined him, pebbles poking up against the stout soles of her walking boots. A picnic basket swung over one arm, and his hair ruffled in the breeze. She wanted to ruffle it further.

They had work to do, though.

"Lunch first," she asked, "or the ruins?"

He pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time, then he glanced up

at the sky. A charade, all of it, overexaggerated attempts to persuade her he actually considered her question when the predatory look in his eyes suggested he'd already made up his mind. "Hmm. Spread a blanket upon the beach and feed you strawberries? Or take you into a dark corner of some precarious pile of ruins and spread you on some fallen boulder? But what should I feed you there? Hmm."

"Why does every option have to do with spreading me atop something?"

He pulled her closer to his strong frame with their linked arms. "Because that is exactly where my imagination goes to. With no effort at all, mind you."

She chuckled. "Let me not tempt your poor feeble imagination and instead reframe the options. *Work* first or *sustenance*?"

He leaned close and breathed against her ear. "What I wish to do to you is both work and sustenance—work of the body and sustenance of the soul."

By Jove, she wanted to roll her eyes at that, but she couldn't when it made her heart leap against her ribs, made her grin like a madwoman.

But she would have to, wouldn't she? They stood on this beach because they intended to look for clues, though they were unlikely to find them. With luck, the clues would lead, eventually, to the discovery of the manuscript, and the discovery of the manuscript meant ... the end. Of her work with Lord Eaden, of her days with Jackson. That's what she'd intended. But now she rather thought ... not.

She'd always thought each revelation she made to Jackson would push him further away. The exact opposite appeared to be happening. Discomposed her, excited her, made a shambles of her plans.

She snuck her hand out of his grasp and twisted it behind her back. "I think I need to move about a bit. No laying me out and pinning me, Mr. Cavendish. The ruins first. I'm itching to sketch them."

He sighed, long and dramatic and suffering, but followed her, boots kicking pebbles up behind and before him. And when he spoke, she heard the grin that shaped his words. "Just as good. I enjoy watching you work, working with you. Your brain suits me as well as your body."

Well, that worked to warm her more than even the sun. She smiled as brightly as that star and only just kept herself from saying that she liked his brain too.

She laughed, then swallowed the sound and cleared her throat. "If we do not find something of interest here, we will have wasted a day of productive

work.”

“I’d hardly call it wasted.” He extended a hand to the water, to the waves rolling up and down the shore, to the still, still line where sky met sea, a storm brewing above it. “Don’t you like the beach? Doesn’t the ocean call to you with its vastness and its storminess?”

“Call to me?” She snorted. “Why would it do that?”

“Because you are also vast and stormy.”

She did roll her eyes then. “I suppose you mean that as a compliment.”

He wrapped a hand around her waist, spun her around and pressed their bodies together as he took her lips. A brief kiss, but it made her as unsteady as the ground they stood on.

He broke the kiss and looked at her with coffee warm eyes. “I like my women mysterious and complex.” A hint of a grin the sun saw and wrapped around. Even light loved him.

She pulled out of his embrace and restarted her march toward the ruins. “At the very least, we’ll have some first-hand experience of these ruins to add to the book. I am convinced they are of a similar era, despite their greater deterioration.”

“My father has likely already included something like that. We know he came here for research. We have the odious Mr. Stewart to thank for that slice of information.”

The castle, or fort, rather, was squat and mostly square. One end appeared rounded.

Gwendolyn nodded to it. “A gun room, do you think?” She stopped and opened her satchel, pulled a pencil and her notebook out.

“Likely. And the outer stone seems to have been stripped away almost entirely.”

“Yes. But look!” Gwendolyn hitched up her skirts and ran to the doorway. “The royal coat of arms is still intact.” She reached for it, but her fingers fell a few inches short, so she studied it, set pencil to paper and soon had its details outlined on her paper.

Jackson peered over her shoulder at her work. “Exactly its match. If we can ever find the manuscript, your illustrations will make it invaluable.”

“The information inside will do that.” But she beamed a little, just inside, knowing she might add something of import to his father’s work.

“I know people who buy Uncle Henry’s books just for the pictures. Your pictures, Gweny. You should be as direct in your pride as you are in your

prickliness.” He kissed her cheek with a kiss as he passed around her.

He gave affection so easily. She hoped to someday do the same. She shook her head out of hopes and dreams and focused on the ruined fort.

“It was supposed to be torn apart entirely,” he said, stepping inside. “I believe two centuries ago, when it was decommissioned.”

Gwendolyn followed him. “Wise. So others cannot use it.”

Jackson turned and ran a flat palm up one stubby wall near the doorway. “Well, let’s take notes. As usual. Two rounds of observations—yours then mine. Call out what we find while the other writes it down.” He crouched and opened the picnic basket, pulled out a pencil and notebook from the very top and sat on a nearby fallen stone. He opened the book up on top of the basket and set the tip of the pencil to the paper. “Ready when you are, Gweny.”

She began a circular inspection of the ruins from outside in, round and round, calling out her observations. Then they switched spots and Jackson did the same but in the reverse direction.

When done, he crouched beside her with a huff. “What do you think? Time wasted?”

She cocked her head, looked to the clear sky, the fallen walls, the rock-strewn earth, the golden man gazing at her. “No.” If she had so few days with him already, an hour spent with him would never be wasted.

He bounced upward and stretched out a hand to help her up.

“Just a moment.” She closed the book and replaced it in the basket, but when she lifted it to stand, something snapped, and the weight shifted. “Oh!” She looked down. The bottom had fallen out of it. But ... none of the food had spilled from inside.

Jackson took it and held it up between them. The bottom had indeed fallen out. It swung down from one side, but it was not the basket’s only bottom.

“A hidden compartment.” The words escaped Gwendolyn’s lips as the barest of whispers. Her hands tingled. A hidden compartment could mean nothing. Nothing at all, but the air around them shifted somehow. The dangling false bottom and the darkness in its shallow depths sang out.

Jackson sank back to the stone he’d sat upon while taking notes, and Gwendolyn found another nearby to sit on. He held the basket upright, to keep the food in the main compartment from spilling forth, and Gwendolyn reached for the hanging bottom. Brown, it seemed, and empty. She brushed her hands along the inside—brown and ... soft. The softest leather. Her heart

stopped. She felt around the edges of the basket bottom. The brown leather was not a bottom at all, but something stuck inside it, wedged. She pried at a corner, her heart having found its purpose again, though it raced like a thoroughbred at Ascot.

The leather shifted, revealing the bottom was not shallow at all, but quite deep, because the brown leather she pulled from it was a thick portfolio, just the size used to carry papers. Her hands trembled as she held the folio up to Jackson.

“Bloody hell.” He swooped in, taking it from her, turning it so he could unwind the strap that kept it closed then pull back the flap. Inside—papers. He pulled the first one out with curiously steady hands and read it. “*A Celebration of the Castles and Fortification of Southern-most England from the Reign of Henry VIII, with Illustrations and Thoughts Concerning the Remaining Ruins.*”

“We found it,” Gwendolyn breathed.

Jackson nodded. “In a ... food hamper.”

“Doesn’t matter where—we found it!” Gwendolyn gripped his forearm with both hands and let her joy ring into the sky. “We found it!”

He knelt, replaced the paper in the folio, placed the folio back in the basket, and closed it. “Safe now. I’m not letting a rogue wind get at it after all this.” Even after standing, he could not take his eyes off it.

Gwendolyn stood next to him, tugged at his sleeve. “What are you thinking?”

“That he could have chosen a better title. Confound it, Gweny, that’s a mouthful.”

She laughed. “Why a picnic basket, do you think?”

“I ... I can’t say. I—oh. It was with him when they crashed. It must have been. My mother believed in always traveling with provisions, and my father liked, as we well know, to keep his work secret. He must have used the bottom compartment of the hamper to hide his work as they traveled.”

“Ingenious. What now?”

“Now we read it, prepare it for publication. He would have wanted that. Maybe we should change the title.”

She bounced her shoulder off his. “Oh, no. Do not do that. I rather like it. It says exactly what it is, tells readers what to expect.” And life was not always that way.

He kissed the top of her head. “If you like it, we’ll keep it.” He huffed a

laugh. “How extraordinary. I never expected to find it today. We must celebrate. I feel wiggly.”

“Jackson—”

“No, Gweny. I must do it.”

“Do what?”

His grin grew wild, and he jumped to his feet, threw his hands in the air, and whooped a celebration as he ran down the beach. She left the fort with a laugh, holding tight to bonnet and following after him with the widest smile she’d ever worn. Pure joy. She’d never felt anything like it. He turned around, yelling victory at the sea, the sky, then returned to her, picked her up, and spun her around. He lowered her back to the ground slowly, stopping his spin as their bodies met, their lips found one another, tasting of salt and sea air.

When neither could breathe, he broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “We did it. We found it.”

“Luck,” she laughed.

“Doesn’t matter. We have it.” He tangled their hands together. “Let’s go home.”

Home. His and hers the same?

They retrieved the basket and the manuscript and made their way back to the coach. By the time they reached it, her joy had flattened, seeped into the sandy stones beneath her feet. They’d completed their mission. What now? The question that would not quiet down inside. She’d been determined to leave him mere days ago. Henry had written to friends to find her new work.

But she couldn’t now. She couldn’t leave the happiest bit of her life behind, leave the man who made her laugh, who made her heart soar. What good was all the work she’d been doing if not to stay, to take a future she’d never thought was for her?

There was the marquess, the content of that ruined letter, his unknown threats and demands. But she’d written to him, warned him off. And Jackson’s words that night in the garden had made her feel safe. She’d written Marianne, asking her to be careful, and he’d written to Max, asking him for a guard or two for her oldest friend. She would be fine. All would be fine, and everyone safe, and Gwendolyn would not have to run an inch away from Jackson’s side.

She *could* make a home.

They settled into the coach, and she pulled her notebook from her satchel

and flipped to a page near the end, after a journey of blank pages, hidden—a portrait of Seastorm. Not stylized as a fairy tale but as it was. Lovely and waiting for its master to return.

He had, and he would stay.

Would she?

Beside her, Jackson had gone stiff, one finger tapping incessantly on the top of the leather folio he held on his lap. Something bothered him.

With a need that surged up in her faster than a fire sprayed with spirits, she turned, clutched Jackson's head, and brought his lips down to meet hers.

The finger had stopped tapping, but he pulled away, looked down at her with eyes brimming with the agitation that had sent his fingers flying moments before. "Will you leave now? We've found the manuscript. Will you leave?"

Ah, that was it, then. Their minds, as usual, had run along the same path.

She surged forward to kiss him again.

He stopped her, pressed a hand against her lips. "Answer, Gwendolyn." His hand slipped away.

"I do not want to." An equivocation he no doubt noticed. Not a solid answer. But she could not quite shake the fear of the marquess's letter despite Jackson's logical response to it, despite her trust in him.

A tight nod as he sank into the squabs. "Were you ever in love ... before?"

She pressed her eyes closed. "No. Infatuated, perhaps. A bit. He *was* charming." But she'd not had enough trust and openness between her and the object of her affection to have experienced true love. "Have you? Been in love?"

His hand slipped around the back of her neck, into her hair, his fingers gentle claws into her scalp as he nudged her closer, rested his forehead on hers. "For six long years, Gwendolyn Smith."

For six long years, she'd gathered her thorns about her, made a brittle shell to call home that kept everyone out. She poked about for it now. Gone. Swept away in Jackson's joy, crushed in his loyal arms. Whatever threat came, she would face it beside him, the chains around her heart thrown open, and the beating organ resting in her open palm, held out to him alone. She had one more truth to share with him, and she no longer feared revealing it.

Nineteen



Gwendolyn looked back to her book for the fifth time in the last hour. Fifth? Probably an underestimate of the number of times she'd caught herself losing focus, drifting into the unknown. Despite the library's perfections, she could not resist distractions. Her lack of concentration rubbed her raw, and she felt like a bear with too-sharp claws, hungry teeth, and little sleep.

Thank goodness Jackson had left early, a whistle on his lips and a spring in his step, despite the lowering clouds outside, to visit Mr. Stewart. He'd stayed up all night reading his father's manuscript, and there was a notation he did not understand. He'd determined to seek the man's help to peek inside his father's mind.

Gwendolyn had happily settled at the long table in the library with her books. If she never had to see Mr. Stewart again, it was for the best, though if she and Jackson resided here most months of the year, she likely would have to. She would not let the man discompose her on those rare occasions. And if he insulted her, she'd merely slap him again.

She tried concentrating again, but the words blurred, and the letters rearranged, becoming something else—the words she planned to tell Jackson as soon as he came down from the cloud he'd been on since discovering the manuscript. She should not be so nervous. She'd already spilled so many of her tightly held secrets like wine over the edge of a goblet. A bit at a time to make a ruby-red mess all over.

But on some level she'd always known would happen, Jackson took each drop with grace and acceptance. She groaned, let her head fall into the book, smack against the paper and ink.

“Miss Smith?” A chipper voice.

Gwendolyn bolted upright, rubbing her forehead. Zeus. She didn’t have the energy to hide from the woman’s sharp gaze today, and what use for hiding now when all would be revealed so shortly?

“Yes, Mrs. Whitlock?” Gwendolyn asked, voice low.

“Lord Eaden has need of you.”

A distraction. Excellent. She closed the book and stood. “Thank you, Mrs. Whitlock. I’ll be right with him.”

But the woman did not leave. With her arms clasped behind her back, she stared daggers.

Gwendolyn reached up to pat her hair. Was it on fire? Did a large, fanged spider sit atop it? Nothing felt out of place. She stared at the housekeeper, trying not to glare at a woman who might one day have to consider Gwendolyn mistress of this house.

A shock of joy bolted through her. To consider such a future with such ease would never have seemed possible a fortnight ago. A week ago. But now ... She grinned. She’d had no future before, and now she wanted to paint every bit of it she saw so clearly in her mind.

Mrs. Whitlock stepped forward, unfolded her arms. She was holding something, and she placed it on the table, slid it toward Gwendolyn. A book with bits and pieces sticking out from almost every page.

Mrs. Whitlock cleared her throat, nodded at the book, and stepped back empty-handed. “I realized where I’ve seen your face before. I thought you might like to see it.”

Gwendolyn’s legs went numb, and she dropped into the chair behind her and gripped the sides of it so hard the bones of her fingers bit into her skin. She sat up as straight as her spine allowed, as far back against the chair as she could, to put every bit of space possible between herself and the book.

“It’s Mrs. Cavendish’s scrapbook,” Mrs. Whitlock said. “She liked to keep abreast of town drama even though she preferred to live here.”

“I ... I remember Jackson—Mr. Cavendish, I mean ... he told me something of the sort. A”—she forced air in and out, in and out, forced a smile onto her frozen lips—“diverting practice.”

Mrs. Whitlock rocked toward the table and whipped the book open, rifled through several pages, back and forth, a blur of black and white and the muted colors of pressed flowers.

Gwendolyn dug her heels into the floor and pushed her body, the entire

chair, farther from the table. Settled on the soft, thick Aubusson rug, it barely made a sound. The carpet hindered her escape as if it conspired with Mrs. Whitlock against her to entrap her.

The page flipping stopped. The housekeeper pointed. “See there.” She tsked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “I remember this one. A sad story, such a young pretty girl. Her life ruined. Mrs. Cavendish thought it sad, too. Pressed chrysanthemums in her pages to give her a bit of hope for the future.”

“I see.” Words barely choked out. “As Mr. Cavendish’s friend and work colleague, I appreciate that you’ve shared this bit of his life with me, but ... I do not see why you would do so. Why this ... this particular page. Perhaps —”

“Because that’s you, isn’t it?” Her finger stabbed at the illustration that had been pressed between the book’s pages.

Gwendolyn knew it well. Slashing black ink sloped her brow, her prim curls, her high-necked gown, the one she’d worn in court. And the tiniest drops of ink sketched out a line of tears down her cheek. The last time she’d allowed herself to cry. In front of everyone during her husband’s trial for bigamy. Her husband no more.

Gwendolyn stood. “That is not me. I can see the likeness, how you would make the assumption, but I am afraid you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

Mrs. Whitlock frowned, first at the book then at Gwendolyn. “It’s a well-known secret no one knows much about you. Not even Lord Eaden.”

They were gossiping about her below stairs. Of course they were.

She swept around the table and gave Mrs. Whitlock her brightest smile. “I am a private person.” She slammed the book closed, snatched it from the table, and held it close against her belly. “But I assure you, I’m not—” She could not speak the words *I am not her*. Because she was. She was. “Thank you, Mrs. Whitlock. I’ll go see what Lord Eaden needs now.”

The housekeeper curtsied. “He’s in the study.”

Gwendolyn walked with measured steps to match her measured thoughts.

She waited for the dread and anguish to bury her alive. But she’d been walking steadily toward the girl in the book clutched to her belly for days now, and she felt ready.

She paused at the door, took a breath, and pushed through. She’d wanted to tell Jackson first. Perhaps she should wait until he returned. No. No. What if Lord Eaden heard whispers? She must tell him in her own words. Then

she'd wait for Jackson and tell him too. Somewhere private and quiet and dark.

Lord Eaden looked up with a grin. "Good morning, Miss Smith."

She crept into the room, closed the door behind her, and twisted her fingers together before her.

"You wished to see me?" Let him have his say first, then she hers.

He picked up a slip of paper from his desk, waved it at her. "I've just received a letter for you. Several, in fact."

Slowly, as if stepping over glass, she took one of them, opened it. "Oh. Lord Birmingham welcomes my illustrations for his next publication. And ... my ... it's an excellent salary."

Lord Eaden raised a brow. "Better than I provide?"

She nodded, showed him the sum, a bit astonished herself.

He slammed forward, forearms and clasped hands making a strong V on the table. "I'll double it."

The way he looked at her, as he did the daughters of his blood, it broke her down into a river of tears. She reached up to her cheek, brushed a salty drop away. Had it stolen into her from the sea yesterday? But no—another, and another, and ... she was crying. For the first time in years.

"Zeus!" Lord Eaden rose and hurried round the desk, guided her to a sofa and set her down. He wrapped her in large arms that could hold up the world, that had held up her world for the past six years. "Shh." He hushed soft sounds into her ear. "Should I call for Sarah? You two had a rocky start, but she thinks of you as her own now. As do I. You must know that. And you must know that whether you continue to work for me or not, you are a part of my family. You always will be, Gwendolyn. Zeus. Let me call Sarah. She's much better at comforting than I am."

She stiffened at his use of her given name. It brought more tears that she wiped away. "I am sorry for crying. I do not relish the idea of leaving you. And I have reconsidered that move of late."

"You have?" His voice a peal of joy.

She licked her lips, took a steadying breath. "I must tell you something first. You may not wish me to stay once you hear what I have to say. Though, I am trying to convince my heart to trust what my mind already knows—that you will not turn me away."

"Whatever it is, I will not."

She pushed out of his embrace and lifted her gaze to his. Brown eyes, so

like Jackson's looked back at her, steady and strong.

"I should have told you from the first," she said, "but I wanted to forget. And you let me. Thank you. But ... I'm ready to speak of it now." She had to be or dishonor this man and another. She had to or dishonor herself. An odd and new notion, but it felt right as it settled in her chest near her heart.

His jaw hardened. "Are you sure?"

"I am sure. I do not wish to run any longer."

He placed a hand over hers, engulfing it. "You do not have to. I—"

"I was married once, to a man who already had a wife. Two other wives. Two quite alive wives. So"—she gave a shrug, tried a laugh, found it hollow—"I am afraid I was not really married at all. Yet I lived with him, as a married woman, for an entire year."

His face softened, melted into pure soft emotion, an unusual look from this man, though she did not find herself surprised. His hand atop hers squeezed. "I know, Gwendolyn."

The ground dropped from beneath her. The wind picked her up and swept her away. The King of England appeared before her and declared her queen. Those things would not have shocked her more than his statement had.

"You ... you know?"

"I'm afraid so." He pulled his hand away and leaned into the opposite end of the couch, arms crossing over his chest. "It was not difficult to discern. The likenesses in the papers were very accurate. When a shivering young woman showed up on the same ship as I, clearly desirous to escape some horror and looking exactly like the woman in the sketches"—he shrugged—"I made assumptions, helped her, then asked very covert and careful questions about her later. Behind her back. Apologies."

She waved away the apology. She did not need it. She stood on unsteady legs, and let those limbs take her aimlessly across the room. "You've known this entire time?"

He nodded.

"Does Jackson know? Lady Eaden? Your daughters? Everyone?" Were they all pitying and snickering about her behind her back? She closed her eyes to press back memories of the day she'd had to appear in court to give testimony arguing she'd known nothing at all about her husband's other marriages. Laughter, whispers, horrid words not whispered at all. Many hadn't believed her. Thankfully, the judge had.

"No," Henry said, rising and coming to her side. "I told no one. It is not

my secret to tell. They would not care, though, if they knew. They feel for you as I do.”

She pressed her eyes so tightly closed, stars bloomed like a midnight garden behind her eyelids. “And how is that?”

“They love you. As a daughter and sister and as a— Well, Jackson loves you a bit differently than that, doesn’t he?”

She slammed her eyes open. “You know of us too?”

A small crook of a smile at the corner of his lips. “Just a bit. I didn’t pry. But I have my suspicions. Affection was the natural conclusion to such a relationship. And Miss Limesby mentioned it to me once. Or ten times. Quite perturbed I never intervened and separated the two of you.”

“Did she?” The old chaperone Henry hired as companion to Gwendolyn on their travels had never said a word to her about the matter, though she had done her fair share of frowning between much heavier bouts of sleeping. “I did not think her an overly concerned chaperone. Thought that was why you hired her.”

“Oh, it was. Surprised me, too, when she complained. He placed a hand atop hers where it rested over Jackson’s mother’s scrapbook. She’d forgotten she clutched it still, heavy in her lap like a cannon.

A cannon no more. She’d moved the ship, and it would no longer tear a hole through its mark. She’d told her story, and ... nothing had happened. No sinking, no destruction, no flames and screams of anguish.

It felt like stepping outside after a week of relentless rain—gulping fresh air, everything clean, the sky open and calling.

She opened the book to the page that should have killed her. She saw not the crying girl, drained, broken, and dying, but the pressed chrysanthemums, still bright despite the years. What had Mrs. Whitlock said they represented?

Hope for the future.

Lord Eaden squeezed her hand. “Do not leave us, Gwendolyn, unless you truly wish to, unless your happiness depends upon it. If that is the case, I let you go freely with only well wishes. If that is the case, then I celebrate your departure.”

“Mrs. Whitlock knows, or suspects, who I am. I am sure others will know, too. Mr. Stewart perhaps.”

He shrugged. “I am a man often gossiped about. Some whispers are good and others bad, but none of them impact the home I’ve made with my family, with Sarah. Only my own fears can do that. My fears have done that. More

than any gossip ever has. Do not worry about what others whisper.” He chuckled. “Easier said than done, I know.”

“But you’re right.” She felt the truth of it. The gossip and words slung at her before she’d left England with Lord Eaden had sliced deep, but what had tangled like sharp, curved knives in her heart and mind so long was her fear, lacerating, silencing. She closed the book and stood. “I must speak with Jackson.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Lord Eaden.”

“Henry. Zeus, girl, it’s about time you called me Henry. Or perhaps you will take a page from Jackson’s book and call me Uncle.” He winked.

The corners of her lips inched upward. She tried to stop them, to snuff them out like candles and bask herself in darkness once more, but the chrysanthemum brightness tugged them up into a smile anyway.

He waved her toward the door. “Go. Go hunt down my nephew, but be careful.” He tossed a look out the window. “Looks like rain.”

“I’ll be sensible ... Uncle Henry.”

He gave her a grin to match her own, and she couldn’t take that much glee. She turned and ran down the hall and up the stairs to don her pelisse and walking boots. She shoved the unopened letters in her pocket. She could read them while walking. She did not have to run away and spin a new life out of nothing in order to paint pretty pictures for scholars.

She should stay and wait for Jackson, but she could not. She had to move. Chrysanthemums were blooming all inside, and she had to let them out.

Twenty



The rain pelted Jackson unceasingly, and he cursed as he jumped from his horse and ran into the manor. He slipped out of his soaked and dripping greatcoat. “Mrs. Whitlock!”

The call echoed, the housekeeper appeared promptly, and Jackson handed off the coat.

“This needs to be cleaned, I think.” He grimaced. “I worry I’ve ruined it.”

She clucked her tongue, holding it away from her skirts. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Is my uncle in the study?” He ran fingers through his hair from forehead to neck and felt cold water sluice down his shoulders and back.

“He is, but I think you should change first, Mr. Cavendish.”

He smiled. “Perhaps you’re right.” He clutched the satchel to his side, wet, too, but less so. Hopefully the manuscript inside its folio had survived the ordeal entirely dry. He should have stayed at Mr. Stewart’s until the rain let up, but the man had kicked him out for suggesting Tudor castles had no superior benefits to castles from other ages. Jackson hadn’t said it because he thought it true. He just liked poking the man, and he’d asked too many questions about Gwendolyn.

Gwendolyn who had been silent as the grave last night after their return from the shore, prize in hand.

He shook his head, sent droplets flying, and put a foot on the first step.

“Mr. Cavendish.”

“Yes?”

Mrs. Whitlock stood behind him, uncharacteristic worry on her features, her fingers fidgeting with her skirts. “I wished to apologize.”

He leaned against the banister, the cold seeping into his bones only partially from this odd omen. “I cannot imagine you’ve done anything necessitating an apology.”

“I spoke with Miss Smith this morning. And I made some implications she perhaps took as insult. I did not think myself wrong, and I let my curiosity best me.”

“What did you say?”

“Only that I knew where I remembered her face from. The papers. Six years ago. I wouldn’t have remembered, it was so long ago, but it had been so sad, and—”

“And you suggested she was the girl? From the paper?”

Mrs. Whitlock nodded.

Jove. No good. Had Mrs. Whitlock been right?

“Where is she?” he demanded.

“She left. An hour or so ago, right before the rain started.”

He strode for the door, shoving the satchel toward the housekeeper. “Give this to my uncle please.” He was going to find Gwendolyn, and see if she’d let him ... what?

No coherent goal, no coherent thought. Just the knowledge she was hurting and the instinct to roar to her side.

Without a greatcoat, the rain soaked him quickly enough. Thunder shook the earth and the gray sky flashed bright. Where had she gone? Where did she have to go? He ran to the gardens—empty but for barren branches and brown grass. The greenhouse. He slammed through the door—empty as well. Had she gone up to her room? He looked up at the house, the square of her room’s window dark. Not there, either. She had no other place to escape to. Had she left, then? Well and truly left?

What a ruin his life would be if that were true.

He’d run after her. He’d not let up. Not yet.

He ran to the stables and had a fresh horse saddled. He could not be sure what words and actions had made it happen. Thoughts had no weight or shape anymore. He jumped into the saddle and took off down the drive. The mud kicked up behind him, and he kept his eyes riveted to the drive. Where would he go? Wherever she was. To London? She’d revealed so much of her past this last week. And so little. He still knew nothing. Nothing that would help find her. The old castle rose before him on the side of the road, jagged and eerie looking in the merciless storm. Thunder, another flash of lightning

outlining the sharp-toothed edges of the building with ... with smoke spiraling out the chimney?

He tugged the reins, bringing the horse to a stop. Could she be here? He swung to the ground and stormed into the castle. Light flickered from the old banquet hall, and he strode through the soaring arch that had long ago held wide wooden doors and stopped.

She stood slowly, her body limned by firelight. "Jackson? Is that you?"

He took a step, halting and unsure, then he ran to her, grabbed her into his arms and squeezed her tight. "Don't leave. Please don't leave."

Her palms pressed hot into his chest, and she gained enough space between them to look up into his face. "I do not want to. I'm not." She reached up and wiped wetness from his cheek.

Rain drops or ...? Zeus and Jove and the entire pantheon! Was he crying? He laughed, throwing his head back, and the sound seemed to make its own thunder. He crushed her tighter to him. "You're still here. You're still here." Solid and shivering in his arms.

"Where did you think I went?" she asked, a mumble against his chest.

"You're cold," he said against her soaked hair.

"I made a fire."

Indeed, a fire roared at the end of the banquet hall, in a fireplace almost as large as the wall. The hall's windows were blank, glassless eyes, and the roof had only half-survived the centuries. Large holes opened the room to the sky and the rain. But not near the fire where his father's ratty armchair and dusty rug remained. It glowed, an elemental invitation Jackson could not resist.

He pulled her toward it. "I didn't know where you had gone. My father's manuscript has been found, you had plans to leave, and when I returned to the manor, Mrs. Whitlock tells me she's offended you, and I thought ... I thought ..."

"You made the quite logical conclusion that I'd fled."

"Yes."

"I did not. As you see. I went for a walk to clear my head, to think. And the rain caught me, but I saw the castle roof through the trees and ran for it. Not before I was soaked to the very bone. As you see." She bit her lip and looked into the fire.

He rubbed his hands up and down her arms.

"Did Mrs. Whitlock tell you her suspicions?"

"No specifics. Only that she had offended and was sorry."

She turned from the flames to look at him, and they danced in her eyes, a sea of fire. "It's time for me to tell you. I am sorry I've taken so long. Where to start?"

She paced away from him. When she returned, he sat her on the rug near the fire and joined her. They faced one another, legs crossed before them, and he stretched out his hands, offering his strength.

She took them, and before the leaping flames, she held his gaze as well, forging a connection between them that felt strong as steel. "Do you remember our conversation with Mr. Stewart? How he acted toward me?"

"He did not treat you as a lady." A grumble. A growl. "He asked questions today, but I threatened to set his books ablaze, and that shut him up quick enough."

She gasped. "You would never, Jackson Cavendish! All those books!"

"I wouldn't. I'd rather put my fist in his face, but he needn't know that. He's less scared of a fist than he is of losing his ill-organized library."

"As he should be." She let the lightness between them fade and squeezed his hands. "He is not the first man to think Miss Smith a woman of easy virtue. Or none. Nor is he the first to think Mrs. Mary Bartlett a lightskirt." She laughed, a sound full of pebbles and sand and shards of glass, a dried river bottom of a sound. "Go ahead. Ask. Ask me who Mrs. Mary Bartlett is."

He swallowed hard. The truth so close at hand. Did he welcome it or dread it? Above them, the skies wept, beside them, the fire crackled. He raked his fingers through his hair, pushing the wet strands away from his forehead, and dropped his gaze to Gwendolyn.

Her hair hung loose, thick and sodden down her back, and tendrils clung to her cheeks. But she hardly seemed to notice. She looked at him but did not look at him, trapped somewhere far off.

"Mrs. Mary Bartlett," she said, "is me. Though I was born Lady Mary Lytemore." She looked at the fire once more.

And he waited. Did she wait for him to speak? He had questions. An entire ruined castle's worth of questions. But he could wait. Her story, when told in her own time, would likely answer all of them.

"'Tis lucky," she finally said, "that there was wood and a tinder box here."

"My father kept it here. Just in case. For occasions like this, I can only assume."

"I like a prepared man." She chuckled, but it sounded hollow. Her hands

slipped from his as she stood. Hugging herself tight, she wandered away from him, a solo dance around the shattered room.

She stopped at the edge of a hole in the roof and stuck her hand out, let the rain pelt her skin as she turned her arm over and over. Some drops bounced and others soaked deep, and they fell with a rhythm, a patter that she set her words to. “The first time a man propositioned me, I was twenty-one. The scandal had been in the papers but a day, and naïve as I was, I took a walk through Hyde Park. I thought a hooded cloak could hide me, didn’t really know I’d need to be hidden. I thought it a private wound, a tragedy no one would know of but me. And I needed air. It had been weeks since I’d felt like I’d taken a full breath.”

Fire crackled across the room, turning her story into a song sung around fires in ancient days, a Greek tragedy come to life.

“The man and his friends approached me. I’d no idea who they were. But they knew me from the picture in the papers. They all agreed it was a good likeness, and they all wondered how a woman became ... how a woman became a third wife.”

She pulled her hand in from the rain and wiped it on her skirts, but they were wet, too; useless to sweep the rain from her skin.

She clasped her wrist behind her back and walked in the other direction toward an arched window with no glass, one of the castle’s many blind eyes. “One fellow said I must be lusty. Another suggested that my husband must be insatiable to take three wives at one time, and that he wanted a taste of one of the women who could quench the thirst of such a man. Then ... *then* I was horrified, a naïve little thing. Now, I’ve heard much worse.” She shrugged. “Seems rather tame. They had little imagination. As does Mr. Stewart.”

He stood and went to her, pulled by an impulse stronger than any thought or desire in his body. Every word was like a cloud dissipating from a stormy sky. The clear blue truth of her spread out for miles before him now. He stopped when he stood right before her, but he did not touch her.

She tipped up her chin and smirked. “I was married just before I turned twenty to a man who could refill my parents’ coffers. I was alone for much of the time after that. He kept me in a small house on the outskirts of London near no one I knew. My parents never visited. He rarely visited after the first six months. How was I to know I’d married a bigamist?”

Bloody hell. That was certainly one possibility he’d not considered. Who would?

“I think you know all of me now.” She lifted her chin high and met his gaze with a challenging spark in her eye. She would not stand for fear or pity.

Jackson gave her rage. “If I could, I would open the very earth and throw your tormenters inside. Your husband, was he tormenter, too?”

She shook her head. “He was always kind and, when home”—she blushed—“quite affectionate. Only, he was not often home, and I did not know what he was about during his absent days. And nights. Until I did. A fellow knocked on the door of our little home one day, sat me down in the sweet little parlor I’d had painted bright pink. I was wearing pink too. I remember that color so well, how pale and meek it was. Is. He sat me down and told me my husband had two other wives. Still living. One in France and another in Scotland. You see, I was his London wife, his ton wife. Ha. I should have known when none of his family attended the wedding that something was wrong. He seemed too genial a fellow to have angered them. It did not take much for him to court me. Sweet words, smiles, kisses. He won my father’s approval—and my own—in a fortnight. We were married four weeks later.

“The first time I saw him after I found out, I asked him. Demanded to know the truth. I’m sorry. The tale is not coming out in order, but it all runs together in my mind. If I were to paint it, nothing would be where it should be, some images bigger and others smaller depending on how much anger or fear I felt in the moment. Loneliness too.”

She bent her head, and the gold of her hair, burnished dark by the rain, glowed new and multifaceted in the firelight. No golden sun, no pale moon. More of a candle reflected in a thousand mirrors, over and over, hypnotic and unreachable, ever burning but cold.

When she finally lifted her head, anger had burned her sea eyes to ice fields. “When I confronted him, he smirked. He laughed. He assured me I’d been a good time for him. Then he left. That was the last I saw him outside of a courtroom. There was a trial. I can only assume the reason you seem to know nothing about it is that you were out of the country.”

He shook his head, reaching through memory to six years ago. “Yes.” The only word he could speak in his shock.

She nodded. “The book Mrs. Whitlock gave me will tell you all about it, I’m sure.” She pointed to a low, rubbish-strewn table beaten and bruised along the edge of one wall. A book lay there, one he recognized. His mother’s scrapbook. “But I will recount the details if you wish. Each word

makes the next easier to say.”

He shook his head, his hands finding the shape of fists, and his fingernails pinching his palms.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“That I would like very much to run a dagger through that man’s heart. That you deserve a future better than your past. And that ... I love you.” What else could he say? Those three words were the only ones that mattered, and they ran true through his entire body. He held his breath, not sure what his thorn, his moon, would say to such a declaration.

She stood so close, yet they did not touch. The air between them was thick with words and wanting, with the past and the present. Then the corner of her mouth hitched up, and her body swayed toward him. Her fingers found his lips, the pad of her thumb brushing lightly over them.

“I love these lips,” she said, “that say such things with such ease.” Her hands moved to the corners of his eyes. “And I love these eyes that always look on me with affection.” Her fingers slipped into his hair, slicking it back against his skull. “And I love this mind that holds humor and knowledge and loyalty and ... love. I ... I love you, Jackson Cavendish.” Then she went up on tiptoe and melted her lips to his, sealing her declaration with a kiss so soft and bright it would light up Jackson’s world forever.

She was not leaving, and she’d come to him one final time, each step bringing her closer, more surely to his side. Where she would stay this time.

He kissed her back, wrapped his arms around her, pulled her away from the hole in the roof, from the never-ceasing drops swallowing the floor.

She wound her arms around him, broke the kiss, and rested her head on his shoulder, hugging him back, a gesture of comfort, of acceptance, of coming home.

Her body shook, but when he looked down at her, he saw a smile, and laughter left her lips. “You do not care. I tell you I was married to a bigamist, and you tell me you love me. Ha! I ... I knew you would not care.”

“If that is true, then why wait so long to tell me?” he asked. Good to know she had faith in him, but what had held her back for so long, even with that faith?

“I am not that girl anymore. I do not want to be her. Speaking of her brings her back. Best to leave her dead. Drowned in the Thames.”

“Then you do not wish for me to call you Mary?” Was it the time to tease?

“I will cut your tongue out if you do, Jackson Cavendish.” She said it as if she were telling him the rain was letting up.

He chuckled. There she was, his surging flame of a woman, his sharp-as-a-needle partner.

Who hung her head once more. “I’m sorry I have been such a coward. When you called me such, I hated it, but I knew it for truth.”

“I was wrong. You lived through something few have, and instead of crumbling, you reinvented yourself, jumped on a boat to who knew where, and joined yourself to a man and his nephew you did not know.”

“I may have known. Everyone knew your uncle back then.”

“Very well, but you did not know what he is like. You were lucky. And brave. And I do not blame you for wanting to leave all of that in the past.”

A bit of color returned to her cheeks as the tips of her lips tugged upward. *Gwendolyn is my name, you know. Mary Gwendolyn Lytemore. I suppose legally that’s what I’m to be called. Legally, it’s what I would have to sign in a wedding registry. Marrying you means resurrecting her, signing her name. I have not been brave enough to face that.*”

He tightened the hug, tucked her head underneath his chin. “What is in a name? A Gwendolyn by any other name would still smell as sweet. Or rather, snap as sharply.”

“You’ve butchered Shakespeare, Jackson.” But she laughed, and the happiness of the tone seemed to lighten the sky above, lessen the rain.

“Or bettered him.” Jackson smoothed his fingers down her back. Cold, wet. Unsupportable.

“Vanity, thy name is Mr. Cavendish.”

He wrapped his hands around her upper arms and held her at arm’s length, nodded. “Capable of barbs. You’re feeling better.”

“I am. Miracle, that. I always feared this conversation. But a weight that has rested on my shoulders for six long years ... it seems ... lifted. Lightened.” She wrapped her hands around his jaw. “That night in Paris, I felt light, too. It seemed like a moment out of time where I could be myself with no name or history and just have you.”

“You want me?”

“I do.”

He took her hand and led her closer to the fire. “Then have me, Miss Smith. But be careful. For I won’t let you give me back.”

Twenty-One



The ground had not opened up and swallowed her. Her parents had not jumped out from hidden corners to chastise her for her sins. The man she'd once called husband had not waltzed in and staked a claim to her, nor had his father.

But her heart had stopped racing. Her feet had stopped itching to run, and her mind had settled into the sort of peace she'd only ever found in a large field on a misty morning as the sun rose slowly and banished the fog, unfolding a clear blue over everything. Even the thunder in the sky had quieted, the violent cascade of the rain through the roof's holes slowed to a hypnotic pitter-patter.

She'd spoken her shame and survived.

And the man she loved tugged her down to the old rug on the floor before a happy, crackling fire with eyes burning with passion and a lush mouth of promises. As soon as she sat, he leaned her back and stretched out beside her.

But when he slowly—oh so slowly—lifted his hand to her neck, her jaw, he used the lightest, softest touch and the stone at her back no longer mattered. No one else but they two mattered. A world of feathers, a bed of flowers, a puddle of moonlight for them. And the fires of hell, the crush of rock against bone for all others.

He swept his thumb over her lower lip. "I knew you before this, Gwendolyn. I know the steel of you and the porcelain. I know your thorns and your petals. I know your meticulous notes and your impatience for fools. I know your worry and your joy. I may not have known some details, but—"

"Being a bigamist is not a detail, Jackson."

He shrugged. "Were you the bigamist, or he? You had only the one

husband, correct? Speaking of details, let's get them right, hm?"

She snorted. "Here is a correct detail for you, then. I lived as a married woman but was not married."

"You assume I care."

"Others have."

"I don't. I only care that he knew he had three wives. Or did he forget?"

"He knew. The villain."

"I'd use a much stronger name for him, frankly. May I ask what happened to him?"

She shook her head. She did not know. "I've diligently avoided any knowledge of him these six years."

"I hope he's dead. But if not, I can think of several creative ways to make it happen. Life and death often go hand in hand, you see, and in my study of the amorous arts, I've coincidentally picked up an unasked-for bevy of information on more deadly matters. Hands can be used in many ways."

"Jackson, focus." On her body preferably. She was done with details except for those that could be decided with tongue and fingertips and other delicious parts.

"Is he dead?" Each word a fist, an arrow, a sword point, a swing with a deadly mace.

"Not that I know of. He was sentenced to be transported, but he ... disappeared. His father is a marquess, and I assume money and connections helped him into a pretty little situation on the Continent somewhere."

Jackson's curls, usually sunshine yellow, had been pushed harshly back from his forehead in a dark burnished slick against his skull, and the change sharpened his features—cheekbones like knives, a jaw like stone, and lips that promised to know all the right words to kill a man.

He was danger, not just anger. He was retribution, a vengeful god from old brought to life to do her bidding. He could crush a man.

She wanted him to crush her to his chest. Enough talk. She slipped a quick hand between their bodies, found the bulge pressing against her belly and cupped it.

He hissed, threw his head back, revealing the sinewy strength of his neck.

His hand on her neck tightened, loosened. "I have many other questions, namely why you found yourself on a boat alone, heading to God knows where when you should have been in the bosom of your family, receiving support and solace, but ... I've heard enough stories about them to make

pretty accurate assumptions. More villains.”

That cracked her open as little else had. Mr. Stewart had sent rage ripping through her, telling Lord Eaden she planned to leave his employ had flattened her, but none of it made her *want* to cry.

She could cry with Jackson, and he would wrap her up, keep her safe, and let her wet his shirt until she felt better. He wouldn't expect her to be strong, but with him by her side, she would be anyway. No doubt clouded that fact.

Her throat full to choking, she pushed the words out. “Later, I plan to lie in your arms and cry. Great, unattractive heaves, mind you—”

“Gwendolyn—”

She pressed a finger against his lips. “But right now, I want something quite, *quite* different.”

“Anything. Everything.”

“Make love to me. In the broad light of day. No more hiding.”

“Are you ready for that? Because once we do, I claim other daytime activities. Walks along the Brighton Pavilion, shopping on Bond Street. A wedding.”

“Yes.” No hesitation. Not today. Not in this moment. Hopefully never again.

One hand at the back of her neck, he pulled them both to sitting. “I think we should remove these wet garments. Wouldn't want to catch a chill.”

“Always so chivalrous.”

His gaze prowled the length of her body.

Between them, no more secrets lay, and she had the sudden fierce intention that there be nothing else between them either. She came to her knees and wiggled, pulling her skirts, wet and heavy from beneath her knees. She dragged her sodden hair over her shoulder and turned her back to him.

He needed no instruction. She felt his fingers like points of fire on her back as he undid the tapes of her gown, as he slid the shoulders down her arms. Soon she knelt in a puddle of wet silk. Her stays came next, loosening under his touch and joining the gown in a muddled pile. And soon the light, almost invisible, chemise that clung to her body with wet folds joined both.

His gaze roamed her body. He ran a single fingertip down her shoulder, her arm, and he pressed a palm against her belly then smoothed it around her waist and down her skin to cup her rear. With his other hand, he grabbed the end of his cravat and tugged it, slowly undoing the knot at his throat. “Just so we are clear, luna my love, I do not care what name you sign in a wedding

registry so long as it is alongside mine. I do not care if the beds you have slept in belong to a husband or devil or whoever else as long as you wanted that person there, and as long as you want *me* there from now on.” He unwound the wet linen and threw it to the ground. “Do you want to know what has changed between us?” His fingers tangled with the buttons of his waistcoat, and he flicked them out of the holes.

She nodded, body melting toward his. She did not care what had changed between them because it was for the better. Specifics no longer mattered. The only pressing point she could entertain was that which hardened at the apex of his legs.

He shrugged out of his waistcoat and pulled his shirt slowly over his head. Soon all but his pants and stockings and boots lay piled on the ground beside them. “What has really changed between us is us. I’ve always seen you—your strength and courage, that something scared deep inside—but I could not see *us* even though I wanted us. Wanted it like mad, wanted it with every breath I pulled into my aching chest. I’ve wanted us so bad I thought I might die if I did not get it. I know I seem a tame man, but I snarled every time I thought about you leaving.” He stood, a column of strength and power.

Tame? No. Restrained. The man had a world’s worth of self-restraint in him, and he’d used it all up, it seemed, and did not intend to wrap himself about with those chains anymore.

She leaned back on her elbows to look at him. Half of him shone molten in the firelight. The other half of him was draped in a stream of sunlight that pierced through a hole in the roof. Sun and fire and everything hot.

She wanted him. Now, tomorrow, all the tomorrows after.

Soon his boots were chucked across the floor, his pants too. And he dropped, naked and jutting, to his knees before her, laid himself at her side and gathered her into his arms. A gentle touch from a sun god.

“My luna.” He breathed the words into her jaw right below her ear. “I’m going to make you mine.”

“I already am. Have been.”

Cradling her head in his hands, he kissed her softly, as if she were made of gossamer and spiderwebs, as if his breath might blow her away. And she let him. She did not rush him or push harder. She let him kiss her like they had all the time to do so.

How long did they kiss? No way to tell, but her body slowly rolled to a boil under his lips, his hands doing little else than soft strokes against her

cheek, his hard body lying alongside her own.

The hard stone floor and the threadbare rug between them and it dropped away in that forever place, the sound of the rain, too, and the threat of the growing puddles. Before the fire, a new world was forged just for them, a world of golden shadows and eternal light.

When she sighed into his kiss and wrapped her hands about his neck, though, rubbing her body against him in the slightest of ways, he changed. The slow, methodical scholar gone. Lord Mischief returned in full form. He rolled to his back, taking her with him, and she straddled his hips, cradling the hard length of him against her core. She rubbed against him, and his hands found her hips, marked her skin with digging fingers.

She moaned and rocked against him again and again. Then he surged up, wrapped her in his arms, and stole her breath with lips crushed to lips before running a trail of possession down her chin to her neck, where he suckled at her breasts until she arched and moaned and gripped his hair, needing more. Needing all.

Slowly, she lifted and lowered herself onto him. A greedy grin spilled over his face as his hands took possession of her waist, helping her ride him up and down. His hands moved lower once she found her rhythm, settling at and teasing that bud that came live with just a thought of him, just a look in his laughing eyes. Those eyes closed as she leaned over him, kissing him, making him her own.

“My own, my sun,” she whispered in his ear. Sun and moon, a cycle complete only with each other.

His eyes flew open, and his arms wrapped round her, tighter than tight as the world tilted around her, and she found herself flat on her back, head cradled by his head once more, a hard kissing lifting her head off the ground. She needed that kiss to *breathe*. Her heart would stutter to a stop without it.

He drove into her, hard and merciless, and she needed all of it, all of him.

His lips on her ear tightened her core. She grasped at his back. She rocked her hips against him, needing more, needing all, no more walls and thorns between them.

He whispered, “My lady. My love. Mine.”

And her pleasure spiraled out of control, a burst of sunlight flooding her with pure heat as he drove into her harder and harder. They cried out together, locked around each other, and collapsed in a steaming knot of arms and legs and tongues languidly tasting sweat on skin, teeth lazily nipping

ownership, and mouths, with all the ferocity of truth, making promises.

She may have fallen asleep. She could not be sure. But when she next opened her eyes, the world had shifted toward sunlight. Though the largest hole in the roof above, the sky glowed pure blue. Not a cloud in sight.

“The storm has passed,” she said.

He rolled onto his back and took her with him, settling them belly to belly, his arms clasped behind his head. “It has.”

She lifted her head and rested her chin on his chest. “You make a lovely mattress.”

“Are you bruised? Was I too hard? There’s rug, but it doesn’t offer much —”

She shook her head. “I would like to do it again.”

He raised a brow. “You would not prefer a comfortable bed?”

“Perhaps. But if a hard floor and a hard you are the only things at my disposal, I’ll not turn them down.”

He laughed and pecked her nose with a kiss. “Well, I’m lying naked on a pile of wet clothes and think perhaps we should dry them out as best as possible, don them, and return home.” One arm snaked from behind his head and wrapped around her waist, cinching her tight to him.

They disentangled themselves and shook out their damp clothes. The heat and friction of their bodies, the heat of the fire beside them, had—a very little bit—drawn the excess moisture from the linens and wools. Once their ruined clothing covered their sated bodies, they stood before the fire, his arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her close, her head leaning on his shoulder.

“To home?” he asked, taking her hand, kissing her knuckles.

She nodded. She had not had a home in quite some time, had thought she never would.

They walked in step together, through the wreckage of the castle, dodging drops of rain from the holes in the roof, and came out into the sunshine arm in arm.

His horse had taken shelter under an awning, and he took the reins, guiding the beast to the road and down it, content to hold hands and walk through the rain-clean sunshine.

“You know,” he said, “I have thought much of the painting you gave me. Of Seastorm. I do not think you should limit yourself to illustrations in scholarly publications. Your paintings would look lovely in children’s

books.”

She looked up at him, the idea like a spark inside her. “Do you think so? That would be lovely. Oh!” Remembering, she reached into her pocket, found the letters there, soggy and crushed. She pulled them out and held them up. “Oh no.”

“What are they?”

“The letters that arrived from your uncle’s inquiries for me, about illustrating books.”

Jackson winced. “You’ll have to inquire again. Not sure you can read that mess.”

“Why does my post always meet with soggy ends?” She peeled the letters from one another and tried to read the running ink on the front of each. That one might be from Sir Bellafler. And this one—” She froze.

“What is it?” Jackson squeezed her hand.

A familiar red wax seal stared up at her.

Her hands trembled.

Jackson’s hands cupped her face. “Gwendolyn, what is it?”

She handed him the letter. “The Marquess of Preston.”

He took the letter, slashed at the seal, and ripped the epistle open. “Damn. Almost impossible to read. Again.”

“He found me.” She looked up at Jackson. “He found me.” She let her hand drop, the paper dangling, damp between her fingers, and she lifted her gaze to Jackson’s. “I need to know what it said. I think ... I think I need to visit the Marquess of Preston.”

“I’ll visit him. You’ll stay here. I’ll return to London, and—”

“I’ll not stay here. No more hiding and running. I’ll face him. Odd, perhaps, that the man I’m most scared of is not the man who tricked me, but his father. The son is a heartless trickster, but the father is a devil.” And she did fear him, so much so she’d been willing to give up everything she cared for. “I must face him. I cannot let you do it for me.”

He took her hand, kissed her knuckles, and pulled her along the path toward home. “I’ll be beside you. You won’t have to do it alone.”

And that banished much of the fear, made a shadow of a man who’d seemed a monster.

She’d spent so much time running, and she’d only just stepped into the light. She would have to resurrect Lady Mary Lytemore to marry the man she loved. The present moment was unsustainable, and the future ones could not

excise the influence of the past. Lord Preston still lived, and if she wished to live without fear of her past, she would have to face it completely.

Twenty-Two



Jackson sat beside Gwendolyn on the small sofa in the parlor. Two pairs of eyes stared wide at him, unblinking then startled into joy.

Uncle Henry bounced out of his chair and lifted Gwendolyn from her seat, hugging her so tight her feet left the ground. When he put her down with a pat to the cheek, Sarah was there to take his place, and he crushed Jackson's hand in his, shaking it as if it wasn't attached to a human who might feel pain. But Jackson only laughed and rubbed his shoulder when it was finally released.

Gwendolyn beamed through the hugs and sat beside him with a shy smile. Gwendolyn ... shy? A new look for her, but one that put blooms on her cheeks he wanted to kiss. He crept his hand toward her, and she took it without reservation.

"I assume then," Jackson said, "that all of you approve of our upcoming nuptials."

Another round of joyful shouts.

"It is wonderful," Sarah said, then screwed her mouth to the side, rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Although, Nora has won, and she will crow."

"Won?" Gwendolyn asked.

Sarah blushed, a fierce red rush across her skin. "We may have had something of a bet going ... about how long it would take the two of you to see each other clearly."

Gwendolyn opened her mouth and shut it. "I'm not quite sure I approve."

Sarah patted her hair. "You must, I'm afraid. When shall you wed?"

"As soon as possible," Gwendolyn said. "But there is something I must do first. I fear I cannot move forward until it happens."

She told them of the letter, of her need to speak with the marquess.

Uncle Henry's arms crossed over his chest as she spoke, his eyebrows sliding toward one another. "We'll go with you."

Gwendolyn waved her hands. "Oh no, I do not mean that. I merely ... I have not been open with any of you since meeting you, and I want to rectify it. It is the only reason I tell you."

Sarah linked her arm through her husband's, laid her hand on his forearm. "We'll go with you and take the children back to London. The marquess could be in town. And if not, we'll leave the children with Nora and Max and travel with you wherever he is."

Gwendolyn gripped her skirts with white knuckles, her jaw a line of stone. "Thank you. I was not always nice to you, and likely do not deserve your support. But I will take it nonetheless."

"Bah," Sarah said. "Nonsense we've already put behind us. You have not always trusted me, no, but you were protecting people you loved, and I admire that. I've not held it against you." She swiped the bad air between them away as if it were nothing, but tears shimmered in her eyes.

"Thank you," Gwendolyn said. "You are a better mother than I was born with."

"Oh." Sarah clutched a hand to her chest and pressed a heel of her hand to her eye. "Now I'm going to cry."

Uncle Henry kissed the top of her head. "Let's banish tears and focus. Preparations for London. Can we leave tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not," Sarah said.

"Excellent. Let's get to work! It will take ages to round up the children." He guided Sarah out of the room, and with a final glance over his shoulder at Gwendolyn and Jackson, a final smile, he closed the door.

Gwendolyn turned to Jackson. "Do you remember when I told you I would likely cry all over you later?"

He nodded.

"Well, now is later." She barely choked out the last word before she fell against his chest, a cry ripping from her throat.

He gathered her into his arms and held her tight. Her hair was still damp from her bath, and she smelled of roses, the scent of her soap.

What awaited them in London?

He wanted to keep her safe at Seastorm, a quiet wedding followed by whatever life she wished to live—traveling and playing the scholar, staying

and playing the lady of the manor. He did not care, as long as she was happy. Though he hoped she wanted to call Seastorm her home, to settle at least part of the year in these walls. Their home.

Her sobs racked his body, and his chest tightened into a boulder. She had suffered through so much so silently all these years. No wonder her thorns. No wonder her running.

He understood why she could not run from the marquess now. So even though he wanted to wind her round with cotton and keep her here, he would not. He would take up a sword and stand by her side; and should any marquess or otherwise threaten the new smile that had made a home of her lips, he'd slash them through.

Her shaking softened, and she lifted from his chest. Second shirt to be soaked today. He did not mind in either case.

She wiped her eyes, red-rimmed and glittering. "That is the second time I've cried in six years. And both on the same day. I must have opened a door I cannot shut. It feels good, though. Clean."

He pushed a fallen curl behind her ear. "My shirt is here to be soaked whenever you need it.

She laughed, then leaned on him once more, spoke into his chest. "You do not think *he* has returned to England? Is that the reason his father wrote to me?"

She spoke of the man who'd tricked her into marriage, used her parents need for money to buy himself a third wife.

"I do not know," Jackson said. "Considering his sentence of deportation, he would not be welcome. It would be dangerous for him to return, and after he'd gained his freedom"—he shrugged—"I can't say a return would be worth it."

"I know. You're right, of course. But I made myself anew. He could too. I've thought of it often through the years. Feared I would be walking down the street and see him. And he'd see me, and somehow, I'd be lost again."

He squeezed her, kissed her temple. "You can't be lost anymore. I'll know where you are. Or be there with you." He stroked the hills of her knuckles, up and over, up and over, one direction then the other. "What would you do? If you had to face him once more?"

She took a shaky breath that rattled his very bones. "I've thought of that often. At times I'd thought I would run. Others, I knew I would have a speech prepared, something brilliant that would make him see what a cad he is. But I

think, what I'd really like to do is—"

"Punch him?"

She shook her head.

"Throw him in front of a mail coach?"

"No!" A laughing answer.

"Lower a portcullis on top of him?"

She slapped his chest. "Not bad enough. Really, Jackson, I thought you possessed greater imagination than that."

He tipped her chin up, tried his best not to kiss her. Failed. Just a short meeting of lips before he asked, "What would you do, little moon?"

"I'd look him right in the eye, arch a brow—just one, mind you. Superior-like, as you do—then I'd give him the cut direct. Turn on him without a word."

"The cut direct? Now who has little imagination?"

"You fail to see the importance in the gesture." She tapped his nose, kissed the tip of it. "A cut direct tells him, as no words could, that he is not worth my time, my emotions. I have given too much of that to him throughout the years. No more."

"You're right—the perfect message."

He just hoped she did not have to make use of it.

He leaned in for another kiss.

And a cat jumped in Gwendolyn's lap, bumping its head between them.

Gwendolyn jumped, laughed, gathered the unwelcome feline into her arms. "There you are, Electra. I've been wondering where you got to."

Jackson draped one arm across Gwendolyn's shoulder and, with the other hand, patted the cat's head.

It purred, softening his ire at having been interrupted at the good part.

"You've named it Electra," he said. "I would have thought Shadow more appropriate. Since she is yours."

"Oh no. She's nothing so meek as a shadow. She doesn't blend in. She demands to be seen. A sun goddess. Also, I met her when I came here, and coming here has brought me light."

"God, Gwendolyn, I'm going to kiss you now, so dump the cat off your lap or I will. Sun goddess or no."

She laughed and dropped Electra to the floor. "Exactly what I've been hoping for."

Him too. Hope had been an airy shadow for so long but now it had found

solid shape—bright and bold—in a home and in her.

Twenty-Three



Gwendolyn's palms sweated despite the bitter-cold promise of snow in the air and in the heavy hanging clouds above. She glared at them and hunched her shoulders against the wind, curled her gloved hands tighter into the fur-lined muff. Her breath fogged the air, and beside her, Jackson's did too. Their arms were linked together, an unbreakable chain.

He squeezed her to his side. "Are you ready?"

She would never be entirely ready. The Marquess of Preston's terrace home rose before her like a giant soldier, narrow and stiff and uniform. It looked like the others, but inside—a man she'd never met but had once believed herself related to. And possibly the man she'd once thought her husband.

Her feet screamed to run.

She rooted them to the ground. "Yes, I'm ready." They'd been in London a week, planning. The day had come, and they hoped to utilize the element of surprise in their direct attack.

"You should not have brought the pistol, Jackson."

He'd slipped it into his greatcoat, and he'd kept his hand in his pocket—on the weapon, ensuring it was safe and ready—on their journey here.

He grunted. "I'm no sharpshooter like Nora, but I can hit a man's chest from a close enough distance if I need to."

Hopefully he wouldn't need to.

Her family waited back at the Cavendish townhome. *Her* family. The words brought a smile every time, but it died quickly when Jackson knocked on the door and a butler answered it as if he'd been waiting for them. Quick as a wink.

Jackson stepped forward. “Lady Mary and Mr. Cavendish to see Lord Preston. We do not care for his desires. If he is within those walls, we will see him.”

The butler slammed the door.

“Should have expected that,” Jackson said. “Go in guns blazing? Like a story from the American wilds?”

“I suppose we’ll have to.”

The door opened again, and the butler bowed them inside. “You are welcome here. This way.”

“No guns, then,” Jackson murmured, almost sounding disappointed.

Gwendolyn’s heart became a hammer in her chest as they stepped inside. She wiped her palms on her skirts. *Brave. Be brave.* She was cornering her monster in its den, and she would win. She had to.

“It seems too easy, Jackson,” she whispered. “For him to have just let us right inside.”

Jackson’s breath tickled her ear as they followed the straight-backed butler down a short hallway. “Everything appears quite normal. I’d be surprised to find a torture chamber here.”

He’d likely be surprised to find that the most acute tortures took place in broad daylight, in the most fashionable of places, behind hissing fans and cold palms.

The butler opened a door, and two people stood as Jackson and Gwendolyn walked in.

The man, in dull, scuffed hessians and a brown jacket, strode forward. His black hair was a tad too long, but his eyes ... they brimmed over with kindness. Except for that detail, he looked terribly like Daniel.

Yet he was not the old marquess.

He bowed. “Lady Mary. I recognize you from the trial.”

She curtsied. “And this is my betrothed, Mr. Cavendish. I am sorry, but I do not recognize you. I am looking for the Marquess of Preston.”

The marquess shot his hand through his hair. “I’m the Marquess of Preston. Have been for four years now.”

Four years. The old marquess had died four years ago, and this one was his son, her husband’s brother. Unexpected, that. A shock she did not know what to do with.

“This is my wife, the marchioness.” Preston held out a hand to the only other person in the room—a woman with yellow hair and a kind smile.

She strode forward and reached for Gwendolyn, holding her hands out palms up.

Unsure if it was the right thing to do, Gwendolyn took her hands, and when the woman closed her fingers around them with a smile, she knew she'd chosen right.

"Please do call me Evelina. A tad unusual and informal, but we could have been family."

Jackson pulled Gwendolyn closer to his side, as if he feared the mere suggestion would make it true.

"I do not mind informality," Gwendolyn said. "In fact, I would prefer being called Gwendolyn. It is my middle name, but it is what I have called myself for the last several years. I ... I must admit I'm a bit shocked. I had not expected such a friendly greeting. I had expected to see your father here. I received a letter ..." She sat on the sofa Evelina indicated, Jackson sitting beside her.

The man and woman who took seats on the sofa across from them, holding hands and sharing speaking glances, were so far from the villain she'd imagined, she felt almost numb.

Evelina's brows drew together, a faint frown pointed at her husband. "What did you tell her in your letter, John, to scare her so much?"

"I don't remember exactly, just that she should come. I've been rather nervous about this meeting. I thought my letter would have explained everything, but the note you sent back, Lady Ma—excuse me—Gwendolyn, suggested I'd upset you mightily."

"What did you write to him, Gweny?" Jackson asked low near her ear.

"Oh. A few very carefully chosen words."

"She told me to go to hell," the marquess said.

"Ah." Jackson chuckled. "Sounds like her."

"I thought your father had written the letter. It was him I wished to hell." She winced, glanced at the marquess. "Apologies, but—"

"None necessary, I'm pretty sure that's exactly where the old reprobate is."

"You wrote me that letter?" She shook her head. The jolly man with the pretty, welcoming wife had written her, not the monster from her past? "You wrote the letter with words like death and sins?"

The marquess frowned.

Eveline patted her husband's hand. "I should really ban you from written

correspondence.” She gestured to the tea set before them. “Would you like any refreshment, Gwendolyn? Mr. Cavendish?”

Gwendolyn shook her head. “I came only to find out the contents of the letter. It was ruined before I could read it. The second one, too, I’m afraid.”

Jackson patted her hand. “You really should take better care of your correspondence.”

She looked up at him. He seemed entirely at ease. But she could not be. Not yet.

“I must know the contents of the letters,” she said.

Evelina’s warm smile wrapped the whole room in comfort. She turned to her husband. “Perhaps you should tell her now.”

The marquess sighed, nodded, and sat up straighter. “What is the last you heard from Daniel?”

The name still felt like a punch to the gut, but Jackson, strong beside her, allowed her to survive the blow, to catch her breath quickly.

“I’ve heard nothing from him or of him since the trial six years ago. I admit I’ve avoided all mention of him. I know he escaped before meeting his sentence.”

“The blackguard.” The words tore from the marquess’s lips, raw and ragged. His eyes blazed disgust. The marquess ... he seemed to *hate* his brother possibly as much as he seemed to dislike his father.

The young girl still curled tight and scared deep inside her relaxed a bit, her muscles loosening as she lifted her head from her knees to see how differently the world took shape around her.

“You’ll scare her, John.” The marchioness spoke low and firm.

“My apologies,” the marquess said. “I do not mean to upset you. I have never claimed an affinity for my brother, and his actions in those years were insupportable. I have adopted the three innocent children he left behind him in his years of profligacy. Thankfully, the women he wed did not conceive, as far as I know.” A questioning look.

“No,” Gwendolyn said. “There was no babe.” Her hands trembled in her lap. Thank goodness she’d rejected the tea, or she’d have spilt it a thousand times over by now.

“The scoundrel escaped to the Continent and never, as far as I can tell, paid for his crimes.” The marquess huffed, crossed his arms over his chest. “Hopefully he’s paying with eternal hellfire now.”

Gwendolyn jumped. “Pardon?”

“John,” Evelina crooned, “you have just mucked it up.”

“Blast,” the marquess breathed. “I have, haven’t I? I wrote to you to tell you of my brother’s death and that I am hoping to make amends for his sins. He died last year. Somewhere in Russia. I feel as if I should offer my condolences, but considering his actions, I fear you would benefit more from an apology. I am sorry he preyed on you and your family. I am sorry he lied to everyone, and I hope the years you’ve lived since him have been happier than the ones before.”

Why was it so hard to breathe? Dead. Daniel was dead. She should be dancing, not sinking further into the floor. And this brother—he did not rant at her, accuse her of being a moral blight on his family as her father had done. He apologized ... to *her*!

Unbelievable.

She blinked. She blinked again. She felt stuck. “I ... I do not know what to say.”

“We can leave, Gwendolyn.” Jackson wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “We can leave and come back later if you so desire.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I ...” She faced the marquess. “Do you know how it happened?”

“No. I rather hope it was painful. Perhaps a wild boar sliced him through. Or a building collapsed on him.”

Jackson nodded in appreciation. “You have potential, Lord Preston. I like how your mind works.”

Gwendolyn shook away the distractions. “I have not thought on him with any affection since ... since everything. Thank you for letting me know.” Daniel dead. His father too. A great evil in her life gone. And she’d been petrified the last several weeks of a letter from a kind man attempting to deliver the news. She wanted to bury her face in Jackson’s chest and laugh. Or cry. Perhaps both.

“Tell her of the other thing, John. Tell her the making amends part.” The marchioness leaned toward Jackson. “Would you like anything, Mr. Cavendish?”

“I’ll take tea,” he said. “With just a splash of lemon.” Exactly the way Gwendolyn liked it. Jackson liked his black, and when Evelina handed him the cup and saucer, he did not drink but held it.

The steam rising from the rim waited for her lips, not his. She wanted to kiss him, no matter their audience.

But more remained unfinished.

“What else is there, Lord Preston,” she asked.

“My brother died without a will but *with* a considerable amount of wealth. He was good with cards and investments. As his closest remaining relative, I have been charged with seeing to his fortune. The bulk of it I’ve used to create inheritances for my wards, his children, but the remainder I have decided to divide amongst his—ahem—wives. For lack of a better term.”

It could not be a trick ... could it? Who would do such a thing?

The man sitting before her, apparently, whose wife sat near and gave him strength, who had adopted his brother’s children.

“I feel guilty,” he said. “I know I am not responsible for my brother’s actions, but I did little to tame him except disapprove. We did not even know he’d married. Any of the times. The first woman died shortly after his trial. That leaves you and a Miss Haymore to split a considerable sum.”

Gwendolyn took a few breaths, hand over her heart to press it into submission, then shook her head. “No. I do not need it. I have done good work for good wages the last six years, and I have a home and a family, and I have need of nothing. Please donate it or give it all to Miss Haymore. Or, if one of his children is a girl, turn it into an inheritance with no marriage stipulations so that she may live as she chooses when she grows up.”

The marquess and marchioness nodded, mouths grim lines and eyes pools of sorrow.

“I hope,” Evelina said, “that should we pass in the street, we can meet as friends. I know you may not wish—”

“Yes.” Gwendolyn clasped her hands and nodded. “Yes, I would like to meet as friends.”

“It will not pain you?” the marquess asked.

“No. I have been working diligently to become mistress of the ills my past served me, and today you have both helped me.” She slipped her hand around the cup Jackson held, brushing her fingers against his and lifted it to her mouth. She took a long, slow swallow of the steamy stuff, just right, and let it settle and warm her. Then she set it down and stood, Jackson bouncing to his feet with her. “Thank you so much for your kindness. I hope we do meet again.”

The marquess and marchioness stood arm in arm and walked them to the door where they said their goodbyes and stepped into the sunny day. Sunny?

She laughed. Less than an hour ago, the clouds had been threatening snow. Now, the birds called to one another, sweet songs in the bright winter air.

A low, long inhale of breath at her side. “Jove, Gwenny. This is ... How do you feel about it all?”

She laughed. “An excellent question. Right now, I seem to be feeling so many emotions at once, I cannot even begin to categorize and identify them all.”

Daniel dead. And his family ... a complete delight, as hurt by his actions as she had been. Like her, they could not outrun the past, not even with Daniel’s death. Yet it did not oppress them. She’d felt nothing but lightness from them. No doubt the children were better off with them than they would have been with Daniel, who’d only ever cared for himself.

How did she feel?

The past had died. Quite literally. Nothing left but sour memories and people glad and eager to do better, to form a better world than had existed before.

She felt like rusty metal. A rusty old key in a rusty lock long forgotten. Rusty metal hinges squeaking open as something inside of her unlocked. She could step free now. Free from a rusty, forgotten room into a palace filled with other people, into a banquet where *everyone* sat waiting for her. And at the head of that table—Jackson.

He’d been waiting for her longer than anyone, after all. And the Cavendishes. Because they wanted her to leave that rusty room too. Even Daniel’s family welcomed her into life and light.

And the sun and birds and crisp winter air sang her a welcome.

“What shall we do now?” Jackson asked, linking his arm through hers and pulling her across the street and into the great, teeming stream of London life. With his other arm, he reached into a pocket and pulled out his watch, beaten but gleaming still. He flipped it open. “We may have time to—”

“Get married?” She grinned up at him, at the man who held her heart in gentle hands, and the man she’d loved even when she’d thought she could not have him.

A slow smile spread over his face. “Yes. I’d say there’s time for that.” He clicked the watch closed. “Is that a proposal?”

She nodded. “Marry me?”

He pulled a special license from his pocket. They’d been saving it for just the right time. “I assume you mean today ...?”

She pulled him down for a kiss that crushed all doubt. “Today and every day,” she breathed against his lips.

He thread their hands together, and they ran, laughing, into the sunlight. No longer her five steps ahead in flight, but their strides in perfect sync, their hearts side by side.

Epilogue

July 1822, Cavendish Manor

Jackson hovered behind the large upright stone and peeked at the blankets spread across soft grass in the distance. Two food hampers lay open, one on either end of the spread, and Uncle Henry and Sarah lay, side by side and hand in hand, between them.

Even farther in the distance, Nora and Max helped Pansy and the twins stand on their hands, and nearby, beneath a tree, Ada and Cass sat, twined around one another like two ropes of ivy, a book open but almost forgotten on Ada's lap.

Could any of them see? Would they notice? Or would he have to wait for greater privacy to tease his wife into a kiss.

Gwendolyn stood beside him, squinting at the stone in the sunlight. "Pagan?"

Jackson nodded. "So Uncle Henry says. The Coldrum Long Barrow. A burial site."

Gwendolyn shivered and ran her fingertips down the stone. "Ada says the name stems from an old Cornish word that means *place of enchantments*."

He pressed her palm flat against the stone. "Do you feel it enchanting you?"

"Perhaps."

"Or perhaps, it's just me." He grinned, winked.

She swatted his arm, but the gaze she tipped up to him was hotter than the sun. She turned, her fingertips flirting with his waistcoat buttons. "A burial site is a morbid choice for a picnic. Your family, Jackson, continues to be quite odd." No snap or judgment in her voice though. Pure love floated every word out into the air.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Our family. And I don't know if it's so strange. Look around. So much life here—green grass, blue sky, the purple blooms on the tree."

“If you launch into a lecture on the interconnection of life and death, I’ll tickle you.” She rested her cheek on his chest, though.

“It’s all caught up together.” He kissed the top of her head. “Just as I’m all caught up in you, and I’d like your legs all caught up around me. If we were home at Seastorm right now, I’d take you to our bed and show every inch of your body how much I love you.” This was their first trip away from Seastorm since they’d wed, and they planned to return soon and had no plans to travel far for quite some time.

They’d both stopped running, and in that still place, with steadying breath, had found their home.

She lifted up on tiptoe, tilted her face up to him, and silenced him with a kiss that tasted of lemon tart and poured a ravenous need into his belly. He growled, pulled her behind the stone.

“Shh,” she laughed. “They’ll hear us.”

“I’ve considered that. I’ve also considered that they’re all too wrapped up in each other to notice or care what we choose to do. Especially if it’s this.” He lowered his head, took her lips, and kissed her till not a single muscle protested.

When he finally lifted from the kiss with panting breaths, her eyes were foggy with lust. He dipped to do even better than that.

“Ack!” Gwendolyn’s lips slipped out from under his, her body sweeping to the side.

Nora, her hand circling Gwendolyn’s wrist, ran off with his wife. “You may have your wife back, Jackson, when she’s gone upside down. Just once!”

Gwendolyn’s laugh rippled into the heavens, as blue as her eyes. “I’m not going upside down, though.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” Nora said, tugging her toward a field of soft, level grass. I’ll show you how to tie your skirts just so. To hide the essential bits.”

“All my bits are essential, thank you very much,” Gwendolyn said.

Jackson jaunted out from behind the stones, following his wife as his cousin pulled her along, his heart soaring happy and high as her laughter. How would she get out of this little corner?

Nora threw a hand out to her older sister. “Ada, do tell her it’s not that difficult. Max and I will support her.” She looked over her shoulder and called out, “She’ll be safe, Jackson. Promise! Ada, do tell her.”

Ada stood and laughed and swatted Cass’s hands away as he swiped the

grass off the back of her skirts with a rakish gleam in his eyes. “It was interesting, Gwendolyn. And if you do not try it once, she’ll make puppy dog eyes at you until you do.”

Nora laughed and made pouty, puppy dog eyes. “Well? Can you resist?”

“I can’t,” her husband, Max, mumbled.

Gwendolyn flashed a look at Jackson.

He shrugged, nodded, smiled. Let her say what she must. The time had come to share their news.

She nodded. “I truly cannot go upside down today, Nora.”

“Don’t be silly,” Nora said. “Max and I will help. It’s—”

“I’m with child.” Gwendolyn grinned.

Nora’s mouth dropped open.

Even the birds stopped singing to hear the news.

“For such a usually loquacious lot,” Jackson said, “you are awfully quiet.”

More silence, in which Gwendolyn’s smile wavered. Jackson strode to her side.

“You know,” Max finally said, “I’ve seen women with child walk on their hands. Perhaps not in the final months, but—”

“Absolutely not!” Sarah said, jumping to her feet and rushing toward Gwendolyn to smother her in a hug.

“I’m sure it would be fine,” Nora said with a chuckle. She linked her arm through her husband’s. “I’ve been doing them, and—”

He tipped her chin up and kissed her. Silencing. The words “not today, darling,” seemed lost in the warmth of the kiss he placed on his wife’s neck.

Jackson should not have heard. He seemed the only one who had, and by Jove, he was glad he had, though. Cousins of a same age. Family growing.

“Brilliant news,” Cass said as Ada took Aunt Sarah’s place in Gwendolyn’s embrace.

“What language do you think your little one will most wish to learn?” Ada asked. “I’ll start buying books now. French? Perhaps Italian. There is some delicious love poetry in Italian.”

Gwendolyn swallowed a smile and put a hand on her belly. “I’m sure you’ll know what’s best.”

Uncle Henry found his feet slowly, placed one hand on Jackson’s shoulder and the other on Gwendolyn’s. Tears glittered in his eyes like fine diamonds. “I am filled with joy. And pride. And”—his gaze dropped into the

shadows of seriousness—“you must name the child for me.”

“Henry!” Sarah slapped his arm.

“Papa, no!” Ada and Nora said together.

“Name the baby after one of us,” Thomas said.

“After a flower,” Pansy offered.

“Uncle,” Jackson said, “what if it’s a girl?”

Uncle Henry huffed. “Especially name it for me if it’s a girl.”

“It will be,” Ada said. “It must be. We always need another Cavendish woman about.”

The women ushered Gwendolyn back to the blanket, peppering her with questions.

“She’s right of course,” Henry said, patting Jackson on the back. “There’s never enough of them. Thank you for bringing one more into the family. She’s always been an honorary Cavendish, even if she didn’t know it.”

“Now she has the name to prove it, to make it official.”

Uncle Henry placed his hands on his hips, beamed at his family. “My first grandchild.”

He’d be a great-uncle not a grandfather, but Jackson wouldn’t quibble.

Uncle Henry glared at Cass and Max. “I expect a few more.”

Max nodded but looked up into the sky, and Cass pulled at his cravat.

Uncle Henry clapped his hands and strode off toward his wife and daughters, diving into the very center of them like a king among his courtiers. But they were his center, his queens, his sun. He would give everything for them.

Jackson would do the same for his family.

Cass elbowed Jackson’s ribs. “If he’s waiting for me and Ada to ... you know ... he might be waiting a while. She’s not keen at the moment, and neither am I, frankly. One day, but ...”

“The man’s deuced impatient,” Max said. “If he’d just wait another fortnight or so, he’ll receive news that will make him pleased enough.”

Cass swung to look at Max. “Is that so? Well, congratulations for the thing you’re not saying yet.” He clapped Jackson on the back. “You too. You too. I’ll be keen to hold the little bundles as long as I don’t have to change any nappies.”

Jackson and Max wrinkled their noses. For Jackson, a surface reaction merely. He embraced whatever hardships—and yes, nappies—the future held for he and Gwendolyn.

Life bustled about them loud and bright and good. And his moon, the center of his universe if no one else's, laughed in the arms of his family, blushed and smiled, and gave joy with no reservation into the world.

The stones behind them, and the mysteries they signified, had stood for hundreds of years, the past gone but never quite faded, its mark always upon the land, the soul. The stones made this land what it was. And their pasts—his and Gwendolyn's—had shaped them just as surely into hearts and minds the perfect fit for one another. In dreams, in life, and in all else—present and future—they walked side by side.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Love a Lady at Midnight*. I always knew Gwendolyn's journey would be a rough one, and that she'd need a VERY patient man to wait for her on the other side of it all. I hope you cheered for these two as much as I did!

There's one more Cavendish book coming to you in May, and [you can preorder it now](#). In the friends to lovers novella, *Scandalizing the Scoundrel*, a lonely widow and a charming equestrian circus performer discover the trick to falling in love and staying safe—you can't ... but you should do it anyway.

Acknowledgments

Thank you, as always, to my husband and children who hear about every single book I write in some form or another, from the excitement of creation to the stress of production.

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All my readers always have my deepest gratitude. If no one read my words, I would still write because it's who I am, but man ... what a trip to have other humans bring my stories into their lives. THANK YOU SO MUCH.

Also by Charlie Lane

The Cavendish Family

[Leave a Widow Wanting More](#)

[Teach a Rogue New Tricks](#)

[Bring a Boxer to His Knees](#)

[Love a Lady at Midnight](#)

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Kiss or Dare

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Only Rakes Would Dare

Daring Done Right

A Very Daring Christmas



Miscellaneous

Naughty or Nice Holiday Collection

Jane Austen Tea Party, Charity Anthology (on pre-order)

About the Author

CHARLIE LANE traded in academic databases and scholarly journals for writing steamy Regency romcoms like the ones she's always loved to read. When she's not writing humorous conversations, dramatic confrontations, or sexy times, she's flying high in the air as a circus-obsessed acrobat.

If you love the historical aspect of historical romance, [sign up for Charlie's newsletter here](#). You'll not only receive insight into the history that informs her novels, but deals on free books and updates on her next books.

