



TRISHA MESSMER

REDEEMING  
LORD NASH

# REDEEMING LORD NASH

Book 5 of The Hope Clinic



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## DEDICATION

*To Nic and to all who struggle with dyslexia. Your courage and honesty are inspirational. And to quote Nic: “Don’t let your dyslexia define you.”*



# PROLOGUE



ETON COLLEGE, ENGLAND, 1806

Nash gawked as his family's carriage came to a halt before the imposing buildings of Eton College. Knots formed in his stomach at the mere thought of his secret being exposed among not only his teachers but his peers. How would he ever survive?

A sound slap to the back of his head drew his attention away from the carriage window.

"Close your mouth, Nash." His brother, Roland, four years his senior, stared at him with the same contempt Nash expected to witness for the next five years.

"It's big," Nash said, immediately regretting the stupidity of his statement.

Roland rolled his eyes. "Will you make me ashamed I'm related to you on your very first day? Good God, Nash. Have some dignity. I simply won't tolerate you mucking about like some simpleton."

Nash clamped his mouth shut. He bit back the words that, despite his struggles, even at thirteen, he was more intelligent than his brother. It wouldn't do to exacerbate Roland's perpetually foul mood on Nash's first day at Eton.

Trunks scraped against the wood of the carriage as the footmen unloaded the boys' belongings. Although home had never held the warmest of memories, at least it was familiar and Nash knew what to expect. Besides, home meant his mother and younger sister, the only bright spots in his life. Removal of the trunks sounded the final death knell for the end of his childhood.

"I understand the Duke of Ashton's sons are arriving this year. They're your age. I would advise you to latch yourself onto them forthwith."

"My age? Both of them?" Once again, Nash cringed at his imbecilic question.

“They’re twins. Identical from what I hear.” Roland grinned. “That should prove an endless source of fun. Imagine the pranks they can pull on the beaks.”

The carriage door opened, and the footman lowered the steps. Nash received another sound slap to the back of his head from Roland. “Well, go on. Get your arse out.”

Nash’s knees quaked as he stepped from the carriage. Other boys alighted from similar coaches, some gaping at the buildings in the same fashion he had.

Their parents had not accompanied them to the school. Their father had announced that, at seventeen, Roland was capable of overseeing Nash’s adjustment.

But Nash knew the truth. His father was ashamed of him—ashamed of his secret. When Nash enrolled in the school, his father had instructed him to wait outside while he spoke to the headmaster. Listening through the door had been most enlightening. His father *donated* a great deal of money that day, with the understanding that—although there was no expectation that Nash would receive special privileges—*his teachers* would overlook certain . . . deficiencies.

Without a glance back, Roland bounded off, leaving Nash alone and unsure where to go or what to do. He decided to join a group of boys who appeared to be his own age. Perhaps they would also be as nervous as he was. There was something to be said for commiserating with one’s peers.

As he approached, he noticed two of the boys were remarkably similar. Both blond, fairly tall and leanly built, the only difference seemed to be the expressions on their faces. One gazed around in wonder, much as Nash had done, while the other seemed aloof and uninterested, as if he had many better things to attend to.

“Hello,” Nash said, approaching them.

The arrogant looking one raised a brow, peering at Nash as if he were horse manure to be scraped from his shoe. “Who are you?”

“Nash Talbot. Are you the Duke of Ashton’s sons?”

“Yes. I’m Harry,” the nicer boy said. “This is my brother, George.”

George shot his brother a disdainful look. “How many times have I told you? We introduce ourselves by our titles. It’s the way to get respect.” He turned toward Nash. “I’m the Marquess of Exeter, and my brother is Lord Harry to you.”

“Ah, so you’re the heir,” Nash said. He’d been drilled enough about the peerage to know the first-born son typically had a courtesy title. If anything, Nash sized up the situation quickly. “My brother, the Earl of Southbridge, told me about you two.”

That did it. George, err, the Marquess of Exeter raised that blond brow once again. “So your father is titled? Well, that does make a difference.”

“Yes. My father is the Marquess of Edgerton.”

“In that case, *you* may call me George. But only in private. We must maintain appearances, you know.”

Nash turned to George’s twin, the spare, feeling a bit of camaraderie with the other boy. Nothing formed a bond quicker than feeling you were a mere afterthought in case something happened to your older brother. But twins, now, that was interesting.

“How did they know which one of you was born first?”

George snorted. “Well, clearly, I’m the more intelligent, as the heir should be. Harry here doesn’t have what it takes to be a duke. He’s too soft.”

Nash shot Harry a sideways glance. The boy didn’t seem the least bit affronted by his brother’s unkind words.

“Mother said they tied a blue ribbon around George’s ankle as soon as he was born and made certain they always attached it either to his person or his clothing while we grew so they could tell us apart. At least until I got this”—he pointed to a long scar running down the side of his face—“thanks to George.”

Nash gaped at the red welt, then darted his gaze back to George, who seemed exceptionally proud of inflicting such injury. Nash had received his own share of bruises from Roland throughout the years, not to mention times when he'd encouraged Nash to do things with horrible consequences.

Nash didn't understand the cruelty of the peerage.

Before he could say another word, a man appeared at the entrance of the main building, calling the boys to order. As they lined up single file, George pushed and shoved several smaller boys out of the way to move in front of them.

"Is he always like that?" Nash asked Harry.

"Yes. It's best not to upset him if you can help it."

With that bit of advice tucked away, Nash entered the building and received his house assignment, discovering he would bunk with both of the twins and one other boy.

Upon entering their room, he found a boy with a mop of red hair laying out his clothing on his bed.

George marched over and shoved the boy's clothes on the floor. "I want this bed. Take another."

The redheaded boy's mouth opened in a little O, his blue eyes wide with shock.

"This one looks better, anyway," Harry said, motioning the boy to the other side of the room. "What's your name?"

"Andrew Weatherby."

George barked a laugh. "You look more like a weasel to me. I think that's what I'll call you. Don't you think he looks like a weasel, Lord Nash?"

Nash gulped, his eyes darting between the three boys. Remembering Harry's advice, he said, "Yes. Yes, he does."

Regret surged through him at Harry's disappointed expression.

"Pay them no mind. I'm Harry Radcliffe. Pleased to meet you." Harry stuck out his hand, then Andrew shook it. "Mind if I take this other bed?"

Andrew darted a glance toward Nash, then toward George, who plopped himself on the bed Andrew had occupied moments ago.

“Go ahead. I’ll take this one,” Nash said, pointing to the other spare bed. Hoping to make amends, he picked up some of Andrew’s discarded clothing and, holding them out, whispered, “Sorry about the weasel comment.”

Andrew grunted, apparently not quick to forgive.

Nash struggled to make amends by sharing some insider information. “My brother says the beaks will beat you if you get an answer wrong.”

Harry’s and Andrew’s eyes widened. Apparently, they hadn’t heard the same horror stories Roland had imparted to Nash on the long carriage ride from their family’s estate in Shropshire.

George huffed and raised on one elbow. “Anyone who dares try to beat me will hear from my father.” He stretched back out on the bed. “Besides, I’m always right.”

Harry busied himself by retrieving more of Andrew’s clothing. “Pay him no mind. He’s full of himself.”

Something told Nash that he needed friends other than George. He picked up a pair of Andrew’s breeches still on the floor. “I’m really sorry.”

Andrew took both the offered breeches and apparently Nash’s apology, giving him a nod of the head. “I don’t like to be called names.”

On that, Nash could agree. He’d had enough name calling to last a lifetime, most aimed at his perceived lack of intelligence. And it galled. Because Nash wasn’t stupid. Any fault lay with the letters on a page that wouldn’t hold still.

Over the next few weeks, the three boys became friends, much to George’s fury. He’d scowled and grumbled and played pranks on the three of them, always telling Nash it would serve him better to align himself with those who would advance him in society, and the few times Nash had encountered Roland, his brother gave him the same advice.

Yet for once in his life, Nash felt accepted. And that was when it happened. He'd let his guard down and confided in Harry.

And Harry utterly betrayed him.

CHAPTER I—ENCOUNTER ON  
THE DOCKS





LONDON, ENGLAND, APRIL 1828

Nash concentrated on the scrambled letters, willing them to stop wiggling and stay in their correct position. It didn't help that his brother, Roland, the Marquess of Edgerton, huffed impatiently while perched regally before him. Nash swore the chair at Roland's desk replicated the king's throne.

"Well?" Roland said, the word sharper than a rapier.

Nash stared at the scandal sheet again.

"Is it true? Is there yet another family I need to placate to make this go away? Your escapades are costing me more blunt than I care to admit."

Nash squinted again, barely making out the name associated with his. "It's not true. The chit tried to lure me into a compromising position—one a blind man could have seen. It's all bluster—a veiled attempt to extort money from you."

Roland's eyebrow rose in the haughty way Nash detested. "So a small amount should silence them sufficiently?"

"There's nothing to silence," he answered, tossing *The Muckraker* onto his brother's desk. Unfortunately, Nash's reputation had laid the groundwork for the recent barrage of accusations. Yet even his reputation as a rake had, for the most part, been fabricated, making it easy for people to believe he had little respect for women and used them ill.

It kept most people at arm's length. Just the way he wanted it.

"I grow tired of this, Nash." Roland punctuated his statement with a yawn. "It's time you settle down and marry and put an end to this."

"I have no desire to marry, which you well know."

"I'm not suggesting. If you wish to continue living in the manner you've grown accustomed, you *will* marry, and you will do so within three months' time."

Nash slammed his hands on the desk before him and received a glare from his brother. “Three months! Who would you have me marry?” He picked up the scandal sheet, waving it before him. “Miss Myrtle Hemmings?”

“She tried to lure you, so it would appear she’s interested.” Roland steepled his fingers, peering at Nash with a devious expression.

Nash’s gut twisted. Myrtle Hemmings was a brainless flirt. She’d probably tugged half the men in the aristocracy—excluding Nash.

“But no,” Roland continued. “She has no dowry, and frankly, I’m tired of supplementing the living Father left you in his will. I understand Anne Weatherby has a large dowry, and her brother has been most eager to find her a husband. It would seem scandal is a breath away from that young lady. You two should be a perfect match.”

“She’s a child, Roland.”

“All the more time to beget your own children.”

“That’s not what I meant. Besides, Andrew Weatherby would rather cut off his arm than allow me to marry his sister.”

“You have a point. The man is as self-righteous as his friend, the duke. I swear if I hear another person wax poetic about Ashton’s clinic, I shall cast up my accounts into the nearest chamber pot.” He drummed his fingers on the mahogany desktop, the *ra-rump, ra-rump* unsettling Nash’s nerves.

“Lady Honoria Bell, perhaps? As the daughter of the Marquess of Stratford, it would be an almost even match. She’s a bit dull, her nose always in a book, but she would be biddable. Stratford has been eager to marry her off ever since that mess with some commoner, and even more so since Marbry threw her over for the Pratt chit.” He seemed to ponder it for a moment, and Nash felt the parson’s noose tighten around his neck.

Roland pulled a piece of parchment from the desk drawer and dipped his pen into the inkpot. “Yes. I believe that should

do it. I'll write to him forthwith. Polish your dancing slippers, Nash. You'll be wed before you know it."

Exactly what Nash feared.



ADALYN LOVELACE CLUTCHED THE SHIP'S RAILING AS IT MADE its way into London's harbor. She and her father had traveled from Boston, first visiting Germany and the Netherlands, where her father consulted with other prominent physicians.

She learned a great deal while she stayed by her father's side during their trip, and she was eager to share it with Harry. She barely had a chance to say goodbye, his departure so abrupt when he returned to England to claim his rightful place as the Duke of Ashton, and she missed him.

Her parents had speculated she and Harry would marry. At least it was what her father had hoped for when he took the young physician under his wing upon his arrival in America. However, Harry's mind had been focused more on medicine than it had been on her, and while she liked him, she never experienced the spark she'd hoped would develop with a man—if she married.

"It will be good to see Harry again," her father said as if reading her mind when he ambled to her side. "I'm eager to tour this clinic of his. I'm very grateful he's continued to practice and turned his skills to such a worthy cause."

A gleam shone in her father's eyes. "On that count he has some sense."

"You need to let that notion of a union between us go. He's happily married, and I, for one, am looking forward to meeting the woman who finally turned his head."

"Think, my dear. You would have been a duchess."

"And been away from you? From Boston? Never! Besides, I doubt the English are as open-minded to women in medicine as you are. And where would that leave me?"

“A powerful woman can do great things.”

“The eternal optimist. Who knows, perhaps I can lure some other aristocrat into marriage, then drag him home with us. I could be both titled and continue assisting you.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “If only your mother could see us.”

“Would I scandalize her with my wish to become a physician?”

He tugged her to his side. “She would be proud.”

The world would be a better place if all men were like her father.

“Wait here,” he said. “I’m going to oversee that our trunks are assembled.”

When the ship pulled into the harbor, men lowered the gangway with a solid *thump*. Working feverishly, sailors secured the large vessel to the dock pilings, and people gathered on the streets below, waiting in anticipation for passengers to disembark. Fishmongers called from their vendor stalls, peddling their catch of the day, the smell lingering upon the sea salt spray in the air.

Heedless of her father’s warning to remain there, the lure of the bustling city called to her, and she followed several people down the wooden planks to the city’s cobblestone streets below.



A WOMAN’S SCREAM PIERCED THE THICK AIR AT THE DOCKS, and Nash jerked his head up from where he’d been attempting to decipher Lloyd’s List for information on arriving and departing ships. In a blur, a shabbily dressed boy darted past him, holding onto to what appeared to be a woman’s reticule.

“Stop him!” a woman yelled, presumably the same one who’d interrupted his concentration but a moment prior.

Nash raced after the lad, the boy's legs no match for Nash's long stride. "Stop, you!" His cry was futile. The little thief wouldn't stop simply because he was told to.

As Nash reached out only inches away from grabbing the urchin's torn coat collar, the boy darted around the corner of a building. Nash slipped on an oily substance and momentarily lost his balance. By the time he regained his footing and rounded the corner, the boy had completely disappeared.

Nash skidded to a halt, the corner of his gaze catching the slight wobble of a board in the building's side. "Aha! You little mongrel. I see your hiding place."

When he pushed against the board, it swiveled to the side, allowing a small gap in the building's exterior—much too small for Nash's large frame, but perfectly proportioned for the youthful pick-pocket.

Feet pounded behind him, and Nash turned, hoping it was the boy's accomplice. Experience had taught him they performed their thieving in pairs, with one operating as a lookout while the other executed the crime.

Instead, a woman appeared, her bonnet askew, silvery-blond hair blowing free from its pins, and cheeks reddened from exertion. She barreled into him, practically knocking him to the ground.

On instinct, he wrapped his hands around her waist to steady them both.

"Where . . . is . . . he?" Her words came in short bursts, the sound of them a bit—off.

Rather than trying to puzzle it out, Nash held a finger to his lips, then pointed to the narrow opening. Deliberately raising his voice, he said, "He got away, I'm afraid. You can try to locate a constable and file a complaint, but these ruffians are a clever lot." He gave her a wink, then motioned for her to follow him while he stomped to the side of the hidey-hole.

She gave an acknowledging nod with her pretty blond head. "Oh, dear. I suppose you're right. I should return to where I was and find my father."

*Ah. An American. Fresh off the boat, no doubt.*

The street urchin probably had lain in wait for unsuspecting foreigners to disembark, then strike, knowing anyone unfamiliar with the seedy side of London wouldn't expect to be fleeced as soon as they arrived.

Nash pressed his back against the building far enough away from the opening to remain unseen, and the woman followed suit. As they waited, he studied her. Young, but not too young, perhaps six-and-twenty, her blond hair more straight than curly, but falling in tendrils against her neck and forehead. Her eyes, bluer than a summer's day, locked on his, meeting his gaze directly rather than blushing or feigning shyness as many young women of his acquaintance were wont do.

He liked that about her. Instinct told him she was a woman who knew her own mind.

Of course, she neither knew him nor had heard about his reputation.

He liked that as well. Someone, for at least a brief time, with whom he could be himself.

She opened her mouth to speak, his eyes drawn to her perfectly formed lips, but he shook his head, reminding her to remain silent. He mouthed the word, "*Wait.*"

Truth be told, he didn't mind waiting for the rascal to reappear, as the nearness of the woman sent an unfamiliar yet pleasant longing in him. She shifted, her hand brushing against his and stirring his imagination. Her citrusy scent drifted toward him from the gentle breeze. He inhaled—not lemon—and took another deep breath—orange, the fragrance a blessing to counter the stench of fish.

Lost in his thoughts, he'd almost missed the rustling coming from inside the narrow opening. When the boy's head popped out, Nash grabbed him by the collar and yanked him from his hiding place.

"Hand it over," he said in his sternest voice.

"Wha'?" the imp answered.

Scrawny and underfed, the lad appeared to be about eleven or twelve. His filthy face and torn knees of his breeches elicited a wave of compassion in Nash's heart.

Nash had heard about the boys Ashton had rescued from the vile man Coodibilis. Ashton had adopted Manny, and Camilla Denby had adopted the boy they called Pockets.

Was the fellow before him a remnant of Coodibilis' gang? Nash gave him a little shake. "The lady's reticule. We know you have it. Return it at once, and I won't seek out a constable and press charges."

The woman sent a castigatory glance Nash's way. "You're frightening him."

"He's not going to hand it over if you offer him tea and biscuits."

"Well, I might," the boy chimed in, a grin spreading across his face. "I 'eard some of you lot are good to blokes like me."

Nash bit back a grin at the boy's cheek. He briefly considered using his rank to frighten the boy but decided not to use that leverage with the lady next to him. Besides, the lad seemed a better judge of Nash's station than the woman. He'd heard how Americans took pride in their egalitarian ways.

He shook the boy again and delivered an idle threat. "I'll box your ears if you don't hand it over this moment."

The woman forced her way between them. "I forbid you to harm him. He's only a child."

Nash couldn't help it. He rolled his eyes. "Madam, this *child* has purloined your reticule."

"Look at him. He's probably hungry." She stooped toward the urchin, her expression kind and compassionate.

Oddly, Nash yearned to have such an expression directed toward him—especially from her. He shook himself for his moment of weakness.

"You talk funny." The lad's lips quirked upward. Somehow Nash didn't think the boy was laughing at her, but like himself, found it rather delightful.

“She’s from America. Yet another reason to return what you’ve stolen. We don’t want to make a bad impression on our visitors, now do we?”

The child opened his ratty coat and untied a rope around his waist that held the woman’s reticule. With a filthy hand, he held it out.

When she took it, the boy kicked Nash in the shin and raced off.

“Bloody hell!” Nash hopped on one foot, grabbing his throbbing shin. “I’ll catch that thieving street rat if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Language, sir.” She grasped his arm and lead him to a group of barrels lined up against the building’s wall.

He leaned against one for support while massaging his tortured shin. Such audacity. “I’d wager you would curse too if someone assaulted you.”

A tiny smile crept across her delectable lips. “And you would most likely win. Allow me to examine you.”

Nash’s gaze jerked toward her. “Examine me?”

“Yes. I’m a physician. Well, that’s not entirely true. I don’t have the actual credentials, but I’ve studied under my father and assist him in his practice.”

Another bluestocking. Were they overtaking the civilized world? What was it with women? Although, he had to admit, his recent experiences had shown them to be intriguing. Laurence Townsend certainly seemed a happy man. Nash thought about the portrait of the viscount’s wife hanging in the man’s study. Maybe he had erroneously discounted them.

“And does your husband approve of you examining strange men?”

She peered up with those big blue eyes from where she palpated his leg through his trousers. “I’m not married. And I wouldn’t marry a man who didn’t approve.”

When she resumed assessing his injuries, he allowed the smile to break across his face. *Not married. Excellent.*



“As you’re an unmarried woman, especially considering you’re touching my person, I believe introductions are in order,” he said. “I’m Nash Talbot.”

“Adalyn Lovelace,” she answered, continuing to press lightly against the affected area. “You’ll bruise, but nothing seems broken. Is there anywhere to obtain some ice? Applying a portion might reduce the swelling. Otherwise, there might be a bump.” She rose, standing before him. “Try to put weight on it.”

He straightened and eased more weight onto his injured leg. Although it still throbbed, it certainly wasn’t unbearable. “The little mongrel purposely disabled me so I couldn’t go after him. He’s both fast and wily.”

“I imagine he would have to be to live on the streets.” She backed away, and for the first time, a slight blush bloomed across her cheeks.

It only made her more attractive.

“I should get back,” she said, her voice wavering slightly. “My father will be concerned. Thank you again for your assistance. It was most gallant of you.”

*Gallant?* Well, that was a word never used in conjunction with the name Nash Talbot. The day had been full of surprises.

“It was my pleasure.” He pulled a card from his coat and handed it to her. “In case you care to call on me to see how I’m coming along with my injury, I would be delighted to see you again. In a professional capacity, of course.”

As she accepted the card, her fingers brushed his again, sending that enticing wave of pleasure up his arm. “Of course.” The blush deepened.

Satisfied she’d interpreted exactly what he intended with his offer, he bowed and kissed her fingers. Then he returned to where he’d come from.

His life suddenly seemed to brighten.

## CHAPTER 2—FRIENDS AND FREEDOM



Adalyn stared at the retreating back of the tall, dark stranger. She wouldn't describe him as classically handsome, certainly not like Harry Radcliffe, but a strong attraction had seized her when they brushed fingers.

His dark eyes seemed to pierce into her very depths as if in search of her soul. There was a dangerous quality to him, but tempered with a vulnerability she couldn't name. She sighed and peered at the card in her hand.

*Lord Nash Talbot.*

From his dress and mannerisms, she should have guessed he was an aristocrat. Why hadn't he introduced himself as such? His address displayed beneath his name, and she smiled at his tempting suggestion to seek him out for a follow-up consultation.

Tucking the card inside her returned reticule, she wove her way through the throngs of people back toward the dock to find her father. He would be crazed with worry about her.

As expected, when she reached the ship, he was moving frantically from person to person, gesticulating wildly. No doubt demanding they reveal her whereabouts.

"Father!" she called over the sounds of gulls squawking and the buzz of chatter around her.

His head jerked in her direction, and he practically pushed a man aside as he raced to her side. "Adalyn," he said, out of breath from his exertion. "I told you to wait for me."

“I’m sorry, Father. I couldn’t resist looking about just a little. Before I knew it, someone grabbed my reticule and made off with it.”

His eyes widened, and he grabbed her by the upper arms. “Are you harmed?”

“No. No. I’m fine. A gentleman came to my aid and retrieved it.” She held it up as evidence.

He shook his head, sending her a censorious look. “Ten minutes. I leave you alone for ten minutes, and you’ve already managed to find an adventure.”

Adalyn’s lips twitched from the restrained smile. Even with the stern delivery of his words, her father was all bluster. She would wager part of him was even envious he had not been party to the events.

“You only have yourself to blame, Father. All your talk about seizing life and enjoying it to the fullest. I’m an apt pupil, eagerly listening to my mentor’s advice.”

“Bah.” He waved a hand in dismissal and sent her a sheepish glance. “But perhaps it would be best to keep your adventures to one per week. I’m not certain my heart can handle more.”

She threaded her arm through his, tugging him close. “I’ll do my best.”

“Now, shall we go find Harry?”

Adalyn nodded, and they boarded a hired coach.

Throughout the journey to Harry’s, Lord Nash Talbot remained in her thoughts until the carriage slowed and stopped before a stately home.

“Oh, my,” Adalyn whispered. She turned toward her father, who apparently had the same reaction.

When the driver lowered the steps, her father exited and held out his hand. “Shall we see how the other half lives?”

The Duke of Ashton’s imposing home was twice as large as many they’d passed, even in the obviously affluent area.

Carefully manicured shrubbery provided a bit of privacy for the house, which sat back from the street. She wondered if his surroundings had changed Harry since she'd last seen him five years ago.

After a single knock, the door opened, revealing an elderly, congenial-looking man.

He beamed at them and bowed. "Dr. and Miss Lovelace, I presume. I'm Burrows, His Grace's butler. He and Her Grace are expecting you. If you would follow me."

After instructing several servants to see to their trunks, Burrows led them up a beautiful, wide, curving stairway. Portraits of men, presumably the previous dukes, lined the walls. She poked her father in the ribs and pointed to one. "That can't be Harry?" she whispered, taken aback by the scowl on the man's face. What had made him so unhappy?

Apparently Burrows had exceptional hearing. "That portrait is of His Grace's brother, George Radcliffe, the sixth Duke of Ashton. His Grace's portrait is in the library, as is that of Her Grace."

Adalyn cast a glance at the portrait again. "He looks just like him."

"They were identical twins," Burrows answered.

"Did you know?" she asked her father.

He shook his head, his eyes wide as he gazed around the opulent surroundings.

She and her father wanted for nothing, but this way of life was far distant from her own.

Burrows led them into the library, and Harry rose in greeting, a smile breaking across his face. "Daniel, Adalyn! How wonderful to see you again. Allow me to introduce my wife, Margaret, Duchess of Ashton. The nanny has insisted the children rest, although I suspect Edmund is planning a coup from his bed."

"I can't wait to meet them." Unsure what to expect, Adalyn studied the woman before her. Taller than the average

woman, she still appeared petite next to Harry. Soft tendrils of raven hair framed her strikingly beautiful, heart-shaped face. She smiled warmly, her unusual violet-like eyes crinkling at the corners. No wonder Harry had lost his heart.

Adalyn curtsied. “Your Grace. It’s an honor to meet you.”

Margaret glided forward, her hands outstretched, then took Adalyn’s in her own. “None of that. Call me Maggie. Harry has told me so much about you. I feel we’re already good friends.”

Adalyn’s gaze shot around Maggie toward Harry. How much had he told her?

Harry merely smiled in response, stepping toward her father to clasp his hand and pat him on the back. “You’ll stay with us, of course. We have plenty of room.” He motioned toward a grouping of sofas and chairs. “Come, sit. I’m sure Burrows will harass Cook to hurry with the biscuits and tea.”

Mention of biscuits elicited a chuckle from her father. “Still have that sweet tooth, eh, Harry?”

“Always.” Harry winked, then patted his stomach. “Although Maggie has warned me to limit my consumption.”

As if on cue, a delicious aroma of freshly baked goods teased Adalyn’s nostrils.

Burrows entered carrying a silver tray, the old gentleman remarkably steady as he placed the tray on a table before the duchess. “Will there be anything else, Your Grace?”

“Have rooms readied for Dr. and Miss Lovelace. And choose an appropriate valet and lady’s maid from among the staff to tend to their needs during their visit.” The warmth and affection Harry exhibited for his butler reminded Adalyn of Harry’s compassionate nature.

“Consider it done, Your Grace.” With that, Burrows bowed, turned on his heel, and left.

Harry grinned at them. “Since I alerted him of your arrival a week ago, I suspect he’s already accomplished both. He

probably had it in hand the very next day. However, he does place importance in having me give him orders.”

“He’s a treasure,” Maggie said. She pointed to the two silver pots on the tray. “Coffee or tea, Dr. Lovelace? Adalyn?”

Her father’s face brightened. “You remembered, Harry. Coffee, please, Your Grace. Black.”

Maggie nodded, then poured the coffee, handing it to her father with the elegance one would expect from a duchess. “Adalyn?”

“Unlike my father, I intend to absorb as many of England’s customs as possible. Tea, please, Maggie.”

“How do you take it? Milk? Sugar?”

“Whatever you recommend.” Adalyn felt a little sheepish with her request. Truth be told, she usually drank coffee, black, like her father, but the urge to make a good impression on the duchess won out.

Always eager to learn, Adalyn observed carefully as Maggie poured the tea, adding one lump of sugar and a splash of milk.

A knowing smile tipped the corners of Maggie’s lips. “I hope you enjoy it.”

After Maggie prepared tea for both Harry and herself, Harry helped himself to an exceptionally large cookie—err—biscuit. “I hope your journey was uneventful. I would say pleasant, but I’ve never found traveling by sea pleasant.”

Her father finished taking a sip of his coffee. “The journey itself was uneventful. However, when we arrived—”

Adalyn placed a hand on her father’s arm, discreetly giving a shake of her head. She had no desire to upset Harry or Maggie over her incident on the docks.

Leave it to Harry to parse that small slip into something more. His eyebrows rose, and his teacup hit the saucer with a *clink*. “Did something happen?”

Before her father could continue and further worry Harry and Maggie over what amounted to nothing—well, nothing except for that devilishly handsome man, Lord Nash—Adalyn intercepted the conversation. “What Father meant to say was that when we arrived, he hoped our inspection of your clinic would be most eventful.” A burst of pride shot through her at her quick thinking.

Her father slipped her a suspicious sideways glance.

Although she couldn’t explain it, something prevented her from sharing her encounter with Lord Nash Talbot. Adalyn wasn’t a superstitious person, but she had learned to trust her instincts, and they veritably shouted to keep mum about the rescuer of her reticule.

“I’m eager to show you what we’ve accomplished in a scant five years. However, you must be exhausted from your journey. I’m sure you would like to rest. The clinic can wait until tomorrow.” He rose and tugged on the bell pull in the corner of the room.

Almost instantaneously, Burrows appeared.

“Are Dr. and Miss Lovelace’s rooms ready, Burrows?”

Harry’s supposition that Burrows had prepared the rooms well ahead of their arrival proved true, for the old gentleman nodded. “Peter shall assist Dr. Lovelace, and I’ve selected Eloise for Miss Lovelace.”

“Excellent choices, Burrows,” Maggie said.

Adalyn finished her tea and followed Burrows and her father to the lavishly appointed rooms. When Adalyn entered, a petite brunette smiled shyly and executed a little curtsy.

“You must be Eloise.”

“Yes, miss,” the girl said. “I’m very pleased to serve you.”

Adalyn wasn’t accustomed to having a maid tend to her needs. She’d always been a self-sufficient woman. When her mother died, grief had dictated Adalyn’s simple coiffure, but she later embraced it as a matter of practicality when assisting

her father in his medical practice. Sick people didn't care a wit about a fancy dress or elegantly dressed hair.

Yet the girl seemed eager to help, her eyes shining brightly as she waited for Adalyn's first command. And the elegant four-poster bed beckoned Adalyn's travel-weary body.

"Might you assist me with my gown? I think I shall rest a while before supper." Adalyn gave the girl a little wink. "The duke's orders."

Eloise tittered a little laugh but nodded.

Like styling her hair, Adalyn was adept at dressing and undressing herself, including managing her stays, which she'd had specially designed. But she allowed Eloise to unfasten her gown.

"Miss Flora, Her Grace's lady's maid, trained me." Eloise said, making quick work of Adalyn's gown. "I hope to find a position as a lady's maid in a fine household. Although, truth be told, I will hate leaving here. Everyone is so kind."

Sincerity rang in Eloise's words, not that Adalyn doubted it. Of course, Harry would be a caring employer. Still, it was comforting to know power had not sullied him. Men had been seduced and corrupted by much less.

"Have you known His Grace long, miss?"

"We met nine years ago." Adalyn had been nineteen when Harry had arrived in Boston. He'd received a chilly reception by many because of his English birth, but her father had welcomed him with open arms, securing him a position at the Boston Dispensary.

"He and Her Grace are incredibly happy." The serious tone in Eloise's voice failed to match her words.

Adalyn placed her hand on Eloise's. "They are indeed. It gives me great joy to see His Grace so in love. I have tremendous affection for him myself—as one would for a dear brother."

Eloise visibly relaxed, the taut lines of her mouth easing back into a smile. She curtsied and left Adalyn, promising to



return to dress her for supper.

Adalyn had spoken the truth to Eloise. If Adalyn was anything, she was honest, sometimes to a fault.

Both her mother and father had encouraged a match between her and Harry, frequently inviting him to their home for dinner and parties, allowing them to stroll together unchaperoned in the garden. But both she and Harry agreed they were better as friends than lovers. One rather awkward kiss had confirmed that agreement.

Adalyn was well acquainted with how it felt loving a brother. Grief and guilt entwined, creating a double-edged knife, piercing Adalyn's mind as she remembered Benjamin, the brother she'd lost so tragically. In some respects, Harry filled the masculine void Benjamin had left at his untimely demise. When her mother died, Harry had been Adalyn's rock. She loved him, just not in the way her parents had hoped.

She pushed the painful memories of Benjamin back into the darkest recesses of her soul, vainly trying to keep the haunting visions entombed. Perhaps here in England, without the constant reminders, she might find a modicum of peace.

As she stretched out on the soft mattress of the opulent bedroom, she sighed, happy that Harry at least had found his heart in Maggie.

At eight-and-twenty, Adalyn accepted the fact she was resolutely on the shelf. Yet, her busy days providing care to others not only atoned for her sins but kept her mind occupied, and longing for a close partnership like her parents shared, or what she'd witnessed in so short a time with Harry and Maggie, remained in the shadows.

But now, lying in the big bed, loneliness encroached, seeping in like a dark fog.

She closed her eyes and thought of the dark, seductive gaze of one Lord Nash Talbot.

And cursed her unworthiness to find her own happiness.



NASH CLOSED HIS EYES, TAKING A LONG, LANGUOROUS SIP OF the brandy. Seated at the desk in his study, he reviewed his ledgers, finding comfort in the numbers. The events at the docks left him flustered. Flustered! He never became flustered around women—until the moment he crossed paths with Miss Adalyn Lovelace.

Unbidden, a smile tugged at his lips at the way she'd defended the street rat. His shin still throbbed from where the little devil had kicked him, but the memory of Miss Lovelace's gentle touch eased the pain. In fact, her very touch had sent an unexpected sensation through him, and he struggled to name it.

The closest he could think of was what he'd experienced when having sex.

He felt his brow knit. All she had done was touch him, and it was decidedly not sexual, yet it sent a thrill through him the likes of which he'd never experienced.

His valet entered. "The Marquess of Edgerton to see you, sir."

"Out of my way, man." Roland pushed past Evans and stormed into the study.

Nash downed the rest of the brandy in one gulp. From the expression on Roland's face, Nash would need the fortification. "Don't you have enough of your own servants to torture, Roland? Must you come here and disabuse mine?"

As usual, Roland ignored him, and without invitation, took a seat across from Nash. His brother's dark eyes bored into him.

Nash resisted the urge to squirm under his brother's scrutiny, but it was damned near impossible. Ever since they'd been children, Roland had a way of unnerving him.

Roland pounded his walking stick on the floor with an angry *thud*. "I'm here for a progress report."

The numbers on Nash's ledger called to him, and he dropped his gaze to focus on the amount that was nearly there—but not quite. *So close.* Giving him strength, he kept his focus on the ledger. “Progress on what, Roland?”

*Thud. Thud. Thud.* The walking stick demanded Nash's attention. “Look at me when I speak!”

*So close. Just a little more.* The thought gave him the strength he needed. Slowly, deliberately, Nash raised his eyes to meet his brother's and waited.

“You know very well what progress. Lady Honoria. Have you called on her?”

Nash's jaw tensed. He would develop another debilitating headache if he didn't relax. Of course, the god-awful banging of Roland's stick didn't help matters. “I haven't found an opportunity. It's been barely two weeks.”

The thudding slowed to a rhythmic tapping. Not a good sign. Roland's eyes narrowed to slits. Even the tapping ceased when he leaned forward, clutching the gilded, ornate eagle on the handle. “You will *find* an opportunity—forthwith. Or I will cut off your allowance. Entirely. Is that understood?”

Three months. Would three months be enough? Nash darted a glance to his ledgers, performing quick calculations. Almost. He could do this. Determined, he locked eyes with Roland. “Quite.”

*Thud.* “Very well. The Saxtons are hosting their annual musicale in two weeks. Did you receive an invitation?”

Did he? “I'll check my correspondence.”

“Notify me at once if you haven't received one. Saxton is eager to have as many from the *ton* in attendance as possible. God knows why the family insists on continuing with the event, their finances being what they are.”

Although Nash had no great love for Lord and Lady Saxton, he did admire their daughter, Beatrix, and their new daughter-in-law, Priscilla. In friendship to them, he felt honor-bound to defend their family. “I believe their circumstances

have improved significantly since the marriages of their children.”

*Thud.*

Nash’s head pounded, the dull ache he’d been fighting since his brother’s entry blooming into a full migraine.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.* “Yes. A marriage to Miss Pratt and her healthy dowry would have served you quite well—which, from what I understand from the gossips, you threw away.”

Nash opened his mouth to protest but snapped it shut when Roland rose from his exalted position. He had no desire to detain his *beloved* brother any longer.

“Do not repeat that mistake with Lady Honoria.” With a final *thud* of his walking stick, Roland turned on his heel and quit the room.

*Three months.* His head throbbing, Nash double-checked the ledger and calculated with more precision. He slumped back into his chair. Confirmation of his earlier quick estimation should have made him proud of his prowess with numbers. But he had prayed he’d dropped a one and underestimated the total.

Even cutting back on expenses and saving most of his monthly allowance for three months, he would still be short one hundred pounds.

That which caused panic to twist his insides now provided hope. *Three months.* Surely in three months, he could raise an additional one hundred pounds.

And buy his freedom.

## CHAPTER 3—WHEN INSPIRATION STRIKES



Gales of giggles erupted from Edmund, filling the drawing room, as Harry threw his son into the air, catching him with an “Ooof.”

Adalyn laughed along with the boy. “You’ll throw your back out if you’re not careful, Harry.”

“Thank you, Adalyn,” Maggie said. “I keep telling him, at almost four, Edmund is much too old to be tossed about.”

Harry grinned at his wife. “So, Charles, perhaps?”

Maggie stepped back, cradling their four-month-old son in her arms. “Don’t even think about it.”

Wetness pricked Adalyn’s eyes, and her heart squeezed at the picture of married bliss. Oh, to have such a loving family. She gazed over at her father.

The wan smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes said, “*You could have had this.*”

She would speak with her father later, reiterating what she’d said six years prior. Harry was not the man for her. But as much as she respected and adored her father—and they indeed formed a loving family—it wasn’t the same as a husband and children.

As of late, it had become more difficult to fill the void in her heart, try as she might to busy herself with work.

Harry set Edmund down and approached Maggie.

When he leaned down to kiss her, Adalyn quickly averted her gaze and turned toward her father, exchanging rather embarrassed smiles.

Harry motioned to the door. "Shall we go to the clinic?"

Edmund waved his little hand. "Goodbye, Papa!"

They settled against the sumptuous squabs of Harry's carriage, a stark contrast to the worn and cracked cushions of the hackney coach they'd taken from the docks the day before.

Adalyn stared out the window at the passing scene, watching in reverse the transformation of the day before. Like the contrast of the carriages, elegant homes morphed into more modest ones, then to dilapidated buildings in dire need of repair.

She remembered Harry's correspondence about the young boy he'd rescued from the streets. "Where is your ward, Harry? I was hoping to meet him."

"Manny is away at school. The lad is extremely bright. Maggie instructed him the first few years, but even she admitted his thirst for knowledge had surpassed what she could offer. He's in his third year at Eton and should arrive home shortly."

Harry pursed his lips as if considering something. "If you find yourselves missing any articles, say pocket watches, notify me immediately."

Her father barked a laugh. "Still pick-pocketing, eh?"

A wide grin spread across Harry's face. "He insists it's only for practice, to keep his fingers nimble, and, to my knowledge, he always returns what he's nicked."

Adalyn wondered if Manny would know the boy who absconded with her reticule. "There were other boys, were there not?"

Harry nodded. "Pockets, or I should say Philip, Dr. and Mrs. Somersby's ward, and another boy who came to the clinic last year with a twisted ankle."

Adalyn straightened from the soft squab of the carriage. “What did he look like?”

The narrowing of Harry’s eyes and the tilt of his head sent off a warning in Adalyn’s mind.

“Why?” Harry asked. “I had the impression something happened upon your arrival yesterday. Something you were reluctant to tell me.”

She exchanged a nervous glance with her father.

“We should tell him, Adalyn,” her father said.

With an exasperated sigh, she acquiesced. “Very well. A young boy stole my reticule while I waited on the docks.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Why didn’t you tell me immediately? I would have called the constable and hired a Bow Street runner to investigate.”

She lifted her reticule for Harry’s inspection. “No need. A very kind gentleman assisted me in locating the boy and retrieving my reticule.”

Falling back against the cushions, Harry exhaled a sigh. “Thank goodness. And you’re unharmed?”

“Yes. Perfectly. Although I can’t say the same for the gentleman who came to my aid.” The dark eyes of Nash Talbot danced in her memory.

“What happened?”

“The boy kicked him in the shin, inhibiting the gentleman from giving chase. The boy got away.”

Harry gave a soft chuckle. “I presume the gentleman is otherwise uninjured—except for a sore shin and perhaps his masculine pride. Did you get his name? I should like to send him my thanks for his gallantry.”

“Lord Nash Talbot. Do you know him?”

Any expectation Harry might know her hero and arrange a proper introduction vanished with the flash of anger on his usually serene countenance.

“Nash! Are you certain that was his name?”

Adalyn pulled the card from her reticule and handed it to Harry. “He gave me this.”

Harry stared at the card, then shook his head as if to clear it. He dashed a glance toward her father, then pinned her with his gaze. “And you’re unharmed? Nash didn’t . . .” He darted another glance toward her father.

To say Harry’s reaction perplexed her would be an understatement. And what did he imply with his unfinished question?

Her father straightened, his tension palpable. “Harry, what is it? You know this man?”

“I do. I’ve known him since we were boys together at Eton. Adalyn, were you alone with him at all?”

*Oh!* “If you’re asking if he compromised me, the answer is a resounding ‘No.’ He was a perfect gentleman at all times.” She refrained from mentioning the shiver of excitement she’d experienced when their fingers had brushed.

With narrowed eyes, Harry studied her, then turned again to her father.

Why did men address each other, excluding the woman who had direct knowledge of something—especially when she was right in front of their noses?

“Daniel, I would recommend you and Adalyn avoid Lord Nash Talbot. His reputation is renowned and deserved.”

Adalyn would have none of it. “Reputation for what, precisely?”

At that, Harry’s hazel eyes pinned her. “As a rake, Adalyn.”

*Oh. Ooooh.* The dark, dangerous quality Lord Nash had exuded suddenly made sense. And yet, something seemed amiss—something she couldn’t quite explain. Her instincts were rarely wrong, but she held her tongue. Clearly, Harry held no affection for her gallant champion.



The situation required further examination before she could make her own diagnosis.

One thing was certain. Lord Nash Talbot might be the most exciting thing about her journey to England—if only she could see him again.



ADALYN DESCENDED FROM THE CARRIAGE, WHICH HAD STOPPED before a modest building wedged between others as if to strangle the life out of it. Noxious smells of rotting garbage and waste assaulted her, and she fought the urge to hold her handkerchief to her nose.

She gazed at a simple metal sign posted above the door that read *The Hope Clinic*. “What a perfect name.” Of the many needs of the people living in the lugubrious area, hope was most likely on the list.

Harry motioned them forward. “It was Maggie’s idea. At first she suggested *The Radcliffe Clinic*, but I told her it wasn’t about me, but about what it offered.”

“Then perfect indeed,” her father said.

A bell tinkled as Harry opened the door, and they stepped inside. Several people sat in chairs in an open area, and a blond woman sitting behind a desk smiled in greeting.

“This is our waiting area.” Pride lit Harry’s face as he guided them over to the woman at the desk. “And this is Mrs. Marbry. She keeps us organized. Mrs. Marbry, may I introduce Dr. Daniel Lovelace and his daughter, Miss Adalyn Lovelace.”

“Priscilla, please,” Mrs. Marbry said. “I’m pleased to meet you both.”

“Mrs. Marbry is the wife of Dr. Marbry, one of our physicians.”

A burst of excitement raced through Adalyn’s veins. “How interesting that you work side-by-side at the clinic with your

husband. Harry's unconventional ideas seem to have taken root and grown well in England."

Priscilla gave a lilting laugh. "Much to my mother's dismay, it would appear."

Harry leaned in to whisper. "Mrs. Marbry's parents are titled, as she will be one day. Her husband is heir to Viscount Saxton."

Adalyn's father bellowed a laugh. "Are you converting all the aristocracy into charitable ventures?"

Harry grinned. "Far from it, but I do try. Come, I'll show you around and introduce you to our physicians. If you would excuse us, Mrs. Marbry."

Adalyn immediately liked the blonde, whose blue eyes seemed to dance with mischief. It was a rarity to find another woman of sufficient means who pursued an occupation.

Harry led them down a narrow hallway toward a grouping of rooms. In one, a tall, dark-haired man was placing jars of supplies on shelves above a table. Apparently hearing them approach, he paused and turned his attention to the open doorway.

"Dr. Somersby, pardon the intrusion." Harry made the introductions.

Dr. Somersby nodded toward them. "An honor. Call me Oliver, please. Harry has spoken fondly of you both and about his time spent in America under your tutelage, Dr. Lovelace."

Her father brushed it aside with a wave of his hand. "Bah. I learned as much from Harry as he did from me."

Oliver smiled, a delightful dimple popping on his cheek. "Miss Lovelace, I understand you're also studying medicine under your father?"

Relieved she didn't have to defend herself, Adalyn returned Dr. Somersby's warm smile. "I am. Although I fear being accepted into medical school to officially declare myself a physician is merely a dream. However, I assist when possible."

“My wife insists upon meeting you.” He chuckled. “Between you and Mrs. Marbry as inspiration, she’ll be wanting to run for parliament before you know it.”

“Is that possible?” Adalyn’s voice sounded breathy to her own ears.

“No. But that wouldn’t stop Camilla,” Dr. Somersby said.

“Camilla and Maggie are the best of friends,” Harry said. “I met Oliver on my voyage back to England, where he was the ship’s surgeon.”

“Harry saved my life,” Oliver said.

Harry waved it off. “Merely a few stitches.”

“I’m beginning to see a connection in your staff,” her father said.

“You have no idea.” Harry didn’t leave time to comment on his cryptic remark, but quickly led them back into the hallway.

A door to another room opened, and a man with auburn hair escorted an older woman out. Upon seeing them, he bade goodbye to the woman, indicating the way back to the waiting room.

“Dr. Marbry, we won’t keep you,” Harry said, then made the introductions.

The same mischief shone in Dr. Marbry’s green eyes as did his wife’s, making it clear to Adalyn she would like them both very much indeed.

After Dr. Marbry left to call his next patient, Harry led them to another empty room and kept his voice low. “It’s best you hear it from me first rather than through idle gossip. We’ve finally put it past us, but Dr. Marbry’s wife is the woman with whom I had the unfortunate incident before my marriage to Maggie.”

Harry’s earlier cryptic comment solidified.

Adalyn questioned her initial assessment of the friendly blonde. She seemed so genuine and incapable of duplicity. The

thought took Adalyn aback, and she wondered if she had been too quick to give Lord Nash credit for unselfish behavior. Perhaps she should give Harry's assessment of the man more credence. Yet Harry seemed to have made amends with Mrs. Marbry.

Her father interrupted her meandering thoughts, but he voiced that which Adalyn had not. "I should like to hear how that all came about, if it's not too painful. I've always credited you with an open mind and fairness, but to allow a woman who almost destroyed your happiness to work in such close association . . ." He shook his head, apparently as perplexed as she was.

"Since it all ended well, I shall be happy to convey the tale, but perhaps later. In the meantime, I suggest we all get to work."

When they walked back out to the waiting area, Adalyn did her best not to allow her new knowledge of Mrs. Marbry to color her judgment. But Mrs. Marbry's intellect and instincts were evidently sharp.

After Mrs. Marbry assigned Harry and Adalyn's father two patients, she met Adalyn's gaze. "I see you have heard a bit about my history with His Grace. I had hoped, during your visit, we could be friends, but I quite understand if you prefer to keep your distance."

Oily unease churned in Adalyn's stomach. How many times had women turned up their noses at social functions simply because of Adalyn's chosen profession? They treated her as coldly as they would if she'd walked the streets of Boston. "I apologize, Mrs. Marbry. I will admit it was a shock. But I do expect we will be friends." She hoped her voice conveyed the sincerity of her words.

Priscilla's bright smile returned. "Then please, call me Priscilla. My in-laws are hosting a musicale in two weeks. His and Her Grace are always in attendance. I do hope you'll join them. My sister-in-law, Beatrix, is magnificent on the pianoforte, and Dr. Somersby's wife has a voice like an angel."

“That sounds delightful.” Adalyn chewed on her lower lip, the question she desperately wanted to ask lurking on the tip of her tongue.

“You look as if you’re unsure.”

If she didn’t ask her question, she couldn’t expect an answer. “Do you know Lord Nash Talbot?” She braced herself for the response, then wilted with relief when Priscilla grinned broadly.

“I most certainly do. Have you met him?”

“Informally. Harry doesn’t seem to approve.”

Priscilla waved a dismissive hand. “No offense to His Grace, but my experience has been much different. If he attends the musicale, I can formally introduce you, if you like.”

Relieved that Priscilla’s opinion seemed to support her initial assessment of Lord Nash, Adalyn wanted nothing more. “Priscilla, I think we shall be very good friends indeed.”



WAFTS OF LILAC BLEW ON THE GENTLE BREEZE AS NASH SAT upon his steed. He’d invited Lady Honoria to accompany him for a ride, remembering the time he, Priscilla, Honoria, and Timothy Marbry had a rather eventful excursion a year ago.

In the week and a half since he’d first called on Honoria, he’d taken her to Gunter’s Tea Shop, her maid in tow, attended an opera—he couldn’t recall the name—and now riding on Rotten Row. On his initial call, as he sat sipping tea and talking about the weather, he discovered after the first hour and twenty-three minutes amid excruciating stretches of silence, both he *and* Lady Honoria enjoyed their time together best if they occupied themselves with outside entertainment.

Since Nash wasn’t much of a reader, when Honoria began discussing various books, he had little to contribute to the conversation. As she discussed the story lines, her face brightened, enhancing her understated beauty, and she became

her most animated. Admittedly, he found several plots most intriguing and wished he could read them himself. It would at least be something they could share.

Things being what they were, he did his best to discover what else they might have in common.

In the same manner that he clutched the reins of his mount, he held on to the hope that riding might be one possibility—which was to say so tightly he would more likely strangle it to death rather than let it run free to flourish. Tension in his grip stretched the supple kid leather of his riding gloves.

“It’s a lovely day. Not a cloud in the sky,” she said.

Ah, yes—the weather. He forced a smile and nodded his agreement.

“Will you be performing any of your riding tricks today?” From the serene expression on her face, Honoria appeared to ask out of courtesy rather than a plea for him to exhibit his daring, much like asking him if he thought it would rain tomorrow.

With a quick survey of the path before them, he shook his head. “It’s much too crowded today. I wouldn’t want to put anyone else in harm’s way. Perhaps another time.”

“Of course.” Her answer, again, was matter-of-fact. No downturn of lips, no little pout, or pleas for him to reconsider. Nothing he would expect from a lady truly interested in him as a suitor.

Roland’s idea was destined for disaster.

He didn’t blame Honoria, nor could he blame himself. Both were caught in an untenable situation, but at least he had choices, albeit undesirable ones.

However, Honoria already paid the price of a failed courtship with Timothy Marbry. When he’d broken their attachment to marry Priscilla Pratt, the scandal sheets had been filled with speculation.

His valet had read him the headlines.

*Lady Honoria Unmarriageable?*

*What Sends Men Fleeing from Lady Honoria's Side?*

*Is a Social Pariah Preferable to a Marquess' Daughter?  
Ask Timothy Marbry.*

No wonder the Marquess of Stratford hadn't batted an eye when Nash called. Even with his blackened reputation, at least he was a suitor from a titled family—one on equal footing with Stratford.

Guilt gnawed at him for using Honoria to stall Roland for the three months he desperately needed. What would happen to her when he, too, ended their courtship?

A thought flickered in and out of his mind as quickly as the flit of an insect. He could marry her anyway.

It would be the honorable thing to do.

And the thing least expected from Lord Nash Talbot, notorious rogue and rake.

No, the persona he'd carefully crafted for most his life would serve him well when he disappeared, leaving Honoria suitor-less once again. He could almost hear his valet reading the headline.

*Could We Expect Anything More from Lord Nash Talbot?*

And it galled.

Curious eyes darted toward them as he and Honoria walked their horses at a sedate gait down the stretch of Rotten Row. Men tipped their hats in Honoria's direction, their eyebrows raising as they dashed a glance toward Nash. Sympathetic, tight-lipped smiles from women vexed him on Honoria's behalf.

She deserved better than pity.

After her marriage, Priscilla had written to him, and when his valet had read him the contents of the letter, his admiration for Honoria grew tenfold. According to Priscilla, Honoria had confronted Marbry, informing him, in no uncertain terms, he was pursuing the wrong woman.

Where Nash's efforts to make the man come to his senses of his own accord had failed, Honoria's directness had succeeded. Like many men, Marbry needed the truth spelled out for him.

Nash gazed over at Honoria, studying her. She would make a perfect wife—for someone. Attractive in an unassuming way, she sat her mount regally. The green bonnet perched atop her red curls matched her sea-foam green eyes as well as her riding habit of luxurious velvet.

In addition to fulfilling Roland's ultimatum, marriage to Honoria would provide a rather large dowry—one the rumor mills indicated had increased exponentially after the failed match with Marbry. Nash wouldn't even need the stipend his brother provided to supplement the small living he'd received from his inheritance.

Other than the fact that he and Honoria were, by his accounts, not well-matched, he doubted she would agree to his proposal. But maybe a different proposition would serve them well.

Considering Honoria's directness with Marbry, Nash hoped she would be just as forthcoming with him. What had he to lose—except the additional two and a half months of time he needed?

He cleared his throat, garnering her attention. "Lady Honoria. Forgive my bluntness, but I feel I must ask. Are you truly considering me as a marriage prospect?"

Pink blossomed on her cheeks, but she met his gaze directly. "I might ask you the same question, sir."

Clever woman, but it would be most ungallant if he were the first to admit the truth. "You may speak freely with me. Our conversation need not go any further than the two of us."

She sighed, the smile she had no doubt pasted on her lips vanishing. "My father has made it very clear I am to give serious consideration to any suitor from a respectable family."

Nash barked a laugh at that. "Respectable? And yet you're here with me."



Her lips twitched, the tiny smile returning, that time reaching her eyes. “Very well. Titled family.”

“So he’s forcing you to receive my calls?”

Silence conveyed her answer.

With the waters tested and found favorable, he waded deeper. “And—theoretically, mind you—if I were to propose, would you accept me?”

The heavy somberness in her expression returned, and her sea-green eyes speared him. “I don’t know. If you truly wanted to marry me, perhaps. *Me*. Not my dowry, not my familial association. *Me* as a person.”

Honesty. He’d asked for it, and she’d delivered.

Where they had failed to connect by discussing the weather, books, fashion, hunting, reforms, or the various other topics they had tested to find common ground, her admission struck a chord deep within in him.

With all sincerity, he said, “I feel exactly the same.”

She reined in her horse, as if what she had to say required his full attention. “What are we to do?”

Air stilled around them in anticipation. “I have an idea.”

## CHAPTER 4—NOTES OF ATTRACTION



Adalyn lifted a hand toward the artfully designed curls framing her face, amazed how Eloise had coaxed her straight locks into such a feminine style.

“Careful, miss,” Eloise said. “Your hair is thick, and the pins may not hold.”

Obediently, Adalyn lowered her hand. “You’ve outdone yourself, Eloise.”

Adalyn gazed up at the girl’s reflection in the mirror. The maid beamed with pride. It had taken some persuasion on Eloise’s part to use the hot metal on Adalyn’s hair, but she couldn’t argue with the results.

“Flora has hair like yours. She let me practice on her.” Eloise giggled. “I think Peter, one of our footmen, especially liked it.”

Adalyn had noticed the little glances between the handsome footman and Maggie’s shy lady’s maid. No matter where she turned, couples in love appeared, taunting Adalyn.

Well, perhaps taunting was too harsh a word. People couldn’t help if they fell in love. Could they?

Eloise gave a nod of satisfaction. “You should catch many a gentleman’s eye tonight, miss.”

Adopting her most serious expression, Adalyn addressed the maid. “I’m going to listen to music, not search for a husband.”

Eloise remained undaunted. “It’s when you’re not looking that you often find one.” With a final knowing smile, the girl practically skipped from the room, a muffled giggle trailing in her wake.

Adalyn shook her head at the innocence of youth.

Yet, there was one particular gentleman she hoped would take notice—if he were in attendance.

Adalyn preened before the mirror. After viewing Adalyn’s selection of practical gowns of sedate, dark colors, Maggie insisted they go to her modiste and order new ones in the latest fashion.

The results were magnificent. The pale blue of the gown brought out the color of Adalyn’s eyes. And the new, lower waistline set off her figure to perfection. The bodice’s V-shape narrowed down to a point, emphasizing her tiny waist. The neckline and puff sleeves sat low, exposing her shoulders. Tiny ribbon bows trimmed the flounces pulled up at the bottom.

“You look lovely, Adalyn.” The deep masculine voice startled her.

Embarrassed to be caught admiring herself, she sent Harry a sheepish look. “Maggie’s modiste is a wonder. Any credit to my appearance should rightly go to Madame Tredwell.”

“Nevertheless, I expect a number of eligible gentlemen will bombard me for an introduction. Your father may return to Boston without his daughter.”

Laughing, she threaded her hand through Harry’s proffered arm. “Don’t say that around Father.”

Her father and Maggie waited at the bottom of the staircase, and together they all boarded the carriage.

Maggie chatted excitedly about Camilla’s vocal abilities. “Perhaps Oliver will accompany her on his violin.”

“Dr. Somersby plays?” Adalyn asked.

Harry nodded. “He’s exceptional. Says it’s in his blood. He’s even teaching Pockets, I mean Philip. Dash it if I can remember to use the boy’s new name.”

The carriage slowed, stopping in a queue of others, waiting for their passengers to descend. Nervous anticipation tripped up Adalyn's spine, and she reflected on Harry's words as they left his home.

She'd never imagined living anywhere other than Boston, much less in another country. She darted a glance at her father, whom she loved dearly. How could she ever think of leaving him? He'd sacrificed so much for her, enduring criticism and even the loss of patients by training her in medicine and insisting she work by his side. Deserting him to marry a foreigner was unthinkable.

After exiting the carriage, they entered a lavishly appointed home. People bowed toward Harry and Maggie and sent curious glances toward Adalyn and her father. Adalyn breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing Dr. Marbry and Priscilla in the receiving line. At least there would be a few people she knew. She'd never been especially comfortable in large gatherings, but so many unfamiliar faces exacerbated her discomfort.

A petite redhead, not much taller than Priscilla, stood on her left. Spectacles perched on the woman's nose, which she pushed up with her index finger. Next to her, a tall man with chestnut hair shifted on his feet, looking perhaps as uncomfortable as Adalyn felt. His face lit up upon seeing Harry and Maggie.

"Montgomery," Harry said, shaking the man's hand. "May I present Dr. Lovelace and his daughter, Miss Adalyn Lovelace? Daniel, Adalyn, Viscount Montgomery."

"A pleasure," Lord Montgomery said. "Bea has been eagerly waiting to speak with you, Miss Lovelace."

The petite redhead elbowed Montgomery, who gave a soft "Ooof" but smiled adoringly at her.

Harry moved toward the redhead, taking her hand and kissing it. "And this is his wife, Lady Montgomery."

"You must call me Bea, Miss Lovelace. I have so many questions for you. Unfortunately, I shall be at the pianoforte

most of the evening. Harry, surely you could spare her from the clinic for a day?”

“For you, Bea? Anything.”

Adalyn remembered Harry mentioning Lady Montgomery’s interest in science. “It’s a pleasure to meet a like-minded woman, Bea. I’ve been hoping to spend time with you as well.”

Once Priscilla and Dr. Marbry—Timothy as he insisted—greeted them, Harry introduced them to Timothy and Bea’s parents, Lord and Lady Saxton. Both Timothy and Beatrix had come by their red hair from their mother, a short, rather plump woman. Their father, much taller and leaner, smiled amicably, but stood much farther away from his wife than did Timothy and Lord Montgomery to theirs.

Perhaps not everyone in London was enamored with their spouse, a realization Adalyn found strangely comforting. At least she didn’t feel as if she was the one person in the world who had not found a love match.

In the ballroom, people milled about in clusters, speaking in hushed voices. Chairs lined the room in neat rows. Two outside aisles flanked the chairs, and one split them down the middle. On a dais, a pianoforte waited for Bea’s fingers to bring it to life.

Harry made more introductions, and Adalyn finally put faces to the names of Andrew and Alice Weatherby, as well as Camilla Somersby and her father, Lord Harcourt. As pleasant and welcoming as everyone was, Adalyn continued to scan the room for a certain tall, dark-haired—and dangerously handsome—champion of purloined reticules.

Flutters erupted in her stomach when, over Harry’s shoulder, she spied the head of such a dark-haired man threading through the crowd toward them. But as much as she liked him, the flutters ceased, dropping like stones when it turned out to be Dr. Somersby.

He handed his wife a glass of lemonade. “Hydrate, Camilla.”

The attractive brunette rolled her eyes. “My husband, ever the physician.”

Someone tapped a crystal glass, drawing everyone’s attention to the dais. Lady Saxton cleared her throat. “If everyone would please take their seats, we shall commence momentarily.”

As they made their way to a row toward the front by the dais, Adalyn’s heart skipped a beat when, from the corner of her eye, Lord Nash entered the room, then immediately dropped to her toes at the sight of a lovely brunette on his arm. Escorting the woman to a chair at the back of the room, he slid into one next to her.

She chastised herself for allowing her heart to hope.



NASH ARRIVED AT THE MUSICALE LATE ON PURPOSE, MUCH TO Charlotte’s consternation. Roland had secured him an invitation, but Nash still wished to avoid the reception line. When Saxton’s butler had taken his hat, he’d informed Nash and Charlotte the performance was about to begin.

Luckily, seats remained at the rear of the room, and after settling Charlotte, he slipped into one close to the door next to her. As he scanned the room for Lady Honoria, a strange awareness seized him. Seated in the front next to Ashton, the lovely blonde from the docks turned around, snagging Nash’s attention.

Nash’s stomach soured. How in blazes did she know the duke? The hope it was merely coincidence tumbled to his boots when Ashton whispered something in her ear.

Eyes narrowed and fists clenched on his thighs, Nash exhaled roughly through his nose.

For a week after his encounter with Miss Lovelace, he held a hope, as flimsy and costly as spun candy floss, that she would call upon him to follow up on his injury.

Yet she had not, and the price he paid for that fleeting hope was indeed dear. After another week of moping about, he forced her from his mind, focusing instead on Honoria.

He tore his gaze away from Miss Lovelace and scanned the room again. Several rows behind the captivating Miss Lovelace, Honoria waved a fan in a lazy rhythm. The seat next to her remained unoccupied, and Nash gave a moment's thought to join her. Before he could contemplate the idea further, Beatrix Townsend took her place at the pianoforte.

When a footman stationed at the ballroom door had held out a program listing the musical pieces scheduled for the evening's performance, Nash declined. Any attempt to decipher the jumbled letters would only result in a pounding head that even the loveliest of sonatas couldn't ease.

Instead, he sat back and closed his eyes, taking in the complex arrangement of notes filling the air. Behind closed lids, the colors of the notes grew more vivid. Shades of blues and dusky pinks swirled in his mind as Beatrix played Beethoven's *Appassionata*. One of his favorites, and indeed one he played many times himself, he appreciated Beatrix's interpretation. Muted purples had mingled with the blues when he'd played the same piece. It was admittedly a slight difference, but a difference nonetheless.

The aria Camilla Somersby sang, her husband accompanying her on the violin, produced bright reds and vivid greens, invigorating and sensual. Encouraged by the mood the song evoked, he opened his eyes, his gaze immediately homing in on Miss Lovelace.

Suddenly regretting his refusal of a written program, he leaned over to Charlotte and whispered, "When is the intermission?"

Keeping her own voice low, she answered, "Bored already?" She pointed to the program. "We're here, and the intermission is here."

After nodding thanks to his sister, he wondered if an opportunity would arise to speak with Miss Lovelace without Ashton hovering by her side.

He used the time to develop a strategy, one he hoped wouldn't appear too obvious. When the musicians rose and left the dais, he excused himself, slid from his seat, and worked his way through the crowd toward the front.

As luck would have it—at least his luck—Ashton remained firmly rooted next to Miss Lovelace. However, they currently conversed with Lady Honoria, providing Nash the perfect opportunity for a proper introduction.

Honoria smiled at his approach, and he gave his most elegant bow. “Lady Honoria.” He tipped his head toward the duke and duchess before sliding his gaze toward Miss Lovelace. “Ashton. Your Grace.”

“Lord Nash,” Honoria said as if reading his mind. “Allow me to introduce Miss Adalyn Lovelace and her father, Dr. Daniel Lovelace from America.”

Nash waited a heartbeat, wondering if Miss Lovelace would acknowledge their previous encounter. If Ashton had heard about it, it might explain why she had not called on him as he'd hoped.

Ashton's mouth pressed in such a sharp line, had it been made of metal, Nash imagined he could have used it as a knife. Even the duchess, known to be more forgiving and compassionate, remained silent next to her husband.

All seemed lost until Miss Lovelace spoke. “We've actually met before, Lady Honoria. When my father and I first arrived, Lord Nash gallantly retrieved my reticule from a young thief.” She held out her hand. “It's a pleasure to see you again, Lord Nash.”

Nash tamped down the satisfaction surging in his chest at Ashton's disapproving glare. The man appeared ready to explode. Instead, Nash took Miss Lovelace's offered hand and bowed low over it, resisting the urge to brush a light kiss across her gloved fingers. “And you, Miss Lovelace. I imagine Ashton's kept you quite busy at the clinic during your stay in London.”



A slight blush of pink colored her cheeks. “It’s been most fascinating. I apologize for not calling on you to see how your shin is healing.”

He waved it off. “Think nothing of it. The expert care you administered at the docks was more than sufficient.”

“Who is your charming companion?” Miss Lovelace asked.

Even more pleased by Miss Lovelace’s veiled jealousy, Nash answered, “My sister, Lady Charlotte.”

From the corner of his eye, Nash noticed Honoria’s curious gaze as it traveled between him and Miss Lovelace. A tiny smile flitted across her lips. However, he was more interested in the relief spreading across Miss Lovelace’s face.

“Are you enjoying the program?” Nash asked, his question not directed to anyone in particular, although he glanced toward Miss Lovelace.

“Lady Montgomery is exceptional as are Dr. and Mrs. Somersby,” Miss Lovelace said.

Before he could respond, Ashton interrupted. “Daniel. Miss Lovelace. Why don’t we seek out the refreshment table? I’d like to introduce you to some of the other guests.”

Ashton’s meaning was as clear as the fine crystal holding aforementioned refreshments. *Other more respectable guests.*

To further his point, Ashton turned toward Honoria. “Would you care to join us, Lady Honoria?”

Nash yearned to plant him a facer.

Thank goodness Honoria saw through it as clearly as said crystal. “Thank you, Your Grace. I believe Lord Nash and I have something to discuss.”

In a look that could have rivaled his deceased brother, George, Ashton raised a censorious blond eyebrow toward Nash. “Very well. I shall leave you to it, then.”

As they strolled off, Miss Lovelace glanced over her shoulder, her gaze pinning Nash in place.

“Lord Nash?” Honoria’s voice jolted his attention back.

“Forgive me. Where are my manners?”

She brushed his apology aside. “Nothing to forgive. Miss Lovelace is incredibly intriguing. I do so admire women who pursue their dreams as she has. I would imagine it takes great strength to withstand the naysayers and critics.”

Nash rather thought Lady Honoria didn’t give herself enough credit in that department, yet he held his tongue. It might only embarrass her. If he’d learned anything during his time spent with her, she was humble to a fault. Instead, he met her gaze directly, hoping she would understand the deeper meaning of his words. “I agree completely.”

“May I speak freely?”

Yet another thing he truly admired about her. It was a shame neither had more romantic feelings for the other. “Of course. As we agreed.”

“I couldn’t help but notice a certain”—her cheeks bloomed with color—“attraction between you and Miss Lovelace.”

Was he that transparent? He’d always prided himself on presenting the cool, detached demeanor that kept others at arm’s length. But when it came to Miss Adalyn Lovelace, it appeared he was a book for all to read. He grunted in disgust at his analogy. Like a book, in his hands his affection would only become a muddled mess.

Honoria’s eyes widened. “I apologize if I am mistaken.”

Realizing she had interpreted his nonverbal response as denial, he quickly made amends. “No. You’re not mistaken. However, if Ashton has anything to say in the matter, I fear any feelings I have for Miss Lovelace, or she for me, are destined to remain unexplored.”

His gaze drifted toward Miss Lovelace as the self-righteous duke introduced her to Mr. Victor Pratt.

And his blood boiled.

## CHAPTER 5—COMPLICATIONS



The man standing before Adalyn contrasted sharply to Lord Nash. Mr. Victor Pratt was handsome in the most classic sense. Not that the two didn't have some commonality. Both were tall and broad-shouldered, with a trim waist and long, well-formed legs.

But where Lord Nash's dark hair and stormy eyes exuded a certain mysterious, if not dangerous, quality, Victor Pratt was all sunshine and light. His blue eyes danced with mischief as if he were plotting his next prank. He wore his long, blond hair tied back in a queue. Almost golden, it shone with health, as if, like a woman, he brushed it one hundred strokes every night. Although she suspected his natural complexion was fair, his skin, sun-kissed and tan, was almost as dark as Dr. Somersby's.

"My sister speaks highly of you, Miss Lovelace." Even his voice hinted of a playfulness Adalyn found charming.

"Your sister?"

"Yes, my sister Priscilla. She's married to Dr. Marbry."

"Of course. I should have made the connection immediately from your resemblance."

Dimples dented his cheeks when he grinned, the lopsided smile no doubt a secret weapon in his arsenal of seductive tactics. Adalyn pictured many a woman fanning herself to avoid a swoon.

Yet, as attractive as Mr. Pratt was, he held no special appeal for Adalyn. He certainly didn't elicit the sensations

Lord Nash Talbot had.

Priscilla appeared from behind her. “Whatever my brother has said, do not believe a word. It’s sinful how much he exaggerates.” She slapped her brother’s arm with her fan.

“Ouch. Now I will believe Marbry when he tells me about your penchant for such violence.”

Priscilla rolled her eyes. “So what lies has my brother been telling you, Adalyn? If he’s already pledged his undying love after just meeting you, I believe that’s one of his favorites.”

Victor pressed a hand to his chest. “Me? I’m innocent. If I were going to pledge such devotion, I would do so in Italian. It has a much better effect.” He wiggled his eyebrows, and Adalyn couldn’t suppress her laugh.

“That’s because the woman wouldn’t understand what you were saying, even if you remarked about her overly large feet.”

“But it would sound romantic, and isn’t that the point?”

“Unless she speaks Italian,” Adalyn said, adding, “Non è giusto, signore?”

Victor’s eyebrows rose. “You speak Italian?”

“Enough to stumble through a few phrases. There is a family who frequents my father’s clinic in Boston who emigrated from Milan.”

“Ah. Then I shall be on my best behavior and speak only English.”

“Victor studied art in Florence under one of the masters.” Priscilla’s voice exuded both affection and pride for her brother, and Adalyn’s heart gave a painful squeeze, remembering the same affection and pride she’d held for Benjamin.

“If Ashton can spare you from the clinic, I would love to escort you to some galleries,” Victor said.

Upon hearing his name, Harry turned from where he’d been conversing with Lord Montgomery. “I think that’s a

marvelous idea. You shouldn't spend your whole time in London at the clinic. Go, enjoy yourself."

Her father nodded. "It will be difficult, but I'll manage without you." The little smile he gave her warmed her heart. He'd always made her feel practically indispensable.

Victor's dimples deepened. "I shall call on you tomorrow, if that is agreeable?"

"It sounds lovely." Although there was truth in her words, she couldn't help but glance over her shoulder to where she locked eyes with Lord Nash. If only he were the one to escort her to the galleries. Unwittingly, she sighed.

"Miss Lovelace?"

Adalyn turned to find Priscilla gazing at her with an interest that unnerved her.

Priscilla linked her arm in Adalyn's. "I fear my brother has monopolized your time. With Ashton's permission, why don't I introduce you to some of the other guests?"

Harry nodded, then turned back to his discussion with her father and Lord Montgomery.

As Priscilla led her away, she leaned in and whispered, "Were you introduced to Lord Nash?"

"Yes. Lady Honoria introduced us, but Harry was not happy about it. He insisted we meet other guests."

"So, you had no chance to speak to him outside of Ashton's presence?"

Adalyn shook her head.

The gleam in Priscilla's eyes reminded Adalyn of the mischief dancing in Victor's. "Let's take a turn out on the terrace for some air."

They walked past Nash and Lady Honoria and through the double French doors to the terrace—Nash's gaze trained on them the entire time.

The cool night breeze brushed against Adalyn's face, but compared to the heat and crush inside the room, it was a

welcome relief. Notes of fragrant lavender drifted around her, calming her nerves.

Animated conversation emanated from two women near the terrace doors.

A pretty brunette, approximately Adalyn's age, huffed an exaggerated sigh. "Lord Nash hasn't called in weeks. I've sent him notes, but they remain unanswered."

"Haven't you heard? He's courting Lady Honoria Bell. You need to keep up with *The Muckraker*, Cordelia." The older woman pointed toward the house. "Even as we speak, he's at her side."

The younger woman turned and, catching sight of Adalyn and Priscilla, pulled the older woman out of earshot.

Adalyn's stomach dropped to her toes at the news. She leaned down to Priscilla. "Is that true? And was Lord Nash courting the woman Cordelia as well?" Perhaps Harry was right about Lord Nash Talbot after all.

"I'm not sure. I try to avoid the scandal sheets as much as possible, especially *The Muckraker*, having been a main attraction in them for so long. As far as Lady Cordelia Worthington, she's been widowed barely a year, although I suspect there wasn't much love lost between her and her elderly husband. Perhaps she's set her cap for Nash."

"I see." Adalyn cringed at the pathetic sound of despair in her own voice.

"Take heart, Adalyn," Priscilla said. "I know both Honoria and Nash well. Besides my husband, my father, and my brother, they're two of my favorite people. As much as I admire them both, they don't seem suited for each other. If Nash has indicated interest in you, he surely would not do so if he were serious about Honoria." Priscilla looked over to where Cordelia and the other woman had their heads together. "And I don't want to gossip, but I have my suspicions why Nash may have been calling on Lady Worthington. If she interpreted it as anything more, then she only has herself to blame."

Even with the chilly breeze, Adalyn's cheeks heated. Priscilla need not elaborate on her suspicions. Adalyn wasn't so innocent that she didn't understand her meaning. Widows made good mistresses.

Somehow, the thought that Lord Nash would court Lady Honoria *while* dallying with an attractive widow rankled, then completely left her head when Lord Nash strolled out onto the terrace.



WHEN MISS LOVELACE AND PRISCILLA MARBRY WALKED PAST him and through the terrace doors, Nash immediately recognized the opportunity he'd been waiting for.

"I feel the need for some air. Would you excuse me, Lady Honoria? Unless you would care to join me?" He added the last out of courtesy. It was the least he could do since she'd stayed by his side rather than abandon him for Ashton. Yet he hoped she would discern his true intention.

She did not disappoint him. "I'm afraid it's a bit too chilly for me without my wrap. Besides, I want to compliment Lady Montgomery on her impeccable interpretation of Beethoven's *Appassionata*. It was truly genius."

On that, he agreed. "I must remember to do the same. She has a true gift. Montgomery is a lucky man."

The genuine smile Honoria sent him was enough to make him feel a little guilty he could not give her more than friendship.

She tilted her head toward the terrace doors. "Now, go before she comes back inside and Ashton hovers around again."

"You are a treasure, my lady."

Lady Honoria made a dismissive wave of her hand, then turned to find Lady Montgomery.

Speaking of Ashton, if he was aware Miss Lovelace had gone out to the terrace to take some air, it wouldn't do to have him catch Nash heading in that direction as well. Nash scanned the room, breathing a sigh of relief upon finding Ashton deep in conversation with a group of people. Ashton gave a hearty laugh, most likely about something the fool Andrew Weatherby had said.

Nash took full advantage of Ashton's preoccupation and slipped past a small knot of people by the terrace doors. Notes of lavender triggered an alert. He was intimately acquainted with that perfume. Waves of unease rolled across him as he caught sight of Lady Cordelia Worthington mere feet away from Miss Lovelace and Priscilla. To make matters worse, the widow Berkeley accompanied Cordelia.

Four sets of female eyes turned in his direction. Cordelia made the first move, speeding toward him as fast as her little slippers could carry her. "Lord Nash!"

*Deuce it all!*

"Lady Worthington." He made a brief bow, but his gaze cut to Miss Lovelace, hoping she would understand his desire to speak with her.

Cordelia slapped him on the arm with her fan. "Why haven't you written back, you naughty boy?"

He wanted to roll his eyes at her exaggerated pout. Her disgusting display of mocked umbrage would embarrass them both. "I'm hardly a boy, my lady. And I apologize if I've neglected to return any correspondence. I've been busy as of late. Now, if you will excuse me." He kept his tone deliberately indifferent.

Although Cordelia wasn't the most intelligent of creatures—her *talents* being more of the physical variety—he hoped she would accept his polite dismissal and refrain from making a scene.

He'd only managed two steps when Cordelia grabbed his arm. "You will not dismiss me so easily, *my lord*," she hissed.



Any hope of remaining dispassionate left him, and he turned on her, anger roiling in his chest. Yet he kept his voice low. “Cordelia, calm yourself. Don’t embarrass yourself in front of the other ladies.”

Strange, that less than a year ago, he wouldn’t have cared in the least if others overheard him telling Cordelia to find another man to warm her bed. But now . . . He slid his gaze to Miss Lovelace, then back to Cordelia. “Not here. Meet me in the front parlor in thirty minutes.”

The prospect of an assignation seemed to appease her, and she nodded, then reentered the house. At least he would disappoint her in private.

Hot on Cordelia’s heels, the widow Berkeley edged past him, sending him a disapproving glare.

As if he weren’t accustomed to such disparaging looks. He almost laughed outright.

Any amusement he might have felt dissipated, and a knot formed in his stomach when he turned toward Miss Lovelace. Clearly an intelligent woman, she’d most likely deduced that there was more to his relationship with Lady Worthington than a simple acquaintance. Had he destroyed any chance he had with the lovely female physician before he’d even begun?

Nothing ventured . . . Hadn’t he said as much to Priscilla a year ago when she’d asked for his advice regarding her feelings for Dr. Timothy Marbry? What had he said? Not to run from your problems, but pursue what you want? That it would be better to have tried and failed than live with regrets the rest of your life?

With purposeful steps, he approached the two women. “Miss Lovelace. Mrs. Marbry. Enjoying the cool evening air?”

Priscilla sent him her signature smile, the mischief shining in her eyes. It was nice to have a cohort on his side. “We are, Lord Nash. Although I fear it’s becoming a little *too* chilly for me. Might I impose upon you to keep Miss Lovelace company while I step inside and warm myself for a moment?”

“But of course. No imposition at all.” He met Adalyn’s direct gaze, pleased she didn’t seem to mind.

Before making her way inside, Priscilla said, “Don’t let my brother bore you to tears when he takes you to the galleries tomorrow, Adalyn.” She gave Nash a wink as she passed.

So, Victor Pratt had already arranged to call on Miss Lovelace. The man didn’t waste any time. The thought galled.

He arched a brow toward Adalyn. “Galleries?”

“Yes. According to Mrs. Marbry, Mr. Pratt studied art under a master in Italy. I expect he wishes to impart his expertise as we view the paintings.”

Impart his expertise indeed. “Any particular gallery on the agenda?” At the quizzical expression on her face, he added, “I only thought I might take in a few myself and wondered if he had a favorite since he is an *expert*.”

“Would you care to join us?”

Well, he hadn’t expected that. “Nothing would please me more, but I doubt Mr. Pratt would welcome another man tagging along. But if we should, say . . . be at the same gallery at the same time, well . . .” He held out his hands in mock innocence.

Her laugh—like a sunburst on a cloudy day—sent waves of light through him, dispelling the darkness that so often weighed heavily upon his soul.

God, this woman.

She leaned in, tapping his arm with her fingers. The heat generated from her touch seeped through his coat sleeve. “I shall ask him. Discreetly, of course. Perhaps I’ll use the pretext of making sure my father knows where we are in case he should need me.”

“We may not have another opportunity to speak after this evening. Not if Ashton has anything to say about it.”

“Leave Harry to me, Lord Nash. But for now, I fear I must return inside before either Harry or my father hunt me down.”

“I shall await to hear your discovery.” He held out his hand, and she slid her gloved fingers into his, the silk of her glove caressing his skin. He bent and brushed a light kiss over her knuckles.

As she slipped inside the house, he wondered how long he would have with her until she discovered what an impostor he really was.

## CHAPTER 6—WHISPERS AND PLANS



Adalyn knew she was flirting with danger when she'd suggested Lord Nash join her and Mr. Pratt at the galleries. Nash's assessment that Mr. Pratt would not take kindly to having another man along was most likely accurate. Although Adalyn had never cared much about garnering the attention of more than one man, she couldn't mistake the look in Lord Nash's eyes upon the mention of Victor Pratt.

Jealousy.

And she had to admit, she liked it.

Not that she had any serious interest in Victor Pratt. True, he was charming. Yet, his charms weren't sufficient to tempt her to stay in England and give up her work in medicine with her father. But an excursion to art galleries where she *might* encounter Lord Nash, that was another matter entirely. She held no fear of breaking Victor's heart. To hear Priscilla tell it, her brother was the party who did the breaking, so much so that he caused their mother countless sleepless nights worrying if he would ever settle down and produce an heir of his own.

It had been some time since she'd had a romantic relationship, and she had to admit she was rather out of practice. Flirting had never been something she'd honed, preferring instead to sharpen her skill at diagnosing illnesses and tending wounds, and the only hearts she'd been concerned about were the ones that pumped blood throughout the body.

Yet her own heart twinged upon being in Lord Nash's presence. It wasn't exactly painful, more like a bittersweet

ache she longed to experience again. The mere idea of seeing him the next day generated a sense of excitement deep within her. She must determine the name of the gallery and convey it to him before the evening ended.

She caught sight of Priscilla conversing pleasantly with her husband, Lady Honoria, and Dr. Somersby. Priscilla could obtain the information for her. Adalyn waited for Priscilla's acknowledgment, then tilted her head toward a sideboard containing refreshments.

As she poured a glass of lemonade, Priscilla stepped beside her. "I didn't expect you inside so soon. Did it not go well?"

"It went very well indeed. However, I didn't want to raise suspicion. Harry has been determined to protect me from what he perceives as my ruination."

Priscilla blanched. "I believe, because of me, he sees the possibility of compromise around every corner. However, I don't know what has caused the animosity between him and Lord Nash."

"I wish I knew. I fear if Lord Nash *were* to call on me, Harry would send him away."

"Men. When will they learn we're capable of making our own decisions?"

Adalyn laughed. She'd grown to like Priscilla and felt she had a comrade-in-arms. "I need a favor."

A gleam rose in Priscilla's eyes. "Oh? Is it scandalous?"

Adalyn shook her head in amusement. "My, you must keep Dr. Marbry on his toes. But, no. A simple request. Can you ask Victor which gallery is on his agenda? Lord Nash inferred he might visit one himself and wondered if Victor had a recommendation."

"Oh, Adalyn, I have much to teach you. Because if I handle things correctly, it *will* be scandalous!" She patted Adalyn on the arm. "Leave it all to me." With that, Priscilla bustled off, presumably in search of her brother.

Nash reentered from the terrace and wove his way through the crowded room. When his gaze shifted toward her, a slight smile ghosted his lips, but he made no other sign of acknowledgment—which was fortuitous as her father, Harry, and Margaret strode toward her that very moment.

“There you are.” Harry said, concern shining in his hazel eyes. “I wondered where you’d wandered off. Victor Pratt said Priscilla was going to introduce you to others, but you seemed to vanish, and not long ago I saw Priscilla conversing with Victor.”

“What Harry is trying *not* to say,” Margaret added, “is he was concerned you had a run in with Lord Nash Talbot.”

“Father, will you kindly inform our dear friend Harry that I’m capable of taking care of myself?” Try as she might to inject a sense of amusement in her tone, her outrage at being coddled betrayed her.

“My dear,” her father said. “Harry is only concerned for your welfare. He knows these people far better than we do. I beg you to heed his counsel.”

She wanted to stamp her foot like a child, but she refrained. It would do nothing to further her cause of being treated like an independent, grown woman. “Not you, too?”

Thank goodness for Maggie, who put an end to the nonsense. “Gentlemen. Adalyn appears to be perfectly fine, and the house is teeming with people. Surely you can loosen the reins a little for one evening and allow her to enjoy herself?”

Pink tinged her father’s ears, and Harry shuffled his feet, both thoroughly chastised.

Across the room—standing in a cluster with Beatrix, Laurence, and Timothy—Priscilla gave Adalyn a discreet nod. Perfect. “If you will excuse me. I wish to convey my personal appreciation for Lady Montgomery’s performance.”

With a chorus of “Of course,” from the trio, Adalyn wove her way through the crowd.

As Adalyn approached, the tiny smile flitting across Priscilla's lips gave Adalyn hope that her friend had secured the information.

Dr. Marbry made room for Adalyn in the small circle of people. "Are you enjoying yourself, Miss Lovelace?"

"Most assuredly, sir. Lady Montgomery, I'm duly impressed with your talent at the keyboard. The emotion that comes through the notes is extraordinary."

Lord Montgomery gazed down at his wife with adoration. "She is indeed a marvel."

Beatrix blushed at her husband's compliment. "Do you play, Adalyn?"

"Not well, although I appreciate music. I fear my love of medicine and following my father around like a puppy overshadowed my mother's attempts to improve my social skills."

"I understand Lord Nash plays quite well," Priscilla said.

Timothy grunted, his face skewering up comically.

Priscilla ignored him, and Laurence chortled.

"He does indeed," Beatrix said. "I heard him play once not long after my come out when his father, the previous marquess, was still alive. I was quite impressed."

"Not you, too?" Timothy said. "Thank goodness I was in the military and not privy to *that* show of bravado."

"Don't mind Timothy." Priscilla threaded her arm through her husband's. "He's still stewing over an incident where Nash came to my rescue on Rotten Row."

Lady Honoria joined the group. "That *was* exciting. Not to mention the tricks he performed on horseback prior to your fright, Mrs. Marbry. Although Dr. Marbry also raced to your aid."

Timothy stood a little taller, and Adalyn stifled a giggle. Apparently there was some competition between the two men. Which led her to consider Lady Honoria. Was the gentle lady

the object of Nash's attentions as the two women on the terrace had suggested?

"Could we please speak of something other than Lord Nash?" Timothy grumbled.

"I'm working on a new invention," Laurence said.

Timothy groaned, apparently not finding that topic much of an improvement.

As Laurence proceeded going into great detail about a process to provide hot water more efficiently, Priscilla leaned in and whispered, "Victor plans to call on you around eleven tomorrow morning and said the National Gallery is first on the agenda. If you wish to write it down and slip it to Lord Nash discreetly, there is a small parlor at the front of the house that contains a writing desk with paper, ink, and pens."

Adalyn excused herself and strode toward the small parlor Priscilla had mentioned. Two voices drifted from inside the room. When she recognized the deep baritone of Lord Nash, she stopped outside the door, standing to the side and out of sight.



NASH CHECKED HIS POCKET WATCH, NOTING TWENTY-SIX minutes had passed since Cordelia retreated from the terrace. People gathered in small groups in the hallway, most likely seeking relief from the crowded ballroom. Thank goodness the small parlor at the front of Lord Saxton's home was some distance away from prying eyes.

Soft candlelight flickered in the dimly lit room, casting shadows against Cordelia's waiting form. Apparently, she was eager to meet with him.

As he stepped inside, she moved to close the door.

He grasped her wrist. "Leave it open. This won't take long."



Obviously, she misunderstood his meaning, for she ran a hand up his sleeve and pressed her body against him. “In a hurry? I do love the thrill of possible discovery.”

He brushed her hand away. “You misunderstand me, madam. Whatever was between us, it’s over. Find someone else to warm your bed.”

When he turned to exit, she grabbed his coat. “You don’t mean that. There was something between us, Nash. Don’t deny it.”

He spun toward her, blood pulsing in his head. With no ladies present to overhear, he didn’t soften his words. “What was between us was a mere physical release. Nothing more. You were a convenient, and mostly pleasant diversion. I’ve decided I want something more.”

Fire blazed in her eyes. “With Lady Honoria?! That mealy mouthed ninny. You’d get more passion from a parsnip. Surely you’re not seriously courting her?”

“What I do with my time is no concern of yours, my lady. I would kindly ask you to leave Lady Honoria out of it.”

“She’s desperate, you know. Especially if she’s considering the likes of you as a husband.”

Her barb landed a direct hit, but not as she expected. He cared nothing for how she viewed him. It was no less than anyone else in the *ton* had expressed countless times. But he *did* care about what she said about Lady Honoria.

Tension pulsed through his jaw as he said through clenched teeth, “She’s one thousand times the woman you are. If men are too stupid to see it, that reflects on them, not her. However, you are correct in this much. I’m not worthy of her, but I have more pride than to continue sully myself cavorting with the likes of you, madam.”

She jerked her chin up in a defiant gesture. “You’ll come crawling back. You’ll see.”

As she stormed from the room in a swirl of dark purple satin and an overabundance of lavender, he wondered what he had ever seen in her.



PARALYZED BY THE WORDS SHE OVERHEARD, ADALYN STOOD pressed against the wall outside the small parlor. Although she wasn't so naïve to believe men refrained from sexual encounters as women were expected to, the meaning of the exchange had been clear. They'd been lovers. And Lady Worthington wished to continue their liaison.

Yet Nash's defense of Lady Honoria had impacted Adalyn and precipitated her current state of shock much more than learning of Nash's activities with the young widow. Genuine affection had imbued his words of defense.

Questions raced through Adalyn's mind, and she nearly forgot her reason for coming to the parlor. Should she proceed with her plans to provide Lord Nash the name of the gallery?

Had she misread his flirtatious advances for something more than it was? Or was he seeking yet another casual liaison with her, where there would be no lasting reminder once she returned home to Boston?

And did Lady Honoria know of Lord Nash's dalliance with a certain widow, or that he had shown interest in Adalyn?

In a flurry of violet, Lady Worthington burst from the parlor, her face contorted with anger. She cast Adalyn a sharp look, then turned up her nose and hurried away as if Adalyn had some horrible, contagious disease.

Panic snaked up Adalyn's spine that Nash would find her lurking outside the doorway. Would he think she was spying on him? Guilt mixed with the panic to form an unsavory cocktail. She *had been* eavesdropping, albeit unintentionally. She should have departed as soon as she'd heard voices coming from the parlor, most definitely when she'd recognized Nash's deep baritone.

Without a second thought, she composed herself and hastened back down the hallway toward the ballroom—away from Nash. Once inside, she would blend within the crowd as if nothing had transpired.

Before she reached the ballroom doorway, Lady Honoria approached, pinning Adalyn with her gaze. “Miss Lovelace. Might I have a word?”

Adalyn’s eyes darted toward the sanctuary of the ballroom. *So close.* However, chatting with Lady Honoria might also provide a sufficient cover for her previous actions. “Of course.”

“May I be direct?”

Adalyn’s stomach twisted into a tight knot. Had Lady Honoria received word of Adalyn’s flirtatious behavior with Lord Nash? Adalyn had been the target of a woman’s jealous accusations before—although innocently. Women had little regard for other women examining their husbands or fiancés, particularly in a state of undress.

She braced herself for Lady Honoria’s censure. “Of course.”

“I understand from Mrs. Marbry that you may be under the impression that Lord Nash and I have formed an attachment.”

Not exactly the words she expected, although the subject was the same.

“What I’m about to say is in confidence, Miss Lovelace. Do I have your agreement you will respect it?”

Adalyn nodded, curious what might be so secretive.

“What you witness between Lord Nash and me is a pretense. Both of our families insist on a match between us, but we have agreed we are not suited for one another. Although I admit to developing an affection for him. He’s not at all what people paint him to be, Miss Lovelace.”

After overhearing the conversation with Lady Worthington, Adalyn had doubts about the last statement, but she certainly wasn’t going to admit to eavesdropping.

“We agreed to present an appearance of a courtship to delay any further matchmaking efforts from our families.” Lady Honoria sighed. “Lord Nash has a particular goal he only needs a few months to achieve, and I am more than willing to

assist him in providing that time. And although it seems pointless for me, on my twenty-fifth birthday, my father will release my dowry, providing me a modicum of independence.”

Adalyn stared at the woman before her. The picture of propriety and grace, Lady Honoria had multiple layers hidden beneath her calm exterior.

“Lord Nash has expressed his interest in you to me, but he’s concerned His Grace may thwart his efforts. Rest assured, I am in your corner, Miss Lovelace, and anything I can do to—shall we say—orchestrate meetings between you, simply ask. You must still be discreet, of course, and if you do not object to my presence, I may accompany Lord Nash on such *encounters*.”

No wonder Nash spoke so highly of the quiet redhead. “There is something. Mr. Pratt plans to escort me to some galleries. I understand from Mrs. Marbry we will visit the National Gallery shortly after eleven tomorrow. Lord Nash has expressed an interest in exploring some galleries himself and wondered if Mr. Pratt had a recommendation.”

Honoria’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Viewing art is one of my favorite past times. Perhaps I should suggest such an excursion to Lord Nash—say, around eleven tomorrow?”

Before Adalyn could respond and thank Honoria, Nash emerged from the small parlor.

Executing a small bow, he greeted them. “Ladies.” His gaze shifted toward Adalyn, a question in his dark eyes.

With both alacrity and tact, Honoria wasted no time in broaching the subject of the gallery. “Perhaps it’s due to the focus of the evening, but Miss Lovelace and I were discussing art. For music, if performed adequately, is art, is it not? But I understand the National Gallery has acquired a new collection.”

One of Nash’s dark eyebrows lifted, and his lips twitched as if fighting a smile. “Have they?”

Although amusement flashed in his eyes—their color a rich, dark chocolate—Adalyn sensed an undercurrent of deep

sorrow in their depths.

“Yes,” Honoria continued. “I would love to see it.”

Nash’s attention shifted briefly toward Adalyn, before addressing Honoria. “Then I am your humble servant. Would you allow me to escort you?”

“That would be lovely. Shall we say around eleven tomorrow?”

“I will look forward to it with great eagerness, my lady.” Nash bowed and left them.

And even though Adalyn was not part of the conversation, she knew she was directly in the center of it.

Nash wasn’t the only one eagerly anticipating the next day.

## CHAPTER 7—BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



Shortly before eleven the next day, Adalyn paced the floor of the drawing room of Harry's home. Both Harry and her father had left for the clinic an hour before, insisting she not worry and enjoy herself with Mr. Pratt. Margaret had agreed to accompany her as chaperone.

The ease of which plans came together the evening before seemed thwarted. Neither Harry nor Margaret held a fondness for Lord Nash, and Adalyn sincerely doubted she'd have much chance of speaking with him alone with Maggie present. Yet Adalyn would be an ungrateful guest if she refused Maggie's kind offer. She consoled herself that she would at least see Lord Nash even if she had no opportunity to converse with him privately.

She sighed. Had she really become so enraptured with the man the mere sight of him was sufficient?

Edmund tugged at his mother's skirts. An unpleasant scowl covered the nanny's face as she stood nearby with Charles in her arms.

"Mother, you promised time with me today." The child's eyes were enough to melt any mother's heart, and Maggie's—Adalyn discovered—was especially vulnerable to her son's requests.

As luck would have it, when Mr. Pratt arrived, Priscilla was with him.

She curtsied to Maggie. "Your Grace. It's a pleasure to see you so soon again. When I discovered my rogue of a brother

had invited Miss Lovelace to tour the National Gallery, I reminded him that unmarried ladies must have a chaperone. My husband insisted I accompany them.”

Margaret hesitated, and Adalyn made haste to explain the situation. “Her Grace also offered to act as chaperone, much to Master Edmund’s dismay.”

Edmund’s protruded bottom lip quivered. “She promised to read a new book this afternoon.”

Victor’s gaze darted between the three women. “As much as I would adore to have three beautiful women on my arm, I would hate to be the one responsible for the little marquess’ disappointment.”

“Well.” Margaret gazed down at her son, then at Adalyn. “Harry specifically requested I accompany you.”

Priscilla surprised them all. “Your Grace, do you always do what your husband requests? I confess that I do not.”

“Much to your husband’s chagrin,” Victor added with a chuckle.

Priscilla patted Victor’s arm. “Although, as my brother said, we would love to have you with us, time spent with your son is important as well. I promise I will keep my eye on my brother at all times and ensure he behaves as a gentleman should.”

Victor nodded. “She is most vicious, Your Grace. I will have Miss Lovelace back safe and sound in time for afternoon tea.”

Adalyn took a chance and added the final coup de grâce. “You did say last evening that, as an independent woman, Harry and my father should give me more freedom. And I’m certain Mrs. Marbry will do her utmost to care for me.”

“Please, Mother?” Edmund’s lip retracted, his eyes hopeful.

Maggie gave a heavy sigh. “Very well.”

They bid Maggie farewell, and Victor assisted Adalyn and Priscilla into his father’s carriage. Settling next to her, Priscilla

whispered, “That was a close call. I shall have to remember to send Edmund some sweets as a thank you.”

“What are you two all smiles about?” Victor asked, taking a seat opposite them. His own smile broke across his face. “My charm and dashing good looks, no doubt.”

“But, of course,” Priscilla said, then burst out in gales of laughter. “But don’t expect to make Miss Lovelace your latest conquest. She’s too intelligent for your empty honeyed words.”

Victor placed a hand over his heart and closed his eyes. “You wound me, sister.” He met Adalyn’s gaze directly. “And there is no question of Miss Lovelace’s intelligence, but I assure you, my honeyed words are sincere.”

Although Adalyn’s cheeks warmed from Victor’s probing eyes and flattery, her reaction was negligible compared to the strong visceral response she’d experienced simply being in Lord Nash’s presence.

What was it about Nash that turned her world on its head?

Whatever it was, she had to admit, she looked forward to exploring the possibilities.



NASH RAN A FINGER AROUND HIS CRAVAT. DAMNATION IF HIS valet hadn’t tied it so tight he found it difficult to breathe. Strange, he hadn’t had any trouble prior to boarding his carriage with Lady Honoria and her maid as they set out for the National Gallery.

Honoria, however, appeared at ease, and she chatted amiably about the exhibit. “I understand Ashton recently donated some paintings to the collection.”

A growl emanated from Nash’s throat. Would the man never give Nash a moment’s peace? “That was *generous* of him.”



“What caused such animosity between the two of you?” Honoria glanced over at her maid, who feigned interest in something outside the carriage window.

She didn’t fool Nash. Well acquainted with the loose tongues of servants, he recognized the mock disinterest as a device to encourage forthrightness among anyone within her presence.

“Let us not cast a pallor over our day with talk of betrayals.”

When Honoria’s eyes flared at his last word, he cursed himself for the slip. But as was always the case with Honoria, she respected his wishes and dropped the unpleasant subject.

Before long, the carriage stopped in Trafalgar Square in front of the National Gallery. Nash peeked at his pocket watch. Eleven thirty-three. Hopefully plenty of time for Adalyn and Victor Pratt to have arrived. Nash wondered who would accompany Adalyn as chaperone. Surely her father and Ashton would insist upon it.

Not that he planned on anything untoward. For once in his life, his motives for spending time with a woman were honorable. Not that all his thoughts about Miss Adalyn Lovelace were pure. But he couldn’t control his unconscious mind when in a dream state, could he? And if he were truly honest with himself, which he wasn’t always, he would have to admit that a stray inappropriate thought had invaded his mind occasionally even when fully awake.

After handing both Honoria and her maid down from the carriage—the touch of Honoria’s hand in his not eliciting any reaction—they entered the building and began strolling through the rooms. Having only opened several years prior, the gallery was small, and crowds of people clustered in some rooms while others remained relatively empty. Nash made a mental note regarding which seemed to be popular and why, noting portraits seemed to garner the most attention while landscapes remained relatively unappreciated.

Lady Honoria’s maid remained the prescribed ten steps behind, allowing Nash to converse with Honoria relatively

freely. Once again, Nash admired Honoria's ability to present an appearance of interest in the gallery's offerings while scanning—as he did—the attendees in search of Miss Lovelace.

Honoria leaned in and whispered, “There, to your left. She's wearing a lovely cornflower blue gown with a matching bonnet.”

He should have known she was near. As soon as he'd stepped within its walls, an awareness he couldn't explain had come over him, his senses heightening as if his body hummed with energy from being in the same room with her. Yet, having never experienced such a phenomenon before, he didn't understand what it meant.

Nash jerked his head to the left, searching. What the devil was cornflower blue? He saw several ladies in blue gowns. Wasn't blue simply blue?

“Although I suppose it's not a true cornflower blue, as it's much lighter—”

“I see her,” he answered, effectively shutting down the debate over the shade of blue of Adalyn's gown.

Next to her, Victor Pratt's blond head towered over the other patrons in the small grouping viewing a portrait of some aristocratic family.

Urgency hastened Nash's steps when Adalyn smiled prettily at her escort. A petite woman stood between Adalyn and Victor, and when she turned in profile, Nash recognized Priscilla. Nash breathed a sigh of relief that her chaperone wouldn't pull her away at the sight of him.

“Lord Nash,” a feminine voice called from behind.

He slowed his steps and turned at Honoria's address. In his haste, he'd forgotten about her, and she struggled to keep up with his long strides.

“It would be best not to appear too anxious, would it not? To maintain the appearance that our meeting is merely by chance.”

“I beg your forgiveness, my lady. You are correct.” It was a demeanor the Nash of ill reputation had perfected and knew instinctively. The cool nonchalance he typically projected had served him well at keeping others at a distance—at keeping him and his secret safe. What was it about that one woman who could lure him into lowering his guard so carelessly?

Muted conversation buzzed like bees around him as he purposely slowed his steps, allowing Honoria to keep pace by his side, all the while his heart hammered a rhythm of *Hurry. Hurry. Hurry.*

As they approached, Victor Pratt’s long, elegant hands moved animatedly, most likely describing something about the portrait they were viewing. An artist’s hands, Nash noted. Not unlike his own in some respects. His fingers were long, but, unlike his rival, Nash’s knuckles protruded more than normal from too many bare-knuckle boxing bouts at Gentleman Jackson’s. And as much as he enjoyed playing the piano, the injury to his hands sometimes made it difficult.

Would Adalyn prefer an artist’s hands to someone who used them in such a violent manner? He had no time to ponder it as Miss Lovelace turned and smiled in greeting.

Her blue eyes sparkled, which only made his heart thump harder. “Lady Honoria, Lord Nash, what a pleasant surprise.”

“Surprise, indeed.” Victor’s gaze dipped in question to his sister.

Priscilla appeared fascinated with the portrait they had been viewing, completely ignoring her brother’s implication.

Nash bowed in greeting, his gaze landing on Adalyn’s then shifting to Victor. “Lady Honoria mentioned the new acquisitions and her eagerness to view them. Might you know where they are displayed?”

Victor’s blond eyebrows raised. “New acquisitions? I wasn’t aware of anything new. Perhaps we might enquire with the curator.”

Nash longed to have a moment alone with Adalyn, a difficult task considering the crowds and Victor Pratt’s

attachment to her side like a barnacle to the side of a ship. If anything, the man stepped closer to Adalyn as if claiming his territory.

“I understand you studied under a master in Florence, sir,” Honoria said. Clever woman to divert the man’s attention by stroking his ego.

“I did, my lady.”

Priscilla finally turned from her perusal of the portrait. The aristocratic woman in the painting glared down her nose at the lot of them. “Victor was explaining the different brush stroke techniques and use of color to show light and shadows. It was quite fascinating.”

The twinkle in Priscilla’s eye indicated she found it anything but fascinating. Nash stifled a chuckle. “Indeed? Perhaps he might graciously impart some of his expertise to us. I’m afraid I’m not much of an art connoisseur. Music however . . .”

“Yes, Lady Montgomery mentioned you play piano,” Adalyn said.

“I would be delighted to show all of you some of my favorites. If we’re lucky, perhaps we will stumble upon those new pieces.” Apparently, Victor took umbrage at having the conversation move away from his own talents.

Using the pretext of scanning the framed art on the walls, Nash searched for the closest doorway. He would bide his time, but if they could move closer . . .

“We are your willing pupils, Mr. Pratt.” Nash motioned with his hand, indicating Victor should lead them.

A growl formed in Nash’s throat when Victor grasped Adalyn by the elbow, leading her to some monstrosity at the far wall. At least it was closer to the doorway of the next room. As they stopped before the depiction of a ship tossed about on the sea, the image pulled Nash in.

Victor nattered on about the use of color to denote the minuscule ray of sunlight peeking through the storm cloud,

explaining it was the artist's way of saying that there was hope in the darkest of situations.

*Balderdash.*

However, something about the scene struck a deep chord in Nash's very soul. Tumultuous waves buffeted the ship, pushing it precariously to the tipping point. Treacherous rocks crested near the shoreline, ready to wrack the ship to shreds. How often Nash had felt that way—ready to break apart and sink to the bottom of despair. To him, there was nothing hopeful about the artist's rendering.

The connection to the painting, to how the artist may have felt while painting it, rattled him uncomfortably.

He tore his eyes away from the damning painting as if it pointed a finger at him, revealing his innermost thoughts.

Someone touched his arm. "Lord Nash, are you unwell?"

He turned toward the soft, feminine voice. Adalyn peered up at him, concern in her eyes. Her direct gaze unnerved him. It was as if she looked past the façade he'd presented and saw *him*. The real him. Not the rakish image the *ton* saw. Certainly not the villain Ashton saw. Raw, it shook him to his very core. He'd never experienced such a strong reaction to a woman.

Air. He desperately needed air as the room pressed in upon him.

In his element, Victor continued his long-winded monologue about the use of color and brush strokes to evoke emotion, but the only emotion the damned painting evoked in Nash was ugly and dark.

The bright smile on Priscilla's lips disappeared the moment she cast a glance over her shoulder at Nash. With a subtle nod toward the open doorway leading to the next room, she mouthed the word, "*Go*." Then she touched Honoria on the sleeve and whispered something in her ear while Victor pointed to something else on the painting.

Other patrons drifted over to join their little circle, listening intently to Victor's detailed exposition.

“What of the one over there, Mr. Pratt?” Honoria gestured to a painting on a far wall. “Can you enlighten us as eloquently to that one as you have here?”

Victor’s chest puffed up. “Of course.”

So immersed in his role as guide and artist extraordinaire, Victor paid no attention when Nash leaned in to whisper to Adalyn. “Hand me your reticule.”

She met his eyes with a question.

“Trust me.”

She hesitated a moment, then relinquished her bag.

Hiding it, he whispered, “Announce you’ve lost it—loudly.”

As the group moved to the far side of the room, Adalyn said, “Oh, my. I believe I’ve dropped my reticule.”

Everyone turned, and Victor responded in the expected gentlemanly fashion. “I shall fetch it, Miss Lovelace.”

Nash held up a hand. “Allow me, Mr. Pratt. I’m dispensable, whereas you are not. Pray, continue with your illuminating insights regarding the paintings. I shall join the rest of you in a moment.”

Victor nodded. “Very well.”

When the group turned back to continue. Nash touched Adalyn’s arm and whispered, “Follow me.”

Sheltered by the throngs of people, Nash guided Adalyn to the adjacent room.

He finally had her alone.

## CHAPTER 8—HIDDEN STORMS



*A lone at last.* Albeit in a group of strangers. Adalyn performed a brief scan of the room. A few people milled about providing enough company to maintain propriety should Victor seek them out.

Nash reached inside his coat and produced her reticule.

Adalyn stifled a laugh. “I’m surprised Mr. Pratt didn’t notice how your coat bulged a bit at the chest.”

A delicious twinkle appeared in Nash’s eye. “It’s been my experience that most men don’t pay heed to another man’s chest.” His eyes dipped briefly to Adalyn’s bodice, bringing a surge of warmth to her cheeks.

At that, she did laugh. “You, sir, are diabolical.”

The charming twinkle vanished as if she’d inadvertently struck a nerve. She hastened to clarify. “In the most welcomed way, I assure you. How long do you think we have?”

“Not long, I would imagine. Unless either Lady Honoria or Mrs. Marbry keep Mr. Pratt well occupied and focused on the painting.”

“We are fortunate indeed to have two comrades in arms to assist our nefarious escape.” She would thank Priscilla and Lady Honoria later.

Nash’s gaze darted to the doorway of the room where their companions waited. “Then we should take advantage of their kindness and make the most of our few moments. Am I to

hope that, should circumstances be different, you would welcome my calling upon you?”

“Circumstances being Harry’s objection?”

A dark eyebrow rose, his deep chocolate eyes searching hers. “Are there other impediments of which I’m unaware?”

*Only the risk to my heart.* “There are the circumstances of our residencies. My father and I will return to Boston in July. He wishes to leave before the seas grow too tumultuous in September.”

Dark shadows passed over his countenance, and she remembered the painting and his apparent discomfort. “So, you *will* return to America?”

Why would he think otherwise? What was he implying? “Why would I not? It’s my home. Where I assist my father.”

Something in his demeanor shifted. The vulnerability in his voice disappeared so quickly she wondered if she’d imagined it.

“Then we are of like minds, seeking a casual attachment, nothing more.”

Although not cold, his tone distanced them, as if physical arms reached out, pushing her away. She longed to pull him back to her. “In the other room, you appeared distraught. Was it the painting?”

He blinked. Once. Twice. Three times. Then shook his head as if to clear it. “I beg your pardon?”

“The painting of the storm at sea, the ship on the verge of destruction. You stared so intensely at it as Mr. Pratt described it, and the color drained from your face, much like the shades of gray and blue of the painting. I asked then if you were unwell.”

His gaze darted away, focusing on a pastoral landscape across from them. “Did you? Perhaps it was the lighting.” Once again, he became guarded, as if she’d come too close to unearthing a secret.



Rather than press him directly, she tried a different tactic. She often found that by expressing her own struggles and vulnerabilities, others would reciprocate. It worked wonders on her patients. “Perhaps I was projecting my perception onto you. I failed to see the hope that Mr. Pratt indicated in the small beam of light. To me, it was the other way around. The darkness was engulfing the ray of hope, extinguishing any remaining vestige of salvation.”

He stepped closer, his fingers reaching out to brush hers. “Truly?”

She nodded, wetness pooling at the rims of her eyes from the memory she’d fought to keep locked away. She resisted choking out the affirmative answer lest she release the awful memory from the depths of darkness in her heart.

He turned toward the painting of the landscape again, though his eyes appeared unfocused. “Why do you suppose some people see the hope and others do not?”

Although not admitting that the painting had elicited such despondent feelings in him as well, his veiled question was telling.

“Perhaps those who see the positive have not experienced so great a tragedy to know the depths of despair.”

Still not meeting her gaze, he cocked his head, considering her explanation. “Yet others who’ve experienced horrible tragedies remain hopeful. Perhaps it’s not so much from tragedy, but the responsibility one feels. That they caused their own misfortune.”

His words left Adalyn speechless. It was as if he knew her darkest secret and the pain she carried for years because of it.

Like the changing winds, when he turned toward her, his eyes shone with mischief. “But as I’m not a philosophical man, I shall leave such speculation to others wiser than I.” Then the mischievous gleam turned seductive, his gaze raking over her and creating gooseflesh on her arms. “Besides, why waste our time together speaking of such maudlin topics? Surely Mr. Pratt will have noticed your absence and come

running to your rescue shortly. Tell me when I may see you again.”

She yearned to say *tomorrow*, and the next day, and the day after that. But she was a pragmatic woman. “It might be best not to raise suspicions. Although I’m certain my father and Harry function perfectly well at the clinic without me, they might question my desire to schedule another outing so soon.”

“That seems wise. Preferably a place less”—he gazed around—“crowded.”

Trills of excitement sparked along her spine at what a less crowded place might mean. Heat rushed to her cheeks.

And even if Nash did not profess to be a philosophical man, he was obviously a perceptive one, for he hastened to add. “Shall I request Lady Honoria to function as mediator and chaperone on our behalf? Surely Ashton would have no objection to an outing with such a fine lady.”

“You are also cunning, my lord.”

His deep, sensual chuckle sent another shiver across her skin. The wicked gleam in his eyes had returned full measure. “Now, shall we rejoin the others for more instruction in painting techniques?”

With her nod, Nash led her back to join their companions, and although Mr. Pratt might provide knowledgeable and insightful commentary on the gallery’s offerings, Adalyn would be focused on one thing only.

Lord Nash Talbot and his dark, exciting eyes.



NO OTHER OPPORTUNITIES TO BE ALONE WITH ADALYN AROSE during their excursion to the gallery, although Nash had ample time to observe her.

As Victor Pratt discussed the lines of paintings, Nash studied the lines of Adalyn’s form. Wispy blond tendrils of

hair brushed against her long, graceful neck, and his fingers ached to play with a lock and test its silkiness. Flashes of desire coursed through his veins when she sent occasional glances his way. When Victor nattered on about the use of color to depict light in a still life, Nash imagined Adalyn stretched out naked on his bed, the sunlight playing against her skin.

Yet he not only noted her physical attributes but also the way she engaged both Priscilla and Honoria in conversation. The genuine affection in her voice and expression indicated she was not a woman who saw others of her sex as competition but as friends. To say it was refreshing would be a gross understatement. Nash's respect for her grew, but with it a deepening sadness that such a fine woman surely would want nothing to do with him once she truly got to know him. No wonder Ashton warned her to stay away.

His mood darkened, and his thoughts returned to the painting of the ship. For a moment, he'd felt a deep connection to Adalyn, a belief that—somehow—she shared his pain. He longed to know what had caused her to see the darkness rather than the light and, if possible, ease her burden.

The thought jolted him. Although not quite the despicable villain painted by the *ton*, even he had to admit his motives were rarely, if ever, altruistic. His scheme to throw Laurence Townsend and Beatrix Marbry together was more to bring Laurence down a peg from his lofty perch of self-righteousness than to assist Miss Marbry in securing her heart's desire.

The same could be true for Priscilla Pratt and Timothy Marbry. Nash had taken great pleasure watching the man squirm with jealousy over Priscilla.

Even assisting with Oliver Somersby's rescue from the unruly mob at the gypsy camp had been more to assuage his own guilty conscience over his boyhood sins.

But there was something about Adalyn Lovelace that made Nash want to be a better man. To put away any selfish motives

for making her life a little brighter—with no hope of reward for himself. To seek her happiness for its own sake.

The idea was damned uncomfortable. Like a too-tight pair of boots, or a coat too snug in the shoulders, it pressed on him, pinching and sending a painful reminder that it was not designed for him. He'd worn the custom-tailored coat of self-interest and self-preservation far too long. The comfortable black boots of his tarnished reputation had kept people at arm's length and his secret safe. And he felt exposed without them.

He slipped his well-worn garments back on and smiled at something Victor said, all the while thinking of a way to seduce Miss Lovelace. Several delicious possibilities teased his mind.

“What amuses you, sir?” Adalyn's innocent eyes created turmoil within him.

Nash's attention swung back to the painting Victor had been explaining ad nauseam, chagrined to find nothing humorous about the depiction of Satan luring Eve to the forbidden fruit. As Nash struggled to find an appropriate and acceptable response, Victor's attention regrettably shifted from his pompous lecture to the people around him.

“Perhaps Lord Nash finds Eve's gullibility amusing. Surely you don't suggest that all women succumb so easily to temptation?” Victor had clearly constructed his accusation to diminish Nash in the eyes of the ladies, especially Miss Lovelace.

With an alacrity that surprised even him, Nash donned his most innocent smile. “Not at all, sir. My amusement stems from the fact that the artist ignores the fact it is the male sex who is so easily lured from the straight and narrow path. I've always had my doubts about that biblical story. It seems most unjust to the fairer—and often more rational—sex.”

Images of scooping his winnings from the center of a gaming table flooded Nash's mind from the astonished expressions on the ladies' faces. His more innocent smile

transformed into a smirk of glee as Victor's mouth moved soundlessly in shock.

After an obviously forced cough to clear his throat, Victor wisely avoided a rebuttal. "Well . . . um . . . shall we proceed then?" Victor motioned the group to follow him away from the controversial painting, and Nash had to give the man credit for knowing Nash had bested him.

As they moved into a room containing a private collection, Nash's gaze slid toward Adalyn. She returned the gaze. The tiny smile gracing her mouth indicated he'd taken at least one step forward in his goal to get her into his bed.



AFTER BIDDING GOODBYE TO VICTOR PRATT, MRS. MARBRY, and Miss Lovelace, Nash escorted Lady Honoria and her maid home. As he sat across from the two ladies in his carriage, he considered asking Lady Honoria to assist him in seeing Miss Lovelace again. However, in the close confines of the carriage compartment, he held his tongue.

Instead, he waited until he handed them out of the carriage, then leaned in to whisper in Lady Honoria's ear, "May I have a word in private?"

Apparently, his deep voice carried more than he'd intended. Either that or the maid had exceptional hearing. Her eyes grew wide, and she curtsied to her mistress and made a mad dash inside the house.

If only it would be so easy with Adalyn.

Once inside the house, Honoria led him to a small parlor near the entrance. "I'm afraid my maid may have misconstrued your request."

Realization dawned. "She thinks I plan to propose?"

"I expect so. My hope is she keeps such suspicions to herself until I can dispel them." Her gaze darted to the open doorway, then she motioned for them to step farther into the

room. Keeping her voice low, she asked, “Is this about Miss Lovelace?”

He nodded. “First, thank you for your help at the gallery. I will have to remember to thank Mrs. Marbry as well.”

She waved it off as if it were a trifle, but to Nash, her kindness meant the world, especially considering she was the one he was supposed to be courting. “I wish we could have provided you more time.”

“Could I impose on you to arrange another meeting? Miss Lovelace is agreeable to seeing me but fears Ashton will object. So we must keep things quiet for the time being.”

For the first time, Honoria studied him with something other than kindness. “Forgive my bluntness, sir. Of course, it’s none of my affair, but if I am to help arrange such secretive meetings, I feel it’s my duty to ask. Are your intentions honorable toward Miss Lovelace?”

*Ah. There it is.* Once again, his reputation overshadowed everything else. How could she *not* question his motives? The fanciful visions of Adalyn he’d entertained at the gallery resurfaced. He responded in the way he did best. He lied.

“Of course.”

A flicker of doubt flashed in Honoria’s eyes, but she nodded. “Very well. How soon would you like me to arrange something?”

“We both agreed it would be best to wait a few days, so as not to arouse Ashton’s suspicions. I believe she also feels a duty toward the clinic.”

“Did you have anything in mind?”

“Many people meet by chance at the park. Perhaps even enjoy a light luncheon on the grass.”

“Hyde? Early afternoon?”

“Perfect. There’s a grassy area near the Serpentine, not too far from the fountains. Do you know it?”

“I do indeed. I shall arrange it with Miss Lovelace and write to inform you of the precise day and time.”

“You are a treasure, my lady.”

Her bright smile returned. “Perhaps I could spend my spinsterhood arranging marriages for others. I seem to be quite adept at it. What do you say, Lord Nash?”

*Marriage?* He never mentioned marriage. Foreboding crept up his spine. Yet he forced a smile and—avoiding her question—bent to kiss her hand. “Until the park, then.”

Heaviness replaced the spring in his step he’d experienced when setting out that morning. Naturally he looked forward to seeing Adalyn again, but as he settled against the squabs of his carriage, the duplicity with which he’d misled Honoria shouted accusations in his head.

*You’re living up to your reputation.*

*You’re nothing but a cad.*

Nausea churned in his stomach at the thoughts. Honoria trusted him, believed in him when many others had not. He would not only be using Adalyn, he would be using Honoria as well. Did he really plan to seduce Adalyn without a moment’s thought to what such an alliance would mean to her?

Or to him?

And what *did* she mean to him?

An unnamed and unfamiliar emotion niggled at the back of his mind. War raged inside him between his desire for Adalyn and the need to protect and defend her—even from himself. He hardly knew how to respond to such uncharted feelings.

His muscles coiled with unspent tension from the battle. He needed some release.

White’s?

No. Not physical enough.

A rousing fencing match?

He would work up a sweat, but the poke from a protected tip of a rapier was hardly enough punishment. He needed something to knock some sense into him and rid him of these complicated feelings.

He rapped his knuckles against the roof of the carriage compartment. "Gentleman Jackson's," he called to his driver.



## CHAPTER 9—FIGHTING FEELINGS



Adalyn removed her bonnet as she entered Harry's mansion in Mayfair. Burrows greeted her with a bow. "Did you have a pleasant outing, Miss Lovelace?"

"I did indeed, Burrows. Thank you."

"Her Grace is in the library reading to Master Edmund."

Adalyn hesitated briefly, debating if she should interrupt Maggie's time with her son, then headed toward the library. If nothing else, she wished to let Maggie know she had returned home safely. Doing so would placate Harry's concern over her exploration of London.

Maggie peered up from the book she was reading. "Adalyn, you've returned." Maggie lifted Edmund from her lap and kissed him on the cheek. "Run and find Nanny. I shall read more to you later."

As Edmund scooted past her, Adalyn had the urge to reach out and touch the boy's head of dark curls. He looked so like his mother, but he had Harry's grin and exuberance. "How you must adore him."

"He and Charles are the joy of our lives." Maggie stood and held out her hands. "Tell me of your excursion to the gallery. Did you enjoy your time with Mr. Pratt?"

Adalyn bit back the laugh bubbling to her lips. "You have a gleam in your eye that makes me most uneasy. Pray, don't plan my wedding yet."

Maggie rang for tea, then they both settled on the sofa. “Yet?” That sparkle in her eye remained. “Am I to hope then?”

“Mr. Pratt is very agreeable. And knowledgeable about painting. I believe I learned more about the use of color to denote light and texture than I will ever need.”

“Unless you marry Mr. Pratt. Then it might prove most useful.”

No longer able to withhold her amusement over Maggie’s matchmaking efforts, Adalyn laughed. “I doubt Mr. Pratt would appreciate you pushing him toward the parson’s trap.”

Maggie sighed. “I suppose I simply can’t help myself. I’ve found such happiness with Harry that I want everyone else to be as happy.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible. What you and Harry have is nothing short of magical.”

“Don’t discount my efforts, Adalyn. I don’t want to brag, but I had a hand in pushing Camilla and Oliver together at one of our masquerade balls. And I’ve since discovered that Beatrix and Laurence developed a connection at the same masquerade ball.”

“Is that how Dr. Marbry and Priscilla met?”

Burrows brought in tea and set the tray on a table in front of Maggie. After preparing a cup, she handed it to Adalyn. “Well, not precisely. Although I understand he discovered her true identity at one of our masquerades.”

“I see a pattern here. Please don’t tell me you have one planned during my stay?”

“Unfortunately, we typically hold them at the start of the Season. The harsh winter often depletes the clinic’s funds, so it’s a perfect time for an infusion of donations.”

Adalyn wilted with relief.

“However.” Maggie’s face brightened, and Adalyn knew her relief was short-lived. “We could hold another ball. Perhaps not a masquerade, but something in honor of your visit.”

“Please don’t trouble yourself on my account.”

Maggie took a languorous sip of tea, studying Adalyn over the rim of her cup. “One thing you must learn about the aristocracy, my dear, is that we adore balls. And as duchess, it is one of my duties. Many a heart has been won over a country dance—or even better—a waltz. I understand Mr. Pratt is an exceptional dancer.”

If she were truthful with herself, Adalyn’s heart beat a little faster imagining herself being twirled about a dance floor in the arms of a handsome man. However, it wasn’t Mr. Pratt who elicited the reaction. The dark, dangerous—sometimes troubled—eyes of Lord Nash flashed in her mind.



GRUNTS, THUDS, AND THE SMELL OF SWEAT GREETED NASH AS he entered Gentleman Jackson’s Boxing Saloon. He would say assaulted if he found the sensations offensive. Instead, he found them comforting, even welcoming. Different from the masculine scents at White’s, where fine brandy, cigar smoke, and notes of sandalwood permeated the air and hushed conversation amid the shuffle of cards soothed his senses. He appreciated both, but found the less civilized atmosphere of Jackson’s more attuned to his nature.

He scanned the room for an opponent, his gaze landing on Laurence Townsend. Shirtless, braces hanging loose against his breeches, he sat on a bench where an assistant wrapped his hands, readying him for a bout.

To say it surprised Nash would have been an understatement. He strode forward, stopping in front of his old nemesis. “Well, well. Never expected to see you here, Montgomery. White’s seems more to your liking.”

Montgomery peered up, an eyebrow quirking. “I come here occasionally when I need something of a more physical nature.”

The assistant took Nash’s hat and coat, then retreated, leaving them alone. “Trouble in paradise? Little wife grown

tired of your incessant prattling?”

Although Montgomery’s wrapped hands clenched and released, he remained calm. Nash admired him for that much. “Not exactly. Although we did have a minor disagreement.”

“Oh?” The softness of the word surprised him, and Nash cursed himself for the moment of weakness currently slipping through his armor. The man appeared to need an ear. He sat next to Montgomery. “Care to talk about it?”

“I worry about her. I simply suggested she refrain from lifting heavy objects until . . .”

“Until?” Nash struggled to comprehend the man’s meaning.

“She’s with child again and insists on continuing with experiments. I’ve been working on a system to deliver hot water indoors through a piping system, and I found her lifting a large portion of copper tubing.”

“Well, first, may I offer my congratulations.” Nash’s words were sincere. It was indeed a day of surprises.

Montgomery nodded. “She reminded me she’s capable of knowing her own limits, and I should trust her judgment. Then she veritably threw me from the house, instructing me to find a way to come to my senses.”

“And you decided pounding on something would be a perfect solution.” Not a question. After all, it’s precisely why Nash was there. “I quite understand. Do you have an opponent?”

“Are you volunteering?”

Nash shrugged. “Why not? What say you?” Deciding to taunt just a little, he smirked. “I promise to show mercy.”

*Ah, that did it.*

Montgomery stood, pulling the braces over his shoulders. “It is you who will beg for mercy.”

“Very well.” Nash stripped down to the waist, all the while doing his best to maintain eye contact with Montgomery in an

intimidating stare.

Montgomery met his gaze directly, not flinching in the least.

This would be good.

Nash removed his boots and stockings, and an assistant rushed over and wrapped his hands.

“Shall we make a wager?” Nash asked.

Montgomery nodded. “Loser pays twenty pounds to their favorite charity.”

Nash rolled his eyes. “Would that be yourself?”

“You’ll never know, as I don’t intend to lose.”

“Is Jackson here today?” Nash asked the assistant.

The man nodded toward a far corner. “Over there.”

“Call him over. I’d like him to serve as referee. I’ll also contribute two pounds so he can give instruction to Montgomery to even the odds. He’s going to need it.”

As he and Montgomery climbed into the ring, men gathered around. Murmurs rose around them. Some called out wagers on who would win.

Satisfaction swelled in Nash’s chest as his name rose above the din—loud and clear.

Jackson called for the match to begin, and both Nash and Montgomery circled the mat, sizing each other up. Nash noted that, unlike many aristocrats, Montgomery’s physique was toned and well-muscled. And unlike his wife, he moved with grace, adeptly dodging several of Nash’s jabs.

“Pull your elbows in closer. Protect your body,” Jackson yelled.

Unsure if Jackson directed the advice to Montgomery or himself, Nash moved his elbows in a little tighter, congratulating himself on the idea of having Jackson provide instruction. It wouldn’t only benefit Montgomery.

“Are you here for the same reason?” Montgomery asked after delivering a jab to Nash’s left side.

Nash pivoted back from the blow. Flabbergasted that the man would hold a conversation during a boxing match, he wondered if it was a tactic to distract him. “Pardon?” He returned a solid punch to Montgomery’s chin.

Montgomery shook his head to clear it, then took two steps back.

*Smart. Keep your distance, Montgomery.*

“You said you understood my need to pound something. Yet you’re not married. Don’t tell me you’re having woman troubles?”

Definitely a distracting tactic. “Did I say that? Perhaps another blow to your head will clear it.” Nash took a swing but connected with air as Montgomery ducked.

“Ha! You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Be quick on your feet, man!” Jackson called.

Nash growled. That had to be directed toward him. Anger clouded his judgment, leaving him wobbly on his feet.

As Nash struggled to regain his balance, Montgomery delivered two solid punches to his ribcage, temporarily knocking the wind out of him. With an arm pressed against his aching side, Nash stumbled back, partly in shock at his opponent’s aggression.

“I may have underestimated you, Montgomery.”

Like the gentleman he was, Montgomery waited for Nash to recover from the blows.

*Mistake, you fool.*

Pretending to still regain his composure, Nash gauged Montgomery’s position in front of him then, striking as quick as a snake, prepared to land a blow to Montgomery’s face. Unfortunately for Nash, Montgomery had made his own plans, delivering a strike to Nash’s eye at the same time Nash connected with Montgomery’s left cheek.

Still woozy from the blows to his ribs, Nash's feet flew out from under him, and his body fell like a stone to the mat beneath.

*Thud.*

*Thud.*

His head spinning, Nash wondered why he'd heard the echo of his fall.

Shouts from the onlookers filled the crowded room, but he couldn't make out what they were yelling.

His head hurt like the devil as he gingerly lifted it and propped himself up on an elbow, only to see Montgomery lying on the mat before him.

Like him, Montgomery appeared to struggle to pull himself upright.

"Draw!" Jackson yelled.

No wonder the crowd was up in arms. At least Montgomery hadn't bested him. He'd never live with himself had that been the case. But he had to give the man credit for a good match.

Montgomery dragged himself to his feet and, standing before him, held out his hand to Nash.

Nash stared at it as if it were foreign and to be avoided at all costs. But when he looked up into Montgomery's face, he found no menace, no self-satisfaction, only respect.

Nash grasped the man's hand and rose to his feet. They stood eye to eye for what seemed like an eternity.

"Excellent match," Montgomery said. "Do what you wish, but I intend to donate twenty pounds to the clinic."

Nash pondered that idea. What would Ashton think if *he* made a substantial donation? Of course, he needed to consider that each pound leaving his coffers took him farther away from his goal, and time was dwindling. Yet he had won thirty pounds at White's the previous week. Surely he could part

with twenty if it would further his pursuit of Miss Adalyn Lovelace.

The thought of Adalyn brought him back to the reason he'd come to Jackson's, and as he made his way over to where Montgomery was splashing water on his face from a basin, a strange camaraderie swept over him.

"If you give one of the boys here a shilling, they'll run and fetch ice for that bruise forming on your face, Montgomery."

Touching his cheek with his fingertips, the man peered over his shoulder at Nash. "I could say the same to you."

Nash flipped a boy a shilling, holding up two fingers for some ice. He splashed water on his own stinging face, his eye paining him like the devil. "Ah, but I have no one at home to worry about upsetting. You're already out of your wife's good graces. Won't she give you grief over participating in such barbarous activities?"

Montgomery snorted a laugh. "She might, but these things tend to work to my advantage. She'll no doubt call me a dunderhead, but then she'll fuss over me and before she knows it, she will have completely forgotten she's angry with me, especially when I mention you were my sparring partner."

Nash was impressed. "You're more diabolical than I gave you credit for."

Montgomery threw his shirt over his head and retied his cravat. "Don't misunderstand. I would never manipulate Bea. It's just her nature to fuss over those she loves when they're hurt."

"Should I expect a scathing note from her requesting I leave her husband in one piece?"

"Probably more likely a thank you for knocking sense into my head. I'll return properly remorseful"—he met Nash's eyes directly—"which I am. I should give her more credit. But I can't help but fuss over her as she does me. The difference being, I allow it."

No one had fussed over Nash since his mother died. Making a casual show of redressing, he asked a question he'd



never dreamed he'd be asking. "Do you enjoy it? The fussing?"

Pausing with a boot midway to his foot, Montgomery stared as if pondering the simple question. "I suppose I do." He slipped the boot on. "At least she enjoys it, so that in itself pleases me."

Nash wondered if all married men grew so soft. "From what I can tell, marriage has rotted your brain, Montgomery."

The man snorted another laugh. "Your day will come. Mark my words."

"God forbid." And yet a vision of Miss Lovelace appeared in Nash's mind.

"In case you haven't heard, Felix Davies bragged about pursuing Lady Worthington."

"He's welcome to her."

Montgomery raised an eyebrow. "So, you've ended your relationship with her?"

Nash stared at the man as if he had grown two heads. "You *have* become soft. When have you started gossiping like a woman?"

With a shrug, Montgomery rose, then slipped his arms inside his coat a footman held. "We were speaking of women and marriage, and Bea mentioned she'd heard Lady Worthington say she expected to bring you up to scratch any day."

"Over my dead body." Nash rose and accepted help with his own coat.

The boy returned with the ice, and Nash tossed a chunk toward Montgomery, then wrapped the rest in his handkerchief. "Now, if you will excuse me, I plan to find myself another mistress. One who doesn't have dreams of marriage."

Perhaps if he repeated it enough, he'd believe the lie.

## CHAPTER 10—BLESSINGS OF MISPLACED PARASOLS



Thoughts of Nash invaded Adalyn's mind the day after her excursion to the gallery. She did her best to push them aside in order to assist at the clinic to the best of her ability. However, far too often when she made her way out to the waiting area, she and Priscilla would exchange glances, and Priscilla's lips would tip up in a secretive smile.

Such behavior did not go unnoticed by Dr. Marbry. Adalyn had just finished assisting him as he dressed a burn, and when they escorted the patient out to the waiting area, he addressed his wife. "Am I to presume I'm the reason for your exceptionally cheerful disposition?"

Adalyn resisted the chuckle. Why did men believe everything centered on them?

Priscilla's gaze darted to Adalyn before returning to her husband. "But of course, my love. Why else?" Priscilla called the next patient. "Before you return to the examination room, may I have a moment, Miss Lovelace?"

Dr. Marbry sent his wife one last smile, then guided the new patient back to the examination area.

"I've been dying to speak with you all day," Priscilla whispered. "Victor's presence limited Honoria's and my conversations. However, she confided that her arrangement with Lord Nash is strictly for appearances. As Honoria is my friend, I was relieved." Priscilla studied her. "Are you going to meet Lord Nash again?"

The mere mention of his name set Adalyn's heart fluttering. "Yes. Although, we agreed we should wait a few days to avoid raising suspicion. I must confess, I'm eager to set a day and time."

Priscilla peered down at the list of patients, her fingers toying with the corner. "Victor is also enamored with you. I suspect he intends to call upon you again. He couldn't stop babbling about your cerulean eyes the moment we left you."

"Cerulean? My, he *is* an artist. I never considered my eyes to be anything but plain blue."

"My brother is a romantic at heart, Adalyn." Priscilla's expression grew serious. "I don't wish to see that heart broken."

Ugly guilt soured Adalyn's stomach that she had perhaps used him ill for her own purposes. She placed a hand on Priscilla's, calming the nervous twisting of paper. "I shall dissuade him from any further attempts to pursue a relationship, making it clear we are not suited and I fully intend to return to Boston in July."

Priscilla's smile returned, although it appeared weak. "My brother is not averse to living abroad. He had done so for over five years until his recent return home. If he believes himself truly in love, he would follow the lady to the ends of the earth."

Would Lord Nash have the same ardor? Shame warmed her cheeks that her first thought was for Nash rather than Victor.

"Then I shall remind him he has obligations here as the heir to the viscountcy."

"Be gentle and do not delay."

"You have my word."

Later that evening, Adalyn, her father, and Harry joined Margaret and the children in the drawing room of their home, the room abuzz with excitement for Manny had returned home from school. As he entertained them with another tale of his escapades, Burrows entered with a silver salver laden with a

large stack of correspondence. One piece sat to the side of the larger pile, and as Burrows held it before Harry, Harry's gaze slid to the solitary letter, then up to meet Adalyn's.

"There's a letter for you, Adalyn," Harry said, removing the larger pile.

Burrows held the salver in front of Adalyn.

Although Margaret's posture was impeccable, she seemed to straighten even further. "Is it from Mr. Pratt?"

Adalyn broke the seal and checked the signature. "It's from Lady Honoria." A trill of excitement skittered up her spine. Quickly scanning the contents, she determined it would be safe to share the letter with Harry or Maggie should they ask. Honoria had not mentioned Nash, although Adalyn understood her meaning. "She's suggested I join her for a stroll in the park if I can arrange time away from my duties at the clinic."

Harry glanced up from one of his own letters. "I hadn't realized you and Lady Honoria had developed a friendship. You only just met her at the Saxtons' musicale."

"She says that as incomparable as a host you must be, that you are no doubt preoccupied with your own duties at the clinic, and she wished to offer her services to show me more of London."

"That's so like Honoria, Harry. She's always concerned about others," Maggie said.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Isn't Lord Nash courting her? Although it baffles me why she would encourage his attention. Nothing good can come of that association."

"*The Muckraker* has been most unkind to her after what happened with Dr. Marbry. Perhaps her father has grown desperate." Maggie turned toward Adalyn. "Dr. Marbry courted Lady Honoria before he married Priscilla. Although from what I understand, it was Honoria who broke off the attachment."

Harry shook his head. "Regardless, if Nash is with her, I would advise you to decline the invitation, Adalyn."

Adalyn scrambled for a counterargument. “It would seem most counterproductive to invite another woman to join her if she expects her suitor to call.”

Adalyn’s father looked up from where he jostled Edmund on his knee. “She has a point, Harry.”

Harry lifted his hands in surrender. “I concede. Forgive me for being suspicious.”

“What day does she suggest, Adalyn?” Maggie asked. “Perhaps I can join you as well.”

Maggie’s presence would impede the plan to spend time alone with Nash. Adalyn scrambled for a solution. “She suggests the day after tomorrow. Weren’t you planning on making calls to raise funds for the clinic? Although I would adore your company, it’s such an important cause; I would hate to have you postpone simply to accompany me.”

“The funds *are* running low again, my love,” Harry said.

Disappointment evident on her lovely face, Maggie acquiesced. “Very well. Perhaps next time.” Her face brightened. “But what of my idea for a ball?” She turned in her seat to face Harry, the fabric of her gown rustling against the seat. “We could host it in honor of our esteemed guests. It would provide yet another opportunity for Adalyn and Daniel to mingle with our friends.” She grasped Harry’s arm. “Oh, please, Harry?”

Harry laughed and sent a wry smile toward Adalyn and her father. “How can I refuse her?”

“You’ve been so kind to Father and me. How can we ever repay you?”

Her father gave her a weak smile. “They can repay us by making sure you return home with me. First Mr. Pratt, now Lady Honoria. I feel England is trying to steal you away from me.” He patted her hand. “Not that I don’t understand everyone clamoring for your attention. I’ve said for years, you are a remarkable young woman. It’s good these Londoners appreciate you.”

Her father's estimation of her notwithstanding, at that moment, there was only one person Adalyn hoped would appreciate her.

Lord Nash Talbot.



NASH ADJUSTED HIS COAT FOR THE TWELFTH TIME AS HE waited among the copse of trees near the Serpentine. He checked his pocket watch. Ten past one. Honoria said they would arrive at one. Had Adalyn changed her mind? Or perhaps—more likely someone had changed it for her. Namely, a certain duke.

He'd counted the minutes since receiving Honoria's letter. As his valet read the missive to him, anticipation grew with each word. He planned a private luncheon in a secluded spot, away from prying eyes.

Thank goodness the weather had cooperated. Earlier that morning, heavy fog had blanketed the air but dissipated with the heat of the rising sun, leaving the sky sunny and blue. Much like Miss Lovelace's eyes.

In honor of those striking eyes, he wore one of his more colorful waistcoats. Typically, he preferred black for every item of clothing except his shirts and neckcloths, which were always an impeccably starched, crisp white. Not that he was a dandy. Simply that he used his well-groomed appearance to detract from his other short-comings if possible.

But he wanted to impress Miss Lovelace. Even his valet had remarked on it when he slipped the sapphire blue garment over Nash's shoulders. "On the hunt for a new ladybird, sir?"

Nash had raised a dark brow at Evans. The disadvantage of having his man read his correspondence meant he knew practically all of Nash's business, and Cordelia had sent a threatening missive the previous day.

Montgomery's sources had been correct. Felix Davies had been sniffing around her, ready to pounce on Nash's leftovers.

Cordelia's idle threats she was considering taking Davies as her new lover fell on deaf ears, and Nash had instructed Evans to toss the letter into the fire.

But Adalyn was no ladybird, and an unfamiliar twinge of discomfort settled in Nash's chest that Evans might think so. "It may shock you to learn the lady in question is quite respectable."

"I don't recall you taking such care for Lady Honoria, sir."

Nash had ignored the comment, and Evans was intelligent enough to remain quiet as he finished tying Nash's cravat, the tightness of which brought him back to the present.

He resisted running a finger around his collar and glanced at his watch once more. About to lose hope, the lilt of a woman's voice echoed in the distance—one with an American accent. He lifted his head and scanned the area.

The damnable neckcloth tightened again, making it difficult to breathe when he caught sight of her. A vision in a pale lavender gown, Adalyn wore a wide-brimmed bonnet over her blond hair. He had to admit he liked that her hair wasn't a mass of curls like most women.

He imagined those locks falling around him like a thick blond curtain as she lay above him. Pushing that into the recesses of his mind to be retrieved later that night when he was alone, he gave a signaling wave to the women, hoping to eradicate the arousing image before the women joined him.

Bright smiles from Honoria and Adalyn greeted him, but Honoria's maid—following the requisite ten steps behind—appeared less amiable. Silently cursing the standards of propriety, he reminded himself any time with Miss Lovelace was better than none. However, the maid put a damper on his plans.

"Lord Nash!" Lady Honoria said. "What a pleasant surprise."

Nash stifled the chuckle—but only barely. When Honoria had written him of her plans, he refused to allow Evans to read the missive, snatching the parchment from the man's hands.

Instead, he struggled for a quarter hour, deciphering the jumbled letters for the time and place. The rest he had taken upon himself.

“Ladies.” He bowed, his eyes never leaving Adalyn’s. “A pleasure, indeed. Miss Lovelace, are you still enjoying your stay in England?”

“More so every day, sir.” Her smile conveyed an underlying message meant for only him.

Nash’s stomach performed an odd tumble at her pointed words. Perhaps the bacon he’d had that morning had gone rancid. Yet, it wasn’t an unpleasant sensation.

Honorina gazed up at the sky. “It is most fortuitous the fog lifted.”

*Ah, the weather, her favorite subject.*

Yet, she surprised him how she used the mundane information to advantage. “Oh, dear. I should have brought my parasol. If the sun grows more intense as it does in the afternoon, I fear I shall burn.” She turned toward her maid. “Susan, will you please return home and fetch it? The pale green one that matches my gown.”

Susan’s gaze darted between the two other women, then landed firmly on Nash—with great distrust.

Honorina patted Susan’s arm. “I assure you, we are perfectly fine. It’s the middle of the day. Miss Lovelace and I can act as chaperone for each other. Plus, we have Lord Nash as protector.”

Nash could almost hear the maid’s restrained snort of disbelief. She had clearly taken his measure and found him lacking.

“As you wish, my lady.”

“Oh, and Susan,” Honorina added as her maid turned to leave. “I fear it may not be in the usual place. I may have misplaced it after my turn in the garden the other day.”

*Clever woman.*



Susan gave a quick curtsy and then ambled off to retrieve the parasol.

“How long do you expect we have until she returns?” Nash asked.

“I would say at least half an hour. It will take her a good ten minutes each way to and from the house, and I *may* have hidden the parasol in an unusual place.”

Adalyn, who, like Nash, had been observing the exchange with interest, gave a bright laugh. “Honorina, I would never have imagined you as a schemer.”

“Nor I,” Nash said. “But I, for one, am most grateful.”

She gave them both an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile. “We all have our little secrets, do we not?”

*Indeed, we do.*

## CHAPTER 11—BEST LAID PLANS



Adalyn stared at the petite redhead before her. She'd imagined Lady Honoria to be the perfect example of propriety and decorum, but she quickly discovered there was much more to the unassuming woman.

“Did you truly hide your parasol?”

Honoria grinned. “I did indeed, first thing this morning. I will admit I did it on a lark, hoping the weather would turn. It was so gloomy, I had no fear then that Susan would fetch it before our walk. But I only hoped it would provide the perfect excuse to send her back to the house.”

“But you are indeed fair and will catch too much sun if you're not careful,” Adalyn said, worried the delay in fetching the parasol would be detrimental to her new friend.

“Then we should find her a shady spot in which to wait,” Nash said. “And I fear you also might need a bit of shelter, Miss Lovelace. I decided to enjoy a small luncheon a little farther back from the path. Would you ladies care to join me?”

Gooseflesh flared up Adalyn's arms at the devilish gleam in Nash's eyes. “That sounds lovely. What do you think, Lady Honoria?”

With Honoria's agreement, Nash offered both of his arms and led them to a small clearing where a servant stood guard over blankets laden with domed serving dishes. In the center of the repast, a chiller held a bottle of wine.

“You must have an enormous appetite, Lord Nash,” Adalyn said as she gazed at the sheer quantity of food before

her.

A dark eyebrow ticked up. He leaned in, his whispered words tickling her ear. “You have no idea.”

Heat rushed through her at his seductive tone, and she was grateful Honoria seemed preoccupied with something in the other direction.

Nash held out his hand. “May I help you settle?”

Adalyn slipped her gloved hand in his, and even through the fabric, a raw energy passed between them. He lowered her to the blanket, then assisted Honoria in the same manner.

“Wine?” He held out the bottle of a sparkling white.

At their agreement, he poured each of them a glass, then lifted the lids on the plates of food. “Just a light bite. Some fruit, cheese, a bit of sausage, some savory biscuits.” He produced several fine china plates and handed them each one.

After nibbling on a piece of cheese and a few grapes, Honoria said, “Perhaps I should return to the road and watch for Susan.”

Nash rose and helped her up, then resumed his seat, much closer than he had been before. “I owe her a great debt.” His husky voice—or perhaps his nearness—sent a shiver of excitement up Adalyn’s spine.

Scents of spice, leather, and shaving soap, masculine and uniquely him, teased at her nose as he leaned closer.

A gentle breeze ruffled his dark hair, blowing a lock over his forehead and making him appear rather boyish. Or it might have been the mischievous quirk of his lips as he stretched out on his side next to her.

“Tell me.” He raised a piece of cheese to his lips, drawing her eyes to the fullness of his mouth. “What made you wish to study medicine?”

How could she answer truthfully without laying herself bare before him and exposing her most painful memory? Yet, unlike other men who had shown an interest in her, he didn’t speak of domesticity and the number of children he desired.

She found it both exhilarating and flattering that he should focus his attention on her choice of occupation, rather than how she would make his life more comfortable.

“There is so much suffering in the world we have no control to ease. The mind is an elusive patient. But the body, under the right conditions, can be mended and made whole.”

Eyes as rich as dark chocolate studied her, their intensity unnerving her to the point she wanted to look away, but they pinned her in place. It was as if he gazed into the depths of her very soul, seeing it in its true state—damaged and vulnerable to attack—and did not find her lacking.

The acceptance in his eyes took her breath away. Would that acceptance vanish like the morning fog at the first rays of the sun if he knew what had caused the damage?

*Trust him*, a tiny voice whispered. And oh, how she wanted to, but it was too soon in their acquaintance. In truth, she'd never formed a romantic relationship that lasted long enough to share that dark place of her soul.

Desperate to turn the conversation to lighter topics, she asked, “And what of you, sir? Why did you wish to become a lord?”

His laugh, a bright crack of sound, reached his eyes, which crinkled at the corners. “I’m afraid I had little choice in the matter. My status is a casualty of birth. Guilt by association, as it were.” He sipped his wine. “I’m not titled, if you were wondering. Merely a courtesy as the younger son of a marquess.”

“Do you mean to say that if given the choice, you would not be a lord?”

His eyes no longer reflected his still present smile. “And give all this up?” He waved a hand over the lavish display of food. “However, there are advantages and disadvantages to every station in life.”

Having seen so much suffering of the poor, she opened her mouth to protest.

He held up a hand. “Hear me out. As I mentioned, the perks of being wealthy and privileged far outweigh the less tangible advantages of the less fortunate.”

“Which are?”

“Ability to choose whom they love—marry. Not being under the scrutiny of society waiting for them to make the slightest error.”

“But are they? Truly? Are their choices still not restricted by their circumstances? And *I* would argue that gossips exist in every walk of life.”

He nodded. “You’re correct, of course. I yield to your superior logic and wisdom.”

Once again, unlike other men who would insist they had the right of it, Nash surprised her, ceding the victory. But sorrow in Nash’s eyes made the victory—hollow.

“Perhaps it’s not logic or wisdom, but more of practical knowledge.”

“Your work with your father and at the clinic?”

She nodded. “Now, shall we turn our conversation to less serious topics?”

He sat up, his attention turning toward the pathway and Lady Honoria. “Like the weather?”

“It seems to be a favorite among polite society.”

“Since no one’s ever accused me of being polite, I suggest we not talk at all.” Lifting a fat, ripe strawberry from the plate, he dipped it in his glass of wine, then lifted it to her lips.

She took a bite, the flavor bursting in her mouth. A bit of wine dribbled down her chin.

“Allow me.” He removed his glove and used his thumb to wipe the drop away.

His dark eyes bored into hers. Birds who had been chirping merrily in the trees stopped their song, the wind stilled, ceasing the rustling of leaves, a hush falling over everything around them.

Or so it seemed.

When his eyelids lowered to half-mast, and his gaze lingered on her lips, she swore even her own heart stopped beating.

She tilted her head toward him in invitation. Like the skilled lover she supposed him to be, he read it with accuracy, lowering his head, his lips tantalizingly close.

A soft puff of his breath brushed against her skin, sending electrical tingles up her arms.

She parted her lips ever so slightly, encouraging him.

He whispered her name, the sound of it caressing her. Then he moved to close the distance between them.



“STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” HONORIA’S CRIES BROKE through the fog of lust in Nash’s mind, and he shot upright from where he had come so close to getting Adalyn exactly where he wanted her.

Had Honoria come back so soon and caught them? He darted a glance around, but she was nowhere near. He jumped up and hurried toward her cries, Adalyn’s skirts rustling behind him.

Up near the path, Honoria struggled with a young boy—a familiar boy, who tugged furiously on her reticule. Although he gave Honoria credit for her tenacity against the lad, he worried the boy might strike her should she continue to resist.

“I’ll get you this time, you little thief!”

The boy’s head jerked toward him, then he gave Honoria a sound shove.

Instinct to maintain her balance had Honoria wheeling her arms and releasing the object of the boy’s desire.

“Catch him!” Adalyn’s panicked voice sounded behind him.

“Tend to Honoria, Adalyn. I shall pursue the scoundrel,” Nash yelled over his shoulder, heedless of addressing the ladies properly. Time was of the essence, Nash’s only thought to apprehend the urchin and make him pay.

With an intensity that surprised him, Nash dashed after the robber of reticules, chasing him to the edge of the Serpentine.

The boy apparently realized his mistake, skidded to a stop, and spun around, looking for another path of escape. Clusters of people began gathering at the sounds of the commotion.

“Aha! Where will you go now, boy?”

Cornered like a rat, the child clutched the reticule, his eyes pleading.

Nash almost felt sorry for him. Almost, but not quite. “A little far from home, eh, boy? Don’t you belong down at the docks?”

The dirt on the child’s face split in a defiant grin when he opened his mouth to speak. “There’s better pickin’s here.”

The impertinence. Nash had to admire him that much. Faced off with the boy, Nash circled him, the memory of his sore shin keeping him at a safe distance. When the boy’s gaze darted to the side, no doubt still searching for an escape route, Nash made his move and grabbed him by the shoulders.

Once again, the child kicked out, but Nash remembered Jackson’s instruction, anticipating such an attack, and dodged away. Retaining his hold on the boy with one hand, Nash reached down for the reticule.

They struggled, the child’s hold stronger than Nash had expected. A brief thought flickered through his mind. Perhaps hunger and desperation make one stronger.

With one powerful shove against the boy’s chest, Nash yanked the reticule from the child’s hands. And like Lady Honoria, the boy pinwheeled his arms, falling backward into the Serpentine.

Although the water wasn’t especially deep at the edge, the boy struggled, sputtering and flailing his arms. Nash took a

step toward him, and rather than pull himself from the water, the child moved backward to where the murky water dropped off considerably.

Terror flashed in the child's eyes the moment before he went under.

"Serves you right, you little thief," Nash muttered to himself, thinking perhaps a good dunk in the water would make him think twice before pilfering from unsuspecting and helpless women. Although, Nash had to admit, neither Adalyn nor Honoria were what he would call helpless.

"Lord Nash!" Adalyn called.

He turned as Honoria and Adalyn hurried toward him as quickly as he supposed their stays allowed.

Holding up the pilfered bag, he grinned at them. "Your reticule, Lady Honoria."

Honoria nodded her thanks, panting heavily and apparently too out of breath to form the words.

Adalyn seemed much less winded. "Where is the child?"

Nash turned, pointing to the Serpentine, expecting to see the wet rat bobbing in the water. Bubbles formed on the surface and, for a moment, the child's head popped up, but he continued to flail and went under again.

Adalyn grabbed Nash's arm, a look of sheer terror on her face. "He can't swim. Someone must do something."

Nash admired her kind heart, but thought her rather gullible. "A ruse, I'd wager, to distract us and make his escape." Yet there was something in Adalyn's eyes that he wished to soothe, a consuming fear so strong as to make him reconsider.

"Please, Nash."

Other bystanders watched in casual disinterest, apparently unwilling to sully their fine garments for a mere street urchin.

Nash shrugged off his coat. "Very well, but if I receive additional injury from the lad from my heroic efforts, I expect



compensation.”

Color rose to Adalyn’s cheeks, but she urged him to hasten. “We’re losing time.”

Not taking time to remove his boots, Nash stepped into the murky water, wading as far as he could until the ground beneath him did indeed drop off like a shelf. After pulling in a deep breath, he dove under and searched for the boy, half expecting to find him swimming farther away along the shoreline.

Instead, the dark shape of a body floated before him. Tiny bubbles drifted from the child’s mouth. Seized with panic, Nash wrapped one arm around the child and swam toward the surface.

As he dragged the child’s limp body toward the shoreline, Adalyn’s cries reached his ears. She seemed utterly distraught, more so than he anticipated for a child she didn’t know. Closer to shore, he lifted the child in his arms, and carried him out of the water. He laid the child in the soft grass and knelt beside him.

“Is he breathing?” Adalyn asked, her own voice sounding as if it struggled to pull in enough air.

He leaned down, placing his ear next to the child’s nose. “I can’t tell. Perhaps you should—”

“I can’t.” Her words seemed choked—forced, and her face had gone even paler.

Honorina, too, seemed perplexed, and she grasped Adalyn by the waist as if to support her. “What is it, Adalyn?”

Adalyn uttered one word. “Benjamin.”

Nash and Honorina exchanged a concerned look. All the while, the child lay motionless on the grass. Someone had to do something! “Tell me what to do.”

Adalyn still stood frozen before him.

He jumped up and grasped her arms, shaking her, perhaps a bit too roughly. He would apologize later. They were running out of time. “Adalyn, snap out of it. What should I do?”

The distant look in her eyes vanished, and she met his own. “Massage his chest. Start low under the rib cage and move upward. We must expel the water from his lungs.”

Nash hurried back to the child and placed his hands in what he hoped was the right position. He looked at Adalyn for guidance. “Here? Like this?”

With her nod of approval, he moved his hands upward as she instructed. Concentration on his movements prevented him from noticing the first time. But on his second attempt, although the child’s ribs protruded from its scrawny body, as Nash moved upward, two soft mounds of flesh met his hands with the slightest resistance. He was all too familiar with the distinguishing attributes of the female body.

Shock froze him in place for a moment, then his hands flew up, away from the child. “I can’t.”



FROM THE MOMENT ADALYN SAW THE CHILD FLAIL THEN SINK beneath the water, haunting memories flooded her mind and paralyzed her. She couldn’t save Benjamin when he needed her, and now a helpless child would be lost to inaction.

Nash’s gaze darted toward her, an odd look on his face as he threw his hands in the air and said, “I can’t.” His eyes held both shock and pleading.

“You must. Don’t give up,” she pleaded.

“It’s a girl.”

He jumped to his feet once again, meeting Adalyn’s eyes with determination. “Let the masses think what they wish about me, but I will not lay my hands on such a young girl. You must gather your wits, Adalyn. You obviously know what to do. If you wish to save this girl’s life, break free from whatever has gripped you.”

Adalyn forced herself to return her attention to the child—the girl—only to find Honoria on her knees beside the girl, trying in vain to perform the maneuver. She was the most

well-equipped to deal with the dire situation. Shame filled her, finally unleashing her from the tether of fear holding her in place.

She scrambled to the girl's side, and gently removed Honoria's hands, sending her—what she hoped—was a look of gratitude for her efforts. As Adalyn massaged the girl's chest, she said, "Honor, retrieve a handkerchief from my reticule."

Before Honoria could respond, Nash held a man's handkerchief in front of her. Taking it, she placed it over the girl's mouth, and with short puffs, breathed what she hoped was life-giving air back into her lungs. Panic once again threatened to freeze her, but she pressed forward, pushing Benjamin's lifeless eyes from her mind.

After performing another set of chest massages, she breathed again into the girl's mouth, then wilted with relief when the girl sputtered, and dirty water spurted from her mouth.

Stronger and in command now, she called to Nash. "Help me turn her on her side."

Nash was there in an instant, pinning her with his gaze. The admiration and encouragement shining in his eyes soothed her, keeping her in the present and out of the clutches of the demons from her past.

As the girl sputtered and struggled to regain consciousness, Adalyn also regained her own sense of purpose. "We should take her to the clinic."

Drenched to the bone, Nash's linen shirt clung to his body, practically transparent from the water, and his dark hair lay plastered to his head like a cap. He hesitated but a moment. "My carriage and driver are not far." He picked up the girl in his arms as if she weighed nothing.

Honor, maintained the wherewithal to retrieve Nash's coat, which they wrapped around the girl's shoulders for warmth. Then she and Adalyn followed him back toward the area where they had enjoyed such a pleasant, albeit brief, moment together.

Rather than go back to the clearing, Nash proceeded a little to the left, slightly off the path. “Jones!”

A liveried driver stepped out from a grouping of trees.

Nash took command and barked the orders at his servant. “Hurry. Fetch the carriage. Tell Anderson to gather the food and dishes in the clearing, then wait for your return. We must make haste.”

The man nodded and rushed off.

The girl uttered protests, pushing weakly against Nash’s chest. “Let me go.”

Adalyn stood close and stroked the girl’s damp forehead. “Shush, child. No one will hurt you. But we must attend to you somewhere other than the park.”

“Miss Lovelace,” Honoria said. “I hesitate to suggest this, but I fear I must return home, otherwise my maid will send out the alarm if I’ve vanished.” She directed her gaze toward Nash. “Sir, can I depend upon you care for Miss Lovelace and the child?”

Nash nodded. “You have my word.”

When Nash’s carriage approached, Honoria said, “Forgive me, Adalyn. I know this isn’t proper.”

Adalyn squeezed her hand. “Think nothing of it. I can think of no safer place to be.”

## CHAPTER 12—DEALING WITH DEMONS



Once Adalyn had settled in his carriage, Nash lifted the girl onto the seat next to her. The sallow color of the girl's skin and her labored breathing concerned him, but he worried more about Adalyn.

His mind raced at what had caused her strange paralyzation. The vacant expression in her eyes contrasted directly with the determined woman he'd first met on the docks. Thank heavens she snapped out of it long enough to resuscitate the girl.

After giving instruction to the driver as to the location of the clinic, Adalyn seemed to drift back into that state of oblivion, and as the carriage pressed forward toward their destination, Nash's mind struggled to solve the equation, searching for the determining factor.

The same child. Check.

Theft of a reticule. Check.

Near the water. Check.

A near drowning. Aha!

Nash remembered the name Adalyn had muttered when in her trance-like state. "Adalyn," he said as gently as he could.

Her eyes snapped to his, wide, still holding terror.

He reached over and caressed her hand. "Adalyn, sweet. Who is Benjamin?"

She blinked several times, as if not registering his question, but he remained silent—and patient.

At long last, her gaze sharpened, and she cleared her throat. “Benjamin was my brother.”

One word of her response screamed for attention. He kept his voice soft, hoping to soothe her. “Was?”

Her eyes shimmered as tears welled. “He died. In front of me. From drowning. I couldn’t save him.”

Nash didn’t need to enquire further. The equation did not involve the theft of a reticule but a drowning Adalyn had witnessed. As she struggled to pull herself from the memory, Nash desired nothing more than to help her back into the present.

“You saved her, Adalyn. The girl will live because of you.” Nash forced the optimistic words to his tongue. Nestled between them, the girl had drifted off, stirring only when another fit of coughing overtook her.

One tear coalesced in the corner of Adalyn’s eye, fat and clear. When she blinked, it clung to her lashes, holding on stubbornly as if by letting go it would release a flood of its sisters.

The tear broke free and meandered down her cheek. Its companions followed, and she wept openly.

For once in his life, Nash’s desire to pull a woman into his arms had nothing to do with sex. Yet the child between them prevented him from such a gesture, which in his estimation may have been a blessing. He had no wish that Adalyn would misinterpret his intention. He wished only to comfort her, to kiss her tears away and tell her how brave she had been to confront her demons.

If anyone understood about carrying burdens, Nash did. Granted, not in the same respect, but the heavy blame of guilt and shame placed upon one’s self was a crushing load to bear. He banged on the carriage roof and yelled, “Faster, man!”

After what seemed like an interminably long ride, the carriage pulled to a stop, rocking on uneven cobbles. The child

stirred briefly as Nash gathered her in his arms and leapt from the carriage, pulling down the step with the toe of his boot and hoping Adalyn would forgive him for not offering her his hand.

Luckily, Adalyn's focus remained on the girl, and she hurried past him and led the way into the clinic and—for him—into enemy territory. People either sat or stood within an open area just inside the door, and everyone's attention turned, assessing the new arrivals.

Seated at a desk, Priscilla gazed up, her eyes widening, then sprang from her chair and rushed over. "Lord Nash, Adalyn. What happened?" Her attention turned toward the girl, and if possible, her eyes widened even further. "Fingers?"

*Fingers?* Why did that name sound familiar?

"Do you know this child?" he asked.

"Yes. Err. No, not really. He stole my reticule over a year ago and twisted his ankle in his escape. I brought him here for treatment."

*Ah, yes.* Vague memories surfaced of an event Priscilla had recounted at the Montgomerys' garden party a year prior. "She. The child is a girl."

As Priscilla's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, Adalyn stepped forward, taking charge of the situation. "We must get her to a treatment room. She fell into the Serpentine and nearly drowned."

At last, Priscilla seemed to register the state of Nash's disheveled appearance, and her gaze darted between him and the girl. "Did you ..."

"Yes. Lord Nash saved her life," Adalyn said.

"No. I merely pulled her from the lake. Miss Lovelace is the true hero." He hoped his words would help ease her pain.

Under other circumstances, Nash would have chuckled at Priscilla's lack of decorum, for she yelled louder than a fishwife. "Timothy!"

Marbry rushed into the room, skidding to a stop when his attention landed on Nash holding the child in his arms. “What the devil?”

No doubt curious as to Priscilla’s call of alarm, Ashton, Dr. Somersby, and an older gentleman Nash recognized as Adalyn’s father appeared, each with the same look of disbelief. Odd satisfaction filled Nash’s chest at the confusion covering Ashton’s self-righteous face—he could almost hear the questions swirling in the duke’s mind.

Ashton’s gaze slid to Adalyn, flitted back to Nash, then landed firmly on the child. “What happened?”

Adalyn repeated a succinct explanation of what had transpired, once again painting Nash as the hero.

Dr. Lovelace’s jaw dropped at the tale, then raced to Adalyn’s side. “Adalyn, are you . . .” He studied her with loving concern, and something about the man’s demeanor suggested he understood more about the severity of Adalyn’s reaction to the incident than one would expect.

She placed a hand on the man’s arm. “I’m fine, Father, truly. It’s the child we should be concerned about.”

“Of course, you’re right. Follow me.” Ashton guided them down a hallway.

When they entered a treatment room, Dr. Lovelace’s attention turned toward Nash. “And you, sir? Let us tend to you as well.”

Nash waved him off. “No need. As your daughter stated, the child is the primary concern.”

He placed the girl on a table. He had given up on prayer years ago, finding offering words to an unseen, and—to him—uninterested deity a waste of breath. But at that moment, he called upon the faceless, all-powerful entity.

*Dear God, let her be all right, for Adalyn’s sake.*

If the child died, what burden of undeserved guilt would Adalyn heap upon herself?



Ashton pushed him aside, none too gently, and leaned over the girl. He slapped the child's cheeks.

They were nothing more than gentle taps, but Nash's anger roiled at the barbaric tactics the paragon of virtue used to rouse the girl. "Is that really necessary, Ashton?" he spat out, the words swollen with bitterness.

His anger abated—albeit minimally—as Adalyn touched him on the sleeve. "Trust him, Nash."

The child stirred again, coughing pitifully, her eyes blinking as her gaze darted around her. "Wha'?" She tried to rise, but Ashton held her shoulders, keeping her in place.

"You're safe, child." Ashton's whispered words were gentle, and Nash begrudgingly admitted to their soothing quality.

Marbry stepped closer. "Fingers, do you remember me? Can you tell us what happened?"

Anger bubbled in Nash's gut. "Adalyn . . . Miss Lovelace has already recounted the events several times."

Marbry glared at him. "I wish to hear it from the child's own mouth. I'm not convinced your part in this was entirely altruistic. It's not in your nature."

Hands tightened into fists, Nash wished he were back at Gentleman Jackson's. He needed to punch something. Hard.

Once again, Adalyn's soothing hand touched him on the sleeve. "Lord Nash jumped into the lake at great personal risk to rescue the child. What more do you need to know?"

Ashton snorted in disbelief. "I doubt any personal risk was involved. If memory serves, I recall from our boyhood that Nash is a strong swimmer. The question remains, how did Fingers, who apparently cannot swim, wind up in the Serpentine?" Nash's nemesis turned toward the girl. "Did this man"—he pointed a finger at Nash—"push you into the lake?"

Unbidden, Nash took two steps toward Ashton, prepared to grab him by the throat and throttle him for the accusation.

Dr. Somersby, the one man in the room who did not hold him in disdain, stepped between them. “Perhaps it would be best if you wait outside. We’ll straighten all this out, but it will do the child no good to witness violence.”

“Father,” Adalyn said. “As a precautionary measure, perhaps you could examine Lord Nash?” Her pleading eyes did more to convince him to step outside than any spoken words.

Nash gave a curt nod and, mumbling an apology to Adalyn, followed Dr. Lovelace out of the room.

Once again, he’d been tried, judged, and convicted on misconstrued evidence.



THE EXPRESSION ON NASH’S FACE BROKE ADALYN’S HEART. She wanted to rail at Harry for his presumption that Nash had caused the girl injury, but Dr. Somersby was correct. At the moment, only Fingers mattered.

Harry pulled out his stethoscope, nodding in satisfaction as he pressed it against the girl’s chest. “Still some wheezing, but her heart sounds steady and strong.”

Priscilla stepped forward and crouched before the child. “Hello, Fingers. Do you remember me? We met last year. In the park as well. It would seem you like the park as much as I do.”

A stifled chuckle came from Timothy.

Fingers’ eyes widened. “I remember you.” She darted a nervous glance toward Timothy. “And him.”

“Good,” Priscilla said. “Then you know we only want to help you. No one will call the constable. You have our word. Doesn’t she?” Priscilla turned, waiting for the group’s agreement.

A collective *Yes* rose in the small room.

Adalyn admired the way Priscilla spoke to the child. She didn't accuse or reprimand. Her voice remained soft and comforting. "Can you tell us how you came to fall into the lake?"

"That bloke who just left pushed me."

"I knew it," Harry muttered.

Things looked bleak for Nash, but the child spoke the truth. Nash did shove her.

"If I may," Adalyn interrupted. "Fingers, do you remember me? We *met*—as Mrs. Marbry so aptly put it—on the docks about a month ago."

Fingers refused to meet Adalyn's eyes. Instead, the girl focused on one of her soggy, worn shoes, but she nodded.

"Tell everyone why you were near the Serpentine."

"Well, I . . . um . . ."

"You were running, were you not? Because Lord Nash, the man you accused of pushing you, was chasing you to retrieve a stolen reticule. Isn't that the truth?"

"I didn't steal yours." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I found one on the ground and was running to find its owner."

Oliver chimed in. "Lying is also wrong, Fingers. We agreed not to call the constable, but if you refuse to tell us the truth—"

"A'right, a'right. I done it. Please don't call the constable. But it weren't 'ers." Fingers pointed toward Adalyn. "That big bloke chased me, and I sure as hellfire wasn't keen on giving 'im my takins. We may 'ave tussled over it a bit."

Following Priscilla's lead, Adalyn kept her voice calm and non-accusatory. "So Lord Nash simply pushed you to make you release the reticule. Is that correct?"

Fingers nodded and swiped her nose with the dirty sleeve of her too small coat. Nash's coat slipped off her slender shoulders and fell around her to the table.

"And that's when you fell in?" Harry asked.

“Not at first. I was only in a little ways, but he was comin’ after me, so I stepped back and went under. I can’t swim.”

Adalyn turned on Harry. Blood whooshed in her ears. “Now. Are you satisfied? And for your information it was Lady Honoria’s reticule, and if you ask, she will confirm the events.”

Lips pursed, Harry nodded. “Fingers, do you know a boy named Manny?”

Fingers’ head jerked up, but she remained silent.

“And Pockets?” Oliver added.

“Whats you done wif ’em? They’ve been missin’ for years.” Color drained from her already pale face. “You didn’t kill ’em, did you?”

Harry and Oliver exchanged a glance. Harry was the first to answer. “They’re very much alive. Loved and well-cared for. I’ve adopted Manny, and Dr. Somersby and his wife have adopted Pockets. Would you like to see them?”

“This ain’t no trick?”

“Not at all,” Harry said. “Come home with me to recover from your ordeal, and you can have a reunion with your friends.”

Fingers’ eyes narrowed, studying Harry. Adalyn couldn’t really blame her. Naturally, a child living on the street would be suspicious.

Adalyn squeezed the girl’s filthy hand. “If it reassures you, my father and I are staying with the duke and his wife. Manny has just arrived back home from school and will be thrilled to see you.”

The word *duke* seemed to register in Fingers’ mind, and she darted startled eyes toward Harry. “I thought you was a doctor.”

“I am, but I’m also a duke. The two aren’t mutually exclusive. But as I told Manny years ago, don’t hold that against me.”

The child turned toward Oliver. “I suppose you’re the king?”

Oliver shook his head, the dimple denting his cheek. “A simple doctor, I’m afraid. Although Dr. Marbry is heir to a viscounty.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Fingers muttered.

Priscilla giggled before she admonished, “Watch your language, young lady.”

Dr. Marbry tugged Priscilla to his side. “You’re one to talk.”

“Since we have other patients waiting,” Harry said, “I suggest Miss Lovelace stay with Fingers while the rest of us get back to work. Fingers, I expect you to be on your best behavior, and if you do, I promise there will be plenty of hot food and sweets to eat when we return to my home.”

“And Manny and Pockets?” she asked, apparently not allowing them to forget the promise to reunite them.

“And Manny and Pockets. Although you will probably have to fight with Pockets over the biscuits,” Oliver said.

As they filed out of the room, Priscilla stopped and took Adalyn’s hand, giving it a little squeeze. “I have a feeling the exciting events may have interrupted something with Lord Nash. Shall I send him in when your father has finished his examination?”

“If you would be so kind.”

“Of course.” In a swish of skirts, Priscilla left Adalyn alone with Fingers.

“Why do you talk funny? Are you really from America?” the girl asked.

Adalyn smiled inwardly at the girl’s remark. Everyone she’d met so far had been too polite to mention her American accent. Leave it to a child to point it out. “Why don’t we play a game? For each question one of us asks, we also must answer one—truthfully.”

Fingers seemed to think it over. “What if I don’t want to answer?”

“Ah, but those are the rules. Do you accept? If you prefer not to play, we can sit in silence until the end of the day.”

“A’righ’.”

“Very well. First, I don’t think I speak *funny*, as you so colorfully put it. However, you are correct. I’m from a city called Boston in America. Have you ever met someone from America?”

Fingers grinned, no doubt thinking this an easy game. “Is that your question?”

Adalyn met her grin. “Yes, and since I’ve answered the one you just asked, I earn the right to ask another immediately. But first, you must answer.”

“No, I ain’t never met no one from America.”

“Well, I hope your experience doesn’t give you a bad impression. Now, for my next question. What is your real name? Certainly, it can’t be Fingers.”

“Wha’s wrong with Fingers? It’s a right good name.”

Adalyn held up a finger. “That’s another question, which you haven’t earned the right to ask since you haven’t answered mine truthfully.”

Fingers’ mouth dipped at the corners, the forlorn expression on her face heartbreaking. “I don’t rightly know.” Again, she wiped her nose with her dirty sleeve.

Adalyn made a mental note to provide appropriate clothes for her once she had bathed.

“I recollect being called something that sounds like Filmena, but Manny said Fingers would suit me, and it’d be better to keep Cood from knowin’ I was a girl.”

*Cood? Who in the world?*

Adalyn would have a multitude of questions for Manny when they returned to Harry’s.

“Perhaps Manny will remember. We shall ask him tonight.”

“Is he really alive? And Pockets? Lawd. I miss ’em somefin fierce.”

Adalyn’s heart broke anew at what the girl must have gone through, left alone, thinking her friends were dead. “That’s more than one question, but I’m feeling generous, so I shall answer. Yes, they’re truly alive and very loved. Although I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Master Pockets yet, as the duke said, Manny returned home from school the other day. I’m sure they will be overjoyed to see you again.”

After removing Nash’s coat, Adalyn retrieved a blanket from a shelf and tucked it around the girl. “Now rest. Your body is still recovering.”

“You won’t leave me?”

“I shall remain at your side, your dutiful servant.”

Fingers giggled a little, her throat still raspy from her ordeal, then she curled up on the table, her eyes remaining open as if she didn’t quite trust Adalyn’s promise.

Soft footsteps sounded behind Adalyn, and she turned to find Nash standing in the doorway.

“Adalyn?” Devoid of the crowd that had gathered earlier, the room became an echo chamber for his deep baritone, filling the small space and her heart with warmth.

He tilted his head toward the girl. “Will she recover completely?”

Adalyn tugged on his arm, pulling him to the side and whispered, “There is still a chance for ill effects from the dirty water. We shall have to watch her for fever, but God willing, yes. I believe she will recover.”

“And you?” His dark eyes pinned her.

Every instinct in her wanted to avoid his probing gaze and the unmasked portion of his question. To think of Benjamin would send her spiraling again. But something about Nash’s patience and acceptance gave her strength.

“With time, I hope that I, too, will recover fully.”

He cradled her hands in his much larger ones, his touch tender as he caressed them. “If you ever wish to speak of it to someone who will not judge, you have only to ask, and I shall listen.”

The crack in her soul shifted slightly, as if forcing it closer to wholeness. “I shall remember your kind offer.”

He nodded. “Since you have no further need of me, I shall leave you.”

She handed him his coat, and for a moment, when his gaze dipped to her lips, she thought he might kiss her goodbye.

Yet, he did not, and disappointment flooded her.

As he turned to leave, she stopped him. “Shall I see you again?”

The devilish grin that she’d so quickly grown fond of returned in full measure. “You may count on it.” In a blink, he was gone.

“So, you’re sweet on that big bloke, eh?”

Lost in Nash’s eyes, Adalyn had completely forgotten the child in the room. She adjusted the blanket around the girl and said, “The water has addled your mind.”

In her heart, she knew the truth. Adalyn was very sweet on Lord Nash Talbot.



ON HIS WAY HOME, NASH FOUGHT OFF THE CHILL SETTLING IN, wondering how much of it was from the remnants of the Serpentine’s cold water or the frigid reception he’d received at the clinic.

Not that he’d expected anything more. But to be accused of harming an innocent child?

Scratch that. Young Miss Fingers could hardly be called innocent. Thank heaven, if Adalyn was correct, she would



make a full recovery.

He let his head fall against the squabs of his carriage and closed his eyes. Although he would not deny using a feat of heroics to entice a woman, it surprised him how little his desire to get Adalyn into his bed had played in his rescue of Fingers.

Not that she didn't influence his decision to jump in the cold, filthy waters—fully clothed, no less—to pull the child out. However, the look of terror on her face had spurred him forward, wishing to be *someone's* hero for once in his wretched life.

Warm satisfaction glowed in his chest, lessening the chill from his damp clothing. He'd only experienced that sensation once before, when he'd assisted Oliver Somersby's escape.

Yet, witnessing gratitude in the eyes of a beautiful woman surpassed any satisfaction he'd received from the astonished look on Ashton's face when he'd discovered Nash had helped save a man's life.

Come to think of it, Ashton mimicked that exact expression when they'd barged into the clinic, making it doubly satisfying.

After the carriage pulled to a stop, he bounded toward his townhouse. A footman threw open the door, and Nash brushed past him, bellowing for his valet. "Evans!" Nash threw his hat and coat on a bench by the door.

Evans came running down the stairs, halting momentarily—one foot poised midair—when he caught sight of Nash. "Sir, what happened?"

"An unplanned dip in the Serpentine. Prepare a hot bath at once. And I mean hot, not warm." He pointed to the coat on the bench. "Then have my coat cleaned thoroughly."

Evans scurried off toward the kitchen.

Shivering, Nash trudged up the stairs, exhaustion slamming into him most unexpectedly. In his room, he stripped out of all his wet clothing, then wrapped himself in his banyan to keep warm while Evans prepared his bath.

Finally, steaming water filled the tub, and Nash slipped into the delicious warmth. “Leave me.” Thoughts of Adalyn filled his mind, and he needed time alone without the prying eyes of his valet.

For the second time that day, Nash immersed himself fully underwater. Unlike earlier, soothing warmth rather than bracing cold seeped into him, and he imagined Adalyn’s arms caressing his skin.

Slowly, the chill left his body, allowing him to think more clearly. A bond had formed between him and Adalyn that afternoon. He recognized it in her eyes, even if she refused to name it.

Shame.

Capricious as the winds, Adalyn had blown into his life and turned it upside down. He found he could not ignore fate any longer. The reappearance of the child—the girl—that had begun this journey for him confirmed it. Adalyn Lovelace was his destiny.

But the question remained.

How?

## CHAPTER 13—REUNITED WITH OLD FRIENDS



Thankfully, contrary to Priscilla's warning, Fingers did not attempt an escape from the clinic. She would have been hard pressed to do so, as Adalyn, Priscilla, and even the doctors took turns sitting with her throughout the remainder of the day.

Around five that afternoon, Drs. Somersby and Marbry convinced Harry to take Adalyn, her father, and the child home, assuring him they had things well in hand. Oliver promised to bring his family to call later that evening so the children could have a well-deserved reunion.

"I can't wait to see Pockets' reaction," he said. "Last year when I asked him about Fingers, he was extremely tight-lipped. I should have known something was afoot." A shadow passed across his handsome face. "I should have pressed him further."

"You couldn't have known, Oliver," Harry said. "Even when I wrote to Manny, he refused to provide any information. It's clear they were protecting her."

"Misguided protection, if you ask me," Timothy said. "She could have been cared for rather than roaming the streets and stealing to survive."

"True," Harry said. "But they're children and their logic isn't often sound."

When they boarded Harry's ducal carriage, Fingers' jaw dropped open at the plush interior. "Is this real velvet?" she asked, running her hands against the squabs.

Adalyn worried the girl's filthy clothes would soil the plush red cushions and a servant would have to clean them.

Sitting opposite the girl and Adalyn, her father chuckled. "Soft, isn't it?"

Fingers nodded, her blue eyes taking in the scene outside the window as they passed from the dingy East End into Mayfair. Adalyn understood her reaction. Had she not felt the same upon their arrival in London?

"You're familiar with the area, are you not?" Harry asked. "Considering your propensity for *frequenting* Hyde Park."

Fingers' attention didn't leave the window. "Mostly, I keep my head down and stick to the back ways, around the mews. No one notices me that way."

When the carriage pulled to a stop in front of Harry's stately home, Fingers planted her hands flat against the carriage window, staring in wonder. "Lawd." She whispered the word reverently, befitting the word itself. "You live *here*?"

"I do, and you, along with Dr. and Miss Lovelace, are my honored guests."

The footman opened the carriage door. Harry exited first, then turned and held out his hand to Fingers. "My ladies."

Fingers' head couldn't seem to move quickly enough, her mouth agape as she took in the opulent surroundings.

Adalyn descended from the carriage and leaned down to whisper, "Don't be intimidated. They put their trousers on one leg at a time, just like you and I."

Fingers snorted. "You ain't wearing trousers."

Adalyn bit back her laugh and the urge to explain what an expression was and instead enjoyed the girl's fascination with what, to her, was a whole different world.

Burrows opened the door. Other than an almost imperceptible jerk of his head, he displayed no other indication he found the ragamuffin child before him to be anything out of the ordinary. He gave a stately bow. "Your Grace, Dr. Lovelace, Miss Lovelace." The man's blue eyes

twinkled as his gaze dipped to the girl. “And you, young man.”

Fingers scrunched her face at the old gentleman.

Harry rested a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Burrows, this is Fingers. *She*,” Harry stressed the word, “will require a bath and some fresh clothes.”

Fingers’ head jerked up toward Harry. “You ain’t said nothin’ about no bath.” She turned, no doubt desperate to make an escape, but Harry grasped her arm.

“But first,” Harry continued, “where is Manny?”

“In the library with Her Grace, sir. I shall have a maid see to a bath and some clothing.”

The mention of Manny seemed to calm her, although she now sent looks toward Harry that promised retaliation.

“I ain’t takin’ no bath,” Fingers mumbled. “I had a good dunk in the lake.”

True, the water from the Serpentine had washed the worst of the caked-on filth off the girl, but Adalyn couldn’t help but worry about other lingering effects the lake water could have on the girl’s health.

The threat of a bath seemed to disappear from the girl’s thoughts as they climbed the ornate stairway to the second floor of Harry’s mansion. As Adalyn had, Fingers stared at the portraits hung on the walls, occasionally reaching out to scratch a few of the gold-leafed frames with a dirty, broken fingernail.

“Those are too large to slip under your coat, Fingers,” Harry said good-naturedly.

When they entered the library, Manny, his nose buried in a book, was bent so far over, Adalyn thought he might fall against the pages. Maggie sat serenely in a high wingback, working on a piece of embroidery. It was a picture of family bliss, and Adalyn’s heart squeezed, imagining her own son studiously poring over a textbook and Nash reading a newspaper.

Harry's announcing cough interrupted the idyllic image.

Maggie smiled as she gazed up, then her mouth fell open slightly at the sight of Fingers by Harry's side.

"Manny," Harry said, requesting his adopted son's attention.

"You tricked me. That ain't Manny," Fingers whispered, taking a step back.

Adalyn reached out and took her arm, holding her in place.

Manny lifted his head from his book, glancing toward his father for only a moment until his gaze landed on the bedraggled girl. He blinked rapidly, then shook his head. "Fingers?" he asked, his voice broke, switching from the deep tones of manhood to the high pitch of childhood.

He shot from his chair, and forgetting all the manners Maggie had no doubt tried to instill, raced over to Fingers and hugged her fiercely.

Tears welled in the girl's eyes. "Is it really you? You look so different."

"It's been five years," Harry said.

"You're taller. And fatter, and where'd you get them fancy duds?" She ran a finger down one of Manny's lapels.

Manny seemed speechless, his smile stretching from one side of his face to the other. "I eat regularly now. And my father provides everything for me."

"You ain't got no father."

"I do now. And a right good one, too." Manny's gaze slipped lovingly toward Harry. "How?"

"It seems Fingers found herself in possession of another reticule. Lady Honoria's, to be exact. Miss Lovelace brought her to the clinic after Fingers nearly drowned."

Adalyn couldn't help but notice Harry's omission of Nash in his accounting.

“You know she’s a girl?” Manny asked. He turned his attention back to Fingers. “You never learned to swim, like I told you? Oi, girl, what am I to do with you?”

Maggie had joined them, no doubt imagining a little princess under the rags and dirt. “The first thing we are to do is give you a bath and find you something more appropriate to wear.”

Fingers groaned. “Not you, too.”

Manny took Maggie’s hand. “This is my mother, Her Grace, the Duchess of Ashton. Trust her, Fingers.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any clothing for a girl her size,” Maggie said.

Adalyn could see the wheels spinning in Maggie’s head, likely planning a visit to the modiste.

Her father tapped a finger to his chin. “She’s fond of trousers. Do you have some clothes Manny has outgrown?”

“Excellent idea for the interim, Daniel. Oliver and Camilla plan to join us for dinner with Pockets and the other children. Perhaps they could provide something more feminine of Victoria’s.” Harry suggested.

“Such an intelligent man,” Maggie said. “I knew there was a reason I married you. I shall write to Camilla while Fingers is bathing.”

Fingers moaned again.

“It’s not so bad, really,” Manny said. “The soap smells nice.”

Fingers leaned forward and took an audible sniff. “You smell like a French ta—”

Manny slapped his hand over Fingers’ mouth. “Watch it. Do you trust me?”

When Fingers nodded, Manny removed his hand.

“Is Pockets really alive?” she asked.

Grinning, Manny put her at ease. “Alive and as annoyingly sweet as always. Thank goodness Dr. and Mrs. Somersby took him in. He would never have survived alone on the streets as long as you have.” He gave her a little push. “Now go get a bath. You stink.”

Some time later, after sounds of arguing and fussing drifted in the library, Fingers arrived freshly bathed and redressed in some of Manny’s outgrown clothes, a glower on her face.

Maids must have performed some type of magic on the girl, for her stringy, dingy hair shone, a short cap of blond curls framing her slender face. Free from the grime covering her, her freshly scrubbed skin appeared rosier and healthier. But her bright blue eyes narrowed with distrust, her little cupid’s bow of a mouth drawn into a thin slash.

“You said there’d be food,” she grumbled, pinning Harry with a challenging stare.

“And there shall be. As soon as the Somersbys arrive. But in the meantime . . .” He held out a plate of sweet biscuits.

Fingers snatched one off the plate and shoved it into her mouth whole, her sunken cheeks puffing up comically.

“Slowly,” Adalyn said. “We’ve resuscitated you once today. No need to choke yourself. No one will steal it from you.”

Fingers took another, but continued to eye the plate of remaining biscuits greedily.

Burrows entered, followed by Oliver, Camilla, and several children. The boy, younger than Manny and who Adalyn suspected was about twelve years of age, raced forward, throwing himself into Fingers arms.

When he stepped back, his eyes shimmered. “You’ve grown.”

Fingers blinked. “Pockets?” Her face split in a grin. “So have you. You’re taller than me now.”



Manny punched Pockets in the arm. “Act like a man, Pockets. No crying around girls.” His gaze slid over to the adorable girl with black curls and incredible blue eyes standing beside Oliver.

Pockets gave a snuffle and nodded, pulling Fingers by the hand. “Come meet my sisters.”

A younger girl peeked from behind Oliver’s legs. Warm brown eyes darted from Pockets to Fingers, then up to Oliver.

Oliver nudged the girl forward, who continued to cling to her father’s trouser leg. “It’s all right, Eva. Fingers is Pockets’ friend.”

“Fingers,” the older girl scoffed. “What kind of a silly name is that?”

“Tori, behave,” Oliver admonished.

Pockets, apparently used to his sister’s remarks, reassured Fingers. “Don’t pay Victoria, no ... I mean, any mind. She fancies herself a great lady.”

“Well, seeins she’s your sister, I’ll forgive her.” Fingers shot Victoria a warning. “This once.”

“And this,” Pockets said, drawing Fingers closer to the shy toddler hanging on her father’s leg, “is my sister Eva.”

Fingers crouched before the child. “Ello, little one.”

Eva’s face broke into a smile, and she launched herself at Fingers, hugging her tightly.

Camilla gasped. “She never is that open with strangers.”

Oliver nodded. “It’s true. I’m not sure where her shyness comes from. Certainly not from her mother.”

Camilla swatted her husband’s arm.

Burrows entered and announced dinner. “I’ve ordered additional places set at the children’s table, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Burrows.” Maggie smiled warmly at the old gentleman then redirected her attention to the rest of them. “Nanny should be here momen—Ah, here she is.”

Harry and Maggie's nanny entered, Edmund by her side and little Charles in her arms.

Harry placed a hand on Manny's shoulder. "Do you mind eating with the younger children this evening? You, Pockets, and Fingers can have a reunion without interference from adults."

Manny motioned for Fingers to follow him. "Come meet my brothers Edmund and Charles."

As the nanny led the children away, with Eva foregoing Victoria's offered hand to cling to Fingers, the adults filed from the library.

Her father tugged gently on her arm, holding her back from the group. "I haven't had an opportunity to speak with you in private since your ordeal." Concern shone in his eyes. "Lord Nash expressed worry over your emotional state. But he praised your valor for conquering whatever demons seemed to have held you in their grip in order to help the girl. He seems to genuinely care about you. I'm having some doubts as to Harry's assessment of the man."

"As I can never lie to you, I will admit I'm still shaken. I've told Lord Nash very little, and thankfully, he didn't press. And although I can't explain it, I feel safe with him. Whatever has come between him and Harry must be rooted so deeply that neither can see the good in the other."

She paused a step, then added. "And I intend to discover what it is."



TWO DAYS AFTER FINGERS' RESCUE, NASH WOKE EARLY IN THE morning covered in sweat. Bed linens twisted around him, binding his legs in tangled knots. His head pounded like the devil, and fire burned in his throat. He tried to push up from the mattress with his elbows, but the muscles in his arms shook, and he collapsed back onto the bed.

Evans breezed into the room and threw open the curtains.

Light streamed in, blinding Nash and, if possible, made his head pound even more. “Shut those damn things.” He barked the order, his words sounding raspy, the pitch even lower than his normal deep baritone.

He cracked one eye open and watched his valet.

Dutiful servant that he was, Evans rushed to his side, and laid a hand against Nash’s forehead. “You’re burning with fever, sir.”

Nash swatted the man’s hand away, although swat didn’t quite describe the weak maneuver. It was more like a half-hearted brush of annoyance.

As Nash continued to watch Evans lest he try to mother him again, his valet’s concern grew. “Shall I send for the physician?”

Always blessed with good health, Nash rarely needed a physician, which he counted as a doubly good thing. He detested those horrible, wriggly, vampiric creatures the doctor insisted on using.

He certainly didn’t want them attached to his body when he felt like bloody hell already. “Don’t send for Crawford. Pen a message to Dr. Lovelace. He’s staying with the Duke of Ashton and assisting at his clinic. If the footman doesn’t locate him at the duke’s home, have him to go to the clinic in the East End. My driver knows where it is.”

Adalyn’s father had treated him fairly the day before at the clinic. Hopefully, the man didn’t aspire to the use of leeches, but something about him inspired trust. He’d raised an intelligent, compassionate daughter, after all. That had to account for something.

Of course, Nash would have much preferred the gentle hands of Adalyn herself, but since he’d previously decided to make his intentions known, it would appear unseemly to request she tend to him alone in his bachelor townhouse. Besides, he didn’t want her to see him like this, weak and helpless like a newborn babe.

And he certainly had no desire to call upon Ashton. The man would probably bring several jars of the black blood-suckers just for the hell of it. Marbry was out as well.

Nash's conscience prodded him. He could have easily called upon Oliver, as they had formed a friendly relationship. But in all honesty, he had to admit he might have had the tiniest ulterior motive for choosing the father of the woman he desired.

Once Evans assured him Potter, the footman, had left with the message, he reluctantly allowed his man servant to bathe and shave him, then prop him in bed with fresh bed linens. He even had the man pull out an unused nightshirt and slip it over his naked body—in case Miss Lovelace would accompany her father.

It was one thing to have Evans fussing over him and quite another to have Adalyn's delicate hand caressing his fevered brow.

Lord, but he had gone soft.

## CHAPTER 14—ILL EFFECTS



“Hold still, Royce. The doctor is almost finished.” Adalyn gentled her voice. She held the boy’s head while he lay on the examination table.

Harry pulled the last suture through and tied it off, closing the gash in the child’s forehead.

Royce’s mother looked on, wringing her hands in front of her. “Will there be a scar?”

Harry nodded, his eyes filled with compassion. “Most likely, but it’s high enough on his forehead, if he wears his hair long, it will be covered.” He turned his attention to Royce. “Having a scar is not the end of the world.” He pointed to the thin, silver line trailing down his face from his eyebrow to his cheek. “And sometimes the ladies find it quite appealing. You can tell them it is a war wound.”

“Is that how’n you got yours?” the boy asked.

Slipping the needle into a jar of chlorinated lime, Harry smiled. “In a manner of speaking.” He assisted the boy from the table and gave instructions to Royce’s mother regarding care of the wound before they left.

Curious, once alone, Adalyn asked. “How *did* you get that scar. I’ve never asked. Was it truly a war injury?”

“A war involving my brother. George delivered a blow to my head with a rock.”

Adalyn couldn’t imagine such animosity between brothers. She had adored her own. “How ghastly.”

Harry shrugged it off. “It actually worked to my benefit. It was one way people could quickly tell us apart. Before that time, especially when we were younger, George wore a blue ribbon to identify him as the eldest and heir.”

“From the little I’ve learned, other than appearance, you seem so different from your brother, being in your presence alone would identify you.”

“True, although when we were younger, George became most adept at impersonating me.”

Adalyn wiped down the examination table with a cloth dipped in the chlorinated lime solution. “Don’t tell me you switched places?”

“Occasionally when we were at Eton. Typically when George wanted to avoid a particular lecture. He detested his science classes.”

Adalyn laughed, knowing full well where this was leading. “Which you of course loved.”

Harry’s answering grin would have been enough. “Indeed. I found out quickly that the days George wished to trade places generally occurred when an exam was scheduled. He received high marks in that class.”

She couldn’t restrain her laugh. “And you, which class did he attend on your behalf?”

“Literature mainly. Although he failed to reciprocate during exam days. I ended the practice when I found out *I* had barely passed one exam.”

“Was he not well-versed in literature?”

“He received firsts in his own class, supporting my suspicions that he did poorly on purpose during my exams.”

“Forgive me, but from what I’ve heard about him, he did not appear to be a very agreeable man.”

Harry leaned back against the now-clean table. “I hate to speak ill of the dead, but my brother was a monster.”

Adalyn shook her head. “And Maggie was married to him.”

“To this day, she still suffers from his abuse. When she wakes from a nightmare and stares at me with terror-filled eyes, it breaks my heart.”

Instinctively, she reached out and touched his sleeve. “Oh, Harry.”

He gave her a wan smile. “You should know. Lord Nash was his best friend.”

She reeled back on her heels, the information a verbal slap.

Harry said nothing further, allowing her to mull it over and ponder the implications.

She struggled to reconcile the considerate, kind man who had come to her rescue as well as a child’s with one who would befriend such a ruthless and heartless tyrant.

Harry pulled her from her confusing thoughts. “Come, let us tend to another patient.”

Out in the waiting area, they found her father speaking with a liveried servant—a most unlikely sight indeed. Wouldn’t an employer arrange for the care of his servant?

“Daniel? Is something amiss?” Harry asked, his eyes showing the same curiosity and surprise.

Her father held up a note. “Lord Nash has urgently requested my attention.”

Unbidden, Adalyn’s hand went to her throat. “You examined him two days ago, Father. Was he not well then?”

“He was. Shaken, but otherwise no worse for wear. I cautioned him that there might be some ill effects from the lake water.”

Harry scoffed. “It’s a ruse, then. A ploy to no doubt lure Adalyn to his home.” And although he kept his voice low, the vitriol in Harry’s voice shocked her.

“Beg your pardon, good sirs.” The servant’s eyes darted to each of them. “My master is indeed quite ill. Evans, his valet,

said Lord Nash is weak with fever, and he requested the good doctor, not the young lady.”

“Then let him send for his own physician. We have work to do here,” Harry said.

It seemed a day when Adalyn’s preconceptions of people were to be challenged. Even people in the waiting area stared in disbelief at the insensitive man they had come to trust as kind and caring. She touched Harry gently on the sleeve and whispered, “Harry. This is not like you to turn anyone in need of medical care away, regardless of their reputation.”

Emboldened apparently by Adalyn’s attempted intervention, the servant added, “Evans said Lord Nash was most impressed with Dr. Lovelace and expects he doesn’t use leeches.” The man shuddered as if to drive home his own dislike of the creatures.

A weak smile crossed Harry’s lips.

*Curious.*

“This is not a humorous matter, Harry,” her father said, the stern admonishment she had experienced as a child clear in his voice.

“Forgive me. But Nash has always had an aversion to leeches, ever since we were boys when he fell into a pond near Eton and rose covered in them.” The memory seemed to soften Harry back to the man she knew. “Very well. I have no authority to keep you here, Daniel. Fetch some willow bark from our supplies to give him.”

As her father turned, she announced, “I’m going with you.”

She didn’t even halt her steps at Harry’s cautionary response. “Adalyn.”

Nash needed them.

Returning from the examination room with ample packets of willow bark, they followed the servant out to Nash’s carriage.



Once seated, her father studied her in silence. With the Somersbys and the reunion of the children occupying their attention, they had yet to discuss the events which transpired at the lake. She braced herself for her father's questioning.

"Adalyn," he said, his voice soft as a feather.

She waited.

"Do you wish to speak of what happened with Fingers?"

Knowing well what he would reply, she asked anyway, "If I say 'no' will you leave it be?"

"No. Not entirely. I've tried to give you time, but Lord Nash was most concerned. He mentioned you literally froze before him, unable to move even though the child needed your assistance."

She fought back the tears announcing their presence. "All I could see was Benjamin. Lying there before me, so cold and still."

He reached across the seat and took her hands in his. "And yet you did rally and save her."

"Because Lord Nash broke through my haze of terror." She fell against the squabs. "And now he's ill, paying the price for his heroism."

"He seems strong and healthy. Let us expect the best of outcomes, not the worst." His eyes still probed her face, a father's understanding of their child's innermost thoughts. "You are quite fond of him. Your defense of him to Harry seemed more than concern for a needy patient. At least to me."

Burdened with her thoughts, a heaviness from something much denser than wool filled her head, the nod she managed more from the weight than from agreement to her father's statement. "I don't understand why Harry hates him."

"From what I witnessed, I would say the feeling was mutual."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Only the jerking of the carriage as it came to a halt roused them from their thoughts.

Admitting them, a servant led them up a flight of stairs to a bedchamber. The man knocked once and received a raspy reply of, “Enter.”

Opening the door, the servant stood aside and announced them. “My lord, Dr. and Miss Lovelace.”

Propped up on an abundance of pillows, even ill Lord Nash Talbot commanded the room. Although half-moon shadows darkened the skin under his eyes, he appeared otherwise well-groomed. The linen nightshirt hung loose and open at his neck, revealing a spattering of dark hair that Adalyn yearned to run her hands across to test if it was coarse or soft.

Tendrils of heat crept up her neck to her face when her gaze locked with Nash’s, no doubt catching her staring at his exposed skin.

“Miss Lovelace.” He’d barely uttered the words when fitful coughing overcame him.

Regardless of Harry’s opinion of the man before her, Lord Nash truly was ill. The question was—how seriously?



BOTH DELIGHTED AND MORTIFIED TO SEE ADALYN STEP INTO his bedchamber, Nash drank in the angelic vision. Another coughing fit interrupted his thoughts. His throat burned as if he’d swallowed shards of glass. Trying his best to recover, he waved the doctor and Miss Lovelace inside.

“Doctor,” he managed to get out, thankfully without coughing.

Dr. Lovelace moved quickly to his side, setting his medical bag on the bed. “Don’t try to speak, sir. Preserve your strength.”

At the implication of weakness, Nash straightened as best he could while lying in bed. Although the loveliness of Adalyn’s face gazing with such concern at him was the best

tonic he could ask for, he still hated having her witness him in such a state. Thank god he'd bathed and was clean-shaven.

While Dr. Lovelace held Nash's wrist and stared at his pocket watch, Nash continued to stare at Adalyn. Other than the brief flash of pink coloring her cheeks, she didn't seem the least embarrassed witnessing a man in such dishabille. He wondered just how much of a man's body she *had* seen.

"Your pulse is strong and steady, if perhaps a little rapid. But that's to be expected during illness." Dr. Lovelace's words snapped Nash out of his musings. "When I examined you yesterday, you stated you did not swallow any of the lake water."

Nash nodded, afraid that if he tried to give a verbal response another coughing fit would ensue.

"What about water remaining on his lips. If he licked it off?" Adalyn asked, her gaze sliding to Nash's mouth.

He took satisfaction that her cheeks pinked once again and that he wasn't the only one to think of their shared kiss.

Her father shook his head. "It's unlikely such a small amount could have ill effects. But I suppose it's possible." He turned his attention back to Nash. "Any diarrhea or vomiting?"

Nash's gaze darted toward Adalyn before answering. "Is it necessary for Miss Lovelace to witness such a personal interrogation?"

Adalyn remained stalwart, her shoulders straightening slightly. "It's how I learn, sir. I assure you, I've heard things of a much more personal nature than simple bodily functions."

"Very well," Nash said, admiring Adalyn's composure. "Thankfully, no. But my throat is bloody sore."

"Then it's most likely not from the lake. And swallowing contaminated water shouldn't cause coughing and a sore throat."

The man pulled a strange tubular instrument out of his bag and pressed one end to Nash's chest. "Hmm. Can you sit up a bit more, sir?"

Nash pushed himself from the pillows with shaky arms.

“Adalyn, please assist Lord Nash. I wish to listen to his lungs from the back.”

In a swish of skirts, Adalyn rushed to Nash’s side, her gentle hands grasping his arm and holding him forward. His already warm body heated further from her touch.

*If I didn’t feel so bloody terrible . . .*

“What is that thing?” Nash asked as the doctor pressed it against his back.

“It’s called a stethoscope. Adalyn, listen to this.”

The doctor and Adalyn switched, with Dr. Lovelace holding Nash forward. When she handed the stethoscope back to her father, they exchanged a curious glance.

“Open your mouth for me, sir, and stick out your tongue.”

Once again, Nash’s gaze snapped toward Adalyn, expecting her to be grinning at the ridiculous things the doctor asked him to do. Yet, her expression remained serious, but surprisingly less concerned than she had appeared when she first arrived. With reluctance, he complied with the doctor’s command.

“Hmm.” Dr. Lovelace peered into Nash’s mouth, the uninformative muttering driving him mad. When Dr. Lovelace turned away, he tossed the stethoscope back into his bag and snapped it shut. “I’m afraid there is no real cure for what ails you, sir.”

A chill having nothing to do with illness tripped up Nash’s spine. “How long do I have?”

The man’s mouth quirked slightly at the corner. “I would say a week to ten days.”

“You don’t have to be so bloody cheerful about my impending demise,” Nash barked. “Although I expect no less from a friend of Ashton’s. No doubt he will throw a celebratory dinner.”

His heart broke when Adalyn laughed.

“You’re not dying, Nash,” she said. “You have a cold.”

“A cold?” Lord, it had been years since he’d had a cold. Had he always felt this bloody awful?

Adalyn’s father pulled several packets from his medical bag along with a piece of paper. “Prepare this in some tea. Here are the instructions. It will help with the fever—which I am happy to report, is mild not raging as your servant reported—along with any muscle aches.”

Nash stared at the writing on the paper, deciphering it the best he could. “Miss Lovelace, would you mind giving a tug to the bell pull by the door?”

After doing as he requested, she returned to his side. “You should feel better within a few days. Expect some sneezing and nasal drainage if you haven’t experienced it already. Try to avoid close contact with others.”

Something about the last words had his mind returning to the kiss they shared, but before he could explore the thought, Evans arrived.

“Sir.”

Nash held out the packets of medicine and paper. “Prepare this as instructed.”

After Evans left, Nash turned to Adalyn’s father. “Doctor, could I have a moment alone with your daughter?”

Before Nash’s eyes, the compassionate doctor transformed into a protective father, hesitating for a moment, before nodding. “I shall be right outside the door, Adalyn.” And like any good father, he left the door slightly ajar as he stepped outside.

It took Nash no effort to keep his voice lower, his throat protesting at the mere whisper of air needed to force out the words. “Adalyn.”

She stepped closer, her eyes fixed on him.

An odd shifting rose in his chest at the softness of her eyes, and he worried that perhaps the good doctor’s diagnosis had been a bit too hasty. He rubbed at his sternum.

Adalyn reached down and took his hand. “What is it? You seem worried.”

“I am,” he admitted. “About you. You mentioned avoiding close contact. Have you forgotten about”—he darted a glance to the opened door—“our kiss? What if you become ill?”

“Then I shall develop a cold.”

“But won’t your father question how you contracted this bloody disease?”

Her lovely blue eyes widened, and she released the gentle hold of his hand. “Are you concerned you will be accused of compromising me? You English are ridiculously preoccupied with these things. But have no fear, Lord Nash. I have no intention of dragging you to the altar because of a kiss. The fact remains that if I should contract this—as you say—*bloody disease*, I can quite easily attribute it to being in the same room with you. With my father as witness.”

With the warmth gone from her eyes, she said, “Now, you should try to rest, and drink the tea, even if it tastes horrid.” Then she marched from the room.

Nash fell back against the pillows and ran a hand down his face. How the bloody hell did he manage to muck things up so badly.

## CHAPTER 15—WHEN WORDS MISLEAD



The gall of the man! As if she looked for any opportunity to trap him into marriage. Yet, Nash's confused expression poked a hot iron at her conscience, searing it into her mind. Stepping out of the bedchamber into the hall, Adalyn breezed past her father.

His brows dipped into a pronounced V. "Adalyn, if Lord Nash attempted anything untoward, anything to hurt you—"

Adalyn spun on her heel. "No, he did not." Nothing other than slice her heart, his distrust as sharp as a blade.

She tamped down the anger bubbling inside. If she failed to control it, it would manifest in tears. And she hated to cry. It was difficult enough to be taken seriously as a woman practicing medicine, but if she couldn't control her own emotions . . . well, it undermined people's perception of her ability to maintain a cool head in a crisis.

Not that she controlled her emotions admirably when she panicked at Fingers' drowning. On that she had failed miserably, and she railed against the justified accusation, mentally arguing it was completely different.

Safely ensconced in Nash's carriage taking them back to the clinic, she gave in to her fury. "Why must men be so concerned about women trying to trap them into marriage?"

Her father's head jerked back as if she'd slapped him, his eyes blinking rapidly. "Adalyn, I fail to see—"

As if she hadn't even heard him, she continued, the rage seeking an escape like a volcanic eruption. "The nerve of him!

As if I don't have higher aspirations than to be someone's wife. Especially in England, so far from my home! He's not *that* irresistible." Exhausted from her tirade, she gave a final huff and fell back against the soft squabs, tears falling freely. "Men."

Shocked from her display, her father's mouth hung agape. "Adalyn, what has come over you? I scarcely left you alone two minutes with Lord Nash."

Blinking back the tears, she glared. "Were you timing me?"

He had the nerve to look sheepish! "Well, I simply had my pocket watch out, checking how long we'd been away from the clinic."

She swiped at the tears dripping down her cheeks, fighting back the urge to laugh at her father's chagrined expression. She'd witnessed schoolboys caught stealing glances at risqué drawings who appeared less guilty. "You were. Admit it." Inadvertently, he'd diffused the anger surging through her, replacing it with love for his unnecessary but well-meaning concern.

"Forgive me, daughter. I hardly expected the man to leap from his sickbed, but although I question Harry's judgment, there must be something about Lord Nash that causes him to distrust the man." He leaned forward, taking her hand. "Obviously, he said something to upset you. Talk to your old father. What's this about entrapment? Did he accuse you? If so, I will demand the driver turn this carriage around so I may have words with him myself—ill or not."

*Drat!*

Much calmer, she tried her best to explain. "He didn't directly accuse me of anything. He expressed concern over my health. To be precise, that I may contract a cold from him."

"Concern over another's health is hardly grounds to construe accusations of entrapment." If anything, from the look on his face, her father's confusion intensified rather than abated.



She waited while he puzzled it out, the precise moment as clear as day.

“Adalyn, in the rush of events and my concern for your own well-being, I failed to ask how Lord Nash became a party in the rescue. Did happenstance play a role in Lord Nash’s proximity during the theft of Lady Honoria’s reticule, or was the meeting orchestrated?”

She couldn’t lie to him even if she wanted to. He’d recognize the mannerisms she always failed to hide when prevaricating—the biting of her lip, the twisting of her hands in her lap, the involuntary motion of her eyes shifting to the left as she tried to think of a believable account. It wasn’t simply that she *wouldn’t*, but that in attempting to lie, he would see right through it.

Determined to be truthful, she met his gaze directly, her lip free from attack, her hands resting comfortably in her lap. “I confess it was a planned rendezvous. I had no desire to keep it from you, but Harry’s opinion of Lord Nash such that it is . . .”

“Oh, Adalyn.” His sigh, heavy and deep, tugged at her heart. He pinched the bridge of his nose, lifting his glasses away from his eyes. When had he grown so old? And why hadn’t she noticed the fatigue that seemed to plague him as of late?

After moving from her seat across the carriage to sit by him, Adalyn threaded her hand through his arm. “I’m sorry, Father. Forgive me?”

His smile was wan as he patted her hand. “Of course.” Another beat passed. “So his concern for your health rests on more than being in his sickroom? How close in contact had you been with him?” Tension stretched the words as tight as a suture.

“If you’re asking if he has cause to worry about an accusation of compromise, I suppose it depends.”

Although cloaked in his coat, the muscle in her father’s arm tightened. She hastened to reassure him as much as she

could. “We shared a kiss. But it would appear that English gentlemen have been dragged to the altar for less.”

That taut muscle in his arm relaxed, as did the tightness in her chest at having to confess that Lord Nash had taken such liberties—albeit liberties she had been eager to allow. “He expressed concern you would find out.”

“And did he expressly state that such a discovery would lead to him being dragged before the parson?”

Why must men be so literal? “Well, no. Not in so many words.” In fact, once she had reined in her anger, she realized he had done nothing of the sort. And perhaps—*only perhaps*—his inquiry had been solely out of concern for her reputation.

Silence flowed between them—not the disquieting sort when one doesn’t know what to say, but the comforting kind shared between two people who understand and accept each other, faults and all.

And as it typically did, the silent acceptance made her examine her own motives for leaping to conclusions. Harsh reality stared back at her, pointing a bony finger. She had let her guard down. Let Nash get too close. Too close to her secret shame. Hadn’t his perceptive questions and gaze after Fingers’ near drowning indicated as much?

Had she truly latched on to an opportunity to push Nash away? To keep him at arm’s length out of self-preservation?

With three words, she broke the silence. “I should apologize.”

“If you believe that best. However, I would be remiss in my fatherly duties to ignore the fact that he attempted liberties with you. It may have been just a kiss, but often a kiss is only a prelude.” He met her gaze with serious eyes. “As you well know. I would urge you to proceed with caution when dealing with Lord Nash.”

Although Adalyn voiced her agreement, in her heart she admitted she had already disregarded caution when it came to the enigmatic dark-haired lord.



“TAKE THIS ABOMINATION AWAY.” NASH HELD OUT THE teacup holding the nasty brew, the porcelain cup rattling against the saucer. Bitterness coated his tongue, making him gag.

Evans shook his head. “My mum always said ‘If it tastes bad, it must be working.’”

Nash narrowed one eye at his valet, a signal of his displeasure in both the tea and his servant’s impertinence. “Well, your *mum* isn’t in charge here, is she?” The cup rattled again as Nash pushed it forward.

“The instructions did mention I could sweeten it with honey.” Evans admitted, looking rather sheepish. “However, because Mum said—”

“Are you deaf, man? I don’t give a damn about what your mum said,” Nash roared at his servant. He’d forced down four cups of the disgusting concoction the previous day, and admittedly, both his fever and the soreness in his throat had abated.

Evans’ lips twitched slightly. The audacity of the man! “It seems to be working, my lord. At least enough to allow you to return to your usual jovial self.”

Not to be outdone by a servant, Nash continued to hold the cup out. “Honey. An abundance of it.”

Finally taking the wretched brew, Evans bowed and scuttled out of Nash’s bedchamber.

Grateful for a moment’s peace and reprieve from the so-called medicine, Nash stretched his arms above his head. He’d spent the entire day in bed following Adalyn’s call, managing to get some sleep after the first cup of witch’s brew Evans had forced upon him.

But such inactivity grew tiresome. Lying in bed and staring at the four walls and ceiling didn’t make him feel better, only

worse. With little to occupy his mind, it naturally drifted toward Adalyn and her abrupt change in demeanor.

What the bloody hell had he said to upset her?

“Women,” he muttered to himself.

He’d merely expressed concern over her own well-being, fearful that she, too, would fall victim to the wretched illness.

Voices rang from downstairs, and his empty stomach clenched painfully at the haughty tones of his brother.

“I don’t care if he is indisposed. If you won’t announce me, I shall go up myself.”

Roland’s cane announced his approach, growing louder as he climbed each stair.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*THUMP.*

With each subsequent clash of cane on floorboard, Nash’s head pounded in time with it.

First the tea and now a call from Roland. The foul tasting brew was the lesser of two evils.

Not caring about his appearance, Nash didn’t bother to rake a hand through his hair or pull the counterpane higher up his bare chest, although he knew it would vex Roland to witness him so unkempt.

The thought was a bright spot in the otherwise unexpected and unpleasant call.

Roland barged into Nash’s bedchamber as if he owned it.

To be fair, a substantial portion of the stipend Nash received from his titled brother paid for the townhouse he kept in Camden Town, but with a little more luck and another month, that would change.

“What’s this about being ill?”

Nash splayed out his hands, gesturing to the rumpled bed linens and well-used handkerchief lying on top. “It’s just as you see, brother.” Out of reflex and habit, Nash straightened, the counterpane dropping even farther down his naked body.

“Good lord, man, put on a nightshirt while you speak to me. You’re a disgrace.” Once again taking charge, Roland gave the bell pull a sound tug and, when Evans came running, ordered the valet to dress his employer.

Out of spite, Nash slid his body from the bed, then—yanking the nightshirt from Evans’ hands—slipped it on, dismissed Evans, and climbed back into bed. “Satisfied?”

Unsure if Roland’s grunted response was a yes or a no, Nash continued. “Why are you here, Roland? Surely not out of concern for my health.”

Roland slapped his cane on top of the covers, barely missing Nash’s hand. “Why have you been ignoring my correspondence?” He waved the tip of the cane in front of Nash’s nose. “And don’t use that pitiful excuse of yours. I know, imbecile that you are, your manservant reads your correspondence to you. Father should have taken you to the Thames and drowned you as a babe.”

Although Roland’s disgust left Nash unfazed, the mention of drowning had his mind shifting to Adalyn and the child. And rather than provide a sense of pride that he had assisted in the urchin’s rescue, the image of Adalyn storming from his room, disappointment wreathing her face, offended by god only knew what that he’d said, taunted him. Perhaps Roland was right. It might have been best for all involved had he perished as a babe rather than face constant reminders of his failures.

Yet, he refused to give Roland the satisfaction of thinking his barbed remarks had inflicted injury. Nash had long grown past allowing Roland to harm him. “I’ve been rather preoccupied.”

“Which is my other reason for calling. I’ve heard the most unbelievable rumors.”

Nash tugged at the itchy collar of the nightshirt. How in the devil did people actually sleep in the things? “Gossip bores me. Don’t you have your toady Middlebury to listen to your rants on society’s latest foibles?”

“This particular rumor concerns *you*.”

Nash steeled himself. Granted, it could be any number of things—frequenting Gentleman Jackson’s, the dissolution of his association with Lady Worthington, a gaming loss at White’s. His name appeared in the scandal sheets regularly, and for the most part, such notoriety served his purposes well.

However, that purpose did not include bringing Roland to his door, and Nash had a suspicion it involved either Lady Honoria or Miss Lovelace. Still, he feigned disinterest and yawned. “Do get on with it, brother. I’m trying to follow doctor’s orders and rest.”

With his eyes focused on Roland’s cane, Nash had failed to notice the piece of paper clutched in his brother’s other hand—paper which Roland now tossed at him. “Since you can’t read to save your sorry hide, let me summarize. Apparently, there was a commotion in Hyde Park the other day in which a street urchin fell into the Serpentine.” Roland frosted him with an icy glare. “And rather than let the rat drown as he should have, *you* jumped in and pulled the wretched creature out.”

Nash lifted an eyebrow, a mannerism he knew Roland detested. “I fail to see how my act of heroics should upset you.”

Roland drew closer, practically nose to nose with him, and with all his might, Nash willed a sneeze to form. Sadly, it did not.

*Blasted tea.*

“Talbots do *not* stoop to aid those beneath us. The city is crawling with those insects, begging for food, spreading their filth and disease. They’re a plague upon society. You should have allowed nature to take its course.”

Nash’s patience snapped. “It was a child, Roland!”

“All the more reason to end its life before it grows and breeds more.” He withdrew and paced before Nash’s bed. “But that’s not all *The Muckraker* said. It appears you were with that American woman staying with the almighty Duke of Ashton. I thought you hated him.”

For once, something he could answer truthfully. “I do hate him.” However, speaking truths to Roland had its limits. “I came across Miss Lovelace by chance. Lady Honoria accompanied her, and per your demands, I seized the opportunity to—”

“Enough!” The cane slammed down on the bed again.

Lord, how he hated that damnable stick.

“From the account in *The Muckraker*, speculation has arisen that you have formed an attachment to this Miss Lovelace.” Roland spoke Adalyn’s name as if the mere formation of it on his tongue caused him pain. “I suspect Lady Honoria is yet another victim of your machinations. I have taken great pains to secure a match between the two of you, and to spite me, you rush headlong into an affair with a foreigner—humiliating a fine, well-bred Englishwoman.”

Despite Roland’s disparaging name-calling, Nash was not stupid. He could read, but sometimes the middle of longer words got jumbled up, or he would reverse letters. It didn’t make him an imbecile. In fact, Nash was quite adept at quick thinking when necessary.

Which it was at that moment. He needed to provide a reason that would allow him to continue seeing Adalyn, but appease Roland, yet protect Honoria and the part she played in their agreement. Distasteful as it was, Roland’s very mention of Ashton sparked an idea in Nash’s mind.

“Relax, brother. As I tried to explain before you interrupted me, it’s all part of a plan to inflict injury upon Ashton.”

Eyes narrowed, Roland studied him. “I don’t see how pursuing a woman results in injury to the duke.”

“Then perhaps I’m not the one who’s an imbecile.” Nash relished delivering the slur, especially from the ire creeping across Roland’s face.

“See here, *boy*. As your elder, you owe me respect.”

“Four years might have made a difference when we were boys, but now that we’re men, it matters little.”

“Be that as it may, lest you forget, I still hold the purse strings.”

How could he forget? Each day that ticked by when he was no closer to his goal reminded him. Years of self-preservation had allowed him to rein in his anger and feign indifference, and at that moment, he counted it a blessing. He shrugged. “Do you wish me to continue to enlighten you or not?”

Roland waved a hand in a get-on-with-it motion.

“Ashton is fond of Miss Lovelace and her father. It’s my understanding he loves her like a sister. So I ask you, brother, how would *you* feel if someone used our own sister Charlotte ill?”

“I would kill him with my bare hands.”

Although Nash wouldn’t have any compunction in calling someone out if they ruined Charlotte, he suspected Roland’s declaration was false bravado. Worried about soiling his hands, Roland would likely employ a hired thug to do his dirty work. Nevertheless, Nash had adequately planted the seeds in his brother’s mind.

“So you plan to ruin the American, then refuse to marry her?”

“You’re missing the point, brother. Ashton would rather cut off his arm than have me marry her. And he won’t challenge me. His precious medical oath won’t allow him to endanger a life willingly—even though, in reality, he would be the loser.”

“And Lady Honoria? How do you plan to shield her from this scandal?”



“Lady Honoria is perhaps the most guileless person I have ever met. She won’t suspect a thing. She’s befriended Miss Lovelace and merely views my interest as common courtesy to her friend. What happens behind closed doors would be only speculation. And as I mentioned, Ashton will do his best to keep the matter hushed up to protect Miss Lovelace. No doubt, he’ll ship her and her father back to America as soon as possible. Lady Honoria need never know.”

“Since they are friends, what if the American confides in Lady Honoria regarding her feelings toward you?”

Nash hated that Roland refused to call Adalyn by name. Still, he exhaled an exaggerated sigh. “Brother, brother, brother. Have you forgotten how these women are when vying for a husband? They are more cut-throat than the most nefarious pirate. Those dainty hands have sharp claws. Miss Lovelace won’t say a word.”

Roland twirled the cane, a sure sign he was thinking.

Nash held his breath, waiting for Roland to take the bait. *That’s it, brother.*

After an interminable silence, Roland gave one curt nod. “Very well. But if this plan of yours goes awry, and Lady Honoria breaks off the attachment, I will cut you off without a farthing.”

Not waiting for a response, Roland turned on his well-heeled shoes and marched out the door.

Nash fell against the pillows, and although he already felt like the devil, the acid churning in his stomach from his lies made everything worse. He had taken an enormous risk to appease Roland. His one consolation was that, like himself, there was no love lost between Ashton and his brother, and the two had little contact outside of the House of Lords.

Even then, Nash could imagine Roland watching Ashton with an evil satisfaction, knowing what he thought was about to transpire.

As far as Roland’s threat, if Nash could hold out a little longer, it would matter little. He would cut ties with his

brother once and for all.

He just hoped it wouldn't be at too great a cost.

Before he could ponder it further, Evans appeared with another cup of that blasted tea. "I've added honey, my lord."

Honey. Exactly what Nash needed to sweeten the harsh words he'd delivered to Roland to make them more palatable.

Unfortunately, he held out little hope anything would ease the guilt squirming in his gut like a nest of vipers regarding what he said about Adalyn.

Thank god she would never have to find out.

## CHAPTER 16—APOLOGIES



“Please, slow down or you shall choke.” Adalyn placed a hand on Fingers’ arm as the girl clutched her fork like a weapon of war. Adalyn supposed perhaps to Fingers, it was. Starvation being the enemy to be defeated.

Fingers, or Mena, as Adalyn reminded herself, stared back, her cheeks puffed up with chunks of goose and potatoes she had shoved into her mouth.

Manny confirmed the girl had mumbled something like Filmena when he’d found her wandering near the docks, frightened and alone, so many years ago.

“Most likely Philomena,” her father had suggested.

Manny, being not much older, not only nicknamed her Fingers in order to prevent Coodibilis from discovering her sex, but also because he had struggled to pronounce her true name. Maggie suggested shortening it to Mena, which seemed to please the girl.

Manny reassured Mena that Cood, sent to Australia, could no longer harm them. For the past five days, Mena had grown more comfortable in her new surroundings, and less fearful they would punish her for the crimes she had committed in order to survive.

That evening, Maggie also suggested allowing Mena to join the adults and Manny in the dining room for dinner.

With remnants of food coating Mena’s lips and face, Adalyn questioned the wisdom of it, but one did not argue with a duchess.

“Mena,” Maggie said with patience that Adalyn envied. “No one will take the food from you. You may take all the time you need and eat all that you wish. And you will enjoy it all the more if you savor each bite.” To prove her point, Maggie placed a dainty piece of carrot on her fork, slipping it past her lips with an elegance Adalyn presumed took years to master. Then, to everyone’s amusement, she closed her eyes and uttered a moan of delight.

Adalyn darted a glance toward Harry, who gave a little cough. A smile ghosted his lips as he shifted his gaze toward Maggie, his cheeks darkening in what Adalyn suspected was a blush.

“Just don’t serve Mother Brussels sprouts.” Manny speared a piece of roast goose, apparently oblivious to the inner secrets his adoptive parents shared. “She hates them.”

Mena’s lips pursed in a pout. “I ain’t never goin’ to be a lady.”

“Aren’t going to be,” Manny corrected, his own diction impeccable. “But look at me. You won’t know if you don’t try.”

Adalyn wondered how long it had taken him to transform into the young gentleman he had become.

Maggie had already procured new clothes for the girl, resulting in loud protests about the discomfort of stays and voluminous skirts the first time they had dressed her appropriately. “How can anyone walk in these? And I can scarce breathe.”

Yet, when Manny’s eyes widened at the sight of Mena’s transformation, Adalyn knew the girl recognized the power women had over men, and she no longer grumbled quite as loudly about her new wardrobe. Even Victoria, Oliver’s daughter, complimented her on her new attire.

As they finished their dinner, with Mena scraping her plate, Harry suggested they all retire to the library where the men would enjoy a brandy and the women a glass of sherry.

Adalyn loved the relaxed evenings at Harry's home in Mayfair, especially after the days spent at the clinic. The disparity of the two worlds never ceased to amaze her—especially how easily Harry slipped from one role of dedicated doctor to aristocratic duke.

Maggie studied her over her glass of sherry, her eyes shining brightly. “Have you heard from Mr. Pratt, Adalyn?”

Victor Pratt, although charming, had not been the man foremost in Adalyn's thoughts, although she had indeed received correspondence from him. “He wrote the other day offering to escort me to Vauxhall Gardens, accompanied by his sister and Dr. Marbry, of course. He even suggested Father come along, stating he would like to get to know him better.”

Maggie straightened in her seat. “Oh, that sounds promising.” She turned toward Harry. “What if we make a day of it? We can even include the children if we go during the afternoon.”

Mena raised her head, which had been bent over one of Edmund's books, with Manny pointing a finger under the words and sounding them out for her. “I always wanted to go to Vauxhall. Good pickins' there, I reckon.”

Manny elbowed her, and she uttered a short *oof*, then glared at him. “What'd you do that for?”

“No more nickin' stuff, or you don't go,” Manny said.

With her bottom lip protruding out comically, Mena slumped in her seat, her arms crossed defiantly over her chest, and frosted Manny with a glare. “I don't think I like this new you.”

Adalyn suppressed a snicker over the two friends.

Apparently recovered from Manny's admonition, Mena straightened in her chair. “Is Mr. Pratt your beau? The bloke who fished me out of the lake?”

All heads collectively turned toward Adalyn at Mena's description of Nash, each pair of eyes holding questions.

Heat crept up Adalyn's neck to her face, the room not only growing warmer, but closing in around her. She struggled to diffuse the situation, purposely avoiding addressing the first of Mena's questions. "No. Lord Nash is the man who rescued you."

"Mena," Harry said, his tone the same one he used when coaxing information from patients—calm and reassuring. "What made you think the man was Miss Lovelace's suitor?"

The girl waved a hand as if Harry were daft. "They was all lovey-dovey like. I watched 'em from behind a tree, waiting for my chance to grab the one lady's bag. Looked to me like he was goin' to kiss her."

*Oh, dear.*

If Adalyn thought the room was closing in around her before, it was nothing compared to what she experienced at that moment. Harry and Maggie exchanged a concerned glance.

Her saving grace appeared to be the children in the room. Although Manny seemed to deduce the impact of Mena's declaration, Mena prattled on, directing the conversation back to where it had been before the mention of Lord Nash Talbot. "So, who is Mr. Pratt then?"

No one answered. The room had gone deathly quiet. Long moments passed, marked by the clock on the mantle—its *tick, tick, tick* reverberating in Adalyn's very bones.

"Wha'?" Mena asked, nonplussed. She darted glances around the room. "What'd I say?"

Before anyone could answer, Burrows entered the room, stopping before Harry. He held out the silver salver with a card sitting on top. "A caller, Your Grace. Here for Miss Lovelace."

Harry's eyes still focused on Adalyn, he lifted the card from the tray, giving it a quick glance. "Speak of the devil. It would appear Lord Nash has come to call."



NASH DID HIS BEST NOT TO PACE AS HE WAITED IN THE entryway of Ashton's home. The old butler had given him the side-eye. Nash remembered him from when George still lived. But the old man knew his place and, after Nash put forth his most charming smile, promised to see if Miss Lovelace was accepting callers this late in the evening.

It certainly wasn't the appropriate time for making calls. But when had Nash ever done anything particularly appropriate? No doubt his choice of time wouldn't raise an eyebrow. At least not as much as his actual appearance in the home of the man he detested.

Gazing around, Nash noticed the small changes in the ducal home in London since George's death. Lighter colors brightened the walls. Nash ran a finger down a delicately cut crystal vase holding fragrant blooms of lilac.

More than the trappings seemed to lift the heaviness once weighing down the residence. The whole atmosphere seemed brighter. Servants who bustled past him wore genuine smiles, casting him a quick glance and nodding before continuing on with their duties. Even the aged butler's lined face seemed younger and more relaxed.

Tension had permeated the place when he'd come here with George, practically vibrating in the air like a living being, feeding and growing from George's cruelty. Fear and wariness in servants' eyes had belied their tight smiles. Nash remembered one particular little parlor maid who jumped every time George spoke.

George was slightly more tolerable outside of his own domain, but here, Nash had typically felt a sense of unease, as if the house held dark secrets.

At that moment, a different type of unrest settled on him, and he slapped his hat against his thigh, wondering what was taking so bloody long. If Ashton wished to throw him out, a servant would have done so immediately.

Finally, the butler appeared. "Follow me, sir."

Not even a *my lord*. If that didn't speak volumes, Nash didn't know what did.

The old man led him upstairs, past the room where George hosted balls. Nash peeked through the open doorway. Chairs and sideboards lined the walls, the center of the polished floor cleared of furnishings, and crystal bobs on the chandeliers shimmered and sparkled to perfection as if preparing for just such an event. Nash remembered the lively parties and how beautiful but haunted Margaret had appeared as she stood by George's side, receiving guests.

"This way, sir." The old man's words brought him back to the present.

Nash halted as the old man stepped aside at the doorway of a small parlor. Inside, Adalyn waited, Ashton standing dutifully by her side. Nash ground his teeth at the thought of having to make an apology in front of his enemy, especially considering he wasn't even sure what in the devil he was apologizing for.

Adalyn's gaze locked with his, and something about the softness in her eyes eased the tension in his chest.

"Late for a social call, Nash," Ashton said, his gaze not nearly as welcoming as Adalyn's. In fact, the duke's glare could create ices at Gunter's.

Nash fought back the chuckle at the image of icicles shooting from Ashton's eyes, transforming flavored water into the chilled treats. Rancor curdled his stomach at the thought he would have to kowtow to the self-righteous duke. Yet Adalyn was a guest in the duke's home, so he executed a graceful bow, albeit directed more toward Adalyn than Ashton. "I beg your forgiveness, Miss Lovelace. I would have called earlier, but, as you are aware, I've been indisposed."

Ashton snorted. Not very befitting of a duke, Nash admitted with more than a bit of unhealthy satisfaction.

"Ah, yes. I see you've managed to drag yourself from your deathbed. I trust your *cold* is improving."



Before Nash could respond, his fist clenching at his side, Adalyn sent Ashton a censorious glance. Even sweeter, she followed it with a verbal admonition. “Harry, this is unlike you.”

*Yet, not at all unlike the man I know.*

Tamping down his anger, Nash focused on Adalyn. “I am much improved thanks to your and your father’s excellent care. Although I will admit, I hope to god to never need that abomination you call tea ever again.”

Her lovely brow furrowed. “Did you not add the honey to cut the bitterness?”

“Eventually. My manservant is under some strange notion that to work, medicine must taste bad. Something his dear mother said.”

Adalyn laughed, the bright sound doing more for him than all the willow bark tea in the world. He almost forgot Ashton was still in the room.

Almost.

But not quite.

Nash needed to speak to Adalyn alone. “Ashton, would you be so kind as to allow Miss Lovelace and me a moment alone?” Like the honey for his medicine, he hoped he’d sweetened his words enough to convince Ashton to leave. And like the tea, he had to force every single word past his lips, nearly choking on them.

Ashton crossed his arms over his chest. “No.”

With a fire that should have shocked him, yet did not, Adalyn spun toward Ashton. “Harry. I am *not* a child. I’m quite capable of having a private conversation with a man without someone watching over me. We shall leave the door open.”

Ashton pointed a finger at Nash. “Not *this* man. Adalyn, you have no idea what he has—”

“Stop!” Hands on her hips, Adalyn appeared like a mighty warrior ready to battle her foe. “Now, go!” She pointed toward

the door.

Warmth spread through Nash's chest at the sight of her defending him against his foe.

Ashton had the decency to appear appropriately chastised.

Nash almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

But not quite.

"If it eases your mind, Ashton, I've merely come to ask how Miss Fingers is faring and"—Nash darted a glance at Adalyn, hoping she would understand his meaning—"make an apology to Miss Lovelace."

"Apology for what, precisely?" Anger flashed across Ashton's face, and he turned toward Adalyn as if to examine her for injury.

Nash's unexpected, and infinitesimal, compassion for the man before him vanished. Did Ashton really think he would ever intentionally cause harm to Adalyn? Sharp guilt poked at Nash's conscience. Wasn't that precisely what he had implied to Roland?

Thank god for Adalyn. "Harry."

When Adalyn placed a calming hand on the man's arm, Nash's jaw tightened.

Ashton shook his head. "Adalyn, you don't understand."

"I know you wish to protect me. But as much as I love you, trust that I know my own mind and am capable of understanding more than you give me credit for."

Hearing the word *love* from the woman before him directed not toward him but to his lifelong enemy was almost more than Nash could bear. And the realization of how much it affected him took him aback.

"Very well." Ashton moved toward the open doorway.

Nash stepped aside, expecting Ashton to bump him on his way out—surprised when he did not.

“Harry,” Adalyn called. “Please send Mena in. She should thank Lord Nash for saving her life.”

Ashton nodded and, shooting Nash one last look of warning, left them alone.

“Mena?” Nash asked, looking over his shoulder to make certain Ashton was truly gone.

“Yes. Manny remembered she called herself Filmena when he first found her on the docks. My father suspects she meant Philomena, but she prefers the diminutive.”

Nash couldn’t help but grin. “It is certainly preferable to Fingers.”

Her blue eyes pinned him in place. “You said you wished to apologize.”

“Yes.” Nervous as a schoolboy—a time in his life he never wished to repeat—he turned his hat in a circle before him with shaking hands. “Although I have no idea of my offense. Only that I said something to upset you. And for that, I wish to apologize.”

She sighed, her gaze darting toward the open door. Fingers—that is Mena—had yet to arrive. “It is I who should apologize. I fear I attributed false meaning to what you no doubt intended as genuine concern for my reputation and health.”

He also peered quickly over his shoulder to ensure they were still alone. “False meaning being?”

“That you feared I would trap you into marriage.”

“Ah. No doubt Ashton has relayed my aversion to the institution.”

“In honesty, he has said very little about you. He’s merely expressed concern over our . . . acquaintance.”

Reluctantly, Nash had to give the man that much credit. At least he hadn’t exposed all of Nash’s failings. One in particular came to mind.

“’Ello. Lord duke said you wanted to see me.”

Nash turned at the girl's voice. He stared at the sight before him. Free from the filth covering her face and dulling her hair, a perfect imp of femininity stood before him.

She squirmed a little, pulling at the pale pink material where it tapered to her waist. Dressed not just in a gown, she wore no less than the latest fashion.

"This can't be Miss Fingers?" He sent the girl a teasing grin.

"Whatcha mean? O' course it's me." She tugged at the material again.

"Problem with the gown? I suspect it's not as comfortable as your trousers, but it is lovely."

She leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. "It's these damn things they call stays. Torture device, if you ask me."

He laughed aloud. "No doubt."

"Mena," Adalyn said. "Do you have something to say to Lord Nash?"

The girl rubbed a finger against her chin, eyes narrowed, as she pondered the question. "Miss Adalyn says I should thank you for saving my life."

Nash opened his mouth to tell her it was nothing, primarily to take advantage of the situation and appear nonchalant about the whole matter in Adalyn's presence. As if he rescued street rats every day.

But before he could form one word, Mena continued. "But the way I see it is, I wouldn't have fallen in the damn lake if you hadn't chased me in it."

Nash bit back the laugh. The girl had a point. "I accept your perfunctory gratitude. But it was actually Miss Adalyn who truly saved your sorry skin. She's the one who breathed life back into you." His gaze snapped to Adalyn's just in time to witness pink blossom on her cheeks.

"My wha' gratitude? You be cursin' at me?" Mena's glare rivaled the one Adalyn had sent to Ashton. God help any man who crossed either of them.

“I believe what Lord Nash meant was your heart didn’t seem to be in your expression of thanks.”

Mena’s pink bow of a mouth pursed, then she gave a nod. “Well, I suppose he’s got that right, and sounds like I should be more grateful to you, Miss Adalyn.”

“Let’s say it was a joint effort, shall we?” Adalyn’s blue eyes met his, affection shining in their depths. It was as if she saw through his carefully crafted veneer to the hidden recesses of his soul.

And it terrified him.

## CHAPTER 17—A GRUDGINGLY GIVEN INVITATION



For a moment, Adalyn glimpsed something in Lord Nash's eyes. She struggled to name it, coming up short. It wasn't exactly distrust, but she'd witnessed a similar expression in faces of patients who were unconvinced of her ability to treat them and not cause them further harm.

As quickly as it had appeared, it vanished, almost as if a curtain had fallen, blocking her from further examination.

Nash turned away, focusing on Mena. Although his face appeared controlled, the hat in his hand bounced against his thigh in an uneven rhythm, and his fingers trembled as they clutched the brim.

"Now that I'm reassured you are on the mend, Miss Mena, I should take my leave." He pivoted back to Adalyn and sketched an elegant bow. "Miss Lovelace."

The need to speak with him alone again gripped her. "One moment, Lord Nash. Mena, please return to the library and tell the duke I shall be along shortly."

With a final look of distrust at Nash, Mena nodded and left the room in a swirl of pink silk.

Finally alone with him, Adalyn's mind struggled with what to say. His dark eyes probed hers as he waited.

Several uncomfortable moments later, he broke the silence. "Does Ashton think that's wise?"

She blinked, giving her head a little shake to clear it from the cobwebs that had formed in such a short duration. "I beg

your pardon?”

“Dressing her up like a doll. Giving her a taste of what it’s like to live in comfort, without want.”

His explanation provided little clarification.

“How is it unwise to provide for her?”

“For how long, Adalyn? A few weeks? A month? A year? What will happen to her if she fails to meet Ashton’s high standards? What if she continues to steal? Will she no longer be welcome in his household? What then? Where will she go? Will another aristocrat offer to take her in as a ward? And what would be their intentions? Not all motives are as altruistic and innocent as those of the Somersbys and”—he paused, scrunching his face as if he’d tasted something foul—“Ashton. Boys can be taught a trade, an occupation. But a girl . . .” He shook his head, a vein pulsing in his neck.

Cold dread snaked up her spine as she followed his path of thought. “Would she not face the same future if left to the streets?”

“Unfortunately, undoubtedly. Either that or she’d finally be caught in the act of her thievery and thrown in gaol. Even there, I suspect she’d face the same abuse.”

“Then how is it unwise to give her a chance?”

“Perhaps not unwise as much as cruel. At least left on the streets, she’d never have been given false hope. What Ashton’s done is give her a taste of something she can never really have, and the pain of that longing will be even sharper when it’s taken away. Life isn’t a fairy story, Adalyn.”

She stared at him as if she didn’t know him. Perhaps she didn’t. “Why are you so cynical?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he yanked his gaze away, focusing on something over her shoulder. “Miss Fingers and I have more in common than you would imagine. Not all who are damaged are clothed in rags. Some simply hide their inferiority beneath fine trappings and airs of indifference. We may *suffer* in luxury, but the pain of being less-than is a constant reminder of how we shall never measure up.”

Stunned by his declaration, she blinked. His words made no sense. Intelligent, well-spoken, the epitome of elegance and sophistication, how could he consider himself inferior? “If you’re speaking about Harry’s opinion of you—”

“Not only his. And I’ve said too much. I urge you to consider the consequences of toying with the girl’s future.”

“Harry would never toss her out onto the street nor release her to a household that would abuse her.”

Nash’s dark eyes snapped back to hers. “I pray you’re right. And to be clear, I rarely pray. I’ve found it a useless waste of breath. That being said, unless Ashton plans to support Mena for the rest of her natural life, her prospects are limited. If he thinks to move her into society, which I doubt even the *paragon of virtue* you believe Ashton to be would consider, he’s likely to become a laughingstock. Perhaps not to his face, but behind his back. We are not like you Americans with your ideals of equality. We are a judgmental lot. You simply haven’t been in our company long enough to experience it.”

How had things turned so ugly between them? She reached out, touching his coat sleeve. “I vow to do all in my power to ensure Mena’s well-being.”

The hard edge to his eyes softened, and he glanced down at the hat in his hands. “I apologize if I’ve upset you.” He looked up, pinning her with his gaze.

Once more, she felt it was she who needed to apologize. She held out her hand. “I accept. And I, too, apologize. I didn’t realize that by trying to help Mena, it would open other avenues of pain.”

She had forgone gloves, and when he slid his gloved hand against her bare fingers, even through the soft kid leather, energy raced up her arm, sending gooseflesh ablaze. He didn’t grasp her hand as if to shake it, but caressed it, his thumb rubbing against the back of her hand.

His gaze dipped to her lips. “I would have preferred a different form of apology, but perhaps this isn’t the best place



or time.” He bent and brushed a soft kiss against her knuckles, warming her skin even more. “Now, I should take my leave before Ashton has several of his footman escort me bodily from the house.”

A smile played at his lips, easing the tension that had built in her chest, and he returned to his carefree self, the man to whom she’d been so attracted.

But as he retreated, a part of her wished to better know the serious and somehow troubled man who had made such a brief but disconcerting appearance.



VAUXHALL GARDENS TEEMED WITH PEOPLE ENJOYING THE sunny June day, among them Nash and Honoria. The *ton* had yet to flee London for their country estates because of the Season’s late-ending session in Parliament. Nash had kept his opinions to himself when Roland, a staunch supporter of amending the Poor Laws, had lamented the *toll* taken on his purse to provide for those less fortunate.

Nash had gritted his teeth, literally biting his tongue thinking of Mena and the cost the girl would pay if she were to be sent to a workhouse as proponents of the amendment suggested—Roland’s cost of a few pounds a year were trivial in comparison.

Honoria’s hand rested lightly on Nash’s arm, and she gazed up at him from beneath her parasol. “I’ve done my best to convince my father to argue against the amendment, but I fear I’ve failed miserably. He sees the prospect of workhouses as a boon rather than a detriment to the poor.”

Nash nodded, grateful they were discussing something other than the weather. “At least his motives are honorable—although misguided. I don’t have the faith he does that those sent to such institutions would not be mistreated.”

“You’re still concerned about Fingers—I mean Mena?”

“I only question the wisdom of Ashton’s actions. But Miss Lovelace promised me the girl would be cared for.”

Honorio gave his arm a slight squeeze. “I’ve always said you have a much softer side than reported.”

Nash barked a laugh. “And like our agreement, please keep that to yourself—although perhaps it’s you who are misguided regarding my intentions. I feel no more for the urchin of a girl than I would for a scrawny pup scrounging for scraps.”

“Hmm,” Honorio muttered, her gaze turning toward the path ahead, but a whisper of a smile flitted across her lips.

Nash wondered what went on in that quiet mind of hers. Like him, she kept her thoughts and feelings guarded.

Ugly regret, the color of rust, swirled in his chest, and for a moment he wished he could feel the same zing of energy surging through him at her touch as he did with Adalyn. Once he met his goals, and they ended their attachment, Nash would be no worse for it. Little could be done to blacken his reputation further, and if his investment proved fruitful, he could break ties with Roland forever.

But Honorio was another matter, and he hated that his own selfishness would cause her harm. Perhaps he should do the honorable thing and offer for her. “Lady Honorio, about our agreement.” He kept his voice low, even though her maid followed at the requisite distance.

“Are you close to acquiring the prescribed amount needed for your venture?” Her wide eyes held no concern or worry, simply curiosity and perhaps even a bit of envy.

“Not precisely. In fact, my contacts have requested a larger investment than initially agreed.”

She waited, patient as always.

He forged forward. “I wondered if you had reconsidered and hoped for a more genuine attachment?”

Eyes narrowed, she studied him. “Do you?”

How he wished he did. It would solve so many problems, not only his, but possibly hers. But he couldn’t lie to her. “To

be honest, as much as I've grown to respect and admire you, I'm afraid my heart would not be in agreement. However, if you would wish—"

"Say no more. My heart agrees with yours. If you're concerned about the repercussions of our deception, allow me to put your mind at ease. I have only to endure another year before my father releases the funds that were to be my dowry. Although I may wind up a spinster, I shall be a comfortable spinster in charge of my own life. I have born the lash of wagging tongues before. I shall survive again."

If only he could love her as she deserved. But like his mind when it came to letters on a page, he had little control over the workings of his heart. Indeed, he'd often questioned if he even had one—at least in respect to strong emotions. The organ that beat steadily in his chest had always been just that—something that maintained his sorry existence.

However lately, the not quite unpleasant squeezes in his chest and the rapid pace with which the organ beat when Miss Adalyn Lovelace was near informed him otherwise.

And as if his very mind conjured her from thin air, she appeared on the path before him, her hand resting on the arm of Mr. Victor Pratt. Nash's heart not only increased its tempo, but gave a sharp *thud* against his ribcage.

Victor leaned down to whisper something in her ear, and Adalyn's bright laugh drifted on the breeze toward him.

Nash wanted to pull Victor Pratt aside and plant him a facer.

Priscilla and Marbry accompanied them, and to make matters worse, Ashton and the duchess followed behind, their brood of children in tow, including Mena. The boy Manny watched the little thief closely while her own gaze darted to all the finely dressed patrons, nodding their *good days* to the duke and duchess.

Nash could only imagine her devious mind sizing each person up as possible prey.

Of all the faces, only Adalyn's and Priscilla's acknowledged Nash with a smile as he and Honoria approached. Nash bit back a laugh and withheld the taunt begging for release when Marbry pulled his wife closer to his side.

In the lead, Victor tipped his hat. "Lady Honoria. Lord Nash. Good day to you both."

Nash and Honoria greeted everyone. Then he turned toward Adalyn. "Your father did not accompany you? I trust he isn't unwell."

The smile she directed toward him canceled out the glares burning into him from Ashton, Marbry, and even Victor Pratt. "He is quite well, thank you. He volunteered to stay at the clinic with Dr. Somersby. Harry promised we would come again some time in the evening to view the fireworks. My father adores those colored explosions."

Given the chance, Nash hoped to provide Adalyn her own experience of fireworks, those of the more private, internal variety.

Honoria moved toward Margaret and the children. "Is this the youngest?" She held out her hand, and the baby in Margaret's arms grasped her finger. Honoria would make a wonderful mother.

Strange, but the thought eased his guilty conscience that he couldn't offer her more. As painful as the unfulfilled longing would be, he supposed she would experience less heartache if she remained unmarried than to have a husband who refused to give her a child.

His eyes darted toward Adalyn, his gut twisting as the same besotted expression flashed across her face at the sight of Honoria cooing at the babe.

"He's so darling, Your Grace," Honoria said. "May I hold him?"

Margaret transferred the child—Charles, she called him—to Honoria's arms.

Adalyn moved to his side. “It’s like the Madonna and child, is it not?”

Honorina did indeed appear beatific.

“She best bring you up to scratch, Nash,” Victor said. “I suspect she’ll want a few of those herself before long.”

Nash couldn’t help but note the hint of challenge in the man’s voice. Nash remained silent lest he say something he would surely regret—especially in front of Ashton. Such a display would not further his cause.

Which was what exactly? He questioned his own motives. At first, it was simply to lure the attractive American to his bed. But somewhere along the way, things changed.

His feelings had changed.

*He* had changed.

And it was damned uncomfortable.

He shook off the disconcerting thought, focusing instead on the scene before him.

What was it about babies that turned grown people into puddles of goo? The group circled around Honorina holding the infant.

Mena had slipped to the side of the group. She assessed each passing couple, and Nash envisioned the wheels turning in her mind with calculated interest.

Nash whispered his excuses and maneuvered to the other side, out of Mena’s field of vision.

As a family passed, Mena moved into position, her hand outstretched toward a reticule dangling from a woman’s wrist.

Nash grasped Mena’s arm, holding back her progress. “Don’t.”

She spun toward him, her eyes wide.

He kept his voice as gentle as he could under the circumstances. “Do you really want to ruin things with the duke?”

Yanking her arm away, the little spitfire glared at him. “I weren’t doing nothin’ wrong.”

A younger male voice sounded next to Nash. “Yet.”

Nash glanced down at the lad.

Manny returned Mena’s glare measure for measure. “Remember, Fingers, I’ve been where you are.”

“What’s going on here?” Ashton’s supercilious voice echoed from behind.

Ah, Nash knew it was only a matter of time before His Self-righteousness would join the fray.

Ashton pinned Nash with his stare. Evidently, it was the day for glaring.

“Lord Nash stopped Fingers from making a poor judgment, Father. We should thank him.”

*Well, well.* Nash’s respect for the former street urchin grew. The boy apparently made up his own mind about people.

Mena mumbled, “More like stopped me from gettin’ a few coins.”

The words sticking in his craw, Nash forced them out. “His Grace’s generosity should be more than enough, Mena. No need to continue stealing.”

One of Ashton’s blond eyebrows rose, which sweetened the praise’s foul taste in Nash’s mouth—if but a little.

Yet, even sweeter, Ashton clearly caught the adoring gaze Adalyn sent Nash’s way. He wanted to shout with glee at the direct blow to Ashton’s perception of him.

“You learn to restrain yourself, Mena,” Ashton said, then mumbled a quick, “Thank you,” to Nash before turning back to his other, more worthy companions.

Still reveling in his small victory, Nash perked up his ears when Adalyn mentioned something about a ball.

“I realize it’s late in the Season, but Harry and I wished to honor our guests before they return to America,” Margaret

said. "I told Miss Lovelace there is nothing as romantic as an English ball."

Discomfort churned in Nash's stomach when the duchess glanced between Adalyn and Victor Pratt.

"I received my invitation this morning," Honoria said, sliding a glance toward Nash. "I shall respond immediately."

Keeping his face passive, Nash said, "Mine must be late in arriving."

Margaret blanched, and a sharp blade of guilt pierced Nash's chest. He truly had no desire to cause her harm, but as before, he treated her as a casualty of war or a sacrificial pawn to checkmate the king.

The adoring expression on Adalyn's face vanished.

Once again, Honoria came to his rescue, and saved face for Margaret. "Ah, but you will escort me, will you not, Lord Nash? Her Grace must have presumed as much since we are courting."

A muscle in Ashton's jaw pulsed, a reflex Nash understood well. Ashton gestured to the side. "A word, Nash?"

When they had moved out of earshot, Ashton said, "Out of courtesy for Lady Honoria and to save embarrassment for my wife, I will allow your attendance."

*Allow? The gall!*

Ashton rattled on. "But if you make one misstep, I will remove you bodily myself."

Nash lifted one shoulder in a shrug of insouciance. "If you believe you can."

Oh, how he loved goading the man.

In direct contrast to Ashton's earlier icy glare, his stare scorched Nash with heat. "In case you've forgotten, I bested you before."

Memory of the incident on the terrace at Lord Cartwright's ball several years prior flashed in Nash's mind. "I was drunk, giving you an advantage." What Nash refused to admit was the

fact that his drunken state not only resulted in a broken nose, courtesy of one irate, blond-headed duke, but in serious and unrelenting self-recrimination for his ghastly behavior.

To say his actions had been ungentlemanly, even for him, would be a gross understatement, and he had yet to apologize to Margaret. But he refused to do so in front of Ashton, and the man would never allow Nash to speak to her in private.

Not that he could blame him. Perhaps at the ball, if Ashton busied himself with his guests, Nash could pull Margaret away for a moment in the safety of the ballroom.

“Then I suggest you curb your intake of alcohol during the event.” Ashton shook his head. “I’m baffled as to your association with Lady Honoria, and I fervently hope she has not misplaced her trust.”

Nash’s earlier conversation with Honoria resurfaced. If nothing else, at least Ashton would place the blame squarely on Nash’s shoulders when he and Honoria ended their association. “Speaking of the lady, I should return to her side. I promised her father I would have her back home by three.”

Without another word, Nash turned and strode back to the group. “If you would excuse us. I promised Lord Stratford I would have Lady Honoria back home. I believe she has other plans this afternoon.”

As he led her away, Honoria sent him a quizzical look. “Is all well, Lord Nash?”

“Forgive my rudeness. I thought it best to remove myself before I said something to Ashton I would later regret.”

She grew pensive. “If you prefer not to go to the ball, I could always make your apologies.”

“On the contrary, Lady Honoria. I very much wish to go to the ball. I’m in your debt for your quick thinking.” Attending the ball meant an opportunity to dance with Adalyn.

*Not to mention the burr it placed under Ashton’s backside.*

Nash pushed that pleasant image aside. “Ashton expressed his concern regarding your association with me. If nothing



else, you should have his support when we part ways.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand the animosity between the two of you, but I fear it will be an obstacle in your pursuit of Miss Lovelace.”

Although Nash believed she did not design her statement to pry, he detected a hint of curiosity coloring it. He trusted Honoria more than he’d trusted anyone else in the *ton*, but he could not bring himself to share that particular bit of information.

“It’s nothing to be concerned about. And as far as Miss Lovelace, I’ve never backed down from a challenge.”

## CHAPTER 18—EXPECTATIONS



Excitement bubbled in the air of Harry's ducal manse the afternoon of the ball, and Adalyn found the energy palpable.

Harry had closed the clinic early, insisting Adalyn rest before the festivities. "English balls last well into the wee hours of the morning, Adalyn. Some guests don't return home until they've broken their fast here."

After a light meal, she tried to read, but her mind raced, the thought of dancing with Nash too enticing a prospect. Perhaps he'd even request a waltz.

His abrupt departure at Vauxhall Gardens eight days prior had been the last she'd seen of him. Granted, at first his absence gave her time to ponder his behavior toward Margaret. If she'd only known Maggie hadn't invited him to the ball, she wouldn't have mentioned it. Had he truly meant to embarrass Maggie by pointing out the apparent slight? She played his words back repeatedly, trying desperately to remember his tone, but there was something in his eyes, a flash of regret or apology that convinced her he meant the duchess no harm. Instead, his intended target had to have been Harry.

However, Nash was not the only gentleman to occupy her thoughts. Victor Pratt had called twice. Thankfully, she had been at the clinic, but the servants relayed his disappointment that he'd missed her. Flowers followed accompanied by notes requesting she accompany him to several of the remaining social events of the Season.

Again, Priscilla expressed concern over her brother's growing affection, reminding Adalyn of her promise to let him down gently. Even without Priscilla's urging, Adalyn knew she had to take action.

Of course, it didn't help that both Harry and Margaret seemed to approve of, and even encouraged Victor's attentions. Margaret had thrice suggested they invite him to dinner. Victor Pratt was exactly the type of man she should want as a husband.

Kind, generous, cheerful, with a passion for something other than cards and horses, not to mention he was exceptionally good looking.

All that being said, even if Adalyn could force her heart to feel something more than friendship for Victor, if he truly knew her and her secrets, he would most likely sever their relationship quickly and permanently. Even if she desired him as a husband, he would not want her as a wife.

Would the same thing would be true for Lord Nash? Her mind drifted back to their exchange at the art gallery and the feeling that he saw beneath the surface into the dark recesses of her soul and did not recoil in disgust.

She brushed that thought aside, realizing it was a fanciful whim. Her plans to return to Boston with her father prevented anything of a lasting nature with either Victor Pratt or Lord Nash.

Unable to concentrate, she put her book down and entered the hallway, hoping to find something to occupy herself and her recalcitrant thoughts.

Servants bustled about, dedicated to achieving perfection down to the tiniest detail. Crystal vases placed strategically around the house held vibrant, fresh-cut flowers, their fragrances bringing a bit of summer inside.

She stopped by one, arranging a sprig of lavender an inch to the side of an elegant white calla lily. Moving on to another arrangement, she glanced over her shoulder, catching a maid

surreptitiously placing the lavender back in its original position.

Feeling utterly useless, she headed toward the ballroom in the hope there might be something she could do there. At the doorway, she practically had to jump out of the way when two footmen approached behind her, their arms laden with enormous potted plants.

“Excuse us, miss.”

No matter where she went, she seemed to be in the way. No wonder Harry had suggested she retire to her room. She debated going back, but upon glancing out the double doors of the ballroom, she spotted her father sitting on a bench on the terrace. Perhaps he had the same sense of restlessness.

Sunshine warmed her skin as she stepped outside, eager to have a moment alone with him. At least he would keep her mind occupied. As she grew closer, his hunched shoulders and bowed head sent a sudden chill through her as if a dark cloud had blocked the sun’s rays. Both of her parents had struggled with despair after Benjamin’s death, and she worried that something had dredged up those bleak thoughts once again.

She kept her voice low as to not startle him, but she couldn’t mask her concern. “Father?”

“Adalyn.” He turned, shifting on the bench to partially face her.

Although surprised, he appeared happy, the brightness shining in his eyes from delight in seeing her rather than unshed tears over his dead son. A small book rested in his hands, and his spectacles balanced on the top of his head.

Unable to contain her laugh, she settled on the bench and hugged him. “When will you admit you need a new pair of spectacles?”

The sheepish grin indicated he was in no hurry. “It’s not that. In fact, I’ve found I can often read better without them, especially when the writing is smaller.”

She gave him the look only daughters can, then pulled the book from his hands. “What’s so interesting?” Written in a

neat, masculine hand, the book contained a detailed list of what appeared to be patients' complaints and ailments. Rather than names, initials identified patients along with the date of treatment.

"It's Harry's," her father said. "He's tracking various patients and taking histories to see if there are any family connections to some of the more troublesome disorders."

Several notations captured her interest. "Eye and hair color? I wouldn't think of those as disorders."

Her father gave a soft chuckle. "I noticed that as well. Harry said it helps him determine the strength of the link between family members."

"Fascinating." She peered up from the precise penmanship. "Has he come to any conclusions?"

"Speculations, as he readily admits. He hopes to pass his research on so another younger doctor may continue."

"Does he hope Edmund will follow in his footsteps as both duke and doctor?"

He shrugged. "He said Manny has expressed an interest in the field. As for Edmund, Harry wisely said he will leave the choice of career up to the boy."

"It must be difficult, trying to juggle the crown of aristocracy with the practice of medicine." Adalyn couldn't help but wonder how other titled men viewed Harry's unconventional ways.

Perhaps that's what lay at the root of the animosity between Harry and Nash.

"Father, when Harry was with us in Boston, do you recall him speaking of his acquaintances in England?"

Her father's wiry eyebrow lifted. "In what way? If memory serves, he avoided discussion of his prior life."

"Only if he considers those who choose the more traditional route of their titles negatively." At her father's continued quizzical gaze, she elaborated. "What I mean is if he considers those who do not have an occupation as lazy or

resting on their laurels, especially when there's so much good that could be done with their power and wealth."

From the look on his face, her father gave her question considerable thought. "He hasn't said as much to me, but Harry has always worn his heart on his sleeve. So I suppose we will witness for ourselves how he treats his fellow aristocrats during the ball this evening."

She always knew her father was brilliant. Thank goodness she had an excellent memory and keen observation. That evening she would discover if it was noblemen without direction in general or one in particular.



"NOT THAT ONE, EVANS." NASH WAVED AWAY THE GRAY waistcoat. "The new scarlet." If he accomplished nothing else that evening, he would stand out in the crowd. Not that he believed he needed to. No doubt Ashton would instruct his servants to never let him out of their sight, practically bursting with anticipation of catching him making one false move.

"A bold choice, sir. Your new affinity for more color is a welcome change."

Nash lifted a brow at Evans. "For whom? You or me?"

Evans chuckled. "Both of us, sir. I enjoy offering a greater selection than black or gray." He slipped the colorful waistcoat over Nash's shoulders, smoothing it out, then moving to the front to button it. "And if I may say so, it seems to have improved your overall mood as well."

Nash snorted a laugh as Evans moved on to tying his cravat. "Your imagination is a thing of wonder, Evans. You should write novels or plays."

Evans quirked a brow at that.

Nash couldn't blame him. The man had often suggested embellishments when transcribing Nash's correspondence. He'd been torn in allowing Evans to read and respond to Cordelia's latest barrage of letters. Her persistence had become

irksome, delivering idle threats if he didn't return to her bed. Nash instructed Evans not to mince words in his reply as to the finality of their affair.

"Have you acquired a new ladybird, sir?" Evans asked as he perfectly tied Nash's cravat. "Miss Lovelace, perhaps?"

Several weeks ago, in a moment of weakness, Nash had mentioned Adalyn's name to his valet.

"Miss Lovelace is a respectable woman." The fact didn't deter Nash in the slightest.

But as much as he wanted to taste Adalyn's lips again, he wouldn't risk compromising her at the ball. He'd rather suffer in silence than give Ashton the satisfaction of knowing he was right.

Because although Ashton was not wrong about Nash's desire to have a physical relationship with Adalyn, he was utterly wrong about his motivations. For once in his life, Nash's desire, although lusty, was not lust based. Loathe to admit it, he knew his feelings had grown to something much deeper than simply sexual need.

Evans stirred him from his thoughts. "You appear pensive, sir."

"As I said, your imagination never ceases to astound me. Can't a man have thoughts to himself without his valet interrogating him? Next thing I know, I'll find out you're the wagging tongue behind the stories in *The Muckraker*." Nash pulled down the sleeve of his tailcoat, sending Evans a glare of warning. "And if I do, you will be seeking employment elsewhere. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir." Evans' words of agreement didn't quite match the flash of upturned lips he apparently made no effort to hide.

Nash strode from the room. "Don't wait up for me. I intend to enjoy torturing His Grace as long as possible." He turned, casting his servant one final glance. "You're damned lucky you're an excellent valet."

When Nash arrived at the Marquess of Stratford's home for Honoria, Stratford's butler directed him to the Marquess'

empty study. Although the same rank as his brother, Roland, and still imposing, Nash found Stratford to be less arrogant. Yet, Nash couldn't help but wonder if he was about to receive another call to action regarding his intentions.

“Ah, Lord Nash.” The marquess' tenor elicited shades of sea green in Nash's mind. Interesting that the color matched Honoria's eyes. “Honorias is still fussing with her hair. Women. Married nigh on thirty-two years, and I have yet to understand why they spend so much time pinning it to the tops of their heads.” He made a circular motion around his own head of thinning auburn hair.

“I would imagine they do it so men ponder why in the world they do it.”

Stratford laughed. “An endless cycle of cause and effect, eh?”

“It keeps us on our toes, does it not?”

“Indeed.” Stratford poured himself a brandy and motioned an enquiry toward Nash.

Nash waved it away. “None for me, sir. I would like to be in full possession of my faculties to appreciate the time Lady Honoria has spent on her hair.” Fully admitting he may have been lavishing the praise a little too liberally, Nash also admitted there was an element of truth to his words, although in reference to Adalyn rather than Honoria.

Stratford studied him, then gestured for Nash to take a seat. “I hope you mean that. Honoria will not survive another suitor who pursues her without intention of making an honorable offer.”

No one would believe it if they'd heard what Nash said next. “If you're referring to Dr. Marbry, it's my understanding that he fully intended to offer for her, but Lady Honoria turned him down, telling him point blank he should marry the woman who held his heart.”

“So she's told me. I worry that girl will be the death of me.” He grinned at Nash, who couldn't help but picture the cat



who'd managed to get into the cream. "But I hope soon that will be your worry, not mine."

Before he could formulate a competent and acceptable response, the butler appeared at the doorway. "Sir, Lady Stratford and Lady Honoria are waiting in the entry."

Nash vowed to thank Honoria later for her well-timed interruption, then followed Stratford out to collect the ladies and proceed to the ball.

Seated next to Stratford and across from the ladies in the carriage, Nash was acutely aware of the similarity between Honoria and her mother. Both had a subtle, understated and dignified beauty. But Lady Stratford's most notable feature was the lack of lines around her eyes and mouth. For a woman her age, her skin remained perfectly smooth, as if smiles and laughter had not been welcomed visitors, leaving the areas uncreased from such visitation.

His gaze flitted to Honoria, who gave him a tight-lipped smile, forming no telltale lines around her mouth or eyes. Had someone taught her to withhold any expression of amusement or gaiety? And if so, by whom? Did her mother lead by example? And if so, was it her nature or was she, too, instructed to refrain from such plebeian behavior?

He'd wager a goodly sum that Honoria did not come by such restraint naturally. Oh, she'd conducted herself with propriety at all times, but occasionally when she didn't think anyone was watching, he'd caught glimpses of the girl she'd most likely kept locked away—one who would laugh until tears streamed down her cheeks.

An unnatural silence filled the carriage compartment, and Nash squelched the urge to shift in his seat. The nagging guilt that, like others, he would abandon Honoria to a sterile life of loneliness and ridicule slammed him square in the chest.

Thankfully, the journey from Stratford's stately home in Mayfair was not far from Ashton's ducal mansion, and they soon found themselves in the queue behind the other carriages.

Gazing down next to him, Nash noticed the almost imperceptible motion of Stratford's fingers against his thighs. So, the man was human after all—and impatient.

“I hope Ashton has a card room prepared,” Stratford said. “At least this isn't one of his infernal masked balls he and the duchess are so fond of hosting.”

Honorina and Lady Stratford exchanged a look that Nash could only interpret as disagreement with Stratford.

As Ashton had never invited Nash to any events, much less a masked ball, he had nothing to offer in agreement or disagreement.

In Honorina's typical perceptive way, she addressed Nash directly. “The duke and duchess give the most wonderful parties. There is such merriment and general affability among all attending.”

“Humph,” Stratford said, tapping his thigh a little more aggressively.

Nash restrained the sigh of relief when the marquess' carriage arrived at the front of the queue and a footman opened the door. He exited first and held out his hand to Honorina.

She leaned in and whispered, “There should be ample opportunity to request a dance with Miss Lovelace, even if I'm not preoccupied with another gentleman on the dance floor. I can always make my excuses and withdraw to the ladies' retiring room.”

Nash darted a glance back at Stratford. “We need to be careful, my lady. Your father is becoming impatient and will most likely be keeping close watch on us this evening.”

She waved it aside. “Pish-tosh. No doubt the duke will have provided a card room, occupying my father most of the evening and leaving my poor mother to congregate with the widows and gossipers.”

Nash questioned his own sanity when, for the second time that evening, his thoughts and words were most un-Nashlike.

And the idea gave him an exceeding amount of joy when he imagined the look of shock on Ashton's face when he performed the act of kindness.

## CHAPTER 19—FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES



Pain throbbed in Adalyn's cheeks, her muscles stretched to the limit from the constant smile she forced to her face. She slid her gaze toward Maggie, both in admiration and envy at the natural ease with which she greeted her guests, her own smile relaxed but genuine.

As surreptitiously as she could, Adalyn darted a glance toward the entryway where the seemingly endless line of guests waited to approach the receiving line, in hopes to glimpse Nash before Burrows announced him. A subtle clearing of a throat returned her attention to Lord Felix Davies standing before her.

Presuming he, like so many other guests, had wished her an enjoyable stay in England, she responded in kind. "Everyone has made me feel most welcome. Thank you, sir."

His lips twitched and his eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly. "I'm very glad to hear that. But I'm curious how that relates to my request for a dance this evening."

*Oh.* She scrambled for an acceptable answer, proud when she made a quick connection between the two unrelated topics. "Only that the number of gentleman who have requested to partner with me in a dance has made me feel most at home."

The glint in his eyes indicated she had only partially succeeded in covering her inattentiveness. "Then I shall count myself fortunate if you consider me one of them." He leaned in ever so slightly. "But if you should feel the need for a

respite, I understand the duke's library has been a haven for ladies to rest their dancing slippers.”

Before she could consider if his suggestion was appropriate or an indecent proposal, he had moved on to greet her father.

“The Marquess and Marchioness of Stratford. Lady Honoria Bell and Lord Nash Talbot.”

Adalyn's head jerked toward the entrance at Burrows' announcement, her heart giving a hard thump against her ribcage. No longer forcing the smile to her lips, she turned back and greeted Oliver's parents, Lord and Lady Trentwith.

Perhaps that's how Maggie managed. With Harry by her side, all she had to do was think of him, sneak a glance, brush his hand, and the happiness she felt would radiate on her face.

“Dr. Somersby has spoken of you both often. It's a pleasure to finally meet you,” she said. “I'm especially honored since your son stated you rarely attend social events such as this.”

Lord Trentwith nodded. “Oliver assured us we would be among friends. But I hope you will forgive me if I don't request a dance. I rarely leave my wife's side.” He gazed at Lady Trentwith with adoration. It was no wonder. Her beauty was truly captivating.

Likewise, the love shining in Lady Trentwith's eyes indicated she was equally devoted to her elegant, handsome husband. “Nonsense, Charles. I shall be fine. Oliver and Camilla are here to keep me company should you wish to dance—or visit the card room.” Added to the love, a touch of mischief sparkled in her brown eyes.

Oliver appeared to be a perfect combination of his parents, both physically and temperamentally. Adalyn had witnessed his serious side with his patients, as well as his playful side with his children and wife. He told her once that he often felt as if he were wearing a mask—one that, although remaining part of him, kept the most private parts of him hidden.

Oliver's words had her thinking of Nash. Did he use a mask to hide a private, perhaps painful, part of himself? And would he trust her enough to remove it and allow her to see all of him?

With luck, she might find out that very night.

Anticipation bubbled in her veins like champagne as he approached.

Barely able to contain her enthusiasm, she turned her attention to Victor Pratt as he bowed before her.

"Miss Lovelace. If I may say so, blue is most becoming on you." He moved back a step and assessed her. "But that appears to be a shade deeper than the gown you wore at the musicale. Closer to the rich blue of your eyes." He gave an approving nod.

His graceful fingers ran down his chest. "I'd hoped you would choose blue again." Indeed, the blue of his waistcoat almost matched her gown. "We shall make a fine pair on the dance floor. If you would so honor me."

"I would be delighted," she answered, keeping her tone polite and devoid of the eagerness that would come naturally had Lord Nash asked the same question. The last thing she wanted was to give Victor false hope.

She still hadn't spoken to him regarding the impossibility of any meaningful attachment. As a person, she liked him very much, but that was the extent of her feelings. Would it be cowardly to make her interest, or lack thereof, known on the dance floor? Not that she expected any dramatics from Victor. He was the epitome of the renowned English reserve.

Regardless of when she rejected his interest, she would do so gently. Surely a man as attractive and charming as Victor Pratt would recover quickly.

Apparently, he was also perceptive, and a brief shadow passed over his typically congenial face. But as she expected, he didn't press the matter, but bowed and moved on to greet her father.

From the corner of her eye, she stole a glance toward Nash as he stood before Harry. A muscle in Nash's jaw pulsed, but he executed an elegant bow. His voice sounded strained as he greeted his host. "Your Grace."

The light touch on her elbow drew her attention toward her father on her right. He nodded his head, indicating the woman before Adalyn.

*Goodness.* "Forgive me, Lady Stratford." She curtsied, dipping her head, hoping to hide her lovesick expression.

When she rose and met Lady Stratford's gaze, it became clear she had failed completely.



GRATEFUL HE'D ONLY EATEN A LIGHT SUPPER, NASH WANTED to cast up his accounts on Ashton's boots. Having to defer to the man galled. If asked, Nash would never have imagined he'd stoop so low in order to pursue one woman.

But, by god, Adalyn looked beautiful. The moment he entered the room and their eyes locked, his stomach flipped. And, Christ, he'd even felt lightheaded. He wanted to curse himself for acting like a green boy instead of a man of five-and-thirty. He needed to get her out of his system or she would destroy him.

Ashton's eyes narrowed. "I trust you remember our conversation, Lord Nash."

The same height as the man before him, Nash met Ashton's gaze with defiance. "My *memory* is exceptional, Your Grace." The bite at the last two words knifed at him.

Tension tightened between them. Like an unbreakable, rigid tether, their past both linked them and kept them apart.

He stepped aside to greet Margaret. The terror that had always lived within her eyes when George was alive had lessened considerably, but a flash of it sparked when Nash greeted her.

And unlike Ashton's response, Margaret's wounded him. He hated that not only his association with George had caused her pain, but his own reprehensible behavior had harmed her. Her gloved hand trembled slightly as she extended it.

Taking it gently and bowing over it, he did his best to soften his voice. "It was most gracious of Your Grace to include me, and if I may say so, you look especially lovely this evening."

From the corner of his eye, Nash caught Ashton's posture stiffen, so he quickly released Margaret's hand. Even with the animosity Nash held against the man, he had to admit Ashton loved his wife, and she him. George had only viewed her as a prize and possession to be used as he wished, whereas Ashton treasured her.

Nash sensed more than saw Adalyn observing the exchange. For good measure, and perhaps a bit of self-serving platitude, he added, "Marriage to your new husband agrees with you. As I stated several years ago, it appears all you needed was the right man. I'm pleased you have found him."

As much as he wished to gauge Adalyn's reaction, it was Ashton's that held Nash's attention. The man blinked—twice—then gave a subtle shake to his head as if to clear it.

Margaret, too, appeared nonplussed by the statement. "I—I—as am I, Lord Nash."

Wondrous possibilities for the evening awaited as Nash stepped forward to greet Adalyn. He bowed before her. "Miss Lovelace."

When she slipped her hand into his, even through their gloves, a current of energy sparked between them. "Lord Nash." Her gaze dipped to his waistcoat. "A striking color."

Careful to keep his voice low, he said, "I'm glad it pleases you. Dare I hope you will save a place on your dance card for me? I'm told I waltz divinely." Although he would relish any opportunity to dance with her, he longed to hold her in his arms and spin her around the dance floor.



The radiance of her smile seeped under his skin, warming him from the inside out. “I shall make a point of it.”

Reluctantly, he released her hand. After greeting Adalyn’s father, he joined Honoria and her parents. The queue for the receiving line waned, with Andrew Weatherby and his wife the last to greet their hosts.

Notes from the orchestra sounded from the dais as musicians tuned their instruments. Hues of blues and purples floated through Nash’s mind.

As Adalyn entered the ballroom on her father’s arm, a line of men formed to claim a place on her dance card. In order to keep up appearances, Nash scratched the letter *N* on Honoria’s card for the first and fourth set. Under her father’s watchful eye, he said loudly enough, “With your permission, my lady, may I request a dance from our hosts’ guest of honor?”

Honoria followed suit. “That is an excellent idea, and most thoughtful of you, sir.”

Nash bowed and joined the ever-growing queue of gentlemen requesting Adalyn’s favor.

A low growl formed in his chest as Victor Pratt signed Adalyn’s card.

“Who would have thought an American would garner so much attention?” Felix Davies’ tenor voice sounded from behind Nash.

Nash turned, prepared to give the man a warning glare, but Davies’ expression appeared indifferent as he examined his well-manicured nails.

“Then why are you waiting to request a dance, Davies?”

The wicked glint in the man’s eyes chilled Nash’s blood. He was familiar with the thoughts precipitating that look.

With an insouciant shrug, Davies said, “Because I’ve never tugged an American. I’m curious if it might be different. A bit of flattery and dancing tends to loosen a woman’s morals.”

Every fiber of Nash’s being signaled a warning, and he wanted to grab the man by the throat and squeeze until the

smug look vanished. But doing so would surely have him thrown from Ashton's home forthwith, leaving Adalyn unprotected from vultures like Davies. Besides, he had his own sullied reputation to maintain.

Reining in his anger, he feigned his own indifference. "A tup is a tup. Besides, would you really want to bring the wrath of the duke upon your head? From what I understand, he's quite protective of his attractive guest."

Davies muttered something about the duke's own interest in Adalyn, but it barely registered in Nash's mind as the man before him moved aside, leaving him face-to-face with Adalyn.

"Is there room on your dance card for me?" he asked, unable to keep the eagerness from his voice.

"Let me see . . ." She made a show of studying the list, then peered up at him, her lashes fluttering seductively.

He hadn't thought she had a flirtatious nature, but he admitted he liked this side of her.

She held her card up to him, then leaned in to whisper, "It seems I have *Lord Nash* written for the waltz."

So she did, the little minx. "Well, that is most interesting. It's exactly the dance I hoped to secure." Unable to make out the jumble of other names, he noticed two blank lines. "Might I be so bold as to request an additional dance as well?"

She handed him her card, and he scribbled his letter *N* on the first available line.

When he gave it back, he kept his voice low. "Perhaps add someone else to that last remaining dance and inform Lord Davies standing behind me that your card is full."

The delicate curve of her brow arched upward, but she gave a subtle nod, her pencil moving across the paper.

After bowing, he took his leave. "I shall look forward to our dances with the utmost eagerness." For once in his life, the words weren't a mere formality to be polite or to further work his way under a woman's skirts.

Moments later, the orchestra opened with bright notes, announcing the quadrille. Nash escorted Honoria to the dance floor. Couples lined up in neat rows beside them, greeting each other with elegant bows and graceful curtsies. Adalyn partnered with Ashton, and Nash loathed how she gazed at his nemesis with such fondness.

Not close enough to allow the cross pairing of partners, Nash's jealousy shifted to Victor Pratt, who had partnered with Montgomery's sister, Miranda, but secured a place next to Adalyn and Ashton. When Victor brushed fingers with Adalyn during the pass, Nash stumbled momentarily. He cursed under his breath. Normally, for a big man, he was known for being extraordinarily light on his feet.

Honoria whispered, "Is all well, Lord Nash?"

He nodded, and although he did his best to keep his attention on his partner, his gaze continued to shift toward Adalyn.

At last, the blasted dance finished. When he and Honoria returned to the edge of the ballroom, Timothy Marbry approached and requested a dance with Honoria, leaving Nash to his thoughts.

"The card room awaits," Stratford said. "May I trust you to attend to the ladies, sir?"

Nash forced a smile. "But of course."

He darted a glance to the couples positioning themselves on the dance floor and almost wilted with relief that Adalyn partnered with Viscount Montgomery. As lovesick as the man was over his own wife, he would perform the dance merely as a duty to his friendship with the duke.

Lady Stratford stood quietly next to him, a sad longing in her eyes.

"May I have the honor of this dance, my lady?"

Honoria's mother's blue eyes widened, and her lips parted slightly. She took his proffered hand. "I would be delighted."

Nash made a point of locating Ashton as he escorted the marchioness onto the dance floor, taking great satisfaction at the same shock on Ashton's face that he'd witnessed on Lady Stratford's. He made no stumbling moves during the simple English country dance.

When they finished, she fanned herself. "My daughter is lucky to have such an accomplished dancer as a suitor, Lord Nash."

"You flatter me, my lady. But like everyone born into society, I received dancing instruction at an early age."

"I'm surprised that both the waltz *and* the laendler are on the program this evening."

Nash struggled to remember the odd dance he'd claimed on Adalyn's dance card. If it was indeed the laendler, he counted himself lucky. He'd learned the traditional steps while in Austria on his grand tour.

Lady Stratford's fan swished. "I heard from Lady Easton that the duchess requested the laendler specifically. It seems it became a favorite of hers when she and the duke were in Germany for their wedding. It's quite romantic, perhaps rivaling the scandalous waltz."

On that, the marchioness was correct, and he counted the moments until the time arrived for the sixth set.

The orchestra called a small intermission after the fourth set, and as the ladies excused themselves to seek out the retiring room, Nash made his way to the card room to pass the time.

As predictable as rainy weather in London, Lord Harcourt sat at a table across from Lord Stratford. Lord Easton sat on Harcourt's left with Felix Davies on his right.

"Have they run you off already, Talbot?" Stratford asked.

"The orchestra is taking a respite, as are the ladies."

Stratford rose and stretched. "It appears they are wiser than I. Harcourt has taken enough of my money for one evening. If you would excuse me."

The three men remaining at the table watched Nash with imploring eyes, nodding in approval when he settled himself in Stratford's vacated seat.

Felix Davies chuckled as he watched Lord Stratford exit the room. "It's a good thing he left when he did. Any more losses and he would gamble away Lady Honoria's dowry, which would be bad news for you, Nash."

Surprised, but pleased to find Davies had not stayed in the ballroom, Nash brushed off the intended slight, instead delivering his own. "No ladies willing to subject themselves to your *charms* this evening, Davies? I thought you were going to request a dance from Miss Lovelace."

Davies snorted in disgust. "The chit's card was already filled. No doubt every man was merely trying to get in the good graces of the duke."

For the second time that evening, Nash tamped down the urge to plant the man a facer.

"I disagree," Harcourt said, shuffling the cards. "From what my daughter and son-in-law say and from my own observations, she's not only lovely, but intelligent. Oliver says she's been a great help at the clinic. Shame her sex prevents her from practicing medicine fully."

To Nash's surprise, even Easton contributed to Adalyn's defense. "As much as I hate to admit it, Harcourt's right. My daughter-in-law reminds me every chance she gets that the world suffers from women's inability to pursue their talents to the greatest of their ability."

Davies rolled his eyes. "I'm shocked Montgomery hasn't brought his wife firmer into hand. I would never tolerate such a shocking display of vocal dissent."

Nash sent him his best smirk. "Which may be why you're still unmarried, Davies. I admire an intelligent woman who's not afraid to speak her mind."

Davies laughed. "Which may be why *you're* still unmarried. I'm sure any woman you would pursue who speaks her mind would tell you to go to the devil. No one likes you,

Nash. *No one.* Oh, we tolerate you well enough”—he motioned to the card table—“to take your money, but I suspect that Easton here would think twice before allowing you to court Lady Miranda. You’re fortunate Stratford is desperate after that debacle with Marbry.”

“That’s enough, Davies.” Trentwith’s voice boomed from the entry of the room, fury flashing in his ice-blue eyes.

Nash had witnessed the same anger on Trentwith’s face when he arrived to stop an unruly mob from hanging his son.

Davies grunted and scooped up his money, rising and pushing his chair away from the table so forcefully, it fell over onto the carpet with a *thud*.

The two men glared at each other for a moment before Davies brushed past the earl and, thankfully, left the room.

Trentwith righted the chair and took Davies’ place at the table. His gaze shifted to Nash. “It’s not true, you know.” He placed a five-pound note on the table and received markers from Harcourt. “My son owes a great debt to you, as do I on his behalf.”

Nash shifted uncomfortably, not keen to be recognized for the part he played in Oliver Somersby’s rescue.

Trentwith studied him for a moment. “But even though I like you, that’s not to say I’m not happy to take your money. Now, let’s play cards.”

And for one of the few times in his life, Nash felt like he had a friend.

## CHAPTER 20—LESSONS



Ever since Nash had written his name next to the laendler, Adalyn was practically breathless with anticipation. No other man had requested that particular dance, instead opting for one of the quadrilles. She'd feared he had promised it to Lady Honoria.

True, there was a remaining quadrille on her dance card for the ninth set, but he had not hesitated securing the first available spot.

Maggie had taught her the dance, and she'd practiced with Harry. Like the waltz, she found it quite intimate, requiring a great deal of touching, and she understood why Maggie and Harry loved it so much.

Quiet settled over the ballroom, replacing its previously charged energy. People had wandered off during the orchestra's much deserved intermission. From bits of conversation, Adalyn gathered the men sought out the card room or billiards room, whereas the ladies planned to rest their tired slippers.

Parched, Adalyn stopped at the refreshment table for some lemonade before taking her leave to the retiring room to join the other ladies. She sipped the beverage's perfect blend of tart and sweet.

"Miss Lovelace," a male voice sounded behind her.

She spun around, her lemonade sloshing against Victor Pratt's coat sleeve. "Oh, dear. I beg your pardon."

A footman hurriedly handed Victor a serviette.

Victor dabbed at the wet spot. “It’s quite all right. It won’t be the first time something has spilled on this poor coat, nor do I expect it to be the last.” His usual carefree demeanor seemed off, and his gaze shifted around the practically deserted room before returning to meet hers. “Would you take a turn around the room with me?”

She wanted to say ‘No,’ but she remembered her vow to inform him of the impossibility of anything more than friendship between them. “Very well. I suppose with the servants present, we don’t need a chaperone.” A flush of heat flooded her face with the thought that she would be less concerned about propriety had a similar request come from Lord Nash.

Unfortunately, Victor took her blush as encouragement, and his eyes and smile brightened. “If it makes you more comfortable, I will ask my sister to join us.”

Goodness, but her slippers pinched her toes, and she just wished to sit down. “No, no. Please don’t bother her. If she is anything like me, she is probably in the ladies’ retiring room resting her feet.”

He chuckled. “Cilla loves to dance. But I promise not to keep you terribly long. I believe I have the honor of the next set when we resume, and I would be a most insensitive partner if I didn’t allow you to revive yourself beforehand.”

With slow steps, they began circling the ballroom’s perimeter. Adalyn held her breath, anxious about what Victor wished to say and reluctant to voice her own sentiments.

“Miss Lovelace.” A slight tremor sounded in Victor’s typically confident voice. “It cannot have escaped your notice that I have developed—”

She held up her hand. “Mr. Pratt, please don’t go any further.”

A troubled furrow creased his brow. “I beg your pardon?”

“If you were planning to say what I think you were, I wish to save us both embarrassment. Please understand that as much as I admire you and value our friendship, I am not



seeking any permanent attachment here. I plan to return to Boston with my father in a little more than a month.”

Victor’s blue eyes blinked. Once. Twice. “I thought . . . I don’t understand.”

Adalyn expected him to be angry, accuse her of leading him on. Instead, he simply appeared hurt.

She would have preferred anger. Anger would have at least assuaged her guilt.

“Is there someone else? Back home in Boston, perhaps?”

How could she answer and remain truthful? Of course, there was someone else. But as much as she was drawn to Lord Nash, the obstacles preventing a lasting and happy relationship were too great. “No. No one back home. But that is where I belong. As lovely as all this has been.” She touched his still damp coat sleeve. “And it *has* been lovely. This is not my home. Even though I can’t practice medicine fully in Boston, I have a place there by my father’s side.”

“But the duke. He would welcome you at his clinic.”

Oh, Victor was such a dear, sweet man. Her heart tugged at the pleading expression on his face. “You are in line to inherit, are you not? You deserve a wife dedicated to you, supporting you in your endeavors. Not one who would stir scandal and gossip and seek her own fulfillment through an occupation.”

“I fear you do not give me credit, dear lady. I am made of stronger stock. And my family has already seen its share of scandal and survived.”

This was not going well at all. Try as she might to skirt the issue and hope he would bow out gracefully, she decided it was time for the truth. “And the woman you marry will be lucky to have you as her husband. But it is not I. If I ever marry—and in truth, I doubt I will—it will be for love. And as much as I like you—admire you—I do not love you, Mr. Pratt.”

His mouth twisted at the corner in a wry smile that did not meet his eyes. “I give you Americans credit for your

bluntness.” He exhaled and gazed around the room. “My sister tried to tell me as much, but fool that I am, I failed to listen.”

“I should have said something sooner. I’m so sorry.”

“No, no. You have done nothing to make me think you wanted anything other than friendship. In hindsight, I see that.”

“There is someone worthy of you, sir. I fully believe that.”

He nodded, his wan smile fading. “Now, go rest your feet, so you are ready for our next dance.” He stopped and met her gaze directly. “As friends.”

Guilt and relief mixed in her chest as Adalyn made her way to the ladies’ retiring room. Surely, he didn’t believe himself to be in love with her? Although their time together had been pleasant, it had been superficial. How could you love someone if you didn’t even know who they truly were?

Her mind drifted again to Nash as it was wont to do each time she pondered the subject of love. The conversation they’d had at the gallery, his knowing gaze after Mena’s rescue, his concern over Mena’s future when he’d confronted her about Harry’s motives. All probed deep into her psyche and heart.

Mere glimpses—fleeting and vague—she believed were flashes of his true self. With them, a sense that Nash carried a deep pool of pain brimming barely beneath the surface—the water making it murky and hard to distinguish clearly.

Did she have the courage to reach down, to pull it out and examine it fully?

Or, like with Benjamin, would her panic and fear of failure allow it to sink back down, never to surface again?

As she entered the retiring room, Priscilla rushed forward. “There you are! Victor said he planned to speak with you. Did you see him?” Priscilla’s blue eyes, although not unfriendly, called Adalyn to task.

Adalyn could only nod.

“And?” Priscilla pulled her to the side, away from where the other ladies chattered excitedly.

“I’m afraid I was rather blunt.” She sent Priscilla a watery smile. “He said so himself. I interrupted what I believe he meant to be a proposal. I told him I don’t love him and have no plans to remain here in England.”

Priscilla studied her. “How did he take it?”

“Well, I think. It’s hard to tell with you English.” She smiled, hoping she had not ruined what she believed was a true and lasting friendship. “Except for you. I think you are a rarity among ladies of your station.”

Her lips quirked. “So my husband reminds me daily. Often to his dismay.”

“Do you hate me?” Adalyn held her breath.

“Of course not. You can’t help whom you love—or don’t love. I know that well.” Priscilla darted a glance toward the other ladies, still occupied with their nattering. “What about Lord Nash?”

Adalyn allowed her body to drop to a reclining sofa. “I don’t know.”

Priscilla joined her. “I feel badly for Lady Honoria, caught in the middle again. Goodness knows I owe her a debt I can never repay.”

“She has been a good friend to me—as have you.”

Priscilla appeared to ponder things for a moment, gazing off into the distance. “Although she assured me she has no interest in Nash, she deserves someone who loves her.” She returned her attention to Adalyn. “Five years ago, I would never have believed it if you had told me I would be so concerned about the happiness of others. But I am. Love makes me want to see everyone as happy as I am.”

She gave Priscilla’s hands a squeeze. “You are a good person—and a good friend.”

They sat in silence for some time, and Adalyn wondered if she would ever experience the type of love that changed her view of the entire world.

A maid appeared at the entrance to the room announcing that the ball would recommence shortly.

Her weary feet now rested, Adalyn made her way back into the ballroom. A flash of something pink moved from behind a potted plant, catching her eye and piquing her curiosity. Beneath the pink fabric, a pair of bare feet peeked out.

Adalyn approached slowly, keeping her footsteps as silent as possible. “Mena?”



NASH WAS ABOUT TO GATHER HIS LATEST WINNINGS WHEN Victor Pratt stumbled into the card room. The man looked positively devastated.

Lord Easton spoke the words Nash suspected they were all thinking. “Good god, man. What happened?”

Victor shook his head and headed for the duke’s best brandy.

“Must be a woman,” Harcourt said. “It’s always a woman.”

“Especially at a ball,” Trentwith added, nodding.

Had Adalyn finally dissuaded the man? Nash rose from the table. “If you would excuse me, gentlemen. Thank you for your contributions.” He grinned at the three men while he patted his pocket holding their vowels. Once he collected, the amount would inch him closer to his targeted goal.

“Mind if I join you?” Nash grabbed the decanter and poured himself a drink.

Victor side-eyed him. “Help yourself. As you always do.”

Of course, Nash would be glad to have Victor out of the way, but the boy—and he really was only a boy in Nash’s estimation—appeared so forlorn. “Is Harcourt correct? If so, no woman is worth being so miserable.” As soon as he uttered the words, Nash doubted the truth of them.

“How would you know?” Victor snapped. “When have you ever been in love?”

Nash raised the glass of amber liquid to his lips, taking a languorous sip before responding. “Never, I admit. But if that’s what love does to you, I shall leave it to others.”

He watched Victor down a full glass of liquor in one long gulp. “Slow down or you’ll have a sore head in addition to a broken heart.” He placed his hand on Victor’s arm. “How old are you, Pratt?”

“Twenty-six.”

Nash snorted a laugh and received a fiery glare from Victor. “A babe in swaddling still. Why rush into something when there’s so much of life to taste and enjoy? Do you really want to be relegated to the same dish night after night?”

Victor hung his head. “I didn’t use to. But with her . . .”

“From your behavior”—Nash motioned toward the empty crystal glass in Victor’s hand—“my guess is she doesn’t feel the same.”

“No.”

Nash placed a hand on Victor’s shoulder, feeling somewhat magnanimous even though he’d wanted to strangle the man earlier in the evening. “Then wait for the woman who does.”

A footman appeared at the entrance of the room. “Excuse me, gentlemen. The ball will recommence in ten minutes.”

Removing the glass from Victor’s hand, Nash said, “Go. Find another lady to flirt with. It will make you feel better.”

The sad smile Victor sent him spoke volumes. “My next set is to be with her. As a friend.” With that, Victor lumbered from the card room.

The three other men at the table rose.

“I best get back to Sabina,” Trentwith said. “Oliver told me he intends to dance with Camilla once and then whisk her away back home.”

Harcourt's face contorted. "Say no more, Trentwith. I'd prefer to remain ignorant of my daughter's love life." He paused, a smile appearing on his face. "Although Pockets and Eva have been requesting a baby brother."

"Not Victoria?" Trentwith asked, amusement coloring his voice.

"No. She says she has one of each and there is no need for more children since they have her and she's perfection."

Trentwith bellowed a laugh. "That sounds like my granddaughter." He patted Harcourt on the back as the two left the room in tandem. Easton nodded once at Nash and then followed them.

Did all men become so addle-pated over women?

He strode back toward the ballroom, eager for the sixth set when he could finally dance with Adalyn.

Barely at the entrance to the room, he halted. As if he conjured her by mere thought, Adalyn stood inside the room, addressing a . . . potted plant? "Mena?"

The mention of the girl's name grabbed Nash's attention.

Leaves rustled on the plant, and blue eyes peered out between the branches.

Adalyn placed her hands on her hips. "Come out from there. It's late."

Mena stepped from behind the plant, her chagrined expression so comical, he bit back the laugh.

With a sternness he didn't know she possessed, Adalyn confronted the girl. "Why are you out of bed?"

Nash leaned against the door frame, arms crossed over his chest. Eager to hear the waif's explanation, but not wishing to interrupt, he silently observed the scene unfold.

"I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Tha's all."

"Not planning on stealing anything?"

The girl shook her head. “Just wanted to see the dancing. I could hear bits of the music from my room. When it stopped, I figured it was safe to sneak down and watch. I don’t expect I’ll ever get to see anything so fine again.” She grinned up at Adalyn. “But if a lady happens to drop one of them fancy baubles ...”

Nash watched in amusement as Adalyn’s stern expression melted away.

Laughter bubbling from her, Adalyn opened her arms, beckoning the girl in. “You are one of a kind, Miss Mena.”

The love on Adalyn’s face as she embraced the child knifed Nash in the chest, reminding him of the promise he made to himself years ago. Clearly, Adalyn desired to have a family of her own one day, and she would make a marvelous mother.

Something he could not—would not give her. Even if his intentions toward her were completely honorable, how could he marry her if he refused to give her that which would make her happy? Quickly, he pushed the idea of marriage aside, admonishing himself for even thinking it, and thanking the stars above he wasn’t a lovesick pup like Victor Pratt.

He wanted Adalyn. There was no doubt. A strange connection had grown between them, but he assured himself it was merely a remnant of the strong physical attraction they both undeniably felt.

“The duke won’t be happy if he sees you milling around his guests,” Adalyn said.

“Can’t I stay and watch just one dance? I want to know what it’s like.”

Nash straightened from his position at the door. “Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

Adalyn’s head snapped toward him, her smile broadening. “Dragging her back to bed? I doubt Harry would appreciate you roaming the halls of the living quarters.” She sent him a saucy grin. “Particularly the bedchambers.”

“Nothing like that, I assure you. But perhaps if I gave Miss Mena a bit of dancing instruction, it might appease her curiosity.”

The girl’s eyes widened, and a light blush rose to her cheeks. “I’ve learned a little with Manny, but he keeps stepping on my toes. I think he does it on purpose.”

Nash failed to restrain his laugh. “I remember doing the same as a young lad before I grew to appreciate a lady’s charms.”

“But he doesn’t step on Victoria’s toes when we practice with her. I think he’s sweet on her.” Mena screwed up her face in disgust. “She’s prissy. I bet she couldn’t pick a pocket if her life depended on it.”

The truth behind Mena’s words slammed him in the chest. Mena’s life most likely had depended on her thievery for many years. “A fact her father is no doubt grateful for.” He held out his hands. “Now, shall we begin before the crowds descend upon us?”

“There ain’t . . . I mean, there *isn’t* any music.”

“No?” Nash cocked his head dramatically. “You don’t hear that?” He hummed a favorite of his, one he remembered learning to dance to as a boy.

Mena clapped her hands, jumping up and down. “I know that one!”

“Then you know there is no jumping—at least not in that manner. Now, shall we begin?” He bowed before her while she performed a rather clumsy version of a curtsy, then he began to hum once more.

His gloved hands nearly engulfed the child’s as they clasped hers. He sang the directions to her, never missing a beat or a note. “Two steps to the right. Now to the left. Right, two steps, hop.” He continued on and found Mena surprisingly quick to follow, only stumbling against him and trodding on his feet twice.

They finished the dance accompanied by enthusiastic applause. After he bowed once more to the child, receiving a



somewhat less clumsy curtsy in return, he turned toward their audience.

Others had joined Adalyn to view the lesson. Camilla Somersby stood by her husband's side and gazed at Nash as if she'd never before seen his face. Lady Worthington appeared aghast, and Nash wasn't certain if the expression on Cordelia's face was surprise or disgust. But when he finally turned his attention to the one person who mattered most, he realized he had not prepared himself adequately.

Intense emotion lit Adalyn's eyes—the mix of admiration, affection, and appreciation morphing and changing the more he stared into the blue depths.

With speed to rival his best horse, he pulled his gaze away. “Now. Off to bed with you before the duke catches you down here spying on his guests.”

Mena smiled coyly and, with a rather uncharacteristic shyness, gave a little wave of goodbye to the onlookers, diverting attention from him. He would try to thank her later for returning the favor of his rescue with her own, although the girl would not understand what she had rescued him from.

As the crowd dispersed, Adalyn touched his sleeve. “That was . . . so gallant.”

He bellowed a laugh, drawing the meager crowd's attention yet again. “Gallantry had nothing to do with it. The girl wanted to know what it was like to attend a ball, and the only way to get her to return to her room was to show her with her own experience.”

Adalyn studied him, her incredible blue eyes probing deep.

Unease crept up his neck like a thousand marching ants, and he pulled his gaze away.

She gave a little tsking sound. “Deny it if you must. But know this, Lord Nash. I see you for who you truly are.”

And that's what worried him the most.

## CHAPTER 21—THE HARD TRUTH



“Ready for our dance, Miss Lovelace?” Victor Pratt’s voice jolted Adalyn out of her stupor, and her gaze darted from Nash to Victor, then back to Nash.

Nash’s dark eyes flickered with amusement—and was that pity?—as he glanced at Victor. Did Nash know what had transpired between her and Victor earlier? He bowed to both of them. “Miss Lovelace. Mr. Pratt. I shall leave you to it.”

When Nash turned and walked away, Adalyn stared at the broad plane of his back, strong shoulders, trim waist and hips, and long well-muscled legs. A contented sigh escaped her lips.

Good gracious, had she truly perused the man from top to bottom in such a lascivious fashion?

A strangled cough sounded from behind. “Miss Lovelace?”

Good heavens, but Victor appeared so tightly wound she worried he might snap in two with the slightest breeze. “Mr. Pratt. Please don’t feel obligated to honor our dance commitment. I will understand if you wish to bow out.”

A blond eyebrow hitched. “Do you wish me to?”

“Only if you so desire.”

“Then we shall dance. I will consider it one final opportunity to enjoy the pleasure of your company.” He paused, studying her. “As friends.”

“Will we cease to be friends after the dance?”

“I expect with your imminent return to America, we will no longer have the opportunity even for that. Even if you were to remain, I would find it difficult to settle for friendship.” His lips quirked up in the corner in a sad but rakish smile. “But at the moment, I have no desire to court gossip. A gentleman must keep up appearances, must he not?”

“Then let us not provide the wagging tongues any fodder.” She took his hand as he led her to the dance floor.

The warmth Victor had exuded earlier in the evening all but vanished, and although he performed the steps of the quadrille with grace and perfection, he barely met her gaze throughout, focusing on her right ear instead.

Relieved when the dance ended, she curtsied and thanked him.

He bowed before her. “Be happy in whatever . . . whomever you choose, Miss Lovelace.” His gaze moved to the side of the room where Nash chatted with Priscilla. “But I also urge you to take care.”

With that, he was gone, his back straight and his blond head held high. A perfect example of British dignity.

Before she had time to succumb to the oily guilt coiling in her stomach, Nash’s deep voice sent gooseflesh skittering up her arms. “Is all well, Miss Lovelace?”

She spun on her heel, expecting to find his lips curled in amusement. Instead, understanding shone in his eyes.

She shook her head. “I’ve wounded Mr. Pratt. Unintentionally, I assure you. I stopped him from declaring his feelings, telling him we could be no more than friends.”

“I suspected as much when he stumbled into the card room, his usual ebullient manner most forlorn.”

“Will he return to his typically joyous self?”

Nash studied her as if carefully weighing his words. “Eventually. How quickly and to what degree depends on the depth of his feelings.”

“I don’t think he truly loves me. He doesn’t even know me—not really.”

“As an artist, perhaps he’s more in love with the idea of love, the agony and ecstasy of it. I imagine the pain he’s feeling will inspire some rather intriguing paintings.”

“Like the one of the ship tossed at sea in the gallery?”

Ever so slightly, Nash recoiled as if his whole body blinked at her question. His gaze darted away, his mouth forming a taut line. When he finally turned his attention back to her, it was as if she’d imagined his discomfort. “I expect his painting might be more on the order of large-eyed puppies.”

The answer so unexpected, a bubble of laughter burst forth at the image it conjured. Heads turned in her direction. Too late, she raised a hand to stifle her amusement. “Lord Nash, that is not very . . . kind.”

With liquid grace, he gave a shrug of one shoulder. “I’ve never claimed to be kind, especially when it comes to a rival.” He leaned closer, his breath brushing against her skin as gently as a kiss, and his spicy, sensual scent teasing her nose. “Besides, it made you smile. I consider that a fair price for an insult the man didn’t even hear.” He held out his arm. “Now, I believe it’s time for our first dance.”

Warmth flowed into her belly, low and delicious, as she placed her hand atop his. Candlelight in the room suddenly seemed to glow brighter. The air around them vibrated with possibility. Several other couples joined them on the dance floor, among them Harry and Maggie. Fewer dancers chose to participate, and Harry’s concerned gaze landed on her as she took her place in front of Nash.

“Don’t worry about him,” Nash said. “Keep your eyes on me.”

That wouldn’t be a problem. In fact, Nash was not only all Adalyn could see. As the music began and he took her hands in his, he was all she could think about.



NASH'S BODY HUMMED AS HE LED ADALYN TO THE DANCE floor. Her presence electrified him, and touching her only intensified the sensation.

Of course, it could have been the fact that they seemed to be the center of attention. Ashton practically shot a warning glare in his direction. Cordelia partnered with Felix Davies and sent Nash a smug look over her shoulder as if to say, '*You could be dancing with me, you fool.*'

Apparently, she had not understood his message earlier that he no longer had interest in her *charms*. She had been nothing more than a warm body in his bed. In retrospect, relief had settled over him when he ended their relationship. She had come dangerously close to discovering his secret.

And Cordelia loved nothing more than to have information she could hold over others.

But as he gazed at Adalyn's quiet beauty, her eyes sparkling with intelligence and compassion—something Cordelia sorely lacked—he knew the truth. It wasn't so much that Cordelia held no power over him, but that Adalyn did.

The last time he'd completely trusted someone, he'd been a green lad of thirteen.

And it had gone horribly wrong.

He darted another glance toward Ashton, who was smiling at his wife and no longer preoccupied with him.

Soft strands of music floated through the air. In perfect time, they moved through the steps as if they'd danced together for ages. He'd known she was graceful from watching her with Pratt and her various other partners throughout the evening, but with him, it was as if they had become one person. When their hands briefly parted, he felt bereft—missing a part of himself, floundering in the storm like the ship in the painting, recovering only when her fingers slid into his and completed him once again.

Heat seeped through his gloves as his fingers touched hers—palm against palm. Each point of contact seared him with awareness of her nearness, but also agony that he was not nearly close enough. Insidious and suffusing, it burrowed under his skin and wove throughout his whole body, melting away his carefully crafted defenses. Every movement he made, that she made, became his sole focus, as if all else around them faded into nothing.

As he drew her toward him with their arms extended in the overhead hold, framing their faces mere inches apart, his eyes locked with hers, and the truth—terrifying and raw—slammed into his chest with such force it wrenched all breath from his lungs. Try as he might, he could no longer deny or escape it.

A tender ache swelled in his chest—not unpleasant, but certainly unfamiliar. His knees grew weak, and his breath hitched.

*No! No, no, no, no no!*

He loved her.

Desperately.

Unconditionally.

Eternally.

And it would destroy him.

He shook his head and pulled away without a word, leaving her standing partnerless on the dance floor. The confused look on her face burned into his mind, condemning him.

Whispered voices trailed him as he barreled through the crowds and sought the shelter and safety of the terrace.

He needed air.

He needed space.

He needed . . . her.

*Fool!*

He'd had her, and he'd let her go. Embarrassed her in front of the duke's guests and brought more scathing gossip upon himself.

Grasping the railing of the terrace wall that looked out onto the impeccably manicured ducal gardens, Nash pulled great gulps of air and gazed into the dark night, hoping to find answers to his dilemma.

His hand shook as he raked it through his hair. How could he have let himself become so vulnerable? To allow her to burrow and take root so deep in his heart? It was only meant to be a dalliance, a pleasant diversion with a woman who actually seemed to like him—for him.

Nothing more.

But also nothing less.

Unlike Cordelia, he liked Adalyn. Respected her. Admired her. He yearned to be in her presence, to spend time with her for more than physical pleasure—even though, many a night, he'd fantasized about that possibility.

He'd been so close to slaking that thirst, appeasing that hunger for a connection with her. Then, satisfied, he could let her go.

But now . . . now, he knew one coupling, even two or three, would never be enough.

Why did he have to fall in love with her?

He couldn't allow that. To love her meant he would have to trust her, not only with the good parts of him—few that there were—but the dark parts as well.

And his secret. Christ! If she knew, she would laugh in his face and tell him to go to the devil. For what woman could love someone so worthless?

“Nash?” Soft as a kiss, a woman's voice broke through his self-loathing. Already he knew the timbre of that voice—the soft pastel blue swirled with pink it evoked in his mind. His mother's voice had produced a similar soothing palette.

He refused to turn and face her. Seeing her lovely face would destroy any resolve to end this folly. His throat thick with emotion, he croaked his response. “Adalyn, go back inside. It’s not proper to be alone with me out here.”

“I’m not alone. Mrs. Marbry is with me.”

He pulled in another fortifying gulp of air, then reluctantly turned to face her.

Light from the brazier torches flickered across her face, casting a soft glow over it in the moonlight. Lord, but she was beautiful. She took a step forward, her movements tentative. “Are you unwell?”

Unwell couldn’t begin to encapsulate how he felt. The blossoming ache in his chest spread to every inch of his body.

He wanted to laugh and curse at the same time that he’d called Pratt a lovesick pup. The accuracy of the word mocked him.

He was sick with love. There was no cure for what he felt, only mitigation, and he would never recover. It would eat him alive until there was nothing left. The only thing that would ease the pain and save him was if Adalyn returned his love.

And that would never happen.

Not if she *knew*.

And witnessing disgust—or worse, pity—in her eyes would be a blow too great to bear. Accepting his death sentence with as much dignity as he could muster, he lifted his heavy gaze to hers.

The compassion he witnessed in her eyes battered his chest, leaving him breathless once again. How did men survive this madness?

“Are you? Unwell?” she asked again. “You left so suddenly, and your face seemed flushed.”

He darted a glance over Adalyn’s shoulder. Priscilla stood by the double doors, examining a shrub, although she’d never expressed any interest in horticulture.



Admitting weakness of any kind, whether physical or emotional, was inconceivable, yet he opted for the least offensive. “I needed air. The ballroom is stifling.”

It might have been the flickering torchlight playing tricks on his eyes, but her lips twitched. Regardless if the movement was real or imagined, the unrelenting pull of her exacerbated the ceaseless ache emanating within him. The need to ease it, if only for the moment, overpowered him, and he closed the distance between them until only a whisper remained.

His hands itched to reach for her, to wrap them around the nip of her waist, pull her against him, and feel her heat, smell her citrusy fragrance. His gaze locked in on her lips. “I want to kiss you.”

Her eyes, half-lidded and dusky with desire, met his. “I’d love that,” she whispered.

Slipping one hand around her waist, he pulled her flush against him, while the other caressed her face, tilting it to the perfect angle. His heart pummeled against his sternum as he lowered his head.

Lightly at first, he touched his lips to hers. Sweet. Sweeter than he’d imagined. He nipped and teased, relishing the softness and pliancy of her mouth.

She sagged against him, and he moved his hand from her face to her waist, supporting her before he deepened the kiss.

Lord, but she tasted like heaven, and he almost laughed with the thought it would be nearest he would ever get to that fabled place. He would never get enough of her if he lived a hundred years.

She clung to him, her fingers clutching at his upper arms.

He tore his lips from hers and traced them across her jaw to the spot beneath her ear.

She shivered against him, then released her grip on his arms to run her hands through his hair, driving him mad with desire.

Forgetting where he was, he trailed a path of kisses down her neck toward the creamy swell of her breasts. Her heart, beating like the hooves of a racehorse, pulsed against his lips, and he couldn't contain his satisfaction that the passion surging through him affected her, too.

Priscilla's voice broke through his haze of need. "Someone is coming!"

Mind still foggy and dizzy with desire, he failed to heed Priscilla's cautionary call. He clung tight to Adalyn, refusing to release her.

Until Lord Stratford burst onto the terrace. "So it *is* true!"

Nash stumbled back, breaking the delicious connection and immediately mourning its loss.

Honorina and her mother rushed onto the terrace. "Father!" Honorina's gaze slid toward Nash, the almost imperceptible shake of her head shooting a warning up his spine.

Stratford pushed past Priscilla and strode forward with quicker steps than Nash would have credited him. His gaze locked on Adalyn's gown, the top left of which hung provocatively low on her upper arm, exposing more of her breast than was decent.

When in his haze of desire had he tugged her gown down?

Even in the dim light of the moonlit terrace, he saw Stratford's face redden. "Cover yourself, woman!"

Priscilla rushed to Adalyn's side and pulled up her gown.

"And you!" Stratford turned his ire on Priscilla. "I should have known you would be an accomplice to this."

Nash stepped between Stratford and Priscilla. "Leave her out of this. She's innocent."

"I would hardly use the word innocent in conjunction with Priscilla Pratt."

Priscilla stepped from behind Nash and straightened her shoulders. "It's Priscilla Marbry, if you please."

Nash could hardly deny being caught with Adalyn in his embrace, yet, curiosity at Stratford's words made him ask. "What is true?"

"Eh?" Stratford's ruddy face turned toward him.

"You said, 'So, it is true.' What precisely is true?"

Stratford turned toward his wife. "Lady Stratford overhead some gossip regarding your *interest*"—he pointed at Adalyn—"in this woman."

Nash clenched his jaw, holding back the words that would only make matters worse. Yet he could not tolerate Stratford's disrespect toward Adalyn. "Miss Lovelace has a name. If you're going to impugn her character, have the decency to use it. And for your information, Miss Lovelace is entirely innocent of any wrongdoing, real or imagined."

Stratford would not be dissuaded, and he pointed a finger at Nash's chest. "Be that as it may. Do not call on my daughter again, or I will have you thrown bodily from my home."

"May I enquire as to the source of this unsavory gossip?"

Lady Stratford glanced toward her husband, who gave her a permissive nod. "Lady Worthington. However, it isn't only what I heard, Lord Nash, but what I witnessed with my own eyes. Your expression when you danced with Miss Lovelace was evidence in itself."

Had he really been that obvious to everyone?

Stratford resumed his tirade. "And I arrived in time to confirm it. It would appear, Lord Nash, that you have been making a fool of my daughter. Foolishly, I believed your intentions were honorable. I want better for my daughter than some wastrel who will dally with a mistress on the side."

"Now, see here, Stratford. I will not have you casting aspersions on Miss Lovelace."

Stratford ignored him. "And you, young woman. If this is how Americans conduct themselves, it is fortuitous that England has severed ties with the colonies. However, I must warn you, if you thought to trap someone of the aristocracy

into marriage, you've chosen the wrong man. Not only is he a second son, but I doubt he will behave as a gentleman should and offer for you."

"Strange, but until moments ago, I was good enough for your daughter." Nash regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth.

Lady Stratford teetered in a swoon, and her husband wrapped his arm around her waist to steady her.

"Your brother assured me you had changed your ways. The onus is on me that I was fool enough to believe him."

Still supporting his wife, Stratford turned toward Honoria. "Come. Let us take our leave of this pathetic excuse for a gentleman."

There was little left to do. Nash bowed before Lady Honoria, and when he reached for her hand, Stratford bellowed, "Do not touch her!"

Moisture glistened in Honoria's eyes, but in direct disobedience to her father, she slipped her gloved hand into Nash's. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Forgive me, my lady."

He bowed to Lady Stratford, who remained stalwart by her husband's side, no longer impressed with Nash's charm. How much it must pain her to have her daughter embroiled in scandal yet again.

As the evening devolved around him, Nash wondered what else could go wrong.

Ashton stepped out onto the terrace. His gaze locked with Nash's before he turned to Stratford. "What is going on here?"

"We're leaving, Ashton." He turned back to glare again at Nash. "I would suggest you remove this man from your home forthwith."

After Stratford and his family left, Ashton darted a glance toward Adalyn. "Miss Lovelace, are you unharmed?"

“I’m fine, Harry. We simply became a bit overheated from the dance and came out for some air. Mrs. Marbry remained with us the entire time.”

Overheated. An apt word, cleverly used in the situation. *Well done, Adalyn.* Nash tamped down the urge to laugh at how she disregarded Ashton’s insistence on formality and called him by his Christian name.

Ashton’s eyes narrowed, his mouth in a firm line. “Mrs. Marbry, Miss Lovelace, would you kindly give Lord Nash and me a moment?”

Adalyn darted a concerned glance toward Nash, and he sent her a smile of encouragement. “Go. The duke and I will remain civil.” He turned his attention toward Ashton. “Won’t we?”

“That depends on you,” the self-righteous do-gooder said.

Priscilla tugged Adalyn by the arm, and both re-entered the ballroom.

“I warned you, Nash.” Ashton’s words brought him back to the matter at hand.

“And I have heeded your warning. I have done nothing to ruin your party.”

“Haven’t you? Why were you out here alone with Miss Lovelace? I noticed how you were leering at her.”

Nash clenched his jaw, biting back the words he truly wanted to say. “I wasn’t *leering*. And as Miss Lovelace said, Mrs. Marbry was here the entire time as chaperone.”

Ashton drew a hand through his hair. “I don’t doubt that she was present. It’s her ability to serve as a respectable chaperone that gives me pause. She hasn’t proven to be the most trustworthy of people.”

“Are you so unforgiving, clinging to past wrongs, you refuse to see that she’s changed? She’s happily married. To one of your own doctors. But why should I be surprised? You’ve always been a petty, back-stabbing—”

“Stop!”

Both Nash and Ashton's attention jerked toward Margaret, who entered the terrace in a swoosh of lavender. Rather than fear, as Nash expected, outrage colored her face. "Harry, he's right. Priscilla has changed. Hasn't she proven it with her service at the clinic? She's constantly enquiring about Mena's health and well-being. She's happy. Dr. Marbry is happy. She's repeatedly expressed her regrets over what happened. You must let this mistrust of her go."

Nash sent Ashton a smug grin.

"And you, Lord Nash!" Apparently, Margaret had not finished her chastisement. "Wipe that smile off your face."

My, but she *had* changed. Gone was the woman who cowered in terror from a simple, disapproving look. In fact, she was much like Nash remembered her when they'd first met and before George married her.

She remained by Ashton's side, but she met Nash's gaze directly. "Regardless of Mrs. Marbry's presence, Ashton and I both have cause to be concerned about your intentions toward Miss Lovelace."

Nash itched to remove himself from the interrogation. "What cause? That I danced with her? Conversated with her? Isn't that what guests are supposed to do with guests of honor?"

"Your reputation alone is sufficient to cause us concern," Ashton said. "But Stratford's abrupt departure adds to our suspicions that your intentions, whatever they may be toward Miss Lovelace, are less than honorable. I want you to give me your word, such that it is, that you will cease any pursuit of Miss Lovelace."

The lovely ache that had filled his chest earlier now burned like fire, consuming any gentle feelings he had and torching it to ash with his futile dreams. It was for the best, although he would not admit that to the man in front of him.

"You don't deserve my word, but Miss Lovelace does. Rest assured, Ashton. She shall see no more of me."

He turned and bowed toward Margaret. “Your Grace, I’m truly sorry to have cast such a pall over your lovely party. I pray you’ll forgive me.”

Without a word to Ashton, he strode back toward the ballroom.

Adalyn stood just inside, her eyes filled with questions. She placed a hand on his sleeve, and he burned the feel of it into his memory.

The words crowded on his tongue, unwilling to be released. He forced them out, delivering the blow as gently as he could. “It’s over, Adalyn.”

As he walked through the expanse of the ballroom, people paused. Women whispered behind fluttering fans, men glared, and Cordelia smirked.

He paid them no heed. And as he exited the ducal manor, he remembered he’d ridden to the ball in Stratford’s carriage. Soft rain pattered against his hat as he walked toward Hyde Park to hail a hackney. By the time he climbed into a hired coach, rain had pelted his face. He let out a rusty, bitter laugh that grated across his rib-cage and stung from both the irony and the aptness of it. His whole life he’d done nothing but muck everything up.

Why should falling in love be any different?

## CHAPTER 22—SHATTERED HOPE S



Nash's words ricocheted in Adalyn's mind.

*"It's over, Adalyn."*

How had things changed so quickly? One moment he held her in his arms and they shared the most exquisite kiss, and the next he was striding out of the ballroom. The enchanting evening had transformed into a nightmare.

The whisper of the kiss still lingered on her lips, and she lifted her fingertips to them.

Although the music had resumed, people milled in groups around the dance floor rather than dancing.

Adalyn never enjoyed being the center of attention, much less in such a negative manner. Her stomach still roiled from the way Lord and Lady Stratford glared at her with disapprobation. Yet, Honoria's kind, green eyes spoke an apology as her father directed her none too gently from the ballroom.

Harry and Margaret followed Nash in from the terrace and stood by Adalyn's side. Harry's brow furrowed with what she could only describe as brotherly concern, and Maggie's expression mimicked Honoria's.

But no expression knifed through her greater than Nash's. With surgical precision, the regret and finality in his eyes sliced her heart.

Her father appeared at the entrance of the room, his bright smile fading as he hurried to her side. "What has happened,



my dear?"

How could she answer and not send him charging off to confront Lord Stratford for insulting her?

"That's precisely what I would like to know," Harry said. "I found Adalyn on the terrace with Lord Nash at the same time Lord Stratford announced he and his family were departing. He demanded I remove Nash from the premises."

Her father's worried gaze slid to her. "Were you alone with Lord Nash?"

Careful not to supply any additional information that would incriminate either her or Nash, she answered truthfully. "At no time was I alone with him this evening."

The deep lines between her father's eyes lessened, and he exhaled an audible sigh. "Then what has you so distraught?"

"Does it have something to do with Stratford leaving so suddenly?" Harry asked.

Until that point, Adalyn had always admired Harry's deductive reasoning and analytical skills. But at the moment, she flinched under his knowing gaze.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, carefully choosing her words. "It appears some gossip led Lady Stratford to believe that Lord Nash was pursuing me behind Lady Honoria's back, leading to an end to their courtship."

"And was he?" Harry asked.

"No." At least not behind Lady Honoria's back, but she refused to make matters worse for either Nash or Honoria by sharing that bit of information.

Unable to withstand Harry's scrutinizing stare, she turned toward her father. "As I told Harry, Lord Nash and I merely stepped onto the terrace for some air. Mrs. Marbry accompanied us." Hopefully, Priscilla would corroborate her accounting, but keep the other details to herself.

Dratted men. When she turned back toward Harry, he continued to stare at her.

Refusing to let the matter drop, he said, “Given Nash’s reputation, I can see how Stratford would fall prey to such falsities. Did he say where such gossip originated? If someone is spreading rumors to tarnish your reputation, I wish to deal with it.”

Unbidden, Adalyn’s gaze shifted to where Lady Worthington chatted with Lady Saxton. The smirk on Cordelia’s face condemned her.

Astute, as always, Harry followed Adalyn’s line of sight. “Lady Worthington? It doesn’t surprise me.” His typically gentle features hardened, giving Adalyn a glimpse of the powerful duke he’d kept so carefully hidden. “If you would excuse me.”

Groups of people parted, making way as Harry proceeded toward Lady Worthington with determined steps.

Adalyn turned toward Maggie. “How did he . . .?”

Maggie shrugged a delicate shoulder. “He detests them, but he reads the scandal sheets, more to see if he can mitigate any repercussions for our friends than anything. Not long after you and Daniel arrived, a piece in *The Muckraker* ran at great expense to Cordelia, criticizing both her and Lady Honoria. Something about Lord Nash trading in an old, worn out filly for an unbroken one.”

“So she seeks revenge using Adalyn?” her father asked.

Adalyn remembered Nash’s private encounter with Lady Worthington the night of the musicale. The woman had been incensed at his rebuff.

“It would appear so, if she is indeed the one to instigate the gossip. Harry will get to the bottom of it, I’m sure.”

Muscles in Adalyn’s shoulders tensed. “Maggie, after we found Mena, didn’t one of those publications imply something similar about Lord Nash and me?”

Compassion shone in Maggie’s eyes as she brushed Adalyn’s forearm with a gloved hand. “It did. However, *The Muckraker’s* mysterious origins make it difficult to demand a

retraction. Harry tried his best to determine the author, more for your sake than Nash's, but without success."

All three turned toward where Harry confronted Lady Worthington. Whispers from the guests replaced the music as the orchestra paused between sets.

At first, she appeared to protest, but whatever Harry said to her, she acquiesced. With a jerk of her head, she flounced from the ballroom.

The music resumed and people moved awkwardly in pairs toward the dance floor as if only complying by demand.

Maggie touched Adalyn's arm. "May I have a word in private?"

Adalyn followed Maggie onto the terrace, gazing back at her father's concerned face. What could Maggie want that required privacy?

"Please forgive me, Adalyn, for what I'm about to ask. But are you being truthful about Lord Nash's behavior toward you? He hasn't . . . forced his attentions on you?"

*Forced?* She reeled back from the word. "What do you mean?"

Maggie's alabaster skin paled further. "Did he assault you? Attempt to force himself on you?"

"No. Of course not." Icy fingers of unease gripped Adalyn's neck. "Why would you think that?"

"He has a reputation—"

Of course, she'd heard rumors that Nash was a rake, but something in Maggie's eyes told her there was more to her concern.

The tenderness with which Nash had initiated the kiss contrasted sharply with Maggie's accusation. True, it had grown more passionate. But *force*?

"I don't care about his reputation!" Adalyn spat out the words, and Maggie blinked.

Shame coiled in Adalyn's chest at her behavior. She rushed to ease the sting, softening her voice. "I apologize, but everyone talks about his black reputation, but I've only witnessed kindness and gentleness—especially toward me."

"I'm relieved to hear it. But, it's more than what people have said."

"Maggie, you're frightening me. Please, just say it."

"I speak from my experience. It was before Harry and I were married, at a ball much like this—on a terrace much like my own. We were alone and he . . . tried to . . ." Maggie choked out the last words.

Adalyn always found the phrase about blood running cold ridiculous. The life giving liquid was warm. But at that moment, her skin prickled. Her mind scrambled to reconcile the man she'd grown fond of, who had kissed her, who saved a drowning child, with a man who would assault a woman.

Tears gathered on Maggie's lashes, ready to drop to her cheeks, but she brushed them away. "Harry came to my aid just in time."

Adalyn wanted to ask precisely what had happened, but she had no desire to upset Maggie further. "Oh, Maggie, I'm so sorry."

"I only tell you this so you're aware there is a reason for his reputation. For your sake, I'm grateful nothing happened. But it might be best to avoid him completely for the remainder of your stay."

Grateful Maggie didn't demand she promise to stay away, Adalyn could only nod her head. And although she refused to dredge up more pain for Maggie, she needed the whole story before making any final decisions. How far had Nash gone?

When she and Maggie reentered the ballroom, Harry had rejoined her father. A forced smile played across Harry's lips. Yet his eyes were deadly serious. "Now, I believe the next dance is mine, Adalyn."

It was a lie, of course. Harry had reserved only the opening dance. She peered down at her dance card, trying to determine

which of the remaining dances he had usurped. There had been the blank space Nash suggested she fill in with a phantom partner and a quadrille promised to Dr. Marbry. How long had it been since she'd followed Nash onto the terrace?

When Harry led her to the dance floor, the orchestra struck up the opening notes of a waltz.

“Whoever claimed the waltz might be disappointed,” Harry said. “But I think it’s more important we show them we will not countenance idle gossip.”

All she could think about was that Nash wouldn’t be the only one disappointed.



A RAY OF LATE AFTERNOON SUN CUT THROUGH A SLIT OF THE drawn curtains, casting a stripe of gold across the floor. Nash stared into the almost empty glass of brandy. It no longer provided the relief he sought. Love for Adalyn was too powerful to be erased with alcohol. He had the urge to fling the glass across the expanse of the room for its failure to provide solace, shattering it into a thousand tiny shards.

Not unlike his heart.

He rubbed his hand across his jaw, eliciting a scratching sound from the stubble. Slumped in the chair ever since he returned home from the ball, he was the antithesis of an English gentleman—not only unshaven, but unkempt, his cravat untied and hanging loosely down his chest, his shirt open.

Twice, he had shooed Evans away when he’d attempted to bring a tray of food or administer Nash’s morning toilette. Nash threatened to sack him if Evans bothered him again without being summoned. Nash wanted no comforts, for he had not earned them.

Lack of sleep and too much drink left his head numb, as if wool had replaced his brain. He snorted a laugh. Perhaps wool

would serve him better than the worthless organ he called a mind.

A soft knock sifted through the morass in his head and interrupted his self-deprecating thoughts.

“I warned you, Evans,” he bellowed. Attempting to rise, he stumbled and fell back against the leather with an *oomph*.

Evans poked his head around the door. “I beg your pardon, sir. But your brother—”

“Is here.” Roland pushed Evans aside and paraded into the room.

*Why in the bloody hell didn't I hear that infernal cane?*

Nash drained the last of his brandy and held up the empty glass. “Good afternoon, Roland. Care for a drink?”

“No.” Roland plucked the glass from Nash's hand. Turning toward Evans, he flicked a hand at the half empty brandy decanter. “Get this out of here.”

“Don't!” Nash stared down Evans as he approached the decanter. “I need that.”

“You might want to ration such expensive liquor from now on. I warned you, Nash. You assured me Lady Honoria would not learn of your scheme to seduce the American woman. And yet”—he threw *The Muckraker* on Nash's lap—“it appears she has. And of all places at the Duke of Ashton's ball.”

“That was Cordelia's doing. How was I to know she would whisper in Lady Stratford's ear?” He needed another drink. “I could strangle her,” he mumbled.

“Yes, well, not only Lady Stratford, but apparently the entire *ton* is aware. Like everything else in your life, you need to learn to control your women. I should have known better than to trust this ridiculous stratagem of yours.”

“Cordelia is jealous and bitter. She'd say anything if she thought it would get me crawling back to her.”

Roland snorted a derisive laugh. “You give yourself too much credit, brother. You're no prize. Nevertheless, it would

appear in this case she has the right of it.”

Nash opened his mouth to protest, but Roland held up a hand, summarily quelling any attempt to counter.

“The point being, it matters little what others speculate. Only what Lord Stratford thinks. I called on him as soon as I received this”—he pointed a finger toward the gossip rag lying in Nash’s lap—“*news*, and he assured me in no uncertain terms that any restoration of your attachment with Lady Honoria is out of the question—no matter how you try to rectify the matter.”

Nash clamped his mouth shut. Nothing he could say would appease his brother.

Roland made a great show of walking casually around the room, pausing at the pieces of art hanging on the walls and examining the crystal decanters and vases. “Do you still have the piano?”

Cold pinpricks of dread skittered up Nash’s spine at the mention of the six octave Broadwood grand. One of his prized possessions, the instrument occupied most of his parlor. However, Nash never found it to be an issue. People rarely visited him anyway.

“Yes. What of it?”

Roland’s icy stare reflected Nash’s fear. “You may wish to sell it, along with your other valuable possessions, to liquidate your assets. From this moment forward, expect no additional funds from me.” He strode toward the bell pull, then gave it a tug. “And reduce your staff. That’s if they even wish to remain in service to such a disgrace.”

Evans appeared, casting dubious glances between Nash and Roland. “Yes, sir?”

“Evans, is it?” Roland asked, the smirk on his face sending Nash’s stomach churning.

“Yes, my lord.”

“If you find yourself in need of employment, I’m always looking for another footman.”

Nash almost laughed at the subdued look of indignation on Evans' face, but still his valet bowed and muttered, "Yes, my lord."

"I'll see myself out," Roland announced before mercifully leaving Nash in peace.

Evans stared at the open door where Roland had disappeared, then turned toward Nash, tugging on the hem of his coat. "Footman? Is he serious?"

No longer finding the situation amusing, Nash ran a hand through his hair. "I'm afraid so."

His mouth moving wordlessly, Evans stared wide-eyed. Finally producing sound, the man said, "Are you sacking me?"

On leaden legs, Nash rose from the chair. "Not if I can help it. In the interim, make some enquiries as to the value of some of my disposable possessions." He waved a hand toward the paintings Roland had perused.

Evans nodded, his face sombre, then held out a silver salver.

"Yes. That, too. Why have a tray to deliver correspondence? I never saw the point, anyway."

"But, sir . . ."

Too stunned by Roland's appearance and pronouncement, Nash had failed to see the white square of paper lying on the tray. Instinctively, he knew who the delicate handwriting belonged to. The embellished swirl underneath his name was so like her.

"Shall I read it to you?" Evans prepared to lift the letter from its resting place.

"No." Nash snatched it away with greedy fingers and broke the seal. Opening the missive, he immediately dropped his gaze to the signature, the artful *A* confirming his suspicions as to the sender. "I'll manage." And he would, even if it took him the rest of the day.

"Will that be all, sir?"



“Mmm,” Nash mumbled, already struggling to decipher Adalyn’s letter. Yet something about Evans’ tone made him peer up, catching his valet’s worried expression. “Don’t worry about your employment. I need you.”

Evans nodded and exited, closing the door behind him.

Nash spread the paper out in front of him, smoothing the creases and running a finger over Adalyn’s name. With a sigh, he focused on the beginning and began to read.

## CHAPTER 23—A RAY OF LIGHT



For four days, no matter what Nash did, nothing eased the sharp ache in his chest. Each day had led him farther into the dark place that sucked him in and held him under until he could scarcely breathe.

After reading Adalyn's letter, he went to Gentleman Jackson's. He hoped to pound out his frustrations only to find himself—thanks to his wandering mind—more on the receiving end of punches.

Early in the morning on the second day, he ordered his prized gelding, Lance, saddled, then rode out of London into the countryside. He worked his horse hard, returning after dark, both he and his mount tired and hungry. Upon entering his home, he found another letter from Adalyn waiting, and unlike Lance, Nash found no comfort in food or rest. Each bite tasted like sawdust, and sleep had come in fits and starts.

The third day, he made his way to a brothel, only to turn around and return home before entering the building. He knew all he would see in his mind's eye was Adalyn's face, and he refused to sully his memory of her by sleeping with a whore. Acid guilt churned in his stomach upon finding yet another letter from Adalyn waiting.

The fourth day, after another sleepless night, he sat at the piano, trying in vain to find comfort in the notes and the colors swirling around him. Adalyn's letters perched on the top of the piano, and he'd used the emotion her words evoked—difficult as they were for him to read—to compose his own sonata. But

with each stroke of the keys, the notes became more minor and mournful, the colors darker.

Everything that had previously brought him pleasure became meaningless without Adalyn to brighten his life.

He ran his hands over the smooth wood of his cherished instrument. An indulgence, to be sure, the extravagant purchase had reduced the settlement he received from Laurence Townsend. However, Nash had been confident he could raise the remaining blunt needed for his investment through other means.

Such is the folly of fools.

Although selling it would be like losing part of his soul, the Broadwood's rise in popularity would significantly increase its value, inching him closer to his goal and securing his place as investor—and provide his freedom.

As if to say a final goodbye, his fingers lovingly pressed against the keys, becoming more frantic with each note of his swan song. Once finished, he brushed his hands over the ebony and ivory and sat in silence, already mourning its loss.

Evans shook him from his dark thoughts. “Miss Lovelace to see you, sir. Should I inform her you are not receiving?”

Before he could open his mouth and respond in the affirmative, Adalyn burst past the valet, her eyes fiery. “I will not be put off, Nash.” She halted a few steps inside the room, her eyes widening.

True, even he couldn't ignore the dark half-moons under his eyes when he'd looked in the mirror that morning. He expected no callers. Although he'd bathed, he refused to allow Evans to shave him, and against Evans' protests, waved away the cravat, waistcoat, and tailcoat, insisting he could remain in his shirtsleeves in his own damn house.

But Adalyn's horrified expression sent a shockwave of shame through him.

Did he truly look that bad?

Closing the gap in an instant, she arrived at his side before he could rise to unsteady feet and either pull her into his arms or toss her bodily from the room—he hadn't decided which.

It would be better for her if he performed the latter. As for him, his heart was already broken, so any attempt to ease the destroyed organ seemed futile. His dream of holding her, kissing her, loving her, only that—a dream destined to remain unfulfilled.

He peered behind her to where Evans stood alone by the door. “Where is your maid? Your father?”

“I came alone.” A sheepish expression crossed her face momentarily before her gaze raked over him again.

She bent down before him, her hand gently pressed against his sleeve. “Are you ill?” Keeping one hand on his arm, she raised the other and touched his forehead. “You're not feverish. Why haven't you answered my letters?”

“Leave us, Evans.”

The astonished valet stared with mouth agape only a moment before nodding. The man quickly vanished, closing the door behind him with a soft *snick*.

Nash stared at the correspondence in front of him and flicked the topmost with his fingertip. “There's nothing left to say. I'm not good for you, Adalyn. Hasn't Ashton made that abundantly clear? Go back to America and find a nice, respectable man to marry. You don't want a blackguard like me. Look what my actions have done to Lady Honoria.”

Her grasp tightened on his arm, and her eyes narrowed. “I'm capable of making my own judgments about people. I refuse to believe you meant to injure Honoria.”

He shot from the piano bench, jerking his arm from her hand perhaps a bit too forcefully. She gave a tiny yelp, and a knife of guilt stabbed him in the space that held his damaged heart. Words of apology sprang to his lips, but he withheld them. Let her think him cruel. It would make it easier for her to turn away and leave him.

But she did not.

He scowled at her, wondering if the anguish of the impossible love burning in his chest was apparent in his eyes. “Then you’re a fool. I use people. I’m cruel, heartless, uncaring.” He grabbed her by the arms, forcing her to look into his eyes, and gave her a little shake. Did a part of him hope she would see beneath the façade? “There’s so much you don’t know. Horrible, despicable things. You should be afraid of me.”

He expected her to stare at him in fright, in horror. To turn and run from the room and escape him.

She raised a hand to cup his cheek. “I’m not afraid of you. I love you.”

*Blink.*

“You don’t know me.”

“I know the man you allow few to see. The man whose face clouded with pain while staring at a painting of a terrible storm. The man who jumped into the Serpentine to rescue an urchin of a child. Who gave that same child a dance lesson during a ball. The man who kissed me so tenderly, holding me as if I would break in two. I can’t believe that man would harm me. He’s in”—she poked his chest with a finger—“here. No matter how you try to hide him. I love that man.”

Those simple but powerful words broke through his layer of resolve as if it had been as thin as the parchment of the letters she’d written. He pulled her to him, right hand threading through her hair. Soft silvery strands broke free from where they’d been pinned to her head. Then he crushed his mouth to hers in an all-consuming kiss.

Time froze as she melted into him, her own hands running through his hair, scorching heat firing through him. He lingered on her lips as long as he safely could, then pushed her from him and turned away. “Leave. You’re not safe here, no matter what you think.”

“Is it true then? Did you assault Margaret?”

When the first letter from her came the day after the ball, for nearly a quarter hour, he’d agonized over each word. But

he gleaned enough to know Ashton or the duchess had given their account of the events five years past. Any doubts he had about the futility of his love for Adalyn had vanished as soon as he read the damning words.

In truth, he *had* behaved badly that night. But he'd had too much to drink, and the memory of it blurred. He remembered kissing Margaret against her wishes. Had he gone further than that? He knew why he did it. But he refused to make excuses for himself to Adalyn. If he were earnest in his desire to send Adalyn away, he would accept the accusation and be done with it. It would be the unselfish thing to do.

But among the horde of Nash's sins, selfishness loomed large and pushed its way to the forefront to soften the admission. He kept his back turned, not willing to witness the disgust in her eyes when he confessed. "Yes. I kissed the duchess against her will. I've been trying to apologize for my ungentlemanly behavior for the past five years. However, Ashton won't allow me close enough. And I refuse to do so in front of him."

"Why do you hate him so much?"

Were Adalyn's whispered words directed toward him, or merely a private pondering?

Silence stretched between them, Nash refusing to answer. It was a matter between him and Ashton, and one too painful to recount.

Soft rustling from her skirts sounded behind him, moving closer, then stopped. Then the sound of paper shuffling. "My letters. Why didn't you answer? At least have the decency to tell me before you throw me out."

With a jerk, he spun on his heel. "Because I could hardly read them. How can I answer when I don't know what you've said?" It was a half truth, but the portion he did share was so painful to admit, it cut him through.

She blinked, her incredible blue eyes unbelieving. "What do you mean?"

“Exactly what I said. I can’t read them.” He ran a hand through his hair and stepped back, giving himself the distance he needed to bare his soul to the one person who mattered most. “I can read most of it . . . with time and effort. But I struggle. Letters and whole words jumble together, confusing me until my head hurts from trying to sort them out. My valet usually reads my correspondence to me and helps me with responses, but these”—he pointed to her letters—“were too personal, too dear to share with anyone else.”

She picked up the topmost one, opened, and held it out to him. “Try. For me.”

*Christ!* Would she make him humiliate himself in front of her? Wasn’t it enough that she knew his deepest shame? “I can’t.” He barked the words and the force of them had her stumbling back.

What a cad! Everything everyone said about him was true. He had to save her from himself. She deserved so much more than the likes of him.

Yet she wouldn’t yield. The letter shook in her hand, but she remained steadfast. “Please.”

He snatched it from her trembling grasp. If she insisted on being a witness, so be it. He stared at the letter, then, in halting words, began.



ADALYN HELD HER BREATH AS SHE WAITED. SURELY A MAN OF the aristocracy would have been taught to read.

He squinted at the script before him, his face contorted as if in pain. “My dear Lord Nash. Your sudden”—he paused, his eyes shifting slightly downward—“parting from the ball.’ No. That’s not right.” His gaze flicked up from the parchment before him to momentarily meet her own. Apparently confident she exhibited no amusement, he continued, his words slow and plodding as he sounded out the offending word. “‘Sudden de-departure.’ Yes, that’s it. ‘has left me

concerned and worried. Of special concern.’ No, I read that incorrectly.”

He ran a hand through his already mussed hair. “Let me try again. ‘Has left me con-con-fused’ that’s it ‘and worried.’”

She grasped his wrist, stilling him, unable to bear the pain in his voice any longer. “Stop. Don’t torture yourself any further.”

“Torture you, you mean.”

“Allow me to read it to you.”

*My Dear Lord Nash,*

*Your sudden departure from the ball last evening has left me confused and worried. Of special concern are your parting words to me, the finality of them still ringing in my ears.*

*Accusations were made against you that I find difficult to believe. And from the man I know you to be, I cannot believe you would not stay and defend yourself against such falsities.*

*So I fear I must ask you. Did you assault Margaret some years ago? Is this what has caused the animosity between you and the duke? Are there extenuating circumstances you wish to add to explain such despicable behavior?*

*I await your response.*

*Yours,*

*Adalyn*

“Tell me about it. You said the letters jumble.”

He blinked, then shook his head. “You wish to know about my reading and not about the assault to Margaret?” Incredulity rang in his voice.

Tightness banded her chest from the ugliness of Margaret’s accusation. At the moment, all she wanted to do was help him



in his pain. “We’ll discuss that later. Do you need spectacles?”

“I wish it were something that simple. My sight is perfect. I can shoot a man dead, straight through the heart at twenty paces. But the letters sometimes switch places, or I’ll skip words, or find another word a line below and pull it to the sentence I’m struggling with. It’s as if the words and letters don’t want to stay put on the page, that my mind can’t keep them in the proper order.”

“And you’ve always had this difficulty?”

“Yes. As long as I can remember. It was my greatest fear to read aloud in school. My governess and tutor told my father I was slow-witted. Stupid.” He spat the last word. “I was an embarrassment to my family. My father paid dearly for my deficiencies to be overlooked at Eton.”

A shadow passed across his face. “My peers betrayed me. Scorned me. Laughed at me. Out of necessity, I learned to defend myself.”

He met her eyes and, as if reading her question, answered, “Not only fisticuffs. I built walls. Strong, and impenetrable.”

“How? What did you do?”

“I became someone everyone despised. It’s easy to be a villain,” he said, his voice anything but sinister. “People don’t like villains. They keep their distance, avoid them. It makes it easy to keep your secrets to yourself because they won’t get close enough to know you—to see the real you. To discover your weakness, your secret. And use it as a weapon against you.”

Something in her heart cracked open at his words, uttered so matter-of-factly as if he were speaking about purchasing a new horse. Yet she sensed the pain couched in those calmly spoken words. “You’re not a villain, Nash.”

As if to contradict her, he barked an ugly laugh. “If you pretend something long enough, you believe it—become it.”

“No! I don’t accept it.”

“Isn’t what I did to the duchess proof enough? For years, I suspected what she suffered at the hands of her first husband. The monster was my friend! I associated with degenerates, Adalyn. And yet, to wound Ashton—Harry—I used Margaret. I could tell he held affection for her, so I wanted to steal her from him. What kind of sick monster does that to an innocent woman?”

“You’re not a monster, Nash. I refuse to believe it.”

He grabbed her upper arms again. “For your own good, you must.” His hold released, and his hands slipped to his side. “Now leave before I do something we both will regret.”

She remained rooted in front of him.

His dark eyes bored into her, searching, imploring, and his voice softened. “Please, Adalyn. Go. I don’t think I can bear being near you a second longer without touching you.”

She stepped closer, placing a hand on his chest. “Then touch me. Kiss me again, Nash. Before you throw me out, show me the man I know you to be.”

With one smooth gesture, he swept her into his arms, pressing her against his hard chest. “There’s no going back,” he said, right before lowering his head and molding his mouth to hers.



NASH’S CONSCIENCE POKED THROUGH HIS LUST, ACCUSING HIM of taking something not rightfully his. If he put Adalyn before his own selfish desire, would it be worth it, or would they both suffer? Didn’t they both deserve at least a few stolen moments of bliss?

He broke the kiss, giving her one last chance to flee and save herself. “I want you, Adalyn. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Her hand, which had rested against his chest, drifted lower and brushed his arousal. “I do.”

He sucked in a shuddering breath, shocked at her boldness. Her touch inflamed him. “I’ve no experience with a virgin. I might hurt you.”

“Would it matter to you if I’m not a virgin?”

Was he surprised? Certainly. But why should he expect her to adhere to different behaviors than a man? “No. It wouldn’t matter.” He grinned at her. “Would it matter to you that I am not?”

“Well, if that’s the case, I should be off.” She gave him a flirtatious toss of her blond curls and swung out of his arms as if to leave.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her back tight against his chest. “So,” he said, running a finger down the side of her face. “You like your men inexperienced?”

The blue in her eyes deepened, growing dusky. “I didn’t say that.”

Unease crawled up his neck, and as much as he hated voicing his concern, he had to know. “Was your previous experience . . . of your choosing?” He swallowed. “No one forced you, did they?” At least in his experience, gently bred women only lost their innocence before marriage through force or by trusting in someone they loved.

“No. Not exactly.”

“Did you—do you—love him?” The thought that she had given her heart to someone before him galled, and even more so that the man might be waiting for her back in America.

“I thought I did. I was young and impulsive.” She laughed, the sound self-deprecating, something with which he was intimately acquainted, and there was no amusement in her eyes. Rather, she grew sullen—pensive. “But why are we wasting time speaking of this”—she cupped his cheek—“when we could participate in less loquacious activities?”

Covering her hand with his own, he pressed it tight against his face, drinking in the warmth of her touch. Then he pulled it away. “You should leave, Adalyn. Ashton will have Runners out searching for you.”

She shook her head. “Harry and my father are at the clinic. I told Margaret I wanted to be alone to procure gifts before our return home.”

“So, you lied?” He pressed his lips together, doing his best to refrain from smiling. Apparently, he failed.

She slapped his chest. “Don’t look so pleased about it. It’s not like I wanted to lie. But I was so worried when you didn’t respond to my letters.”

He pulled her toward him once again. Heat from her body—her breasts pressed against his chest—seared through the thin fabric of his shirt. Notes of her citrusy fragrance teased and tempted him. “Are you always so willful when you want your way?”

She threaded a hand through his hair and pulled his face down to hers. Sweet puffs of her breath brushed against his lips as she said, “Why don’t you find out?”

## CHAPTER 24—TRUE SELVES



Wrapped in Nash's arms, Adalyn had never felt so emboldened. Yet, she didn't regret her words of encouragement. She wanted him. Sparks of passionate fire licked along her nerve endings, creating gooseflesh on her skin.

"You're cold." Nash ran his large hands up and down her arms, the action doing nothing to tame her reaction.

His dark eyes bored into hers, the intensity of his desire further heating her from within.

"Kiss me." Barely a whisper, she wasn't sure he'd even heard her at first, but his eyelids shuttered, and he lowered his head, capturing her mouth again.

Traces of brandy coated his lips, the taste sweet and heady. Coarse whiskers from his beard scratched against her face, but she found the sensation erotic.

He broke the kiss, taking a step back. "I need a shave. I didn't expect such tempting company."

A hint of leather mingled with brandy and sandalwood, the combination intoxicating, masculine, and completely Nash. She tugged on his shirt, pulling him closer. "I like your whiskers."

Pure masculine desire brewed in his eyes. He tugged her closer, his brandy-scented breath teasing her nose. "You may regret that later."

She reached up and threaded her fingers through the silky strands of his dark hair.

A deep growl took her by surprise. He spun them both around, pinning her against the piano's keyboard. A cacophony of unmelodious notes echoed around the room in sharp contrast to the beautiful music she heard upon arriving. Obviously, he'd been playing, but before she could ask him, he sealed his mouth to hers in a searing kiss.

Her knees weakened, and she grasped his neck tighter, all rational thought making a quick departure.

Nash banded her with his strong arms and kept her upright as he continued to apply the sweet torture with his lips.

Heat burned low in her belly, and a slow, insistent ache formed. Unable to contain it, she moaned, the mewling sound expressing the need growing inside.

Nash growled louder, and—much to her dismay—broke the glorious kiss, his lips traveling across her jaw and coming to rest on the sensitive spot below her ear. He teased and nipped, growling again with each moan and whimper he elicited from her.

The fire he'd ignited became an inferno when he trailed gentle kisses down to the neckline of her gown. He slid his hand from her waist to cup her breast, running a thumb across her sensitive nipple.

She moaned louder, tugging at his head to direct it downward.

He released a muffled chuckle against her skin, then dutifully replaced his hand with his mouth, suckling through the fabric of her gown. "Too many clothes," he muttered.

In one smooth movement, he picked her up and strode to the doors, setting her down only long enough to open them. Then he swooped her up once more and carried her up a long flight of stairs.

One of the servants—the man who announced her—scurried out of the way, his eyes wide as he pressed against the wall to make room for his master.

Nash stared down at her and smiled. “Don’t mind Evans. He’s the soul of discretion.” He carried her into a large bedroom, and after setting her down, studied her with serious eyes. “Are you certain, Adalyn? You can leave now if you wish.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever been this certain about anything in my life.”

“Even after learning what I did to the duchess?”

Pain twisted her stomach at the thought of what happened with Maggie, but still she struggled, fighting her own desires. “You said you wished to apologize, to make amends. Promise me you will do so—in front of Harry.”

The scowl on his face reminded her of Mena when she’d first donned more feminine attire.

“Do I have to like it?”

She laughed outright. “Often the best expressions of remorse are those which cause us discomfort. If it cost us nothing, would the apology truly be of value?”

His lips twitched upward. “Why did I have to fall in love with a wise woman?”

Her mind stuttered at the casual declaration. “You . . . love me?”

He blinked, perhaps only then realizing the magnitude of his statement. “I would say I loved you from the moment we met, but that would be a lie. You intrigued me. You were unfamiliar with who I was . . . am. I only realized the depths of my feelings at the ball when the truth slammed into me as we danced. It’s as if you saw past who I purport to be for who I truly am. And it scares the hell out of me.” He laughed, the sound brittle and humorless. “I shouldn’t admit that to you . . . especially at a moment like this. But oddly, you make me feel safe. I think I fell slowly, bit by bit, like an insidious infestation taking root in my heart.”

She should have been insulted, but she only laughed. “From a medical perspective, that sounds like something to be avoided rather than sought.”

A sad smile formed on his lips, and he pointed a finger at her. “See. That’s precisely why you’ve stolen into my heart. It’s that inscrutable quality that keeps you from taking offense and allows you to see beyond the surface of the words to the deeper meaning. As far as love, for me, it *was* something to be avoided. Maybe it still is.” He shook his head. “What can come of this, Adalyn? We’re doomed before we begin.”

Unwilling to admit the truth in his words, she pushed them aside, focusing on the present. “We have this moment. Why waste it worrying about an unpredictable future?”

He locked the door. “Then let us not waste a minute more.”

Her pulse raced, her heart a frantic drumbeat in her throat.

He stepped closer and caressed her face, his fingertip sliding featherlight across her cheek.

Her skin hummed with a current from his casual touch. Electricity crackled between them, the very air around them vibrating with sensual energy. Something solid and aching had lodged in her throat. Yet she longed to hear him speak the words intentionally. “Say it again.”

He tilted his head, considering her request. Their gazes locked, and as their souls connected once more, understanding dawned in his dark eyes. “I love you, Adalyn. If there is such a being, then may god help me. But I do love you.”

With the most important words exchanged, no more were needed. Nash pulled her into his arms and peppered kisses over her cheeks, her jaw, her eyes, finally settling on her mouth.

When the tip of his tongue traced the seam of her lips, she opened. Amid tangled tongues, he stoked the fire inside her and sent shockwaves of pleasure coursing through her body. Silently, she agreed with his assessment that they wore far too many clothes, and she tugged at his shirt.

He grinned and stepped back, deftly pulling the linen garment over his head and tossing it aside. The dark hair on the hard planes of his chest called seductively.



She ran her fingers through it, relishing in the texture that wasn't quite soft or coarse. His pectoral muscles—firm and defined—twitched slightly at her touch. A frisson of naughtiness tickled low in her belly that she elicited such a response from such an experienced man. Encouraged by his reception, she continued her exploration, running her hands over his muscled shoulders and arms. More fine hair covered his forearms.

Her gaze snagged on the dark trail of hair that ran below his umbilicus and disappeared beneath the waist of his trousers.

“Do you like what you see?” His honeyed voice teased her.

Heat traveled up her neck and bloomed on her cheeks. Still, she met his carnal gaze directly. “I do.”

“You have me at a disadvantage. Shall we even things up a bit?”

His dark gaze scattered what remained of her wits, and she could only nod.

Her heart pounded against her sternum at his devilish wink as he stepped behind her. With remarkable efficiency, he unfastened her gown and slipped it from her body until it pooled at her feet, all the while dotting kisses along her shoulders, neck, and back.

Nash's satisfied murmurs drifted across her shoulder. With his arms wrapped around her waist, he pulled her against him, his rigid arousal pressing against her backside. “Intoxicating,” he muttered, then slid his hands up her arms.

Every point of contact, each finger, the palms of his hands, the brush of air from his breath, created sensations so overpowering she felt she might swoon. She moaned something unintelligible. Her head fell back against his shoulder and nestled beneath his chin.

He spun her to face him, claiming her mouth with his—the kiss more urgent than the gentle touches he'd distributed moments before. Breaking the kiss, he reached toward her hair, removing the pins and releasing each carefully secured

lock. “I’ve wanted to see your hair flowing around you since we first met.” Finished, he laid the pins on a table as gently as he would a piece of the finest china. Heat burned in his eyes when he faced her again, and he grasped a blond strand of hair, running it between his fingers, then bringing it to his face. “So soft.”

Once he had arranged her hair around her shoulders to his liking, his hands moved to her back. His dark brows furrowed. “These stays are a puzzlement.”

“Allow me. I’ve had these specially made.” She worked slowly as she released the constraining garment and finally dropped it to the floor. “Better?”

“Much.” His wicked grin sent gooseflesh flaring to life along her arms. He made quick work of her chemise, then carried her to the bed where he removed her slippers and stockings.

“God, but you’re beautiful. I could feast on you for hours.” Indeed, his gaze raked over her, devouring her like he was a starving man set before a constantly replenishing banquet table. He stood back, his hands on his hips, drawing her attention to the way his trousers strained at the fall.

She sent him what she hoped was a saucy grin. “I believe it’s your turn to even things a bit.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Minx.”

Never in her serious, purpose-driven life had she been called something so playful. And yet, as she lay exposed before him, she’d never felt so naughty and decadent. Never more like herself.

She loved it.

And she loved him.



NASH MADE QUICK WORK OF THE REST OF HIS CLOTHING. HIS eyes locked with Adalyn’s as he yanked off his boots and

stockings. Masculine pride swelled in his chest when she sucked in a shuddering breath as he unfastened the buttons on his fall and slid the trousers off his body. Though it seemed impossible, the passion in her eyes inflamed him even more.

His love for her would consume him. Burn him from within until nothing remained but ash.

And he didn't care.

All of his life, he'd been an imposter. To protect himself, he'd created a persona to keep people at arm's length. It had been a lonely life. He'd stolen what little pleasures he could, all the while knowing they weren't truly his.

At that moment, when he stood naked before her, baring not only his body, but his soul—his true self, he should have felt vulnerable.

But he didn't.

She made him feel safe.

Accepted.

For who he was.

All of who he was. The dark shameful parts that lurked in the shadows, appearing when necessary to keep people away. The parts he'd kept carefully hidden that secretly worked for others' happiness. The melancholy parts that threatened to drown him in a sea of solitude. The lost boy who only wanted a friend he could trust.

She *saw* him.

And loved him anyway.

Once again, with greedy fists, he prepared to grab what wasn't his to take. He would wrap himself in the blanket of her love, imbue every fiber of his being with it, keeping it locked safely away in his blackened heart. When she was gone and he drifted into his melancholy, he would bring it out and remember the woman who, for a few stolen moments, truly loved him.

She held out her hand, beckoning him to her. Lust darkened her bright blue eyes, her tremulous smile somehow unsure.

He continued to stare down at her like a dolt. Did she think he didn't want her? Wasn't the way his body responded evidence enough of his desire? He smiled to reassure her. "Indulge me. I'm memorizing this moment."

Although he'd spoken the truth that he didn't fall in love with her the moment he met her, he had fantasized about having her in his bed. But with the reality of his desires finally within his reach, he intended to savor it, for it had transformed into something much more than a mere slaking of lust. He wouldn't only share his body, he would share his heart, which was a decidedly riskier proposition.

After he drank his fill—at least for the moment—he climbed onto the bed next to her and pulled her into his arms. Skin against skin had never felt so perfect. She fit against him with astonishing rightness, each luscious curve yielding and molding to the hard planes of his body. In no hurry, he resumed his slow kisses, teasing her lips with his tongue until she opened and eagerly met his with the same abandon.

She moaned into his mouth. Sweeter than honey, he sipped the soft sighs of pleasure from her lips. As they lay face-to-face, he teased her side with his fingers, and she squirmed away from him, giggling, the playful sound joyous and free. He pulled her back against him and kissed her soundly again.

"Say it," he whispered against her lips. As he did with her, he knew she would understand.

The mischievousness shining in her eyes moments before vanished, and she pinned him with serious eyes. "I love you, Lord Nash Talbot. More than anything."

Everything he had concealed, kept locked safely in his heart, broke free with her earnest declaration, forever changing him. Perhaps he deluded himself, but in that moment he believed he was worthy of her love.

## CHAPTER 25—FACING OBSTACLES



Even the air in the room seemed to shift at Nash's request and her declaration. Adalyn understood the weighty importance of it, not only for herself, but for Nash as well. "I love you, Lord Nash Talbot. More than anything."

Vulnerability flickered in his eyes, and for a moment Adalyn wondered if she'd imagined it. Before she could ponder it further, with one searing kiss, he drove all rational thought from her mind like dandelion fluff scattered upon the wind.

He broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against hers. "Woman, you have no idea what you do to me." Pressed together along their length, it was as if they had become one person—although they had not yet joined. For long moments, he held her close, staring into her eyes and stroking her face. Perhaps, much like her, he wished to burn their time together in his mind.

But she'd had enough of sorrow and regret to last a lifetime, and she yearned to lift the darkness that had fallen like a shadow over his face. "Although it has been some time, if memory serves, there is more to lovemaking than kisses."

A deep laugh rumbled from him. He kissed the tip of her nose. "Are you rushing me?"

"Never." She threaded her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck, toying with a strand. Silky soft, the contrast with the coarse stubble on his chin and jaw fascinated her. She

traced the contours of his face, memorizing each sharp angle, the tiny bump at the bridge of his nose.

He grinned wickedly at her. “There are other parts of me you might enjoy as well. Allow me to demonstrate some possibilities.”

Her skin hummed with pleasure as he explored her body. His hands seemed to be everywhere all at once, her arms, her side, her breast, her legs. Playing her body like a fine instrument, he coaxed music from her as expertly as the most accomplished pianist.

When he dropped his head to tease her nipple with his tongue, her nails scraped along his back.

“Mmm,” he murmured, not breaking contact with her breast.

Pleased with his response, she followed his lead and ran her hands along his back. Like the contrast of his hair, she loved how his muscled body differed from hers. After lingering for some time on his back, fingers playing along his spine, she traced upward around his arms and shoulders. With each brush of her fingers, he vocalized his satisfaction with sensual mutterings.

When she slipped her hand between their bodies to stroke his arousal, he broke contact with her breast and sucked in a hiss. He cupped her face with both hands, then captured her lips with his.

“Vixen.” His sweet, brandy-scented breath brushed against her lips. “Two can play at that game.”

With excruciating slowness, his hand inched its way down her body, his gaze never leaving hers.

She squirmed next to him as he gave special attention to each breast, and she pulled him toward her for a kiss.

“Such impatience.” Still, he continued the downward motion, next stopping at her navel.

When he pressed his index finger on the indentation, she giggled.

“I plan to kiss all of this later. But for now, I’m marking my route.” Heat burned in his gaze as he proceeded.

The aching need built in her as he drifted closer to its source. She squirmed again, but he didn’t chastise her for her impatience. Instead, he dipped his fingers into the soft curls at the juncture of her thighs, teasing, but doing little to relieve the urgent need. She moaned something, the words gibberish to her own ears.

“I’ll start here.” He placed a quick kiss on her lips. “But I will end up here.” He pressed against the sensitive area between her legs.

She almost came apart from the mere thought.

True to his word, he peppered kisses over her face, her neck, and her upper torso, journeying down her body with his lips and pausing at each spot his hand had lingered. Love poured from him as he gently and lovingly circled each areola with his tongue and suckled each nipple of her breasts. He worshipped the indentation at her umbilicus, whispering thanks it had sustained her life within her mother’s womb.

It mattered little that she wanted to reciprocate his ministrations. Her mind would not cooperate. She clutched at his shoulders, his hair, the sheets. When he positioned himself over her and kneeled between her legs, she feared she would lose her mind.

She’d spoken the truth; she wasn’t a virgin. But when his mouth landed on the promised end of his journey, he awoke new sensations in her.

She teetered at the brink, grabbing his hair and holding him in place. Then everything shattered within her. Pinpricks of light flashed in her head, her pelvis arching and undulating under his continued sweet torture.

When she came back down to earth, she found Nash gazing up at her from between her legs, a wicked grin on his face. She grasped his arms and pulled him toward her. “You look inordinately pleased with yourself.”

“I am. You’re incredibly beautiful when you find your release.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. “I’ve never done that before.”

His grin widened. “Then I’m especially pleased with myself. But I’m only getting started.”

And with his confident statement, her body tingled in anticipation of what was to come.



NASH NOT ONLY FOUND SATISFACTION IN ADALYN’S RESPONSE, but a strange relief that he had been the first to bring her to release. He’d wondered what her previous experience had been, but kept his questions to himself.

He ached with the need to enter her. “I have French Letters, but your unexpected arrival hasn’t allowed time to prepare one.”

“What?” A lovely crease formed between her eyes.

He smoothed it with his finger. Regardless of her claim of experience, she was, in many ways, still an innocent. “A prophylactic. I’ve used them regularly. I don’t wish to get you with child, so I will withdraw.”

“Oh.” Pink blossomed on her cheeks. “I’ve never heard them called that.”

He studied her face. “That is if you wish me to continue. If not, I shall be content that I’ve pleased—”

She silenced him with a kiss. Her tongue pressed against his lips, and he delved his tongue into her mouth. She had already been wet before he’d brought her to release, but once again, he teased the sensitive area between her legs with his fingers. He inserted a finger, and with each slow, steady stroke of his tongue, he mimicked the movement with his hand.

Each moan of pleasure from her drove him closer to the edge and seeped under his skin, fueling the fire burning inside



him and licking at his restraint. His voice hoarse with need, he asked, “Are you certain this is what you want?”

Through half-closed lids, her blue eyes, dusky with desire, answered him wordlessly.

He positioned himself but paused. Once he entered her, he would be senseless with desire, and he needed to remember every detail. Like a man dying of thirst, he drank his fill—the bow of her rosy lips, the sleek line of her graceful neck, the soft curve of her cheek, the surprisingly dark lashes that fell like feathery crescents against her creamy skin.

Their gazes tangled, and as her eyes searched his, he never felt so naked. Incredibly intimate, nothing had felt so right.

With one smooth thrust, he entered her.

She sucked in a breath.

Worry constricted his chest, and he stilled. She was so tight. He silently questioned her truthfulness about her experience. “Did I hurt you?”

Shaking her head, she rewarded him with a brilliant smile. “Don’t stop. It feels wonderful.”

Wonderful was too inadequate a word. Sheathed within her, he’d never experienced anything so perfect. They fit together as if they had been made for each other. He moved slowly at first, then more urgently as she adjusted to his girth.

Balanced on one forearm, he snaked his other arm between them and toyed with the stiff peak of her nipple. Once more he captured her lips, exploring the sweetness of her mouth, his tongue dancing in frantic rhythm with hers.

He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to hold out until she found her release again. She was so close, scraping her nails down his back, her hands drifting lower to cup his arse and hold him tight against her.

When he slipped his hand from her breast and down their joined bodies, he teased the swollen source of her pleasure.

She cried out in ecstasy, then arched beneath him, meeting him thrust for thrust. “Nash!” She threw her head back, her

hips lifting off the bed as her muscles pulsed around him.

He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to hold back, and opened his eyes. He needed to watch her face. As her contractions eased, he waited as long as he could before he pulled out and spilled on the bed linens. Then he collapsed next to her—sated and content.

She had utterly ruined him for any other woman. In a moment of madness, he gave in to the temptation and imagined a life with her forever. A hundred what-ifs battered his mind. How could he promise her a future when his own was uncertain? What if he couldn't secure the rest of the funding for his investment? Would Roland consider reinstating his allowance if he married Adalyn? Would she be willing to give up her dream of practicing medicine to remain in England with him? Could he even ask that of her? Would he be able to tolerate her association with Ashton?

As he gazed down at her serene face, he understood the folly of men when caught in the rapture of love. He'd promise her everything, although he had nothing to give.

He gathered her in his arms and whispered the words he never thought he would, "Marry me, Adalyn."



AS ADALYN LAY SAFELY WRAPPED IN NASH'S ARMS, SHE floated on a cloud of contentment. Nothing had ever felt so decadent and wonderful.

She wanted to remember every second. How the dappled sunlight poured into the room, moving and swaying as branches from a tree scattered and dispersed the beam. How the curtains fluttered on the gentle breeze and sweet birdsong drifted in from the open window. To relive the taste of brandy coating his lips and the scrape of his whiskers against her sensitive skin. To burn in her mind the heady, masculine scent of leather, sandalwood and something uniquely him.

How would she ever give him up and return home?

She blinked, pushing the thought away and focusing on the present. “What did you say?”

His usual confident smile seemed tentative. “I asked you to marry me.”

Time froze. Even the curtains ceased their fluttering and the birds their song as if all the world waited for her answer. A mass in her throat prevented her from speaking, and she swallowed, forcing it down. Her fingertips traced the contours of his face, brushing against the coarse stubble of his whiskers. “You’re under no obligation. What we shared I gave to you freely, with no conditions or expectations.”

He mimicked her movements, moving his large hand to caress her cheek. “And I love you all the more for it. I’m not asking out of some code of honor. I’m asking because I want you with me forever.”

Another woman might have been thrilled with his request, but Adalyn’s stomach tumbled, twisting uncomfortably. Like every other man, he expected her to give up everything for him. Torn between anger and hurt, she choked out her response. “I must return home with my father. My work is important. I thought you understood that.”

She started to rise from the bed to gather her clothes, but he grasped her arm and held her in place.

“I *do* understand.” He practically barked the words, then turned away and ran a hand through his hair. A muscle pulsed in his jaw before his gaze returned to her. Softening his tone, he said, “No. I don’t. Not truly. Will you explain it to me?”

She had no desire to dredge up the horrible memory from her past, but she owed him something. She’d already shared a large part of it, but perhaps the time had come to share the rest. “Hold me?”

He pulled her back into his arms, and she laid her head against his chest. It would be easier recounting the details if she didn’t look into his eyes. “You remember I told you about my brother?”

“Yes.” His chest rumbled with his answer.

“The shame of watching my brother die in front of me is only part of why I dedicate myself to medicine. The other is the reason he died.”

He stroked her hair. “You said he drowned.”

“Yes, but not how he came to be in the sea in the first place.”

Muscles of his chest tensed as he sucked in a breath, yet he remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

“There was a fight between him and another man.”

“And you were there . . . with this other man?”

“Yes.” The guilt of it weighed heavily, and she fought back the tears.

Proving his superior intelligence, Nash said, “The man who took your innocence.”

“Yes. I was sixteen, and John was twenty-three. We were going to run away, but Benjamin found the note I’d left for my parents and came after us. He found us at the docks late at night. They argued. Benjamin accused John of already being married and using me to blackmail money from our father.”

The ugly words surfaced again in her mind, sending her back to that fateful night. “John laughed and admitted it. When Benjamin launched himself at John, John overpowered him. A blow upset Benjamin’s balance, and he slipped and fell into the harbor.”

Her voice choked on the words. “Benjamin had never been a strong swimmer. He flailed in the water, weighed down by his clothing. I screamed for John to help him, but when Benjamin sank under the water, John ran away. By the time someone arrived to help, Benjamin’s body floated lifeless in the water.”

“My god, Adalyn. You were not much more than a child. No wonder you froze with Mena.” He stroked her back and hair, his touch comforting.

She forced herself to face him, to look him in the eye when she admitted it, not only to him but to herself. “You don’t

understand. It was all my fault. My actions and choices killed Benjamin as surely as if I'd pushed him in the water myself. He was only nineteen." Scrubbed raw, she pulled in a shuddering breath. "I'm not worthy of love, especially yours. My love is toxic."

Anger flared in his eyes, and he grasped her arms, pressing his fingers into her flesh and shaking her. "Listen to me! It was not your fault! You did nothing wrong. People make mistakes. You trusted a man who didn't deserve it, and he betrayed you. Stop punishing yourself. And I love you all the more for facing your demons and saving Mena's life."

Unable to hold them back any longer, Adalyn allowed her tears to flow. Although she'd wept many times over the tragedy that had determined the direction of her life, as she gazed into Nash's face, the tears she shed at that moment washed away the guilt and self-loathing.

He knew her greatest shame, and he loved her anyway. "Do you understand why it's important that I continue with medicine?"

"Of course." He wiped her tears away with his thumb. "But might I propose something?"

"Other than marriage?" She forced a watery smile to her lips.

"Let's say in addition to. Would you consider assisting Ashton at his clinic?"

"And marry you?"

"Yes."

It truly had been a momentous day. "You would overlook your feelings for Harry?"

"I'll get on my knees and grovel before the self-righteous . . . before the duke, if that's what it takes. I've already promised to beg the duchess' forgiveness in front of him. While I'm on my knees, I'll ask him to tolerate me as your husband."

Whatever lay between Nash and Harry, it was dark and troubling. Yet, Nash was willing to supplicate before his enemy—for her. Torn between her love for Nash and her desire to return home, she weighed the prospect of a new life in England.

Nash's dark eyes studied her. "Before you answer, I have my own confessions, although I admit it's not in my best interest to do so. Yet, you should know everything."

Icy prickles notched up her spine, vertebra by vertebra. "More than your difficulty reading?"

He nodded. "The first is part of it. I don't want children. I refuse to pass this—encumbrance on to a child."

"But you can't know for certain you would. Do you know anyone in your family who has experienced the same difficulty?"

He shook his head. "But—"

"We can ask Harry if it's possible. He keeps a journal studying things passed down in families."

Nash scrunched his face. "Not an appealing prospect, but what if it is possible?"

She ran a hand down his chest. "We will love our child. It would change nothing."

Pain radiated in his eyes. "It would change everything for the child. I know."

"Were your parents not kind? Loving?"

He heaved a sigh. "My mother was, but I caused my father and brother nothing but shame."

"You are not your father. You would understand. We would do what we could to help our child and make sure he or she felt loved."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "It's not only family who matters. Peers, especially children, can be cruel."

"Between us, we'll find a way to help you with your reading, and then we'll use what we've learned for our child."

He smiled, the action not quite meeting his eyes. “My little physician. Always trying to fix things. I’m broken, Adalyn. You can’t fix me.”

“Will you at least try? If you insist on not having children, I will abide by your decision. I’d rather live with you and not have children than live without you.”

He stroked her cheek with a fingertip. “I promise I’ll try. But that’s only the beginning of my confession. Because of the debacle at the ball, my brother has cut off additional financial support. I have a small inheritance, but it’s a pittance. Part of Lady Honoria’s and my agreement was to buy us each time. For her more time closer to her twenty-fifth birthday when her father will release her dowry, and for me, to continue gathering funds for an investment that would free me from my brother’s purse strings.”

“What if I had an income?”

Nash flinched. “As much as I support the work you do, it wounds my masculine pride to depend on you for our living. But all is not lost—yet. I’ve asked Evans to sell some of my disposable possessions to raise more funds. If the investment yields results, we could be very rich.”

“What is this investment?”

Excitement shone in his eyes. “Rail transportation. It’s still new, used mainly for hauling minerals from the mines, but I foresee exceptional growth potential as a way of travel for not only goods, but people.”

She shot up from his arms. “I know about this! We have something like that near Boston. It uses animals to pull the cars on tracks.”

“Yes. But here they use steam-powered engines, which can pull heavier loads and don’t tire like animals as long as there is fuel.”

“Nash, this is marvelous! What foresight you have to see the possibilities.”

“I’m pleased you share my enthusiasm, my love, but remember, we could face a struggle before things come to

fruition—if they bear fruit at all.”

“Oh, they will, Nash. They will. I just know it.” The bubble of excitement popped, and she floated back to Earth. “It’s only . . .”

The brightness of his face dimmed. “You don’t want to stay here? To marry me?”

“I’m all my father has. It would break his heart—and mine—to be so far apart.” She searched for a solution. “Come to Boston with me! My father will help us.”

His tight-lipped smile spoke volumes. “First, you suggest I allow my wife to support me, then that I rely on her father. Adalyn, I may be many things, but I have my pride. My investment is here.”

She sighed, collapsing on his chest. “Oh, Nash. What are we to do?”



## CHAPTER 26—FINDING SOLUTIONS



Nash wanted to laugh at the irony of it. Why did love have to hurt so much? Didn't all the poets paint it as something to be desired, sought after? Perhaps he had the right of it all along, and it was something to be avoided.

Adalyn's words bounced in his mind. Indeed, what were they to do? At a crossroads, neither was willing to give up the life they'd known for the other.

Not that England held any fondness for him. If anything, starting a new life away from his reputation sounded appealing.

But he'd be damned if he would rely on a woman or her father to support him.

Hope was a tenuous thing, yet he grabbed onto it with both hands.

"When do you return home?"

"In three weeks. Why?"

"Allow me to speak with the man in charge of my investments. Perhaps he knows of an American railway project —"

Before he could finish, she stifled his remaining words with a kiss.

He laughed, wrapping his arms around her. "You approve of my idea?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, Nash!"

“Is that a ‘Yes’ you approve or a ‘Yes’ you’ll marry me?”

“Both.” She launched herself at him, covering his face with kisses.

“If this is how you respond, then I should tell you about my other ideas.”

“Unless they involve this bed, then save them for a later time.”

“I have many. However, there *is* one in particular that involves a stunning blonde in my bed. But rather than tell you, why don’t I show you?”

After another session of lovemaking, Nash gently washed Adalyn and helped her dress. He gathered the hairpins he’d placed on the table. “I know nothing about dressing a woman’s hair. Should I call one of my maids to assist?”

Pink bloomed on her cheeks, and she shook her head. “I can manage.”

He loved how, even after they’d made love twice, he could still make her blush. Leading her to a dressing table, he found a brush and guided it through her silvery-blond locks. “Your hair is like angel wings.” He laughed at his own statement. “Although I’ve never seen an angel, and chances are unlikely I ever will.” He kissed the nape of her neck, finding the sensitive spot that drove her to distraction. “Except for you.”

She batted him away. “None of that, or I shall never finish dressing.” She arranged her straight locks into a simple chignon.

“When we’re married, will you wear your hair down for me?”

“Only in private. It’s neither appropriate nor the fashion.”

“Pity.” He toyed with one errant strand trailing along her neck.

Finished fussing with her hair, she turned and faced him. “Now, I really must go. I still have to find gifts to allay suspicion.”

“Who are they for? The gifts?”

“Harry and Maggie. For their kindness and hospitality.”

Sourness filled his mouth at what he was about to suggest. “One moment.” He strode to his clothespress and opened the bottom drawer. A small rosewood box lay inside. He lifted it, then retrieved a silver diamond-studded stickpin and a sapphire ring.

Returning, he placed them in her hands. “The ring was my mother’s. One of the few things she specifically left to me. Give it to Margaret. It matches her eyes. Ashton can have the stickpin.” He didn’t mention that he hoped it would poke the duke in the heart as he inserted it.

Her blue eyes widened. “Nash, I couldn’t. These are too valuable. Won’t you need them to raise the funds you need?”

“As much as I hate to, if I give in to this folly to go to America, my piano will be of no use. The price it will bring will more than cover the cost of these items.”

She grabbed his hands, the stickpin scratching against his skin. “Oh, Nash.” Tears shimmered in her eyes, and she blinked. “I do love you.”

Her words brought a smile to his lips. “And I love you. I shall call upon the duke this evening, and after that, I’ll speak to your father.”

“No. Not tonight. Harry and Maggie are hosting a dinner for Beatrix and Laurence.”

“Tomorrow?”

She grinned at him. “I would almost think you were anxious, Lord Nash.”

“Like a green lad. With three weeks, there will barely be enough time for the banns to be read in order to marry here. Unless I get a special license. I want to marry you before you come to your senses and change your mind.”

“Tomorrow it is. We typically arrive home from the clinic before we dine at seven.”

“I’ll arrive at nine.” He pulled her into his arms for one last kiss, then nudged her gently toward the door. “Now go, before anyone starts questioning your whereabouts. ”

As he watched her leave, a strange sense of foreboding built in his chest. What in the hell had he been thinking?

He rang the bell pull, summoning Evans.

Upon arriving, Evans’ gaze flitted to the rumpled bed linens. “Sir?”

“Write a letter to Naismith and post it as urgent.”

“Are you reinstating your offer for investment? Perhaps requesting a lesser share?”

“Not exactly. How do you feel about living in America?”

Evans blinked. “America?” Again, his gaze wandered to the bed, this time remaining moments longer. “Are felicitations in order, sir?”

“That remains to be seen. First, I need to determine if I can invest in an American railway project. Now move, man.”

As Evans rushed to the writing desk and prepared pen and paper, Nash wondered if he had truly lost his mind.



BUBBLES OF HAPPINESS BUOYED ADALYN UNTIL SHE FELT light as the air around her. The urge to share her news overwhelmed her. Who could she talk to? Honoria? No. Adalyn wouldn’t be welcomed in her home after the debacle at the ball. Even telling Priscilla was out of the question for the moment. If Adalyn arrived at the clinic with her news, it would be impossible to keep things from her father and Harry. Difficult though it may be, she would have to wait until Nash spoke to her father.

Adalyn’s mind whirred as she hired a hackney carriage, requesting the driver to take her to one of the little shops she’d discovered on Bond Street. She purchased several boxes and pretty paper with which to wrap the items Nash had

generously given her. If nothing else, the shop owner could vouch for her whereabouts.

Thankfully, no one was at home to raise questions when she arrived back at Harry's. Maggie had left to call on Camilla, and Harry and her father had yet to return from the clinic. She quickly called on Eloise to redress her hair, stating that a strong wind had blown her bonnet off.

"It appears you have a rash of sorts on your face and neck, Miss Lovelace."

Adalyn's face heated, remembering Nash's whiskers rubbing against her skin. "It's nothing, Eloise. I have some cream to apply which helps."

The look in Eloise's eyes suggested she didn't quite believe Adalyn's excuse, but she made no further mention. Thankfully, the abrasions faded before anyone returned home, and Adalyn covered what remained with powder.

That evening at dinner, she brought up the subject of rail transportation.

Not surprisingly, Beatrix was the most vocal on the subject. "It's marvelous, Adalyn. Steam-powered engines can travel long distances at much greater speeds. Just think of the advances."

Laurence nodded. "Indeed. I've considered investing myself."

She turned to her father. "There are ventures at home for expansion, are there not?"

"I heard talk about plans in Baltimore." He turned toward Laurence and Beatrix. "Baltimore is a city in our state of Maryland."

"Do you recall the name of the company, Father?"

His eyebrows raised as he sipped his wine. "I don't recall you having such an interest in rail travel. But yes, the company is The Baltimore and Ohio. I read an excellent article in the paper before we left on our excursion."

The rest of the evening became a blur, and Adalyn filed the information away to relay to Nash when he came to call the next evening. Perhaps his investment contact would have heard of the company.

She hardly slept a wink that night. Tossing and turning, she bubbled with excitement. By the same time the next evening, she might be engaged to the man she loved.



THE MORNING AFTER HIS DELICIOUS INTERLUDE WITH ADALYN, Nash paced the floor of his study, waiting for a response from his investment contact. He'd sent Evans out to enquire about selling his more valuable possessions, including the piano.

The mere thought of losing the cherished instrument galled, but not as much as the thought of giving up Adalyn. For her, he'd sacrifice anything, even his own life.

He laughed outright at the absurdity.

"Something humorous?" a male voice sounded from the doorway. Laurence Townsend, Viscount Montgomery, with hat in hand, gazed at him curiously.

Nash blinked. "What are *you* doing here?" He glanced at the clock—quarter of ten. "A little early for a social call."

"I'm here on business." Montgomery said. "Your man was nowhere to be found; your footman let me in and told me where you were." He perused the room where paintings had been removed and lined up against the wall. "So it's true?"

"What's true?" His patience worn thin, Nash's skin crawled at the way Montgomery eyed the paintings.

"I heard a rumor at White's about your financial situation. Something about liquidating your assets."

"That's none of your concern." *What the blazes was keeping Evans?* "Wait, is that why you're here? To gloat?"

Nash would have preferred sick satisfaction rather than the compassion in Montgomery's eyes. "Not at all. I'm here on

another, although not unrelated, matter.”

“Spit it out so you can take your worthless carcass out of my home.”

“My, you’re testy. I came to enquire about investing in the railway venture.”

Nash’s head jerked back. “What about it?”

“I heard you’re retracting your offer to invest. I’ve considered it myself. In fact, Miss Lovelace reminded me of that last evening at Ashton’s.”

The mention of Adalyn’s name piqued Nash’s interest. “I wasn’t aware you considered investing.”

Montgomery shrugged. “I recalled you speaking about it. Bea thinks it’s a worthwhile project, but I wondered if something put you off the idea.” He waved his hat at the paintings. “But now I’m wondering if it’s simply that you no longer have the funds. I merely came to seek your advice if I should pursue it.”

“My advice?” *Well, that was a first.* “If you must know, the investment should still prove lucrative. However, I find myself in the position of investing in a similar project overseas.”

Nash could practically see the cogs in Montgomery’s head turning. “In America? Dr. Lovelace mentioned a project in some city called Baltimore.”

God love Adalyn. She had done some of Nash’s work for him.

Montgomery’s eyes widened. “Are you planning on leaving the country?”

“Like much of this conversation, that’s none of your concern.”

“Hmm. Perhaps *The Muckraker* has the right of it, and you *are* pursuing Miss Lovelace.”

Nash glared at the man. Would he never leave?

Montgomery continued to stare at the paintings. “If you’re selling these, I might be interested.”

Nash barked a laugh. “If that’s your way of extending a helping hand, I don’t need—” A brilliant thought stopped him short. “Wait, there is something you may be interested in.”

Montgomery tilted his head.

“Your wife is exceptional on the piano. How would you like to surprise her with a Broadwood grand?”

After agreeing on a price for the piano, which even Nash had to admit was generous, Montgomery left, pleased he had secured an anniversary gift for Beatrix. He promised to bring the funds the next day and arrange for transport of the instrument.

Relieved to have at least something to offer Adalyn, Nash planned out his apology to Margaret and his speech to Ashton.

When Evans arrived back, the valet held a letter in his hand.

“What? No tray?”

Evans shrugged. “I thought we were dispensing with the formality. It’s from your investment contact, sir.”

Nash waved at him to read it, anticipating the contents from what Montgomery had shared.

Evans peered up from the parchment. “It appears there is indeed a project in America.”

“In Baltimore.”

Evans blinked. “How did you know?”

“Montgomery stopped by. He’s considering investing here and wanted my opinion. He also bought the Broadwood.”

“Is this . . . good news, sir?”

“Better than I expected. His wife is quite accomplished. She will cherish the instrument. And Montgomery said he only has an old pianoforte that she complains about. Plans to give it to her for their third anniversary. She will appreciate and use it well.”



Nash strode toward the brandy decanter, but withdrew his hand. He needed to remain clear-headed. “Does Naismith name the company in America?”

“Yes, sir. Should I write to them on your behalf?”

Nash nodded. After calculating the time necessary for correspondence to travel back and forth, he dictated the letter. “Stress the urgency of my request. However, tell them to hold their response as I may travel there personally, but will contact them if my plans change. Offer them an investment of ten thousand pounds to reserve a share in the project with more to follow.”

Evans finished writing, then read it back to Nash. “So, you’re truly going to America?”

“If all goes well tonight, yes.” Nash peered at his trusted servant. Evans was still a young man, barely in his twenties when Nash hired him ten years prior. Not long after Evans had come into his employ, Nash learned of his trustworthiness when he discovered Nash struggling with a letter and offered to help. He’d become more than a valet and a secretary. He’d become a friend. And Nash had so few of those. “I want you to come with me, but I understand if you—”

“I have nothing to keep me here. My parents are dead. I have no brothers or sisters—no wife.” He grinned at Nash. “Perhaps the wilds of America shall be good for us both.” He glanced at the still unsealed letter. “Do you think I might also invest? I have savings.”

“I think that’s a capital idea.” Nash laughed at his own pun. “Add a postscript or amend the letter as you see fit.”

The lure of the Broadwood called Nash, and he prepared to make his way to the music room when Evans stopped him. “Sir? About Miss Lovelace . . .”

Without making eye contact, Nash said, “I plan to offer for her this evening.”

“Then I shall lay out your finest clothing for you tonight.”

“The scarlet waistcoat, Evans. Miss Lovelace fancies it.”

Once again, Evans stopped him. “One more thing, sir?”

Nash snorted in frustration and turned. “What is it this time? I’d like to play the Broadwood one last time before Montgomery gets his hands on it.”

“I just thought you would find it of interest, sir. I noticed some commotion at Lady Worthington’s this morning. It appears the constable was called.”

“Lady Worthington is no longer any of my concern, if she ever was. No doubt she entertained one too many boisterous gentlemen, and the neighbors complained.” He motioned toward the door. “Now, with your permission . . .?”

## CHAPTER 27—TRUTH REVEALED



Adalyn muddled through the next day at the clinic, her mind on Nash rather than the patients.

Even at dinner, she picked at her food, her stomach in knots, anticipating his arrival.

Maggie set down her glass of wine. “Is the lamb not to your liking, Adalyn? You’ve hardly touched a bite.”

“It’s delicious. I’m afraid I have little appetite.”

Her father gazed at her over the rims of his glasses. “You seemed distracted today at the clinic.”

All eyes turned toward her. Harry especially scrutinized her like a specimen to be examined. Briefly, she considered telling them of Nash’s planned call, but dismissed it just as quickly, worried Harry might instruct Burrows to send him away without even bothering to hear what he had to say.

She opted for feigned ignorance. “Was I? We’ve had such a wonderful time here. I’m sorry it’s coming to an end.”

Maggie sent her a wan smile. “It’s a shame things didn’t work out with Mr. Pratt.”

“Another thing we have Nash Talbot to thank for, no doubt,” Harry muttered.

When they all gathered in the drawing room after dinner, the topic returned to Adalyn and her father’s inevitable return home. The approaching date only exacerbated Adalyn’s constant checking of the clock.

At five to nine, Burrows entered. “Your Graces, Lord Nash Talbot to see you both.”

“Tell him we’re not available,” Harry said, then sipped his brandy.

“Burrows, wait!” Adalyn said, much too eagerly.

Harry’s blond eyebrows raised. “What’s going on?”

“Please, Harry. Speak with him.”

“You know why he’s here?”

Adalyn’s cheeks heated. “I do. Please?”

Harry waited a beat, as if considering her request. “Very well. But I’ll see him alone.”

“No!” Goodness, she had become demanding. “I mean, what he has to say involves Maggie as well.”

Caution rang in her father’s voice. “Adalyn.”

“It’s fine, Daniel. Although, I’m concerned Adalyn finds it so important that I speak with him.” Harry held out his hand to Maggie, and when she arrived at his side, he wrapped a protective arm around her waist.

Adalyn sucked in a breath and said a prayer as they exited the room.

When they were alone, her father pinned her with his gaze. “What’s going on.”

She sent him a smile, trying to tamp down her excitement. “You’ll find out soon enough. I expect Lord Nash will ask to speak with you next.”



NASH PACED THE SMALL PARLOR WHERE THE BUTLER HAD LED him—the same one he’d been in when he came to enquire about Fingers, or should he say, Mena. His stomach twisted, and a sharp pain formed low in his gut. He ordered his shaking hands to still.

Did all people find apologizing to one's enemy so distasteful?

Ashton interrupted his musing on the question. "Talbot. To what do we owe the *pleasure*?"

The man before him had somehow changed from when he'd returned from America. If Nash had to describe it, he would have said Ashton had grown into his title. Not exactly unsure, Ashton had been less imposing when he'd first arrived and claimed his rightful place as duke. But now, he seemed more imperious than ever.

Groveling before him would be even more difficult.

He would start with Margaret. At her husband's side, she appeared serene, as if she knew whatever transpired, Ashton would protect her. "Your Graces." He bowed, hoping that would ease the way. "I've come to apologize for my past behavior, especially to you, Your Grace." He met Margaret's gaze directly, pleased she didn't flinch.

"My actions of five years ago were inexcusable, and although I could provide you with reasons, I will refrain from doing so. I'm heartily sorry that I caused you undue pain. It was most ungentlemanly of me."

Ashton snorted, and Margaret sent her husband a disparaging glance.

Nash fought the smile tugging at his lips.

"I believe what my husband's inelegant response means is that he finds your statement insulting. Ungentlemanly hardly describes your behavior, sir."

*Ouch.* The duchess landed a direct blow. But she had the right of it. "I bow to your assessment, Your Grace. You are correct. My actions were ghastly, but I beg your forgiveness, and hope you can allow me to make amends in whatever way you see fit."

"You can leave us alone," Ashton said. "And leave Miss Lovelace alone."

“Ah. I’m afraid I’m unable to agree to the latter. You see, I’m in love with her. It’s on her request that I’ve come to make amends.”

Ashton stepped forward. “You’re not fit to clean the muck off her shoes.”

“On that, we agree.”

Ashton’s eyes widened.

“I’ve surprised you.” Nash laughed. “Good to know it’s possible. However, regardless of my worth, she loves me. God knows why, but she does. I plan to ask her father for her hand.”

Ashton’s eyes flashed. “Over my dead body.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Chest to chest, they stared each other down. So much for his promise to Adalyn to grovel and make amends.

*The self-righteous pr—*

“Gentlemen. And I use that term loosely.”

Both Nash’s and Ashton’s heads jerked in Margaret’s direction.

“If you’re going to behave like children, I will treat you like children.” She pointed to a chair. “Lord Nash, sit.”

Ashton chuckled.

“And *you*”—she pointed at her husband and then the sofa—“here.”

Ashton’s smug smile vanished, but both of them did as ordered.

“Lord Nash, you stated you came to apologize. I presume, since you asked to see us both, that includes my hot-headed husband.”

*Hot-headed?* George, yes. Harry? No.

Margaret pinned Nash with her gaze. “I shall consider your apology, sir. On one condition. Whatever is between the two of you, I suggest you get to the heart of it. For Adalyn’s sake, if

no one else's. I've seen the look in her eyes when she speaks of you, Nash—the affection she holds.”

“You have?” Ashton sounded utterly shocked.

“Any fool with eyes could have seen it. Which is no doubt what happened with Lady Worthington, not to mention Lord and Lady Stratford. Although I believe Adalyn is ill-advised in her feelings, she's a grown woman, capable of making up her own mind.” She turned her gaze toward Nash. “And mistakes.”

With that, she turned on her heel and left the room.

“She's changed.” Nash's whispered statement drew Ashton's attention back.

“For the better.”

Nash could only nod.

Ashton folded his arms over his chest, one ankle balanced over his long leg. “Tell me one thing. You said you had reasons for accosting Margaret. I can't think of any that would be acceptable.”

“I didn't *accost* her. I kissed her.”

“Against her will. From where I stand that's—”

“Very well.” Nash barked the words. “I accosted her. I was drunk, and I wanted to hurt you.”

Ashton had the nerve to roll his eyes, but Nash pressed forward. “It's true. I'd heard the rumors that you two had grown—close. But the way you looked at her, I knew you loved her. I wanted to take her from you because I knew it would kill you to see her with me.”

“You used her to get at *me*?”

Greasy guilt swirled in Nash's gut. “Yes. And for that, I'm truly sorry. Margaret is a fine woman and didn't deserve what I did.”

Without raising his voice, Ashton's threat was clear. “Do *not* use her Christian name.”

“I apologize. It won’t happen again.”

Silence settled around them, and although not precisely uncomfortable, Nash’s task remained unfinished. He dug deep inside to find the will to speak the words that would burn on his tongue.

But before Nash could open his mouth, Ashton drew a hand through his hair. “To harm an innocent woman just to wound me. It’s unfathomable. I never understood why you hated me so much. Or why you associated with George.”

“Don’t you?” Nash fought back the sneer of contempt.

Without warning, it all rushed out like a huge deluge of pain, humiliation, and anger in one outburst. “Back at Eton, when you humiliated me in front of the class. You were well aware I had difficulty with reading. I confided in you, and you used it against me. I’ll never forget it.”

Ashton appeared dumbstruck.

Heedless of Margaret’s demand, Nash jumped from his seat. “Don’t act like you don’t remember. You took great delight in it. I saw it on your face as I looked out at the sea of laughing faces in the classroom. When you volunteered me to read the passage from *Othello* aloud, you knew very well I would stumble, fight with the words as the letters jumbled on the page before my eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Professor Holbrook’s literature class. We’d only been there a month, and I *trusted* you.” Nash ran a hand through his hair, the pain of the memory gouging a crevice inside him, scooping out the memory and serving it fresh. “I had only told you two nights before of my . . . difficulties. You seemed so understanding, and I felt for the first time in my life I had a friend, a confidant. And you *betrayed* me in the worst possible way.”

Ashton continued to stare. “You never told me you had any such difficulty. Are you sure it wasn’t George you confided in? Did you see my scar?” He pointed to the now silver-white scar running down the side of his face.



“It was dark. How the devil was I to know to look for your scar? We’d sneaked out of our room to raid the kitchen. George was out doing god knows what. Weatherby was gone, too. Something about practicing late for cricket because he wanted to make the team. Lord, he was horrible.” Nash stopped himself from digressing from the matter at hand.

“When was this again?”

“The first damn month.”

Ashton squinted, a deep crease forming on his brow as interminable silence stretched between them. He rubbed his chin, then his expression changed. “I was the one who was gone. With Andrew, helping him practice. I remember because I accidentally hit him in the groin with the ball. He begged me not to tell anyone. Whatever you told, you told to George. I had no idea you struggled in such a way.”

Nash raised his voice, unwilling to believe Ashton had no part in his disgrace. “Then how did you find out and humiliate me during class?”

“Professor Holbrook, you say? George regularly asked me to take his place in his science class. If I recall, the practice began some time the first month. He hated science. It was the same time as my literature class. It seemed a fair trade. I would say it was George who revealed your secret, not I.”

*No! It couldn't be.* All the years he'd harbored such hatred against the wrong brother. And George had never let on, even when Nash had told him that Harry had made a fool of him, although he refused to say how. George never pressed the matter, which was unlike him. Yet, he *wouldn't* press if he'd already known the reason.

Nash slumped back into the chair, his body falling limp as if the bones had vanished. That one incident had shaped so much of his life.

Ashton rose from his seat. After pouring a glass of brandy, he handed it to Nash, poured one for himself, then took a languorous sip. “I remember when you attacked me in the

hallway. I repeatedly asked why you were so angry. But you kept saying, 'You know why.'"

Nash lifted his gaze to meet Ashton's. "Because I thought you did." He shook his head. "All this time, we could have been friends rather than enemies."

"That was your doing." No anger heated his words. In fact, Harry—Nash could no longer think of him as Ashton—spoke with compassion. "If you had explained, I could have refuted it all those years ago."

"Then it would appear I do owe you an apology for blaming you all these years."

Harry held out his hand. "Apology accepted. My brother had a knack for ruining people's lives."

Nash grasped his former enemy's hand. Although both of their grips were strong, neither fought for dominance. "So much time wasted. Is it too late for us?"

Harry shrugged. "Time will tell. However, I believe we've taken the first step. You can't rebuild something by refusing to acknowledge what destroyed it."

Nash swallowed. "My own stupidity."

"No!" Anger flashed again in Harry's eyes, and Nash jerked back. "George's duplicity and jealousy destroyed it. You were a boy who trusted the wrong person."

Rather than the usual contempt, Nash gazed at his old enemy with respect. "Do you always take the high road, Your Grace?"

"When I can. It's less murky up there."

Nash smirked. "You really are a self-righteous prick."

Harry laughed and tilted his glass toward Nash's. "I'll accept that insult. And call me Harry."

Nash clinked his glass with Harry's. "To the duchess' wisdom." Then they both downed the rest of their brandy.



WITH SWEATY HANDS, ADALYN TWISTED THE SKIRT OF HER gown. The poor thing would have pleats before the evening ended. “What’s taking them so long?” Thirty minutes had passed since Maggie had returned to the drawing room.

Maggie sent her an understanding look. “I instructed them to get to the bottom of their animosity. I suspect it goes back years, so it will no doubt take some time.”

“If they don’t kill each other first,” Adalyn mumbled.

Her father’s eyes widened. “Good God. You don’t think they would . . .”

Maggie attempted to reassure him, but concern shone in her eyes. “Of course not.”

“Well, I’m tired of waiting.” Adalyn rose from her chair. “I’m going to find out.” She strode from the room, ignoring the protestations of Maggie and her father.

Unsure what she expected to find upon approaching the parlor, she imagined shouting of heated words or sounds of a scuffle.

Not—laughter? She paused momentarily outside the door, wondering if she’d stumbled upon the wrong room and perhaps several servants had slipped in for a respite.

But no. Nash’s voice rang loud and clear. “And do you remember when Weatherby hit himself in the head with the cricket ball? Lord, I laughed for a week every time I saw that knot on his forehead.”

Harry’s chuckle was less boisterous, but he was amused nonetheless. “You really should be kinder to Andrew. He’s a good chap.”

Adalyn stepped inside the room. Seated together on a sofa, both men had empty glasses, and Harry was pouring more into Nash’s.

“What’s going on here?”

The men bolted from their seats.

Nash stumbled, and brandy sloshed from the glass onto the floor. “Adalyn.”

“Are you both . . . foxed?”

A lopsided grin spread across Nash’s face. “Not yet, but we’re well on our way. Wouldn’t you say, Harry?”

*Blink.*

*Blink. Blink.*

*Blink. Blink. Blink.*

“Harry?” Since when did Nash refer to Harry by his Christian name? She would have loved to have heard Nash’s apology. It must have been stupendous.

“Yes?” both men answered.

Harry pointed the decanter toward his chest. “I’m Harry. You’re Nash. Let’s keep that much straight.”

“I think Adalyn was referring to my use of your Christian name. Isn’t that right, my love?”

*My love? In front of Harry?* He’d lost his mind. Wool filled her own.

“Yes. No.” She waved a hand in frustration, then frowned. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I think you’re in trouble,” Harry said to Nash.

Nash snapped his fingers. “You might be right. I was supposed to speak with her father after making amends with you.”

She stared in wonder at the two men who were having a grand time at her expense.

“You’re in no condition to speak with my father. One whiff of your breath and he will refuse your suit. He doesn’t tolerate drunkenness.”

“Oops,” Nash said, then broke down in laughter. The dunderhead brushed tears of mirth from his eyes.

*Men!*

“She’s right, Nash. Daniel has high standards.” Harry had the nerve to pour more brandy into his own glass.

Adalyn pulled the glass and decanter from Harry’s hands and set them on the table. “Allow me a private word with Lord Nash.”

Harry shook his head. “I shouldn’t.”

She grabbed Harry’s arm and turned him toward the door. “Go.”

After what she presumed was a warning glance at Nash, Harry mercifully left them alone.

Nash set down his glass and reached for her, but she stepped back.

“Oh, no, you don’t. Go home. Come back tomorrow when you’re sober.”

“I’m not drunk, Adalyn.”

“That’s a matter of opinion. Regardless, I think it best if you approach my father with a clear head. Now, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Do I get a kiss goodbye?” He grinned at her.

She pecked him lightly on the lips, but he banded her with his arms and, pulling her close, placed his mouth on hers in a searing kiss. Breathing heavily, he released her. “Until tomorrow, sweetling.”

Adalyn wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. Perhaps she’d do a little of both, the tears coming from the absurdity of the situation. Whatever had transpired between Harry and Nash, it had lifted a dark shadow from the man she loved. “If you’ve come here on horseback, don’t fall off your horse.”

When he turned to leave, his echo of laughter lifted the heaviness in her own soul.



NASH HAD INDEED GONE TO HARRY'S ON HORSEBACK. BUT being an excellent horseman, he had no worries about falling out of the saddle. The cool evening breeze brushed against his face as he rode in a trot toward home. Gazing up, he marveled at the stars that seemed to burn brighter than he remembered.

After he and Harry—it was strange to think of the man on friendly terms—made peace, Harry enquired as to Nash's difficulty in reading. Between sips—or rather large swallows—of the expensive brandy, Harry suggested Adalyn work with him to help him manage. Oddly, Harry mentioned that Margaret and Adalyn had been working with Mena, who seemed to have a similar difficulty in making sense of the words on the page.

Perhaps Adalyn had the right of it, and he did have too much to drink, because Nash suggested that he and Adalyn take Mena in as their ward when they went to America.

He pondered Harry's words. "There is nothing harder than rearing a child. But nothing more rewarding. If you had asked me yesterday, I would have expressly refuted the idea of you as a caring father, but now." He had shrugged. "It might be good for you. Like Manny, Mena needs firm but gentle guidance."

Christ, how his life had changed in only a few months. All he needed to make things perfect was to secure an investment in the American railway. He had every confidence it would make him—and Adalyn and Mena—as rich as Croesus.

When he reined in his mount in front of his building, a groom raced up to take his horse. He'd never felt so light as he approached his doorway.

Evans opened the door before Nash even reached it, his valet's eyes somehow wild.

What the devil was wrong?

"Sir," Evans said, taking his hat. "They've been waiting for you in the parlor."

Without asking who, Nash hurried to see for himself. Nothing could have prepared him when he entered the room

and the constable strode forward.

“Lord Nash Talbot, you’re under arrest for the murder of Lady Cordelia Worthington.”

## CHAPTER 28—ACCUSED



When Adalyn returned to the drawing room after Nash left, Harry explained what had transpired years ago when he and Nash were boys.

“I’m not saying we’ll be the best of friends,” Harry said. “But it’s like excising a tumor. The root of the problem has to be addressed before healing can begin. I give him credit. It took courage to tell me of his difficulties reading.” Harry darted a glance toward her father. “Daniel, I trust you will keep this in confidence.”

Her father eyed Harry over his teacup. “It’s not like I’m going to have any interaction with the man after we return home.”

Heat bloomed on Adalyn’s cheeks as she and Harry locked eyes. “About that. Father, I believe Lord Nash will be returning tomorrow evening to speak with you.”

“Whatever for?” He paused a moment before his eyes widened. “A proposal of marriage?” Tea sloshed from his cup as it landed on the saucer with a *clink*. “You plan to marry him and stay here?”

The pain in his eyes lanced her heart. “I’ve made it clear to him that my place is back home, assisting at your practice. I don’t intend to give up either you or my work. It’s why I enquired about the railway project back home. Nash would like to invest. He will come with us when we return to Boston.”



Her father continued to stare as if he had trouble processing the information.

She couldn't blame him; she could hardly believe it herself.

“Harry? What do you think?”

Unease sifted through her at her father's strangled voice.

“It's unimportant what I think. Adalyn should make her own choices.”

Warmth spread through her at Harry's words.

Then quickly eked out with his next. “But I would caution you, Adalyn. It remains to be seen if you can trust him.”

They spoke no more about Nash, turning instead to escapades of the children. While Maggie chattered excitedly about Manny's superb marks at school and little Charles' first attempt at crawling, Adalyn's mind remained fixed on Harry's words.

Could she trust Nash? What else did the man hide beneath that roguish exterior?

The next morning at breakfast, Adalyn pushed her coddled egg around her plate. She'd tossed and turned most of the night. What little sleep she managed, Nash had invaded her dreams.

Burrows entered with a newspaper on a silver salver, placing it in front of Harry. “Your Grace, there is some disturbing news. The staff is already chattering about it. I thought I should apprise you.”

Harry glanced up from his toast and jam. “Very good, Burrows.” The moment his gaze fell upon the paper, a curse flew from his lips.

Maggie startled, dropping her fork on her plate with a clatter. “What is it?”

Adalyn's stomach tightened as Harry's gaze met hers. “Nash has been arrested. For the murder of Lady Worthington.”

For the second time, both in relation to Nash and violence, Adalyn's blood chilled, and uncomfortable tingles shot along her skin. Grateful she was seated, she fought the blackness edging the corners of her vision, and her head swam.

Her father raced to her side. "My dear, you've gone so pale." He barked a command over his shoulder to one of the footman. "My bag, quickly. It's at the front entrance."

Scurrying footsteps sounded around her. A chair pushed out, scraping against the wooden floor at the edge of the rug. Someone pressed a glass of water to her lips.

"Drink." Maggie's voice sounded hollow and far away.

The acrid odor of smelling salts assaulted her nose and shook her from the encroaching darkness. She coughed and waved the hovering crowd away. Multiple pairs of concerned eyes gazed at her. Not only her father, Maggie, and Harry, but the servants as well. The footman holding her father's medical bag appeared positively horrified. Burrows whispered something to Harry, who had grasped her wrist, taking her pulse.

"Let's get you upstairs and into bed," her father said.

Harry stared at her with serious eyes. "I instructed Burrows to send word to the clinic that we won't be in today. Oliver and Timothy can handle things."

Maggie pressed a cold cloth to Adalyn's forehead.

"No!" Adalyn pushed them away. "I must go to him. It has to be a mistake. He would never—" As she tried to rise, her knees buckled from under her, and she fell back into the chair.

"I'll carry her." Harry lifted her in his arms, and although she wanted to bat his arms away, her strength had deserted her. "Burrows, prepare some St. John's Wort tea and bring it to her room. Add a little brandy to it."

"Right away, sir." The old gentleman's voice sounded muted and distant, and Adalyn wanted to protest that they should be concerned for him rather than her.

Once Harry and Maggie had settled her in bed, Burrows brought in a tray with tea, setting it on a table by the bed.

Harry poured and handed her the cup. “Sip this.”

She tried to raise herself from the bed, but her arms trembled. “Would everyone please stop hovering? I’m not who needs your attention. We need to help Nash.”

“Adalyn.”

She cringed at the condescending tone in Harry’s voice.

“Listen to me. His brother is a marquess. Certainly, he will provide Nash the assistance he needs. There is nothing we can do.”

“But you’re a duke. They’ll listen to you.” She grasped Harry’s coat sleeve, pressing so tight he winced. “Please, Harry. Can’t you at least find out what happened?”

Lips pressed in a tight line, Harry nodded. “Very well. But promise me you will remain in bed and rest.” He held out the cup again. “And drink this. Doctor’s orders.”

Everyone filed out behind Harry, leaving her alone to ponder the nightmarish turn things had taken in such a short time.



THE CELL STANK OF SWEAT AND URINE, AND NASH FOUGHT back the gag at the plate the gaoler had called food. He pushed it away. He’d starve before he ate such slop. Moans from his fellow prisoners echoed around him.

He’d demanded answers and received a sound blow to his head in response. His cheek still throbbed from the assault.

They’d taken his pocket watch before throwing him into the miserable cell, and the darkness of night seemed interminable. He’d given a rueful laugh, knowing that even if he’d kept his watch, he’d have no way to determine the time in the blackness surrounding him. Meager light from candles

barely illuminated the hallway, much less the cells to which they led.

Unable to sleep, he'd lain on the straw mattress and stared up at the tiny opening they called a window. Barely large enough to insert his hand, the opening squeezed a beam of light through, announcing the rising sun.

Evans had promised to send word to Roland. Surely help would arrive before long.

Yet, as he waited, despair pressed on him, and he could almost feel the noose tightening around his neck. The fleeting happiness of a future with Adalyn snatched away before he could even blink. Even if he did manage to untangle himself from this mess, would she still want him?

"Adalyn." He muttered her name in supplication and regret, needing to say it aloud if only to hear it once again on his lips.

Footsteps scuffed along the cold, stone floors of the gaol, and a beam of light grew brighter from the hallway. He stood and ran a hand through his mussed hair, hoping to appease his brother's impossibly high standards by some small degree.

A gruff voice broke through the cries of prisoners calling for the guard's attention. "He's over here, Your Grace."

*Your Grace?*

Had he heard correctly? Had the short stay in this hellhole addled his brains?

He shielded his eyes from the guard's bright torch, then blinked at the man standing before him. "Ashton? What are you doing here?"

"That should be obvious. Adalyn implored me to see you." The kindness and camaraderie the duke had shown the previous night had vanished like Nash's freedom. The hard flint to the duke's eyes reminded him of George.

Nash fought the urge to recoil.

"Did you do it?"

Nash blinked again, in part to clear his vision, and in part to clear his mind. “Murder Cordelia?”

The duke nodded.

Nash grabbed the bars of the cell. “No! I’ve demanded to know what evidence led them to accuse me, but no one will answer.”

“Leave us,” Ashton said to the guard.

Nash could no longer think of him as Harry. That brief rekindling of their boyhood friendship had retreated to the dark corner of Nash’s cell.

The guard sent Ashton a dubious look. “Beggin’ your pardon, Your Grace. He’s a dangerous criminal.”

“I’m not afraid of him. Now, go!”

With one final look at them, the man spat on the floor at Ashton’s feet.

Once he was out of earshot, Nash said, “The peerage holds little sway here. Most view us with disdain. I think they’re relishing having me here.”

Ashton stepped closer. “Is that a bruise under your eye?”

Nash straightened. “It’s nothing. I’ve had worse.”

“Hmph.” Ashton pointed to the plate of gruel. “And have you had worse than that as well?”

Barking a laugh, Nash shook his head. “I’m afraid that truly does win the prize for the worst.”

“Here. I anticipated as much.” Ashton withdrew a small package from his medical bag. “It’s just bread and cheese, but it should sustain you.”

His stomach growled at the mere thought. With greedy fingers, Nash snatched the food from Ashton’s hands. He shoved the bread into his mouth, closing his eyes at the welcomed taste.

“Slowly. Your stomach hasn’t been empty so long as to bring it back up, but perhaps make it last until I can bring you

more.”

“Why?” Nash asked around a mouthful of bread.

Ashton cocked his blond head. “Primarily because of Adalyn. But not only that. I couldn’t reconcile a man who would grovel before his enemy to please a woman with someone who would kill another woman in cold blood.”

“I didn’t kill Cordelia!” Another of the duke’s words registered. “And I didn’t grovel!”

Ashton had the gall to smirk.

Nash bit off another piece of bread. “Got anything to drink in that magic bag of yours?”

Ashton pulled out a flask and passed it through the bars. “Brandy?”

“Christ, yes!” The sweet burn was like heaven going down his throat. The ache in his belly eased, and he met Ashton’s gaze. “How is Adalyn?”

“Overwrought with worry about you. She collapsed at breakfast when we heard the news.”

Nash nearly dropped the precious flask in the urge to reach through the bars and grab Ashton by the shirt. “Is she all right?”

“She will be once she recovers from the shock.” He nodded toward the food and drink. “I’ll try to bring more, but first, we need to discuss the more pressing matter.”

“You mean who killed Cordelia?”

Ashton nodded. “Do you have any idea? Did she have enemies? Anyone who wanted revenge?” Ashton pinned him with his hazel eyes. “Besides you, that is.”

“I didn’t want revenge on Cordelia.”

Ashton sent him a dubious glance.

“Very well. I was angry, but I wouldn’t kill her. No matter what they say. Which speaking of, do you know what evidence they have against me?”

“Other than she was your mistress? No. I came here first. But I will request a meeting with the magistrate and see what I can find out.”

Nash’s throat tightened. “Thank you, Ashton.”

“Harry, Nash. Remember?” He nodded again to the food and flask. “Now, hide that so they don’t take it away.”

As Nash stared at Harry’s retreating back, he never would have believed he’d have an ally and defender in the self-righteous duke. A glimmer of hope sparked in his chest.

Much later in the day, Roland arrived at Nash’s cell. His brother held an embroidered handkerchief to his nose as he swung his gaze around the desolate surroundings.

“I never expected much from you, Nash. But this?” He waved that damnable cane back and forth. “This is beneath even you.”

Anger fueled Nash’s veins. “I’m . . .” He paused, biting his tongue. Innocent never applied to him. “I’m not guilty. I didn’t kill Cordelia.”

Roland stepped up to the bars, the handkerchief still poised at his nose, thankfully muting his voice. “And yet you said you wished to strangle her. What else am I supposed to believe?”

Nash ground his teeth, refusing to dignify Roland’s statement with a response. “Are you here to help or gloat, brother? Do you have any information regarding the evidence against me?”

“As to your first question, I haven’t decided. What reason will you give me that it would be worth my blunt to secure a barrister to save your sorry hide? I only tolerate you at Charlotte’s insistence. You’ve been a pox on me since you were born.”

Nash refused to wince at the insult. “And the second question?”

“The magistrate has not been forthcoming. Something about a scratch on your hand and letters found in Lady Worthington’s possession that implicate you.”

“Ha! Well, we both know how unlikely that is.” Although Evans could have penned them on his behalf. But Evans wouldn’t betray him so ill. Would he?

“So you plan to use our family’s shame to worm your way out of this mess?”

*Mess?* “Is that all you view this as, Roland? A mess to be swept under the rug and ignored? My life is at stake here, man.”

“Just so. The question is, is it a life worth saving?”

“I’m your brother!”

“A fact I try to forget on a daily basis.” He waved the handkerchief at Nash, then, apparently thinking the better of it, returned it to his nose. “I shall contact a barrister to see what can be done—if anything.”

With no further word, Roland turned and left, moving faster than Nash ever remembered.

Left alone with only the insects climbing the walls of his cell and the rats scurrying in and out of holes near the floor, Nash wasn’t sorry to see him go. The rats were better company.



## CHAPTER 29—SEEKING ANSWERS



Contrary to Harry's admonition to rest, Adalyn paced the floor of her bedchamber, waiting for his return. She recalled the state Nash had been in after everything had fallen apart at the ball. Could he have really been so distraught as to silence Lady Worthington?

She pushed the disturbing thought from her mind. There had to be a reasonable explanation.

What was keeping Harry?

She jumped at the soft knock. "Enter."

Harry popped his head around the door. "You're not in bed." He sent her a castigatory glance. "But I suppose I understand." He entered, motioning to a chair by the escritoire.

With reluctance, she sat. "How is he?"

"To his credit, he's concerned about you. I thought he would shoot through the bars of his cell when I told him you had collapsed this morning."

An ache formed in her chest that even in his dire situation, his thought was for her. "Did you find out anything?"

"I asked to speak with the magistrate regarding the evidence for the charges."

"I want to go with you."

"Adalyn . . ." The condescending tone in his voice set her on edge.

"I'm not a child, Harry. I'll go mad if I stay here."

“Very well. I requested they send word when the magistrate will see me, but I stressed the urgency.”

After Harry left, Adalyn tried to busy herself running through scenarios. However, she had no idea who else could have been responsible. She knew so few people in London, and those she had met seemed unlikely to have committed such a heinous act. But if her brief interactions with Lady Worthington indicated anything, the woman had to have had enemies other than Nash.

Later that day, she sat in the library with Margaret, attempting to work with Mena on her reading. The girl struggled in much the same way Nash described his own difficulties.

Frustration built in Mena’s face, and she slammed her hand down on the table beside the book. “I can’t do it!”

Adalyn exhaled a heavy sigh. She could hardly fault the girl when she herself couldn’t concentrate. Her head jerked up when Harry entered.

“The magistrate has come to us. He’s waiting in my study.”

Adalyn bolted from her seat, knocking the book to the floor.

Mena’s cry of “Oi!” sounded behind her as she exited the room to follow Harry.

Hands clasped behind his back, the magistrate stood at the window. His tall, thin frame reminded Adalyn of an obelisk.

“Your Grace.” He bowed toward Harry, then cast a quick glance toward Adalyn. “Miss?”

“Miss Lovelace is my guest and a close friend of Lord Nash.”

“I understand you have questions regarding Nash Talbot’s charges,” the magistrate said.

A chill slithered up Adalyn’s spine at the man’s grim expression.

Harry pressed forward. “What evidence do you have?”

“It’s quite irregular to discuss the case with someone who is not a barrister.”

Harry waved it away. “Irregular or not, I insist.”

“Very well. The constable discovered some letters in Lady Worthington’s possession, indicating she and Lord Nash had a”—his gaze shifted toward Adalyn—“relationship, and that the dissolution was rather contentious.”

Adalyn stared, aghast. “You can’t convict a man on the mere existence of some letters.”

“No. Of course not.” The magistrate’s gaze returned to Harry.

“Has the coroner examined the body?” Harry asked.

Adalyn shivered. Strange to think of the woman who had been so vibrant a few nights before as *the body*.

“He has.” The magistrate refused to meet Adalyn’s gaze.

Harry persisted. “And his determination?”

“Death by asphyxiation. It appears Lady Worthington was strangled.”

Adalyn swayed on her feet, and Harry grasped her elbow. “I want to see the body.” The words came out of her mouth in a whisper, but both men turned their gazes on her, the magistrate’s mouth falling agape.

“That is highly—”

“Irregular. Yes, I understand,” she said. “His Grace is a physician. Allow him to examine Lady Worthington’s remains.”

Corners of the magistrate’s eyes pinched. “I’m well aware of His Grace’s clinic, and although he may be qualified to perform such an examination, you, my dear lady, are not.”

“And if I insist that Miss Lovelace accompany me?” The iron tone in Harry’s voice manifested his power as a peer of the realm.

His mouth in a tight line, the magistrate paused, studying them both. “Very well. You will require a letter advising the coroner of my permission.”

At the moment, Adalyn couldn't have cared less about the magistrate's attempt to maintain control over the situation. She needed to see the evidence with her own eyes.

After penning a letter, the magistrate left, encouraging Harry to allow those in charge to perform their duties.

“What a disagreeable man,” Adalyn said.

“He's a fair man, and he's only doing his job. I've dealt with him before. Our request truly is most irregular.”

How she was growing to hate that word.

“Harry. Perhaps we should stop at Lady Worthington's and speak to her servants. They might know something as well.”

Harry sent her a rueful smile. “Are you considering switching from medicine to investigations?”

“They go hand in hand, do they not? As physicians, aren't we called to find the root of the illness by examining the symptoms? And aren't symptoms evidence?”

“I can't argue with that logic. But, if you would, allow me to do most of the talking.”

She rolled her eyes. *Men.*

Once they arrived at the coroner's, letter in hand, they received a chilly reception.

Mr. Pennywaithe, the coroner, stared dumbfounded at the request, his mouth opening and closing multiple times. Wisps of white stood at odd angles on the man's liver-spotted head as he ran his hands through the few remaining strands.

Before he could form the words, Adalyn said, “I understand this is most irregular.”

Although there was no humor in the purpose of their visit, Harry gave a soft chuckle, then sent her an apologetic glance.

“Well, if you insist. You’ve come just in time. I was preparing to send the body to the undertaker.”

Thank goodness they had come posthaste.

Mr. Pennywaithe motioned for them to follow him, his gait stiff.

On a long table, the top covered with cold marble, a body lay draped in a white sheet. The coroner eyed her suspiciously. “Are you certain you’re prepared for this, miss?”

She waved him to continue. “Yes. Yes. I’ve seen dead bodies before.”

The man’s eyes widened, but he nodded, then pulled back the top of the sheet to expose Lady Worthington’s pale face.

Her dark hair, which previously had been so elaborately pinned in curls and braids on the top of her head, now lay limp and loose around her shoulders. No pink dotted her cheeks or colored her lips, but crescents of dark thick lashes rested on her face in eternal repose.

Harry stepped forward and lifted one eyelid. “Look, Adalyn.” He pointed to the red pinpoint marring the whites of her eyes. “Petechial hemorrhaging.”

She nodded, stepping closer.

Mr. Pennywaithe leaned in. “I noticed that. What’s it mean?”

“I’ve seen it in choking victims or”—Harry cast an apologetic glance toward Adalyn—“strangulation victims.”

“Ahh,” Mr. Pennywaithe murmured. “Notice the faint bruises on the throat.”

Adalyn’s stomach fell to her toes, but it wasn’t from the gruesome signs of death, but rather the violence that appeared to have caused them. She leaned in, her gaze lingering on the finger marks. “Wait. Harry, look at the size of the marks.” She placed her own hand against the bruises, her fingertips covering them completely.

Harry’s eyes widened.

“What is it?” Mr. Pennywaithe said, his voice interested rather than offended.

Harry conveyed a look to her that said, *allow me to handle this*. “Mr. Pennywaithe, did you state in your report to the magistrate that you determined the cause of death was asphyxiation most likely from strangulation by a man?”

“Well, no. I didn’t specify the sex of the party involved. Only the cause.”

Adalyn threw her arms around Mr. Pennywaithe. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Flustered, the old man blushed and stumbled backward. “Would you kindly explain?”

“You’ll have to forgive Miss Lovelace, sir. She’s American.”

Adalyn was too giddy to be offended.

The old man grinned at her. “Ah. I see.” Then he tilted his head. “No. Not really.”

“Adalyn, would you like to explain to Mr. Pennywaithe?” The pride in Harry’s eyes warmed her.

“A gentleman named Lord Nash Talbot has been charged with the crime. But as you can see”—she motioned him closer and placed her fingers over the marks again—“the size of the marks could not have been made by a man’s larger hands. These are clearly the marks of a woman. Or at least someone of a much smaller stature than Lord Nash Talbot.”

“Oooh. Very good, miss.” The old man nodded, his eyes filled with respect.

“Thank you so much for your time, Mr. Pennywaithe,” Harry said. “If I would ask one more favor. Please refrain from transferring Lady Worthington’s remains to the undertaker just yet.”

“I can’t stall long.” He pulled the sheet back to cover Lady Worthington.

“At least another day, if possible. I’ll send over ice for the body.” Harry offered his hand. “And if there is ever anything I can do for you, please seek me out.”

The coroner stared a moment at Harry’s extended hand, clearly not used to such familiarity from a duke. After a quick handshake, the man bowed. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

As they left the coroner’s, Harry turned toward Adalyn. “Did you ever doubt his innocence?”

Had she? She’d always been truthful with Harry—well, almost always. “There was a moment, briefly. After the ball, he was so distraught—so angry with Lady Worthington about what happened, and strangulation is such a crime of violence —”

Harry stopped mid-stride. “After the ball?”

*Oh, dear.* “Well . . . I . . .”

“Adalyn, did you see Lord Nash after the ball?”

A drop of sweat trickled from her forehead. “I may have encountered him the day I went to buy gifts.”

Harry eyed her askance but mercifully asked no further questions. After escorting her to his carriage, he instructed the driver to proceed to Lady Worthington’s. “Next step, determine who did place those marks on her neck.”

Adalyn puzzled over the evidence, trying to make sense of it all. The idea that another woman would commit such a despicable act chilled her to the marrow. “Harry, do you have any idea who it might be?”

He shook his head. “Nothing specific. But after we question the servants, we should call upon the magistrate with our findings at the coroner. Perhaps we will extract some additional information that will assist in the case.”

Although her question was indelicate, Adalyn was willing to face any embarrassment if it helped Nash and identified a murderer. “When Nash ended their association, might she have taken a married lover? So, perhaps a jealous wife?”

“Your father would be mortified to hear you speak of such things. But, yes. That is a possibility. The servants should know who came to call.”

The carriage came to a halt in front of a home in Grosvenor Square. As Harry assisted her down the carriage step, Adalyn gazed up at the stately home. A bit of jealousy raced through her veins that Nash had been a frequent visitor. She pushed it aside at the sight of the black wreath hanging on the door, reminding her of the purpose of their call. Grasping the brass circle still visible in the middle of the wreath, Harry gave two sound knocks.

Moments later, an older man opened the door. When Harry handed him his card, the man bowed profusely. “Forgive me, Your Grace. We weren’t expecting visitors, as you can imagine. How may I help you?”

“Our condolences upon the death of your mistress. I would like to ask the staff a few questions, if I may.”

The old man blinked. “Questions, Your Grace? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“About Lady Worthington’s death. The day she died.”

Adalyn couldn’t help but notice that Harry did not use the word murder.

The door opened wider, and the man motioned them inside. “I’m afraid some of the staff are not at home. They’re out seeking new positions. I’m Newton, the butler. Perhaps I can be of service.”

After passing several rooms where white sheets draped furniture, Newton led them into a spacious parlor. “May I offer some refreshment?”

“That won’t be necessary, Newton.” Harry and Adalyn settled on a sofa. Newton stood at attention before them, and Harry motioned to a wingback. “Please, Newton, have a seat.”

The old man hesitated a moment, then acquiesced, balancing on the edge, his back ramrod straight, and his hands on his knees. He glanced between her and Harry, obviously waiting for a question or order.



“Newton,” Harry began. “Were you home the day of Lady Worthington’s death?”

“Not the entire day, Your Grace. Around one, my lady requested a late luncheon be brought to her room, then dismissed the staff for the remainder of the afternoon. We were to return home in time to prepare for supper. I arrived back shortly before six in the evening.”

“Who discovered her body?” Adalyn immediately regretted her choice of words when the old man blanched.

“Her lady’s maid, Barnes, found my lady on the floor of her bedchamber when she arrived to dress my lady for supper.”

“And this was at what time?” Harry asked.

“Around half of six, Your Grace.”

“Newton, you may call me sir.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I beg your pardon. Sir.”

“What happened next, Newton?” Adalyn hoped to get more than simple statements from the man.

“Pandemonium, miss. Everyone had returned by that time, and we all rushed to see what happened. We tried to rouse her, but to no avail. Cook was distraught, as she was the last to see our lady alive. I sent a footman to fetch a constable. He didn’t arrive until eight that evening. After sending for the coroner, the constable left, telling us not to touch anything in my lady’s room and that he would return in the morning. There had apparently been a burglary he needed to attend to forthwith and since my lady was beyond help . . .”

Harry jotted the information down in a small notebook. “Was she expecting any callers that afternoon?”

If possible, Newton stiffened even further. “I’m not at liberty to discuss Lady Worthington’s callers, sir. However, under duress, I gave a list to the constable.”

Adalyn grew frustrated with the English sense of propriety. “The time has passed for discretion, sir. If a murder had

occurred, it's imperative to identify suspects and eliminate those who are innocent."

Harry touched her forearm, giving it a little squeeze. "Newton. I admire your loyalty to your employer. I'm grateful to my own staff for their discretion when needed. But perhaps you can further serve Lady Worthington by helping us determine whose actions snuffed out her young life? Doesn't she deserve justice?"

She stole a glance at Harry. When did he become such a diplomat?

For a moment, Newton's perfect posture cracked, his shoulders slumping minutely. "I suppose when you put it like that . . ."

"Who was on the list, Newton?" Harry kept his voice gentle, but firm. "We've already approached the magistrate, so I could simply demand the list from him, but I'd rather hear it from you, as you may have specifics regarding her callers. No one knows what goes on in a house more than the butler."

Although he still maintained his formal posture, Newton's narrow chest puffed out.

*Ah, that did it.*

"That is true. The constable seemed especially interested in Lord Nash Talbot, and although he had been a frequent caller, I stressed to the constable that Lord Nash had not been here for several months." He paused. "At least, to my knowledge. Lady Worthington was generous and dismissed the staff several afternoons a month."

"As she did that fateful afternoon," Harry offered.

"Yes, sir. "

"Who else?" Adalyn asked, trying to keep her own voice from sounding demanding.

"Lord Felix Davies has been a frequent caller as of late." Newton cast a glance toward Adalyn.

Harry drew the man's attention back. "Has the constable questioned him?"

“I’m not sure, Your Grace.”

It was an odd question due to the size of the marks on Lady Worthington’s neck, but Adalyn trusted Harry had something in mind.

Harry nodded. “Is there anything else out of the ordinary about that day you can recall?”

“No sir.”

“Are the lady’s maid and cook here? I would like to speak with them.”

“Cook is here. I’m not certain about Barnes. She left this morning, but she may have returned.” He rose. “If you would excuse me, I’ll go see.” He bowed and exited the room.

Although they were alone, Adalyn kept her voice low. “Why did you ask about Lord Felix? If we’re correct about the marks, wouldn’t he also be ruled out?”

“I would imagine, but I want to see if the constable singled Nash out. Also, if Davies had been courting another lady, there might be motive there.”

Adalyn swallowed hard. What if suspicion fell on her? Before she could ponder it further, a ruddy faced, middle-aged woman entered the room. She twisted her hands in front of her as she stared at the floor and executed a clumsy curtsy. “Newton said you wished to see me, Your Grace.” Nervousness laced her heavy Irish brogue.

Gentleman that he was, Harry rose, even though she was a servant. “That’s correct. Please take a seat, Mrs.?”

“O’Leary, Your Grace. But everyone’s been callin’ me Cook.”

Harry smiled, and the woman seemed to relax. “Mrs. O’Leary, I understand you were the last to see Lady Worthington alive. You brought her a late luncheon, I understand.”

“Tha’s right. I set the tray on the table in her room, and she says I could go. So’s I went to see my sister. She’s who got me

this job. Married her an Englishman.” She glanced toward Adalyn.

“How long have you worked for Lady Worthington?” Adalyn asked.

“Just started, I did. The old cook up and died sudden-like, she did.” Her gaze skittered between Adalyn and Harry. “I ain’t in no trouble, am I?”

“No, of course not,” Harry said. “We only want to ask some questions about what you remember.”

Adalyn wasn’t as quick to dismiss the woman’s question. “Why would you ask that, Mrs. O’Leary?”

The cook refused to meet their questioning gazes, and her hands resumed twisting in her lap. “No reason. I just ain’t used to bein’ questioned about no murder.”

“That’s understandable,” Harry said. “Did you like Lady Worthington?”

The woman’s gaze shot to theirs. “O’ course. I mean, I didn’t talk to her much, bein’s I’m only the cook and just started the day afore . . . you know. But she promised me good wages, she did.”

Harry sent her a smile. “Tell us a little about that day. What was Lady Worthington’s mood when you brought her luncheon? Was she happy? Did she seem nervous about anything? Did she say anything to you? Anything you can recall might be helpful.”

“Like I told you, she just said to put the tray down. She was fussin’ with her hair.” She peered over her shoulder, then leaned in, whispering, “If you ask me, she was expecting a gentleman caller, if you know wha’ I mean.”

Harry lifted his hand to stifle a cough. “Yes. Mrs. O’Leary, I believe we understand. So did she seem happy? Eager?”

Mrs. O’Leary nodded. “But a trifle nervous, too.”

“Anything else you remember?” Adalyn asked.

“No, miss.”

“You’ve been most helpful, Mrs. O’Leary,” Harry said.

When Mrs. O’Leary rose to leave, Harry stopped her. “I have one more question.”

“Yes, sir?”

“What did you serve Lady Worthington for luncheon?”

With a slight tilt of her head, Mrs. O’Leary said, “I made a lovely gliomaigh stew. Missing home, I was, and got one fresh from the market that morning seein’s we didn’t have none here. The stew is one of my best recipes and smelled so lovely, I thought my lady would enjoy it.”

Something about *gliomaigh* tickled Adalyn’s brain, but she couldn’t bring it forward.

Harry interrupted her puzzling. “Thank you again, Mrs. O’Leary. Would you ask Newton if he’s located Barnes? We’d like to speak with her as well.”

Mrs. O’Leary rose and again demonstrated her awkward curtsy, then practically backed out of the room before scurrying away.

“She seems skittish,” Adalyn said. “And something is bothering me.”

Harry shrugged. “She says she’s new to service. Probably not accustomed to meeting with high-ranking members of the peerage.”

“Let’s hope the lady’s maid has more to offer. She was first on the scene, so perhaps there will be some clues there.”

They didn’t have to wait long before a tall, thin, and dour-faced woman appeared at the doorway of the room. “Your Grace. I’m Barnes. Newton said you have questions about my lady’s death.” Unlike the cook, the lady’s maid seemed confident and poised.

Adalyn was grateful the woman didn’t waste time. It was a precious commodity, especially for Nash.

Interestingly, Harry did not rise to greet her, but motioned to the chair as he had for Mrs. O’Leary. “Barnes, please tell us

exactly what you saw when you found Lady Worthington? No detail is too small.”

Barnes slid her gaze to Adalyn momentarily, then proceeded. “As I told the constable, I arrived to dress Lady Worthington for supper at half of six. I knocked, as was customary, but then entered. My lady always knew precisely when I would arrive to dress her. We had an understanding, she and I.”

Like Newton, Barnes sat ramrod straight in the chair. But although her deference to Harry was evident, there was more of an air of pride about her. She recounted the details in a rather detached manner. “My lady lay sprawled across the floor, face down. A chair at the table had been knocked on its side, and the contents of her luncheon were strewn on the floor, the bowl turned upside down.”

“Signs of a struggle?” Adalyn asked Harry.

“Possibly.”

Barnes’ eyes narrowed. “May I enquire who you are, miss?”

Before Adalyn could open her mouth, Harry intervened. “This is Miss Lovelace, and anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of her. Now, Barnes, do you know if Lady Worthington expected any callers that afternoon?”

The woman’s lips tightened as if holding in her secrets. “I provided that information to the constable.”

Adalyn huffed. “Which we can obtain from the magistrate, but it would be so much simpler if you would tell us.”

“Very well. My lady had been hoping to rekindle an attachment to Lord Nash Talbot. I believe she had written him and expected him to call that afternoon.”

“And this is what you told the constable?” Harry asked.

Adalyn slid her gaze over, catching the tightening of Harry’s jaw.

“I did.”

“This is most helpful, Barnes. We appreciate your candor,” Harry said. “Please convey our thanks again to Newton and Mrs. O’Leary. If you think of anything else, please let us know. Nothing is too inconsequential.”

Barnes gave a curt nod, then escorted them out.

Adalyn had so many questions, but she withheld them until she and Harry could speak privately. But if she calculated the day correctly, rather than meeting with Lady Worthington, Nash had spent the afternoon making love to her.

Which presented a whole different set of problems.

She tried again to recall what the odd name of the stew meant. She’d heard it before from the Irish immigrants.

Something was definitely amiss.

## CHAPTER 30—THE EVIDENCE



Nash nibbled on the bread and cheese Harry had given him. Only a small portion remained, and he re-wrapped it in the cloth and placed it behind a loose stone in the wall, hoping Harry would keep his promise to bring more.

He tried to sleep to pass the time, but the uncomfortable straw poking through the thin mattress covering kept him awake.

“You’ve grown soft, Nash,” he muttered to himself. He needed to hear something other than the interminable moans from fellow prisoners and the *drip, drip, drip* of water leaking somewhere. He’d go mad if he didn’t hear a human voice, even if it was his own.

A noose started to look appealing. He hoped the snap would be quick.

Closing his eyes, he saw Adalyn’s face, her clear blue eyes looking at him with the same disgust he’d witnessed so many times from others.

To think he’d dreamed of a life with her, rearing Mena together. A fresh start in a new country.

*What a fool.*

Like everything else he touched, the beautiful vision crumbled before him and turned to ash.

Footsteps roused him from his morbid thoughts, and he pulled himself upright on the cot.



“You’ve got five minutes,” the voice of the burly guard called out to someone.

Evans appeared around the corner, his eyes widening with horror as he stopped mid-stride. After recovering from his shock, the valet rushed forward. “Sir. How are you faring?”

Nash gave him a rueful smile. “As you can see, the king has spared no expense for his guests.”

Evans’ gaze darted to the floor behind Nash, then he jumped back. “Is that a . . . rat?”

“Ah, you’ve noticed my little friends. I’ve named that one Jack. I suspect he’s searching for the remaining cheese the duke provided. Greedy little devil, that one.”

Evans stared as if Nash had gone mad. Perhaps he had.

“His Grace sent word, suggesting I bring more.” He pulled out a cloth-wrapped bundle from inside his coat. “The way the guard eyed me, I felt certain he would search my person and discover these, so I offered him three shillings.”

Nash took the precious bundle from Evans’ hands and unwrapped it. “We’re lucky you didn’t lose both your money and the food.” More cheese and bread. Well, beggars couldn’t be choosy, and he tossed the bundle onto his cot. What he would do for a piece of meat.

As if reading his mind, Evans pulled out another wrapped package. “Meat pie, sir? I kept it separate. It’s still warm.”

Nash snatched it away and bit into the warm crust, the meat’s savory flavor dancing across his tongue. He moaned. “Tell Mrs. Hodges if I get out of here alive, I’ll raise her wages.” He bit off another large mouthful, chewed, and swallowed. “Yours, too.”

“About that, sir.” Evans peered over his shoulder. “Your brother hired a barrister who questioned all of us. He asked if we knew of your whereabouts the afternoon Lady Worthington died. We told him you were at home the entire day, but he asked if anyone other than servants could verify that.” Another glance over his shoulder. “I didn’t mention Miss Lovelace, sir. But perhaps if she—”

“No!” Nash nearly dropped the precious pie as he reached through the bars with his free hand. “You will not mention her. Do you understand? It would ruin her.”

“But, sir—”

“Under no circumstances. Swear to me. I will not have her name and reputation sullied just to save my sorry hide. If there’s any hope for me, it must come from another source.”

Muffled footsteps shuffled nearer.

Heedless of the smuggled food, he reached through the bars and grabbed a fistful of Evans’ shirt. “Swear it!”

“I swear, sir. Now, hide your food.”

Nash quickly re-wrapped the pie and temporarily stuffed it along with the other package under his mattress seconds before the guard reappeared.

“Time’s up.”

Evans scowled at the guard. “That’s hardly been five minutes, sir.” He reached into his coat pocket, then held out another shilling. “Might I suggest you check your watch?”

“Hmph,” the guard grunted, snatched the coin, and turned. “Two more minutes, but I ain’t givin’ you no more’n that.”

Nash had to work fast. “Ashton said the magistrate is basing his case on some letters from me found in Cordelia’s possession. Did you write anything other than what I dictated?”

Evans’ brow furrowed, and he rubbed his chin.

“Think, man!”

“It’s possible I may have embellished a bit.”

“Anything that might imply I would commit violence against her?”

Evans paced in front of the cell. Nash wanted to reach through the bars again and shake him.

“If I recall, it said if she continued her unwanted advances, there would be consequences.” His eyes widened in horror

once more when his gaze swung toward Nash. “Oh, sweet Mary.”

Nash’s legs grew weak, and he stumbled back, his calves hitting the edge of the cot.

“Oh, sir. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean . . .”

Nash couldn’t fault the man. He had no way of knowing Cordelia would end up dead. “Relax, Evans. I don’t hold you responsible. If I blame anyone for my predicament, it’s myself for becoming involved with Lady Worthington.”

“If you wish, I could go to the constable and the magistrate and advise them it was I who wrote the letters.”

Nash shook his head. “No. If I’m to hang, then let my secret go to the gallows with me. At least give me that dignity.” He thought about how understanding Adalyn had been when she learned of his shame. She truly was remarkable. “Go home. In the desk drawer of my study, you’ll find the funds I’ve been saving for the investment. Divide it among the staff and thank them for their loyalty.”

“Sir, we couldn’t.”

“You can and you will. Better it goes to you than back to my brother. Oh, and send an anonymous donation of one thousand to Ashton’s clinic.”

The guard’s footsteps sounded in the hallway.

“Don’t give up, sir. We’ll think of something.”

Nash’s mouth twisted in what he hoped was a smile. “Thank you, Evans.”

After the guard escorted Evans away, Nash allowed his body to drop to the stiff cot, forgetting the meat pie he’d tucked under the mattress. As the filling oozed from the edge and dropped onto the cell’s floor, he stared down at the mess.

*How appropriate.*



ADALYN PACED THE FLOOR OF THE MAGISTRATE'S OFFICE. What was keeping the man?

“Sit, Adalyn.” Harry’s command was gentle but firm.

In a most unladylike fashion, she plopped down in the chair.

Harry raised a blond eyebrow.

“Don’t you dare say anything, Harry Radcliffe!” Heat crept up her neck to her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Harry. But something is bothering me about the gliomaigh stew. I know I’ve heard the term before, but I can’t remember what it is.”

With a shrug, Harry said. “I’ve never mastered the Celtic tongue. I had a hard enough time with Scottish when I attended university in Edinburgh.” He pulled out his notebook and pencil, jotting a quick note.

A grumble greeted them as the magistrate stepped into the room. “Your Grace. I didn’t expect to see you again. Wasn’t your inspection at the coroner sufficient?”

She exchanged a glance with Harry, who sent her a silent warning. “Although it was most enlightening, it generated more questions. Mr. Pennywaithe was most cooperative, and, in fact, my colleague”—he nodded toward Adalyn—“noticed something quite interesting.”

“Hmph.” The magistrate’s lip curled as he slid a glance toward Adalyn. “And what might that be?”

Harry nodded for her to proceed.

“The finger marks on Lady Worthington’s neck were much too small to be from a man the size of Lord Nash Talbot. They appear to have been from a woman’s hand.”

The magistrate opened his mouth, but Harry held up a hand. “The coroner agrees and has stated he will amend his report for your records.”

“That doesn’t explain the threatening letters from Lord Nash, and he had a scratch on his hand as if Lady Worthington fought back.” The magistrate slid his gaze back to Adalyn, this

time pinning her in place. “You seem particularly interested in the case, miss. Perhaps he had a female accomplice.”

Harry shot from his chair. “Now, see here, sir! What you’re implying is beyond the pale. I will not tolerate it.”

“Nevertheless,” the magistrate said. “Unless someone else is identified as the murderer, Nash Talbot remains in gaol.” He placed his hands on his desk and leaned forward. “But I will postpone passing judgment to allow further investigation.”

Harry settled back into his seat. “Speaking of the investigation, Miss Lovelace and I called on Lady Worthington’s servants after we met with the coroner.”

The magistrate stiffened. “That is most—”

“Irregular?” Adalyn finished for the magistrate, who sent her a glare.

Harry ignored him, continuing on. “It would appear Lady Worthington’s assailant interrupted her luncheon, as, according to her lady’s maid, the contents of a bowl of gliomaigh stew were spilled on the carpet.”

The magistrate scrunched his face. “Can’t abide the stuff myself.”

Adalyn exchanged a quick glance with Harry. “You know what it is?”

“Made with lobsters. Poor man’s chicken to the Irish. I have a second cousin who married an Irishman. I find the stuff tasteless.”

Energy bubbled in Adalyn’s veins. *That was it!*

Harry’s knee bounced up and down, a habit she remembered him exhibiting when he was anxious. “We understand the constable spoke with the servants. Do you have his notes?”

“If you’re insinuating the man did not perform his duties —”

“I would simply like to compare them to my own as I may have missed something.” Harry held up the notebook.

Exhaling a heavy sigh, the magistrate shook his head. “One moment. I shall return shortly.”

Alone again, Adalyn turned to Harry. “Are you thinking what I am?”

“Possibly. The stew spilled on the floor indicates whatever transpired occurred before she’d finished eating. If the staff recalled no callers before leaving her alone in the house, someone either sneaked in unannounced . . .” He paused dramatically. “Or she was alone.”

Adalyn’s pulse raced. “I’ve seen a similar case in Boston. The Irish love their lobster, but not all can tolerate it.”

The magistrate reappeared and handed Harry several sheets of paper.

Unable to restrain herself, Adalyn rose and stood behind him, reading over his shoulder. Information on the report corroborated what Newton and Barnes had said. None of the servants reported anyone calling that afternoon, Newton being the last among them to leave the house. Still, it wasn’t enough evidence to preclude that Lady Worthington hadn’t simply left a portion of her lunch unfinished and someone had appeared later. The report did not mention the lobster.

Adalyn peered up at the magistrate. “Would it be possible for us to speak to the constable who wrote this?”

The magistrate had the gall to roll his eyes. “I would have to find him. He has duties, you know.”

Harry sent him a ducal glare. “Considering a man’s life is in the balance, I think this falls within his purview, don’t you, sir?” Harry rose. “When you locate him, have him wait at Lady Worthington’s for us there. In the meantime, I demand to speak with Lord Nash again.”

The magistrate grumbled some more but wrote a message to provide to the guards. His tone softening to one of curiosity, he asked, “What is it you think you’ve found?”

Harry nodded toward Adalyn. “Lady Worthington may not have been murdered at all. Her death might have been

accidental. A severe reaction to food intolerance, specifically the lobster.”

The magistrate’s eyes widened, his mouth opening in preparation to speak.

But neither she nor Harry waited to hear him as they hurried from the room.



THE FOUL STENCH IN THE GAOL MADE ADALYN GAG. SHE HELD a handkerchief to her nose, but it didn’t help. Groans reverberated in the dank space. Grimy hands reached through cell bars as she and Harry followed the guard through the dark passageway. Her heart pounded, the *thrum, thrum, thrum* pulsing in her ears.

She remained close to Harry, grateful for his presence. When her gaze landed on Nash’s cell, a sick, dropping feeling in her stomach made her sway on her feet, and Harry grasped her arm, steadying her.

Nash sat on a makeshift cot, his head in his hands, his hair ruffled as if he’d drawn his fingers through it repeatedly.

Something furry scurried across the floor of his cell, and she gave a soft, “Eeek!”

Nash’s head shot up, his eyes locking with hers as he bolted from the cot. “Adalyn!” He seemed pleased at first, then his face contorted in anger. “Ashton, what in the bloody hell are you doing bringing her here?”

She reached through the bars. “Nash, stop.”

He jerked away. “Go home, Adalyn. I don’t want you to see me like this.” He sent another angry glare toward Harry. “Once again, I’m a fool for trusting you.”

“Calm yourself, man. Adalyn wouldn’t take no for an answer. For someone who claims to love her, you don’t seem to know how stubborn she is.”

Nash ran a shaky hand through his hair, confirming her earlier suspicions. When his eyes locked with hers once again, the hollowness and hopelessness in their depths broke her heart. She wanted to give him something to hold on to. “Nash, we may have discovered what happened.”

In a flash, he stepped toward the bars, wrapping his hands around them. “You know who did it?”

She exchanged a glance with Harry, then tilted her head toward Nash.

Harry nodded. “Possibly. Lady Worthington was served a lobster stew before she died.”

Nash huffed and pushed away from the bars. “What has Cordelia’s menu have to do with anything?” He paced around the small cell like a caged animal, then abruptly came to a halt. “Wait. Did you say lobster?”

A smile ghosted Harry’s lips. “I did. Does that seem odd to you?”

“Hell, yes!” He sent an apologetic look to Adalyn, and she waved it aside. “Cordelia couldn’t tolerate shellfish. Once at Lord Cartwright’s, a physician had to administer an emetic when she accidentally nibbled a lobster patty. It was when old Worthington was still alive, and I thought the old man would have a heart attack right on the spot.”

“And her servants were aware of her intolerance?” Adalyn asked.

Nash’s pacing resumed. “I would imagine.” He stopped again, his eyes widening. “You don’t think it was intentional?”

Harry shook his head. “I highly doubt it. The cook is new, and no one probably advised her.”

Nash stared in disbelief. “How? How did you figure it out?”

Harry smiled. “You can thank Adalyn. She noticed the finger marks on the body were too small to be from a man of your size. When we questioned the servants, her lady’s maid



described the scene, indicating Cordelia's luncheon had been interrupted, the bowl overturned and spilled on the floor."

"Woman, you are bloody brilliant."

She smiled at him, hoping to ease his mind. "I'll accept that compliment and forgive your swearing."

"We need to confirm it with the servants in front of the constable, but I wanted to stop here first. If all goes well, you might be released soon."

For a moment, Nash stood perfectly still, his eyes searching hers. Then he snaked his hand between the bars toward Harry. "Thank you, Ashton."

Harry grasped his hand. "Harry, Nash. And you're welcome."

"Could I have a moment with Adalyn?"

"I'll be right over here." Harry motioned with his hat, then stepped to the side.

Adalyn moved closer to the bars, then threaded her hand through and cupped Nash's cheek. "You're hurt."

With tenderness that broke her heart, he grasped her hand and placed a kiss in her palm. "It's nothing." His shirt hung open, exposing his neck, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "You should go. You don't belong in this place."

He kissed her palm again and jerked his head toward Harry. "Get her out of here, Harry."

As Harry took her arm and led her from the dank place, she craned her head over her shoulder, looking back at Nash until he disappeared in the darkness. The finality in his eyes chilled her more than the damp air of the prison.



PRESSURE CRUSHED NASH'S HEART AS ADALYN DISAPPEARED around the corner. He didn't want her to remember him in this sorry state. He would have severe words with Harry later for

bringing Adalyn to such a desolate place. That was if the duke actually managed to have him freed.

The small flutter of hope that winged in his chest settled back on its perch, tucking its head in for a long rest. He'd believe it when the guards opened the door of his cell and escorted him not to the gallows but to freedom.

Even then, his dream of a life with Adalyn had burst like a soap bubble on a strong wind. She deserved better than the likes of a man who could be accused of murder so easily.

What could he offer her? Shame? Disgrace?

Certainly not financial security. Evans had probably already divided his savings among the staff. Oddly, the thought didn't rankle. Such a windfall would better serve the servants.

If he gained his freedom, he would have to crawl back to Roland, who would never support a union with Adalyn.

He let out a bellow. "Damn you to hell, Cordelia!" If she hadn't already been dead, he'd have seen to it with his own hands.

And wasn't that a sobering thought?

## CHAPTER 31—FREEDOM



“The constable and staff are assembled in the large parlor, Your Grace.” Newton led them up the long staircase to the second floor.

Adalyn’s fingers tightened on the banister, attempting to calm her shaking hands. Nash’s freedom, his very life, depended on the truthfulness of the servants.

All heads turned toward her and Harry as they entered. Mrs. O’Leary twisted her apron in her hands, her gaze fixated on the wrinkled mess the action created. Other servants merely appeared curious, exchanging glances and a few whispered words.

The constable stepped forward, bending slightly at the waist. “Your Grace. May I enquire as to the purpose of this gathering?”

Harry placed a hand on her arm, leaning in to whisper, “Allow me to handle this.”

She nodded. Nash’s freedom was more important than her silly pride.

“Some evidence has recently come to light that may change the course of your investigation, Constable.”

The man stiffened, the corners of his eyes creasing. “I assure you, Your Grace, I take my responsibility seriously.”

Harry held up a hand. “I have no doubt. Based on the face value of the evidence, it’s clear why you came to your

conclusions. I'm suggesting there is another explanation. If I may direct some questions to the staff?"

The constable crossed his arms over his chest. "Go on then."

As Harry questioned the staff, he assured them no one would be in trouble if they spoke the truth. Most of the staff said they had left late morning after their mistress had dismissed them, leaving only Newton, Barnes, and Mrs. O'Leary. No one recalled any early afternoon callers.

Adalyn grew impatient with Harry's questioning, yet she held her tongue.

Finally, he got to the crux of the matter. He brought out the notebook, making a show of studying it. "Barnes, how much of the stew was spilled onto the carpet? A little, or a lot?"

"I don't see—"

"Please, just answer the question."

"It's hard to recall. I was more concerned about my lady than a bit of spilled stew. But I suppose it appeared as if she had eaten at least a fair portion of it."

"But not all of it. Is that correct?"

"Well, yes, since some was on the carpet."

"Could the upset chair, bowl, and stew have been caused by Lady Worthington stumbling away and knocking those things to the floor herself?"

"Now, see here, Your Grace," the constable said. "I saw the scene myself, and there was clearly a scuffle. You're putting ideas in her head."

Harry ignored him. "Mrs. O'Leary, you state you served Lady Worthington gliomaigh stew you had prepared for yourself. Gliomaigh is Irish for lobster, is it not?"

Barnes and Newton pulled in audible gasps.

The cook blinked back tears. "Yes, sir."

“And did you know, Mrs. O’Leary, that Lady Worthington had an intolerance to shellfish?”

The woman fell in a heap to the floor, her tortured apron used to wipe the tears from her eyes. “I didn’t know. I didn’t mean to . . . kill her.” A heavy sob broke through. “I didn’t know . . .”

Barnes knelt beside her, comforting her.

The constable stared at the scene before them. “That doesn’t explain the marks on her neck.”

Harry nodded at Adalyn to explain. “I believe it does, sir. When we examined the body, the marks were too small to be from a man Lord Nash’s size. If you place Lady Worthington’s hand over them, I predict you’ll find they match exactly.”

The constable looked thunderstruck. “You’re saying she strangled herself?”

Harry took over. “Not precisely. The intolerance most likely caused her airway to constrict—to tighten and close—where she couldn’t breathe. When we examined the body, the finger marks were faint. I suspect she clutched her throat as a response. The reaction also may have caused her to push away from the table, tipping over the chair and her lunch before she collapsed on the floor. With no one there to come to her aide, well, the outcome . . .”

The constable turned his attention to the staff. “Did any of you know about this so-called *food intolerance*?”

Newton nodded. “We did, sir. But Mrs. O’Leary was new to service, only starting the day before the—incident. Things have been rather chaotic since old Cook died. I thought Barnes would tell her.”

“Me?” Barnes’ head jerked up from where she comforted Mrs. O’Leary. “I thought you would tell her.”

Mrs. O’Leary’s tear-stained face gazed imploringly. “Am I goin’ to prison? You ain’t goin’ to hang me, are you?”

Everyone stared at the constable.

“Will you all give statements to the effect of what was said here?” he asked.

Murmurs of agreement drifted throughout the room.

Harry stepped close to the constable. “It was a horrible accident, sir. Surely her guilt over the incident will be enough punishment.”

Adalyn couldn't agree more. Hopefully, one day, the woman would forgive herself just as Nash helped Adalyn come to terms with Benjamin's death.

“I don't make the determinations, you understand, but with your statements, the magistrate should be agreeable to closing the case.”

Adalyn's heart beat frantically. “And Lord Nash?”

“I will have to submit my report to the magistrate, but I would expect he will release Lord Nash. There's still the question about the letters and his whereabouts on the day of Lady Worthington's death.”

“What about his servants?” she asked.

“Servants are loyal, miss.” The constable inclined his head toward the crowd before him. “They will say anything to protect their master, especially if he's still living and paying their wages.”

“And if someone else was present who can verify that Lord Nash was at home the entire time?” she asked.

“Adalyn.”

She brushed Harry's warning aside.

“Do you know of such a person, miss?”

“I may.”

Harry tugged on her elbow. “Constable, please call on us for any further statements you require. I'm afraid this has been a shock for Miss Lovelace, and I wish to take her home.”

As Harry ushered her out of the room, he leaned in to whisper, “Adalyn, if you're implying what I think you are . . .”

Pressing her lips together tightly, she refused to acknowledge him.

“You can’t lie to protect him.”

She spun on her heel, meeting his gaze head on. “It’s not a lie.”



LATE THE NEXT MORNING, NASH ROSE FROM THE COT AND stretched his aching body, questioning if one more day of living was worth the deplorable conditions. He finished the remainder of cheese and bread, tossing a tiny piece of cheese to Jack.

The rat sat on its haunches, eyeing Nash warily as it nibbled the cheese.

“It’s the finest the duke has to offer, Jack. You should be grateful.”

Footsteps sounded, and Jack scurried off to his hole in the wall. Keys jangled, the metallic notes promising some soul freedom, captivity, or death.

When Evans appeared behind the guard, Nash rose to attention. Unsure if Evans’ grin was a figment of his imagination, Nash rubbed his eyes.

The grin remained. “Sir. You’re being released.”

Nash almost fell to his knees. “Say it again.”

“You’re free, sir. The magistrate signed the order this morning. The duke advised him to send word to me once it was done so I could bring you home.”

“It’s true?” Nash shifted his gaze to the guard.

“Hmph,” the man answered. At least Nash presumed it was an answer. The key turning in the lock was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard—apart from Adalyn’s honey-timbered voice.

Things moved in a blur as Evans wrapped a coat around Nash’s shoulders and led him to his waiting carriage. Nash

breathed deeply, the usual stench of London smelling sweet after the rank odor in the cell. He rubbed a hand over his beard-covered face, the whiskers rasping against his skin. “You’ll have your work cut out for you once we’re home.”

Evans continued to beam. “It will be my pleasure, sir. We must get you presentable for Miss Lovelace.”

“No!”

Evans jerked back as if Nash had slapped him. “Sir?”

“If she calls—*when* she calls,” he amended, knowing full well she would indeed call. “Turn her away.”

Evans appeared crestfallen. “I don’t understand.”

Nash turned away and stared out the carriage window. “I’m no good for her. She’s better off without me. Once she’s home in America, she’ll forget all about me. It’s for the best.”

“Best for whom, sir? Not for you, surely? And I would venture to say not for Miss Lovelace, either.”

“Do you still wish to be employed?” Nash snapped, returning his attention to his valet.

Straightening in his seat, Evans nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Neither of them spoke for the rest of the journey. As he entered his home, the servants lined up to greet him, expressing their belief in his innocence and gratitude for his exoneration.

It humbled him. He needed to be alone. When he strode past the music room, he expected to find an empty space where his Broadwood had been, but the instrument sat proudly in place as if waiting for him. He turned toward Evans, who followed him like a puppy. “Did Montgomery change his mind? Decide not to purchase from a criminal?”

“No, sir. In fact, he left the funds the morning after they arrested you. Thought the money might prove useful for your defense. But he felt you might wish to play it one more time when you were released.”



An odd wetness formed in his eyes, and he blinked it away. “Well, I wouldn’t want to disappoint Montgomery, would I? Draw me a bath, but while I’m waiting, I need to write a letter.”

When Evans moved to sit at the escritoire, Nash stopped him. “No. It’s to Miss Lovelace.” He stared at his valet, knowing the words would wound, but not caring. “And I don’t trust you to write this particular one.”

Evans opened his mouth to protest.

Nash ignored him. “Now, go. I want that bath.”

Alone, Nash sat at the escritoire, carefully crafting each injurious word. At least Adalyn knew of his difficulties and would overlook any odd spelling or phrasing. He kept the missive brief. Then, folding and sealing it, he gave it to a footman, instructing him to deliver it posthaste to Miss Lovelace, finishing as Evans announced his bath was ready.

Refreshed from his bath, he tried to make amends with Evans. “Write to Montgomery, advising him to transport the instrument. I’d hate to give him another beating if he’s disappointed his wife again and she sends him off to Jackson’s.”

Evans chuckled, the sound music to Nash’s ears.

Which speaking of . . . Nash returned to the music room and, taking a seat, ran his hands across the cool ivory keys. Bittersweet notes flowed from his fingers producing soothing hues of soft purples and pinks. A swan song both to the instrument and to Adalyn.



ADALYN STARED AT THE WORDS OF THE LETTER. “I DON’T understand.” Standing in the entryway of Harry’s home, she’d prepared to travel to Nash’s as soon as they’d received word of his release. Instead, a liveried footman had arrived, delivering the letter.

Hat in hand, her father stepped closer, concern furrowing his brow. “What does it say?”

Unable—or perhaps unwilling—to say the words, she simply stared, her mind fuzzy as if someone had stuffed cotton inside her skull. Her mouth was moving, but no sounds emerged. Nash had clearly written it himself, the odd choice of words, misspelling, and transposition of letters indicative of what he had described.

“May I?” Her father reached for the letter.

Nodding, she handed it over.

He scanned the contents, his eyes widening and tipping up to catch hers.

*I'm no good for you, Adylan. Therefore, I relieve you from nay promises made to me. Do not uhtempt to change my mind. This is for the best.*

*N*

Whether it was simply sharing the letter that allowed her to find her voice, she wasn't certain, but she choked out the words. “How can he make decisions about my life, my choices?”

“He's had a shock, my dear. Perhaps given some time to readjust, he—”

“We're leaving in two weeks. There *is* no time.” She jammed the bonnet on her head and tied the ribbons around her chin. “We're going to see him.”

When they arrived at Nash's, his valet, Evans, refused them entrance. “I'm under strict orders, Miss Lovelace. Please, understand.” The tortured expression on the man's face mirrored her own turmoil.

Melancholy notes from a piano swirled around her, taking her back to their first formal meeting at the musicale. She pushed past Evans—his eyes widening in disbelief—and headed toward the music.

“Adalyn,” her father called from behind.

Yet, she didn’t slow her steps.

The door to the room was ajar, and she peeked around the corner.

Immersed in his music, Nash played as if his life depended on it, the sweet notes so heartbreaking she wanted to cry at their beauty.

As if sensing her presence, his fingers stopped mid-measure, and he glanced up. Love radiated on his face, giving her strength to proceed.

When she stepped into the room, his mood shifted as suddenly as springtime weather. Dark and tumultuous, it raged like the sea in the painting. “What are you doing here? I told you to stay away.” He pushed back from the piano, knocking the bench on its side. “I’ll have Evans’ head for this. Evans!”

Each taking swift steps, she met him halfway. “Don’t blame him. I forced my way in.”

Out of breath, her father’s voice sounded behind her. “Adalyn. Please.”

Evans begged his apologies. “I’m sorry, sir, I couldn’t stop her.”

Nash directed his attention past her. “Your daughter is too headstrong, sir. Please escort her home at once.”

“Nash, please.” She clutched at his coat sleeve, and his gaze dropped to her hand, then lifted.

“Are you sure you wish to do this in front of your father, Adalyn?” Nash’s dark eyes chilled her to the marrow.

She stood her ground. “I’m not leaving until I have answers.”

“Very well, if you insist. I tried to do this gently. To minimize your pain. But I see I need to be more direct. It was all an act, Adalyn. I used you to get back at Ashton. Ask my brother if you don’t believe me. It worked even more to my

advantage than I'd imagined. I never dreamed both of you would come to my aid in freeing me from a murder charge."

The room swayed. "It's a lie." She choked the words out. Panic rose, its acrid taste burning her throat.

He grasped her arm, steadying her, and concern flickered in his eyes.

Why was he lying?

"I don't believe you," she whispered.

"Then that is your misfortune. Go home, Adalyn. Back to America where you belong. Find a nice young man to marry."

Someone grasped her arm, and she turned to find her father's concerned face. "Come, Adalyn."

It wasn't possible. Surely she couldn't have misjudged a man so grossly again? As her father led her from the room, her legs—numb and heavy—fought against each step as if they trudged their way through quicksand.

Nothing made sense. Even Evans' pitiful stare seemed to shout *He's lying*. But what could she do?

As her father murmured soft words of comfort, all she could think about was the flicker of love she knew in her heart she'd witnessed.

## CHAPTER 32—A FRIENDSHIP REDEEMED



The moment Adalyn left the room, Nash sank to the floor. Evans rushed to his side, but Nash brushed him away. “Leave me.”

“Sir, you’re still weak from your ordeal.”

Nash shook his head. “It’s not that.” His physical strength was the least of his worries. It was his heart that had been ripped from his chest. Lies that burned his tongue. The sick nausea that roiled in his stomach from the pain on Adalyn’s face.

“Why, sir?”

“It’s what’s best for her. I would drag her down in the cesspool with me if I married her. She deserves better than that—so much better.” Nash pinned his faithful valet with his gaze. “Besides, I have nothing left to offer her. I’ll have to beg Roland’s forgiveness in hopes he’ll supplement my income again.”

Evan appeared chagrined. “Sir, about your request.”

Nash flicked a hand at him, then stared at the patterned carpet beneath him. If only he had the will to pick himself up. “It’s fine, Evans. The money will better serve you and the staff.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“What?” Nash’s head snapped up.

“The money. I didn’t do as you asked. It didn’t seem right.”

“Are you stupid, man? If they had taken me to the gallows, the money would have reverted to my brother!”

“I had faith in you, sir.”

Nash threw himself flat on the carpeted floor. If only he could have the same faith in himself. The least he could do was pull himself together and try to salvage his investment opportunity in England. He rubbed his hands down his face. “I’ll do my best to see you haven’t misplaced that faith. Now, help me up. Then fetch pen and ink. I need to contact my man of business.” He stretched out his hand, and Evans grasped it, pulling Nash upright.

Nash dictated a letter, asking Naismith to reinstate his offer to invest at home. Suspicion crept across his neck like insects at the wicked gleam in Evans’ eyes. “Read that back to me.”

When Evans read back Nash’s dictated words verbatim, Nash relaxed. Still, his valet seemed privy to some secret he was unwilling to share.

“Also, see if you can determine exactly when Miss Lovelace and her father are leaving and on what ship. I have a three-movement sonata on the piano. Wrap it and have it delivered to her attention the day she leaves.”

“Should I say who it’s from?”

Nash shook his head. “She’ll know, but it will be too late to do anything about it.”

“Sir. About Miss Lovelace—”

“Save your breath, Evans. I’ve bent as far as I can without breaking. Now, go. I’m going to lie down in my rat-free room.” He paused and grinned. “Although I will miss Jack.”

As Evans stared dumbfounded, Nash emitted a bitter laugh that burned from the irony.



ADALYN COULDN'T FEEL HER BODY. NOISE LIKE BUZZING insects filled her head. Everything seemed unreal. She turned a vacant gaze toward her father seated across from her in Harry's carriage. His mouth was moving, the corners of his eyes pleated with concern.

"Wh-what?" She forced herself to listen, to push the incessant whirring in her head aside.

"Perhaps we should see if there is an earlier ship we can take to return home?"

Home. Why did it sound foreign to her? She loved Boston. Loved her life assisting her father. But somehow, the call of it seemed empty. Nash wouldn't be there. Fat wet drops fell onto the reticule in her lap, and she raised her hand to her face. Pulling it away, she stared at the darkened tip of her gloved finger.

Wordlessly, her father handed her a handkerchief.

Everything felt—wrong.

She nodded. "Yes. Home."

He reached over and squeezed her hand, the pity in his eyes only exacerbating the pain in her shattered heart.

When they arrived back at Harry's, she barely managed up the long staircase to her room. Her legs grew heavier with each step as her father held her arm, guiding her as if she were a child.

Eloise gave her a sad smile and made quick work of undressing her and settling her in bed. Voices drifted in and out. Maggie's face appeared over her, brushing back the hair on her face. Harry came in and took her pulse, muttering something about cowards.

Sunlight dimmed in the room, and a servant brought up a tray of food. Adalyn forced herself to pick at it. Each bite tasteless, she pushed the tray away. People wandered in and out of the room, their mouths moving, faces concerned. But all she heard was the constant buzzing.

Night fell and Eloise came in and extinguished the candles burning by the bedside. Adalyn stared at the ceiling in the dark. She'd fallen into the bleak place that had trapped her when Benjamin died.

Strangely, she remembered Nash's words after they had made love. "It was not your fault! You did nothing wrong. People make mistakes. You trusted a man who didn't deserve it, and he betrayed you. Stop punishing yourself." Had he tried to tell her something even then? Yet, he'd said something else, too, hadn't he? That he loved her all the more for facing her demons. Yes, that was it.

So at the first light of dawn, she rose, washed her face, and dressed even before Eloise appeared to assist her.

Ready to face her demons.



NASH STOOD IN THE EMPTY PLACE WHERE HIS BROADWOOD had been. Two days after he'd broken Adalyn's heart—and his own—men had come and hauled the instrument away. The day after that, Montgomery sent him a letter thanking him profusely. Apparently, Beatrix lavished her husband with appreciation for the gift.

"At least someone is happy," he mumbled to himself.

"Ahem," a deep voice sounded behind him.

He spun around. "Ashton. What the deuce are you doing here? And where is Evans?!"

"I told your valet not to bother announcing me." Harry strode in like he belonged, his gaze darting to the indentations on the carpet the piano had left. "Montgomery mentioned he purchased your Broadwood. That must have brought you a pretty penny. Laurence is a generous man, especially when it comes to Bea."

"No one asked you." He sent the duke a frosty glare. "Or invited you."



“True.” Harry nodded. “Although you may not *want* me here, you need me.”

Nash swiveled away. “I don’t need you or anyone else.”

“No? You’ve come to your senses on your own, then?”

Nash ignored him and walked to the window, but the bloody fool kept talking.

“I heard you muttering about being unhappy. You’ve only yourself to blame, you know. And I would have no problem staying out of your choice to be miserable if it didn’t also affect Adalyn.”

Nash toyed with the edge of a curtain as he stared out the window, avoiding Harry’s perceptive gaze. “How is Adalyn?”

“Marginally better than when you first broke her heart. She’s putting on a brave front and throwing herself into her work.”

“Hmm. I’m glad. She’s good at what she does.”

“Damn it, man. Look at me!”

Nash felt his eyebrows raise at Harry’s lack of control, and he slowly turned. “Don’t order me around,” he said through gritted teeth.

Harry moved within arm’s reach. “Listen carefully. I’ve waited for you to come to your senses. But Adalyn and Daniel are leaving tomorrow for Boston.”

Ice tripped up Nash’s spine. “Tomorrow? I thought they were leaving on *The Minerva* a week from now?”

Harry tilted his head. “You took the time to discover that, did you? Doesn’t sound much like a man who used a woman to get back at me.”

“My servants heard it in passing,” he lied. From the expression on Harry’s face, he hadn’t done a very good job of it.

“They booked last minute passage on *The Destiny*. Servants are packing their trunks as we speak. And since you still are the same stubborn arse you’ve always been, I thought

perhaps a good swift kick into reality might do you some good.”

“You’re wasting your breath. I’m beyond hope.” He didn’t need the high-and-mighty, self-righteous Duke of Ashton to point out his faults and failures.

Harry ran his fingers over the brim of his hat, twirling it much like Nash had done that evening when he’d called upon Adalyn and Mena.

*Mena.* “What about the girl? What’s to become of her?”

“Adalyn and Daniel are taking her to Boston with them. They’ll give her a good life. Daniel’s a fine man, but he’s growing older. Mena could use a man in her life who will be around for a while.” Harry pinned him in place with his gaze. “As could Adalyn.”

“Haven’t you been paying attention, Ashton? It was all an act. I used her. You said so yourself.”

“No. I said your actions are not those of a man who would do such a thing. What you told Adalyn were words, Nash. I’m a man of science who believes in empirical evidence. The man I witnessed in that prison cell, the way he looked at Adalyn spoke a greater truth than any words. I’m intimately familiar with the feelings that cause such expressions. It’s love, deep and abiding, for someone who has become part of you. To deny Adalyn is to deny yourself. I had a similar conversation with Oliver once. Before you saved his life that night at the camp.” Harry paused, studying him. “I could scarcely believe it. But now, it makes sense. You were atoning for past sins.”

Nash turned away. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are we going to continue playing these games, Nash? We’re no longer boys with a disastrous misunderstanding between us. Wouldn’t the best way to atone be finding your own happiness?”

Nash turned on Harry, heat flushing through his body. “I don’t deserve happiness! My actions caused a man’s death. My silence allowed George to inflict pain on Margaret, and

then I inflicted even more just to get back at you. I deserve every ounce of misery heaped upon me.”

“But does Adalyn?”

Nash opened his mouth to protest. To tell Harry, with time, Adalyn would forget all about him. Yet, something prevented him from speaking.

“I never pictured you as a coward, Nash.”

Nose to nose with the man he’d hated for years, Nash spat the words. “I am *not* a coward.”

“No?” Harry’s voice remained calm. He didn’t budge an inch from Nash’s closeness. “Then why are you allowing your own need to punish yourself to stand in your way of pursuing Adalyn? The Nash I remember would do anything to get what he wanted.”

Unable to meet Harry’s direct gaze any longer, Nash turned away. “I should have known any reconciliation would be short-lived. Your insult proves it.”

“In this case, I didn’t intend that as an insult. You’ve always been a determined man. That’s a strength when used for the right purposes. I would say love is the pinnacle of right purposes, wouldn’t you?”

Nash strode over to the sideboard and picked up the package containing the sonata he’d written for Adalyn. “Give this to her before they leave.”

After taking the package, Harry reached into his coat and handed him a much slimmer bundle. “This is for you. In case you change your mind. I would urge you to think long and hard, Nash.”

Without another word, he strode from the room.

Nash opened the package, finding a first class passage aboard *The Destiny* set to leave the next day. He shouted after the duke, “Trying to get rid of me, Harry?”

A soft chuckle drifted from the hallway.

Nash marched over to the bell pull, giving it a sound tug and yelling at the same time, “Evans!”



THE SWISH OF A FLORAL SACHET SWIRLED IN THE AIR AS Eloise packed Adalyn’s gowns. Curtains lay still against the opened window, the air heavy with the kind of humidity that threatened rain by nightfall.

Eloise kept up a cheerful chatter as she folded and placed the gowns in the trunk while Adalyn sat at the escritoire, composing a letter.

She’d begun several times, only to crumple the paper and toss it aside. Balls of parchment littered the top of the desk. Yet each time she wrote Nash’s name, a sharp pain lanced through her chest, and she barely made it through the salutation.

A tap at the door drew her attention, and Eloise opened it, giving Harry entrance. His gaze shifted to the littered escritoire, and he sent her a smile not reflected in his eyes. He held out a package. “From Nash.”

With shaking hands, she accepted the parcel. “You saw him? What did he say?”

Harry nodded. “Not much.”

Something in Harry’s eyes told her he withheld information. The package flexed in her hands, and she untied the string holding the brown wrapping together. Exposing the contents, she read the title on the top sheet of music: *For Adylan*. Her finger traced over the transposed letters. Nash had to have written it himself, making it even more precious.

Urgent need to hear the music filled her, and she bolted from the chair and rushed past Harry to the music room. Once there, she sat at the pianoforte and spread out the sheets of music. Her woeful skills made a mockery of what she instinctively knew was a masterpiece, the notes in the upper register too complicated for her meager talent.

When she gazed up, she discovered her father, Harry, Maggie, and the children had joined her. She sent Maggie a pleading look.

In silent understanding, Maggie took her place at the keyboard. Familiar strands of music drifted through the room, exquisite and bittersweet. Twice before, she'd heard parts of it: The first time the day she and Nash had made love. The second, the day he destroyed her heart. The three movement sonata documented their love story—hopeful, joyful, soul-crushingly sad.

She wept from the beauty of it.

How could he throw their love away so easily?

Finally, the words she needed to say came to her. After making a curt apology, she hurried upstairs to write the letter, telling Nash exactly what she thought of him. She folded and sealed the missive, then called a footman, instructing him to deliver it at once.

Then she waited.

## CHAPTER 33—GIVING IN TO LOVE



*Coward.*

Nash stared again at the ticket of passage, Harry's accusation ringing in his ears.

*Damnation!* The man simply didn't understand. It took all of his willpower not to go after Adalyn, but in doing so, he would only continue to hurt her. He'd given Evans a sound tongue lashing and instructed him to not allow anyone else entry.

Nash needed to wallow in his grief alone.

"Sir." Evans' voice barely registered in his tortured mind.

"I told you to leave me alone," he barked at his faithful servant.

"A letter has arrived. From Miss Lovelace, sir."

Hair on the back of Nash's neck rose at the mention of Adalyn's name, and he crossed the room in twelve long strides, plucked the letter from Evans' grasp, and broke the seal. Thank god it was short, the thought then giving him pause.

Evans hovered nearby. "Would you like assistance?"

Time pressed in on him. He thrust the letter at Evans, then closed the door. "Read."

Evans' gaze slid to the letter, scanning it, then lifted his eyes to Nash.

"Aloud, you fool!"

“Perhaps you should sit down, sir.”

“Read!” he barked the command again, growing tired of Evans’ coddling.

After interminable throat clearing, Evans began.

*Nash,*

*How dare you! You, sir, are no gentleman!*

*You say you used me for some vendetta against Harry, then you dedicate a sonata to me so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes.*

*I refuse to allow you to toy with my feelings in this manner any longer.*

*If you can't be honest with me, at least be honest with yourself.*

*Adalyn.*

Evans took a cautious step back, as if preparing for the expected onslaught of anger.

Nash threw his head back and laughed.

Evans stared, dumbfounded. “Sir?”

Nash wiped away the tears forming in his eyes and shook his head. “God, I love that woman.”

“You find this . . . humorous?” Evans held up the letter, his hand shaking. “She is exceptionally angry.”

“Mad as a trapped fox, I would wager. But don’t you see? She still loves me.”

Evans stared down at the letter again. “I don’t . . .”

“She’s strong, Evans. Tough as nails. She’ll stand up to me and knock me down when I need it. But she loves me anyway! Now, don’t just stand there, man. Pack my trunks. I’m going to America!”



*THUMP, THUMP, THUMP.* ROLAND'S DAMNABLE CANE HAD irritated Nash for the last time.

“You heard me, brother. I'm leaving for America if Miss Lovelace will still have me. You'll no longer have to spend your precious money to assuage the wagging tongues. And when my investment bears fruit, I won't even miss the income you discontinued.”

Night had fallen, but servants bustled around them in Nash's study, packing whatever possessions Nash had that were either transportable or sentimental. The portrait of his mother sat in the corner with instructions to send it when he provided his final destination. He couldn't presume he and Adalyn would be together. But damn it all, he wouldn't give up trying to win her back. The belief in her love for him gave him the strength he needed to face his demons head on.

He'd almost hugged Evans when the man told him that instead of requesting Naismith resume negotiations for the railway opportunity in England, he'd written that Nash planned to pursue the same in America, and if possible, offer a good word for him with the American company.

“I should have your job for that, Evans,” Nash had said, unable to restrain his grin.

If only dealing with Roland was so easy. Out of courtesy, he'd sent a message to his brother after making his decision. He never expected an in-person call.

“I should be glad to be rid of you,” his brother said, giving the cane another sound *thump*. “However, now I shall have to deal with the repercussions from *The Muckraker*.”

“Why don't you beat them to the punch and provide the story yourself? They might pay a pretty penny for such a juicy bit of gossip. I can see the headline now.” Nash raised his hand, moving it across him with flare. “Lord Nash Talbot thumbs his nose at the aristocracy to marry an American.”



“Now, see here, Nash.” Roland waved the cane at Nash’s nose.

With speed Gentleman Jackson would have admired, Nash snatched the stick from Roland’s hand, broke it across his knee, and handed the two splintered pieces back to his brother. Giddiness flitted through him like birds taking flight. “When I make my fortune in the railroads, I’ll buy you another—even more ornate than this one.”

“Don’t come crawling back to me when all this crumbles around your ears.” Roland turned, tossing the broken cane to the floor as he strode out.

Potter, one of the footmen, stooped to pick it up, sending a questioning glance toward Nash.

“Cut the head off that thing and pack it. I’ll consider it a memento of my freedom.”

For the first time in his life, the burden of his family, his difficulties, lifted from his shoulders, and a bright future lay ahead.

As long as Adalyn would forgive him.

He bounded up the stairs to check on the packing of his clothing. Thunder clapped and lightning flashed from the summer storm raging outside, but it didn’t darken his mood.

When Nash entered his bedchamber, Evans directed footmen helping pack the trunks. “No. No. Leave the scarlet waistcoat out for tomorrow.”

“Planning my wardrobe already?”

“With all due respect, sir,” Evans said, not bothering to look up at his employer as he folded pairs of trousers and placed them in a trunk. “Regardless of what you think, I would expect some groveling to Miss Lovelace to be in order.”

“So I should look my best when I do this *groveling*, eh?”

Evans’ lips quirked. “But, of course.”

Another clap of thunder startled the two footmen, who were carrying a trunk from Nash’s room. The steady pounding

of rain beat against the windows with a *rat-a-tat-tat*, the sound surprisingly soothing.

Nash moved to another bedroom as servants continued preparing and packing his belongings. However, sleep did not come readily.

Someone nudged his shoulder. “Sir. It’s morning,” Evans’ annoying voice stirred him from a delightful dream about Adalyn.

Disoriented, Nash rubbed his eyes. No sunlight shone through the window, the room cast in gray shadows. “Can’t be,” he muttered and turned over, pulling the pillow over his head.

“We must ready you, sir. I’ve drawn a bath, and the water will grow cold.”

His dream-fogged mind cleared, and he remembered. “Adalyn! What time is it?”

As Nash shot from his bed, Evans wrapped a banyan around his shoulders.

“Calm yourself, sir. It’s barely half of nine. The ship doesn’t leave until one.”

Once Nash bathed and Evans shaved and dressed him, he met with the staff. He gave them each one hundred pounds. Thank goodness he had a small staff. “I’d write you references, but—”

Evans caught his eye. “But you have, sir. Don’t you remember?”

*Ah, good man.* “Did I write one for you, too?”

Millie, one of the maids, giggled.

Mirth twinkled in Evans’ eyes. “Have you forgotten? I’m going with you.”

Nash opened his mouth to remind his valet he only had passage for one.

“I sent Potter to the docks to exchange our tickets aboard *The Minerva* when our plans changed.”

“We had passage aboard *The Minerva*?”

Evans grinned. “Yes, sir. Of course, since you already have one on *The Destiny*, Millie will be joining us as well. I’d planned to send for her once we were settled.”

The giggling maid blushed.

Nash darted a glance between Evans and Millie. What else went on within his household he wasn’t aware of? “We’ll discuss this later.” However, he was in too good of a mood to reprimand his scheming servant.

After the trunks were loaded on the carriage, Nash bid farewell to his staff, leaving Potter in charge to oversee the remaining items and closing of the house.

The previous night’s storm had slowed to a steady, even rain. Fat drops fell from the brim of Nash’s hat, and his boots splashed in puddles as he strode to his carriage. After he climbed in, he motioned to Evans and Millie, who were preparing to climb on the back. “In here, you fools. No sense anyone besides the driver getting soaked.”

As his valet and maid took a seat across from him, he studied them. “So, how long has this been going on under my nose?”

Millie raised a hand to stifle her giggle. Apparently, Evans didn’t find the trait as irksome as Nash did, for his valet gazed at the young maid with the same devotion Nash imagined shone in his own eyes when looking at Adalyn.

Evans took Millie’s hand in his, giving it a little squeeze. “Three months, sir.”

Before Nash could question them further, the carriage jerked to a stop. Nash peered out the carriage window. They were still some distance from the docks. He banged on the roof, and the driver appeared, opening the door. “Beg your pardon, sir. But a peddler’s vegetable cart has tipped over, spilling beets all over. Carriages are lined up ten deep. It could be a while.”

Nash pulled out his pocket watch. Quarter past eleven. Plenty of time, but he still needed to find Adalyn and beg her

forgiveness. He bolted from the carriage, pushing his driver aside. "I need a horse!"

People turned and stared.

"One hundred pounds for a horse!"

"You can have mine, guv'nr." A middle-aged man dismounted and held out the reins of his nag.

"Pay the man, Evans, and meet me at the ship," Nash shouted as he slapped the horse into action, then bounded into the saddle. Evans shouted something back, but Nash didn't bother to listen.

Expertly weaving the horse through the line of carriages and smashed beets, he leaned forward in the saddle and urged the horse onward.

Rain pelted him in the face, and he recalled leaving Harry's ball the night he realized he was in love with Adalyn. He'd run away that night like a coward. But now he ran toward her, ready to grasp with both hands the happiness that she promised.

Ships loomed ahead of him at the docks, and he reined in the horse. Men shouted at him to move out of the way as they carried heavy crates and trunks. He jumped from the horse and tethered it. Soaked to the skin, he searched the ships, desperately trying to decipher the lettering for *The Destiny*. Frantic, he grabbed the arm of one of the men. "Where's *The Destiny*?"

The man huffed. "Are ye blind?" He pointed to a large ship to his right.

Not bothering with apologies or pleasantries, Nash nodded and raced toward the vessel. He scanned the crowds of passengers moving on and around the ship. Where was she?

Sensing more than seeing, he directed his gaze upward. Like a beacon, his eyes trained on Adalyn, standing at the railing under a black umbrella.

"Adalyn!" He rushed forward toward the line of people boarding.

A man in uniform stopped him. “Ticket of passage, sir?”

Nash reached into his coat, finding—nothing. *Damnation!* Evans had the tickets. “I don’t have it on me, but I have passage.”

When he tried to push past, the man stepped in front of him. “No ticket, no boarding.”

“Adalyn!” Nash lifted his gaze to the railing, but she was gone.

He backed down the ramp, then raced back and forth below, searching the length of the railing. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he muttered to himself.

The soft, honey-timbered voice behind him said, “Stubborn, yes. Exasperatingly so. But stupid, never.”

He spun around to find Adalyn.

Face to face with her, he struggled to remember the words he’d rehearsed most of the night, her clear blue eyes scattering his wits.

“You’re a fright,” she said, gesturing to his wet clothing.

He pictured Jack, the rat, and imagined he looked like his old cellmate.



EARLY THAT MORNING, EVANS, NASH’S VALET, HAD SENT word that Nash had planned to surprise her at the docks. He entreated her not to let on, but to allow Nash to beg for forgiveness. She had laughed at Evans’ words:

*It will do him good to grovel a bit, miss.*

On that she couldn’t agree more, and as she waited for him at the railing of the ship, she had every intention of making him grovel as much as humanly possible. But as she looked into his frantic face, her anger melted—a little.

His scarlet waistcoat was so drenched it appeared black. Rain dripped from his hat, pouring from the brim when he

lowered his head toward her.

“Not that it would help, but step under here with me.” She lifted the umbrella higher, accommodating his tall frame.

He ducked underneath and took the umbrella from her hand, holding it more over her than himself. He stood so close she felt the heavy pulls of his breathing.

Remembering Evans’ words, she said, “Why are you here, Nash?”

Heat from his dark eyes bored into her. “I—I—I’m coming with you.”

She grasped the thread of anger, trying desperately to maintain hold as it slipped through her fingers. “I don’t recall inviting you.”

He blinked, and he suddenly seemed unsure, like a lost boy.

His gaze darted toward the ships in the harbor. “The ship.”

“Isn’t leaving yet.”

He shook his head, remaining rain spinning off. “It’s not that. Do you remember the painting in the gallery?”

“Yes.” How could she forget? It was her first glimpse beneath the façade of the man before her. “It seemed to disturb you, but you brushed it off as my imagination.”

“You had the right of it. I’ve been like that ship. Tossed—dangerously close to crashing myself upon the rocks. But you, Adalyn”—he cupped her cheek, and even wet, his hand warmed her—“You anchor me. I laughed at Pratt when he said the beam of light breaking through the clouds was the artist’s way of depicting hope amid turmoil. But now, I concede that he’s right. Please, don’t take my anchor, my light, away and leave me to sink under the waves.”

Sharp as a scalpel, his words lanced her heart. Instinctively, she knew they were not easy words for him. Nor did they come naturally.

“I love you, Adalyn. I’m sorry I pushed you away, said what I did. I tried to be selfless, to protect you—from me. But your letter . . .”

“Where I told you to go to the devil?” She fought the smile threatening to appear.

He grinned at her, his smile so dazzling, she rocked back on her heels. He removed his hand from her cheek and snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her taut against him. “You told me you still loved me.”

*Blink.* “I did no such thing.”

His lethal smile remained. “Yes, you did. When you said my sonata brought tears to your eyes. It wouldn’t have moved you if you didn’t still love me.”

Although his words were true, she would not give in so easily. She pushed against his chest, but his hold remained firm. “You’re mad.”

Eyelids lowering to half-mast, he dipped his face closer. “Mad for you. Marry me, Adalyn. Allow me to follow you to America like a sad puppy. We can have Pratt paint a picture of me with large eyes.” He grinned again. “Besides, you still owe me that waltz.”

Finally, her resolve cracked, and the bubble of laughter traveled up her throat to freedom. “You are incorrigible.”

“True.” His eyes shimmered with mirth, but suddenly became serious. “Adalyn, I can’t promise I won’t be an idiot, that I won’t withdraw into myself on occasion and become sullen. I certainly can’t promise you wealth—yet. But if you marry me, I promise I will always love you and do everything in my power to make you not regret it. I know I’m not good enough for you, but—”

She placed a fingertip on his lips. “You’re perfect for me. Now, kiss me before I change my mind.”

Locked in Nash’s embrace, Adalyn’s mind hardly registered someone shouting his name.

He groaned and broke away, resting his forehead against hers. "I'm going to sack that man."

Evans raced up to them. "Your ticket, sir." His gaze darted toward Adalyn. "Miss Lovelace, is all well?" A petite brunette joined him, her shy smile directed toward Evans.

"Very well, Evans. Your employer has dutifully groveled, and I have accepted his offer of marriage."

Nash jerked back. "I did *not* grovel." He blinked. "Wait. You did?"

"Yes. Although we'll have to wait two months before we marry. It's a long journey to Boston."

Nash groaned, eliciting laughs from them all. "Perhaps we can find a minister aboard." He snatched the ticket from Evans' hand. "See to our trunks. I have a father to speak to."

As Nash led Adalyn toward the ship, she said, "Don't expect such an easy go of it from my father. He's more upset than I was about your behavior."

She laughed as Nash groaned again. "Second thoughts?"

He shook his head. "If necessary, I would face the devil himself."

She patted his arm. "He's not quite that bad. Almost, but not quite."

Nash groaned again.

As another laugh broke from her lips, with a full heart, she embraced the happiness and laughter Nash offered her.



# EPILOGUE



BOSTON, DECEMBER 1828

Adalyn returned home after a long day assisting her father with his patients. Cold air blew around her, and snow billowed in from outside as she opened the door and stepped into the small entryway of the apartments she shared with Nash. Masculine voices drifted toward her from the room Nash used as a study.

She placed the wrapped painting on the floor by the foyer table. Her gaze drifted to the additional hat and coat hanging on a peg by the door, noting the exceptional quality of the garments.

Pulling off her gloves, she smiled at the simple gold band adorning her left hand. Nash had groused about not providing her something more elaborate, but promised as soon as he made his fortune, he would buy her the most ostentatious ring he could find. She assured him that because of her work with her father, simpler was better and he would do no such thing.

They had indeed married aboard *The Destiny*. After considerably more groveling to her father than he had done with her, Nash located a minister among the passengers and, with some persuading, had convinced the man that it was imperative they marry as soon as possible.

No doubt the man presumed the worst as he cast disapproving glances their way throughout the brief exchange of vows, focusing on Adalyn's abdomen.

Although, truth be told, the reason Nash stressed urgency was no less scandalous.

"If you expect me to restrain myself for five weeks, and then another three when we arrive, you obviously don't know me as well as you believe." His grin told her he jested—at least in part.

After the brief ceremony, they spent the rest of the voyage in Nash's quarters, emerging occasionally for sustenance. She discovered her husband had an enormously healthy appetite for all things.

The door to Nash's study opened. A man, much shorter than Nash, preceded him. "Ah, my wife has returned home. Adalyn, this is Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt."

Kind eyes shone in the man's long, narrow face, and she smiled warmly. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Vanderbilt."

"The pleasure is mine, Mrs. Talbot. Your husband is a man of vision and forward thinking, quite like myself, if I may be so bold. He tells me you work with your father at his medical practice."

Adalyn darted a glance toward Nash, relieved he sent no warning.

In fact, he added, "My wife is quite skilled, sir."

Warmth spread through Adalyn at Nash's compliment, more because she knew they were not idle words.

"My own dear wife, Sophia, is quite the businesswoman as well. Operates a profitable inn in New Brunswick." He turned toward Nash. "Consider my offer, sir. I believe a partnership would be beneficial to us both. Now, if you will excuse me, I should be on my way." As he moved toward his hat and coat, Adalyn assisted him, and both she and Nash bade him goodbye.

Nash removed her coat, hanging it on the now vacant peg where Mr. Vanderbilt's had been. Cold air still lingered in the entry, and as Nash ran his hands along her arms to warm her, she stepped into his embrace, burying her face against his chest.

"Difficult day?" His soothing voice was like a tonic.

"It's better now." She lifted her face to look at him. "What did Mr. Vanderbilt want?"

Leading her into their modest drawing room, he sat on the sofa and pulled her onto his lap. "He heard of my interest in the railroads, stating he's also interested. He fears it may be some years before the investment comes to fruition, but he suggested I also invest in his business of steamboats."

"And?"

“It sounds promising and would provide a more immediate source of income.” He gestured around the room. “You deserve more than this.”

“I have you. That’s all I need.”



ALTHOUGH HE KNEW ADALYN MEANT HER WORDS TO EASE HIS mind, Nash flinched, still struggling with his pride. “My love, I need to do this for myself, too. I don’t want you ever to be sorry you married me.”

“I could never be sorry.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “So, you’re interested in his proposal?”

“Very. And he was most interested in what I had to say about the railroads.”

“Then if it makes you happy, you should do it.”

He tugged her toward him. “You make me happy.”

The love that shone in her eyes battered his chest. Every day he spent with her was a gift. Which reminded him. “I’m afraid I don’t have much to offer you for Christmas, my darling.”

Her eyes widened, filled with a mischief that unsettled him. “Oh, speaking of.” She scooted off his lap and rushed back into the entryway, returning with a large wrapped package. “I had it sent to Father’s because I wanted to surprise you.”

Accepting the large, rectangular package, he peered at her. “Did you think I would peek?”

Her smile lit up his world. “I *know* you would have.” She settled next to him. “Go ahead. Open it.”

She practically bounced next to him on the sofa as he slowly untied the twine holding the brown paper in place. It slipped aside, revealing the backing of a painting.

She pushed on his arm. “Turn it over.”

“My, aren’t you impatient? Reminds me of when we’re in bed and—”

She slapped a hand over his mouth. “Nash. Mena will hear you.”

“She’s in her room. I told her to stay there until Mr. Vanderbilt left. I wouldn’t want him to discover he was missing any items.” Nash had found his watch missing on several occasions. “Now, shall I proceed?”

He loved the visible excitement bubbling through her. With great flair, he flipped the canvas over, his jaw dropping at the painting of a ship being tossed at sea. “This can’t be the same one? How would you have paid for it?”

“Not exactly. It’s a replica. Notice the added detail.” She pointed to a place on the ship where a chain led to the waters beneath. Then the name of the ship—*The Nash*. “I had Victor Pratt paint it. He didn’t charge me anything. Said it was good to practice his technique. Look closer.” She pointed to the murky waters.

Victor’s technique was indeed exceptional, for an anchor, distorted, not by his mind, but as if by the water’s wave, read *Adalyn*.

“No matter what you do, Nash. I will be there supporting and anchoring you throughout it all.”

Something hard and aching lodged in his throat as he stared at the painting. He let it slide to the floor and pulled Adalyn in to his arms. “I don’t—”

Again, she slipped her fingers over his mouth. “Don’t you dare say you don’t deserve me.”

He shook his head. “I have nothing to give you.”

“You’ve already given it to me. However, it won’t arrive until next summer.”

Confused, he stared at her. As she placed his hand on her stomach, realization struck. He threw her back on the sofa, and she squealed with laughter.

From down the hall, Mena's voice called, "Oh, good grief. Not again!"

And although he wanted to give Adalyn, Mena, and his new baby more than what they currently had, he thought it fitting that in their simple life, he'd found his redemption.



WOULD YOU LIKE A PEEK INTO NASH AND ADALYN'S FUTURE? Click [here](#) to download an extended epilogue eight years into the future. There is no obligation. Simply enjoy!



IF YOU LOVED NASH'S STORY, LET OTHER READERS KNOW BY leaving a short, honest review on Amazon. Click [here](#) to take you right to the review page. Easy peasy!



ARE YOU FRETTING ABOUT LADY HONORIA? WANT HER TO have her own HEA? Me, too! Look for her story in the upcoming spin-off series *The London Ladies' League* where crafty females work to unmask who's behind *The Muckraker*. Honoria's second chance romance will be first on the the list!

## AUTHOR NOTES

This book was a labor of love. When I first started the journey of writing historical romance, I was unsure I could do it. No. That's not accurate. I was terrified. It's such a beloved sub-genre of romance with very high expectations of readers. Trust me, I know. I am one of them. I've learned a lot while writing this series. The research I've done has been both interesting and eye-opening. I'll be the first to admit that sometimes I get things wrong, or an anachronistic word slips by me. For any inadvertent errors, I hope the story itself covered my sins and you can forgive me.

If you haven't read the book yet and peeked ahead, just be forewarned. There are spoilers waiting. But I'm not the boss of you.

When Nash appeared in *The Reluctant Duke's Dilemma*, he was quite the villain. But something niggled at the back of my brain that he wasn't what he appeared to be—that there was more to him than met the eye. With each book, the thought persisted. And slowly, very slowly, everything took shape.

Like all good characters, he has a wound that colors his whole view of the world, shaping his behavior. I had to dig to understand what the wound was. I found it hidden in the other stories, waiting for me to uncover it. The clues were there, even for me who wrote the books!

At the end of *The Reluctant Duke's Dilemma* when Laurence (Viscount Montgomery) comes forward to admit he suspected Nash had participated in the scheme to trap Harry into marriage with Priscilla, he mentions that there was an

usual curve to the letter S that he had seen in Nash's signature. In *Healing the Viscount's Heart*, Nash thrusts Lord Middlebury's promissory note at Timothy Marbry to read because "he's too angry." This also explains why Nash didn't initially catch the clause that negated the note.

So, in my subconscious writer's mind, Nash was pleading with me to "see him" and tell his story. At least that's how I look at it, as silly as it may seem. I hope I did that part of him justice.

These types of unintentional breadcrumbs are a writer's dream. It's like finding gold. If you subscribe to my newsletter, you know I don't plot. Of course, I know there will be a happy ending and love will conquer all, or else it wouldn't be a romance. But I start with an idea and characters. How they get to their happy ending is up to them (for the most part). Sometimes when I try to drag them places they don't want to go, they will protest—loudly. When Nash leaves the ball after Lord Stratford discovers him kissing Adalyn, I initially had him crying.

I could hear him in my head. "I would *not* cry." It was like he stood there, arms crossed over his chest, glaring at me in his Nash way. So I had him laugh, and he was satisfied (as were my critique partners who have been with me through each book and know him almost as well as I do).

But all that being said, the story unfolds for me as I write it. Which leads me to the times the words won't come. They are agonizing times, for certain. But I've learned they happen for a reason.

When I was writing the love scene (of all things) I felt stuck. It wasn't the love scene that was the problem; it was what would come after. I had a little idea of what would cause the "dark moment," but something was stopping me from moving forward. So I did something drastic.

I killed Cordelia. There is a whole story about how this came about, but I won't bore you with the details here (sign up to my newsletter or drop me an email and ask if you really want to know). What's important to note is that when I made



that decision, everything snapped into place. Then, when I went back to thread in some clues and foreshadowing, I found I didn't need to. They were already there. Again, like finding gold without even knowing it was buried there. I get shivers even now thinking about how perfect it was.

As an added "bonus," the death of Cordelia rounded out how Harry's book and Nash's book "mirror" each other. Harry's book starts with the death of a despicable character (George), and Cordelia's death occurs toward the end of Nash's book. The whole concept about how these two characters contrast with each other brings me joy.

That's not to say I didn't have some problems to iron out. Thanks to my wonderful critique partners, they questioned a few things I had written, and they helped me fix them. I hope you agree that it made the story that much more satisfying. (Although I apologize to those of you who wished I had killed off Roland instead—or in addition to Cordelia).

Regarding dyslexia. I hope I've done justice to how it manifests for Nash. There is no one way an individual experiences it. I based my descriptions on what my son-in-law shared with me, but others may experience it differently.

I hope if you or someone you know struggles with this condition, that you give yourself and them grace. Thank goodness we know more about this today than they did in Nash's time. But even with today's knowledge, neurodiverse individuals are often made to feel less-than, stupid, lazy, unmotivated. The list goes on. None of that is true. These individuals often have wonderful gifts and abilities.

When I interviewed my son-in-law, I asked him if there was anything at all he would like me to include in the book. He said (and I paraphrase the first part), "Give him something he's really good at. Don't let his dyslexia define him." That last struck a chord in me so hard I included it in my dedication.

Never let a label define you, dear reader. You are so much more than that.

I hope you enjoyed *The Hope Clinic* series. Thank you for reading and sharing this journey with me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, first and foremost, to my family. I love you all so very much. Thank you for indulging me with this “pastime” that has grown into so much more.

To my critique partners at Critique Circle: Brad, Clarissa, Ellie, Izzy, Jess, and Lisa. Your help in polishing this story was almost as invaluable to me as your friendship. Thank you for pointing out my rough spots and helping me brainstorm to fix them, for responding with “LOL” or smiley faces in all the right places, for the hearts and the righteous anger on Nash’s behalf. It told me I was hitting the right notes. I will be forever grateful.

To my wonderful cover artist, Johana Duran. I don’t know how you do it, but each cover becomes more beautiful than the one before.

To Jess, my eagle-eye editor/proofreader. I cringe at the typos and other errors I miss, but I’m so grateful you catch them. Any remaining errors (or ones I created later) are my own.

To Anna for suggesting the name Adalyn Lovelace for my heroine. It fits her perfectly.

To Jo (and her husband) for being my sensitivity reader. Thank you for sharing your husband’s experiences with me and for your invaluable feedback.

A very special thanks to Nic, my son-in-law, who graciously shared his story about struggling with dyslexia. I will be forever grateful for your honesty and openness about your experiences and how it made you feel. I hope I’ve done justice to you and Nash. I’m so incredibly proud of you. Love you bunches!

And lastly, to you, dear reader. Without you, these stories would be gathering digital dust on my hard drive. Thank you

for allowing me to do what I love and share my stories with the world.

ALSO BY TRISHA MESSMER



The Hope Clinic Series

No Ordinary Love (Prequel Novella)

The Reluctant Duke's Dilemma

A Doctor For Lady Denby

Healing The Viscount's Heart

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The London Ladies' League



Different World Series (Contemporary Romance):

The Bottom Line

The Eyre Liszt

Look With Your Heart

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Trisha Messmer had a million stories rattling around in her brain. (Well, maybe a million is an exaggeration but there were a lot). Always loving the written word, she enjoyed any chance she had to compose something, whether it be for a college paper or just a plain old email. One day as she was speaking with her daughter about the latest adventure going on in her mind, her daughter said, “Mom, why don’t you write them down.” And so it began. Several stories later, she finally allowed someone, other than her daughter, to read them.

After that brave (and very scary) step, she decided not to keep them to herself any longer, so here we are.

She hopes you enjoy her musings as much as she enjoyed writing them. If they make you smile, sigh, hope, and chuckle or even cry at times, it was worth it.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Trisha graduated from the University of Missouri – St. Louis with a degree in Psychology. Trisha’s day job as a product instructor for a software company allowed her to travel all over the country meeting interesting people and seeing interesting places, some of which inspired ideas for her stories. A hopeless (or hopeful) romantic, Trisha currently resides in the great Northwest.

