

THE
LORD'S
ICY
TEMPTRESS

MEGHAN SLOAN

The Lord's Icy Temptress

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

MEGHAN SLOAN

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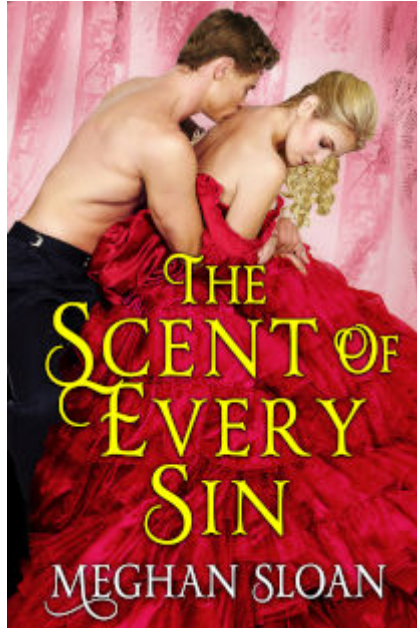
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The Lord's Icy Temptress

Introduction

Seraphina Hawthorne, daughter of the Earl of Emberdale, is hailed as the “Unattainable Rose”. Adored by society for her beauty and intellect, she guards a secret that could shatter her carefully constructed world forever. Born as the daughter of a maid but raised as nobility, Seraphina’s heart is torn between her lineage and the life she’s known. However, as her third Season unfurls, her encounter with the rakish Marquess of Aylesbridge challenges her position as the ton’s cherished diamond. Helpless before the allure of his scandalous seduction, her very identity stands on the precipice of transformation.

Will she succumb to her desires that could tarnish her reputation?

Tristan Ashford is the captivating Marquess of Aylesbridge, whose charismatic veneer veils a history etched with scars of maltreatment. His reputation as a roguish libertine conceals the fortress of emotions he’s erected to safeguard his heart. When destiny aligns his path with Seraphina, sparks fly, and a tantalizing waltz of pursuit and evasion begins. Amidst Tristan’s concealed affection for literature and Seraphina’s expressive pursuits, a lustful bond weaves its tendrils, daring him to dismantle the barricades he has so meticulously built.

Will Tristan find the strength to unveil his scars and open his heart to the possibility of love?

In a daring journey, Seraphina and Tristan defy conventions and entangle fates. As hidden truths echo, weaving their destinies anew, Seraphina’s secret identity and Tristan’s roguish past cast their shadows upon their burning romance. Trapped in the intoxicating vortex binding the “Unattainable Rose” and the enigmatic Marquess, they must confront the silhouettes that menace to rupture them asunder. Can their sizzling love last and embrace their true selves? Or will their bewitching courtship draw them into a life of misery and fear?

Chapter 1

“But it is not thus easy to steer a right course amidst such powerful and opposite tides; all I can do is to take example by the virtues of those with whom I converse, and avoid, as much as possible, the imitation of their faults.” - Evelina

It was the third time Lady Seraphina Hawthorne had read the book *Evelina* by Frances Burney. She consumed the pages at a rate that she had not been able to replicate with another tome, much to her mother's chagrin. It was certainly not the sort of book that Seraphina was supposed to be reading. The novel, filled with scandalous romance and societal intrigue, was considered somewhat controversial for a lady of her stature. However, Seraphina's inquisitive mind and thirst for adventure led her to explore literature that went beyond the boundaries of conventional societal norms.

As she lost herself in the vivid descriptions and captivating storylines, Seraphina could not help relating to the struggles of the novel's protagonist. Evelina's journey of self-discovery and navigating the treacherous waters of high society resonated with Seraphina's own experiences.

Or, perhaps it was merely her own ego that made her feel that way. It was not as if she had any scandalous romances to compare experiences. No, Seraphina had yet to have a man make her feel half as enthralled as the written word was capable of doing. Lost in the world of words, she could momentarily forget the weight of her own secrets and the expectations placed upon her.

Seraphina was acutely aware that she was not like other young ladies of her station, her lineage concealed under a carefully constructed facade. The weight of that hidden truth burdened her soul, creating a perpetual sense of isolation and vulnerability.

Yet within the pages of *Evelina*, she found moments of respite and a glimmer of hope. It was as if the words whispered to her, reminding her she was not alone in her struggles. Seraphina longed for a life where she could shed the

shackles of societal expectations and embrace her true self, unencumbered by the secrets that bound her. Perhaps, if she were honest with herself, she wished she could be more like Evelina.

Sunlight streamed through the ornate stained-glass windows, casting colourful patterns on the rows of books in the family library. It was her favourite room in the house. But Seraphina knew her momentary escape was fleeting. Soon, she would be thrust back into the world of ballrooms, high society, and the expectations placed upon her as the daughter of the Earl of Emberdale.

As if on cue, Seraphina's peaceful reading was interrupted by the entrance of her mother, Lady Lillian Hawthorne, Countess of Emberdale. Lillian's eyes held a glimmer of concern as she joined Seraphina and sat beside her.

"Seraphina, my dear," Lillian began, her voice gentle but tinged with a hint of unease. "I wanted to talk to you about the upcoming Season. It will be your third, and I cannot help feeling a modicum of worry."

Here came the lecture. For the past three years, Mother had given her the same lecture before the first ball of the season in one form or another. Granted, last year's lecture was tinged with desperation for her daughter to marry, and this year was likely to be downright frantic.

Seraphina closed her book. "What worries you, Mother?"

Lillian glanced around the room as if checking for prying ears before continuing. She held her narrow shoulders bunched high and her anxiety clear in her anxious posture as she shifted uncomfortably on the bench beside Seraphina.

"My dear, you are known as the 'Unattainable Rose' of the ton. You are admired by many, but it seems that suitors are hesitant to approach you. I fear they may believe you to be unapproachable or uninterested in marriage."

Seraphina sighed softly, a hint of frustration tugging at her features as her grip tightened on the book in her hands. It was not as if she had chosen to be the rose of anything. "I

understand, Mother. But it is not as if I intentionally repel potential suitors. I simply have not found someone who sparks my interest or captures my heart.”

Among other things.

Lillian reached out and gently placed a hand on Seraphina’s, her touch comforting. “I know, my dear. And it is perfectly alright to be selective. But I worry that the rumours and speculations surrounding your ... aloofness might hinder your chances of finding true happiness.”

Seraphina acknowledged her mother’s words with a nod, her heart fluttering in apprehension. The silent pressure conveyed by Lillian’s reminder was all too familiar.

“I appreciate your guidance, Mother,” Seraphina responded, her voice filled with a mix of gratitude and uncertainty. “I understand the expectations placed upon me and will do my best to fulfill them. But I also hope to find someone who appreciates me for who I am, someone with whom I can share my passions and dreams.”

Lillian’s eyes softened as she placed a reassuring hand on Seraphina’s arm. “My dear, I want nothing more than your happiness. It is not just about fulfilling societal expectations; it is about finding a partner who sees the true beauty within you and who cherishes your intellect and creativity. I know it is not an easy task, but I believe someone out there will love you for who you are.”

Seraphina could appreciate that her mother was a romantic at heart, but the dreamy version of the marriage mart that her mother appeared to hold was nothing like the reality that Seraphina had been subjected to for the past three years.

It was not as if any of these men would pay her the time of day were they to know who she truly was.

The very same secret that Seraphina was never meant to have found out about would be the exact same thing that would ruin her prospects. All the more logical reason for her to find a husband as quickly as possible. Seraphina’s thumb anxiously tapped against the back of the book in her hand as

she nodded to her mother's request. There was added urgency to the necessity of marriage, she knew. The implication that she was not getting any younger was loud and clear.

She had accidentally learned of her true parentage from an overheard conversation between Lillian and her lady's maid, Adeline: she was, in fact, Adeline's biological daughter, not Lillian's. Lillian's own daughter had tragically passed away after a complicated childbirth.

The weight of this secret has burdened Seraphina ever since. Fear of rejection and abandonment had become a constant companion, fuelling her aloofness and distant demeanour. The knowledge that her true lineage remained a closely guarded secret gnawed at her heart, creating an invisible barrier between her and the outside world.

How could she ever allow herself to be vulnerable when the truth of her birth could potentially shatter the fragile acceptance she had found in the noble world? The love and care bestowed upon her by Lord Philip Hawthorne, the Earl of Emberdale, and Lady Emberdale had provided her with a privileged life, but the knowledge of her true lineage haunted her every step. She yearned for connection, for someone who would see past the facade she had meticulously constructed and love her for the person she truly was.

If she were never meant to know this secret of her identity, how could she entrust her worries to the woman who raised her?

"Besides, it shall be fun, will it not?" Lillian gushed and leaned in closer to her daughter. "Dancing, a little wine, the soiree hosted by the Duchess of Windermere's only two days away, so you ought to have plenty to look forward to!"

Seraphina forced a smile, but it felt hollow. "Mama, I—"

Their conversation was curtailed by the butler's announcement of arriving guests. "Presenting Lady Diana Hamilton, accompanied by her daughter."

Seraphina's heart soared at the announcement. She was saved. Elizabeth, her dearest friend, was here to visit with her

mother, Diana, which meant she would have a reprieve from such uncomfortable conversations, if only for a short while.

The women rose from their seats to greet their guests, who were in the middle of what appeared to be a highly animated conversation about the very same event they were just discussing.

“—said that she is going to wear a powder blue. Can you imagine? Repeating the same colour dress from last season?”

“Well, Mother, you know that she does not much mind why people are speaking about her ... just so long as she is the centre of all conversation.”

“Quite right. However, you, my daughter, will be in moss as every respectable young woman will favour this year. I have it on good authority that the queen herself is ordering dresses and ribbons in moss.”

“I presume you are speaking of Lady Travers?” Lilian asked with a girlish giggle.

“Could we be truly speaking of anyone else?” Diana, Elizabeth’s mother, added simply. “My daughter had said something about the modist pushing blue dresses. Absolutely not.”

“The colours on the invitation clearly requested pearl and white.” Lilian gasped, suddenly rethinking the entire wardrobe she had planned for Seraphina this year.

Sera, however, could not care less which dress she was to wear. She felt a pang of envy as she watched the easy camaraderie between Elizabeth and Diana, their shared excitement for the social event. Seraphina longed for that connection with her mother, the freedom to share her fears and dreams without the weight of secrets and expectations. Would she ever be able to embrace such moments fully without the constant reminder of her hidden past?

For now, Seraphina played her role, engaging in polite conversation and masking her inner turmoil. She understood the importance of these social events, the dance of courtship and connections that occurred within the glittering ballrooms.

But deep down, she yearned for something more—a genuine connection that transcended societal expectations and allowed her to be truly seen and loved for who she was.

Seeing Seraphina’s quiet demeanour, Diana gently nudged her with a smile. “You must be excited about the duchess’s soiree, my dear. It’s a splendid opportunity to showcase your charm and grace. What colour shall you wear?”

“Clearly not blue, My Lady.” Seraphina offered a faint smile in response, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of her hidden identity.

“Quite right!” Diana gushed and pulled Lilian into a friendly embrace as the women headed to the parlour to take tea.

Elizabeth hooked her arm in through Seraphina’s and leaned in conspiratorially. “While they discuss dresses, I have to tell you about the real gossip. You are going to absolutely hate it.”

Sera smiled tightly. She could not summon the same thrill she used to get from the same sorts of conversation. Sometimes she worried that she might become jaded by it all. Was it so terrible to hope for more? Something thrilling? Something that would pulsate desire and adrenaline to her very core?

As the teacups clinked and laughter filled the room, Seraphina silently hoped that amidst the glamour and superficiality of the Season, she would find someone who saw past the unattainable facade, someone who would cherish the real Seraphina hidden beneath the mask of the “Unattainable Rose.”

Chapter 2

No man in all of London hated ledgers more than Tristan Ashford, Marquess of Aylesbridge. Something about endlessly leering at numbers on a page made his eyes want to cross. A necessary evil, he knew, as there was work to be done, and he was the only person who could do it — but he would be damned if he did not think the old bastard did not leave the books a sodding mess on purpose.

“Impossible,” Tristan muttered for the hundredth time this afternoon as he bitterly hurled another book filled with scribbled, tiny writing back to his desk. Though, the resentment that presently overwhelmed him was only partially because of the improper record keeping and mainly because he loathed his late father with every fibre of his being. Were there another heir, he would have happily passed off all his father’s inherited affairs and the title that came with it.

Tristan sank heavily into the worn leather armchair and glared at the pile of paper on the desk that never seemed to get any smaller, no matter how many days he dedicated to his work. He scrubbed his hands down his face with a sigh. At least the man was dead. That was what really mattered. All this was worth it so long as he had been given the gift of never seeing the bastard again.

As the flickering candlelight cast dancing shadows on the walls, Tristan’s thoughts drifted back to his childhood—a time filled with fear, pain, and longing for a love he never received. He remembered the icy glares, cutting remarks, and relentless demands that left him feeling inadequate and unwanted. The wounds inflicted upon his young heart had shaped him into the enigmatic, guarded man he had become.

Tristan’s gaze fell upon a portrait of his late mother, her gentle smile a stark contrast to the haunting memories of his father. She had been his beacon of warmth and affection, the one person who had shown him kindness and love amidst the darkness of his childhood. Losing her at the tender age of thirteen had shattered his world, leaving him with a profound fear of emotional vulnerability and a reluctance to trust.

He had spent many years seeking a connection wherever he could. Matters of the heart wholly ignored in favour of pleasures of the flesh. The rakish reputation he had earned for himself had come easily. It was a role he had felt only too easy to slip into. He felt no remorse or shame for how he chose to spend his evenings.

With a sigh, Tristan closed the ledger and leaned back in his chair, his thoughts consumed by the weight of his past. Despite the passage of time, the wounds remained fresh, etched into his very being.

In the depths of his solitude, an unspoken desire stirred within him—a longing for something more, something beyond the shallow affairs and scandalous encounters that had come to define him in the eyes of society. Certainly something better than spending his nights here in his late father's damned office.

He had to get out of here. He could not sit here and wallow, and if he did not put space between himself and the ghosts that haunted this home, he would go insane. Before he could give himself time to talk himself out of leaving and heading into London proper — he left the mess of work to be handled at another time and went to ready himself for his favourite gentlemen's club.

Sometime after returning to the city, this club started to feel more comfortable to him. He could not name how it had happened, but he felt himself more of a regular here than he had been in his younger years. Drinking here was nearly a habit. One that he should have felt badly about, but he simply did not. It was comfortable. Tristan came, drank, and spent time with his best friend, and then when the night started to dwindle, he would accompany whichever woman he felt was the prettiest to spend some quality time together.

He planned for the same thing this evening. As he arrived, the dimly lit room was filled with laughter and clinking glasses, creating an atmosphere of mischief and revelry. Lord Michael Thorne, Earl of Devon, sat at their regular table in their secluded corner. His friend lifted a glass in his direction the moment they made eye contact with one another, and

Tristan headed over. He could not help noticing Michael's grin and the impish glint of mischief in his eyes.

Whatever the man had planned, at least he had the foresight to have a drink ready for Tristan before he arrived.

"Dare I ask what has you looking so pleased with yourself this evening?" Tristan greeted as he slid into his regular chair. Tristan sipped his whiskey, savouring the smooth warmth that spread through him. He leaned back in his chair, a bemused smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Another devilish plan you have concocted, my friend?" he asked, raising an eyebrow in anticipation.

"The game is afoot, my friend." Michael leaned forward, his voice barely above a whisper yet brimming with excitement. "Have you heard of Lady Seraphina Hawthorne? The 'Unattainable Rose' of the ton?" he asked, a hint of challenge in his tone.

Tristan's interest was piqued. Lady Seraphina Hawthorne was known for her icy demeanour, a challenge that few men dared to take on. He raised his glass in a silent toast. "Ah, the infamous Lady Seraphina," he replied, a note of intrigue in his voice. "What audacious plan have you devised this time?"

A mischievous smile played on Michael's lips as he leaned in closer. "My dear friend, I propose a bet," he whispered, his eyes glinting with excitement. "I bet you cannot seduce Lady Seraphina and thaw her icy heart."

Tristan's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Seduce Lady Seraphina? The notion was both thrilling and daunting. Lady Seraphina had built a reputation for being unapproachable, a challenge that had enticed many but remained unconquered. Tristan's mind raced with possibilities, his curiosity piqued by the daring proposition.

"And what do I gain if I succeed?" Tristan asked, his voice laced with amusement.

Michael leaned back, a sly smile on his lips. "If you manage to capture the heart of the unattainable Lady

Seraphina, I shall concede defeat and forever refer to you as the ‘Master of Seduction.’”

Tristan chuckled, the challenge igniting a fire within him. He had always been drawn to the thrill of conquest, but the idea of breaking down Lady Seraphina’s defences intrigued him like no other. Tristan leaned back against the plush velvet upholstery of the booth, swirling the amber liquid in his glass as he exchanged a knowing glance with Michael. The flicker of excitement danced in his eyes as he spoke, his voice laced with a mischievous tone.

Perhaps this was exactly the sort of distraction that he so desperately needed.

“Michael, my dear friend, we are embarking on a venture that will require equal parts finesse and charm,” Tristan began, a hint of a smirk on his lips. “Lady Seraphina Hawthorne, the elusive beauty known as the ‘Unattainable Rose,’ has proven to be a formidable challenge.”

Michael chuckled, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. “Indeed, Tristan. But fear not, for we possess the audacity and wit to overcome this challenge. We must ensnare her heart and captivate her mind.”

Tristan nodded, his gaze fixed on a distant point. “Aye, Michael. Lady Seraphina is no ordinary woman. She possesses intellect and discernment that surpasses the majority of the ton. The trick will be doing so in a way that she does not see coming before we have even begun. I have heard a great many tales of men with wounded pride and their tails tucked firmly between their legs after an evening with her.”

Michael leaned forward, his voice low and conspiratorial. “But let us not forget the power of passion, my friend. Lady Seraphina may be aloof and reserved, but I believe a flame within her is waiting to be ignited. We must kindle that fire.”

Tristan raised an eyebrow, intrigued by Michael’s suggestion. “Passion, you say? How do we go about stoking those embers?”

Michael smirked, his eyes glinting. “Through subtle gestures, heartfelt compliments, and unwavering attention. Of course. How else would we do it? She is still a woman, just like any other. We must make her feel desired and adored, Tristan. Show her that we see beyond the ‘Unattainable Rose’ facade and appreciate the woman within. Allow her to be vulnerable.”

Tristan’s lips curved into a confident smile. “Very well, Michael. Let the games begin. We shall woo Lady Seraphina with our intellect, charm, and undeniable allure. And when the time is right, we shall unleash the full force of our passion upon her, leaving her no choice but to surrender.”

“I knew you were the right man for this particular job. A challenge to top all others! A bet to end all bets!” Michael gloated as he lifted his nearly empty glass. His words started to slur together, but he was no less charismatic because of it.

Tristan leaned back in his chair, swirling the amber liquid in his glass, as his eyes flickered with curiosity and apprehension. He took a sip before finally posing the question lingering in his mind. “And if I lose this bet of yours, Michael? What then?”

Michael’s smile widened as he considered the possibility. “Ah, my dear friend, if you should find yourself on the losing end, the consequences will be quite entertaining, I assure you.” He leaned forward, his voice laced with playful taunting. “You shall have to don the mantle of a hopeless romantic, writing the most eloquent of love letters and serenading Lady Seraphina beneath her window in the moonlight for all to see.”

Tristan scoffed, a glint of amusement dancing in his eyes. “Serenading? Surely you jest.”

But Michael’s expression turned serious as he continued, his tone filled with genuine conviction. “No, my friend, I speak only the truth. You shall have to express your deepest emotions and lay bare your heart, risking rejection and exposing the vulnerable side of your nature. It will be a test of your mettle, a challenge to overcome your fear of emotional vulnerability.”

Tristan's lips curved into a wry smile, a hint of determination gleaming in his eyes. "Very well, if it comes to that, I shall embrace the role of the hopeless romantic. But mark my words, Michael, I intend to win this bet and prove that I am more than capable of capturing Lady Seraphina's heart."

The two friends clinked their glasses together, sealing their pact to conquer the heart of the enigmatic Lady Seraphina Hawthorne. Their plan was set in motion, and they were determined to succeed where others had faltered.

Chapter 3

Two days later, the Hawthorne family made their grand appearance at the Windermers' soirée. The sprawling estate was adorned with twinkling lights and vibrant flowers, creating an enchanting ambiance. Seraphina's heart raced with excitement and apprehension as the carriage pulled up to the entrance. The entire ride over, Mother made sure to explain exactly how the evening was supposed to go.

She seemed to believe that if she did not tell Seraphina how to stand and what angles were the most flattering for her, she would somehow forget. Never mind that she explained the same things before every social event they attended.

The moment the carriage door swung open, Seraphina emerged; her blue eyes widened in awe at the grandeur of the estate. She stepped onto the cobblestone path, her satin gown gently rustling against her slender frame with each graceful movement, an off-white, nearly pearl colour with moss green accents that matched the adornments in her raven black hair. Per her mother's request, she was certain to be in the height of fashion for the event. The soft glow of the lanterns illuminated her delicate features, accentuating her radiant beauty.

Taking a deep breath, Seraphina entered the grand hall, her entrance accompanied by a hushed whisper that spread through the room. Heads turned, gazes fixed on her as she glided through the crowd with an air of regality. Seraphina's heart pounded within her chest, her fingers tingling with nervous anticipation. It did not matter how many times it happened, she was always caught off guard. She knew that she had been relegated to 'rose' for numerous reasons, and not all of them favourable, but the title ensured that eyes were always on her.

Seraphina knew that she ought not to complain, but after three years, it was more than a little exhausting to have to be 'on' all the time.

She exchanged polite nods and smiles with the familiar faces of London's elite, her eyes darting around the room in

search of her close friend Elizabeth. The lively chatter and elegant music filled the air, but Seraphina's thoughts were consumed by the weight of her secret as if somehow she was going to move wrong or say something that would betray the fact that she did not belong here.

It mattered not that she had been raised her whole life as Lillian's daughter; somehow, she no longer felt she belonged here. Most days, Seraphina wished that she had never overheard that horrible conversation. That day two and a half years ago had been the worst thing to ever happen to her.

The hidden truth that threatened to unravel her carefully constructed façade. She thought that she could push it down. Seraphina had tried to ignore it, but the lie she had uncovered sat there as a constant presence in the back of her mind. She would give anything for a proper distraction.

Finally, Seraphina spotted Elizabeth in a cozy corner of the ballroom, her friend's eyes lighting up as she approached. They exchanged warm greetings, and Seraphina couldn't help noticing the subtle excitement dancing in Elizabeth's eyes.

"Is not this ballroom simply exquisite?" Elizabeth exclaimed, her voice filled with awe as she surveyed the elegant decor. "The Duchess of Windermere certainly knows how to host a soirée."

Elizabeth had always been the more optimistic of the two. Nothing ever seemed to get her down. While it was also her third season, the magic of the marriage mart was not lost on Elizabeth. She still managed to see everything placed in front of her as an opportunity.

Seraphina nodded, a smile gracing her lips. "Indeed, it is a sight to behold. The attention to detail is impeccable. I can see why this event has been the talk of the ton."

"Come now; you cannot say that our host has not wholly outdone herself this year," Elizabeth asked as she grabbed the pair glasses of wine. Seraphina happily accepted hers.

Seraphina smirked. "Fine. I relent. She has spared no expense. I wish I could see it all with your enthusiasm.

Instead, when I look out at this room, all I see are people waiting for me to do or say something gossip-worthy.”

“Perhaps you should shock them all by simply behaving?” Elizabeth teased with a giggle.

“Now, where would the fun in that be?” Seraphina laughed.

“There are some new faces, at the very least. You will have some variety to choose from.”

“I doubt there is any that shall strike an interest. My reputation tends to precede me at this point. Besides, endless conversations about the same thing are so exhausting. I do not know how you can tolerate it,” Seraphina answered easily.

“I still maintain that you are simply not as well versed in conversation as everybody has been fooled into thinking.” Elizabeth nudged her with her shoulder softly and then froze. “Oh my ... do not look now., but I think things are going to get a lot more, uhm, interesting for you.”

Naturally, Seraphina turned to look immediately. Her heart dropped into her stomach with a sense of impending dread as her eyes settled on the same man Elizabeth had. None other than the insufferable man that she had the misfortune of being courted by during her first season, Lord Reginald Blackwood.

Seraphina’s stomach dropped. A feeling of dread leaving her cold.

She quickly spun away from him in hopes that he would not look at her either if she did not look at him.

“What is he doing here? I thought he had left for good after telling everybody I had broken his heart,” Seraphina remarked dryly. She had done no such thing, of course, but his ego would not have allowed him to leave London quietly. “I had hoped he would have found other pursuits to occupy his time.”

Elizabeth nodded, her gaze fixed on Lord Blackwood. “I heard he inherited a modest sum when his parents passed, but it seems insufficient to clear his outstanding debts. Perhaps that is why he has resurfaced.”

“It would not surprise me that he is looking for another wealthy young woman to wed,” Seraphina murmured, her tone tinged with a hint of resignation. “Financial troubles have a way of bringing people back into society’s spotlight, regardless of their intentions.”

Elizabeth’s brows furrowed with concern. “Do you think he holds any grudges against you? After all, you did reject his proposal.”

Seraphina’s gaze flickered towards Lord Blackwood once more before returning to Elizabeth. “It is possible. Rejection can often breed resentment. But I hope he has moved on, just as I have.”

Elizabeth placed a reassuring hand on Seraphina’s arm. “You made the right decision, my dear. A loveless marriage for the sake of convenience would have brought you nothing but sorrow. Your happiness should never be compromised. Besides, it serves him right for not being able to appreciate a good thing properly when he had it.”

Seraphina chanced an anxious glance over her shoulder, only to find Lord Blackwood’s beady gaze firmly locked on them. He did not even appear to blink. Seraphina had to repress a shudder.

“I cannot fathom why Lord Blackwood insists on staring at us,” Seraphina murmured, her tone tinged with annoyance. Given how roughly things had been ended between the two of them, it made even less sense. Had Mother seen that he was back yet?

She felt the urge to find her mother and express her clear discomfort about Lord Blackwood’s sudden attention to her. Was he going to attempt to stir up trouble? “It is quite impolite and rather unsettling.”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes darting towards Lord Blackwood before returning to Seraphina. “Indeed, his gaze is rather relentless. It is as if he holds a grudge or harbours some sort of resentment towards you. I wonder what could have caused such lingering animosity.”

Seraphina's brows furrowed, a mixture of confusion and frustration evident on her face. "Nothing that should not have been soothed by his three years outside London."

Elizabeth's expression turned thoughtful as she mused, "Perhaps it is his wounded pride. Rejection can breed resentment and fuel unrequited desires. But it is no excuse for his discourteous behaviour."

Seraphina sighed, her gaze lingering on Lord Blackwood for a moment longer, the dread in her stomach growing before she turned her attention back to Elizabeth.

"Regardless of his motivations, I will not let his presence or unsettling gaze ruin our evening. Let us enjoy the festivities and pay him no mind. We have better things to occupy our thoughts and conversations."

Elizabeth smiled, a determined glint in her eyes. "You are right, my dear Seraphina. Far more delightful and worthy gentlemen in this room deserve our attention. Let us revel in the joy of the evening and dismiss Lord Blackwood and his ill-mannered stares from our minds."

"So tell me, Elizabeth, which of these young men seems the most interesting to you? Have any caught your fancy yet?" Seraphina asked innocently, not really expecting an answer.

She certainly was not expecting the full-body blush that seemed to consume her dear friend when the question was asked.

"There is!" Seraphina gasped happily. "Where is he?! Show him to me!"

Elizabeth tightened her grip on her friend's arm and shook her head firmly. "No! I cannot! I shall make my move in time, but I shall die of embarrassment if you do not stop at once!"

"I will only stop once you tell me who it is!" Seraphina refused.

So absorbed in their conversation, the pair of giggling women nearly collided with the broad chest of a man.

“Pardon me, ladies,” came a smooth, deep voice. Seraphina’s eyes flicked upward, ready to dismiss the man like she did every other man who attempted to speak with her — but her protests died in her throat the moment she locked eyes with perhaps the most handsome man she had ever seen.

She clutched Elizabeth’s hand more firmly in her own as her gaze rolled up a broad, muscular chest. The man she had nearly collided with looked as if he had strolled right off the pages of one of her romance novels. Seraphina’s heart skipped a beat. Tall, unruly dark brown hair and a pair of emerald, green eyes that somehow caught the light perfectly.

The man wore a polite smile as he looked to excuse his careless actions, but Seraphina could hardly hear his words; he so transfixed her. It was as if someone had reached into her mind and pulled out the same man that she envisioned every night in her dreams. That same man she placed as the romantic interest in every book she read and every daydream she indulged in.

He was far, far too handsome to be a real man. Whoever he was, she was in a world of trouble.

Chapter 4

Only two minutes into the ball, Tristan was already regretting his bargain with his annoying friend. The Windermere family had certainly spared no expense in ensuring that the season's first ball was lavish and overly stunning. The work was certainly cut out for the families that would host balls in the wake of this one.

Lady Seraphina was a renowned beauty, for certain. For three years, there had been not a single debutant who had been able to hold a candle to her in terms of looks and inherent grace, but looking out over the dance floor now, he knew that there were some faces that, under regular circumstances, he would have dearly liked to have got to know better.

But Tristan knew women, and he knew the power of his undivided attention. It was his theory that Lady Seraphina was the sort of woman who needed loyalty and attention. With the reputation for having such a cold heart as she did, Tristan figured he just needed to find out enough about her passions and interests until he was an expert in those things. Then, once she could not dismiss him as an intellectual inferior, then he would make his move.

It was the perfect plan.

But first, to locate her. If only he were a horse with blinders, then he could more easily avoid all the stunning creatures present this evening. His eyes scanned the ballroom, and his gaze landed on Lady Seraphina Hawthorne. Time seemed to stand still as he watched her move gracefully through the crowd, her raven-black hair shimmering under the soft glow of the chandeliers. The whispers and glances from the guests were nothing but background noise to him, for his focus was solely on the "Unattainable Rose."

His heart raced with a mixture of anticipation and nervousness as he made his way towards her, each step bringing him closer to the fulfillment of his audacious challenge. He could feel the weight of the room's expectation upon him, but his determination never wavered. He, too, had

formed a bit of a reputation for himself. Granted, it was of a more salacious sort. There was bound to be more than one mother in this room anxiously awaiting who his first target would be.

Lady Seraphina seemed wholly intent on keeping to herself, so he did the first thing he could think of — he put himself deliberately in her path. Though, he was hardly expecting her to knock directly into him. His hands lifted, bracing her in her path with a reassuring smile. “Pardon me, ladies.”

The challenge he had undertaken was not just about seduction but about breaking through the barriers guarding her heart, a feat he knew would require more than just charm and wit. Their eyes locked briefly, and Tristan sensed a hint of curiosity mingled with scepticism in that fleeting connection.

He wondered if she knew his intentions or if she simply regarded him as another suitor vying for her attention. Either way, he was prepared to prove himself worthy. He rose to his full height and donned his most charming smile, which always ensured a lady to swoon for him.

“You are pardoned,” Lady Seraphina said flatly. She was already side-stepping him and attempting to move out of his company. He could not allow that. This whole ordeal hinged on their first meeting. Things needed to go properly.

“Allow me to make it up to you?” Tristan offered, his gaze never leaving hers.

“That is quite unnecessary, I assure you.” Lady Seraphina dipped into a modest bow that gave him the very distinct impression that he was being dismissed from her company. That, he also could not allow.

“Even if I insist?” He ventured again. “Perhaps with a dance?”

Lady Seraphina’s brow quirked as she looked up at him. “I think that would benefit you more than it would me.”

Tristan could not help smirking. “You can only say that because you have not yet danced with me. It will be a

transformative experience.”

Oozing with charm, bordering on arrogance, but he could see that same flicker of challenge answered in Lady Seraphina’s gaze. She would have to dance with him now, if only to prove him wrong.

“Very well. One dance,” Lady Seraphina agreed.

Child’s play, honestly.

Perhaps all the other men that had angled for her attention just were not her type. Tristan was everyone’s type. He offered his arm, which Seraphina hesitantly took. The last thing that he would allow was for her to have a moment to second guess herself or her choice to dance with him.

They made their way to the dance floor, and the room seemed to fade into the background, their focus solely on each other. He applied strong yet gentle pressure of his hand on her waist as he led them into a fine waltz, their steps effortlessly synchronized.

“You have pleasantly surprised me, Lady Seraphina,” Tristan whispered, his voice laced with a hint of intrigue. “I did not expect you to accept my invitation to dance. At least, not so easily.”

A small smile played at the corners of Seraphina’s lips as she met his gaze with amusement and curiosity. “Indeed, Lord Ashford, surprises can be quite delightful, can they not?”

Tristan’s gut told him this was a test. He could not take anything she said at face value. The trick would be learning how to interpret the subtleties in what she did not say. All the while he would still need to flatter her and ensure that she had a good time with him.

He had hoped it would be simple, but he could already feel the challenges as his mind raced to guess how their interactions would turn out before they happened.

Tristan’s eyes sparkled with a mixture of mischief and admiration. He supposed there was certainly no point in pretending that he did not know who she was nor to be ignorant of her reputation. That would only do a disservice to

them both. “They certainly can, especially when they involve captivating women like yourself. I must admit, I am intrigued by the enigma that is Lady Seraphina Hawthorne.”

“Am I to understand that you have preconceived notions of me, Lord Ashford?” Seraphina’s gaze flickered with a hint of something he could not quite place, though she quickly regained her composure. “And what is it about the enigma that captures your attention, Lord Ashford?”

Tristan twirled her gracefully, his movements as smooth as silk. “Your beauty is undeniable, Lady Seraphina, but your intellect truly captivates me. You possess a sharp wit and a depth of knowledge that sets you apart from the crowd. I find myself drawn to you, yearning to unravel the layers beneath.”

“Is that so?” Lady Seraphina challenged. A blush tinged Seraphina’s cheeks. He had to take that as a good sign. No doubt, she had grown accustomed to others admiring her from afar, appreciating her as an unattainable ideal. At least it was evident that flattery was effective on her, even if she might not trust his words to be true. Honesty and forwardness might be the key in the future.

Perhaps it was wrong to approach the whole scenario as if it were a game of chess, but he found that with each sly smile she gave him and each time she looked up at him with those pretty eyes from underneath her lashes, the more interested he was in the challenge that she presented.

“I will not deny that people have rumoured you to be cold, but even our sparse conversation tells me that is untrue,” Tristan continued. “I personally find that the greatest reward comes from working for it.”

“I imagine that you, sir, would not have the reputation you do if not for that same work ethic. Why, rumour has it that you have raked your way through half of the countryside before returning to London. I would venture that does require a bit of ... work ethic.”

The boldness of her words pleased him. The smile he wore was genuine as he nodded. He leaned closer to her, his fingertips brushing the bare skin of her back just above the

hem of her dress as he whispered. “Are you curious about my work ethic, Lady Seraphina?”

The redness to her cheeks deepened, and for a moment, he was certain that she would pull away from him. It was forward, but he was thrilled she did not mind pushing boundaries. Perhaps that was the issue all along, that nobody challenged her to leave her comfort zone. The reputation that followed her everywhere was a cage. Could it be that she simply wished to have somebody break open the doors to that cage? That would make winning this bet the simplest thing in the world.

“If you are going to be improper, Lord Ashford, then I shall be forced to cut this dance short,” Lady Seraphina answered after a beat, though she would no longer meet his gaze.

“Playing hard to get? Have we not established already that I enjoy a challenge?”

“Disinterest is more like it.”

“Then why do you insist on looking everywhere but me? I have it on very good authority that I am handsome.” Tristan was desperate to have those perfect blue eyes on him once more.

“You are not half as charming as you think you are, Lord Ashford.”

He laughed then. “Yes, I am.”

That did it. She glanced up at him, only for a moment, but hope fluttered in his chest. She had the most adorable, irritated face he had ever seen. Her brow furrowed, and her eyes sparkled with that fire inside her that she tried so desperately to pretend did not exist.

She did not refute his comment about being charming either. He took that as a personal victory, though try as he might — she would not speak again. Her body moved flawlessly under his direction over the dance floor. She had to be just as aware as he was that they were presently the central focus of the ballroom. As the music swirled around them,

Tristan attempted to break through Seraphina's icy exterior with his charming banter. He initiated light-hearted conversations about society gossip, shared literary interests, and even ventured into the realm of their shared love for art.

However, each attempt was met with a curt reply or a dismissive glance. Undeterred, Tristan persisted, determined to unravel the enigma that was Lady Seraphina. "Lady Seraphina, I must admit, your demeanour intrigues me," he remarked, a note of genuine curiosity in his voice. "Is there a reason for the frostiness that surrounds you tonight?"

Seraphina's gaze remained fixed ahead, her expression guarded as the song ended and thus marked the end of their brief dance.. "My attitude is but a reflection of my disposition, Lord Ashford," she replied coolly, her voice devoid of warmth. "I find it prudent to maintain a certain distance from those I encounter."

Tristan's brows furrowed in confusion, a hint of frustration creeping into his voice. "But surely, there is more to you than this impenetrable exterior? We shared a dance, and I hoped to glimpse the woman behind the facade."

Seraphina's lips curved into a cold smile, her eyes glinting with defiance. "Appearances can be deceiving, Lord Ashford. It is not my duty to reveal the depths of my being to every dance partner I encounter."

Tristan's gaze flickered with disappointment and determination, his tone coloured by irritation. "I never expected you to bare your soul, Lady Seraphina. But a semblance of openness and genuine conversation would be appreciated."

She arched an eyebrow; her voice laced with a touch of challenge. "Perhaps, Lord Ashford, if you seek genuine conversation, you should look beyond the superficiality of society's gatherings."

Tristan's lips twitched into a rueful smile, acknowledging the truth in her words. "Touché, Lady Seraphina. It seems I have underestimated the depths of your guarded nature," he teased her easily. "Pray, tell me which events you would prefer

to meet at outside of those specifically constructed to foster such conversations?”

“If you are so cunning, certainly you can figure that out for yourself? What of all your talk of loving challenges?” Lady Seraphina smirked.

She was teasing him. Point in her favour.

A brief silence hung between them, the music providing a backdrop to their unspoken tension. Seraphina’s facade began to crack slightly, revealing glimpses of vulnerability beneath her composed exterior.

Tristan took a step closer, his voice gentle yet earnest. “Lady Seraphina, forgive me if I have misstepped. I sense there is more to your story, more to the walls you have erected around yourself. And while I may not understand it completely, I am willing to learn, should you choose to share.”

Seraphina’s gaze softened for a moment, a flicker of hesitation crossing her features. She shook her head slightly, a mixture of sadness and determination in her eyes. “There are certain truths that must remain hidden, Lord Ashford.”

Tristan’s shoulders dropped slightly, a tinge of regret in his voice. “Very well, Lady Seraphina. I will respect your boundaries. But know that should you ever choose to trust someone with your secrets, I will be here, ready to listen. In the meantime, I accept your challenge, and my curiosity will only grow until our next encounter.”

With a final, fleeting glance, Seraphina turned away. Tristan watched her retreating figure, frustration and intrigue swirling within him. He had underestimated the complexities behind the “Unattainable Rose” of the ton, and he was determined to discover the truth hidden beneath her guarded facade. He had taken the bet on a whim for a bit of light-hearted fun, but now there was something else.

Seraphina made no sense to him. She was distant in their brief conversation, certainly, but it felt to him that she was only looking for a person willing to put in the proper work to get to know her better. Tristan could understand the desire to

weed out the weak. If that was truly her intention, then she would be pleasantly surprised to learn that Tristan did not give up on his desires lightly.

It would be a pleasure to bend her to his whims and desires.

The sweetest honey was always found in the most difficult of hives, after all, and Tristan had a ravenous sweet tooth.

Chapter 5

Elizabeth tried very hard not to be a jealous woman. The last thing she would have ever wanted was to place herself in a position where she felt she was competing with her best friend. Seraphina claimed not to be interested in finding a husband, seemingly content with a future of spinsterhood, but Elizabeth did not feel the same. Seraphina could claim indifference all she wished, but that did not mean she did not turn the heads of every gentleman she walked past.

Elizabeth was not a woman who harboured any false sense of modesty. She knew she was an attractive woman and went to great lengths to properly maintain herself, but Seraphina was on another level entirely. A natural, effortless sort of beauty. Normally, it did not matter. But, when standing alone on the side of a ballroom with only her mother for company? Elizabeth sometimes had intrusive thoughts that she could not help.

She wished to dance.

Was that asking for so much? She wished to dance on the arm of a handsome gentleman helplessly in love with her. A head-over-heels sort of obsession would be ideal. If only the man whom she secretly desired was the romantic type. Yet, she knew Michael well enough to know that he would never take a wife. It did not matter how infatuated with him that she was. She would simply have to find another — something her mother was likely to start lecturing her on any moment now.

Right on cue.

“My dear Elizabeth,” Lady Diana began, her eyes filled with motherly concern, “this season is crucial for you. It is essential that you make a favourable impression on eligible suitors and secure a good match.”

Elizabeth nodded, understanding the gravity of her mother’s words. Her words were perfunctory and dry. “I know, Mother. I shall do my best to make a favourable impression.”

“You are a charming young woman with a bright future ahead,” Lady Diana continued, her voice carrying pride and worry. Mother’s attention seemed to shift to the dance floor where Seraphina and Lord Ashford shared a beautiful waltz. It was hard to look anywhere but them as they moved so well together. “However, I must caution you to avoid gentlemen with dubious reputations. Rakes like Lord Ashford can be captivating but can also bring unnecessary scandal to your name.”

“I assure you, Mother, I shall not entertain any attention from rakes,” Elizabeth replied firmly, a hint of determination in her eyes. “I value my reputation and would not want it tarnished by association with someone who does not take matters of the heart seriously.”

It was mostly true. Elizabeth could not say with any sort of certainty what she would do should Michael suddenly take an interest in her. She would never tell her mother, but he was always going to be something of a weakness for her.

Lady Diana smiled, seemingly relieved by her daughter’s sensible response. “I am glad to hear that, my dear. Your reputation is your most valuable asset, and you must protect it at all costs.”

Just as they were finishing their conversation, the very subject of their discussion made his presence known. Lord Michael Thorne, renowned rake and devilishly handsome centre of Elizabeth’s obsession, approached with a charming smile, bowing before Elizabeth. “Lady Elizabeth, may I have the honour of this dance?”

Mother would like for her to decline. She could feel the heat of her mother’s accusatory stare as it was obvious that Elizabeth was intent to defy her wishes instantly. She tried to place her hand on her daughter’s arm to keep her in place, but Elizabeth easily shrugged out of her hold.

Elizabeth returned Michael’s smile, stars in her eyes as her worries were momentarily forgotten. “Of course, Lord Thorne. I would be delighted to dance with you.”

As the soft strains of the dance began to fill the air, Elizabeth's heart fluttered nervously in her chest. She had been infatuated with Michael for what seemed like an eternity, and now, dancing with him, she could not help feeling a mix of excitement and trepidation. Her cheeks flushed with a rosy hue, and she worried that her nerves might betray her. He was unlikely ever to see her as anything more than a friend, but she could not help holding out hope that someday, magically, he would see her as something more.

Michael, ever the attentive partner, noticed her nerves and offered her an encouraging smile. Honestly, it ought to be criminal that he was as dashing as he was.

"Fear not, Lady Elizabeth," he said, his voice warm and reassuring. "You are in safe hands. Just follow my lead, and we shall glide across the floor with grace."

His charm and confidence eased Elizabeth's anxiety somewhat, and she was guided skillfully by Michael's expert dance steps. His touch was gentle and supportive, and any worries about stepping on his toes quickly faded away. Instead, Elizabeth was swept away by the music and the pleasure of dancing with the man she secretly admired.

As they twirled gracefully, Elizabeth allowed herself to steal glances at Michael's handsome features. His striking green eyes held a spark of mischief, and his smile was enough to make her heart skip a beat. With every turn and spin, she felt herself falling deeper into the enchantment of the moment.

"You are a wonderful dancer, Lady Elizabeth," Michael complimented, his voice tinged with genuine admiration. "I always mean to say it, but the eloquence of thought translated into words has never been my strong suit."

Any words from him would always be most welcome. Blushing at the praise, Elizabeth replied, "Thank you, Lord Michael. Your skills as a dancer are truly unparalleled. I must confess, I was a bit nervous at first."

"There was no need to be nervous, my dear. Dancing with you is always an absolute delight." Michael chuckled softly, his hand tightening slightly around hers. "It is truly

fascinating, is it not, Lady Elizabeth?” Michael remarked, a glint of amusement in his eyes. “Watching everyone preen and peacock themselves in the intricate dance of courtship. It is like a performance, yet there is an undeniable charm to it all.”

Elizabeth smiled, feeling a rush of excitement at the prospect of continuing the conversation. “Indeed, My Lord, it is quite the spectacle. The elegance and grace displayed by the couples are a sight to behold. One could easily lose themselves in the artistry of it all.”

Michael nodded, but his eyes seemed to hold a hint of contemplation. “You know, I have been thinking that perhaps it is time for me to consider settling down as well,” he admitted, carefully observing Elizabeth’s reaction.

Her heart skipped a beat, but Elizabeth tried her best to maintain her composure. “Settling down, My Lord? That sounds like a sensible idea. Many ladies in the ton would be honoured to be courted by you.”

Michael’s gaze lingered on her face momentarily before he replied, “Indeed, there are many eligible ladies. However, I find myself seeking something more, something genuine and meaningful. Someone who sees beyond the title and wealth and truly understands me.”

Elizabeth’s heart soared at his words, but a sense of uncertainty crept in. “I am sure you will find that connection you seek, Lord Thorne,” she said softly, trying to hide her hopefulness. Elizabeth’s curiosity was piqued, and she could not help playing along with the subtle flirtation. “Ah, My Lord, but the challenge lies in finding such a person in the whirlwind of society events and endless suitors,” she replied teasingly.

He chuckled, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “That is true, Lady Elizabeth. But perhaps the one I seek has been right in front of me all along,” he said, his gaze holding hers in an intimate moment.

Elizabeth’s heart fluttered at his words, and she felt a rush of warmth spreading through her. “And perhaps she is just waiting for a certain someone to take a chance and discover

the depths of her heart,” she replied, her voice soft but filled with subtle invitation.

“Quite right! That would be most ideal,” Michael agreed, his focus shifting from Elizabeth’s face out over those they shared the dance floor with, and her heart dropped. Of course he did not mean her. He saw her as nothing but a friend.

He was likely looking for input from people who would best suit him. She would not do it. She refused to surrender her hope of a future with him. Despite being obtuse from time to time, she adored him. Being near him was just so easy for her.

“You know, Lady Elizabeth,” Michael started, his voice laced with a hint of mischief, “my ideal woman is one who possesses both grace and wit. Someone who can navigate the intricacies of society with elegance but also share a clever repartee that keeps me on my toes.”

Elizabeth’s heart skipped a beat as she recognized the description perfectly fitting her. She could not help blushing, her excitement palpable. “That sounds like quite a remarkable woman, My Lord. But I imagine such a lady would be quite elusive to find,” she replied, a playful glimmer in her eyes.

“Ah, but you see, Lady Elizabeth, you have hinted that I have already found her,” Michael said, his gaze tender as he held her close. Closer than was strictly necessary for their dance. It would be far too easy for her to read into such a touch — but he had always playfully blurred that line between friendship and something more.

“Yes, but you will have to be wise enough to see her for all her true values,” Elizabeth managed to say, her face burning from the deep shade of pink she knew was consuming her features.

As the music began to fade, the dance came to an end, and Michael and Elizabeth reluctantly parted ways, knowing they could not linger in each other’s company forever. But not before leaning in close to her ear, his voice low and warm. “I hope to see you again soon, Lady Elizabeth.” He slipped away into the crowd before she had the chance to answer him.

Elizabeth turned to find her mother glaring at her disapprovingly from across the room; she could not suppress the joy that danced in her eyes. Their subtle flirtation had ignited a spark between them, and Elizabeth couldn't help wondering what the future held for them. She knew her heart was already smitten, and she hoped that Michael felt the same way.

Chapter 6

Seraphina stood in the middle of the bustling ballroom, her heart and mind in disarray. The dance with Lord Ashford had left her feeling oddly unsettled, and she could not decipher her emotions. He had been an enigma on the dance floor, his charm and wit mingling with an air of mystery that kept her on her guard.

She could not deny that Lord Ashford was strikingly handsome, his dark unruly hair and intense green eyes captivating her. Yet, behind that façade of charm, she sensed a depth that she could not quite grasp. It both intrigued and troubled her. What was he hiding beneath that rakish demeanour?

Her best friend, Elizabeth, approached her with a warm smile, breaking through her reverie. “Sera, you danced quite splendidly with Lord Ashford,” Elizabeth remarked, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

Seraphina offered a small smile in return, her mind still preoccupied with the memory of the dance. “He is an accomplished dancer,” she replied diplomatically, trying to hide the turmoil within her.

“He is indeed,” Elizabeth agreed, her eyes searching Seraphina’s face with curiosity. “But there is something more, is there not? I saw the way he looked at you, Seraphina. It was as though you were the only person in the room.”

A faint blush crept onto Seraphina’s cheeks, and she looked away, feigning nonchalance. “Me? Do not pretend that I have not just seen you dancing with Lord Thorne!”

If she could shift the conversation topic from herself to her friend, that would be ideal. Seraphina did not think she was quite ready to discuss things pertaining to Lord Ashford just yet. Not when she did not understand how she presently felt about him.

But Elizabeth was not easily deterred, even if she did seem to be blushing furiously on every bit of exposed skin. “I have

known you long enough, my dear, to recognize when your heart is touched. There is no need to deny it. Lord Ashford certainly seems taken with you.”

A mixture of emotions surged within Seraphina, and she struggled to find the right words. “He is a rake, Elizabeth. I should not allow myself to be swayed by his charm,” she murmured, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

It was the responsible answer, even if it was not the whole truth. He might be a rake, but she was swayed all the same. She could not help picturing her book hero’s overlain with himself. In her mind’s eye, she overlaid herself with the role of heroine — it was more than a small indulgence if she were honest. Her mind’s eye embellished their encounter greatly if she were even more honest.

A very large part of her hoped he rose to the challenge he placed upon himself to come and seek her out. Another part hoped that he would simply ask her for another dance or to go on a walk. The men who had attempted to court her in the past had never looked at her with half of the genuine interest that he had already shown. They certainly had not cared what she had to say.

Her gut said not to trust it — that he was a man and, therefore, he had to be like everyone else.

But what if he was not?

Elizabeth laid a gentle hand on her arm. “Oh, Sera, you must not let his reputation cloud your judgement. People can change, and perhaps there’s more to him than meets the eye. Give him a chance, as you would with any other suitor.”

Seraphina smirked and folded her arms across her chest. “Is that right? Is that advice meant to be for my benefit, or is it rather the same thing that you have been telling yourself every moment since interacting with Lord Thorne?”

“I ...” Elizabeth’s blush impossibly seemed to darken. “It is applicable to both in equal measure!”

“I only danced with him to dissuade Lord Blackwood from leering at me as he was!” Seraphina exclaimed. It was easy to

offer the half-lie as an excuse. It was why she had bothered accepting the dance in the first place ... but it would not be why she accepted a second were it to be offered to her.

A secret thrill bolted through her core as she recalled his fingers brushing against her skin — his voice in her ear as he whispered. Goosebumps rippled down her spine as she forced the memory away.

As much as Seraphina wanted to dismiss the idea, Elizabeth's words resonated with her. She knew she should guard her heart against the allure of a man like Lord Ashford, but the memory of their dance lingered, leaving her heart in disarray. She could not deny his strange pull on her, and she found herself torn between caution and curiosity, wondering what destiny had in store for her and the enigmatic Lord Tristan Ashford.

“Sera, I must confide in you,” Elizabeth began, her voice barely above a whisper. “I believe Lord Thorne is finally considering taking a wife.”

Seraphina's eyes widened in surprise. “Lord Michael Thorne? But he has always been known as a notorious bachelor, never one to settle down.” she held Elizabeth's hands tightly in her own. It was no secret that Lord Thorne had always been the object of Elizabeth's affections. If it was true and the rake was not merely toying with her friend, it would be exciting news indeed. For Elizabeth's sake, she could only hope that his intentions were true.

“I know, but I have noticed a change in him lately,” Elizabeth explained. “He spoke about watching everyone court and peacock themselves tonight, and it almost sounded like he was considering doing the same.”

A mix of hope and apprehension filled Seraphina's heart. “But how can you be sure, Elizabeth?”

“He described his ideal woman, and as he spoke, I could not help thinking he was describing me,” Elizabeth replied, her cheeks flushed with excitement. “He talked about intelligence, wit, and a woman unafraid to speak her mind. And he said she must have a heart that beats only for him.”

Seraphina could not help smiling at her friend's enthusiasm. "Elizabeth, you know I want nothing but happiness for you, but are you certain he was referring to you?"

"I cannot be completely certain, but I cannot help but hope," Elizabeth admitted with a wistful sigh. "I have admired him for so long, and now it seems like he might be looking for something more meaningful in his life."

"But what if he does not see you in that way?" Seraphina asked gently, concerned for her friend's heart.

"I will do everything in my power to make him see me," Elizabeth declared with determination. "I will court him, seduce him if I must. I will not let him slip through my fingers without trying."

"Well, then I shall support you, of course." Seraphina squeezed her friend's hands, hoping they were not on a fool's errand. She envied her friend's ambition. She knew what she wanted and would not hesitate to go after it. As she should. Seraphina, however, did not feel nearly as bold. She was certainly not brave enough to open herself up to ridicule of exposure or potential heartbreak from doing the same. No matter how handsome Tristan might be.

"Oh, can you imagine the scandalized looks on our mothers' faces if they knew what we were discussing?" Elizabeth giggled, her eyes twinkling with mirth.

"Indeed!" Seraphina replied with a soft laugh. "They would probably faint from shock."

"But you know what they say, desperate times call for desperate measures," Elizabeth teased, her gaze drifting towards Lord Thorne, who was conversing with another group of guests.

"Desperate measures indeed," Seraphina murmured, her thoughts momentarily drifting back to the enigmatic Lord Ashford.

As if reading her very mind, Elizabeth asked again. "So, what about Lord Ashford?" Elizabeth asked, nudging

Seraphina playfully. “You have been quite mysterious about the whole encounter.”

Seraphina’s cheeks flushed faintly, and she offered a cryptic smile. “He is ... different. I cannot quite put my finger on him. That is all that I wish to say on the matter.”

“Different? In what way?” Elizabeth pressed, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“He is charming, and he knows it, but there is an air of mystery about him,” Seraphina mused. “He is not like the other gentlemen who are eager to win my favour for the sake of it, it seems.”

“Interesting,” Elizabeth replied, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “And how do you feel about him?”

That was the question of the hour. Almost against her will, Seraphina’s gaze turned out over the ballroom in search of Lord Ashford. He had not taken anyone else onto the dance floor, to her surprise and pleasure, for she could not see his deceptively good dance skills in action. When she found him — her heart fluttered in her chest, and she quickly looked away before he noticed her searching for him. She whipped her focus back to her friend instead.

Seraphina’s gaze faltered, and she hesitated for a moment before replying, “I cannot say. I hardly know him, and yet, I find myself intrigued.”

Elizabeth nodded understandingly, sensing the conflict within her friend’s heart. “Well, take your time, Sera. There is no need to rush into anything. Besides, we have more important matters at hand,” she said, glancing back at Lord Michael Thorne with a determined glint in her eye. “Such as the fact that Lord Blackwood still cannot keep his beady black eyes off you.”

“I cannot fathom why he continues to stare at me so intently,” Seraphina said, her brow furrowed with concern.

Elizabeth shot a disapproving glare in Lord Reginald’s direction. “It is rather impolite and unsettling, is it not? I wish

he would turn his attention elsewhere. Anywhere else would be welcome.”

“Indeed, it is unsettling,” Seraphina agreed. “But perhaps he holds a grudge after I rejected his proposal? It seems so irrational given that it was nearly three years ago.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, Sera, you must not blame yourself for his actions or choices. His alleged debts and rumoured gambling problems were never your fault. He should have had the self-control and responsibility to manage his life and habits.”

Seraphina sighed, appreciating her friend’s understanding. “You are right, Elizabeth. I should not let his bitterness affect me. I have no reason to feel responsible for his actions.”

As the night wore on, Seraphina tried her best to ignore Lord Blackwood’s persistent gaze. She focused on enjoying her friends’ company and the ballroom’s splendour. But beneath her composed exterior, a mix of emotions swirled inside her—doubt, unease, and a flicker of anxiety.

Amidst the whispers and laughter of the ballroom, the Regency society played its games, and Seraphina found herself caught in the middle of it all. The dance of hearts and intentions was a complex web, and she could not help wondering if Lord Tristan Ashford was just another player in this intricate game. His enigmatic charm and mysterious allure were intriguing, but she knew better than to let her guard down completely.

Chapter 7

The following morning, Seraphina awoke with thoughts of the previous night's dance with Lord Tristan Ashford still lingering in her mind. As she rose from her bed and prepared for the day, she could not help replaying their conversation and the subtle flirtations between them. Her emotions were in turmoil, and she was both drawn to and wary of the enigmatic Marquess of Aylesbridge.

Joining her parents for breakfast in the elegant dining room, Seraphina was greeted with smiles. However, her mother's eyes sparkled with curiosity, and her father's expression was a mix of intrigue and concern. They had undoubtedly heard about her dance with Lord Ashford and were eager to know more.

"Good morning, my dear," her father, Lord Philip Hawthorne, Earl of Emberdale, greeted warmly and signalled for her to take a seat.

"Good morning, Father," Seraphina replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil within. She took her place at the table, and her mother poured her a cup of tea.

"We heard you danced with Lord Ashford last night," her mother said with a teasing glint in her eye.

Seraphina could not help blushing slightly. "Yes, Mother, we did share a dance."

Her mother leaned in, a curious smile on her lips. "And how did you find the notorious Marquess of Aylesbridge? Did he live up to his reputation?"

"He was ... intriguing," Seraphina replied, choosing her words thoughtfully. "Lord Ashford has a way of engaging one's attention, but he is also difficult to read."

Her father chuckled softly. He winked at her knowingly as if he could see something she had not yet caught on to. "That sounds like Lord Ashford, always keeping people on their toes. But you must be cautious, my dear. He is known for his rakish ways and may not be the most reliable suitor."

“I am well aware, Father,” Seraphina assured him with a hint of determination. Whatever her father thought he saw there — she wished to squash that idea quickly. “I will be cautious, but I do not intend to consider him a suitor. He is hardly the sort to be taken seriously.”

Father cleared his throat loudly, and his brow arched dramatically before he spoke. “Because of his reputation?”

It was always so easy to forget the reputation that Father had always held. He, too, had once been considered a formidable rake before falling so deeply in love with her mother. It was a rare success story. Seraphina had been raised on that tale of true love to the point where she could almost recite their origin story by heart. But, just because it happened to work out for them did not mean it would for her. Seraphina had also heard countless stories of cases where rakes would be unfaithful in their marriages, then protected by society as they took mistress after mistress. That would not be her fate. She would not allow it.

When she did not answer immediately, her father continued, “Because I think that should you find Lord Ashford objectionable, it should be for something far less superficial than the rumours that surround him. Until you know the truth of his heart or the origin of his affections for you?”

“It was one dance, Father. It was not exactly love at first sight,” Seraphina muttered. Again, the memory of his warm breath against the shell of her ear rippled through her.

“Love has the power to transform a man! You cannot possibly know his feelings on the matter! You are my beautiful, stunning rose of a daughter! I would not doubt for a second that a man could take one look at you and fall wholly in love with everything about you,” Father said while using a piece of half-eaten toast as a baton to emphasize his point further.

“Lord Ashford and I have barely exchanged a few words. It would be unwise to draw conclusions based on such limited interactions,” Seraphina added in a tone that she hoped would quickly close the conversation.

Father waved off her concerns with an emphatic “phooie.”

Lillian, her maternal instincts ever vigilant, could not help worrying about the intentions of the notorious marquess. She knew first-hand the allure of a charming and seductive man and the dangers that lurked beneath the surface. “Seraphina, my darling, I am glad you are being careful,” she implored, her eyes expressing both love and concern. “Not all men have noble intentions, and Tristan’s reputation precedes him.”

“I understand, Mother,” Seraphina assured her, reaching across the table to take her mother’s hand in a comforting gesture. “I shall be cautious and guard my heart. I am not easily swayed by flattery or charm.”

Philip nodded, acknowledging his daughter’s wisdom. “We trust your judgement, Seraphina,” he said with a hint of pride in his voice. “But do remember, your mother and I only want what is best for you. It would not harm you to allow yourself to be swept off your feet from time to time. Allow yourself permission to feel things fully; that is all I ask.”

“I know, Father,” she replied softly, her eyes locking with his in a silent understanding.

Yet, she knew that she could never do as he asked without being honest about her inferior birth. How could she ever entrust herself fully to another person with that forever hanging over her head? She sat here, listening to her father speak about love and how it had transformative properties, yet she knew it was not enough. The love between her adoptive parents had not been enough to give them a child of their own.

As the afternoon sun cast gentle shadows across the elegant drawing room, Seraphina found solace in the pages of a captivating novel. Her mind wandered into the world of fiction, where the troubles and dilemmas of society seemed distant and inconsequential. The characters came alive, drawing her into their struggles and triumphs, momentarily shielding her from the weight of her own.

There was nothing that Seraphina enjoyed more than losing herself in a good book. Second only to drawing and painting all the visions created inside her vibrant mind's eye by said books.

In the drawing room, surrounded by the soft rustling of pages, Seraphina immersed herself in the latest novel, finding a sense of freedom and escape within the ink-stained lines. The fictional world offered her an opportunity to explore the intricacies of emotions and relationships without the scrutiny of society's judgemental eyes. She relished the moments of solitude, cherishing the intellectual and emotional connections she forged with the characters on the pages.

How she longed to be them. If only she could crawl inside her favourite paintings and books — what she would not give to be able to transport herself thusly.

The soft chime of the tea tray echoed through the serene room, forcing Seraphina to hastily look up from her book, a jolt of adrenaline spiking her heart rate from the unexpected interruption. The tea cart pushed into the room was operated by none other than the woman who was the source of her present identity crisis — Adeline. It was nearly impossible to face her mother's lady's maid now that she had overheard the truth.

It angered her that neither woman was likely to have ever told her the truth. Were it not for the fact that she happened to have overheard their private conversation — she might have lived the entire rest of her life without ever knowing the truth of her identity.

“Tea, My Lady?” Adeline offered with a gentle smile, setting down the delicate china cup before Seraphina. “I brought your favourite blend.”

“Thank you, Adeline,” Seraphina replied softly, her voice hesitant. She reached out to take the cup, her fingers wrapping around the delicate handle.

Adeline settled into the chair opposite Seraphina, uninvited, her expression warm and understanding. “You were

immersed in your book again, My Lady. May I enquire which author has captivated your attention this time?"

It ought not to be a big deal. Adeline had been coming to speak with Seraphina for as long as she could remember. Any time Mother was away visiting with friends, as she was this afternoon — Adeline used to come and play with Seraphina. They would enjoy cards and chess for hours on end. She had always been something of a mother figure to her, a nanny ... but now that she knew just how true that sentiment was, it was hard to speak to her without feeling somewhat uncomfortable. While Adeline was doing absolutely nothing wrong at all ... Seraphina could now see the motivation behind it.

"Oh, just a novel by an author I discovered recently," Seraphina replied, trying to keep her tone casual. "It is an intriguing tale of forbidden love and hidden secrets."

Before she had learned the truth, her answers might have been more verbose, but Seraphina could not summon the enthusiasm.

Adeline nodded, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. "It sounds like a captivating story indeed. You always have a talent for finding the most interesting reads, My Lady."

"Thank you, Adeline."

It was nothing short of a mercy whenever the butler entered the small room to announce the arrival of yet another unexpected guest.

"My Lady, you have a caller," the butler spoke, his nose notched respectfully upward. Seraphina glanced at Adeline seated across from her, but of course, the woman would have no reason to know who was coming to call on her. It was highly unlikely that she had been expecting anyone either. Without Mother here, it meant that only Adeline could serve as her chaperone, so she would have to stay.

"Who is it?" Seraphina asked, her brow knit in confusion.

"Lord Tristan Ashford, My Lady."

Seraphina could have been knocked over with a feather; she was shocked. A single dance and the man took it upon

himself to think that meant she wished to be called upon? It was bold, to say the least. Though, it was not wholly unwelcome. She sat slightly straighter in her chair and nodded for the butler to show him in.

“Very well.”

“This is most exciting, mistress!” Adeline hurried from her seat and moved to stand some distance behind Seraphina so that she could observe respectfully but not so close as to make Seraphina feel that she needed to watch what she said and how she said it.

The memories of the dance with Tristan resurfaced, along with the enigmatic air surrounding him. His presence stirred emotions and thoughts she was not accustomed to, leaving her with a strange mix of fascination and uncertainty. The memory of his strong hands guiding her so effortlessly and how she seemed to fall into step with him with far more ease than before. At least meeting with him a second time would show her whether or not it had merely been a fluke that first encounter.

Chapter 8

The grand halls of the Hawthorne estate seemed strangely unfamiliar to Tristan as he waited in the opulent drawing room, his usual air of confidence replaced by a touch of nervousness. He had come to call on Seraphina, guided by an inexplicable impulse that drew him to her side once more. Something about her mysterious allure intrigued him, and he found himself unable to resist the temptation to see her again.

Besides, he had a bet to win, after all.

He had arrived unannounced, forgoing any formalities that usually accompanied such visits. It was a risky move, but Tristan was not one to adhere to societal norms regarding matters of the heart. The notion of seeking out Lady Seraphina without any pretence or calculated plan thrilled him, even though he was uncertain of the outcome.

As he waited in the lavish hall, his gaze wandered to a painting adorning the wall—an exquisite portrait of Lady Seraphina. The artist had captured her ethereal beauty, yet the painting failed to capture the enigma that she truly was. She truly was easy on the eyes. He clasped his hands firmly behind his back as he gazed upon her, taking in the curve of her jaw and the delicate slope of her neck. No, it would be no hardship whatsoever to seduce a woman as stunningly beautiful as her.

But, his aim was not to seduce her. At least, not only to seduce her. He was supposed to make her fall in love with him. Somehow. His heart quickened with anticipation as he heard footsteps approaching, signalling the butler's imminent arrival. Despite his rakish reputation, Tristan found himself in an unfamiliar position of vulnerability. He could not help wondering how Seraphina would receive him, especially after their dance and her cool demeanour.

On the one hand, Michael's challenge was a tantalizing prospect. The thrill of the chase, the conquest of a seemingly unattainable woman—the very essence of Tristan's rakish reputation. It was a game he had played countless times

before, revelling in the chase and the pursuit of fleeting passions.

But on the other hand, there was something different about Lady Seraphina. Beneath her detached exterior, he sensed a vulnerability that piqued his curiosity. Her sharp intellect and cool demeanour only added to her allure, leaving him yearning to unravel the layers of her enigmatic personality.

Tristan found himself at a crossroads, torn between the pursuit of a mere challenge and the genuine interest he felt stirring within him. A part of him wanted to prove to Michael that he could win any woman's affections with his charm and wit, but another part of him wanted to delve deeper into the mystery that was Lady Seraphina.

Tristan shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. With a deep breath, he straightened his cravat and prepared to face the puzzling Lady Seraphina Hawthorne, knowing that this encounter could change everything.

"Lady Seraphina will see you now." The butler did not make eye contact as he spoke, leading Tristan into the room where Seraphina awaited him. The lilac dress she had chosen for the day perfectly complemented her fair skin and the stark contrast to her raven hair and the rich pink shade of her lips — he could not wait to taste those lips.

He smiled as he bowed deeply in a respectful greeting. His gaze never broke from hers through the gesture. It was interesting to him that her mother did not appear present, but he assumed the woman near was under her family's employ. Pity. He would have loved to have happened to time things well enough to catch her without a chaperone. His usual charming smile brightened his handsome features as he greeted Seraphina.

"Good afternoon, Lady Seraphina. I hope I find you well," he said with genuine warmth.

Seraphina did not answer him. Her chin dipped only into the smallest of greeting gestures as her hands demurely clasped in front of her person. She did not so much as rise to greet him as he had entered. Clearly, she was not welcoming

him in. No doubt, she was only tolerating his company until she figured out what he wanted. Well, she would be disappointed because he was not here with a particular goal apart from breaking down her defences little by little.

“You look lovely, of course,” Tristan continued, but it only resulted in Seraphina pulling her lips into a thin line. He could not help smirking. “Really want to see me put in the effort today, hm? That is all right. I do not mind carrying the conversation.”

Seraphina shifted on her seat, and for a moment, he thought she would smile. Perhaps he should make that his ultimate goal as she had such a very pretty smile. Tristan was certainly not the sort of man to ever back down from a challenge. His gaze drifted across the room, and his eyes fell upon the book Seraphina had been reading. The sight of *Emmeline* by Charlotte Turner brought back memories of his mother, who had been an avid reader and had instilled in him a love for literature. A wistful expression flickered across his face, momentarily betraying the carefree facade he often wore.

It made sense to him that his mother would find comfort in a book highlighting the struggles a woman had to endure to survive. Tristan believed she likened the oppressive thumb of the fictional uncle, Lord Montreville, to the husband she had been forced into marriage with.

“Ah, ‘Emmeline’,” Tristan remarked, his tone tinged with nostalgia. “A fine choice of literature, if I may say so.”

“You have read *Emmeline*?” Seraphina asked sceptically.

Tristan nodded and sat across from her without touching the tea service. He had a feeling that it had not been served with the intention of suitors in mind. The memory of his mother brought a bittersweet ache to his heart. She had been a source of love and warmth in his tumultuous childhood, the one person who had shown him kindness and affection. But she had passed away too soon, leaving him with a void that nothing could fill. Worse, she had left him alone with his father — wholly and utterly at the man’s mercy and the only target of all his father’s rage.

Tristan's gaze returned to Seraphina, and he noticed how she held the book with reverence. He wondered if she, too, found solace and escape in the world of literature, just as he had.

"I must admit, Lady Seraphina, your choice of reading material intrigues me," he continued, his eyes locking with hers. "It speaks of a curious mind seeking knowledge and understanding. I find that to be a rather captivating quality."

His compliment was sincere, and he hoped she could see the genuine interest he held for her, but he did not think she was going to take it that way. How she looked at him implied that she was waiting for him to get to the point.

"Is it surprising to you, Lord Ashford, that I would find value in a novel like 'Emmeline'?" Seraphina asked, her tone cool and challenging.

Tristan leaned back in his chair, his gaze steady as he met her frosty demeanour with an amused glint in his eyes. "On the contrary, Lady Seraphina," he replied smoothly, "I believe your choice of literature speaks volumes about your character. 'Emmeline' is a tale of love, loss, and resilience, and those themes resonate with many. It is a refreshing departure from the typical frivolous novels that seem to dominate the literary scene."

From how she looked at him next, he had to assume he had answered her question properly. She pulled the book closer to her defensively.

"Perhaps you are not as predictable as I assumed," she conceded, her guard still up but showing a slight crack in her facade.

Tristan's lips curved into a playful smile. "And perhaps you are not as unyielding as you want others to believe," he countered. He leaned forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his knees as he nearly encroached upon her personal space. "There is more to you than meets the eye, Lady Seraphina, and I find that rather intriguing. Are we not fortunate to both be in such multifaceted company?"

Seraphina sighed, though it seemed she was only doing it for show. The longer he spent in her presence, the easier it became to read her. “You say a lot of words for a man who does not seem to say much at all.”

“Would you prefer that I be direct? It tends to be much less entertaining when I am too forward with my intentions.” Tristan lifted one shoulder into a shrug and finally helped himself to a biscuit. “Besides, can you honestly say that if I plainly said that I was intrigued by you and wished to get to know you better to court you, would you believe my interest was genuine? I have the feeling you have a sceptical nature, Lady Seraphina.”

She pursed her lips, confirming that he was right. It appeared as if she were putting forth much effort to keep from smiling at him. He decided at that moment that his new personal goal would be to get her to laugh. It was close; he could feel it.

“How about this? We could offer a truth for a truth?” Tristan proposed. “I shall offer up one genuine piece of information about myself, and then you shall do the same. What say you?”

“Very well. Make it count,” Seraphina remarked, her facade slipping further by the second. The fire he had seen in her eyes seemed to spark once more as she felt even the slightest challenge. He could only imagine what it might be like in other situations.

“I enjoy Emmeline because it reminds me of my mother. It was a favourite of hers when I was young as well, and since she passed when I was quite young, I felt that one of the ways that I could grow closer to her memory was to love her favourite books as she did,” Tristan admitted plainly.

Seraphina blinked at him, taking a moment to absorb what he had just said to her. He could tell that she was considering commenting or asking him follow-up questions about his statement but then denied herself. He was more disappointed by that than he cared to admit.

“Your turn, Lady Seraphina.”

She considered for a moment and then seemed to make her metaphorical chess move. "I dislike shallow conversation."

Tristan's tongue ran over his lower lip in contemplation. She had fulfilled the terms of the game he set forth, but only in the strictest possible sense. He had already guessed she did not care for anything casual.

"Then this game is perfect for us, as I presumed." Tristan wanted to laugh. Of all the things that she could have said, he was glad that was what she offered. His eyes twinkled with amusement as he regarded her, appreciating the challenge Seraphina presented. "You have a talent for concealing your true self, Lady Seraphina," he remarked with a knowing smile. "But I feel there is much more beneath the surface."

"And what makes you think that?" Seraphina retorted, determined to keep her emotions guarded.

Tristan reached forward and grabbed the arm of her chair, pulling her closer to him. A bold move, he was sure, but she did not fight him on it. His voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. "Call it a hunch," he said. "Or perhaps it is the way your eyes light up when you talk about books or the spark of curiosity in your gaze when something intrigues you. There is a fire within you, Lady Seraphina, waiting to be unleashed."

A pink flush overtook her cheeks as he spoke. "You seem quite adept at unravelling people's mysteries, Lord Ashford," she observed, a soft hitch in her voice. His gaze dropped from her eyes to her parted lips only momentarily.

He chuckled softly. "Perhaps it is a result of years spent navigating the complex social circles of London," he mused. "But I feel you are not one to be easily deciphered." He leaned forward with a smirk. "Those are my favourite sort of puzzles."

"And perhaps I do not wish to be solved?" Seraphina laughed easily and leaned back in her chair. "Perhaps I am perfectly content with things like they are?"

"Another truth?" Tristan's gaze lingered on her, a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. "You know, Lady Seraphina," he

began, his voice softer than before, “I have spent most of my life hiding behind the façade of a carefree rogue. But lately, I find myself yearning for something more. Something real.”

She seemed to be drawn to the sincerity in his words, an unexpected understanding blossoming between them. “Why are you telling me this?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Tristan shrugged nonchalantly. “Perhaps it is because I sense a kindred spirit in you,” he said, his eyes locked with hers. “You hide your true self from the world, but I see glimpses of the real Seraphina beneath the mask. And I find myself wanting to know more.”

“But, I should leave before I wholly wear out my welcome.” Tristan grinned and reached for her hand. Seraphina hesitantly accepted his touch as he bent to press her knuckles to his forehead reverently and then brushed his lips over her knuckles before righting himself. “I look forward to continuing our game of truths another time, dear Lady Seraphina.”

After Tristan’s departure, Seraphina found herself lost in conflicting emotions. A part of her believed she had succeeded in being distant enough to deter him, but the memory of his handsome features lingered in her mind, unsettling her composure. His enigmatic charm had managed to crack through her icy exterior, and she could not deny the intrigue he stirred within her.

Chapter 9

In her private sketching room, tucked away from the world and its relentless demands, Seraphina found solace amidst the fragrant aroma of graphite and parchment. The delicate strokes of her pencil danced across the pristine paper, capturing the exquisite details of a blooming rose with remarkable precision.

The soft morning light filtered through the window, casting a gentle glow upon her work. She had always found that in moments of unrest, art was one of the only things that could truly soothe her soul. So few things could settle her from the inside out, but expressing herself on paper was her primary go-to.

As she immersed herself in the art of sketching, the outside world faded away, and the deafening cacophony of societal expectations was replaced by the comforting silence of her sanctuary. With each delicate line and shading, Seraphina felt a sense of tranquility settle upon her.

The act of creating art allowed her to pour her innermost thoughts onto paper, a release she craved amidst the stifling constraints of her privileged life. The rose she was sketching seemed to come alive under her fingertips, its petals unfolding in intricate detail, a testament to the beauty that could be found in nature's creations.

As she worked, her mind wandered back to the encounter with Tristan. The memory of his disarming charm and enigmatic allure played like a vivid tapestry in her mind. She wondered if he also sought refuge in art or any other pursuit to escape the weight of his reputation.

Everything about the interaction that she had had with Lord Ashford had confused her. Seraphina had prided herself on becoming something of an expert on people over the last few years. At least in so far as figuring out what they wanted from her. Usually, when a man asked her to dance, it was only to speak about himself for the entire dance duration. Those sorts of men were only interested in her because they wished to have someone pretty on their arm. They did not care about

her heart or mind so long as she was beautiful and would give them many sons.

However, those sorts of men were far preferable to the sort who only wished to try to touch her in ways she did not wish to be touched. Those with the wandering hands and the oily smiles that she had to spend the entire duration of dancing with her adjusting their grip and pointedly stepping on their toes so that they would behave themselves.

Tristan was the first man in a long time who seemed not only to wish to get to know her for who she truly was but also to be confident enough not to be discouraged by her coldness.

Time seemed to lose meaning as Seraphina continued pouring her soul into the sketch. The rose before her was no longer just a flower; it had become an embodiment of her feelings, a symbol of the delicate balance between vulnerability and strength she found herself navigating. She drew the flower with thorns, but the petals slowly fell from where they belonged. She drew them more vibrant and fresh on the ground than those still attached to the bloom. She knew that once she was finished with the sketching portion, those petals on the ground would be the only ones she added red pastels to. She would leave the rest in shades of gray. She could not explain it, but it felt right to do so.

As Seraphina sat in her peaceful haven, her mind fully immersed in the world of art, the sound of the door creaking open brought her back to reality. Her concentration was gently disrupted, and she looked up to find her best friend, Elizabeth, entering the room with a warm smile.

“Seraphina, my dear, I hope I am not disturbing you,” Elizabeth said softly as she closed the door behind her.

“Not at all, Elizabeth,” Seraphina replied with a content smile, setting her sketchbook aside and motioning for her friend to join her. This was her private space, where even her parents did not often come without an invitation. In truth, Elizabeth was the only person that was permitted to come and go as she pleased. “Please, come in. I always welcome your company.”

Elizabeth took a seat beside Seraphina, her eyes bright with excitement and curiosity. “I just had to find you,” she confessed. “I overheard Lady Windermere and her daughter, Lady Alice, discussing Lord Ashford’s interest in you at the Windermere soirée.”

Seraphina’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “They were talking about Lord Ashford and me?”

“Yes, and they seem convinced that he was quite taken with you,” Elizabeth replied, leaning in with an encouraging grin. “I believe that the dance you shared might have been the most talked about pairing of the whole evening!”

A faint blush crept onto Seraphina’s cheeks, though she quickly masked her emotions with a composed demeanour. “It was merely a dance, nothing more, just as I told you,” she stated, trying to downplay the significance of the encounter.

“Oh, come now, Seraphina,” Elizabeth teased, her voice playful. “I saw the way he looked at you during the dance. I daresay there was something more than ‘merely a dance’ in his eyes.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of Seraphina’s lips. “Well, if there was, he did a splendid job of concealing it,” she remarked, recalling how enigmatic Tristan had appeared during their conversation. “He’s a puzzle, that one. I cannot quite decipher him.” Seraphina hummed to herself softly as she cleaned the charcoal off her fingers. “I suppose it should be no surprise to you that he came to call on me this very afternoon, then.”

Elizabeth leaned in conspiratorially. “He did not!” she whispered, her eyes sparkling mischievously. “You know, I have always thought of Lord Ashford as the epitome of a roguish rake, but now ... perhaps there is more to him than meets the eye.”

Seraphina considered her friend’s words, contemplating the enigmatic Marquess of Aylesbridge. “You may be right,” she admitted thoughtfully. “There is a depth to him that I cannot quite fathom, a complexity that draws one in.”

Elizabeth nodded in agreement. “Exactly! He’s like an intricate puzzle waiting to be unravelled. I must say, it’s rather exciting, don’t you think?”

A soft chuckle escaped Seraphina’s lips. “Funny, he said the same thing about me,” she confessed, allowing herself to revel in the intrigue surrounding Lord Ashford. “Though I must admit, I have no intention of being swept away by any roguish charms.”

“Of course not; one does not intend to be swept away; it simply just happens! At least, that is what I have heard,” Elizabeth replied with a wink. “But there is no harm in enjoying a little mystery and excitement, is there?”

Seraphina’s gaze softened as she looked at her dear friend. “No, you are right, there is not,” she said, appreciating Elizabeth’s support and understanding.

Part of her wished to confide in Elizabeth the truth of her birth. Perhaps it would make it simpler for Elizabeth to understand Seraphina’s caution. She knew that whomever she chose to be with, if anyone at all, would have to be somebody she trusted implicitly to love her genuinely and not simply for her family name. That way, should the truth come to light, it could not be used against her and whatever union she made. But that same hesitance was exactly why she chose not to say anything about her true birth at all.

“Thank you for being here, Elizabeth. Your friendship means the world to me.”

Elizabeth smiled warmly, reaching out to take Seraphina’s hand in hers. “And your friendship means just as much to me,” she said sincerely. “Now, enough talk about mysterious rakes and social gossip. Let us do something fun together. I am certain you have been cooped up in this room for far too long as it is.”

Seraphina’s eyes sparkled with delight. “I could not agree more,” she replied, feeling a sense of comfort and joy in her friend’s presence. With Elizabeth by her side, she knew that even amidst the whirlwind of social expectations and intrigue,

she would always have a true and loyal friend to share her journey.

“Fancy a trip to the ice shops while I recount my entire dance with Michael for the tenth time?” Elizabeth practically vibrated with excitement at the very prospect. Seraphina had never met another woman with such a sweet tooth.

“If that is what you wish.”

“I do!” Elizabeth linked her arm through Seraphina’s and started to talk as she pedalled her best friend out of the parlour, leaving the artwork behind.

Elizabeth’s face lit up with a radiant smile.

“Oh, Seraphina, you will not believe how utterly magical the dance with Michael was! I was rather hoping that at least some of the gossip this morning might have been about us, but sadly it was not. Which means that he does not yet have enough reason to keep his focus on me. I am going to have to try harder,” she exclaimed, her voice carrying the unmistakable delight of a young lady entranced by the allure of love and happiness.

“He is quite the charming partner, you know, and I could not help feeling as if we were floating on air.”

Seraphina couldn’t help smiling at her friend’s exuberance. Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled with joy as she recounted every step and every word exchanged during the dance as if reliving the enchanting moment all over again. It was a familiar scene, one that Seraphina often found herself in— playing the role of the eager listener, sharing in her friend’s hopes and dreams.

As the afternoon waned, the two friends continued to share laughter and dreams, cherishing the bond that had grown between them. Seraphina treasured Elizabeth’s friendship, the one constant in a world of swirling expectations and uncertainties. And while her heart remained a maze of conflicting emotions, she knew that with Elizabeth by her side, she could navigate the maze with courage and grace.

Chapter 10

Tristan's favourite gentlemen's club did not hold the same appeal tonight as it normally did. Perhaps it was simply that he felt too preoccupied to properly dedicate himself to being social, but he found himself waiting until it was polite to leave. He had only been here a short while, and it would be terribly rude of him to leave while still in the middle of his game with Michael.

As the ivory balls clicked and clacked on the green baize of the billiard table, he could feel Michael's insistent gaze upon him. Perhaps he noticed the unusual distance in Tristan's gaze. Usually, Tristan was the superior player, effortlessly sinking one ball after another with an air of nonchalance. However, his shots were slightly off today, and his mind seemed distracted.

Michael set his cue aside, leaning casually against the table as he regarded his friend. "Something on your mind, old chap?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

Tristan sighed, finally looking up from the billiard balls. "It is nothing, really," he replied, attempting to brush off the matter.

Michael raised an eyebrow, unconvinced by the dismissive tone. "Nothing? You're not usually one to lose your focus during a game. Is there something troubling you? Not that I shall ever complain about taking easy money from my dear friend."

Tristan hesitated for a moment, torn between opening up and maintaining his usual reticence. He and Michael had been friends for years, sharing many secrets and confidences, but this was a matter he was not entirely sure he wanted to reveal just yet. Even more so, he did not wish to have his friend tease him for losing at a bet he had appeared so arrogant about.

"It's just ... the bet," he admitted reluctantly. "I'm torn between fulfilling it and ..." He trailed off, not quite finding the right words to express his inner turmoil.

“Between fulfilling it and ...?” Michael prodded gently, sensing there was more to Tristan’s hesitation. Michael clutched his chest dramatically, his billiard cue falling to the ground loudly as he gasped. “Do not tell me that the infamous rake, Lord Tristan Ashford, is finally growing a conscience after all these years?! Say it is not so!”

Tristan sighed again as he rolled his eyes over the theatrics, his shoulders slumping slightly. “And a genuine interest in Seraphina,” he confessed at last. “There is something about her ... something different. I cannot quite put my finger on it.”

Michael raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. “Different? How so?”

“She is not like the other women of the ton,” Tristan mused, running a hand through his unruly dark hair. “She is aloof, yes, but there is an underlying vulnerability that I cannot ignore. And the way she challenged me about my choice of literature ... I do not know; it was refreshing.”

Michael chuckled, sensing the sincerity in his friend’s words. “Refreshing, eh? You do sound rather taken with her, Tristan. Are you perhaps going soft on me as well? I never thought that I would see the day!”

Tristan frowned, his emotions in turmoil. He had never felt genuine irritation with his friend before, but he did now. “I do not know what to make of it,” he admitted. “Part of me wants to fulfill the bet and move on, but another part of me ... well, it wants to explore this connection further.”

Michael grinned knowingly. “Ah, so I was right. You are going soft. What misfortune. The infamous Marquess of Aylesbridge struck by Cupid’s arrow. Who would have thought?”

Tristan rolled his eyes, trying to brush off Michael’s teasing. “Do not be ridiculous,” he retorted, though a hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

“You know, you do not have to fulfill the bet if you are genuinely interested in her,” Michael suggested, a note of

sincerity in his voice. “I mean, it is just a bet, after all. And there is no shame in finding someone you genuinely connect with ... you know what you must do should you wish to be let out of it, though.”

Tristan’s gaze narrowed as he battled the irritation once more.

Tristan forced a smile, not willing to reveal his inner turmoil to Michael just yet. “I have lost nothing yet,” he replied, his tone light and playful. “The bet is still on, and I fully intend to win.”

Michael raised an eyebrow, clearly sensing there was more to Tristan’s words than met the eye. However, he did not press further, respecting his friend’s boundaries for the time being.

As they continued their game, Tristan found it challenging to concentrate. His thoughts kept drifting back to Seraphina and their conversation in the drawing room. He could not shake the image of her engrossed in her book, her intellectual curiosity shining through, and her refusal to be swayed by societal expectations. It was refreshing and alluring, and he found himself drawn to her in ways he could not fully comprehend.

Just then, their billiard game was interrupted by the arrival of a noticeably intoxicated Reginald Blackwood, stumbling over to their table. His eyes were glassy, and his movements were unsteady as he tried to steady himself on the edge of the billiard table.

Reginald stumbled over to Tristan and Michael, a bitter chuckle escaping his lips. “Well, well, well,” he slurred, “if it is not the great Tristan Ashford trying his luck with the ‘Unattainable Rose’.”

Tristan’s gaze hardened as he met Reginald’s mocking eyes. He was growing tired of Reginald’s constant snide remarks and veiled hostility. However, he maintained a facade of nonchalance, refusing to let Reginald get under his skin. Tristan was certainly nothing even close to resembling a friend with this vexing creature.

He exchanged a brief glance with Michael, both aware of Reginald's propensity for indulging in excesses, particularly when it came to drinking and gambling. It would have been better for the ton as a collective if only he had stayed in whatever hovel he had crawled into for the past few years. It was certainly no secret that his reintegration had been rocky at best.

He was not even going to attempt to speculate as to why Reginald felt it appropriate to speak to him about Seraphina.

"Oh, Lord Blackwood," Tristan replied with a faint smile, "I never back down from a challenge."

Reginald's drunken laughter echoed as he took another swig from a nearby glass. "You are a brave one, Lord Ashford," he slurred, "but good luck trying to win her over. You will need it."

Michael shot Tristan a concerned look, aware of the tension between the two men. He tried to diffuse the situation by changing the topic. "Come on, Lord Blackwood," he said, "let us not spoil the evening with talk of challenges and bets. We are all here to have a good time, remember?"

The knuckles of Tristan's right hand cracked as his fist tightened around his billiard cue. If he continued to speak about Seraphina in that flippant tone, he was not going to be able to tolerate it long.

Reginald waved a dismissive hand, almost spilling his drink in the process. "Of course, of course," he mumbled, "but I just find it amusing, that is all."

Tristan's irritation grew, but he managed to keep his tone light. "Amusing, you say?" he replied, "Well, I am glad my romantic endeavours can entertain you, Lord Blackwood."

Reginald's eyes narrowed, and he leaned closer to Tristan, his breath heavy with alcohol. "Just remember, Tristan," he said, his voice low and threatening, "you may think you can charm any woman you want, but not all of them will fall at your feet like some lovesick puppy."

What was that supposed to mean?

Tristan's jaw clenched as he fought to control his anger. He knew that Reginald's bitterness stemmed from his own failures and frustrations, but that didn't excuse his behaviour.

"I do not expect every woman to fall for me," Tristan replied evenly, his tone low in warning that Reginald was quickly approaching a line that he ought not to cross. "and I certainly do not see Lady Seraphina as some conquest. She is a woman of intellect and strength and deserves to be treated with respect. Certainly you can agree with that."

Reginald scoffed, but before he could respond, Michael intervened. "Alright, that is enough," he said firmly, "let us enjoy the rest of the evening and put this discussion to rest."

Reginald grumbled something unintelligible, but he relented, knowing he wouldn't win an argument with Tristan and Michael.

Tristan took a deep breath, trying to shake off the lingering irritation. He knew that Reginald's words were just a reflection of his own insecurities, but they still stung. However, he was determined not to let anyone sway him from his course, especially when it came to Seraphina.

"Certainly, you have another reason for approaching us that was not to incite an argument?" Michael cautioned, giving Reginald an 'out' to save his dignity in this conversation.

Reginald waved a hand dismissively, nearly knocking over a cue ball in the process. "Just thought I would try my luck at a game or two," he replied with a hiccup.

Michael leaned in, concern evident in his expression. "Perhaps you have had enough for one night, old chap," he suggested gently.

He had always been the more patient out of the pair of friends. Michael could tolerate Reginald and his antics far better than Tristan. As the man had not been invited to join them, nor was his company wanted, Tristan was of half a mind to have him thrown out.

Reginald laughed loudly, not heeding the warning. "Nonsense! There is always room for a bit more fun," he

slurred. “Right, Lord Ashford?”

Tristan exchanged a worried look with Michael, realizing that Reginald’s behaviour might draw unwanted attention and embarrass his friend. He quickly stood up, attempting to steer Reginald away from the billiard table.

“Come on, Lord Blackwood,” Tristan said firmly, “let us get you some fresh air. You have had enough for tonight.”

Reginald wavered on his feet, but he allowed Tristan to lead him towards the exit. Michael gave him a nod of gratitude before returning his focus to the billiard game. Tristan gave his friend a pointed look that he had better not cheat while Tristan was occupied with Lord Blackwood. How taxing.

Once outside, Tristan guided Reginald to a bench and sat him down. “You really should be more careful, Reginald,” he admonished gently. “Drinking like this will not do you any good.”

Reginald pouted, his drunken demeanour momentarily replaced by a hint of sadness. “I know, I know,” he mumbled. “It is just ... everything seems to be going wrong, Tristan. I don’t know what to do.”

Tristan sighed; he had not signed up for this. He did not wish Reginald to think of him as a shoulder to lean on. He had heard enough from others that when Reginald thought he could trust you, it only meant that he would regularly ask for money. “Life can be challenging at times,” he said. “But you have to take control of your actions and choices. Blaming others will not solve anything.”

Tristan hoped that was supportive enough not to be considered rude but general enough to show that he did not wish to be involved.

He should have known better.

Reginald nodded, the weight of his troubles evident in his expression. “You are right,” he admitted, his voice tinged with remorse.

Tristan patted him on the back reassuringly, hoping that would mean he was finished with this conversation. The

sooner that he could depart from Reginald, the better. “Come on, let us call you a carriage to take you home. I am certain that you can figure things out in the morning.”

Chapter 11

In the quiet solitude of her bedroom, Seraphina prepared for bed, the flickering candlelight casting a warm glow across the room. Her mind, however, was far from calm. Thoughts of Tristan Ashford lingered like shadows in the corners of her consciousness, refusing to be dismissed.

The conversation with Tristan had profoundly impacted Seraphina, and as she studied her reflection in the mirror, she saw a complexity of emotions reflected back at her. Her usual aloofness had been replaced with a hint of vulnerability, and her eyes betrayed the turmoil within her heart.

Despite her best efforts, she could not stop from recalling the way his cheek dimpled only on one side when he smiled or the comfortable way he seemed to move his body around any space he occupied. Was he aware that he tended to run his thumb over his bottom lip when he was focused intently on her? Did he do so on purpose?

Oh, she needed to snap out of it. Quickly.

Seraphina brushed a lock of raven-black hair from her forehead, her mind swirling with conflicting thoughts. On the one hand, she yearned for someone to see her beyond the facade she presented to the world, to see the true Seraphina hidden beneath the “Unattainable Rose” persona. Yet, the fear of rejection and judgement held her back, reminding her of the consequences her mother had warned her about.

Seraphina sighed, slipping out of her elegant gown and into a comfortable nightdress. He did have the most striking green eyes. The way that he seemed to cut through her words to her true meaning was unlike anything she could have anticipated. It was no wonder that he reminded her of the romantic interests she found inside her books as apparently he had read all the same ones she had.

That had to be why she was even remotely interested in him. The only reason.

At least that was what she was going to tell herself.

Adeline had likely told her mother that he had come to call on her by now. Tomorrow she was going to have to explain herself, and she was not entirely certain that she could come up with a good enough excuse for having a man in the house without her mother present. It would hurt Lilian to learn about the information second-hand, but Seraphina was not ready to share her feelings until she figured out more about them for herself.

The candle's flame danced, casting fleeting shadows on the walls. Seraphina knew she needed to tread carefully to guard her heart from potential hurt. But there was more to her contemplation than mere fascination with his charm. Seraphina could not help wondering about the sincerity of his intentions.

She had always been cautious in matters of the heart, aware of the need to protect herself from potential harm. And yet, something about Tristan stirred a longing within her—a longing to know more, to understand the man behind the rakish reputation.

Seraphina slipped into her warm bed and blew out the flickering candle, leaving the room in darkness. She brought the fluffy bedding up to her chin and held it there. She was too awake to even shut her eyes.

His words had stirred something deep inside her—a longing to be known and understood, yet also a fear of the consequences should her true identity be revealed. What if she went to him and offered him another truth? He had given her two, after all. She did owe him, and she had no intention of being in anyone's debt. Least of all his. What would he do if she were the one to seek him out and intrude upon his space? She rather liked the notion of turning the tables on him.

She could not help wondering how Tristan's perception of her would change if he discovered her secret, the truth of her birth that she had guarded so fiercely. The walls she had built around herself were beginning to crumble, and in their place, she found an unexpected desire to be known and accepted for who she truly was.

Would she dare to take a step closer to Tristan, to let him in and share her true self? Or would she continue to hide behind the mask of the “Unattainable Rose,” afraid of the consequences that revealing her true lineage might bring?

As sleep eluded her once again, Seraphina knew she stood at a crossroads, and her choice would shape not only her destiny but also the fates of those around her. With a heavy heart and an uncertain mind, she closed her eyes and let the night embrace her, hoping that clarity would come with the light of a new day.

In the depths of the night, Seraphina’s restless mind gave birth to vivid dreams. In her slumber, she was transported to a grand ballroom adorned with opulent chandeliers and cascading flowers. The moonlight filtered through the large windows, casting a soft glow upon the dancers.

And there, amidst the swirling couples, she saw Tristan extending his hand towards her with an enigmatic smile. Unable to resist, she placed her hand in his, and they began to dance. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony as if they had known each other for a lifetime. The warmth of his hand against her waist sent shivers through her, igniting a fire within.

In this dream, they were not the “Unattainable Rose” and the notorious rogue; they were simply Seraphina and Tristan, lost in the moment’s magic. His gaze was tender, and his touch was gentle, making her heart flutter with both excitement and trepidation.

As the dream shifted, Seraphina stood with Tristan under a canopy of stars. The air was thick with anticipation, and their eyes locked in a magnetic gaze. Slowly, he leaned in, and she felt the soft pressure of his lips against hers. It was an intense kiss that stirred emotions deep within her soul. She had felt the static of contact everywhere.

Tristan pulled her further into his arms, his kiss deepening as he eliminated the space between their bodies. His large hand splayed over her back and slowly pushed up to the back

of her neck until he could hold her head in his grip. Even in her dream, she was breathless as she was consumed by him.

But as quickly as the dream had begun, it dissolved into the ethereal realm of slumber, leaving Seraphina tangled in a web of emotions upon waking. The remnants of the dream lingered, and she found herself torn between the desire for such intimacy and the fear of letting down her guard.

Her heart raced as she replayed the dream, questioning its significance and the emotions it evoked. A newfound heat curled low in her core that she had never felt before. The dream's intensity only exacerbated her internal conflict—the longing for connection versus the fear of vulnerability.

In the quiet solitude of her room, she found herself grappling with the tangled threads of her heart, unable to untangle the conflicting emotions that Tristan had awakened within her. The dance and the kiss felt so real, yet, they existed only in the realm of dreams and fantasies.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes, hoping that sleep would once again embrace her and grant her respite from the whirlwind of emotions. But even in the silence of the night, the memory of the dream lingered, leaving her with an unshakable sense of uncertainty and the lingering question of what lay ahead in her tumultuous journey with Tristan.

Chapter 12

It was a bold choice to come to visit with Lady Seraphina for a second day in a row. Mostly because she had not invited him. She had given him very few clues that his presence was even wanted, but he cared not; he had to see her. He hoped his proximity would allow him to continue to break down those barriers she had placed between them.

This time he knew better than to come with something so trivial as flowers or traditional gifts. Instead, he chose to bring something that he thought might appeal to her a touch better. Though, with the book that he had chosen for her, he might be taking a step too far from what he knew she liked. The novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe was not a romance, but it was a favourite Gothic novel of his featuring a strong female lead.

It was also one of those from his mother's collection — just about the only things left in the house he still cared about. His mother's private parlour filled with all her books, was just about the only room he put the proper amount of care and effort into maintaining, unlike the rooms that belonged to his father.

When he arrived at her home, Lady Seraphina was not taking visitors in the parlour like he expected. He had rather hoped he could continue their conversation about books with this newest addition. But, the moment he was shown out onto the balcony, he was most pleased that she was not.

There, with a paintbrush in hand and seated at a small stool was Seraphina. A canvas and easel were in front of her, with a perfect view overlooking the impressive rose gardens. She had a wide-brimmed hat affixed to her raven hair to keep the sunlight off her face as she worked. A practically untouched lunch spread was forgotten on a table beside her as she seemed intently focused on her work. He could hardly blame her; it was the perfect day for art — though he never would have assumed that she was a painter.

As Tristan grew nearer, he could see flecks of paint on her dress and her bare hands. She had a smudge of red across her cheekbone from where she must have wiped the back of her hand on her face.

He watched in silent reverence as she paused to stretch her arms over her head as if working out a crick in her back from sitting still for too long. Her spine arched and twisted before turning her focus back over the gardens. She lifted her pallet and started mixing the shades of pinks and reds on her board until she found the colour she was looking for. She looked wholly and utterly absorbed by her work.

“I shall just announce you, My Lord,” the butler whispered, and Tristan stopped him with a touch to his hand. He shook his head and smiled softly. He wanted to wait just a moment longer. Tristan folded his arms across his body with the book safely tucked under his arm and leaned against the wall of her home, observing.

The butler bowed and left them to visit with one another in the company of her maid in the distance. He did not know how long he stood there as she worked. She possessed a true talent; there was no denying that. She painted like it was her calling to create — something he had never had the patience to do.

She looked so peaceful. He almost did not wish to disturb her, but he would give just about anything to know what was on her mind. How long had she been painting? Did she only paint nature? What moved her to learn that particular skill in the first place? Whenever he thought he had learned something about her, he was forced to realize he was no closer than at the start.

“You are very talented,” he remarked finally.

Lady Seraphina startled, and her paintbrush jostled from her hand, clattering to the ground below her, and he rushed forward to pick it up for her.

“Apologies, My Lady, I did not mean to startle you. I had merely meant to come to call on you.” Tristan offered the paintbrush back up to her. “Truly, please carry on. It is a rare privilege to witness creation such as yours.”

“Do you often take to surprising young ladies, My Lord?” Lady Seraphina muttered awkwardly, a hint of frosty discomfort in her voice.

“Such are the pleasures of unpredictability, I would suppose.”

Lady Seraphina shook her head and slapped her hands as if clearing the paint from them. “Apologies, My Lord, if I had known I was to have company, I would have been more presentable.”

“I could not dream of it.” Tristan grinned. “I would much rather see you in this state. I would love to see more of your work.”

Lady Seraphina shook her head again as if embarrassed. “No, I never show off my work to anyone. I would never ...”

“But you should! You are very talented!”

Seraphina blushed. “It is only because I have such a pretty subject.”

“You are being far too modest!” Tristan added easily. It was refreshing to see her so disarmed. It made it all the easier to speak with her.

Lady Seraphina shook her head once more, though the corners of her lips were tilted up slightly. “Hardly. I have not done anything extraordinary here.”

Tristan moved closer, daring to look more closely at the painting still drying in the sunlight. Up close, she was even more breathtaking. The words on his tongue in answer died as he gazed longingly into her eyes — even more captivating in the sunlight.

Lady Seraphina glanced down at the book in his hands curiously. “What do you have there?”

It was what he needed to snap back to reality. He pulled the book out from under his arm and held it to her — it felt terribly unceremonious to just thrust it at her now. “A gift. I had planned a touch of fanfare, but now ...” Tristan laughed awkwardly as he held out the book for her inspection.

Lady Seraphina gasped as she ran her paint-flecked fingers over the book cover reverently. “But where did you find it?!”

There it was — a rare smile as she flipped open the book and started to thumb through the pages. “I have searched for a copy of this book everywhere, but it is so very hard to find a copy anywhere! Do you truly mean to lend this to me? It is too much!” She paused, seeming to remember herself and reining in her excitement. “I mean, thank you, My Lord. This is very generous.”

“If it means that much to you, it is yours. Very well worth it to see such a smile.”

“Again with the flattery Lord Ashford?” Lady Seraphina asked without ever looking away from the book she was admiring. After another moment, she clutched her prize to her chest happily, faint flecks and all.

“Is it flattery if I am merely stating an obvious fact?” Tristan teased with a smirk. He was getting closer to getting her to drop those high walls she liked to hide behind; he could feel it. “Though, I confess that I was a little wary of the genre of the book. I was unsure if you enjoyed a good mystery.”

“Well, in truth, I—” Lady Seraphina’s words were cut short by a sudden gust of wind that gusted through the open space of the veranda violently. Book clutched in one hand, Lady Seraphina went to stabilize her painting to keep it from toppling over into the ground, but that did nothing to save the leather-bound portfolio of sketches and drawings that had been resting on the table with all of her paints. She gasped softly and tried her best to reach for both as the strong gust of wind lifted the sketches and spiralled them through the air.

Tristan moved to catch one, plucking the paper out of the air as he then jogged across the open space to try to catch them as best as he could. Lady Seraphina joined him moments later, reaching for the same piece of paper off the ground as he did — her bare hand closing over the top of his own.

His eyes lifted to hers, only to find that she was far closer to him than he had anticipated. He could smell the sweetness of her perfume and the lingering smell of paint that decorated

her. Sparks tingled up his fingers from every place that she touched.

For a moment, she seemed to soften, if only a little. There were no lines of tension on her face as she smiled softly at him, a warmth in her expression as she slipped her fingers through his own to extract the drawing she had been reaching for. He could not help himself— he was drawn to her by a force that he could not understand and did not dare to question. He did not wish to question it. He could feel her warm breath against his lips — so close that if only the moment between them lasted a little longer, he might have kissed her.

Just as quickly as the moment had come, it ended.

For a moment, they were frozen in place — he could have sworn that he heard her heart thundering just as loudly as his own as the wind curled around them. Even Mother Nature seemed to wish to push them closer to one another.

Lady Seraphina pulled her hand from his and clutched her sketch to her chest. When she spoke, it was the same calm, collected tone she had used in their prior conversations. He could see that the walls she had started to let slip were now firmly back in place. “Thank you, Lord Ashford, for your assistance.”

A dusting of pretty pink coloured the bridge of her nose and the apples of her cheeks. Just enough that it sorely tempted him to push the envelope and see just how much further he could press the subject. He wanted to kiss her — but the moment was over.

Tristan had to hope against hope that he would get another chance.

Chapter 13

Amid the opulence of Lady Diana's grand dinner, Seraphina gracefully glided across the ballroom, her presence commanding the attention of all in attendance. Her raven-black hair was elegantly styled, and the soft glow of candlelight reflected in her piercing blue eyes, creating an aura of regal allure.

The Earl and Countess of Emberdale, her parents, walked proudly at her side, basking in the admiration their daughter elicited from the distinguished guests. But, her mind was only occupied with thoughts of one man and one man alone. She could not get their afternoon together out of her mind. He had left shortly after the encounter with the sketches, stating he had some important business to attend to, but the truth was there had been a moment between them, and she had bungled it.

As per usual, Seraphina had allowed her thoughts to get the better of her. They ran rampant and untamed in her mind, whispering only the worst-case scenario of every event that could possibly happen. She ought to have apologized, or at least she should have tried even harder to keep herself from acting so awkwardly around him. He did seem to have pure intentions.

Mostly.

If he had kissed her ... she thought she might have allowed it.

Over and over again, she had replayed those fleeting moments in her mind's eye and pictured all the ways it could have gone. It would have been even better than she had dreamt it, for she had no experience to draw from, and Lord Ashford was a living, breathing person. Unlike the version of him that existed in her dreams, he could touch her.

Her eyes seemed drawn to him, standing with his friends and dominating whatever conversation the small grouping of men seemed to be having. Lord Ashford smiled easily, lighting up the space around him in a way that made her heart flutter.

She found herself mesmerized by his ability to easily navigate the intricacies of high society while maintaining a sense of authenticity she rarely encountered.

She wanted to tell him what she thought about the book he had brought her. She had stayed up for far too many hours the previous night, burning her candle low so that she could devour it. There was no reason for her to stray from the status quo and strike up a conversation with him. It would ruin the whole ‘aloof’ image that she had so carefully cultivated, but despite her best efforts, she found herself gravitating towards where he stood.

Lord Ashford’s gaze lifted, locking with hers from across the room and she felt her mouth go dry as he transfixed her. What was this feeling? She had never been so frozen by such a simple glance before! She did not know how to proceed. It was uncharted territory. If Elizabeth were standing right next to her here, no doubt her friend would push her towards him, hoping to start another conversation, but she was not so bold.

Lord Ashford seemed to excuse himself from the conversation he was in the middle of, patting the back of the man nearest to him in a friendly gesture as he worked away from the group, seeming to be intent on coming to speak with her. Her stomach tightened. The smart thing would be to go away, to further discourage any more contact or conversation ... but she wished to speak with him.

More than anything, Seraphina wished to have him closer to her once more. It was such a foolish, silly notion. Her hands folded demurely in front of her body as she awaited him — just as the music changed to signal that dinner was being served.

Lord Ashford glanced over his shoulder as the murmured conversation around them shifted and changed to discuss the meal. Seraphina’s disappointment was palpable. The mass of bodies that had been dancing only moments prior seemed to move en masse towards the dining room. She lost sight of Lord Ashford in the throng of it. She bit down on her bottom lip softly as she, too, was forced to head in that direction, lamenting the moment of near conversation with him.

The dining room was divine. The lavish setting was already laden with decorative platters and pretty displays of every dish she could imagine. Couples and families mingled around the room's edges, but most had taken their seats. Seraphina actually looked for her parents, whom she was certain she would be expected to sit beside, but her gaze found Lord Ashford all the same. He waved her over the moment he caught her eye — he had saved a seat beside himself for her.

She ought to decline. It would send the wrong sort of message, and she knew it. Her parents would get their hopes up. Sitting at his side would spark rumours that they were courting when they absolutely were not.

Her feet carried her to him anyway.

Lord Ashford rose from his seat to pull her chair out before she had consciously chosen to sit next to him. It was like her body had taken over, shifted out of her control with a mind of its own. She felt as if she were overly aware of his frame and how close their chairs were to one another. Images of the parlour where he had pulled her closer to him warmed her. If she were not careful how she sat here, her thigh would brush against his.

“So, Lady Seraphina,” Tristan started, his voice rich and velvety, “I wished to apologize for leaving so quickly. I wished to convince you that you should show me more of your sketches. I only caught but a glimpse or two, but they were very well crafted.”

Seraphina looked up; her piercing blue eyes met his gaze with surprise and curiosity. She was not accustomed to compliments, especially not from notorious rakes like Tristan. Yet, the sincerity in his voice disarmed her, making her defences falter for a brief moment. If he continued on this path every time they encountered one another, she was going to start believing him. It would do terrible things for her ego.

“It is merely a pastime, nothing of great significance,” she replied with a touch of modesty, trying to maintain her icy demeanour.

Tristan chuckled softly, and the sound sent a pleasant shiver down Seraphina's spine. "I assure you, Lady Seraphina, your talent is far from inconsequential. If your sketching is anything like the painting I saw, they will undoubtedly possess a captivating quality, a glimpse into the depth of your soul, if I may be so bold."

For a moment, the icy barrier that Seraphina had carefully cultivated wavered, and she was caught off guard by Tristan's keen observation. Under his intense gaze, she felt exposed, as though he could see right through her façade. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips that she could not squash. Was she imagining things, or was he paying special attention to her lips as she spoke? Why did it make her stomach flutter at the thought?

"I told you, your flattery is unnecessary, Lord Ashford," she retorted, though her tone lacked its usual sharpness. "I hardly see how my art is of any interest to you."

Tristan leaned in slightly, his voice lowering to an intimate whisper. "On the contrary, Lady Seraphina, your art is of great interest to me, as are all things that interest you. It speaks volumes about the person you are, revealing a side of you that many fail to see. I thought I had been clear in my intentions and desire to get to know the true you."

Seraphina felt her heart race, the intensity of their conversation stirring something within her. She glanced away, trying to collect her thoughts and regain her composure. But a spark of intrigue in Lord Ashford's eyes kept pulling her back.

"I must admit," she said, her voice softened slightly, "that art has always held a special place in my heart. My governess was an ardent lover of paintings and once took me to an exhibition. I was enchanted by how those canvases conveyed feelings and stories, each stroke of the brush speaking volumes."

Seraphina's tone attempted to mask her growing fascination with art as she spoke about her governess's influence. The memory of that long-ago art exhibition filled her mind, the vivid colours and intricate brushstrokes leaving a

lasting impression. She recalled how her governess had carefully explained the emotions and stories behind each painting, opening her young eyes to the world of artistic expression.

For all the world, it appeared that Lord Ashford could see nor hear anything in the dining hall but herself. He did not even turn his focus to the plate laden with delicious-smelling food placed in front of him when it was served.

“I can see why,” Lord Ashford replied, a genuine smile gracing his lips. “Art has a way of touching our souls, of capturing the essence of human emotion and experience. It is as though the artist reaches out across time to connect with the observer, leaving an indelible mark.”

Seraphina nodded, her heart beating a little faster as she sensed their genuine connection over this mutual passion. “It is true,” she said, her voice laden with sincerity, “I have always been moved by the power of art to evoke emotions that words cannot express. Each painting tells a story, and I find myself getting lost in those stories.”

Lord Ashford leaned in a little closer, their conversation taking on an intimate air amidst the grandeur of the dinner. “Lady Seraphina, I have never heard anyone speak about art like you have. There is such a passion behind your words despite how you attempt to mask it.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face and then up into his hair. It seemed as if he were taking a moment to measure the weight of his words. He nodded to himself. “I would like to take you to a gallery. I think that my education in art has been clearly lacking, and I can think of no better teacher than you; truly it is a rare gift.”

Seraphina’s cheeks flushed slightly at his words, feeling both seen and understood in a way she never thought possible. His compliment struck a chord deep within her, resonating with the woman she had always been but rarely showed to the world.

Too often, her hobbies and interests were dismissed as being ‘lesser than’ because they did not often have practical

application. But in the past two years, she did not know what she would have done had she not had art to turn to in her darker moments. To her, it was a vital thing.

“I ... thank you,” she stammered, a hint of vulnerability creeping into her voice. “Your words are kind, Lord Ashford, and I must admit they are rather unexpected.”

Tristan smiled warmly, his gaze unwavering. “Does that mean you will go with me?” He leaned closer to her, his expression animated as he continued to speak with dramatic flair. “I speak only the truth, Lady Seraphina. A captivating charm about you sets you apart from the rest of the ton. Your love for art is just one facet of your intriguing nature.”

Seraphina laughed and rolled her eyes before she could stop herself. “Enough! It is too much!”

Lord Ashford smiled in return. “Can there truly be such a thing as too much flattery?”

“I assure you that there can be. You crossed those thresholds some time ago.”

He nudged her softly with his shoulder, just a subtle glance. “I disagree! I not only have got you to agree to come out with me willingly, but I have also been graced with a smile. Clearly, it was just the right amount of flattery.”

Seraphina attempted to push the smile away and failed.

Chapter 14

As the dinner ended, the ladies gracefully excused themselves, retreating to the elegant drawing room adorned with plush furnishings and soft candlelight. Instead, the men chose to adjourn to a large parlour for cigars and brandy. Neither option seemed particularly appealing to Seraphina as she knew that no matter whom she encountered next, Lord Ashford would still be on her mind. Her skin felt warm as if she were overheating. She needed a moment to compose herself in the cool night air. That would be the proper solution; she was certain of it.

She might have allowed herself to get a touch too carried away. As Seraphina snuck out onto the balcony and left the low din of conversation and music behind her, she felt more at ease. The evening breeze wrapped around her, emptying most of the excessive chatter inside her head. Comments and thoughts swirling around that did not need to be there.

Seraphina was allowing herself to fantasize too strongly over a man hardly even knew. She had refused to allow herself to ask more about him because it felt too much like surrender. Already she was giving in and telling him too much about herself. She heard herself repeatedly offering up excess information where she had never allowed another potential suitor to grow that close to her.

She certainly had not allowed herself to fantasize about any of those other men. Yet, she stood here thinking about what it might be to have his lips brush against hers. What would his hand feel like in hers? Her heart fluttered at the thought that he might appear here and pull her into his arms with that impish grin on his face that would force her to forget anything other than himself.

Seraphina forced herself to turn to look out over the beautiful gardens below. Her eyes closed as she focused on her breathing.

Get a hold of yourself.

She pressed the back of her gloved hands into her too-warm cheeks in the hopes that it would do something to calm herself — it did not.

Footsteps sounded behind her, soft and steady, that snapped her out of her trance. She spun to see who the new guest was or even to mutter lame placations about why she was on the balcony in the first place but there he was. It was as if he had read her mind!

When their eyes met, Seraphina felt a flutter of butterflies in her stomach. The cool mask of aloofness she usually wore was gone — she could not have summoned it if she had tried. Instead, she could feel the hope shining through her chest and outward. After all, was it not what she had said that she had always wanted? Somebody to take an interest in her not for the fact that she was the ‘unattainable rose’ nor for her beauty. She had wished for somebody to get to know her mind and her heart, and Lord Ashford seemed to do so in a way she could have never anticipated.

Now he approached with purpose, and his voice broke the silence, carrying a warmth that contrasted with the cool night air.

“Enjoying the view?” Lord Ashford enquired, his gaze holding an intensity and insinuation that made her cheeks flush.

“I find the gardens quite charming,” Seraphina replied awkwardly, attempting to maintain composure. She wrapped her arms around herself as she spoke. “It is a welcome escape from the bustling ballroom.”

A faint, knowing smile played on Lord Ashford’s lips.

It seemed that he was not about to allow her to get away without answering the underlying question he posed.

“And what about the company? Do you find it charming as well?” he asked, the air between them thick with unspoken words.

She could lie. The choice was laid out clearly in front of her. She could be dismissive and insist that it was improper for

him to be standing here while she was alone. There was a multitude of things that she could shout at him to express how indecent the whole thing would be should anyone come out here and happen across them.

Yet her tongue was silent — she could not bring herself to turn him away when he had taken such effort to seek her out. She did not wish him to go.

“I suppose the company is ... intriguing,” she replied, her voice steady, though her heart pounded in her chest. He stood too close to her — leaning against the balcony railing beside her. It would be proper to step away from him. It would be decent to excuse herself back into the ballroom — but she stayed at his side.

Boldly, he moved closer until she could feel his warmth. His cologne’s soft, musky notes mixed with the floral aroma in the air as he captured her eyes once more. “Just intriguing?” he whispered, leaning closer with a grin. “Lady Seraphina ...”

“Sera,” she interrupted softly.

Lord Ashford looked as if he could have taken flight that very moment. His grin morphed into a bright smile, a shine to his eyes. One would think he had just been gifted piles of gold and jewels for how happy he looked. His hand lifted between them, stopping just short of crooking a finger under her chin. His gaze dropped as if at battle with himself to touch her or refrain from touching her. “I shall only call you Sera if you call me Tristan.”

Seraphina dipped her chin into a nod, for she found that she was speechless.

“Sera,” Tristan whispered softly, his curved finger finally pressing into the underside of her chin. “I find myself bewitched by you.”

The words hung in the air, heavy and laden with desire that she was almost afraid to acknowledge. Her breath caught in her throat as she indulged in his attention. Just for a moment, she entertained the notion of him in a genuine way. For so

long, she had just known that romance and connection of this sort were simply not in the cards for her.

The things she had heard from other girls of the ton about being swept off of their feet and into strong, capable arms sounded like nothing more than the fantasies that Seraphina liked to read about. Now that such a reality was presenting itself to her she was not certain how she felt about it.

Tristan's thumb brushed over her chin, and her lips parted softly. "Is that line borrowed from one of your Gothic novels?"

Tristan's lip tugged upward, a ghost of a smile on his lips as he shook his head. "I assure you, it was no line."

His presence was very nearly overwhelming. The intensity of his gaze, coupled with the lack of space between them, was almost too much. Her heart raced, and her blood pulsed loudly in her ears as she attempted to remain composed. He lifted her chin ever so slightly, angling her face towards his as if he might actually kiss her — already, it was so much better than the version from her dreams. She would not back down now — she could not.

Tristan took her other hand in his, pushing his fingers between her gloved ones, and urged her closer until they stood toe to toe. She could feel something like lightning pulsing between them, the anticipation nearly driving her mad as the rest of the world seemed to fade away into nothingness — the world narrowed down to only the two of them.

Only to be interrupted by the loud squeal of hinges from the balcony door.

Like cold water to the face, the moment shattered— disappointment unfurled inside her like a living creature. Unhappy and throwing a tantrum as it surged through her and Tristan's hands dropped from her, and they stepped apart. His tongue ran over his bottom lip as he took a single step back to put some modicum of decent space between them. His eyes never once left her lips, even as he offered her a sad, remorseful smile.

Who was joining them was headed this way. A beat of panic registered, but Tristan was already walking backward to the nearest pillar so he would not be seen standing here alone with her. She did not wish to see him go. Already she felt the loss of his company deeply. She had never once considered herself irrational, but she wished to chase after him just to have another few moments together — no matter how ill-advised it was.

Her heart was still racing like a rabbit's when she turned to see Elizabeth stepping out onto the terrace; Seraphina forced a smile, hoping to hide the lingering effect of Tristan's presence.

“Seraphina! I have been searching for you everywhere,” Elizabeth exclaimed excitedly, linking her arm with Seraphina's as they started walking back towards the manor.

“Apologies, Elizabeth. I needed some fresh air and found solace on the balcony,” Seraphina replied, trying to sound nonchalant. She glanced over her shoulder but did not catch even the slightest glimpse of Tristan. He had either slipped away when she was not looking, or else he was very adept at hiding.

Elizabeth could not contain her excitement as she shared the details of her budding connection with Michael. “Oh, you have missed so much! Lord Thorne stole away from the parlour where all the men were congregating to come and seek me out. Can you imagine it?! He told me that my company was far more interesting than the ‘stuffy old men,’ his words, not mine.”

Seraphina felt like a bad friend for the fact that she could not properly focus on what her friend was saying. Any other time she would have been over the moon with excitement for her and the developments with her long-time crush.

“Then he complimented my dress. Not in the casual way he used to do; well, it felt different this time,” Elizabeth gushed happily.

Seraphina wondered what Elizabeth might say if she told her she had almost got her first kiss.

What would she say if she knew what she had nearly walked in on? Seraphina wanted to think that her friend would be excited, but she was not entirely certain. For now, she would keep it to herself. Even if it did make it harder for her to focus on the things her friend presently said.

As they reentered the manor, Elizabeth continued to chatter, but Seraphina's mind was elsewhere. The intensity of Tristan's gaze, the proximity of their bodies, and the almost-kiss they had shared were all permanently imprinted in her memory. She grappled with emotions she had not expected to experience.

Chapter 15

After the ball, in the quiet solitude of his elegant bachelor pad, Tristan reclined in a plush armchair, his thoughts consumed by the recent events. The memory of his encounter with Seraphina, the enigmatic Lady of Emberdale, lingered in his mind like a beguiling melody, refusing to fade into the background. Her presence had left an indelible impact on him, challenging the foundation of his beliefs and rousing feelings he had long thought were beyond his grasp.

As he leaned back, gazing at the dancing flames in the hearth, Tristan's mind wandered to the touch of her hand — the brief moment their fingers brushed during their intimate time alone together. He could almost feel the warmth of her skin against his, igniting a spark that sent shivers down his spine. Her laughter echoed in his ears, a soft and melodic sound that had the power to chase away any shadows lurking in the corners of his soul.

Tristan's heart raced as he acknowledged the undeniable truth. He had fallen prey to an enchantment he had once scoffed at— genuine affection. The rakish Marquess of Aylesbridge, notorious for his charm and seductive ways, found himself captivated by the mysterious Lady Seraphina, the “Unattainable Rose” of the ton. He smirked to himself, remarking on just how much trouble he had managed to get himself into. Certainly not the outcome he had been expecting that night at the gentlemen's club with Michael.

His thumb ran over his bottom lip as he sat in his contemplation. If only they had managed a few more moments together, something magical could have happened. Tristan's knee bounced anxiously as he replayed the events over again. The more he thought about her, the more restless he felt. Before now, he had always laughed and mocked those who would spend their days pining after their women, and now he understood. She had so quickly become a permanent fixture in his mind. So much so that it was impossible to sit still. He felt full of energy and nowhere to put it.

Tristan pushed out of his armchair and paced momentarily, trying to convince himself that it would be beyond foolish to attempt to sneak off in the middle of the night to meet up with her unannounced. He hoped that she was thinking of him.

The thought of her lying in bed, thinking about him, roused all sorts of other feelings inside him. His hands moved to his waistcoat, undoing the buttons as he left the parlour and headed towards the stairs. He needed to take his irrational self to bed before he got himself into trouble.

If only they had not been interrupted. If nobody had come out in search of her, he could have pulled her into his arms. The moment was right. He would have been able to taste her lips against his, to feel her small frame against his body — her heat. He desperately wished to know what she tasted like ... what noises she would make in heated passionate moments. Just how far was she willing to go once he broke her out of her shell of repression — he wanted to thaw her icy exterior and see just how warm he could make her.

The soft way her lips parted when she was surprised, the delicate blush to her cheeks that was such a pale shade of pink that it was almost impossible to see in the dim lighting — it was enough to have him stir in his trousers. He wanted to capture that full bottom lip of hers — first with his fingers and then with his teeth.

There could be no greater pleasure than seeing her — the picture of control — wholly and utterly undone, and Tristan desperately needed to be the one to do it.

He wanted to see her brilliant, overly busy mind blank with pleasure and think of nothing beyond him and the sensations he would wrest from her pliant body.

Tristan adjusted his trousers and scrubbed his hands up and down his face, attempting in vain to clear his mind of her.

Ice bath. That was what he needed — lots and lots of ice.

There was a light on in the parlour, a light that he had no idea why it would be lit at this hour. Half of the house had already gone to bed, and the other half was busy shutting

things down so that they, too, could retire. His brow furrowed with curiosity as he headed towards the parlour and pushed the door open slowly. Perhaps it was his butler. Sometimes the man could not sleep and needed some decompression time with a glass of warm milk. Conversation would do them both good, then.

Only it was not the butler — it was the very last person he would have ever expected to see in his home at this hour. The unwelcome silhouette of a person whose presence could only be described as intrusive.

“... Evangeline?” Tristan asked, dreading the moment that she turned around.

It was not as if her slender frame could have belonged to anyone else. That brazen red shade of dress was going to match her lipstick perfectly when she turned around. The glow of the fireplace seemed to make her all that more ominous as she turned her chin over her shoulder to bat her impossibly long eyelashes at him with a soft, girlish giggle. “Hello, Tristan. It has been a while.”

Tension formed in his jaw as he clenched his teeth. Could it ever truly be long enough between their meetings? He did not think so.

“How did you get into my home?” he demanded gruffly, not caring in the slightest if his words or tone offended her.

Her smile was just as alluring as ever, but she had the eyes of a siren. The dangerous sort of beauty that had once bewitched him before he had learned of the poison lingering beneath those sultry looks.

“Oh, I have my ways.” Evangeline was deliberately vague as she turned to fully face him. “Careful lover, or I will think you are unhappy seeing me.”

The knuckles on his hand popped from the tension he balled his fist with. “I am not happy to see you. I think you should leave now.” Tristan rolled his head in the direction of the door pointedly.

Evangeline's heels clicked softly over the wooden floor as she sauntered towards him with a seductive smile on her features. She pouted prettily. It was the expression that would have put him putty in her hands during their passionate affair, but that had been two years ago. They were beyond over and done with — she had run off to Bath claiming that he had broken her heart by leaving her, and he had honestly hoped that she would stay at bath so that he would not have to see her again.

Apparently, that was nothing more than wishful thinking.

“Are we to play games, lover? I must say I was hoping for a rather ... passionate reunion,” Evangeline continued as if he had not asked her to leave at all.

He certainly did not like her referring to him as her lover. His lip curled as she closed into his personal space, her finger trailing down his chest lightly, her actions brimming with unspoken invitation. Unwanted. The soft lilac and almond of her perfume once had appealed so strongly to him on her skin, but now it only served as a potent reminder of the past mistakes he had made with her.

A chill shuddered down his spine at the memory.

His hand caught hers by the wrist, and he shook his head. No, he was not going to entertain her any longer. He was no longer hers to touch. He had not been for a very long time. In truth, if he never had to think of her again, it would still be too soon.

Startled by his actions, Evangeline looked up at him with something akin to resentment. Had she truly thought that she could just let herself into his home after all this time and that he would simply welcome her with open arms? Well, she had always been a touch on the delusional side, so he could not say that he would be honestly surprised if she had.

Whatever her intentions or purposes in coming here, he simply needed to set the needed boundaries into place to ensure that she understood that whatever they might have been once, they were not going to be that ever again. Holding her wrist in his hand, his grip was firm but not unkind as he met

her eye. For a moment, she seemed to think that he was still playing some game. But, after a moment, she seemed to understand, her expression softening.

“Enough, Evangeline,” he warned her in a tone that offered no room for argument.

“Enough, what?” She countered, attempting to get him to budge in his limits already. She attempted to worm her way closer to him even while he held her away. “You cannot possibly be serious ...”

“You are not welcome in my home, Evangeline.”

The silence that followed his words was so thick he could almost taste it. For a long while, she appeared frozen in a state of shock. She was not a woman who often was told no to anything she wanted, and this was hardly the first time he had denied her. No doubt it wounded her pride more than she cared to admit.

She wrenched her arm out of his grip and shuffled back a step, affronted.

While he did not intend to hurt her, he needed to be sure that she understood where he stood on the subject of them. There would be no continuation of their previous relationship, and he was quite glad that she did not press matters further.

She gathered her shawl from where it had rested above the mantel and hastily threw it over her shoulders before her clicking heels slowly faded as Evangeline left in an outraged huff.

There was only one woman he wanted to have touch him, and it was not Evangeline.

Chapter 16

In the sanctuary of her opulent bedchamber, Seraphina sat by the window, the moonlight casting a silvery glow on her delicate features. Her fingers absently traced patterns on the windowsill as her thoughts spun in a whirlwind of emotions. The memory of her encounter with Tristan lingered like a sweet enchantment, filling her heart with a delicious thrill she could not quite comprehend.

His intense and penetrating gaze seemed to have peered into the depths of her soul, unearthing secrets she had long kept hidden. The gentle touch of his hand had left an electrifying sensation on her skin, and his confessions about his changing perceptions of her had stirred something deep within her heart. As she replayed the moments in her mind, she wondered whether this newfound attraction was merely a fleeting infatuation or something more profound, something as compelling as love.

If only they had not been interrupted.

The “Unattainable Rose” of the ton was not accustomed to such inner turmoil. Her aloof demeanour had always shielded her from the frivolities of romantic entanglements, yet, here she was, entranced by a man she had once dismissed as a rakish rogue. But Tristan was proving to be more than a charming seducer; there was a vulnerability in his eyes, a glimpse of a man yearning for something genuine and true.

As she finally settled into bed, her thoughts continued to swirl like a tempest. She knew not what the future held, but she could not deny the allure of what had transpired that evening. Would he come to call on her again tomorrow? Would he truly take her to the gallery as he had offered? She had to hope that he would, for the more she thought about him, the more she found she was looking forward to their next encounter. Perhaps, if she were fortunate, they might even be able to conclude what they had started that night.

Seraphina pulled the blanket up to her chin, attempting to seek comfort from the warm layers but finding none. They did

not provide half the comfort of being in Tristan's arms. When she closed her eyes, she could still see the intensity of his hooded gaze.

Her hands drifted up to her neck as a smile played softly on her lips, and her finger hooked under her chin just like he had done. She allowed her mind to transport herself back to that balcony, feeling the sparks between them and the soft sound of crickets in the distance. It was so much better than her books — feeling it on a level she never could have.

Seraphina's fingers trailed over her bottom lip with a contented sigh as she imagined if she had just surrendered to her more base desires. She ought to have gathered her courage and stolen a kiss — just one. Then she would know how it felt to be properly touched by him. She could not imagine where his hands might go, but she could imagine that if he were to treat her as indelicately as the heroines in the books they both loved so dearly ...

Under the blanket, her hands traversed her body, imagining for an indulgent moment that they were larger, stronger as they moved over the flat plane of her stomach. Her nightgown caught on her fingers and pulled as she trailed her hands upwards towards her breasts.

So often she denied that she was even capable of feeling anything — she tried not to ever acknowledge when an errant thought would tighten her nipples under her dresses, but Tristan's mere voice had a way of rippling over her skin. It induced all manner of new sensations— a curling of desire for the very idea that he might wish to possess her body in the same indecent way that she longed for.

If only he were here, poised above her, pressing her down into her bed as a husband might. If he moved between her thighs with that confident smile on his arrogantly handsome face as his tongue moved over her skin ...

Heat flamed across Seraphina's face as she yanked her hands from her body and up over the covers, embarrassed of the direction her private thoughts had chosen to turn.

Her heart felt both buoyant and heavy with the weight of uncertainty as she wondered whether the enigmatic marquess had managed to breach the walls she had carefully built around her heart. The night wrapped her in its embrace, cradling her in the gentle realm of dreams, where Tristan's image danced, and the possibility of love glimmered like stars in the night sky.

In the soft afternoon light, Elizabeth arrived at Seraphina's doorstep, her eyes sparkling with excitement and her cheeks flushed with a youthful glow. Seraphina welcomed her dear friend warmly, though her heart still bore the traces of the previous night's tumultuous emotions. Elizabeth's enthusiasm was palpable as they settled into the elegant sitting room.

"Seraphina, my dear, I simply had to come and tell you all about it!" Elizabeth bubbled, barely able to contain herself.

"What has you in such high spirits, Elizabeth?" Seraphina enquired with a small smile, her interest piqued. Though, she knew before the words had even left her lips that only one thing could make her look so happy. She was practically giddy with joy and could not seem to sit still in her chair.

"It is Lord Thorne," Elizabeth said, beaming. "We spent the most delightful afternoon together at the park. He is quite the conversationalist, you know, and we spoke about books and art and our favourite authors. It was like finding a kindred spirit!"

Seraphina could not help sharing in her friend's joy. "I am thrilled for you, Elizabeth. It sounds like you had a wonderful time."

"I did, indeed," Elizabeth gushed. "And I could not have asked for a more perfect day. The sun shone, the birds sang, and Lord Thorne's company was simply delightful. It was everything that I hoped it would be. You know very well that I have wanted this for so long. I just wanted him to truly see me as a woman." Elizabeth swooned and fanned her face with her hand. "I still cannot believe it is finally happening. I believe I am quite smitten!"

Seraphina chuckled softly, feeling a hint of envy mixed with genuine happiness for her friend. Elizabeth's exuberance was infectious, and for a moment, it lifted the weight of her own uncertainties. "As you should be! He has been a friend to you for so long. It was high time that he opened his eyes and truly saw the value of what he already had."

"I do hope that this is true. I hope he truly means to put an end to all of his rakish tendencies ... I want him so badly, Sera." Elizabeth sighed wistfully and leaned back in her chair. "Can you imagine it? Me being his wife? I could be Lady Thorne!"

Seraphina could picture it easily. Lord Thorne needed somebody who could keep up with his endless energy and given that he was known for his gambles and good-natured pranks on his friends, she could think of no one with a better sense of humour to appreciate the man than her friend, Elizabeth. Personally, she felt they were perfectly suited to one another.

"I am glad you've found such happiness with Lord Thorne," Seraphina said, smiling warmly at her friend. "He does seem like a wonderful match for you."

"He truly is," Elizabeth replied dreamily, her eyes shining with adoration. "He has started to ask me more about my parents ... ensuring that my father has no upcoming travel plans. He thinks he is being subtle, but I know him far too well for that. He is looking for something more serious, something long-lasting. Paired with asking about my father ... well, you know how he was before, but I think he is ready to settle down now. Oh, Seraphina, I cannot help but hope he might one day propose!"

Seraphina chuckled softly, happy to see her friend so enamoured. "It sounds like you have already made up your mind about him," she teased.

"Was there ever really a choice? I mean, I was wholly ready to go to any lengths necessary to win his affection, but it seems more and more that all I have to do is simply to be myself!" Elizabeth blushed slightly but nodded. "But enough

about me. What about you, Seraphina? Have you given any thought to what I said earlier?"

Seraphina paused, her gaze drifting towards the window as she considered Elizabeth's words. "I have," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "There is something about Lord Ashford that intrigues me, something that I cannot quite put into words. But I also fear that I am reading too much into it, that I am simply caught up in the moment."

Never mind the fact that if she admitted to herself the depths of her feelings for him — she would have to choose to admit the truth about who she actually was and the inferiority of her birth.

Elizabeth reached out and gently squeezed Seraphina's hand. "Love is always a risk, my dear. But it is also one of life's greatest adventures. If you feel something for Lord Ashford, if he stirs something inside you, then perhaps it is worth exploring. You never know where it might lead."

It certainly did cause a stir within her. Even now, just the memory of his touch on her skin had her shift uncomfortably in her seat.

Seraphina's heart swelled with gratitude for her friend's support and wisdom. Elizabeth was right; love was unpredictable and sometimes required a leap of faith. Perhaps it was time for Seraphina to embrace her feelings for Tristan, to face the uncertainties head-on.

"You are right, Elizabeth," Seraphina said, her voice steady with determination. "Perhaps it is time for me to be a little more daring, take a page out of your confidence playbook, as it were, and be a little more open to the possibilities that life has to offer."

It was nearly as if her friend had pulled her thoughts directly out of her head.

Elizabeth beamed, clearly pleased with Seraphina's response. "That is the spirit! You never know; perhaps reformed rakes do make the best husbands."

Seraphina cringed, knowing that was the same line her father always seemed to be saying.

They both giggled, enjoying the lightness of the moment. As the afternoon sun painted the room in warm hues, Seraphina felt a newfound sense of hope and excitement. She could not predict what the future held, but she was ready to take a step forward and explore the depths of her heart and the enigmatic connection she felt with Tristan.

Chapter 17

The gentlemen's club was not providing the same solace to Tristan that he had found in the past. He had come here that night looking for distraction and company to keep his busy mind from continually thinking of Seraphina, but he could not. Every time a play or event was brought up, he found himself wondering what her opinion would be on such a thing. He could not help wondering what she might think if she were here, engaging in these conversations with him.

Amidst the lively atmosphere of the gentlemen's club, Tristan found himself surrounded by laughter, camaraderie, and the clinking of glasses. Yet her image seemed to dance before his eyes, and her presence felt as palpable as if she were there with him. As his friends exchanged jests and tales of their exploits, Tristan's attention remained elsewhere.

He couldn't shake off the captivating moments he had shared with Seraphina—their conversation on the balcony, the nearness of her form, the warmth of her breath against his skin. The memory of her touch sent a thrill down his spine, and he felt a sense of longing he had never experienced before.

Lost in his thoughts, he took a sip of his drink, the warmth of the liquor doing little to distract him from the memory of their intimate moment on the balcony. The feel of her hand in his, the softness of her lips so close to his own—it all felt like a tantalizing dream. He found himself yearning for more, craving to explore the depths of their connection.

“Tristan, are you even listening to me?” Michael asked, snapping him out of his reverie.

He chuckled and nodded, feigning attention. “Of course, old friend. You were saying something about how Elizabeth is the most enchanting creature that ever graced this earth?”

Michael rolled his eyes playfully. “Close enough. You know, you should really find yourself a lady like her. Someone who can captivate you with a single smile and challenge you in the most delightful ways. I have truly done us both a disservice by not paying proper attention to her before. Say —

perhaps when our wager is completed, we will set about finding you a wife as well!”

Tristan scoffed on reflex alone, privately shocked that the idea did not bring about the same sense of dread in his gut that it had once before. Tristan could not help internally smiling at the irony of Michael’s words. Little did he know that he had already found such a lady—Seraphina. The mere thought of her made his heart race, and he was torn between wanting to explore this newfound affection and the fear of losing the aforementioned wager with Michael.

“Well, I have always been more of a rogue, you know,” Tristan replied nonchalantly, hoping to mask the turmoil within him.

Michael raised an eyebrow. “Ah, but even rogues find love eventually. You cannot escape it forever, my friend. Take me, for example!”

Tristan’s gaze drifted to a distant corner of the club, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. He had always prided himself on his detachment and avoidance of emotional entanglements. But now, he could not deny the allure of Seraphina and how she seemed to awaken something he had long buried within him.

Michael shifted in his seat across from him and placed his hand of cards down. Neither of them had truly made a move in some time now, for Tristan was far too distracted to pay proper attention to it. “Unburden yourself to me, friend. I can see how troubled you are by whatever is weighing on your mind. You are not acting yourself. Confide in me so that we can go back to harmless debauchery.”

Tristan almost laughed.

“Am I so transparent? Likely so.”

Tristan’s thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the unwelcome memory of Lady Evangeline’s recent visit. Her sudden appearance at his doorstep had been unexpected, and her bold confrontation had caught him off guard. He had been

clear in his intentions to end their affair, but Evangeline seemed not ready to accept that.

A frown creased his forehead as he recalled her bitter words and the look of scorn in her eyes. He knew he had hurt her, and he couldn't help feeling a pang of guilt for the pain he had caused. But he had made a choice to move on from their tumultuous relationship, and he would not allow her to disrupt the newfound clarity he had found in his feelings for Seraphina.

"I had an unexpected visitor the other night, and I have not been sleeping very well as a result of it," Tristan confessed with a sigh. Michael had been there in London when all the misfortunes with Evangeline had transpired, and he felt that if he were to speak about her too seriously, she would somehow mysteriously know that her name was being spoken and show up, unwanted, out of thin air.

"I fear that the company might be a bad omen. Particularly since our wager is firmly under way and going so well. I confess I am deeply enjoying my time with Lady Seraphina."

In his heart, he knew that Evangeline was a part of his past, and he had no intention of revisiting it. But the intensity of her resentment left him uneasy, and he couldn't help wondering what she might do next. She was a possessive and determined woman, and he feared that her anger might lead her down a dangerous path.

Tristan took a deep breath, trying to shake off the troubling thoughts. He knew he could not let Evangeline's actions dictate his own happiness. He had found something special with Seraphina, something he had never experienced before, and he was not about to let it slip away because of someone from his past.

"Dare I ask who your visitor was?"

Tristan gave Michael the side-eye and sighed. "Evangeline."

Michael hissed and scrunched his nose as if just speaking that woman's name was a curse in and of itself. He shifted in

his chair, adjusting himself and crossing his legs. “And you kicked her right out, I hope?”

“Of course I did. Naturally, she was not overly pleased with my continued rejection of her. She is the bitter type and no doubt will retaliate in some fashion. I am loathe to think what she might do if she were to catch wind of my intentions with Lady Seraphina,” Tristan continued.

“Absolutely not.” Michael agreed. “Not only for her own sake, but she is Lady Elizabeth’s dearest friend, and I will not allow harm to come to either of them.”

“It is simply the feeling that we have not seen the last of her yet that I cannot seem to shake.” Tristan smirked, “And believe me when I say there are far more pleasant things that I would much prefer to think about.”

Michael smirked, but the expression was short-lived on his features as he looked somewhere behind where Tristan was seated. “I do not wish to be the bearer of further bad news, but it would appear that our reluctant acquaintance has taken a shine to you once again.”

Tristan turned in his chair, only to catch the persistent gaze of Lord Reginald Blackwood yet again. “Well, am I not Mr Popularity this week?” he muttered bitterly. “I had thought we were perfectly clear the last time he attempted to intrude upon us ...”

“It is best not to engage. Pretend he is not there. That would be the wisest course of action.”

“But, he vexes me so.” Tristan’s grip on his glass tightened as he resisted the temptation to retaliate against Lord Blackwood’s hostile glare. His jaw clenched, and he felt a surge of anger rising within him. It took all his self-control to heed Michael’s wise advice and avoid unnecessary confrontations.

“Tristan,” Michael warned in a rare serious tone. “Let it be. Rumour has it that Lord Blackwood’s come into some small inheritance recently. But, instead of investing it wisely,

he has been squandering it away on booze and seeking trouble where he can.”

He turned his attention back to Michael, forcing himself to relax and push aside the tense encounter with Reginald. He reminded himself that it was not worth it. Engaging in a confrontation with him would achieve nothing. Tristan heeded Michael’s warning, realizing that engaging with Lord Blackwood would only be a waste of his time and energy. He took a deep breath, trying to let go of the lingering unease in the pit of his stomach.

“You are right, Michael,” Tristan replied, trying to keep his tone casual. At least, there was no point in confrontation until the man inevitably asked one of them for money yet again. But until it was forced to be his problem, it was best to focus on more important matters. “There is no use getting involved in his affairs. Let him squander his inheritance as he pleases. It is none of my concern.”

Michael nodded in approval, appreciating Tristan’s decision to avoid unnecessary drama. “Exactly. It is best to focus on the things that truly matter,” he said, sipping his drink.

Tristan tried to follow Michael’s lead and shift his focus back to their lighthearted banter. They continued their conversation, talking about their recent exploits and sharing amusing anecdotes from their respective circles. Despite the lingering sensation of unease, Tristan did his best to immerse himself in the camaraderie of the moment.

Yet, no matter how much he tried to push the encounter with Lord Blackwood to the back of his mind, the memory of the man’s hostile glare remained stubbornly present. He could not shake off the feeling that there was something more to Lord Blackwood’s resentment, something deeper than just an old grudge. Paired with the sudden resurface of Evangeline, it was too much of a coincidence to ignore. He felt as if there was a storm cloud brewing on the horizon.

Chapter 18

In the elegantly adorned bedchamber of the Hawthorne residence, Seraphina sat before her vanity mirror, surrounded by an array of delicate cosmetics and perfumes. Her lady's maid stood beside her, meticulously preparing her for the evening's ball hosted by the ever-eccentric Lady Violet. The soft glow of candlelight bathed the room in a warm ambiance, adding a touch of enchantment to the preparations.

The maid's skilled hands expertly coaxed Seraphina's dark tresses into an intricate updo, adorning it with delicate pearl pins that caught the light with a subtle shimmer. The subtle scent of rosewater lingered in the air as her maid gently brushed powder over Seraphina's porcelain skin, enhancing her already radiant complexion.

The ball gown laid out on the bed was a masterpiece of silk and lace, the bodice adorned with intricate embroidery that echoed the beauty of the blooming gardens outside. As Seraphina slipped into the dress, it cascaded around her like a waterfall of moonlit silver.

The gown's wide skirts billowed gracefully, offering a glimpse of the delicate slippers peeking out from beneath. The maid fastened the gown with skilful hands, ensuring every seam and fold was perfectly in place. Her eyes gleamed with admiration as she took a step back to admire her handiwork, her years of service to Seraphina evident in the devotion she poured into every detail.

As Seraphina stood before the mirror, she could not help marvelling at the vision that stared back at her. Will Tristan like my dress? The gown accentuated her every curve, and the swathe of fabric seemed to tell a story of grace and sophistication. The soft candlelight lent her an ethereal glow, and for a moment, Seraphina felt like a character in one of the novels she so dearly loved.

Though her reflection radiated an air of poise and elegance, Seraphina's thoughts were anything but tranquil. The events of the past few days weighed heavily on her mind, and

her heart fluttered with nervous excitement as she anticipated the evening's events. With a final touch of blush on her cheeks and a dab of perfume behind her ears, Seraphina was ready for the ball.

As she rose from her seat, the silken fabric whispered against her skin, and her mind was filled with Tristan. Her hope was that he took one look at her in this dress and had no choice but to ask her to dance with him.

Hopefully, he would be able to steal her away for another private moment between the two of them. She felt as if it had been far too long since they had been together. As she studied her reflection, Seraphina's hands brushed the outsides of her thighs under the guise of smoothing the fabric down yet again, but in her mind, her hands were transformed to Tristan's. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that he was there, standing behind her, uttering words of endless flattery like he was so commonly doing — it brought a smile to her face.

“Oh darling,” came Lilian's voice from the doorway. “It does my heart so good to see you smiling like that.”

Instant embarrassment at having been caught flushed her face red as she spun to face her mother. Shame bubbled inside her as she anxiously pinched the fabric of her skirt. Was she getting too carried away with herself? If this was all just some indulgence of a rake, should she truly be getting her hopes up like this? She had no words that would not be damning to say, and her mother's expression dropped, seeming to misread the change in her daughter's demeanour.

“You look beautiful, daughter,” Lilian added gently as she came into the room to stand beside her daughter. “Are you not excited for this evening?”

“I am, Mother.” Seraphina forced a smile and nodded, but her mother was not so easily discouraged.

“You seemed so happy a moment ago; am I intruding?” Lilian pressed.

“It is not that. I am very happy, Mother.” Seraphina hoped that her mother would buy the excuse. “I have not been sleeping as soundly as I would like. That is all.”

It was an easier excuse than the truth, but her mother knew her far too well to buy it. “Is this because of that gentleman? Since you have met him, you seem to have very hot and cold moments, my dear. I know that your father is pressing you into pursuit of him, but if you are not interested in him, that is all you need to say on the matter.” Lilian folded her arms across her chest as she spoke, and Seraphina was flattered by her defensive nature.

Her mother continued, “There is simply no need to rush into any choices regarding your future. I know that sounds contrary to what I have said to you so many times before in that this is your third season but ultimately, your father and I only wish for what is best for you and will ensure that you are happy.”

Seraphina’s posture softened, and she turned to take her mother’s hands in her own with an empathetic smile. “I believe that Lord Ashford will make me happy, Mother. I think I was too quick to distrust his intentions, and my assumptions about him based on his reputation might have clouded my judgment ... but I feel now that he might be the first man to truly see me for who I am.”

She squeezed Lilian’s hands softly, hoping that her mother would understand her feelings and empathize with her.

“It always surprises me when you remind me of myself.” Lilian grinned. “I can remember saying something very similar about your father to my mother back in the day.”

Seraphina sighed and fought the urge to roll her eyes. “If this is going to be another lecture about the benefits and negatives of reformed rakes, I do not think I can endure it, Mother.”

Lilian laughed.

“Fine, fine! It just brings about happy memories for me is all.”

Nostalgic tears brimmed in Lilian's eyes as she pulled her daughter in for an embrace. "I never thought to consider what it might be like to think of you married. I was only looking to have you married in the social sense, but now that the moment I might lose you is so close ... I do not know what to do with myself."

Seraphina softened and hugged her mother firmly. She had struggled so often with her notion of identity since learning that her mother had adopted her at birth. But, the one thing that she had never doubted in the slightest was her parents' love for her. Even if they could not birth their own children, Seraphina had felt loved as if she had been.

Even her actual birth mother, Adeline, had done everything in her power to ensure that Seraphina had been loved and cared for in every aspect of her raising. She had not suffered as a result of the adoption, even if it was now regarded as a secret that she felt inherent guilt over. She ought to be easier on them, even in the privacy of her own mind. Seraphina knew she was blessed to have so many people who cared so deeply for her, and she knew that should something more serious happen between Tristan and herself, he would also take care of her.

"Let us hurry to the carriages before I change my mind about attending this evening at all," Lilian offered as she broke their embrace. "Lady Violet can be difficult to endure even on the very best of days, but she is a menace when she feels slighted."

"Slighted?"

"Yes. She takes great personal offence to people being late to her balls when she does feel moved to host them, which is very seldom as it is." Lilian sighed. "Besides, your father always likes to be punctual."

Seraphina could picture the man already tapping his foot and awaiting their company. As she linked arms with her mother to head for the carriage, excitement at the prospect that soon she might be on Tristan's arm bubbled inside her.

The lustre of the ball was somewhat lost on Seraphina, for she had eyes for one thing and one thing only. It mattered not that the charity ball was a grand affair. She had lost sight of her mother fairly early in the evening, hoping that Lord Ashford would be in attendance and that she might convince him to ask her to dance. She had been mustering up the courage to say a few things to him the whole carriage ride over. She had resolved that perhaps he was worthy of seeing past the walls he had so valiantly attempted to climb.

This meant that she also needed to confide in her friend, Elizabeth, the true scope of her feelings. Though, it was proving rather difficult to get a word in edgewise into their present conversation.

“I clash! I knew that Lady Violet had rather particular tastes, but I never imagined she would take things this far! What if Lord Thorne sees me in my pretty yellow dress and notices how amid all this garish decor, it is presently making me appear ill.”

Distress hedged into Elizabeth’s normally happy voice. She was in a state of near panic. But, she had a point — the colour scheme of the ball seemed to have been intentionally withheld so that all the guests clashed with one another. While Lady Violet was positively thrilled over the amount of colour in her ballroom — she was the only one.

“I shall have to come up with some excuse, or perhaps I can spend the evening in a parlour and have him fetch me? Oh, this is terrible.” Elizabeth muttered. Lord Thorne’s opinion of her was the highest matter of importance. Seraphina should have given it the proper amount of attention, but she could not.

Amid the chatter and laughter of the ballroom, Seraphina’s attention was diverted when her eyes locked with someone across the crowded space. There, standing amidst a group of gentlemen, was Tristan. Her heart skipped a beat, and she momentarily lost herself in the intensity of his gaze. Despite her attempts to maintain her composure, her cheeks flushed with a faint blush, betraying the impact of their previous encounters.

Elizabeth, ever perceptive of her friend's emotions, noticed Seraphina's change in demeanour. "What has caught your attention so suddenly?" she asked, her eyes following Seraphina's gaze. Though, she was likely to notice the man standing beside Tristan than the man himself, given that his present company was Lord Thorne.

"Oh, it is nothing," Seraphina replied, attempting to sound nonchalant as she tore her eyes away from Tristan and returned her focus to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow playfully. "Nothing, you say? It looked like quite something to me," she teased, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Please tell me, I am in desperate need of distraction."

Seraphina let out a small, amused sigh, knowing there was no hiding her feelings from her perceptive friend. "Well, it is just I have decided that I wish to court Lord Ashford," she admitted, her voice tinged with uncertainty and intrigue. It was certainly the most appropriate thing she wished to do with him.

Elizabeth's eyes widened with curiosity. "Truly? Do tell me more," she urged, her playful demeanour turning into genuine interest. "Oh, how he looks at you heats even my skin, and you know I have eyes for none other than my beloved Lord Thorne."

"It is ..." Seraphina trailed off, her focus back on Tristan across the room. His pointed gaze shifted to trail down her frame with an intense appreciation. She could feel it like a physical caress as if he were standing with his hand on her waist. Tristan nodded towards the dance floor, but before she could take a step towards him, Lord Thorne at his side forcibly recaptured his focus. Disappointment blossomed in her gut as she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth in disappointment.

What was the matter with her? The moment he looked away from her, she wished to cross this ballroom just to give him another reason to focus on her. It was some sort of madness that she clearly suffered from. She needed to get a hold of herself.

Seraphina forced herself to turn away from where he stood, and her face felt as if it were on fire. She fanned herself softly. “Perhaps we are both suffering from the same sort of illness,” she muttered to Elizabeth.

Before she could answer, Elizabeth appeared to catch sight of somebody cutting through the crowd. The change on her friend’s face was drastic enough that Seraphina turned to see what vexed her so. A strikingly stunning woman cut through the dancefloor rudely. She did not seem to care if she disrupted others’ dancing, nor the opinion of those around her as she made a direct path to where Lord Thorne and Tristan stood. There was no way to know which was her target until she reached them.

“And who is this now?!” Elizabeth whispered harshly. The note of jealousy in her friend’s voice was echoed in her own chest.

Whoever it was, Seraphina had a very bad feeling about her.

Chapter 19

As the charity ball at Lady Violet's estate continued, Tristan found himself standing with Michael amid the lively crowd. The grandeur of the ballroom and the enchanting melodies of the orchestra were lost on Tristan as his thoughts were consumed by the memory of Seraphina's captivating presence.

His eyes wandered across the room, searching for any glimpse of her. He could not deny the effect she had on him, the way her rumoured icy demeanour contrasted with the warmth he felt whenever she was near. As if on cue, he spotted her at the side of the ballroom, engaged in a conversation with Elizabeth. Tristan's heart skipped a beat as he watched her, his resolve to approach her strengthening with each passing second.

It was just about as clear of an invitation as he felt he would ever get from Seraphina. She no longer avoided his gaze — she met it with just as much intensity as his own. He appeared not the only one who could not get her from his mind. He had never welcomed such obsessive thoughts before. He needed to touch her. His hands craved her skin.

Tristan nodded towards the dance floor, asking silent permission to approach her while she was with her friend, and she had agreed.

However, fate continued to be cruel to him. Just as he stepped forward to leave Michael's company, the man's hand thrust out so that the back of his palm was pressed into Tristan's chest. His friend leaned in conspiratorially, his breath smelling like overly sweet wine. Tristan could never drink the same varieties that his friend tended to favour.

Just as he was about to make his way over to her, Michael's jovial voice interrupted his thoughts. "Ah, there she is, the 'Unattainable Rose' herself," Michael teased, nudging Tristan playfully.

Tristan rolled his eyes at Michael's nickname for Seraphina, trying to hide his true feelings. "You never let that

go, do you?” he replied with a smirk, hoping to deflect the conversation away from Seraphina.

Michael chuckled. “Of course not. It is not every day I see my best friend so taken by a lady. You must admit, the pursuit of the unattainable has its charm,” he said, raising an eyebrow mischievously.

It was true. He had been charmed. She was all that he thought about. Tristan shrugged nonchalantly, though his thoughts were still fixed on Seraphina. “Perhaps. But it was all in good fun, you know. I never expected it to go anywhere.” Tristan sighed and took a long drink of his wine. The words were false on his tongue, and they both knew it. It did not matter what his intentions had been; he knew very well that feelings had developed, and strong ones at that.

Michael gave him a knowing look. He spoke in sing-song tones as he teased him. Michael’s finger pressed into his chest to further his point. “Is that so? I have a feeling you are not being entirely honest with yourself, Tristan. There is something about her that has captured your interest. I knew that you would never be able to resist the challenge.”

“You speak as if you knew how this would all end from the start.”

Michael winked. “Perhaps I did. Perhaps I know you better than you even know yourself at times.” He lowered his hand and finished off his drink. “Perhaps I knew your match before you could have even contemplated it. Now, we will all settle down as a quartet and venture into this new path of our lives together!”

“Is that right?”

“But of course!” Michael’s words might have been a touch slurred as he spoke, his lips still wet from wine, but his good humour never faltered. “All the pieces are falling directly into place as I have desired them to go! You have underestimated my mastermind abilities.”

“Says the man incapable of winning a game of chess,” Tristan answered.

Michael moved in close to where it was Tristan's impulse to take a step back, but he did not have the space available. "Do not look now," Michael whispered just a touch too loudly. "But it would appear that we have a shadow."

Of course his impulse was to look, but he would know that pungent liquorice cologne anywhere. The man reeked of bad choices and cheap ale at all times. Miserable sod. He apparently did not know when to take 'no' for an answer. Tristan's brows furrowed in annoyance, sensing the bitterness in Lord Blackwood's demeanour as he eavesdropped on their conversation.

Michael tapped the side of his nose knowingly like he was using some secret signal to tell Tristan something, but he had not bothered to tell Tristan the cipher to whatever code he was using. Which left him floundering as his friend took the moment of silence to quickly excuse himself from Tristan's company and started towards the two women that Tristan would much rather be speaking to.

It did not take long to figure out why.

The prick had abandoned him the moment he had seen the woman making her way over to him as if on a mission. His blood ran cold as a sense of foreboding came over him. What was she doing here? Evangeline ought to have slunk back to her country home in shame like she had the last time he had rejected her. Now, he was stuck between an eavesdropping fool and a viper on a mission to get him back for reasons he could not fathom.

"Hello lover," Evangeline spoke too loudly. Had she no shame? That was hardly the sort of thing any proper lady would say out loud in such a public space!

"I told you not to call me that," Tristan reprimanded her angrily.

Evangeline only smiled serenely. She stood too close to him as if attempting to box him into a conversation he did not wish. "Dance with me, lover."

“Why would I do that?” Tristan reprimanded, looking around to ensure that no one would overhear their conversation. That was the last thing he needed. His courtship with Seraphina could be called into jeopardy if he did not get a hold of her.

Rumours would be poison to their budding romance. She would think that he had lied about his intentions and that the rakish rumours about him were all that he was. Gaining even the smallest bit of her trust had been difficult, and it meant the world to him. She was what mattered. Not Evangeline.

“Tell you what, I shall do as you ask, but only if you grant me a dance. Do you not think you owe me at least that much when I have come all this way just to see you?” Evangeline added sweetly, her voice like syrup.

“You have wasted your trip,” Tristan warned, but he knew that she was like a dog with a bone — she would not stop until she got what she wanted. It would be simplest to surrender to this simpler request before she became angry and started to either demand outlandish things or even worse, cause a scene.

The muscle in his jaw feathered. He could feel the strain from how tightly his teeth clenched as he stiffly offered his arm to appease her.

Evangeline’s pretty face turned positively radiant as she smiled. The force of her pleased laugh and excited, happy clapping drew the focus of those around them in a way that Tristan abhorred. How could he have ever found her appealing?

He could see now that her manipulations were so abundantly obvious, and her antics bordered on childishness. For far too long, she had skated by on her appealing looks and the fact that she could make people do what she wanted — it was part of the reason he had ended things with her in the first place.

He could only hope that Seraphina would not think anything of him dancing with her. He would go to her the moment he had removed the leech that was Evangeline and explain everything to her. Whatever end goal this parasitic

woman was hoping to accomplish with her clinging, Tristan was going to make sure she did not get what she wanted. No matter what.

As they stepped onto the dance floor, Evangeline attempted to stand too close to him, the gesture overly intimate. Paired with the longing look on her face and her wide, doe eyes as she blinked up at him as if they were deeply in love ... people were going to talk. Tristan tried his very best to avoid making eye contact with her as she placed her hand in his own. Even dancing with her made him feel dirty.

It was as if he could feel Seraphina's eyes on him. He was nervous to look in her direction lest she take this casual and unwanted dance incorrectly. That was the very last thing he wanted. Evangeline's hand moved to his shoulder as he took her other hand, and they fell into step. He ensured that he danced poorly, wishing her to take the hint that she seemed to want to refuse to do.

The song could not end quickly enough.

By the time he was brave enough to look in Seraphina's direction, she was nowhere to be found. The song ended, and he turned in place, looking frantically for where she might have got off to. He caught only a glimpse of her as she hurried out of a side door without looking back.

Tristan's feet automatically started to follow her, but Evangeline grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"And just where do you think you are going? I am not finished with you yet!" Evangeline batted her eyelashes up at him and donned what she must have assumed was a demure, alluring face. His nose wrinkled in distaste as he pulled his arm forcibly from her grip and shook his head.

"But I am done with you. Do not make me tell you again. In fact, forget that we ever met; that would be best for both of us."

"But, Trista—"

"Lord Ashford," he reminded her sharply. "Do not address me so informally," Tristan spat angrily. He did not wish any

more delay. He had to fix things with Seraphina before all was lost.

Chapter 20

It took too long to find her.

The sinking feeling in his stomach seemed to grow further with every step. Seraphina was not on the balcony or in any of the parlours that were open to the public. Naturally, she was in the very last place that he went to look —down into the gardens themselves. When he found her, she was seated at a bench surrounded by every coloured flower imaginable to him. She did not so much as look up when he came near to her. If even the smallest semblance of doubt lingered in his mind that she had not seen the dance, that alone confirmed it.

“I have been searching everywhere for you,” Tristan breathed.

“Have you? I should think that you are quite needed elsewhere, Lord Ashford,” Seraphina said in an overly stiff, formal tone.

He scrubbed his face, unsure how best to navigate these tense waters. “There is nowhere I would rather be other than here with you.”

Slowly, Seraphina turned her head towards him, her expression more open and vulnerable than he had seen from her yet. It tugged at his heartstrings. He did not wish to make her doubt his affection for her at any cost. She looked to him for assurance, even if she did not say the words themselves.

“I assure you, Sera, there is nowhere I would rather be.” He held out a hand to her. “Take a walk with me?”

Her hands clenched and unclenched the fabric of her dress as she stared at his hand. He could see the internal battle she waged with herself as she debated whether or not to let the topic go so easily. If she did ask him about Evangeline, he would be honest, but he would prefer not to taint their present conversation with such unhappy things.

Finally, she placed her hand in his, and a wave of relief washed over him. He guided her away from the bench and into

the moonlit path of the garden, where the scent of the flowers filled the air.

In the secluded moonlit garden, Tristan and Seraphina's tension escalated as they walked and discussed Gothic novels, their bodies brushing occasionally. The moon's soft glow highlighted Seraphina's features, making her even more mesmerizing. The more they spoke, the deeper Tristan found himself drawn to her. He could listen to her speak for hours and never tire of the sound of her voice.

They reached a softly lit fountain, its gentle cascading water creating a soothing ambiance. As they stood side by side, Tristan could not help admiring Seraphina's elegance and poise. The moment felt almost surreal as if they had been transported to a world of their own. She had a magical way of making even the simplest things like admiring a fountain, look beautiful.

Tristan's fingers twitched with the urge to reach out and touch her, to explore the softness of her skin. He wanted to see if the spark of electricity he felt every time their hands brushed was as real as he imagined. He found himself captivated by her, every fibre of his being yearning to be closer to her.

Unable to resist any longer, he reached out, his fingers gently tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The contact sent a jolt of electricity through Seraphina, her breath catching in response. Tristan could see the surprise and vulnerability in her eyes, and it mirrored his own emotions. He could not deny his intense attraction for her, an attraction that had grown far beyond the bounds of a mere bet.

He took a deep breath, deciding to be honest with her, even if it exposed his vulnerability. "Sera, there is something I must admit," he began, his voice tinged with sincerity.

She turned to him, her expression curious and attentive. "What is it?" she asked softly.

He hesitated for a moment, trying to find the right words. "I ... I find myself drawn to you in a way I have never experienced before. It is as if I cannot get you out of my mind,

no matter how hard I try. Your wit, intelligence, beauty ... they have all captivated me in a way I cannot explain.”

Seraphina’s eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, Tristan feared he had said too much, and that he had crossed a line. But then a soft blush tinted her cheeks, and she looked away, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Tristan, I ... I feel the same way,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “You have managed to surprise me in so many ways, and I cannot help being intrigued by you.”

Relief washed over him, and he felt a newfound sense of hope. “Then perhaps we should stop fighting this attraction between us and see where it leads,” he suggested, taking a step closer to her.

Seraphina’s eyes met his, her gaze steady and searching. “And if it leads to complications and heartache?” she asked, her voice tinged with vulnerability. “There is still so much that we have yet to learn about one another ... what if we begin this path and then you find something you do not like?”

Tristan’s hand reached out to gently cup her cheek. “I would rather take that risk than regret never exploring what could be,” he replied, his thumb caressing her skin.

They simply stood there for a moment, their eyes locked in an unspoken understanding. The world around them faded away, leaving only the two of them in that moonlit garden, their hearts beating in sync.

As the evening breeze whispered through the trees, Seraphina finally nodded, a small smile gracing her lips. “Then I suppose we should embrace this uncertainty and see where it leads,” she said softly.

Tristan’s heart soared with joy, knowing they were both willing to take a chance on what they felt for each other. With a gentle tug, he pulled her into his arms, their bodies fitting together as if made for each other. At that moment, as they held each other beneath the moonlit sky, Tristan knew he had found something special, something worth cherishing and

fighting for. And he was determined to do whatever it took to keep the flame of their newfound affection alive.

Tristan's lips brushed against hers softly, for he could hardly believe that this dream was coming to pass. It was still surreal, even with her in his arms and the warmth of her flooding his chest. His hand lifted to cup the side of her face, his thumb sweeping along her jawline softly, reverence in his eyes for all she was before he kissed her again. Softly at first as he could feel the nervous tension melt from her shoulders as she sighed into the contact.

When she kissed him again, it felt as natural as breathing. A lightness in his chest took flight and soared throughout his limbs as he deepened the kiss. His lips pressed to hers as if memorizing the way this moment felt. The barely contained hunger within him welled up in a way that was harder to control with each passing moment.

He never wished to stop kissing her.

The soft sound of her moaned pleasure made him wish there was somewhere they could go to be alone together — somewhere without the constraints of a ballroom or people that might come looking for either one of them. Blood rushed south as her tongue danced against his. He made up his mind — she would be his. The unattainable rose would be his to capture and not because of any bet, not for a wager or claims of glory, but because he was absolutely certain that he was in love with her.

As they reluctantly pulled apart from their first kiss, the intensity of their feelings hung in the air like an electric charge. The world seemed to disappear around them, leaving only the two of them connected by an unspoken understanding.

But the spell was broken by the sudden sound of rustling nearby. Startled, Tristan turned his head to investigate, his protective instincts kicking in. He noticed a fleeting shadow darting away behind a cluster of bushes.

“Did you hear that?” Seraphina asked, her eyes wide with concern. Her hands tightened around his biceps as she leaned

further into his chest, hoping that whatever was lurking about the hedges, he would protect her from.

It made him prouder than he cared to admit. Never mind the way that she felt pressed against his chest like that.

“Yes, I did,” Tristan replied, scanning the area around them. He found it unlikely that anyone else would have left Lady Violet’s party and risk her wrath by coming outside like this. “It is probably just an animal. Let us go back to the party.”

Though he tried to sound reassuring, a nagging suspicion lingered in the back of his mind. He could not shake the feeling that they were being watched.

Hand in hand, they made their way back to the ballroom, their hearts still racing from the stolen moment they had shared. He did not wish to let her go. He lingered, her hand in his until the very last possible second when he was forced to release her to head back into the estate lest someone see them.

There was nobody in the hall that he could see, but it was better to be safe than sorry until such a time as he could speak to her father. The distant sound, however, cast a faint shadow over their joy, and they found themselves stealing glances over their shoulders as they moved separately through the crowd.

As they re-entered the ballroom, their friends greeted them with knowing smiles, but Tristan and Seraphina managed to keep their newfound connection a secret, at least for the time being.

Throughout the rest of the evening, the strange sound continued to haunt him for reasons he could not explain, a constant reminder of the intensity of their emotions and the challenges that lay ahead. He attempted to convince himself that it was nothing more than disappointment that anything had dared to interrupt them in the first place, but he knew he was right to be cautious either way.

Despite the distraction, Tristan finally asked Seraphina to dance, their bodies moving in perfect harmony, and he found comfort in her presence. As the night wore on, the strange

sound remained a mystery, leaving him on edge. But despite the lingering unease, the magnetic pull between them was too strong to resist.

Chapter 21

2

The following morning, Tristan woke with a sense of disorientation, his mind still swirling with thoughts of the stolen kiss from the night before. The taste of Seraphina's lips lingered on his own, and he found himself navigating uncharted waters of genuine affection. What had started as a mere wager had blossomed into something far deeper, something he had not anticipated nor prepared for.

Then there was the stiff, uncomfortable morning issue made all the harder to handle now that he knew how sweet she tasted.

He had spent countless hours with women of all kinds, charming them with ease and enjoying their company, but none had left such a lasting impression on him as Seraphina. Her intelligence, her wit, and the way she carried herself with a mix of vulnerability and strength had captivated him in ways he could not fully comprehend.

Just the magic of her allure, he supposed. Tristan had been content living a carefree and unattached life, but everything had changed. He found himself longing for her company, craving her presence in a way he had never experienced before.

The notion of love had always seemed like a fickle and frivolous sentiment to Tristan, but with Seraphina, it had become something real and tangible. He could not deny the pull she had over him, the way she seemed to occupy every corner of his mind.

As he prepared to call on her that morning, a mix of excitement and nervousness coursed through him. He wondered how she felt about him and if the stolen kiss had affected her as deeply as it had affected him. Tristan had always been confident in his ability to charm and win the affections of women, but with Seraphina, it was different. He could not simply rely on his usual tactics. He wanted her to see

the real him, the man behind the facade of the notorious Lord Ashford.

As he made his way to her house, his mind continued to race with thoughts of their shared moments. He could not shake the feeling that he was about to embark on a journey that would change his life forever. He was so excited that it nearly pushed all worries of that mysterious sound in the garden out of his mind.

Tristan arrived at Seraphina's house, his heart pounding with nervous anticipation. He was greeted by a servant and shown into the drawing room, where he found Seraphina and her mother, Lillian, engaged in conversation. The flowers he had ordered for delivery the night before were already decorating the room.

He knew it was a regular courting gift, but it did not feel as if it were nearly sufficient enough to reflect the depth of his feelings for her.

While Seraphina straightened in her seat and smiled at the sight of him, her mother seemed wholly the opposite. Lady Emberdale's guarded gaze met his, and he sensed her disapproval of his pursuit of her daughter. A pang of guilt washed over him as he acknowledged that his initial intentions had been less than honourable when he accepted Michael's bet.

However, getting to know Seraphina had changed everything for him. She was far more than the "Unattainable Rose" label suggested. He found himself genuinely drawn to her, and the thought of hurting her or betraying her trust weighed heavily on his conscience. He hoped that he would be able to convince her mother of that properly in time.

He bowed deeply in a respectful greeting, but her mother's expression did not warm in the slightest.

"Lord Ashford," Lady Emberdale said, her tone polite but guarded. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit today?"

Tristan cleared his throat, trying to find the right words. Usually, abundant flattery came easily to him — he should not have had this much difficulty getting words out. Then again, he had never had such pressure to have someone approve of him before. Before this, he could effortlessly throw out meaningless and shallow words of praise because however they were interpreted held no consequence.

“Lady Emberdale, I had hopes of spending more time with your daughter this afternoon. I am afraid that I am quite taken with her.”

He smiled his most charming smile. Lady Seraphina covered her mouth with her hand and diverted her gaze. Was she laughing at him? Little devil, she thought his prostration before her mother was amusing, did she?

Lady Emberdale raised an eyebrow, her expression sceptical. “Is that so? And what are your intentions towards my daughter?”

Tristan took a moment to gather his thoughts. “I cannot deny that when I first arrived in London, I was not looking for anything serious. I had my share of frivolous pursuits and amusements, but everything changed when I met Lady Seraphina. She is intelligent, kind, and passionate about the things she loves. I find myself wanting to be a better man when I am with her.”

He paused for a moment and grinned.

“That, and to ask permission to promenade with her this afternoon.”

Lady Emberdale studied him for a moment, seemingly assessing the sincerity of his words. “You must understand, Lord Ashford, that I want nothing but the best for my daughter. She is precious to me, and I will not allow her to be hurt.”

Tristan nodded earnestly. “I understand completely, and I promise you that I would never do anything to hurt Lady Seraphina. My feelings for her are genuine, and I wish to be with her for who she truly is.”

Lady Emberdale seemed to soften slightly, though her caution remained. “You have a reputation, Lord Ashford, as a bit of a rake. I hope you understand that I have reservations about a man with such a past pursuing my daughter.”

Tristan nodded, acknowledging his past actions. “I shall not deny that I have made mistakes in the past, but I am willing to change to be a better man. Lady Seraphina brings out the best in me, and I want to be worthy of her love and trust.”

Lady Emberdale regarded him carefully, and Tristan could see the wheels turning in her mind. After a moment, she sighed and said, “I can see that you are sincere in your feelings for my daughter, and I cannot deny that she seems to be drawn to you as well. But I will be watching closely, Lord Ashford. I will not tolerate any games or deceit when it comes to my daughter.”

Tristan nodded, feeling a weight lifted off his shoulders. “I understand, Lady Emberdale, and I promise to always be honest and true with Lady Seraphina.” He shifted his focus to the woman, trying her best not to laugh at his expense sitting beside her mother. “Does that mean you will join me for a walk?”

Seraphina turned to her mother, seeking permission. Lady Emberdale appeared reluctant for only a moment but nodded finally. Seraphina smiled warmly, and happily rose from her seat to take his proffered arm. “I would like that very much.”

With Lady Emberdale’s watchful eyes following them and agreeing to take Seraphina’s maid, Lucy, to chaperone their walk, they set off. Tristan could hardly believe his luck, for he knew he had no intentions of taking her to the park whatsoever. He had never had any skill in concealing his true motives.

Given his reputation, it might be a surprise to her that Tristan was almost terribly inefficient at keeping secrets of any sort. Given that he wanted to surprise her, he could not reveal their true destination until he at least had them in the carriage.

“What is it?” Seraphina asked, eyeing him sceptically as she grabbed her parasol and stepped out into the warm afternoon air.

It would have been perfect park weather if he had not already made other plans for them.

“Can I not simply be excited to spend time with you?” Tristan tried to suppress his grin before it gave him away.

“Certainly, but it almost appears as if you are plotting something.” Seraphina’s gaze narrowed as she stared at him, expecting a spontaneous confession to his motives.

“You have been reading far too many mystery novels, reading into things,” Tristan mused happily.

“I wonder who is to blame for that?” Seraphina countered.

She had him there. “Why, I have no idea what you mean? Certainly, no painfully handsome gentleman would be supplying you with rare but fascinating books.”

“A barely tolerable gentleman, at best.”

Tristan laughed freely; being with her had become such a simple thing. Even the slight contact of her hand on his arm thrilled him. “Is that right? Well, if that is how you truly feel about me, then perhaps I will not give you your surprise.”

“Surprise?” Seraphina’s face lit from within as she turned excitedly towards him.

“Well, yes, but now ...” Tristan raised a brow as if he had the power to deny her anything.

“What is the surprise?”

“If I told you, then it would not be much of a surprise.”

“I care not! Tell me!”

“I shall not. You will have to trust me.” Tristan leaned in closer to her, delighting in how her cheeks turned pink with his nearness. “You do trust me, do you not?”

Seraphina’s lower lip was captured prettily by her teeth as she nodded.

“Then follow me!” Tristan said ominously before changing their direction towards his carriage.

Chapter 22

In the cozy confines of Tristan's carriage, the air was charged with anticipation, Seraphina's heart fluttering like a caged bird. Beside her sat Tristan, his green eyes flickering with excitement and mischief. Ever attentive, Lucy occupied a seat opposite them, an unspoken presence that reassured and constrained.

The interiors of the carriage were adorned with plush fabrics and intricate designs, a reflection of Tristan's noble status. The muted sunlight filtering through the curtains created a warm and cozy atmosphere, contrasting with the bubbling excitement and tension that filled the space.

Seraphina's eyes flicked towards Tristan, who sat casually, his posture relaxed but an unmistakable glint of excitement in his eyes. Seraphina's mind was a swirl of thoughts as the carriage rolled along the cobbled streets of London. She had been prepared for a stroll in the park; their usual interactions centred around neutral ground. But the twist of events took her by surprise. Tristan's enigmatic smile hinted at something more that tugged at her heart in both exhilaration and trepidation.

Their stolen kiss from the night before lingered in her mind, the memory a mixture of exhilaration and worry. As the carriage continued its journey, Seraphina's gaze wandered to the passing scenes outside. The vibrant city seemed to blur as her thoughts centred on the enigmatic man across from her. What could he be planning?

Tristan's voice broke through her reverie. "We are almost there," he said with a hint of playfulness. Seraphina's heart skipped a beat, the excitement building as the carriage began to slow down.

"You will not give me even the smallest hint as to our destination?" Seraphina enquired, hoping for even a small clue. She was certainly happy enough to spend time with him; the destination did not matter.

Naturally, Tristan did not answer her but merely offered a knowing wink in her direction. “Need I remind you that patience is a virtue?”

Soon enough, the carriage came to a gentle halt, and Seraphina stepped out onto unfamiliar ground. The realization of their destination struck her like a bolt of lightning. Her lips parted softly in surprise as she was rendered momentarily speechless. He had asked her to accompany him to the gallery, but she had not imagined it would be so soon. Tristan’s thoughtful gesture warmed her to the core, his careful attention to her words a testament to the depth of his interest. Her gaze met his, her gratitude shining bright in her eyes, and for a moment, they exchanged an unspoken understanding that surpassed the confines of words.

Tristan extended his hand towards Seraphina, a charming smile playing on his lips. “Shall we?” he asked, his voice a mixture of invitation and intrigue. Seraphina hesitated for a moment, her gaze locking with his, before she placed her hand in his, feeling a tingle of excitement at the touch.

As they entered the gallery, Lucy’s presence was a reminder of propriety, the boundaries of society echoing in the delicate hush of the surroundings. Yet, the connection she felt was undeniable, an invisible thread that seemed to draw them closer with every step. Amidst the grandeur of artistic expressions, they strolled hand in hand, their fingers entwined in a silent promise of unity. Each brushstroke on canvas seemed to mirror the emotions that surged between them – the colours of passion, the shades of vulnerability, and the intricate textures of their growing bond.

Stopping before a captivating landscape, Tristan’s voice broke the hush. “Is this one of your favourites?” he asked, his eyes flickering between Seraphina and the masterpiece before them.

Seraphina nodded, her gaze fixed on the canvas, but her attention was divided. The connection between them hummed in the air, a magnetic pull that defied the boundaries of social decorum. “Yes,” she replied, her voice soft and tinged with

warmth. “It is as if the artist has captured a world within the colours, a hidden story waiting to be uncovered.”

Tristan’s lips curved into a playful smile. “Much like the secrets we hold within ourselves,” he said, his tone dipping into a deeper register. His thumb brushed Seraphina’s knuckles, a gentle caress sending shivers down her spine.

She met his gaze, her heart pounding against her ribs.

“Indeed,” she agreed, her voice barely a whisper. The intensity of their connection seemed to echo in the gallery’s grandeur, creating a world where only the two of them existed. As they continued their exploration of the gallery, the world around them seemed to fade into the background. With every shared glance, every lingering touch, their connection deepened. Seraphina’s heart danced to a rhythm she had never known, a melody composed of stolen glances and the promise of something more.

And as they stood before a breathtaking portrait that captured the essence of passion and vulnerability entwined, Seraphina made a bold decision. For all that he had gone through on her behalf in planning this outing for the pair of them this afternoon ... it was the least she could do to make a move of her own. Turning to Lucy, she offered a soft smile as she whispered.

“Lucy, would you mind giving us some privacy for a while? There is a painting I would like to discuss with Lord Ashford.”

She knew asking to be alone with a man was indecent, but she trusted Lucy to give them more space and discretion than she already was. The maid nodded understandingly and retreated to a discreet distance, leaving Seraphina and Tristan alone amidst the artistry that mirrored their own emotions. In the hushed space, their gazes locked, the intensity between them palpable. It was a moment suspended in time, where the artwork’s allure paled compared to the pull of their hearts.

In a dimly lit, secluded corner of the gallery, Tristan’s magnetic presence drew Seraphina closer, her heart racing in sync with the pace of her breath. The allure of their stolen

intimacy heightened the charged air around them, a symphony of desire echoing in their hearts.

Seraphina took a small step closer to Tristan, her voice a breathy whisper. “The way the artist captures the vulnerability here ... it is as if they have bared their souls for all to see. I hope to someday have half the courage that this artist has that I might create something even a fraction as beautiful.”

Tristan’s fingers brushed a stray strand of hair from her face, his touch igniting a fire within her. “Sometimes,” he replied, his voice low and husky, “vulnerability is the most beautiful canvas upon which to paint our desires.”

Their eyes locked, and at that moment, words seemed unnecessary. The gallery, the world around them all faded away as they stood entwined in the electricity of their connection. And in that stolen moment, amidst the artwork that mirrored their unspoken passion, Seraphina and Tristan’s hearts beat as one.

His hand, warm and possessive, settled at the small of her back, his fingers pressing gently through the fabric of her gown. The subtle touch sent a jolt of electricity through her, every nerve ending awakening under his caress. Her own fingers found the lapels of his coat, a silent invitation to draw him even closer.

As their eyes locked, the barriers that had once separated them seemed to dissolve. Tristan’s intense gaze, filled with raw emotion, held her captive. The world around them blurred into insignificance, leaving only the two of them in a bubble of shared longing. Yielding to the magnetic pull that united them, their lips met in a kiss, soft and comfortable.

As if they suddenly had the luxury of kissing one another leisurely to make up for all the moments they had wished to, but fate had intervened. Seraphina could not imagine a moment more perfect, surrounded by beautiful things in the arms of a man who had ensnared her mind so quickly. Something within her shifted as Tristan’s hand tightened around the back of her gown.

Her body pulled flush against his chest as they both forgot themselves and where they stood. The notion that another person could come around the corner at any moment was wholly lost to her sensibilities as desire consumed her mind. A symphony of heat and urgency, his lips were soft against hers, yet fervent in their exploration, igniting a fire that had smouldered beneath the surface.

Their bodies pressed close, every inch of them connected in a dance of desire. The sensation of his chest against hers, the warmth of his breath mingling with hers, heightened the intoxicating magic of the moment. Time seemed to stand still, lost in the vortex of their mutual need.

It only lasted a moment, certainly not long enough as she would have liked. When they broke apart, breathless and wanting, she would have given anything to buy out the gallery for their own personal use. To buy just a few minutes more — to have an excuse and reason to leave her hands on him for just a little longer.

Her eyes opened slowly, her breathing erratic as her hooded gaze lifted to his.

Dash propriety ...

She was of half a mind to pull him right back to her, to coax his lips back to bee-stung lips when Lucy came back around the corner once more, forcing them apart.

With a subtle smile playing on his lips, Tristan's voice, rich with desire, trembled like a secret shared between them. "Seraphina," he murmured, his words a caress against her skin, "there is something further I wish to ask you."

The world beyond their cocoon of intimacy seemed to hold its breath, time bending to their will. The anticipation that danced in his eyes sent shivers down her spine.

His fingers brushed against the tips of her fingers, hidden by her side away from prying eyes, his touch gentle and intimate. "Tomorrow, Lord Thorne is hosting a rather fanciful picnic for himself and Lady Elizabeth. He asked me to invite

you to join the three of us ...” His voice held a note of hope, a desire for her to say yes.

A mixture of surprise and pleasure flickered in her eyes. A picnic, a casual gathering, yet the invitation felt like something more than that. The prospect of sharing time with Elizabeth and Lord Thorne felt like an extension of this delicate intimacy they were building. Undoubtedly, spending time with just the four of them would be lovely, acting as chaperones to one another ... the underlying implications of that thrilled her.

Seraphina’s heart raced as she met his gaze, her lips curving into a soft smile as she nodded her acceptance. “I would be delighted,” she replied, her voice a mere whisper yet carrying a depth of emotion. The prospect of spending more time with Tristan amidst the beauty of the countryside, felt like a dream she dared not awaken from.

Tristan’s smile matched hers, a genuine warmth in his eyes. As he leaned in, his lips brushed against her cheek in a chaste yet lingering kiss, as if sealing their unspoken agreement.

Chapter 23

The sun dappled through the leaves, casting a playful dance of light and shadow over the picturesque scene. Seraphina found herself drawn to the vibrant hues of the meadow, the gentle rustle of the breeze, and the joyous laughter that filled the air.

Beside her, Tristan was a vision of casual elegance, his unruly dark hair catching the sunlight and his green eyes alive with a warmth that made her heart skip a beat. She had hardly been able to sleep a wink last night in anticipation of today's picnic. She was certain to be placing far too much importance on the matter, but it mattered not.

Elizabeth and Lord Thorne, the companions for their picnic, added to the atmosphere with their carefree spirits. They had chosen a cozy spot under the shade of a majestic tree, a chequered blanket spread out with an array of delectable treats. As they all settled down, the casual chatter began. Elizabeth, ever the vivacious one, animatedly recounted her recent escapades, much to the amusement of the others. Lord Thorne, though only slightly quieter, contributed with witty remarks that often had them all chuckling.

Seraphina felt a sense of ease among them, a feeling she rarely experienced in social gatherings. It was as though the world had softened its edges just for this moment, allowing her to savour the company of friends who embraced her for who she truly was. How simple it would be to live a life like this one.

Tristan's gaze met hers, a knowing twinkle in his eyes that spoke of a shared secret, an unspoken connection that was palpable even in the midst of their companions. His presence anchored her, making her feel secure and understood.

The topic shifted naturally, as it often did, to the upcoming events of the ton. Elizabeth's eyes lit up with excitement. "Oh, have you all heard about Lady Susannah's spring party? It is said to be the grandest event of the season."

Tristan raised an eyebrow, a playful grin tugging at his lips. “Ah, yes, my dear aunt’s parties are always quite the spectacle.”

Lord Thorne leaned forward, his curiosity piqued. “And what makes this one different?”

“Rumour has it,” Elizabeth said with a mischievous glint in her eyes, “that Lady Susannah has something particularly enchanting planned for the evening.”

Seraphina could not help smiling at the animated exchange. Despite her initial reservations, these interactions felt genuine, a far cry from the superficial conversations she had grown accustomed to. She would take this sort of afternoon over an evening spent at a ball with forced conversation any day of the week.

Tristan’s fingers brushed against Seraphina’s hand, a fleeting touch that sent a jolt of electricity through her veins. She glanced at him, catching the heat in his gaze before he returned to the conversation.

“Are you planning to attend, Lord Ashford?” Lord Thorne asked, a knowing grin on his face.

Tristan leaned back, his tone casual. “I suppose I must, considering it is my aunt’s event. And who knows what mysterious enchantments she has in store this time? Tristan turned to Seraphina, his expression warm. “Would you honour me with your presence at the party, Lady Seraphina?”

Elizabeth clapped her hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle. Seraphina knew how strange it must look to her friend to be so willingly engaging in behaviour like this. To allow the attentions of a gentleman, no, to welcome those attentions was strange for her friend to see, no doubt. She could feel Elizabeth staring at her with bated breath — if she agreed, she was all but stating plainly to her best friend that she was happily courting Tristan. As if it were not already obvious.

Her heart fluttered at his question, and she met his gaze with gratitude and delight. “I would be delighted to attend, Lord Ashford.”

His smile deepened, a shared understanding passing between them. The promise of the spring party held a new kind of allure now, one that was more than just social obligation. Though, she could not deny that a very large part of her hoped this invitation would include spending a little more time alone with one another like at the art gallery.

She was no better than Eve with the damned apple. She had sampled the forbidden fruit, and she wanted more, so much more.

As the remnants of their picnic were packed away, Elizabeth and Michael exchanged knowing glances, a silent agreement passing between them. They drifted away from the group without a word, seeking a moment of privacy.

Tristan offered his arm to Seraphina, his touch sending a subtle thrill through her. They strolled along a meandering path, the park's tranquility wrapping around them like a comforting embrace. The sound of their footsteps mingled with the rustling of leaves as they walked side by side along a meandering path. Seraphina allowed the comfortable silence to settle between them for a while, taking in the tranquil beauty of the surroundings.

Eventually, her curiosity got the better of her, and she turned to Tristan with a thoughtful expression. "Tristan, I realized that we have spoken much about my family and past, but I know so little about yours."

Tristan's smile was tinged with a touch of melancholy as he met her gaze. "My family's history is not as rosy as one might hope, I am afraid."

Intrigued, Seraphina's eyes held his, encouraging him to share. "Please, if you are comfortable, I would like to know."

His gaze softened, and he began to speak, his voice carrying a hint of nostalgia and pain. "My mother passed when I was only a boy of thirteen. Certainly old enough to feel the loss of her keenly. She was a warm, lovely person taken well before her time. My father passed about a year ago."

The tone he used when speaking about his father certainly did not broker any further questions on the subject. She could not help noting the vast differences in how he spoke about each parent. Something about him hardened just at the mention of his father. They must not have had a very good relationship with one another.

“I was fortunate enough to have my father’s housekeeper, Mrs Thompson, who became a mother figure to me in my mother’s stead after she passed,” Tristan concluded.

Seraphina’s heart ached at the sadness laced in his words. She reached out and gently touched his arm, offering a silent show of support. She wanted to question the dark look that flickered over his features. There was a hidden depth of pain there; she could feel it. But then, just as quickly as it had come, he pushed it away once more.

Tristan’s lips quirked in a wistful smile. “Mrs Thompson was the one who furthered my education of the arts, knowing how important it was to my mother that I be well rounded. She pushed me further into the world of books, art, and intellect. She instilled in me a love for learning, which has been a constant companion throughout my life.”

Seraphina listened intently, her admiration for the man beside her deepening with each word he shared. “It sounds like she was a remarkable woman.”

He nodded, his expression a mix of gratitude and longing. “She was. They both were. But, alas, life has a way of moving forward.”

Seraphina sensed there was more beneath the surface, questions she longed to ask. But before she could, Tristan’s gaze shifted, and his posture tensed slightly.

“I apologize, Seraphina, but I believe it is time we return. The servants will be arriving soon, and I would not want to cause a scandal.” Tristan’s bright, charismatic mask was back in place.

Caught off guard by his abrupt change in demeanour, Seraphina nodded and offered a gentle smile. “Of course,

Tristan. Thank you for sharing a glimpse of your past with me.”

“Actually,” Tristan took her hand and cast a glimpse over his shoulder, ensuring they were alone and no other eyes were on them. “While the other pair is occupied, we might be able to steal a moment for ourselves as well if we hurry. It will not be long before the servants return to the carriage ... we can surely beat them.”

He picked up pace without warning, Seraphina forced to gather her skirts up in her hands and jog after him with a giggle bubbling on her lips. Tristan hurled open the carriage door and hastily helped her up inside it, shutting and locking the door from inside. He tugged the curtains closed, and before Seraphina could properly process what was happening, he reached forward and took her by the waist. His fingers indented into her skin softly as he pulled her up and onto his lap, and her mind nearly short-circuited.

He bunched her skirt up over her legs, only far enough to allow her to manoeuvre her legs to either side of him, and her breath trapped in her chest as she allowed herself to be moved by him.

“I have been thinking of this all afternoon ... over and over again, I have plotted this moment and the ways I would make it happen ...” Tristan confessed with a sigh before he kissed her. “You have no idea how badly I have wished to have you alone, dear Sera.”

Seraphina shuddered at his confession, at his total mercy as he slid her closer to his body, her knees pressed on the small, padded seat of the carriage, surprised by just how easy it was to fit their bodies together in this fashion. His hands traced the line and curvature of her spine reverently, over her shoulders and down her arms where they jumped the gap, one to her waist and the other to her breast as he deepened their kiss.

She attempted to summon courage, to permit herself to touch him, to let her fingers memorize the curve of his jaw and the way the hint of stubble on his skin felt against the satin of

her gloved hands. She did not know if they had time to remove them, but she wanted to lose her fingers in his unruly dark hair, to feel the tresses against her skin when she curled them into her fist, but she would settle for this for now.

Tristan's nose pushed her back, exposing her throat to him as he groaned in satisfaction, pressing himself up into her, providing friction in a place that she had never dreamed of needing to seek. That pooled desire normally only a source of heat but now held the promise to be so much more as he touched her, her body automatically seeking more of that contact as his hand guided her hip to roll down and forward, giving her what she wished — friction.

He kissed her neck, trailing teeth down the column of her throat, and lavished attention on her collarbone. He moved over her décolleté until his hand moved from her breast back up the path his lips had just been on.

“I shall never tire of your skin and the way it flushes such a perfect pink,” Tristan whispered; she could feel the rumble of his words against her skin.

A knock on the carriage door interrupted their antics. “My Lord? Are you in there? Are you well?”

Tristan's footman. The servants had returned.

With a reluctant groan and a final, searingly intense kiss, Seraphina pulled off of his lap. It was becoming harder and harder to remove herself from him.

Chapter 24

The grand ballroom of Lady Susannah's opulent estate was a sight to behold. Elaborate chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting a warm and golden glow over the elegantly dressed guests. Seraphina's heart raced with anticipation as she and her parents entered the room, their footsteps muffled by the plush carpeting. The grandeur of the event was breathtaking, and she could not help being swept up in the excitement of the evening.

Her gaze scanned the crowd, her eyes searching for Tristan. Anxiety and anticipation churned within her, causing her stomach to flutter. She hoped to catch a glimpse of him, to share a smile or a knowing look that would ease the tension that had settled within her. The version of herself from months ago before she had met him would not be able to recognize the version of her that stood here today, desperately searching his aunt's ballroom for a glimpse of him.

She broke away from her parents as they went to fetch wine, muttering excuses that she wished to go and find Elizabeth so they could socialize. Her mother looked at her strangely, practically accusing her of having ulterior motives, but mercifully, the older woman did not comment. There was a twinkle in her mother's eye as she slipped her arm into her father's and hummed softly before parting.

No doubt Seraphina was not being half as subtle as she liked to think she was. She milled about the edge of the dance floor, hoping to catch sight of him. It was his aunt's ball; certainly he would not be late for such an important event.

"Looking for someone?" Reginald Blackwood interrupted her focus. His unwelcome presence lingered despite her obvious unwillingness to engage with him. His smirking countenance sent a shiver down her spine. His presence in the room sent a jolt of unease through her, and she could not shake the feeling that he was up to something, that his intentions were far from innocent.

It had always been that way between them. Even during their brief, unwanted courtship, he tried to make her do things he wanted, whether she found them distasteful or not.

“Yes, actually,” Seraphina answered, hoping it would discourage him from lingering long.

Lord Blackwood’s gaze drifted down to her lips, the neckline of her dress, and seemed to linger, so much so that she felt the need to cover herself in a way that was not presently possible.

“In search of Lord Ashford, perhaps?” he continued, not meeting her eye as he spoke. Seraphina whipped her fan open to block her upper torso from his view. Her lips pulled into a tight line of dissatisfaction.

“I do not think that it is any of your business whom I am waiting for, but yes, if you must know. I am to meet him here. He will be along any moment, so I do not require you to stay by my side.”

Seraphina tried to keep her voice neutral so it would not have any reason to spark his ire. But something bitter flashed across Lord Blackwood’s features as she spoke.

“There was a time when I was supposed to accompany you in everything.” He took a slow, noisy sip of his wine. “How strange to hear you say such things to me now. I would say you were attempting to get rid of me.”

How preceptive.

Seraphina’s thin smile widened, her discomfort growing.

“Such a pity. I would have hoped that our time apart would have allowed you to come to your senses,” Lord Blackwood continued ominously. Seraphina was shocked — he could not honestly have thought that after breaking off their engagement that she would have wished to spend more time with him or that their arrangement could have been picked up. She had more than moved on. She had never truly liked the idea of him in the first place.

“But it seems you are making even poorer judgement calls now than you were then.”

“I beg your pardon?” Seraphina could not believe what she was hearing. Who did he think that he was?

“You should,” Lord Blackwood agreed. “I believe that in the future, you will wish you had begged my pardon back while you still had a chance.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Lord Blackwood smirked, leering at her as if he knew something that she did not. “Dance with me, and I shall tell you.”

It felt like blackmail. It felt like a mistake waiting to happen. Seraphina shook her head softly. “I am afraid that would not be a wise thing to do, Lord Blackwood.”

Seraphina glanced around, desperate for any reason to flee from this conversation as quickly as possible. As she had not yet managed to locate Tristan, the growing sense of panic in her stomach urged her to go anywhere to get out of this conversation.

There, in the corner of the room, hidden away from most prying eyes, were Elizabeth and Lord Thorne, seemingly engaged in private hushed conversation. It was the sort of thing that normally, Seraphina would not dare to intrude on, but she was desperate. She lifted her hand as if Elizabeth summoned her over and she needed to accept the invitation and dipped into an awkward bow to remove herself from Lord Blackwood’s uncomfortable company. “If you will excuse me.”

Lord Blackwood seemed as if he were reluctant to allow her to leave his company. For a moment, Seraphina feared that he would reach out and physically bar her. She hurried away as quickly as she could, never looking back despite the feeling of his eyes boring into her as she retreated.

“I am so sorry to interrupt,” Seraphina muttered as a greeting as she practically wedged herself between Lord Thorne and Elizabeth. She hoped they would take note of her wide-eyed expression and understand that her intrusion was not for fun.

“It is all right, my mother was moments away from interrupting us if you had not beaten her to it,” Elizabeth muttered. She cast an errant gaze towards her every watchful mother for good measure before focusing more properly on Seraphina. “You look a state! What happened?”

“Nothing,” Seraphina answered automatically and then sighed. She folded her arms across her torso, almost hesitant to bring further attention to the issue. “Lord Blackwood ... he just made me uncomfortable.”

“That rogue?” Lord Thorne answered. “Point him in my direction next time, Lady Seraphina; I shall gladly assist you in any way you desire.”

Seraphina smiled at him warmly, happy to have his assistance. “I think he simply holds a grudge. He is discontent to see me interested in somebody else besides him. I think it was easier for his ego when I was not interested in anyone as then he did not have to perceive some sort of fault within himself.”

“That man is full of fault.” Elizabeth scoffed, then turned to make moon eyes at Lord Thorne. “Not like my Michael.”

Seraphina smiled. It warmed her heart to see them so happy together. She would have hoped that Elizabeth’s mother would have been happier about the prospect, but no doubt it was just the overly brazen way the new couple seemed to prefer only one another’s company to those around them.

“Ah, see, there he is.” Lord Thorne lifted his arm to gesture to where Tristan had just arrived, more than a little fashionably late. From where the three of them stood, it almost appeared as if Tristan were looking for her, at least, Seraphina hoped he was searching for her. “Oh, well, drat.”

“What is it?” Seraphina asked Lord Thorne as he chuckled to himself.

“It appears that dear Aunt Susannah has intercepted him before you shall have a chance to. Unfortunate, that. She is bound to keep his hooks in her for quite some time.” Lord

Thorne mused with a heavy sigh. “Fortunately for you, there is something that she likes better than her nephew.”

“What is that?” Seraphina asked curiously.

“Me.” Lord Thorne winked with a grin as he answered. He paused for long enough to squeeze Elizabeth’s shoulder reassuringly before finishing the last of his wine. “I shall go and save him from her clutches, but I do believe this will mean that you technically owe me one.”

Perhaps another time, Seraphina would have attempted to argue with him ... but the desire to be near Tristan again was too much. “I accept those terms.”

Lord Thorne saluted the pair of women dramatically before turning off to Tristan’s side. He certainly did not appear happy to be discussing anything with the woman holding him captive. He did, however, appear to breathe a sigh of relief the moment Lord Thorne made contact with a hand on his shoulder. Tristan then practically shoved his friend at the old woman.

As the melodies of the waltz filled the air, the dance floor came alive with swirling gowns and twirling couples. Seraphina’s heart quickened as the music seemed to match the rhythm of her pulse, and she felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation. The tension in the room was palpable, an undercurrent of hidden desires and unspoken emotions.

Amidst the lively scene, Tristan’s gaze locked onto Seraphina’s, and their eyes met across the crowded ballroom. His lips curved into a knowing smile, a silent invitation that sent a rush of warmth through her veins. At that moment, all worries and doubts seemed to dissipate, leaving only the undeniable pull between them.

He made a gesture towards the side door on the far end of the ballroom — her heart was beating in her ears as she nodded that she understood. Surreptitiously, Tristan excused himself from his aunt and Lord Thorne and moved with practiced ease through the throng of guests. She watched him weave through the guests as her own feet started to carry her after him.

She felt as if she were not being nearly discreet enough for how quickly she left the room.

It did not matter once the sounds of the ballroom started to fade into the distance behind her, and it mattered even less as Tristan grabbed her from around the first corner of a hallway she walked past. Seraphina's startled yelp instantly silenced by his lips on hers, a searing kiss that was far too short for her liking.

"I have missed you." With a small nod and a conspiratorial grin, Tristan led her away from the main ballroom, their fingers brushing against each other's as they navigated the estate corridors. Soon, they found themselves in the expansive library, a haven of solitude amidst the bustling festivities.

The moment the door closed behind them, the air seemed to shift, charged with different energy. The room's silence enveloped them, and their eyes locked in a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken desires that had been simmering beneath the surface.

Without a word, Tristan closed the distance between them, his hands finding their place on her waist, his touch sending shivers down her spine. Seraphina's breath caught in her throat as she met his intense gaze, the weight of his emotions mirrored in his eyes. Their lips met in a kiss that was at once familiar and electrifying, a culmination of the tension that had been building between them.

The kiss was passionate and consuming; their bodies pressed close as if the world outside the library ceased to exist. Time seemed to stand still as they explored the depths of their desires, each touch and caress igniting a fire that burned hotter with every passing second.

In that stolen moment, surrounded by the scent of old books, Seraphina and Tristan surrendered to the emotions simmering beneath the surface. The boundaries of their world blurred, and for that fleeting instant, they were free to indulge in the passion that had ignited between them. He held her close, his touch searing at every point of contact as his tongue

delved into her mouth, learning her - possessing her in every way she was willing to give him.

Tristan walked them back until her shoulders met the nearest bookcase, his body trapping her against the surface and surrounding her with the indulgent smell of old books. His hands moved up her ribs until his hands could encompass her breasts, massaging them as he kissed down her neck. His knee slipped between her legs, providing more of the delicious friction that she was coming to adore so strongly. Her body arched up into his, seeking more contact as his name left her lips in soft prayer.

“Tristan, please,” she breathed, not even fully aware of just what she was asking him, as if he could somehow read her mind. Desire fogged her mind, lust making her incapable of thinking clearly as he lifted her leg to hook around his hips. Seraphina reached above her head, holding onto one of the sturdy shelves of books, allowing herself to be lifted up into his arms more easily. Her skirts lifted, bunching around her thighs, and it did not even occur to her that she should be ashamed of the wanton behaviour she exhibited — she wanted him.

She had certainly read enough to know the gist of what could happen next - and what more fitting a location to have things happen than in a library? Their shared love of books had been a binding agent that brought them together, and there was no telling if or when they would be allowed alone together again.

Seraphina was certain about him, and she just needed him to understand.

“Tristan ...” Her voice was strained, breathy as a deep pink burned her cheeks. Tristan pulled back, his lust-filled gaze locked on her eyes in silent understanding of her desires. She could see the moment of realization settle over him as his eyes widened fractionally as he understood.

“Oh, dear Sera ...” he whispered.

Her heart dropped. It felt like the sting of rejection, and he had hardly even said a word.

“No! No, it is not that ...” Tristan quickly amended, seeing the look on her face. “When that moment happens, which I want more than nearly anything, it should be under the right circumstances ... when I make you mine, dear Sera, it will be somewhere that I can ravish you thoroughly, where I can claim every part of you until we are both satiated ... certainly not rushed here in someone else’s library where we could be interrupted at any moment ... no matter how badly I desire you.”

His hands gripped her more tightly as he spoke for emphasis. His eyes lifted to hers, something deeper swimming underneath in the depths that she could not fully process. Something that threatened to pull her under.

She was of a mind to let it.

Chapter 25

The turning of a door handle had never been quite so loud.

It was a small jingle of polished metal, but it could have rivalled a gong for how loudly it resonated in her head. Panic surged through Seraphina's veins, and her eyes widened as she realized they were no longer alone. In a flurry of movement, Tristan swiftly ducked behind the heavy draperies, his presence disappearing from view just as the door swung open.

Lillian's entrance was accompanied by a gust of air, and her discerning eyes swept over the room, searching for the source of any commotion and landing on the sight of her daughter, clearly flustered and floundering for an excuse. A knowing smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she caught sight of Seraphina, who was standing amidst the disarray, her flushed cheeks and slightly tousled hair betraying her momentary lapse of composure. The urge to simply run came to mind, but she knew it would be of no use to even try. She had been spotted.

"Mother!" Seraphina answered in a voice just a touch too high to be casual. She likely looked a right state, but attempting to correct herself would only damn herself further, and she knew it. Instead, she stood ramrod straight and blinked awkwardly at her mother, who looked around the room as if searching for something.

The last time they had been interrupted, there had been a great many more places for Tristan to hide. The likelihood of being caught was so much higher in this small, confined space.

"Well, my dear," Lillian said with a playful glint in her eyes, "it seems you have found quite the corner to hide away in."

Seraphina's heart raced, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. She cleared her throat, attempting to regain her composure, even though her heart still pounded with the intensity of the emotions that had surged through her just moments before.

“I ... I was merely ... admiring the ... collection,” Seraphina stammered, her voice betraying her unease. It was a very pathetic attempt at an excuse in the first place, even to her ears, but she could not take it back now that it was out.

Lillian arched an eyebrow, her expression both amused and knowing. “Indeed. Well, I believe it is time for you to freshen up. The powder room is just down the hall. I shall accompany you; there are a great many people that I should like to introduce you to!”

“Yes, Mother, of course.” Seraphina moved forward awkwardly, feeling at odds with her body. Strange to go from one end of the sensation spectrum to the other so quickly. It nearly made her dizzy from the rapid shift. It took everything left in her self-control to keep from looking back over her shoulder to see if Tristan was visible or if he had any thoughts about her leaving so quickly. To do so would be to give herself away to her mother, and she certainly did not wish to look any more guilty than she already did.

As Lillian’s gaze lingered on her, Seraphina knew that her mother was well aware of the reason behind her flustered state. With a nod of acquiescence, she managed a faint smile before slipping past Lillian and making her way to the retiring room, Mother’s gaze burning into her back with every step. How was she going to explain herself? Was there anything that she could even say to defend herself? She supposed she ought to be grateful that it was her mother who had come to find her and not somebody else who would have cooked up an unwanted scandal.

The memory of Tristan’s touch lingered on her skin, and her heart raced at the thought of him hidden behind the draperies, watching and waiting. The encounter left her both exhilarated and slightly rattled, a cocktail of emotions swirling within her. Seraphina strolled right across the room to the small wash basin and rung out the cloth there to dampen her flushed face. Any moment her mother would start asking her questions that she did not know how she would answer.

“Dare I ask what you were doing in the library, alone?” Mother asked, her voice gentle but leading.

Seraphina glanced at her through the reflection in the small, circular mirror and struggled to summon a sufficient answer. At her silence, her mother continued her line of questioning, though Lilian was not the sort of woman to simply come out and ask directly. No, she would attempt to make Seraphina confess on her own first.

“Seraphina, you’ve been acting rather ... uncharacteristically lately,” Lillian began, her voice laced with concern and reprimand. “Dare I ask if this has something to do with our recent infatuation with Lord Ashford, perhaps?”

Seraphina replaced the cloth back on the basin and tried to walk towards the door. As if there was any chance of her leaving this room without explaining herself first. “I am sure I do not know what you mean, Mother.”

Lilian smiled softly. “I was once a young girl, too, you know. I know what it is like to be wrapped up in a man of a certain reputation ... but there is a time and a place for such things! You cannot afford to ruin your reputation after all these years by acting so recklessly! He has not even proposed to you!”

“I know that, Mother. Honestly, I know the risks. I was being careful.” Seraphina sighed, knowing that she was possibly admitting to far too much with such a simple statement as that.

“If I saw you and put the pieces together, you must know that others have as well! You are not some faceless wallflower floating by your seasons until reaching spinsterhood, my dear girl; you are the rose. You are watched, studied, and adored whether you like it or not. With that comes certain obligations. You must be more cautious than others! It does not matter how infatuated you are or are not. Lord Ashford does not have to worry the same as you because while it is unfair, he is a man, and that is simply how things are!”

Seraphina’s gaze narrowed. “Stop this. You know not of what you speak.”

“And if you do this — if you allow yourself to be carried away, and he does not propose? If he uses you and does not

put a ring on your finger? What then? You shall be ruined! Our family shall be tarnished.”

“Is that what this is truly about? Mother? Your reputation? How this will affect you?” Seraphina’s words came out far more sharply than she had intended them to.

“I urge you to mind your tone when you speak to me,” Lillian reprimanded firmly. The soothing, conversational tones were gone — quickly replaced by a demand for an explanation. “This is about you behaving improperly! You cannot seriously think that anything about what you were doing was a good idea?!”

Seraphina’s heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of fear and indignation bubbling within her. She squared her shoulders, meeting Lillian’s gaze head-on. “Improper? I do not see how having a conversation in the library is improper.”

“Conversation? With a man alone? You cannot possibly expect me to believe that you are suddenly so very, very foolish!” Lillian’s lips tightened, her gaze unwavering. “People will talk, and we cannot afford to have our family name tarnished by scandal.”

A spark of anger flared within Seraphina’s chest, her frustration bubbling to the surface. “And what if I do not care about what people say? What if I want to make my own choices?”

The moment she said the words, Seraphina wished she could take them back. She did not mean them. Even learning that she was adopted and the truth of her birth, there was no point in which she had wished not to be a part of their family. No part of her would have ever wished to truly endanger them or their reputation.

Lillian’s expression hardened, her voice taking on a firmer edge. “You are part of this family, Seraphina, and your actions reflect not only on you but all of us. I have raised you to be a proper lady, and I expect you to act accordingly.”

“But I am not a proper lady, am I? I am just a commoner playing pretend. But you knew that already.” The tension in

the room was palpable, the air thick with unspoken words and emotions. Seraphina's voice quivered as she retorted, her anger and pain colliding in a whirlwind of emotions. "You are not my real mother."

Pain lanced over Lillian's face. No doubt she questioned how it was that Seraphina knew the truth or at which point she had learned about her true parentage. The older woman's chin dimpled as she fought back the urge to cry. She had hurt her mother with her words, something she had not thought herself ever capable of. She quickly regained her composure, her voice steady and measured. "No, I am not your birth mother. But I have raised you as my own, and I have worked hard to provide you with a good life and opportunities you would not have otherwise."

Seraphina's voice shook with emotion as she shot back, her words sharp and laced with bitterness. "And no matter how hard you try, you cannot erase the fact that I am the daughter of a maid. No matter how much you want to mold me into a proper lady, I will always be different. No matter how pretty a dress you put me in or how I conduct myself, I shall never be who they think I am!"

Emotion was getting the better of her now, and she could not stop it.

"So really, what is the point?!"

Lillian's expression softened slightly, a flicker of sympathy in her gaze. "Seraphina, I know your upbringing has been different, but I have tried to give you a chance at a better life. I have treated you with love and care, and I have hoped that you would embrace the opportunities you have been given ... you are my daughter, and I love you. Even if I was not lucky enough to have carried you."

Seraphina's anger began to wane, tears welling in her eyes as a complex mix of emotions replaced her frustration. She sank into a nearby chair, her shoulders slumping as the weight of her conflicting feelings settled upon her. "I know, Mother. And I appreciate everything you have done for me. But sometimes, I just ... I cannot escape the truth of where I came

from ... I have tried and tried to figure out what it means for me and how I think of myself, and I ...”

Lillian approached Seraphina, her hand resting gently on her shoulder. “I understand that this is not easy for you. But you are not defined by your past. You have the power to shape your destiny and rise above the circumstances of your birth.”

As tears welled in Seraphina’s eyes, she looked up at Lillian, her voice softening. “I know. It is just ... sometimes it is hard to believe that when I hardly even know the truth of who I am ...”

Lillian’s touch was comforting, a silent reassurance of her presence. “I know it is a struggle, my dear. But you are stronger than you realize. And no matter where you came from, you have a family that loves you.”

It felt as if a weight were lifted off of her shoulders — the apprehension and fear that she had felt over her mother knowing that she knew ... that everything might come out into the open and somehow be bad lifted. As her mother pulled her into her arms, Seraphina exhaled slowly, letting go of as much of the uncertainty as she could.

Chapter 26

She wanted him.

Seraphina had all but confirmed it — asking him like that. Where would that encounter have gone if they had not been interrupted? Where would they be standing now? Idly, Tristan's fingers trailed across his lip contemplatively as he naturally scanned the room for her. No doubt her mother had spoken to her for but a moment, and she should be located somewhere beside her best friend, Elizabeth. At least, so he hoped anyway.

But the moment he stepped into the ballroom, Tristan immediately sensed an unusual tension in the air. Whispers and sidelong glances seemed to follow his every move, setting off an alarm in his mind. Something that on his own would not have been shocking to see at a ball such as this one, but it seemed to be targeted at him so singularly before.

He was fairly certain that he had done nothing gossip-worthy in public as of late. As he straightened his jacket and navigated through the crowd, his unease deepened. The eyes followed him to varying degrees of interest. Tristan was fairly certain he had never been met with such outright animosity as he was at this very moment.

Before he could fully grasp the situation, Michael approached him with an anxious expression. The urgency in his friend's demeanour was palpable. The anxious way that his friend glanced around the room turned the ball of dread in his belly to something rancid.

“Tristan,” Michael's voice was hushed but urgent. “Come, let us speak in the hall ...”

“What? Why? What has happened?”

“In the hall ... it would be best not to speak about this so openly ...” Michael urged. It was such a rare thing to see him carrying himself in such an overly serious light that he had no doubt the situation at hand was rather dire. But panic fueled him, and every worst-possible-case scenario ran over and over

in his head. Had they been seen? Had somebody overheard something they should not have?

“Where is Sera?” he asked softly, ensuring that nobody but the man at his side would be able to hear him.

Michael’s expression softened. “Perhaps now would not be the best moment ...”

“And why not?” Tristan’s heart raced in his chest. If something had happened, he would certainly not allow her to suffer on her own. If there were some way to shoulder half of whatever this was, he would do it without hesitation. He knew how cruel the ton and their sharp tongues could be.

“There is a rumour, well, a couple of rumours ... it would be best to discuss them discreetly as one seems to involve you,” Michael muttered, trying to fake an unbothered expression and still somehow shepherd his friend towards the door he had only just entered through.

Tristan’s brows furrowed, a mix of concern and frustration knotting in his stomach. “What rumour?” he pressed, his voice edged with worry.

“I have not yet located the origin of the rumour, but it sounds very much as if there was or is a private conversation happening between Lady Seraphina and her mother, ah, alleged mother ... a conversation in which brings to question the legitimacy of her birth ... tied with the notion that you are only courting her to win a wager ...”

Tristan’s heart could have stopped cold in his chest. He could think of only one person who would be wicked, vile, and spiteful enough to have overheard such conversations. The wager that had only ever been discussed in the privacy of their club - and then tonight. He would not have put it past the insufferable bastard to have been following Seraphina around ... spying on her and her affairs.

Lord Reginald Blackwood.

He might not have proof, but he knew in his bones that the jealous man was the culprit. Tristan’s jaw clenched, his knuckles whitening as he fought to contain his anger. Lord

Blackwood was playing a dangerous game that could irreversibly damage Seraphina's reputation and happiness. "Blasted fool," he muttered through gritted teeth. He scanned the room, noting the prying eyes and hushed conversations that followed him and Michael.

"We need to stop this," Tristan asserted, his gaze determined. "I have to talk to Seraphina, make sure she knows what is being said and reassure her that I will not let this tarnish her reputation. I can bear it, but she cannot be subjected to the cruelty and rumour of the ton. I have to find her."

Michael nodded in agreement, his expression solemn. "I shall keep an eye on Lord Blackwood. I believe that Elizabeth is already searching for Lady Seraphina as we speak. Hopefully, we can contain this before it spreads further."

Tristan's eyes quickly scanned the ballroom, looking for any of those people whom he needed to find, but none were there. A hollow, aching feeling took residence in his body as his eyes connected with none other than Phillip, Seraphina's father. The man looked at least three shades paler than Tristan had ever seen him before. He appeared only barely to be holding it together. It was not a good look, given the seriousness of the rumours. It would affect her whole family. Their reputation would be ruined if it turned out that it was true and Seraphina had not, in fact, been born to the pair of them.

The realization hit Tristan very suddenly that he could not have cared less who her parents were. He did not care if she was of humble birth or if this was nothing more than speculation brought about by a petty, jealous man.

Tristan would ensure that Lord Blackwood got what was coming to him — one way or another.

"Do you think that is wise?" Michael grabbed Tristan's arm before he had a chance to head towards Phillip.

"If we present as a unified front ... it might discredit ..."

“Yes, certainly. However, please take into consideration that he might very well think that you are nothing more than the man using his daughter to win a wager. You might be the last person in this ballroom with whom he wishes to speak. I strongly suggest that you give him his space.” Michael spoke reason, but that did not make his words easier to obey.

Tristan had thought the first real conversation he would have with Seraphina’s father would be under very different circumstances.

“Alright, I understand — let us find ...”

For a moment, he forgot himself. Lord Reginald Blackwood stood to the opposite side of the door, watching Tristan’s every move. He wore a smug expression that could only be classified as triumphant. Just what did he have to be so happy about? Did he take pleasure in possibly ruining an innocent woman’s life? Was he still so horribly broken up about his own scandals that he needed to make all those around him just as miserable as he was?

Something inside of Tristan seemed to snap. He could feel it pull taut — the control over himself thinned and strained until it simply broke into pieces.

His gaze narrowed, face hot with indignation as he willed the wrath inside him to only be aimed at one person, and one person only. His teeth ground together bitterly as he started towards that terrible soul. If his reputation was already going to be damned, then he might as well give into it full tilt. It would be the very least he could do to avenge even some of the damage done to Seraphina’s honour. He did not care how much of a scene it would make, either.

Michael’s hand alone would not be quite strong enough to stop him, but the sight of Seraphina and her mother slowly entering brought him up cold, ice replacing the veins in his neck as he watched, helpless, as Seraphina had to face the instant disdain of a ballroom full of people.

Chapter 27

Seraphina could not remember the last time she had gotten into an actual fight with her mother. Not that she considered their argument a true fight necessarily, but it was certainly closer to one than she would have liked. Somehow, it was for the best. As she and her mother walked arm in arm with one another back to the ballroom, she felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

She felt as if she were lighter in her steps, that she and her mother had reached an understanding from a place of honesty — she still was not entirely certain how she was going to move forward with the truth of her birth out there in the open, she still had her father to confront about the whole thing ... but the fear of their reaction was removed.

It was better this way.

The only way she would get to know every part of herself was to be honest and allow herself permission to feel any way she liked about it. A necessary sort of discomfort.

Though, that discomfort shifted as they crossed back into the ballroom. Seraphina had intended to slip along the sidelines as she always did when meandering around these great estates, but the music had stopped. Nobody was moving on the dance floor at all. In their place seemed to be a buzz of conversation, and while sometimes she had felt as if all eyes were on her before ... they certainly were right now.

“I have a feeling that we have missed something important, Mother,” Seraphina whispered to her mother, who looked to be just as confused as she was. In truth, she had never seen anything quite like this — the singular focus of the London elite turned to one person.

She might have been flattered if it did not appear so intimidating. Instead, the sense of unease shifted to dread in her stomach. Seraphina’s world seemed to shatter like fragile glass, her heart sinking as her father’s sombre figure approached. Whatever was going around, whispered behind fans ... he knew what it was. Clearly, it was something to do

with them and their family. Father's face was etched with an agony of embarrassment, a reflection of the truth that Seraphina had tried to deny. As he reached them, his voice trembled with a mixture of regret and resolve.

"I am so sorry, my dear," he said, his words heavy with sorrow.

"Philip, what is happening?" Lillian asked with her lips hardly moving.

So it was about them. Something had happened. Some secret had come to light, and she could not fathom which of her many secrets it might be. Where was Elizabeth? Lord Thorne? Tristan? There had to be at least one kind face left for them in this room. Her heart pounded in her chest, the reality of the situation hitting her like a cruel slap. She had hoped that somehow, in some miraculous turn of events, her gut would be wrong. But her father's confirmation shattered that fragile hope.

He looked at her with love and sorrow, his eyes pleading for understanding. "I have arranged for our immediate departure. We must leave this place, this mockery of a society."

The weight of his words bore down on her, and Seraphina felt a lump forming in her throat. The ballroom, once a place of elegance and laughter, now felt suffocating. She glanced around at the guests, her fellow peers, her so-called friends, who now regarded her with scornful glances and whispered mockery.

The isolation was palpable, the warmth that had filled the ballroom replaced by a chilling emptiness. It was as if a barrier had been erected between her and everyone else, a barrier built on prejudice and judgement. Seraphina clenched her fists at her sides, the sting of their disdain piercing through her like sharp daggers.

Lillian did not fight her husband and allowed herself to be led by the arm into a half circle, but the confusion on her face was evident by her knit brow. "Yes, we will go with you, of

course, we will, beloved, but I demand to know what has happened.”

Phillip glanced around as if speaking the words out loud would somehow give them more power than they already had. He met her gaze, the pain in his eyes reflecting the pain he knew their daughter would soon experience. “Lillian, the rumours have spread. They know about Seraphina’s lineage. I do not know how they know, but rumours that she is of inferior birth paired with some other malicious rumours about her courtship with Lord Ashford — I fear that as the mob seems to have turned on our girl, they will stop at nothing to degenerate her fully.”

Put in that context, something seemed to flicker across Mother’s features that Seraphina assumed she would only understand if and when she ever had children of her own. A gasp escaped Lillian’s lips, her face paling as the gravity of the situation dawned on her. She turned her gaze to Seraphina, her heart aching for their daughter. “Oh, my poor child ...”

Tears welled in Seraphina’s eyes, her parents’ distress mirroring her own. How could this have happened? They had been alone in that room, had they not? She wanted to hide, to escape from the judgemental eyes that were surely fixated on her now. But her father’s voice drew her attention back.

“We must leave this place, Lillian,” he continued, his voice heavy with resignation. “This society, these people ... they will never accept us, not after this.”

Lillian nodded slowly, her hand still resting on her husband’s arm. “You are right, Phillip. Our priority is Seraphina’s well-being.”

Seraphina felt gratitude and sadness as she listened to her parents’ conversation. Despite the turmoil, they stood together, united in their determination to protect her.

Her mother’s gaze found hers, and in that shared moment, Seraphina knew that her parents’ love for her was unwavering. Seraphina’s mind raced as her father continued to speak, explaining their hasty departure. She could not help feeling angry and frustrated at the unfairness of it all. She had done

nothing wrong, yet she was being cast aside, her reputation tarnished by the cruel whims of society.

“What was the rumour about Lord Ashford, Father?” Seraphina found herself asking, her feet unmoving despite how he urged her to retreat.

Phillip gazed for a long moment into his daughter’s eyes, reluctant to say but knowing her well enough to know that she certainly would not surrender easily. “They are saying that the only reason he courted you was to ruin you in the name of a bet ...”

“A bet?” Seraphina blanched. Suddenly it did not matter that people were watching her. All the rest of it seemed to fade away into background noise, just murmurs that could not compete with this sudden onslaught of buzzing in her ears. “No ...”

Surely it was false. Tristan would not treat her that way ... he was not that sort of person. Their connection was true ... the things they had in common ... the time he had taken to build her trust within him.

Could it truly have been a lie?

Suddenly, there he was, like the ocean of people had parted to allow her to look at him with red-rimmed and angry, accusatory eyes.

“Seraphina!” he called out, his voice laced with urgency, desperate to reach her before she could be whisked away into the carriage that would take her away from him.

She turned to him, her gaze as cold as winter frost, and he felt the weight of her betrayal in the accusation that lingered unspoken between them. Her voice was laced with bitterness as she questioned him, her words cutting through him like a blade.

“Is this what it was all about, Tristan?” she asked, her voice trembling with anger and hurt. “A bet? A game to seduce a maid’s daughter?”

Seraphina wanted him to refute it. She wanted him to say that it was all just a misunderstanding — she wanted it more

than anything else because she desperately wanted to believe it. One word from him and she would banish the thought and doubts from her mind instantly. She practically begged him with her eyes — she needed him to refute it ... just a nod would do. Instead, he looked moved to near agony.

“Seraphina, I—” he began, his voice cracking with the weight of his emotions.

But before he could continue, Philip stepped between them, his expression stern and protective. He gently guided Seraphina towards the waiting carriage, his gaze never leaving Tristan’s.

“Enough, Lord Ashford,” Philip said, his tone firm. “Your presence here has caused enough turmoil for my daughter. We will not entertain this any longer.”

Without another word, Phillip pulled his family into the hall and towards the exit where their carriage awaited them. Seraphina could only pride herself on the fact that she did not look back, no matter how desperately he wanted her to.

The journey home was steeped in a heavy silence that matched the weight in Seraphina’s heart. Each passing moment felt like an eternity, the carriage moving through the streets of London as if in a dream. Lillian’s stony silence beside her served as a painful reminder of the harsh words Seraphina had spat earlier. She wished she could take them back, erase the anger and frustration that had driven her to lash out.

She cast a sidelong glance at her mother, taking in the profile that seemed so distant and cold. The woman who had raised her, who had been a constant presence in her life, now felt like a stranger. Seraphina’s own words echoed in her mind, a reminder of the hurtful things she had said in the heat of the moment.

Despite the whirlwind of emotions that had consumed her, Seraphina could not help acknowledging the depth of Lillian’s love for her. From the earliest days of her childhood, Lillian had been there, a motherly figure who had shown her

unwavering affection and care. Bloodline or not, Lillian had loved her unconditionally.

Tears welled in Seraphina's eyes as she realized the pain she had caused, not only to herself but also to the woman who had given her everything. She swallowed back a sob, her throat tight with remorse. The ballroom incident had been a revelation, but it had also been a cruel reminder of the people who truly cared for her.

She wished she could take it all back, the anger, the accusations, the hurtful words. But they hung in the air between them, a barrier that felt insurmountable. She longed to reach out, to apologize, to somehow bridge the growing chasm between them.

As the carriage rolled on, the city passing by in a blur, Seraphina's gaze remained fixed on her mother. She could feel the weight of Lillian's disappointment, of her own pain, and it was a heavy burden to bear. The revelation of her true lineage had shattered her world, and the fallout was far-reaching.

She could not stop herself from leaning into her mother's side, only somewhat surprised when the older woman wrapped her arms around her and allowed Seraphina to bury her head in her mother's shoulder and weep.

Despite the tumultuous emotions that swirled within her, Seraphina knew one thing for certain. No matter the circumstances or secrets and revelations, the bond between a mother and daughter was unbreakable. And as they continued the journey home, she silently vowed to find a way to mend what had been torn apart.

Chapter 28

The night air was thick with tension as Tristan emerged from the grand estate, his strides purposeful as he headed towards his awaiting carriage. The events of the evening had left a bitter taste in his mouth, a mixture of regret and frustration that coiled within him. He had underestimated the power of rumours, the way they could twist and distort reality until it was unrecognizable.

Just as he was about to reach the carriage, his path was unexpectedly blocked by a figure stumbling out of the shadows. It was none other than Lord Blackwood. His demeanour was a far cry from the man who was drunkenly weeping on himself as Tristan was forced to escort him out of their mutual gentlemen's club. This man, this broken and pathetic man, was the cause of so much pain, and for what?

What did he stand to gain by any of this? He could not believe that any of this would help his reputation in the slightest. None of this would detract from the fact that he was gambling broke low life. Yet, Lord Blackwood wore his smug expression as if a badge of honour as he swaggered and staggered his way towards Tristan's carriage — expression marred by the effects of too much drink. Tristan's irritation flared, his brow furrowing as he assessed the man's drunken state.

Lord Blackwood let out a loud, mocking laugh; his words slurred as he addressed Tristan. "Well, if it is not our dear Lord Ashford, the conquering hero," he sneered, his voice dripping with derision. "I must say, I am thoroughly impressed. Who would have thought you could have been the one to finally thaw the Ice Queen?"

Tristan's jaw tightened, his fingers curling into fists at his sides. He had little patience for Lord Blackwood's taunts, especially not after the tumultuous events of the evening. Even that precariously thin sliver of self-control he had left over himself was fraying rapidly. "Save your sarcasm, Lord Blackwood; if you have any sense of self-preservation, I urge you to head back inside at once," he retorted, his tone icy.

Lord Blackwood's eyes gleamed with malicious amusement as he continued, his words a barbed attack. "It is truly remarkable, Tristan. You managed to seduce the most unattainable woman in London. But of course, we all know the truth, do we not? The Ice Queen is nothing more than a maid's wanton daughter. All of that effort and for what? Nothing more than a common nobody."

Tristan's anger surged, a fire igniting within him at Reginald's callous words. Without another thought, his fist shot out, connecting with Reginald's sneering face. The force of the blow sent Reginald sprawling to the ground, a shocked expression replacing his newfound arrogance.

Lord Blackwood clutched his jaw as he tried to push himself up. The alcohol in his system was labouring the effort further than it needed. Spittle clung to his mouth as he attempted to right himself, and fury shone in his eyes. "You will pay for that, Lord Ashford, mark my words," he spat, his words laced with venom.

Tristan stood over him, his chest heaving with the remnants of his anger. "Enough, Reginald!" he snapped, his voice low and dangerous as he dropped all formality between them. "You have had your fun for the evening."

Reginald shot him a glare before pushing himself to his feet, swaying unsteadily. "This is not over, Tristan," he slurred before stumbling away, disappearing into the darkness.

Tristan shook out his hand, hoping to ease the pain in his now split and rapidly swelling knuckle. He had not meant to punch him that hard, but he certainly was not sorry he had done it. Tristan stood in the aftermath of a storm, emotions swirling like debris around him. Reginald's jeering words still echoed in his ears, the taste of anger and frustration still fresh on his tongue.

He turned towards his carriage, a strong desire to retreat gnawing at his insides. The idea of solitude beckoned like a safe haven, a place where he could try to untangle the mess of emotions that had been stirred up. Just as he stepped in that

direction, a figure emerged from the shadows, intercepting his path.

It was Michael, his usually jovial expression now tinged with concern. “Tristan, wait,” he called out, his voice carrying a note of urgency.

Tristan halted, turning to face his friend, his frustration momentarily forgotten. “Michael, what is it?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

Michael approached, his gaze locked on Tristan’s. “I know things did not go well tonight,” he began, his words carefully chosen. “But you cannot let this consume you. All is not lost yet. Do not lose hope, my friend. Lady Seraphina deserves better than that.”

Tristan’s jaw tightened, a mixture of guilt and frustration bubbling within him. He knew Michael was right, knew that he needed to find a way to make things right with Seraphina. But the weight of the situation felt suffocating, and he wasn’t sure where to start.

“I messed up, Michael,” Tristan admitted, his voice laced with a rare vulnerability. “I never meant things to get so out of hand.”

Michael placed a reassuring hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We all make mistakes,” he said gently. “The important thing is what you do next. If you think it will help, I am happy to take responsibility — the wager was all my idea. I shall confess it to her so she knows it was only my terrible idea ...”

It meant a lot that his friend was willing to do that for him. Tristan let out a heavy sigh, his gaze distant as he considered Michael’s words. The thought of Seraphina hurt and betrayed weighed heavily on his mind. He had to find a way to mend the rift that had formed between them, to make amends for the pain he had caused.

“Thank you, Michael,” Tristan said sincerely, his voice tinged with determination. “But, I must do this alone. I have to speak to her ... I need to set things right.”

Michael offered a supportive nod. “You can do it,” he said, his gaze unwavering. “And if you need any help, you know I have got your back.”

Tristan’s attempt to regain his composure was thwarted yet again, this time by the unexpected appearance of Evangeline. Just when he thought that his evening could not possibly get any worse, there she was. Like a damned pox, she was. Her husky voice carried a tone that set him on edge, a tone he had grown all too familiar with. He turned to find her leaning against the entrance of his carriage, her expression a mask of feigned sympathy.

“Tristan,” she purred, her smile too saccharine to be genuine. “What a dreadful turn of events.”

Tristan’s patience was already worn thin, and the sight of Evangeline’s insincere concern only exacerbated his frustration. He stepped towards her, his glare cold and unyielding, his voice dripping with warning. “Evangeline, I have no patience for your games right now. What do you want?”

Evangeline’s smile faltered, but she recovered quickly, her eyes narrowing slightly. She extended a hand towards him as if seeking a connection, but he pulled back, his stance rigid. The air between them crackled with tension, a silent battle of wills.

“I heard about the scandal,” she said, her tone almost sympathetic, though Tristan knew better than to trust it. “How dreadful it must be for you.”

Tristan’s jaw tightened, his frustration simmering just beneath the surface. He couldn’t afford to engage in Evangeline’s manipulative dance, not when his thoughts were consumed by Seraphina and the mess he had created.

“Save your false attempts at sympathy, Evangeline,” he snapped, his words laced with a sharpness he could not suppress. “I do not need it.”

Evangeline’s facade wavered, a flicker of hurt crossing her features before it was masked by defiance. “You were always

one to push away those who cared for you,” she retorted, her voice holding a hint of bitterness.

Tristan’s patience had reached its breaking point. He took a step closer to her, his voice low and forceful.

“Cared for me? Cared? No. We never cared for one another ... and any misplaced affection that you think you have for me is nothing that cannot also be attributed to sheer boredom. I hope that when I say these words, you listen ... I feel nothing but annoyance for you, Evangeline. Nothing. Get out of my way.” he warned, his gaze unwavering.

For a moment, they stood locked in a silent battle, the weight of their history hanging heavily in the air between them. Then, with a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of years, Evangeline finally relented. She straightened, her defiance giving way to resignation.

“Very well, Tristan,” she said, her voice devoid of its earlier bravado. “But do not think this is over.”

She and Lord Blackwood would make a perfect match for one another — each had a soul as black and tainted as the other.

Evangeline’s departure left a lingering sense of unease in the air, but she maintained her poise as she stepped away from his carriage. Her head was held high, a clear display of her indomitable spirit. Tristan’s gaze followed her retreating figure, a mixture of emotions churning within him. He knew that dealing with Evangeline was a battle he could not fully escape, no matter how hard he tried.

As the echoes of her footsteps faded into the night, Tristan was left standing alone in the dimly lit courtyard. He sighed heavily, his thoughts a tumultuous whirlwind of regret, guilt, and an odd touch of relief. Relief that the confrontations of the evening were over, at least for now. But beneath it all lay a gnawing sense of unease, a growing awareness that the choices he had made were setting into motion a series of events he might not be able to control.

With a heavy heart, he finally turned away from the scene, his steps carrying him towards the waiting sanctuary of his carriage. The door closed behind him with a soft thud, enveloping him in a cocoon of solitude. The carriage jolted to life as the horses began to pull it away from the chaos of the evening.

Tristan sank into the plush cushions, his mind a whirl of conflicted thoughts. The events of the night had left a mark on him, a stark reminder that his actions had consequences and that his pursuit of Seraphina was not as simple as he had once believed.

As the carriage rumbled along, the moon's glow cast fleeting shadows through the window, illuminating his troubled expression. He replayed the evening scenes in his mind, each confrontation, each whispered rumour, each fleeting touch with Seraphina. His heart ached with longing and regret, a potent cocktail of emotions that left him feeling adrift.

The city streets passed by in a blur as the carriage carried him away from the ball, away from the tangled web of secrets and desires that had consumed him. He stared out into the darkness, lost in his thoughts, wrestling with the knowledge that his chosen path was fraught with obstacles.

Tristan's fingers absently traced the edge of his coat lapel, his mind working through the choices he had made and the impact they would have on his future. He knew there was no turning back now, that the course of his life had been forever altered by the events of this night.

Tristan's thoughts gradually began to settle. The weight of the evening's revelations still pressed heavily upon him, but amidst the turmoil, he felt a flicker of determination. He might not have control over the rumours or society's judgements, but he could control his own actions.

With a resolute exhale, he leaned back into the cushions, his gaze fixed on the passing scenery. The road ahead was uncertain, fraught with challenges and uncertainties, but Tristan was determined to navigate it with as much grace and

integrity as he could muster. The events of the evening had shaken him to his core, but they had also ignited a fire within him — a fire to prove that he was more than the rumours and the whispers, a fire to show that he was capable of change, growth, and, above all, genuine love.

Tristan found himself ensnared in a web of guilt and regret that tightened with each passing day. She would not return his letters — she would not allow him to come to call on her. Four days and even Elizabeth, her dearest friend, was not allowed to visit.

The consequences of his reckless wager had woven a tapestry of pain and hurt, its threads stretching into Seraphina's world. He couldn't escape the weight of his actions nor the torment they had caused her.

In his study, bathed in the soft glow of candlelight, Tristan paced restlessly. The room, adorned with rich mahogany furnishings and rows of leather-bound books, had been a refuge of comfort for him in the past. But now, it felt like a prison, the walls echoing with his own inner turmoil.

His fingers clenched and unclenched around the edges of an ornate wooden frame that held a portrait of his mother. Her serene face stared back at him, her eyes seeming to hold a depth of understanding that transcended time. The gentle smile that graced her lips seemed to mock him, a silent reminder of the woman who had always encouraged him to be better.

The memory of his mother's unwavering support weighed heavily on his conscience. She had believed in his potential for kindness and compassion, qualities he had foolishly set aside in pursuit of a wager. As he stared at her image, a surge of determination welled up within him.

He knew what he needed to do. He could not undo the past or erase the pain he had caused Seraphina. But he could make amends, prove that he was capable of more than the callous bet he had engaged in. He could fight for her to earn back the trust he had lost. If she would not allow him to visit, he would just have to make her allow it. He would have to change her

mind, she was worth it. He would not allow the woman he loved to slip through his fingers.

The realization struck him like a lightning bolt, electrifying his senses.

Tristan grabbed his coat; sure steps and confidence that likely bordered on foolhardy carried him to the Hawthorne residence. He simply would not take no for an answer. In light of the recent scene, there was simply no way he was going to be turned away from them.

Tristan's heart drummed in his chest like a relentless beat as he waited in the hallway of the Hawthorne residence. The anticipation of facing Seraphina after the pain he had caused was both nerve-wracking and necessary. He knew he had to make amends and prove to her that he was not the heartless rake she believed him to be.

A flicker of movement caught his attention, and he turned to see Lillian Hawthorne approaching. Her posture was rigid, her gaze icy as it bore into him. Tristan swallowed hard, understanding he was far from welcome in her home.

"Lady Lillian," he greeted with a respectful nod, though he sensed that pleasantries were futile in the face of her displeasure.

Her lips curved into a semblance of a smile, but her eyes held none of the warmth that typically accompanied such expressions. "Lord Ashford," she replied curtly, her tone laced with a thinly veiled warning.

Tristan did not attempt to prolong the conversation. He knew Lillian's feelings towards him were justified, and his focus remained fixed on the task ahead – speaking with Philip and, hopefully, gaining a chance to apologize to Seraphina.

Moments later, the butler emerged from the depths of the house, his attire impeccable and his demeanour professional. "Lord Ashford, Lord Hawthorne will see you in his study," he announced.

Tristan nodded his gratitude and followed the butler's lead, navigating the grand halls until they reached Philip's study.

The door creaked open, and Tristan entered, finding Philip seated behind an intricately carved desk. His face, usually marked by a friendly and approachable countenance, was now etched with lines of concern.

“Lord Ashford,” Philip greeted, his tone carrying a mixture of formality and weariness. “What brings you here?”

Tristan cleared his throat, his palms clammy with nervousness. “I wish to speak with Lady Seraphina, please,” he said, his voice steady despite the internal turmoil.

Philip regarded him for a moment, his eyes searching Tristan’s face. “You understand the pain your actions have caused my daughter,” he stated, his words heavy with a father’s protective concern.

Tristan nodded, his gaze unwavering. “I do. And I deeply regret it.”

Philip’s expression softened slightly. “Very well,” he said, standing up from his desk. “I will allow you to speak with her. But know this, Lord Ashford, her well-being is my utmost priority. If you hurt her again ...”

“I understand,” Tristan interjected, his sincerity evident in his voice. He knew he had to prove himself, not just to Seraphina but also to her family.

Before the butler could guide him to wherever Seraphina was at present, Lord Hawthorne spoke a firm word of warning. “This will be the one and only chance that I give you, son. You do understand that? If my daughter were not so wholly miserable without you ... I would never even allow this much. Do not make me regret this.”

Chapter 29

Four Days Later

Seraphina would never be able to show her face in public again.

Since the scandal's revelation four days ago, Seraphina had chosen to withdraw from the bustling social whirl of the city. Instead, she sequestered herself within the comforting walls of her family's home. The once-familiar surroundings now felt like a sanctuary, a shelter from the judgemental gazes and cruel whispers that had become her constant companions.

She sat alone in the spacious sitting room, a dim glow from the fireplace casting flickering shadows across her features. Her raven-black hair cascaded over her shoulders, a curtain shielding her from the outside world. Her piercing blue eyes, usually so vibrant, now held a hint of weariness as she nursed a heart battered by disappointment and hurt.

The air was heavy with silence, a palpable reminder of the upheaval that had shattered her world. Seraphina's fingertips traced absent patterns on the arm of the chair, her thoughts a jumble of emotions she struggled to process. Her heart ached with the sting of betrayal, her mind wrestling with the memories of shared moments with Tristan.

She could not help feeling like a fool, her optimism shattered by the harsh reality of the rumours. How could she have been so naive? She had believed in the possibility of something genuine with Tristan, that the affection they shared could transcend societal expectations. But now, her hopes lay shattered like glass, and the pain of that realization was a heavy weight on her chest.

The room seemed to close in around her, the walls a stark reminder of the world she was now meant to navigate. Her father's books lined the shelves, a testament to his scholarly pursuits. Seraphina had inherited her love for literature from him, but even her beloved books could not provide the solace she needed now.

The fire crackled softly, its warmth a stark contrast to the coldness that had settled within her. She hugged her arms around herself, a futile attempt to ward off the chill that had nothing to do with the weather outside. Her thoughts drifted back to the stolen moments with Tristan, the stolen kisses and whispered promises that now felt like a distant dream.

Even now, amidst all the pain, she still longed to have him here. She wanted more than anything to feel his strong arms wrap around her and pull her close. She wished him to whisper soothing words into her ears that everything would be all right — she craved his assurances.

Strange, as she was also perfectly certain that she would never be able to look him in the eye again. She did not know how to reconcile those two versions of him — the perfect one who made her heart skip a beat with every memory — and the poisonous liar who only had ever wished to be near her as a result of a bet.

As the hours passed, she felt a strange mixture of anger and sadness. Anger at herself for being taken in by Tristan's charms, for allowing herself to be vulnerable, and sadness for the loss of what she had believed they shared. The pain was raw, the wound still fresh, but amidst the darkness, a flicker of determination ignited within her.

Seraphina knew she could not stay hidden forever. The world outside awaited her, with all its judgement and gossip. But she was determined to face it, to rise above the scandal that threatened to define her. With a deep breath, she pushed herself up from the chair, her eyes focused on the fire's dancing flames.

It was as if the universe had heard the desperate longing of her heart and decided to mercifully grant her this wish. Seraphina's heart raced when Tristan entered the drawing room, a rush of emotions sweeping over her like a tidal wave. Surprise mingled with apprehension, her guard immediately rising in anticipation of his words. She could not forget the pain he had caused her, the humiliation she had endured because of his actions.

“Lord Ashford,” she greeted, her voice tinged with a mixture of formality and the bitterness she struggled to conceal. Her eyes bore into his, a silent demand for an explanation.

Tristan paused, his gaze steady on hers. The weight of his guilt was palpable in the room, and he took a steadying breath before he began to speak. “Seraphina, please, hear me out. I promise that I shall not consume too much of your time. I know I do not deserve your forgiveness,” he started, his voice carrying a raw sincerity. “But I need you to know the truth.”

She remained silent, her eyes never leaving his face. Her heart hammered in her chest, torn between the lingering hurt and the possibility of understanding his motivations.

“I made a foolish wager, one that I deeply regret,” Tristan confessed, his voice laced with remorse. “But my feelings for you were never part of that bet. I was drawn to you from the moment we met, and as much as I tried to deny it, I could not escape how much you affected me.”

Seraphina’s brows furrowed in confusion, her defenses warring against the sincerity in his tone. “You expect me to believe that?” she retorted, her voice laced with scepticism.

Tristan took a step closer, his gaze intense and unwavering. “I do not expect anything from you,” he replied, his words carrying a weight of truth. “I only want you to know how I feel.” He hesitated for a moment, his vulnerability exposed. “I care about you, Seraphina. And I am truly sorry for the pain I have caused you.”

The room was filled with a charged silence as Seraphina absorbed his words. She felt torn between the wounds he had inflicted and the earnestness in his confession. It was a battle between her heart and her pride, a conflict that left her struggling to find her voice.

“Tristan,” she finally said, her voice softening as she met his gaze. “Do you expect me to believe that you can change overnight? That your feelings for me suddenly override the wager you made?”

Tristan shook his head, a hint of desperation in his eyes. “No, I do not expect you to believe that. But I want the chance to show you that I have changed. I want to prove to you that my feelings for you are genuine. I will do anything to prove it to you, however long it takes.”

Seraphina’s heart wavered as she looked into his eyes, searching for any hint of deception. She saw regret, remorse, and a glimmer of hope – a hope that they could mend what had been broken.

“You have hurt me deeply,” she admitted, her voice trembling with the weight of her emotions.

“I know,” Tristan said, his voice gentle. “And I mean it, I am prepared to do whatever it takes to earn back your trust.”

The vulnerability in his gaze matched the vulnerability in her own heart. It was a leap of faith, a chance to believe that people could change, that mistakes could be rectified.

Seraphina’s guard began to crumble, the walls she had built around her heart slowly breaking down. The hurt remained, but amidst it, she saw a glimmer of possibility – a chance for forgiveness, for healing, and for a love that could transcend the pain of their past.

Seraphina’s heart remained a battlefield, torn between her lingering hurt and the hope that Tristan’s words held. She could sense the sincerity in his voice, yet bitterness still clung to her, a shield against the possibility of further pain.

“Could you truly desire a relationship with the daughter of a maid?” she challenged, her voice laced with both resentment and a faint glimmer of yearning.

Tristan’s gaze never wavered, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine. His lips parted, and for a moment, it seemed he struggled to find the right words. But when he spoke, his voice held a weight of emotion that struck deep into Seraphina’s heart.

“Your lineage means nothing to me,” he declared, his voice trembling with sincerity. “I see you, Seraphina, for the person you are, not for the circumstances of your birth.”

His words landed like a shockwave, shattering the walls of bitterness she had erected around her wounded heart. She stared at him, her breath caught between disbelief and yearning. His confession defied everything she had believed in the wake of the scandal.

For the past few days, she had steeled herself for rejection, for the harsh reality that society's judgement might indeed define her future. And yet, here was Tristan, the very source of her pain, declaring that her lineage was inconsequential to him. Her emotions warred within her, a tumultuous storm of hurt, confusion, and the tentative spark of hope.

She wanted to believe him, to let herself be swept away by the possibility of a love that transcended social boundaries. But at the same time, she was wary – wary of trusting him again, of opening her heart to someone who had caused her so much pain.

“Tristan,” she said softly, her head shaking as tears threatened to fall softly. Her voice was a mixture of vulnerability and caution. “You have caused enough damage.”

He reached out, his fingers brushing against hers in a gentle, almost tentative touch. The warmth of his touch sent a jolt of electricity through her, a reminder of the undeniable connection that had drawn them together despite the odds.

“I know,” he replied, his voice a mere whisper.

Seraphina searched his eyes, seeing both regret and determination in their depths. The storm of emotions within her had yet to find resolution, but amidst the uncertainty, there was something she couldn't deny — the pull of her own heart.

As much as she wanted to guard herself against further pain, as much as she yearned to shield herself from the vulnerability of hope, a part of her that longed for the possibility of forgiveness, of healing, and of a love that could rise above the scars of their past. With a mixture of trepidation and resolve, she offered him a faint nod. “Prove it then, Tristan,” she said, her voice a soft challenge. “Prove that you are capable of change.”

Tristan's fingers tightened around hers, a fleeting but reassuring touch that sent a rush of warmth through her veins. He met her gaze, and at that moment, they stood at the precipice of something new – a chance to mend what had been broken, to rewrite the story that mistakes and regrets had tainted.

As Tristan's gaze remained locked onto Seraphina's, the room seemed to shrink, the world narrowing down to just the two of them.

“Sera,” he began, his voice steady but laced with vulnerability, “I understand your hesitation. I realize I have caused you pain, and I deeply regret the consequences of my thoughtless actions.”

Tristan's voice carried the weight of his past as he continued, his words a testament to his vulnerability.

“My father, he was a harsh and cruel man. He cared only for appearances and the power his title gave him. My mother tried to shield me from his cruelty, but she could not escape it herself. She passed away when I was just a young boy, leaving me alone with a father who seemed to revel in his control over me.”

Seraphina's eyes held a mixture of empathy and sadness as she listened, her heart aching for the pain he had endured. She had never imagined such a tumultuous history beneath his confident exterior.

“But there was one person who showed me kindness, who stood as a pillar of strength when I needed it most — our housekeeper,” Tristan continued, his voice softening as he spoke of the woman who had offered him a lifeline.

“She became a mother figure to me, offering me love and stability when my own family had failed me.”

He paused as if gathering his thoughts before meeting Seraphina's gaze. “I share this with you not to elicit pity but to show you that my experiences have shaped me into the person I am today. I learned that privilege does not insulate anyone

from suffering, and I understand that people are not defined by their circumstances or lineage.”

Seraphina’s eyes held a newfound understanding, her heart expanding with compassion for the man before her.

“I see now,” she said softly, her voice tinged with empathy and regret. “Tristan, I have been so blinded by my own fears and assumptions that I failed to truly see you.”

He offered her a small, understanding smile. “We have both made mistakes, Seraphina. But the important thing is that we recognize them and strive to make amends.”

As he spoke, he reached out, his fingers brushing against hers. It was a simple touch, yet it held a world of significance – a gesture of connection, vulnerability, and the possibility of forgiveness.

“Your parentage does not change the person you are,” Tristan said, his gaze unwavering as he met her eyes. “And it certainly does not alter the way I feel about you. I want to be by your side, to prove that my affections are genuine.”

Tears shimmered in Seraphina’s eyes as she took in his words, her heart thawing in the warmth of his sincerity. It was a journey of healing, unearthing hidden truths, and building a connection that transcended societal expectations. Her breath seemed to catch in her throat as she absorbed his words. The distance between them felt monumental and insignificant, a divide he desperately wanted to bridge.

Slowly, as if drawn by an invisible force, he reached for her hands, his fingers intertwining with hers. The touch was electrifying and grounding, a tangible connection defying the walls they had erected between themselves.

“Sera,” he murmured, his voice a tender caress, “I love you. My heart belongs to you, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to prove that my feelings are real.”

Time seemed to suspend as his words hung in the air, a promise of love and a plea for acceptance. The air around them hummed with anticipation, the weight of their past

choices and the hope for a shared future converging in this pivotal moment.

Seraphina's heart raced as she looked into Tristan's eyes, seeing the sincerity that emanated from him. Her emotions swirled like a tempest within her, a mix of confusion and a glimmer of hope that perhaps, despite the chaos and hurt, something beautiful could be salvaged from the wreckage. Her arms found their way around him, pulling him into an embrace that held a world of meaning. Her voice, soft and vulnerable, carried the weight of her feelings. "I have been so hurt, Tristan, but I ... I love you, too."

The words hung in the air, a delicate confession that held the promise of healing and renewal. The turmoil that had defined the past days seemed to melt away in the face of this shared understanding, this mutual declaration of love.

Tristan leaned down; his lips captured hers in a kiss that held all the intensity of their emotions. It was a kiss born of forgiveness, acceptance, and the knowledge that they were meant to be together despite the odds stacked against them. At that moment, time seemed to stand still, and they were enveloped in the cocoon of their love, shutting out the world beyond.

When they finally broke apart, their foreheads rested against each other, and their breaths mingled in the space between them. A shared smile graced their lips, a reflection of the happiness that bloomed within their hearts.

Amidst the whirlwind of scandal and the weight of their past mistakes, Seraphina and Tristan had found solace in each other's arms. Their love had weathered the storm, emerging stronger and more resilient. As they stood together, entwined by the unbreakable bond they had forged, they knew they were ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead – as a united front, as partners in love and life.

Epilogue

A week later ...

The sun bathed the elegant garden of Seraphina's family estate in a warm and golden glow. Delicate petals from a myriad of flowers adorned every corner, their vibrant colours a reflection of the love that was about to be celebrated. The air was filled with a sense of anticipation, and a gentle breeze whispered through the leaves, carrying with it a promise of new beginnings.

Underneath a beautifully adorned archway, the ceremony space had been transformed into a sanctuary of love and devotion. White fabric billowed like clouds, the softness of its folds contrasting with the rich greenery that surrounded it. The guests, a gathering of friends and family, took their seats, their faces alight with smiles and joy.

In the heart of this natural paradise stood Seraphina, a vision of ethereal beauty. Her gown flowed like liquid moonlight, each stitch a testament to the craftsmanship of love that had gone into its creation. A crown of delicate flowers adorned her raven-black hair, a symbol of her purity and the beginning of a new chapter. Her eyes sparkled with excitement and a hint of life's uncertainties.

At the end of the aisle, Tristan stood, his expression a blend of awe and adoration. His eyes remained locked on Seraphina, his heart beating in sync with hers. His suit was perfectly tailored, reflecting his transformation from a roguish rake to a man fully committed to love and responsibility.

As the ceremony began, their vows resonated through the garden, a promise of unwavering devotion and support. Their hands intertwined; they exchanged rings – symbols of their unbreakable bond. The officiant's words were accompanied by the soft chirping of birds and the rustling of leaves, nature itself bearing witness to their union.

And then, the moment arrived. With the utterance of "I now pronounce you," cheers erupted from the crowd, mingling with the songs of birds and the distant sound of waves

crashing against the shore. Tristan and Seraphina shared their first kiss as a married couple, a kiss that sealed their love and marked the beginning of a new adventure together.

Amidst the jubilant applause, they turned to face their loved ones. Their smiles were radiant, their hands held tightly, a tangible reminder of the strength they had found in each other's arms. Petals rained upon them as they walked down the aisle, a shower of blessings from their friends and family.

Their journey had been tumultuous, filled with challenges and heartache, but it had led them to this moment – a moment of pure, unadulterated happiness. As they walked hand in hand into their shared future, they knew their love was strong enough to weather any storm, to conquer any obstacle.

Amid the tinkling of glasses and the gentle clinking of silverware, the wedding breakfast unfolded in a swirl of laughter and joy. Tables were laden with a sumptuous feast, a reflection of the Hawthorne family's commitment to hospitality and celebration. The garden, adorned with twinkling lights and fragrant blossoms, served as the backdrop to this momentous occasion. The sunlight filtered through the garden's foliage, casting a warm and inviting glow over the scene. As the wedding breakfast progressed, a sense of anticipation buzzed through the air.

Elizabeth's mother, Diana, radiant in her elegance, stood at the head of the gathering, her voice carrying a note of joyful authority as she raised her glass. The room hushed, all eyes turning towards her as she began to speak.

"Dear friends and family," she began, her smile infectious. "Today, we gather not only to celebrate the union of Lady Seraphina and Lord Ashford but also to embrace the bonds of love that connect us all. As we partake in this delightful feast, I have the immense pleasure of sharing some news that adds to our joy."

A ripple of excitement coursed through the assembly, the murmurs growing louder as they leaned in, eager to hear her announcement.

“As we celebrate the love of Lady Seraphina and Lord Ashford, let us also revel in the happiness of another couple among us,” Diana continued, her gaze shifting to Michael and Elizabeth. “In the spirit of unity and shared joy, Lord Thorne and my daughter, Lady Elizabeth stand before us, their hearts entwined in a love that has grown strong over time. I am delighted to announce that they, too, are engaged to be married!”

The room erupted in a chorus of cheers, applause, and well-wishes. Michael and Elizabeth, their faces illuminated with happiness, exchanged a glance that spoke volumes – a promise of a future filled with love and togetherness. The joy was palpable, a testament to the bonds forged through the trials and triumphs of their intertwined lives.

Amid the applause, Seraphina and Tristan shared a knowing smile, their hands finding each other’s beneath the table. This shared moment of celebration felt like a fitting continuation of their journey – a journey that had led them from uncertainty to love and now to the heartwarming realization that their happiness was woven into the tapestry of those around them.

As the applause and cheers subsided, the gathering settled into a renewed sense of camaraderie. The engagement announcements added an extra layer of celebration, a reminder that amidst life’s challenges, love prevailed, and the bonds of family and friendship were stronger than ever. The garden seemed to sparkle with an extra layer of magic, a reflection of the shared joy that had blossomed within its embrace.

Amid the shared laughter and joyous conversations at the wedding breakfast, Michael and Tristan found a moment to step away to a quieter corner of the garden. Michael’s face wore a mix of curiosity and satisfaction as he turned to his friend.

“Tristan,” he began, a playful glint in his eyes, “I have heard some interesting tidbits about our departed guests.”

Tristan arched an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? Do tell.”

With a chuckle, Michael leaned in slightly. “It seems Lord Blackwood had a rather swift exit from London. Rumour has it that he found himself yet again in a bit of financial trouble, owing a substantial sum to a rather unpleasant individual. The word is he fled town to escape the consequences. Though, I would almost be willing to place another wager on whether the constables reach his miserable arse before the debtors do.”

Tristan’s lips curved into a wry smile. “I cannot say I am surprised. Lord Blackwood always did have a knack for getting himself into unsavoury situations.”

Michael nodded in agreement. “Indeed, and as for Evangeline, you will be most pleased to learn that it appears she has returned to Bath. Perhaps the allure of London’s social scene lost its charm for her. Cannot imagine why that might be.”

Tristan’s expression softened, his gaze briefly drifting towards Seraphina, who was engaged in animated conversation with her parents. “Sometimes, I think people like Evangeline are driven by the need for attention and power. It is a pity they miss out on what truly matters.”

Michael clapped Tristan on the shoulder. “Well said, my friend. And speaking of what truly matters, I have seen the change in you since Seraphina entered your life. It has been quite the transformation.”

Tristan’s gaze held a mixture of gratitude and sincerity. “She has taught me there is more to life than games and superficiality. Love and honesty matter, Michael.”

Michael smiled warmly. “You have come a long way from the man who made a wager on her. I am proud of you, Tristan.”

As they watched the celebrations unfold around them, Tristan’s gaze found Seraphina once more. He felt a sense of contentment he had never known before – a contentment that was rooted in the love they had found and the understanding that had blossomed between them.

“Thank you, Michael,” Tristan replied, his voice soft but resolute. “I could not have done it without her.”

The two friends shared a moment of companionship, their smiles reflecting the genuine happiness that filled the air around them; the journey of love, growth, and transformation continued for all whose lives had intertwined in the most unexpected and beautiful ways.

As the evening sun cast a warm and golden hue over the estate, the wedding celebration began to wind down. Laughter and music still lingered in the air, but the time had come for Seraphina and Tristan to retreat from the joyful chaos. They slipped away from the merriment, their fingers intertwined as they walked hand in hand through the enchanting garden pathways. The twinkling stars began to emerge in the darkening sky, and the soft breeze carried with it a sense of tranquility. Their steps were unhurried, their silence a comfortable companion.

Eventually, they reached the grand staircase that led to their shared bedchamber. Tristan’s eyes caught Seraphina’s as they stood at the threshold, the flickering candlelight within the room casting a warm glow on her features. The day’s events had been a whirlwind, and now, they were about to embark on a new chapter of their journey.

Tristan’s voice was a low murmur filled with tenderness. “Are you ready, my love?”

Seraphina’s gaze met his, a mixture of emotions dancing in her eyes – love, happiness, and a touch of uncertainty. She nodded, a soft smile gracing her lips. “Yes, Tristan. I am.” With a gentle squeeze of her hand, he led her up the staircase. Each step felt like a deliberate, shared ascent into their future. As they entered their chamber, the flickering candlelight created a cozy, intimate ambiance. The scent of fresh flowers wafted through the air, a reminder of the beauty surrounding their union.

Tristan turned to face Seraphina, his eyes tracing every line of her face as if memorizing it. “Sera,” he whispered, his voice

husky with emotion, “today has been a day of celebration, but it is also a beginning. A beginning of a lifetime that I am grateful to share with you.”

Seraphina’s heart swelled with affection, her fingers brushing against his. “And I with you, Tristan.”

Their closeness was magnetic, drawing them together in a dance of shared desire and unspoken promises. Tristan’s hands found her waist, his touch sending a delicious shiver down her spine. The space between them grew smaller, the world outside their chamber fading away until there was only them.

Their lips met in a tender and passionate kiss, a merging of souls that spoke volumes of their love. The cares of the day melted away at that moment, leaving only the intensity of their connection. As they broke apart, their foreheads rested against each other, their breaths mingling in the intimate space between them.

“Tonight,” Tristan whispered, his voice a velvet caress, “is for us.”

Seraphina’s eyes sparkled with a mixture of anticipation and love. “Yes, Tristan. Our beginning.”

Tristan smirked knowingly, his hands working down the buttons and clasps of her gown until his fingertips could brush against bare skin. A shudder rolled down her spine, chased by gooseflesh as Tristan pulled her close — it took nothing for the heat to ignite within her core all over again. So much better than their encounter in the library as she no longer had to be careful or limit the noises she made — the liberating knowledge that he was hers and she was his was more than she could have fully anticipated.

Her hands ran up his arms and rounded his shoulders, cupping the back of his neck and deepening the kiss - it seemed to be all the encouragement Tristan needed. He pushed the sleeves from her shoulders, the dress fell from her and fell into a soft pool on the floor by her feet for only a moment before Tristan scooped her up into his arms.

He encouraged her legs around his waist - she had been right, the sensations were so much better without the layers of clothing between them. Even the grate of his clothing against her now bare skin as he walked the pair of them over to the bed.

Her insistent, impatient hands grabbed and pulled to get his shirt free from where it was tucked until she could pull it up over his head and throw it off to the side. His chest hair grated against her nipples in a whole new bevy of sensations that left a soft sigh of pleasure as his lips travelled down the corner of her lips and jaw.

Her fingers curled up into his hair, pulling softly as the soft kisses heated further, desire curling lower as his hands roamed her nude frame, alternating between soft and firm and massaging his way lower until he could cup her rear in his hands, pulling her closer until her body was melded to his own.

His hard line pressed up against her core as her hips undulated against his and Tristan moved the pair of them to the bed, holding her onto his lap as he situated the pair of them — her legs curling around his hips as her arms wrapped around his neck. Powerful thighs lifted the pair of them, shifting until he was positioned over the top of her.

Even all the books she had read could not have properly readied her for this moment or the sensations curling into damp wet between her legs. Tristan pushed his trousers down his hips in a fluid movement, but instead of allowing her that hard length that she had so wantonly wanted as friction, he started to kiss lower down her body, lavishing attention on her breasts and holding her closer yet.

His hand dipped between them, two fingers fitting inside her that had her breath leaving her body in a gasp — she arched up into his hands even as he started to pulse them inside her, spreading her slick wetness over his hand and readying her with steady eye contact.

Something was intoxicating about looking at him doing such things to her - knowing that they would have the rest of

their lives to explore one another and she could learn every dip and curve of his frame — the way to pleasure him— but tonight, she just needed him. She wanted to feel him. She needed to know they were one in a way that could never be broken.

Tristan kissed a trail back up her neck until he could capture her mouth under his, tongue slipping between her lips, savouring her, and then he was there, his fingers replaced with something much larger — a new sort of heat that took her breath away in the best way imaginable with only a momentary sharp pinch of pain. He allowed her a moment to steady herself as her fingers raked down his back. Tristan lifted one of her legs up and over her shoulder as he pushed deeper, filling her totally.

Seraphina had imagined what it would feel like a thousand times, reading the pages in her books and trying to put herself in the place of those heroines. Nothing compared to the actuality of it, though. The way his hips flexed against hers and the sound of his ragged groan right against the shell of her ear.

It was empowering. The shiver of anticipation that filled her had everything to do with the slow way he pulled back out of her, that pain receding to be replaced by a feeling she could not even describe. Her stomach knotted up, her breath leaving her in a breathy moan that she could not bear to bite back. When he pushed back into her, it was sudden and fast, with none of the care he had taken into his first thrust, and just like that, her entire world seemed to shift.

Pleasure chased down her spine, her breath catching again as she tried to push her hips back up into him when he went to pull back again, but his fingers were a hard, unyielding barrier on her hip, pushing her back down into the mattress and holding her in place as his hips picked up a rhythm that had her throwing her head back. There. Right there. The friction was unbearable, the feel of his hip bones against hers and his pelvis against that place that only she had ever dared to touch.

When she gasped, she felt Tristan shift, his body adjusting so that he could fit his hand back between them and his thumb

could replace where his pelvis had been only moments before. That gasp turned into a noise she did not recognize at all, wanton and loud between them as he rolled slow circles that didn't at all match the pace his hips had picked up into.

“Oh, God,” she begged. She did not know what she was begging for even. She did not know what to ask for, but Tristan was two steps ahead of her, his hips flexing and the noises he made in her ear so indecent that everything else faded. There was no thought as she arched into him, her chest heaving from her stuttered, shaking breaths. There was no consideration when her stomach coiled just that much tighter, and she felt her whole world shatter.

Like stars bursting in the sky, everything shrinking as the pleasure inside her reached that final peak, and she came up off the bed into him.

If she had thought he was unrestrained before, he proved her wrong. His thrusts became jagged and untimed, his head sinking into the space between her neck and collarbone with a noise that broke through that blackness that had seized her and pushed her just that much further over the edge she was already tumbling down.

He was still inside her when he stilled, warmer and full in a way that she did not understand.

And when he rolled them, she could only sink back into him as he curled around her back, his arm heavy across her hips as his breathing evened out. Some words would need to be said, things to look at closer in the bright of day. But that was not here and now.

For now, Seraphina could look up into her husband's eyes and feel how full her heart was. The way it seemed to beat only for him, and she was happy. The future that would lay ahead of them for the rest of their lives held no certainties other than the fact that every night she would be able to fall asleep in his arms.

As if reading her mind, Tristan reached down to look at where he held her, a smile playing softly on his lips before he kissed the very tip of her nose. “I love you, Sera. I intend to

spend the rest of our lives showing you the depths of my love.”

A smile split her face from ear to ear as she barely contained bubbles of happy laughter. “I love you, too.”

THE END?

Can't get enough of Seraphina and Tristan? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

How will Seraphina's transformation from the "Unattainable Rose" to a joyful, fiery woman mark her sizzling romance with her husband?

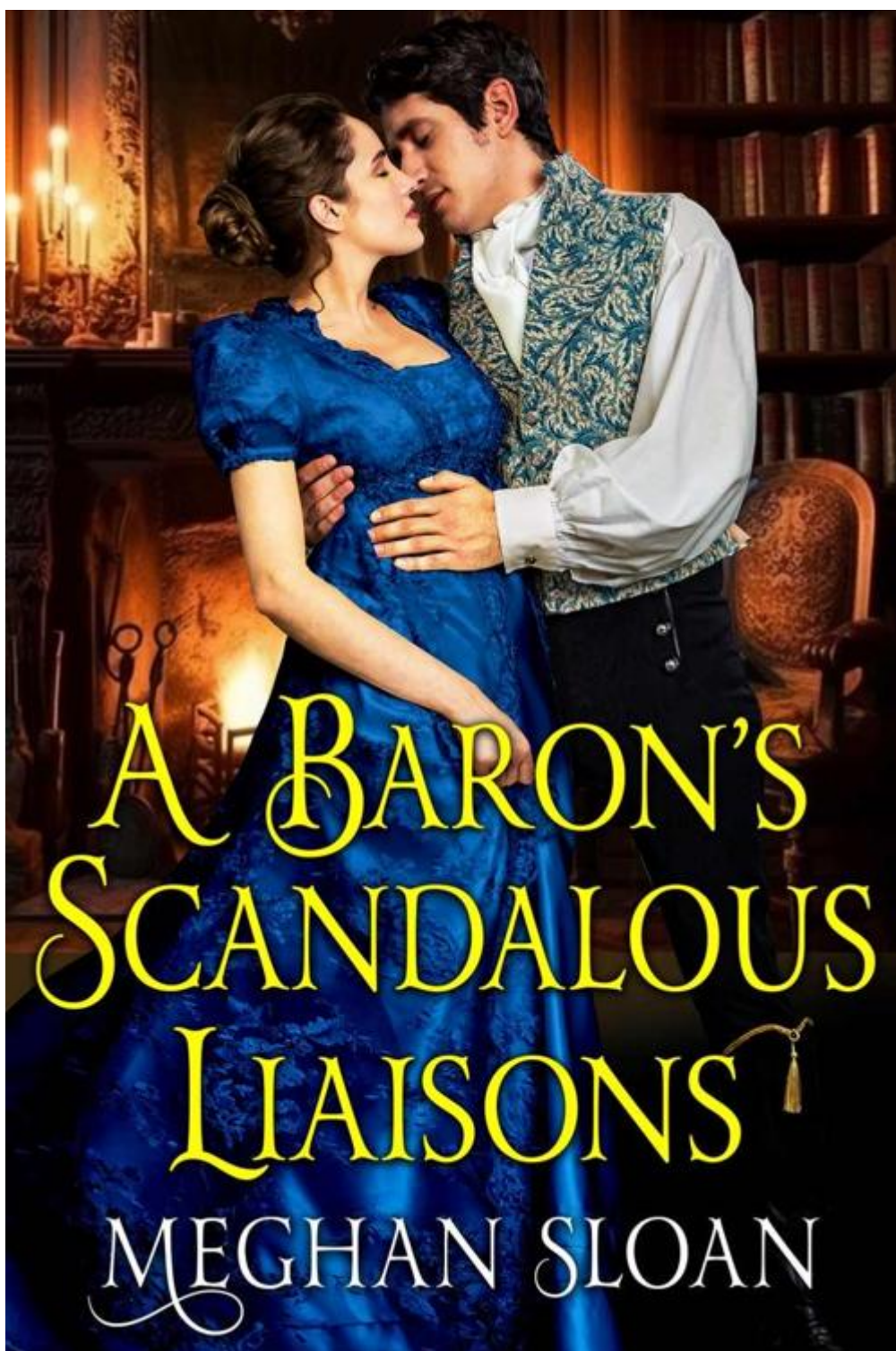
How will the fiery couple feel about Elizabeth and Michael's growing family?

What will the news of Reginald's unfortunate fate be and how will the couple react?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

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*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **A Baron's Scandalous Liaisons**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



A BARON'S
SCANDALOUS
LIAISONS

MEGHAN SLOAN

A Baron's Scandalous Liaisons

Introduction

Beneath Marina Hensman's modest but fiery spirit lies a burning desire for love. Entrapped in a web of deceit, she becomes a pawn in the cunning schemes of her guardians, who manipulate her dowry to ensnare a gentleman and secure her a suitable match. As she grapples with the fear of a loveless union, Marina's path intertwines with Laurence, an arrogant and irresistibly seductive Lord, at a dazzling ball. Their lives collide in a tangle of obligation and intrigue, thrusting them into an arranged marriage neither of them desires.

Can Marina follow the passion burning within her, even if it means defying everything she has been taught to believe?

Laurence Highview, the rakish son of a Viscount, has to save his family fortune from crippling debts and his father's reckless habits. Bound by the duty to secure a wealthy wife, his freedom fades as he becomes captivated by Marina's gentle nature, defying their initial animosity. As they peel back the layers of pretense, scandalous feelings ignite within him, fueling his untamed lust.

Will Laurence find true happiness next to Marina, or will he be trapped in a maze of deception and greed?

Passion and loyalty collide as Marina and Laurence dare to forge their own destiny, their love searing and consuming amidst a world fueled by lies and greed. As their sizzling connection deepens, they must unravel the secrets that bind them, defying the forces working against their happiness. Will they emerge triumphant, defying the odds and breaking free from the suffocating constraints of society? Will their sinful romance be the flame that burns through the darkness, guiding them to a future where their desires and hearts are no longer held captive?

Chapter 1

Marina Hensman felt a flutter of excitement and nervousness as she stepped out of the dark carriage and made her way into the dazzling lights of the ballroom. She had been both looking forward to and dreading this night for weeks, ever since her guardians, Sir John Andrews and his wife, had announced that they would be attending the Season's opening ball in London.

She knew little about this man who was supposed to be hosting her, except that he was a former navy officer who had risen to the rank of knight thanks to his mysterious employer, and that he did not care much about her.

"Come along, Marina," Sir John, a stout and greying man with a gruff voice and a perpetually stern expression, said, pulling at her arm impatiently. "We do not want to keep potential suitors waiting. You are already eighteen, and you are about to enjoy your debut into fine society. Can you not see the importance of this night?"

Marina followed him obediently, feeling out of place and overwhelmed, even though she had been taught every rule of etiquette a young lady was supposed to know. She had spent the last six years at a boarding school in Bath, where she had received the finest education and training in all the accomplishments expected of a young lady.

She had learned to play the piano, sing, draw, embroider, dance, and converse in French, yet none of that seemed to suffice now that she was finally attending her first event of the Season.

"Keep your chin up, child, and remember to smile," his wife, a tall and slender woman with blue eyes devoid of affection, scolded Marina. She knew that Lady Andrews did not care for her and had made it clear that she considered her a burden every time she returned home from Bath. "You have such a pretty smile—use it to your advantage."

"Lady Andrews, I am trying to smile," Marina said softly, feeling a knot in her stomach. "But I cannot help but feel

awfully anxious. Am I truly ready for the Season? Perhaps we should wait one more year. I will be nineteen then and not fresh out of boarding school. People will notice I have no experience, and they will notice how lost I am. What should I say if anyone asks me about my family, my background?”

“Marina, how many times do we have to tell you?” Sir John snapped, keeping his voice at a whisper so only she could hear. “If anyone were to ask, you are our distant cousin, and we took you in out of charity. That is all you need to know and all you need to say. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied meekly, lowering her eyes, her gaze focused on her gloved hands. She was, in fact, not related to her guardians at all. They were not distant cousins, not even four times removed. Documents would state otherwise, but she knew them to be less than truthful.

“My wife has already made certain rumours of your sizeable dowry begin to circulate among the proper circles to spread long before tonight, so no one will be overly concerned with your parents or your past. You are a commodity for gentlemen in need of a wealthy wife, and your beauty and youth will only sweeten the deal, so I expect you to dazzle every single man that asks you to dance tonight. Do I make myself clear?”

Marina nodded, attempting to conceal her discomfort as she looked around the ballroom: ladies and gentlemen of noble birth, all dressed in their finest and most fashionable clothes. She had to face the music, literally and figuratively, making her debut into society while keeping her secrets close to her heart.

She was relieved when she spotted her best friend, Miss Sarah Milton, standing by the refreshment table—she was the Baron of Mithre’s third daughter and had been Marina’s roommate at Bath.

“Marina, you look lovely tonight. I am so glad you are here. I have missed you terribly,” Sarah, a petite young woman with rosy cheeks and a sweet disposition, took Marina’s arm the moment she saw her approaching.

“Thank you, Sarah. You are too kind.” Marina flushed lightly, still not used to compliments, even when they came from a trusted source. “I have missed you too. I do not believe I could have made it tonight without your advice.”

“Oh, nonsense. You belong here, look at how everyone notices you already, and you have yet to be introduced to anyone. When I stepped into the ballroom, no one turned to look my way,” Sarah said, sipping her champagne.

“I am certain you have been asked to dance already,” Marina protested, but Sarah simply shrugged.

“I have, but he rushed after another lady the moment the music stopped. But we are not speaking about me—we are speaking about you. Is Sir John still so intent on finding a proper husband for you before the Season is even halfway through?”

“More so than before.” Marina sighed, not daring to look over her shoulder to see if her legal guardians were staring daggers at her. “I am certain Sir John already has talked with several potential matches, and it is only a matter of time before he informs me who I am to marry.”

“I am certain he will take your opinion into consideration. He would not just give your hand to someone you have never met!”

“No, he would expect me to dance with him first and make a good first impression,” Marina replied quietly, feeling a sense of dread wash over her. “What if this suitor is unkind? Or cruel? What if he never grows to love me?”

“You should not speak that way—I am certain he will be lovely. And as for not loving you, how could any gentleman with a good head on his shoulders not adore a lady such as yourself? You will be the jewel of your husband’s eyes, no matter who he might be,” Sarah replied, encouraging as ever.

Marina smiled weakly at her friend’s words but felt no comfort in them. She knew Sarah meant well, but she also knew marriage was not a matter of love or happiness but of convenience and duty.

She was about to reply when she saw a tall, stout man approaching them, followed closely by the Master of Ceremonies. He was, of course, the first to speak, introducing both strangers so that they might dance and socialise as the Season demanded.

“Miss Hensman, may I introduce you to Sir Harris?”

“Of course, thank you,” she replied with a polite curtsy, though she was not eager to begin dancing yet.

“Miss Hensman, may I have the honour of this dance?” Sir Harris asked, bowing gentlemanly, and Marina gave Sarah a rueful look, only to receive an encouraging smile as a response. With no real reason to reject the request, she nodded and smiled daintily.

“Of course, sir,” Marina said, taking his offered hand. It seemed she had been right to hesitate, as her dancing partner stepped on her toes not once but three times until the music mercifully stopped. He had barely stopped talking about himself enough to discover more than her name.

Before Marina could attempt to return to the refreshment table, however, a second gentleman was quick to step toward her, this time without the company of the Master of Ceremonies.

He was shorter and older than her previous dancing partner, which she wouldn't have minded had it not been for the way he stared up and down at her. It made Marina feel like she was a piece of furniture he admired in a London shop rather than a young lady.

“Miss Hensman, I presume?” he asked, without waiting for a proper introduction, prompting Marina to blink with confusion.

“Yes, sir,” Marina said politely, curtsying slightly, too stunned to reply anything else.

“My name is Mr Edmund Collins. I am the son of Lord Collins of Wiltshire. I have heard much about you and your generous dowry,” he said bluntly, breaking countless rules of etiquette in a single breath.

This must be one of the potential suitors Sir John must have talked to—why else would he swiftly bring up my dowry before we have exchanged three words?

“Oh, I...Yes, of course. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Marina said, forcing a smile.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance?” he asked boldly, holding out his hand, prompting Marina to look around her as quickly as possible. She desperately wanted someone to aid her, yet Sarah had accepted a gentleman’s request to dance, and Sir John and Lady Andrews made no effort to step forward.

She could have rejected him due to the improper manner in which he had approached her, yet she decided it would be safer to simply accept and then step away once the waltz ended.

“Of course, sir.” She sighed inwardly and accepted his hand, being led toward the dance floor.

He was sweaty and clammy, and he smelled of tobacco; his stare was too focused on her figure for comfort.

“How much is it, if I may ask?” he asked, his eyes gleaming with greed. “Your dowry.”

Marina felt a wave of disgust. She could not believe how rude and impertinent this man was. She wondered why he thought it was appropriate to ask such a question.

“That is a private matter, sir,” Marina said firmly, wishing the waltz was over already, yet it had just started.

“Come now, Miss Hensman, there is no need to be coy. We are both adults here, and we both know what the London Season is about. It is about finding a suitable match, a profitable alliance. And I think we would make a very good match indeed. You have the money, and I have the title and the connections.”

Marina inhaled softly, attempting to keep her composure. This man did not even seem to see her as a person but as a prize.

“Sir, I appreciate your interest, but I think it is too soon to talk about marriage,”

“Nonsense, Miss Hensman. Marriage only demands we sign a contract and exchange some vows. The rest will come with time.”

She endured the rest of the dance in silence, avoiding his gaze as best she could. She finally pulled away the instant politeness allowed her to.

“Thank you for the dance, sir,”

“My pleasure, Miss Hensman,” Mr Collins grinned, still holding her hand too firmly for comfort. “May I escort you to the refreshment table? Or perhaps to the garden?”

“No, thank you, sir,” Marina replied firmly, pulling her hand away from his grip, knowing he would only grow bolder if she allowed him to carry on further. “Please excuse me.”

Without waiting for an answer, she quickly entered the crowd, praying that he didn't follow behind her.

Chapter 2

Laurence Highview was not in a good mood—he had been dragged to this dull ball by the Baron of Rosenthal, Marcus Williams, who claimed it would be good for him to mingle with society and find a suitable wife. If Marcus had not been his hunting partner and close family friend, Laurence would have adamantly refused, yet here he was, sipping a glass of wine and scanning the room with a bored expression.

He saw nothing but the same crowd he had seen all too many times, even if the faces and titles changed from Season to Season. Simpering ladies making their debut, scheming mothers and pompous lords. He felt stifled and restless in this environment.

“Why did you bring me here?” Laurence asked, frowning at the red-headed man standing by his side. Though he was considered a tall and athletic young gentleman by all accounts, his friend still stood three inches above him, forcing Laurence to look up whenever they spoke. “You know I loathe these affairs.”

Marcus, who had served in the navy before inheriting his title from his late bachelor uncle, could only chuckle. Laurence could not comprehend how his old friend remained optimistic after his painful past. He had lost his late wife to childbirth only a handful of years before this night.

“Come now, no need to be sour. Look at the bright side. There are plenty of beautiful young ladies eager for your attention. Surely you can find one who catches your eye.”

“Beautiful? Perhaps. But also boring, shallow, and empty.” Laurence snorted. “They are like dolls in a shop window.”

“You are too harsh, Laurence. Not all ladies are like that,” Marcus protested, shaking his head. “My Bethany was bright and charming, and I am certain there are several ladies here who could impress you with their wit and interests if you simply gave them a chance.”

“That is hardly fair! How can I argue with you now?” he shook his head, looking away. “You know I cannot waste time with this dance or with visiting. I have more pressing matters to worry about. My father’s debts are piling up, and our lands are in need of care.”

“Yet you find time to hunt and ride your horses,”

“And you accompany me often if I remember correctly,” Laurence replied bitterly, only for the baron to chuckle again.

“That I do, but I do not try to find excuses to neglect my social obligations. You are the son of a viscount and the heir to a title. You have a duty to your family and your name to find a suitable wife and secure your future. And believe me, my old friend, marriage will bring your heart great joy if you give it a chance.”

“Suitable wife? That is a joke. Surely you mean a wealthy heiress who will bail my lineage out of the troubles my father created? No, thank you. I do not wish to marry anyone for love or money. I value my freedom too much.”

“You cannot stay a bachelor forever. You need a wife and children to carry on your legacy, someone to share your life and happiness with.”

“I plan on letting my family line die with me.” Laurence scoffed, shaking his head and finishing his wine.

“Argue with me all you want, but you agreed to come already. As long as you are here, why not enjoy one dance or two?”

Laurence scoffed but found no arguments to reject his friend’s logic.

“Very well, but only to prove optimism alone cannot make a dull ball any more enjoyable.”

Marina sighed with relief as she spotted a familiar face near the east windows, Sarah’s cousin by marriage, Lady Danielle.

She remembered how kind and friendly she had been to her when she visited Sarah at Bath, even though she was the only daughter of the Earl of Harewood and, as such, she was higher in rank than either of them. Danielle had become a good friend through the years, even inviting them to spend a few weeks at her family's estate during the summer.

Danielle, a tall and graceful woman with dark brown hair and hazel eyes, smiled brightly when she saw Marina. She was clad in a blue silk gown that complemented her fair complexion, looking every inch the daughter of an earl.

"Danielle, I am so glad to find you here."

"Marina! How lovely to see you in London. How have you been?"

"I have been well, thank you," Marina replied politely, but her voice betrayed her anxiety. Danielle knew her too well to believe her lie.

"Is something wrong?" She gently led her away from the crowd.

"That man over there," Marina whispered, tilting her head to subtly guide her friend's gaze toward Mr Collins. "He introduced himself and then asked about my dowry the instant we started dancing."

"That is outrageous." Danielle gasped, holding Marina's arm tighter. "How dare he treat you like that? Worry not—if he dares approach us, we can walk over to my father. He will stop any further nonsense."

"Thank you, that is a relief. He did not seem to want to let go of me. I wish Sir John would not consider him as a proper suitor."

"Of course, he will not, dear. How could anyone find such an awful man a good prospect?" Danielle reassured her, but Marina wasn't so certain. No one knew how ruthless Sir John could truly be, and she did not dare confess the truth about her family to anyone, even her closest friends, even to help them understand why she was so horribly concerned about her future.

“You are right.” Marina forced herself to smile, deciding it was best to change the subject. “Has your night been any better than mine?”

“Better than having a man introduce himself and ask about my dowry? Yes, of course, most anyone has,” Danielle replied jokingly, and Marina giggled earnestly for the first time since she had arrived. “I have yet to meet anyone that captured my eye, unfortunately. I remain hopeful, however, and so should you.”

“Marina, Danielle. There you are. I have been looking all over for you.” Sarah’s voice prompted them to turn around. “I saw you dancing with another gentleman, but then you practically rushed away the instant the music ended. Is everything all right?”

“Nothing we cannot handle, dear cousin,” Danielle replied with a smile, waving her hand casually. “I am glad you found us.”

Marina understood why her friend so quickly dismissed the subject, as Sarah was quick to worry whenever those she cared about suffered in the slightest. She didn’t wish to ruin her night as well, so she followed Danielle’s lead, downplaying the incident.

“It was nothing, Sarah. Just a rude gentleman who kept stepping on my toes.”

“Oh, that sounds awful. I am certain the next gentleman will be an utter delight.”

“Your dancing partner surely seemed like one.” She grinned, watching her friend flush furiously. As Sarah told them every detail of the conversation they had shared as the music played, Marina wondered if the night would get any better from that point on, or if every single potential suitor that approached her that Season would prove to be worse than the one before.

Chapter 3

“It pains me to admit you might be right about one of the perks of being here tonight. There are indeed some beautiful young ladies in attendance,” Laurence remarked as he glanced around the ballroom, his eyes finally landing on three lovely women standing near the east windows. They seemed to be engaged in a lively conversation, laughing and smiling at each other.

Though he usually avoided flirting with peers due to their annoying adherence to the strict moral values that annoyed him to no end, he could not deny that one of them stood out to him more than any other woman that night. She had fair skin with blushing cheeks, brown hair that shone under the candlelight, and pale green eyes that sparkled with intelligence and kindness.

She was wearing a stunning white gown that accentuated her slender figure and graceful movements, and Laurence could not help but indulge in lascivious thoughts as he admired her from afar. He imagined how her cheeks would flush even further if he were to draw her against his body, how she would gasp with delight when their lips met. How silky her skin must be, how lovely her curves under his fingertips...

“Who are they?” he asked Marcus, nodding toward the trio. His friend followed his gaze and smiled knowingly.

Maybe that dreadful night could be redeemed after all. He would not find a wife here; that was out of the question, yet a companion that could provide him with both pleasure and delight for a few hours?

“Ah, I see you have noticed Lady Danielle.”

“Which one is she?”

“The one in blue, with dark hair and hazel eyes. She is the daughter of the Earl of Harewood, a very influential and respected family. I met her at a previous ball, and we had a pleasant conversation.”

“She was not the one that caught my eye, however beautiful she might be. I mean the one clad in white.”

The one clad in white had indeed caught his eye and flamed a fire in his loins that greatly improved his mood. He allowed himself to admire her beauty from afar, his gaze exploring the contours of her lithe, delicate body. He could almost feel her smooth skin underneath his fingertips, her lips parting to gasp his name as they lost themselves in a passionate embrace, preferably without that silly gown getting in the way.

That would be indeed delightful, and Laurence smirked to himself, wondering if she was the kind of woman who would allow herself to be seduced out of wedlock. Those rosy lips held so much promise.

“Well, I have not been introduced to her, to be perfectly honest. I do not believe I have seen her before, either. She is quite lovely, though, is she not?”

“A magnificent creature,” Laurence agreed at once, feeling that heat rising from his loins, and he allowed himself to cling onto it before sighing, and adding: “She seems awfully prim and proper, however.”

“Stop attempting to find excuses, old friend. Come, I will request Lady Danielle to introduce us to her companions, and you may ask your lady in white to dance.”

Laurence followed Marcus reluctantly, though he had to admit he could barely keep his eyes off this mysterious debutante. She had a delicate face with a small nose, full lips, and a slender neck adorned with a simple pearl necklace. She moved with elegance and poise but also with a hint of shyness and reserve, not overtly seeking to draw attention to herself, unlike some of the other ladies he had met.

Maybe she would be different in even more ways. Maybe she would gladly follow him out for a stroll in the gardens, where they could enjoy a moment of privacy away from prying eyes.

“Look who is coming our way.” Danielle nudged Marina gently and whispered in her ear. “The Baron of Rosenthal and his friend...I have not been introduced to him yet, but I am fairly certain he is the Viscount of Birchton’s only son. They are both very handsome and eligible, do you not think?”

Marina turned her head and saw the two gentlemen walking toward them with confident strides. They were indeed very handsome, but in different ways. The Baron of Rosenthal was very tall and muscular, with red hair and freckles that gave him a friendly and cheerful look. He wore a navy blue coat that matched his eyes and a white cravat which contrasted with his skin.

It was, however, the Viscount of Birchton’s son who captured her attention. He had black hair that curled slightly at the ends, warm brown eyes that seemed to pierce her soul as he stared directly at her, and a strong jaw that gave him a masculine and handsome appearance. He looked like a rogue and a gentleman at the same time, and Marina felt both drawn and intimidated by him.

“Good evening, Lady Danielle. You look lovely as ever.” The Baron of Rosenthal smiled warmly, bowing politely, his smile boyish despite being at least ten years Marina’s senior.

“Good evening, my lord. You are too kind.” Danielle replied effortlessly, and Marina wished she could conduct herself with such natural charm.

“May I introduce you to my friend, Mr Laurence Highview?” he asked, gesturing to his companion.

“Of course, my lord. It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr Highview.”

“Good evening, Lady Danielle. The pleasure is mine.” Laurence bowed slightly and spoke in a low voice that was masculine and enticing at the same time.

“Allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Miss Sarah Milton, and my dearest friend, Miss Marina Hensman,” Danielle continued with the proper protocol without skipping a beat, since she was used to the art of introductions.

Marina could hardly believe it could be true, but it seemed that Mr Highview's eyes were fixed only on her, as if he did not notice anyone else in the room. He nodded and smiled politely at Sarah, but his gaze quickly returned to Marina once more, making her feel both flattered and nervous.

"Miss Hensman, may I have the honour of this dance?" he asked, extending his hand to her.

"Yes, Mr Highview. I would be delighted." Marina flushed and could not help but smile at his invitation, accepting his offer all too quickly. The instant her fingertips touched his hand, Marina felt a tingling sensation that seemed to somehow travel all across her skin in the span of a second.

Her heart skipped a beat, as if it was suddenly coming to life. His touch was firm yet not unkind, and she flushed as his thumb rolled over her palm, a hidden little caress no one but the two of them would ever know about.

Her stomach fluttered with anticipation for what was to come, and she found it hard to look away from that hypnotising stare.

His smile was dazzling as he led her to the dance floor, where the orchestra was playing a lively waltz. Her gaze met his brown eyes, which seemed to glimmer with mischief and curiosity.

She found herself enthralled by his handsome countenance, by his delightfully enticing smile. Marina would not mind a man such as himself courting her, whispering sweet nothings into her ear and lavishing her with attention.

She wouldn't mind following him to her wedding bed after they became husband and wife. Wasn't that the reason most bachelors and unwed ladies were there, to begin with? To find a husband or a wife?

If she had to wed anyone, she certainly would fancy it being a young man of such manners and such dashing good looks.

"You are quite the breathtaking beauty, Miss Hensman," he spoke boldly, prompting Marina to flush even further than

before. There was a boyish charm to his boldness, however, and his smile put her at ease even though they had only just met.

“Thank you, Mr Highview. You are very kind,” she replied coyly, trying to sound polite and composed. She was tempted to return the compliment, to tell him just how handsome she found him, how his arms seemed to be strong and his chest broad under his neat clothes, how he seemed to have the body of a man used to riding and hunting every single day.

But Marina held back such words out of fear of being considered too vulgar, too forward.

“Not at all. I am merely stating the truth.” His voice was low and raspy, and Marina felt her breath growing irregular as they danced, enjoying the relative intimacy that music granted ladies and bachelors during the Season, the one time they could speak without their chaperones eavesdropping on every word. “Tell me about yourself. Where do you come from? What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?”

Marina wished he hadn't asked about her past at all. She had gotten lost in the fantasy of this handsome gentleman staring at her like she was the only woman in the room, but reality came crashing down on her head all at once. The idea of kissing those lips, of those strong arms pulling her close once they were engaged, had been so tempting, but now she needed to focus on the present.

She did not wish to reveal anything about her family or her past for fear of being judged or rejected. Even the lie Sir John expected her to repeat was too painful for her to utter, and so she decided to give him vague and general answers, hoping he would not press further.

“I come from the country, sir,” she replied, choosing her words carefully. “I enjoy music and painting, among other activities. Especially Mozart and Beethoven, yet I believe everyone in attendance tonight would share the same sentiment. I also adore reading and getting lost in a good book.”

Though he nodded and smiled politely, she could tell he was not impressed or amused by her answers. He seemed bored and indifferent, as if he had heard the exact words from dozens of other ladies before.

Marina felt a twinge of disappointment and frustration, wishing she could find a way to impress him but weary of speaking more freely, fearing she could reveal more than she was supposed to.

She wondered if he regretted asking her to dance and if he wished he had chosen someone else instead.

She decided to try a different approach and ask him some questions instead, hoping to spark his interest and show him that she was not a dull and timid lady.

“What about you, Mr Highview? Where do you come from? What are your interests?”

“I am a Londoner, Miss Hensman. I was born and raised in this splendid city and have never wished to leave it. As for my interests, I am fond of hunting and riding,” he replied, and as his piercing brown stare focused on her eyes once more, he seemed to look straight into her soul. “Have you ever gone hunting?”

Marina wished she could impress him, yet she was also painfully aware that she had to be careful with her words and actions. She could not reveal that she had once ridden her horse further from her group than was appropriate, following gentlemen enjoying a hunting party back when she was fifteen, out of innocent curiosity. She could not reveal that the headmistress had severely reprimanded her for her impulsive decision.

“I have never gone hunting, no.” She shook her head but added with a faint smile, “Yet I do admire your courage and skill. I imagine it must be an exciting and rewarding activity.”

Laurence sighed as his preconceived notions were confirmed in their brief interaction. Marina Hensman was stunningly beautiful, yes, but she was also a proper lady who

followed the expectations of society and her class, who valued safety and comfort, not excitement and risk.

“Thank you for your kind words, Miss Hensman. Hunting is indeed one of my passions. But I understand it is not for everyone.”

He glanced at the orchestra and bowed to her as the music finally came to an end.

“May I escort you back to your friends?”

Laurence could swear he saw a tinge of disappointment in those lovely green eyes, and for an instant, he considered staying by Miss Hensman’s side, if only for tonight. Who knew? She could be amiable enough to follow him out into the garden for a walk, and though she would certainly not indulge in carnal delights, he could enjoy flirting with her and watching her flush so beautifully for an hour or two.

After all, no women in this ballroom could provide him with the excitement he ached for, so he might as well spend his time with the most lovely among the virginal and proper ladies.

“Thank you for the dance. It was enjoyable indeed,” she replied dutifully, prompting him to dismiss the idea, knowing quickly in his heart it would be a waste of time and effort.

He gallantly took her hand and led her back to where Miss Milton still stood. Marcus and Lady Danielle were also returning from the dance floor, their conversation far more lively than the one he had endured.

“Ladies, it was a pleasure to meet you all. I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.” Laurence said at last, as they were all reunited, offering them one final bow.

He wondered if the lovely Marina Hensman wished he would ask for her card and visit in the morning and discovered that a part of himself indeed hoped he would see her again if only to enjoy the sight of her breathtaking beauty. Yet he was quick to dismiss such an idea, confident she could never give him the excitement and adventure he longed for.

Chapter 4

Three days had elapsed since the first dance of the Season, and Laurence was glad he had been able to avoid any further social obligations thus far.

He stepped into the breakfast room, where he expected to find his father getting ready to leave for a meeting or a trip, as usual. The viscount was not without faults, and his passion for gambling had worsened every year since the viscountess's death, yet he could still be trusted to attend to the family's obligations for a few hours every day.

His father was indeed there, sitting at the head of the table—only instead of looking composed and authoritative as he usually did in the mornings, he looked dishevelled and groggy. Laurence had only seen his father looking so ragged late at night when all the servants had already retreated to their bedrooms.

“Father!” Laurence exclaimed with a mixture of concern and irritation as he took a seat. “Are you all right?”

His father blinked several times slowly before lifting his head with an effort, squinting at Laurence with bleary eyes.

“Quite all right, Son. Quite all right,” the older man replied lazily at first, but as he spoke, it seemed to dawn on him that there was important business he needed to discuss with Laurence. Taking a long sip of coffee, he continued speaking with more composure, “I have an important announcement to make.”

“Father, you should get changed, shave, and worry about making yourself look presentable before you make any announcements.”

“Nonsense, boy. I will say my piece as the lord of this household, and you will listen with the respect any heir owes his father.”

“Very well, Father. What is your announcement?” Laurence sighed, bracing himself for some unpleasant news.

“I ran into an old friend the other day,” he began, regarding Laurence intently. “I have been looking for a respectable man to offer me a fair loan for only a few months, and...”

“Another loan? Why did you not speak to the bank?”

“Because, Laurence, I wanted to keep it within our circle. You understand the importance of maintaining our status, or are you too dense to figure out bankers can also enjoy spreading a good bit of gossip?” The viscount replied, his voice laced with a hint of annoyance.

Laurence leaned forward, his expression serious.

“It is not the first time you have borrowed money from acquaintances, and I fear it will not be the last. We are slowly digging ourselves into a hole, and it is time we take responsibility for our finances.”

“Enough!” the viscount snapped, slamming his fists against the breakfast table, making the cups rattle. “Laurence, I have a splitting headache. Will you quit interrupting me and listen to me?”

I am well aware of our financial situation, but I have taken measures to ensure we will be able to repay this loan. In fact, that is what my announcement is related to. This old acquaintance, Sir John, told me he has a ward who is in town for her debut Season. She’s quite the beauty and well-off, as well, so I naturally thought of you.”

“I do not believe this is a good idea. I have no intentions of marrying a woman merely because she is in need of a husband, or you are in need of her dowry,” Laurence replied ruefully, unable to believe his father was trying to solve their problems by marrying him off to a wealthy young lady.

He was old enough to decide on these matters for himself, and he had no interest in jumping into an arranged marriage. “You know my views on this matter.”

His father’s face grew stern as his brows furrowed in disapproval.

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