

The trouble with flirting is that you
sometimes hook a dangerous
viscount...

One Thing
Led to
Another

Singular Sensation, book 6

SANDRA SOOKOO

USA Today bestselling author

One Thing Led to Another

Singular Sensation

Book Six

Sandra Sookoo



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Author's Pledge and Promise

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

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

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

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

Thank you for your continued support.

Dear Readers,

I hope you enjoy the latest book in my Singular Sensation series. You've met Graham a few times in previous books.

Now he's finally having his story told, and it's everything I'd hoped it would be.

And Caroline is just the cheekiest, pluckiest heroine who is the perfect match for him. Of course, it helps she's had a crush on him for years...

I can't wait to hear what you think! Happy reading!

Sandra

Dedication

To Allyson Leitner. I'm so glad we met through books, and I'm equally glad we're friends through the same. You are one of my most fervent fans and supporters, and I love your enthusiasm for life. Keep on being that light, and I'll keep on entertaining you with stories.

Blurb

Digging for the truth requires a person to dirty their hands, but it might also set them free.

Graham Islington—Viscount Aldren—is no stranger to life’s foibles. After being given his title from the Regent for heroic services to the Crown during the war, he’s used his retirement from the military as an excuse to find scandal and sin in the *beau monde*. But when a rare, bejeweled parasol handle once belonging to Louis XVI is discovered in his bed—along with the dead body of a courtesan—he regrets his careless lifestyle.

Lady Caroline Marlowe—sister to the duke of Lockwood—just turned nine and twenty. She suffers from boredom and is sick to death of London, as well as her brother’s rules, and needs excitement to relieve ennui. Everything changes when the man she’s harbored a secret *tendre* for shows up at her house in the middle of an autumn night trailing gossip, bloodied hands, and quite possibly murder. He demands her brother’s assistance, but with the duke busy with his new life, the responsibility lies with her.

As the two are thrown into a sticky web of revenge, forced proximity leads to forbidden desire between the viscount and Caroline. With reputations at stake, society matrons cutting them to ribbons with gossip, and trouble nipping at their heels, they will need to prove their mettle, especially when the madman grows desperate enough to put Graham’s life into jeopardy. If she wants a romance for the ages, Caroline will have to ignore familial expectations as well as her own doubts and risk everything for that chance... providing they both survive.

Chapter One



October 2, 1817

Aldren House

London, England

Graham Islington—Viscount Aldren—flopped onto his back as the exhaustion that followed sexual release came over him. Pleasant lethargy weighed his limbs. Darkness flickered at the edges of his mind, for he was well and truly in his cups, and that had been part of what had led him to pick up a member of the demi-monde at whatever society function he'd attended this night. He couldn't remember any of the damned details he'd experienced over the last few hours, because his alcohol consumption had been quite copious. And neither did he care. There were far too many vices he used to help him forget that they'd almost become like medication or a permanent crutch.

Damn and blast, but I'm naught but rubbish. I need help...

Then he let the encroaching darkness have at him and slipped blissfully into unconsciousness. Not that he had a choice after being so inebriated.



Some godforsaken battlefield in France, March 1807

Fighting was fierce. The enemy was seemingly everywhere. Constant noise from cannons, rifles, and pistols firing echoed in Graham's ears. Through the smoke-filled haze, he and the other members of his regiment prowled ever closer to enemy lines, for they could have the upper hand in this battle if they were diligent.

He glanced over. The reassuring form of Emanuel Langley strode beside him, rifle in hand. The men he fought alongside day in and day out had become his brothers. It mattered not that they weren't related by blood. Fighting—surviving—with men oftentimes meant a stronger bond than lineage formed. Their regiment had taken heavy casualties by the afternoon. Now that it was nearing sundown, they were a tattered, raggedy bunch indeed. But that didn't matter. They had determination and perseverance on their side. The purpose of this mission was to serve as reinforcements for the regiment that the Duke of Edenthorpe led, for they had been beleaguered for a bit.

“God, I honestly thought we might die today,” he said to Langley in a low voice as he scoured the landscape for Frenchmen.

“Oh, we will probably die during this bloody war, but today is not that day.” His friend flashed a grin that brimmed with confidence. “I am not in the mood for mourning.”

“Ha. Neither am I.” Yet the sad truth was, every day there was someone to mourn, another reason to give up completely, for war was a horrid endeavor.

A deep chuckle from his other side confirmed that Cecil Fitzwilliam, Viscount Rockwell—the younger brother to the Duke of Edenthorpe—was still among them. “Come, friends. Let us not talk of death, unless it is the French. Present company excepted, of course.”

Graham snickered. “I take no offense. Those who back Napoleon and his reign of insanity need to be snuffed out. The fate of the world is at stake.”

His father and English mother had fled to England a few years ahead of the Terror, but tragedy struck as it always

did in such situations, and his mother didn't survive the trip. She had already been of frail health, and the turbulent, hasty passage over the Channel had only exacerbated things. Eventually, his father had gone on to marry again—an English heiress who had been a sought-after courtesan in her past, but that was not conversation usually brought up.

Regardless, Graham was the oldest child in the family. He had two half siblings.

Cannon fire erupted all around them. In some cases, it shook the earth. There were so many screams—both from the living and the dying—it was difficult to discern who was still alive as they passed. There would be time enough to decide later when they could go back through the battlefield. Smoke filled the air making it a nightmare to see correctly.

“There!” Through the haze, Langley pointed a finger that looked very much like a specter. “That is Edenthorpe. I’ll wager everything upon it. Just behind a small hillock.”

“Shit.” Graham’s pulse accelerated. “There’s a French soldier following him.”

Rockwell gasped. “We won’t make it in time, and all my brother’s got is his bayonet.”

Without a word, the three of them hustled over to that location, but as they arrived, the Frenchman was upon Edenthorpe. And then he fired.

Bang!

The duke uttered a cry and immediately clutched his left thigh. As he lay on the ground, the Frenchman advanced upon him.

Langley gestured for Graham and Rockwell to go up around and get behind the Frenchman. “I’m going to help if I can.”

Graham shook his head. “It’s certain suicide.”

“Doubtful. He’ll have to reload the rifle. We have seconds, perhaps. I refuse to let Edenthorpe die. He has done much for us all already over the course of this damned war and

out of it.” Then he slipped into the smoke and disappeared from sight.

Shit.

As quietly as he could, Graham crept off to the side and came at the situation from a different angle. As soon as he came upon the scene and the smoke swirled about enough to see, he gawked at what unfolded before him. The Frenchman had drawn a pistol and cocked it, while Edenthorpe lay crumpled on the ground, his gloves stained with blood, the enemy pulled the trigger.

Bang!

Then there was a rush of red as Langley launched himself toward the duke while Edenthorpe scrambled to pull a pistol from its holster.

Bang!

A second shot was fired. The sound echoed through the smoky air. Then Langley grunted. He staggered, and seconds later, he toppled over to fall across Edenthorpe’s legs.

“Langley!” In horror, Graham rushed over to the two men, past the dead Frenchman. “You damned fool,” he muttered as he fell to his knees beside Edenthorpe. Together, they rolled the man over to assess for damage, but he *knew*. When one saw as much death as a soldier did on a regular basis, one always knew.

Edenthorpe glanced at him with shock etched on his face. “He didn’t hesitate to take the ball that was meant to kill me.” His words faltered. “Langley saved my life.” Quickly, the duke scrambled out from under their fallen friend and fellow rogue. “He might still live. Help me!”

As Graham worked to wrench open Langley’s uniform, both he and Edenthorpe gasped, for the ball had ripped open a hole in the other man’s chest. “The wound is too large, and from such close quarters, there is no way we can stem the flow of blood.”

“I know, but I have to try. He’s my friend; I acted as his mentor.” The words were choked with emotion.

Langley's breaths were labored and rattled with wetness. "Look... after... Leah..."

When it became obvious nothing would save him, he gathered the younger man into his arms and held him until he drew his last breath. "I will. I promise. Damn, Emmanuel, I'm so proud of you," he crooned to the nearly dead man as tears fell unchecked down his face. "I couldn't have asked for a better brother than he'd been to me."

Oh, God. A wad of unshed tears lodged in Graham's throat, for it was worse than marching through hell when one of their brothers-in-arms fell. He bowed his head as Rockwell approached with his rifle at the ready. The viscount would stand guard as they mourned their dead.

"I'm sorry, Edenthorpe." He reached over and gently closed Langley's lifeless eyes from where his gaze still rested upon the duke's face. "It's a hell of a day."

"He died so that I could live." Awe rode in the duke's voice. "Why? I am no one. Certainly not better than him."

"Perhaps it is better not to ask why right now. It won't bring him back." Graham shrugged, but the urge to sob at the unfairness of it all took hold. "Accept the gift as it was given. Rockwell and I will get you both back to camp for transport."

"Thank you. I will never forget this day or him." Shock and grief reflected in Edenthorpe's eyes. "It will haunt me."

"No doubt that's true, but we need to move. We're far too close to the French encampment, and I refuse to lose more than one friend today." Softly, he whistled to gain the viscount's attention. "Carry your brother to camp. I've got Langley."



Present day

Graham woke violently in the middle of the night gasping for breath. Sweat poured down his back, and for a few moments, he didn't understand why he was twisted in bedsheets with the cool air of autumn pouring into the room from a window. His head pounded fiercely. There was the acrid scent of gunpowder and smoke in his nose while his ears rang with cannon fire. He continued to gasp, draw in lungfuls of air, and through it all, his pulse pounded as if he'd run here all the way from France.

Damnation. Of course he'd had another nightmare. He suffered regularly from them, seemingly from the second the war had ended, and he'd come home. When they grew too bad, he sought out the comfort of laudanum, which was even now resting on his bedside table in a nondescript brown bottle with a glass pipette next to it. It was dangerous business relying on the drug, for he had been perilously close to the edge of addiction a time or two, but luck was usually with him, and he was able to pull himself out of it. Sometimes only by the help of his fellow club members at the Rogue's Arcade.

As his heartbeat slowed toward normal and the terror found in the nightmares faded, Graham rubbed his hands over his face. God, meeting his friends right now would do him a world of good, for every time the nightmares came, they grew progressively worse. This time it had been when Langley had died. The young man had been the first of their friends to perish in the damned war, but he hadn't been the last. It was particularly more horrid because Edenthorpe had been shot in that same battle.

So much blood.

The metallic scent of it still lingered in his nostrils, even ten years later.

Yet when he'd returned home from the war, the Regent was only too happy to bestow awards and accolades on the men who'd proved themselves on the **fields of battle**. As a matter of course, Graham had been given his title from the Regent for heroic services to the Crown. He'd singlehandedly saved three men at Waterloo.

That was the last heroic thing he'd done, for he'd come home broken in mind and spirit, and there was no doubt in his mind he would never be that man again.

Thank the lord.

What he really needed was some time in the ring, for he was a boxer of some small acclaim when he had the time. The war—and his mother's blood—had left him with a quick temper. Seemingly everything annoyed him, he was very jaded, the time in the war had done that to him as well, with the fat cats in charge safe at home while other men fought for them, lined their pockets, which was why he'd turned to boxing; he'd come to do so through another member of the Rogue's Arcade. He tried to funnel his anger through that outlet—fisticuffs never failed him—and while it helped his mindset as well as to work off some of the aggression part of the time, at others he was a victim of it, which led to laudanum abuse in a vicious cycle.

When would it end?

Not wishing to try and return to slumber for fear of another nightmare so soon on the heels of the last, a memory poked through the fuzziness and pain clamoring through his brain. He'd brought a courtesan home with him the night before after getting into his cups at the club. Had he already fucked her? There was an odd blankness to much of the night due to copious amounts of alcohol.

Well, why not now, then? It would take his mind off his demons. Was it another vice like drinking to excess? Yes, but there was nothing for it. A right proper rut was what he needed in the moment before he passed out once again.

“Let's have a go,” he whispered into the dark as he put a hand to her shoulder, her cold shoulder, and when he urged the woman onto her back, leaned down to kiss her equally cold lips, he discovered the horrible truth with a frown. “Argh!”

There was no doubt in his mind the courtesan was dead. The metallic scent of blood flooded his nostrils; so it wasn't merely part of a nightmare this time. As quickly as he could, Graham exited the bed, and with shaking hands, he lit

the candle on the bedside table. Then he turned back to the woman who'd lain beside him. Once he flicked back the bedclothes, he gasped and then had to swallow down the urge to retch at the same time. She'd been stabbed in the stomach and left to bleed out, the blade twisted in her midsection to cause maximum damage, but why hadn't she cried out and awakened him? How had he not known there'd been an intruder in the room? He glanced at the door, but it was firmly closed. Neither had his valet alerted him, for the man had his room next door to Graham's suite.

The truth plowed into him like a powerful jab to the stomach. He'd drunk himself to oblivion because reality was enough to make him insane, but the nightmares were even worse, for then he was forced to remember, to relive the events that had driven him close to that edge. With a cry of dismay, he held his head between his palms. Damned wretched headache. What the hell had happened here last night? Then he noted his laudanum bottle was overturned and nearly empty. The glass pipette had gone missing. Good God, had she drunk the opiate and fallen into a stupor? It would explain how someone had gotten close enough to stab her fatally and her not saying a word.

But then just as quickly, he dismissed that thought. Why would she have done that? She hadn't seemed like an addict when he'd brought her home. He thought. More likely, she had been drugged by someone using the pipette.

Why and by whom?

Moving around to her side of the bed, Graham began an investigation even though he cast up his accounts at the bedside table. *Well damn.* Once he had himself somewhat controlled, he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm. She was nude, of course, so checking her person was an easy task as long as he avoided the stab wound. Ordinary knife with nothing to recommend it. The wound was perhaps three inches in length, but it had gone deep, so deep in fact that the knife had been pushed inside her body slightly past the hilt.

Carefully avoiding his vomit on the floor and her blood in the bed, he checked her limbs. In her right hand she

clutched a bejeweled parasol handle. The multiple jewels of all sorts twinkled and winked in the faint candlelight. *Shit, shit, shit.* From the darkened, brandy-soaked depths of his memory, he recognized that damned handle. He'd stolen it over a decade ago on a dare straight from Carlton House—a full six months before the fateful day when their mutual friend had died on the battlefield—which had led him being formally invited into the Rogue's Arcade by the Duke of Edenthorpe.

However, he had no use for the piece that had belonged to Prinny, so he'd sold it to a collector, who had quite an unhealthy fascination with the Regent. What was it doing here now?

And who the devil had brought it to his house? The killer? If so, for what purpose?

“Damn it all to hell.” He needed answers and a life change, for he wildly regretted what he'd become in an effort to hide from the aftereffects of the war. After apologizing to the woman lying dead in his bed, he drew the sheet up over her body, for he couldn't stomach gazing at the carnage of her form any longer.

What should he do now?

With shaking hands, he gathered the clothing he'd worn earlier in the evening. It took three tries to don his breeches as well as his shirt. The Rogues would help, of course. They were always there for each other, but Edenthorpe had a new babe, which had arrived two weeks early and meant he was ensconced at his home for a while. The Earl of St. Vincent wasn't far behind with his first child due in mid-December. Already, his wife had had a difficult pregnancy, so it was doubtful he would be available. The Duke of Lockwood's first babe was due any day as well, for it seemed when the members of the Rogue's Arcade decided to start their nurseries, they all did it with determination.

That prompted a bitter grimace as he struggled into his waistcoat of burnt orange satin and then fiddled with the laces as he continued to go down the list of his friends in his mind. Twinsfield and his wife were recently wed and had left

London for a time to go fight the good fight against the men who would ship human cargo as slaves to America. There was no word when they would return or what their reproduction situation was.

Not that he needed to be privy to any of that, but he held the baron in high respect for doing what he felt was right following his contretemps with a certain horrible duke.

The Duke of Broadmoor rarely left his home, and even more so now that he'd wed—scandalous the way he was wrapped up in his wife—but he deserved every good thing especially after so many failed pregnancies with his wife. Life was difficult no matter which way a man looked at it. Graham couldn't imagine the heartbreak his friends had endured, even the ones they didn't make public at the club.

So that left the Earl of Hazelton, Viscount Winteringham, and Lord Timelbury. All of those men were good options and men of integrity, and every one of them had fought in the war in some capacity. Best of all, none of them had succumbed to parson's mousetrap or begun filling nurseries.

Bitterness filled his chest, difficult to evict once it took hold, but there nonetheless. It was something he needed to analyze later, or he could add it to the pile of all the other things that made him an unsavory man.

Christ but he couldn't think. Graham shoved his free hand through his hair and then put the parasol handle into his waistcoat pocket. Nearly retching again, he struggled into his tailcoat, and it was a miracle unto itself he'd located his cravat, but making a decent knot was beyond his talents at the moment.

It didn't matter. Best get out of the house and let the wind take him where it would. To clear his head away from the dead woman in his bed. Then he could make a plan, and that answer started with whomever owned the blasted parasol handle... or whomever knew he'd originally stolen it from the Regent in the first place.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

Chapter Two



Lockwood House

Fitzroy Square

London, England

“Something isn’t right.”

Lady Caroline Marlowe came awake in the dead of night by a feeling of something being out of sorts. As she glanced around her shadow-filled bedchamber, everything appeared normal, and nothing was disturbed. Thinking that perhaps her sister-in-law’s waters had finally come, and she might be in labor, Caroline flew out of bed, threw a dressing gown over her night clothes of fine lawn embroidered with dainty flowers and vines, and padded over the floor to peek out the window. There was no activity on the street, and in fact it was raining.

And it would no doubt keep raining through Christmastide.

She blew out a breath. At nine and twenty, she was languishing here, watching time pass her by while her friends of the same age were announcing engagements or having children with their adoring spouses. And still others were going off on adventures, traveling the world with more coin than sense. Nothing ever changed since her brother Edward had married. Not that she didn’t adore his wife, Juliet, but when he’d bought a new townhouse and moved, she’d been left with her mother and younger sister. Which meant she was the next one on her mother’s list to see matched on the Marriage Mart.

It is so dull around here.

What she needed was some sort of excitement to distract her from her mother's machinations. Every new month brought another potential suitor who came with gifts and flowers and promises she knew he would never keep. None of those men made Caroline's heart beat faster and certainly none of them compelled her to imagine what they looked like *sans* clothing, so time after time, she'd turned them all down. The ideal man in her head wasn't those men, for she secretly harbored a *tendre* for one of her brother's friends and fellow Rogue's Arcade members—Viscount Aldren. Oh, he was beyond handsome with his swarthy looks and his half-French blood that led him to do impulsive, rash things. Yes, he was a bit of a drinker, gambler, and womanizer, but she knew if she had the chance, she could encourage him to change his ways.

If only he would acknowledge that she existed, or if he did, saw someone other than his friend's sister. Once, a long time ago, he'd given her a kiss. For a long time afterward, she treasured that gesture. Obviously, it hadn't been given in a romantic way, but a kiss was still a kiss, especially to a young miss. Since no one knew about her romantic hopes, her mother was nothing if not determined, and enduring those ill-fated matches was what Caroline had to keep doing, gritted teeth and all.

As she glanced out the window once more, the mellow glow of golden light from a room on the ground level provided a huge contrast to the dark of the night. What the devil was going on? It was just after two o'clock in the morning. None of the staff or her family should be awake.

Was it an intruder?

Frowning, Caroline exited her rooms and made her way downstairs, her feet silent on the hardwood floors since she hadn't bothered with slippers. She ignored the chill in her toes, for perhaps this was the excitement she'd been looking for. Her sister and mother were apparently still abed; she didn't meet anyone in the upper corridor. Nothing monumental had occurred, but the restless feeling in the pit of her stomach wouldn't quiet.

The butler wasn't at his customary post in the small room off the dining room on the second floor, across from the drawing room, which meant he was wrapped in slumber and not concerned. Had he lit the lamps in the downstairs parlor? For as she made her way downstairs, a few candles had certainly been lit.

"Greason? Are you here?"

"Yes, my lady." The older man came out from the parlor and into the corridor to join her. "I heard someone knocking on the door. Thought it might be His Grace who'd forgotten his key. Might be the babe's time of arrival."

"That is what I assumed too." That muffled urgent pounding on the front door came again. She nearly yelped when she heard it, for in the darkness it was quite spooky. Not wanting to have the rest of the house alerted, Caroline quickly hurried into the entry hall. With a look at the butler, she wrenched open the door.

Then she gasped. Viscount Aldren—the very man she had thought about not five minutes past—stood or rather wilted in the frame, looking like a dog's breakfast with his dark brown hair wild and matted from the rain, his clothing beyond rumpled, and himself reeking of brandy and vomit. She raked her gaze up and down his person. "Uh, why are you here, Lord Aldren?" Was that... blood on his hands, his cravat, marring his waistcoat? "This is hardly a proper hour to call." But a thrill went down her spine nonetheless to find the object of her fantasies on the stoop.

"I..." He glanced at his hands then at her with confusion in his expression, as if he couldn't understand what had happened. Horror and hopelessness warred for dominance in his dark eyes. "I need to speak with Lockwood."

"He no longer lives at this address." It was the height of scandalous to have this man—or any man—at her door and her in nightclothes while he looked like a criminal. "I can talk to your driver, send you in the right direction."

"Where is he?" When he shook his head, he winced. "Need help. Immediately."

Oh, bother. Certainly, he couldn't stay here.

She stood aside. "Quickly, inside." As Caroline ushered him into the entry hall, she glanced at the street to make sure no one was out there except for his carriage and driver. "Into the front parlor, and be quiet about it." The moment she closed the door behind him—good lord did he stink!—she glanced at the butler. The viscount listed wildly beside her. So much so that she slipped an arm about his waist to keep him upright. "This is Lord Aldren. He's in a bad state. I'm going to set him to rights as best I can before I send him on his way. Please return to your bed."

Greason frowned. "Are you certain, my lady? Shall I rouse your mother?"

"No!" *God, no.* That would only complicate everything. "Let her sleep. This shouldn't take long, and then I'll come up."

"Very well." The butler nodded, and with another curious glance, he finally made his slow way along the corridor toward the servant stairs.

"Come." With her pulse pounding in her veins, Caroline urged him down the corridor toward the parlor.

"My head aches like the devil," he mumbled, and continued to act disoriented. "So much blood."

What had he gotten himself tangled up in? "What happened?" As excited as she was to have this man in her house, at her side, even temporarily, she had no choice but to thrust everything to the background, for now wasn't the time to gush.

"Don't know. Can't remember." He shook his head as they passed into the parlor. Beneath all the foul odors coming off the man, the faint scent of cedarwood and sage wafted to her nose.

"Did you kill someone, Lord Aldren?"

"No?" As she shook his head, he dry heaved. In this state, the man was simply not attractive. "Woman in my bed."

Caroline rolled her eyes. "Isn't there always?" She half pulled half dragged him across the room toward a low sofa. Despite the circumstances, she reveled in how he felt pressed against her. Was that her imagination or did he brush his fingers along the side of a breast? Regardless, it was a cheeky move, and she tamped the urge to grin. "Sit." Then she pushed him onto a sofa in the parlor.

He sprawled on the piece of furniture with his legs splayed. "I need to see your brother."

"Not until you answer some questions." Not knowing what else to do, she sank onto the sofa next to him. "What made you come here?"

"Need your brother." When he rested his dark brown eyes on her face, banked heat simmered at the backs. "Something is terribly wrong."

That was stating the obvious. "Why don't you start with the blood on your hands and clothing. What happened?"

He looked at his hands. "Courtesan in my bed is dead."

"How?"

"Stabbed in the gut." The viscount shook his head. "So much blood."

"I can only imagine." Annoyance filled her chest. Why did he feel the need to turn to courtesans when she'd made it abundantly clear she was available and that she fancied him? Typical male. "Who was she?"

"Don't know." Wiping his face with one end of his cravat, he roved his gaze up and down her person, making her acutely aware she was only clad in thin nightclothes. "I need to go find Lockwood." Confusion went over his face. "I think. Laudanum gone. Woman was drugged."

With every word he said, the scenario worsened. "You are in no shape to go anywhere."

"Being framed."

How could he possibly know that? She needed more answers before she let him go. "Lord Aldren, perhaps you

should tell me exactly what happened tonight.” When he stammered and stuttered, she blew out a breath of frustration. The man was too foxed to be of use, even for his own defense if he truly killed a courtesan. “Think back. Did you attend a society event earlier tonight?” Needing to touch him, she brushed his hair from his forehead. No doubt it would have been silky soft if it wasn’t so sweaty. “Did you anger someone while you were out?” As she talked, Caroline slid a hand up and down his arm. At least trying to puzzle out the situation in which the viscount had landed would alleviate her recent boredom.

“Stop!” Anger twisted his face and echoed in his voice. Lord Aldren stood so quickly he nearly toppled over. He glared at her while swaying. “This isn’t you, Caro.”

She snorted. “You don’t know who I am because you’ve decided that for years I’m not sophisticated or beautiful enough to compete with the doxies you usually keep on your arm.”

He pointed his gaze to the ceiling, suddenly halfway lucid. “Don’t make yourself such a desperate case that it’s written all over your face, especially if you are trying to gain that same man’s notice.”

“I’m not desperate.” It wasn’t as if she pined after him. She was still able to live her life... while he lingered at the back of her thoughts.

“Bloody hell.” When he clutched at his head, she rather thought he’d tumble back to the sofa. “That sort of blatant behavior is a certain way for a naïve woman like you to be hurt in society. And while a man might enjoy being pursued, he doesn’t put stock in harassment.”

“Oh! Is that what you think I’m capable of? That I’d stalk you all over London?” She blinked rapidly as hurt went through her chest. “Such arrogance you have, and quite a high opinion of yourself.” That followed the very little she did know of him, for he was a boxer in his spare time. No doubt his experience and victories in the ring had gone to his head. Tears climbed her throat. “I’m merely trying to calm you and

make you feel comfortable, so you'll tell me the truth. But if you take issue with that, I can gladly summon a constable." Could she do that to him, turn him into the law, where he'd be found guilty merely for the state of his mind and clothing?

Fear jumped into his expression. "Please don't. I swear I'm not a killer."

"Then stop making assumptions about me." With all the willpower she possessed, Caroline shoved her feelings down to ignore them. "For your future information, fancying someone doesn't make a woman desperate. It means she's hopeful, you great lout, and I cannot believe I have spent so much time thinking you might notice me." *Perhaps I've been naught but a silly goose.* "In your present state, I'd be mad to do anything with you, to say nothing of your womanizing reputation."

Would he remember this conversation once he sobered? Doubtful, and there was a certain comfort in such knowledge.

"I don't know about all that." His gaze dropped to her mouth. Did he want to kiss her? "If I did, I wouldn't want you mixed up inside any of what happened tonight."

"Why not?" Slowly, she stood then crossed her arms over her chest. "I can take care of myself." It was foolish, this harboring a tendre for a man who thought nothing of bedding anything in skirts. If she had a brain in her head, she'd move on and pursue one of the matches her mother wished to make for her. At least then she could be certain there wouldn't be a chance of disease should she find herself in an intimate moment.

He snorted. "I'm sure you can, but damn it, you're Lockwood's sister, and I shouldn't be here." Again, he put a hand to his forehead as pain skittered through his eyes. "He'll kill me, and now that I *am* here, I'm realizing he moved out upon his marriage."

"I just told you that!" Drunken men were the most annoying sorts. None of that alleviated the temper she'd fallen into. "Are you more fearful to be here with me without a

chaperone, out of the warnings my brother has given you, or because of what you might have done at *your* house?" All were interesting theories, and she absolutely wished to hear more.

For long moments he stared at her while swaying. "To be honest, I don't know."

A thrill tripped down her spine. "Ah, does that mean you *might* fancy me after all the hints I've dropped?" She was naught but a ninny to ask him something like that now, when he was obviously in the middle of something horrific, but she couldn't help it. It was vanity, of sorts. Her brother had kept her away from all the members of the Rogue's Arcade out of fear she might flirt with one of them and subsequently have them court her.

It had made for a rather dull Season after Season, and all the men her mother paraded in front of her paled when measured against the viscount. Not that Edward would ever give his permission should anything happen between her and Lord Aldren.

What was so bad about the members of the Rogue's Arcade?

For long moments, the viscount peered at her in the dim candlelight as if she were a puzzle he couldn't quite solve. He was rather green about the gills, and she really didn't want to be anywhere near him should he cast up his accounts again. "Perhaps I might have at one time."

A series of flutters went through her lower belly, but she frowned. "And now?"

"I'm not a good man for you to chase, and definitely not after the events of tonight. Whatever they might have been." A faint noise from the corridor beyond made him cagier. Panic sprang into his eyes. "I must go. Need to speak with your brother and the other rogues before someone comes upon that crime scene and rushes to judgment."

"Did you kill that woman?" She could forgive many things, but him being a murderer? No, that was unacceptable.

“I don’t know, can’t remember.” He withdrew something from the pocket of his waistcoat as a hint of vulnerability went over his face. “I’m not that man any longer, not after the war. I haven’t taken up a weapon since the day I came home, with the exception of my fists.”

“I see.” She glanced at the object clutched in his hand. “What is that?” Perhaps three inches in height, and round, white enamel and covered in multi-colored jewels, she had no idea what it was, but it looked expensive.

“A calling card from the person who is trying to frame me for murder, but in reality, it is a parasol handle dating back to Louis XVI. Owned by Prinny, which is who I nicked it from over ten years ago.” He held it up to the light. “Why it’s back and who knew I was mixed up in its provenance, I have no idea.”

“Then...” A cold chill danced down her spine. She gave into a shiver. “Why does someone hate you so much they want to destroy you like this?” Of course, she didn’t know him well enough to form an opinion over and above she liked the looks of him. Neither did she know the circumstances surrounding this night which had led to him coming to her home, bloodied and fearful.

Secrets and shadows moved through his eyes. “Multiple reasons, surely. I haven’t been a good man since before the war.”

Protectiveness welled within her. “Go find my brother. Though he has much on his mind just now, there is no one better to help.”

“I will. Thank you.” Then he dashed out of the room and into the corridor, crashing into the wall once as he went.

Caroline was seconds behind him, and as he trailed his free hand on the wall for stability, he left a few bloody smudges behind. “Wait!” The man was nothing if not impossible. “I meant take me with you.” All too soon, he was out the door and ensconced in his carriage.

Well, drat. She stomped a bare foot against the floor in frustration. It would seem if she wanted anything from this particular man, she would have to secure his undivided attention, and in order to do that, the viscount needed help in clearing his time as well as his name.

If he indeed didn't murder that poor woman, for she wasn't certain she believed him. He was still too far deep in his cups to speak coherently or even think at all.

Already, the longcase clock in the downstairs corridor chimed the three o'clock hour as his carriage pulled away from the curb and she closed the door to the outside world. If she were going to do something for him, it would need to be soon. Obviously, she wanted to help, and that meant dressing in a more appropriate outfit in which to sneak about Town. Lord Aldren was heading for her brother's home, and that meant they would undoubtedly summon more of the rogues for a council of war. She *would* be a part of that, regardless of what Edward would say.

Chapter Three



October 2, 1817

Marlowe House

Marylebone, London

Oh, God.

The urge to cast up his accounts flooded Graham as he sat in the drawing room of the Duke of Lockwood's home. Even at this late hour—or early depending on how a person ordered their days—the duke's butler still answered his knock and led him to the drawing room. It seemed Lockwood had enjoyed an evening of cards with some of the men from the Rogue's Arcade... and no one had thought to invite him.

As soon as he saw the duke, he rushed over to the middle of the room. "I need your assistance immediately, Lockwood." Cold fear twisted down his spine, for it wasn't every day one woke up next to a dead body.

The duke frowned. "It's after three in the morning. We were just preparing to retire..."

With a flicked glance at Viscount Winteringham and Lord Timelbury, he nodded and then focused his attention on the duke. "I know, and it wasn't my plan to come to you in the first place, but Caroline said there was no one better—"

"What?" One of Lockwood's brown eyebrows shot upward. "You saw my sister tonight?"

Damn. That should have remained a secret. "I went there first. I wasn't thinking clearly." He tugged on his mess of a cravat. "I'd forgotten you'd moved."

“Stay away from her.” The duke dropped a hand on Graham’s shoulder. “I mean it, Aldren.” Annoyance flashed in Lockwood’s eyes. “Caroline is better than to be involved with a member of the rogues and especially one who is embroiled in whatever this is.” The duke gestured at him. “You look a fright.”

Just wait until I tell them the story. “I agree.” If his head pounded any harder or louder, everyone in the house would hear it, and he’d be dead from having his skull split open.

Though he’d often teased Lockwood he would either court his sister or bed her merely to get a rise out of the duke, he was never serious about it. The last thing he wanted was to be involved with a virgin or the sister of one of his friends from the club. That would prove too messy if the relationship ended badly, for he well knew how the men from the club were overly protective of the women—and men—they had responsibilities toward. But on the other hand, didn’t the love of a good woman go a long way into helping the men redeem themselves?

Perhaps, but no woman should have to put up with an ex-military man with issues in his head. Belatedly, he realized Lockwood’s lips were moving, but he hadn’t heard a word the man had said. No doubt it was a lecture about Caroline. He rubbed a hand over one of his eyes, but that only made the megrim worse. *Shit, shit, shit.* And still his mind dwelled on that certain brown haired brown eyed lady he’d come to see before anyone else tonight. Odd, that. The last thing he wanted as a distraction right now was anything smacking of love and romance. There was too much going on in his life to even wish to play at those things. Especially when there was, right this very moment, a dead courtesan in his bed.

Yet Caroline had looked all too delicious in those frilly nightclothes, had felt warm and soft when she’d assisted him into the parlor, and he’d brushed his fingertips along the side of her breast, because at the heart of everything, he was a rogue.

I should have stolen a kiss when I had the chance.

The duke cleared his throat. “We will revisit this conversation later.”

“Yes, thank you. I’m sure we will.” Every beat of his heart echoed inside his head like a drum. The scent of blood on his clothes and hands constantly made him want to vomit. It put him right back in the war, in the most trying times of his life, when everything was horrific.

“What the hell are you doing here, Aldren? You have said many things just now, but none of them are the reasons you are here.” Shock filled the duke’s expression as he looked Graham up and down. “I assumed you had other plans tonight. Otherwise, I would have called you here for drinks and cards and a bit of gossip.”

He snorted, but there was no mirth in the sound, even though the statement was quite ironic. “Well, you can gossip about me, for this night has been trying and full of scandalous fodder.” Then he frowned. “Doesn’t your wife require your presence since the birthing time is so near?”

The duke shrugged. “Right now, she sleeps frequently, and is uncomfortable the rest of the time. Since there is little I can do for her at the moment, I would rather stay distracted else I’ll go mad with worry.” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face as he turned back around to face the room and took Graham with him. “Winteringham and Timelbury can leave if you would rather not share your story in front of them.”

Graham waved a bloodstained hand. “I need as many of the rogues as we can gather, for I have a feeling something is most certainly wrong about what happened to me this night.”

“Very well.” Lockwood nodded and led the way over to a grouping of furniture where the other two men were sitting. “Let us have a council of war.”

“Thank you.” Relief twisted down his spine, but it couldn’t quite dislodge the fear. Never had he been more terrified since those days on the battlefields.

“You are quite welcome, of course. In lieu of Edenthorpe being here, you are a rogue, and we stick together, especially in times of crisis.”

Graham threw his gaze to the other two men. Winteringham’s red hair gleamed like brass in the light of the candles and the fire that danced behind a decorative metal grate. Timelbury’s dark raven hair was ruffled, as if he’d shoved his hands through it. Perhaps he lost at cards. “I appreciate your discretion as well.”

The viscount nodded. “Of course.”

Timelbury’s expression remained sober. “There was never a question.”

Once the duke settled into a chair, Graham collapsed into a matching one. Damn, but the fire felt wonderful to chase the chill from his bones. “Earlier tonight, I’d attended a rout. When that didn’t lift the ennui bedeviling me, I flirted with a member of the demi-monde and ended up taking her home.”

“That’s hardly a shocking development.” Winteringham snorted. “You always have a new woman on your arm every week.”

Heat went up the back of Graham’s neck. “True, but even that is wearing thin.” Was this the catalyst that would usher in a change for his life? “I’ll admit, I was well into my cups by the time I arrived home last night. For whatever reason this week I’ve been plagued by nightmares stemming from the war. Hell, just last night I was revisited by the time Langley died.”

Grief flitted over Lockwood’s face as he nodded. “I understand completely. These lasting mementos from the war will never truly leave us.”

“Yes.” Graham nodded. “Though I cannot be certain, I no doubt took the woman to bed and then passed out. We were both naked. After waking from the nightmare, I needed something to make me forget, and since laudanum and I have a dangerous history, I turned to sex.” He shrugged, for there was no excuse for it. Every man in the room had his own demons

to fight. “But when I moved her onto her back, she was stone cold dead with a knife plunged into her midsection and blood everywhere.”

“You didn’t hear anything?” the duke asked.

“I did not. There were absolutely no sounds of someone entering my rooms or of distress from her. When I did a bit of investigating, the laudanum bottle was empty, and the glass pipette gone.”

Timelbury huffed. “The intruder must have drugged her. No use doing the same to you since you were in a drunken stupor.”

“And *this* was clutched in her hand.” He brought forth the parasol handle, held it up to the light so all the men could see it. “I stole this over ten years ago from Prinny’s private collection at Carlton House. Then I came upon hard times and was forced to sell it to a collector for a decent fortune, so why is it back in my house, and more importantly, who knew that this piece and I had a history?”

“While I’ll admit, that is a possibility I hadn’t anticipated, it is not your most pressing problem,” Lockwood said with uncharacteristic reserve. “For the moment, the members of the Rogue’s Arcade will take up this matter ourselves and keep the death from the papers as well as the authorities. My reach as a duke will ensure this remains secret, at least for a while.”

“Thank you.” Relief poured over Graham’s person.

“Who is the courtesan?” Timelbury asked as he examined the parasol handle. “Perhaps your adversary is French, since this piece came from France.”

Graham shrugged. “I don’t know. As I said, I found her at the rout. Names didn’t matter.” Another wave of heat climbed the back of his neck. Never had he regretted his roughish lifestyle more than he did right now. “There was nothing special about the coupling, just a usual fuck to relieve the needs of the body,” he admitted in a low voice. “A way to

stave off the nightmares, when all the usual vices cease to work.”

Sympathetic murmurs went about the room.

“We all have been victim to those things, some more than others. There is no shame, but I would advise you to look into other, perhaps less destructive means of managing the nightmares as well as the anxiety.” Lockwood frowned as he took a turn at examining the parasol handle. “I will inquire with the hosts of the rout, perhaps find a name for your courtesan, then notify the family if there is any. In most cases, women who work such a trade aren’t attached to anyone.”

Winteringham nodded. “There must be some reason for it, though. As we have seen over the last year or so with the rogues, nothing happens by chance. So the question now is, who the hell would want to kill a woman like that, and in your private bed no less?”

“Not to mention leave an object that you stole from your past,” Timelbury added. “Almost as if it’s a calling card or a taunt.”

“All good questions.” Unfortunately, none of them had answers.

Lockwood shook his head. “It’s not an ideal situation, but we will tamp it as best we can, try to keep it from the authorities for as long as possible while we do some investigating of our own.” He sighed as he rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “Winteringham and Timelbury, you’ll go to Aldren’s home with him. Take care of the corpse and look for clues regarding the break-in, murder, or the theft of the parasol handle.”

Before anyone could move, Caroline quietly entered the room, which prompted the men to scramble quickly to their feet. Graham gawked at her, for instead of her night dress, she was now clad in men’s fawn-colored breeches and a loose fine lawn shirt that showed a camisole beneath. A pair of scuffed boots and a coat of brown tweed completed her ensemble, with her shapely legs on display and the imaginings

brought on by the tantalizing peek of flesh beneath the lawn shirt.

Damn, but she looks good enough to eat.

The duke groaned as she crept deeper into the room. Winteringham and Timelbury snickered, while Graham couldn't tear his gaze away. Why had he assumed she wasn't that attractive before? Certainly, she was bold and daring, but that would probably land her into scandal more sooner than later; she didn't need him to accomplish that.

Immediately, Lockwood sprang to his feet and intercepted his sister in the middle of the room. "What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded in an angry whisper. "It is not proper, and this conversation doesn't concern you."

She popped her hands on her hips, which only served to call Graham's attention to the nip of her waist, the curve of her hips and what her body would feel like moving against his in the heat of passion. "Don't try to dissuade me, Edward. Lord Aldren called on *me* first, and now that I know a bit of what happened, I wish to help. He *is* an acquaintance, after all."

Lockwood's frown was fierce. "This is no place for a woman, and an innocent at that."

A blush crept across her cheeks. Even from his location, Graham discerned the annoyance in the lady's eyes. "I can render my assistance, though."

Every man in the room voiced a protest.

"Please. Even you know Lord Aldren cannot be sent to prison for a crime he didn't commit." She threw a frantic glance his way, and Graham shrugged. He was in no position to align himself with Caroline and thereby anger her brother—a duke with far reach who could truly help. With a huff, she regarded her brother once more. "This will require everyone to work together."

"I absolutely agree with you, and the members of the Rogue's Arcade will take care of everything." Then Lockwood slipped a hand about her upper arm and quickly ushered her to

the door of the room. “Go home, Caroline. This doesn’t concern you, *shouldn’t* concern you. I have long warned you away from the members of my club.”

She uttered a sound of frustration. Even went so far as to stomp a foot. “But he’s in trouble.”

“And that’s on him. He’ll work it out. We’ll help him, but none of that includes you.” Lockwood’s tone brooked no arguments. “I’m responsible for you and your sister. You have a good future ahead of you in society, you’re making waves and gaining invites. There is no reason you won’t make an advantageous match soon, but wishing to keep company with the viscount will hinder that. You *must* think of your reputation.”

When Graham would have made a protest, Winteringham’s hand on his shoulder prevented such an utterance. *Am I that abhorrent, then?*

“Ha! My *reputation*. As if a real man wishes to marry a woman who is so dull she hasn’t done anything exciting or scandalous.” Caroline shook her head. “At no time did you ask *me* what I wanted for *my* own life. Perhaps there is something else out there for me other than marriage.”

While Graham exchanged glances with the other two men, Lockwood huffed. “I don’t have time for this. I have pressing business. We can discuss this later.”

She briefly pointed her gaze to the ceiling. “You always do, and since you’ve wed, there has been no time for your family.” Her voice broke slightly. “I... I miss you, Edward. That wasn’t a lie or manipulation just then as I said it. It’s a fact.”

“I’m sorry you’re feeling neglected.” Lockwood relaxed his grip on her arm. Exhaustion lined his face. “Aldren holds my attention just now; I have to help him due to promises made in the war. Afterward, I *will* spend time with you before the babe comes.”

“Lord Aldren is more important than your own sister?” Her words were so low-pitched that Graham had to strain in

order to hear them.

“I...” Confliction warred in the duke’s face. “No, of course not, but he *is* a brother by word and deed, Caroline. I didn’t leave him behind then and I won’t do so now.”

“I appreciate that, Lockwood,” Graham said with a hand clutched to his chest where it ached in time to the drums in his head.

Both the duke and his sister ignored him.

“Stay here and keep Juliet company,” Lockwood continued as he held Caroline’s gaze. “She’s been restless and bored since she can’t get to the bookshop as much as she’d like. I will talk with you later, and we will once again discuss proper deportment.”

“What an arse you are.” She rolled her eyes. “I am a woman grown. I don’t need your lectures or society’s rules.”

The duke huffed. “They are there to keep you safe. Scandal is not your friend, nor would you be good at it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do, and I also know that your silly little fancy for the viscount is ill-advised.” His words sent a furious blush into Caroline’s cheeks and consternation through Graham’s chest. Lockwood pointed to the door. “Go upstairs and check on Juliet. If she’s not awake, make use of the guest room, but under no circumstances are you allowed to just wander willy nilly through London at night by yourself. Understand?”

She threw a glance around the room, barely rested her gaze on Graham before snapping it back to her brother. “Fine, but I’m only following your order under duress.”

“I don’t care as long as you do so.” Once she left the room, Lockwood sighed. “Gentlemen, let this serve as notice that younger sisters will drive you mad if you let them.”

Timelbury chuckled. “I know this all too well. My sister Annabelle is a scare half the time. When she was younger, she was much the hoyden, and frankly, nothing much

has changed in that quarter. I despair of her ever finding a match.”

“I know the feeling. Both Caroline and Elizabeth are quite vexing, though Elizabeth is the more docile of my sisters. She’ll make a match sooner, I think. Caroline will give me an apoplexy, I’m afraid.” Then he shrugged. “But there is no time to worry over her future just now. We’re here to assist Aldren in cleaning the crime scene and clearing his name.”

Graham nodded. “We should do it soon. If someone wishes to make my life difficult, they are perhaps watching my townhouse in an effort to call attention to it.”

“True. Dirty business at hand.” Lockwood shook his head. “I’ll do what I can, but if Juliet goes into labor, I cannot guarantee how present in the mission I’ll be.”

“Understood.” Graham extended a hand to the duke. “Do what you can. As you said to your sister, this is on me and my mess to clean up. I’ll try to think if there was a person in my past I wronged that might have brought this about.” Oddly enough, there was an urgency buzzing through him to gain back his good name if only to be worthy enough to keep company with the duke’s sister... even if it would invoke the duke’s wrath after he so graciously offered his help.

“All right. Accompany Aldren to his home. Do what you need to do. Make it as if the murder never happened. We shall reconvene at some point tomorrow and puzzle out our next step. Good luck. I have a few urgent letters to write.”

Graham glanced at the other two men as they strode across the room with him. “Thank you seems so banal.”

Winteringham snorted. “We all have times of need, my friend. At least this way, I don’t have to go home and meet with the ghosts from my past. My son is under the supervision of his governess, so all is well.”

Timelbury nodded. “We’ll figure things out. Keep the faith.”

That was part of the problem. He hadn’t had faith in anything for a very long time indeed.

Chapter Four



“Just because you’re a duke doesn’t mean you have the authority to order my life,” Caroline said in a hissed whisper as she climbed the stairs to the third floor in the dark. Her brother and his club members had summarily dismissed her and assumed she couldn’t help, assumed she hadn’t a brain in her head, assumed that her standing in society was more important than assisting a friend in his time of need.

If she were being honest with herself, she would admit Lord Aldren wasn’t a friend. More of an acquaintance, really. A friend of her brother’s and decidedly off-limits by Edward’s decree. And if she were being *truly* honest, she would ask herself why she insisted on carrying a torch for a man she ordinarily would snub in society, for he had more vices than freckles, she’d wager.

That was something she couldn’t readily answer, for there was something about Graham—oh, to be able to call him by his Christian name!—she couldn’t explain. She only knew there was a connection between them, and shouldn’t she have the freedom to explore that?

I’m not a child anymore, Edward, no matter what you might think.

It was rather eerie traversing Edward’s townhouse in the middle of the night. She wasn’t all that familiar with the floorplan, but it was a good deal smaller than where she lived—her family’s townhouse, the one which had belonged to her father.

After Lord Aldren had called, she hadn’t been content to leave that visit alone, so she’d sneaked out of the house, dressed like a boy, and had gone across town to her brother’s home. He didn’t need to know how often she put on those clothes that had once belonged to him or where being in such a

costume had let her go. Really, it was appalling how much of London was closed off to women, but she'd certainly had her eyes opened to another part of the world around her, and what was more, it excited her. Made her want to investigate more of that. To travel the world and learn about other cultures and peoples. To see beyond the narrow and often prejudiced scope of the *beau monde*.

Of course, once she'd arrived at Edward's home, he summarily treated her like a wayward child or a porcelain doll that had slipped from a shelf. Honestly, why hadn't Juliet knocked some sense into him by now? How was she supposed to learn the mettle of a man if she couldn't interact with them? For that matter, she rather doubted Lord Aldren was as bad as he'd alluded to; no one was, unless they were villainous scum like the stories she'd heard about the Duke of Winthrop, told by her brother, perhaps as a cautionary tale.

The viscount didn't possess a black heart. He was merely... lost, jaded, bored, confused, but then, wasn't everyone?

As she gained the third floor, she paused at the top of the stairs, listening for sounds that would indicate the duchess was awake. A pox on all men! Lord Aldren and the other two men from the Rogue's Arcade were going out to have an adventure—how *did* one dispose of a dead body anyway?—while she had been tasked with keeping Edward's wife company.

Not that she minded. Juliet was a dear, and she was well read, but Caroline rather hoped the babe didn't come while her brother was otherwise engaged.

The longcase clock on the floor below chimed out the four o'clock hour. Good heavens! Most of the night was gone already, but it only made her more determined to enjoy it. After knocking briefly at the door to the ducal apartment, she slipped inside. Instead of the darkness she expected, her eyes fluttered at the candle that had been lit on the bedside table. Her sister-in-law sat against a mountain of pillows. The counterpane had been drawn over her extremely rounded belly.

She'd propped her swollen feet and ankles on yet another pillow.

It seemed pregnancy was rather hell on a woman's body. A shiver went down Caroline's spine, for she didn't wish to do that any time soon.

"I thought you'd be asleep," she said without greeting.

A tired giggle issued from the duchess. "So did I, but slumber doesn't apparently come easy the last month of pregnancy, nor does it linger when I do get to sleep," Juliet groused, clearly uncomfortable, and finally rested her folded hands atop her enormous stomach. "Speaking of things that are unexplainable, why are you here so late and dressed for scandal?"

"It's rather a long story."

"Ah, I adore long stories, for that means there are definitely juicy bits embedded within." She patted the mattress then pointed to a chair near the bedside. "Come sit with me. Is my husband still playing cards with his friends?"

"Ha." Caroline did as she was bid. "They had finished and were preparing to break up the party when I arrived... er rather, when Lord Aldren arrived some minutes ahead of me."

"What for? The last Edward told me, the viscount filled his time in the boxing salon—"

"—when he wasn't burying himself in various vices?" Caroline interrupted with a lifted eyebrow. "Yes, well, the tale goes further than that, for apparently, he drank himself into oblivion earlier tonight, couldn't remember how the devil he'd spent his time, and then woke up next to a dead courtesan in his bed. Which precipitated his flight here. Well, to my home first and then here." She shrugged. "And apparently, there is a bejeweled parasol handle in the mess, something he'd once stolen from Prinny ten years ago?" With the shake of her head, she looked at the duchess. "It is rather convoluted, and I'm going to need clearer answers."

"Oh, dear. The man has thoroughly courted scandal, it seems." Juliet's eyes widened, but amusement danced in her

blue-gray depths. “So you became involved because you are worried about the viscount, yet you’re upset Lockwood didn’t think you could contribute. Knowing Edward, he sent you up here as a convenient way to have you out of his hair.”

“Yes! Him and every other man there. My Neanderthal brother even delivered a lecture in front of them as if I were a schoolgirl.” Heat slapped her cheeks. “It was quite infuriating and embarrassing.”

“I will talk with Edward.” For long moments, the duchess remained quiet then chuckled and moved a hand to a section of her belly. “The babe is kicking.” She glanced at Caroline. “I imagine you didn’t enjoy such highhanded treatment because Viscount Aldren was in attendance.”

Another round of heat went through her cheeks. “He wasn’t the only one.”

“No, but he’s the only one you might have a fancy for, hmm?”

Was it that obvious? Thankful for the dim illumination in the room as the heat intensified, she asked, “Does everyone know that?”

“I couldn’t say.” Juliet shrugged. “Lockwood mentioned it a time or two. When he’s in a mood or growly from nightmares, he grouses about life and his responsibilities. Your future comes up often.”

“Of course it does.” Her heart squeezed for the fact her brother still struggled with the after-effects from the war even though he’d married. “Why can I not guide it in the direction I wish it to go?”

“You can, but you must do it in such a way that your brother thinks it was *his* idea all along.” She gasped then winced and rubbed her belly. “Oh, my.”

Worry knotted in Caroline’s gut. “Is all well?”

“I think so. A slight contraction, but I have been having them a couple of times every day for the last week.” A sheepish grin crossed her face. “Though I don’t know what any of it means and hoping it is normal. Beyond that, I am

wildly uncomfortable and ready to be done with this part of pregnancy.”

“I can only imagine.” Was that something she wished to have for herself in her life? Caroline didn’t know, but she supposed it would all hinge on what sort of man she might marry. Then her thoughts once more turned to the viscount. “Do you think Lord Aldren is a good man?”

For long moments, Juliet was silent. “I think he is a good but troubled man. Much like all the rogues are—or were depending on their lives.”

Fair enough. “Then you feel I *should* pursue him.” If the duchess gave her approval, Edward wouldn’t have an argument any longer.

“I didn’t say that.” Juliet held up a hand. “Good heavens, I didn’t say that. But... knowing what I do of Edward’s struggles, about some of what the other men have gone through or still fight with, I will tell you this.” She winced again as she repositioned herself against the pillows. “If you choose to align yourself in any way with the viscount, do so mindfully. He might suffer from demons he picked up in the war that you and I don’t realize. Those things might never go away, so if you *do* manage to turn his head and attentions, and you *don’t* have the fortitude or stamina to stay by his side while he battles with those demons, do the humane thing and leave him be.”

“Ah. Sound advice.” She hadn’t thought that deeply about the issue before. The mental health of former soldiers was a delicate prospect. “Right now, all we have done is flirt back and forth—mostly to annoy Edward—but the viscount *did* kiss me a few years ago.” When Juliet’s eyes widened, she rushed on. “He was in his cups and just passing by the house with Edward. My brother had to quickly attend to something Mother needed him for prior to going out, so the viscount—he’d just recently received the title from Prinny—pulled me into a corridor and then into the butler’s pantry, then kissed me. Nothing that a girl could lose herself in, but it was enjoyable.”

“That’s a fun story. Is that when you decided to set your cap for him?”

“Oh, no!” Caroline snorted. “That happened during my Come Out year. He was so dashing; they all were, going off to war or popping into London on leave, looking splendid and intriguing in their uniforms.” She shrugged and a sigh escaped. “Somehow, he’s become the measure from which I look at all men.” *I should have flirted wildly with him before now and perhaps he would have done more than kiss me.* And then she wouldn’t be in danger of being on the shelf as a dried-up spinster who had never been bedded.

“Which is why you remain unmatched.” Juliet nodded. “Now it makes sense. I could never understand why you didn’t take to any of the men your mother and even Edward send your way.”

“Perhaps.” The whole business of matchmaking annoyed her. “Or perhaps no one else feels rights. Surely you can understand what that is like. You have to know it beyond all doubt in your heart that a man is your destiny.” She narrowed her gaze on the duchess. “Didn’t you and my brother decide to marry after only knowing each other a handful of days?”

“Yes.” There was a decided blush in Juliet’s cheeks. “This isn’t about me and Lockwood.”

“No, but my point *is* valid.”

“Yes.” The duchess sighed. “If there is even the tiniest bit of a connection, you owe it to yourself to pursue it, even if it might lead you to scandal and sin.” She lowered her voice. “Please don’t tell your brother I’m encouraging any of this.”

“Your secret is safe with me. I don’t want him to know of my plans either.” They shared a giggle. “I want to help the viscount clear his name if he is innocent. No one deserves what he’s going through.”

“Agreed, and not long ago Baron Twinsfield was framed for a murder he didn’t commit, and Lord Aldren was there to help.” Juliet sighed. “What a coil, though. Tread

carefully. The men of the Rogue's Arcade are many faceted, and not always as they seem on the surface."

"Doesn't that make a man more interesting as well as a lovely challenge to try and land?" Is that what she ultimately wanted? To bring Lord Aldren up to scratch? If he did propose, would she accept his suit? For that matter, would Edward even let her?

"Well yes, of course, but—"

"—I'll keep your words in mind. Don't worry about me. I'm a woman grown who knows her own mind. I have learned much from watching my brother and listening to his stories." Caroline shrugged. "Besides, as of right now, he thinks of me as an annoyance. Since I'm unable to be close to the viscount without always being under someone's watchful eye, I don't know if there is any heat between us. Perhaps it's all in my head." What a terrible prospect that would be.

Juliet chuckled. "I remember well those confusing feelings, but there is always Lord Bainbridge. The floral offerings he sends you each month are quite impressive, and he is very determined to do more than call. Eventually you will need to see him."

"Bite your tongue!" She pulled a face and made a sound of disgust. "Bainbridge is twelve years older than me. And he's balding." A shiver went down her spine. "Can you imagine a man with that girth coming over you in bed?" she asked in a whisper. "There is nothing about that man that exudes romance. And those fish lips! I should die if he tried to kiss me."

Both of them giggled.

Then the duchess sighed. "Being settled and having a secure future is more than looks."

"Certainly, but I'd at least like to get my arms around the man I marry." She smirked, for she couldn't help teasing. "Also, I suspect Bainbridge's equipment is on the smallish side." When the duchess gasped, Caroline laughed. "I should let you rest."

“Please stay.” Juliet caught her hand. “I don’t wish to worry Edward, but I’m a bit terrified at what comes next for me, especially now that I’m having the odd pain here and there.” That emotion shadowed her eyes. “What if I...”

“Die?” No sense in trying to hide it in sweetness, for it was a valid concern. Caroline squeezed her hand. “Don’t think like that. At the end of your laboring, you and your baby will be healthy and happy, and Edward will be so proud he’ll likely pop.” At least, that was the hope, but every day, women perished in childbirth or lost the babies to the same.

“I hope you’re right.” But her voice shook. “My father is excited to have a grandchild.”

“We will all be here surrounding you with love and best wishes.” Caroline squeezed Juliet’s fingers. It was a horrible thing to be so near to the birthing that the time was marred by worry. “You will come through that valley, Juliet. Please try not to fret much.”

“I appreciate that.” Her smile was on the watery side as tears welled in her eyes. “It’s good to have a sister.”

“Well, it’s good to have *me*.” Caroline winked. “Elizabeth doesn’t come through crisis situations well. She goes into hysterics and then promptly faints. I suspect that is in part to her wishing to have the attention on her.” With a shrug, she dismissed her sister from her mind. “I hope Mother decides to leave her at home once it’s time.”

“Oh, my.” But Juliet giggled. “So do I.”

They passed another quarter hour talking of generalized things then the duchess drifted off to sleep. Caroline lightly dozed in the chair as she waited for her brother to come upstairs.



April 1814

Lockwood House

Fitzroy Square

London, England

“Oh, there he is!” Caroline said to her best friend Lady Theresa Bollinger, who was the sister to the Earl of St. Vincent. “Viscount Aldren is here!”

Her mother had decided not to throw a ball since Edward was home on leave for a few weeks. She said it would be too much trouble, and that Edward would want to be at his club anyway. Instead, she put on an open-ended buffet of canapes and drinks, where people could come and go as they pleased while Edward was in residence. And that meant members of the Rogue’s Arcade would be underfoot during the next few hours.

Theresa snorted in amusement as she clutched Caroline’s hand. “He is quite dashing tonight in the uniform.” Then she gestured with her chin. “My brother is here as well, but knowing him, he’ll pluck some willing widow from the crowd and disappear with her for unspeakable things.”

“Lucky widow,” Caroline murmured, for at six and twenty, her head was stuffed full of romantic notions and fairy tale endings. “Though I’ve had my fair share of kisses since my Come Out, I’ve never had one from Viscount Aldren.”

“Or any of the members of the Rogue’s Arcade,” Theresa added in a low voice. “There is something about those men that goes beyond their looks in uniforms.” She tsked her tongue. “Do you know who it is I fancy?”

“Who? Surely not a rogue?”

“Yes.” Mischievousness danced in the girl’s brown eyes. “That Lord Timelbury is quite delicious, don’t you think? His hair is set just so, and it makes me want to run my fingers through it and ruffle those strands, merely to upset him. He’s far too uptight.”

Caroline gawked at her. Then she cast a glance across the crowded drawing room to the lord in question. “He’s married, for God’s sake!” She shook her head. “Why pine after a man who is unattainable?”

“Perhaps it won’t always be that way.” Theresa winked. “And perhaps it will, but it’s lovely to dream about. Finding myself in a shadowy room, alone with him, perhaps with a storm raging outside. We both move together with the next clap of thunder, and suddenly I’m in his arms and he’s kissing me so intently I fear—hope—he wishes to devour me.”

A thrill twisted down Caroline’s spine. “You should pen scandalous novels. There are plenty of ravenous readers that would adore reading such scenes.”

“Hmm. That’s not a bad idea.” Theresa’s eyebrows rose. “Wouldn’t St. Vincent have an apoplexy if he found out?”

They dissolved into giggles while continually watching various Rogue’s Arcade members do the pretty throughout the room.

Caroline sighed every time Lord Aldren talked to yet another woman, flirted with them and raised countless hands to his perfect lips. “Just once, I wish he would take notice of me as a woman instead of Edward’s sister, who they all apparently think is still in the schoolroom.”

“Then make him notice you.”

“What? How?” Sometimes, Theresa’s experience boggled her mind. Though the same age, her best friend seemed to have a certain ease around men that she lacked, but despite her asking, the woman never told her if she’d ever been bedded or even thoroughly kissed. Every time, there was a deep sadness in Theresa’s eyes she couldn’t understand.

“Come.” She pulled Caroline toward one side of the room, then spun her about so that her back was to the crowds. “You have to enhance your charms.” As if she were a modiste or a madam instructing courtesans, Theresa tugged at Caroline’s scooped bodice until the fabric revealed a

scandalous amount of her breasts. “A man of Aldren’s tastes will surely notice *that*. Now, pinch your cheeks to put color in them.”

“Truly?” But she did as her friend instructed.

“Oh, yes.” Theresa winked. “Bite your lips. It’ll stimulate blood flow and redden them.”

How did she know all of this?

“Quickly. It looks like the club members are preparing to depart, so when you approach Lord Aldren, make certain the sway in your hips is exaggerated.” She gave Caroline a little push. “Good luck. I’m going to one of the refreshment tables.”

With butterflies dancing through the pit of Caroline’s belly, she turned about and then after sighting her quarry, she walked through the crush of people toward the viscount’s location. Edward frowned at her, but their mother called for him to attend her immediately, so he veered off, and she breathed a sigh of relief. For the moment, Lord Aldren stood alone. The other members of the club were giving their final farewells to various guests.

Then she was in front of the viscount as he threw back the contents of his brandy glass in one swallow. As he rested the glass on a nearby ivory-inlaid table, he turned and his dark brown gaze alighted on her.

“Ah, Lady Caroline. Lovely to see you tonight.” The veriest hint of a French accent threaded through his voice, and that delicious tenor tickled low in her belly. “Edward was remiss, for he never said his sister was so beautiful.” When his attention lingered on her décolletage, she shivered.

“You are too kind, Lord Aldren, but I adore you in that uniform.” The scarlet red that contrasted with the white accents put so many imaginings into her mind. “It’s a pity tonight wasn’t a ball, for I would have enjoyed a dance.”

“As would I.” He swayed slightly, a testament to the fact he was a bit foxed. “However, perhaps I can provide something... better.” When he offered his arm, bent at the

elbow, she stifled a gasp, and with a quick glance at her brother to make certain he was occupied with their mother, Caroline put her fingers on his arm.

“How intriguing.” She had no idea how to act, but this was the closest she’d ever come to interacting with the viscount, and she couldn’t believe her luck. On the way out of the room, she caught Theresa’s gaze and winked.

Before she knew what he was about, Lord Aldren whisked her into the corridor where other guests milled about. In short order, he pulled her along, and then at the door to the butler’s pantry across from the dining room, he urged her into that room, led her deeper into the darkness, for there weren’t candles lit there.

“You are quite like a peach ripe for the plucking tonight,” he murmured, and the sound of his whisper while in the dark was thrilling enough, but as he took her into his arms, she trembled with delight and anticipation.

Then his lips were on hers. Though he stank of spirits and the faintest scent of cheroot smoke, she sighed from the indulgence of it all. As her hands came up of their own accord, she clutched at his elbows while he dared to deepen the kiss. His mouth moved over hers with an intensity that made her senses spin, and when he probed the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue, she gladly opened for him, but she was wildly unprepared when he slid his tongue along hers. It didn’t matter, for just as her eyes drifted closed, he abruptly pulled away and set her at arm’s length.

“Good night, Lady Caroline. I have other engagements yet tonight, but a friendly word of advice? Don’t put yourself on display like this unless you are very sure you wish to reap the consequences.”

What an arse. Annoyance stabbed through her chest to chase away the feelings of romance the kiss had generated. “Thank you for that, but here’s some advice for you. Women can go about in society regardless of her looks, and men should be able to control their lustful urges.” As much as she

wanted to slap him for his arrogance, she didn't want to physically harm him. "Enjoy your evening."

Then she stormed out of the butler's pantry with her head held high. Despite the horrid end to the kiss, she still fancied him. Perhaps he would mature with time, and she would dream about that embrace for months.



Present day

Caroline smiled to herself as she found a more comfortable position on the chair. One thing was certain: her path and the viscount's were *not* done intersecting.

Chapter Five



October 5, 1817

Mayfair

London, England

What the hell am I going to do?

He hunched further into his greatcoat, for the weather was fairly damp and chilly with more rain in the offing, but the longer he stayed inside his townhouse, the more he began to jump at shadows.

As of yet, neither his investigation nor inquiries put forth from the duke or his Rogue's Arcade brethren had turned over any clues. Lockwood had succinctly taken care of the courtesan's body; the other men had removed every trace there had ever been a female in residence, so by the time Graham's housekeeper had visited, she was none the wiser.

And more to the point, no one had come forward claiming responsibility. There was no mention of the parasol handle in the papers, and no constable or any other authority figure had come calling at his door.

Logic said he should be able to relax, but he couldn't. After all the things that had gone on to and against various members of the Rogue's Arcade in the last year or so, things like this didn't just happen on a whim. Why the hell wouldn't the man just come forward and have at it?

The anxiety and fear that plagued him was the reason he'd left the townhouse this afternoon. Perhaps a stint at the boxing salon would help calm his nerves and center his attention. DeBeyers Salon was located on a short side street off Bond Street and sat on the second floor of the number 6

building. Though not as famous as Gentleman Jackson's Salon, Graham had learned everything he needed to know about fisticuffs there, and it was where he'd turned to funnel his quick temper and feelings about the war.

Now, as he walked through Mayfair, choosing exercise instead of taking his carriage, he craved the rush that boxing brought him. It had been a handful of days since he'd visited the salon, and with the bit of trouble he'd fallen in, he needed a chance to clear his head. Hopefully, clues would come to him that would lead him on the right path, for the local authorities couldn't be held at bay forever, regardless of Lockwood's reach.

And besides, he didn't want to rely on the duke's assistance. The man had a babe due any day and should be free to enjoy that time. Graham could stand on his own two feet, fight his own battles, even if they frightened him.

As he passed an alley, something darted out of the shadowy space and slammed into him, throwing his form to the ground.

"Just remember, Lord Aldren, you deserve everything that's coming to you," the assailant said in a graveled, scratchy voice as he sprang to his feet.

What the devil did that mean?

Graham scrambled into a standing position, but he couldn't see his attacker well, for the man was dressed all in black with a fabric kerchief tied about the lower half of his face. As he stood staring, trying to puzzle out why the man had knocked him to the ground, his opponent threw a punch that caught him on the chin. "What the hell?" He stumbled backward in an effort to keep his balance.

Then instinct took over. He swung out with a jab of his own that caught the other man in the shoulder. Soon they circled each other, waiting to strike. When his assailant threw his next punch, Graham danced away, but the other man countered with a quick rebound and caught his midsection with a fist.

“Oomph!” Pain exploded through his body, but he returned the favor by drilling a fist into the man’s temple, which caused him to retreat a few paces.

Clutching the side of his head, his opponent narrowed his eyes. “Watch yourself, Aldren, and search your soul, for when revenge strikes, you’ll know why. Justice will be served.” Then he darted back into the alley, and though Graham gave chase, he was far too knowledgeable about the warren of connecting alleys and soon disappeared.

With his chest heaving from exertion and pain ricocheting through various portions of his body, Graham continued on his way. That encounter had been exceedingly odd, and the man’s words made absolutely no sense. He had no idea the identity of the attacker, but was it related to the dead woman in his bed? To the parasol handle?

In due course, he finally reached the boxing salon, and by the time he’d climbed the stairs and entered the unassuming space, he breathed a sigh of relief and instantly relaxed. The scents of sweat and chalk infiltrated his nostrils. Grunts and groans filled the air, punctuated with barked instructions and corrections of form. Throughout the long, open room, men stood at various stations—punching bags filled with sand or straw were hung from the ceiling where men were practicing punches and kicks, there were roped off sections that served as rings, mats on the floor where basics were taught, and wooden contraptions that let men build their upper body muscles. This had become very much his second home, a place where he could talk privately to his friends and work out his problems and possibly beat back his demons.

As his gaze landed on the tall form of the Earl of Hazelton, he nodded to his fellow Rogue’s Arcade member. “Good to see you, my friend.”

“It’s been too long a time since we last spoke,” the earl agreed with a grin. “Probably at Twinsfield’s nuptials.”

“Indeed.” Then another man entered his line of sight. “Hullo, Loftus.” Oddly enough, this man was closer to him than some of the rogues, and there was nothing wrong with

that. They'd met at this boxing salon years before, and in addition to Loftus being a superior boxer, he also held a secret that he was forced to keep dear lest he land into dire circumstances.

"I'm glad to see you, man." A smile lit the man's face. Loftus Nathaniel Ward was of mixed heritage. His father was an English lord who'd married a Jamaican high-born lady, but above and beyond that, his sexual preferences ran to men. Only a handful of people in London knew that secret, and Graham had already pledged his discretion, for it was no one's business who a man loved. "It's been an age." The veriest hint of a Caribbean accent threaded through his voice.

Hazelton grinned. "It is fortuitous we have this salon." He'd already stripped to the waist and had removed his boots, for it appeared he would indulge in a workout with one of the trainers waiting at one side of the long room. "You look like hell, Aldren."

"Feel like it too." Briefly, he caught them both up on the events of his life to date, including the attack he had just come from.

Both men stared at him.

"That is why I'm here. I need to take out my frustrations in the ring."

"Absolutely." Hazelton nodded. "The salon is busy today. I'm getting ready to square off with Anais over there," he indicated a large Greek man in one of the two roped off sections in the room, "but I'm sure DeBeyers won't mind if you and Loftus spar."

"Thank you." Gratitude surged through him as he set about removing his greatcoat and then jacket of gray superfine. He couldn't wait to lay his fists into something. The fight on the street angered him, but restless energy had taken hold since Caroline had come flitting back into his life, regardless of how worried he was about the noose tightening at being framed for murder and perhaps theft. To say nothing of the relentless, recurring nightmares that robbed his sleep.

It was all too much.

Loftus turned eyes that danced with amusement on him while Hazelton made his way to the ring at the far side of the room. “It sounds as if you’ve fallen into a spot of bother, eh?”

“That is quite possibly the understatement of the year.” Graham continued removing clothing until he’d stripped down to his breeches and bare feet. “While I cannot understand it, I will face off whatever foe I need to, and perhaps this has to do with something in my past. It’s too difficult to tell right now.” He ducked into the second roped off area close to his current location. At the front of the building near the entry door, men were warming up by punching their hands into the gloved hands of others.

God, he loved this place. Everyone was at the same starting point here; both members of the *beau monde* and commoners melded here. Boxing and fisticuffs were great equalizers.

“That may be so, or it could also not be connected at all. People go mad for reasons the rest of us cannot comprehend.” Loftus joined him in the ring, and Graham nodded. “Let us not talk about that now. How have you been keeping yourself otherwise?”

He snorted. “I am alive. You?”

“I could complain about politics, class divides, the weather, but I won’t. I have my health and friends, and my shipping outfit is keeping me busy.” Loftus raised his eyebrows. “Do you wish to do this with gloves or without?”

Wasn’t that an interesting insight into life? “Considering I already had my arse handed to me earlier today, I’d say gloves. Just for self-preservation.”

“Ah. I don’t blame you. Best protect your face so the ladies will still come flocking.”

“Hardly.” In this moment, he was quite done with women. “Women have proved to be nothing but trouble.”

They both laced on gloves then got to it. After a few lunges and jabs back and forth, they danced around each other,

sizing each other up. Graham's pulse raced; God he adored fisticuffs. Both he and Loftus got in an uppercut and then a punch to a breadbasket and gut.

"Hold." Graham stumbled back against the rope, winded. "What of your romantic endeavors? When last I spoke, you were contemplating a change. Have you broken your engagement?"

In fact, Loftus had been largely unsuccessful with women. He liked them well enough—for friendship or companionship—but when it came to sex or even love? That's where the confusion came in and sent him reeling. After they'd had a serious talk about a month ago—before Graham had been bedeviled by a swath of nightmares which had necessitated him burying himself in all sorts of distracting vices—Loftus had finally admitted he was a gay man, and that the more he thought about being with a male of that same persuasion, the more he warmed to the idea.

Except society frowned on such things, and it was a crime punishable by death.

"Ah. The engagement still stands. Plans are moving forward." A flush rose up Loftus's neck as he drifted closer to Graham's location. "However, now that I've been honest with myself, I have made inroads into securing the attentions of a certain *person*." He glanced about. Even in a boxing salon where the men who attended were close, there was always the threat that admitting to being gay would land one into trouble with the powers that be in society. With a lowered voice, he said, "He is *quite* a wonderful person."

"I'm glad for you." The sheepish expression on his friend's face brought a genuine grin to Graham. For far too long Loftus had been confused and at sixes and sevens. "You look happy. It does me a world of good to see that." Point of fact, it gave him hope, and he hadn't had that in a long time.

"Honestly, I am." His grin was on this side of cheeky. "Never knew just how happy I could be, truth to tell." The emotion reflected in his eyes. "When you find a connection with someone else—a truly deep connection that has eluded

you from all others—you realize why nothing else worked in your life.”

“Ah.” Graham pushed off the rope and came at Loftus with fists raised. “Have you been with him yet?”

As Loftus defended, he danced away with neat footwork that Graham had always admired. “We’ve attended the opera, done some sightseeing, took dinner at Claridge’s. Went to a rout but arrived separately.”

“No, man. You misunderstand.” Graham jabbed and caught the other man on the chin. Obviously, Loftus was distracted by his new man, for it was rare Graham could get the drop on him. He lowered his voice. “Have you fucked him yet? Had your wicked way with him?”

Loftus uncharacteristically missed a step. Ruddy color darkened his cheekbones. “I’m impressed you came right out and said it.”

“Why not?” Graham laughed. “It matters not to me who people bed, who they choose. I just want to know that my friends are enjoying a good toss and even better companionship.” He tagged him again. “Best defend better than that, friend, else I’ll have you knocked out presently.”

His friend chuckled. “In any event, yes, we have been together physically twice now.”

“And?”

“And I think I’m well on the path to love.” Loftus came back strong with a one two uppercut that landed Graham on his arse before he knew what was happening. That was the problem with distractions. He grinned down at him. “You ought to try it.”

Such gammon. “What, bedding a woman or love?”

“All of it.” Loftus held out a hand.

Graham grasped it and used the assistance to stand. “No to love. I’m *quite* certain that lauded state is not for me, and as to the bedding, that is exactly why I’m in the dire straits that I am. It’s eating me from the inside out.” Which brought

the worry pouring back in. It had temporarily been beaten back by boxing, but now it demanded to be dealt with. No more dilly dallying about Town. For two days he'd done nothing to help his own cause.

Get off your arse and start working for your innocence, Aldren.

“Ha.” Loftus snorted with amusement. “That’s because you’ve been doing it all wrong.”

“Have I?” Graham scoffed. The audacity. “I’m *quite* skilled in such things.”

“Such arrogance, Aldren.” The other man rolled his eyes. “With the wrong people then.”

“Now you’re suddenly an expert in bed sport? What of your fiancée?” Loftus had been engaged for a year to the daughter of a viscount. She was an heiress, and he needed the position in society, as well as the respectability and coin the union would bring.

“No, I am not an expert, but I *can* look at things beyond the narrow scope of my nose.” Sadness flitted through his expression. “As for Miss Burton, well, we are due to marry in March of next year.” A trace of despair pooled in his dark eyes. “This is the reality of things, man.”

“What?” Graham sagged again on the rope. He stared at his friend. “Even after—”

“—yes.” Loftus nodded. “It’s illegal for me to be open about my... alternative sexual preferences, so I’ll need to keep up appearances, make it seem to society that all is well and that I am an upstanding gentleman of the *ton*.” The slight hitch in his voice gave away how much pain such an action caused him. “This way it’s safe to continue seeing my lover.”

What a terrible life, and to know it would never be easier, to know one could never wake up next to the person one loved. “What of Miss Burton? She’ll want a real husband. Children. Are you prepared for all that will entail?” He slowly shook his head as the magnitude of the situation pressed in. At least in his own life once he found out who wished him to

hang, he'd be done with it, while Loftus would forever be bound by his choices. "Are you even aroused by a woman?"

"That depends on how much preparation I have in advance." But his sigh seemed to come from his toes. "So, we're going to see what happens. I do care for her, but I also care for him. It's a maddening place to be in, but if it keeps me alive and solvent..." He remained silent for a bit as he removed his gloves. "I'll live for the moments I can see him. Clandestinely, of course. Perhaps I'll tell her I'm going to my club. Perhaps I'll join his. It is the only way I can keep a piece of that happiness and not put my life or his in jeopardy, for the world isn't quite ready to be accepting of love that is different or what they deem as unwholesome."

Such a sad commentary of how far England needed to grow as a society. "I'm truly sorry you feel you must do this." His respect for Loftus soared. "You are quite certain you would make such a sacrifice for love?"

I cannot imagine doing something like that.

"How could I not?" Loftus' eyes softened and shone with a light that Graham couldn't understand. "Love is everything we as a species seek from the moment we are born until the second we die, and when you find it?" A sigh shuddered from him. "There is nothing like it."

"Good God." Graham ripped off his gloves in order to rub his eyes. "Why is it that my friends are falling, one by one, like the plague is taking them out, all over the prospect of love and finding that one person who makes them complete? Who makes life less horrid?" Though there was a trace of bitterness there, he also heard the longing in his own voice. "I am growing sick of how insipid you men are. Surely love isn't that wonderful." When his mother had died, he remembered his father grieving a bit, but he remarried shortly afterward. Did love count then or did it even matter?

"You poor, jaded, lost man." Only Loftus could make those words sound like a Caribbean litany. "Obviously, you have other things on your mind just now and are not in the correct frame of mind, but if you escape the noose, you should

change your ways and start being respectable. Find a woman. Let her help you.”

Graham snorted. “I’m beyond that, don’t you think?” At least that’s what he felt like deep down in his soul. “No woman should need to accommodate my demons.”

“The right woman won’t care.” Loftus dropped a hand on Graham’s shoulder. “She’ll sit beside you in the dark with them if that’s what you need.” He arched an eyebrow. “What about that sister of Lockwood’s? Haven’t you told me a time or two when you’re foxed that you’ve fantasized about her?”

“Uh...” Heat crept up the back of his neck. *What the hell kind of man have I turned into?* “She’s forbidden fruit. I’ve been warned off her by Lockwood. Thinks I’m not good enough, and that’s true.”

“I am not convinced it is true.” Loftus heaved a sigh. “It is a sticky wicket for sure, but if you have chemistry with this woman, why wouldn’t you chase it?”

“I don’t know.” Outside of their limited interactions and his obvious lust for her, he wasn’t certain he had any business courting such a woman. “I’d have to spend time with her, and right now, things are... difficult.” Fear played his spine with icy fingers. What if he wasn’t able to clear his name? What if the unidentified man caught him unawares and killed him like the courtesan was killed? Anxiety tightened the knots in his gut.

How the hell am I supposed to sleep at night?

“I know.” Concern wrinkled the other man’s brow. “Want to go ‘round again?”

“Best not. I need to concentrate on this mystery, and it starts with the damned parasol handle.” He dropped the gloves in one corner of the ring. “I cannot let this fester any longer.” If he wanted a future, he had to clean up the present.

“Understandable. If you need assistance, let me know.”

“Thank you.” Quickly, he padded over to the place where he’d dropped his clothes. “I don’t know what I need just yet.” But somehow, images of Caroline kept flitting into his

mind. He shoved them back down. She would only complicate an already complex issue.

And that was the sad truth. Unless something changed, there was no hope for him. He was naught but a rat in a trap, waiting for death.

Chapter Six



October 6, 1817

Mayfair

London, England

Where the devil is he?

Caroline had sent a short, cryptic note 'round to the viscount's residence that morning asking him to meet her in Hyde Park, for she might be able to help with the parasol handle. She had a friend whose brother owned a pawn shop. All manner of things came through the space, so perhaps that man might have come into contact with the handle.

Unfortunately, the weather worked against her, for it was raining, and with the precipitation, a cold chill had set up in the autumnal air. She shivered beneath her cloak while in her brother's closed carriage. Would the viscount even show? Perhaps he ignored her summons, for she hadn't seen him in three days. Then knots of worry pulled in her belly. Had he already been hauled off to Newgate to await trial?

Finally, a dark carriage drew up beside hers just inside the main gate to the park. She breathed a sigh of relief, and when she peeked out the window, he did the same, but there was no gladness in his expression. He beckoned her over then drew the black curtain back over the window glass, and the door swung open.

As annoyance stabbed through Caroline's chest, she left her carriage but told her driver to circle the park a few times, for she needed to have a conversation with Lord Aldren. Once he put the vehicle into motion, she accepted the viscount's hand and was soon pulled up into his carriage. "You

know, men who are close to being accused of murder and theft shouldn't act the arse when someone tries to help them," she said as she tumbled onto the bench opposite his.

He slammed the door closed then rapped on the ceiling. "Giles, a lovely drive through the park is in order even though it's raining."

"Aye, my lord."

Then the viscount rested his dark brown gaze on her. "What the devil do you want?" A fair amount of surliness threaded through his voice, and he crossed his arms at his chest as he stared.

"Ah, good, you're grouchy. I would say I'm shocked, but it seems fitting for your situation." She didn't care that the sarcasm in her voice was blatant. Despite her ire, she appreciated his appearance. God, he was handsome! He looked much better than when he'd stumbled to her house a few days ago. In a dark gray greatcoat and a black beaver felt top hat, he was the epitome of a gentleman about Town. Gray kid gloves covered his hands, but those gorgeous eyes of his never left her face. "Regardless, I wish to help you."

"Lockwood would forbid it."

She shrugged. "What my brother doesn't know won't hurt him." The scent of cedarwood and sage wafted to her nose. Oh, he smelled delicious! "Frankly, I'm tired of having to consider him anytime I wish to do something."

"None of that answers my original question. Why am I here?" Strain lined the corners of his eyes and framed his mouth. No doubt he was under some anxiety.

"I have a friend whose brother owns a pawn shop. We should pay him a visit and show him the parasol handle. Perhaps he has information on it."

"Ha." The viscount shook his head. "I already know the provenance."

"Why?"

“Because I was the one who originally stole it. From Prinny himself.” When she didn’t say anything, he huffed in apparent annoyance, but he pulled the parasol handle from a pocket of his greatcoat, held it up so she could see. “It was a little over ten years ago. The Duke of Edenthorpe dared me to do it, said if I was as good a thief as I bragged about, I should be able to do the job without issue.” He shrugged. “I slipped in one evening while the Regent was busy entertaining. Found the parasol handle in what he considered his trophy room, and I slipped away without incident. No one was the wiser.”

“Until the object left your possession.”

“Well, there is that.” His gaze didn’t soften as he tossed the handle to her. “I needed funds a handful of years back, so I sold the piece to a collector of odd things once belonging to royalty.”

It didn’t matter that his tale had almost been told in a monotone voice or that all the joy from the theft seemed to have left him. To her, it was quite exciting, and she could listen to his baritone all day. She turned the piece over this way and that so that the dull illumination from outside caught the jewels. Too bad it was raining instead of sunny. “Then let us call on the man you sold it to. Start there. Someone somewhere must have answers.”

“No.” The viscount shook his head. “I refuse to put you in the center of this mess.”

“Am I not already there by being in your carriage now?” Why was he being so impossible? “If you didn’t want that, you should have replied as such to my missive.” When he didn’t answer, she huffed out her annoyance. “So then that’s it? No outing? No errand? You are just going to give up and let fate have at you for a crime you didn’t commit?”

“Perhaps it is easier than fighting... everything.” For the first time since she’d entered his carriage, she spied a hopelessness at the backs of his eyes that was disconcerting.

“I never thought you were a coward, Lord Aldren... Graham.” She dared much by using his Christian name without being given leave. Oh, but saying the word out loud

felt so lovely! “But then, I have been known to be wrong even though every instinct screams otherwise.” How disappointing. She wrapped her gloved fingers around the parasol handle. “By all means, declare defeat. Let the enemy win. After all, I suppose now that the war is over you needn’t fight for anything and just become a victim to your vices.” That might have been over the line, but she couldn’t help it. Perhaps if she needled him enough, it would bring a spark back.

For long moments, the viscount sat across the narrow aisle and watched her through narrowed eyes. Then he pushed himself to the edge of his bench with his fingers digging into the squabs. “What do you want from me, Caroline? This was never a social call. We were never going to go on an outing. And what I do with my life is not your concern.”

Though a thrill twisted down her spine when he used *her* Christian name, annoyance stabbed through her chest. “Perhaps this meeting didn’t mean much to you, but it does to me. I’m trying to help in my own way, and I feel I could be good at it, but you’re so damned stubborn and self-defeating you think I have nothing to offer unless I was at the bottom of a brandy bottle or dressed like a courtesan.”

There. Let him mull that barb over. He could come the crab all he wanted, but she was right.

“Ah, you’re cross.” The corners of his mouth twitched, which only drew her attention to his sensuous lips.

“I am.”

“So, is me not taking you to visit with the collector the only reason you wish to tear my eyes out of my head?” One of his black eyebrows rose in challenge.

“No, actually.” She narrowed her eyes. Perhaps it was best to tell him the truth. Otherwise, this would have been a waste of time. “It boggles my mind how you can keep company with courtesans and members of the demi-monde with a different one on your arm each week as if you were showing off a new waistcoat, but you won’t deign to give *me* the time of day.” She tossed the parasol handle on the bench beside her reticule. “And *I’m* a member of the *beau monde!*”

Heat went through her cheeks at her own effrontery. She didn't care if the carriage driver might hear. "How is that pedigree not good enough for you?"

Shut up, Caroline. You seem extremely desperate.

The sigh he uttered sounded long-suffering. "It's not a matter of being good enough. Hell, you are far too good for me. I shouldn't even be here talking to you."

She snorted. "You are afraid of my brother. Like a coward."

"Not overtly, but I *am* afraid of being the one to ruin your reputation and kill your chances of making a brilliant match."

What the devil did *that* mean? "My reputation? A woman would need to do something—anything—to even care about a reputation. Besides, I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions—good or bad."

Finally, a grin curved his lips, and she couldn't stop staring at his mouth. "Oh, that has been readily obvious."

Infuriating man! "Then why won't you let me close? For help or anything else."

Annoyance flitted through his expression. "Because I'm a broken man, Caro. Probably always will be."

How lovely was his use of her shortened name? "As is my brother, but he hasn't managed to lock himself away or off himself. In fact, he has married against the odds and Juliet has been good for him." She shrugged. "He is healing, slowly, but it's healing. Why do you not want that for yourself?" Could she do the same for the viscount or was it merely wishful thinking?

"Well, you certainly have a high opinion of yourself, hmm?" Again, an eyebrow rose in challenge, and she wanted to smack it right off his face. Aldren blew out a breath. "The second reason that I must keep you at arm's length is I'm drawn to you for some inexplicable reason." When she gasped, he held up a hand. "Though it's the truth, I'm afraid that the

second I touch you, I might not be able to stop. Then your brother *will* hunt me down.”

“Well.” That answer mollified her slightly, but she was still annoyed. “Yet you’ll consent to bedding anything in skirts without knowing much more than their names? It makes no sense.” Yes, she was pushing him, perhaps too far, but this was outside of enough. She wanted a reaction, wished for him to stop giving up on himself, wanted him to keep fighting, to realize he was still alive for a reason. “For years you’ve taunted me with charming grins and the occasional suggestive words in passing whenever you thought my brother wasn’t around. We’ve flirted inside a few dances; you kissed me once years ago—”

“—I was in my cups—”

“—that matters not.” She’d never forgotten. “And for years, I’ve been forced to either watch as you pursue ruined women, grasping widows, or innocents who have more bosom than sense, or worse, read about your exploits in the gossip rags and hear about them from my friends.”

“What the deuce does that mean? I don’t understand why you’re venting your spleen, for you and I were never together!” He shoved a hand through his hair. “There is no ownership there! One kiss doesn’t mean a lifetime.”

“I’m not asking for a lifetime!” How did this man manage to aggravate her so quickly? “I merely want you to notice me, and not because I’m the sister of one of your friends.”

“Don’t you think I have? I’m trying to protect you.”

“That’s an excuse and you know it.” Caroline shook her head. “How is it that a man who has come back from the war decorated and lauded with accolades, who’s been given a title and land, suddenly recoiling from a woman of substance?” She blew out a breath, but his eyelids flickered. “I think you are afraid of taking a chance that might mean something more than the roguish lifestyle you’ve been leading.” She leaned forward on her bench. When their knees knocked together, heat shot up her leg. Surprised, she drilled a

finger into his chest, his hard, muscled chest. *Oh, dear.* “Is it the *chance* you are frightened of or *me* in particular?” Her mind screamed a warning, but she didn’t heed it. Verbally bantering with this man was such fun and made her feel so alive!

With a sound of frustration and something else she didn’t understand, he shoved himself to the edge of his bench so that their knees once more knocked. Tingles went through her lower belly. “You’re jealous.”

Awareness of him danced over her skin, and suddenly the tension inside the carriage shifted, grew. “Perhaps I am. What of it?”

“You’re a harridan. Did you know that?”

“And as I said before, you’re a coward. I thought better of you.”

“Then that is your fault.” Shock reflected in his eyes then they darkened with the same spiking desire that had turned the blood in her veins to molten need. One by one, he tugged on the fingers of his gloves until the accessories came off and he tossed them to his bench. “If you are so determined to play with fire or alternately wake a sleeping dragon, then don’t blame me if you reap the consequences of that decision.” Then he was on the bench beside her; when had he even moved? His hand was in her hair, and he dragged her roughly to him, claimed her lips in a kiss apparently designed to shock and to tease.

Oh, dear lord, it’s happening!

Caroline didn’t mind the heavy-handed treatment, for he was only doing it to frighten her, but she was made of stronger stuff than that. She hadn’t existed so long in society without being able to flirt with men until they kissed her. Some of those embraces were lovely while others were horrid, but this kiss from the viscount? It exceeded her wildest dreams and fanciful notions. As her fingers curled into the lapels of his greatcoat, she returned his embrace as best she could while inwardly rejoicing at finally being properly kissed by this man, her crush.

“Damn.” As Lord Aldren wrenched away, his breathing was as ragged as hers. His eyes were as dark as midnight, but there was a certain hunger deep in those depths that made her shiver. “If all you want me for is physical pleasure—since that is all I shared with those women—then that is *exactly* what you’ll have, my lady. Perhaps after that, you’ll see me for the scoundrel I truly am and finally get the notion that I can be saved out of your mind.” Emotion graveled his words as he kneeled in the narrow aisle between the benches.

“But I—” Before she could finish her protest, he leaned into her, put his hands to her shoulders, hooked his fingers beneath the bodice of her gown, and then he yanked the upper portion of the garment down. While her throat went dry, she shivered as the cooler ambient air wafted over her suddenly bared skin. Seconds later, he’d manipulated the laces of her stays enough that her breasts popped free of her clothing. “Oh, I—”

“Ah, cannot follow through when your teasing brings you to a crossroads, hmm?”

God, she wanted to smack that smug expression from his face, but in order to hide her confusion, Caroline held his gaze. Daring much, she grabbed his cravat and tugged him closer. “I do not fear you or new experiences.” Some of those men she cajoled kisses from had trespassed upon her enough to cup a breast but none of them were as blatant or as confidence as the viscount.

“How intriguing.” Interest flickered in his eyes. “Let us see how far you’ll go then.” He took her breasts in his hands, and the odd combination of the chilly air coupled with the warmth of his skin against hers made her gasp.

The more he squeezed and massaged those globes, the more fires erupted in her blood, but when he brushed the pads of his thumbs along her nipples, they immediately hardened into tight little buds, and wild sensation streaked through her body to lodge in her core. “Oh!” How delightful this bit of scandal was.

“Involving myself with an innocent is a properly bad idea,” he whispered as if to himself, but that didn’t distract him from continuing to tease her breasts.

“We are hardly involved,” Caroline managed to pant out while pleasurable feelings coursed through her body. “You are merely doing this as a ploy, as a way to hide from your truth.” Did it matter, when every strum of his fingers on those sensitive tips ushered her closer to heaven?

“What would you know of it?” The shock in his eyes was noticeable before he shuttered it behind a blank expression, but she’d gotten beneath his skin, for he applied himself to teasing and torturing her nipples all the more.

“I have seen how my brother struggled—still does, actually—know how the Earl of St. Vincent does as well through my friend Theresa’s comments,” she gasped when he closed his lips around one turgid tip, and as he swiped his tongue along the surface of that nipple, she nearly lost her grip on reality. “No man returned from the war unscathed; you all need something as a distraction or wherein to hide.” Then her words dissolved into moans as she concentrated on what he was doing to her.

“What if those distractions and vices are no longer enough, and continued horrors have intruded anyway,” he asked in a low voice as he rolled her nipples in his fingers.

Oh, dear lord! This was beyond scandalous, beyond anything she’d imagined, but bobbing in the sea of passion in her mind was a thread of commonsense, yet a shiver of need went down her spine. “I’m not one of your doxies.”

“Indeed, you’re not, for they wouldn’t be keen on having a damned maddening conversation while I’m pleasuring them.”

“It is not my fault if I know you better than you assume.”

“You do *not* know me, Caro.” The longer he worried her nipples with his teeth and tongue, the more unrelenting pressure built and stacked low in her belly.

The unfamiliar sensations left her adrift, stole away her breath, and still she wished to cross verbal swords with him, for that was as addicting as his touch. “Whose fault is that, Viscount Aldren?” She couldn’t resist putting slight emphasis on his title.

He didn’t answer with words. Instead, with a hand about her nape, he drew her against him and plundered her mouth with another string of deep, drugging kisses while the other hand continued to roll and pinch one of her nipples until she was gasping for breath, drowning in a myriad of sensations she couldn’t quite keep ahead of. Slowly, he drew up her lightweight wool and silk skirting while nipping her overly sensitive nipples.

“Dear lord, you must leave off,” she gasped out, for if he didn’t, she would surely dissolve into a melted puddle on the floorboards of the carriage.

“You were the one who needled me, so we will not stop until you have been sent flying,” he said as he pushed her backward on the bench and encouraged her legs to part. The fabric of her skirting was bunched about her waist, which put the lower portion of her body on full display to his gaze. “Besides, there is a strong connection between us that vexes me.”

How interesting, and slightly alarming. She shivered in anticipation. “Lust, perhaps. Nothing more.” If so, why hadn’t he noticed her before now?

“It’s all one needs, and what *I* need is to send you flying. I’ll wager it’s the only thing that will render your tart mouth speechless.”

Caroline snorted even as she trembled with anticipation. “I rather doubt, you are as good as you say with carnal skill. Men who brag about themselves are usually less than that.” It was a barbed statement to vex him, and it found its mark all too well.

He grinned, and for fleeting seconds, the gesture took years from his face. “You can make that assessment in a bit.” The dratted man glided his fingers along her flesh made slick

from his teasing her breasts, back and forth in a mesmerizing rhythm. “It seems you’re all too ready, even if you are an innocent.” Before she could utter a response, he’d coaxed her swelling nubbin out of hiding, and rubbed it.

She had the errant thought of slapping his face for his effrontery, but with each pass of those talented fingers, shivers of raw need danced over her skin, fracturing throughout her body into every nerve ending. Of course he *was* as good as he’d said, and if he could bring her that close to the edge without much effort, what else could he do?

“Cat got your tongue, my lady?” Over and over, he worked that tiny bundle of nerves, and when she couldn’t hold back a moan, he grinned.

“Do hush,” she managed to gasp out and curled the fingers of one hand around his nape. How was it that he had nearly sent her over that edge into bliss with hardly a touch?

“It occurs to me that I should at least ask. Do I have your permission to do unspeakable things to you? I’d rather not carry the burden alone if your brother catches wind of this bit of insanity.”

At least there was the semblance of a gentleman buried deep down inside him. Caroline met his gaze, caught the knowing light in those dark depths, and heat stung her cheeks. “It’s not a crime to enjoy such a thing, and I won’t tell Edward if you won’t.” And she wouldn’t go to her grave an unwanted spinster.

“I do not need to antagonize Lockwood at the moment.” Then he gripped her inner thighs and splayed her open. “Damn, I thought your breasts perfection, but this is even more so.”

She didn’t know what he’d found in her to warrant such a comment, but the words filled her with warmth. Anticipation battled with anxiety in her belly. “You plan to put your mouth on me?” Caroline buried the fingers of one hand into his hair, and oh it was as thick and luxurious as she’d dreamed.

“Oh, yes.”

“But, I—” Her voice cut off in a squeak as he put his mouth to her button.

He chuckled and the vibrations sent her into another level of delight and wonder. “I’ll wager you’ll enjoy this.” And he began the next stage of his seduction—or rather his retaliation.

“Merciful heavens.” From the moment he employed his lips and hot tongue to her most sensitive, private parts, Caroline slowly lost the last vestiges of her sanity. “This... You...” She couldn’t catch her breath, for with each nibble, every nip, all the swipes and strokes of his tongue, she was hurled higher and higher into pleasure, into a world she was unfamiliar with but had always thought about.

Wild sensation coursed through her body. She shook from it. Tears unashamedly fell to her cheeks for everything was too big, too much, too overwhelming. Never once did the viscount shy away from his work. He was a man bent on tossing her over the edge, and she hovered there, trapped, waiting with a hammering heart for him to give her up into that dark void.

But he didn’t. Not even when she begged him. Repeatedly, not caring the driver could hear. “Lord Aldren... Graham, please leave off!”

The dratted man kept her poised on the razor’s edge, pinning her there again and again with every penetrating stroke of his tongue, each calculated nibble, every new torment of suction on that swollen button until she squirmed on that bench and prayed for some sort of relief. She curled her hand into his hair alternately to shove him away and cease the exquisite torment but also to hold him to her tighter, guide him to exactly where she needed him.

“Oh, oh, oh...” Her body shook; the relentless pressure in her lower belly built and coiled and stacked. Fearing she would break apart, Caroline squirmed, but he gripped her thighs tighter to keep her in place.

When he chuckled against her flesh, it was almost the end of her, but he kept on as if he were the scoundrel he'd likened himself to earlier.

“Graham!” She shook as tears of pleasure and wonder rolled down her cheeks. Not even in her dreams could she imagine such marvelous feelings. Her back arched of its own accord, which put her deeper into his care. “I... Oh, I am going to break.”

“That is the purpose of this exercise, my lady.” Then he followed the comment with a particularly strong bit of suction.

“I need— Ah!” The dam holding back the mounting pressure within broke. She shattered in spectacular fashion, fell into that black void full of the most wonderful bliss as her inner walls convulsed with a violent release—her first—and the fact it came from the attentions of this man made her squirm all the more. A half-muffled scream left her throat, for it was so incredibly glorious.

The viscount glanced up, but she was barely aware as she floated in a realm not bound to Earth. “Dear God,” he crooned. “Because I’m a damned bastard, come again for me, show me how much your body wants me.”

Despite the fact her body shook as if she'd shoot right out of the carriage and into the heavens, Graham continued to worry her swollen, hypersensitive nubbin. When he inserted two fingers, pumping them in and out of her convulsing passage, she bucked against his hand while imagining those fingers were his length spearing into her. Oh, it was all too much! Then he twisted those digits in order to massage a spot on her spasming flesh that completely separated her soul from her body.

“Graham!” The word was long and drawn out in a keening wail that would probably embarrass her after the fact. How could she ever meet the carriage driver's eyes? But thinking was beyond her as Caroline hurtled over the edge into a hard release that stole her breath and rendered her temporarily unable to move. Her thighs trembled in time to her

racing pulse, while over and over flutters ran riot through her core as strong contractions rocked through her. Finally, when the viscount was finished with her, he withdrew his fingers and pulled away. She could do nothing else but collapse into the squabs and pray for death.

“I adore seeing women as they come undone.” There was no mistaking the smugness in his voice. “Innocent no more, hmm?”

Heat went through her cheeks, but she hadn’t the strength to deny it. “Bastard.” There was no doubt in her mind, though, he was certainly skilled even though he’d done such to her in revenge.

“Not quite, but I *am* an addict, I fear.” The viscount removed a pristine handkerchief from an interior pocket. “I did tell you I’m not a good man.” Finally, he resumed his bench, his hair in disarray while he wiped his face, yet there was shame and smugness in his expression. “If you think this is all I am capable of, congratulations. It would seem you’re right.”

“Stop.” Barely having the strength to reposition herself on the bench, she tugged her stays and bodice back into place while the carriage slowly rolled to a halt. A residual reaction shook her body, but her mind couldn’t turn over words. Certainly, he was coarse and not the refined man she’d dreamed he might be, yet there was an intensity about him, a unique vulnerability she couldn’t ignore. After the wonderful things he’d done to her, she assumed he would have played to the connection he’d mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, it appeared he did the same to women every day.

Therein lay the problem. She was nothing to him except his newest conquest and he’d never claimed her body with his. With a shaking hand, she pulled back the black velvet curtain on the door nearest to her location. The ducal carriage with Edward’s golden crest emblazoned on the side pulled to a stop next to Lord Aldren’s.

I need to leave, to hide. This has been a terrible mistake.

Almost in tears, Caroline fumbled with the door handle. “Thank you for showing me the man you truly are, Lord Aldren. Or the man you *think* you are, but you forget, I’ve lived with my brother for years. I’ve seen what the war did to him. You are not alone, but you *are* human, so it’s perfectly natural to be terrified of these recent developments in your life.”

“You don’t know—”

“Again, stop.” She cut off his words with a raised hand. “You cannot close yourself off from them or the people around you who wish to help.” She shoved open the door. “Perhaps when you come to your senses and stop hiding in your vices, you’ll call on me.” At the last second, she scooped up the parasol handle, shoved it into her reticle, and then exited the vehicle.

Once inside hers, she gave into tears that were both of frustration and joy, and far too near the surface. Why were men so impossible? For that matter, was she now ruined even though they’d not indulged in coitus per se? It was a murky matter indeed, and one thing was certain. She’d heartily enjoyed herself.

Damn his eyes.

Chapter Seven



October 7, 1817

Aldren House

London, England

What kind of scoundrel am I?

Apparently, the worst sort. As guilt continued to pummel Graham as he accepted his greatcoat from his butler, he retreated once more into his thoughts. Why the hell had he done that to Caroline? She was his friend's sister. A *duke's* sister! And Lockwood had specifically told him he didn't want his sister trifled with. Though the subject matter was serious enough, a grin of satisfaction snaked over his lips as he pulled on his gloves and jammed his top hat on his head.

Oh, I did way more than trifle with her, but at least I didn't fuck her.

Not with his prick, anyway. He nodded at his butler and then left the house, quickly got into his waiting carriage at the curb, but directed the driver to the shops on Bond Street. He'd need to procure a few presents, for he intended to call on the lady, apologize profusely.

Yet, as he settled back among the squabs, he couldn't help but remember what exactly he'd done. The subtly sweet taste of her still lingered on his palate, and when he'd penetrated her with his tongue, pleased her button without ceasing while tears of pleasure had rolled down her cheeks...

Damn, but that hadn't been gentlemanly of him, yet he'd enjoyed every second of the scandal. He shouldn't have done it, should have stopped at the kisses, but damn if she'd taunted and teased him. When she'd accused him of being a

coward, that had set fire to his blood and swept all commonsense from his brain. Just as he'd told her in the carriage, the second he'd touched her, kissed her, he'd been easily addicted to the softness of her skin, of how she smelled like sunshine and daisies, of how the soft sounds of pleasure she'd uttered had driven him half-mad.

Would he do it all over again if he'd had the chance? Absolutely. Should he also feel ashamed of himself, since she'd been an innocent—still was in some ways? Yes, but he couldn't bring himself to feel anything except the thrill of victory... as well as the guilt.

Which was why he was on his way to Bond Street in order to personally pick out gifts to bring the lady that would hopefully help smooth his apology. Calling on her was also vital, for the damned woman had taken the bejeweled parasol handle, and he needed that to go visit the collector he'd sold it to years ago.

Had that been her plan all along, to force him to call upon her?

He snorted, and glanced out the carriage window. Once more it had begun to rain. It was highly unlikely, for she wasn't that manipulating. Truly, she had been inundated by the sensations she'd found when he'd pleased her in this very carriage, and at no time did she beg off or demand he cease his trespass. Hell, she'd even encouraged him at various points. She might like to think she had experience in bedeviling men, but she was still a naïve young woman, so what she'd let him do to her was both confusing and the pinnacle of erotic. A chuckle left his throat. A compromised young woman who was the sister to the Duke of Lockwood, one of his closest friends.

He is going to put a ball between my eyes.

An hour later saw his carriage rocking to a halt outside of her townhouse. There was no more time for contemplation or reflection. Doing the pretty was a foreign concept for him; though he had a bevy of friends and acquaintances, he was much a loner, for he didn't wish for anyone to see him as

weak. And the women in his life were never there on a permanent basis, yet that didn't explain the problem of Caroline or why she insisted on being around him.

Or believing in him.

With knots of worry pulling in his gut, he gathered the rather impressive floral bouquet as well as the expensive box of French chocolates, left the relative safety of the carriage, then strode up the short walkway to the cheerful, green-painted door.

The same butler he'd met the other night while in his cups met his knock. With a stare down his longish nose at Graham, he answered in the affirmative that Lady Caroline was indeed at home, but he would see if she wished to have visitors since the dowager duchess as well as Lady Elizabeth were out calling on acquaintances.

"In the interim, do you mean to keep me cooling my heels on this stoop, then?" If he was a tad more annoyed than usual, he couldn't help it. Once he'd returned home yesterday afternoon, he'd taken refuge in the brandy bottle, and was obliged to attend to the raging cockstand he'd been left with once the lady returned to her carriage in a snit. Now he battled a mild megrim plus more guilt and some damned restlessness he couldn't quite pinpoint.

One corner of the older man's lips quirked upward. "You may wait in the blue parlor. Follow me."

Muttering curses beneath his breath, Graham followed the man into the large entry hall and then into a long corridor until he was shown into a smallish room decorated in shades of blue. "Thank you for the kindness," he said with heavy sarcasm in his voice.

The butler said nothing as he left the room.

Not having anything to occupy his mind, he sat upon a chair with navy crushed velvet cushions and gilt-painted spindly legs. The floral scent from the bouquet was nearly overwhelming, but the colors of autumn were pretty, and the chrysanthemums were rather cheerful sitting amidst brown-

eyed Susans and delicate Queen Anne's lace among other flowers he couldn't identify. As for the box of chocolates, the fancy pink linen box with a blue lid had been tied with a wide satin ribbon in pink as well. Twelve of France's finest chocolates and bonbons rested in said box, and frankly he was a bit jealous to give it over.

But would it remove her from the snit she'd fallen into when he dropped her off yesterday? For that matter, why did he care what a woman felt like? Ordinarily, when he was done with a woman for whatever reason, he sent them on their way and rarely thought about them again. So why did Caroline lurk about his mind like a vengeful specter intent on dressing him down until he kissed the ire out of her?

Or the ghost version of her.

Damn, but she is confusing as hell.

A half hour later, the rustling of fabric at the announced Caroline's presence before he actually saw her. When she came into the parlor, Graham sprang to his feet. "Good afternoon, my lady."

She huffed in apparent annoyance. "Leave off with the formalities, Lord Aldren." As she crossed the floor and then sat on a low sofa, her expression didn't bode well for him, for in every flick of her gaze, the way she arranged her wine-colored skirting about her legs announced that she was incensed. He couldn't blame her. What he'd done was unforgivable. "What do you want, Graham? I assumed that after you had what you wanted from me, I wouldn't see you again."

Without thinking, he tossed off, "If that were so, why did I stop yesterday without finishing the job?" Then heat crept up the back of his neck as he stared at her, and she stared back with the pink stain of a blush in her cheeks. However, the sound of his name in her voice went straight through his chest. "I, uh, wanted to call and make certain you were in good health." What a remarkably stupid thing to say, especially after the other stupid thing he just said.

“There is nothing wrong with my health.” Such a haughty lady when she wished to be. He rather liked it, for that just meant she wished to be taken in hand. As she eyed his gifts, one of her brown eyebrows arched. “For me?”

“Yes.” Graham gave over the box of chocolates first. “From a fancy French chocolate shop. I thought you might have a sweet tooth.”

“It is a lovely gesture, of course, but I don’t care for chocolate, so I’ll pass these onto my sister.” She rested the box on the sofa next to her.

“Fair enough. Perhaps you’ll enjoy these flowers more.” When he offered the tissue paper-wrapped bouquet to her, their fingers brushed in passing. Heated tingles danced up to his elbow. How exceedingly odd. “I rather liked the colors, especially that large yellow one that looks like the sun.”

An unexpected giggle escaped her as she touched a flower petal. “You mean this sunflower?” A small smile curved her rosy lips. Those damned kissable lips he couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Yes.” *The woman makes my brain mush.* At least he had a smile from her. “Listen, Caro, I promise nothing like what happened between us yesterday will occur again.”

For long moments, she kept her gaze on the flowers, then she laid them atop the box of chocolates and focused her attention on him. “Well, that is truly disappointing.”

“What?” Why did it feel like he never stood on solid ground in her presence? “I beg your pardon. I must have misunderstood.”

“It isn’t difficult to understand.” When she shrugged, the simple bodice of her gown pulled briefly over her breasts, which only served to make him remember how perfect those globes had been in his hands. “I enjoyed myself thoroughly and wished to go exploring if we were given another time together.”

Bloody fucking hell.

“Uh...” He cleared his throat. Being certain to keep his voice low, he glanced at the open door to the room. “Let me be perfectly clear. There will *not* be a next time.” Not if he wished to keep his place in society, which he wouldn’t once Lockwood got wind of this little disaster. “What we did—”

“—or rather what *you* did to *me*—”

“—yes, well, true.” He tugged at the knot of his cravat. At least the conversation caused him to ignore the megrim. “In any event, *that* cannot happen again.”

“We shall see.” Caroline crossed her ankles and deliberately arranged her skirting in such a manner that he couldn’t help ogling her stocking-covered calves. “As I have told you—and my brother—numerous times before, I’m a woman grown and know my own mind. I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions.”

“Ah.” What he wouldn’t give to glide his palms up those satiny legs again, explore between her thighs and—

“Is that all you have to say for yourself, Lord Aldren?” A decidedly arch tone wove through her voice that brought his attention back to her face. One of her eyebrows had risen, and her expression suggested she had an inkling of what he was thinking.

Another round of heat went up the back of his neck. “Uh... no.” Graham shook his head. He needed a distraction, or she would completely ruin him and vice versa, and this time there would be no guilt, for the lady knew exactly what she was doing. “There was another reason for my call, of course. I wanted to know if you’d like to accompany me on a visit to see the collector to whom I sold the parasol handle, and since you took that same piece—”

“Well, I *did* need insurance you would come ‘round again,” she said with a grin and not a hint of embarrassment.

A huff escaped him. “Does that mean you will come, then?”

“I did exactly that for you yesterday, didn’t I?” she quipped in a barely audible voice. Amusement danced in her

eyes.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The heat on the back of his neck intensified and moved up his chest. He had the distinct feeling he'd caught a tigress by accident and now didn't know what to do with her without being severely wounded.

Or completely devoured.

Perhaps it was best to ignore her blatant hints. "We will *not* talk about what happened yesterday. It was an aberration."

"Sooner or later, Graham, you will need to be honest with yourself for once." Slowly, she stood, and smiled again when he scrambled to his feet. "I rather doubt you are a rogue or the scoundrel you've likened yourself to, even if you follow such a lifestyle."

"Perhaps." Only time would tell, but as they left the room together, tension and sexually charged energy fairly crackled between them.

God grant me the patience and the willpower to survive her.



A half hour later, his carriage rolled to a stop in front of an unassuming townhouse in the Marylebone neighborhood, where they were led into a drawing room done in shades of beige and rose but decorated by all manner of ancient antiquities as well as glittering objects encrusted with jewels.

"I've never seen so many beautiful things crammed into one place," Caroline breathed as she brushed her gloved fingertips over what appeared to be a diamond and ruby studded state crown that had once belonged to the royal family of Prussia.

“Where the devil did he procure that?” Graham asked as he drifted to a stop beside her, so close that the heat of her seemed to reach out to him.

“By illegal means, no doubt.” Even though the skies were overcast, the jewels twinkled like mad.

“Oh, obviously, but why?”

“Any number of reasons, perhaps. Just because a man steals jewels or objects such as this doesn’t mean he’s a terrible person.”

She snorted. “I didn’t say he stole it, Lord Aldren. He could have paid handsomely for someone to find it for him.”

The clearing of a masculine throat at the doorway had them both turning about. The man who came into the room and moved toward them was unassuming as the townhouse. Tall, thin, and with mousy brown hair that would rapidly go to balding in a few years, he’d chosen shades of brown for his clothing, and walked with the air of someone who wishes to be forgotten immediately upon sight.

That wouldn’t be an issue for there was truly nothing to recommend him. For anything.

“Ah, Lord Aldren. It has been an age since I’ve had the pleasure. What can I do for you?” Even his voice didn’t hold anything remarkable or memorable.

Graham put a hand to the small of Caroline’s back and led her toward a grouping of furniture a bit away from the curio cabinet that held all the treasures. Once she’d settled herself on a low settee, he sat beside her while the other man perched on a matching chair nearby. “It has been quite some time, hasn’t it, Lord Pearson?” Then he sighed. “Unfortunately, this isn’t a social call. I have come to ask a question.”

“Very well.” The man waved a hand. “Proceed.”

When he cocked an eyebrow and glanced at Caroline, she immediately took the parasol handle from her reticule. “Recently, this particular piece came back into my possession.” The other man didn’t need to know how. “When I

sold it to you seven years ago, I assumed it would remain a permanent part of your vast collection.”

“Ah, I’d wondered where that piece ended up.” His eyes glittered with greed as he studied the parasol handle, but when he reached for it, Caroline held it away. With a sigh of longing, Lord Pearson focused his gaze on Graham. “Shortly after I purchased that, I made a series of bad investments and equally bad wagers, which meant I fell on hard times. I was forced to pawn the piece for ready cash until I could recoup my losses.”

“And then?” It was a story that happened to many men throughout London.

“When I was solvent again a year later, I went back to reclaim the piece, but it had been bought by someone else.”

“Who?”

He shrugged. “The pawn shop owner refused to say, under orders of the purchaser.”

“Ah.” Graham exchanged a look with Caroline then back to the peer. “Which shop?”

“Raddick’s Pawns and Antiquities. Off Bond Street in a cul-de-sac.”

“Thank you.” It was the same shop Caroline’s friend’s brother owned. “I believe we are finished here.” He once more looked at the lady, except this time he did it with narrowed eyes. *How convenient.* Did Caro know something about the piece? She’d taken the handle to go to that very same shop. Was she trying to trap him? Had she been involved in the murder of the courtesan? But to what purpose?

The matter required further thought.

“Are you sure you won’t stay to tea? I have some time before I need to attend an underground auction this afternoon.”

Of course he did. “I am quite certain.” Graham stood, and with a hand on Caroline’s upper arm, he brought her to her feet while she stuffed the parasol handle into her reticule. “Thank you for your time, Lord Pearson.”

As soon as they reached the street, feet from his carriage, she rounded on him. “Why are you glaring at me as if *I’ve* done something wrong.”

He grunted. “I am not glaring, but I *am* suspicious that we now need to visit the same pawn shop you mentioned earlier.”

“I had nothing to do with that. It’s a coincidence, nothing more.” She glanced at the driver, who shrugged but retained a faint smirk. Was he remembering what occurred in the carriage yesterday?

Damn the man’s eyes.

“Why do I not believe you? After all your brother is a member of the Rogue’s Arcade—”

“—as are you,” she was quick to remind him.

Graham blew out a breath and ignored her. “—which means *you* are not a novice regarding jewel thieves.” That was an interesting theory on its own. Would she be open to running a mission merely for the thrill of the heist? Then he just as quickly thrust the idea from his mind as she escorted her to the carriage and assisted her up. Once inside, he settled on the opposite bench, told the driver to go to her address. Then he focused on her once more. “Where do you fit into this puzzle, my lady?”

For long moments, she stared at him, her expression giving nothing away. “You think I want the bloody handle for myself?” When he didn’t answer, she huffed. “I do not. I’m only trying to help you regain your innocence.” A look of hurt lined her face. “But you are so full of your damned self-importance and arrogance, and perhaps a measure of wounded pride, that you cannot see what’s happening around you.”

“What the hell?” It had been an age since he’d been taken to task by a woman. It was... interesting and slightly heady. “You realize I’m living on borrowed time before my neck’s in a noose for a murder I didn’t commit?”

“Of course I do! Why the devil do you think I’m even consenting to talk with you?” Concern threaded through her

voice. “If we work together, we can cover more of London to try and ferret out the clues to this mystery. Someone wants you dead, Graham, or at the very least to suffer. Don’t you want to know why?”

“I... That is to say...” She’d caught him off guard.

Caroline sniffed. “Unless you have given up. You wish to surrender to your vices, let life have at you, all in an effort to escape the past. Because it’s easier than fighting, hmm?”

Lord help me.

Before he could say anything, she continued. “If you can manage to pull your head out of your arse, I have been invited to a rout at the Bennington’s home tomorrow evening.”

He rallied, then. Was this an opportunity to see her socially? “As am I.”

“Good.” Pleasure pooled in her brown eyes, and he wished to explore that. “Meet me there. We can put a few words in a few ears and see what happens. Perhaps flush out the perpetrator.”

“Yes, and then the constables will come and haul me away.” It was an impossible situation.

“Coward.” She shot him a look that proclaimed him an idiot. “Trust me.”

“Why should I? I hardly know you.”

She snorted. “If you trust enough to take strange women into your bed on a regular basis, you can do this for me.” Frost had returned to her voice. Her lips formed a thin line. “Though I’m not a proponent of your lifestyle, I do enjoy our bantering, as well as the attraction that has sprung between us, so therefore, I’m helping because you are far too handsome to hang at Newgate.”

“Oh.” At least it was something. “Thank you.” It was pulled from him. Grudgingly. Why the hell did she believe in him? But it was as she’d said. He was too big a coward to ask.

For long moments, silence reigned between them. Then she brightened and once more her gaze was on his face. “Will

you teach me to box?”

“What?” Out of all the things she could have said, he had never expected that.

“Just what I said.” Caroline nodded. Her expression lit. “I’d like to learn how to box. For self-defense purposes. The daughter or sister of a duke comes with unique challenges, like fortune hunters for example.”

Well, damn. His respect for her went up. Then worry climbed his spine. “Are you being courted presently?”

“Not seriously.” A frown tugged down the corners of her mouth. “There is a man who keeps calling with gifts, but he won’t take no for an answer. He is not a threat and will lose interest soon enough. He came at Mother’s insistence. What does any of this have to do with my request for fisticuff lessons?”

A swift stab of jealousy went through his chest, yet why? She was nothing to him, was she? “Do you require assistance with encouraging him to move on?”

“I can take care of myself, and like I said, he will take the hint soon. They all do.”

“While that is true, it would mean more coming from a man.” How many suitors had she turned down and why? She was well past the first and second blooms of youth.

Caroline rolled her eyes. “Arrogant bastard. Forget it. Go home and nurse your bruised ego. Wait for fate or the consequences of your own choices to catch up to you. I’m washing my hands of you.” She rooted around in her reticule and then withdrew the parasol handle. “Here.”

If he took that bejeweled piece, he would probably never see her again, and suddenly, he didn’t want that. For whatever reason, she’d brought a glimmer of light, of hope, into his dismal existence, and he didn’t want to be further lost.

Don’t give up on me. I’m truly trying to be a better man.

By increments, but it was easier to know she might be watching. A sigh left his throat. “Keep it safe for now.” He reached out and curled her gloved fingers around the piece. “I’ll teach you to box.”

“When?” She brightened and her wrath from earlier evaporated.

Relief shuddered down his spine. “Soon. First, let us tackle the rout.” What the hell was happening to him? He wasn’t strictly together with this woman, but here she was bossing him as if they were a couple, making plans with him, demanded more and more of his time. What was more, he’d done unspeakable things to her that he was forced to keep secret from her ducal brother. Now they would be meeting at a society function in front of prying eyes, and that might put her in danger if the unknown person who was trying to frame him for murder were also there.

To say nothing of the fact she aroused him beyond reason. How the hell was he supposed to hide that? *Clearly, I’m fucked.*

But it was the most excitement he’d had since the war ended.

Chapter Eight



October 8, 1817

Bennington House

London, England

Immediately upon arriving at the rout, Caroline hurried to her best friend Theresa's side. She'd come to the society event with her mother and sister, but she didn't wish to remain in their company the bulk of the evening, and she certainly didn't wish for them to meet with Lord Aldren, for that would be disaster once Edward discovered what she'd been doing.

Theresa grasped her hand. "Your gown is truly wonderful!"

"Thank you. I've been dying to wear this, and it's an eye-catching color, don't you think?" The turquoise satin had a matching sheer organza overskirt that sparkled with hundreds of tiny silver sequins. Silver beading lined the low bodice and went around the waist.

"Absolutely." Amusement danced in her friend's eyes. "Can I assume it's a certain viscount who you wish to snare tonight?"

"Always." Heat went into her cheeks. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Haven't I kept so many of yours already?" Amusement danced in Theresa's eyes.

"True." Looking about the drawing room that teemed with a crush of people, she quickly pulled her friend out into the corridor beyond, going as far as the end of the hall where a bow window was situated, then she tugged her down onto the

window seat. “The other day, when I went driving with Lord Aldren, he kissed me.”

“What?” The exclamation brought more than a few heads swiveling in their direction.

With heat in her cheeks, Caroline shushed her friend. She lowered her voice to a barely audible whisper and nodded. “He kissed me, and it was glorious.” The act of telling someone about the most exciting thing in her life brought much relief. “My brother, of course, doesn’t know, but something else happened that night.”

Theresa clutched at her hands. “Did you...” Her eyes widened.

“Not completely, but I’m rather certain I’ve been compromised.” Quickly, succinctly, Caroline relayed the gist of the adventure without giving away too many details. Those were for her alone, and she didn’t want that time spent with the viscount sullied. “My mother and brother will absolutely have a fit if they ever find out, and I don’t mean for them to know, but don’t you think that’s glorious?”

“I’m in awe of you.” Theresa’s grin was sly. “What now? Are you going to demand that he come up to scratch? You have him by rights.”

“Of course not.” Caroline shook her head as some of the excitement faded from sharing the tale. “I don’t want a man by obligation or guilt.” Had the viscount been guilty when he’d called on her? Very much so, but she’d disabused him of that quickly enough. “Right now, I’m wildly enjoying whatever it is between us, and don’t much wish to think on the future.”

“Ah, he’s skittish.” She shook her head. “Why is it that so many men are afraid of entering parson’s mousetrap? It’s not as if their lives will change all that much. Not like a woman’s life. We’re much like cattle or goods, belonging first to our fathers and then our husbands. We can only pray we’re treated with respect, and hope love comes from all of it.”

What a sad commentary of life. No amount of privilege or wealth could change those facts. Caroline sobered quickly. “While this is true, I still have the hope that if you choose the correct man, he will land on the more progressive side of things. The world won’t change if one continues to do things the way they’ve always been done.”

“Do you still believe Lord Aldren will fall in love with you?” Theresa blew out a breath as her gaze went to the crush of people waiting their turn to get into the drawing room. “Every year that goes by I give up on the hope for the same myself.”

“It is a conundrum indeed, but I believe Lord Aldren has potential.” Was he a rogue and a scoundrel in every sense of the word? Absolutely he was, for a true gentleman wouldn’t have trifled with her in that carriage and would certainly not have let her tease him into such actions. However, why did everyone assume a lady wanted a decent man? Just because a man had dents and dings in his metaphorical armor didn’t mean he wasn’t a good person deep down. “Making him see that potential for himself is the real challenge.”

Keeping her voice low, Theresa leaned closer and asked, “Do you think he will ever go so far as to fully bed you?”

“I honestly hope so.” Awareness prickled over her skin when she thought about the scandalous things he’d done to her in that carriage, the things she’d let him do, encouraged him to do, in fact. It had all been so delicious and even now, days later, she continued to feel as if she were drowning in those sensations. Heated tingles bedeviled her core, and as unobtrusively as she could, Caroline squeezed her thighs together to prolong the feelings. “I’m so very curious about what the next steps entail.”

“I envy you that.” A look of longing crossed Theresa’s face. “Was it as wondrous and thrilling as our friends at Miss Everly’s Finishing School whispered about?”

“Even more so.” There was simply no way to explain the sensations he’d been able to invoke in her. “They say it’s

much like flying, but it's more complex than that, and to know that a man can make your body experience those things?" She shrugged and shook her head. "Truly, it's something you'll need to know for yourself in order to understand."

"As if I am not trying to flirt my way into scandal." They both shared a laugh. "So far, though, the only men I manage to attract are old, bald, and paunchy. My brother says beggars can't be choosers, but I'm an earl's daughter, for lord's sake. Surely there is a man out there who isn't twice my age or merely looking for a mother to his brood."

That was also the risk one took when one wasn't married in their youth. Too many women thought a bird in hand was worth two in the bush. Why didn't more women realize they didn't need to settle for a less than desirable marriage?

"Never give up on the life you want," Caroline said as she rose to her feet. "The moment you do that, there is no hope." Her gaze landed on a lord who had recently left a calling card at her home. It had been on the afternoon she'd gone out with Graham that had proved so pleasurable. "What do you think of Lord Everidge?"

Theresa followed her line of sight. "He's handsome enough, of course, but I don't know anything about him. My knowledge of the peerage is rubbish, even though both Mother and Leopold keep hoping I'll suddenly remember everything they try to teach."

"I feel much the same. It is difficult to keep track when so much has happened recently to change the landscape of the peerage." Marriages, deaths, long-lost relatives coming into titles, the Regent giving out titles and land... It was almost too much. "He left a calling card at my home the other day. No gifts, just the card with wishes to call again the next time I'm at home to visitors."

"Interesting."

"Yes, isn't it?" His black hair, prone to curl, gleamed in the candlelight from the sconces in the corridor. As of yet he hadn't spotted her, and she wished to keep it that way. He

possessed darker features than a typical Englishman as well as slightly olive-hued skin that betrayed his roots as from the Mediterranean or southern France. There was definition in the nose and brow, and his hazel eyes were slightly larger than his English counterparts. Expertly tailored evening clothes defined a lean body while every movement was elegant and like a poem. “I wonder who his people are, for he is definitely not English.” Not that it mattered, for there were rumors Lord Aldren was half-French himself. She hadn’t had time to ask him any sort of personal questions, but perhaps that would change soon.

“There is only one way for you to discover that.” Theresa nudged her ribs with an elbow as the lord went into the drawing room. “Go talk to him.”

“I rather thought to reserve my time for the viscount.”

“Yes, but he isn’t here yet, is he?”

When Caroline would have pouted, a familiar form came jogging up the stairs. Her heartbeat accelerated and her breathing shallowed. “Is he not?” Quickly, she pulled Theresa up with her. “Would you like me to introduce you to him?”

“I don’t think you’ll be given a choice,” Theresa said in a barely there whisper as Graham caught sight of them immediately and made his way through the crowd to stand before them. “Good evening, Lady Caroline.”

“Good evening, Lord Aldren.” Flutters went through her lower belly when he took one of her hands, brought it to his lips, and kissed her middle knuckle. “This is my best friend, Lady Theresa Bollinger.”

“Ah, you’re St. Vincent’s sister.” He gave the same treatment to her hand, only Theresa simpered at him. “How does your sister-in-law fare?”

“She’s lovely and glowing. We are quite excited for the babe to arrive.” Then she glanced at Caroline. “I should go mingle. Mother won’t be pleased if she finds out I tried to hide for the bulk of the evening.”

“Enjoy yourself.” Once she was alone with the viscount, she gave him what felt like a genuine grin. “It is good to see you looking well rested and devastatingly handsome.” What she wouldn’t give to have a peek at his naked chest. Since he engaged in fisticuffs regularly, she would wager his form was quite defined. The way a small sprig of hair fell over his brow had her fingers itching to brush it back.

“Believe it or not, I’m feeling better than I have in months.” For the first time since she’d begun her intentional pursuit of him, his brown eyes were clear of pain or confusion. He tugged at the knot of his cravat. “I haven’t had liquor or laudanum for almost two days.”

“That’s wonderful news.” Pride for him welled in her chest. “What has made the difference? Have the nightmares left you?”

“Hardly.” He offered her his arm crooked at the elbow. “I still have nightmares and at times day terrors. However, I have recently had the thought to manage my addictions instead of **relying** on them. It is my hope to stop leaning on those crutches so much and find some other way of enduring the memories.”

She rested the fingers of one hand on his sleeve. It was positively indecent for a man to look so handsome in evening clothing. “That is a good start to a better life.” With a smile, she gazed up at him. “I misspoke before.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Perhaps you aren’t a coward after all, since it takes a strong man to do what you are doing, even though cutting yourself off from those vices is probably frightening.” Was he doing it for her benefit or his? In the end, it didn’t matter.

A pleased expression crossed his face. “I appreciate that, and I realize now I should never have let the addictions have at me like they have. For far too long I’ve been trying to destroy myself.” He led the way along the corridor and waited until they had clearance enough to enter the drawing room.

Immediately, the buzz of conversation and laughter met her ears. The crush of people was magnificent, but everywhere she looked, brightly colored gowns gave interest to the room. Jewels sparkled in the candlelight. All the furniture had been removed and the carpets rolled back to accommodate dancing that would begin shortly. A light buffet supper would be served in a couple of hours so the guests could continue to mingle and socialize without having to sit down to a formal dinner. The scents of perfumes, pomades, and powders teased her nose, but it was the sandalwood and citrus cologne from the man beside her that sent skitters of awareness down her spine.

“It sounds as if you’ve found a new reason to be the man you were always meant to be, hmm?” Dare she hope that it might be her? After all these years of pining after him, would he start returning some of those feelings?

Humor reflected in his eyes. “Perhaps I have. It bears watching.”

Though that told her absolutely nothing, a queer little squeeze went through her heart. Then the energy in the room shifted as someone **called** for dancing, and the first set would be a country reel.

“Would you care to partner me, or would you rather stay on the sidelines?” he asked with a certain amount of heat in his eyes that had flutters tripping through her belly.

“By all means, let us dance. A woman can tell much about a man by the way he dances.” She tightened her grip on his arm until he escorted her into an empty space on the makeshift dance floor. For the moment, knowing he was willing to change, willing to take command of his life and do the work made her happy. Even if nothing else happened between them, if he continued on this trajectory, he would be all the better for it.

As soon as the opening notes erupted into the air, they both moved into the appropriate steps. As with all country dances, she didn’t remain as the viscount’s partner for the whole thing, but each time she came back into his company,

she made certain that her touch was exaggerated, her looks lingering, and that her eyes hopefully said all that she wasn't allowed to say in public. For his part, it seemed he wished to do the same, for there was a hunger in his eyes she couldn't help but notice, and his gloved fingers skated along her palms, the small of her back, and anywhere else he could get away with.

Once, during the course of the reel, she was partnered with Lord Everidge. Pleasure reflected in his expression.

"I have been trying to gain your attention, Lady Caroline."

"Oh, I am aware of that, Lord Everidge, but here we are." Though it was difficult to converse during a country reel, she wanted to have her obligation to this man over with by the time it ended, for she wished to be back with Graham. "What would you like to say?"

"Your permission to pay my addresses, obviously." His hand slid along her palm as they moved within the steps. "Or at the very least, a moment of uninterrupted time with you this evening."

Well, that was better than setting aside an hour or two of him calling at her house. "After the second set of the evening, fetch me a glass of punch. I'd be happy to talk to you then before my time is claimed elsewhere." And hopefully that would leave the remainder of the evening open to spend with Graham, though they would have to do it away from the crowds or in mixed company. To be alone with the viscount while in society would be to invite sure scandal that would reach Edward's ears.

"That doesn't leave us much time for a decent conversation." There was a definite trace of annoyance in his voice.

She shrugged. "Then try your luck and call upon my house again. Perhaps I'll be home this time." It was folly indeed to encourage the man, but she was curious about him, and something about him compelled her to take a second look. Normally, her intuition about people wasn't wrong.

As the steps of the dance separated them, Lord Everidge nodded. "As you wish." Then she was once more reunited with Graham since the dance was winding down.

He frowned. "Who was that man?"

"Lord Everidge. I don't know much about him, but he wants to pay his addresses."

"I see." Frost had formed in the viscount's voice as the music wound to a halt and the dancers ceased their steps. "Is that something you are interested in pursuing?" A trace of jealousy went through his dark eyes as he peered down at her, and he led her to the side of the room.

How very interesting. "I haven't decided yet. It all depends on how this night progresses." Was that a veiled notice to make his claim? With a smile, she lightly rested a hand on his arm. "To be fair, you have a commanding head start in this race."

"That is good to know." He didn't offer his charming grin to her again. Instead, he panned his gaze around the room until he'd located Lord Everidge, and his eyes narrowed. "I don't know much about him either, but if he is someone you have a marked interest in, you can wager I'll do some investigating."

A mad little flutter went through her heart. "I appreciate that. In the meanwhile, perhaps you might wish to share another set with me?"

"If it keeps you away from another man, absolutely." The viscount snatched up her hand, planted it on his arm, and then escorted her back onto the makeshift dance floor. "Perhaps I chose the wrong time to give up my vices." There was a veritable growl in his voice.

"Do hush, Aldren. A little jealousy does a man good." But it thrilled her all the same to see him so upset that she *might* entertain another man's attentions. "And do remember, at the moment, I remain unclaimed and unspoken for, so I am well within my rights to do what I must." When he growled

again, she giggled. “Settle, Graham. I haven’t lost the torch I’ve carried all these years.”

Perhaps that would placate him—or provoke him—enough that he might try to steal a kiss.

Chapter Nine



The fool woman was trying his patience to the breaking point with her teasing and needling. Once the second set ended, Graham escorted her back to the sidelines, where she cajoled him to accompany her to the refreshment table to meet Lord Everidge.

What he truly wanted to do was escort her arse right out of the room, down the stairs, into the first unused room he could find, and then kiss her senseless until she couldn't think of any other man. On the other hand, the last words she'd said to him sank into his brain. No, she wasn't spoken for neither was she under anyone's protection. If she thought he would leap to the forefront with a proposal on his lips, she was misled indeed.

I am not looking to fall into parson's mousetrap.

Nonetheless, he followed the lady out into the corridor beyond. In the alcove where he'd met Caroline and her friend Theresa, the refreshment table had been set up wherein guests could procure glasses of punch or champagne. A handful of people were already there, milling about the area while talking and laughing as if there was nothing wrong with the evening.

Then he saw the man who had fired his ire. Lord Everidge, of whom he knew very little, had the telltale looks of a man with French ancestry. Graham stood like a lump at Caro's side, she chatted animatedly with the other man—a man who wished to pay his addresses to her. The whole world had tilted when she'd told him that, and yes, he suffered from a bad case of jealousy, yet a tryst in a carriage didn't make a relationship.

Did it?

And why the hell was he suffering from jealousy? He wasn't attached, hadn't pledged himself to the lady even though he was beginning to look forward to seeing her every day.

"I'm certain you've met Lord Aldren at some point, haven't you Lord Everidge?"

Graham's attention was yanked back at the mention of his title within the conversation. He barely accepted the glass of punch Caroline offered him without turning it down with a growl, but he truly didn't need the champagne if he was trying to be a changed man.

Yet, if she preferred this chap, what was the point?

The other man blatantly stared him up and down. "I have heard his name mentioned here and there." A dark look flitted over his face. "Most of the gossip isn't flattering. Many in the *beau monde* think you a wastrel and an addict of opiates." The faintest hint of a French accent lingered beneath a strong English one. Did that mean it had been bred out of him or was he attempting to hide it?

Then the words finally soaked into his brain. "I am *not* an addict." Please God let that convince both this man as well as Caroline. "Where have you been hiding yourself, Everidge? What club do you belong to? Can't seem to place you in Town."

"I don't tend to spend much time in London. Though this time around, when I arrived, I happened to glimpse Lady Caroline at an event and knew I wanted to further our acquaintance." Everidge shot her a glance. "I would like nothing more than to take you driving on the next fair day this week."

This time Graham did growl but covered the sound with a cough. Then he tossed back the contents of his punch glass and swallowed it down while glaring at his rival. Caroline, on the other hand, looked beyond pleased at the added attention. Drat her eyes. "I believe Lady Caroline's time is already spoken for this week. She and I have made plans on

a matter of some urgency.” He wanted it all too clear he was the chosen man in this odd triangle.

When Caro bestowed an enigmatic smile on him, heat shot through his chest. “That is quite true. Lord Aldren and I do have business to attend this week, but perhaps once that has been concluded, I can receive your call, Lord Everidge.”

Another growl emanated from Graham, and he couldn’t fathom where the hell such a reaction was coming from. “Perhaps we should discuss the feasibility of that at a later time.”

Both the other man as well as Caroline ignored him.

The damned Lord Everidge scooped up her hand and brought it to his lips. “I believe that decision rests solely with the lady. You are not her keeper, Lord Aldren.”

The audacity of the man!

Before he could respond, Caroline said something that ended with a laugh, then they fell to conversation, but the feeling of having met the man in the past, the very sound of his voice, slammed into Graham’s gut with the intensity of a cannon ball.

The feeling of ants crawling over his skin assailed him as he stood, unseeing, beside the two of them.



Early August 1808

Near Mondego Bay, Portugal

Eve of the Battle of Roliça

Graham’s nerves felt strung too tight. It was now a matter of waiting, for British forces would step in tomorrow and help drive France’s forces from the Peninsula. They had

terrorized the people of Portugal enough. Still, that didn't alleviate the anxiety he felt before each battle.

The sounds of a scuffle in an alley near the location where he did his surveillance in the village street occupied his attention. With a glance to the man he was with, he gestured with his chin toward **the alley**.

As they approached, the sound of a gunshot echoed.

Bang!

Graham hustled to the alley, and when he held up his lantern and the golden light illuminated the interior of the space, a French soldier stood over the freshly shot body of a young man who was probably not more than eighteen who wore the uniform of the Portuguese army. "What the hell?"

The French soldier held a pistol that still had smoke curling from the nose. "He was my enemy. It was either him or me."

"Yet that man wasn't armed." He flicked his gaze to the dead boy. "There isn't even a pistol holstered at his waist or thigh. You killed this boy in cold blood. Murdered him."

"It was my prerogative." The Frenchman shrugged. There was a boredom in his voice and his face reflected antipathy. "This is war. I fight for my country just as you do." His hand went to the hilt of the dagger at his hip. "Walk away now or I'll be forced to do the same to you."

When Graham's companion moved to apprehend him, the Frenchman yanked a dagger from the belt at his waist. In a flash, the blade was plunged into his friend's gut and twisted for maximum damage. With a grunt and a sigh, he collapsed to the ground next to the young man's body. The whites of his eyes were clearly visible in the lantern light. He implored Graham as the life drained from him to end the Frenchman's life.

"Damn you." Uttering a cry of pure rage, Graham dropped the lantern. The tinkle of glass echoed in the air as he sprang at the Frenchman. With a powerful uppercut to the man's jaw, he followed it up with a powerful punch to his gut,

and when the French soldier tripped over the sprawled legs of the Portuguese young man, Graham took the opportunity to draw his pistol. He pulled the trigger before he could have second thoughts about it.

Bang!

The acrid scent of smoke filled his nostrils while the French soldier crumpled fully to the ground. As he jammed his pistol back in its holster, he peered down at the man, nudged him with the toe of his boot to make certain he was completely dead, then he knelt by his fellow soldier's side, held his hand while he took his last breaths.

"I got him, Mason. A life for a life, and I swear to you I'll end as many of the French scum as I can until this damned war is over." His eyes welled with tears, and he clung to his friend's hand until his fingers went slack.

Too much bloodshed. Too much death. When would it end?



The scent of a snuffed candle infiltrated Graham's nose, but it was the touch of Caroline's fingers on his arm that brought him back to the present.

"Lord Aldren, are you quite well?" Concern echoed in her voice as she held his gaze. "You've dropped your glass and all the color has leached from your face as if you've seen a ghost."

He blinked rapidly and shook his head to clear it. "Perhaps I have." Then he turned the full of his attention to Lord Everidge as he shook off Caro's touch. "Now I know why you seem familiar to me." Was that true, though? Was it true that the man before him had a brother, that same man that Graham had killed during the war? And perhaps that was why the knife wound in the courtesan's belly was oddly familiar.

Someone must have taught both brothers how to use that particular move.

Lord Everidge laughed, but his eyes were hard. “I’m sure I have no idea what you are talking about.” He looked at Caroline. “My lady, perhaps we should return to the drawing room and leave Aldren to his confusion. It is obvious his mind is bothered.”

She glanced at Graham. “Are you well?”

“I’m not sure.” Was it possible his mind was playing tricks on him?

The other man offered her his crooked arm. “You know how it goes with men who abuse opiates.”

That was outside of enough. Yes, he’d had issues with laudanum in the past, but he’d grown in the interim and knew his limits that he no longer relied heavily on the drug to get through life. “You are naught but a fool, Everidge, so I’m asking you as a gentleman to leave the lady alone.”

“I think not.” The peer made a movement toward the drawing room, while Caroline glanced over her shoulder at him, confusion evident in her gaze.

A faint red haze fell over his vision. Ignoring the curious looks from the couples milling about the corridor, Graham strode over to the man and wrenched Caroline’s hand from his sleeve. All he could see was that man in Portugal who’d killed the young boy as well as Graham’s own brother-in-arms. It would appear the brother—if that’s indeed who he was—was just as horrid. “I have asked you politely, Everidge. Now I demand satisfaction from you.”

Finally, Lord Everidge paused. He turned fully about to face Graham. “Since you are obviously intent on creating a scene in public, I ask that we away to the back garden and settle this as gentlemen.” When he tossed a look Caroline’s way that clearly meant Graham was out of his mind, heated anger climbed his throat. “Perhaps I can knock you out of your drug-induced stupor. If not, I’ll call for your carriage and send you home.”

As if I'm pathetic or have destroyed my life.

“You are welcome to try.” But he hadn’t trained in pugilistics for nothing. Far more annoyed than he had the right to be, he made his way along the corridor and then plunged down the staircase. The rhythmic thud of Everidge’s footsteps behind him let him know the man followed.

“Good heavens, Lord Aldren, think this through.” Concern threaded through Caroline’s voice as she brought up the rear. “You don’t need this on your conscience in addition to everything else.”

He ignored her; had to. Too many emotions were slamming through him, and in his mind, he was locked in the war, couldn’t unsee the carnage and the blatant horrors enacted by his fellow man against the same. Though his mind remained confused, he was certain Lord Everidge was the brother of the man he’d killed in Portugal. There was a certain chill in his blood, for he suspected that, if what he thought were true, this could possibly be the first real clue to the person trying to frame him for murder and possibly theft.

And he wanted answers, even if he was wrong.

By the time they’d gained the back gardens, whispers and rumors were undoubtedly swirling through the drawing room. There was nothing he could do about it, and neither did he care. It was hell having a mind that fractured every once in a while, when memories overlapped reality and he couldn’t make sense of things any longer. The urge to return home and bury himself in brandy laced with laudanum grew strong, but he was made of stronger stuff than that. Wasn’t he? And he’d already made big strides in overcoming those addictions. It was folly to ruin that now.

Caroline tugged on his arm. “Please reconsider,” she cautioned in a low voice. The golden illumination from the house’s windows bathed her in an almost heavenly light. “He isn’t worth the trouble.”

“I must,” Graham bit off as he yanked off his tailcoat and then shoved it into her arms. “He has trespassed on something after I have clearly told him I have claimed your

time this week.” Beyond the fact that his gut insisted *something* was afoot with the man.

“He is nothing to you,” she continued while he pulled off his cravat and gave that to her as well. “The two of you don’t know each other.” The worry in her chocolate-hued eyes gave him pause, but then he shook his head.

“Perhaps, but he is much too arrogant to let this go unchallenged.” Why couldn’t he be the bigger man and simply escort her away from the house, let the matter drop? Because that damned memory was stuck in his mind’s eye, and he was sure it was connected—somehow—to his current case.

When he turned back to face Lord Everidge, the man had also removed his jacket and had his fists raised. “I’m surprised you wish to do this, Aldren. Isn’t your name already being dragged through the muck?”

“How do you mean?” Slowly, he circled his opponent. Though he didn’t know Everidge’s skill in fisticuffs, he was more than confident in his.

“I’ve heard a few rumors you are wanted for murder.” There was a definite taunt in the other man’s voice. “Something about a courtesan.” Everidge’s eyelids flickered. “Messy business, that, but with your lofty friends, you’ve managed to keep it from general knowledge, haven’t you?”

Muscles pulled in his gut, but he snorted in disgust. “Where did you come by such fantastical information? It sounds like a desperate serial story found in a newspaper.” None of that had been released past the members of the Rogue’s Arcade. Only people tight in his circle knew details. “You must be desperate to think anyone would believe such drivel.”

“Time will tell.” Everidge swung the first punch, but Graham dodged the blow.

“Yes, it will.” And he hoped to God that by the time news broke of his involvement, the case would be well on its way to being solved. He struck out with an uppercut, clipped

the other man on the chin, but Everidge danced backward enough that it was only a glancing touch.

“Your reputation is crumbling, Aldren,” his opponent continued. “You are nothing but an object of pity within the *ton*.” He lunged, got in a jab that connected into Graham’s stomach.

“Oomph!” Stumbling backward, he glared while Caroline gasped. “I rather think you are guessing, Everidge, trying to get a rise out of me.” Graham came roaring back with a one-two punch to catch the other man in the chin and shoulder. God, it felt good to tag his fists into someone who deserved the beating.

In the back of his mind, he wondered if Caroline enjoyed his form while he faced off against Everidge.

That little bit of distraction cost him, for the other man clipped him on the jaw hard enough to spin him about. “Shit.”

Caroline gasped again. “Stop it right now, you two!” When she tried to insert herself between them, Graham eased her out of the way and put her behind him.

“Not in prime fighting shape, are you Aldren?” The teasing tone in Everidge’s voice worked to further incense him. “I’ll wager back in your military days, you were much handier in a fight than this, but then you probably didn’t use your fists, hmm?”

Though it wasn’t a secret he’d been in the military, those exact words gave him pause. Was that a reference back to the man in Graham’s memories? And if so, did that positively mean the two were related, or was he erroneously connecting them in the shadows of his mind?

“Tonight’s fight and what I did during combat are two very different things.” He lashed out with a fist, but his opponent easily sidestepped him. The momentum he had carried through, and he stumbled a few steps past Everidge’s location.

“Damn drunken fool.” The other man caught him in the back with the sole of his shoe and gave him a push that had

him falling face first into the soft, cool grass of the garden. The scent of earth overwhelmed his senses. “Go home, Aldren. You are embarrassing yourself.”

“Enough!” Caroline once more stepped in as Graham pushed himself to his hands and knees. She pulled Everidge away. “Go back inside. Such antics become neither of you.” When he didn’t immediately follow orders, she gave his shoulder a shove. “Now. If you choose to offer an apology, do so with a gift at my home. I may or may not be available to receive you.”

“Very well.” Everidge looked past her until his dark gaze connected with Graham’s. “You and I are not finished, Aldren.”

“Absolutely, we’re not, and the next time we meet, I *will* clean your clock.” Quickly, he scrambled to his feet and swayed a bit until he could find his bearings.

As the other man retrieved his jacket, he addressed Caroline. “Reconsider giving Aldren the advantage over me for your attentions. He will eventually go to Newgate while I remain an upstanding member of society both here and in France.” Then, with savage movements, he shoved his arms into his tailcoat, nodded at her, and then left the garden to presumably return to the house.

Graham shoved a hand through his hair. Various muscles and places on his body ached. “Caroline, I...” How could he explain when he didn’t trust that his own mind wasn’t playing tricks on him?

“I don’t wish to hear your explanation.” She held up a hand while clutching his discarded clothing to her bosom. In the dim illumination, her cheeks blazed with high color and her chest heaved. “Since I don’t want to worry my mother and sister nor should they leave the rout early, I demand you take me home.”

Fair enough. Not thrilled she was in another snit with him, Graham nodded. “It’s the least I can do.”

Chapter Ten



They had barely been settled within the dark confines of his carriage when Caroline shot the first volley into the silence. “What the devil were you thinking back there?” Her voice was little more than a hiss and graveled with all the emotions seething inside her. “Deliberately antagonizing that man, and for what? An excuse to use your fists?” Not that she’d minded. Watching him fight over her with another man had sent desire through her blood. The warmth of that awareness continued to wash over her. “If word of this incident reaches Edward’s ears, he’s going to confine me to the house!”

Why were men like that? At the first sign of someone tramping on what they considered their territory, they immediately sprang into possessive Neanderthals. Instead of telling said woman they might fancy her. Yes, the realization was the same, but she would have rather him say it in a romantic sort of way. The fact he was bothered by another man was telling.

“I swear I know that man, or at least know of him.” Graham was back to his sullen, impossible self—the man who arrived on her doorstep bloodied and disoriented. “When I served in the military and was sent to the Peninsula, my buddy and I were out on patrol. We encountered a French soldier who’d killed a Portuguese young man in cold blood, so we did something about it. That man reminds me much of Lord Everidge.”

“Does it really or is it merely a product of your imagination distorted by your time in the war?” She tossed his clothing to the side of her bench. “Be honest, Graham. You’ve told me you suffer from nightmares and day terrors. Was that what happened to you just before you challenged Lord Everidge to a bout of fisticuffs?”

“I don’t know.” He glared across the aisle at her. Tension fairly crackled between them, for he was quite ruggedly handsome with a shadow of whiskers clinging to his jaw and the placket of his shirt undone enough to give her a peek of his chest in the illumination from a nearby gas lamp. “Isn’t it enough I took him to task?”

“You cannot go around challenging every man who speaks with me to a fight!” She blew out a breath. “Especially when you haven’t the courage to be truthful with yourself.”

“Why the hell are you so damned managing?” The question was more or less a yell.

A knock on the roof of the carriage interrupted them. “I need a direction, my lord,” said the driver into the sudden rolling silence.

He peered at her through the darkness. Caroline looked back, daring him to follow her orders. “Damn it.” Shoving a hand through his hair, he said, “Drive about Mayfair a time or two. Go to Hyde Park. I really don’t care, Eads.”

“As you like, my lord.” Then the carriage lurched into movement.

She huffed. “Why the highhanded treatment? I asked you to take me home.”

“And I asked you to leave me alone, but you are quite stubborn.”

“As if you aren’t?” Fury mixed with flat out lust in her chest until she was panting from her efforts at remaining calm.

His eyes glinted in the dim light. “Why the hell are you out of temper with me? I did nothing wrong!”

“You did *everything* wrong!” Caroline shook her head. “I would think that a man who will no doubt be charged with murder before too long, especially after tonight, would at least try to keep a low profile instead of acting like a pigheaded young man and challenging a peer to a fist fight!” She cut off his protests with a raised hand. “You are supposed to be solving your case, but instead you’re preening and taunting like a rooster at a cock fight.”

Laughter from the driver only tempered her ire slightly.

Graham glared at her. “I rather doubt a rooster will preen at a cockfight, for there are only other roosters to impress instead of females.”

That set her off again. Why wasn’t he taking any of this seriously? “Then if there were ladies present, you’d be preening?”

“There was only you, and from the way you’re presently acting, it looks as if my taunting got under your skin.” That small grin, coupled with the forming bruises on his face, drove her completely to distraction. “Besides the fact you were obviously playing me off Everidge for a reaction, so get off that high horse, my lady. You’re no better than the rest of us.”

“Damn your eyes, Aldren.” Heat rose into her cheeks, for the accusation was true enough, and if she didn’t touch him right now, she would probably burst into flames. “I despise when you’re right.” Being pushed to the edge of reason by tonight’s events, she left her bench, loomed over him, and then leaning over, she smashed her lips to his in a poor attempt at a searing kiss. No doubt he would merely push her away and tell her such a thing couldn’t happen again.

He *did* pull away, breathing as heavily as she, and for the space of a few heartbeats, they stared at each other. When she tried to return to her bench, Graham snaked a hand about her nape—the reddened knuckles were difficult to ignore—dragged her to him, and when she sprawled awkwardly in his lap, he proceeded to kiss her apparently senseless for all the quarter he gave.

Dear lord, what is wrong with me that I must needle this man until he’s past his breaking point physically?

She didn’t know, but she was far too aware of him as a man. The faint scent of his cologne blended with the primal smell of man, and she craved every part of him. With a moan mixed with a cry of annoyance that she needed to break the kiss in order to shift positions, Caroline quickly moved into a more comfortable stance. He helped to haul her more firmly

into his lap so she straddled him with the turquoise skirts of her gown rucked up about her thighs and waist.

“Why are you like this?” she breathed against his sensuous lips that cradled hers all too well.

“Why are you?” He framed her head with his hands then once more a series of frantic almost desperate kisses were exchanged. “Lord Everidge is not a good man.”

“You told me *you* aren’t a good man.” She blew out a breath of frustration. Did he truly wish to talk at a time like this?

A growl escaped him, much like he’d done the whole time she’d conversed with Lord Everidge much to make Graham jealous, which had happened. “Don’t let him near you again.”

Well, that was outside of enough, but a thrill went down her spine all the same. “Why? You have no right to dictate my life.” Then, because she wanted to tease him, she squirmed against him and felt the not-too-subtle hardness of his arousal.

“Damned tart mouthed woman,” he said on the heels of a groan. “I might not have that right, but you don’t *deserve* that man.” Once more he claimed her lips, and there was so much authority in that gesture and the way he held her head steady that said far more than his absent words ever could.

Over and over, he moved his mouth on hers as if he were waging a campaign of conquest. Not even when he’d sent her flying in this very carriage days ago had he been as assertive or as thorough as he was now. One of his hands went into her hair. Pins and combs tumbled from the locks, and when a subtle prick of pain skittered along her scalp as he tugged her head backward, exposing her neck, it only enhanced her own need of him, and she kissed him back with matching enthusiasm. The fingers of his left hand curled about the back of her neck, and he glided the pad of his thumb along the underside of her jaw. The added stimulation put a hitch in her breathing.

Caroline wrenched away merely to suck in much-needed air. “You are quite potent tonight.” Never taking her gaze from his, she removed her gloves and then threw them over her shoulder. “I wonder why that is.”

“You tell me, for you’re watching me with hunger in your eyes.”

“Seeing you fight is a wonderful aphrodisiac.” She leaned forward and he hissed, shifted no doubt to accommodate his growing shaft. Oh yes, she wanted him. Into his ear, she whispered, “How far do you wish to go tonight, I wonder?” Daring much, she gave his ear lobe a quick nip.

“Shit!” Graham tugged more firmly on her hair, licked the side of her neck before releasing her. “Why don’t we discover that together?” This time, the viscount claimed her lips with more determination and aggression. When she balanced on her knees, held his head between her hands in order to better concentrate on kissing him back, he slipped his hands beneath her skirting. The silk and taffeta only heightened her awareness as it rasped over her legs, but as he trailed his palms over her skin, gooseflesh chased after his touch. “Your brother is going to kill me,” he murmured against her lips.

While she couldn’t help but agree, she tossed her head, and her freed tresses brushed against her back. “I don’t wish to speak of Edward just now.” She moved on from his mouth to lay a line of nibbles and licks beneath his jaw. The difference in texture from his smooth skin to where the nighttime shadow lingered fired her need and sent heat into her blood. When he groaned as she found a particularly sensitive point, she spent a few seconds at the spot, teasing it with her lips, teeth, and tongue.

Oh, this man will soon be my addiction.

“Ah, Caro.” Over and over, he kissed her as if he sought to learn every secret her mouth held. While she floated on clouds of passion, he explored the column of her neck, glanced his lips along her décolletage, caressed her thighs until

she stirred, restless, her eyes shuttered closed as she imagined how far he would go.

And how far she would let him this time.

“Tell me why I should choose you over Lord Everidge.” It was pure madness on her part to continue to tease him, but she couldn’t help it. If it kept him focused on pleasure, then she would do whatever it took.

“Managing baggage,” he whispered against the underside of her jaw. The viscount didn’t waste time with compliments or words. Instead, he worshipped her body, and that was perhaps more acceptable for she’d long dreamed of being at his mercy in this way.

Whatever was between them, only a dullard couldn’t see that it was based solely on mutual desire. Yes, he had been her crush for a handful of years, and though she was still enamored with him, perhaps she only wanted him for carnal pursuits. No one had to know; no one *would* know. They’d been careful except for the unfortunate incident tonight. Despite that logic, she gasped as he tugged down the bodice of her gown and the chemise beneath, gave into a shiver as the chilly air in the carriage wafted over her just-bared skin and tightened her nipples.

“So gorgeous,” he whispered and took both her breasts in his hands, mashed them together, weighed them, kneaded them, glanced his palms lightly over her erect nipples.

“Oh, dear God.” Caroline uttered a tiny whimper, for she needed so much more.

“We’re well beyond the help of any deity.” On the heels of a chuckle, he took one of those hardened buds into his mouth.

A shuddering sigh escaped her; there was no turning back, for she wouldn’t leave until he’d ruined her completely. It was time. Her mind separated from reality while he teased that tip with his lips and tongue. Breathing shallowly, Caroline’s head lolled to her shoulder. She arched her back, which put both breasts directly into his care. Like a man

presented with his favorite foods at Christmas, he devoured her offering, stroked, squeezed, pleased them until she squirmed upon his lap, a seething pool of hot need and blatant desire. For long moments Graham tormented a pebbled nipple with his tongue and at the same time eased a hand between her thighs.

“Oh, yes.” She long ago left decorum behind, for she wanted his touch so badly. When he found the swollen bud at her center, a squeal of delight left her throat. It was far too satisfying to feel his fingers working their way over her sensitive flesh. “I need more from you.”

He groaned. “In this, you and I are of the same mind.” Again and again, he circled that button with a fingertip, and each time she feared she would break apart from the sensations that coiled tight within her belly.

“I might be an innocent, but please don’t hold back,” she whispered as she stared into his eyes that were dark fathomless pools in the dim illumination from the gas lamps they passed.

“Message received.” He applied stronger friction to that pearl while his other hand drifted back to her breast.

“Mmm yes!” Soft sounds of enjoyment escaped her throat, and she couldn’t hold them back. “Just there. More, and... oh!” A gasp was pulled from her. She bucked against his hand. The fingers that rested on his shoulder clenched, digging into his shirt. “Oh!” Acutely aware they were in a carriage, and the driver was sitting not a foot above them, Caroline swallowed the scream that climbed her throat, but she writhed on Graham’s lap as a wave of release crashed over her.

“Next time I want to hear you as I send you over,” he whispered against the shell of her ear. “Either way, you’ve made me beyond hard.”

“Good.” Her chuckle was smoky with desire. Then she had nothing else to say, so she lowered herself back onto his lap and kissed him as if they both had minutes to live. By the time she pulled away, they were both panting and breathless. “My turn,” she said in a barely there voice.

“What do you mean?” Truly, he sounded all too confused.

“I thought you were an expert at physical relations.” Caroline slipped backward, balancing once more on her knees. She delved a hand through her skirting, and when she reached his front falls, she quickly worked the buttons from their holes.

“I am, of course, which is why I thought we would move directly to—Eep!” His spine went ramrod straight when she freed his erect shaft from his silken evening breeches. “Cheeky woman, what the hell are you doing?” He pinched one of her nipples to apparently punctuate his questions.

Pleasure streaked from her breast to between her thighs, where her core still throbbed with unfulfilled longing. “I’m tormenting you like you did me.” Then she carefully wrapped her fingers around his hot, thick length. “Dear lord, you’ll be so satisfying.” Was that scandalous to say out loud? It didn’t matter and she didn’t care, but imagining that rod sliding inside her own body sent a host of shivers down her spine.

“I can honestly say I’ve never met a woman quite like you.” As best he could, Graham widened his legs to give her better access, which prompted her to open her legs as well. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.”

“You wouldn’t. I was just sent over the edge.”

His chuckle sent tiny flutters through her lower belly. “I would and I will.”

Concentrating on him, she pumped her hand along his shaft. The silk over steel feel of him heightened her awareness, and as she cupped his hair-covered stones, he sucked in a breath. “Perhaps I should explore with my mouth.”

“Not tonight.” A gasp sailed from his throat when she found a rhythm and began to tease. “Fuck, Caro, you’re going to kill me.” One of his hands tightened on her outer thigh while he slipped the other once more between her legs. He kissed, licked, and fondled every portion of her body he could separate from her clothing.

Not to be outdone, Caroline did the same to him. Her free hand slid beneath his shirt to find a sprinkling of coarse hair decorating his chest. “Too bad I can’t see you.”

“Too bad,” he managed to gasp out, and reached around her to yank the window curtains closed. “Too much more and I’ll embarrass myself.”

She gave him an open-mouthed kiss. “Good.” Certainly, she felt the wanton with her gown sagging down her shoulders, her breasts bare, and her hair tumbling down her back. “I want you balancing on that razor’s edge.” Then a half-stifled squeal wrenched from her throat when he’d rubbed her sensitive button in just the right way that she rode a subtle wave of release. “Naughty man.”

“I’m not the reforming type.” His hand was back in her hair, and he claimed her lips again in a kiss that seared his taste, his scent, his touch into her brain.

“As it turns out, I rather enjoy being scandalous.” With a grin that felt all too wicked, Caroline maneuvered herself into position on his lap. “I hope you are ready for me, Aldren, because I have dreamed of this moment for far too long.”

“In an effort for honesty, so have I.” Gripping her hips, he peered into her eyes.

For one second, doubts snuck in. She shouldn’t do this; such an act came with consequences, and once her reputation was destroyed, she wouldn’t be able to reclaim it. “I shouldn’t do this. You were just with a courtesan last week and you’re a womanizer besides.” Where was her commonsense?

“All true.” He kissed and licked the side of her neck. “The choice is yours. Always has been.”

There was much more she needed from him, though. “Are you sorry about the careless lifestyle you have been living?”

His eyes were enigmatic as he met hers in the darkness. “God yes.”

That was all to the good. “Do you have diseases? I’d rather not involve myself with such a man.” It was the height

of awkward to have this conversation seconds before she would give him her innocence, but she couldn't live with herself if she didn't.

A chuckle came from him. "Yet you'll do the same with a man who might be known for murder?"

"Ha." Caroline ground her hips into him, jostling his member, which provoked a moan from him. "None of your cheek, Aldren."

"Fine." Though he groaned, he once more took a nipple into the warm cavern of his mouth and spent the next few moments torturing her in the sweetest of ways until she thought might go mad. "I'm healthy. Just saw my physician a few days ago for pains in the chest, brought on by recurring nightmares."

Poor man. "We shall discuss that later." She licked his bottom lip, but then the needs of her body got the better of her. "I..."

"If you would rather beg off, I'll understand, and I'll let you get *me* off with your hands instead," he whispered, and the warmth of his breath skated along her cheek.

Deep down inside him, he *was* a good man. She nodded. "Thank you."

Graham nuzzled the crook of her shoulder. "As I said before, the choice is yours."

"I've made it and have no regrets." With her heart beating far too fast, she slowly and oh so decadently positioned the head of his shaft at her opening. Chills of anticipation raced over her skin, but she maintained eye contact with him. Her heart squeezed when he grinned. Then she moved, slid down his long, thick length, but then stopped, fearful of the pain that was to come. "I... I... Help me. I don't want to do this part alone." Perhaps she wasn't as brave as she wanted him to think.

"I'm honored." With a nip to her chin, he slid his hands around to cup her arse, spreading the cheeks, digging his fingers into her flesh. "It'll go fast, but try not to think about

it.” When she nodded and held onto his strong shoulders, he tightened his grip, his fingers hard enough on her skin she feared he’d leave marks, then his muscles bunched and went taut. Seconds later, the viscount thrust upward with enough force to pull a surprised gasp from her as he broke through that slight barrier. He smirked. “Congratulations, you are now officially ruined.”

Heat went through her cheeks and chest, but she grinned like a loon. “Why do I feel as if I’ve been granted a boon of freedom?” With a laugh, she gyrated her hips in order to seat him better inside her body, and when he groaned, she giggled. “What now?”

“We move together. You come down while I thrust up. You are a quick study when it comes to kissing and arguing, so this should be easy for you.” A note of teasing lingered in his voice.

“I’ll try.” This was all so new to her, naughty and unfamiliar, but she was joined with this man, and it was even better than her dreams. With renewed confidence, Caroline moved up and down his straining, impossibly hardened shaft. Perhaps she would tease him into insanity. It took a few moments before she was able to work in tandem with him, but once she figured out how it worked, she found a rhythm she enjoyed. Each time she shifted downward, he stroked up. Soon she was slamming herself home with enough gusto to rock the carriage, but with rattling and shaking of the vehicle as it went over cobblestones, it was doubtful the driver would notice. “Oh goodness.”

“Keep going.” His hands were seemingly everywhere on her person—fondling, teasing, rubbing. Every touch enhanced the actions of their joining.

“Oh, oh, oh. This is…” Unable to finish the thought, Caroline let her eyes close in order to enjoy the moment.

Frantic, hard, and deep he went with each thrust. The sounds of her pleasure blended with his grunts and groans. Tingling raced down her back to bury deep in her core where he pumped in and out. As she bounced on his lap, Graham’s

thrusting quickened and intensified. She threw back her head, for she wasn't joking when she said she'd found a new freedom. One of his hands played at her breast, pinching the nipple and releasing it, which only enhanced everything else he did to her.

And she was far too primed to last. "I can't hold on." Yet she wasn't ready to end this glorious night.

"Neither can I." He thrust once more while she slammed down onto him. "Argh!"

"Graham!" A powerful wave of blissful release engulfed her. Caroline stiffened and as her body was racked with strong contractions that sent her flying into the heavens, she uttered a low-pitched scream. Vaguely she was aware of him stroking one last time. A lovely sort of warmth followed, and still she was lost. She ground herself against him in an effort to prolong the wonderful tremors, but eventually her strength gave out. With a moan mixed with a sigh, she fell onto his chest, her arms looped around his shoulders, her breathing ragged and labored.

"Damn, Caro. That was... I haven't come so intensely in a long time." The wonder in his voice made her smile, but when he wrapped her into his arms and simply held her in a loose embrace, she unexpectedly lost a piece of her heart.

"Since that was my first release during a coupling, I quite agree." All too much, she reveled in the intimate connection they still shared. Then a tired sigh followed. While she buried her head in the crook of his shoulder, she grinned. "I will never forget this night."

"Neither will I." His arms went tighter around her, and he pressed his lips into her hair.

Something shifted in their relationship during those heated moments, at least for her. No longer did she merely fancy him or carry a torch from a young girl's infatuation. Those feelings had changed, grown, and now she feared she'd been placed on the slippery slope that might lead to love if she wasn't careful. No, he wasn't a marriage-minded lord, but somehow that didn't matter in this one, sacred moment.

One thing was certain. Nothing would be the same after tonight.

Eventually, he stirred, encouraged her to meet his gaze. “Thank you for the gift you’ve given me.”

Heat went through her cheeks. “I’m glad it was to you.”

His swallow was audible. “Your brother is going to kill me, so I won’t need to try so hard to avoid the noose.”

“Stop.” Caroline swatted at his shoulder but then ended up softly claiming his lips. When she was done, she sighed. “We’ll muddle through, try to keep this from him for as long as we can. Then we’ll move forward from there. In the meantime, there is your case to solve.”

“And boxing lessons to look forward to.” With a pinch to her arse and a chuckle when she squealed, he grinned. “I never thought I’d bed Lockwood’s sister...”

“Do shut up, Aldren, lest I regret my decision.” But she couldn’t help her grin.

Chapter Eleven



October 8, 1817

Aldren House

London, England

Graham came awake gasping for breath with sweat covering his skin and vestiges of a nightmare clinging to his mind while the longcase clock in the corridor beyond chimed the two o'clock hour, yet shadows still clung to the room. Night hadn't yet passed.

Dobbs—his valet—came into the room with a lit candle. The flame danced eerily in the darkness. “Wake up, my lord. Concentrate on the sound of my voice so the nightmares will leave.”

How much did he appreciate the man? Sometimes, when he became lost in terrors left over from the war, waking didn't necessarily mean he'd left that hell behind. Instead, the images danced behind his eyes and through his mind even though his body was trying to operate in reality. Slowly, he focused on the valet with his red hair that was prone to curling and the slight Irish lilt in his voice, watched the flame of the candle dance in the chill of the room.

“I thought I was dead this time,” he admitted in a choking whisper as he forced a swallow into his dry throat. “The French were bearing down on my location where I'd hidden with Hazelton and Broadmoor.” He raked his fingers through his sweat damp hair and noted that those same fingers were shaking. “The duke suffered a saber wound to his back, was bleeding profusely; rain poured down. So much mud.” With longing, he glanced at his bedside table, but the

laudanum bottle was no longer there. There was now a glass carafe of water with a matching tumbler.

“But you three fought valiantly, and everyone was able to reach safety,” Dobbs said as he approached the bed. “No one was lost that day; your friends remain here in London.”

Graham nodded at the comforting sound of his valet’s voice. “Yes, this is true.” It was easier, now, to separate reality from the dream world. “If you would, bring me a brandy.”

“I’m afraid this is a request I must decline. You are trying to wean yourself from the vices. Remember?”

“I need a drink, or even laudanum. Something to dull the memories.” He threw the bedclothes off himself, surprised to find not a stitch of clothing on his frame. What the devil happened last night? Or rather earlier this night?

“I couldn’t live with myself if I were the one who fed your addictions.” Dobbs held his gaze, and his blue eyes were hard like sea glass. “You are better than the man you were.”

“I don’t feel like it.” In fact, he was battling yet another megrim and sweating profusely. “I feel like I’ve been run over by a carriage.”

“Nightmares coupled with withdrawal from both laudanum and liquor.” Dobbs assisted him out of bed and accompanied him across the room until Graham slipped behind the painted silk privacy screen. “You came home around midnight, my lord, with bruises and near-busted knuckles. Did you indulge in a round of fisticuffs?”

“Uh...” Had he? Then memories of the evening came back to him, and heat went up the back of his neck as he relieved himself in the chamber pot. “I did, actually.” As succinctly as he could, Graham told Dobbs about the taunts from Lord Everidge. “Do you think members of my staff gossiped about the dead woman the other day?” Knots formed in his gut. Had his staff betrayed him?

“I should say not. Everyone is fiercely loyal to you. Even while in your cups, you treat your servants with respect.” The valet was right there to help him gain the washstand.

“Then how could he know those details?”

“I couldn’t say, my lord.”

He frowned as he drew a damp sponge over his face, neck, and upper body. The coolness of the water helped to energize him and banish the rest of the nightmares. “Interesting.”

“Not as interesting as you babbling about the latest woman you’d been with and the fact she is no longer an innocent.” One of Dobbs’ eyebrows lifted as he caught Graham’s reflection in the square looking glass that hung above the wash basin.

The remainder of the evening came back to him now that the nightmares had eased. The rout. Dancing with Caroline. Going with her for punch. Her blatant teasing. Lord Everidge’s arrival. The subsequent fight and the peer’s warning. The argument with Caroline in the carriage when she demanded that he take her home.

Coupling with that same woman after kissing the hell out of her and seeing her come undone. Heat engulfed his entire being as he remembered how she’d looked, how she’d felt while riding him, bringing them both to orgasm on that damned carriage bench.

No wonder the muscles in his body ached.

“Lady Caroline,” he breathed. The realization that it hadn’t been a dream came over him, and he couldn’t help the tiny smirk of pride that pulled at the corners of his mouth. “I fucked her in my carriage after a heated argument. After I told Lockwood I’d leave his sister alone. After I promised myself I wouldn’t touch her following the last incident in that same carriage.” Slowly, he turned about to face his valet. “Damn but that was one of the best evenings I’ve spent in a long while.”

Dobbs snorted. “Did you promise the duke you would leave his sister be?”

“Not in so many words.” This changed everything. Could their relationship remain the same as it had been now that he’d claimed her body? Hell, for that matter, would she

wish to spend time with him? She'd been quite insistent and was more like a bloody Siren of old. The remembered touches she'd given his equipage had his shaft hardening. "I never overtly promised I wouldn't do anything with her."

I need to talk about this to men who will understand.

The urge to indulge in a drink—hide in a drink—crashed over him, but he truly had wished to change who he was. Because of Caroline's influence? It was difficult to say, yet all he knew was that need had taken root shortly after she'd come into life following the dead courtesan in his bed.

I want to be a better man who might be worthy of... something. As long as he could remain in her company. The previous thought was best left unfinished.

"What will you do now?" The grin that flirted about the valet's mouth sent hot annoyance stabbing through Graham's chest.

"I've promised to give her bloody boxing lessons later today."

"Surely not at this hour." When it became apparent Graham was casting about for clothing, Dobbs led him into the adjoining dressing room.

"No, of course not. However, I'm going to the Rogue's Arcade. Bedding Caroline has complicated my life in ways I'm not certain I'm ready for, and I need to discuss it with men who have—"

"—felt a similar confusion out of fear they might have fallen for the wrong woman as well, my lord?" the valet finished helpfully as he handed over a fresh lawn shirt.

Graham pulled a face. "I haven't fallen for her. As to the mistake?" He yanked the garment over his head and shoved his arms through the sleeves before smoothing it along his torso. "That is another problem entirely. My first priority is clearing my name of murder. Then I can turn my attention to everything else. That is if Lockwood remains in the dark about what I've done."

“May we be ever hopeful.” Without another word—but plenty of facial expressions—Dobbs assisted him in dressing.

A half hour later, Graham snatched up his gloves and then headed for the corridor.

“My lord?”

“Yes, Dobbs?” Between the headache, the memories of last night with Caroline, and the constant battle against his cravings, truly what he should do for the remainder of the night was stay in bed—alone. Yet the second he didn’t have something to occupy his thoughts, that’s when the demons sneaked in to torment him.

“Remember the promise you made to yourself, that you were leaving your vices behind in an effort to attract more... goodness into your life.” Worry shadowed the man’s face in the candlelight. “Don’t undo all the effort you’ve already put in.”

That humbled him. Knowing so many others cared about his life, left him shaking. “I’ll do my level best, and thank you, Dobbs. I’ve been a wastrel and a rogue for far too long. Perhaps it’s time I became an expert at something else entirely.”

So why did he have a feeling that particular road led directly to Caroline?



Another half hour later, he sat in a private room at the Rogue’s Arcade, and for three in the morning, there was quite a lot of activity filling the rooms. When a footman came to the table with his standing order of brandy, Graham shook his head and declined. “I would rather have a pot of strong coffee. Thank you.”

If the footman thought it an odd request, he was too well trained to show it.

Soon enough, other men from the club filtered into the room—Timelbury, Winteringham, and of course, Hazelton. Not seeing Lockwood come through the door sent relief twisting down his spine. “It’s good to see you.” No doubt Lockwood, Edenthorpe, and even St. Vincent had domestic tasks—or contentment—to keep them occupied. No longer were the rogues a cohesive unit, meeting together at all hours of the night. Bitterness cut through his chest.

Bah. That isn’t what I want for my own life.

Was it?

Hazelton chuckled as he took a chair next to Graham. “What trouble have you gotten yourself into now? We haven’t cleared the last spate.”

“Which is one of the reasons I’m here. Sleep is elusive.” Which wasn’t a lie, per se, but sleep now included being bedeviled by thoughts and feelings that related to Caroline. “There is much on my mind.” When the footman returned bearing a silver pot, a porcelain cup, and tiny pots of cream and lumps of sugar, Hazelton eyed him askance. “No brandy?”

“I am trying to reduce my dependence on various vices.” Graham refused to meet his gaze as he poured out a cup of the fragrant brew. “I have been made to see that I’ve used those things to hide behind, to escape from life, but now I must battle their hold on me.”

The men sitting around the table exchanged glances of surprise as murmurs of the same filled the air, but it was Winteringham who spoke first.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but a man only wishes to make such changes in his life for one of two reasons.” He held up a hand and put a finger in the air. “He has recently had a brush with death, or...” He held up a second finger as his gaze found Graham’s. “...he has met a woman who has sent his existence tip over tail.”

Heat crept along the back of his neck, but he took refuge in his cup of coffee. “Or perhaps said man is wanted for

a murder he didn't commit and wishes to do the most with the time he has been allotted."

"No." This time it was Timelbury who protested. He chopped the air with a hand while his blue eyes sparkled with mirth. "That may very well have been true a week ago, but something else has happened to you in the interim. Something... far too interesting."

Well, damn. "I have been conducting an investigation, of course."

Hazelton grinned. His light brown hair gleamed in the gaslights. "You might be looking for clues, but gossip has been buzzing about the contretemps involving you at a rout last night."

Was there nothing these men didn't know? He huffed and took another sip from his coffee. No, it wasn't as soothing or as satisfying as brandy, but it did warm his blood and give him the jolt he needed to remain awake. "Before I address that, tell me what you boys have found regarding my case. After all, the goal is to stay out of Newgate as well as the noose."

"I hardly think it will reach such a horrid stage, but after two additional days of poking around, we have discovered the agency—and I used that term loosely—who employed the courtesan."

"Oh?" Graham's spine straightened. "Who is she?"

"We don't know." Winteringham shrugged. He took a sip of his glass of wine. "She worked under an assumed name, of course, but no one at her agency seemed to know her real name or who her people were."

"Damn. So where does that leave us?"

Hazelton shrugged. His tall form was elegant; no one would suspect he enjoyed boxing. "Back at the beginning, I'd say. The body's gone unclaimed at the nearest morgue. No one cares enough to try to find her killer. Things like this happen to women like her every night in London."

A gnawing feeling began in the pit of his stomach. "And the parasol handle? Any news that it has been stolen?"

“Since that is within your purview, we haven’t chased down that angle.” Timelbury gave him an encouraging grin. “Besides since the piece is still in your possession, it is rather difficult to chase after a lead without being able to refer back to it.”

“Understandable.” With a groan, he realized he’d refused to take the parasol handle back into his possession from Caroline. “Possible clues?”

Hazelton’s grin was a dazzling affair. “You tell us. Rumor has it that Lady Caroline met you in Hyde Park a handful of days ago, and then you took her to a different destination before dropping her back at her carriage.”

“To say nothing of the fact you left the rout last night with that very same lady,” Winteringham added with a gleam in his eyes. He leaned forward and clasped his hands on the polished wooden tabletop. “Care to explain yourself?”

Heat rose in his chest. Images of Caroline in various stages of pleasure flitted through his mind to the point that he swore he could smell her perfume. As quickly and calmly as he could, Graham told them what happened at the rout with Lord Everidge and then the argument he had with Caroline following the bout of fisticuffs.

“You fought a man you didn’t know for the mere fact he dared to talk to a lady at a society event?” Winteringham said slowly as he exchanged glances with the other men.

“Not for that, obviously, but because he wishes to pay his addresses to her.” Then he explained the familiarity of Everidge to the man he’d killed in Portugal. “If he *is* related, I don’t want her anywhere near him.”

“To what purpose?” Hazelton frowned. He downed the whisky in his glass. “You have no right to the lady’s life, and you aren’t her brother.” One of his eyebrows rose in question. “Unless she means more to you than the mutual acquaintance of a rogue or the duke’s sister?”

“I am well aware of where I stand in her life or social connections.” For long moments, Graham stared each of them

down as heat crept into his cheeks. Then he blew out a breath. “The lady and I argued heatedly after that, about a variety of topics. One thing led to another and...” Surely, they wouldn’t make him admit it aloud.

Timelbury snorted. “And?”

When Graham bounced his gaze between them, all three men looked back with expressions of anticipation. “And I fucked her.” He shrugged. “Or rather she did that to me. It’s all wrapped in a haze, for the moment we started kissing and hands went beneath clothing, things happened so quickly. Then it was over, and she was no longer an innocent.”

Hazelton stared at him in open-mouthed shock. “Was this your first time with her?”

“Uh... no.” Graham shook his head then finished the remainder of the coffee in his cup. “We got a bit handsy in the carriage in Hyde Park days ago, and I truly thought my interest in her would drop at that point.”

“Yet there is something about the lady you find fascinating,” Winteringham said as he rolled his gaze to the ceiling. “You’ve never met anyone like her and can’t evict her from your mind, right?”

For some reason, his mocking tone poked at his annoyance. “Are you making jest of me?”

“That largely depends on whether you are trifling with the lady,” the viscount said with a grin that held a serious edge. “If you are only using her to fill the time, to relieve boredom, or because it saves you from walking about with a raging cockstand, I’m afraid in lieu of her brother, *I* must protest.”

It was time for him to take a hard look at himself. Throughout recent memory, he had used women for little more than his own pleasure, yet Caroline had come along and turned his world on its head. She was a managing baggage who knew her own mind, but she’d wormed her way into his existence, teased and taunted him to do unspeakably scandalous things to her—with her—and now where did that leave them? It was a

question he couldn't answer. Another was, could he see a future with her?

"I give you my promise as a gentleman and an upstanding member of this club, Lady Caroline is safe from me. I will not—have not—used her as I have every other woman of my acquaintance for the past few years." Then he met Winteringham's eyes. "And yes, she is uppermost in my mind, like a muse or a siren or even a bad trip, but she's there, and for the moment, I am quite all right with that."

Once more Hazelton appeared shocked. "Do you wish for a future with her?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "There is nothing to recommend me to her. I am nothing, and she is..." The urge to retch climbed the back of his throat. "She is so much better than I am, for I am a man broken from the war, a man who holds a title that was gifted to him, a man who hasn't done much of consequence in recent years except chase vices and addictions."

"While that is true, look at you now." Timelbury flicked his glance to the coffee pot. "You are making an effort to change, and since there is no other worldly reason why except her, we all know what that means." His grin reflected compassion and joy. "If you can manage to win her heart, I will be the first to congratulate you."

Winteringham nodded. "You are like all of us, Aldren. Wounded and scarred from the war, but you remain alive for a reason. Make sure living a lovely life, showing others the same, is that reason." A flash of pain reflected in his eyes. "That is the dream of us all. To finally be content with ourselves, whether or not we've found love. To forgive ourselves for what we had to do while fighting for England."

A wad of emotion stuck in Graham's throat. "Thank you, but I don't know if love is what is between us." Lust, certainly. Desire, of course. A budding friendship, possibly. Respect, definitely on his part for her.

Does she respect me, though?

“The fellows are correct.” Hazelton dropped a hand on Graham’s shoulder. “If she is the motivating factor behind your wish to change, that is all to the good. Keep going, and fate will meet you eventually.” He clasped his hands on the tabletop. “More to the point, does Lockwood know you’ve defiled his sister?”

“God, I hope not.” Pouring out another cup of coffee, he glanced about the table. “What do I do now? I’m still wanted for murder.” The encounter with Lord Everidge still rubbed him the wrong way.

“We shall summon a council of war soon. Until then, be cautious. Keep the lady safe. Continue your investigation.” Hazelton shrugged. “And for God’s sake, stay out of your own head. You deserve good things in life, Graham. Don’t think you don’t.”

His friends had rendered him speechless, so he merely nodded and continued to drink his coffee. The boxing session would need to wait. Today was for visiting that pawn shop.

Chapter Twelve



October 8, 1817

Marlowe House

Marylebone, London

Anxiety rode Caroline's spine as she looked across the narrow aisle at her mother and younger sister, Elizabeth. Edward had sent over a note not an hour past telling them that Juliet had been laboring for the better part of twelve hours. "Oh, why is it taking so long for this carriage to complete its journey?" The trip wasn't even across the breadth of Mayfair! Worry knotted in her belly, for birthing a child was fraught with danger.

"Settle, Caroline. Why are you so high strung these days?" Her mother looked at her with critical eyes. "For that matter, you've popped in and out of the house for most of the week, and you never tell me of your comings and goings. How have you been spending your time?"

She almost giggled. "Oh, doing this and that. There is quite a lot to do just now."

"With whom?"

"It depends on the day." By sheer willpower alone, Caroline ignored the heat in her cheeks as she glanced at the carriage window at the sun-drenched world. "Why, just the other day, I dropped in on a man who collects rare and expensive things from all over the world."

Her mother gasped. "By yourself?"

"Of course not, Mother. I had a companion with me." She and Graham had visited the collector after he'd done those

delicious things to her with his mouth and fingers in the carriage.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “I think she’s lying. Probably sneaking out with a man.”

“Do shut up, Lizzie. You know nothing of it.” Caroline made a face at her sister. Elizabeth had been a surprise baby for their parents and was nine years her junior. She’d just made her own Come Out last year, but so far, she hadn’t any luck in attracting a rich and biddable—stupid—man, a man with many varied interests that might occupy his time so he wouldn’t want to trail after her day in and day out. Those odd traits were what *she* wanted in a husband.

“I know enough to think that if the right person came into my life, and that person made me heated and cooled by turns, who offered me a way out of my current existence, I wouldn’t hesitate to run away with said person.”

For long moments, silence reigned inside the carriage as Caroline peered more intently at her sister. She had been extremely careful not to say “man” in her outburst, but why? In fact, every time Elizabeth had been at a society function, she’d always looked ill-at-ease whenever she’d had to talk with men. Of course, she was young, but she had been the more vivacious of them, and with her hair more of a sandy-blond color, she’d been the prettier of them both. There should have been no reason she didn’t have a line of would-be suitors. Perhaps she did, but she just didn’t pay them mind. Caroline wouldn’t know since she had been busy herself for the past week, but when her gaze fell on Elizabeth’s right hand, she noticed a thin ring made of braided hair resting on her middle finger.

From a special suitor who perhaps wasn’t a male?

When Elizabeth became aware of Caroline’s interest, she quickly tugged on her kid gloves and then folded her hands in her lap.

How interesting. Perhaps if she could get her sister alone, she would ask.

“She’d best not be sneaking out. Caroline has too many respectable suitors to willingly throw herself away on scandal.” Her mother leveled a glare at her. “And from the way you keep rejecting all of them, I despair of you ever making a match. I’m running out of suitors, and you are nearly thirty!”

“Leave it alone, Mother. I will choose a man in due time.” As if age was an impediment. Her mind jumped to last night after the rout when she and Graham had argued and then afterward, they’d come together in a frantic and wild coupling. Afterward, she’d known her life had changed, but she still couldn’t believe it. Finally, after all the dreaming and fancying and pining, not only had the viscount noticed her, he’d claimed her body with his.

Where did that leave them?

Her mother sniffed. “I am trying my best to look after you. Lord knows Edward abandoned that task.”

“He didn’t abandon us. He is married and now his wife is his first priority. As it should be, and soon he will have a family of his own.” Caroline blew out a breath. “Besides, I am old enough to know my own mind. I can look after myself to a certain extent.”

“Your future needs settling. As does Elizabeth’s. I want titled men for you both.”

She exchanged a look with her sister, who shrugged. “Perhaps you’ll have your wish.” Though not by the means she thought. Was Graham of a mind to marry? And if he was, did she want a man with his flaws and shortcomings? Had Edward been right after all when he said that being involved with a Rogue’s Arcade man came with too many struggles?

In the end, it didn’t matter, for the moment they entered the ducal townhouse, the staff was wreathed all in smiles, and the news filtered down from the butler that the duchess had been delivered of a son.

“That’s wonderful!” Caroline rushed out of the entry hall toward the staircase as Edward was coming down. “I just

heard the news!” As soon as he gained the floor, she threw herself into his arms. “You have an heir.” She couldn’t help the tears in her eyes, and as she pulled away, the rest of her family joined them.

Edward’s grin was this side of goofy. “I have an heir.” Exhaustion lined his face. “It has been a long night. Juliet was in a fair amount of pain. I thought it would never end.” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “They are both healthy but tired. You may peek in if you’d like but don’t linger. I’ll have you all over later in the week for a proper visit, but I wanted my family around me in the event something... occurred.” There were tears in his eyes as well.

“That’s perfectly understandable.” Caroline bussed his cheek. “Tell Juliet I’ll spend some time with her when she’s feeling more the thing.”

“I will. Do you want to come up?”

“Not yet. I’ll do so later but take Mother. She’s quite excited. I’ll return home.”

“I’m glad you came.” He nodded. Then he beckoned to their mother and sister, led them up the stairs.

Though it was a joyous occasion, a twinge of envy went through her chest. She didn’t begrudge Edward the babe, just the love and contentment he’d found with first Juliet and now his son. Then she reminded herself his romance hadn’t come without struggle, so perhaps there was hope for her, but being here in a house full of wonder and happiness only served to pick at her inadequacies. Remembering she had Graham’s parasol handle in her reticule, she went back outside and told the driver to take her to the pawn shop.

She could gain some answers for the viscount and then he might view her as more than a lover.

Perhaps.

When she arrived at Raddick's Pawns and Antiquities in the quiet cul-de-sac off Bond Street and alighted from her carriage, she gasped to find Lord Aldren's vehicle waiting at the curb in front of hers. "What the devil is he doing here?" Putting a hand to her bonnet, she walked swiftly along the pavement and then pushed open the door to the shop. The cheerful tinkle of a tin bell announced her arrival.

Ordinarily, she adored exploring the shelves and tables within the shop. There were usually interesting and odd objects to procure, yet today, she had a much larger quarry. Both the owner of the shop and the viscount glanced up. Both wore expressions of delight and welcome, but as she approached the front counter where they talked, Graham's eyes darkened. He blatantly roved his gaze up and down her body.

A shiver played her spine, for Caroline swore she felt his regard as if he'd caressed her with his hands. And that only made her revisit their naughty endeavors from yesterday in her mind. "Good afternoon, Lord Aldren, Mr. Raddick." *Good heavens, Graham is so handsome!*

The men nodded. The owner of the shop greeted her first. "I'm glad to see you again, Lady Caroline. My sister will be jealous."

"It *has* been an age since I've visited with her." She flashed a smile. "Tell her I'll call soon to catch up on the gossip." Then she half-turned to the viscount. "I'm surprised to find you here. I thought you were one of those men who didn't rise from his bed before noon."

"I, uh, was plagued by a nightmare and woke in the middle of the night."

Upon further inspection, the lines of fatigue on his brow and wrinkling the delicate skin at the corners of his eyes was more than visible. "I'm sorry to hear that. Are you well?" She couldn't imagine going through life battling such things, and her heart trembled for him.

"More or less."

Caroline dropped her voice. “No, uh, aids got you through?”

“No. I gritted my teeth, talked to my valet, and then went to my club.” She must have looked surprised, for he grinned. “I *am* looking forward to taking tea after this. I’m quite famished. All I’ve had to eat since early this morning is copious amounts of coffee.”

“Coffee?” Her eyebrows lifted in surprise, and though Mr. Raddick looked on with undisguised interest, she continued, “I thought you preferred brandy.” On the pretense of pulling the hem of her skirting from beneath her heel, she moved closer to him by a few inches. After sniffing, she couldn’t discern the telltale fumes of the alcohol.

How interesting.

“I thought a change might be in order, but it has kept me alert and awake since three this morning, and the fellows at the club thought the coffee was quite the joke too.” His chuckle tickled through her chest. “By the by, I’m here to inquire about a certain bejeweled antiquity.” He widened his eyes slightly. “The one you wished to study the other day.”

“Oh, yes. My apologies for accidentally taking it home instead of returning it to you at that event the other night.” Trying to remain vague required more cogitation than she was capable of at the moment, but as Mr. Raddick looked on with a patient smile, she pulled the parasol handle from her reticule and gave it to Graham. “It *is* quite stunning.”

“Indeed, it is.” He held it aloft between his thumb and forefinger so the pawn shop owner could see it. “Do you recognize this piece, Mr. Raddick? I have it on good authority it dates back to the court of King Louis XIV.”

The shop owner nodded as his eyes lit. “Oh yes! I remember that piece well. It resided here behind the counter for months, for we couldn’t obviously sell it at a discount, and most folks who visit aren’t looking to part with a fortune.”

“Did anyone come into the shop with a particular eye for this piece?” Graham continued to move the handle this

way and that. Light refracted off the stones until it looked as if he held a riotous party in his hand.

“There were a few, but only one stands out to me.”

Caroline tamped on the urge to huff out her frustration. “Who?”

“I believe it was Lord Everidge.” An expression of satisfaction crossed Mr. Raddick’s face. “Congenial chap. Comes in once a week and usually buys something each visit.”

Dear lord! She glanced at Graham, who widened his eyes again. The same shock running through her system reflected in his face. “So, he obviously bought the piece then.”

“He would have had to, for there isn’t another like it in all of London, but *I* didn’t sell it to him.” The shop owner shrugged. “Perhaps my cousin did. He sometimes handles things here when I can’t. I shall ask him the next time I see him.”

For long moments, silence reigned in the shop, then Graham tucked the parasol handle into the pocket of his waistcoat. “No need. Now more than ever I’m quite certain Everidge purchased it, but for what purpose I have no idea.” Yet there was a banked anger in his voice Caroline had not heard from him before.

“Gentlemen are peculiar about what they collect.” Mr. Raddick beamed. “Can I interest you both in something else?”

“Not today. Thank you for your time.” Caroline gave him a wave. Seconds later, she encouraged Graham through the shop and then outside. “What now? Why the devil did Everidge have the parasol handle? Did he buy it for the killer?” She gasped. “Is *he* the killer? But why?”

“I don’t know, but perhaps he truly *is* related to the man I killed in Portugal. More research is needed so I can determine that memory wasn’t merely produced from a laudanum haze.” He wrapped a hand around her upper arm and steered her toward his carriage. “Tell your driver to return home. I’ll escort you back later.”

She frowned. “Where are we going?” Not that she minded being in his company. There *were* things they needed to discuss.

“Eventually, for tea, but first, to Hyde Park. It’s a fine enough day, so let us enjoy it. Besides, there is a tea house near that location, and I rather fancy the sponge cake there.” Then he handed her into the carriage, murmured directions to his driver—the same one as yesterday, who gave her a smirk—and by the time the viscount joined her inside the vehicle, heat burned in her cheeks.

For the space of a few heartbeats, Caroline watched him across the aisle. He was every inch the relaxed and unaffected gentleman about Town, except for the muscle that ticked in his cheek. “Are we going to ignore what happened yesterday?” She’d been floating on clouds when she had been escorted home last night. Being utterly and completely ruined had been the best thing to ever happen to her, but once she’d been safely ensconced in her room and away from the passionate fog of his making, commonsense crept in.

If Graham didn’t come up to scratch over the coming weeks, and as a result of that coupling she found herself with child, what would happen to her? There was a very real possibility her future could be snatched away before she’d ever had time to plan it. The disgrace would be horrible; Elizabeth’s future would be taken away as well. Edward would be livid and would probably banish her to one of his country estates. And she’d have a child she didn’t know if she wanted, for being a mother hadn’t been on her horizon.

“For the moment, yes, we are, but make no mistake. That session is uppermost in my mind, not because I’m worried or full of regrets, but because I enjoyed myself so heartily.” When he met her gaze, nothing but truth was reflected in those rich brown depths. “How do you fare afterward?”

“Well enough.” She waved his concern away, for his words were enough to send warmth into her belly. “There was some blood on my shift and petticoat, but I folded the garments and buried them deep in a trunk beneath old, unused

things.” With a shrug, Caroline dismissed the awkwardness. “There is no pain today.”

“Good.” He drummed his fingers on his thigh, which only served to draw her notice to how lovely his legs were encased in those tan breeches. “Why did you come to the pawn shop this afternoon?”

“I wanted to continue our investigation, and since I hadn’t heard from you...”

A hint of color shadowed his cheekbones. “As I said, I woke with a nightmare then went to the Rogue’s Arcade.” With a sigh, he shook his head, looked out the window. “Where I truly did drink coffee, even though the detoxification from both liquor and laudanum are trying the best of my strength.”

“Then you weren’t lying in front of the shop owner?”

“I was not.”

Happiness bubbled through her chest. She allowed a small smile. “I’m pleased for you, Graham, and proud. Good things are in the offing for you, I think.”

“Thank you, but why would you continue the investigation?” Honest confusion shadowed his expression. “I could have taken care of it.”

Another piece of his puzzle moved into place, and she gasped from the realization. “Do you truly believe everyone is as you are—or were since you are bettering yourself?” When he didn’t answer, she rushed onward. “Just because you and I coupled doesn’t mean I am done with you.” She leaned forward and rested a gloved hand on his knee. He flinched as if she’d struck him. “I won’t lie and say intercourse wasn’t wonderful, but that isn’t *all* I want from you. Men and women are quite capable of enjoying a relationship—friendship if you must put a label on it—together while being distracted by physical needs.”

At least she hoped so, for by his own admission he left women once he’d bedded them.

“Is that what is between us, then? Friendship?” A trace of annoyance wove through his question. The hand resting beside him on the bench curled into a fist.

“Uh...” When she tsked her tongue and flicked her gaze to his hand, he immediately relaxed his fingers. “Friendship, an affair, an unorthodox courtship. Take your pick, and I won’t find offense in any of them.”

Surprise sprang into his expression. “You wish for me to court you.” It wasn’t a question.

Slowly, she nodded, for that was the next logical step. “I do.”

“Your brother has forbidden such a thing.”

She snorted. “He’d also have an apoplexy if he ever discovers what we have *already* done together.” What she still wished to do *to* the viscount—and with him. “I shall take care of Edward. It might take some convincing, but perhaps he’ll come ‘round.”

“I rather doubt that. He was adamant I stay away, that I not touch you.” His eyes darkened slightly. “Of course, I don’t listen to orders very well.”

“That largely depends on the command, doesn’t it?” Flutters danced through her lower belly. “We shall keep whatever it is between us to ourselves for the time being, but I don’t want to put pressure on you. Consider it a relaxed sort of thing, merely to explain our spending time together in the event rumors begin to circulate.”

“I...” His swallow was audible. “I haven’t any practice being a suitor, and I am afraid that if we become too involved, the man I am will prove too disappointing for you. And there is every possibility I’ll go to Newgate.”

Oh, the poor man! A piece of heart flew into his keeping, and it was much different from the blind infatuation of her youth. Caroline patted his knee. “You could never disappoint me... unless you fall back on your vices.”

“I won’t. You have my word.” Hope lit the backs of his eyes, faint yet, but it was there.

It fed her own. “Good. Will we indulge in our first boxing lesson today as scheduled?”

His face fell. “Tomorrow would be better. I am not in the right frame of mind, and would rather spend the time with you doing expected society things such as tea.”

She couldn’t help her smile. “That is acceptable.”

“Caro?”

“Hmm?” When she glanced at him, insecurity flashed over his face.

“Are you truly willing to let Lord Everidge pay his addresses after our discussion just now?”

“Isn’t it better to keep your enemies close?” With a wink, she relocated to his bench and settled beside him. His growth into a better man was coming along nicely. “Trust me when I tell you there is nothing to worry about or be jealous over... unless you’d like to call him out again. It was quite thrilling to watch you in a bout of fisticuffs.” Already, she was becoming hot and bothered thinking about it.

His chuckle sent shivering tingles through her chest. “Noted.” Then he flicked the edge of her bonnet. “Why are you wearing headgear? Never since we have been out together have you bowed to such convention.”

“I was with my mother and sister earlier this afternoon as we went to Edward’s home, which necessitated following the rules. His wife was delivered of a son today.” It felt all too natural sitting in the carriage beside him.

“I’m happy for Lockwood. Should probably call on him and wish him well.” He moved his hand and his fingers brushed hers.

“He would like that.” When she curled her pinky around his, he didn’t pull away. “Thank you for inviting me to tea. I hadn’t realized how famished I am.” For more than mere food, but she didn’t want to rush things, and truly, she wanted their next carnal encounter to be somewhere other than a carriage.

One day at a time.

Chapter Thirteen



October 9, 1817

Aldren House

London, England

Graham paced in front of the windows in his drawing room that looked out onto Cherry Tree Lane where his townhouse was located. Where was she? For that matter, would Caroline even make an appearance?

It was two minutes past the three o'clock hour, which was the time they'd agreed to meet at his home for her first boxing lesson, and since she'd always been prompt before, the fact she was late now caused him undue anxiety. They'd also agreed it was a good idea for her to come in disguise in the event there were prying eyes.

Yet she hadn't arrived.

Just when he formed the thought to track her down, movement out of the corner of his yanked him out of his musings. A hired hack had pulled up to the curb a couple of townhouses down from his but was clearly visible from his windows. When a young boy hopped out of the hack with a cloak swirling about his body and a low black cap pulled down over his eyes, Graham couldn't help but grin.

She's here!

For it could only be Caroline, and in extremely scandalous attire indeed. She was dressed in the same outfit she'd worn that horrible night when she'd burst into her brother's drawing room after Graham had discovered the dead courtesan in his bed. In her hand she carried a brown leather

valise, no doubt containing a more respectable outfit for the sister of a duke.

Once the hack pulled away from the curb, Caroline headed up the pavement toward his house. He lost sight of her the closer she came to the residence, but his anxiety evaporated, replaced with heated currents of anticipation. Hell, it was far too risky to have her here unaccompanied, let alone dressed as a boy, but he didn't care. It was the only way he could safely begin their boxing lessons, unless she'd preferred them to be in Hyde Park.

Which wasn't a bad idea. Perhaps in the future.

Though his butler had been instructed to usher her directly into the downstairs parlor, which had long ago been converted into a home boxing salon, Graham hurried along the corridor and then raced down the stairs. He ended up intercepting Caroline as she followed behind the butler toward the parlor that was situated at the rear of the house.

"I'm glad you decided to keep the appointment. Learning the art of fisticuffs will be quite useful in life."

"I suspect knowing such will be good in the event I find myself in trouble." She nodded to the butler and then proceeded into the parlor.

"Except *you* are usually the one who instigates trouble." He glanced at the butler. "See that we aren't disturbed for the next hour, Wilson. Once the hour has elapsed, we'll take tea in the drawing room."

"Very well, my lord." Then the older man left on silent feet and closed the door behind him. If he took issue with Graham giving a boxing lesson to a female dressed in men's clothing, he was too well-bred to say anything.

"During this first lesson, you and I won't share punches." By the time Graham turned back to Caroline, she had removed her cloak.

Even though he'd seen her in this outfit before, hell, he'd been beneath her skirting with his fingers and face—he'd *claimed* that very body he now ogled—his lower jaw dropped

to see Caroline in her full glory clad like that. *Fuck me twelve ways to Sunday. The woman is going to kill me, I swear it.* Dressed in buff-colored men's breeches, a lawn shirt with full sleeves, and a brown vest over the top of that, she was most certainly his muse or a siren straight out of his dreams. Brown leather half boots—cut to a woman's foot—completed the ensemble. “Damn, but I must ask you not wear such clothing for any other man.”

“Why, Lord Aldren, are you having trouble concentrating?” Teasing was evident in her voice, and it worked even more to heighten the awareness racing over his skin.

“I'm fine.” Needing something to do with his hands instead of tug her into an embrace where he would slide those hands beneath that shirt of hers, he yanked off his superfine jacket and then tossed it in the direction of a straight-backed wooden chair. Half the room had been cordoned off by ropes. Mattresses covered that part of the floor. “Uh, you might want to take off the boots.”

“Oh?” She lifted an eyebrow, and he snapped his gaze to hers from her legs as heat crept up the back of his neck and into his groin.

“Easier to maneuver,” he managed to choke out. As he tore at the laces of his waistcoat and struggled to remove it from his form, he gave up the struggle to put her from his mind. He raked his gaze down the length of her body to pause at the tempting vee of her thighs. Damn, but he couldn't help but remember what her heated flesh had felt like to his fingers and tongue, what that honeyed heat had been like the first time he'd trust upward... *Shit!*

Graham took a ragged breath and firmly pinned his regard to her face, where indecision brewed. *Find a distraction!* “Fighting is easier without extra clothing. In the ring, we box bare-chested and oftentimes bare footed.” The crowd enjoyed seeing a well-worked physique and would oftentimes wager more if both combatants were easy on the eyes.

“Have you boxed for prize winnings?” she asked while she toed off her half-boots.

“A handful of times. I’ve won more than I’ve lost.” Would she censure that?

“How wonderful!” Caroline’s grin was genuine. “I hope I can someday see you fight in a professional capacity.”

“Perhaps we can make that happen, but you’d have to come disguised. Bouts occur outside of London proper, and women are not allowed to attend.”

She blew out a breath and rolled her eyes. “When do I ever do what’s expected?”

“Not since I’ve known you.” He uttered a snort. “Regardless, I’m not scheduled for a bout, though, for a few weeks.” Shoving the fetching image of her in breeches from his mind, Graham grinned. “Being with me here will have to suffice.” He sat on the chair and proceeded to remove his boots.

“As if that is such a bad thing?” It was her turn to send her gaze up and down his person, which resulted in blood rushing to his shaft, tightening it against the front of his breeches.

Oh, she’d definitely be trouble. Standing, he dusted his hands together. “Let’s begin.” He closed the distance, and immediately her floral scent teased his nose. “You need to learn how to make a proper fist.” He held up a hand, fingers curled, thumb across his digits. At least the instruction would provide much needed distraction or else they’d end up on those mattresses for a completely different reason than sparring.

“I don’t know that I’ve given thought to how a fist should be formed.” She experimented with her own fingers. “Like this?”

“No. Mind your thumb. It’s too easy to break if tucked under.” Again, he held up his own fist as he drifted to her side. “There you go. Like that.” He nodded, and pleasure lit her eyes. “Now, let’s work on your stance. Plant your feet, knees

slightly bent, arms up and fists at the ready.” He demonstrated the correct form. “The fists are what connect to your opponent, but your arm is where the power lies. Your feet will help to keep you upright.”

“I never knew there were so many steps to boxing.”

“This is only the beginning. I could probably teach you for six months with everything you’d need to know, but this will be a simplified course.”

“Because you don’t believe I can do this?” Awkwardly, she assumed the position.

“No, because I want you to be comfortable and retain the lessons. I well know how impetuous and impulsive you can be.”

She snickered. “Fair enough. How do you know which fist to punch with and when? Does your body move of its own accord, or should I know that as well?”

“All that will come in time. Right now, I’ll teach the basics. In some respects, it is much like dancing. The best bouts are choreographed and beautiful with footwork before the first punch is thrown.” Graham then demonstrated how to throw a punch. Never had he been more aware of how he moved. “Lead with your first two knuckles. Where they go is where your fist will land.”

“Let me see that again,” Caroline asked with a wicked light in her eyes. “Oh, and it might make a greater impact on me if you removed your shirt.”

“Ha! You don’t need such a distraction, I think.” But he showed her how to move the fist.

“Ah. Thank you.” She copied the movement but twisted her arm slightly in the delivery.

“Not quite. Remember, keep everything tight. Save your energy.” Graham maneuvered himself behind her. The faint scent of perfume drifted to his nose, but he ignored the temptation. “Straighten your arm when you swing.” He framed her body with his, leading her arm like how it would be if she were punching on her own, but her muscles were taut. “Never

say you're nervous." Surely that wasn't possible for one so self-possessed as her.

"I've never done something like this before, so yes. I'm nervous. Don't wish for you to think I'm incapable."

"Never. You are hardly that." At the last second, he tamped on the urge to grin. "Relax. Boxing while stressed will find you injured."

By increments, Caroline relaxed. Again, she attempted to move her arm while he guided her fist. "Somehow, I fear this will be more complicated than I originally thought."

"Boxing will give you more confidence. Why did you want to learn this?" Having her in his arms but not for carnal reasons was far too tempting, but he concentrated on the art form instead of on her.

"Honestly, I grow weary of being in a world that assumes women are little more than show pieces or property, that we are not intelligent enough to make a difference." When she suddenly turned about in his arms, he backed away, giving her space.

"Then your plan to gain notice is to enter a ballroom with fists flying?" As she watched, he demonstrated how to move her other arm. "Lead with your dominant hand. Find your mark with the knuckles, and while your opponent is distracted, come at them with an uppercut from your second fist."

"Like this?" Caroline mimicked exactly what he'd done.

"Yes, you're getting it." Pride for her welled in his chest. "If you wish to thumb your nose at the whole foundation our world rests on, then discover a platform. Find a cause and throw your support behind that, but by all means, don't do what society expects out of fear that you might have to go into the future alone." It was only a guess on his part, but he knew enough about her to voice it.

Shock filtered into her eyes. "I'm nearly a spinster, Graham. But much of that is my own fault for being too picky,

for never being interested in men who didn't remind me of you." She shrugged and experimented jabbing with her fists. "Edward has started his nursery, and unless I'm off with my instincts, my sister is far more likely to enter into a scandal with lasting impacts than I am."

"Meaning?" He frowned, for he really had no knowledge of her family.

"This is only speculation on my part, but I suspect my sister only wishes to marry well so no one will suspect where her heart truly lies."

His eyebrows rose. "A lover?"

"I don't know." Caroline lowered her voice. "A potential *female* lover at that." She threw a punch that surprisingly clipped his shoulder. Her eyes widened and a giggle escaped. "I will try to find some time to talk with her, give her as much advice as I can, but I just want her to be happy. Like Edward."

How the devil had she gotten a touch on him her first time, without any sparring practice? Too damned distracted by her, that's why. "What of you and your own happiness?" In some amusement, Graham circled about her, keeping light on his feet with his fists raised. Then he struck out and his fist barely grazed her cheek, much like a butterfly's wing, for he wasn't the sort of man who would strike a woman, even in a boxing lesson.

At least not without the padded gloves—mittens—laced on.

For the first time since he'd known her, a trace of vulnerability moved through her eyes. "That remains to be seen and depends on many things, I suspect." She struck out with a punch that caught him on the chin.

There wasn't much force behind the blow, but it made him stumble back in surprise all the same. "Somehow, I feel you'll be a natural at this in no time."

"I *am* rather enjoying myself." Slowly, Caroline came toward him. Stalked him, if he were being honest, but she

laughed, which made him do the same.

Damn, when was the last time he'd genuinely laughed? It felt all too freeing.

"Do you have other things to teach me, Lord Aldren?" A certain gleam appeared in her brown eyes he didn't quite trust. "Surely this isn't the end of our lesson."

His concentration of boxing shattered. "Oh, I have *much* to teach you still," he said in a barely audible voice. With a sound akin to victory, Graham tugged her easily into a loose embrace. "Shall we shift topics of discussion for a bit?"

"I'll admit, I did have something else on my mind, but I find boxing interesting so wish to continue the lessons after you give me a kiss." She tugged at his cravat. "Perhaps, if I'm good enough later, I can be your fighting partner."

"It's called sparring, Caro." Warmth welled in his chest that she still wished to be in his company for as long as it would take to learn all the lessons.

"Then let us spar." With her palms resting on his chest, she lifted up onto her toes and fit her lips to his.

The oddest sensation of falling assailed him. In all his years of being around women, nothing of the sort had happened. When she would have tugged his shirttails from the waist of his breeches, he grabbed her hands and gently held them behind her back merely to subdue her. Then he claimed her mouth in a kiss designed to both arouse and comfort. Damn, the soft pillows of her lips cradled his with exquisite perfection. As she tried to free her hands, he held both wrists with one of his hands and with the other, he cupped her cheek, slipped his fingers into her thick hair, and deepened the kiss.

What was he to do? With the advent of this one woman, this one fully determined and headstrong woman, fresh life had been breathed into his lonely and misguided existence. Unexpectedly, Graham lost a piece of his heart to her in that moment.

A sound of contentment issued from the back of her throat. She stirred against him, and when he released her

wrists, she immediately looped her arms about his shoulders then applied herself to kissing him back, matching him tit for tat.

Graham slipped his free hand to the enticing curve of her arse. When he brought her flush to his body, their groans blended into each other. Everything was infinitely easier when Caroline was nearby, so why was he fighting formally courting her, fighting such a large commitment, despite both being forbidden by her brother?

And perhaps more to the point, why was that hurdle suddenly not as terrifying as it was before?

Eventually, he set her aside. “As much as I adore kissing the hell out of you, if we continue to indulge, you’re going to end up bent over that chair while I do unspeakable things to you before we can finish the lesson.” Though he wouldn’t mind teaching her how fun different positions within a coupling could be, today was not the appropriate time.

“Oh!” Her eyes rounded. The same hunger circling through his blood reflected in her gaze while a pretty blush stained her cheeks. “Not even if I beg for exactly that?”

Dear God in heaven, she was out to kill him.

“Later,” he said, and his voice sounded more like a dying frog’s croak than anything else. “If you’re not of a mind for boxing, I could give you a tour of the house. Tea will be served soon in any event.”

“I would enjoy that.” Then the cheeky woman let her gaze rove down his body to linger on the front of his breeches where an impressive cockstand waited. She tsked her tongue. “Unless you need help with *that*?”

Heat shot up the back of his neck and throbbed through his shaft. “I do not.” He gestured to a bamboo woven privacy screen in one corner of the room. “Let me unfold the screen for you so you can change clothes.” At least it would give his erection time to settle.

“Thank you.” With a look of disappointment, Caroline turned away and moved to the spot where she’d left her bag.

“But promise me we’ll double up on the next lesson. I truly do wish to learn to box.”

“You have my word.” After he set up the screen, he said, “I apologize for not having a washstand here, but you may use the one in my bedchamber if you need to.” However, if things progressed between them and she truly was a regular visitor of his makeshift salon, he would gladly do renovations for her.

“I’m fine, presently.” Then she slipped behind the covering while he waited in some impatience on the other side. The rustle of clothing tried his willpower, but he held himself to being a gentleman. Ten minutes later, Caroline came out from around the screen. “On to the tour if you please.”

He took the leather valise from her. “Gladly.” Since the townhouse wasn’t all that large, the tour was conducted rather quickly. It ended in the drawing room, where Caroline freely circulated about that room like she had all the others.

“I adore the décor in your home. It’s quite worldly.”

For the first time, he saw the room from her eyes. “Oh, the oil paintings and some of the bric-a-brac came over to England from France when my parents fled the Terror. I’m glad I still have a few trinkets to remind me of them.”

“Are they still alive?” She drifted over and touched a porcelain figurine of a dancer with a fingertip that rested on a small rose-inlaid table.

“Only my father. He lives in the country, though. Disliked London so when he remarried, they moved, and that is where my half-siblings were raised while I went off to war.”

Her eyebrows rose. “How many siblings do you have?”

“Three. Two brothers and one sister. And to anticipate your next questions, I haven’t seen them in years. I wouldn’t even know where to begin to find them or even know if they would wish to see me.”

“As much as my own siblings nearly drive me mad, I don’t know what I would do without them.” Her gaze found his. “Perhaps you should make an attempt with yours.”

A wave of emotion welled in his chest that took him by surprise. He hadn't thought of his family for ages. "I doubt they would welcome a reunion. I've made a mess of things, including relationships with them." It had been a turbulent time in his life when he'd left home for the military. His father had been opposed to it, yet he hated Napoleon. In the intervening years, what exactly had Graham done with his life to make anyone proud?

"You are speaking gammon, Graham." Caroline drifted close, took his hand, and then tugged him down onto a low sofa with her. The bag fell to their feet. "They might have wondered what became of you. And remember, you came home a war hero."

"A broken man with a shattered mind who needs vices and sins to make it through his days." He huffed. "A man wanted for murder."

She shook her head, clearly not having any of his excuses. "You are working at improving yourself, and we both know you are innocent in that crime."

"Yet we haven't that proof." Now more than ever he wished to change, wanted respectability, wanted to leave all his vices and scandals in the past. Because now he had a new goal, something to live for—her.

"We will. Have faith." Caroline turned to him and laid a palm against his cheek. The warmth of her, the scent of her was just so damned calming and arousing that he lost the ability to speak. "I feel we are close to a breakthrough."

On the case or a relationship? God, but he appreciated her willingness to be with him despite the mess he was. It held him captive and in awe. "I hope you're right."

Nothing more was said, for the butler brought in a tea service, and the next few minutes were spent eating and drinking their fill.

Not twenty minutes later, the butler returned. "The Duke of Lockwood is here to see you, my lord."

“The devil he is,” Graham gasped out as he cast a frantic look at Caroline. She shrugged, and he sighed. “Show him in.” Perhaps this was the day his doom would fall upon him. Once the butler left, he frowned. “I apologize if this meeting will go poorly.”

“I shall take care of Edward.” Barely had she patted his thigh and pulled her hand away when the duke strode into the room.

“Caroline?” An expression of shock crossed his face. “Why are you here?”

“I, uh—”

It was past time for him to step into the man he needed to be. Graham rose to his feet and then waved the duke into a nearby chair. “She came by to discuss the case with me since I’ve been running into walls with the rogue’s investigation.” Thank goodness they were both fully clothed—more or less—and that they were legitimately drinking tea.

Lockwood’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you in your shirtsleeves?”

“Oh, I...” Heat went up the back of his neck. “I’d been laboring about the house when Lady Caroline called.”

“Ah.” The duke blew out a breath and looked at his sister before sweeping his gaze back to Graham. “I’ve heard it on the best authority that Bow Street has been engaged. It seems an anonymous person has put in an inquiry regarding the dead courtesan.” He shrugged. “There is nothing I can do to prevent the investigation from continuing with them. I’m terribly sorry, Aldren.”

His hopes sank like rocks into his belly. Cold disappointment snaked through his gut. “We both knew I was living on borrowed time.”

Caroline sprang to her feet, prompting both men to stand. “That’s not fair. We all know Lord Aldren is innocent.” She looked at him. “You must run until your name can be cleared.”

God, he was so tired of trying. Exhaustion smacked into him like a wall. “If I run, it will announce to all of London that I’m guilty.” He bounced his gaze between the siblings. “Things are coming to a head. We have but a handful of days, I think.”

“Edward, you *must* do something!” Caroline closed the distance between her and the duke and took his arm. “Please!”

Before Lockwood could answer, Graham shook his head. “I’ll puzzle it out. The pieces are all there. I merely need to find out how to piece them together until a clear picture forms.”

The duke nodded. “Just so.” He patted Caroline’s hand. “Come. I’ll take you home. It is scandalous enough to have you here without a companion or maid.”

When she looked at Graham with stricken eyes, emotion balled in his throat. “Go ahead. I shall be all right.” What was he going to do without her by his side, helping him, encouraging him, reassuring him that all would be well? He forced down a swallow. “Thank you for trying on my behalf. Both of you.” No matter what he was facing, the only thing he could think about was openly defying the duke, for he might just wish to pay his addresses to the lady.

If he could manage to remain a free man.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Chapter Fourteen



October 10, 1817

Lockwood House

Fitzroy Square

London, England

Anxiety once more knotted Caroline's belly as she sat in Edward's closed carriage. Her brother had sent for her since the rest of her family were busy visiting with friends. Although it was on the pretense of meeting the baby, she knew in her heart he wished to speak with her about why she'd been at Lord Aldren's home yesterday, unaccompanied.

Perhaps it was time to tell him the truth, come what may. It would be easier than continuing to lie and hide and scheme to be with Graham.

As she glanced out the window, she followed the progression of two raindrops that clung to the glass. It was a typical gray, rainy autumnal day, and all she wished to do was curl up on a sofa in the drawing room before a fire with a cup of tea and a book. Of course, having the viscount nearby would have been ideal, but she couldn't rush her fences. They were on shaky ground as it was, and the man had never needed to make a commitment to a woman in his life before, so the odds weren't in her favor he would this time.

Yet, everything was different, wasn't it?

Oh, why was falling in love such a bother and a nuisance? Why did one have to wait, to feel confident, to wonder what the other party was doing? Yes, she'd carried a torch for Graham, had fancied him for more years than she could count, but now, spending time with him, kissing him,

understanding him, coupling with him had made her see him in a new light—a mature light—and still she continued to fall for him.

Whether or not it would prove fruitful was fate's prerogative, but she could make damn certain he might avoid Newgate, for she would hide the man herself if she had to.

Hopeless or not.

The knots in her belly pulled for a different reason. When she'd left his home yesterday with her brother, she'd never seen Graham more defeated, and it tore at her heart. All she wanted to do was bring him comfort and hope, but she rather thought this a true test for their relationship.

Am I strong enough to survive a man such as him?



December 12, 1810

Sussex, England

It was the night of Caroline's twenty-second birthday, and though her parents had thrown her a birthday ball tonight, her heart just wasn't into it, and she was bored besides. Most young men of any consequence had gone to war; some would never return from it. The fact that the *beau monde* could even think of celebrating anything while war raged on and held the country in a death grip sickened her, but what was London without its gaiety?

She'd slipped away from the ballroom, taken her cloak and then went to sit on the top step outside in front of her father's manor house in the Sussex countryside. It was where they'd always gone ahead of the Christmastide holidays and where they would remain until after Twelfth Night and until parliament reopened. The chill in the air cooled her overheated

skin, but there was far too much on her mind to make her return to the crowded ballroom.

“Why are you not in the ballroom, lapping up the attentions from your admiring public?”

The sound of *his* voice made her startle, but at the same time, warmth went through her chest as she scrambled to her feet and faced Graham Islington. “I cannot help but think about all the lives lost during the war, so indulging in something like a ball while others are fighting has the tendency to make me ill.” Though pleased he’d sought her out, she remained curious. “Why are you here?”

In fact, she hadn’t been aware any sort of military personnel had been invited.

“I can understand that. It is a bizarre world we live in currently.” Mr. Islington came toward her, gestured to the step where she’d been prior to his arrival. “Please, resume your seat. I could use the rest.”

“All right.” Caroline once more perched on the step. She internally thrilled when he settled beside her with a foot of space between them. The fact he was even here with her wasn’t lost on her. “Did my brother come with you?” Due to schedules and military movements, she and her family hadn’t seen Edward in nearly three years.

“He did not, but he suggested I should come and enjoy myself, so I brought a couple of friends with me. They are currently dancing.” A huff escaped him. “There have been rumors your brother is being groomed for spy work, so if that does occur, he’ll be given leave before the transition.”

“Oh.” Though being a spy was better than being one of many on a battlefield, it still came with a highly dangerous risk. “I’m happy for him.”

“As am I, though I would have adored being selected for missions like he will have.” Mr. Islington shrugged. “Edward has too much potential and a grand life ahead of him to be put into harm’s way on a battlefield. In this way, he

might remain alive longer.” For long moments the man remained silent. “Your brother told me today is your birthday.”

“It is.” She kept her gaze focused on the circular drive that was lined with carriages, which would be employed once the ball concluded.

“Many happy returns of the day, Lady Caroline.” He pressed an object into one of her hands. “It isn’t much, but I thought it might make you smile, and with supply lines blocked, it is difficult to procure new fripperies.”

With a gasp, she glanced into her palm where a hair comb rested. Made of Mother of Pearl, it fairly gleamed in the starshine. “It’s lovely!” She traced the edge with a gloved fingertip.

“As are you.” It was too dark to properly see the emotions in his eyes, but she hoped he considered her with fondness. “Enjoy this new year, my lady. Perhaps all of your dreams will come true.”

“Thank you. I hope you’re right.” Yet she rather doubted that, since he would return to the battlefields, and truly how could there be any more happiness while England was still gripped by war?

He nodded. “Well, I should go and do the pretty before your parents come searching for you.” Then he leaned close, quickly kissed her cheek, and stood. “Enjoy your ball.”

For long moments afterward, Caroline sat on that step with a silly grin on her face and the comb held tightly in her hand.



Present Day

“My lady? Are you well? We have arrived.”

The sound of the driver's voice yanked Caroline's from her thoughts. She blinked rapidly at him standing in the open doorway of the vehicle with his hand outstretched and ready to assist her down. "I apologize. Woolgathering, I suppose."

"It is nothing, my lady."

Once she'd been handed out of the carriage, she hurried inside the house so as not to get overly damp. As soon as she gave Gleason her cloak and gloves, she touched her fingertips to the Mother of Pearl comb she'd worn to one side of her upswept hair today. Had it prompted the memory from earlier? Or had she subconsciously been thinking about Graham when she'd conducted her toilette? There was no way to tell.

"His Grace is expecting you in the drawing room, my lady," Gleason informed her.

"I'll go there directly. Thank you." Once she entered the drawing room, Edward rose to his feet.

"Good afternoon." He smiled, which made the lines of exhaustion on his face fade ever so slightly. "I'm glad you've come. Juliet will welcome the company."

"I cannot wait to meet the baby," she said as she settled on a chair near the cheerful fire that danced in the hearth behind an ornate metal grate. "What did you name him?"

"Phillip Edward Richard Morrow." He shrugged but continued to smile. "After Father and myself, and then Juliet's father thirdly."

"It's a lovely name."

"I thought so too." Her brother was nearly beside himself for having an heir. "Our lives have certainly changed."

"I can understand that all too well." The words were spoken before she could recall them, but there was nothing for it.

His gaze fixed on her face as he sat on a low sofa near her location. "I was surprised to find you at Aldren's house yesterday."

“Truth to tell, he is giving me boxing lessons. Yesterday was the first one.”

“Ah, that explains much.” He nodded. “Why do you find the need to learn the art of fisticuffs?”

“It is quite a complicated explanation. Suffice it to say, I am different from most ladies of the *ton* and leave it at that.”

He snickered. “I am quite aware of that, dearest, which leads me to ask what has been going on in your life recently? I feel as if I’ve missed out due to the baby’s arrival.”

A trace of heat went through her cheeks. “Why do you wish to know?” How much should she tell him?

“You seem different. Happier.” Edward rested an ankle on a knee as he looked at her. “Dare I say full of purpose?”

Oh, she’d been full of *something* recently, and quite frankly she couldn’t wait to find herself in that state again. Yet even she knew it was a dangerous and scandalous way to conduct her life. “I suppose I *am* happy.” What an interesting state of developments. Spending time with Graham had made her almost giddy to know she was realizing dreams. Frankly, she wanted to marry Lord Aldren—reputation and all—but she doubted he’d come up to scratch, doubted he was marriage minded, and he certainly wasn’t a lord any matchmaking mama would choose.

Perhaps that is exactly why I want him.

“That’s wonderful news. For far too long you have been in a depressed state. Mother and I nearly despaired of what to do with you.”

Caroline rolled her eyes. “You have enough to worry about. I don’t need to add to that.”

“I agree.” Exhaustion was evident on his face. If she remained quiet, he would most likely fall asleep, as any new parent could attest. “All is well with Juliet and the baby?”

“Of course.” A sigh escaped him. “Though we have hired the appropriate staff, I still fret, which is why I’m spending as much time as I can with them both.”

“You are a good man, Edward, but as the baby grows, you will become more acclimated to being a parent and will more easily relax.” She hoped. “Have your friends from the club come by to wish you well?”

“A few have.” He nodded. “Edenthorpe was over yesterday before I paid Aldren a visit. He is having his own struggles with being a father, so we were able to commiserate and encourage each other. I’m glad not to feel so alone in this suddenly frightening new world.”

“You will prove a wonderful father.” For the space of a few heartbeats, Caroline gazed at her brother. He’d practically given her the natural break she needed to begin this next bit of conversation. “Do you recall when you told me—numerous times over the years—that you never wanted me to match with any of the members of your club?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?” Suddenly, the exhaustion fled from his expression, replaced with wariness.

She blew out a breath. “Why do you have to think that? Are not the men from the Rogue’s Arcade your friends?”

“They are, of course. I would give my life to defend any of them, and they would—and have—done the same for me. However, I know those men closely.” He narrowed his eyes on her. “Some of them carry far too many demons to make domestication the lovely thing it should be. I don’t want that life for you.”

That was a fair enough answer, yet it didn’t sit well. “I’m nine and twenty. My life is my own and has been for a while. I can make my own decisions, stand by my own mistakes, and learn from them.” Had it been a mistake to couple with Graham? Absolutely not, but the possible consequences had the power to drive her insane.

A long-suffering sigh issued from him. “Why do I have the feeling you’re hinting at talking about Aldren?”

“Because I am.” Caroline huffed in frustration. “He is a good man, Edward. Deep down, *I* know it, even if he doesn’t.”

“That might be true, but he is fighting more than a few addictions, I’ll wager. I don’t want that for you. It will not be an easy existence.”

“But it would be *mine*.” Emotion welled in her throat. “Do you believe being partnered with any of the rogues is easy?” While he sputtered, she raced onward. “Every one of you has demons, fights problems and mental issues you sometimes don’t let even your friends see. It doesn’t mean you are less than anyone else. None of that makes you unworthy of love.” She searched her mind for her next words. “Neither is Graham, for those same reasons.”

Surprise jumped into his expression. “Hmm, it’s Graham, now?”

Heat slapped her cheeks. “It’s complicated.” She couldn’t very well tell him how deeply she was connected with the viscount or what they had already indulged in. “We are working to solve the mystery surrounding him, to clear his name.” Tears welled in her eyes. She caught an escaped drop with her forefinger. “I don’t wish for him to hang for something he didn’t do.”

“Neither do I.” Silently, he handed her his handkerchief. “But there is literally not a trace of who committed the crime. Neither are there records with the Home Office that might render the identity of who might hate Aldren so much as to do this.”

What a dismal turn of events. “Perhaps a jealous man who’d protected the courtesan before? Did Graham woo her away from someone?”

“I am not certain, but that is a good angle. I’ll have one of the rogues follow up that train of thought.”

“Or you could ask the man himself.”

Edward sighed again. “I rather think this is his mess to clean up.”

Caroline frowned. “Then all your talk of not leaving a man behind was bluster? I expected better from you, Edward.” How could he abandon one of his friends and walk away?

“Hear me out, little sister.” He held up one hand. “I can only do so much. Every avenue available to me is blank or coming back empty. If you want answers—if *he* does—they are contained in his past, in *his* mind. He’s going to have to do the work.”

“I understand that, and I am trying to do exactly that. Graham has opened up a bit, but there are secrets he hasn’t told me. I’m sure of it.”

“Of course there are, and he probably won’t, at least not right now. If your relationship progresses—” When she gasped, he raised his eyebrows. “—I’ve heard... rumors regarding to two of you, and I can only make assumptions.”

“Oh.” The heat in her cheeks renewed itself, but she refused to be cowed by embarrassment or her brother’s judgment. Before she could form a rebuttal, Edward continued.

“Once your relationship progresses, if the man lets himself fall for you, then perhaps a portion of the wall around himself will crumble, but you cannot rush such things.” He gave her an understanding smile. “Men like us, men who survived the war *physically*, we carry our wounds deep in our souls, our minds. Sometimes they go so deep no one can help like with Broadmoor, but that doesn’t mean we don’t yearn for help trying.”

“Yet you cannot ask for that in so many words,” she added in a low voice.

“Exactly.” He nodded.

It was a daunting task, to say the least. She sighed as her spirits plummeted, but she refused to give up. “What should I do?”

“Remain patient with him. Encourage him. Dare I say... love him and show you feel he’s worthy of that and so much more.”

“What?” Another gasp was pulled from her throat. “Are you telling me I have your blessing if Graham comes up to scratch, if he and I will—”

“Yes,” he interrupted with a pleased grin. “But he *will* need to marry you after compromising you as I suspect he did. Somehow, I also suspect you had a large hand in ushering in that state.”

Another round of heat infiltrated her cheeks and chest this time. Why deny what he already knew? “There truly is no one else I’m interested in. Please tell Mother to stop having men call on me.”

A genuine chuckle emanated from him. “Perhaps if I buy her a grand gift, I’ll tell her as I present it to her. Then that blow won’t be as severe. After all, she still has Elizabeth to focus upon.”

“Yes, but I don’t believe Elizabeth’s path will bring Mother the attention she craves.”

“Meaning?” The word was rather sharper than it needed to be.

“Merely a feeling.” Caroline shrugged. “Regarding Graham. I *do* love him, you know. And it’s different than the infatuation I’ve carried for a while.”

“I know.” Compassion reflected in his expression. “I can see it in your eyes, hear it in how you talk about him. Knowing you, you’ll push him to be a better man, a changed man, just as I hope he will temper your impetuous side.”

“Ha.” She briefly pointed her gaze to the ceiling. “What do I do now?”

“If you have exhausted all avenues, then you wait. Or dare to draw the real killer out into the open. It is your choice and Aldren’s.”

“Meaning?”

“Either set the stage in Hyde Park or Covent Garden. I’ll make certain a few rogues are in attendance to render assistance if needed but keep me informed. Or, there is ball coming up in a couple of days. Mother is quite beside herself that you and your sister were invited. As was I, but I don’t know if I’ll attend due to the baby’s arrival.” He shrugged. “However, many of the rogues will be there, since we have a

vested interest in the host. He has been missing for months and has stymied even our best investigators. The fact he might have returned home to England is intriguing.”

“How interesting!” Then she frowned. “What do I use as bait? Myself?” Somehow that felt wrong.

“Use the parasol handle—I feel the answer is in that piece—or use Graham. But at least you’ll have the matter dealt with and over. Then you can move forward with your life.”

“Perhaps.” She thought about that for a few seconds as her insecurities surfaced. “Do you believe Graham will come up to scratch?” It was a fear of hers that he was only using her in multiple ways, and if he was, it would break her heart.

“Oh, dearest.” Edward’s sigh sounded as if it came from his toes. “Aldren has always been a wild card. He truly hasn’t let himself burn for something he believes in wholeheartedly. It’s true he has a temper, but he’ll need to take a stand. He’ll need to fight for that one cause which will set his soul on fire. Then and only then will you be able to see what he’s made of, see what sort of man he will be in the future. To know if he loves you. Because I don’t want you to marry for anything less. It’s folly otherwise.”

It was good, sound advice even if it meant temporary uncertainty. “I’m afraid I’m not good enough for him,” she admitted in a whisper.

“What?” Her brother leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees with his hands dangling between them. “How can you think that? You’re a duke’s daughter.”

“It has nothing to do with societal position.” How to explain that didn’t make her seem too shallow? “You see, I have little to no aspirations in life. I used to think my only goal was to marry well as I’d been taught. I’m not especially fond of all the skills a *ton* lady is supposed to enjoy. I have no talent to speak of. Except...”

She gasped as a realization hit her. *How did I not see this before?*

“Yes?” One of his eyebrows rose in challenge.

Once more her cheeks heated. “I’m fairly good at fisticuffs and I enjoy such exercise. Do you think I would be a good teacher to other women?” In her excitement, her words tripped over themselves. “Women who need to defend themselves against the horrible men in their lives? To help stop the abuse they are given time and again by spouses or family members?” Never had she been as enthusiastic as she was about this. Would Graham think it a good idea?

For a long time, Edward remained silent. Then he spoke. “I rather like the idea and will encourage it... *only* if you are married and under Aldren’s protection.” When she sputtered, he shook his head and held up a hand. “I am adamant, Caroline. The world is changing. It’s going through birthing pains of some sort, and I don’t want you to go it alone, for you *are* intent on being a part of that change.” His grin was genuine. “I’m proud of you, but I want the assurance you will be protected. I want you to have a good man at your side to support you and lift you up when times are hard, and life antagonizes you.”

A lump of emotion lodged in her throat as tears welled in her eyes. It was as good endorsement as any. “Thank you. You have given me much to think about.”

And it all hinged on Graham.

“I’m glad. Now, shall we order tea?” Edward sat back against the sofa cushions. “I want to gossip a bit before I let you talk to Juliet.”

Caroline nodded. It felt as if a large weight had been lifted from her shoulders, but there was more work to do before she could breathe easily. Perhaps that was what maturing was like.

Chapter Fifteen



October 11, 1817

Aldren House

London, England

It was almost like waiting for the enemy to come over the ridge and bear down on his regiment, only he was no longer in the war, and now his life was at stake. When would Bow Street come knocking? When would he be accused of a murder he didn't commit?

When would the fibers of a rope bite into the skin of his neck as the noose was put about his neck in preparation for being hung at Newgate prison?

The one thing that brought light into the ever-darkening life of his was the existence of Caroline. She made him feel better; she made him want to *be* better. And she was due at his home for a second boxing lesson at any moment.

“Good afternoon, Lord Aldren.”

He spun about at the sound of her voice. “Caroline!” It was always a surprise that she continued to come back, continued to wish to spend time in his company. “You wish to resume the lessons, then?”

“Isn't that why I'm here?” Dressed as she had been the other day, she removed her cloak and tossed it over the wooden chair. Then she set down her valise. “I'm anxious to start, for it's quite chilly outside, which makes the rain colder.”

“Then by all means, let's get right to it.” Since he'd already stripped to navy breeches and a fine lawn shirt, he lost no time in removing his boots. “This afternoon we'll spar with padded gloves instead of bare knuckles.”

Caroline frowned as she removed her half-boots. “All right. What is sparring? Is it different than the sort of fighting you do?”

“It is for the simple fact that it is mock fighting. You’ll use what you’ve learned in a different format. Like a real fight to make certain you’re comfortable taking on an opponent.” He removed his socks as well. Might as well be as authentic as possible, but he refused to take off his shirt as a nod to her sensibilities.

“Our last lesson ended early. Do you think I’m ready?”

In his honest opinion, the woman could take on a group of opponents right now and come out the victor. “You’ll never know unless you try.” When he sent her a grin, a faint blush stained her cheeks. It was adorable, but why the devil was she given over to such displays after what they’d already done together?

Slowly, she nodded. “Will I have to strike you?”

“You don’t have to, but that is the gist of boxing. Besides, when you tagged me the last time, you didn’t cause pain.”

“Hmm, then I shall need to do a better job this time.” When she grinned, he couldn’t help but stare at her, for she truly was a beautiful woman. With her hair braided and then bound in a coronet around her head, the disguise of men’s clothing, and the dearest peek of her feet in socks as she looked back at him, excitement—hell, call it what it was, fondness—buzzed at the base of his spine, which was odd, for he hadn’t felt such a thing in a long time for a woman.

“Uh, you can try.” To stop his thoughts from pinwheeling into scandalous territory, Graham moved across the room and ducked beneath the rope to reach the space of floor covered with mattress ticks he used for a makeshift ring. Then he picked up a pair of worn, brown leather gloves—mittens really—from the floor and held them up. “Put these on.”

“All right, but they’re quite ugly,” she said as she joined him. Once she held them, she wrinkled her nose. “And they stink.”

“We’re not attending high tea.” Graham snorted with laughter, but even in this she brought humor. “How did you spend your day yesterday?” While he waited for her response, he slipped on a matching pair of gloves, pulled the laces tight with his fingers and teeth when needed.

“I visited with Edward. Talked with Juliet and was able to hold the baby.” With a grunt, Caroline tugged on the padded mittens. “I can’t curl my fingers into full fists.”

“Well, yes. The padding will prevent that, but if you get too heated in a fight, there’s not enough padding to stop serious injury.”

“Then why use them?”

Would she always be impossible? “They are a training tool, mostly, and will help with not beating your opponent to a pulp.”

“Ah.” Worry flitted through her eyes. “Will there be too much bruising? I don’t wish to have questions—”

“Stop.” Command rolled in his voice. “You’re letting fear overrule your common sense.” He came forward, closing the short distance, and dropped his gloved hands on her shoulders. “Concentrate on the lesson. Don’t let fear be the bully else you’ll lose the fight from within, and I know you are not the sort of woman to let anyone control you.”

“I am not.” She flashed a grin. “Tell me what I need to do.”

“Just like we did that first lesson. Fists at the ready. Knees slightly bent. Keep your muscles loose. Remember to circle your opponent—me.”

“When is one declared the winner?”

“There are usually several rounds during a bout, but whoever knocks an opponent out for more than a few seconds is declared the winner. The quicker that is accomplished, the

quicker the bout ends.” He nodded and clapped his gloves together. “Do your best. Come at me.”

“You’re letting me throw the first punch?” A bit of awe clung to her voice.

“I am.” He smiled, and he unexpectedly lost a piece of his heart to her, for he was able to see everything in the world around him newly through her eyes. “Since this is sparring, we *will* exchange blows.” He gestured with his padded fists and then assumed the position. “Give me your all, and I’ll do the same.”

“Right.” She smacked her gloved hands together. “No mercy, Aldren.”

“I shouldn’t think so.” God, he adored how she challenged him.

“One question though.” She planted her feet, lifted her fists, and leaned forward slightly. “How do I know which fist to lead with?”

“Use your dominant hand, but you have to be ready for anything.” He gently tagged one of her mittens with his, setting them both into motion by circling her. “You hesitated too long, so I took the advantage.”

“Not fair.” But she circled him, watched him, and he could almost see her brain working. She would soon be a worthy opponent. Then, she struck, threw a punch... that missed his upraised fist. Both of them. “Drat.”

“Sometimes, patience is your best bet.”

Caroline snorted. “That is not my strong suit.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed, but the people who would beat us down or bully us will never play fair, which is why you’ve asked me to teach you to box. Lead with your knuckles and trust yourself.” Again, he tapped her gloved hand with his and darted away. “Come at me.”

“You won’t like it.”

“Neither will you if I need to defend, but it is my hope you’ll grow to love the sport.”

“Time will tell.” Caroline circled him while keeping her mittened fists raised.

“Go.” Each time he threw a punch, he connected lightly with her hands. When he returned to a guarded stance, she swung. The first few missed him, and he retreated, which made her concentrate that much more, just as he’d wanted.

“Why the hell can I not do this?” Frustration rang in her tone. When she lashed out with what should have been an uppercut, she only grazed the tip of his mitten.

“Stop.” Graham held up a hand. “I see this all the time with men in lessons. Your concentration is not on me as your opponent or on boxing in general.” When she frowned, he blew out a breath. “What has you distracted? And I will not be amused if you say me.”

She snorted. “You are not, at least not in *that* way.”

“Oh, thank you.” He couldn’t help his grin even though he’d employed sarcasm in the response. “Are you worried about your new nephew?” From all he’d heard, a newborn was still vulnerable, and any number of dangers could befall it.

The corners of her lips twitched, but she didn’t fully smile. “No, my worry is not for the babe.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “What, then?” He propped one mittened hand on his hip. “Tell me. Let’s have it out in the open so we can move forward.”

“It *is* you I’m worried about.” She stepped forward and shoved at his shoulder, but that emotion reflected in her eyes. “You cannot go to Newgate; I won’t let you hang. If I need to hide you myself, I—”

“Stop.” But her willingness to take such extremes humbled him. “That is my burden to carry. Not yours.”

“No. Perhaps a week ago it was, but not now.” She propped her mittened fists on her hips, which had his gaze jogging down her body. “You and I are a team—partners. When I’m in trouble, I hope you’ll help. The same goes for you. I’m not going anywhere until we catch this killer.”

“What are you proposing?” Though he didn’t want her involved, she would be more difficult to dislodge than a burr beneath a saddle.

“We need to draw the person out who wishes you dead, who has done such horrible things along that path.” A trace of fear went through her eyes. “It’s the only way to reclaim your life and clear your name, but I cannot do it alone, Graham. I need you, need your help.”

Dear God. That plea, those rounded eyes, that softened expression, that gently quivering chin. They all chipped away at the walls he’d kept about himself so that he wouldn’t rely on anyone and thereby not need to draw closer or to care.

Yet she had bypassed all of those defenses and crept beneath his skin, the bricks about his heart, and he *did* care. About her. For her.

“I don’t know if I could deny you anything since you’ll keep on badgering me until I give in, hmm?”

“Because you cannot do this yourself.” Caroline pressed her lips together. “Agreed?”

“Fine.” He nodded. “Finish this lesson, this sparring, and we’ll talk about our next step in closing this damned case.” Putting space between them, he raised his glove-covered fists. “Of all the women in London, I had to find myself involved with the most troublesome.”

“Ha!” She resumed the stance for a fight. “As if you’re everyone’s benchmark for a gentleman,” she said with a wink, but just as quickly, her burst of confidence wavered. “If we had more time... If there were more clues...” The delicate tendons in her throat worked with a hard swallow. “If you are put to death...”

Finally, he knew how to motivate her even as his heart squeezed from her obvious distress. “With you around? I don’t see how that would be possible.” Graham stepped forward and rested a mitten-covered hand on her shoulder. She tilted her chin up so their gazes met. “Stand firm, and quite frankly, if you give in or give up, you’re not the woman I’m beginning to

see you as.” It was perhaps the most honest thing he’d ever said to anyone.

“Oh?” Immediately, her expression brightened. “How *do* you see me?”

That was a dangerous topic, so he avoided it for the time being. “You have a backbone and spirit. Do something with them.” He stepped away. “Use your difficulties and disappointments as your fuel. Show other women in your same situation that *anything* can be conquered if they have the correct mindset.”

She gasped. “How did you know I wish to teach other women to fight so they won’t be abused as much? Because I enjoy boxing so much,” she rushed to add when his eyebrows soared.

Shock plowed through his chest. “You do?”

“Yes. With you.”

A queer sort of skipping gripped his heart. “And you want to teach other women.” It wasn’t a question.

“I do, once I learn more and can find a place... or make other plans.” She again raised her hands and eyed him askance. “Now, shall we begin?”

“I rather think we already have.” In so many things. When he raised his fists, he flashed a grin. “If need be, think of me as the man who perpetuated this whole bloody case, the person you wish to pummel into the ground.” He circled her. “Come at me with vigor this time.”

Then a second realization slammed into him hard enough to cause him to briefly stumble. He might be falling for her, and it was terrifying, for what sort of man was he to offer for a woman? *Shit! Is that what I want to do?* No lady in her right mind should need to be faced with the wreck that he was—Caroline especially. *I need to change; I need to put in a concentrated effort for her. To be worthy of her and hopefully Lockwood will see that.*

While he was woolgathering, she tagged his shoulder, which brought his attention to her face and the glee there.

“Damn!”

“Ha!” Caroline again raised her fists, her gaze never leaving his. “Stand and deliver, Aldren. Next time, I’ll find my mark on your handsome face.”

How much was he coming to adore her? His chest tightened. “Confidence is the first step to outsmarting your opponent.” Once more he circled her, his feet moving over the mattress ticks in a familiar rhythm.

“As I said, you are a lovely teacher.” There was nothing but seriousness in her expression as she circled him, her sock-covered feet making almost no sound. Then, she darted into his space, and when she threw a punch, it connected with his left fist. The smack of leather against leather resounded in the room.

And he was elated. “That’s it. Keep going,” Graham encouraged in a soft voice.

“There is a certain thrill to this sport, a rush of excitement, and an immediate disposal of everything unpleasant in one’s mind as soon as my fist connects.”

“Yes! There is more, but this is the start.” He gestured at her with a glove. “Punch me again.”

“All right.” As she gained more confidence in her stance and the power she wielded with her fists, her punches connected more solidly with his gloves. Every once in a while, Graham would swing and tap her hands or tag her shoulders, but she quickly learned how best to defend herself, when to retreat, how to rout him and set him on the defensive. “Impressive.”

“I’m merely studying you.” And she emulated him, watched his feet, bounced her gaze between his fists each time he jabbed or lunged, then she made the same work for her.

As the hour dragged on, sweat poured down his spine and his lawn shirt stuck to his skin. Sweaty tendrils of hair clung to her temples, and each time she delivered a punch, an adorable grunt escaped her throat. Her jabs connected more solidly so that he felt them whenever she found her mark.

Then the sparring took a turn into greater intensity. The tip of her glove glanced over his cheek, and when she voiced concern, he came roaring back, his glove skimming her shoulder. With a huff, she delivered a jab that caught him in the breadbasket and left him temporarily winded. Amused, Graham struck out and landed a soft blow to her other shoulder, which had enough force to spin her about.

“Oh... you!” Caroline came back like a wet cat. She pummeled his fists with enough force that he stepped backward a few times. He tagged the shell of her ear, so she gave him a jab to the temple that would have sent him to his knees had she been a man with bare knuckles.

And they continued to spar in the makeshift boxing ring.

“Is that the best you have, my lady?” He wiped at the sweat on his forehead with a sleeve.

“You tell me.” Before he was ready, Caroline got off a punch to his chin, though gloved, that sent him reeling backward onto the mattress ticks. “Woo!” With a grin, she put a sock-covered foot on his chest. “You’ve been down for more than three seconds. Does that mean I’ve won this bout?”

Well, damn.

“That is exactly what it means.”

“And you didn’t let me win?”

“I did not.” In fact, he moved his jaw around. There was a bit of pain in his chin. “That was a fantastic punch. Be certain to do more of that during our next sparring session. I’ll also teach you holds and things like that if you find yourself in trouble.”

She beamed and his world cartwheeled. “Oh, this is such fun!”

“It was nicely done.” He was so damned proud of her that his chest might pop from it. “You’ve taken to the sport with aplomb. Have natural skills.”

“It’s a lovely way to spend an afternoon, and the exercise makes me acutely in the mood for other... things.” Then she dropped to the mattress beside him with a grin that practically announced scandal and sin as she took off her gloves. “I cannot wait until our next lesson.”

“Neither can I.” Graham also removed his gloves and tossed them to the side. “I never expected to have such fun with a woman in this way.”

Her huff blew warm breath over his cheek. “Don’t be so arrogant.”

“It was meant as a compliment, but obviously I’m woefully out of practice with flirting.” Then he couldn’t stand it any longer. It was only natural to snake a hand about her nape and pull her down for a kiss. She was so damned fetching dressed as a boy that he was randy as hell, and her lips were so soft and welcoming he couldn’t have enough of them.

With a tiny sound of either encouragement or surrender at the back of her throat, Caroline returned his kisses. When he cupped the side of her face to better guide the embrace, he tugged her closer until she was more or less draped over his body. He explored the seam of her mouth with the tip of his tongue, silently thrilled when she opened for him and met his thrust with her tongue. All too soon, the glide of satin against silk became his world. As she plucked at the placket of his shirt, he wished to tease her with the same, and gently he rolled her over onto her back. Slowly, he pulled the tails of her shirt from the waist of her breeches.

“Time for some sparring of a different sort,” he whispered as one of his hands disappeared beneath her shirt.

Chapter Sixteen



Shit, but he wanted this woman!

Graham's world was tumbling, falling, and alternately soaring the longer he kissed Caroline. He couldn't have enough of her petal-soft lips or the satin of her tongue, but the moment his wandering fingers encountered the heated silk of her breast, the rapidly hardening pebbled tip of her nipple, he was well and truly lost.

To her credit, the lady's hands were everywhere, smoothing over his skin as she shoved the fabric of his shirt up his chest. He levered off her long enough so she could help him out of the garment and as soon as he came back down, he delved both of his hands beneath her shirt to cup her breasts.

"Graham... Please spar with me as you promised." Her eyes twinkled with amusement and arousal. "Send me flying." The plea, said against the underside of his jaw, sent fires through his blood.

"As if I could deny you." That was beginning to be more obvious as time went on.

This time her smile sent desire shivering down his spine. "You are a quick learner, I'm quite certain you can be... inventive."

"Ha. Let's see." Inch by inch, kissing the satiny skin he revealed along the way, Graham tugged the shirt from her body. When her breasts swayed from the movement, his shaft hardened. Soon he would be lost in the glory that was this woman and there would be no more talk. But first he would have her hovering on the edge of bliss, as long as she would let him. "Should I bedevil you with my lips and tongue between your thighs or should I concentrate on your gorgeous breasts before we become fully involved?" As he spoke, he

kissed a path between her breasts, along her torso, past her navel.

“Does it matter? If you don’t do such things now, we will eventually get ‘round to them.” Caro lifted her hips to assist in the removal of her breeches. The socks came off with the garment, and when she was nude, a shuddering sigh left his throat. “Why do you stare at me so?”

“It’s the first time we’ve done this *sans* clothing.” And it was worth the wait. Caroline was laid out on the mattress tick with her perfect form trembling either from anticipation or need, her rosy nipples hardened, a hand resting casually at the vee of her thighs just over the thatch of light brown curls there. “You are so damned gorgeous.” The curve of her breasts, the nip of her waist, the flare of her hips all called to him like a siren’s song.

A flush moved over her chest and into her cheeks. “While I appreciate your obvious admiration, I am only average.”

“Gammon.” It wasn’t his first time seeing a woman in the nude, but now that Caroline had given him this gift, she was the only one he ever wished to see thusly going forward. Once more, the feeling of falling assailed him and he marveled at that.

“What the devil are you waiting for, Graham?” Annoyance went through her voice. She scrambled to her knees then lunged at him, knocking him onto his back. “If you aren’t going to start things off then I gladly will.”

“Show me, then, unless you are merely bragging?” He cocked an eyebrow, but that apparently further annoyed her, for Caroline came over him, claimed his lips with an open-mouthed kiss that sent his senses reeling. In his wildest dreams or most carnal imaginings could he have known this fiercely determined and headstrong woman would have willingly partnered with him or given herself to him in such a manner.

“Does this feel like bragging?” She delivered a nip to the underside of his jaw then blatantly brushed her breasts along his chest.

Dear God, the sensation of that skin-to-skin contact! “Depends.” When he reached for her, she batted his hands away.

“On?” The maddening woman nibbled and licked a path down his chest and over his abdomen. All the while she danced the fingers of one hand along his hip then plucked the buttons of his frontfalls until one by one, they released from their holes.

“What else you’re planning on doing before I take command of this session.” For once he had her on her back again, he wouldn’t let her go until they were both sweaty and sated.

“This.” The second she took down his frontfalls, Caroline winked at him, moved to kneel between his bent knees, and then she leaned forward and took the tip of his hardened member into her mouth.

“Shit, Caro, I... argh!” Clearly, he had no choice other than to let her have her way, so he widened his legs to give her more room to play. Slowly, while he watched her, she took more of his length into the warm cavern of her mouth, and as she did that, she wrapped the fingers of her right hand around the base of his shaft.

It was both heaven and hell, made even more erotic for the fact that each time he thrust upward, he was able to see his prick move in and out, observe her puckered lips as they slid along his erection.

As she worked, the braid of her hair fell from its pins, and the gathered tip brushed along his abdomen, which added another layer to the torture she provided. All the while, she went exploring along the back of his thigh, his buttock, then she cupped his stones, held them firmly in her palm. Without ceasing, Caroline worked him over, sliding up and down his length and twisted her hand as she went.

Wild sensations streaked through him. Graham’s pulse pounded in his ears in time to the throbbing in his length, and still he thrust. When she hummed her approval, apparently enjoying herself to the hilt, he nearly lost his grip on reality.

“Leave off,” he whispered, but his voice was graveled with emotion and strain. “I’m going to explode.” Though doing so down her throat had its advantages, that wasn’t what he wanted from this session.

She came off his length with mischief in her eyes. “Shall I continue?”

“Not if you want to couple with me.” While indecision reflected in her eyes, he took advantage of the momentary lull to calm his body and remove his breeches. Then he tackled her to the mattress tick, held her hips in a strong grasp, and then proceeded to devour her as she’d done to him. The moment he coaxed her pearl out of hiding, he suckled that bud, teased it with unrelenting friction from his tongue until she squirmed.

“Yes, yes, like that. Give me more,” she crooned and then alternately begged him to stop. Her hands were in his hair, tugging, pulling, pushing as he worked her over. In seemingly no time at all, she broke from his ministrations.

Damn, but he adored when she shattered from the pleasure he gave, and those half-stifled shouts mixed with moans were the sweetest sounds to his ears.

“Why are you like this?” she whispered between panting gasps as she took hold of his upper arms and dragged him up and over her body.

“Like what?” He propped himself on his elbows while lying all too easily between her bent knees.

“Like a rogue who cares about nothing one minute to a man who has everything to lose the next, looking at me with hope and a future in your eyes.” Concern reflected through her expression. “It’s so confusing to know where I stand with you, but regardless, I need you. *Only* you, so give me everything you are, because I wish to give you the same.” Honesty shone in her eyes, and a hint of vulnerability he understood all too well. “Right now, right here.”

And he tumbled even harder for this woman.

“Gladly.” Graham cupped her head between his palms, threading his fingers into her hair. “This is...” There were no

words, so he stopped trying. Instead, he claimed her mouth with firm intent and treated her to long, drugging kisses that went deeper and harder each time, robbing them both of breath. When she clutched his shoulders and molded herself to his body, he continued at his leisure, keeping her trapped within the cage of his arms.

“I adore being able to feel you completely against me.” With a soft sound of approval at the back of her throat, Caroline smoothed her hands down his back. “Outside of boxing with you, this is what I like best.” Her fingers danced over his arse cheeks, dared to pinch one, and the sensations nearly made him come prematurely.

“Fuck!” Need streaked through his member and tingled in his stones. “I’d like to think you adore other things about me, but for the moment, my quest is seeing you satisfied. Perhaps then you’ll know for certain.”

“Ha! You *are* an expert at satisfying me,” she murmured with a lick to the column of his neck. “I can think of no one better.”

“Good.” His chuckle rang with conceit, and he didn’t care. Moving slightly downward, he spent the next several moments fondling, licking, nipping, and suckling the erect, rosy nipples that never failed to tempt him.

“Dear God.” Caroline’s back arched. “More.” She wrapped a hand around his neck and pressed him closer, her breathing shallowed. “I adore it so.”

The passion-laden whisper stoked the fire in his blood into infernos. *I adore you*. His shaft throbbed painfully, but he would make this session last as long as he could. Once again, he paused merely to stare at her. Those lips—kiss-swollen and slightly parted—coupled with her eyes darkened with passion as she peered back made quite the memorable picture. “I will remember you always like this.”

“A lovely thought, of course.” Caroline’s smile had his world tilting. “I’d rather you remember me now by imprinting yourself on me.” She wriggled beneath him, sighing when he settled more comfortably in the cradle between her thighs.

“How can I deny you?” He caught her hands in his and brought them up over her head, pressing them to the mattress tick. At the same time, he rubbed the head of his shaft along her flesh to flirt with her opening. “I must have done something right at some point in my life to have met you, to have had you drop into my life to bedevil me.” Slowly, to tease and torment, he thrust into her tight passage. *I want this to be my life for the conceivable future.* Was that even possible since he was merely waiting to be taken to Newgate?

“Perhaps, but you are the better for it.” She attempted to free her hands, but he threaded their fingers together and held her steady. With a tiny huff, she canted her hips, sending him deeper. “That is quickly becoming one of my favorite things.”

“Good.” The second he pulled out, he penetrated her all over again, just as slowly as before even though the friction hurtled him closer to the edge. “I have never been that to anyone.”

“Don’t rush our fences, Aldren.” She matched his movements and soon they worked together in a leisurely, unhurried rhythm that brought mutual pleasure but in a deliciously exaggerated fashion.

Moans broke the silence and blended with the snap and crackle of the fire. Sweat rolled down his back and along his skin from the heat in the hearth and his exertions. And still, he didn’t hasten his thrusts. Neither did he close his eyes. He held her gaze, lost himself in those brown pools, and that intensified connection gave a renewed edge to every jolt of bliss that shot through his veins.

“Graham, while this is lovely...” As she wriggled her hips in an effort to hurry him along, he merely grinned. She tightened her fingers in his. “Finish me. I am breaking apart.” She thrashed her head back and forth.

“That is the idea, and after the last time, I thought we both deserved a slow bout of lovemaking.” *Damn.* That was exactly what this was, and so different from anything else he’d known with other women. Why, though? Then he knew, of

course he did. There were emotions involved; he truly cared for this woman, continued to fall tip over tail for her, which made the act so bloody much better. Need swept up his shaft. Release was near. “But since I wish for a spectacular ending as well, I shall grant your request.” He increased his pace. Each thrust went deep, penetrated hard, and irrevocably joined them. “Caro...” Desperation ravaged his voice. It wouldn’t be long.

“I know.” She drew her legs toward her chest. A keening wail escaped her lips instead of words. Her eyes closed. The tremors flooding her body transferred to him and further dragged him into the storm they’d both created. “Almost there.” Her breathing changed to pants. “Give me all of you.”

“I rather think you already have me,” he whispered, and then gasped in shock at his own words. Urgency tightened his stones, making them heavy and pulling close to his shaft. Awareness raced up his length. “We go together, but remember this, Caroline. You are *mine*.”

She opened her eyes to meet his gaze. “Only if you realize the same.”

“Somehow, it’s being impressed upon me.” Then he gave himself completely to her. He thrust once.

Twice.

Three times he stroked as deep as he could and thrice, she canted her hips, meeting him. They stared into each other’s eyes, and he swore he touched her soul, exchanged a piece of his with hers as ethereal light wrapped around them. A scream ripped from her throat before she muffled it by biting her bottom lip as she clutched him closer. Her inner muscles fluttered around him, squeezing his length, drawing out his descent into madness. Graham was completely lost, but he stifled his own shout and thrust deep one last time. His grasp on reality shattered, and he was thrown into a hard release that shot him into the heavens for brief seconds.

“This has been the best day yet,” he whispered against the shell of her ear while he ground his hips into hers in an

effort to prolong the sensations. “You have changed... everything.” Still, he craved that connection even as he released her hands and collapsed on top of her body.

Her breathing warmed the side of his face and neck. “I rather think that’s a good thing, and perhaps a natural progression, hmm?” She took a shuddering sigh and relaxed beneath him. A few silent minutes passed before she spoke again. “If sparring matches or boxing sessions end like this, I absolutely wish to continue my lessons.”

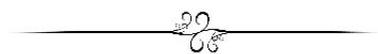
“Wouldn’t that be something?” Sex and sparring. He would rather adore a life filled with that with her by his side. After brushing his lips over hers, he rolled to his side but left their legs tangled together. It would be an unorthodox life, but somehow, he suspected it would suit them both quite well.

Yet he didn’t have the right to ask her to promise anything.

For long moments, they remained spent and gasping on the mattress ticks, then Caroline moved a hand to clasp his.

“Live for the little moments like this, Graham. The future is built upon them, and we *will* fight with everything we have to ensure you have that.”

Emotion clogged his throat, but he nodded. “I rather believe we will.”



Hours after Caroline left to return home that evening, he soaked in a bathtub full of rapidly cooling water.

After the session with her, he absolutely wanted the future she spoke about, and that meant taking his case into his own hands and thrashing out the man who wished to frame him, or even kill him. It was time to play the final hand at cards, so to speak, to throw everything that he was out there in order to chase dreams he never knew that he had.

The parasol handle winked and glimmered in the candlelight from its place on the flat lip of the porcelain tub. With a sigh, he took it in his hand, peered deep into the hollow end of it. What the devil had been the point of leaving such a treasure? It served absolutely no purpose; the dead courtesan in his bed would have been a better calling card.

Yet... He frowned, for when the candlelight hit that dark interior just right, something was just barely visible. What the hell? Swiftly standing, he left the bathtub, and not caring that he dripped all over the hardwood and Aubusson carpeting in his bedchamber, he quickly crossed into the adjoining dressing room. On top of a bureau was a grooming kit. After opening the carved wooden lid, he delved into it, rummaged around until he grabbed a pair of metal tweezers.

“Let us see what you were trying to tell me all along,” he murmured, then carefully picked at the object seemingly glued to the sides of the interior. Several agonizing minutes later, he removed a thin slip of paper that was perhaps half an inch wide and three inches in length. Once he’d tossed the tweezers back into the box, he carefully unrolled the paper. “Well, shit.”

The writing on the paper was in a faint hand, the words in French, and extremely tiny.

To the unfortunate and useless Viscount Aldren,

*You took what was mine; so I will do the same.
What you have killed, I will put to death as
well. You will reap what you have sowed,
Graham Islington.*

You have my word,

*The Comte of Fontaine or as you know me,
Lord Everidge.*

His blood turned to ice in his veins. “Oh fuck.” The man who wished to frame him for murder or even kill him was the same man who wished to court Caroline. The man he’d fought with the other night. The man who was even now no doubt prowling through London, planning the final stages of his plot of revenge, for now the memories were clear. Graham had killed his brother while in Portugal, and this man wanted him to pay. Fear twisted down his spine but resolve swelled his chest. “I have to keep her safe.” But he couldn’t do that alone. It was time to rely on his friends. “Dobbs!” he yelled as he yanked on a blue brocade bell pull.

A few moments later, his valet ran into the suite. “What is amiss?” He swept his gaze over Graham’s wet and naked form.

“I need to dress to go out this evening.”

“Where?” Dobbs frowned. “I rather thought you’d stay in after events of the afternoon.”

Heat crept up the back of Graham’s neck. “To my club. It’s urgent.” He shoved the parasol handle and the note into his valet’s hands. “I know the identity of the man who wishes for me to hang, and now I need to make plans to beat him to a bloody pulp.” It had been there all along, yet he’d been too defeated, too arrogant, too distracted by Caroline to see the truth in front of his eyes.

Damn it all to hell.

“Right.” Dobbs nodded. “Then may we not delay any longer.”

Chapter Seventeen



October 12, 1817

Baselford House

London, England

Caroline couldn't help but take a few deep breaths as she went through the receiving line.

The host and hostess of the Harvest Ball were quite congenial. She was the Countess of Baselford and according to the rumors buzzing about the place, her husband had been missing for five years, presumed dead. Beside the woman with the blonde-brown hair and the sparkling diamond tiara, was a handsome man in the requisite dark evening clothes. His black hair gleamed almost blue beneath the candles, and the width of his shoulders alone was quite impressive. At the last second, she caught his title: Earl of Starkington. Both wore matching expressions of excitement, and they had made it quite clear they were presenting the ball as a couple.

Though her mother and sister were attending the society function with her, nerves beset her, for Graham was scheduled to meet her there, and he'd promised her a waltz. Other members of the Rogue's Arcade would also be in attendance, which meant the viscount was moving ahead with his plan of trying to draw out the real killer.

Yesterday, he'd sent round a brief note telling her he looked forward to seeing her tonight and to not give Lord Everidge her time, for he wasn't a good man. While she appreciated his concern for her, the overprotectiveness rankled slightly. It wasn't as if she didn't have a brain in her head and couldn't make her own decisions. All the scandal and sin they'd gotten up to aside, he still hadn't come up to scratch

even though that last joining had left them soul-bound, and it put her in an awkward position. She refused to be any man's mistress.

To say nothing of the fact she was hopelessly in love with him. After the last time they were together for boxing and the intense session of intercourse afterward, there was no more doubt. She was tip over tail for the man—flaws and all. If he ended up hanging at Newgate, she would mourn for the remainder of her life, for there truly was no one else for her.

If that made her an object of pity or desperation, so be it, but she believed in him, and what was more, she believed in them together.

Once they cleared the reception line and made their way toward the ballroom at the back of the large townhouse in St. James Square, Caroline's mother glanced at her. "I assume you will dance with Lord Everidge this evening?"

"I haven't decided yet, but I do intend to dance with at least one titled man." How would she react if she knew Graham was the man who held her heart? That she was in love with a man who battled addictions to several vices, a man who would be wrongly accused of murder, perhaps this evening. After all, didn't Bow Street always nab their quarry? For that matter, where were those principal officers? Unless her brother's influence had temporarily delayed them.

It was all too much to think about and made her stomach ache besides.

"See that you do. You are much too long in the tooth to be choosy when it comes to men." Then her mother looked at Elizabeth. "Hopefully, you will have better luck. It would be nice to have both my daughters engaged by the end of the year."

Caroline glanced at her sister, who appeared rather green about the gills, but Elizabeth said nothing, merely nodded and smiled at their mother.

The moment the three of them entered the ballroom, noise from the crush of people inside swirled about her.

Conversation flowed, laughter sailed through the air, scents of candle wax and perfumes assaulted her nose. Gaiety and color were everywhere in the room which had been decorated in the colors of autumn, complete with floral arrangements that had been enhanced with stalks of wheat and bunches of grapes.

One of her mother's friends hailed her, so she bustled over with Elizabeth in tow. That was fine with Caroline, for Theresa immediately pounced on her once she was alone.

"You are gorgeous in that gown tonight, so much so that you are positively glowing!"

"Thank you." But the russet taffeta gown had nothing to do with her mood, though the dress was quite beautiful. It featured a low scooped neckline accented with tiny garnet beads, short, puffed sleeves, and a satin ribbon about the waist also decorated with garnets. In her low chignon, she'd instructed her maid to arrange autumnal flowers. With every step, she felt as if she were a harvest goddess, but the person she most wanted approval from had yet to make an appearance. "I adore your gown as well. That saffron color is amazing."

"It is quite vibrant, but perhaps it will gain me attention." Theresa snapped open her fan and employed it to cooling her face. Mischief jumped into her expression as she pulled Caroline further out of traffic toward a wall. "Are you hoping to dance with a certain viscount tonight?"

"Yes." Heat went through her cheeks as she scanned the crowded room. It seemed Graham hadn't arrived quite yet. "He made me promise him a waltz."

Theresa giggled. "Can I assume he is courting you, then?"

A sigh left Caroline's throat. "Our relationship is rather... complicated at best." She shrugged and returned her attention to her friend's face. "It is my hope he might come up to scratch soon since we've done... things that might land me into irrevocable scandal rather more sooner than later." With widened eyes, she willed Theresa to understand.

“Oh!” Surprise reflected in the other woman’s eyes. “How delightful!” She lowered her voice. “Was it wonderful, being thoroughly ruined?”

“It was beyond lovely,” Caroline admitted in a soft voice with renewed heat in her cheeks. Briefly, she added what had occurred two days before. “Perhaps I’m doing him more harm than good, for he said he can deny me nothing.” That had been quite flattering and satisfying. “But can he truly change his ways? He is trying, and that’s endearing, yet is he too damaged from war?”

Theresa shrugged, but all gaiety left her expression, for her brother had been there too and had his own demons to fight. “Only you can say, but hasn’t Lord Aldren made the steps necessary to change already? Even though he’s embroiled in a murder investigation, he’s remained loyal to you, hasn’t gone out into society with another woman, and he’s been with you intimately twice now.”

“This is true.” Another round of heat went through Caroline’s body. There had been a specific look in his eyes that last time, when she thought she could see into his soul, that had encouraged her beyond anything else. “Yet he hasn’t shared his feelings.”

“Have you?” Theresa raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps he needs you to go first.” When Caroline remained silent, she huffed. “Consider this. In the past, the viscount never had the same woman in his bed twice. And what’s more, he has promised to be seen in public with you tonight, which is after he did the pretty with you at the rout earlier in the week.” Her smile was encouraging. “You *have* had an influence on him. In fact, I’ve even told the story to my brother, and he’s been shocked in the change the viscount has exhibited at the club.”

“Truly?” That gave her hope.

“Oh, yes. Lord Aldren no longer imbibes heavily in drink. Now St. Vincent wants you both to come to dinner so he can see that change for himself.”

“That would be lovely.” If all that were true, then where was Graham? He still had yet to make an appearance in

the ballroom. Knots of worry pulled in her belly. "I'll be sure to mention it to him, and perhaps we can make plans..." Her voice broke on that word. "...if all goes well."

"Of course." Theresa nodded and squeezed Caroline's fingers. "The rogues won't fail your man. All will come out right."

Before she could answer, gasps circulated through the room. There was a bit of a commotion at the door just after the countess and her apparent escort came in. A gorgeous blond man entered and made quite the sensation, but he wasn't properly dressed for a society event let alone a formal ball. In fact, he wore the clothes of a common laborer, but the damage had been done. The countess went as white as a sheet as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Baselford, is that you, after all this time?" Her whispered inquiry sounded overly loud in the sudden hush of the ballroom as she put a gloved hand to her throat and stared.

The man was all too disoriented. He blinked at all the people, the candles in the chandelier, seemed far too confused to be considered the woman's missing husband. "I... You..." Then he shook his head and bolted from the room as quickly as he'd arrived.

Immediately, the room erupted into excited chatter. No doubt news of this would set London ablaze before the night was over.

"Oh, dear. I'm quite certain there is a story there," Theresa said beneath her breath.

"I feel badly for both of them and cannot imagine what the countess is feeling." She sent up a short prayer their relationship would work out, but there were far too many hurdles in their path. It bore watching anyway. Then she groaned, for Lord Everidge was coming their way with firm intent etched on his face. "You should go. I imagine this exchange won't be pleasant." And quite frankly, she wanted to rebuke his advances in private.

“Good luck,” Theresa whispered with a pat on her arm. “I’m going to see if I can’t snag the attention of one of the rogues, merely to annoy my brother.”

Caroline snorted. “I tried to do the same, but the results weren’t as I’d expected.” She waved to Theresa. Seconds later, Lord Everidge had joined her, looking far too dapper and handsome in his tailcoat and starched cravat. There was no doubt he would be, perhaps, the more stable catch, but her heart firmly belonged to Graham, come what may. Still, confliction raged within her chest. Was she continuing to cling to a girlish fantasy by putting herself in his company when he hadn’t spoken of his feelings for her, if any?

No, that was silly. She shoved those thoughts away, for hope still lived within her heart.

“Good evening, Lady Caroline. You are beyond beautiful tonight,” he greeted as she scooped up her gloved hand and brought it to his lips.

“Thank you for noticing, Lord Everidge. How are you this evening?” She sent another glance about the ballroom. Where was Graham?

“Quite well, and equally anxious for the night to unfold.” His hold on her hand tightened slightly. “I would like it above all things if you would allow me this next dance.” From the experimental notes the string quartet played, it would be a Viennese waltz.

“Uh...” Caroline hesitated. Forcing a swallow into her throat to relieve the dryness, she finally said, “I have promised one to Lord Aldren first.”

The man chuckled, but the sound didn’t tickle through her chest like Graham’s did. Neither did his scent of Bay Rum and lime excite her as the viscount’s favored cologne. “Oh, I rather doubt Aldren is coming to this event.”

“Why?” Surprise stabbed through her even as she frowned.

“I have it on good authority he has other interests to occupy his time just now.”

“Oh?” Cold disappointment twisted down her spine. “Is he with another woman?” It was entirely possible he’d not been strong enough to resist the call of his former vices, but after what they had shared, after he’d laid claim to her, she had thought they shared an unspoken understanding of sorts.

“I can say with absolute certainty it is not another woman that has detained him.” Without releasing her hand, Lord Everidge led her out onto the dance floor and into an open spot.

Try as she might, Caroline couldn’t release herself from his grasp, and now that the first notes had been released and they entered the opening steps, she was well and truly stuck. “How do you know any of that? Did he tell you? Did you see him prior to coming here tonight?” Confusion ran rampant through her mind, but her questions fell on apparent deaf ears. For that matter, how did he know so much about Graham? After that bout of fisticuffs they’d exchanged the other night, it was rather farfetched to think of them as friends.

Then there was no more time for conversation. The steps of the dance led her away from him temporarily. When she came back to him, and their hands brushed as they went through the more elaborate steps, he said, “Since we are growing closer, it is only fair I tell you of my own history, hmm?”

“I suppose that would be helpful.” Though she didn’t much care in this moment, for her thoughts were singularly focused on Graham.

“You might know me as Lord Everidge, that is more or less true.” Again, the movements of the dance took her away from him, and it was maddening to wait until she’d returned to his side. “However, I am more commonly known in my native country of France as the Comte of Fontaine.”

Caroline sucked in a breath. “I beg your pardon?”

“I am indeed a member of the nobility. A distant relative of the extinct Lorraine-Guise line that ended in the late 1600s by way of the Orleans line.” His shrug was a study in French elegance. Graham had a touch of that, but not to the

extent that this man did. “My father kept detailed records of all of those descendants. However, the Terror prevented him from claiming his rightful place, and once more all relatives in the line were either killed or scattered.” He remained silent as their hands clasped and they circled one another.

When the set finally ended, he once more took possession of her hand and led her toward the side of the room. Despite herself, curiosity burned through her chest. “What happened then?”

“What usually happens when one is trying to avoid death.” Though he placed her hand on his arm, he kept his hand over hers so she couldn’t slip away. “Eventually, my parents were forced to become peasants in a country where they should have ruled, to watch as the English—and anyone else—plundered their treasures and bossed their people.”

“While your story is dismaying, the same happened to many people through no fault of the men serving in the war. Everyone had orders.” She tried to remove her hand from his arm, but his strength was surprising. “Do you have siblings? Perhaps you should seek them out and try for some semblance of normalcy.”

“Ha!” His snort of derision sent chill bumps over her arms. “There was the chance to organize an uprising during Napoleon’s war, but everything was chaotic and when supply lines to the French were cut, it became a matter of survival. For everyone.”

“I won’t say the war wasn’t horrible for everyone, and what Napoleon allowed his own people to suffer on the altar of ultimate power was shocking and dismaying. However, you survived. Take joy in that, like the men in England who have come home to rebuild their own lives.”

“I wish it were as easy as trying to forget, but I cannot.” He shook his head and slowly led her toward the top of the room and the open double doors. “My mother expired from a fever that swept our village, brought by some regiment or another. It matters not who was responsible.” A bitter note had entered his voice. “My father died during the war shortly

after that. Most likely from a broken heart, for he'd managed to survive everything else."

Surprise went through her chest. "He served?"

"No." Lord Everidge's mouth was a thin line. "He opted to take his own life, leaving me alone with my younger sister, but my older brother René lost *his* life during the war, at Aldren's hand while they both served in Portugal. I was sent a few letters detailing firsthand accounts of that brutality."

"Oh no." Icy fear played down her spine. Suddenly, everything in her life and Graham's hadn't happened randomly. It had been perfectly planned and choreographed; the loop closed about the viscount's neck like a snare. And the memories Graham struggled with? They were true, and a much different account than this man had just given. The sightings of him at the pawn shop weren't just random either. "You are out for revenge." Her pulse ricocheted wildly through her veins. "It was *you* who left the parasol handle."

A pleased bit of laughter escaped him. "You are quite clever, aren't you?" Though he grinned down at her, there was no mirth in the gesture. "When I saw that damned trinket in the pawn shop, knew it had come from the court of my own countryman and was only an object to be stolen by the likes of Aldren or his damned club members, my plan for revenge finally came to me."

"Dear God." Sour bile climbed the back of her throat while her mind screamed a warning. She tried to pull away, but he held her tighter.

"Do not make a scene, Lady Caroline, or it will go worse for both you and your lover."

A gasp left her. "What have you done?"

"What I needed to do."

Thoughts bounced through her brain like soap bubbles, but the one she focused on was the dead courtesan in Graham's bed. "That prostitute Graham took home wasn't a random occurrence, was it? You arranged that."

“I adore how your mind works, my lady. Perhaps in another life or better circumstances, we could have made a go of it.” His fingers were like a vice on her wrist as he continued to stroll toward the doors. “But yes. I arranged that meeting, which was quite easy given Aldren’s predilections for fast women.” Yet his sigh held a sad edge. “Vivienne lost her will to live following our parents’ deaths and especially after the news from Portugal broke. But she was much a coward and refused to take her own life like our father had done. Instead, she turned to destroying herself a different way and became a courtesan. For years she gave herself over to the most horrid of men who were wealthy and titled within the English *ton*, so I decided to use her pain to my advantage and gain revenge for us all.”

The urge to retch assailed her, but she swallowed until it was under control. “Did you kill your own sister to set things in motion?” What sort of a depraved man did that?

“You will discover that shortly, but for now, just know others in my employ are busy securing the viscount for what will become a befitting end to his troubled existence.” It was insanity that he smiled down at her. Clearly, he was not complete in his upper stories. “My sister had so much potential until tragedy destroyed her.” He sighed with elegance. “She was merely a pawn. True, she was a courtesan, and she was addicted to opiates, so truly, I put her out of her misery so she wouldn’t suffer a long, drawn-out death.” While Caroline gasped, he continued. “The laudanum ensured she wouldn’t know it was me nor would she feel pain.” Sadness flickered in his eyes, which meant he still had part of his soul intact. Didn’t he? “She is now with my family and will perhaps know peace.”

They’d finally gained the doors, but he paused just inside them. For the moment Caroline acted as if everything were quite fine even as chills went over her skin. “What does any of this have to do with me?” Fear kept as tight a hold on her as Lord Everidge did. “I am merely collateral, so let me go.” If she could just get free, she could implore one of the rogues to help.

Remarkably, the dratted man chuckled. “Oh, you are a vital piece in my plan, my lady. Because of that, I cannot merely walk away and leave you unharmed. Not after what Aldren did to my family, so I will carry out my revenge in the most cruel of ways, as the French do.”

Her throat went dry as fear tightened its fingers about her spine. “Meaning?” The inquiry came out as little more than a croak.

“When the French wish to hurt someone, we need that wound to go deep, thus here you are.” He shrugged and there was a hard glare in the backs of his eyes that frightened her. “I wish to see him suffer greatly before I kill him, and since he is nearly enamored of you, I’m afraid I’ll have to use you as sacrifice.”

“The hell you will,” she said on a hiss. She didn’t care that they were in a public setting, for she needed to be free of this madman, needed to at least try to locate Graham, to help him... unless it was already too late.

Lord Everidge tsked his tongue as he led her into the corridor, nodding at acquaintances as he went as if it were an ordinary evening. “I’m afraid your protests are meaningless.”

Trying to dig in the heels of her slippers against the smooth marble flooring was fruitless. “What have you done to Graham?”

“Ah, well, it’s rather a work of art. It is a known fact the viscount is addicted to many things; laudanum is one of them. Many men before him have succumbed to the drug and overdosing is commonplace for former military men.” He made a sound that was supposed to be sympathetic but there was none of that emotion in his expression. “Let us hope the dose I gave him has only subdued him, for I wish for him to suffer while he dies.” Then he transferred his grip from her hand to her upper arm. “Come, Lady Caroline, or we will be late for the final act.”

Fright and revulsion crawled over her skin like ants. What should she do? If she went with this man, there was a chance she could rescue the viscount. Yet how?

Dear God. What do I do now?

Chapter Eighteen



With a groan, Graham came to consciousness. His mouth tasted of wet cotton and seemingly every muscle in his body ached.

What the devil happened?

Snatches of memory assailed him. He'd left his house for the ball. The moment he went to enter his waiting carriage, he'd been attacked by two well-muscled thugs, one of whom knocked his driver from his perch. Though Graham had put up a fight, he was easily subdued once the second man arrived to help. Knocked to the ground and secured by one of the attackers, the second forced his mouth open. Seconds later, a measure of bitter liquid was dropped into his throat; he'd recognized it as laudanum, and it was quite a large dose. Then the man slammed his jaws together and pinched his nose closed so he had no choice but to swallow the vile liquid.

After that, things had become a blur. He assumed that once the drug took effect, his attackers had tossed him into the carriage and stole the vehicle, brought him to wherever he was now.

With another groan, he tried to turn to his side, but as his eyes adjusted to the darkness around him, he found he couldn't move his arms. Neither could he move his feet, and there was an unnatural tightness about his chest. His head pounded, which was often what happened after a dose of laudanum, and his limbs felt excessively heavy as well. Another side effect of the opiate. Then the truth filtered through his still-groggy brain. His wrists had been bound behind him and his ankles tied, then he'd been secured to a Doric column in a drawing room.

Essentially, he was a prisoner in a dark and empty townhouse, but where the hell was he? And more to the point,

was Caroline safe? Fear twisted down his spine, for he remembered that damning clue he'd found inside the parasol handle, that equally damning threat. Lord Everidge would be at that ball tonight with her. Surely, he wouldn't dare to abscond with her in front of that many people.

Pulling at his bonds didn't result in freeing himself. Not that he'd expected it to be so easy. The thugs had done their job all too well. As he strained his ears, he didn't hear any sounds of human habitation in the room around him or in the house itself. Various creaks and cracks that were common to empty buildings reached his ears, but he was convinced he was very much alone.

Whose house was this? Certainly, it wasn't his or even Caroline's. Through the gloom, he glanced at the walls that had been covered with expensive and delicate paper. The gilt accents glimmered occasionally when he moved his head. Swallowing down the need to cast up his accounts, Graham continued to concentrate on the room. At least it would take his mind off the unrelenting fear.

Dark draperies hung at the floor-to-ceiling windows. A few oil paintings in gilt frames still hung on the wall, and he recognized two as having belonged to the Duke of Winthrop. A good amount of furniture had been removed from the room. The only pieces left were a low sofa, a couple of chairs and a table. Carpets had been rolled up and lined the walls as if ready for transport, so clearly the house had been vacant, and someone was in the process of selling off the possessions found within.

But it was the metal grate in the shape of a peacock that identified the owner. Those pieces of twisted and shaped, turquoise-painted metal accented with gold paint and sparkling precious stones fairly screamed wealth and privilege, and the only man he knew of that had such a garish screen had been Winthrop. He'd been the horrible person who'd almost killed Baron Twinsfield and his wife, the man who'd tried to kill his own sister-in-law for an inheritance, who eventually met his end a few months prior by Twinsfield's hand. Assisted by a few rogues from the club, of course.

Why am I here of all places?

Commotion and the rustle of fabric in the corridor beyond yanked Graham from his thoughts. Awareness mixed with fear in his chest, for he recognized one of those voices.

Caroline!

“No more resistance, my lady. We have reached our destination, which will be your final one, if I may be allowed to spoil the ending for you.” Then Lord Everidge came into the room with a hand clamped firmly at Caroline’s upper arm. “Ah, look, my associates have done their job well, for our guest of honor is ready and waiting for us.” The French accent in his voice was more pronounced now, no doubt due to emotion or the fact he no longer needed to hide his ancestry.

When he shoved her ahead of him, she turned her head, and the second her gaze alighted on Graham, she uttered a cry and moved to come toward him. Her skirting whispered with her actions, and even in the dim light, he admired the autumnal hue of the gown with its sparkle of beads. Damn but he would have adored whisking her about the dance floor, showing all of society he’d staked a claim to her.

“None of that. It’s not time for a lover’s reunion quite yet.” There was a hardness in Everidge’s voice that set Graham’s teeth on edge. He yanked her backward against him and then wrapped an arm about her so that her neck was in the vee of his elbow—an easy way to choke an opponent. The violence was a weird juxtaposition to their formal attire, which suggested elegance and a gentility that was missing from the scene.

“Let her go,” Graham demanded as he strained at his bonds. Despite the laudanum hangover, he would find his way out of the ropes. “She has nothing to do with what’s between us.” Not that he knew for certain, but surely this couldn’t merely be retribution for the death of this man’s brother.

“Now, now, Aldren, no need to rush this story.” The damned man tsked his tongue while tightening his grip on Caroline, whose struggles against his hold lessened with the

added pressure on her neck. “Everything is connected.” As he spoke, the madman tugged Caroline toward the sofa.

“Why are we here, Everidge?” Graham was not in the mood for games or tricks. He wanted the facts, and then once he freed himself, he would rip the man’s throat from his body for daring to lay a hand on Caroline in violence.

“Patience. Isn’t that what they taught you in the military?” His dark eyes glittered in the gloom of the room. “In the event you are interested, I have been planning this revenge for years, but only in the last six months have those plans come together enough to set into motion. Almost as if fate were encouraging me to move forward with them.”

“Why? If this is for your brother’s death, many good men died in the war, but your brother wasn’t a good man. His death was called for.” Mostly, Graham said it to further antagonize Everidge in the hopes that he might let Caroline go.

“Oh, my dear viscount, this is for many things, but we are not there yet.” Though his tones were soothing enough, every word that came out of that man’s mouth inflamed Graham.

“Then get on with it,” he bit out but met Caroline’s gaze. She widened hers slightly, which meant she had a plan.

God, she is amazing.

Everidge nodded but kept his hold on her. “When I came to London with revenge uppermost in my mind a couple of months ago, I was able to purchase this house quite cheaply since the prior owner had died and his name was tainted with various unsavory things.” A chuckle left his throat, and he rolled his eyes. “Those acts are all in the beholder’s eyes, hmm?” He shrugged and clenched his hold on Caroline’s neck when she struggled to free herself. “

“What do you know of it? The Duke of Winthrop was a horrible man.” He tugged at his bonds, but the ropes, of course, held.

“In some ways, perhaps, but everyone has a will to survive, regardless of their circumstances.” Watching Graham,

the damned man dared to bury his nose into Caroline's hair and sniff it. "However, the man is naught but a ghost, so I will use his earthly trappings as the scene of your demise." He chuckled when she renewed her fight to get away from him. "You see, I have always been fascinated with death, since it has touched my family so many times. Men in power always seem so keen on killing others they have deemed unworthy, and you are that, my friend." Slowly, he shook his head. "As unworthy as they come. A shell of a man, a slave to his vices and addictions." Again, he tsked his tongue, this time in false sympathy. "As for how you will die? Well, I have planned to set fire to this house, claim that vagrants or the poor did the deed, which will thereby allow me to collect insurance monies on the property. Easily, I will recoup my investment, all the while knowing that you—my enemy—will burn."

The iciness of fear frosted Graham's spine and climbed his throat. "All because your brother was killed." It wasn't a question.

"It is but one part of it, yes." Everidge moved slowly backward toward the sofa. "The courtesan you took to bed and made sport with the night you found the parasol handle? That was my sister." Anger threaded through the man's tone. "She had her faults—we all do—but she was merely the bait so I could catch you. My history is peppered with death and misfortune, this is true, but I grow weary of living through such events. Killing you will be cathartic as well as a new start for me." When Graham scoffed, he laughed, but it was a mirthless sound. "I will return to France, not to my former glory as is my birthright, but knowing I have avenged my family as best I could."

"I don't know what half of that means," Graham said from around clenched teeth. "But you are quite insane if you think to put reason to your actions." With the pounding in his head and the added stress to his muscles due to the ropes, he was much like a caged tiger ready to strike.

And kill.

Caroline clawed at her captor's sleeve. "He is a French comte of royal blood," she managed to gasp out before he

renewed his grip on her throat.

“Nobility and rank matters not when death is in the offing,” Graham said with a glare at the man.

“Oh, indeed. I agree,” Everidge said with a grin that was more macabre than anything else. “While we are waiting for my associates to set the initial fires, I have one more act in store, and I want you to know exactly what suffering feels like so you will welcome the painful death that is waiting for you.”

Despite himself, he was curious. “And?”

“Since you fucked my sister right before she died, perhaps I should do the same to Lady Caroline.” A trace of humor went through the man’s voice, especially when the woman in question renewed her fight to free herself. “Oh, yes, claim her right in front of you because that is something you’ll understand, right Aldren? An eye for an eye, or in this case, a tupp for a tupp?”

“If you even try, I *will* put an end to you.” He strained at his bonds, but the ropes held. There would be no escape.

“I rather doubt that. You are a useless man with nothing to recommend you.” Everidge shoved Caroline onto the low sofa. The sound of fabric tearing echoed in the sudden stillness of the room. “Even if I were to let you live, you will have destroyed yourself within the next six months.” He joined Caroline on the sofa, wrenched her legs apart, laughing as she screamed.

“Don’t do this, Everidge,” she said in a pleading voice that broke Graham’s heart. Clearly, she was terrified, and rightly so. Never should she have been put in that position, and the fact that she was laid squarely at Graham’s feet. As she surged up on the sofa, one side of her bodice had been ripped revealing the top of her breast above her stays. “You are better than this.”

“I rather think I’m not,” the man answered, and for one second, Graham thought the man might leave off with this insanity. “Years ago, perhaps I was, but seeing one’s family decimated by the careless and callous actions of others

removes a chunk of one's soul eventually." One of his hands was at her neck, squeezing, and the sounds of choking erupted into the air.

A red haze fell over Graham's vision. *This is my fault.* In that moment, sudden clarity came over him. Damn if he didn't love her, would do anything to protect her. *I have to get free. Put this man down.* "Leave her alone, Everidge." The warning his voice was all too prominent. Not that it meant anything while tied to the column.

"You are hardly the man to protect any woman after you've abused them in the past."

"No!" Caroline's exhalation was graveled as she removed his hand from her throat. "A man shouldn't be judged by his past when he's making strides to change."

"He is not capable of change!" The sound of flesh striking flesh rang out in the silence as Everidge's palm connected with her cheek.

She cried out in pain then whimpered. "This disagreement is between you and Graham." Tears were evident in her words. "Not me, and I rather doubt you are the type of man to take a woman by force."

"Ha! You know nothing about life and how it works, my dear, for women are naught but bargaining pieces in any of the games men play." Everidge shoved up her skirting, which put her stocking-clad legs on display.

"No!" Graham strained at his bonds. There was a knife inside his boot. If he could only reach it. "Leave her the fuck alone!"

"Ah, you must care for the lady exceedingly much if this enrages you, and I haven't yet violated her." Pleasure fairly dripped from the peer's voice. His eyes glittered with madness in the low light. "Now I will for certain get off my rocks on her, perhaps come all over her neck and face to stake *my* claim, hmm? Knowing that was the last thing you saw before death will comfort me for years."

Shit, shit, shit!

“Please don’t do this!” Caroline’s tearful pleading ripped at Graham’s heart. This was worse than anything he’d ever gone through in the war. She struggled against Everidge as one of his hands disappeared beneath her skirting while the other fumbled at her bodice.

A growl of pure rage escaped Graham as he was helpless to watch the scene unfold. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he became aware of the acrid smell of burning wood. The first wisps of smoke drifted into the room. “I can guarantee you will die for this, Everidge. Perhaps not tonight, but soon, and from my brothers-in-arms.” Surely one of them had seen this man take Caroline from the ballroom, and when neither of them returned, they would have investigated the absence.

Please God let the rogues be enroute!

What appeared as a struggle that Caroline wouldn’t win suddenly became something else entirely. With a grunt, she planted her slippered feet on Everidge’s chest. Seconds later, she heaved him off her body with such force that he was thrown against the arm of the sofa. While he tried to right himself, she quickly scrambled off the sofa and to her feet. She faced her would-be rapist with her fists raised, her knees slightly bent in the prime stance to begin a bout of fisticuffs.

“If you come at me again, I *will* clean your clock.” Though her breathing was labored, there was no denying the intent in her tone. “Your choice.”

Never had Graham loved her more than he did in this moment where she came into her own with all the knowledge on fighting she’d gleaned so far from him. “Hot damn, Caro! You can take him down. I know you can!”

With all the elegance of the Frenchman that he was, Everidge removed himself from the sofa and stood in front of her. “Fight all you want, my lady, but in the end, I *will* win. I’ve planned for every eventuality.” He circled her, raised his fists in a fair imitation of her stance. “I already bested your beloved Aldren on the street nearly a week ago, and I would

have put him down the night of the rout had you not interfered. What is a mere woman compared to that?"

She snorted while Graham gawked. "Why don't you come closer, and I'll be certain to show you exactly what sort of vengeance a 'mere woman' can bring down around you." Slowly, she circled him and the expression on her face would have quelled lesser men.

"I might have miscalculated your tenacity, but eventually, you will fall, just as Aldren has. You are trouble, besides."

"Only the best and most interesting people are." Then she struck, lashed out with a perfectly formed fist and tagged Everidge on the chin, which snapped his head slightly backward. The joy on her face sent Graham once more tumbling tip over tail. "If you want the viscount, you'll need to fight for him, because I do not intend to let him go."

Chapter Nineteen



Caroline tried to regulate her breathing as she slowly circled her opponent. Uppermost in her mind was the fact she'd only had two lessons regarding fisticuffs, and one of those had been cut short while the other had ended with a rather amazing bout of coupling.

Perhaps it didn't matter, for she had willingly entered herself in this, and she would fight not only for herself but also for Graham—for their very lives.

"Don't rush it, Caro. Take your time and find the opening," Graham said with encouragement in his tone.

While she appreciated the support, the full of her concentration was on Lord Everidge. Now more than ever she knew that boxing was in her future. "What are you waiting for, Everidge? I thought it gave you a feeling of superiority and power to bully a woman. And you were certainly thwarted from raping me." She couldn't resist the taunt, for she was itching for this fight. As a duke's daughter, she'd led a more sheltered life than others in the *beau monde*, but that didn't mean she was weak or a victim.

Anger streaked across his face, even evident in the gloom. In his obvious agitation, he swung out a fist, but Caroline managed to dodge the blow. "I thought you were a more clever woman than this, Lady Caroline."

She snorted. "So then, intelligence in females equates to them needing to let horrid things happen to them because a man decrees it?" Hot anger surged into her chest. "Or because society deems us the weaker sex, little more than property, without the ability to make our own choices?" Ire propelled her fist out. Pleasure surged through her being when she found purchase in his shoulder. "I rather think you are wrong, and

there are more women just like me who are going to make every man in England open their eyes and see that truth.”

Where the devil had those thoughts come from and why was she spewing them out to a man of his caliber? Perhaps they’d been simmering inside her for far too long, and it took meeting Graham, being his company, learning to fight to unlock her reticence on the issues.

“Really clock him, Caro! You are truly a singular sensation!” Graham continued to shout his support from where he was secured to the Doric column.

But the moment she quickly glanced at him, Everidge threw out his next punch, which clipped her chin with enough force to spin her about. Precious seconds were lost as she tried to recover her footing, and by the time she stood upright again, she hadn’t raised her fists quick enough to defend. He got in a powerful jab to her ribcage that sent her hurtling to the floor with sharp pain in her side.

“Shake it off, Caro,” Graham crooned. “He’s bearing down. You *must* get up.” Warning echoed in his voice. “Come at him like we practiced during sparring.”

“Right.” Ignoring the pain, Caroline pushed off the floor and gained her feet once more. She stared at Everidge, wanted to smack the mocking grin from his face. “That won’t happen again.”

“Stop fooling yourself, my lady. The world belongs to men who are daring enough to take hold of it.”

She blew out a breath then winced, for her ribs ached. “You think you are that man when not five minutes ago you wished to rape me then leave me and Lord Aldren for dead.” Already, large threads of smoke had infiltrated the room. The scent of burning wood permeated the air. “You are naught but a coward, and I cannot believe I didn’t see you for the man you were straightaway.” With confidence and anger guiding her and Graham’s voice in her head, Caroline lashed out with her fist. This time she found solid purchase in Everidge’s cheek, just beneath his eye. Oh, he’d have a lovely shiner soon!

Remarkably, he chuckled. “We all make mistakes, but your biggest and most fatal one was throwing your lot in with the viscount.” This time, when he jabbed, she danced beyond his reach. “A fitting end for you both.”

“Not while I still have breath.” She flew at her opponent, gave him a quick one-two punch to his gut and his chin, but she wasn’t fast enough to flit away, for her heel snagged in her hem, tripping her.

“That shouldn’t be an issue for you quite soon,” Everidge said as he loomed closer. “Good night, Lady Caroline.” His fists came at her, faster than she’d anticipated, and caught her in the spot where her jaws connected.

Immediately, darkness whooshed in on her and she fell, tumbled down, down, down into that all-encompassing blackness.



“Caro! Wake up!” A series of grunts and growls followed the insistent words. “Caroline Marlowe, wake the hell up or we’re both going to die in this godforsaken place!” Coughing took the place of the warning.

Slowly, Caroline came awake to pain in more than a few places in her body. Her head ached fiercely, and the ambient temperature of the room was quite warm. From where she lay on the hardwood floor, it was still fairly cool, but the general air was filled with thick gray smoke. She coughed a few times herself, glad that near the floor the smoke was a bit thinner.

“Graham?” The smoke irritated her eyes, making them tear and water.

“Over here. Follow the sound of my voice, sweeting.” The relief in his tones was unmistakable.

Though the use of an endearment sent tiny flutters into her belly, she didn’t have the time or luxury to marvel at it.

“I’m in pain,” she said as she rolled onto her hands and knees.

“I know, and as soon as we leave here, we can tend to that.” He jerked against his bonds. “There is a knife in my boot you can cut the ropes with, but you *must* do it soon. The house is on fire, and those flames are coming ever closer.”

“A knife.” What a clever idea to put a weapon in one’s footwear. Then she frowned. “Why are you wearing boots instead of dress shoes? Society matrons frown on boots in ballrooms.” It was hardly the conversation to have at such a time, but it took her mind off the lurking terror.

His chuckle sounded all too forced. “I was in such a hurry to see you I must have put them on by rote.”

“Ah.” When she tried to laugh, the lower ribs on her left side hurt. Were they strained or broken? “I’m coming.” When Caroline attempted to stand, pain and lightheadedness assailed her. Seconds later, she retched onto the floor. The ache in her head worsened. She couldn’t breathe properly due to the smoke in the air.

“Stay low,” he warned.

Without knowing what else to do, she crawled slowly over the floor toward his location, pausing every so often to shove her skirting out of the way. Almost there, she cast up her accounts again, this time all over the front of herself. “Well, the gown is beyond repair,” she managed to whisper. Tears welled in her eyes from both the smoke and reaction to the events of the night, but there was no time to dwell on any of it.

“I shall buy you three more gowns, but we must hurry.” The urgency lingered in his tone. “The knife is inside my right boot, in a slim pocket in the lining.”

“Clever.” Finally, she drew even with him. A quick look into his face gave her a shot of confidence, but her hand shook as she thrust her fingers into his boot. When her fingertips slid against the thin handle of the knife, she almost cried with relief. “Got it.”

“I knew you would.” He gave her an encouraging grin. “Cut through the ropes. We’re running out of time.” Another

round of coughing followed.

“I’ll try my best.” No, she didn’t wish to die in this abandoned house, but it hurt to draw each breath. After pulling the knife from Graham’s boot, Caroline moved to his ankles. It seemed to take an eternity for the blade to cut through the rope fibers, but finally, his ankles were free so that he could begin to have the circulation restored. “I’ll do your wrists next.”

“You are a real brick of a woman, Caro. I’m so proud of you.”

She gave him a tired smile before maneuvering next to the Doric column. It took a bit to reach his bound wrists. The smoke in the room made breathing an issue. Dizziness once more had her swaying, but soothing words from Graham kept her upright if leaning against the column.

“You’ve almost got it.” The pleasant timbre of his tone guided her as she cut through the ropes tying his wrists together. “Just one more and then we can leave this horrible place.”

“My strength... is fading.” It took too much effort to whisper or even hold the knife, but he was still bound to the column by the rope wrapped about his chest.

“I know it’s difficult; I know the only thing you want to do right now is sleep, but the second you do that, the smoke will fill your lungs, and will swiftly kill you.” He shook his head while trying to squirm out from under the ropes, ended up gasping for breath the same as her. “Everything you have ever wanted is on the other side of the fear gripping you, Caro...” Another ragged breath interrupted him. “But you are a formidable woman, and I have every confidence in you.”

“Ha.” Not so far gone she couldn’t joke about the situation, Caroline asked, “What is my reward if we do escape?” Her voice was hoarse, her heartbeat throbbed in time to her head, but there was still a glimmer of hope deep in her heart.

His chuckle was a terrible, wheezy affair. “I’m going to marry you, damn it, whether you want to be wed or not. I

cannot do this alone any longer, and need you with me. For everything.”

“Oh.” How very wonderful! “I would kiss you if I had the strength... and if I wasn’t so... tired and... hurting.” Finally, the blade sawed through the ropes, and they fell slack around his body. The knife tumbled from her fingers, and she didn’t care.

“That’s my girl.” Graham pulled away from the column and threw the clinging ropes to the floor. Then, while still on his knees, he gave her a quick embrace and kissed her cheek. “I would kiss *you*, but you stink to high heaven from retching.”

Despite her aches and difficulties, Caroline snorted with laughter. “As if you smell like a bed of roses.” So many foul odors rose from him, she didn’t know where to start.

“I’m deliriously happy to be able to laugh with you. It means we aren’t lost yet.” Quickly, he removed his cravat. “Here.” He gave it to her. “Wind this over your nose and mouth. It will help... to filter out the worst of the smoke.”

She frowned. “What about you?”

“I’ll manage.” He eyed her askance until she’d followed his command. “Stay as low as you can... and close to me... but we *have* to move.”

While crouching, Caroline let him lead the way from the room. The muscles in her legs ached fiercely from the awkward exercise, but it was better than succumbing to the heavier smoke above.

Clouds of black smoke filled the corridor beyond the drawing room. Various crashes and the sound of fire eating up wood rang in her ears. Terror twisted down her spine as she tried to keep Graham’s form in sight.

“Head toward the staircase!” he commanded while stooping.

She nodded even though he couldn’t see her, but she moved faster since they were no longer crouching. All around them, smoke and flames filled her vision. The heat that rolled

from the more intense flames was incredible, and quite honestly, Caroline thought her hair would be singed right off her head. Fear kept her stomach in constant knots. The smoke got into her eyes and blurred them with tears. Breathing worsened until she uttered a hacking cough for each two breaths she drew. Her throat felt raw and there was not enough moisture in the world to relieve the ache.

Eventually, the staircase came into view, but all she saw was the wallpaper curling off in strips from the heat or the wainscoting streaked with soot or eaten up with flames. The fire had progressed to the stairs; it covered some of the treads. Behind them, the crash of beams and walls thundered through the air, which only served to remove barriers between them and the overpowering heat and flames.

She laid a hand on Graham's back. The comforting solidness of his form reassured her that they still had a chance. "What... now?" As best she could, she kept the cravat around her nose and mouth.

Graham looked about. Soot stained his face while sweat ran rivulets through it. Ash lay distributed through his brown hair. "Take off the gown."

"Why?" This was hardly the time for sensual teasing.

"It's too much skirting and the fabric... is very flammable material." He coughed. "In your shift... you'll have a... better chance of getting... down the stairs." Another round of coughing possessed him. His eyes streamed and when he wiped at his face with a sleeve, it left a horrible mess behind.

"What... about... you?" Since the gown was already torn in a few places thanks to Lord Everidge's rough handling, removing it from her frame was a relatively easy task, even if it made her body aches more pronounced.

"I'll do the same." While he stripped down to his shirt and breeches, the roar of the fire came ever closer. "Put the cravat over your hair."

"No." She shook her head. "You do... that. I'll... use my... petticoat." Then she paused for a wave of coughing.

“What are we going to do?”

He took the cravat from her while she removed her stays and then her petticoat. Clad only in her shift, she wrapped the petticoat about her head and upper body and hoped it would help as protection, but at least it was cooler. “Nothing else to do.” He cleared his throat. “We’re going down the stairs... one way or another.”

Was he mad? “But... They are on fire.” She glanced between the smoke-filled passage and him. “How will... we... descend?”

Graham held out a hand. With the cravat wrapped about his head and face, he resembled an Egyptian mummy. “Do you trust me?”

Did she? Certainly, she wouldn’t have chosen to be in this situation, but since she was, at least she was with him. “Yes.” Caroline nodded and put her hand into his. “With everything that I am.”

“Good.” He kissed her hand. “If we survive this—”

“*When* we survive,” she interrupted and tried to ignore the terror all around them, but there was no shoving it away. The heat and the stink of the fire and smoke clogged her throat and pores while the roar of the flames muffled all other sound.

He nodded. “Then we shall talk. Candidly... and from the heart.” Another round of coughing followed, but he held tightly to her hand. A wall crashing in on itself spurred him into action. “Let’s go.”

With fear sitting in a wad in her throat and her heartbeat pounding out a frantic rhythm, Caroline followed the viscount down the staircase. And it was very much like what she might have imagined plunging into hell would be. Poor Graham. Did it remind him of his time on the battlefield? Would he become disoriented and lost in a day terror?

If he encountered difficulty, she couldn’t tell, but he clung to her hand just as she held tight to his. Coughing soon became her world, for the staircase was clouded by the thick, rolling clouds of smoke. With her eyes streaming, it made

seeing her location much more difficult, and each labored breath hurt, burned through her lungs. There was so much heat, it was as if she had to push through waves of it merely to move down a few steps.

A crash of something nearby sent a shower of sparks into their path. He grunted with pain and nearly toppled, but she wrenched him back onto the steps with a strength she hadn't known she possessed. Soot and ash landed all over them. Burning embers caused the fabric she'd wrapped around herself to char and smoke. How long would it be before that too went up in flames?

Dear God, where was the end of the stairs?

Finally, oh finally, there were no more treads and her feet fell on solid flooring again. The heat was oppressive, and in places the hardwood had buckled, making navigating through the smoke more difficult. Graham tugged on her hand. She squeezed his fingers as a sign that she understood, and once more they plunged into the unknown.

A new sound infiltrated her muffled ears. "Is that... someone... yelling?" She pulled on Graham's arm.

"Aldren? Lady Caroline! Are you in there?"

Oh, dear heavens, it *was* someone! She tried to call out, but her voice was but a croak, her throat too dry.

The viscount nodded and raised his eyebrows. "Go toward... Hazelton's... voice," he told her, his own voice but a rasp and quickly swallowed by the horrible snap and groans of the house coming down around them.

Then a crash close by made her scream. Something hot and heavy fell and severed the connection of their hands. Caroline was sent sprawling to the floor. She lost him in the heavy clouds of dark smoke and the constant licking of flames on the wall. "Graham!" Frantic, she licked her cracked lips, tasted soot on her tongue. "Graham!" There was no answer.

Had he been hit by the debris that separated them? As quickly as she could, Caroline crawled forward while continuing to call for the viscount. There was simply no more

strength to stand. The effort of trying to breathe was exhausting; her lungs hurt far too much to draw a deep breath. Tiny burns broke out over her arms and exposed legs not hidden by the shift. Everywhere she looked was burning or covered by rolling smoke. Then her eyes were streaming so much she couldn't see anything, nor did she have a sense of where she was compared to where the entry hall might be.

With every inch, her remaining strength fled. Everything hurt. Perhaps it was just as well that she die here, with Graham, for theirs was an unlikely pairing to begin with. With a sob and grief filling every part of her for a life she'd wanted but would never have, Caroline rested her forehead on the relative coolness of the floor and shook with fear and disappointment.

Then there was the sensation of strong arms at her waist. The feeling of being feather weighted assailed her as she was picked up and bundled into a man's arms, but he wasn't the viscount. Rescue had come! Not knowing who it was for her eyes were blurry from the smoke and ash, she babbled incoherently until her mind finally formed words and her dried lips released them into the air.

"Graham... is still... inside." Tears rolled down her cheeks while every breath pained her. "He... needs... help." What if he was even now buried beneath debris and couldn't readily be found. "I... must... try and find... him."

"Save your strength. There are men searching for him as we speak." Though his voice sounded like the Earl of Hazelton, she couldn't be sure, for everything was quite surreal as he carried her out of the burning house.

As soon as the chilly, clean night air wafted over her heated body, she attempted to take deep gulps of it, but her lungs burned too much and didn't work properly. She choked and gagged then sagged in the earl's arms.

"Easy, Lady Caroline. You have been through hell, I'll wager." Then she was given over into another set of arms and a cool, wet towel was wrapped around her. Oh, but it felt like heaven on her skin!

She dragged in as much air as she could, found the earl's gaze through the film and grit in her eyes. Her remaining strength was fading, and she couldn't get enough clean breath into her lungs. Darkness shimmied on the edges of her vision. "Find Graham. Tell him..." Tell him what? Her brain refused to work. "I... love... him."

Then, with a whispered protest, she fainted in the man's arms and let the clinging, gripping darkness cradle her into the unknown.

Chapter Twenty



October 16, 1817

Marlowe House

Marylebone, London

Graham came awake, not because of a nightmare, but due to the fact he had slept soundly without being disturbed. For the first time in a long while, he felt refreshed and rested, but then he frowned. Though the drapes at the windows were not drawn and the windows themselves were open to admit cool air that smelled like rain, he didn't recognize the bedchamber. For that matter, the bed in which he lay was quite comfortable and dressed with clothing of a more expensive variety than he would have ever chosen.

Where the devil am I?

He must have made some sort of sound, for as he turned over onto his back to contemplate the ceiling, rustling and movement in the corridor beyond filtered to his ears, then Dobbs came into the room, looking haggard and tired but elated as he approached the bed.

"It is good to see that you are awake and alert, my lord."

"Yes, it is." His voice was much like a rusty garden gate, and there was a foul taste in his mouth as if he'd spent copious amounts of time near an open fire. Oddly enough, he wasn't wearing a shirt. Hell, he wasn't wearing clothing of any sort beneath the sheets and counterpane, but here and there over his chest and shoulders were patches of burn marks that had been treated with some sort of salve. "What the devil happened to me?" When he put a hand to his hair, he found the

strands shorter than usual. “My hair has been cut.” Yet when he scratched his fingers over his cheek and jaw, whiskers clung to his skin.

“You were almost lost to a fire. Once you were brought here, the fire had gotten hold of some of your hair and the strands were fused together.” A trace of a flush went over Dobbs’ cheeks. “While you were out, I washed it as best I could and then gave you a cut to clean it up to the best of my ability. It won’t exactly look fashionable for another month or so, but it’s not bad.”

“I don’t guess I care about hair at this point since I’m still alive.” Then memories gradually came drifting back to him. Being drugged with laudanum. Coming awake tied to a column in an abandoned townhouse. Caroline nearly being abused by Lord Everidge. Navigating through the fire. Losing sight of her when something large had crashed into him in the smoke and darkness. He sucked in a breath, struggled into a sitting position against the pillows. “Where am I?”

“You have been at the Duke of Lockwood’s home since the fire. It was where he demanded you and Lady Caroline be taken.”

His pulse throbbed hard through his veins as questions filled his head like never-ending soap bubbles. “When was that?”

Dobbs shrugged. “Nearly four days ago, my lord. When Lords Winteringham and Timelbury located you in the fire, you had passed out from the smoke. Your shirt was smoldering. The fire brigade arrived, but by then the townhouse had been ablaze too long and it was a lost cause.” The valet looked him over with compassion and relief in his gaze. “Throughout your time here, you’ve been in and out of consciousness. The physician His Grace called in said excessive inhalation of smoke could render a man unresponsive, that it was a matter of time to see if you would pull through.”

Good God, that sounded horrific. “I see.”

“You have been supremely fortunate, my lord. If those men hadn’t come to assist you...”

“Yes, I rather think I would have perished there.”

A carafe of water waited on the bedside table, and with some relief and a shaking hand, Graham poured a measure of the liquid into the matching glass. Then he took refuge in the beverage, gulping it down to soothe his dried and irritated throat. Pain in his left shoulder reminded him that he’d been hit with falling debris. Only then did he realize that arm had been wrapped with bandages and was rendered somewhat immobile by a fabric sling fashioned from a length of cravat. After replacing the glass on the bedside table, he asked his next question, and the one that had knots of anxiety pulling in his belly.

“Where is Caroline? Is she well?”

“She is recovering from bruised ribs as well as burns. The last time I checked, the lady was sleeping. She came out of unconsciousness at some point yesterday.”

“I need to see her.” When he made a move to throw back the bedclothes, Dobbs rushed over and stopped him.

“There is plenty of time for that, but you need to rest, my lord. Regain your strength. You have both been through an ordeal.”

“I need to see with my own eyes that she is recovering.” This time he was able to throw back the bedclothes and then belatedly remembered his naked state. “Where are my clothes?”

Dobbs snorted. “What was left of them were probably put in the rubbish, but I have brought a packed valise.” He gestured to the side of the room where a wash basin rested behind a silken privacy screen. “If you would like to tidy yourself, you might be allowed to visit the lady.”

“As if anyone or anything could keep me away.” But he conceded to Dobbs’ intervention.

A half hour later, he was respectably dressed in breeches and a loose-fitting lawn shirt, but he rebelled against

anything else, for his shoulder ached and it was far too awkward to put other clothing on. Dobbs styled his shorter hair into some semblance of fashion with some of the longer strands swooping down to flirt with his forehead, but Graham had drawn the line at being properly shaved. There was no reason for it, and that would just add extra time that would delay him seeing Caroline. Finally, after he'd brushed his teeth and cleared his mouth of the taste of soot and ash, he was ready.

“Where is she, Dobbs? You cannot continue to keep me from her.”

“No one is trying to prohibit you from seeing the lady,” the valet said with a bit of amusement in his voice. “I do, however, want you to look your best.”

He frowned. “Why? She has seen me before.”

“While this is true, I must tell you that you talked in your sleep while you were out.”

“Oh?” Graham frowned. “What did I say?”

The valet knelt before him and held out a boot. “That you had more or less asked Lady Caroline to marry you, promised that as an incentive for surviving the fire.” He cocked a red eyebrow as Graham shoved his foot into the boot. “Do you intend to honor that?”

Did he? Heat crept up the back of his neck as he remembered what he'd said to Caro in order to encourage her down the fiery stairs. “I suppose that depends on where my case stands. Can I, in good conscience, ask for the lady's hand if I will still swing from a noose? For that matter, what happened to Lord Everidge?”

“Perhaps you should speak with His Grace.” Dobbs helped him to don the second boot.

“That might be best, for there are too many questions.” Yet there was a curious peace bubbling up into his chest that he'd not known before. Thinking about spending the remainder of his life with Caroline by his side almost felt like waking from a relaxing extended sleep. “Where is the duke?”

“I believe he is in the drawing room. Tea is in progress. Perhaps the duchess is in attendance as well.”

Slowly, Graham stood. Being on his feet felt slightly unnerving since he'd been confined to a bed for the last four days, but his stomach growled. And having his arm in the sling impaired balance. “I suppose I should eat else I'll be too weak to be of use to anyone.”

“We tried to keep water and broth in your system those times you were awake but not quite lucid.” Dobbs swung the door to the corridor open. “Do you require assistance downstairs?”

As if he were suddenly eighty? “No thank you. I can manage.” Hopefully.

“And one more thing, my lord.” The valet moved to the bureau top where he retrieved a small ring box covered with worn and faded red linen. “You should probably take this with you.”

He frowned, for he recognized the box. “This was my mother's.” His father had left it to him in his will. Cracking open the box, on the aged red velvet inside, a ring rested. The dull illumination caused the center, oval garnet to twinkle. Tiny round diamonds framed that center stone, and all were set in delicate silver filagree. The ring had been made by a lofty French jeweler, and it was one of the only things she'd taken with her when his parents fled ahead of the Terror.

“It was. I suspected you might need it rather more sooner than later in the event you wished to ask for the lady's hand.” The valet shrugged. “You can always buy her a different ring if this one doesn't suit either of you.”

“This will be perfect.” And would look spectacular against her porcelain skin. “Thank you.” He snapped the box closed and wrapped his fingers around it then tucked the box into his sling. “With any luck, I'll be able to secure the rest of my life.” That was, if Lockwood would lend his blessing.

In some trepidation, Graham made his way along the corridor. Was Caroline waiting behind one of those closed

doors? He couldn't very well burst into any of them and run the risk of embarrassing himself or others. Navigating the stairs was slow going, for it only brought to mind the last time he'd descended stairs, when the fire had raged all around him. That fear pushed back inside him, and he swore he could still smell the smoke in his nose. God, would that join the legions of nightmares he already suffered? Clutching the railing with his right hand, he slowly made his way down to the second floor, and by the time he'd reached the drawing room, sweat had broken out on his forehead and trickled down his spine.

“Ah, Aldren! How lovely to see you up and around.” The Duke of Lockwood rose from where he'd been sitting on a low sofa next to his wife. “Come. Have tea with us. You must be starving after that ordeal.”

What the devil was this, then? The duke was far too congenial this afternoon. He frowned as he came into the room. When the duchess smiled at him, he nodded and gave her a tentative grin. “Hullo, Your Graces.” Then his gaze fell upon the only other occupant of the room, and he completely forgot how to breathe, for Caroline was gorgeous as she occupied another sofa opposite the duke's and across a low table full of a rather large afternoon tea service. “Caroline...”

How was it possible she was more beautiful than the last time he'd seen her when she'd had her petticoat over her hair and smudges of soot on her cheeks? The woman had been full out amazing during that crisis, and how she'd managed to keep her wits about her during that hellish journey, he couldn't imagine, but here she was, looking like scandal and sin, with her brown hair pulled back at the sides, secured with—was that the same Mother of Pearl comb he'd given her all those years ago?—and the locks flowing down her back. There was a wicked light in her brown eyes that had his world tilting onto its side.

“Good afternoon, Lord Aldren. I'm glad to see you are upright.” Her voice sounded slightly raspy as if it were as irritated as his, but oh how it was music to his ears!

He tumbled rather than sat on the cushion next to her while the duchess poured out a cup of tea and handed it to

him. With some awkwardness, he grasped the handle in his right hand, but with his left in the sling, he couldn't manage the saucer at the same time. None of that mattered, not while Caroline was beside him and clad in the most gorgeous gown of periwinkle silk embroidered with swirls and feathers of silver. The bodice and short sleeves of the gown were made of a black lace that flared into an overskirt shot with silver thread. The effect was both elegant and enticing, and coupled with a triple strand of pearls about her bruised neck, she was a veritable goddess.

“It is good to be seen.” Gah! What a nodcock thing to say! As his nerves crawled and anxiety knotted in his belly, he took a sip of tea, and upon finding it only lukewarm, he swallowed the contents in two gulps. “Are you well?” There was sticking plaster at one of her temples and then he realized she sat propped up by pillows and at a slight angle on the sofa.

“A few burns and bruises.” One of her hands drifted to her throat where the unmistakable purple and green marks were from where Everidge had tried to choke her lingered. “Bruised ribs that might be cracked. The physician didn't know for certain, but I've been wrapped and bandaged within an inch of my life and cannot move without pain.”

Lockwood cleared his throat to direct their attention to him. “My sister came awake yesterday morning, no doubt from the pain she's experiencing, but the whole household was worried about your health.”

The duchess nodded. “We fretted if you would pull through after being lost inside the burning house for so long after Caroline came out.”

He didn't remember any of that time or the apparent rescue. “My valet told me the story. As soon as I'm able, I'll call on Winteringham and Timelbury to thank them for getting me out.”

“There is no need to rush your recovery, Aldren.” Lockwood's gaze bore into his. “You and Caroline have survived something unique and life changing. Don't waste this second chance.”

“Of course I won’t.” He held out his teacup to the duchess with a shaking hand. When she refilled it, he nodded his thanks. “I, uh, appreciate your hospitality as well as everything you’ve done for me.” It humbled him greatly to know these people had cared for him enough to oversee his care personally. “I want you to know that even before the horrible incident with Everidge, I had made inroads into changing from the man I was.”

Caroline briefly touched his arm, and that fleeting connection infused him with courage.

Lockwood nodded. “I am well aware of that, Graham.”

The use of his Christian name had a frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. Though he eyed the edibles on the tea tray with a growling stomach, he wanted to have this conversation over and done with. Securing his future was paramount to everything else. “I, uh...” He took refuge in downing the contents of the second cup of tea, and when it was empty, he set the cup on the low table in front of him. Apparently, he would have an audience. “Where is Lord Everidge?” That was the safest topic.

“Sitting in Newgate prison, hopefully reflecting on the choices he made in his life.” For the first time since Graham entered the room, the duke smiled. Some of the lines of exhaustion and concern smoothed from his face. “While Hazelton and Broadmoor were making certain my sister lived—yes, the duke left his house to assist in the rescue, for news of the fire had spread through our little network of rogues, especially since some of them saw Everidge leave the ballroom with Caroline and never return—Hazelton and St. Vincent led a contingent of men through Mayfair. They were determined to track the bastard and his minions to earth.”

“Everidge is in prison.” He could hardly believe it. When he turned his head and glanced at Caroline, she had tears in her eyes, but she nodded.

“They eventually found him trying to enter his carriage a few blocks away. It seems neither of them granted him asylum.” She wiped at an escaped tear on her cheek. “I’m told

Lord Hazelton beat him bloody before allowing Lord St. Vincent to haul him to Whitehall for Bow Street's consideration with the story of attempted murder attached." Again, she touched his arm and this time let her hand linger there. "The nightmare is over, Graham. Your name is cleared."

"What? How?" He could hardly concentrate with her so near, and all he wished to do was kiss her.

Lockwood resumed the narrative. "It seems Lord Everidge was naught but a coward. He agreed to confess everything if his sentence were to be reduced."

"Yet, he killed his own sister," Graham said as his mind reeled at that.

"He did indeed. It's a judge's discretion what will become of him now." The duke shrugged. "Suffice it to say, you have your good name back."

Graham snorted. "I don't know how good it was to begin with."

"Everyone deserves a second chance, Lord Aldren," the duchess said with a smile that lit her blue-gray eyes. "Lockwood preaches that often enough on various subjects, so be grateful you've been given a clean slate."

"Your life is your own again," Caroline said, and her dulcet tones had his attention swiveling back to her. "You have already started the change; keep going." The delicate tendons of her throat worked with a heavy smile. "I adored you before, but now that you have made strides in leaving your vices and addictions behind, I'm proud of the man you are, and..."

"Yes?" Once more, he could hardly breathe as he waited for her to complete the thought.

"And I love you. When I thought you or I would be lost to the fire, to the machinations of that madman, the strength to fight left me, and I'm not ashamed to say I grieved on that floor while the fire raged around me."

Dear God, she loves me!

That was, perhaps, the sweetest sentiment he'd ever known, and it brought home just how fortunate he truly was. That this amazing, determined woman had believed in him all along, when he didn't believe in himself, left him humbled and grateful. Ignoring for a moment the duke and duchess, Graham cleared his throat. "But you shouldn't want a man like me. My personal history is such that people will talk. There will always be rumors. And my head, my memories, are still scarred from the war. You shouldn't need to suffer them—"

"Do hush, Aldren." She leaned over and with a wince slid her hand down his arm until she could thread their fingers together. "I have had much time to think about this."

"And?"

"Love isn't perfect. It is not the sort of thing we read about in fairy stories, and sometimes it doesn't come easy. I'm not so naïve as to think there will never be problems or obstacles strewn in our path."

"Yet you want me still?" He couldn't fathom that sort of sacrifice, yet he would make the same merely to have the chance of winning her.

"Of course I do." Love shone in her eyes. "It is no secret I've held a torch for you, have long been infatuated by the idea of you, but the reality you represent is much larger, deeper, more complicated, and that is the man I fell in love with. That is the man I want by my side for the rest of my life. You have so much courage in the face of things that would make me quake with terror. You continue on despite all that has happened to you. I so admire that strength." Tears welled in her eyes. "Together we will meet every challenge life decides to throw at us, because we are stronger together than apart."

"Ah, Caro." Graham held tight to her hand as moisture gathered in his own eyes. "I love you too, even though you are quite vexing at times and infuriating at others. You are a managing baggage who isn't happy unless she's bossing someone." Chuckles from Lockwood and his wife filtered to his ears. "But you are also steadfast and strong, you are brave

and vulnerable. You push me to be better as I hope that I do for you.” When she nodded and swallowed hard again, he grinned. Slowly he was feeling like his old self, but renewed somehow. “I realize that loving you—loving us together—will take work and commitment, but I want it all, both the hardships and the joy, because at the end of every night, at the beginning of each new day, I will have you, and that is worth everything.”

“Oh, how romantic,” the duchess whispered but was then shushed by the duke.

“It is that,” Caroline said with tears on her cheeks. “Is there any wonder why I adore him?”

Lockwood cleared his throat. “Well, Graham, will you make an honest woman out of my sister? She has always courted scandal, and she probably always will, but I would vastly prefer if she did it within the bounds of matrimony.”

“I would be disappointed in her if she were to suddenly become a docile society lady. I rather admire her fighting for what she believes in.” With heat creeping up the back of his neck he drew forth the tattered ring box from his sling, and then awkwardly slipped from the sofa to one knee beside Caroline’s legs. After cracking open the box, he plucked the garnet ring from the velvet. “There is nothing else to say that hasn’t been spoken today, and if you couldn’t puzzle out how I felt for you on the day of our second boxing lesson, there is no hope for either of us.” He paused for breath while she gave him a watery giggle. “However, Lady Caroline Marlowe, will you make me the happiest of respectable men by being my wife?”

“Of course I will.” She surged forward, uttered a cry of pain, but managed to slip to her knees in front of him with a palm to the side of his face. “Ooh, you are quite tempting with the whiskers,” she said in a barely audible voice, then giggled. “I love you now and will forever Graham Islington, but having your name cleared and planning a wedding doesn’t give you the excuse of stopping our boxing lessons. I’ll be quite adamant about that.”

“I didn’t think it would, sweeting.” He threw a helpless glance to Lockwood, who shrugged.

“She has plans, my friend, and it would behoove you to merely go along with them.”

“As if I could deny her anything.” Then he slipped the garnet ring on the fourth finger of her left hand and brought her hand to his lips. “I cannot wait to start our future together.” He placed a kiss on the back of her hand.

“Neither can I.” His Caro never did anything by half. She threw herself into his waiting arms with such force that he toppled backward, smacking his head on the side of the table in the process. “I love you so much.”

He didn’t care about the pain in his head or the agony that went through his injured shoulder, for the entirety of her body was pressed against the full length of his, and she covered his face with feather weighted kisses before finally claiming his mouth. What sort of man would he be if he didn’t return her regard?

Eventually, Lockwood’s protests filtered through his passion-fogged brain. “Perhaps we should think about procuring a special license. I rather doubt the two of you can act properly through a month of having the banns read, yet you both still *do* need to heal from your injuries.” Sarcasm and amusement threaded through his voice as he stared down at them. “Besides, Caroline is a duke’s daughter. She can do very much as she pleases, but since I’m her brother, I would like it done properly and somewhat discreetly. Additionally, there are contract matters you and I need to discuss, Aldren.”

“Of course.” Then he frowned. “You won’t oppose the match?”

“Not any longer. It is clear to me and everyone else you are good for my sister and Caroline is good for you.”

“Ah.” Graham then peered into her eyes as she levered off him. “Wedding sooner is probably best.” For once she was finally his, he didn’t plan on leaving his townhouse until they were both exhausted and sated from newlywed bliss.

“Agreed,” Caroline said with a hunger in her eyes that matched his own. “But I do need enough time to make plans.”

“There is no rush, for I have already gained everything I’ve ever wanted.” For a few moments, he remained prone on the floor until Lockwood ordered him up.

Life had a funny way of showing a man all that he could have if only he was willing to work to achieve it, and with Caroline by his side, there was no end to the possibilities.

Epilogue

October 30, 1819

Aldren House

London, England

Today was Graham's second wedding anniversary, but the day held much more excitement than merely celebrating the day he wed the most wonderful woman in the world. Not that he didn't plan on marking the day with several romantic gestures. It was just that this surprise had been a long time in coming, and he couldn't wait to show his wife that their efforts of a year had now come to fruition.

Lockwood proved he wasn't merely a brother-in-arms and a fellow Rogue's Arcade club member, for he was more than generous with the dowry he'd given Graham during the short engagement period. With some of that funding, he had made impressive renovations on the townhouse, and while that was going on, after he'd wed the love of his life, they departed on a wedding trip to the Continent. During the trip, he'd showed her a few places where he'd fought during the war with Napoleon, and in the process exorcised some of the demons he'd struggled with in the intervening years.

Touring different countries, immersing themselves in different cultures had made them closer, even more so because Caroline enjoyed herself so much. The one thing that had punctured their bubble of happiness had been the two miscarriages during the extended trip. Of course they'd grieved together, but there was always another glimmer of hope on the horizon. However, since they both wished for a break from further disappointment for the foreseeable future, they'd agreed to take extra precautions so pregnancy wouldn't happen again soon.

By the time they'd returned home six months later, the structural renovations to the townhouse were completed. Then he and Caroline had turned their attentions to making the residence their own instead of merely reflecting his tastes.

Through it all, he kept his promise to her and continued her boxing lessons whenever it was feasible. Once their first anniversary had come about, her skills in the exercises were impressive, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than sparring with her in the parlor turned boxing salon.

After that, though, he refused to let her into that space for he wished to make renovations and changes to it himself as a surprise and a labor of love for her.

"Can you see?" he asked as he knotted the silky length of a cravat at the back of her head.

"I absolutely cannot see anything." Her kissable lips formed a pout as he moved in front of her. "Tell me again why such cloak and dagger tactics are needed?"

Seeing her with the blindfold was unexpectedly erotic. Perhaps they would employ it later during their celebration. "It all adds to the fun." Only having so much willpower, he leaned into her and claimed her lips, and they were so incredibly sweet and inviting that he couldn't help tugging her into his arms.

Caroline immediately stood on her toes and looped her arms about his shoulders as she applied herself to kissing him back. Never one to stand there and let life happen to her, his wife slipped a hand down his back and when she came to a buttock, she gave it a firm squeeze.

Sharp need streaked through his rapidly hardening length and tingled through his stones, but with a growl, he pulled away. "Such play needs to wait. There is something else I would like to show you right now."

Again, she pouted. "You are no fun, Graham, and it *is* our anniversary." A bit of a whine had set up in her voice.

Snorting with laughter, he took her hand. "I'll attend to your needs soon, but in the meanwhile, I think you'll enjoy

this distraction.” Excitement buzzed at the base of his spine as he led her out of the drawing room, along the corridor, and then to the stairs. “Can you manage stairs while blindfolded, or shall I carry you down?”

“Playing the hero now?” She giggled as she stood on the top step. “Is this a gift for our second anniversary?”

“It is.”

“Does it have anything to do with the reason you refused to let me into our boxing salon over the past three months?”

“It does.”

“Ah.” Caroline slipped her hand about his upper arm. “Then proceed to lead me down the stairs.”

He couldn't help his grin, but carefully, as if she were made from the most valuable commodity, Graham guided her down the stairs and then along the ground floor corridor until they came to the door that used to house his little-used library. The books and any bric-a-brac had been moved into his study on the second floor. It made that room more cozy and he rather enjoyed the effect. Some of the furniture had been used to renovate Dobbs' room and the rest had been sold.

“Are you ready?”

“That largely depends on what you have planned for the remainder of the afternoon.” She enhanced her words by delivering a soft pinch to the inside of his arm.

“Don't rush my fences, darling.” It was a phrase she'd often given to him over the past two years, and now it was merely an ordinary part of their life together. Then, he pressed the brass handle on the door and swung the wooden panel inward. “Welcome to our new shared boxing salon and lesson space.”

“What?” Quickly, she whipped off the cravat, dropped it, and then hurried into the overly large suite. “I cannot believe you did this!” A squeal of delight left her throat as she twirled about the newly finished gym. “It's amazing.”

“It is, I’ll give you that.” While his wife explored the salon, he watched her face. The surprise and shock in her expression gave him such joy. “While the parlor side will still be reserved for our private sparring spot whenever we need it —” he gestured at the familiar space with its boxing ring and the mattress ticks, “—the library side will now be a place where you can conduct lessons, teach abused and threatened women how to defend themselves.” He drew her across the room, passing a ring similar to the one on the other side. Leather bags filled with sand hung from the ceiling. Rings, padded mittens, and everything else a beginning student in a boxing salon might need waited in bins at the side of the room. “Where the library doors used to open out into a narrow terrace that led to the back gardens—which it still does—there is now a private walkway that comes from the front of the house that you can use for a private entrance.”

“You did this, for me?” She crossed the room and thrust open the double French paned doors. “Oh, it’s lovely!” With a gasp, Caroline darted outside. She ran up the walkway, followed it parallel to the house and then stood on the connecting pavement to stare at the front façade of the townhouse. “I never thought this day would come, and to think you made that happen...”

Graham shrugged as he joined her. “I would do anything to make you happy, Caro,” he whispered and slipped an arm about her waist. “And since this has been a dream you have been adamant about, I set things into motion.” Slowly, he led her along the walkway and then into the boxing salon once more. “There are privacy screens folded in that corner which you can use to portion off the space for individual lessons.”

“Or if we wish to spar while lessons are in progress on the other side?” she asked in a low voice.

“Of course. Whatever you’d like.” He shrugged. “It was one advantage of having a townhouse that isn’t attached in a row like some in Mayfair. We can do whatever we want.” With a finger, he showed her an appointment ledger with her name engraved on a brass plate on the front. “So you can start booking your first classes.”

“This is the best gift anyone has ever given me, and to think now I can teach women how to defend themselves, how to survive during less-than-ideal situations, to give them a bit of their humanity back, and perhaps encourage them to break free...” Tears welled in her eyes and then spilled to her cheeks. “You don’t know how much this means.”

“Perhaps I don’t, but I *do* know you. Since the first day I introduced you to boxing, you took to it, and it’s illuminated your soul.” He grinned. “I rather think it’s your passion.”

“None of this would be possible without you.” She drifted close and then threw her arms around him. “If boxing is my passion, it will need to share that space with you, because everything I am belongs to you.”

“No, sweeting, you are your own person. I merely enhance the amazing package you are. A singular sensation, indeed.” During the course of their marriage, he had worked to beat his addictions, and while some had been more of a struggle than others, Caroline had been there beside him, every step of the way, even when things were ugly and at their lowest point. “Truly I am nothing without you.”

He had come back to life the moment she’d pushed her way into his existence.

“Then it’s good we found each other.” Then she pulled away enough to hold up the cravat. “Come upstairs with me, Lord Aldren, and I will show you how property grateful I am for all the effort you took to make this salon happen.”

Oh God. Almost immediately, his shaft responded to the suggestion in her voice. “Or...” He tugged on the length of silk and gently led her toward the ring where the mattress ticks waited as his cravat came undone. “We can celebrate the opening of the salon as well as our anniversary in one of our favorite places, since this *is* where I first realized that I was hopelessly in love with you.”

Her eyes lit with wicked promise that sent awareness skittering over his skin. “Close the door. I don’t wish to be disturbed.”

As Graham followed her command, he couldn't help his grin. Never did he think that marrying a friend's sister would have brought change to every corner of his life, but then fate was an interesting thing. The more one tried to avoid it, the harder it came at one. And sometimes, fate's plans were the best ones of all, for fate didn't care what had happened in the past. It lived in the future, and that is exactly where Graham had his attention trained.

One never knew what was possible.

The End



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Author Bio

Sandra Sookoo is a USA Today bestselling author who firmly believes every person deserves acceptance and a happy ending. That is why her characters are not in the usual style and oftentimes struggle with things out of the norm. She's written for publication since 2008. Most days you can find her creating scandal and mischief in the Regency-era, serendipity and happenstance in the Victorian era, or historical romantic suspense complete with mystery and intrigue. Reading is a lot like eating chocolates—you can't just have one book. Give her the chance with one book and you'll be hooked.

When she's not wearing out computer keyboards or mice, Sandra spends time with her real-life Prince Charming in Central Indiana where she also runs a gourmet cookie business and makes moments count with the man because the key to life is laughter. Inspired to storytelling by Walt Disney since the age of ten, when her soul gets bogged down and her imagination flags, a trip to Walt Disney World is in order. Nothing fills the well and fuels her dreams more than the land of eternal happy endings, hope and love stories.

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