



*"An Eva Devon book is
always a witty delight!"*

—LENORA BELL,
USA Today bestselling author

THE
BEAST
AND THE
BOOKSELLER

ONCE UPON A
WALLFLOWER SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON



*"An Eva Devon book is
always a witty delight!"*
—LENORA BELL,
USA Today bestselling author

THE
BEAST
AND THE
BOOKSELLER
ONCE UPON A
WALLFLOWER SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EVA DEVON

THE
*B*EAST
AND THE
*B*OOKSELLER
ONCE UPON A
WALLFLOWER SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EVA DEVON

Table of Contents

[Content Warning](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Discover more romance from Entangled...](#)

[Four Weddings and a Duke](#)

[The Last Lord Standing](#)

[Earls Rush In](#)

[An Earl to Remember](#)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Eva Devon. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means. For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact the Publisher.

Entangled Publishing, LLC

644 Shrewsbury Commons Ave
STE 181
Shrewsbury, PA 17361

rights@entangledpublishing.com

Amara is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Edited by Erin Molta, Lydia Sharp, and Liz Pelletier

Cover design by LJ Anderson/Mayhem Cover Creations

Cover photography by Period Images

PabloUA/Getty Images
ollallya/Deposit Photos

ISBN 978-1-64937-248-2

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition June 2023

AMARA
an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC

At Entangled, we want our readers to be well-informed. If you would like to know if this book contains any elements that might be of concern for you, please check the book's webpage for details.

<https://entangledpublishing.com/books/the-beast-and-the-bookseller>

*For you. You always have my back and I am eternally grateful.
And as always, for Mr. Devon and my three boys who are my
wonderful why's.*

Chapter One

Miss Elizabeth Sharpe had never met a duke.

But it seemed she was about to. And in unpleasant circumstances. She stared down at the small missive that her father had hidden away in his chaotic and rather messy office at the back of the bookstore.

She had been in search of documents regarding a large book purchase. And she'd found a stack. Documents containing concern at first, and then ever-growing warnings.

From the Duke of Montrose.

The words were scrawled in a bold, determined hand across the ivory paper.

They were in a great deal of trouble. The note was quite terse.

Mr. Sharpe, I am deeply disappointed with your behavior as of late, though I am loathe to leave my townhouse. As you know, I shall be in attendance at the bookshop at 10 am on the 11th of April. You will greet me, and we shall sort this out. Tradition must be met, but if you cannot uphold your bargain, I shall have to seek out other avenues.

Other avenues.

She felt her stomach turn and spin inside her.

Elizabeth glanced to the clock.

Two minutes. The duke would arrive in *two* minutes, and her father was nowhere to be seen. He had gone out the night before, as he did so often now, but he had not returned. A circumstance that was growing more and more common as of late.

What the blazes was she going to do?

She resisted the urge to whirl around as she struggled to catch her breath. Instead, she raised her hand and touched the small crocus pin near the throat of her simple gown,

desperately hoping the action of touching something of her mother's would calm her. The bookshop had been her home all her life. She adored its nooks and crannies. Its strange little quirks. Its myriad shelves that she had spent days organizing in new ways, since her father had given up taking care of the shop after her mother's death.

Rows and rows of beautifully bound books lined every surface. Usually, the sight lifted her heart, no matter how difficult things seemed, but now her heart was pounding with such rapidity she feared it might pound right out of her chest. She stared at the stack of books she'd been about to shelve, trying to steady her nerves. It was a wonderful collection on the burgeoning subject of archaeology and the events around the discoveries of ancient sites in the country of Egypt.

It was a difficult but rewarding text, for it detailed all that was happening there. She had mixed feelings about the archaeologists, who seemed to think that stealing was the same as collecting history.

Still, the printed pictures were mind-boggling. She'd never left London, let alone gone to another continent, and the books allowed her such an escape.

She wished she could escape at this particular moment. She swung her gaze to the few clients who were gazing at the books on the shelves, trying to decide on possible purchases or items that they might put on a list for future days.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she forced herself to take stock. She was not prepared to see a duke. Quickly, she ran her hands down her rather boring gown and then up to her hair. She knew she was tidy. She was tidy all the time, but she no doubt had a fine sheen of dust upon her from when she had cleaned earlier.

She swung her gaze back to the clock.

One minute left.

And then... The ticking sounded as loud as the clattering of the horses' hooves and carriages that coursed down Fleet Street. Her father was not here. *What am I supposed to do?*

And the duke was unyielding in his tone! Had her father forgotten? Or had he escaped into his cups as he so often preferred, leaving her to clean up his messes?

The duke was coming to see Mr. Sharpe, not *Miss* Sharpe. It didn't matter that she all but ran the shop now.

The weekly arrangement of her father going to the duke's townhome to deliver books had been happening as long as she had been alive and certainly longer than that, for their family had been selected by the Duke of Montrose's family to be their exclusive purveyor of books. And they had been doing so since before the Restoration.

The idea that they might lose that patronage sent a shudder of horror through her. And as if that shudder was as loud as a gong, the small clock on the mantelpiece suddenly dinged the hour and a cacophony of noise filled the street outside.

She was tempted to race to the windows, but she couldn't move her feet. Her customers, on the other hand, seemed to hear the noise and be drawn like children to a sweet shop.

Their gazes swung to the door and to the windows. People were cheering outside, applauding, even, and her blood grew cold. Such an experience could only mean one thing.

The Duke of Montrose's coach had just pulled up before Sharpe and Son. His Grace was here.

In her entire life, the Duke of Montrose had never come to the shop. And as far as she was aware, no duke had come here since, perhaps, the creation of it.

Oh no, it was the job of whichever Mr. Sharpe owned the shop to bring books to the dukes. After all, dukes were incredibly busy fellows. They were caught up in the affairs of state and the running of the country and seldom went shopping for things on their own.

No, they had people to do that sort of thing for them.

So, the fact that the duke was actually coming here was quite harrowing. And the truth was, his fierce reputation preceded him. The duke was not an easy fellow. All of London knew this. The newssheets made it clear, *and* he almost never

left his house. He went out only to vote in the Lords.

What had driven him to this measure?

She wished she could run around to all the Publican houses, find her father, and drag him up the back steps now. But the truth was, that would be a terrible state of affairs. No doubt, he was deep in his cups. Likely his cravat had been left somewhere in some dark, seedy alley, and he would be stumbling, reeking of wine or gin, barely able to string sensible sentences together.

No, the bookshop was all but hers, though not in the eyes of the law.

She licked her lips and drew herself up. She would handle this. Just as she had handled everything else as of late.

She had to.

And on that thought, the door flung open, and the duke made his entrance.

Entrance really was the only word for it. The power of his presence made her swallow, but she did not take a step back. She refused to be intimidated, for if she was, surely it would all go terribly wrong.

The Duke of Montrose was a force of masculine, crackling power, harnessed, it seemed, with tight control and exquisite tailoring.

His perfectly brushed top hat was cocked at an angle over hair so dark it seemed streaked with blue, like a crow's wing.

His gleaming white cravat was pressed to within an inch of its life and starched so intensely, it appeared immovable in its simple form.

His black coat hugged his broad shoulders like an intimate embrace. And his ivory waistcoat and shirt, though stiff, were beautifully made, clinging to his wasp's waist.

And his legs. Blazes!

His legs looked like they could eat up half the world if he chose to go around it, and those fawn-colored breeches

seemed to emphasize every muscle of his thighs down to the top of his mirror-polished black boots. Beautifully stitched gloves covered broad hands, hands that looked like they'd been made to wield a broadsword, not his silver-headed walking stick, which he thunked on the floor.

She winced at the sound of it striking the worn floorboards.

But it was his eyes... His eyes struck her immediately and sent a jolt of something she did not understand through the length of her body.

Those eyes looked at her with an intensity so strong she felt a quick shock travel from her breasts to her core, pooling between her legs and then racing upward again. She blinked, certain she had imagined it. But there was something about those orbs...

They were dark, darker than obsidian, and they looked at her as if they could cut straight through her soul, discover her secrets, and leave her completely naked before him.

Naked... Before him. Without thinking, she wet her lower lip with her tongue, the image of her stripped before him dancing through her head.

A wild, tingling sensation shimmied through her, one she'd never experienced before and that did the strangest things to her lower belly. She fisted her hands, digging her nails into her palms, lest the power of that gaze cause her knees to give in to the ridiculous wobble he seemed to induce.

For one moment, that gaze of his lingered on her, and his riveting orbs seemed to soften...but then he let out an irascible growl. "*Everyone out.*"

The clients jumped at his surprisingly quiet but forceful and rumbling voice.

All three gentlemen gave quick nods as they scuttled away like crabs running back to the sea, knowing that their time had come to depart. For if they stayed, they would risk attack from a predator. They quickly rushed out in a flurry of coattails and top hats.

The door slammed behind them, and there *he* stood—

immovable, indefatigable.

And at last, she could bear the silence no more and dared, “Your Grace.”

He inclined his head, ever so slightly, as if she was fortunate to achieve even that much.

“We are honored by your presence.”

He snorted.

Snorted!

“Where’s your father?” he drawled. He glanced behind her as if her father might pop out from behind a shelf or counter. His chest expanded in a surprisingly marked breath. “I assume Mr. Sharpe is your father, since you stayed, and he *has* mentioned a daughter.” His gaze narrowed. “You belong here.”

It was an accurate statement.

She did indeed belong here. And not only did she belong here, she wanted to make it hers. This bookshop all but ran in her veins—the ink, her blood, and the paper, her flesh and bone. “You are correct, Your Grace.” She cleared her throat as her insides fluttered with trepidation at being the bearer of unwelcome news. “But my father is not here. Nor is he well. He will not be able to attend you today.”

The duke arched a skeptical brow. “He’s been *ill* a great deal of late, Miss Sharpe.”

The way he said “ill” made it clear he was aware that her father was avoiding his responsibilities.

But even more so? The words “Miss Sharpe” on his lips sent a shiver down her skin. Of fear or wonder, she was not sure.

She forced herself to nod.

“He has not done well since your mother’s death.”

She pressed her lips together. It was not the death of her mother that had grieved her father so intensely... But the lack of a son... And the fact that her mother had died trying to create a boy to inherit the shop.

“You are aware of his circumstance?” she breathed, careful of her response.

He cocked his head to the side. “Of course I know,” he said. “But tradition overcomes such things.”

“Does it?” she blurted before she could stop herself. “Does tradition overcome everything? Even grief?”

She could scarce believe her boldness, but she had to mitigate his clear frustration. For the truth was, despite the loss of her mother, the duke was intimating that he had little sympathy for her father.

But if she could play on the duke’s sympathy, perhaps his anger could be softened and the shop would not be in jeopardy. His hand tightened around the head of his cane, and another marked breath expanded his chest before he rumbled slowly, “The Dukes of Montrose have held the title for hundreds of years. Because they did not give way to sympathy and grief and feeling. If you and your shop and your father can no longer meet the Montrose standard, I shall have to come up with another plan. It is that simple.”

Could he be so cruel? “But Your Grace! My father—”

“This is not impulsive or idle, Miss Sharpe. Your father has been remiss for some time now. And I have been kind and indulgent for months.”

Months? Good God, she’d known her father was keeping things from her, like the stack of the duke’s warnings... But months? What had her father been thinking? He hadn’t. He’d been swimming in claret...gone.

A muscle tightened in the duke’s jaw as if this whole affair pained him. As if being in the shop was...an experience he could barely tolerate. “If I cannot rely upon him, I will have to withdraw support. Frankly, the very idea of it sends a wave of defeat through me—a feeling unfamiliar to my line.”

He swung his gaze around the shop. “The shop looks well taken care of. So, he is, at least, managing it properly.”

She stilled, and he brought his gaze back to her.

“Ah,” he breathed. “I see. *You* are taking care of it.”

She did not reply, then wished she could kick herself for not making a quick answer when he said, “Silence gives consent, Miss Sharpe.” His face remained granite as he added, “Surely, you know that. Thomas More, and all.”

She gave a tight nod in admission.

“So,” he began. “You run the shop, but you do not bring me books. Why?”

“Father never mentioned that he’d stopped going, and he always saw visiting you as his role,” she defended.

“He has abdicated that role. Entirely, it seems.”

“You have a point.”

“Thank you, Miss Sharpe,” he said with the barest touch of amusement, his sensual lips tilting in a wry smile. “I usually do.” He took another step forward, the tails of his coat swinging.

As he studied the books, his fierce stance seemed to ease. His presence was so...unsettling yet captivating.

It filled the room, settling over her like a cloak, and for one moment, she wanted to feel it against her skin... His power, his strength.

But as she watched him, his riveting orbs transfixed, she rushed in: “You like books?”

He tensed. “*Like* is not the word, Miss Sharpe. They are my lifeblood. And it seems they may be yours as well.” He swung back toward her. “We have an affinity on that accord. I can see that the shop is cared for and not out of idleness or benevolent neglect. You’ve made order of it. It is welcoming.”

If his idea of acting as if he was welcomed was this, she was curious what his displeasure looked like... Though she had no desire to see it.

“I have,” she agreed. “It means a great deal to me.”

“It should,” he said softly. “Since it is your family’s shop. I take very serious care of my dukedom. It seems you take care

of the Sharpe shop. Even if your father does not.” A beleaguered sigh slipped past his lips. “Now, what are we going to do? As it stands, I should not continue patronage of this shop. Your father has failed.”

There it was. Her blasted heart hammering away again. “I will do whatever necessary, Your Grace... To please you.”

His eyes widened, and he mocked her ever so lightly. “To please me.”

She felt her cheeks heat as she realized that there had been a double meaning in that. She was very-well read, after all.

He shook his head, hard. “No, no, Miss Sharpe. I am not interested in taking advantage of shopgirls, but I will have what is due me and tradition.” He hesitated, then admitted, “I have attempted to overlook your father’s shortcomings, but he does not seem to be able to meet my expectations.”

Blazes... He was truly going to withdraw almost two hundred years of patronage.

“Can *you* meet my expectations?” he bit out.

“I don’t know. They seem very high, Your Grace,” she countered.

A dark laugh rumbled out of him. “I think they seem very low. All I ask of you is to meet the standard of previous generations of Sharpes. Is that so very high?”

She winced. What had made him so very gruff, so very prickly, like the brambles she had read about but had never seen? She smoothed her shaking hands down the front of her gown. “If all you require is that I meet tradition, I shall bring books to you on the day required, the amount that you wish, and then all shall be well. Shall it not?”

He paused. “I see you are like so many. Willing only to do the bare minimum of what is required to keep the status quo.”

She gasped at the shocking statement. “Are you always so rude?” she blurted. Horrified, she snapped her mouth shut.

“I am always that *blunt*,” he replied with no remorse. “And if I am so mistaken, I dare you to prove otherwise. One would

think you'd go to any honorable length to secure the future of Montrose patronage."

Dare her, did he? Well, she would show him. She would show him that she could far exceed all the male Sharpes who had come before her. That she'd exceed her father. And that she and she alone should have the duke's patronage.

She met his gaze and gave a tight nod. "I accept."

She would prove his skepticism amiss, and the shop would be hers.

And in that pause, her whole world hung in the balance.

"Good," he barked. "*You* bring them. No one else. And let me be plain...if you do not do your duty and bring the books to me every week, if you cannot keep the standards of tradition and my demands, I will cut off the bookshop. That will be an end to it. And I will find another place for my patronage."

And with that, as if something was chasing him, he turned and whipped out of the shop as quickly as he'd come.

The crowd on the street once again began to make a cacophony of sounds.

She ran toward the windows and stared as the coach made its way through the crush of people surrounding it.

A duke was, after all, one of the most important people in all of the land.

And he was the lifeline of her shop. She could not afford to infuriate him, so she would do exactly as he required... No matter what it took.

Chapter Two

Bloody arrogant dukes.

The amount of power they had, to save or condemn... Well, it was shocking. And a fact. Railing against it did little good, but it felt rather nice.

Elizabeth charged out onto Fleet Street, leaving the bookshop behind.

She clutched the extremely valuable and important package of books to her simple bright-yellow spencer. She turned right out onto the teeming street, narrowly avoiding costermongers and street sellers of every variety. She wound her way through the gentlemen leaving the city after their day's labor of counting coins, insuring ships, and generally managing the trade of every imagined item throughout the globe.

She loved the bustle of the city. She always had. Even its rather questionable scents and muddy streets. London was so alive!

Still, she did not often go far from the bookshop. There was no reason to, and she was far too busy for outings.

The truth was, Elizabeth was quite astonished to be on this particular mission. Her father had blinked at her when she'd told him that it was now her duty to go to the duke's. His eyes had blazed with fury for one moment, but then he had stumbled to his office and grabbed a decanter of brandy.

She had not seen him again that night. She'd laid awake, listening to him bang into chairs and his desk.

She prayed he would not accidentally set the shop alight in his stupor.

It was a terrifying and galling moment, realizing that her father was in no state to meet their most important patron any longer.

At the duke's command, she'd go in his stead. The truth was, she wasn't entirely certain what to think about this. After all, she had so much work to do in the shop.

Sharpe and Son required constant love and attention to keep it from falling into arrears. And these were things her father no longer provided.

The significant fact was that there was no *son* to Sharpe and Son any longer. A fact of which she was often reminded by her father.

Even so, she was determined that one day she would inherit the place and make it the greatest bookshop in all London—one to rival Hatchards itself.

It was her mission and her longing, and so she wasn't about to muck up her first meeting. The Duke of Montrose had been a patron of the shop since its opening in 1665, just before the great fire and the return of Charles II.

Yes, the Merry Monarch, Charles II, had been a boon to her family. The king and most of those who had risen to power during the Restoration had loved books, and not just the stuffy kind or the religious tracts.

Actually, it had been quite the contrary. At that time, people had been tired of the gloomy and often cruel rule of Cromwell.

Upon Charles's ascension, adventure, science, theater, myth, and eventually novels, too, had seized the proverbial day!

Oh yes, she could declare with incredible pride that her family had been in the book business for almost two centuries now, and she was not about to let her father destroy that.

Even if he seemed determined to.

Even if she had to deal with a beast of a duke every week.

Though she did not think it at all unreasonable that he wanted Sharpe and Son to live up to their end of the bargain, she did take umbrage with his bristly harshness.

She headed west out along the street dominated by printing presses and news and gossip-sheet writers.

It was a place of energy and excitement, something she usually quite enjoyed, but she could not stop herself from thinking of the missing orders that her father had said he had put in and certainly paid for but which had not arrived.

As soon as she could, she would politely be done with the Duke of Montrose. Then, without delay, she would head back and she would search the shop, top to bottom, for the invoices.

But even as she assured herself of the action, a coil of doubt swam in her stomach.

She had a terrible suspicion that her father was lying to her. Again.

But she didn't want to think about that right now. No. She had to deliver the books and make certain that the accounts were in perfect state with the duke. He always paid on time and without delay, which ensured their continued business.

Another reason for the duke's anger.

Now that it was her job, she'd make certain he was pleased with the weekly delivery.

Much to her surprise, it took her a considerable amount of time to walk from her bookshop to the duke's massive townhouse.

It was not one of the new affairs up near Regency Park.

Oh no. It was past St. James and Westminster.

The house, once she stood in front of it, caused her to gape.

How could she not? It was a towering edifice. Sprawling, even.

It reminded her of the sketches she had seen of the old palace that Charles II himself had inhabited along the Thames. Only Banquet House was left of that.

This establishment looked like a rambling old hodgepodge of a thing, and yet it was the hodgepodge that made it so terribly grand and intimidating. Rather like an old dowager, a-sail in her diamond-encrusted frock, cane in hand, and a cut-direct on her lips, without care for anyone's opinion. This was a house that had survived centuries. It was not made from new money. No, this was made from generations of power, generations who had gotten their political alliances right, and she found herself tingling at the prospect of going in.

She'd never been allowed to go in before. Her father had insisted that a man was the only person capable of interacting with the Duke of Montrose. Until she'd stood her ground with him last night.

She wondered if, when she saw him again, he would even remember.

The duke had, in her estimation, lived up to the reputation her father had warned her about, when insisting that she had no business delivering his books.

Montrose did indeed seem cold, and as quick to turn on one as a bear in a baiting.

And now, she'd have to face the bear every week.

She squared her chin and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear that had tumbled free from her cap. After all, her russet red wiry hair did have a tendency to behave in the most unfashionable ways. She stared at the double doors.

She could do this. She was expected to do this.

It was true that she did not know Society well or the realm of lords because her society was the society of books, of lands inside pages filled with black ink. It was in those books that she could transport herself to better times, to better places, and more exciting situations than the dreary day-to-day routine of taking care of her father and making certain that he did not have the shop put into a state in which the bailiffs would appear.

She feared that particular outcome almost every day.

The idea of having to tell the duke her father had indebted himself to the point of bailiffs knocking on their door sent a wave of nausea through her, and she swiftly shook it off.

As she stared at the massive pillars, red brick, and beautiful carved granite before her, she wondered if the duke could ever imagine the terror of a debtor's jail.

She rather thought not.

A duke had no such fears. After all, it was very hard these days for a duke to be torn down. Perhaps a few hundred years

ago, he might have worried about losing his head. But now, dukes... Well, as far as she could tell, they were as powerful as kings. Sometimes more so.

Still, the Duke of Montrose was not like other dukes, not that there were many of them.

Even she knew that.

She'd scoured the newssheets after their meeting, and of course, her father liked to gossip when he was in his drink.

All business was brought to Montrose, a hermit in his house because he preferred to stay within the tower walls. Which meant he must have been tested sorely indeed, to come to the bookshop and personally threaten the withdrawal of his patronage.

Some said the duke was like a spider at the center of his web, waiting for all to come to him.

He was, if truth be told, a living legend. And she was one of the few people to have had a private audience with him.

Some people whispered that he had some horrific disease. Those were obviously lies. He'd seemed the picture of excellent health to her. Actually, shocking health.

In her opinion, people gossiped too much. Books were the place for fancy, not conversation.

The rumor that he wasn't kind? That appeared true. But she didn't really care about kindness—he seemed fair. After all, her father wasn't kind. Nor did she know a great deal of other people who were actually kind. Frankly, she rather thought kindness was a myth meant to keep people in check.

She strode forward up the steps and lifted her gloved hand. Before she could pound the brass lion-headed knocker, the heavy carved oak door swung open and she met the gaze of an intractable fellow of about sixty years of age.

His silver hair was pomaded to perfection, and his brow was quite quizzical as he gaped at her.

She realized this was probably not his usual expression, for it disappeared as quickly as his eyebrows had darted upward.

They were perfectly groomed and hovered sternly over a pair of steely blue eyes that tracked from her bedraggled bonnet down to her mud-covered shoes.

She refused to flinch, even if she could not deny that the hem of her skirt was coated in the grime of London. His mouth pressed into a thin line for a moment, and he eyed the brown package in her arms.

“May I help you?” he asked.

Drawing herself up, she announced, “Yes, I am Miss Sharpe. I have come in lieu of my father today.”

“I see,” the butler said. “We are not generally in the practice of accepting people *in lieu* of another when there is an appointment with His Grace. But I can see you do have the books, and His Grace would be most put out if they did not arrive.”

She perked up at this statement. But it struck her as odd that the duke had not told his butler that she was replacing her father... Or perhaps, he’d simply forgotten. No doubt a man such as he had great affairs of state with which to contend.

Even so, she rather liked the idea of a gentleman being upset that his books didn’t arrive on time. No wonder he’d all but thundered into the shop.

She’d often wondered if he actually read them or if he simply put them away in a collection like so many of the wealthy gentlemen who bought books by the score from her father. Those poncey dandies filled their libraries to the brim with books that cost more than most people made in a year... Libraries they never entered, libraries where they never bothered to take a book off the shelf, and libraries which were silent, not because of reading but because no one liked to actually go in them.

It was a horrifying situation, and she hated letting her books go to such places.

So many people saw books only as a sign of wealth and power and not for what they actually were—portals to knowledge and wonder and amazement.

The butler stepped back in his full regalia of blue and gold. He waved his snowy white-gloved hand in a gesture for her to enter. She swallowed and reminded herself that she was an incredibly capable woman made of stern stuff and if she could withstand her father's strange behavior, she could certainly handle a Duke.

As she crossed the threshold into the massive foyer, she made certain not to allow her jaw to drop. It was tempting. She wanted to throw her head back and gaze up at the frescoed ceiling.

The colors were astonishing.

She had not realized that a house this old could have colors so bright, especially on the ceiling.

She'd thought it would be dreary—gray, perhaps, or all dark wood, mysterious and crumbling.

She liked mysterious and crumbling, but this house had a black-and-white marble floor in a checkered pattern that made her want to pretend to be a queen on a chessboard. After all, a chessboard was the only place she could ever be a queen outside of a book. In her imagination, on this floor, she would move about and make grand plans to checkmate a king.

The fresco overhead, which was what truly stole her breath, was of Diana, Goddess of the Hunt, on a rampage, tearing through the forest, half clothed in a fiery robe, her dogs fanning out in front of her.

Oh, how marvelous it was!

She had never seen a female figure like that depicted so imposingly, so full of power, so completely in control, so clearly in charge, and she found her jaw dropping, despite herself.

The butler peered upward, then said, "It is a rather good rendition. Is it not?"

"*Good,*" she echoed. "That is an understatement. That declaration is the same as if to say that I love books."

"And do you love books so well?" the butler asked, his face

unreadable.

“Oh, indeed,” she replied honestly. “But love is not a proper word. It is a disappointing word, actually. It doesn’t begin to cover my feelings.”

“Well,” the butler said with surprising kindness. “I have found myself staring at it for hours, if you must know, whilst awaiting guests. There are secrets everywhere in the painting, and if you ever have the chance, you should come and stare at it.”

“Would you allow such a thing?” she queried, shocked.

“If you come again, I will,” he said. “But right now, His Grace is finishing a meeting and will expect you to be waiting.”

She nodded. “I see. Off we go, then. Take me to him, please,” she said.

The butler stared at her, quite amazed at her bold proclamation. But then he smiled. “You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

“Is it obvious?” she asked.

He nodded seriously. “Everyone is nervous around the Duke of Montrose, as they should be. He decides the fate of anyone in his office.”

This statement did not reassure her, and in hindsight, she wasn’t entirely certain that it was meant to. Would she face such a trial every time she met the duke?

Yes, she realized. I will.

She followed the butler, winding their way up the stairs through the massive house, turning and ascending, passing portraits and landscapes and paintings of ships in battle. She wanted to suck in breath after breath of astonishment, for Fleet Street had nothing like it. The bookshop was her life, and she had never travelled to the country to see inside a great house. She’d only seen engravings.

Here, every portrait was a marvel.

How did people walk past them every day without stopping to stare and contemplate the magnificence of each item? She could not comprehend how anyone could be so blasé about them.

But then the butler stopped before a door and knocked softly.

“Your Grace?” There was no reply on the other side.

The butler cleared his throat. “No doubt His Grace will join you in a moment.”

And with that, he turned the handle and opened the door.

The butler locked gazes with her. “Do not go anywhere. Do not touch anything. He doesn’t like his things to be bothered. He will join you when he is ready.”

“Am I just to wait—?”

“Yes, you will wait as long as it takes. His current visitor must be bold. His Grace doesn’t like to deviate from his plans.”

She nodded.

What else was she to do?

She was insignificant compared to the duke.

She stepped into the office, and the butler shut the door behind her with a thud. That thud caused her to jump, and she realized she was far more on edge than she wished to admit. She turned around slowly and took in the chamber.

There were stacks of books everywhere. Reams of paper covered the surfaces, as did all sorts of strange paraphernalia such as magnifying glasses, telescopes, and odd bric-a-brac.

More portraits decorated the walls... But most importantly, there were bookshelves.

Bookshelves that soared up to the towering ceiling, toward another fresco.

This one was of Ares, a god of fierce temperament. She wondered if he had chosen it or if it had simply been passed

down over the years. She did not know. As it was, she slowly turned, holding the package of books protectively to her bosom.

They were growing quite heavy, but she was used to carrying ten tomes at a time. The weight of it did not truly bother her, and the scent of the books reassured her. Though as to their contents... A wave of uncertainty shimmied through her. She always felt she was rather good at picking the right books for the right person. Almost like a sixth sense... But he was a duke. Her fingers tensed for a moment.

How did one predict the tastes of such a man?

She contemplated the room again and wondered if there were any secrets in it that might allow her to understand its owner better. To discern if she had indeed picked the right books. Books to his general requirements on science, philosophy, and history.

She swallowed, not quite able to confirm his personality from the room. Not entirely.

A sort of startling anticipation ran through her for their next meeting. She'd imagined the force of his presence. His sharp jaw. His dark eyes. And his glowering demeanor. Had her imagination also conjured his gruff demand for her to take her father's place?

Slowly, she walked about the office. And after several minutes, her arms finally protested and she dared to place the package carefully on an inlaid mahogany table. With a sigh, she massaged her aching arms and took in the room again.

It was tempting to touch things. But with the warnings of the butler, she did not.

But then she noticed that there was a bookshelf slightly ajar, creating a gap just wide enough for a person to slip through.

The temptation to go in was so great, to slide through, to find another world, that she had to grit her teeth against it.

"Get out, Dobbs," the duke roared in a voice so loud, it caused the crystal on the chandelier to shake.

And Dobbs, she assumed, whipped through the open way and, without even a glance at her, darted out of the room, as if relieved to be alive and escaping the duke's presence.

It was not a good beginning.

She stood ramrod straight, wondering what the blazes she was to do now.

Did she dare when she had been told not to? It was so terribly tempting. For much like the novels she loved so well, that open bookshelf felt like the portal to another world. And then before she could even step forward, a growling voice came from behind the bookcase that was also clearly a door. "Miss Sharpe?"

She jumped at the hard demand. "Yes," she blurted, her eyes wide at the sound of that voice. "How did you know it was me?"

There was an audible snort of disdain. "Your footsteps do not sound like a man's, and you are the only woman I have an appointment with."

"How very observant," she managed to reply.

"Get in here, Miss Sharpe," he commanded. "Perhaps you have all day, but I do not."

And with his command lingering in the air, she found herself striding forward through the door and into a new world.

Chapter Three

Garrett Edward Matthew Maximilian, Duke of Montrose and more titles than he could possibly count, did not like people. He liked books, which was why he spent the vast majority of his life in two rooms in a house that boasted almost a hundred.

They were his office and his library, and they were connected on purpose. They were connected by a door that only his servants, he, and a few trusted individuals knew about.

Dobbs had managed to push his way in today, demanding he cease his endeavors to raise the age limit of miners to twelve. It was all he could do not to throw the man out the window to the courtyard below.

But he wasn't a medieval warlord. Oh no, he'd find a far better way to crush the man who cared for profits above the lives of children. And frankly, he couldn't wait to destroy him.

And now, there was a strange young woman standing before him who had lived up to his demands as her father could not.

A spitfire, with her wild russet hair laced with flames underneath a pokey yellow bonnet that did nothing for her complexion, and a gown of matching hue that reminded him of a singed marigold. It wasn't fashionable, nor was it expensive.

As a matter of fact, the fabric looked quite questionable. Her gown the other day had also seemed ready for the rag bag.

No doubt, it had come from one of those new mills using machines—that also had children running underneath them.

It was one of the shames of the Empire. Children laboring for the ease of others, in the most horrific conditions.

Gall rose in his throat at the thought, as did the usual accompanying force of fury that pounded through his blood.

A sensation he had to control with rigid care.

It had been one of his life's goals to make certain that the working conditions of northern mills improved. He was still

struggling to achieve that, and he had a significant feeling that he would be struggling all his life.

But people did have a tendency to like money over the maintenance of humanity. It was one reason he didn't like people, even though he actively fought for humanity on a daily basis.

He found that if he could simply shore himself up with books, he could remind himself of the greater ideas of philosophers like Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, even bloody Burke. They all made valid points.

He didn't have to like people to help them.

And he certainly didn't need to be with them.

He contemplated the young woman with empty arms. Perhaps she had not lived up to their agreement after all.

And yet, he could not deny that he was pleased at the sight of her. The sight of her hair, streaked with fire, gleaming in the sun. The way her shoulders were back, pressing her breasts against the cut of her simple gown. And the color in her cheeks... He wondered if her cheeks would brighten if he were to kiss her...

The ridiculous thought laced through his veins like intoxicating wine, and he ground his teeth down, willing himself to pragmatism. After all, he couldn't be lusting after his bookseller.

A bookseller who seemed to be negligent.

But before he could query where the bloody hell his books were, she blurted with surprising boldness, "*Is get out* your favorite phrase?"

He stared. "Have you lost your wits?"

"Perhaps," she replied with a quick smile that suggested she knew she'd just spoken aloud something she had not intended. "But you have used it both times I've met you."

He arched a brow. He'd never really considered it before, but he deigned to explain. "Such phrases save time. People are forever rabbiting on in my presence, and my bluntness

expedites things, unpleasant though they might find it. I do not have hours. I have minutes.”

“I see.”

Garrett frowned. “And in that vein, where are my bloody books?” he growled.

“They’re in your office,” she said with surprising firmness before she clarified, “on a table.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Were you given permission to put them down?”

“Did I need permission?” she queried.

He was stunned with that single bold question. People bowed and scraped with an obsequious sycophancy before him. Not she. He liked it. “I’m fairly certain my butler gave you instructions not to touch anything.”

“I did not touch the table,” she pointed out with a shocking tilt of her lips.

It looked deceptively like a mischievous grin.

Is she grinning at me?

No one grinned at him. But there was something inside him, a little rumble, a little spark, which suggested he actually liked the fact that she did not seem bowled over by him. Just as she had not at the shop. Oh, she’d been alarmed, though she’d had cause. He’d threatened her whole world... It had been clear her world was that shop.

But here? She was composed... Steady. Ready to take him on.

Most people who came to visit him clutched their cap in hand or shook in their boots. He couldn’t understand why, given his reputation as a man who did good deeds. Yet they all seemed to quiver before him.

“Well done, then, Miss Sharpe. You may go.”

At that, her bravado dimmed, but she replied, “Go?”

He sighed. He supposed a moment of conversation wouldn’t

destroy him... “Is your father still...unwell? Has he recovered?”

There was a slight tightening of her expression, as if she was warding off pain before she assured him, “He is not his best self, Your Grace. But I have hope.”

He nodded. He didn’t particularly like Mr. Sharpe, but he had been a fixture of his weekly life. Someone who brought him a selection of the most important new works, all of the best new books in science, and all of the new books in philosophy.

He appreciated them all. He devoured them by night when his demons kept him up and he tended to walk holes in his carpets.

He hated February. It was a grim month.

The promise of spring was indeed on the horizon, but in general it was still an insidious state of affairs with coal smoke in the air. Rain threatened at every moment, something common in England, but there was a frigidity to it that chilled one to their bones.

Oh, he knew he was supposed to be made of stoic stuff, and he was. He was not given to flights of fancy in the first place. But the darkness, the bitterness of the cold, and the damp seeping into his bones generally gave him a feeling that hope had been sucked from the world. Books allowed him to keep hoping, hoping in a mass of humanity that seemed intent on destroying itself.

But in books he could see the best of men and women—the hope there. And as he contemplated Miss Sharpe, he wondered aloud, “If your father has no son, who will inherit the shop? I realize this is rather forward, but I am the patron.”

She lifted her chin and said proudly, “The shop will one day be mine.”

There was a certain note to the word “mine” that was so determined he found himself in awe of it.

“I didn’t know Sharpe was so forward-thinking,” he observed.

How strange that the fellow had never really spoken of her. Perhaps only once or twice in passing.

Her mouth tightened, and suddenly he knew why she was a disappointment to her father.

“Ah,” he said softly. “I see. You were supposed to be an Edward, not an Elizabeth, were you not?”

She tensed and seemed to fight a scowl. “How very astute of you, Your Grace.”

He sensed he had upset her with the truth. Something he had a knack for. But in this moment, he wanted to kick himself.

He drew in a breath, then relented. “Forgive me if it was cruel of me to point it out, but you see, I’m a duke. I know how these things go. My mother was paid a tidy sum when I was born because I was a male. If I’d been a female, she would’ve gotten nothing but recrimination, dark looks, and threats to make certain that a male was delivered next time. It is deeply unfortunate, but so the world turns.”

Her face tightened with a shocking dose of crackling anger as if the injustice of it all was simply too much. “My mother was not promised any such payment,” she said. “She was simply expected to have a boy and did not. The attempts killed her in the end.”

“And your father has not remarried?”

“No,” she said softly. “My mother died but two years ago. I realize most think he should remarry to have an heir, but he has not. And in his present state...”

She winced as her grief made itself evident. “He loved her, you see, in his way, I think, and he’s never quite gotten over her vanishing from this earth. And so his chance at a son.”

And then she blinked. “Forgive me, but how do you not know this? You meet every week.”

The comment hit him like a blow as he realized how callous he must seem. “Your father and I do not...chat. We never have. But you’re correct. It is most remiss of me to be so inattentive.”

Even as he realized how negligent he had been in curiosity about his bookseller's life, he hesitated. Especially in the last years, Mr. Sharpe had not been the sort of man that he would've thought so devoted to his dead wife, nor capable of such grand love as in the story books.

The man had always looked positively ruffled and had smelled slightly of gin and brandy—something he had noticed growing more serious.

He hoped the man did not lose himself in a sea of alcohol, as so many did. Grief would make the affliction worse.

In his opinion, alcohol was the general panacea of the masses, and he wished he could stop that, too. But a real cure for social unease was needed, so that those suffering did not turn to gin.

A little bit of a tipple now and then hurt no one.

But the truth was, life was hard and Londoners drank hard to match their pain. Still, Mr. Sharpe was not a truly unfortunate man. Perhaps he knew grief, but he had a bookshop that was beautiful and had his health, food, and a daughter.

It was nothing to be sniffed at. To be born with a shop with a lucrative patronage? Mr. Sharpe was far above most of those in London in terms of privilege and safety.

Truly, given what Garrett had seen in the slums of London, who could complain of a life like that?

It seemed Mr. Sharpe could, and perhaps the pursuit of a son had wrecked him.

Something struck Garrett then, as he studied Miss Sharpe standing so resolutely before him. "Where is your companion?"

He didn't like to think about her out alone in the city.

He didn't like to think of anyone out wandering London without the means to protect themselves. It was dangerous.

Yet there was something whispering within... Something that urged him to take special care of this young woman.

Her eyes were a violet blue that positively flashed with intelligence.

He was certain that she was keeping quips behind her lips, because he did spend a great deal of money at her father's bookshop and she would not want to lose his patronage.

And he'd made it damn clear that she might.

Bloody hell, he wanted to tell her to speak freely, but such a thing would be foolish. He did not truly like people to speak freely. When given their head, sometimes they said the most stupid and offensive things.

It was better if they simply said "yes, Your Grace" and "no, Your Grace," then turned around and left.

But she would not... He knew it in his core. She would not utter inanities. She was cursed or gifted, like he, with the desire to be honest.

And so, he wished she'd say more. She was not like anyone he knew. By choice, he did not spend much time with people—of her or even his own class. It was perhaps an arrogant thing to say, but there it was. Dukes did not mingle with city people unless it was to purchase something or to gather their opinions for bills to be put before the House of Lords.

She paused, a long pause...and he drew in a breath as he understood her unspoken meaning.

"You cannot afford a companion or shop boy to come with you?" he surmised.

She said nothing.

"You reveal yourself, Miss Sharpe," he pointed out. "You run the shop for your father but have no privileges?"

"Your Grace, I do not mean to disparage my—"

"Of course, you did not, Miss Sharpe," he interrupted, rankling at the facts of it. "Ladies are meant to live in the shadow and never take claim for their great abilities. They let the men in their lives claim it. Is this not true?"

She did not reply, but a muscle tightened in her elfin jaw. He

understood that too well; his mother had also been a victim of Society and his father.

That lesson had never left him, nor had his father's brutal reminder of how deep a disappointment his mother had been.

He'd lived with it every day.

Yes, he lived with it every day still, and he was never going to let it go, because every time he looked in the mirror, he saw his mother's face—something his father had made certain he'd known daily.

He could still hear his father's brutal voice: "You look exactly like your mother."

And it had not been a compliment. It had been the most cruel and brutal accusation. Every single time. As if looking like her meant he carried her faults, her weaknesses...

He swallowed back the agonizing wave of memory.

"Thank you for the books," he said swiftly, not liking the way his thoughts were inclining. "You may go."

"I may go?" she replied, her fiery brows arching in surprise.

"Yes, you may go," he dismissed with a slight wave of his hand toward the door.

She hesitated as if she wished to say something.

He sighed. "Yes, Miss Sharpe?"

"I did note the collection of books I brought you, and I was wondering...do you actually read them?"

He blinked at her appalling question. "I beg your pardon?"

She folded her hands before her and continued quite boldly. "The books. Do you actually read them? It seems that you might but—"

"What a strange question to ask," he cut in, marveling at the absurdity of it. "Who buys books and does not read them?"

She laughed, a full bell sound that filled his office. The sound was so unusual he felt a delicious shiver travel over his skin. When was the last time he had heard a laugh in this

room?

He did not know, but he was mesmerized.

“Oh, Your Grace, it happens every day. Sometimes again and again.”

He took in her words. “Truly?” he prompted.

Her smile was strained as she explained. “You see, many people wish the world to think well of them by putting titles on their shelves, but they never read them.”

“What a ridiculous thing to do,” he stated.

“I agree, and it is actually difficult to let books go to such unpleasant homes, but needs must.”

Something lit in him at those words. A slow match, the ember burning through him. An ember of recognition, and admiration...and affinity.

“You see the books as living beings in need of care?” he asked softly.

Her brow furrowed as she considered his statement. “Well, yes, I suppose I do. I love them, each and every one.”

He stared at her, barely able to breathe, as a strange sensation swept over him. She was pretty... Her eyes were bright, her face more than tolerable... But he didn't actually give a damn about that. It was the words she spoke that evoked the most shocking...desire in him. A desire to know her, to speak more with her...to share his own love of books.

And yes...perhaps allow himself to take one of her errant curls between his fingers and touch the silken texture of her hair. He'd lift that lock of hair to his mouth and trace it over his lips...

He envisioned her hair spilling down her shoulders, tumbling over her back, sliding over his hands as he slid them to the nape of her neck, angled her head back and...

Who the devil is this woman standing in my office, saying such strange yet compelling things, awakening feelings I've never had before?

“The scent,” she breathed, transfixed by her own bliss, “of the paper, the leather, the binding—the way the paper feels under my fingertips when I package them and when I put them together and hand them over to someone? I want to believe that they’re going to be cared for, and if they are disheveled at all, I want it to be because of great love.”

He blinked, confused yet captivated. “I beg your pardon? Disheveled because of love?”

A smile turned up her lips as she clearly warmed to the topic. “Well, in my opinion, there are two types of readers.”

He folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head to the side, willing the desire that crackled through him to dim. It did not work, and so he forced himself to focus intensely on her arguments. “I cannot believe that I am allowing this conversation to continue, but I am. Go on.”

Emboldened, she took a step forward on his burgundy-and-navy Aubusson. “There are the readers who will treat books as hallowed objects, who are certain to never break the spine, who are very careful to not mark the pages. Some even wear gloves. They use a book knife to open each new page of the book with perfect precision. I admire those readers,” she said.

“But then... Oh, but then.” A look of perfect bliss overtook her face, and her voice deepened. “But my favorite readers... my absolute favorite?”

“Yes,” he encouraged, wondering what the devil she was on about and finding himself rather appalled by the idea of people treating books like hallowed objects. And yet... He was completely drawn in. He had to know what she would say next.

“I like the people who treat books like old friends,” she continued, her voice warm and firm. “Who take them everywhere, who share cups of tea with them by placing their saucers on their binding, who occasionally spill and sully the pages. They know it doesn’t matter if there are a few marks here and there, or a broken spine. Or if a reader has bent a page to mark their place. For life is full of marks, and we must all muddle through. People who keep the books close to them

in stacks and do not worry a jot about keeping them perfect are magical. For they understand books are meant to be surrounded by people and love.”

No doubt, some people might consider Miss Sharpe mad. Almost everyone would, if she spoke to them in such a fashion. Several doctors he knew and was trying to discredit would happily clap her away in Bedlam on a diet of laudanum and isolation.

But he felt that she spoke more sense than he had heard in years, and suddenly he was reticent to let her go. Ever.

Chapter Four

The duke was dangerous—odd and volatile. There was no question about that... But everyone was mistaken.

In her experience, people were generally wrong. She had a great deal of evidence to back up her hypothesis. After all, as a shopkeeper, she spent a great deal of time with humans. Her bookshop was not a dusty one in which only esoteric tracts were sold.

No, her family had long ago embraced the idea of educational books, as well as popular fiction. One could find the most sought-after translation of Marcus Aurelius or the most recent novel by A Lady on their shelves.

And the fact was, people were strange.

She liked many of them—their quirks were astonishing, and she lived on Fleet Street, which meant that she saw all kinds, from politicians to lords at the House of Courts to hot-soup sellers to newsheet men.

But...in the end...the conclusions drawn about the Duke of Montrose were incorrect.

She had read many gossip columns about him that insinuated he was some sort of gargoyle, some dark figure made of stone who glowered at everyone in his presence, who let out quips of cruelty with rapid-fire speed.

Oh, he glowered; yes, he did. He glowered with such profound efficiency she found herself in awe of it.

How had he honed such a look with his dark gaze, a gaze so dark she felt she might fall into those orbs?

There did not seem to be much separation between the iris and the pupil. She wondered how that was possible, and here, in his office, away from the prying eyes of the city, his jet-black hair tumbled about his face with complete abandon, as if he did not give a bloody damn or farthing for Mr. Brummell's ideas of beauty.

Gone were the elaborate curls that most gentlemen she'd

noticed attempted to create. The wealthy dandies who came into the shop wanted to look like some sort of tortured romantic hero with curly locks—that were no doubt made with a hot iron.

As if a different person than the man who had stormed into her shop, he had stripped himself of his rigid white cravat.

He was not even wearing a coat!

His linen shirt was opened to the neck, and the emerald silk neckpiece? In a pile on the table.

And his waistcoat was only half buttoned, though it was made of silver-and-black brocade.

Roses, she noted, silver roses twined up the fabric. She found herself wondering what it might be like to cling to his frame such as those silvery embroidered vines seemed to do. It was a thought which nearly caused her to blush, but the truth was she was well acquainted with the male figure. After all, the books in the shop carried varying depictions of the great Greek statues, Egyptian carvings, and anatomical diagrams that had been featuring far more details in the last years.

Montrose was a perfect paragon of physique.

Not the Herculean type but the Apollonian. He was tall and hard and strong. He did not look as if he was erupting in muscles, as Herculean figures did. No, he looked as if he was made of capable muscle and bone, as if he could run for miles and tear a fellow apart.

There was a sleekness to him that reminded her of the dark cats she had seen depicted in books. Did he never tire? He fairly crackled with energy.

And his mouth? His mouth was a sensual pairing of lips, but it looked as if he was waiting to bite out barbs that would find their mark to hook their teeth into.

He seemed perfect in her eyes—dangerously so. He was beautiful in his brutal severity. His aquiline features were heaven. Almost unapproachable.

There was something austere and terrifying about him. *That,*

she would grant. She could see how he might cause someone to fall into a heap of nerves with just a glance. And there was something threatening rippling just under his surface—if he freed himself from his current restraint, he could rip a person to shreds with just words and looks.

He was an enigma.

Her life was made of such everyday things that he was quite astonishing. He reminded her of the slightly darker characters in novels, and this was difficult, for they never proved good.

They were usually the villain, and she wondered if he was. In her recent search of newssheets—attempting to understand her patron before she had to spend time with him—she'd discovered he had brought a Doctor Mortimer up on charges for his cruel mismanagement of an asylum. The man would go on trial soon.

She had read many of his bills put up in the House of Lords. They were all noble in their intent, but she knew that people who acted noble could have dark hearts.

History was *full* of such people.

She realized that she was unaccompanied in his office and she was a young woman. No doubt, he thought her little more than the carpet beneath his shoes, but she was aware that foundling hospitals were full of the children of men who had cast their eyes upon maids.

As if he could read her thoughts, he tensed. “How did you get here?” he asked. “Did you take a carriage?”

“No,” she said quickly, her heart beginning to speed. “I do not spend money on such things. It would've been a vast sum to take a carriage from the bookshop to here.”

“Good God, Miss Sharpe,” he growled. “Do you know the sorts of people between here and there?”

“Indeed, I do,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “And I am not particularly fond of the people on this street, any more than the people between here and Fleet.”

He gave her an arch look. “You're not likely to be accosted

in this part of town.”

She frowned, her thoughts racing out her mouth. “Perhaps not,” she said. “But I’m aware of the things that do happen in houses in such lofty squares.”

His brows tilted upward. “Are you?”

“Indeed, I am,” she said. “And I find that the people on Fleet Street, while rough, are interesting and hardworking and generally good sorts.”

“Ah,” he said. “But there’s the rub. *Generally* does not denote all, and it would be easy for someone to drag you into an alley and make certain that your life became a perfect hell.”

She tensed. At least he hadn’t said she’d befall a fate worse than death. She hated people who suggested that being attacked by a man was somehow worse than death. Truly, death was the end.

She sighed. “And what would you have me do, sir?” she demanded softly. “Would you have me spend my hard-earned coin on coaches? I am not made of money.”

“Well, I am,” he all but barked. “I shall pay for you to come if you are to come again.”

“Truly. That is what you wish? You do not seem overpleased with my delivery,” she said flatly, though stunned by his offer.

He narrowed his eyes. “Do you require praise?”

“I do not, Your Grace,” she replied through gritted teeth.

“Good. I cannot abide people who need to be reassured constantly. The bowing and scraping is exhausting. You don’t bow and scrape. Now, you will do your duty and deliver books, and that is quite enough, don’t you think? Besides...”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. Besides what? Despite his gruffness, she rather liked the fact that he did not want her to seek his approval, even though he had so much power over her. And she was rather surprised that he found bowing and scraping so very frustrating. “You’re certain you do not wish my father to return to his duties?”

“Bloody hell, Miss Sharpe. You’re on dangerous ground of needing assurance,” he said.

She cleared her throat, about to apologize, but she swallowed the words, remembering what he’d said before she charged on.

“I like your conversation better than his,” he said with a shrug...though he fairly crackled with energy.

She gaped. It was an interesting admission. “But he’s a man.”

“Yes,” he said, his lips quirking. “He is. But your point of view is unique.”

“Is that a compliment?” she queried, her lips turning up in a brief smile.

“Would I ask you back if it was not?”

She inclined her head. “Then, of course, I shall return as often as you require.”

She paused and drew in a steadying breath. Did she dare?

“Yes, Miss Sharpe,” he barked. “Out with it. I can see your thoughts turning like cogs in a machine.”

She did not hesitate but rather boldly queried, “Would you mind if I perhaps selected some different types of books for you?”

His brow furrowed. “Why would I wish different books?”

She swallowed, and a wave of nerves crashed over her. But he liked her conversation and so he might like her suggestions. And he had dared her to do more than the minimum of his expectations.

It was time to start exceeding them.

She lifted her chin and pointed out, “Well, they’re all of a dark, rather serious turn, are they not? There is not a novel among them.”

He stared at her for a long moment, clearly puzzled, yet not ready to condemn her suggestion.

So, she continued. "If you are not careful," she said, "if you cultivate too many serious books, it will impact your mental faculties."

His mouth dropped. He stared at her, and then a laugh bellowed out of him that fairly shook the windows. "Did you just suggest that I might go mad by reading philosophy, science, and politics?"

She let out a laugh in turn. "Oh dear. It is an accusation generally leveled at ladies for reading novels, is it not?"

"It is," he said, standing, unfolding his muscular limbs to their intimidating height of more than six feet. "And I am stunned that you, as a bookseller, would make such a suggestion."

She grinned at him. "I do not think the reading of books itself will drive you mad, sir, or play with your wits, but I do think that one must be careful about what one consumes."

"Indeed?" he said, his voice a low rumble. There was something in his voice then, a layer of emotion she did not quite comprehend.

She nodded, determined to finish her point. "If one constantly reads about the injustices of this world, one will feel his heart lag."

"Will I?" he said softly.

"Yes. Or if you read Byron or too much Coleridge, it'll also have an effect on you."

He took a step forward, all but daring her to continue. "And what would you have me read?"

"There is a remarkable new writer," she said, barely able to contain her own enthusiasm. "Her books are deep and interesting, but they're also funny."

He blinked. "You're talking about A Lady."

She gasped. "You've read some of her books?"

"By God, I have not," he said, his lip curling ever so slightly. "I do not have time for such drivel."

“It’s not drivel,” she defended quickly.

He arched a brow. “Indeed. Books about ladies attempting to find husbands don’t interest me.” He gave a slight shudder. “Novels.”

“Novels are good for the soul. And such books should interest you,” she dared. “They are a cutting commentary on our society. They are not shallow at all, sir, but deep beyond all measure, and I guarantee you that they will outlast most of the dark and serious books written by men.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Perhaps. But I do not have time for—”

“Try one,” she cut in. “What could you lose?”

He blinked, clearly shocked as much as she that she had interrupted him.

She bit the inside of her cheek as she awaited his reply.

“Well, with that sort of argument, how could I not try one of them?” Again, he shrugged a distracting series of muscles, sinews, bone, and beautiful work beneath his linen shirt and brocade waistcoat. “Bring me one.”

“Bring you one?” she queried.

“Indeed.” He nodded, leaning forward ever so slightly and saying with surprising force, “Convince me. Bring me your idea of the perfect novel.”

“I will, Your Grace, but I will not try to convince you. Rather, I will let the book speak for itself,” she replied, refusing to be intimidated, even as her heart began to race at his nearness.

“Will you truly risk it?” he ventured. “My pleasure and patronage on the chance I might like a novel?”

She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. “Absolutely, Your Grace.”

His gaze slowly trailed over her face. “You’re an interesting young woman,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, refusing to leave room for

anything but a compliment in his statement.

“I think you’re one of the first people I’ve liked in years,” he said, and then an expression of pure astonishment crossed his face, as if he had not meant to say such a thing aloud.

“Well, I don’t know if I like you, Your Grace,” Elizabeth replied honestly. “But I certainly think you are interesting.”

And with that, realizing she may have said far too much, she hurriedly asked, “May I have payment for the books? I must return. Though I find your company quite stimulating, I, alas, have other duties to perform.”

“As do I,” he said, his gaze shuttering, as if cutting himself off from the pleasure of the moment. “The country awaits, but hopefully I shall be able to read most of the books you brought tonight.”

“The books?” she echoed, uncomprehending.

He nodded. “Yes, I’ll read at least two this evening.”

She gaped at him. “They’re not small, the books that my father sent you.”

“No, they’re not,” he agreed.

“Don’t you sleep?” she asked before she could stop herself.

“Not really.” His face was a mask of granite, and yet pain danced in his dark orbs. “Do you?”

“Oh yes,” she said honestly. “For I dearly love to dream.”

Silence stretched between them as he seemed to find her answer a mystery. And then he drew in a breath, his dark eyes sparking with something hopeful.

“Have a dream for me, Miss Sharpe,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “At least one of us can enjoy the night.”

“Will you not enjoy the books?” she queried.

“They’re the only things that get me through,” he said softly. “Now go. Bring me these books that will supposedly do me good. And we shall see if they improve my mood,” he said, though he looked utterly unconvinced.

Chapter Five

When Elizabeth finally left, the butler had all but shoved her into a ducal coach and had sent it smoothly down the road.

She'd not experienced such luxury her entire life, and frankly, she wasn't certain how she felt about it. The idea that a coach could be so sumptuous, while most of the people in London lived in tiny little rooms with pokey fireplaces, if they had a fireplace at all, was a bit galling.

And still, she'd found the beauty of it quite captivating. After all, this was the sort of thing she read about in novels. She'd read about it in Fanny Burney. And in *Pamela*. She'd read about it in Mrs. Radcliffe's and A Lady's novels, and *finally* she'd gotten to experience it.

The coach had maneuvered its way along the crushing London streets with ease. The driver was as smooth as silk as he slipped the coach through the crowd of conveyances of every ilk.

And she had barely felt a bounce, since the seats were so well sprung, the wheels so well made. The cushioned, brocaded silk seats had been a revelation.

Her fingers had felt as if they were skimming heaven, and the scent of the beautiful coach was made even more heavenly by sachets of lavender and roses hung about.

There had even been a coal burner for her to rest her cold, booted toes against.

Which was fortunate, because it was quite gloomy and rather frigid outside. February was a brutal month in London, where everyone went about with faces scrunched up against the weather, waiting for spring, as they leaned into the winter wind.

Usually, she did not mind the weather or the season.

It was a time for cuddling under blankets and reading books and staying indoors, though she could understand why some people felt quite down during the dark months of the year, and

she wouldn't exactly be disappointed when the warm months came back and people were able to read outside again.

Yes, she did think of the world in terms of where one could read and one could not, and where a book might be damaged or not. And this coach was a perfect example of where one might be able to read for hours.

She'd never been on a long journey, but going on one in this vehicle would be paradise. If given the chance, she'd read every book she possibly could get her hands on in this coach!

When they pulled up in front of the small nook of an alley that led to Sharpe and Son, she found herself rather resistant to get out. But the footman opened the door with a twist of the handle, let the carriage steps tumble down, and offered her his pristine leather-gloved hand.

She took it and stepped down into the good London mud.

She knew that half the people in their shops on the street were watching. After all, such an event hardly ever occurred. She kept her chin high and thanked the fellow.

Quickly, she went around the back of the coach and headed down the narrow close that led to the door of the shop.

It was tucked off Fleet Street by just a little bit, allowing the din to be muffled ever so slightly, and it also kept most of the grit and grime away from their precious books. Which was important, for dust and dirt did accumulate in London. It was not exactly a clean city.

She headed through the front door, a bell dinging as she did so. She turned the CLOSED sign to OPEN, though she did not anticipate customers. The shop was no longer fashionable, given her father's decisions, and they did not have coin to pay other staff at present.

Without His Grace, the shop would die within months. She swallowed back a rising tide of fear. For this was in her hands now—her capable hands and at the duke's demand. She would turn this around and, by pleasing the duke, show her father that she should run the shop in truth.

She drew in a slow breath as she faced the dim, empty shop

that should have been full of people gazing happily at the books on the shelves.

Yes, she'd manage it. Somehow. And soon.

She hurried forward, taking off her bonnet. Given the recent events, she had a strong feeling that her dearest friend, Lily, would be over in a trice. Word of the ducal coach stopping outside the shop would travel like fire through Fleet Street. Most of the shopkeepers would have been watching from the polished glass windows of their own shop fronts.

As Elizabeth quickly crossed the large front room that displayed books on every possible shelf surface, she found herself marveling at the day's events. It had been the most astonishing day of her life.

To begin with, she'd conversed with a duke.

She'd certainly never met anyone like him, and her heart hadn't stopped skipping beats since. For he had looked at her in the most remarkable of ways, as if he had wanted to both devour her and protect her.

It was strange, and she wasn't certain what to make of it. She headed to the back room and immediately began considering which books he might like the best that might also soothe the dark strain from his face.

Perhaps the immediacy of her actions would be considered silly. After all, she had much to occupy her and she had almost a week to consider, but she was immediately passionate about the idea.

Montrose had looked so dour, as if his entire world was crushing in on him, and she wanted to find a way to brighten his spirits. Surely, he deserved that, and frankly, in her estimation, there was only one book that would do.

It was the most wonderful book ever written. And she was going to give it to him. She wanted to go over immediately and place it on his palms, but that would be absolutely foolish.

He was a very busy man with no time to be bothered by a bookseller at all hours of the day. The country depended on him and his work.

And as if on cue, the bell rang again at the door and her friend called out in thrilled and dramatic tones, “Elizabeth, doth mine eyes deceive me? Were you not in the Duke of Montrose’s coach?”

Elizabeth drew in a slow breath, but then she could not stop herself. She whipped around, hurried out into the front room, and gushed, “Indeed, it was I, Lily.”

“My goodness!” Lily exclaimed. “You must tell me every bit of it. Is it a scandal or is it a—”

“There is no scandal, Lily,” Elizabeth assured her friend, gesturing for her to come farther into the shop. “You are far too interested in the scandal sheets and penny novelettes.”

“Do not disdain penny novelettes.” Lily tsked. “You read them.”

“Indeed, I do.” Elizabeth laughed. As a matter of fact, she had tried to convince her father to sell them, but he refused to sell things he thought worthy only of chambermaids and street girls.

It was a sore point between them, but nothing she said could convince him otherwise.

“I don’t want you to think that I’m about to be swept away by the Duke of Montrose like in one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels.”

Lily wagged her golden brows. “Well, a girl can dream.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I would not wish to be a duchess. I have not been raised to such a thing. Surely it would be terrible!”

“I don’t know,” Lily said, tilting her head to the side, which caused her blond curls to dance over her shoulder.

Her friend clutched a square of embroidery, as if she had raced out of the shop without thinking and brought it with her, which was not surprising. Lily was often in her own thoughts, and truthfully, she was terrible at embroidery.

She was much better at sketching gowns than making them.

It was one of the great criticisms of the owner of the dress shop.

Lily was supposed to be a dressmaker. She wasn't particularly good at it, but she could speak perfect French and she drew the most beautiful, frothy confections. They were often believed to be done in France... Not from ordinary Fleet Street.

The owner of the shop adored Lily, even if she was all thumbs. Point in fact, the square of linen with its rather bold and slightly odd flowers upon it bore several red dots, which meant that Lily had pricked her thumb.

Again.

Lily was much more of a dreamer than Elizabeth, which was quite funny, considering Elizabeth spent so much time with her head in a book.

"Come," Elizabeth urged. "We shall make a spot of tea. I think it warrants pulling out the box, don't you?"

Lily let out a note of pleasure and ran forward, her beautiful day gown swinging about her legs.

It was important that Lily looked good for customers when they came in. Her dress was not ostentatious, but it was beautifully made of simple rose wool.

Sometimes Elizabeth wished that she could afford one of the dresses that Lily and her mistress made. She would never be able to. Those gowns cost more than a year's wages.

And her father certainly would never, ever invest such money in a girl who was not going to make a great marriage and who, frankly, did not want one. It was her determination to take over the shop when her father died, and possibly before then. She needed the shop. It was her life.

Dresses were not important compared to Sharpe and Son.

She had spent almost every waking hour in it, and she was not about to let it slip through her fingers, even if her father seemed to be trying to get rid of it by his wayward actions.

These days, tea was a luxury.

But this was a moment of exceptional excitement. She slipped into the back room to boil the water over the fire, and she gathered the tea things. If the bell rang, she'd rush to help, but... But the hour was growing late, and everyone was over at Hatchards, no doubt.

Determined not to dwell on misfortune, she brought out the tray, and she and Lily sat before the hearth in the main room, surrounded by books that she had ordered herself, curating the collections with great intention.

Carefully, she opened the tea box and measured the loose leaves into the tea pot, their aroma wafting into the air.

"Where is your sister?" Elizabeth called as she tended to the tea leaves.

"She is still devouring the latest three-volume novel you sent to her." Lily laughed. "She refuses to emerge from her room until she knows if it is a comedy or a tragedy!"

Lily's sister was a dear and delicate soul. And so Lily protected her fiercely, encouraging her love of reading and desire to stay tucked away from the rough streets surrounding their shops.

It was a difficult path young women in trade walked. In this part of town, many men saw an unaccompanied young woman as free game. Some young women put rocks or bricks in their reticules.

But Lily's sister preferred the safety of their shared room in the dress shop and the books which took her away from the harshness of life. Elizabeth was delighted to supply as many novels as she could.

After several minutes, she poured the tea over a strainer into twin cups with blue flowers painted on the pale porcelain. The set was one of the rare luxuries she had allowed herself to buy. Her father did not like the fact that she had splurged on such an item, but she had decided she must find joy where she could. Usually, all her money went to books. Books that she could own, not just for the shop.

She liked to have her own personal collection of friends.

But tea? Tea was a joy, too. One not to be neglected.

She handed the cup to Lily, and Lily grinned. They sat and spoke merrily for several moments about the coach and how everyone was gossiping about its beautiful lacquered paint.

Then Lily could bear it no more. She leaned forward and all but demanded, “Did you meet the Duke of Montrose?”

She nodded.

“And?” Lily prompted with tortured zeal.

Elizabeth closed her eyes for a moment, recalling his scent of leather and citrus, his dark eyes, and the way he had towered over her, seemingly menacing yet caring about her safety. “All I can tell you is the Duke of Montrose is a marvel.”

Lily gaped. “The Duke of Montrose? I’ve heard he is the most terrifying of fellows, and that his face is a map of hideous gloom.”

“His face is anything but hideous, but it is a mask of gloom,” she replied before taking a sip of the rich tea.

“How interesting,” Lily mused. “Why do you think people assume that he is so beastly?”

“He’s exceedingly blunt, but he is not a beast at all,” Elizabeth assured calmly. “He is the most impressive figure that I have ever seen. I don’t know why he allowed me to stay in his rooms so long.”

Lily’s eyes glinted. “Do you think he wishes to seduce you?”

“Lily!” she snapped with indignation. “I doubt it very much. I’m sure the man has a host of mistresses.”

Lily shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s not exactly whispered about in the gossip sheets, is it? It’s not like it’s said, *the Duke of M seen at Lady F’s establishment*. He’s never noted at balls, is he?”

That was true.

The Duke of Montrose was not seen out often at all. As a

matter of fact, the Duke of Montrose did not like to leave his house—thus the tradition of the book deliveries.

She began to think.

“You know,” she breathed, “he said he reads all the books that Papa selects for him in an evening or two. I wonder what he does with the other evenings.”

Lily waggled her brows again. “Perhaps you should find out.”

Elizabeth stilled. Perhaps she should.

Or perhaps she would save him from those dark hours and bring him something to cheer him up.

Chapter Six

A rigid, stoic schedule was the only thing that kept Garrett going.

The ice bath this morning had not been enough. Yes, he even took ice baths in February.

He did not give two pence for what anyone thought of that.

If the Thames had been as clear as the rivers out on his family estate, he would have swum the damn thing, but he did not wish to die of poisoning, so ice baths had to suffice.

There was little else he could find to shock his system into behaving. The truth was his brain was a constant riot of thought, alarm, and memory. It was all he could do to push back the darkness sometimes. He disliked it immensely.

His father certainly thought it had been a weakness. A weakness just like his mother's.

But his father had also done a great deal in creating it. Garrett was no fool in that. His father had been the opposite of a saint. Garrett would not say he was a devil, but there had been something demonic about the previous Duke of Montrose.

The man had been full of fear and anger and hate, and he could still feel the crack of the former duke's big, ringed palm across his cheek. The split of his skin, the blood slipping down his jaw, and the scream strangling in his throat as he fought to not give his father the satisfaction were all but a breath away.

It did not matter that Garrett was six feet and three inches. It did not matter that he could crush most men with one blow of his own hammer-like fist after training with the best boxers in his private arena.

And it did not matter that his wit could skewer another like a hussar's saber.

The truth was, in one moment, with the closing of his eyes, he was a small boy again, being shamed by his father. *You look just like your mother, and you'll turn out mad as she.*

His mother. She had escaped his father, if one could call it that. If he let himself, he could still feel her fingers digging into his arms as they'd dragged her away from him.

He could still see the mask of horror on her face as she'd screamed his name and clung to him as if her own soul was being separated from her body.

And that was the last he had seen or heard of her, except when he had been informed of her death when he'd been eleven.

That had been a brutal moment, because he knew that his mother had not left him because she'd wished to. She had left him because his father had made it so.

He was not entirely certain why his father had hated her so much, but he'd certainly seen her as weak. As a madwoman. That's what he'd said. *Mad*. Of course, she'd gone mad with his father as her master. Who would not?

Garrett swallowed as the cold wind whipped past his face as he rode out on his stallion.

He'd never been allowed to visit her, hold her hand, comfort her. It had been years before he'd even known she'd been forced into Dr. Mortimer's care.

And once he'd become duke... He'd seen what happened in those places. He'd made it his business to know. To avenge her.

Good God, if he could, he would dig his father's corpse up and tear it limb from limb, stuff it back in the box, and then burn it.

But such things would not bring his mother back, nor ease her lonely, cruel ending. God, how he wished he could have saved her.

Most of his nights were spent in tortured imaginings of her tragic existence under Mortimer's care and his *cures*. He would make sure that man could never claim to help another woman again, all whilst brutalizing her.

As Garrett raced out over the fields west of London, he

drank in cold, damp air tinged with burning wood.

His friend, the Lord Essex, charged beside him on his own ghost-white stallion.

The only way they could get in a good ride unobserved was to go out before dawn had truly taken effect. The gray light of February was spilling across the land, making it an inky, gray, horrific, muddy, dark place.

But the air did him good.

He sucked it into his lungs.

And out of the city it was clear, allowing him to catch a breath, to feel differently, to feel anything but the dark shadows of his childhood looming large and cruel in his mind. Finally, his stallion pulled up, his great chest pumping with the exertion.

Essex reined in beside him, his war-worn face lined with concern.

“Good God, man, you’re acting as if Lucifer is on your heels. What the devil has happened?”

“Nothing. Just a regular winter’s day,” he returned, keeping his grip light on the leather strips. Slowly, steadily, he stroked his stallion’s shoulder, drawing peace from the animal.

The stallion pawed the earth and tossed his head as if sensing Garrett’s disease. The animal was exhausted but had a feeling of contentment about him.

Garrett smiled to himself at that. At least one of them was at ease from their labors.

“No,” Essex gritted out, driving a gloved hand through his wild blond hair. “It is not. I ride with you almost every morning, and this is different.”

Garrett frowned, not wanting to be caught out. “Perhaps I am not amused by the treaties with Napoleon that I read last night. The damn man is going to try to take over the continent. Again. It doesn’t matter how many times he’s defeated.”

Essex grimaced. He had been wounded in the war on the

continent, fighting said tyrant.

“I cannot argue that,” Essex agreed as they guided their stallions into a slow walk to cool them down. “The man is insane for power, greedy for it. He doesn’t care how many people he kills. Peasants or soldiers. He simply wants to own the land as far as the sun touches.”

“Like Alexander,” Garrett spat out resignedly.

Essex blew out a derisive breath. “Yes. Like Alexander, except I don’t know if his men will abandon him. Not yet. At least Alexander’s soldiers finally saw the man would never be content and would kill them all to fill the gaping void inside him. Napoleon seems to get people back to his drum and his flag with no issue at all.”

“The blood that man has spilled on both sides is almost impossible to fathom.”

Essex’s face grew grim. “Oh, I can fathom it, old man. I’ve waded through it. And all the bodies of dead young men. I hope to God Napoleon is murdered by his own men, but he has been made a veritable god by all society, holding him up as an indestructible force.”

He said nothing. There was nothing to say. It was true. Even many English nobles spoke of Napoleon with awe, as if there was no point in fighting him, for he was so undefeatable!

“We’ll find a way. It has to be done,” Garrett said at last. “We cannot permit him to win, and Wellington especially will not allow it.”

Essex’s jaw tightened as if a fire of fury was kindled in his guts, just barely kept banked. “Wellington is the only man who can tear the man asunder. I agree with you on that point. Everybody else seems in awe of the Frog, but not Wellington, thank God.” A look of agonized torture crossed his face. “If I could simply get back.”

“You can’t. They won’t have you.”

Essex frowned before he spat out a curse and slammed a hand down on his ruined leg—blown apart by shot and barely put back together enough to support his weight. Essex was

lucky he could ride, let alone walk with a limping gait.

“The army won’t have me,” Essex ground out. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t go back.”

Garrett wondered at that. He had heard whisperings that his friend had begun negotiations with different parts of the Horse Guards. He heard almost everything that went on in this country.

He wanted to tell his oldest friend to cease, to be content, to sit on his laurels, to read. He was a damned war hero, after all. He didn’t have to go back, but Garrett recognized the haunted look in the man’s eyes.

Essex was living in the shadow of dead men, and he could not let it go. He could not allow the souls of his friends to have been taken without fighting back, without making it have meaning.

And as long as Napoleon was controlling half of Europe, marching across those lands, bathing them in blood, Essex couldn’t sleep.

Neither of them could. And he found himself thinking of the young woman who had stood in his office and dared to tell him that he needed to read different material, lest he be consumed by the darkness.

Was she mistaken?

He didn’t know, but he’d read through four tomes her father had picked for him in less than two days, as he’d predicted, and he had slept less than ten hours in forty-eight. It was not a good thing.

Something had to be done.

He was rather glad he’d invited her to try anything to fix his addled brain. But he had to wait several more days until she returned. He found himself wishing that she would come back sooner.

But he was a creature of habit. Habits kept him in line.

Out for a ride before dawn, a six-mile walk, a cold bath afterward, and then he would go back home to write—letter

after letter, speech after speech, which his own MPs, whom he'd selected, would proclaim.

He no longer spoke in public.

He did not like to hear that he looked like his mother. Though he had loved her dearly, he couldn't bear to be reminded of her loss and his father's cruel mockery.

He could not risk hearing those words, which could send him back again and again to hell.

And truthfully, he had no wish to be seen in Society as triumphant, for he would not be a shining jewel in his father's crown.

No, he would do his work quietly, away from Society.

Essex frowned at him. "Something happened."

Garrett rolled his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous," Essex insisted. "Don't try to convince me I am. You know I'm good with people, and I don't like being lied to."

Garrett let out a long sigh. "Forgive me. It was badly done of me. I met a shopgirl, and she said some things to me that struck me as interesting, and I haven't been able to shake them."

Essex's brows rose. "A shopgirl? How the bloody hell did you meet her?"

"Her father is no longer fulfilling his duty and so I charged her with the task," he said tightly. And it astounded him how such a short collection of words, such a small change in his schedule, had so profoundly changed his life.

She'd already changed him...with her observations and questions... It was...strange and had made him want...more.

He didn't need more. More was dangerous.

He adjusted his hands on the reins before he swung down, led the horse to a branch, and tied him off. "Now, let's not speak of it. Let's begin our walk."

“We’re going to speak of it,” Essex said, a slow grin tilting his lips. “You never mention anyone of the female sex to me.”

“It’s not exactly like I’m a monk,” Garrett ground out.

“No, but your affairs are transactional. Kind but transactional,” Essex replied. “Ladies like to have you as their keeper because you make so few demands upon them.”

He tensed at that.

It was a cold description but not inaccurate. He never wanted to hurt a woman. Ever. He would never cause harm. He liked pleasure. Pleasure was important. And he found that he needed to have the release that men seemed to find necessary. And it was generally expected in Society that he have mistresses.

They gave him a few moments of peace, but it never lasted. And lately, he’d begun to find that it wasn’t enough. But he was not willing to give more, either.

He did not wish to be connected to anyone. No, he was going to spend this life quietly working away until at last he was dead. He didn’t want to marry.

He didn’t want to carry on the possibility of madness and the pain that could cause. Nor did he wish to pass on the characteristics of the Montrose line. As far back as he could tell, they’d all been horrendous people.

Certainly, his father had been cruel, and he was not about to create more cruelty in a world that was already steeped in it.

“Tell me about the shopgirl,” Essex prompted as they trekked over the soggy terrain, bracing themselves against a bone-chilling cold that no cloak could expel.

“She was interesting,” he said over the brisk air. “Well-read, and she runs her father’s bookshop.”

“Sharpe and Son?” Essex asked with sudden recognition and excitement.

Garrett frowned. “Yes.”

Essex’s eyes lit up with amazement. “I know the girl you’re

speaking of.”

He whipped his head toward his friend, uncertain how he felt about the statement. “You do?”

“Oh yes.” Essex smiled as he recalled her. “She works diligently every day. She serves almost all the customers, and she has an astounding knowledge of the inventory. I go in myself once a month.”

Garrett could not imagine buying books only once a month, but there it was. Not everyone read as voraciously as he did.

“She is quite capable,” he marveled, impressed, even though he wished he was not. The last thing he needed was any interest in his purveyor of books. It would not do.

Essex laughed. “I think that she could be the mayor of London if she was but allowed. But Society never gives women their due.”

That was bloody true.

Those words echoed through him like thunder in a dark night.

Women were driven to madness in this land, by their masters and a society that did not protect them.

And he felt the loss of his mother again, of her being torn from his arms, taken away. He could still remember screaming her name, calling out, as his father ordered her away.

Doctors assured him that she would be treated and returned once she was well.

But she’d never gotten well.

And she’d never returned.

And he would never forgive those doctors for it, which was why he was about to introduce a bill into the House of the Lords that would bring such horrendous chicanery and cruelty to light and hopefully also bring it to an end.

And it was why Mortimer would be put on public trial.

He was not going to let anything get in his way, not even the

dark shadows of his thoughts. So, if the young lady from the shop could help him with a bit of lightness, he would take it.

For he needed all the tools he could get to fight the battle that was coming.

Chapter Seven

Elizabeth let out a happy sigh as she turned the sign on the shop door. She brushed her hands along the front of her simple cotton apron, feeling a wave of accomplishment.

It was true that the shop did not get nearly as much traffic as Hatchards did just a street over. They never would, as long as her father kept out some of the most popular books. But the shop still did quite a good turnover in rare and expensive books, and that was what mattered.

She slowly turned to face the rows of shelves that she polished and took care of with such detail.

Tired, she smiled. This was a haven for her, a place she adored with all her heart. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she had not eaten all day.

One might not think it, but she'd put in a hard day's work bustling books to and fro, and she felt it was time for a repast.

She would send word to the Crown and Heart Pub and order a steak pie for her father and herself.

Elizabeth did not cook.

She did not have time to cook; nor was it particularly easy to cook things in London, unless one had ovens and an open flame. The best she was capable of doing was a bit of cheese on toast or some rashers in a pan over their fire, and that grew old rather quickly.

Even she liked a good hot meal.

As she bustled back toward the desk that bore the books she needed to have one last glance over—to tot up the accounts of the day and make sure that everything was in perfect order, as she always did—she heard her father stumbling around in his office.

He spent more and more time in the room by himself. It had once been a place of great joy for her—where she'd sit and read, he'd read her children's stories, and they would discuss all the possibilities that might occur one day, especially when

he had an heir.

His dreams had died with her mother, and each day had grown darker for him. She did not understand why it had to be so terrible. She missed her mother deeply, too, but she had turned to the books for comfort.

And surely, he did not need a son to inherit the shop!

She was so very capable. Couldn't he see that?

She pushed the thought aside and refused to consider it. For it did no good, and it caused her heart to pump at an unpleasant speed. No, she would focus on the steak pie with a lovely brown sauce, and she would make herself a cup of tea, and perhaps she would also have a small glass of wine to relax.

But not too much, because she watched now with growing fear the way her father was drowning, and she never wanted to be snoring before a fire, dead to the world. He was on the cusp of true trouble, unable to manage his own existence because of drinking.

And as if on cue, her father rumbled, "Elizabeth, come in here at once."

She sighed. The steak pie would have to wait. Perhaps it would just be cheese on toast tonight, after all.

At least it was a good Stilton.

She turned to his office, strode to it, squared her shoulders, and was determined to face him without showing the dread that was already pulling in her stomach. She used to like coming into this room.

Now it smelled of brandy and sorrow. She shoved the door open and said as brightly as she could, "Yes, Papa."

"Come in," he said, wagging a hand at her.

She stepped in, leaving the door open. The room needed a good airing.

"You must pay the vintner bill as soon as possible."

She frowned. "Papa, I paid it last month."

He snorted. “Well, you must pay it again. They are sending me letters telling me they will cut me off if I do not pay.”

A sour taste filled her mouth as his words sank in. “Papa, how much wine are you drinking?”

His face twisted as if he had been caught like a naughty child. “I ordered extra bottles this month.”

She winced. Most shops would have a running line of credit throughout the year for very wealthy people, but she and her father had financial difficulties due to his impulsive spending.

After all, the shop was successful, but they weren’t Hatchards and they never would be...

Not the way her father ran things.

He refused to hire extra people, and he refused to stock large enough quantities to supply the customers who would come in, bustling, happy, ready to read all of the newest works.

He preferred a quiet, more staid affair.

But that also meant there was financial detriment and they relied on the patronages of people like the Duke of Montrose to stay adrift.

“Papa, I will take care of it,” she said, her heart heavy. “Simply hand me the bill.”

He scowled again, blustering defensively.

His once handsome face was now heavy and lined. His hair was shot through with silver, and he lumbered rather than moved smoothly as he handed the scrolled paper to her. She gazed at it, and her heart dropped to her feet.

The amount was outstanding. “Papa, this is a great deal.”

“And?” he countered through his teeth, which were stained with wine. “Don’t I deserve my comfort?”

She bit back a hasty reply. It was hard to argue with him. He had worked very hard all his life, but now he had shouldered most things onto her and she was not even allowed a new fan or gloves, let alone a bottle of wine or two a day.

And he was drinking good French wine.

She could only imagine the cost on his mind and body, let alone their pocketbook.

She sighed. There was no arguing with him. He was the authority of the money in the household, and she could say nothing about it. Some days, she truly rued the laws of England. They made so little sense, and as far as she could tell, according to literature, women were as sensible as men. In her opinion, lady writers were far superior.

But railing against it would do her no good.

She gave a tight nod and then turned. "I shall go and make us toast and cheese."

Ordering food from the pubs was now completely impossible. Luxuries would not be allowed. They would have to economize, or at least *she* would.

She refused to let them go into debt.

She knew which way that went, and she was not about to see herself or her father thrown into the Fleet Street debtors' prison.

"My dear," he said, his voice wheedling. "I've been considering the future of the shop."

She tensed, her heart leaping into her mouth. Surely, he was about to say that he would pass it to her. "Yes?" she said.

"Someone has made an offer."

She swallowed, her world spinning and any desire for food disappearing as her stomach lurched. "You cannot possibly be serious," she said.

"I'm thinking about it," he said tightly.

Her whole body felt as if someone had thrown frigid water over her.

This couldn't be.

He wouldn't.

This was their family's livelihood. "But Papa, the shop has

been in our family—”

“Don’t I know it?” he ground out with surprising venom, abandoning his sickeningly sweet tones. “And wasn’t I planning on giving it to my son? Sharpe and *Son*?” he spat. “But that is a dream that is dead, my dear. And a lady cannot own a shop.”

“That is not true,” she protested as, much to her horror, tears stung her eyes. “You know that it is not true. There are ladies in this town that have run—”

“Cease,” he roared as he slammed his fisted hand down on his desk littered with dirty cups and opened books. Then he smoothed that hand down his stained waistcoat. He blinked as if gathering his muddled thoughts. “I do not wish to put you in such a position. The amount of difficulty that you will have to deal with, the men you shall have to manage. My dear, you’ve no idea what happens to ladies who run things.”

She swallowed back the scathing reply that all she did was manage a man.

The truth was, she wanted to find out what it would be like to work with the men of the city.

It had to be better than having no power at all, didn’t it? But she knew that there was no reasoning with him in this moment, as she stared at the wine decanter, which was almost empty.

It had been full this morning.

She would not argue this with him when he was in such a state.

And she found herself aching.

Aching for the father who had once told her wonderful tales of foreign lands and fantasy stories of impossible dreams, who had created such a love of books in her.

Like his, those dreams seemed dead now. As he poured himself a glass from the decanter, staring at the fire, she shuffled out of the room and shut the door.

She leaned against it, staring up at the inlaid ceiling and

fighting back her tears, but she could not stop the hot drops from slipping down her cheeks.

She dashed them away. If her father sold the shop, what would she do? There were no lady booksellers in any of the other bookshops. Good God, she would be completely without income if her father did such a thing.

She would have to go and work with Lily... If they'd even have her! She couldn't sew to save her soul. Could she run a hat shop or a ribbon shop?

The very idea of it was horrifying. It wasn't that she found other ladies working at such places shameful or disappointing. It was that she simply had no interest in those things. Her love for books was as deep as her love for life, and the idea that it could be taken away from her...

She swallowed.

No, she would not think of it. She could not. And suddenly she had to get out.

This beloved place, this place that was her haven, was under threat, and she could not be in it for another moment.

She needed to escape.

And so, she did the only thing she could think of. She took the few pennies that she had planned on using for dinner, and she grabbed a book.

Elizabeth headed to the door and out into the night to summon a hackney coach to take her to the West of London. She rushed down the steps into the still-busy street. The sun had long since set, but that did not stop people from racing back and forth. Boys with lanterns traversed the roads, making it possible for people to see.

Sedan chairs went up and down the street.

People spilled in and out of the publican houses that were between the shops, and the rowdy crews of night revelers were already beginning to go out.

Young bucks, excited to start their drinking, their gambling, and their whoring, filled the air with laughter.

She lived in such an odd little corner of the world, a wedge between the extremely wealthy and the poor. Her class allowed her to glimpse both worlds, and she'd always considered herself to be supremely lucky. But now she realized that she'd never truly been safe.

Everything was precarious, her entire position on a knife's edge. She swallowed against the thick London night air, spotted a hackney driving by, and lifted her hand firmly.

The driver pulled up, looked at her most strangely, and then, with a shrug, gestured with his whip. She yanked the door open and hauled herself in. It was a luxury she almost never afforded. But it was dark, and she remembered what the duke had said.

She was not going to be a fool traveling out to see him. Besides, he'd been right about one thing. In the dark hours of the evening, it would be very easy for someone to yank her into an alley.

And she was no fool.

She refused to be, even if spending her last coins might seem the act of a fool. No, she realized—they were an act of hope. She needed company, she needed someone else who loved books, and she needed someone to take her away from the horror that she had just experienced.

And besides, the duke had challenged her to bring him a novel. And she was going to prove to him that she did more than just her duty. She would do whatever it took to keep the shop.

After all, she had a dare to win.

Chapter Eight

“You do not have an appointment.”

It had never occurred to Elizabeth that the butler might not let her in. She gaped at the man who had been rather kind to her upon her first visit.

“Would you let me in to look at the fresco?” she blurted, desperate to be admitted.

He blinked before he arched a brow and drawled, “Have you come to look at the fresco?”

“No,” she admitted, knowing honesty really was the only strategy. “I’ve come to deliver a book to His Grace.”

The butler frowned as he peered around her to the dark street filled with coaches lit by lanterns, traveling up and down as they headed out to balls. “It’s rather late to be delivering books, don’t you think, Miss Sharpe?”

“Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is not customary,” she rushed to say, her palms damp beneath her plain gloves. He was such a fortress, but she could not let herself be turned away. Not tonight. “But it is necessary. His Grace asked me to bring him a specific book, and I have.”

The butler hesitated. “He did not tell me about it, and His Grace is not generally given to inviting people without telling me about it.”

Ah, she thought.

That was what it was about. It was his job to protect the duke from silly people, from difficult people, and from those who might make His Grace’s life unpleasant, and for that, she admired the butler.

She took a calming breath.

“Forgive me,” she said with all her heart. “He did not explicitly ask me to come at this time. But upon our last meeting, he said he would be open to the idea of different books. And there is one that I would very much like to give

him, and I think he would like it very well.”

There was a loud bang from upstairs. The butler’s gaze swung up to the ceiling as if he could see through it, and then, with a sigh, he lowered his gaze back to her.

“I suppose it’s a good idea,” he said.

And with that, he retreated and allowed her into the grand entry.

As she crossed the threshold, there was another bang and her stomach tightened with apprehension.

A good idea?

What exactly had the butler meant by such a thing? And she wondered if she might be some sort of medicine or panacea for the duke’s clearly foul mood.

“Is he upset?”

The butler stared at her.

“Did something happen in the House of Lords?”

“He did not go to the House of Lords today,” he said. “He only goes if he must vote. He sends out speeches. Don’t you know?”

She didn’t know.

Well, she knew to a degree, but she’d never really contemplated it before. It wasn’t as if she’d made a study of the Duke of Montrose’s life.

She peered at the butler. “Should I consider coming back?”

He arched a brow as if to say yes, but he wasn’t about to advise her. And the truth was, she’d come this far. She wasn’t a coward.

“Right, then,” she said. “Up we go.”

The butler’s other brow rose in astonishment as if he had expected her to retreat at the warning, at the possibility of the duke in an unpleasant mood.

But she had dealt with people of all sorts. She was not about to let a little ill humor on the part of a well-read man bother

her. A man who had made it clear that he would not harm her. And so, what need she fear?

Besides, a little *Pride and Prejudice* would put him in the right mood.

Without another word or admonition or warning, the butler took her to the stairs and led her the same winding way that they had taken but days before.

When they stood at last before the duke's office, the butler cleared his throat, bounced on his toes, and raised his hand. It was the oddest little ritual, and he hadn't done it before, which made her think that something was different this night.

She bit the inside of her cheek as she caught sound of the duke's footsteps going back and forth on the other side of the door.

Had she made a mistake? It was possible, but there were no regrets now. She refused to live her life with regret.

"Get on with it," she whispered.

The butler swung her an astonished glance. "I beg your pardon?"

"With unpleasant things," she whispered. "One simply must get on with it."

With a *harrumph*, the butler knocked upon the door. "Your Grace, Miss Sharpe for you."

There was a long pause in the pacing back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. The strength of each step, on the remarkable and beautiful carpet, had surprised her.

"Miss Sharpe is not invited," that voice growled back.

The butler turned to her, shrugged, and began walking down the hall. But she would not give up so easily. Perhaps she should. Perhaps she was being a fool. But her day had been atrocious and she wanted a distraction, and this certainly was a distraction. And she didn't think she was going to upset him.

If she could just get in and show him the novel, all would be well.

“I have the book,” she called.

There was a pause on the other side of the door. “The book,” he echoed, the tone of his voice still gruff but slightly different.

She licked her lips. “The book I promised you.”

There was a long pause. “Come in, then,” he ground out.

The butler froze, glancing at her, and then he gestured with his head for her to go in. She nodded, grabbed the handle, and strode through, her book in hand like a shield.

...

It had been a long day.

Most of his days were.

He dealt with difficult people, challenges, and even opportunities all day long. People sent him letters of petition. He read every single one, and he replied to every single one. He had a vast well inside him, but sometimes it did feel as if it was going to dry up.

It was hard to hear the stories of people who were broken, who were living on the edge, who were barely making it, and who had lost everything. They wrote him with such hope and passion and desperation. And some of them had to hire people to write to him because they could not even write themselves.

Frankly, it could be exhausting—and sometimes he could not help, and those were the cases that nearly drove him mad.

But he would not go mad. No. He clung to sanity and all the things that could make him sane. His intense schedule, his cold baths, his walks, his horse riding, his chess, his reading.

But today, his heart was aching.

He was not going to be able to get a bill through the House of Lords. He couldn't get the votes. Some people were simply too stubborn. They loved their coin more than humanity, and they wouldn't be convinced. It broke his heart to think that there were people who didn't care about children in mines or

chimneys, but they did not. All they cared about was cheap labor, cheap products.

He had fisted his hands and wanted to rail against the world. Instead, he'd written more letters and paced the room, determined to find a new way. He would have to find new speakers. He would have to find new passionate people to create clubs, to spread the word, to grab more ground and more power. It would take time.

Politics was not for the impatient, but he hated having to be patient, and he had been in the midst of such thoughts when his butler had banged upon his door. Something that the butler knew he was not to do when he was in a mood.

But it seemed as if Miss Sharpe was shaking his routines up.

Miss Sharpe, who was not due to arrive for at least two more days. It surprised him, and little did, but he had not wished to deal with another difficulty. Surely, that's all it was. She'd come to him with a problem, as everyone did.

But when she had called out that she had a book for him, he'd been intrigued. How could he not be? It was such an odd thing, her arrival at night with a book.

And so he'd dared to call her in.

She entered with some trepidation, though she appeared bold. Her eyes were wide, her cheeks colored as with exercise or excitement, and she clutched a book before her as if it could ward off his ill spirits.

"Did you take a hackney?" he demanded more bluntly than he had intended.

"I did," she said before adding ruefully, "though it took my dinner money."

He ground his teeth. It was easy for someone like him to tell her to take a hackney for safety. But the truth was his privilege allowed him to be safe, whereas she'd had to give up her dinner money to do it.

"I'll send down for a repast," he said tersely, feeling his own ineptitude. "Would you like to eat something?"

Her stomach rumbled, and her eyes widened with horror.

“My God,” he said. “It’s like you’re one step away from the poorhouse, with your clothes and the fact that you don’t eat.”

“I am not,” she said, her eyes flashing with anger and her free hand brushing over her skirt defensively.

He arched a brow, realizing he’d been cruel—but he’d also been honest.

She readjusted her grip on her beloved book. “Perhaps there are some days we put all our money to books and not toward clothes or food,” she allowed.

There was something else... Something she was holding back, but he wasn’t going to press her to confess it. It wasn’t his affair, after all, and he realized he had been rather insulting with his poorhouse comment. People could be quite sensitive about it, and he should be more sensitive, too. But he tended to say things before he thought. It was a habit born of being alone so much. He was much better with letters than he was with conversation.

“So you brought me a book,” he demanded inarticulately but safely. He was so tempted to blunder into worry for her but hated to make rude statements about her clearly difficult life, though apparently, he couldn’t help it.

She no doubt wished he’d mind his manners and keep his nose out of her affairs.

“Indeed,” she said.

She held the book out without saying anything else.

He crossed to her in the amber glow of the firelight, admiring the way that light glinted in her russet red hair. There was something wild about it, coppery, and he wanted—

Good God. He nearly stopped mid stride as a wave of desire crashed through him.

He wanted to reach out, slip her hair between his fingers, and see if it still glowed like fire in his hand.

It was a shocking thought but a real one. One that traced

through his veins and took root in his belly, flaming a heat there that he had not felt in some time. He swallowed, yanked his gaze away from her hair, and focused on the book in her hands.

He stared at the title embossed in the leather.

“*Pride and Prejudice*,” he intoned before he blinked, unamused.

“Yes,” she affirmed.

“Alliteration,” he drawled, preparing himself to be underwhelmed by the volume about trivial concerns.

“Yes,” she said. Her lips attempted a smile, but she was clearly still ill at ease about something. “Isn’t it a wonderful title?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s about pride, and it’s about prejudice. Sounds rather stuffy to me.”

“It’s not,” she assured.

“*Hmm*,” he replied noncommittally. Frankly, he didn’t think he’d like it, but it seemed to matter to her... Which—much to his shock—meant it mattered to him.

He swallowed at that rather alarming thought.

But he took the small volume in his hands. “It’s not very long,” he pointed out as he felt the smooth leather under his fingertips, just as his fingertips brushed hers...

That gentle brushing caused him to suck in a sharp breath, which he hid with a brusque clearing of his throat.

“Does it need to be, if it gets to the point?” she riposted.

“Fair,” he said, contemplating the spine lest he lose himself in her gaze, in her face, in her lithe body covered by her terrible clothes. “Sometimes people use far too many words, but sometimes the hours are long and filling them up is not a bad thing.”

“You may wish to read this many times, and that will fill up the hours, too,” she countered.

He arched a brow. She was very confident in her love of the book. He looked at the novel again, skeptical that he'd like anything about marriage.

He opened the cover, turned to the title page of the novel, and read, "*Pride and Prejudice* by a lady. A Lady." He sighed. "How mysterious. Mrs. Radcliffe at least uses her name."

"Mrs. Radcliffe is likely not a gentlewoman," she returned, squaring her shoulders. "No one knows who this lady is. There's a very good chance that her brother, her father, or her family in general will not let her publish under her real name."

He gave a nod. "A point to you, madam, and rather rude of me to be so shortsighted."

He turned to the first page and read the first line. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

A laugh barked out of him before he could stop it.

"You see?" Her eyes shone with hope and vindication.

He did indeed see. "It's a satire," he said as he pored over the first page.

"It is," she breathed, her lips parting with her excitement that he clearly understood what made it brilliant. "It is a skewering of Society, Your Grace, and yet it is deep with the dangers that every lady, and even gentleman, must face."

He stilled, his hand tightening on the binding. "You're rather bold to think that I care about the dangers ladies face."

"I know that you do," she whispered back.

"Do you?" he queried softly, his gaze flicking back to her face. And oh... How the sight of her eyes blazing with excitement nearly undid him.

She took a step forward, her face softening in the firelight as she replied, "You cared about the dangers facing me."

He lost his voice then... And perhaps his wits, too.

But she was right.

He did care.

And that was bloody dangerous.

Chapter Nine

“Why are you here?” he found himself whispering, his voice low even to his own ears.

He was not pleasant company. No one thought so. He was generally avoided unless one needed something from a duke.

He had power. He had money. But he was not friendly.

What had compelled her to come here this night? She seemed driven, on edge, and he wanted to take that away, to make her at ease. To soothe her.

It was a longing that was so strange to him, he did not know what to do.

And that was completely unfamiliar to him.

He was well aware that he often put people on edge, but he was certain her particular feeling was not due to him. He longed to reach out, to touch her face, to cup her cheek, to take away her suffering.

It was the most astonishing desire and sensation, and it was strong, rippling through him like a siren’s call. Almost impossible to resist.

She swallowed, and her eyes closed for a moment. “I will not burden you...”

She sucked in a shuddering breath, as if she would say more but refused to allow herself.

She refused to be a burden to him. But it wasn’t feigned, as so many did with him. Her emotion was too visceral...and immediately hidden.

He’d become a master at reading others when they were trying to manipulate him to their advantage. And many had tried over the years. It was the plight of dukes.

The depth of her emotion astonished him, and even more so that she might show it to him before she pushed it back down. And he found himself wondering if the newfound stoicism of Wellington’s era was actually a beneficial thing. He knew that

war made it imperative for people to bear up under their sorrows. But the old days, the generation before—they had not been afraid of emotion. They had embraced it fully, and in this moment he wondered if that had been such a bad thing, with her standing before him, barely able to speak as she tried to contain herself.

“Come now,” he reassured her, slowly closing the gap between them. “I can bear whatever difficulty it is. I’m the Duke of Montrose, after all.”

Her eyes snapped open, her dark blue irises dancing with her distress. “Yes, and that is it,” she replied passionately. “I don’t wish to bring you trouble. I’m sure you are overworn with it.”

Her observation surprised him. No one in his entire life had ever said such a thing to him. Except perhaps his mother when he was small.

And then she had been brutally squashed. After all, dukes could not be mollycoddled by their mamas. Or so his father had ruled.

And even in the few years since he’d ascended the dukedom, no one had ever cared that he might have too many worries, that there’d been too many problems brought to his desk that day.

He found himself bowled over in astonishment at her care for him. Her wish to not prove a burden. “Well, if you do not wish to burden me,” he said, “what should we do?”

“Keep me company,” she ventured.

The request stunned him. “I beg your pardon?”

“It is why I’m here,” she rushed to say, as though if she did not admit it quickly, she would turn and run. “I did not wish to be alone in the shop tonight.”

He frowned, his damned heart aching at her pain. “Is your father not there?”

“Yes,” she said tightly, “but he stays in his office now.” And there was a darkness to her tone that made him think that there

was something amiss, that she truly did not wish to be in the shop, which was also their abode, with him.

And Garrett wondered a painful thought...

He recalled the brandy he had smelled on his longtime bookseller's breath, and his sympathy went out to the young lady standing before him.

At long last, ending the thick silence between them that was interrupted only by the crackle of his fire and the din from the street, he gestured to a chair before the hearth. "Well, you certainly cannot leave until I've deduced whether this book has a lucky start or is the tosh I fear it to be," he said, determined to keep her here for as long as possible, so that she did not have to return to her bookshop with her neglectful father and the pain of a dark, aching night.

He knew the pain of loneliness, of the dark hours scouring one's soul... And he wished to save her from it, if only for a little while.

"Tosh?" she echoed. "I will stay if only to see the look of sheer amazement and delight upon your face as you see how marvelous it is."

"Do sit," he urged, glad that his comment had done exactly what he hoped. Already, color brightened her cheeks, taking away a touch of the sorrow that had paled them.

"I cannot sit," she protested. "I have too much energy about me. The hackney was almost unbearable. Being still so long. And I think you, too, are alive with it."

He laughed ruefully, again astonished that she could waken mirth in him. "You heard me pacing, did you? Right, then. I'm glad you don't wish to sit. Sitting is boring."

She stared for a moment, then let out a ripple of her own laughter, which eased the brittle tension holding her frame. "I suppose we're in agreement in one thing. What shall I do whilst you read?"

Do? Bloody hell. He didn't know. He knew what some devilish part of him whispered he should do with her. He should take her in his arms, stroke her face, tease her mouth

with his own, and discover if her passion for his embrace was as bright as her love of books...

It was a damned dangerous thought and an unusual one for him. He did not lust after shopgirls. Nor did he give himself over to such things.

But with her... She had lit something within him with her talk of books, with her imagination that could not be put out...

She looked about the room as if trying to find something to occupy them before she offered, "Should we read the book aloud and act out the parts?"

Act out the parts? He had not done such a thing in years. But he had once loved playacting, especially with his mother... Before his life had been so completely destroyed... Before all joy had been shuttered away from his heart. He'd continued to do it after she'd gone... But it had never been the same. Its joy had vanished. As had so many things.

"Why not?" he said, relieved that she had come up with such a sensible solution. One that would dim his tempting thoughts of tasting her delightful lips. "I was quite a good actor when I was a boy. I did all the lead parts in Shakespeare, at Eton."

Her eyes sparkled with surprise and admiration. "You did not."

"Indeed, I did," he affirmed, rather pleased he could confess such a thing to someone like her. "I played both the girls' parts and the boys' parts."

She arched her brows.

He winked. "This is necessary at an all-boys school."

"And what was your favorite part?" she asked.

He did not have to think twice. "Oh, by far, Viola from *Twelfth Night*."

She grinned. "Truly?"

"Yes," he said. "How can one not absolutely adore Viola and the fact that she loses so much only to find love and a happy

ending?”

She nodded. “A point well taken. But are you sure you do not mind reading with me?”

He hated that she felt a burden... But the truth was, he was uncertain if he would have permitted such a meeting with anyone else. He preferred to be alone, except when he was with *her*.

“You do not wish to be alone, and my mind is a riot of worries,” he explained, hoping to justify his decision to her. “Perhaps we can help each other. It shall be mutual, the unburdening of ourselves.”

“I like that,” she said with a nod. “I don’t think we can ever be equal, but perhaps here in this room we can meet and we can read.”

“Shall we form a book club?” he asked, teasing, but she stared at him in all seriousness. And he locked onto the idea, determined to get her away from her father at night as often as possible.

That was all it was. A good deed. Yes. It was the right thing to do.

“Why not?” she breathed. “A book club of two,” she mused. It was shocking and inappropriate, and it was the most wonderful possibility he’d considered in years.

Still...

“I’m not certain it’s an entirely good idea,” he said. “Your reputation—”

“Damn my reputation,” she bit out. “I am not a highborn lady. I am simply here at the behest of my father. I am doing the duty of the bookshop, and no one will say anything,” she said tightly.

Much to his amazement, his lips parted in a smile at her words. “You’re determined, aren’t you?”

“This will be far better than the alternative, Your Grace. Besides. I like your interesting ways.”

He did not doubt that. He was odd, and interesting was often a euphemism for odd. But her words? They did something to him. She wanted to be with him. She liked his oddities. “Right. Let’s find out why you like this book so much.”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s.”

And with that, that devilish voice whispered deep within him again, urging him to allow themselves more than the pleasure of their minds.

It was not her face or her figure but her determination, her singular view of the world, that fanned his hunger. And suddenly he wanted to entwine himself with her, to see the worlds that she saw in books.

But he had to go forward carefully. She was not here for passion. He stepped towards her and held out his hand. “Shall we make a deal on it, then? A book club, you and I?”

She nodded and slipped her hand into his. The gentle feel of her fingers in his palm stole his breath, and he folded his hand about her small one.

And in that moment, fire crackled up his arm. Their gazes met, and he felt completely transported by her. For good or ill, his life was about to change.

...

Elizabeth had touched many people’s hands over the years, wrapping up books, passing them over, taking coin.

This was something different altogether.

She had never experienced the strength of a man’s grip like this. She had never felt such a beautiful hand wrap around hers, one so capable, so strong—one that rivaled the figures in the British Museum. Only his was warm—of flesh and blood, not imagination or stone.

His touch stole the breath from her. Oh, how she longed to step into his embrace and feel his hard length against her.

The shock of that thought pummeled her.

What was she thinking? She was here to escape the darkness that had overtaken her home, to lift his mood, and to discuss *Pride and Prejudice*.

But she knew. She had found a kindred spirit in him. There was no other way to explain it. He was someone who was...a soulmate of hers, a twin, so to speak, and she knew, deep in her core, that she had been looking for him for years. No one loved books the way that she did. No one saw them as friends the way she did, living beings to be gathered around, taken care of, loved, and devoured. And here he was, wanting to share that with her.

Dear heaven, she wanted to share more. She wanted to share herself with him.

And as he gazed down at her, his eyes searching over her face, she realized he felt the same. His lips were ever so slightly parted. Her heart was beginning to pound at his nearness.

The scent of him—citrus and leather and juniper berries—washed over her. It was heaven. This whole room was heaven. She had never been so thrilled in her entire life, and she could almost touch the air, drink in the aroma, and *feel* his heartbeat in the room.

Oh, how she wanted to give herself into it. She wished that she was one of those wild characters in the books she'd read who threw caution to the wind and embraced passion.

Perhaps she could, but what if he thought ill of her? What if he rejected her? Surely, she would be throwing away the chance of their burgeoning understanding.

So, instead, she slipped her hand from his and walked to the fire. She gazed into the crackling hearth. It was the largest she had ever seen, and it warmed her, but not as much as his gaze upon her back.

She felt the heat of his eyes as they slipped over her, enveloping her.

She dared to glance back over her shoulder. His dark gaze was astonishing, and she spotted hunger flickering there,

hunger for the stories that they were about to read, but hunger for her, too.

Of that, she was certain. It was palpable. She could almost reach out and seize it with her hand.

She licked her lips, made bold. “Can we meet every day?”

“What?” he whispered, his broad chest expanding against the perfect tailoring of his linen shirt.

“My life is ruled by the bookshop,” she said softly. “By the customers there—but in the evening, all I do is read. I love to read,” she said, “but I admit, I have grown lonely and I would like to share my thoughts with someone.”

“I understand,” he breathed. He hesitated, weighing his words, before he confessed slowly, his voice deep with emotion, “Sometimes, even with books, if I’m not devouring a page, my thoughts?” He winced, then quickly shook away whatever unpleasant remembrance had touched him. “They consume me. Better to allow my thoughts to mingle with yours, Miss Sharpe. Better to focus on the books you bring for me.”

She felt her heart lighten, and she dared to hope. Dared to hope that he would be a light in her growing darkness.

“We can drive our fears away, our worries,” she agreed.

And she was astonished that she could share anything in common with the duke.

She strode to him and inclined her head to the book in his hand.

“Chapter one, page one,” she whispered.

And he nodded, lifted the book, and began to read...

Chapter Ten

A few evenings later...

Just as Elizabeth was about to slip out into the falling dusk of the London night, Lily pounded on the door of the shop.

Blazes. She adored her friend, but all Elizabeth really wanted to do was flit out onto the street, find the duke's coach that was waiting around the corner, and abscond to her book club! The truth was, it felt like she was doing something daring and scandalous, and yet there was nothing daring or scandalous about what they did. They simply spoke of books.

It was the most wonderful thing she'd ever experienced.

They had only had a few meetings so far, but she loved reading with him.

They took the parts in turn, reading aloud, then discussing the bits that they had gone over. She did not stay long; she daren't.

The risks seemed too high, and yet, every night in his company felt like heaven, as if she had finally met someone who understood her.

And she was certain the dare was paying off. He could see how passionate she was about books, the shop...and his patronage.

When she wrenched the door open to Lily, it was all she could do not to tell her friend that she wasn't feeling well and that really Lily should just hie off.

Lily lifted a box. "I have come bearing gifts."

And then her friend barged past her, straight to the fire, and pulled the string atop the box. They were the best cakes in town, and how could she tell her delightful friend no?

And yet, she slunk her gaze to the door, longing to escape.

"Something is going on," Lily said with an arched brow as she opened the lid.

Being a terrible liar, she dug her nails into her palms and

asked, wide-eyed, “Whatever are you speaking of?”

“The coach, my dear, the coach,” Lily said. “There are whispers of it up and down Bond Street and Piccadilly that a certain ducal coach has been stopping near the shop. Now, some say it is just for the collection of books, but I saw how you looked that day after meeting him.”

“Lily,” she chastised. “Do not be silly. I am but a bookseller. His Grace is not interested in me. We only speak of books.”

Lily wagged her brows. “I know the sort of books you read. There are scandalous bits in those. Are you speaking of those things, my friend?”

She gasped. “Lily, do not be dramatic. The duke and I—”

“I can see it on your face right now,” Lily gushed, clasping her hands together. “You like him.”

She scowled. “Well, he’s not like other people,” she said.

“One would hope not, since he’s a duke. The Duke of Montrose!” Lily exclaimed, grabbing up a biscuit and taking a bite. Around a mouthful, she urged, “Come, come. I paid good money for these. Sit down and eat.”

Elizabeth laughed, though she longed to groan. There would be no speedy escape out the door.

She’d have to see this to its conclusion, so she quickly grabbed one of the delicate little cakes that had such a treasured amount of sugar in it.

She took a bite and let it explode in her mouth, the taste of butter and sugar blended with lavender and roses.

She nearly swooned. The only thing that could compare was the duke’s voice as he read Darcy’s lines.

She realized her friend had paid dearly for the sweets, and it was the loveliest treat in the whole world. She savored each little morsel as if it was a new page in a book. She let out a moan that signified heaven from the taste.

Lily beamed, quite pleased that her offering had been met so well. “See? It was worth staying for me, even though you are

about to run after His Grace.”

She snapped her gaze to Lily. “I am—”

“You are,” Lily cut in. “Do not lie to me, or we are not friends.”

Elizabeth sighed, contemplating the beautiful little biscuit. “It’s true. I am going to go and see him. We have formed a book club.”

“A book club,” Lily echoed flatly before she pursed her lips. “How many people are in this book club?”

“The two of us,” she confessed.

“It is not a book club!” Lily’s mouth dropped open in delighted glee. “You two are fast on your way to becoming lovers.”

“Lovers?” Elizabeth gaped. “He does not think of me in such a way.”

Though...he did look at her with heat in his gaze whenever he thought she wasn’t looking.

“You’d better be careful.” Lily wagged her brows. “He might seduce you.”

“He has made no indication that he would do such a thing,” she said. “He held my hand for a moment, but only to make a deal with me. Though truth be told, every now and then he looks at me...like I am this biscuit and he wants to devour me whole.”

“There, you see?” Lily brushed the crumbs from her fingertips.

“But he’s been a perfect gentleman.”

Lily’s eyes narrowed. “How terribly disappointing.”

“Lily!”

“Do you want him to kiss you?” Lily asked simply.

Elizabeth felt her throat tighten and her skin heat as she imagined the duke tilting her chin up and taking her mouth in a kiss.

“I think I might,” she whispered. “I’ve never been kissed by anyone, and there’s something about him that makes me think he would do it quite well.”

Lily’s lips parted in a slow smile. “Oh, my dear friend. I feel like you are playing with fire, and yet I confess I wish to shove you in.”

“That is a horrible thing to say!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“I know.” Lily had the good grace to look chastened. But then she swung her gaze about the shop. “You have had so little joy and so much responsibility. You deserve a bit of fun. You deserve an adventure. I think you should let him kiss you. Do you think you would like it?”

Lily’s words thundered through her head. All her life, she’d worked hard. Worked hard for something that might be yanked from her.

Perhaps her friend was right. She had sacrificed for all these years, only to have her dreams stolen away.

Perhaps she did deserve to allow herself something more with the duke.

She ate the last of her biscuit, then buried her face in her hands. “I don’t know!” she lamented between her fingers. “I like reading books with him. What if a kiss complicates things?”

“What if it makes things better?” Lily teased.

Lily knew about affairs and scandal...and marriage for love. Her own mother, the youngest daughter of an earl, had run off to Paris with her singing instructor. They had been very poor. And very happy. Or so it seemed, from all of Lily’s stories.

“You are not supposed to be tempting me into sin,” Elizabeth pointed out, lowering her hands to her lap.

Lily tsked, aghast to be thus accused. “I’m not tempting you to sin, but we have so little adventure in our lives. What do we have to hope for? Most of us can only hope to marry some shopkeeper, bear a babe a year, keep our husband’s shop, and be completely without thanks for it. I work hard to ensure my

little sister and I will have a future and a shop of our own.”

A dreamy look transformed her friend’s face. “Imagine being the lover of a duke,” Lily mused. “Perhaps he would take care of you, buy you beautiful gowns, put you up in a nice house, and get you all the books you could possibly ever wish to read. Or he might give you enough coin so that you could choose whatever life you wanted.”

She didn’t like to think of the duke that way, using him thus. If she could have his friendship, if she could have his affection, that was something entirely different, but to actively seek his protection did not feel... Well, it did not feel right.

“Oh dear,” Lily said. “I can see on your face you’re far too honorable for such a thing.”

“I have nothing against young ladies who must find such protection. After all, it’s little different than marriage, but I want him to be my friend and I don’t want him to think that I’m using him.”

Lily nodded before she popped another piece of biscuit into her mouth. She shook her golden curls and said with a resigned shrug, “I see. Then you will never know what his kiss is like.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. That seemed like a dire thing indeed, to never know his kiss.

“Now,” Lily said, brushing her hands against her skirt. “I must go and meet my sister, since you have little to tell me except for that you two share a love of literature. I shall have to return again to see if things have changed. Enjoy the cakes.” Lily winked. “I know you cannot wait to go and see him.” And with that, Lily stood and pattered to the door, but then she paused.

“Doesn’t your father object?” Lily asked softly.

Her inside coiled with regret as she shook her head.

She did not want to admit that her father did not even know that she left the shop.

Blazes. He did not even hear when she came in.

The truth was, her father was so drunk these days that he could not possibly know when she was here and when she was not. She was free, in a most dreadful sort of way, to do whatever she pleased without recrimination.

...

“I could not stop reading.”

“I beg your pardon?” She gasped in mock alarm and then declared with drama, worthy of any Gothic character, “You have betrayed me, Your Grace!”

He groaned, extending his hand. “You may whip me if necessary. I realize I have behaved horribly, but I could not stop. Bloody hell, Miss Sharpe! After that horrific experience at Lady Catherine’s, how could I not?”

His dark gaze locked with hers, his eyes dancing, and there was passion there. Passion for the story he was forced to take in doses. “The whole event when she finds out from Colonel Fitzwilliam that Darcy is the reason Bingley does not propose marriage to Jane! Hells bells.” He let out a groan of faux horror, and yet his need to know what happened next was clear. He blew out a sigh before he said matter-of-factly, “It is the most terrible thing. Darcy is an ass.”

She laughed. “Yes, he certainly is.”

But then he furrowed his brow. “But he does care about his friend, does he not? He doesn’t know what Jane is after. He wants to protect his friend from an awful marriage. No doubt his parents’ marriage was not particularly good, nor Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s. Those marriages all were likely awful, and certainly Bingley’s sister’s marriage is not a pleasant one. Can you blame Darcy for wanting to protect his friend?”

She cocked her head to the side, having not really thought about it like that. And she found herself astounded at his understanding of the character so many loved to decry for his arrogance!

Was Darcy so very afraid for his friend? Yes... Heavens, he was, and he was willing to do anything to protect his friend

from the failed marriages he had seen and the unhappiness that those caused.

“I suppose you’re not mistaken,” she confessed, crossing farther into the room, drinking in his form leaning against the mantelpiece. “After all, we know that Jane is good with honorable intentions because we read Elizabeth’s point of view, but Darcy can’t know that, can he? He’s simply caught up in his admiration for Elizabeth, and yet he’s so full of self-punishment for it.”

He nodded. “Exactly so,” he agreed. “I cannot hate Darcy.”

She laughed, rather surprised at his comment. “I do not think we are supposed to hate Darcy,” she pointed out. “I think that we are all supposed to love him dearly.”

“Do you think so?” he breathed, clearly stunned by the supposition. “From the first pages, the man has been painted as a possible villain.”

“Oh yes, but I think that we are all supposed to desperately hope that Darcy and Elizabeth will be together.”

He stared at her, and then he stared at the book. “They’re not going to get married, are they? She’s told him to sod off. And he’s behaved abominably. She has feelings for Wickham, though I cannot stand the mincing fellow. He loves to talk too much.”

Again, she laughed. “Well, one never knows, I suppose.”

He scowled, his sensual lips pursing. “You are giving me clues about the ending of the book, and I do not approve.”

“You read on without me,” she returned, mercilessly.

He laughed—a booming noise. “What am I going to do in the hours between our visits?” he lamented.

“I gave you other books to read without me.”

...

“True,” he said, and she had. The other day, she had come with a large collection of novels by two sisters and Sir Walter Scott

—all romantic, all full of fun, all full of some comedy or drama that was meant to uplift rather than drag down, and he had devoured them all.

He was, in fact, quite the fan of popular literature.

He had been horrified at first, and then he had been filled with glee, realizing that he could follow the lives of absolutely delightful characters getting in and out of scrapes! Those pages had given him a great sense of enjoyment.

“I like laughing,” he said. “When I read.”

“Good. So do I.” She beamed at him, clearly triumphant. “It is a miracle that you did not read books that had amusement in them before, considering how much you like Shakespeare.”

He laughed. “Yes, I suppose it is, but I’ve never had the opportunity. I was always told to read very deep, important books.”

“People are foolish,” she said quickly before her expression darkened. “Especially my father. He only reads serious books and deep poetry. Look where that has gotten him.”

“And where has it gotten him?” he asked softly, hating the sorrow on her face.

“In a not-very-admirable place,” she said.

“Is there anything I can do?” he inquired softly before he could stop himself.

She shook her head. “No, you do enough already with your patronage of the bookshop. For that, I am grateful. Please never rescind that.”

“Oh, I shan’t,” he assured without a second thought. “It is almost literally written into the charter of my family that we support your bookshop. We have been supporting it for as long as it has been in existence. It has little to do with my personal decisions.”

She frowned. “It is not your personal preference to continue on?”

“I’d never even been inside the shop, until I met you there,”

he explained, realizing that there was much to the vast network of his life that he gave little thought to. “So no, it isn’t my personal preference. It’s simply tradition.”

She contemplated him. “And do you do many things because of tradition?”

“I’m a duke,” he stated, pushing away from the fire, gazing down at her, feeling that damned hunger heating him with far more power than any wood fire could do. “I do almost everything because of tradition.”

“How strange,” she mused.

“And you?” he asked, tilting his head down to better meet her gaze, trying not to think of how he wished he could buy her a host of gowns that would keep her warm in such cold months. Warm, flattering gowns that actually fit her. “Do you not do almost everything because of tradition? The bookshop has been in your family for almost two hundred years.”

She blinked, a perplexed look creasing her face. “I suppose I do,” she admitted.

“You do.” He nodded, then gave her a bit of a bow. “You’re not so different from me, after all.”

“My goodness.” She tilted her head to the side and teased, “Not different than a duke? Who’d have thought it!”

He laughed again.

God, how he loved it. He loved how they laughed. He could not recall a time in all his life that he had felt so light, so full of possibility. Even when the world was dark around him, even when he was dragging Dr. Mortimer to justice and the promise of people being hurt and abused was out in the night, here she was...

Lighting his heart like a candle.

Chapter Eleven

“Shall we start from where you left off reading by yourself?”

“Never,” he said, clearly horrified she would suggest such a thing. “How can we possibly skip over that part? We are reading it aloud.”

He arched a brow. “*Together.*”

A slow smile curled her lips. She was rather glad that he did not like the idea of skipping it over. After all, it had been something that they were sharing, and she realized that he thought their time together special. It was no arbitrary thing.

It wasn't simply words read out to meet a goal or a plan. No, he *liked* doing this with her. He liked reading the novel aloud with her. And he wasn't indulging her or tolerating the suggestion that she had made. Quite the contrary. The book, as she'd hoped, was genuinely transforming him before her eyes.

She took up the novel, feeling deep pleasure. “Where shall we begin?” she asked softly.

He cocked his head to the side. “I think we should take it up from the moment that they are in Mr. Collins's parlor, don't you? That's where we left off.”

“Yes.” She grinned, understanding why he had read on without her. “It was rather a cliff to end on.”

“Indeed.” He shook his head with exaggerated gravity. “You are most cruel. To leave me like that and then accuse me of poor behavior for reading on without you.”

She laughed. “You are right. I was cruel. Deliciously cruel, no?”

“You were perfectly cruel,” he assured. For a moment, their gazes held and the air between them seemed to light with flame, but then he swallowed and rushed, “Now, shall *I* play Mr. Darcy, or shall you?”

She laughed. “I cannot wait to hear *you* read this part. I think you were made for it.”

“Damnation,” he said. “Should I be flattered? I do not know. But I shall happily fulfill your wishes.”

And so he began to read. He read with such perfection, such passion, as if he could feel Darcy’s intense agony, his desire and yet his inability to comprehend the cruelty of his remarks. And when they got to the end of the passage, he let out a groan. “Poor fool of a man, to think she could ever say yes to that... And yet she would be a fool to say no.”

“What!” She gasped, her mouth dropping open at his absurd comment.

“She’s a fool to say no,” he stated flatly, leaving no room for argument.

“How can you say such a thing?” she protested.

He smiled, his face gentling—a strange sight, given the usual fierce lines of his visage. “I understand your romantic heart.”

“My heart is *not* romantic,” she protested firmly, rather put out to be brushed off as one.

“It is if you think that she should say no,” he countered.

She drew in a breath, then said without hesitation, “I do not think it’s romantic to be loyal to oneself.”

He blinked at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“I do not think,” she repeated firmly, “that it is romantic to be loyal to oneself. And that is exactly what Elizabeth is doing. She refuses to marry a man who thinks so little of her background and her family that he’s incapable of speaking in a gentlemanly manner. So she will not betray herself by giving herself over for mere coin or a house.”

He sucked in a sharp breath as he contemplated her words, then shook his head with growing wonder. “She is better than most,” he admitted. “I do not know a single person who could do the same, except perhaps...”

He fell silent.

“Except perhaps?” she prompted.

“I was going to say you,” he said.

She swallowed, blushing. “What a compliment indeed, to be compared to Miss Bennet.”

“You are very similar,” he said.

“How?” she queried, both surprised and delighted, for she dearly loved Elizabeth Bennet. “I do not come from a gentleman’s family. My father owns a shop. I work for my living. I don’t have a maid. I have no sisters, and my mother is dead.”

“You have very fine eyes,” he teased, though there was a sort of intense emotional warmth to his voice.

She laughed. “Do you think that they’re made better by exercise?”

“I don’t know,” he said. Those eyes of his... Those dark eyes seemed to glint with an unbidden thought. “I’ve never seen you out of breath.”

Her heart began to race, and she felt the pounding of her blood as the room seemed to shrink about them. “I could run about the room and we could test it.”

“We could do a reel,” he offered.

“Oh no,” she said. “We mustn’t do that.”

“Why ever not?” he asked softly, though it was clear he knew.

“Touching hands?” She tsked playfully, though she felt as if something powerful, wonderful was about to happen next. “Far too intimate stuff.”

He crossed slowly to her, his boots brushing the hem of her gown as he stared down at her. His wild dark hair brushed his harsh cheekbones. “I think that we are already intimate.”

“You shouldn’t say such things,” she warned, though she longed for him to go on.

“I suppose you’re right. But I don’t like to lie,” he rumbled. “Most people prevaricate; most people manipulate. But you and I—we’re different than that, aren’t we?”

She swallowed.

Was he being serious? Was he truthful? She knew in her heart of hearts that yes, he was. He was not the sort of man to make such grandiose statements. It did not matter that he looked like an avenging angel, a terrifying fellow to most.

She saw past all of that. He'd been deeply wounded. She did not know what had happened to him, but there was something dark in him, something that he found deeply unpleasant about himself, and yet he felt at peace with her. She did not know why, but she felt equally at peace with him.

"I do not know what to say," she admitted. "My friend suggested that I should ask you to kiss me."

"She did what?" he blurted.

"She suggested I should ask you to kiss me."

"Do you discuss me with your friends?" he asked, astonished.

"Just one," she breathed. "I have just one friend."

Slowly, tenderly he raised one of his strong hands and gently stroked a lock of her hair behind her ear before taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Two, surely?"

"Two?" she queried, searching his face. "Have you spoken about me with anyone, or am I a secret?"

"You are not a secret," he assured, his gaze traveling over the planes of her face with growing affection. "As a matter of fact, I have spoken about you with someone. Lord Essex."

"Lord Essex," she repeated, shocked. "I've read about him."

"Yes, most people have. He's a war hero."

"You've talked about me with him?"

He nodded.

Without thinking, she licked her lips. "And what has he said?"

His eyes widened and focused on her lips. "He didn't say that I should kiss you. But he could tell that I like you."

“It—It seems as if our friends know us well. Do you like me?”

“Yes,” he whispered before his brow furrowed and he asked: “Do you want to kiss me?”

“Yes,” she said, standing still lest this dream suddenly vanish. For surely it had to be a dream. “Which, of course, is why Lily said I should do it, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Not only are you like Miss Bennet,” he ventured, “you’re actually a great deal like Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, aren’t you?”

She’d always thought she was very like Elinor.

But not now. Not in this moment.

Her body trembled at his nearness. It felt as if she was completely alive, as if she took one step toward him, they would melt together, becoming one. “When did you start *Sense and Sensibility*?” she breathed.

“I went ahead and read it today. I couldn’t bear to abandon A Lady’s stories. So, I read it in one sitting. But I don’t always think such intense sense is a good idea. Society wants us to be sensible...especially women.”

“Yes, they do,” she agreed ruefully. “Unless they want them to be silly.”

“Silly women are often forced to act thus,” he countered with surprising passion. “They’re not allowed to educate themselves, and I find that to be damned frustrating.”

Was he a wonder? What had made him feel thus? Most men did not consider women at all. And all she wanted was to give herself over to him. She could imagine no one else that she could feel such intense desire for.

Yes, he was the one...

“A kiss is educational, too,” she stated.

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve never been kissed,” she confessed. “I have no idea

what it's like. I don't even know what it'd be like to kiss a man like you."

"A man like me?" he queried.

"Oh, don't be silly now," she teased, leaning into his touch. "You know exactly what I'm saying."

"I don't, actually," he replied, letting his hand slide to the nape of her neck. "I will plead ignorance in this, like Darcy, who did not know how he was being so rude."

She rolled her eyes and placed her hands on his chest. "I shall explain it to you. You are clearly a strong, handsome man, and women must like you very much. I'm sure you've had many mistresses and kissed many people. I have not had any sort of education regarding this, except for books."

"All theory," he ventured. "And thank you for calling me handsome. I don't think most people think I am."

She scoffed. "I'm sure most people do think you're handsome. They're just frightened of you."

"But you are not frightened of me," he surmised.

"Why would I be frightened of you?" she exclaimed. "You are perfectly safe."

"I don't know if I'm perfectly safe," he returned, "but I will never hurt you."

"Well, then—should we kiss?" she asked. "Your friend says you like me. Mine says I should ask you to kiss me. Shall I ask you? Shall I follow her advice?"

"No," he said, and her heart sank.

"I see."

He slid his hand to her waist and growled softly. "I think you should do what *you* wish to do, not what someone else thinks you should do."

"And what do *you* wish to do?" she dared.

"I wish... I wish to take you in my arms, to stroke the worry from your brow, to hold you carefully and make certain that

you never feel afraid again. For I can see that you have many worries, and I would take them all away if I could.”

Her breath slipped from her lungs as she listened to those captivating words, promising words, tempting words.

“I’m not your responsibility, Your Grace.”

“No,” he said, “you are not. But that doesn’t mean...”

And before she could say another word, he slid his hands into her hair, tilted her head back, and gazed down upon her face with a searing heat that promised that there would be no holding back.

And took her mouth with his.

The wild kiss teased over her lips, taking and giving in its tender power.

She nearly broke in that moment. She’d held strong for so long. Yet she knew she could surrender entirely.

As his kiss stole her reason, her body responded in the most delightful, delicious ways.

Ways she’d never imagined.

She felt alive.

Each breath was more ragged than the last. Her body felt completely awakened to the room. He was so close; the linen of his shirt felt like heaven. She slid her hands up to his shoulders and then allowed her fingers to tease the hair at the nape of his neck. His kiss deepened then, and he tilted her backward, taking and giving more.

A wild heat tore through her as pleasure danced through her body. The kiss...heavens. No one had ever told her that a kiss could be like this.

She never wanted it to end.

The books had nothing on it, the way his mouth danced with hers. And then he gently touched the line of her lips with his tongue.

On a gasp, she opened her mouth, and then he deepened that

kiss, deepened it until she could think of nothing but him, this moment, and the fact she had no idea what might come next.

Chapter Twelve

Garrett wanted to take her now, in his office before the fire, but such a thing would make him the utmost cad.

She was an innocent. She was unmarried, and while she was not, by technical standards, a lady, she was a young woman of good standing, and he was a duke.

Perhaps some might make the argument that because he was a duke, he could take and have whatever he wanted without thought or recrimination, but he did not feel thus.

Too many people paid the price for the whims of dukes, and so he drew himself back, pulling himself away from the kiss.

It was agony.

Each breath of separation pained him, for his entire being—his soul—cried out to pull her closer, but he could not. She let out a moan of protestation, and that nearly undid him.

It nearly broke his resolve. That devilish voice whispered his primal urges were the right ones, that he should give way and make love to her, but he did not.

No, he wanted more from her, not just a tumble. His desire was far deeper than that.

He did not understand exactly what was transpiring.

He had no intentions of marrying, but he did not like the idea of making her a mere mistress, and he certainly could not have his way with her and be done.

What was happening between them?

It was more than a friendship.

It was more than just an exchange of minds and books and words. They were as one, and yet all the things that had befallen him stopped him from claiming that. Nor could he send her away to remove all temptation. He wanted to see her again and again, and he enjoyed so little in this life that the idea of cutting himself off from her was torture.

He had been tortured enough, and he refused to do it to

himself further. At last, he looked down at her, thinking of the crocus pin he had spotted on her the first day and of the bleak weather of late. In the last two days there had been the promise of sun...even with the cold.

“Do you ever go to the country?” he asked bluntly.

She laughed—a soft, gentle sound—but her eyes were wide, her pupils still dark with desire. Her lips were parted, pink, begging for another kiss. Her cheeks were high with color.

And the evidence of her pleasure hummed through him, tempting him to kiss her again.

She arched a fiery brow. “Do I look as if I go to the country, Your Grace?”

“You must call me Garrett,” he said, realizing how callous it was to use formalities now.

Her eyes widened at the very idea of calling a duke by his given name. No one called him by his given name. No one had in years, but she nodded.

“Garrett,” she said softly. “And you must call me Elizabeth.”

He beamed at that.

“I shall happily call you by that name.” He wanted to reach out and take her hand, but he daren’t risk it. “You do not look like a girl who goes often to the country,” he said. “No doubt you rarely leave the city.”

“You are correct. I am ever busy at the shop. I cannot leave it but when it is closed.”

“So it’s possible,” he said. “Let me take you to the country on the day the bookshop is closed.”

She paled. “You are serious.”

“Indeed I am,” he replied. “I wish to show you something that gives me joy.”

“I’m sure whatever gives you joy would give me joy,” she returned, but her brow furrowed with worry—exactly what he did not want—as she rushed on. “But I cannot imagine

slipping away. There is so much to be done.”

“For one day,” he protested gently. “For one day, let us slip away from the city that we never leave. I walk out past Hamstead Heath every morn or else my mind rattles apart.”

“Do you?” she queried. “But don’t you stay up for all hours?”

“Indeed. One might argue that I just take a nap,” he said. “Before the first rays of the sun have touched London, I am up and about under my regimen of health.”

“A regimen of health?” she echoed.

He nodded, hating to bring up the banalities that made his existence possible. “Yes, I undertake it every day. If I do not, I fear the risk.”

She tilted her head to the side, taking in his form, and said doubtfully, “Surely you could not be at risk for any weakness of health. You are so strong.”

“I am strong because of my regimen,” he explained patiently. “You do not know my history, my family, the things that have made me *me*.”

Her face softened. “Of course, Garrett. I don’t. Nor you me. We know so little about each other.”

He smiled down at her. Some might find that worrying. Not he. “It’s true, but I don’t think it matters. Somehow it feels as if I have known you forever,” he said softly.

“And I you,” she marveled. “I don’t understand why. I do not understand how I am willing to be so intimate with you. No, not willing,” she said. “*Want*. I want to give myself to you entirely.”

“And I you,” he said. “But we must be careful because it is not simple. It is dangerous.”

“How is it dangerous?” She tsked, lifting her chin defiantly.

He raised his brows.

“Oh, I see.” She sighed. “Because I could be ruined. Is that it?”

“Or you could become with child, and what would be done?” he pointed out.

She lifted her gaze to his, and he saw her resolution there. “I do not know, but I can tell you this. This entire life is full of risks and ruin. I could be ruined by you. I could be ruined by —”

Her voice broke off.

“Yes?” he prompted, a moment of alarm filling him.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, brushing her statement off as if it were nothing. “All I know is that one moment you are at the top of the wheel and the next you are being crushed by it. So when you are at the top, Garrett, you must embrace it. You must seize it. You must glory in it. Do you understand? And I intend on glorying in you, in us.”

Her passion for life left him in awe, and he wanted to seize it with her.

“So will you come away with me, then, for a day—for a few hours—to see something different?”

“To be with you?” she asked. “I will.”

Her gaze flitted to the windows, and she frowned. “But now I must go. I cannot afford to be away longer, and I do not wish to return in your coach in the middle of the night. Surely such a thing would cause far too much scandal.”

He nodded. He looked to the window, too. It was dark as pitch, as if it was past midnight. But it was only a little after nine o’clock—a perfectly reasonable time to be returning. Most people were only now going out to balls and parties. She would simply seem as if she was returning from a late meeting. So many Londoners worked into the night when they could.

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” he said softly. “Come with me. I shall arrange everything.”

She nodded. “I will be ready.”

And with that, she slid her hands from his and backed away. With each step, he felt the loss. He felt the ache deep in his

core.

Just one kiss, just a few meetings, but he felt as if he was lost to her. No, not lost. *Found*. She was a beacon, a harbor. She understood him in a way no one ever had, and he was not going to let that go easily. Not for anything.

He did not care that she was far beneath him in class or family or fortune. None of that mattered. All that he wanted was to have her with every bit of his being, and he would make certain that his friendship never did her harm.

For if it did, he'd never be able to live with himself.

...

She could not wait to tell Lily!

A smile tilted her lips as she slipped in through the shop door. Lily would be overjoyed. She had taken her friend's advice and kissed the duke! It was the most remarkable experience of her life.

She kept having those with him. With every meeting, every moment, she felt herself changing, growing, feeling. For his world was so vast, she could not even comprehend it.

What is it like to be a duchess? she wondered. She'd never know, of course. She could not be a duchess. Given her status as a merchant's daughter, she would be lucky if she married a person of the city, if she married at all.

In truth, she had no wish to marry. There seemed to be so much the lady had to give up when she became a wife, and yet it was often considered to be the most secure thing for a woman to do. No. Somehow, no matter what it took, she would inherit the bookshop, and that would be her comfort and her future.

And just as she wandered through the dark shelves, her fingers coming to her lips to recall the passion of the kiss, a hand shot out of the dark and seized her arm. She let out a scream, and another hand clamped over her mouth.

The tips of fingers biting into her flesh cut like talons

through her frock.

“Where have you been, my girl?” her father’s voice growled next to her ear, and the stale note of brandy filled the air.

She grimaced at the horrific scent.

Why! Why was her life plunging into misery after such bliss?

Just as she had told the duke, her life was crashing from the top of the wheel to the bottom in but a few hours. It did not seem fair—though the protestation of fairness was the argument of a small child.

There was little fairness in this world.

Just a few minutes ago, she had felt as if her soul was soaring, but now she was plummeting back to earth into the mud and mire with the man who was determined to ruin her.

Garrett had feared *he* might ruin her? She wanted to laugh. Her father was trying with every moment to make her life hell. She’d gladly accept the duke’s sort of ruin over this.

Her father’s hand slipped away from her mouth as he waited for a reply.

“I have been out,” she hissed, refusing to show him fear.

“Out where?” he demanded, weaving slightly. “Are you making a whore of yourself somewhere? Are you on the game, my girl?”

“No,” she said, recoiling at the accusation. “Only someone of your low thinking would say such a thing. I was with the duke, if you must know.”

Her father blinked, his hand relaxing on her arm.

“The Duke of Montrose?” he challenged.

“Indeed,” she returned, squaring her shoulders. “I am bringing him more books. It seems that he likes other types of books than the ones you have sent.”

He weaved ever so slightly, then cleared his throat.

“You bring him different books?” He stared at her for a long

moment and then began to laugh, a dark sound. “No, I do not think you just bring him books.”

“I do,” she snapped. “I brought him *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*. I bring him—”

“I understand,” he said firmly with a shake. “I believe you do bring him those books, but there’s something more. You are different than usual. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“Do you notice anything?” she gritted out. “In your cups so often?”

His hand rose as if he was about to strike her, and then he realized his own gesture and winced at it. “Yes, I do notice things, even in my cups,” he said. “Though I am racked by grief. Do you intend to make me grieve further with such shameful behavior?”

“Papa, you have chosen pain and sorrow,” she said, her heart aching. “I will not do the same. This bookstore used to bring us such joy. My visits with the duke bring me joy—”

“What sort of joy does he bring?” her father cut in.

“The kind of mutual admiration of two minds meeting to discuss—”

“Your two minds could not meet even if you vaulted toward the heavens,” he sneered. “The duke is so far above you, you can barely see him.”

She wanted to counter that his words were not true, for she had been in his arms this very night, and they had felt, if not equal, akin.

“Don’t you worry,” he said. “I shall take care of all of this.”

“What do you mean by take care of it?” she demanded, a flicker of fear racing through her.

“I can see that you are about to get yourself into difficulty, and if you wish to be with the duke, I won’t say anything about it, but I will make certain that you are secure.”

She wanted to ask what he could possibly mean by that, but she did not dare. Surely it was just the ramblings of a drunken

man in the middle of the night.

“Go to bed, Papa,” she said softly.

“Do you dare to tell *me* to go to bed?” he queried. “No, you are no longer the superior miss of the bookstore,” he said, glowering. “So high above me. I can see you’re on the edge of sin, and I will tell you this: it is you who should go to bed. It is you who should think what you are doing. Now, I shall make certain that the bookshop is safe.” He swallowed, but his shoulders sagged. “And I shall make certain that you are safe, too. Now go.”

She did not wish to argue with him, not when he was in such a mood. And so she turned on her heel and all but ran for her room above the shop.

What did he mean?

Surely nothing.

In the morning he’d have forgotten the whole conversation. He would go back to drinking all day. He would take no interest in the bookshop, and he would let her go on as she had...but she was not so certain now.

Something unpleasant shivered down her spine, a warning that suggested that she should be very careful from here on out. The duke was an honorable man, and she was not on the edge of sin—not the way her father seemed to think of it. No. She was on the edge of heaven, and there was no going back from that.

Chapter Thirteen

Some people might think boxing at seven in the morning utterly mad. He thought it just the thing.

Essex and he circled each other in his private arena at the back of his house. It was a vast establishment; therefore, achieving such a setup was quite easy.

He'd had several fellows over from Gentleman Jackson five years ago to ensure the proper creation of the room.

Every provision had been taken to allow for exercise indoors when the weather was positively grim, or in the middle of the night, if he so desired.

He could walk through every type of season, but occasionally even he could not quite manage the weather and sometimes the night was too damned long.

This morning, he needed this. Dare he say, he *required* it before he met Elizabeth again. Because the truth was, he had to be in perfect control of his emotions and his body.

She awoke things in him that he had not even known he was capable of feeling.

Oh, when he was young, he'd had his passions.

This was different.

He wanted to be fully present for her and did not want to have to battle the desire coursing through him. As Essex circled him, fist raised, he was ready.

He, too, circled.

They both danced on the balls of their feet, exceptional boxers, having trained for years. Garrett's father had believed that a gentleman should be able to defend himself, even if he was a duke.

And so at the tender age of eight years old, Garrett had been put into the tutelage of a county boxing champion. The man's idea of teaching had been to throw one in rather than to explain anything.

He could still remember the first time a blow had clanged his head and shaken his brain in his skull. He'd been certain he was going to die. He had not. And though it had taken him several moments to be able to understand what the man from Yorkshire was yelling in his ear, he had learned to dodge and dance.

His brains had depended on it. But much bruised flesh had occurred first.

As a result, he bobbed and weaved with the best of them. An eight-year-old had to be fast to escape a big man from Yorkshire in a small space.

And Essex, being a war hero who understood real fighting, was quite adept at being sly and sneaky on the job.

As if thought could manifest itself into existence, Essex swung round and indeed jabbed forward. His brutal fist connected with Garrett's kidney. He let out a grunt of a sound, nearly fell to one knee, twirled around, and delivered an uppercut to Essex's middle.

Essex's eyes bulged as the blow hit his stomach. They both danced away from each other and recovered quickly.

Essex drawled, feigning ease, "Something's changed."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true," Essex pointed out before giving a devilish grin. "It's her, isn't it?"

"It is indeed her," he agreed, not seeing the point in pretending otherwise. His friend was too damn astute. "Perhaps you can put me out of my misery. I don't understand what's happening to me."

"You're falling in love with her," Essex said rather brightly for a man who'd just had a good round of fisticuffs.

"I am not. She's a shopgirl."

Essex asked, "Can't dukes fall in love with shopgirls?"

"They're not supposed to," he pointed out.

"People aren't supposed to do a great many things," Essex

said. "That doesn't stop them."

Garrett swallowed as they circled around each other, dancing back and forth as the very idea spun through his mind. "Yes, but I don't wish to marry."

"And?" Essex asked, as if this were easy. "You don't have to marry the girl if you don't wish to enjoy her company. It's not exactly as if she's the daughter of the Earl of Sandwich."

He glared at his friend, fairly certain the man was trying to get a rise out of him.

"What you are proposing is absolutely ungentlemanly," he gritted out.

"I am not," Essex said as he drove a right hook toward Garrett's jaw. Garrett spun out of reach just in time.

"So what exactly are you proposing?" Garrett demanded.

"Ask her to be your mistress. Set her up in a house, make a contract, take care of her for the rest of her life. Nothing is stopping you."

Though it felt foul, he considered. It could work. Many gentlemen did such a thing, and he would be able to make certain that nothing harmed her ever again. And she'd have no worries. He could take care of her.

"I don't like the idea of her being a mistress," he began. "Society will—"

"Society be damned," Essex cut in. "They will think what they want. No matter what you do, Society will have something to say about you and a shopgirl."

This was the truth.

He knew it. And as if to deliver the point of it, Essex managed to slam his fist into his mouth. Garrett's head clapped back. His teeth grated, and his head rang with the intensity of it.

"Bloody hell, man," he muttered. "Are you trying to put me out of my misery so that I don't have to deal with the ramifications of a shopgirl?"

“No, I think she’s marvelous for you,” Essex said with renewed good humor. “You seem to have had more sense than I’ve ever known you to possess.”

“Just don’t knock me dead before I can get Dr. Mortimer.”

Essex nodded, and they both lowered their fists.

It was enough. The two would only ever find a draw in all events.

They headed over to the wooden bench, both picking up linen towels to dry the perspiration from their vigorous exertion.

“I could never do that, old man,” Essex assured. “Mortimer must be brought down. I believe that the documentation you provided will be more than enough.”

“I don’t know,” Garrett ground out. “He’s a wily old bastard. I’m not looking forward to seeing him.”

“Then don’t come into the courts,” Essex said simply.

“I have to go into the gallery, at the very least.” He fisted his hands around the towel, twisting until it bit into his skin. “I need to see it done. Besides, I want the judge to see that I’m there.”

Essex let out a grim laugh. “Going to make sure that justice is done?”

He gave a tight nod. “I’m not entirely convinced that someone won’t pay the judge off.”

Essex tossed the linen over his shoulder. “It is rather a sad state of affairs that such a thing is necessary, but you’re wise. Your pressure is likely needed.”

“So, I must venture to the courts,” Garrett rasped, willing himself to calm at the idea of being surrounded by so many people.

As if sensing his growing apprehension, Essex swiftly returned the subject to their earlier discourse. “What exactly do you do with this young woman, if not make love with her, as you so clearly wish to do?”

“We discuss books,” he said honestly.

Essex blinked, then let out a low whistle of amazement. “I’ve never known you to be so friendly with anyone.”

“I’ve never known it, either,” he agreed. He hesitated, his voice nearly catching in his throat as he confessed, “But she brings me happiness.”

“Then you must marry her,” Essex said quietly.

“Marry her?” he repeated. Hadn’t his friend just said... He realized that Essex had been jesting before but now was in deadly earnest.

What if he *did* ask Elizabeth to marry him? What if he asked her to be the Duchess of Montrose? Society would hate it... Or given their occasional love of shocking amusement, they would love it.

It was almost impossible to tell what the ton would like. It would be incredibly difficult for her as a duchess. She knew nothing of Society. She did not know the ton.

He could simply take her to the country, and they’d be happy there...

Bloody hell, that would never work.

She’d hate it, wouldn’t she? She loved her bookshop. She would never forgive him for taking her away. Surely there was something that could be done.

“Now,” Essex began, stroking through his spinning thoughts. “What are you doing with the rest of your day? I know that you have a great deal to arrange before the case.”

“I am taking the day off.”

Essex’s jaw all but dropped. “I beg your pardon? Who are you, and what have you done with my friend?”

The duke smiled at that. “I am taking the day off because I am taking said young lady to the country.”

“The country? Good god, man, what has she done to you? You only leave your house for walks, not outings.”

“I know, but she never gets to go, and the first day we met, she wore a crocus pin.” He licked his lips. “And I thought she might enjoy a trip out of the city, away from the grim, muddy streets.”

Essex shook his head, then clapped his hand on Garrett’s shoulder. “You are in love with her, old man.”

“Stop it,” Garrett protested.

“Why?” Essex asked with a wink. “It’s the truth.”

He sucked in a shuddering breath.

Could one fall in love so quickly? He was so entirely unfamiliar with love. He’d only known it with his mother.

It had only been a short time.

But then he realized that perhaps love *could* happen so quickly. It was a power that was unquantifiable. It could not truly be described, contained, or dictated.

Besides, did time secure anything? He thought of all the people that he knew or had read of... Time had not seemed to do anyone any favors. If anything, time seemed to ruin things, if one was not vigilant.

Was Essex correct?

The idea rattled through him, and he realized that he certainly felt something akin to love for her because he wanted to make certain that no person ever harmed her, that she obtained whatever she longed for, and that her dreams were fulfilled.

He wanted her to be dressed in beautiful, warm clothes.

He wished her to have books at her fingertips, as many as she could ever want without ever having to surrender another book to an unworthy customer again.

He wanted to read with her every day for the rest of his life, until the words blurred upon the page due to old age. He wanted to hear her thoughts on every subject because she brought such a new perspective to his world.

He had not realized how alone he was.

He'd thought he liked it so well, and she was lonely, too. They both thrived off their meetings.

"Where have you gone? You're woolgathering," Essex said. His lips quirked in a knowing smile. "Or are you with her in your head?"

"Well, if you must know," Garrett said slowly. "I was thinking how nice it is to not be lonely all the time."

"Good God, man," Essex said. "That's one of the saddest things I've ever heard. And yet...it's beautiful, too. I'm glad she—"

"Cease. My life has always been sad, and you know it."

"I've long lamented the fact that you've known so much sadness," Essex said.

He stared at his friend, who had been beside him for years, who had written Garrett every day. Even when Essex had been fighting on the continent, he'd written. Garrett was overcome with emotion as he recalled all the long, sorrowful years. "It was given to me."

"I know," Essex acknowledged. "Your mother's death was a horrible thing. What was done to her was truly terrible."

Society had no clue what had happened to his mother. The story his father had chosen was that she'd simply been unwell and had been taken for a rest cure abroad. She'd never returned.

No one knew Dr. Mortimer had signed the certificate stating she was mad.

Lies. All lies. He knew that now.

But as a boy, with his father insisting his mother had gone mad, he'd struggled to understand why anyone might think so.

She'd been so kind to him. He'd known such love in her gentle embrace, under her patient tutelage.

It was true she'd cried often. She'd argued with his father every day. She'd tried to make his father see that a different sort of education for her son was best, not the brutal poundings

that he received or the cold repetitions of Latin and Greek from the male tutors his father had chosen.

He still sometimes wondered how he'd survived the loss of her.

It was a veritable miracle that he had chosen to be a warrior for justice rather than become a cold brute of a man like his father.

He could only think it was because his mother had spent so much time with him when he was small and had laid the foundations of his life. Garrett had never abandoned her or her ideas. He was deeply grateful for them, though he knew his life would've been far, far easier if he had been more like his father.

He never would've felt the wounds and the pain of seeing a world so unjust, nor felt so trapped by the fact that he could do so little, even with so much power.

"Go," Essex said. "You are losing yourself to your thoughts. Now I can see it. Go get ready. Let her make you happy, and make her happy in return. Do not wait. You must ask her to marry you." Essex drew a long breath, then said in all seriousness, "It is the best idea."

He wanted to believe that all could work out, but life had taught him very differently. He read for amusement, and he enjoyed the happiness of the stories she'd brought him. But he was no fool. Life did not bring happy endings.

"I don't think that she wishes to marry anyone," Garrett stated. "All she cares about is the bookshop."

"She'll be a duchess," Essex countered. "She can do whatever she wants."

A dry laugh rolled past Garrett's lips. "If you think that duchesses can do whatever they want..."

Essex looked aghast. "Forgive me. I did not mean to cause offense."

"You didn't, my friend. You never could."

And with that, he drew in a long breath and headed to the

hall to get ready. The ultimate truth was... Dukes did not marry shopgirls. And it wasn't just for the duke... Because no matter what the fairy tales might say, the shopgirl would almost certainly be miserable in a duke's cold, formal palace.

Chapter Fourteen

Much to Garrett's dismay, Mr. Sharpe stood outside the bookshop, pacing, his hair wilder than it should have been, given the stillness of the air.

What the bloody hell was the man doing?

Mr. Sharpe had driven his hands into his waistcoat pockets, his chin was jugged forward, and his chest was puffed out like a cat with the cream.

And yet the man's coloring was positively yellow. It was a concerning sight to behold.

He looked little like the man who Garrett had met with not even a month ago.

Garrett shoved the door open and jumped down from the coach, not bothering to await his dutiful footman. Given the man's odd behavior, he wanted this handled quickly.

Obviously, Mr. Sharpe wanted to speak with him, but Garrett wasn't about to cause a scene, even if it was a small alleyway off Fleet Street.

Without even a greeting, save a slight inclination of his head, Garrett strode into the shop.

He'd be damned before he caused any sort of difficulty for Elizabeth, and he knew that a scene would definitely cause difficulty.

But as the bell rang overhead and he found himself ensconced in the shop, his breath was taken away. Again. Despite the man breathing down his neck.

Truly, she had done her best to make a haven.

It was evident in every nook and corner, in every perfectly lined bookshelf, and in the beautiful volumes on those shelves, that this was *her* domain, and he found himself in awe of her ability, especially living under the edicts of the fellow behind him, attempting to breathe down his neck.

He glanced back over his shoulder at last, feeling that he had

to give the man attention. “Sharpe,” he said.

“Your Grace,” Mr. Sharpe said, hurrying around him. His hands trembled slightly, at odds with the bold tone of his voice. Clearly, he was nervous and in need of a drink.

Mr. Sharpe declared, “I greatly appreciate your visit this day, though our shop is closed.”

Garrett arched a brow, hoping they would not have to dance about too much. “I’m not really here to visit the shop, am I?”

Mr. Sharpe narrowed his eyes. “No, you are here to take out my daughter.”

“Indeed. I have something that I want to show her.”

Much to his horror, Mr. Sharpe’s eyes gleamed. “We’ve much enjoyed the special attention that you have paid to Sharpe and Son recently. It’s pleasing. Very pleasing, very pleasing indeed.”

And Garrett had a sneaking suspicion that something had occurred that made Mr. Sharpe see his daughter with less than honorable eyes.

And so he said firmly, “Yes, you’ve raised an incredible assistant, Mr. Sharpe. I do hope that she will do a splendid job with the shop, once it is hers.”

“Hers?” Mr. Sharpe said flatly, confused. And then he *laughed*. “Well, I suppose a girl can always dream.”

Was that all it was to be for her—a dream?

He swallowed an acidic taste at the way her father so easily mocked her hopes.

Did Sharpe have no intention of giving her the shop?

It seemed as if the man did not entertain such a thought, and yet he liked the fact that Garrett was paying attention to her.

His stomach coiled. Dear God, the man thought he’d be able to get something out of his interest in his daughter.

For a moment, he’d been half expecting the man to curse at him, to tell him to leave, to take his patronage and go

elsewhere, to never take advantage of his daughter again.

But that was not the sort of man that Mr. Sharpe was. Perhaps a decade ago, he might have been.

Garrett could still recall Mr. Sharpe visiting his father. He'd been a firm young fellow then, with a delightful turn of phrase and a strong mind. But all the joy that he remembered about that man was gone now, replaced by a shadow—a shadow stained with brandy.

“I give you permission to take my daughter out today and to enjoy yourself with her.”

Garrett's stomach turned sour. Was the man truly giving him permission to deflower his daughter? That sounded like what he was saying, but phrases could be so easily twisted. Perhaps the man genuinely hoped they'd enjoy the outing.

“Your daughter gets little time off,” he drawled. “I thought she might enjoy a trip into the fresh air. She has given me a great deal of comfort by providing books that you never thought to suggest.”

“You have such a serious turn of mind, Your Grace. I only strove to please you.”

He drew in a breath before he said evenly, “Yes, but it does seem a serious turn of mind needs joy every now and then, and the books she chose...”

“Yes, very frivolous, silly stuff by ladies.” He huffed. “I don't take any stock in it.”

“Well, you should,” the duke said, wondering how the blazes Elizabeth survived conversations with her father. Had drink stolen all the man's joy? Or had it been the loss of his wife and the hope of an heir? He tried to recall that grief had created much of this. But that still gave Sharpe no right to be cruel to Elizabeth.

And so, Garrett stated boldly, “Those books are some of the best I have ever read, far superior than much of that drivel from the last century, written by men who seem to get a great deal of entertainment out of the pain of others.”

Mr. Sharpe blinked, unwilling to argue with his patron. “I see.”

“Now, I do have a request for a book,” he said.

“Delighted to oblige, Your Grace,” Mr. Sharpe replied swiftly, realizing he had misread the duke’s willingness to berate lady authors.

“Do you have any books on botany?” Garrett inquired.

“Botany?” Mr. Sharpe echoed. “Why, of course; we have a whole section.”

“I require a book on the flowers of Southern England.”

Mr. Sharpe stared at him, quite stunned.

He did not know what Mr. Sharpe had thought they would discuss, but he certainly wasn’t about to discuss the upkeep of his daughter.

And he wondered if that was exactly what Mr. Sharpe had thought he was coming for: to propose the protection of his daughter. A contract, perhaps—an amount to keep Mr. Sharpe in his cups and the shop going while Garrett had his daughter for entertainment.

A bitter note filled his mouth.

Was this the sort of conditions she lived under?

Anger crackled through him.

Damnation, he wanted to rail that someone like her should not be so imprisoned, and yet somehow, she had thrived in this place and had kept the bookstore afloat.

It was a testament to her and to her skill.

And just as he thought of her skills and courage, she bounded down the stairs in a simple gray cloak that was too short.

It wasn’t even wool.

It made him want to tear her father to bits.

Surely, she had something warmer than that to go out into the cold air? But clearly, she did not, and he was rather glad

that he'd had the foresight to bring something in his coach. He'd seen the state of her wardrobe. And yet, he'd never seen her outerwear.

After all, when people visited him, they left their accoutrement with his butler. He fought a scowl. She was underprepared for an outing in the cold, and he wanted to shake her father even more, because it meant that she took to London streets like this in the dead of winter.

And it wasn't as if they were paupers.

Or at least he did not think they were.

"Let us go," she urged.

"Your father is collecting something for me, and then we shall leave immediately."

She smiled but there was a tightness to her face. He wondered then if she and her father had argued or if something had happened just before he arrived. She certainly looked as if she wished to make flight.

And then her father bundled out from the shelves, his face dark with frustration. "Where did you put the books on botany?" he barked.

"You do not know?" Garrett asked flatly.

Mr. Sharpe snorted with annoyance. "She keeps moving things about. It was perfectly fine the way it was when I had arranged everything."

Miss Sharpe's lips pressed into a firm line, as if she was resisting the urge to contradict her father. She folded her gloved hands before her, and Garrett spotted the slight squeeze that no doubt kept her argument in check.

"Would you be so kind, Miss Sharpe?" he asked. "I asked your father for a book on the flowers of Southern England."

She gave a nod and headed in the direction opposite to where her father had gone. She slipped into the bookshelves as if they were made for her, and within a moment, she had a slim volume in her hand.

“*The Flowers of the Southern Counties* by one Margaret Howell,” she said brightly, holding the blue leather book like the jewel it was. “*With* watercolors.”

“Perfect,” he exclaimed. “Now, shall we?”

“Is that all?” her father asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Good day to you, Mr. Sharpe.” And with that, he offered his hand, waiting for her to take it.

Without hesitation, she rested her plain glove atop his perfectly stitched leather one and he whisked her out into the air.

It was not fresh, nor was it particularly brisk, but it was far better than the close quarters of the bookshop with that man.

How did she nourish her spirit with his malignancy about? His heart growled that it was not just. Not right. But he knew that the world was full of such things.

But that did not mean he had to stand idly by.

As he guided her up into the coach himself, he could feel something coming from her, an emotion that was most unpleasant: shame.

He pulled himself up into the coach behind her, and the footman slammed the door with a solid thud.

They rested across from each other on the soft water-blue silk squabs.

She said nothing. Her gaze was fixed on the window, her hands again folded before her as they rumbled down the road heading out to the western parts of London.

It would take them two hours at least to get out of the city and near their destination in his coach. Would they spend it in silence with her sorrow coating her as her cloak could not?

His soul ached for her, but she would not wish to hear that. She did not wish pity. He knew her too well. No doubt, she’d snap at him. But there were other ways to lift her spirits.

She’d taught him that.

“Hand me the book, then,” he said.

She blinked. “Oh, of course,” she replied, and she gave him the small volume.

“You picked a book by a lady,” he mused, tracing his fingertip over the beautifully engraved title.

Her mouth tightened as if she was still recovering from her father’s unkindness. “Yes. Is that wrong?”

“Of course not,” he assured, “but I think your father wouldn’t have done so.”

She narrowed her gaze. “My father doesn’t believe in keeping books by ladies,” she bit out. “It’s a miracle he was willing to keep anything by Mary Wollstonecraft.”

He scowled. “It would be a shame if he did not stock her books. The list of necessary reading written by ladies is vast. It is a great disservice to your clientele not to carry them.”

Elizabeth drew in an exhausted breath. “Perhaps you can convince him as his patron. For I cannot. And I picked this one because I often think that ladies do the best with treatises on botany. You see, so many are excellent at watercolor. After all, ladies are expected to learn to paint and draw.”

He turned the pages reverently. “The detailed work on these is beautiful. Have you seen any of these in bloom?” he asked, showing her a page of crocuses and then bluebells.

Her brows rose, and she pealed with mirth. “Your Grace, I live in London. Of course I have not.”

He let out a sigh. “What a sorrow that is, then.”

“London is a magnificent city, sir, with jewels of a different kind.”

“It is true,” he agreed. “But flowers have their place, too.”

She shrugged as if there was no point feeling the sorrow of her loss. “I have heard that ladies like cut flowers in vases, and that there are orangeries all over the city where people of means can go and see flowers, even in winter. But the truth of it is, I do not have access to such things, so I do not lament it.

It is not good to wish for what one cannot have.”

He thought of the bookshop.

She did not wish for it. She acted as if it was hers, but he had a strong feeling that her father had other ideas, and he was going to have to do something about that—something very strong indeed.

“Well,” he said, “perhaps wishes can become reality.”

“Not in this life,” she said quickly. “Not as far as I can see. But I will say, you are a surprise. You are nothing like I imagined you would be, and you have been a wonder in my life.”

He almost felt like she was saying goodbye to him. It was a strange thought. Surely, he was mistaken. Because he would not let her go. Not into a world filled with so much danger and men like her father who did not see her worth.

After all, she needed him... No. She did not need him, Garrett, the man. She needed the Duke of Montrose, and he could not let himself forget that *that* was what she needed, had always needed, and always would.

Chapter Fifteen

Elizabeth had lived in London all her life.

She'd never left it. She'd never had cause to. Most Londoners never did. After all, her entire life was in the small area around the Thames: Fleet Street, Piccadilly, Bond Street, Oxford Street, and St. Paul's. Occasionally she ventured past Trafalgar Square out toward Westminster.

Sometimes she would go south of the river to the entertainments there, but such a thing was infrequent. On rare occasions, if she had a little extra money, she'd go to the theater at Covent Garden.

Most Londoners never ventured out of their areas. And Londoners loved London.

Traveling through books had always made her content.

As they left the city, she sat on the edge of the cushioned bench. She could see the gray smoke falling behind them as she peered out of the polished window. The sky opened up, and the promising breeze of March's impending wind was coming up from the south.

Slowly, the weather was changing, and she found herself relaxing.

Again, there was a coal burner placed at her feet. The small black item gave off heat, beating back the chill she so often had to ignore.

It was a luxury she'd never experienced until him.

His thoughtfulness was greatly regarded by her. She'd not known anyone to think of her so kindly, except perhaps her friend Lily, or maybe when she was small... Her mother and father had been kind then.

Things had been very different.

But even then, she had not known luxury. The duke was nothing but luxury. He was accustomed to such things. It was no question for him. And when the coach rolled to a stop

before fields and sprawling forests, she gasped.

She was positively gobsmacked.

There was no other word for it.

In all her life, she had only read of forests. She had only read of gardens. She had seen pleasure gardens, it was true, but nothing like this vast array of nature.

She did not know what to make of it. The duke opened the coach door and bounded down, his dark cloak billowing behind him.

He turned and extended his hand to her. Heart beating apace, she slipped her fingers into his and went with him.

The cold air enveloped her, and despite her attempts to resist, she shivered.

“Wait,” he called, and he reached into the box near his coachman’s feet. He snapped out a cloak. It was a beautiful green wool.

Gently, he draped it over her shoulders, and she sucked in a breath at the soft feel of it. She’d thought wool was always scratchy, but this was gentle, like a caress on her skin. She gazed up at him and blinked back tears.

She felt both overwhelmed and grateful for his thoughtfulness and how easily he took care of her.

Though she knew she was capable...having someone concerned for her was deeply touching.

And the feel of his strong hands tying the silk ribbons of her cloak was heaven. As was his scent, teasing her senses.

She bit the inside of her cheek to stop a shiver of a different kind. One of desire.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

His austere face lightened as he glanced over her form. “It looks wonderful on you with your coloring,” he said. “You should wear green all of the time.”

“That’s what people always say of redheads,” she teased.

“I rarely say this, but in this case, *people* are right.” His dark gaze traced over the curls that had escaped her bonnet and tumbled over her shoulder, caressing the green wool. “You will look like a proper wood nymph today.”

And with that, he offered his arm.

She took it. “A nymph, am I?”

“Oh yes. A mischievous one,” he said.

“Now where the devil are you taking me? Is there some rare-book room in the forest?”

A deep rumble of a laugh tumbled past his lips. “No. There is not. Though I would happily take you to visit all the rare books in the country, this is something else.”

The idea of visiting all the rare books in the country was immensely appealing. And she had little doubts that he could. Who would tell the Duke of Montrose no?

And with that, he led her into the woods.

“Are we to walk in the forest for our outing?” she asked, confused.

“Do you not like it?”

“Oh, I do,” she rushed to affirm.

And the truth was, she did like it. She’d never experienced anything like it in her whole life. Being with him was a constant series of firsts. She looked around at the trees of oak and ash. She’d read of them.

Hawthorn, yew.

“My goodness,” she whispered as she tried to take it in. “I can barely make sense of it. I’ve only seen forests in books.”

He gaped down at her. “It is astonishing to me that so many people never have the opportunity to see the wild. And this is not even the wild. Wait until I take you north,” he said. “I shall take you to Yorkshire. I shall take you to Cornwall, Scotland.”

“What?” she queried, her breath hitching in her throat.

“I’d like to take you to all those places. I’d like to hear your

thoughts about them.”

“I can’t leave London,” she said abruptly.

“Well, we won’t worry about that until it is time,” he said. “Besides, we can always discuss the places I mentioned in books, if you cannot leave the city.”

She felt a riot of emotions. He wanted to take her places? Why? They were simply having their little book club, their exchange of ideas.

But his suggestion seemed to imply that he had more in mind. And much like Lily had said, she dared to wonder what it would be like to have the world open to her.

She’d never realized that doors had been closed because she’d never known they were there. But with the duke, there were dozens of doors. Doors in every direction. He held the key to all of them.

Did she dare take them? Did she dare go with him? She’d been married to the bookshop her whole life. She couldn’t imagine leaving it now. It was half her soul, wasn’t it?

He led her through the forest, over the loamy earth, pointing out the different bare trees.

And she noted with astonishment that there were the slightest green buds on them. “They’re going to blossom!” she exclaimed.

“Not quite yet,” he said. “But those are the promise of leaves.” He frowned. “You’ve never seen that in London?”

“No,” she said honestly, marveling at the tiny green dots beginning to emerge on the brown branches. “I haven’t.”

The truth was, London had few trees. There were none in her part, though there were many trees to the west of Fleet Street, which she’d seen while visiting the duke’s house.

The city itself was barren of any greenery at all. It was a vast wasteland of such things. No nature existed in London except the great river. Only those with means were exposed to the beauty of nature.

Here, the forest felt like a revelation.

“Did you bring that book?” he asked.

She nodded and pulled it out of her pocket.

“Look,” he said.

And he gestured toward the forest floor.

Sprawled before them were little flowers of white and purple hue, their throats orange. She froze.

“It can’t be,” she whispered.

She snapped the book open and looked at the watercolor picture. “It is,” she breathed.

It was the flower that had inspired the painting in the book!

They were real, right here before her. She’d only ever seen pictures of them...and on her mother’s pin.

And here was the real thing.

She knelt down on the floor and touched them with her finger. The flower was so delicate, so soft, so silken. Tears stung her eyes.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his voice rough. “You are moved.”

“Yes,” she said, blinking back tears of awe. “So many of the things that I have read about, I’ve never seen. I’ll likely never see most of them. But it has been enough to simply know that they exist somewhere out in the world. I have a great imagination,” she continued, “and I rely upon that. But, my goodness...they’re more beautiful than any jewel could ever be. And I must confess, my mother loved these. She would look at the pictures every late winter and wear her pin, which promised spring... I am very glad to see these. Thank you.”

He smiled down at her. “That is all I can hope for, and I’m honored to be a part of that.”

Again, she touched the flowers gently, marveling at the way they had burrowed up from the dark earth in the winter, made their green shoots, and then bloomed.

Oh, if only she could be as strong as these flowers. What

would she dare? But she would have to trust that there was something beyond the darkness. After all, that is what they did. They had trusted that the sky and the sun and fresh air awaited them.

What if she took the keys and opened the doors the duke suggested? Could she trust that there would be sky and air and sun on the other side?

She did not know. She was afraid. She was so accustomed to the life she had that she could not imagine anything else. But she *could* imagine being in his arms.

Oh, how she could imagine that. She wanted it more than anything. But to venture out of the bookshop, to go to all the places he suggested? She wondered if he meant it. Or had he been teasing? Making light?

“You really want to show me the world?” she asked. Surely, all of this was a dream. And soon she would awaken. She couldn’t trust this. She’d relied on herself so long and gone without anyone to admire her or see her...

It couldn’t last. Nothing good ever did.

The duke was silent as he knelt beside her, his own hands reverent as he touched the earth. “I want us to discover the world together, because the truth is, I don’t go anywhere, either. Books have been enough. My rooms have been enough. But with you, I find that I want to see things, to experience them. To want more than just *enough*. You and your books have made me hope for more.”

She blinked back tears at that. “No one has ever suggested such a thing before. I’ve always felt like a burden.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw before he offered gently, “Because you’re not a son.”

She nodded.

“I’m very grateful you are not a son,” he replied, his voice deep as his eyes lit with desire.

Slowly, he stood, his limbs unfurling to their great height before he offered her a hand and helped her up. “Come,” he

said. "Let us wander."

And they did.

Going deeper into the beautiful wood, she gazed up at the ancient twisting branches. "Will you bring me back here?" she asked, her soul all but soaring amidst the ancient forest.

She wanted to see it. In all its glory. And she was daring, daring beyond all belief to suggest, as he had, that perhaps they had a future... As friends... As... As what? She did not know.

"It would give me the greatest pleasure," he said. And with that, they strolled happily through the forest without another word. There was no need to speak.

He guided her gently, with an arm at her waist, until at last he stopped beneath the branches of a great oak tree, its fingers stretching toward the earth, bowed over from centuries of growth.

He tilted her chin with his gloved hand and looked down at her and said, "You are as beautiful as this forest. You could never be a burden. You are a gift. You're the greatest gift I've ever known."

And with that, he bent down and took her mouth with his.

Though she knew that dreams were just dreams, and reality would no doubt soon come, she was determined to savor this for as long as it lasted.

Chapter Sixteen

Here in the forest, she gave way to passion with him. The way he had brought her here, to this place, to see the crocuses, touched her and awoke a powerful feeling so deep within her, she could scarce name it.

He must have taken note of her pin, the pin that she had worn to remember her mother. Something she always put on to get her through the dark months of winter.

Yes, he'd noted it and had wanted to give her this gift.

As his kiss transported her, his kindness, his actions, his desire to lift her spirits stole all her worries away for one moment.

She was so lucky to have found such a man.

How could Society see him as so difficult? But she saw beneath all of that. He was kind, and gentle, and good. And all he wanted was someone to make him laugh and smile, to offer him hope in a world full of shadow.

And here, he was offering *her* hope.

Beneath the branches of the great oak, he swirled his cloak about her, holding her tight, keeping her warm as his kiss teased her desire to life.

"I want you, Elizabeth," he murmured against the nape of her neck.

"And I, you," she returned, her body taut at the feel of his breath whispering over her.

"I do not want to hurt you," he rasped.

"You will not hurt me," she assured, gazing up at the intertwined branches and up farther to the crystal sky. "I am made of stronger stuff than that, and I refuse to live my life afraid."

"I will not take you here in the forest, in the cold," he said.

She took his strong face in her hands and met his gaze. "I have no desire to be *taken*. I wish to be quite the participant."

His lips parted, and a soft growl of desire passed his lips. “In London, then. Surrounded by books.”

She nodded, the idea filling her with delight.

He frowned as he gazed at the canopy of the forest. In but a few moments, the sky had transformed to a steely grey as the sun slipped below the horizon. “Now, we must go. It is quite a long drive back.”

“It is shocking to think that one has to travel so far to get to a beautiful bit of country,” she lamented.

“One day,” he ventured, “perhaps people will be able to see trees and flowers in London with little effort at all.”

“You could make it so,” she pointed out.

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Why not?” she enthused. “Why not bring the country into London? The wealthy have Hyde Park, and Kensington, and St. James’s. Perhaps there could be small parks in all parts of the city.”

His face warmed. His hard edges seemed to slip away at her suggestion. “And this is why I adore you.”

He adores me?

“The way you view the world is beautiful. That is an exceptional idea.” He drew in a rough breath as they began to walk toward the edge of the forest. “All my life, I’ve always fought against things.”

“But that is something to fight for.” She beamed. “I can see why you like it.”

He nodded. “Will you begin to research it for me?”

“In all my free time?” she teased. “But then again,” she pointed out, “it’s not as if you have swaths of free time, either.”

“Then let us work toward it together,” he offered. “It can be our project.”

Their project.

It denoted that they would be spending a great deal of time together in the future, and her heart thrilled at the idea.

Keeping his cloak about her, he led her over new crocus-lined paths back toward his coach. She was loath to leave this place behind, but the bookshop would need her again by morning. And it had been a remarkable thing to realize that hours had passed on their walk, and it would take at least another two hours to return to London.

It was a beautiful coach, his coach, but it still took time to travel but five miles and through the city.

As always, he offered his hand to her and helped her inside. Then, as if by magic, he produced a small basket and poured her a glass of wine from a small carafe.

He took his own, then offered her bread and cheese.

It was a feast for a king. And as the coach rumbled down the road, she wondered that anyone could live their life like this daily.

Suddenly, the coach jolted to the left. He let out a curse, and her wine splashed all over the seat. She gasped with horror.

“Think nothing of it,” he said. “It’ll be easy to take care of.”

“For someone in your house,” she said. “They will have to clean it.”

“Too true,” he said ruefully. “You make another good point.”

“I always do,” she said. “But what just happened?”

He groaned. “I have a sneaking suspicion. It is winter, and the roads are bad. I had hoped that perhaps they had thawed enough, but the mud.” He glanced out the window and pounded on the roof. His footman came up to the door and opened it carefully, allowing in a trace of the bitter cold air.

“It’s the wheel, Your Grace,” the footman said. “It has broken.”

“Bloody hell,” he ground out. “We feared this might happen. It could take some time to change it. We do not have a spare,

and we'll have to go to the nearest coaching inn or blacksmith. And then we are supposed to try to get back to London before it gets too dark."

She winced. "Is it safe to travel on the roads outside of London after sunset?"

"No." He sighed. "Perhaps we should—" He paused, then let out a low groan. "Shut the door, James."

The footman shut the door with a nod.

"Damnation," he said.

"What?" she prompted.

He thrust a hand through his hair. "You're going to have to stay with me at a coaching inn. Worse, you're going to think I arranged this on purpose."

"What? That you broke the wheel?" She laughed.

"Indeed. It is all too convenient, is it not?"

"It is not convenient at all," she protested. "It is sensible. The roads are bad. It is winter. You were optimistic, and you wanted to show me something beautiful, which you did." She swallowed, then dared, "Now show me something else beautiful."

"What?" he asked, his eyes widening with understanding.

"This?" She gestured to the coach around them. "It is an opportunity. I would never be able to stay in your London house overnight. Papa has grown quite strange. But this? This can be explained away easily. We can be together."

A rush of hope charged through her as she accepted what was going to happen, if he but agreed.

She loved it. It was so marvelous. For a moment, she was willing to believe that the universe was conspiring to bring them together.

And it struck her that she was indeed willing to dare a great deal.

He smiled slowly at her. "You're not angry?"

“No. Why should I be?”

He took her hand in his. “It’s a bit of a walk to the inn.”

“I walk the city all of the time. This shall be nothing.”

“As you say,” he said.

And with that, he pushed the door open and jumped down from the coach.

...

Garrett’s heart hammered against his ribs at the great risk they were taking. At the seizing of a moment’s happiness, of shared bliss.

He had not allowed himself such a thing with such a person in...bloody hell, he did not know. Perhaps never. After all, his heart had long ago learned not to soften to anything that might crush it.

The coaching inn was empty. Garrett wasn’t surprised. Not many people took to the roads this time of year. He had taken a great risk, but he’d truly thought that it wouldn’t be too difficult. After all, it had begun to warm.

And he’d also thought giving her this day had been worth it.

Yes, London roads and English roads were a horrendous sight that were often remarked upon, even by foreigners. Great grooves of mud filled every lane, and coaches simply were not meant to deal with them.

Sometimes, it was possible to navigate the roads, but often it was not.

And they had discovered that it still was not, despite his strange sense of optimism. It was tempting, then, to return to a certain sense of doom. But ever since she had charged into his life with her recommendations and books, he did not wish to choose gloom.

And if he chose the path of optimism? The broken wheel and the difficult roads were allowing him and Elizabeth to have time together.

Perhaps this was the point of it all. It was a whimsical thought; one he should not give any weight to. But here he was, and he wished to think that this was meant to be. In his heart of hearts, he believed it was. She was always meant to have been in his life, drawn to him. And he to her.

So when they crossed the courtyard of the inn and marched into the dark hall, he called out for the innkeeper. A fellow bumbled in, wiping his hands on an apron.

He blinked. "My lord."

He dared to smile at the jovial-looking fellow. "Your Grace, actually."

"Your Grace?" the innkeeper repeated, his voice high with shock. "Welcome, welcome. Has your coach broken down? I did not hear one in the courtyard."

"You've the right of it," Garrett informed him. "My coach wheel has broken. Do you have anyone who can go out and fix it?"

"Oh, aye," the innkeeper said brightly. "My stable lads can bring any of the parts you need, and the blacksmith is very handy."

He let out a sigh of relief, grateful to have found someone so helpful. "Thank you, mister...?"

The innkeeper grinned, pleased that a duke cared to know his name. "Mr. Marsh."

"Mr. Marsh, thank you, and I hope you assist me further. I shall need a room for the night. I do not think traveling back to London wise."

Mr. Marsh clucked. "Oh, not wise at all, Your Grace. You're right to stay. We've had a few toughs around lately, though most of the highwaymen are all gone. All the hangings put most of them off. Few dare to go out roving, but winter's a rough time, and every now and then people do take to the roads to steal a coin here or there. Staying is the safest, especially with a lady. And you're lucky that I do have a single room prepared at present, but it is just the one bed."

Garrett exchanged a look with Elizabeth, who simply beamed.

“Oh, that is perfectly fine,” she said. “After all, my husband and I are eager to spend more time together. We have only just wed.”

Garrett blinked. He’d better not say his title, but the man was no fool. He would likely recognize the ducal crest. Most people were aware of the great titles of the land, even if they did not recognize his face.

The innkeeper clapped his hands. “Solicitations, Your Grace. It is such a pleasure to have you here. Let me take you up to a room immediately so that you may get warm. Or would you like to go to the fire now, and I can get you a glass of punch?”

“Our room would be most welcome,” she replied, beaming.

“Very nice,” the innkeeper said.

And with that, Mr. Marsh headed up a narrow stairway.

The creaking wood was as old as the Tudors, no doubt. She followed him eagerly, as did he.

He rather liked the fact that she was a good storyteller and had a reasonable story to explain their presence together, and if he was honest...he liked the sound of her saying they were wed.

If he allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment, he could envision it... Elizabeth, Duchess of Montrose.

The innkeeper kept rattling on about possibilities for dinner. A good stew; he could kill a chicken, and he had a good wine in—almost certainly from the smugglers who brought it over from France, despite the war. But of course, Garrett would say nothing on that score.

Innkeepers had to do what they could to stay afloat.

And the next thing they knew, they were standing before a dark oak door. The innkeeper opened it, waved them in, beamed at them, and said, “I shall return soon with the repast. Enjoy the fire.”

And with that, the door was slammed shut, and they were left alone.

Entirely alone.

Chapter Seventeen

Standing before the crackling fire, she abandoned reason and gave way to passion.

All her life, she had lived by rules, by discipline—making certain that things her father had forgotten about were picked up and taken care of. But now, she wanted to give herself a dream of pleasure. This was her chance, something that she could hold on to when she was forced to go back to a quiet life of duty and dedication.

A life in which she was given little thanks or appreciation and books were her only joy.

Garret's arms stole around her, his broad palms splaying over her ribs. He tilted her head back as his gaze wandered over her face.

The intensity of his dark gaze sparked a hunger in her so fierce it almost frightened her. His eyes studied her as if he could memorize every line, every plane of her face. Her breath hitched as her skin tingled under his perusal.

She felt desired, perfect, beautiful in his gaze. His mouth lowered to hers, and the searing heat of it stole all remaining thought from her.

Hot desire coursed through her body. Tension evaporated from her limbs, and she melted into his hard, muscled frame. His arms tightened about her as he kissed her. His mouth teased again and again as his tongue slipped past the line of her lips. Easily, she parted for him, and his tongue slid into her mouth.

Their tongues tangled, and she could scarcely believe what she was doing. She'd never read about anything like this. Oh, she knew what could happen between a man and a woman. She'd read enough anatomy books, but none of them had discussed this.

Vibrant need now pulsed through her limbs. She ached, ached to know what would come next, and his kisses laced her body with a want so powerful she felt as if she was becoming

one with him.

He traced kisses along the line of her throat and paused at her cloak. He took the ribbon in his teeth and pulled the fabric from her shoulders. It pooled at her feet.

Without another word, he made short work of her gown and stays until she stood before him in naught but her simple chemise.

His hands fisted the fabric.

She gasped as his hands massaged her body through the chemise.

“I want to see you,” he said. “I want to see all of you.” She bit her lower lip as he tugged the chemise over her body, and then, naked in the firelight, she stood still as he stepped back.

He studied her with heady appreciation.

That hungry gaze of his dragged over her, slowly tracing up and down, traveling from her boots up her plain stockings, to the *V* of her legs.

His eyes heated, as if he wanted to devour every bit of her. That gaze, as palpable as his touch on her skin, then traveled up her stomach, paused on her breasts, and he let out a low moan.

Garrett pulled her to him, then bent his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth.

He teased it with his tongue until it was hard. Her head dropped back, and she grabbed hold of his shoulders, using him as a rock to keep her balanced.

Her legs wanted to buckle at the sheer pleasure of his mouth upon her body. He kissed between her breasts as his hands cupped the rounds of her bottom.

His mouth worked down to her ribs, and he fell to his knees, transfixed.

That wild tease of his lips continued farther down until he skimmed over her hip bones. She stared up at the ceiling, barely able to comprehend what he was doing. But then he

parted her thighs. A low hum of appreciation rumbled from his throat and sent a coil of need spiraling through her.

He urged her booted feet apart.

And then his mouth was upon her. Her hands drove into his hair. She held tightly, waves of shock and delight shivering through her.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Giving you pleasure,” he growled against her.

And he was.

Heavens, he did give her pleasure. His tongue, his mouth, teased over her, unrelenting, tossing her higher and higher until she felt his fingers slip through her wet folds.

His middle finger touched her entry, and she nearly collapsed then, but his other arm locked around her middle and her hips, keeping her upright as he awakened every part of her.

Patiently yet hungrily, he kissed her most sensitive spot. Her mouth dropped open, and she cried out as wave after wave of bliss pulsed through her entire being.

“Oh, Garrett,” she called out.

And with that, he slid her down to the floor in front of the fire, atop the woven rug. He whipped his clothes off quickly, and she was so overcome with her pleasure, she could barely take in his rapid movements.

But when at last she felt able to breathe again, she studied his chiseled muscles.

“You are perfect,” she said softly.

And she lifted her hands.

He took them and gently guided them to his velvet skin.

She skimmed her fingertips over his pectorals, down the valley of his chest, along the ridges, hard muscles, and sinew before she paused. She looked at his sex, astonished.

Is that for me?

It was hard and seemed eager for her. Her eyes widened. She

darted her gaze back to his face.

“I’ll be gentle,” he said.

She nodded. She did not want to go back. She did not want to feel fear, but for a moment she couldn’t help it. Gently, he parted her legs, and he kissed her slowly, patiently, powerfully. And then he parted her thighs, resting his hips between them.

He rocked and stroked the head of his sex up and down her slick core, until she was eager for him again.

She let out a cry of impatience, and at that urging, he thrust forward.

There was a sharp pressure and pain, but then it was gone. She stared at him, shocked. “Is that all?”

“It is just the beginning of pleasure,” he said, his muscles straining. “But are you all right?”

She nodded, biting her lower lip, and she wrapped her arms about him. He began to thrust slow and deep, careful that the rhythm he was building was full of promise and temptation.

She dropped her head back, astonished that the way he could stroke from within could make her feel so completely undone. His breath began to grow ragged as he rocked his hips against her core. The fullness of it nearly undid her, and then... Then his body struck that sensitive spot again, and she cried out. This time, the pleasure was so intense, she could almost not bear it.

Her body tightened about his, and she spiraled with release. Garrett called out her name, shuddering against her. He pulled her tightly to him then, as if he was a man who had been wandering for years, adrift, and had finally found his destination.

He eased her into his embrace as they lay before the fire, both of them out of breath with exertion.

“How did I not know something like that could exist?” she marveled.

“Most of us go through life without knowing something like that exists,” he replied, gently stroking her arm. “That was...”

He swallowed. “Singular.”

She blinked. “You’ve never felt it, either?”

“Not like that,” he confessed, his voice deep with feeling. “Not like that at all.”

He cupped her face, gazed down at her, and kissed her softly, slowly, and whispered, “You are a wonder, Elizabeth.”

And lying there in his arms, she felt more beautiful than she’d ever felt in her entire life.

...

“I won’t let you go. I won’t let you go.”

Garrett’s deep voice tore through the night, fraught with urgency and pain. His arms wrapped about her tightly. She gasped at the power of his embrace.

He was so strong.

In the dark night, in the strange bed with its posters draped in dark-green brocade, she blinked, trying to make sense of what was happening, of where she was... And then, it hit her.

She was with the duke in an inn in the countryside just out of London.

They had spent a revelatory night in each other’s arms, but now, before dawn had come, something was wrong.

He jolted on the bed. “I won’t let you go,” he proclaimed again.

He protested again and again, and the agitation in his voice was tangible. He was afraid.

His eyes were darting underneath their lids in the silvery moonlight.

His face was a taut mask.

She reached up and stroked his cheek. “Garrett,” she called urgently. “Garrett. Wake up.”

“No,” he cried out. “Don’t go. Don’t go.” He let out a sound of misery again, and then he shot upright, letting her go.

He panted. His chest charged up and down as he sucked in deep breaths of air.

“What?” he breathed. “What? Where?”

He looked around, realizing that he was in some strange place and clearly not where he expected to be. And then, his gaze locked on her.

His eyes were full of horror. “Oh, God. Elizabeth, are you all right? Have I hurt you?”

“No,” she rushed to say, her own blood pumping through her veins at her fear for him, at the pain his agony caused her. “You’ve not hurt me at all, but I worry for you. Are you unwell? What has happened?”

He swallowed as he gazed down at her. His eyes searched her face, and then dark memories seemed to wash over him.

“What was I saying?” he rasped.

She licked her lips. “You kept saying, ‘I will not let you go.’” She reached out and gently touched his arm. “Who were you speaking about?”

His gaze swung to the cold moon’s rays sliding in through the window, and for one moment, he looked like a completely broken man. It caused her own heart to spasm with pain. She wanted to take that from him. He was such a beautiful soul, and to see the agony of it bow his shoulders nearly undid her. “Unburden yourself,” she whispered. “Tell me.”

He did not look at her but whispered, “My mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes,” he said softly. “When I was eight years old, my father had her taken away.”

Those words hit her like blows. “Taken away?” she prompted, trying to understand.

“Yes,” he affirmed, his body taut with emotion. “My father had my mother declared mad.”

The words sounded empty, hollow, and yet the way he held himself was so brittle that she feared if she were to reach out

and touch him, he would shatter apart.

“Go on,” she urged gently. “I am here.”

“I still don’t really understand,” he explained, his words tumbling out of his mouth like stones. “I was eight years old. How much can an eight-year-old understand about the workings of adults? But I can tell you that my father told me time and time again that she was a madwoman. That I would likely follow in her footsteps. He insisted over and over that I look just like her, exactly like her, and that I would be like her.” His face creased, and he sucked in a shuddering breath. “He told me we were the greatest disappointments of his life,” he managed to blurt out. “He spilled his disgust for her on me. He insisted that she was a fool, and he had her sent away.”

Those words... Those words were unbearable, and as they slipped past his lips, she longed to take him in her arms. But she knew she must stay still so that he could get it all out.

He shook his head as if the memory was too much to bear. “I can still remember that day, the look on her face. She would not let me go when the men came to take her away.” A guttural sound ripped from him. “They had to tear her from my embrace.”

“Oh, Garrett,” she whispered. “How horrible for you. I’m so sorry. I cannot even imagine the pain of it.”

He didn’t say anything, but he met her gaze as years of memory seemed to come to the surface.

“What happened to her?” she asked.

“She was taken away to an asylum run by a Dr. Mortimer,” he bit out. “My father never let me visit her. He never let her write me. I never heard from her again after that day. The only thing of hers I could keep close to me were her memories. Father eradicated everything of hers from the house. Her portraits, her clothes, her scent, any books that she particularly liked...”

“Good God,” he growled, his eyes sharp with understanding. “That is why I’d never read the kind of books you brought me. He took them all from the house. She loved

them, but he said they had contributed to her madness...”

His hands coiled into fists. “But she wasn’t mad. I don’t remember ever seeing her do anything that struck me as madness, but she defied my father again and again in the way she raised me, and I suppose to him that was enough. A wife’s duty, he claimed, was to do as her husband dictated. And he was a duke. Dr. Mortimer agreed with him.”

The power of his words spun about her, threatening to swallow her up. But she wanted to pull him from that storm. To haul him to safe ground and protect him from the misery of those years. Then a thought struck her. “I understand now.”

“What?”

“There are no mirrors in your house, Garrett,” she whispered. “I wondered at it. Mirrors are costly, and people of my class only have small ones. But I never once saw a single one in your immense house... You don’t want to see yourself, do you?”

His strong face paled, and he stared at her, aghast. “No,” he said. “I don’t. You noticed?”

She nodded before taking his hands in hers, enfolding them gently. “If you look like her, should you not carry her visage on, like a torch for all to see, so that her memory is recalled by all?”

“You would think so,” he rushed. “But the truth is, anytime someone tells me that I look like my mother, I do not see her face. I hear *his* voice like a cannon through my ear, tearing me apart. I can’t tell you how cold and awful and lonely my childhood was, the brutality of it all. It is my regimen,” he said, “that keeps me from that dark abyss.”

She nodded. “I see.”

“I don’t think you can,” he said, “but I’m glad that you want to try.”

“Oh, Garrett,” she lamented. “Everyone assumes that a duke has a perfect life, like a prince.”

He grimaced. “Most princes have terrible lives, if you ask

me. They're deeply unhappy—at least the ones I've met. Not many dukes are happy, either.”

“I'm sorry for it,” she said firmly, squeezing his hands. “Books make it sound so wonderful. But apparently, they truly are full of silliness.”

He stilled, then said earnestly, “They are, but I'm grateful for them, and I'm grateful for you. Those *silly* books have helped me. You've helped me,” he said.

Tears filled her eyes, and she brought her forehead to his, feeling closer to him in that moment than she ever had to anyone.

“I am trying to bring Dr. Mortimer to justice,” he whispered. “It's been much on my mind as of late, and perhaps, that is why I had this dream. I do not often dream of her.”

He winced. “Sometimes I dream of my father. I don't like to close my eyes because I can see his face. Even now, after all these years, I see him berating me. I can feel the things that he did. The horrors of it all, the isolation, the cruelty of my tutors. I relive them all at night. That's why I don't sleep.”

How she longed to hold the little boy who'd been left in such cruelty, to assuage his fears, and to take away the pain that he'd known. She had assumed that he had a wonderful life because he was so powerful.

But this was why Society found him to be such a stonelike gargoyle of a man—because the ton could sense he was full of darkness and pain.

Yet she had seen the traces of light within him, the beautiful golden things that made him who he was, and she wanted to amplify that light and beat back the darkness.

“I am here,” she said. “I'm here for you. I will be here with you through the night. You are not alone,” she said. “This trial—when is it?”

He let out a shuddering breath, as if he had been waiting for her to cast him off at his admissions. “Dr. Mortimer is going to be brought up for examination by trial this week.”

“May I come?” she asked.

He blinked. “You want to come?”

“Yes, if you’ll let me.”

“What about the bookshop?”

She shrugged, then smiled at him. “I shall find a way. You need someone with you. Do you have any friends who will go with you?”

He gazed down upon her and lifted his hand, stroking her hair back from her face tenderly. “My friend Essex will try to come, but if you came, oh...” He said, “If you came, it would mean the world to me.”

“Sleep,” she instructed. “Close your eyes, and I will not leave your side. It is several hours yet before dawn.”

He nodded. “I probably will not sleep.”

“You don’t have to sleep,” she said gently. “Just rest. I shall hold you while you do.”

His eyes softened at that, and he studied her with wonder. Garrett eased himself back onto the beautiful, thick down pillows, and she wrapped her arms about him. She stroked her hand gently along his face, trying to soothe away the worries. He did so much for others. He tried so many things, and yet he was so alone.

Not anymore, she vowed.

She would do everything within her power to make him understand he was not alone. Even though she was a shopgirl, a bookseller, and he was a duke. Society said that they could not be close. That he had to remain above her. Distant.

Their worlds were far apart, but none of that mattered. Not class, not Society, not wealth. At least, not here in this moment.

He was different. He saw her soul. And the rest did not matter at all.

Chapter Eighteen

“My dear girl, I have found the perfect solution to your situation.”

She stood in the center of the bookshop, all the hope of the morning falling away.

It had been a wonderful coach ride back.

There had been a moment of trepidation when she'd realized she had to return to her life and explain to her father what had occurred, if he was even awake at all...

And he was awake. Not only was he awake in the center of the bookshop, he looked radiant. He had not looked radiant in more than a year. His eyes shone as if he had accomplished Herculean labors.

Nor had he had anything to drink as of yet.

“Papa, what have you done?” she queried, wary. She wanted to be excited to see him in such a state, but she was not. A wave of fear engulfed her. What had given him such a feeling of triumph?

She doubted that he had come to apologize to her, to tell her that they could start anew, that he would give her the bookshop. No, there was something else afoot.

He cleared his throat, readying himself for a grand speech, as if he had not abdicated his responsibilities since her mother's death. “I told you that I had a buyer in line for the bookshop.”

She flinched. The mere mention of it was painful to her.

He swept his hand around, as if he could summarize the entire shop in a gesture. “It has all become too unmanageable. I do not wish for you to have to look after it, and I no longer have the time. Nor do I care for it now. Besides, trade is not a young lady's realm.”

“Papa,” she said, forcing herself to speak calmly despite the emotions swirling inside her. “I don't understand. Please do

not sell the bookshop. It has been in our family for generations —”

“Exactly, my dear,” he cut in, folding his hands behind his back. “You have hit the nail on the head. I do not feel good about the idea of selling it to someone, even if it means that you and I would find financial ease, and that I could retire and you would no longer have to toil in a way that young ladies should not.”

“I am not a young lady, Papa,” she pointed out. “I love the toil of the bookshop. It gives me pleasure; it gives me...”

“Then you’ll be even more pleased with what I have to say.”

She drew in a steadying breath. “I don’t understand.”

“Mr. Jonathan Rigby,” he said as if that name solved all their problems.

“Jonathan Rigby,” she repeated. She’d heard the name before. He was a man from the city who had known a great deal of financial success but was looking for a more secure link to Society.

Her father nodded, his silver-lined hair glinting in the gray winter light. “Yes. You see, Jonathan Rigby understands that Sharpe and Son is associated with the Duke of Montrose’s patronage. And I have made it clear to Mr. Rigby that the duke...has a special affection for you in particular.”

Her insides twisted, and she felt a wave of dread. “You did what?”

Her father all but beamed at his cleverness. “I told him that the duke admires you greatly. That he thinks you terribly clever...and likes to take you out for adventures.”

She gasped with horror. “Papa, he will think...”

“He will think what is true,” her father cut in, his face suddenly turning to hard stone.

She wanted to argue with him, but she couldn’t. She had become the duke’s lover. There was no arguing with that.

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. “But Papa, I

have not engaged in anything that I am ashamed of. And what you are intimating—”

“I am relieved to hear that your morals are so loose, my dear,” he said, his eyes shining with dismay. “That you do not feel shame for what you have done or what you are doing. But the truth is, Society does not care as long as there is an advantage, and there shall be an advantage. There always is. When a girl like you becomes the lover of a man like that? Her family does very well.”

He paused, then stated, “But it is incredibly important that she is not racked with scandal.”

Her mouth dried, and she felt as if she could not move her feet. They were full of lead. Her entire body was wrought with agony.

“Papa, I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Please, just out with it. Tell me what it is that you have done.”

“Jonathan Rigby’s son, William, will happily marry you. The bookshop will exchange hands. I will be given a large pension, and you will continue to run it, my dear, if your husband allows and if the duke permits you time, given the occupation that he clearly intends you take up.”

Occupation. His father meant mistress, of course.

“The duke shall never agree,” she bit out, trying to make sense of everything her father was saying.

“Oh, don’t worry, my dear. I shall explain it all to the duke,” her father said, still quite pleased with his maneuverings. “You shall be his official mistress. After all, he owes as much, or else I shall make it clear that he has ruined an innocent young girl. That he is a scandalous fellow. Not at all in keeping with the picture that he presents to Society as a hero of the poor and of the underprivileged.”

The room swung, and she feared she would scream. “Papa, you would not do such a thing.”

“Oh, I absolutely would, and it is for your benefit.” He shook his head, and for a moment, genuine concern seemed to tint his voice. “Do you not understand the position that you

have put yourself and me in?”

“I have chosen affection,” she said. “Something you clearly no longer do.”

“Affection?” he echoed. “You think that duke has affection for you? He clearly thinks that you’re interesting and clever and entertaining, and he wanted to take you to bed, which I can see that he’s done.”

“What?” she breathed.

Her father tsked. “It is clear to me that you have known him. I can see that he has made you happy.”

Good God.

She had been happy until this moment. She had felt a lightness at finally being seen for herself. Finally feeling joy and, dare she say, *love* for a man who would forever be out of reach. But that did not matter.

They at least had this time together.

But now her father was sullyng it.

“Papa, there is no reason to do this. No one knows.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, rolling his eyes with disdain. “Someone will know. If I know, everyone will know. Does your friend Lily know?”

“Lily does not know exactly,” she hedged.

“Ah,” her father lit on, wagging his finger. “But Lily suspects, which means half of Bond Street suspects, my dear. I am arranging your safety and your future, and I am also ensuring that Sharpe and Son will continue.”

“I don’t see how,” she ground out.

“You will marry William,” he said simply, as if speaking to a small, errant child. “You’ll make certain that you have no children with the duke, but if you absolutely must, William will take the child as his own, and it will be clear that whatever male child you bear continues the shop’s line. My line. Everyone will assume the child is my grandson.”

Her father sighed. “And if it is the duke’s son, I do not see why our bookshop should not be elevated and your husband and I should not be given titles.” A slow smile tilted her father’s lips. “Sir Sharpe. I think it sounds marvelous. Just as I’m sure Sir William Rigby sounds marvelous in an exchange for you, because the duke does seem to want you a great deal, my dear.”

A look of surprise creased her father’s visage. “I’ve never known anything like it. Visiting him almost every day? Bringing him books to read? You have taken his interest, and my hat is off to you.”

A wave of disgust coated her. It was as if her father was suggesting that she had seduced the duke! And now, her father was attempting to corner him. To use his wealth and power as so many did.

The shame of it... She couldn’t bear it.

“Papa, please, please do not do this,” she begged.

“I will absolutely do this, Elizabeth. As a matter of fact, I will visit him today to let him know that you will be married soon. The duke will be thrilled, for he can enjoy you without worry.”

Her spirits sank at the foul transactional nature this was all taking. “At least allow me to do it.”

“It is not the business of a young lady,” he said. “Gentlemen arrange these things.”

“Gentlemen,” she spat. “You are not a gentleman, Papa. You are not worthy of the name. Not anymore. Maybe once, when I was small, but now all you care about is pounds and pence, drink, and titles.”

“That’s all there is, my dear. You should know that. You’ve read enough history. Perhaps we will be written about in the annals of London history. This bookshop, older even than Hatchards? Yes, we shall be remembered,” he said.

“That’s what you want,” she whispered. “To be remembered, to be recorded. Why? When you have done so little.”

He took a step forward as if he might strike her.

“When did you become like this?” she cried out. “What has done this to you?”

His hand hung in the air, and it began to shake. “The cold brutality of a disappointed life has shaped me, my dear.”

“Why did you have to be so disappointed?” she protested. “Am I not enough?”

And the silence that stretched nearly undid her. Tears filled her eyes as she realized that no, she was not enough. She would never be enough. And with that, she whipped away from him. She did not know where she was going.

“Come back,” he roared.

“I cannot.”

“You must run the shop today,” he called out.

She let out a cold, brittle laugh.

He expected her to run the shop after such an announcement? She stumbled out the door, turning up Fleet Street. She pushed her way through the crowds of people, tears streaming down her face.

She rushed, not knowing where she was going, but she knew that she could not face this alone. She had to tell someone. She hurried up to Piccadilly and then to Bond Street. She searched the storefronts, desperate for Lily’s. She wound her way through beautifully dressed ladies, some letting out cries of exclamation at her rudeness, and she realized she needed to get ahold of herself for if she did not, gossip would ensue.

People would mention the wild young lady, and some on this street would know it was Elizabeth. And so she slowed her steps. She sucked in breaths, and she wiped the tears from her eyes.

And at last, there it was. Lily’s shop.

This could have been so different, she realized. If she was to do what her father said, all of this could be hers. She could come to Bond Street every day. She could buy dresses from

Lily, and hats and fans. She could ride up and down in her carriage and have all the wealth that she might ever need. She could elevate her father. She could elevate the bookshop... At a cost.

For what her father was proposing was not love or kindness but an exchange. And she was the goods.

She raced to the side entrance of the dressmaker's shop, shoved open the door, and stumbled into the room frantic with work. Several young ladies were whipping embroidery along wide hoops, stitching flowers and birds into fabric that would soon make the beautiful gowns that draped the ton's ladies.

Lily looked up from her sketches. Her eyes went wide. She shoved her papers aside and jolted forward.

“What is amiss?” she called.

“Everything, Lily. Everything.”

And with that, she collapsed into her friend's arms, hoping, hoping that they could make sense of it all, but fearing they could not.

Chapter Nineteen

Garrett's butler looked extremely irritated, and frankly, he could not blame him.

Mr. Sharpe was not exactly the sort of fellow who came around to his house on anything but business, and usually, he just dropped off books and left.

Unlike with his daughter, Garrett was not in the habit of having literate conversations or life analysis with Mr. Sharpe. So, as the man stood before him, the butler leaving the door ajar as he turned, sniffing, on his heels, Garrett wondered what the blazes was about to occur, but he did need to speak to the man about the future of the bookshop. About Elizabeth's future.

He looked at Mr. Sharpe. "How did you know that I was going to call for you?"

"You were going to summon me?" Mr. Sharpe asked, smiling. "I'm glad to hear it. I had a strange sensation that such a thing would occur, and I think I have brought things into action that will please Your Grace."

"Have you?" he asked.

"Oh yes." The man all but bounced with self-satisfaction. "I have read a great deal about the way things are done in the ton and how the organization of such affairs must be taken to ensure the reputations of all involved."

Garrett peered at the man standing before him who did indeed look pleased as punch, but he could not fathom what the man was saying.

"Sir, can you make yourself plain?" Garrett demanded.

"You are my daughter's lover," Sharpe explained. "I realize this is an extremely blunt thing to say, Your Grace, but I think it is important that we eschew formalities, given the nature of the business."

The business, he thought to himself. Ah, this was going to be interesting. Mr. Sharpe, it turned out, was a man of money

after all, though it appeared he gave no care to such things from the way he had shouldered everything onto his daughter. The truth was, she did a better job with coin.

Sharpe was not a businessman. To hear the word “business” cross his lips was almost ridiculous.

“Tell me what you propose,” Garrett prompted, folding his arms across his chest.

And the truth was, whatever this man proposed he would likely do. He had a great deal of funds, and he had much power. If the man wanted a villa in Venice, it would be done. It was the fastest and easiest way to take care of things and *free Elizabeth*.

Her father took a step forward and declared proudly, “I have found a husband for my daughter.”

“You have,” he said, his throat tightening. He wondered if the man was about to say the Duke of Montrose, but he had a striking sensation that that was not at all what he was about to do. He bit out, “Who?”

Mr. Sharpe smiled and announced, “Mr. William Rigby.”

“I have not heard of this man,” he gritted out.

“Well, Your Grace, he is far below your notice, at present, but he would like to rise in your esteem. He is happy to take on my daughter as his wife and allow you to continue in your affair with her until you are no longer interested, but certain things must be decided before such a thing can occur.” Mr. Sharpe clapped his hands together, quite pleased with his efforts. “It’ll protect your reputation and my daughter’s as well.”

Bloody hell.

The words tumbling out of the man’s mouth might sound perfectly sensible to several members of the ton, possibly hundreds of male members of the ton—most certainly Prinny. This was how it was done, after all.

Men had mistresses who had husbands. It was very, very rare that a man would carry on with an unmarried young

woman, unless, of course, she was something like an actress. And even then, she was often married.

His spirits sank.

This was the last thing he had expected to hear from Mr. Sharpe. This was the sort of life the man wanted for his daughter? To be the mistress of a duke? And once on that road, it was very likely that she would be the mistress of other powerful men. That was generally how it went. And her husband, William Rigby, would draw all the security and awards from that situation that husbands did—titles, fortunes, lands—all if she pleased the gentleman that she entertained.

That is what the fellow standing before him expected. He expected to be showered with attention and rewards because Garrett wanted his daughter.

Galling as it was, it hit him, then, with full force, exactly what had to be done to save her from her father and William Rigby.

He was going to have to marry her.

He swallowed back the realization that he was going to be related to the cold man standing before him through marriage.

But marriage it would be. He could not leave Elizabeth to such a horrible fate as her father had dictated. For his gain.

Yes, he'd have to ask her at once. And send for a special license.

It was the honorable thing to do. The right thing to do. And he always did the right thing.

All would be well. He had little doubt that she would tell him yes. What lady would not? And he was marrying her despite her vastly lower status.

"It is an interesting proposition," he said slowly. "I admire your speedy work. You must have taken care of things quickly."

"Yes." Mr. Sharpe coughed as if embarrassed. "Well, Mr. Rigby wanted to buy the bookshop, and this seems to be the best course. He had no interest in his son marrying my

daughter. She has no fortune or anything about her that might make one wish to wed her.”

Those words pierced him like knives. Did Sharpe truly think so little of his daughter? There was no woman as wonderful as Elizabeth Sharpe, and her father was ready to cast her in the cold bin of history.

He drew in a breath, then said firmly, “I have no wish to make your daughter my mistress.”

“But you have had her, sir,” her father piped indignantly as his hands curled into fists.

It was tempting to knock the man’s teeth in, but it would be an unfair advantage. He was far more physically powerful than Mr. Sharpe, who was clearly not in good health and possibly not in the best mental state, due to months of over-imbibing and grief.

“Be careful,” Garrett warned. “You may have little esteem for your daughter, but I admire her greatly.”

Sharpe’s eyes darted about as he tried to make sense of his situation. “But then I do not understand, Your Grace. If you are not to make her your mistress, what do you...”

“I am going to make her my *wife*.” The words felt foreign on his tongue. And his own body was rattling at the sudden realization that he was deviating so far from the duty and traditions of a duke in this marriage.

But he was also a man of honor.

The man’s mouth dropped open in comical fashion. If it had been a play, the audience would’ve laughed, but Garrett could not laugh.

He was furious that this man would be his father-in-law. But he would tolerate him for Elizabeth.

The truth was, despite the fact she was a shopkeeper’s daughter, she meant the world to him. She provided kindness, care, and comfort to him and accepted him the way he was. He would put up with the father because she was magnificent. It did not matter that she was far beneath him in status and funds.

She was superior in all the ways that mattered.

“B-but what shall I tell Mr. Rigby?” Sharpe yelped.

“You shall tell Mr. Rigby that you got the situation wrong and that your daughter is a jewel,” Garrett growled.

“B-but Your Grace, how will she cope?” Sharpe pointed out, his face drawing gray. “She knows nothing of Society. She does not even know how to waltz.”

“Have you not heard of education?” Garrett snapped, though he was aware that Sharpe was not mistaken. It was a damned difficult road ahead for Elizabeth as his wife. Society was cruel to upstarts. Perhaps he wasn’t being kind, forcing her to marry into his stratum... But he could not condemn her to the life her father suggested.

“No one will accept her, Your Grace—not as a true lady.” Sharpe’s brow pinched. “I’ve seen the way the ton acts around city people and merchants. They will sneer.”

“They will do whatever I tell them to do,” he ground out, willing it to be true, even though he knew it would not be easy. “Because I am the Duke of Montrose. Do you understand? They’re already terrified of me. Do you think that they’re going to want to incur my wrath by disliking my wife?”

The man all but shook in his boots. “You’re right. Of course, Your Grace. You’re right.”

“I’m glad you understand that I am right in this,” he said quietly. He then continued, almost to convince himself, “I am always right in these things. Society will bend over backward to follow my dictates. It’s why I don’t like them. It’s why I hide away from them. Everyone trembles when I lay down my law,” he said. “Sycophants, all.”

They all quaked before him, his power, and his coin.

Society looked at him the way he had looked at his father, and he couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t as if he was cruel—not like the previous Duke of Montrose. Perhaps the reputation of the Montrose line was simply too ingrained in Society for anyone to think of him as anything else.

Luckily, he still had no desire to be a feature in Society. He preferred his library and office and the work he did there. And he did not think that Elizabeth would mind being away from Society, either, but it did occur to him she would not like to be separated from the bookshop.

He paused. "I have a condition. She must come with a dowry."

Mr. Sharpe's eyes bulged. "A d-dowry, Your Grace? Such a thing—"

"You'll give the bookshop to her," he said tightly.

"Give?" the man asked, all but gasping.

"Yes," he bit out. After all, if she had to marry a duke, and he a bookseller, surely he could at least get her the one thing she wanted. "It will be hers, and it will still be Sharpe and Son, for I'm sure Elizabeth will have a child one day."

The idea of it struck him, and his feelings were a confusing riot.

His child.

What kind of father would he be? He drew in a breath and vowed to himself that he would be the kind of father that his mother would've wanted him to be, and he felt the power of that go through him with such fierceness he was transformed.

"The bookshop is mine," Mr. Sharpe said with shocking childishness.

"Yes, it is, but without my patronage it will be nothing," he countered with little emotion.

The man's eyes widened to the size of saucers, and he gave a shaky nod. "Of course, Your Grace. I shall do whatever you command. What else can I do, as you are the Duke of Montrose."

"Yes, I am," Garrett replied, "and it is time you stop treating your daughter like she is a burden. She has saved you. She has saved that bookshop, and it should be hers."

The man bristled as if he would argue with him, but he knew

he could not. Instead, he inclined his head. “Whatever pleases you. But what shall *I* do?”

Garrett cocked his head to the side, resigned to the fact that his future would be continually making certain this man did not cock up his life and those around him. It would be a constant threat of scandal.

“What were you doing before?” Garrett demanded.

Sharpe looked perplexed. As if he did not want to keep living the way he was. It was not greed that crossed his visage...but fear.

“You’re lost, aren’t you, Sharpe,” he said with a sudden dose of certainty.

The man looked away.

“You do know it doesn’t have to be like this,” Garrett said softly, allowing himself to relent ever so slightly in his disdain.

“I beg your pardon?” Sharpe blurted.

He lowered his arms from his chest, realizing he was speaking to a man he’d known since he was a boy. “You don’t have to keep living like this, you know. I know you were a decent man once. I can remember you from when I was a child. You don’t have to do this to your daughter or yourself. Some demon has got a hold of you, and I think I know what it is. It’s in a bottle, and you can change still.”

“No,” Sharpe whispered, his voice shaking. “I can’t. If I don’t do what I do every day, the voices in my head, the pain of it all, is too much.”

“Perhaps you simply need to listen to different voices, Mr. Sharpe.”

“Different voices?” Mr. Sharpe echoed.

“Your bookshop is full of the voices of people who might send you on a better path than a brandy bottle. Marcus Aurelius, for one, would do you wonders. Epictetus another. They will tell you that this life is full of pain and sorrow but also wonder. And if you put yourself to the task, the wonder can still unfold before you.” He met Sharpe’s gaze and

insisted, “You do not need to live a hate-filled life.”

He wanted to add... *Like my father did.*

Garrett wanted more for her than this. More than a father who had abandoned himself and abandoned her.

Sharpe’s eyes widened. “You mean it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said.

Sharpe’s shoulders sank as if he realized how far he had fallen and desperately wanted out of that hole. “You believe that I can be different.”

And it struck Garrett that no one had believed in Mr. Sharpe. No one had in years. No one had told him that things could change or be better, that he did not have to lament that he did not have a son. Or if he did lament it, he could at least celebrate his daughter.

What voices had he known, locked away in a small room? He’d clearly read all the wrong books or at least the wrong books at the wrong time.

“You’re going to be my family,” Garrett declared, though the word nearly stumbled on his tongue before he added seriously, “and I will not abandon you. I will not send you off to waste away. It would be the worst thing for my wife. And for you. I want you to see that there is more to this life than what you are living, and I will help you to find it, if you want it.”

Mr. Sharpe sucked in a shuddering breath, and much to Garrett’s surprise, the man’s eyes filled with tears. “I have been holding on so tight,” he said, “trying to find the way to make sense of things. I did not know what to do. I could not figure it out, and so I abandoned everything that I...”

“Loved?” Garrett put in.

Mr. Sharpe gave a nod. Before he could say another word, he drew himself up. “Propose to my daughter. Of course, I shall be happy to say yes—not that I could do anything but, since you are such a powerful man, but know that I give you my blessing. And thank you...for your kindness.”

“Go and tell Mr. Rigby that you are done with him and if he has any complaints to come to me.”

“I will,” he said.

And he wondered then if Mr. Sharpe was going to find a brandy bottle to bury himself in the woe that he felt at this particular moment, or if perhaps he might choose something different.

But no matter the case, he had a marriage license to procure and a proposal to finalize.

Chapter Twenty

Elizabeth's insides shook with fear.

Oh, how she hated the way her body seemed to tremor inside. Outward, she knew she stood calmly, and yet she felt as if her entire body was shaking. Her stomach twisted.

Acidic, bitter notes were creeping up her throat as the duke entered the bookshop. Quietly, he turned the sign to CLOSED, something that almost never occurred at Sharpe and Son, and that feeling of nerves came up in her again, rumbling and rolling through her body.

She wanted to run. What must he think of her? What must he think of her father? Dear God, the horror of it. Or perhaps, perhaps her father had not made a complete fool of himself when he had left the bookshop. Perhaps he had not ruined her relationship with the duke. She could only pray, but when he turned, she spotted the grave note on his face.

He looked quite serious. As a matter of fact, he strode toward her, cleared his throat, and said, "Elizabeth, your father came to visit me today."

"Did he?" she asked, barely able to speak. Her throat tightened, and she forced herself to swallow.

"Yes, he had an idea for me, which I denied."

A sigh whooshed out of her. She wanted to collapse into a chair, but there was none near; nor did she wish to show how dismayed she felt. Even so, waves of relief crashed over her. She'd been so afraid that the duke might be horrified, but he did not appear horrified. Instead, he seemed as if he wanted to extend his hand out to her and offer her hope.

"I do not know why he thought his suggestion was what I wanted," he ventured, "except, I suppose, that it is the way of many dukes. So, I cannot be angry with him on that score."

Could he not? She could, but she admired him for his restraint.

As a matter of fact, he seemed very restrained at present, as

if ruled by some calm dictate.

“Your father is a man who’s been struggling with grief due to the death of his wife and the fact that life has not turned out as he wanted. Unlike yourself, of such remarkable character, he did not have the strength to carry on. He thinks his life is over without a son. But you are here and you are alive, and you deserve more than that.”

“Thank you,” she breathed, unsure of what was coming next. She felt as if her body was humming with a dose of anticipation and dread. “But I don’t understand. If you have turned him down, why are you here? Surely you wish nothing to do with me now. My father must have said terrible things to you.”

Garrett inclined his head. “He did say some alarming things,” he agreed. “But he was concerned about his reputation and yours, and rightly. Elizabeth, whether we wish to admit it or not, you and I have taken actions that could ruin you, and the idea of that is unforgivable to me.”

“Are you going to ask me to be your mistress?” she blurted, her heart hammering so hard in her chest she was afraid she might collapse.

“No,” he said firmly.

“Then I don’t understand,” she replied, drawing in a slow breath as she folded her hands into fists, digging her nails into her flesh to keep her composure. “You know that I chose to be with you,” she said. “It was what I wanted.”

“And it’s what I want, too. But Elizabeth,” he said softly, “it is incredibly important to me that the right thing is done here. Given your father’s behavior, there’s really only one course.”

“What is that?” she queried, and for one moment she was certain he was going to give her the bookshop so that she would have security for the rest of her life.

Surely not. It was her father’s, after all.

“You are going to marry me,” he stated without any room for question, negotiation, or denial.

Those words hit her, and she was not entirely certain if she was awake. Surely, she was now in a dream... A nightmare. For he would never wish to wed someone like her.

“I beg your pardon,” she gasped.

“I’m sure the news is very overwhelming,” he said matter-of-factly. “But I have given this thought. You must be my wife. I understand that our positions are entirely different. You come from the merchant class...” His brow furrowed. “Trade is not ideal, as I come from a line of nobles that stretches back hundreds of years. The Montrose line has seen the rise and fall of kings,” he said as if this was all the most obvious thing in the world. “But it doesn’t matter, Elizabeth. It doesn’t matter if your shop is all that you have. It doesn’t matter if you have no lineage. It doesn’t matter if you have no money. This is what should be done,” he declared. “Despite the vast gulf between us, you will be my wife.”

He finished, waiting... For what, she did not know. And then it hit her.

Gratitude. She was supposed to express her gratitude. And perhaps she should. He offered her a vast fortune and security.

She blinked. “That is absolutely ridiculous.”

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I cannot be your duchess,” she said quietly. “For all the reasons you stated, and clearly, you already resent me for it.”

“Now it is you who is being ridiculous,” he countered. “I have not expressed resentment but facts. Where is the bold girl I spoke to but days ago?” he asked, his eyes wide now with shock. “You must seize life when you are at the top of the wheel.”

“But this is not the top of the wheel,” she cried out. “You are asking me to turn and plunge toward the earth. I will be hated in Society. No one will want me... Even you do not want me to be your duchess. You just made that very obvious. You are asking me, despite all of your knowledge, your *facts*. And if I am your duchess, I will not be able to run the bookshop. People will come and see me like I am some sort of

entertainment to be laughed at.”

“That is not true,” he said, though his voice held a note of doubt.

“What will I do in your great houses?” she demanded. “Run them?”

“You could,” he said with more conviction.

“Yes, I suppose I could, but would you truly want me to?” Her voice shook and yet she held her ground as she continued, “Do you think your servants will wish me—with my city manner and my lack of understanding of how things are to be done—to be their mistress? They will laugh at me behind my back.”

She fought a sob at the idea of being a subject of amusement and ridicule. “I shall be like a child. I know books, Your Grace. I do not know the ways of the ton.”

“I don’t care about the ways of the ton,” he growled passionately.

“Yes, you do,” she returned. “Your entire declaration—not even a proposal, mind you—made that clear.”

He stared at her, his face a mask of shock. “I beg your pardon. But are you telling me no, Elizabeth? I cannot believe you to be so foolish.”

She swallowed, stunned. She’d never seen him shaken, except for their night in the inn after his dream.

“I thought perhaps you were going to tell me that you bought the bookshop,” she whispered.

“Was that what you wanted?” he said, wincing. “Just the bookshop?”

And she realized in that instant, it sounded like she did not want him.

“I want to be with you,” she protested. “You are my friend, but I cannot imagine my life as a duchess. *You* can barely imagine it. I can see it on your face.”

“Elizabeth,” he said, taking a step forward, meeting her gaze

with one that was surprisingly unyielding. “You wanted to change me with your books. To lighten me. Perhaps...perhaps you hoped to eventually convince me of your dreams, that I would transfer my patronage to you as the owner of the shop. Perhaps you thought with your recommendations, I would see that you needed the bookshop and come to your rescue. I am coming to your rescue, but I’m not romantic.”

“I see that,” she said quietly.

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not Mr. Darcy, and I’m never going to be. It is not in my nature to tell you *how ardently I admire and love you*. Do not be a bloody fool like Elizabeth Bennet and reject the man with the estate and fortune. This isn’t a damned novel. Without me, you will be married to William Rigby and be offered up to men on a platter.”

“I see,” she said, her shoulders sagging. “Since you are no Darcy, then I suppose I must be no Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Be plain,” he instructed.

She wanted to cry, but no tears would come. She felt tired instead. “I must say yes.”

He swallowed. “I am glad you see sense.”

“How can I not?” she retorted, her hands shaking. “As you say, the alternative is being passed from man to man, to gain my husband and father favors.”

He took a step toward her, as if he longed to hold her but couldn’t quite allow himself to. “This feels as if—”

“What?” she cut in.

“It feels as if I have cursed you rather than helped you.”

“I understand what you are doing is very noble,” she replied. “It is very good of you to marry so low, someone without fortune or station, but I never imagined that I would need to be so very grateful to my husband, if I was to marry at all. It is very difficult.”

She tried to gather her thoughts. To help him understand how terrifying the void before her was. “I thought I would have a life of independence.”

“He was never going to give that to you,” Garrett said.

“I beg your pardon?” she whispered.

“Your father,” he pointed out. “And I think you know it. He was never going to give you the bookshop, but I will make it yours. I have convinced him to make it your dowry.”

She swallowed. “Thank you,” she said. “At least I have a small asset.”

He winced and looked away.

“I thought perhaps...” She looked away, thinking of all their merry conversations. “I thought perhaps we were changing each other.”

“We are, Elizabeth,” he assured, his voice rough with emotion. “We are. I’ve never known such hope as when I’m with you, such friendship. Don’t you think that can be enough?”

“Enough?” she echoed. “You think so little of me. How can we be friends?”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “I think everything of you.”

She drew in a breath. “Despite the fact I’m so very beneath you? I thought you were different, Your Grace. I am loath to be wrong.”

And her heart was breaking from her terrible mistake.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Bloody hell, old man, you look more like a fellow at the gallows than a groom.”

Garrett ground his teeth together. He didn't want to reply to Essex, but he supposed he had to. “This isn't going exactly as I thought it would.”

Essex's mouth quirked in a dry grin. “What, you mean debauching the young lady and then having to marry her quickly isn't quite up to plan?”

He narrowed his eyes. “That is not what happened.”

Essex arched a brow.

He let out a beleaguered sigh. “I suppose, if one were to look at it entirely from the outside, that is what one might see, but I did not debauch her, nor did she debauch me. We both had a mutual admiration and acted upon it.”

They stood in the small chapel next to Westminster. St. Margaret's was a beautiful affair, and the Archbishop of London had been woken from his slumber late at night to sign the special license, wedding certificates, and do the ceremony.

The man was positively irritable, standing in slightly rumpled robes, blinking behind his spectacles as he clutched his parry book.

“Where is the young lady?” the archbishop demanded with a croaky voice. “I don't want to be kept from my bed a moment longer than necessary. It's far too chilly in this place.”

He wondered if anyone was warming the archbishop's bed, but he wasn't about to ask such a thing. After all, he didn't want the marriage license rescinded and have himself thrown out of the Church of England.

“No doubt she shall be here at any moment. The marriage is an advantageous one to her family,” Essex said.

Garrett pinned his friend with a withering glance.

“What?” Essex said with a shrug. “It's true.”

It was true, and he'd made that woefully plain to Elizabeth. For once, he wished he'd kept his damned piehole shut. Facts did not always need to be announced. Bluntness... Bluntness had served him well over the years, but with Elizabeth it had been a disaster, especially in their last meeting.

The Archbishop of London shuddered with distaste. "A shopgirl, Your Grace. How the mighty have fallen."

It was clear that the archbishop wished he could deny the duke his request, but there was nothing illegal about the marriage.

The archbishop blew out a derisive breath, then tsked. "I knew your father. He'd be horrified."

And for a glorious, selfish moment, beyond Elizabeth herself, Garrett suddenly found the marriage exceptionally appealing. The idea that it would horrify his father so much was quite a boon.

Surely, it meant it was a good thing indeed.

He'd never considered that to be a possibility before. He knew that he should not get delight in defying a man who had gone to the grave years ago, but he did. This was an act of righteous defiance, a vindication of himself and his mother.

He was going to go against what his father would have wanted, and it felt good.

Perhaps he had made a disaster of the proposal...which, in hindsight, had not been a proposal at all. But it had been the right thing to do. And him insisting she marry him, even if it was going to be damned hard for her to be a duchess, was the right thing, too.

They did not need the sentimental nonsense of novels.

And just as he was about to say such a thing to Essex, who was beaming as if he, too, had made note of the fact that the old bugger in the ground would be displeased, the organ at the back of the church began to wheeze.

It was a beautiful instrument, but the person playing it had also been awoken in the middle of the night. He looked as if

he needed his eyes propped open by wooden picks to do a good job, but he was managing a reasonable attempt at a hymn.

It was as he swung his gaze to the back of the church that he spotted her.

She looked pale in her plain yellow gown, which did not fit.

But her glorious red hair glinted copper in the dim light of the chapel, like a fiery crown.

And her father stood on surprisingly firm legs. Her arm was carefully tucked into his as he led her down the nave and stopped before the archbishop.

The archbishop towered over her in his imperious robes and looked most disapproving. His forehead was like a beach whose wave had come and left furrowed sand. He began the words, asking who had brought this young woman to be given away.

And Mr. Sharpe said it was he with surprising clarity. The man had not been at his brandy today. Garrett felt a large dose of pleasure and relief.

He wasn't entirely certain which direction Mr. Sharpe might take, but he had hope for the best.

Reality was grim, but with Elizabeth, he'd realized hope was best.

He held his hand out to her, and she placed her fingers atop his.

She looked as if she'd seen a ghost.

Frightened, perhaps. Frightened of what lay in the future. And he knew that she felt that he had been manipulated into this marriage. It was the furthest thing from the truth. He had been as much a part of their relationship as she. More so, in fact, for he had a great deal of experience of the world and he was a duke, but she took responsibility for everything.

He should have seen the potential of her father's scheming.

For years, she had taken responsibility for her father. She

had taken responsibility for the bookshop, and now she was taking responsibility for Garrett's decisions. And in her mind, they were clearly poor ones.

True, he had not intended to marry a bookseller...but Elizabeth was remarkable. A jewel beyond any diamond. That, he could not deny.

And as the archbishop droned on and on and on, he could not tear his eyes away from her. She lifted her gaze ever so slightly to meet his, and he saw the fear there.

Good God, it danced in her eyes, and he wondered if he had made a mistake. Was she so terrified to be a duchess? Had he made a terrible decision? He had heard stories of another young woman, a barmaid who had been lifted up to great position in Society and how it had proved a cruel disaster.

Perhaps they were taking a great risk, but there was no turning back.

And as soon as the archbishop announced man and wife, he did not wait for tradition. He took her in his arms, bent down, and lightly kissed her cheek.

Essex applauded.

Her father smiled, and he glanced at the archbishop and said, "We'll meet you for a celebratory drink, if you'd like."

The archbishop let out a *harrumph* and looked at Garrett's new wife as if letting her into his parlor was tantamount to allowing a dog with fleas inside, but clearly he was not about to say no to such a thing.

After all, she was a duchess now.

Garrett guided her down the nave out to the darkened front steps and paused. Any other duchess would've had crowds waiting for her, but it was the middle of the night and this had been done in secret.

As if he was ashamed of her.

A bitter gall brewed deep inside him, and he ground his teeth.

This was not a good beginning. And he knew it in his soul.

...

Without a word, for it felt words could only make the situation worse, Garrett had carried her up the steps of his beautiful, sprawling house and over the threshold to the foyer. Her heart had hammered quite wildly as she realized that it was her house too, now.

Upon meeting the butler, who had waited up in the middle of the night, he lowered her to the ground.

“One moment,” he whispered against her ear before slipping back outside to have a word with his coachman.

She felt a fleeting moment of trepidation but then turned to the older man who had been in the duke’s service for years.

The butler eyed her with some serious consideration, and then, with a slow smile, he said, “I suppose you’ll be able to look at the frescoes all you wish now.”

“If it doesn’t bother you,” she ventured as she did her best to appear confident.

This was one of her great fears, and it was all she could do to keep her shoulders back and her chin up. But she wouldn’t be bowed. She had nothing to be ashamed of. Not even the fact she was not of the nobility.

“How could it possibly bother me, Your Grace? You are the Duchess of Montrose.” The butler’s lips turned up in a surprisingly warm smile before he lifted his gaze to the beautiful and fierce depiction above them. “They are *your* frescoes.”

Her frescoes.

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. The sensation was both delicious and fraught with nerves.

It was both amazing and horrifying as she realized that she was the mistress of this whole house and likely several others that the duke took little interest in. She wondered why. Well, the story of his mother no doubt contributed to his wish to

remain here. She did not mind in the least.

London was her home.

She cleared her throat, then blurted, "I hope you do not mind that I am the duchess."

The butler cocked his head to the side. "Mind?" the butler echoed before he drew in a breath and explained: "Your Grace, how could I possibly mind? You have made the duke happy."

She blinked, hardly daring to believe her ears. "I beg your pardon?"

"Over the last weeks, he has transformed," the butler said, his eyes wide with wonder and emotion she couldn't quite identify. "You have altered him, Your Grace. Oh, he has not entirely changed. He still does not like to go out into Society. He still grumbles, and he's still gruff. But there's something different about him, and you can see it in his eyes. He does not feel alone. And I cannot tell you how much this means to all of us, to our little world here in the duke's house."

She beamed, touched and grateful for this. But she wondered if Garrett could see that... Feel that. Or if he would always be looking down at her, pleased with himself for saving her...yet dismayed by her birth.

Still, she was stunned. Could this be true? The butler accepted her? She had expected him to sneer and look down upon her, but it seemed he cared more about his master's happiness than her status.

"Thank you," she said. "I cannot tell you how much that means to me."

The butler bowed his head. "You let us know how we can help you. We are here to guide, as well as to be of assistance."

"I will need your help," she confessed. "There is no question."

"Ah, we are ready to rally behind you, Your Grace."

And with that, the duke strode up behind her, taking her gently into his arms.

“Is the room ready, Hargrave?”

The butler beamed. *Beamed*. “Indeed, it is, Your Grace.”

“What room?” she asked, realizing she was now going to live in a house that her own could have fit into many, many times. “The duchess’s?”

“No, not the duchess’s,” he replied, and she realized that, of course, she would not have that particular chamber.

He would not wish to put her in his mother’s room. It was a place of unhappiness. He swept her up into his arms and smiled a slow smile of anticipation and promise.

“Come, Your Grace. Let me show you your domain.” And with that, he went for the stairs, and she wondered: what was her domain?

...

There was only one thing to be done. And that was to continue on in the great fashion of English marriages. He would ignore the pain and difficulties of their union and focus on what they both wanted...what they both desired.

And that was each other.

“I cannot wait to have you, wife,” he growled against her ear, determined to awaken her desire, even if he had not awakened her heart.

Garrett carried her into his chamber.

He didn’t have to wait. He didn’t have to think twice. All he had to do was find out if she desired him as much as he desired her.

She laced her fingers into his hair and whispered, “Then have me.”

And with that he strode to the green silk-covered wall.

He thrust her back against it and took her mouth in a searing kiss. Garrett pulled at her gown, raising it above her stockings. He traced his hands up her thighs and teased his fingers into her hot core.

She gasped with pleasure.

Bloody hell, he loved how hot and slick and ready she was for him.

He loved that she wanted him so much. He loved that he caused such a desire in her.

Her hands wound about his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his back.

As if she could hear his thoughts, she whispered, “How can you make me feel this?”

“You make me feel the same,” he rumbled.

And then he kissed her slowly, descending to the curve of her neck, teasing his tongue along that soft line of her throat, a throat he adored so well.

All the while, he circled his fingers over her most sensitive spot, sending her legs trembling with anticipation.

A satisfied growl rumbled from his throat at the knowledge that she was already ready for him.

He did not relent until she was rocking her hips against his hand, and then he quickly undid his breeches. He lifted her legs, wrapping them about his waist, found her entry, and thrust home.

She let out a moan of pleasure. “More,” she said softly into his ear.

He loved her boldness. It was one of the things that he loved most about her—her lack of fear, her passion for life, her zest for living—how he longed to have that himself.

It inspired him. He would meet her in it. He had to, and he knew that she was his lifeline to the world.

And he was so grateful for it. He wanted to give her more pleasure than she’d ever known. More luxury.

For she deserved it all.

He would not fail her.

He began to rock and thrust against her body, finding that

spot that would send her over the edge. He took her mouth in a slow, hypnotic kiss.

She arched her breasts against his linen-covered chest, and then he reached between them, still supporting her with one arm, and stroked the spot right at her core.

Her entire body rippled around him as she cried out his name with fierce passion.

He thrust deep then, spending himself in her body.

He rested his head on her shoulder, gasping for air, amazed that he could give way finally and find peace. Yes, with her, he found bliss.

He found home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

They stared at each other across the breakfast table.

Two great countries at treaty, she mused darkly. No, never. She could not ever be truly at war with this man who had done everything that he could to lift her out of a horrible situation.

Or so she hoped.

He had been so kind, so caring on their wedding night... But in the light of day? He was the duke at business. Blunt, efficient, busy, lost in other worlds.

He read reams of papers, paying particular attention to the trial of Dr. Mortimer. Which was to be expected. But his mood grew ever darker, ever more reserved.

The perfect duke. Powerful, unattainable. And she felt at a loss as to how to reach him. And he did not seem to wish her to. As if he was holding on tightly to something she could not see or understand.

Surely, once the trial was over, her friend would return—the warm but gruff man who had seen her...

Waves of guilt crashed over her as she ate her buttered toast and sipped her tea. The tea was perfect.

Lily would've absolutely adored it, and the bread was the best she'd ever had. The jam, the most marvelous strawberry. The whole table was a sight to behold, loaded with rashers and eggs in silver chafing dishes.

As they sat in silence, she fought the urge to squirm. She was surrounded by opulence, and yet she felt very alone.

“Do you usually take breakfast?” she queried abruptly, desperate to end the dearth of conversation.

“No,” he said, his gaze not lifting from his paper as his brows quirked together. “At least not in the breakfast room. Why?”

“This has a very formal feeling to it, and you are acting most oddly. You're not at all yourself.”

He bit his lower lip, sighed, then poured a large cup of tea into his blue-and-white cup and saucer—a cup and saucer far more delicate than her own set, which she had brought from home.

“The truth is,” he began, “I am being myself. This is how I behave. I’m sorry if I have misled you in some way that I was a gregarious fellow. Surely you knew that was not true... I spend most of the time in my office and in my small library.”

“Then you should go there,” she offered kindly, determined not to be a burden on his life. “I do not want to take you away from your regular duties.”

He arched a brow.

“You do not need to entertain me,” she assured softly, feeling on strange ground. For now that they were married, surely they should grow closer. And yet...she had felt closer to him days ago.

He looked at the door and said with a surprising dose of hope, “Do you wish me to go? I can take my tea.”

“I don’t *wish* you to go. I like your company.”

He blinked. “Oh. I’m glad to hear it,” he said.

He did not look particularly glad to hear it. Not now. He looked desperate to escape to his rooms. And she was holding him here.

But how did she explain how out of sorts she felt in his house?

She wound her hands in her napkin, then confessed, “This room is grander than my entire establishment.”

He considered the wallpaper, which was silk brocade, the painting done by Raphael hanging over the fireplace, and the silver on the table. “Yes, I can see how that might feel a bit overwhelming, if one is not accustomed to it.”

“No, you can’t,” she said honestly. “You have grown up like this. This is completely normal to you. For me, this entire house is like a museum. I have never had access to anything like this in my entire life.”

“You dislike it?” he asked with surprising force.

She shook her head, concerned she was not explaining herself adequately. But she had to try. “Everything is beautiful here. Everything is a work of art. When I first came to this house, I marveled at the paintings on the walls and wondered how anyone could walk by them every day without stopping before each one to contemplate their intricacies and magnificence.”

He lowered his cup slowly. “What an interesting thing to say. I never thought of it like that.”

“Of course you didn’t,” she said gently. “You grew up with all of this artwork, but I have never been exposed to such wonders. Every piece in this house is done by a master.”

“It’s true,” he said as he picked up his teacup. He contemplated the delicately painted flowers, each one done individually and with great care. “I am surrounded by wonders, aren’t I?”

“Indeed you are, sir.”

There was a commotion outside the door, and she glanced back over her shoulder.

What was happening? All of this was so new she did not feel at ease, and half of her wondered if her father had arrived to cause trouble, to demand coin already.

Is the bookshop on fire? What—

“I have sent for your friend,” the duke said with little pleasure. It seemed more of a task to be shared by him, this information.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Her name is Lily, I believe,” he added, folding his napkin and placing it upon the table. “I want you to feel comfortable, and I thought perhaps a friend here would make you feel even better. *And* she is a dressmaker. I thought she might also appreciate it if we used her shop. You are in need of new frocks.”

She winced. “I don’t want you to spoil me as if—”

“Cease, Elizabeth,” he returned, doing his duty...again. “It is a necessity.” He cocked his head to the side and said, “If you must know, I’ve envisioned buying you new clothes since the moment I met you.”

“My clothes are not that bad,” she defended quickly.

He said nothing.

And his expression was so hesitant, as if he knew any further comment might offer her true offense, that she laughed. “Oh, dear. They *are* that bad.”

“They don’t suit you,” he explained with a sudden dose of kindness. It was far more tenderness than he’d shown since their wedding. “They don’t fit, and they don’t keep you warm. Spring is almost here, but the damp will remain until summer and I refuse to allow my wife to be cold. My house is not exactly warm.”

My wife.

The two words were so small and yet so powerful.

But they were not words of intimacy. They were her role. Her position.

As he’d said, she had noticed the cold wandering through the halls and through the soaring salons. The fires could barely do anything to beat back the cold. It was a marvel to her that anyone wanted to live in houses so cavernous.

It had never occurred to the powerful that they might be uncomfortable in their beautiful, palatial abodes.

But if he wished to keep her warm, she would not deny him.

And it struck her, the great act of kindness he had done, and her heart swelled with the unique feeling of being so cared for.

Even if it was duty. Even if he was simply being the righteous duke.

It was kind. She had to cling to that. She had to believe, if she just held on a little longer, that their closeness would return... That her heart would not feel so imprisoned by their new titles. Duke and Duchess.

Lily all but bounced into the room, gasping with every step, and the moment she spotted the duke, a bright smile curled her lips. She curtsied and said, “Your Grace, thank you for inviting me to your home.”

“Come have a seat, Miss Lily,” he instructed, a little stiff, as was his usual demeanor. “I must go and do some work, but it would be wonderful if you would be so kind as to keep the duchess, your friend, company.”

“The duchess,” Lily exclaimed, “my friend.”

And with that, she clapped her hands together over her sketchbook.

“Lily,” Elizabeth tsked.

And much to her shock, the duke smiled, though it did not reach his eyes. “Let your friend be happy for you.”

“You are always welcome, Lily. I shall make sure the butler knows you’re never to be turned away. He can be a little bit difficult to get past.”

“Yes, I could see,” Lily said thankfully. “He reminds me of an excellent guard dog. No one could get past him that you did not wish!” She frowned. “We need someone like that at the shop, to keep out the foolish fellows who like to look at the ladies.”

The duke’s brows arched with alarm. “Well said, Lily, and perhaps we can arrange that. I’ll see to it.”

Suddenly, she felt...fear. Fear that he was going to disappear from her life now that they were married. For he was acting more and more the duke rather than her friend, and so she blurted out, “Shall we read later?”

Garrett stared at her for a long moment. “Certainly...if I have time.”

And with that, Garrett stood, took his tea, and made his escape.

Something he seemed all too relieved to achieve.

Elizabeth let out an exhale of dismay as he slipped out the

door and down the hall. What was happening? She had felt so wonderful in his arms, but something had shifted in him, as if an old hook had sunk into him and was pulling him away from her now.

Lily let out a peal of delight. “He adores you.”

“No, he doesn’t,” she replied. “He is merely doing his duty...but I do hope we can be friends again.”

Lily scoffed. “He is a *friend* who adores you, and you should celebrate every moment of that. What young woman can claim a duke adores them, even if they’re just *friends*? Friends who like to kiss,” Lily added, her eyes glinting with mischief. “And do other things.”

“Lily, don’t be scandalous!”

“I’m not being scandalous,” Lily protested, plopping herself down on the chair opposite Elizabeth. “I’m stating the truth. And aren’t you glad that I said you should ask him to kiss you?”

“I am.” It was the truth. That kiss had changed her life. The duke had changed her life, and so had her own boldness. It all felt terribly unsettled, even if she was a duchess now, but she was so grateful for what she had experienced with Garrett.

Even if it meant that now they were growing apart in their marriage.

Was that the way of all marriages? She prayed not. For she couldn’t imagine going through life so empty, without the laughter and conversation she and Garrett had shared.

Lily’s eyes widened. “Goodness, when I think that you could still be moldering in that bookshop, wondering if your father was going to yank it out from underneath you?” Leaning forward, Lily piped, “I am delighted that things have gone so well. Imagine if your father had gone to visit the duke and had never missed!”

Elizabeth didn’t want to imagine it. That day had changed her life entirely. Just as the kiss had. She was so grateful that she had been bold, but now she had no idea what to do moving forward. Was she to go to the bookshop and run it? It was hers,

after all, and she already missed it.

But she was no longer a bookseller. She was a duchess.

“I don’t know what to do with myself,” she confessed.

Lily eyed her up and down, then let out an eager breath. “Well, first we must measure you for new gowns.”

Elizabeth laughed, but it sounded like a half groan. “I suppose so, because mine are terrible, apparently.”

Lily arched a brow. “I’ve told you that before.”

“Yes, but Lily, I don’t like to take advantage.”

Lily lifted a hand. “I will not hear another word. The duke is lucky to have you. Lucky. And I, for one, am glad the duke is an honorable man who wants to see his duchess cared for.” Lily narrowed her gaze. “Even if you don’t dress like a grand duchess, you should at least like the clothes that you wear.”

Elizabeth picked up her tea and took a large swallow. She hadn’t ever really liked the clothes that she’d been forced to wear the last few years. And she knew so little about fashion because she’d never had the luxury of choice. “I shall give free rein to you because I trust you.”

Lily let out a note of glee. “Good. I shall make certain you look a treat. The duke will not be able to take his hands off you or keep his eyes from you.”

Elizabeth rather liked that idea. She loved being in his arms. She wanted to be in his arms every night, and it was perhaps one of the greatest promises of this union. Secretly, she hoped that what they shared at night would slip into their days as well.

She swung her gaze to Lily. “Truly, I do not know what I am supposed to do. I am so used to doing!”

Lily took her hand in a gentle clasp. “Be yourself. He wants you for you, my friend.”

“Perhaps, but I am accustomed to being busy from sunup until I totter into bed.”

“Duchesses are very busy, from what I can see,” Lily

pointed out.

“With balls and—”

“Or politics, or committees to improve the lives of the poor.” Lily nodded. “I read about their causes in the gossip sheets.”

Causes. She’d never had the resources before to do much to help outside her shop. And then, amazed at the possibilities unfolding before her at her friend’s simple statement, she thought of two things...

The duke had mentioned the trial he was going to be attending soon—a trial that seemed to give him distress—and the idea that they’d had together in the forest.

“Lily,” she breathed.

“Yes?” her friend prompted, organizing her drawing pencils.

“I want you to help me commission something,” she announced, her confidence finding anchor. She wouldn’t let it slip now. She’d endured much, and she was going to do more than endure this. She was going to thrive. After all, how many young women like her had fortunes at their fingertips?

Lily blinked. “Me?”

“Yes, you seem to know a great deal more about the way that Society works than I do. I’m not entirely sure how you know, but you do.”

Lily’s cheeks pinkened before she blustered, “I am a font of interesting facts, and I will help in any way I can.”

“Good. I want to write to gardeners. Famous ones,” she clarified. “I have a list in mind.”

“Well, then I will happily help you do that.”

Elizabeth drew in a relieved breath, each moment increasing her determination.

She would support the duke through the trial of Dr. Mortimer, and she would start something new... Something she could be proud of.

Lily whipped open her sketchbook and beamed. “Now, let us make you look as splendid as you are. I’ve already put five or six things down. I shall have them to you in a trice.”

“Can you do such a thing, Lily?”

Lily grinned. “I can do anything when I put my mind to it.” At that, her heart lightened, and she reflected how lucky she was to have such a friend.

Hope laced through Elizabeth as her friend began to work her pencil across her book. It had all felt so grim, so awful. And for a moment, she wondered if she had embraced the darkness, as she had accused the duke of doing for so long.

How had she abandoned the joy that her books had brought her and chosen fear?

Because life... Life had pushed it at her.

But then she understood. One had to defy reality. Reality would drag one down, wrap one up in chains, and try to swallow one up. One had to fight against that. One had to choose love. One had to choose joy. One had to choose happiness.

And a chill slid through her as she considered the beast that Society had cast the duke as. What if he did not know how to do any of those things?

Worse still... What if he did not want to?

Chapter Twenty-Three

The ducal coach rolled to a stop in front of the Inns of Court.

Elizabeth drew in a breath. They had not been out together yet, and the enormity of it settled upon her.

It had seemed a refuge, his staying within his house. But now, for this, he had been clear he would attend the trial every day, and she had made clear that she wished to be with him.

She wanted to support him, to show him that he was not alone and that she could be his companion in this life.

With the cacophony of the crowds outside the coach, having been drawn by the newssheets and the shocking nature of the trial, Garrett sat opposite her on the silk-covered bench, his hands tense on his knees.

He looked like he was headed to do the Tyburn jig.

Her heart ached for him, and she longed to slip her arms about him. Though his body was so very strong, she wished she could transfer a bit of her spirit to him in this moment.

The door swung open, thanks to a perfectly tailored footman, and without a word, the duke looked to that open door as if it was a gate to hell.

She parted her lips to say something to assure him, but before she could, he bounded down the folding coach steps quickly.

As she lingered for an instant, the world seemed to vanish and her fingers felt cold. He reminded her now of the man that London always said he was—the stone gargoyle, impossible to speak to, a beast. And hadn't that been what he said he was? Blunt, efficient, cutting through anything he thought a waste of time?

And so she braced herself, then followed him down, taking the hand of the footman. She shoved away the surprise that Garrett had not paused to help her down.

After all, he had much on his mind.

As they stepped onto the pavement of Fleet Street, she savored the sensation of being surrounded by the teeming glory of London. It was a place that she loved and knew well. He, on the other hand, appeared tense... Grim, even, to be the focus of so many.

And as she came beside him, she offered her hand, not so that he could guide her in but so that she could twine her fingers with his, to show him that all would be well.

Much to her surprise, he tugged his hand away quickly.

He looked down at her from his towering height, his eyes surprisingly narrowed as he stated, "Ton members do not show affection in public, Elizabeth."

She swallowed, taken aback by his cool dismissal of her kindness.

He said it as a fact; there was no censure in it, but there was also no sympathy.

Still, she dared. Dared to hope that he did not expect her to be like a duchess of the ton, for she knew she never could be.

"We could," she ventured.

A look of intense longing darkened his eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

He arched a dark brow at her, clearly unwilling to participate in anything so low, so lower class, as to entwine hands before everyone.

And for one horrifying moment, the gap between them opened wide. She felt the divide then, the difference in them, the way they had been brought up. He had been raised by staff. Oh, his mother, she knew, had been a significant part of his life before she'd been seized from him.

But, even so, he was like all of the other members of the ton.

Largely, he had been raised by nannies and nursemaids, by tutors, in several houses each with a hundred rooms. Perhaps he had only seen his mother for a small portion of the day, and he certainly was almost never seen by his father.

Whereas she had been in the same house as her mother and father her whole life, they had not had staff, and her parents had educated her. And the difference suddenly struck her.

This was what had been intimated, the vast difference between a duke and a bookseller. And she did not know what to do.

For all the doubts, all the things that had suggested that a marriage between them would be a very poor decision, came hurtling to the foreground of her mind.

All the things she had feared might come to pass were now appearing. Threatening her hopes...

In that one arch of his eyebrow, that one clear look, he had said she did not know his ways and she needed to learn them quickly if she was to fit in.

She did not know if she ever wished to fit in, for that world felt cold and lonely, like a coffin that one would never be able to fight their way out of.

He didn't say another word but lifted his gaze to the old building. He strode toward the elaborate facade of the courts.

Wincing, she hurried after him, feeling as if she was chasing him... And she wondered if she would ever be able to catch up.

Or if he even wished her to.

...

The ongoing trial of Dr. Mortimer left her husband a shell of a man every night.

She watched Garrett come back into his beautiful old townhouse after watching the testimony of patients who had been liberated, of modern doctors who had seen the effects of the care of Dr. Mortimer, and of the people who worked in his establishment.

Their testimony left the air heavy with dark memory.

She sat by him every day, high in the gallery.

He sat rigidly, unwilling to accept any form of support from her. She had tried to hold his hand again...foolishly. The look he had given her had stopped her cold. Ice had slipped through her veins as she'd committed the clear faux pas...again.

But no one would have seen their hands... Not from where they were sitting. No, this was now not just about Society. He was shutting her out. And she did not know why.

In all her life, she'd never felt so out of place or out of sorts as she sat by the mighty duke.

It did not matter that he was more than six feet tall and could crush any man. She could not allow the ice to enter her heart.

Not yet. For she could see that underneath his haughty and gruff visage was the boy. The boy who had longed for his mother for years, who had lost her comfort, her love, and her embrace.

Because she had been ripped from him and he had been shamed every day for his similarities to her.

The newssheets were full of public outcry against the horrific conditions in which Dr. Mortimer had kept his patients.

The patients saw little light. They were often kept in rooms alone. They were chained. Their bedding was moldy straw, their clothes made of horsehair. They were given terrible treatments.

And the truth was, none of the treatments were based in science or care. It had all been experimental. And Mortimer had been able to get away with it because so many of his patrons had been wealthy men. Men who had wished to hide away anyone they deemed unworthy or who didn't conform to their wishes...or Society's demands.

Those men? Many were dead now. And it was her husband who had led this, the ousting of this man through his careful and deliberate collection of evidence.

And she was so proud of him, even if she could not reach him at the trial or any hour of the day.

So, when he came into his house every night, his body shaking, his shoulders bowed, she did everything she could to support him. Though he seemed, with each day, to tolerate that less. And less. He was withdrawing into his pain. Pushing her away with the nearing of his triumph over the doctor, rather than drawing her close.

And she longed to rail against that. To scream. But she knew in her gut that he would not respond to such. No, he'd likely only condemn her as a woman of low birth for indulging in her emotions.

Every night, as they walked past the butler, who clearly had known Garrett's mother, Hargrave looked at them both as if they were heroes of a long campaign.

Her husband *was* a hero of a long campaign. Every night, she guided him up the stairs, put him into bed, and climbed in beside him and held him through the night when he permitted. And every night, whilst the intimacy of books now seemed to escape them, she wondered if he would ever let her in again.

They made love...if one could call the hot, fiery exchanges love, for he did not seem able to share what was in his soul or mind. But she clung to the way their bodies tangled together, passion driving them to their release. The only release he seemed to allow in the growing tension and distance.

For though he permitted her company, his heart remained closed, and all the wondrous exchanges they had had over books seemed a distant memory now. She understood. And surely, when the trial was done, when Dr. Mortimer met justice, he would thaw toward her and all the joy that they had experienced would return.

And when she thought the silence unbearable as the weeks stretched, it became clear that it was in the long, cruel hours just before dawn, when sleep eluded him, that he might speak.

The memories stuttered from him as he whispered what his mother had believed to be important.

Science, philosophy, history...

She had been beautiful, clearly. And she had been the toast

of her Season. She could dance, she could sing, she could play the piano, and she'd adored walking with her son.

His mother had been his champion, and she had been taken away. And he had hardened his heart...

And worse, she realized he did not share this with her to increase their intimacy, but because he was a well of pain and memory that could no longer contain it.

Elizabeth wished she could dig up the old duke and shake him—ask him why he had been such a demon of a person, to crush such an independent spirit.

But she knew well that the crushing of independent spirits was a long tradition maintained by powerful men throughout history. And women who argued for any sort of independence were destroyed with little thought.

With every day, she began to understand more and more why he had so entirely withdrawn from Society. But his withdrawing from her? It left her bewildered. But soon the trial would be over and all would be well.

And as Dr. Mortimer took to the stand and insisted that all his methods had been done to ensure the wellbeing of his female patients so that their demons could be eradicated, and that they could be turned into good, un-sinning, faithful women again, she had nearly stood and screamed at him.

It had only been the knowledge that such a thing would go against her husband, and all those who were fighting against Dr. Mortimer, that had kept her in her seat.

Her husband—her beautiful, righteous husband—had sat stone-faced, until at last the verdict of the trial was brought down. Dr. Mortimer would be imprisoned. And he would not see the light of day again. A rather fitting sentence that reflected what he had done to his own patients.

She knew without a doubt that if it was not for her husband, Mortimer never would have been brought to justice. And she prayed now for all the women who had been crushed underneath his boot.

And when she looked at her husband, he stood.

As the crowds cheered the verdict, Garrett headed toward the door of the gallery. She rushed behind him as he wound down the steps, his shoulders rigid.

There was a gasp as he entered the packed hall. Many had seen them throughout the trial, but everyone was accustomed to the duke's reserve and did not expect him to make comment.

The room hummed with anticipation as he crossed to Mortimer, who was being led away by the bailiffs.

Spotting Garrett, the bailiffs paused.

"Justice is done," he said evenly.

Mortimer's brows shot up. "I did the bidding of your father."

"Yes, you did the bidding of a powerful man; that's true. You forsook your vow to 'first, do no harm,' and you cast innocents aside."

"She was *not* an innocent," Mortimer countered.

A muscle tightened in Garrett's jaw, as if he was resisting ripping the man limb from limb. "She was. And you? You will suffer in hell for eternity."

"It seems as if that is you," Mortimer said with a surprising cruelty, "who is suffering in hell."

"My mother was not freed from you while living," he said firmly. "But she is now vindicated. She was far superior to you."

Dr. Mortimer said nothing as the bailiffs hauled him away. Elizabeth waited for Garrett to say anything. To acknowledge her presence. Her support.

But he did not.

No, his face remained granite as he headed out into the crowd with her one step behind.

One step behind.

And a slow sensation of dread pulsed through her.

This was his moment of triumph...and yet there was no triumph. He had not turned to her with joy or release. He had not taken her into his arms.

And perhaps... Oh God... Perhaps he never would. Perhaps he would never share his triumphs with her. Or his heart.

And as he held out his hand to her, to climb into the coach, she hesitated.

Essex rushed up behind them, and he clapped Garrett on the back. "Well done! Shall we celebrate?"

Garrett shook his head. "I've too much to do. My library awaits."

Essex's brow quirked. "But surely..."

And though she knew it was but a moment after the trial's verdict, her soul sank. He wasn't going to abruptly change. He wasn't going to become warm. The beast was here to stay. Oh, he was a righteous beast who always did the right thing...

But he was a beast who longed to be alone.

"I will go with you, Essex," she said.

"Have you forgotten yourself, duchess?" her husband demanded.

"No," she whispered. "I think I have found myself instead. You have given me a title. You have given me so much... But...Montrose," she began, using his title, "I will never be enough. I will never be the duchess you need. In fact, you do not need a duchess at all...or a wife. Or me. I cannot wait and wait for you to change."

"Elizabeth. Do not be a fool," he said. "I never told you I would change."

"I am a fool," she agreed, her throat tightening, but she refused to turn back now. She could not turn her back on herself. Not any longer. "For hoping you'd let me in. For thinking you could want me for *me*."

Garrett swung his gaze about the crowd behind them. Their words were swallowed up by the din.

Essex's eyes had gone wide, stunned.

"I cannot live so cold and empty a life," she declared. "I waited for the trial to end. To support you. Hoping... Perhaps I should wait longer... But I think it will not matter." She swallowed as tears burned her eyes. "But I know where I belong, and that is where I am going."

With that, she turned into the crush and slipped away.

Away from the only man she had ever loved.

And he did not follow.

...

"Bloody hell. What have you done, man?" Essex gritted out. Garrett stood like the eye of a storm as the crowd surged about him. The roar of the company shook him.

What had he done? Indeed, he did not know.

But she had left him here. And the hell of it struck him harder than any blow he had ever known.

How could she? After all he had done... After...

He swallowed as her words echoed in his head.

Surely, she understood him. That he wasn't like others. Or was that an excuse he had used his whole life?

He ground his teeth. He was doing his duty, damn it. What was right. He had so much to do, so many things to consume his time; surely she understood that... Surely, she did not need more than what he had given her?

The title of duchess was not enough. But how could she think that *she* was not enough?

She was everything.

Oh, she had not been born to title or to rank, but she saw him and understood him and had given him so much.

And he, by God... The reality of it cut him with the same intensity as Essex's gaze.

He had given her so little in return. Instead of closeness or

friendship, he had given her the empty trappings of cold gold. He'd withheld his warmth in exchange for what? Tradition? How it had always been done?

He swallowed back bitter gall. "I don't know what I am doing," he replied tightly.

"I never thought to see it," Essex said quietly, his face hard and his eyes dark with disappointment. "You are becoming like..."

"Like what?" Garrett snapped, his entire body ready for the attack.

"Like him," Essex said without mercy.

Garrett's eyes widened. "Take it back."

"I cannot," Essex returned. "With every day, you grow colder and more distant, and you seem to think that you need to cling to the idea of what a duke *should* be." His friend's eyes narrowed. "That's what *he* did. He forced your mother into a box, and then an asylum, because she could not fulfill the role he thought she should. Is that who you are, Garrett? Are you a man who believes that the role, the title is more important than the person who fills it? Because that is what you are doing to her. You made her think that she will never be enough, but she is greater than any duchess I have ever known."

Each word punched him in the gut, and the weight of them nearly crushed Garrett because he could not deny their truth.

Essex blew out a harsh breath. "Can you not see that you're going to be alone? And it will all be his doing... No, now it's *your* doing."

And with sagging shoulders, Essex whipped around on his booted heel and dodged into the crowd, and Garrett stood there alone indeed.

And in his triumph against Dr. Mortimer, he was utterly defeated.

For in all the steps that he had taken, he had not done the most important thing. He had not shown the woman he loved

that she *was* loved.

Oh, no. He had put tradition, duty, and honor before all that.

He had put the cold crown of a coronet above his heart.

And in so doing, he had lost the only important thing.

His wife.

As he stood in that sea of people, alone, he did not know what to do for the first time in his life, except... He had to show her the truth. He had to show her that the world could burn, but his love for her would always endure.

And there, he knew... She was not the fool. She never had been.

In all his gruff efficiency, it was he who had acted that part. And it was time to stop.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A few days later

She clutched the drawings to her chest as she headed onto the busy floor of Sharpe and Son, which was packed with people filling the rows of shelves as they perused all the new books she had selected.

Her fingers ached from scribbling fiercely all morning. She had worked with due diligence since returning to the bookshop. It had sustained her, even as she was certain her heart was breaking. The long, painful hours had only been bearable because of the boxes and boxes of books that she had ordered and shelved and now sought homes for.

The once quiet shop was now full of excitement as customers perused new authors and old favorites. From the gentry to tradesmen, people mused over the selections, their eyes and hands eager.

She averted her eyes from the stacks of *Pride and Prejudice*. They reminded her too much of Garrett.

Her husband was a complicated man, someone who had been wounded grievously. Above all, he put the lives and dreams of others at the forefront of his actions. And she could not harbor anger at him for shoving everyone away who might care for him so that he could do that work.

Sorrow filled her instead. No. Mourning. She mourned the loss of their friendship and conversations and shared intimacy.

It was hard not to feel anger that he had not been able to choose that, but instead had chosen the isolation he had always known.

It did not make her feel better to know that she could not force him to love her.

She saw little of her father, though he had begun to do better, drinking far less. Much to her shock, he had taken up a small set of rooms and begun writing. A novel.

He'd let her read several chapters, and to her astonishment,

it was excellent. His pain was poured out onto the pages, and though she still could not fully forgive his cruelty to her, she'd begun to at least understand him.

Just as she was about to place her new plans on one of the long tables and bundle them up, a loud cacophony of shouts filled the streets.

A wave of hope, such terrible hope, swept through her before she dashed it away.

It had to be Garrett, but that did not mean anything. Not truly. No doubt he'd come to speak of doing the right thing. She lifted her chin and waited as the customers in the shop paused and turned toward the sounds on the street.

The door flung open, the bell dinging, and Garrett charged in.

As he always did.

Her heart leaped at the sight of her remarkable husband, and she nearly laughed at the look on his face.

That beautiful, endearing look.

He looked like a bear with a thorn in his paw, and a muscle tightened in his jaw.

And then she spotted him swallow his words.

She gasped.

They locked eyes, and she said, "You want to say it, don't you?"

He frowned. "What?"

"Get out," she replied, smiling ruefully.

He let out a beleaguered sigh. "I wish to, but I won't," he replied as he strode forward.

Her eyes widened in astonishment that he was not sending everyone away.

He tensed, looked about at the many sets of eyes staring at him, and said, "Carry on. Carry on."

And because he was a duke, the customers did, though she

was certain several would hope to hear a smidgen of their conversation.

Garrett cut through the rows, his eyes locked on her, until he stood just on the other side of the table before her.

He opened his mouth, ready to speak, but then he noticed the bundle of papers in her arms.

“What are you holding?” he asked, his face lined as if he had not slept well.

“It is a secret that I have been working on,” she confessed. “Lily helped me.”

“A secret?” he asked, his eyes shining...with reckless hope. “And I have something to show you, too.”

“Oh, dear,” she said. “You’re going to outdo me, aren’t you?”

“Never,” he assured. “Not my clever wife.”

She laughed, a half groan. And then she placed the parchment down before him.

He stared at it for several long moments. “What am I looking at?”

“Parks,” she said.

“Yes, I see that, but—” And then he let out a low sound of appreciation. “Those are all in the city.”

“Yes,” she said. “You’ve the right of it. Almost all of the squares in London are paved with stone, and there’s no relief from it. When you showed me those crocuses and I finally got to see flowers and trees and forests, it was like I had been given a new appreciation for life. I felt as if I could breathe, and I want people in London to feel that, too. You said we could work on this project together. What do you think?”

Slowly, daring, he reached out and took her hand in his. He turned it over and pressed a kiss to her palm. “I think it a wonder, and I think that we should put a park in as many places as we can. I don’t care what it costs. I don’t care who I have to talk to. It can be done,” he said firmly. “I believe that

anything can be done if we do it *together*.”

“Together?” she whispered, her voice catching in her throat.

“I have an idea,” he said carefully.

“Go on.”

He cleared his throat. “You have already proven to me that you understand what a duchess is capable of.”

She grinned at him, savoring his strong hand beneath hers. “Is this what a duchess is capable of?”

He nodded. “Planning, helping other people, making the world better with the power that we have, but I never thought...” He paused, then continued: “The bookshop. It was a small thing for you. You always hated the fact that you had to sell books to people who didn’t appreciate them.”

She groaned. “That is true.”

He held her gaze and ventured, “What if you could always ensure that whoever received books wanted them?”

She blinked. “How?”

“My darling, what if we put aside the funds for you to create libraries all over the city of London so that people who do not have access to books could read them? We could engage tutors to teach people to read. And then all the worlds in those books would be open to so many.”

She gasped, and tears filled her eyes. “You are talking about a much better world.”

“Yes,” he said. “For all. For us. And you will never have to worry about powdered fools not appreciating your books again. But most importantly... I appreciate you.”

She stilled.

“I love you,” he said. “You are my world. My doorway from my lonely life, and I refused to go through it. But I do not want to be alone. I do not want to be like my father. Show me how to love you, and I promise I will.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. She cupped his jaw in her

palm and whispered, her voice full of emotion, “I love you, too, you foolish man. All I’ve wanted is to be with you and to share your life.”

“Share it with me,” he replied. “Walk with me, work with me, tease me, and tell me when I’m being an absolute arse. I beg of you, my love.”

Another tear slipped down her cheek, and she nodded. “Thank God my father could not come to see you that day. Thank God I came in his stead.”

He sucked in a shuddering, relieved breath, and then, much to her shock, he reached over and hauled her up onto the table and over it into his arms. “And thank God you suggested I read *Pride and Prejudice*,” he returned.

She let out a yelp of surprise, and the entire shop turned to witness their moment of unreserved love.

She gazed up into his eyes as he held her close and stroked a lock of hair back from her face. “I love you, Duchess. I love you with all my heart. There aren’t words to truly describe how I feel.”

“Do you still insist you are not like Mr. Darcy?”

“I’m more like him than I care to admit,” he said, tilting her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I am arrogant and difficult. And you are more like Elizabeth than you might care to admit.”

“Yes,” she said with a laugh. “I have my strong ideas, but we will carry on just like they did. Married and happy. I’m sure of it.”

“We shall do better,” he countered proudly.

“How can anything be better than Pemberley?” she teased.

“Well, I’m a duke,” he said softly. “I own several Pemberleys. We should go and see them.”

She started to laugh. “My, my, Your Grace. You are not arrogant at all.”

“I told you I was. In fact, I sometimes think that the author

meant Darcy to be a duke. She just couldn't say it."

She nodded. It was true. "Because authors weren't allowed to use the actual English nobility in their works of fiction."

"Right," he proclaimed. "Attention all."

And being a man with a formidable voice, and a duke, all in the shop did turn and look with much curiosity.

She peered at him, confused as she whispered, "What are you doing?"

His gaze softened, and he entwined their hands. "I want to kiss you in front of everyone. So the world can see my affection for you."

Tears stung her eyes as she realized the power of his words. He must have known how he'd hurt her.

A wave of hope and love washed over her as her fears fell entirely away.

And then he paused, his eyes warming with emotion. "I have something for you," he said.

"Something else? Something more?" She shook her head. "How could there possibly be more?"

"Take a look at this." He pulled out a volume from his coat pocket. Carefully, eager for her approval, he offered it to her.

She took it from his hands and read. "*Pride and Prejudice*. I don't understand," she said, her brow furrowing. "We already own this."

"Look inside," he urged. She opened the cover and looked at the title page.

Pride and Prejudice by A Lady, Jane Austen.

To my dear Elizabeth—your husband is a most determined gentleman. It sounds as if you are as remarkable as the Elizabeth of my story. I hope you are both as happy as I have imagined her to be.

She lifted her gaze to his, her body humming with excitement. "You found her?"

He nodded. “Do you like it?”

“I love it. But not nearly as much as I love you,” she whispered.

And with that, he tilted her head back, readying her for a kiss before he replied, “It turns out that *a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife...* And it also turns out that I always wanted *you.*”



The love doesn't end here... Join the [Entangled Insiders](#) for free books, giveaways, exclusive access to upcoming titles, and so much more!

Acknowledgments

A book is a collaboration. I am so incredibly lucky to have such an excellent and caring team. Life can be quite challenging and glorious for all of us, at once. So, it's good to be part of a team that is ready to meet life. Massive thank you to: Elizabeth Pelletier, Lydia Sharp, Erin Molta, Jessica Turner, Heather Riccio, Rikki Cleveland, and Jill Marsal. And thank you Louisa Cornell and Christy Carlyle. You two always know how to cheer me up and keep on the path!

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author [Eva Devon](#) was raised on literary fiction, but quite accidentally and thankfully, she was introduced to romance one Christmas by Johanna Lindsey's Mallory Novella, *The Present*. A romance addict was born. She devoured every single Lindsey novel within a few months and moved on to contemporary and paranormal with gusto. Now, she loves to write her own roguish dukes, alpha males, and the heroines who tame them. She loves to hear from her readers.

Also by Eva Devon

[THE TWELVE DAYS OF SEDUCTION](#)

[LESS THAN A LADY](#)

[THE WEDDING WAGER](#)

[THE DUKE'S ACCIDENTAL BRIDE](#)

[NEVER A WALLFLOWER SERIES](#)

[THE SPINSTER AND THE RAKE](#)

[MUCH ADO ABOUT DUKES](#)

[THE DUKE'S SECRET CINDERELLA](#)

Discover more romance from Entangled...

[FOUR WEDDINGS AND A DUKE](#)

a novel by [Michelle McLean](#)

As the middle sister in a bevy of swans, Lavinia Wynnburn is quite content being the odd duck out. Alexander Reddington, the Duke of Beaubrooke, doesn't care for social niceties, nor is he good at them. But when he stumbles into the same corner as a socially awkward wallflower, he knows he's found the perfect wife. Only, Alexander's shy new wife is finding her new position surprisingly exciting and keeps accepting every invitation that flutters past their door. And he might even be falling for her. Now he must hide the truth about why he really proposed...before his unexpectedly happy marriage is dashed to pieces.

[THE LAST LORD STANDING](#)

a What Happens in the Ballroom novel by [Diana Lloyd](#)

Always the rogue and never the gentleman, Kerrigan Northam doesn't worry about anything beyond his own pleasures. Lady Olivia Liberty Chalford is averse to the very idea of marriage. So when she's rescued by a wickedly dashing gentleman who claims to be something of a scoundrel, Libby thinks she's found the perfect partner in crime... But as their courting charade continues, Kerr's gone from wondering how long until she discovers his secret...to how long until he's madly in love with her.

[EARLS RUSH IN](#)

a novel by [Jennifer Haymore](#)

The beloved "sunshine" of the ton, Miss Charlotte Chapman, is trapped in a carriage with the best friend of her deceased brother. The reclusive Earl of Trevelyan has a reputation for being something of a beast in society's circles, but nothing—nothing—will stop him from rescuing Charlotte from her disastrous engagement. He promised his best friend that she and her sister would be looked after. Protecting her from himself is quite another matter... Now, thanks to their upended carriage, they're stranded at a country inn—which has only one room left.

[AN EARL TO REMEMBER](#)

an Unforgettable Love novel by [Stacy Reid](#)

Daniel Rutherford, the Earl of Stannis, has absolutely no memory of who he is. They tell him he must have fallen overboard, and the only person he seems to recognize is the lovely Miss Georgianna Eleanor Heyford—who strikes a chord of familiarity...and the faintest memory of heating his blood. Only now this inelegant, poorly dressed woman claims to be his wife! But the truth is, Georgianna is finally getting her revenge. The dashing earl will work off the money he owes her and no one will be the wiser. Except the longer he stays with her, the more it feels like he belongs there. And that perhaps he'd find a forever place in Georgianna's heart...at least, until his memory returns...