


LAWS
of
ATTRACTION
BOOK 2

The
MARRIAGE
EXPERIMENT

LAURA
TRENTHAM



LAWS
of
ATTRACTION
BOOK 2

The
MARRIAGE
EXPERIMENT

LAURA
TRENTHAM

THE MARRIAGE EXPERIMENT

LAWS OF ATTRACTION

BOOK TWO



LAURA TRENTHAM

CONTENTS

Also by Laura Trentham

Blurb

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Epilogue

Also by Laura Trentham

About the Author

ALSO BY LAURA TRENTAM



*H*istorical Romance

Spies and Lovers

[An Indecent Invitation, Book 1](#)

[A Brazen Bargain, Book 2](#)

[A Reckless Redemption, Book 3](#)

[A Sinful Surrender, Book 4](#)

[A Wicked Wedding, Book 5](#)

[A Daring Deception, Book 6](#)

[A Scandalous Secret, Book 7](#)

[SPIES AND LOVERS BOXSET: Vol 1](#)

[Spies and Lovers Boxset: Vol 2](#)

LAWS OF ATTRACTION

[The Courtship Calculation, Book 1](#)

[The Marriage Experiment, Book 2](#)

[The Passion Project, Book 3](#)

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Sweet Home Alabama Novels

[Slow and Steady Rush, Book 1](#)

[Caught Up in the Touch, Book 2](#)

[Melting Into You, Book 3](#)

[The Sweet Home Alabama Collection](#)

COTTONBLOOM NOVELS

[Kiss Me That Way, Book 1](#)

[Then He Kissed Me, Book 2](#)

[Till I Kissed You, Book 3](#)

[CHRISTMAS IN THE COP CAR, Book 4](#)

[Light Up the Night, Book 5](#)

[Nobody's Hero, Book 6](#)

[LEAVE THE NIGHT ON, Book 7](#)

[When the Stars Come Out, Book 8](#)

[Set the Night on Fire, Book 9](#)

[THE FOURNETTE FAMILY BOXSET, Books 1-3](#)

[The Cottonbloom Novella Collection, Books 4-6](#)

[The Abbott Brothers Boxset, Books 7-9](#)

HIGHLAND, Georgia Novels

[A Highlander Walks Into a Bar, Book 1](#)

[A Highlander in a Pickup, Book 2](#)

[A Highlander is Coming to Town, Book 3](#)

HEART OF A HERO Novels

[The Military Wife](#)

[An Everyday Hero](#)

WRITING as Leah Trent

Historical Erotic Romance

Fieldstones Adventure Novellas

[An Impetuous Interlude, Fieldstones Adventure Book 1](#)

[A Naughty Notion, Fieldstones Adventure Book 2](#)

[A Mysterious Masquerade, Fieldstones Adventure Book 3](#)

[A Dangerous Desire, Fieldstones Adventure Book 4](#)

[The Fieldstones Adventures Boxset](#)

CONTEMPORARY EROTIC ROMANCE

Bad Boys Breakfast Club

[Big Bad Boyfriend, Book 1](#)

Boss in Bed, Book 2

I love to hear from readers! Come find me:

Laura@LauraTrentham.com

www.LauraTrentham.com

Sign up for [Laura's Newsletter](#)

Join Laura's [Facebook Squad](#)

Are you interested in receiving a FREE book?!

Join my newsletter! There will be links in your Welcome Email for TWO free books!

Sign up for [Laura's Newsletter](#)

As an amateur lepidopterist, Adriana Coffey would like nothing more than to live a quiet life in the country and await Cyrus Shaw's return from his grand tour. After all, an understanding has existed between them since childhood. Unfortunately, with Cyrus out of the country, a marriage is arranged with her detestable stepbrother.

Dawson Shaw, the new Earl of Westhorpe, would like nothing more than to grab his younger brother up by the nape and shake some sense into him. Adriana is intelligent, beautiful, and unappreciated by society and his scapegrace brother. But is he willing to betray Cyrus in order to fulfill his own longings?

Adriana feels like she has no choice but to accept Dawson's offer of marriage. Unlike the charming Cyrus, Dawson is aloof and cold... or is he? Their marriage is proof that assumptions can be disproven. The attraction between them is altogether unexpected and new for Adriana. But will their growing connection survive the coming tempest when Cyrus finally returns?

CHAPTER 1



Miss Adriana Coffey was in trouble. Not the usual kind that warranted a lecture from her father like getting so caught up in a drawing of an *Arctia caja*, a common yet beautiful garden tiger moth, she missed afternoon tea. No, her troubles gathered at a crossroads, and if she set a foot wrong, her future could be a dark path indeed.

She paced the drawing room of their rented town house and did her best to tamp down her rising panic. Logic would get her further than panic. What were her options? She could beg to return to their country estate. While it wouldn't solve her problem, it would offer a temporary reprieve to work on a more permanent solution.

What if she confided in her father? She bit at a fingernail. He loved her, but would he believe her? He might blame the entire situation on her passionate Italian blood, never mind the fact she hadn't been given to flights of fancy.

Another option would be to strike out on her own. Unfortunately, she knew of no elderly ladies in search of a companion. Could she work as a governess? While she had no particular affinity for children, she was bright and could learn. However, she had no references, and her father would quash the notion as soon as he learned of her schemes.

It was not lost on her that her good friend had been in a similar situation only weeks earlier, but Madeline was bolder than Adriana could ever imagine being. She had thrown over her betrothed, who happened to be her distant cousin and the heir to a dukedom, to elope with a rake and gambler, albeit a very charming and handsome one.

The difference was that Adriana could not imagine abandoning her father. They were close. After all, it had been the two of them since she was a babe. Until he had remarried two years ago. Things had changed. Of course they had. She had been naive to think they wouldn't.

Her stepmother was in his ear and had convinced him he could very neatly take care of his business and daughter in one fell swoop. It hinged on her marriage. Unfortunately, the intended groom was her odious stepbrother. How convenient to be able to leave his estate to his stepson, knowing his daughter would also reap the benefits. Although would she?

Like the estate itself, she would be owned by her husband and subject to his whims no matter how cruel. She would have no power. It was galling and unfair.

There was another option of course. Marriage to someone else entirely. Someone she had known since childhood. Someone who wouldn't try to subjugate her. Someone kind and funny and handsome with golden hair and green eyes and a wide, ready smile. Unfortunately, Cyrus Shaw was currently gallivanting around the Continent.

Cyrus had grown up the spoiled fourth son of an earl. Nothing had been expected of him, and he had been free to pursue whatever passions inspired him. At the moment, he fancied himself the next great romantic poet of England. If she

were being honest, which she never had been with him about his art, she found his poems a treachery mess.

She and Cyrus might even be in love. He had kissed her once, after they'd turned sixteen. It had felt... nice. A little damper than expected, but nice. Every year afterward, they discussed making a match, but always in the distant future. They had only turned twenty the previous summer, but ready or not, Adriana feared she was soon to be given no choice in the matter.

Twenty was an age where women were speeding toward spinsterhood, and men... Well, men had oats to sow while women watched their unfulfilled dreams wither. She fought a scream of equal parts fury and frustration.

She had written to Cyrus weeks earlier as her situation became tenuous, and his reply had arrived as her situation turned dire. It was not the news she had hoped to receive. Cyrus was not riding to her rescue because he hadn't yet visited the Roman ruins in Italy.

What could she do except write him again, this time holding nothing back as to the reality of what she faced? Decision made, she sat at the writing desk in the corner of the drawing room and readied paper and ink.

She skipped the light, gossipy preamble she usually opened with. Her letter wasn't eloquent or flowery. It was stark, and her fear was evident in the way her usually faultless penmanship was marred by ink spots and squiggly letters. She didn't care. Pretending everything was fine had become exhausting.

The front door opened, and the low murmur of the butler was drowned out by her boorish stepbrother's voice. "Send a full decanter. I'll join Miss Coffey in the drawing room."

Adriana dashed off a signature, folded her letter, and sealed it with a blob of wax. Slipping his last letter and her reply into a discreet pocket sewn into her skirts, she turned and bolted toward the drawing room door. Her desperation to escape was her downfall. She tripped over the edge of the rug and sprawled onto the settee with her skirts around her knees as her stepbrother, Richard Pace-Verney, entered.

“Oho! I wasn’t expecting such a warm welcome.” His gaze was fixed squarely on her exposed limbs.

She scrambled to her feet and smoothed her skirts down. A blush roared through her, and her skin felt stretched tight. She loathed him, but she feared him too.

“Good afternoon, Richard.” Her lips trembled with a disingenuous smile as she sidestepped around him to the door.

He grabbed her arm. While he wasn’t hurting her, she cringed away from his touch. “Why are you in such a rush, my dear?”

“I require a nap before tonight’s ball. It will be a long evening.” She tugged, but he only tightened his grip and pulled her close enough for her to smell the liquor on his breath and seeping from his sweat-stained collar.

“You can surely spare your dear brother a few minutes of your time.”

“You are *not* my brother.” She was failing in her attempt to act dispassionate and polite.

“Indeed, you are correct.” A wolfish gleam came into his eyes, and his grip tightened enough to sting. “Your father desires we make a match, and to that end, I would like us to become better acquainted.”

“Whom I wed is not for my father to decide.” While she wished her declaration was entirely truthful, it wasn’t. Her father did have a say. A rather large one.

Her father had already been a landowner before inheriting the barony. A majority of his holdings weren’t entailed like so many other peers, and he could leave his only child a substantial inheritance. Yet her father, being the upstanding, honorable man that he was, also felt the need to provide for his new stepson, Richard. How convenient for everyone if Adriana would accept her fate with the obedience demanded by society.

Richard was a rake who spent his time whoring, drinking, and gambling. If he inherited her father’s wealth, there would be nothing left within a year. Her father put Richard’s proclivities down to youth even though he was five years older than Adriana and she had possessed more sense as a girl in short skirts than he could currently claim ownership of.

Her father’s title would pass to a distant cousin no matter what, but if Adriana married someone else, Richard would be left with a modest annual stipend and nothing else. Her father’s business and land would pass into her husband’s hands, which meant Richard was determined to marry her through fair means or foul.

“Let me show you how good we can be together,” he murmured.

It took her a blink to realize his lips were coming perilously close to hers. She turned her face, and his wet kiss landed on her jaw. She shoved him with her free hand. “Get away from me. You smell like a distillery and another woman.”

He staggered to the side. If he hadn't been drunk, she would never have been able to budge him. Richard was a big man, tall and broad of shoulder with meaty hands. His eyes narrowed on her, and she braced herself for whatever vileness he might spew.

The butler saved her. He glided into the room, his expression blank, with a decanter and crystal glass on a tray. Adriana slipped by him and ran up the stairs into her room, locking the door behind her. She fished out the letter and smoothed it against her leg. It was slightly crumpled from her fall onto the settee, but the seal was intact.

A nap before the evening's ball would be wise. It would be dawn before she saw her bed, but her mind whirled. How long would it take for her letter to reach Cyrus? A week? Two weeks? It might be longer if he had moved on before the post arrived. And then how long for a reply? Could she count on him to return to her with haste? At best, she would need to survive weeks. An eternity. A panicked sob threatened to escape.

Option one was her only choice. She had to buy herself—and Cyrus—time. She would feign an illness and insist on convalescing at their country estate in Bainbridge. Her stomach heaved. Perhaps she wouldn't have to pretend. The thought of trying to evade Richard in the small town house for another day, much less weeks, made her feel very ill indeed.

The sooner her letter was posted, the sooner she could expect a reply. She summoned Jones, the young maid Adriana and her stepmother, Sarah, shared. "I need you to accompany me to Lord Westhorpe's residence, Jones."

"Yes, miss. Do you wish to change?" The maid's quizzical expression had Adriana stealing a quick glance in the looking

glass.

Her hair had been pinned up, but tendrils had escaped during her morning's work in the garden, sketching the yellow underwing moth she'd caught under glass. Her dress was an older one she wore when she wasn't planning on accepting or making social calls. The hem was short and a little frayed, but the three-quarter sleeves were good for keeping out of paint or ink. It was comfortable but not at all fashionable.

She would squash a bonnet on her messy hair and wear a shawl. It wasn't like she was paying a social call. She would ask Dawson to send the letter to Cyrus with his own correspondence as he had a better idea where his younger brother would be staying while in Italy.

She smiled at Jones. "We won't be long, and Lord Westhorpe cares not for how I look."

She had known Dawson Shaw, Earl Westhorpe, for as long as she'd known Cyrus, but Dawson had been enough older to not qualify as a playmate. He had always been serious and stoic and not given to laughter or adventure or... fun.

When she and Cyrus had escaped their respective schoolrooms to gallivant through the fields and forests between their estates, playing games of pretend or catch me if you can, Dawson had sought solitude with only a book for company. Even now she found him more than a little intimidating. He would have made a fine monk. Instead, he'd become a soldier.

Adriana crept down the stairs and out the front door as quietly as possible. Richard knew his greatest competition for her hand was Cyrus Shaw. In fact, it had been soon after he'd left on his grand tour that Richard began to aggressively press his suit. If Richard suspected she was practically begging

Cyrus to come home and marry her, he would sabotage her plan.

Used to tramping over the hills and fields of home, Adriana took the path through the park to reach Dawson's town house. She only got distracted once when she spotted a *Callimorpha dominula*, more commonly known as a scarlet tiger moth, but pulled herself away and arrived in less than ten minutes. Jones's cheeks were pink from the walk, and Adriana suspected hers were as well. "You may go to the kitchens for a quick visit, Jones."

"Are you certain, miss? I think I should—"

"Lord Westhorpe and I are childhood friends. My father would trust him with my life, let alone my virtue. I won't be long."

Friends might be overstating their relationship. Yet despite Dawson's aloofness, Adriana trusted him.

A memory surfaced with the suddenness of a streak of lightning. Three years prior, when she'd been seven and ten, Dawson had discovered her in a tree with her sketchbook in pursuit of a *Sesia bembeciformis*. Lunar hornet moths were wily and rarely seen. If they were spotted, they were often mistaken for an actual wasp, so good was their camouflage.

Her skirts had snagged on her climb and left her ankles and petticoat in full view. Caught between girlish fear and a womanly embarrassment, she had stammered out a few nonsensical words of greeting as if they were meeting over tea in a drawing room and she wasn't suspended ten feet overhead with her unmentionables in full view.

His lopsided grin and the twinkling of his dark eyes had sent a jolt of surprise through her. The rare event of his smile

struck her as something special. He hadn't commented on her unladylike position or pursuits. He'd merely swung himself onto the branch beside her, untangled her skirts, and lowered her down with an ease that made her stare at the way his arms bulged against the seams of his jacket.

In that moment, she'd been aware of Dawson in ways that made her stomach squirm even now on the steps to his door. It was a feeling she couldn't categorize but that made her uncomfortable. She was never uncomfortable around Cyrus, which led her to the undeniable conclusion that they were well suited.

Why did the three-year-old memory have to torment her now of all times? She banished any thought of the past. She had to focus on saving her future. She stomped up the steps, rang the bell, and waited.

Dawson would help her. He was nothing if not honorable.

CHAPTER 2



Dawson lay his head back, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose. A headache was brewing. He'd never thought to be in his current situation. Emotion worked its way into his throat, but he swallowed it back down. He didn't have the time to wallow in grief.

After surviving the horrific suffering of Waterloo, he'd thought his life charmed. Until he'd received word of the deaths of his mother and father to illness. By the time he'd been granted leave and made his way back to England, his two older brothers had fallen ill.

Cyrus, the youngest of the siblings, had thankfully been away at school, and Dawson bade him to remain there. One of them had to survive to carry on the family name. Dawson nursed his brothers through their fevers, but it was of no use. They'd died a day apart.

Dawson fell ill two days after burying them and fully expected to join his brothers and parents in the ground before the leaves turned on the trees. Instead, he had fully recovered within two weeks as hale and hearty as ever.

Why had he survived when his brothers had not? The question dogged him, and he worried it like a bone in the middle of the long, lonely nights. He was not the better man.

As a third son, he had chosen the military over the clergy. He had gone to war and emerged physically unscathed. The morally gray orders he'd carried out haunted him, but it had all been for the greater good. Or so he told himself.

Now he was left to manage three large estates with only his wits and common sense. He had not grown up at his father's knee being taught the intricacies of estate management like his older brothers, the heir and the spare. He had merely been the leftovers. It was daunting.

And there was Cyrus to worry over. Tragedy had instilled an obsession to live life to the fullest for Cyrus. He was happy, energetic, and beloved by all, but responsibility was a foreign concept.

Before departing on his grand tour, Cyrus had taken to drinking and carousing and running up debts at the gaming table. Bills from Weston and Hoby had been sent straight to Dawson. An actress Cyrus had kept in rooms he could not afford had turned up on Dawson's doorstep looking for her next payment. Dawson had informed her she was no longer under Cyrus's protection and gave her a generous parting gift. Would Cyrus's grand tour be the making of him or spiral him further down the path of excess and ruin?

A light tap sounded on his study door. Dawson straightened and tried to look as if he had everything under control. "Come."

Hayworth, his butler, cracked the door open. "Miss Adriana Coffey is here to see you, my lord. Are you receiving?"

His heart leaped like a spooked deer, and he rose from his chair. "Yes. I will receive her."

Adriana. Now that he was the earl and she was out in society, of course their paths had crossed. She was lovely and sparkling and commanded his full attention even across a crowded ballroom.

Unfortunately, he was painfully aware of the tender connection between her and his brother. Cyrus and Adriana had grown up together, and a match between them had been an unspoken expectation from the time they were eight or nine.

But while Adriana was in London being courted, Cyrus was traipsing across the Continent, nowhere near ready to settle down. Still, she sent a letter every week to Cyrus through him, which meant her interest in his rascalion brother had not waned with the distance.

Adriana entered with her bonnet askew and pieces of her thick chestnut hair escaping to bounce around her shoulders. Her dress... His mouth grew cottony. It was at least two seasons out of date, too tight, and entirely bewitching. Curves he hadn't been aware of were outlined on her willowy frame. It was nothing like the elegant but demure gowns she had favored for the season.

“Thank you for receiving me, Dawson.” She pulled her gloves and bonnet off and commenced to pace.

She was one of the few who hadn't taken to calling him Westhorpe at his ascension to the title, and the mere use of his given name settled him back into his old skin. “I would never deny you. How can I be of service?”

She stopped abruptly as if she became aware her emotions were wearing his rug out and sank into the chair across from his desk, fiddling with the ribbons of her bonnet. He regained his seat as well, not wanting to loom over her like a worried nursemaid.

“I have a letter for Cyrus. Can you include it in your next correspondence to him?” She retrieved the missive from her reticule. The paper trembled in her outstretched hand.

“Certainly.” He set the letter on the ink blotter. The paper was wrinkled and the wax seal messy. He had sent around a letter Cyrus had written to her only the day before. What news had his brother shared to prompt such a quick reply? “I will see it posted immediately. Will you stay and take a cup of tea?”

Adriana crossed and then recrossed her ankles, shifting in the chair and threading the ribbons through her fingers. It was odd seeing her so discomfited. Compared to other debutantes who tended to flutter around ballrooms like drunken butterflies, Adriana had learned how to be still in order to observe the world around her. She drifted around the edges of any social function or sat with the wallflowers, not even trying to get noticed.

She eschewed the usual white gowns for a palette of earthy colors that set off her olive Italian coloring and strong features. She was the most interesting and beautiful woman in any room even if the rest of the ton thought her an odd bluestocking.

“This was not intended to be a social call. I only planned to stay a moment to give you the letter.” She smoothed her skirt self-consciously. “My maid is in your kitchens.”

“You would be doing me a favor. I need a bracing cup and a break from rows of figures.”

She hesitated but finally nodded. Dawson rang the bell, ordered a tea tray, and studied Adriana. Restless, she rose and went to peer out the window. It overlooked his modest garden. Like Dawson, she loved the outdoors. He suspected she found London as stifling as he did.

“Do you wish to discuss it?” he asked haltingly.

“Discuss what?” She presented him with her profile, but her body remained tilted toward the window as if she longed to take flight.

“Whatever was in my brother’s letter that upset you so.” Had he run off with a German milkmaid? Or an Italian opera singer? Or a French dancer? Damn his brother.

“Cyrus’s letter was full of his usual amusing anecdotes. He is enjoying himself.” She gave him a tight smile. “Your garden is lovely. My friend Madeline would enjoy exploring the plantings, and I would like to study your lepidoptera.”

“You are welcome anytime. I would be happy to give you and your friend a personal tour.”

“Oh, I would never impose upon your time. You must be very busy.”

“I miss getting my hands dirty.” He joined her at the window in a splash of sunlight. Clouds gathered on the horizon, promising a downpour by afternoon.

Sympathy crossed her features, pulling her mouth into a small frown. “It must be overwhelming to step into the role of earl when you never expected it.”

Grief lodged in his chest like a bullet fired from point-blank range. Six months hadn’t eased the heartache. He cleared his throat, but his voice still came out rough. “So many people are counting on me. The estates keep the local townships thriving. If I make a hash of it, people will suffer because of my ignorance.”

She laid a hand on his arm. “You will do a fine job. Not only are you intelligent, but you work hard. You won’t let anyone down. Your father and brothers would be proud.”

Letting his father down was his greatest fear. He'd loved all his sons, but he hadn't given as much thought or focus to Dawson, which as a child, had suited him fine. He had preferred the freedom and solitude being the third born had afforded him. He'd assumed there would be plenty of time to mine his father's wisdom. He'd been wrong.

"I hope you are correct," he said gruffly.

Hayworth led a maid holding a tea tray into the study. Once the tray had been placed on his desk and the servants were gone, they sat and he poured them both a cup. He added two sugar cubes and a dash of cream to Adriana's and took his black.

She looked up from her cup with a slight smile of surprise. "You remember how I take my tea?"

He merely shrugged and took a sip of his. "Unless your tastes have changed?"

"They have not, unfortunately. I will own to having a bit of a sweet tooth." She took a sip and glanced at him through her lashes. "I seem to remember you taking yours with sugar as well. Obviously, your tastes have matured."

"Only through necessity. Sugar was impossible to come by in the army. I hated the bitterness at first, but now I can't abide it too sweet."

"Did you enjoy your time in the army?" She made a sound and shook her head. "That was a silly question. I read about the horrors of Waterloo."

"It was nightmarish. So many young men dead. On both sides. Such a waste. But it wasn't always death and destruction. I enjoyed the camaraderie. It reminded me of my brothers when we were all young." He smiled into his tea,

turning the cup in his hands. The countless nights spent around campfires, drinking bitter tea and talking until dawn broke, melded with memories of his brothers romping through the fields and forests surrounding Westhorpe Manor.

“I envied your family when I was young. To have siblings was a dream of mine. I would pretend I had three sisters.” Her smile was ghosted with loneliness.

“You’ve gained a brother, have you not?”

His idle comment wiped the smile from her face, and a tingle went up the back of his neck. His instincts had proven more useful than his saber or pistol while carrying out his orders on the Peninsula and beyond. He’d learned to trust them above all else.

“Not a true brother. We didn’t grow up together. It’s not the same.” Her voice was hard and clipped.

“Of course not. My apologies.” He tried to tease out her emotions. Anger, perhaps? Was there fear as well? Dawson did not know Richard Pace-Verney well, but he would make it his business to discover what sort of man inspired such antipathy from Adriana.

An awkward silence followed. She set the cup back on the tray and rose. “I must take my leave. We are attending the Fairfield’s ball this evening. Will you be making an appearance?”

“I sent my acceptance, but it depends on how much headway I make.” He gestured to the stack of correspondence and the ledger on his desk.

“And here I am distracting you.”

He wanted to assure her she was a welcome distraction, and if she wanted to sit with him and read while he worked, he

would enjoy simply looking up to see her, but the words got stuck. He had not been blessed with charm or a smooth tongue. His nature plus too many years spent in the company of men had rendered him useless with the fairer sex.

She cleared her throat and made her way to the study door. “Thank you for the tea and your assistance in sending my letter to Cyrus.”

“Of course. I’ll see it posted today.” He wanted to offer more but was unsure what he could do to help. Hayworth waited in the hallway to escort Adriana out.

Adriana bobbed a quick curtsy, and Dawson gave her a shallow bow in return. He hated the niceties expected of him in London and much preferred the relative freedom of the country. Did Adriana pine for the same?

Dawson watched Adriana and her maid disappear down the street from the drawing room window. Then he made his way back to his study and picked up Adriana’s letter to Cyrus.

His conscience barely twinged as he lit a taper to soften the wax seal. Carefully, he opened the letter and spread it out, smoothing a hand over the creases.

He noted the general untidiness of her handwriting and the blobs of ink she’d done her best to clean. She’d written the letter in a rush that spoke of desperation. By the time he read to the end, his hands were fisted and his lips were curled back, fury battering him.

While Adriana didn’t spell out exactly what was going on, the dots were easy enough to connect. As her father’s only natural born child, Adriana would inherit a sizable estate and income, but the baron felt obligated to see his stepson taken care of as well. A marriage would be a boon for everyone.

Except Adriana.

How far would Pace-Verney go in order to secure her inheritance? Would he ruin her in order to force her acceptance? Adriana obviously feared him. Dawson had witnessed what could happen to a woman at the mercy of dishonorable men. It sickened him.

Adriana was pinning all her hopes of rescue on Cyrus. While Cyrus had many good qualities, he was still a boy and only concerned with the pleasures of the moment. His letters to Dawson had detailed the string of well-satisfied ladies and not quite ladies he was leaving in his wake across the Continent.

Cyrus would read Adriana's letter with very real twinges of worry for her—at least until the next hand was dealt or the next lady crooked her finger. He wouldn't drop everything to return. He had no desire to marry. Cyrus would not save her from the grinding inexorability of a match with Pace-Verney.

If Dawson had been merely an earl, he would be powerless to protect her. Luckily for Adriana, he was something more. He dashed off a note, and while he waited for a reply, he made plans.

CHAPTER 3



The Fairfield's ball had been tedious, and because of her lack of a nap, she had stifled yawns all evening long. She had been asked to dance enough times that her feet ached. She had sought to camouflage herself next to a large ficus in the corner, but her silvery blue gown was the color of a *Celastrina argiolus*. The holly blue butterfly was very pretty and too flashy to truly hide.

At least Richard had not been in attendance. She suspected the entertainments were not exciting or debauched enough for him. Anyway, he didn't need to woo her. He had her father's blessing and assumed it was only a matter of time before a betrothal was announced.

Dawson had not made an appearance either despite her willing him to walk through the doors. A stab of disappointment blackened her mood further when it became clear he was not attending. Had he had the chance to post her letter yet?

It was noon the next day before she rose, dressed, and girded for morning calls. Not that she expected any gentleman callers. She hadn't even attempted to cultivate suitors, assuming Cyrus would offer for her soon after his return even if they didn't marry right away.

A stranger in footman's livery stood outside the drawing room door. Her steps slowed. "Where is Charlie?" she asked.

"A family illness called him away. The agency sent me to take his place. My name is Wyn." The man's voice was deep and gravelly.

While he certainly possessed the physique of a footman—tall and well-built—he was not handsome in the way of most footmen, and he wasn't in the first bloom of youth either. Not that he was old, but he was a grown man with experiences to match if she had to guess.

His face was craggy, and his silvery eyes were arresting. Most interestingly, his gaze was not cast to the ground or over her shoulder, but he studied her with a curiosity that equaled her own. This was not a man used to blending into the background like a typical servant.

"Has Lady Coffey come downstairs yet?" she asked.

"No, miss."

"Could you have the kitchens send up a tray with tea and sandwiches?"

"Right away, miss." His expression was bland yet unsettled her nonetheless.

"Thank you, Wyn." She stepped into the drawing room, relieved to be alone.

Putting the odd new footman out of her mind, she settled herself on the settee with her needlepoint at her hip and a book in her lap. A kitchen maid arrived with a laden tray, and she was gratified to see sweet bread along with the savory sandwiches. The only sad part about returning to their country estate would be the loss of their town cook. She was exceptional.

Their London staff had been hired through a reputable agency for the season. They kept a much smaller staff in the country even though the house was larger. There were fewer people to impress in Bainbridge.

Adriana drank her tea, nibbled from the tray, and read her book for the next hour, happy to put Richard out of her mind for the moment. Sarah, her stepmother, swept into the drawing room with apologies for her tardiness.

“Has anyone called?” She arranged her rosy skirts and took up her needlepoint.

Adriana regretfully set her book on the side table and did the same. She detested needlepoint but had been chastised too many times about ruining her eyesight by always having her nose in a book. Although *she* was not the one squinting at her needle and thread. “No one yet. Can I help you thread your needle?”

“I am perfectly capable, thank you very much.” It took another minute for Sarah to actually complete the task. “Mrs. Dunham promised a visit.”

“That will be lovely.” A lie. Adriana couldn’t stand the woman. Mrs. Dunham was an incorrigible gossip and social climber.

Unfortunately, Sarah possessed similar tendencies, and Mrs. Dunham only exacerbated them. While Sarah wasn’t the evil stepmother of folklore, she was blind when it came to seeing any fault in her son. Adriana reminded herself at regular intervals that Sarah made her father happy, and wasn’t that more important than anything?

Mrs. Dunham arrived within the hour. The overabundance of flounces and ribbons on her dress hurt Adriana’s classic

sensibilities. Of course Adriana's severe style and earthy colors did not please most, including her stepmother.

After a quarter hour of mindless chitchat, Mrs. Dunham smiled over her teacup at Adriana. "Will we hear an announcement soon?" She hummed suggestively. "You and Mr. Pace-Verney? Such a lucky girl you are."

A bite of biscuit turned to sand in Adriana's mouth, and she couldn't choke it down quickly enough to set the inveterate gossip straight.

Sarah's smile was indulgent and her wink too knowing for Adriana's peace of mind. "We have high hopes to settle things soon."

By the time Adriana managed to force the biscuit down with a gulp of tea, the ladies had moved on to the latest fashions. Her denial of any interest in marrying Richard would only sweeten the power of the gossip.

"If you'll excuse me, ladies, I believe I'll take a turn around the garden." Adriana didn't wait for Sarah to give her permission. She wasn't Adriana's mother, after all. She retrieved one of her many sketchbooks and her tin of pastels before stepping outside. A deep breath did much to restore her equilibrium.

It was a small garden but stuffed full. The chaos of plants and flowers drew a healthy variety of moths and butterflies considering they were in the heart of London. A brown angle shades moth sat on a flower stem, looking like a dead torn leaf to any prey that might be on the lookout for a snack.

Butterflies attracted the most attention with their flashy colors and beauty, but Adriana loved moths. They were just as lovely if one looked closely enough. Even more, their patterns

helped them survive. One of her favorite drawings was of a buff-tip moth that perfectly mimicked the end of a twig. Nature's attention to detail was astounding.

The angle shades moth before her wasn't rare or special, yet the small details fascinated her. She could appreciate a sprawling landscape done in watercolor, but the muted lines and vast scope didn't appeal to her. She used her pastels to recreate the wings of a moth on the stem of the flower.

She was equally skilled with inks, oils, and watercolors, but she found pastels to be the most satisfying even though they had become unfashionable with the elite artists. Michelangelo and da Vinci had favored pastels. Perhaps her Italian blood influenced her choice. Thank goodness drawing was considered a suitable pursuit for a young lady even if she eschewed the usual subject matter.

She tried to concentrate on the whorls in the moth's wings but found herself chewing on the discussion in the drawing room. If Sarah had discussed her wish for a union between Adriana and Richard with Mrs. Dunham, then all society would be expecting an announcement. She was effectively off the market.

"Adriana? Where are you, my love?" As if she'd summoned him like a demon, Richard's voice carried through the garden.

My love? She mouthed the endearment and stuck out her tongue. Clutching her sketchbook close, she frantically looked for cover. The garden wasn't expansive enough to hide for long if he was determined to find her, and it could prove disastrous to be caught alone in a secluded corner.

She popped out from where she was crouched under a low limb and quickstepped toward the garden doors. Richard

stepped into the path to block her escape. His smile sent a shiver up the back of her neck.

“There you are. Your nose is pink, and it’s a feature you hardly need to emphasize. Have you misplaced your bonnet?” His tone was gratingly condescending.

Nevertheless, she had to stop herself from touching her nose. It wasn’t a cute button nose or even the narrow blade typical of the young ladies around her in the ballroom. Adriana’s nose came straight from her Italian mother and her ancestors. Some might call it prominent, but Adriana preferred to think of it as patrician.

“What have you been drawing?” He tugged the sketchbook from her arms.

“Give that back!” She fisted her hands and barely refrained from stomping her foot.

“Any portraits of me in here?” With a smirk she wanted to slap off his face, he flipped through the book. With each page, his smirk fell further into a frown. “It’s all bugs.”

“How very astute of you.” She aimed an equal amount of condescension in his direction. If she was forced to marry him, this would be her life. Each of them inflicting the torture of tiny cuts with their words.

He tossed her the book and she fumbled it, ripping one of the pages before it fell to the dusty path. Anger burned through her as she retrieved the sketchbook and brushed away the dirt.

“Ladies should paint pretty landscapes or vases of flowers. That’s what your husband will expect of you.” A warning sharpened his words.

“Then I will marry a man who does not care to dictate what I draw.”

His smile contained no amusement or good humor. It was cruel and mocking. Her anger turned to fear. She took a step backward, but he grabbed her upper arm in a grip that stung. “You will marry me, and I will be your master in all things.”

The silence was vast. The birds stopped chirping and the city noises faded to nothing. The pounding of her heart filled her ears. She was wrong about the torture of tiny cuts. Richard would bend her to his will through brute force if necessary. Her head grew swimmy. Was she going to swoon for the first time in her life?

The clearing of a throat broke the tension. Richard spun around, his grip still tight on her arm and forcing her to his side. It was Wyn, the new footman. There was nothing subservient about the way the man stood with his chest out and his chin up.

“What the devil do you want?” Richard bristled, his shoulders rising as if sensing a threat. His hand loosened on her arm, and she tugged free.

“Lady Coffey requests Miss Coffey’s attention in the drawing room,” Wyn said blandly.

“As you can clearly see, I require Miss Coffey’s attention at the moment. We are busy. Now go.”

“I do apologize for interrupting, but Lady Coffey was most insistent, sir.” While the footman sounded sincere, he didn’t seem at all cowed by Richard’s aggression.

“I should see what your mother needs.” Adriana slipped by Richard, making sure not to touch him in any way. Her knees were watery as she followed Wyn. He opened the door and gave her a nod as she passed him. Her trembling lips couldn’t hold even the slightest smile of thanks.

Adriana found her stepmother alone. Sarah looked up from her needlepoint. “Did Richard find you in the garden, dear?”

“He did.” She would have imprints of his fingers on her arm as evidence.

“Excellent. He was most disappointed you were not here to greet him when he arrived.” Her stepmother returned her attention to poking her needle through the linen and said nothing more.

“Did you need me for something?” Adriana prompted.

“No, dear.” Sarah’s smile was untroubled. “You should rest. We will be attending the Cannondale musicale this evening. Richard shall accompany us.”

“Can’t Father escort us?”

Sarah cast her a knowing look. “You know how the baron feels about musicales. It’s difficult enough to get him to attend to us at the various balls.”

“Has he left for his club yet?”

“I don’t believe so.”

Adriana went straight to her father’s study and rapped softly.

“Come.” His voice was deep and sonorous.

Adriana entered and closed the door behind her. Her father looked up from the ledger he was making notations in and smiled. “Ah, I’m glad to see you, daughter.”

Her father was barrel chested with thinning steel-gray hair and the ruddy complexion of an outdoorsman. His thick mustaches were his only vanity, and he kept them trimmed and oiled. The only physical feature Adriana had inherited from

him was her blue eyes, but she shared his love for the fresh air and fields and dales of the country.

“Sarah told me you don’t plan to accompany us to the musicale this evening,” Adriana said.

“I can’t stand the caterwauling, and Richard happily volunteered to take my place. He looks forward to spending more time with you.” The satisfied look on her father’s face sent a shiver down her spine.

“Father, may I speak plainly?”

“Of course.”

“I know a match with Richard would be a tidy resolution, but that’s not what I want. You know that.” It wasn’t a secret she and Cyrus had an understanding.

“I know you fancy yourself in love with the Shaw lad, but he is still young and has shown no inclination for marriage. Even now he’s trekking around the Continent indulging in excesses of flesh and drink.” Her father grew up attending the local church and strict adherence to the Ten Commandments. His disapproval of the way the upper classes behaved was a common theme at the supper table. Why then was he blind to Richard’s many sins?

But if she were being completely honest with herself, Adriana also worried about what excesses Cyrus was enjoying on his grand tour. He fancied himself a poet, and as such, it was his duty to experience everything life had to offer. His adventurous spirit had been charming when they were young and getting into scrapes in the country.

While the deaths in his family had settled a heavy mantle of responsibility over Dawson, turning him even more serious, the tragedies had accelerated Cyrus’s thirst to experiment and

take risks. Even before he'd left London for his grand tour, talk of his wild ways had reached her ears through Mrs. Dunham. While they had made no promises to one another, she had faith he would return as soon as he understood how dire and dangerous her situation was.

“Cyrus is better connected than Richard. The Shaws are a very old family. One that we are well acquainted with.” Adriana was grasping for anything that might sway her father.

“True, but he will not inherit the title or lands. The estates are entailed. They will pass to the new earl. In addition, he is as yet too immature and unready for marriage.”

“He is older than I am by almost a year.” Her voice rose along with her outrage. Why were gentlemen held to different standards than women? Why couldn't she pursue her drawings and even present them to other naturalists to study? “In fact, why must I marry at all?”

Her father sat back in his chair with a gusty sigh and linked his hands over his round stomach. “Because you are a woman and need the steadying hand of a man. Richard will be a strong master for you, your children, and my estate once I pass on. It will set my mind and heart at ease knowing you will be cared for and my legacy will live on.”

Richard would be more than strong. He would be tyrannical. “I could manage the estate, Father. I can—”

Her father barked a laugh. “You are so much like your mother—determined and intelligent. Unfortunately, you are too emotional and impulsive to manage anything more than a household.”

She was neither, of course. Fury welled up inside her, burning in its intensity. Letting the fire rage would only prove

her father correct. She would have liked to point out how emotional and impulsive her father had been marrying her mother after knowing her only two weeks. Instead, with a calmness she didn't feel inside, she said, "But Father, I don't *like* Richard."

"You will learn to like him. Maybe even love him."

"No, I won't." Petulance wormed its way into her words.

Her father scooted up his chair and bent over the ledgers once more. "You have much to learn about marriage and life. Richard is older and more experienced and will teach you. I fear I have been too lax, and your dreamy ways have flourished into wildness."

"I am not dreamy." Yes, she nurtured dreams of her future, but she was hardly given to flights of fancy.

"I have allowed you to spend your days drawing nonsense when you should have been learning how to please a husband and run a household. Can you embroider or play the pianoforte?" It felt like he was repeating points made to him, probably by Lady Coffey.

"Those are two skills completely unnecessary to running a household." She wished she could strip the defensiveness in her voice.

It was true she had no great talent for singing or playing or needlework. It was also true she had happily left the household management to Lady Coffey since their marriage. Adriana could easily manage a household—it was merely a question of organization and leadership—but she didn't want to waste time she could otherwise be spending on her real work—lepidopterology.

“Those are skills that husbands value, child. I should have hired a governess instead of sending you to the rectory for your lessons, but I never expected to inherit a barony or present you to society. I blame myself for your deficiencies.”

She rocked back a step, her heart squeezing. Her father thought her deficient. She opened her mouth, but nothing emerged.

He didn't seem to notice the punch he'd delivered with his words. “You have a good man willing to marry you in spite of everything.”

“Richard? A good man?”

“Yes. He has made his intentions clear. He would like to marry quickly, but if you need time to come to terms with the match, I am willing to wait until the end of the season to read the banns. You can marry in Bainbridge this summer.”

Fear whispered through her like an icy breeze. “If Cyrus returns and makes an offer for my hand before the season ends, will you accept him?”

Her father looked up, a crinkle marring his brow. “You would choose Cyrus over Richard?”

She nodded.

“I will promise nothing, but I would consider his offer in good faith.” He shuffled papers on his desk. “I will be leaving for Bainbridge soon.”

Relief burst like a welcome rain in her chest. “I will begin packing immediately.”

“That will not be necessary. Lady Coffey believes—and I happen to agree—that you should remain here to acquire some polish. Richard will be your escort.” He didn't even spare her

a glance. “It is in your best interests to use this time to get to know Richard better and learn to like him.”

Any sliver of hope was snuffed out. Adriana left the study and took refuge in her room, pacing before the window, unable to settle her thoughts enough to nap. How long would it take her letter to reach Cyrus and for him to travel back to England? She imagined him reading her letter and leaving without even packing his belongings. He would waste no time.

Her thoughts then moved closer to home and how to handle Richard until Cyrus arrived to save her. The new footman’s interruption in the garden had been timely. She couldn’t fathom any reason for the footman to protect her, yet Sarah had not given her a message or acted like she’d even sent for Adriana. In fact, Sarah would have wanted Richard and Adriana to be alone as long as possible.

Perhaps the footman had intervened on purpose. Perhaps it was coincidence. Either way, if the footman made a nuisance of himself regularly, Richard would have the man sacked without reference. Richard wielded vindictiveness like an expert swordsman. The least she could do was warn Wyn not to cross Richard on her account.

As quietly as possible, she made her way down the stairs. The last thing she desired was another confrontation in a dark corner with Richard. Wyn wasn’t in the entry, so she headed toward the kitchens. Their small staff, including Wyn, were gathered around the table eating stew and bread.

They all stood upon spotting her. Heat rushed into her face. “I’m so sorry to interrupt. Please continue with your meal.”

No one moved to do as she asked. “Is there something I can get you, miss?” the cook asked.

“No.” She glanced at Wyn. “Actually, I need to speak with Wyn, if I may. It will only take a moment.”

Everyone was silent as Wyn followed her through the narrow hall. “We can speak in the stillroom,” he said.

Adriana nodded, and they entered the small room. The stillroom at their country house was spacious and one of Adriana’s favorite places. Armed with Madeline’s instructions, she had learned to make simple poultices and distilled tinctures using plants found in their gardens and in the woods nearby.

This room was cramped and dim, the only light coming from a single grimy high window at ground level. One table held various liquors to be decanted, and on another were dried herbs ready to be bundled for use in the kitchens. A deep breath of the familiar smells lent comfort.

Wyn faced her with a serious expression and his arms crossed over his chest. “Do you require something from me?”

“No.”

He raised a brow and remained silent. His silvery gaze was as sharp as a stiletto and difficult to meet much less hold. She had a hard time believing service was his chosen occupation. Then again, people—namely women and the lower classes—often didn’t get to choose their occupation; they were forced to do whatever was necessary in order to survive.

“I wanted to extend my thanks,” she said hesitantly.

“For what?”

“Your timely interruption in the garden.”

“I was merely delivering a message from Lady Coffey.” His surety made her doubt her earlier suspicions.

Adriana felt the collar of her gown grow tight. “Nevertheless, you should take care and not anger Mr. Pace-Verney again.”

“Is that what I did?” His voice was as dry as vermouth.

“If you are regularly so bold, you will be sure to draw his ire, and he would not hesitate to throw you out on your ear without a reference. While I appreciated your intervention earlier in the garden—”

“As I said, I was merely delivering a message from Lady Coffey. I believe that is part of my duties.” His expression was bland.

Feeling more than a bit foolish, Adriana stepped toward the door. “I apologize for disrupting your meal, Wyn.”

“Will that be all, miss?” He inclined his head.

“Yes. Thank you for your time.” She made an escape, embarrassed she had misread the situation so badly. Her heightened worry and fear were leaving her addled and not thinking clearly when she needed a cool head the most.

CHAPTER 4



Dawson scanned the rows of chairs facing the pianoforte. The entertainments, such as they were, had yet to start. Ladies and gentlemen milled about drinking champagne and lemonade at the edges of the room. The french doors were open to the garden to allow a slight breeze to ease the heat of so many bodies pressed into the space.

He didn't care for the crowds or the socializing. He was here for one reason. Adriana was attending. He finally spotted her near the corner with Pace-Verney looming over her as if she had retreated seeking safety but only managed to get trapped.

Adriana's russet-colored gown was cut simply and unadorned with the ruffles and lace and beads that seemed in fashion. While her neckline was modest and the fit looser than some of the ladies milling about, her height and willowy beauty drew admiring glances. Most likely more than she was even aware of or wanted.

Her glossy dark hair was dressed in a simple chignon with no sausage curls to mar the lovely shape of her jaw or her high cheekbones. Growing up, he'd watched her stride across the fields to his family's estate to play with Cyrus as rough and energetic as any boy. She had always put him in mind of the

goddess Artemis, except at the moment, Adriana looked like the hunted and not the hunter.

Dawson had made a point to introduce himself to Pace-Verney at their club. It had been easy enough to gather information on the man. The consensus was that Pace-Verney was a handsome, charming bully with a cruel streak. No one much cared for him, but neither did they go out of their way to cross him. He could be vindictive.

Dawson was not cowed nor intimidated by bullies. He'd faced far more dangerous men over a battlefield. Even though Pace-Verney topped Dawson's six-foot frame by at least three inches, he could easily handle him if it came to blows. In fact, Pace-Verney should be the one nursing a healthy amount of fear of Dawson, but of course he was too dull to understand size did not equal skill and bravado was not the same as confidence.

Adriana did not notice Dawson's approach. She was singularly focused on Pace-Verney. Whatever he was murmuring drew her mouth into a slight frown.

"Good evening, Adriana. Pace-Verney." Dawson inserted himself into their conversation. His use of her Christian name was done on purpose. It immediately established their long history for Pace-Verney to chew on.

"Dawson. I'm so pleased to see you this evening." Relief smoothed her features.

"Westhorpe," Pace-Verney said in a flat, unwelcoming voice.

Dawson offered him the briefest of nods before crooking his arm toward Adriana. "Would you care for some refreshment before the entertainments begin?"

“Yes!” Her overly enthusiastic reply garnered a scowl from Pace-Verney. She cleared her throat had said in a more modulated tone. “It is quite warm, is it not?”

She laid her gloved hand on his forearm, and they strolled along the perimeter of the room avoiding the worst of the crowd. “Did you get my letter in the post?” she asked.

“I sent it by special courier.” He still had favors he could call in at the Home Office.

While Dawson felt a niggle of sympathy for Cyrus, he was mostly frustrated. By Cyrus’s age, Dawson had already been battle tested. His time on the Continent hadn’t been filled with wine and women but danger and death.

“I can’t adequately express my gratitude. How soon would you expect a reply?” Her grip tightened on his arm.

“Within a fortnight unless the weather turns.”

“Oh, that’s faster than I imagined.” A measure of tension seemed to leak from her, but anxiety still tightened her mouth. “I hope my request didn’t put you to any undue trouble or expense. I would be happy to reimburse you from my pin money.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Anyway, it just so happened I had something of import to send Cyrus myself.” He had indeed included his own missive. A stark description of what Adriana faced and a warning Cyrus would need to make a decision with haste.

Silence gathered between them, and it wasn’t entirely comfortable. Adriana had never been comfortable around him. Nevertheless, Dawson had been charmed by her warm, husky laughter and sunny smiles—always shared with Cyrus, of course.

Dawson had never been included, and it... hurt. He didn't want to be jealous of his own brother, but deep down in places he tried to ignore, he was desperately jealous. Buried not as deeply was the fact that he loved Adriana and the knowledge that she didn't feel the same about him and never would. It was his charming, inconstant brother who had long ago captured her heart.

If Cyrus possessed a single wit, he would hightail it back to England on receipt of her letter and marry her with a special license within the hour of his return. If asked, Dawson would stand witness to their marriage. He would offer them a place to live on the family estate, he would sit across the dinner table with them, and he would watch their children grow. And as he endured the torture, he would be happy for them and never show even a hint of the pain ripping his heart in little pieces.

He snagged two glasses of champagne from a circulating footman and handed her one.

"Thank you." She downed half the glass and then fiddled with the stem. "I am surprised to see you in attendance tonight."

"I found myself with a free evening." He should be continuing the arduous task of reviewing ledgers in his study. Actually, he should have traveled to Fernlow, his estate in Northumberland, weeks ago. It had suffered the worst neglect by his father and eldest brother. Dawson needed to set things to right, especially as lambing season was around the corner, but he couldn't leave Adriana in such a precarious situation.

"And you chose this over your club?" She raised her brows and a hint of the old twinkle lightened the worry in her eyes.

"Did I make a terrible mistake?" he asked.

“Have you heard Miss Tompkins play?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure.”

She leaned into him to whisper, “It won’t count a pleasure, I’m afraid.”

Her scent was fresh and sharp and reminded him of lazy summer days in the country. Their faces were close. Gold scattered around her irises, and a small white scar peeked out of her hairline. She’d gotten herself stuck in a tree not so long ago, and he’d come to her rescue. He still dreamed about the way her skirts tangled about her knees. Although, much to his chagrin, his imagination had recently started putting her in his bed and not up a tree.

“You are a bit wicked, aren’t you?” His lips curled into a smile, and she jerked ever so slightly away from him as if he’d shocked her. His smile disappeared. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” She was lying.

He hated the fact he made her uneasy. More than anything, he wanted to bask in her smiles and laughter and— No. It was easier this way. How much harder would it be to step back into the shadows once he’d experienced the sun?

“When does your family return to Bainbridge?” he asked.

“Father wants to leave as soon as he can manage.”

“Ah, you’ll have a real garden to sketch in.” Relief mingled with disappointment. The country was safe, but London would feel empty without her.

She swallowed, and when she spoke, emotion roughened her voice. “I have been ordered to remain in London with Lady Coffey and Mr. Pace-Verney.”

Dawson clamped his teeth together as a string of curses threatened to erupt. “That is unfortunate. You will miss seeing the gardens in first bloom.”

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and looked toward the open doors as if she wanted to run and keep running until she was back home. The desperate longing cleared from her face with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “London is more exciting though.”

“Is it more exciting than watching the moon rise over the hills or the sun set over the lake? Or watching dawn creep closer and the world come alive?” If it had been anyone else, they would have thought he was daft or making a joke, but Adriana’s lips parted on an intake of breath.

“No, it’s not. Not even close.” She searched his face, but he wasn’t sure what she found.

Everyone else in the room disappeared as if lost in a mist. He wanted to take her hand in his and assure her everything would be fine. Or at least as close to fine as he could make it. He would do his damndest to protect her even as she chose his brother.

A string of discordant notes broke the spell. Conversation buzzed as the crowd shuffled to take their seats. He was thankful his tongue had tied and he had revealed nothing of how he felt. It was his burden to bear.

Pace-Verney appeared. “Come, Adriana.”

It was the command one would give a hound, and Adriana’s mouth thinned, but she only lay a light hand on Dawson’s arm. “You will send word?”

“As soon as I receive an answer.” He made a small bow and retreated to the back of the room to observe.

Adriana settled herself between Lady Coffey and Pace-Verney. He waited, but she didn't look over her shoulder for him. Pace-Verney did though, and in his narrowed gaze was a warning.

A warning Dawson didn't plan to heed.



YOU ARE A BIT WICKED, aren't you? Dawson's words echoed louder than the music in Adriana's head. The warm tease in his voice combined with his smile had incited a flurry of wings beating in her chest. It had been the oddest sensation.

Perhaps her reaction had been so strong because she rarely saw him smile. It was a little lopsided and crinkled his eyes. She'd had trouble tearing her gaze away from his lips. The bottom slightly fuller than the top, but both well-formed and firm, not fleshy like Richard's. Dawson's lips were worthy of being drawn. Or chiseled in stone.

What was wrong with her? She shouldn't be ruminating about Dawson's lips. Or any other part of him for that matter. Oh dear. Now she was thinking about how broad his shoulders looked in his blue velvet frock coat. Didn't most gentlemen have their tailors pad their coats? Yes, that was probably why he appeared so strong and vital. It was all padding.

Except there had been nothing soft about his forearm under her hand as they strolled around the room. In fact, there was nothing soft about Dawson at all. He was hard and solid and... The odd nervous battering in her chest was accompanied by a squirmy stomach. Could she be getting ill?

Polite, if not exactly enthusiastic, clapping drew her back into the moment. Richard's mouth was so close she could

smell liquor on his breath. “What answer?”

“Excuse me?” She leaned away before turning slightly to look him from the corners of her eyes.

“What answer are you expecting from Westhorpe?”

She debated on telling Richard a lie, but a believable one didn't pop into her head. “An answer to a letter I sent through Dawson for Cyrus.”

His nostrils flared. “It's Lord Westhorpe and Mister Shaw. You will refer to them as such.”

She turned to face him more fully. “Don't be silly. I've known Dawson and Cyrus my entire life.”

He gripped her forearm, the hold becoming incrementally tighter the longer they stared at one another. It grew painful. He wanted a reaction, and she refused to give it to him. She tried to keep her expression bland, but some of her discomfort must have been evident, because the smile that blossomed on his face belonged in a poison garden.

“I don't want to hear any man's given name on your lips ever again. Is that clear?” Anyone watching would assume their courtship was progressing to a match with his smiles and soft murmurs.

His grip tightened even more. His fingers would leave marks that would be difficult to explain, yet she didn't make a sound as the pain radiated. Just as she feared her arm might snap, the music started and he released her.

She cradled her arm against her belly. Tingles radiated to her fingers, and tears crawled up her throat. They weren't from the pain but the frustration of being powerless. But was she? There were sure to be bruises. She could show her father and make him understand why she couldn't marry Richard.

Her neck heated. Someone was watching her. Was it Mrs. Dunham, the ton gossipmonger? She glanced over her shoulder. Dawson stood against the wall to the side of the door. Their gazes clashed. He didn't look away like most people would after they were caught staring. Neither did he smile to defuse the intensity. If she had to put an emotion on his expression, it would be anger.

Did Dawson believe she was flirting and inviting attention from Richard when she claimed to care for Cyrus? Was all this her fault? An oily feeling of shame made her break eye contact and turn around with her shoulders hunched, her arm still cradled against her stomach.

She'd watched girls younger than herself married off to men two or three times their age during her first season. Had those girls accepted their fate with grace or had they secretly fought revulsion and shame and fury? If so, they had lost the battle. Would she end up married to Richard, a man she didn't like, much less love?

The music was background accompaniment to her noisy thoughts. The only one who could put a stop to what felt inevitable was her father. He held the power. Unless she ran off, he could barter her away to Richard in the guise of doing what was best for her.

Could she run away? She had nowhere to go. No maiden aunts or kindly uncles to take her in. As her father had not so kindly pointed out, she did not have the skills to teach young girls to be ladies.

Could she make a living on her drawings? Maddie had mentioned working together on a book of flora and the moths and butterflies they attracted. Adriana would handle the drawings while Maddie worked on the descriptions. She could

imagine presenting their work, not to the Royal Society as Maddie dreamed—Adriana understood how English society worked better than her American friend—but to women who wanted their gardens to overflow with beauty.

Could she make even a modest living doing what she loved? Reality intruded. Maddie had eloped with a bastard gambler and thrown away her connections to society. Anyway, it would take months if not years to assemble a credible guidebook for lady gardeners.

Would Lady Dorn take her in? While she had never met the woman, the three of them, Maddie, Adriana, and Geneva, had corresponded over the past several years. But Geneva had struggled to support herself since she'd been widowed, and Adriana had not heard from her since autumn. Still, it wouldn't hurt to send her a letter. Genteel poverty would be better than marriage to Richard.

The music ended with a discordant flourish. Enthusiastic clapping followed, most likely because the musical entertainments were ending and not for the poor girl's playing. Adriana stood and stole a glance toward the door, but Dawson was no longer there. She should be relieved, and she was, but she was also disappointed. It left her feeling unbalanced and out of sorts.

Sarah filled the carriage ride home with inane chatter. Adriana stared out the window and tried to ignore the secretive, knowing smile Richard aimed in her direction. Her breaths grew shallow as if a noose was tightening around her neck.

Her father was still at his club when they returned. She slept fitfully, finally falling into a deep sleep as dawn broke. Her dreams were riddled with nightmares of being chained in

a dungeon or locked in a high tower. It was not difficult to interpret them. She woke later than she planned, dressed in a sapphire-blue frock with three-quarter length sleeves in order to show her father the light purpling bruises of Richard's fingers.

Jones said nothing upon seeing her arm, but her eyes widened as she helped adjust the gown. "What about your hair, miss?"

"A braid please." It was how she preferred to wear it in the country. With any luck, she'd be packing to leave with her father within the hour.

Jones's deft fingers made quick work of her hair, and Adriana was standing before her father's study door before eleven. She rapped once, opened the door, strode inside, words she practiced while lying in bed chasing sleep ready to trip off her tongue.

Richard sat behind the desk.

Her breath caught and her head grew swimmy. "Where's Father?" she finally managed to choke out.

"He made an early start for Bainbridge." He tilted his head, and the urge to punch the self-satisfied smile off his face had her taking a step toward him, her hands drawing into fists at her side. "Is there something I can help you with? He's left me in charge, you see. I'll be spending my days studying the accounts and my evenings escorting you and Mother. Although I'm sure I can make time for a carriage ride in Hyde Park or a stroll to Bond Street with you. Your father expressly wishes us to spend time together. I hope you're looking forward to it as much as I am."

“I wanted to show him this.” She pushed her sleeve to her elbow and held out the evidence of his brutal hold.

He rose and came around the desk. It was all she could do to hold her ground. Tutting, he linked his hands behind his back and leaned down to examine the imprint of his fingers on her skin. “Next time I’ll be sure to leave my mark where no one can see.”

Next time. The words rang like a death knell in her head.

“Your gloves should cover the marks until they fade.”

“I won’t marry you.” The declaration emerged as an impassioned, desperate whisper.

“You will have no choice. Your father wishes it, my mother wishes it, and I wish it. You have no say in the matter.”

“Cyrus will—”

“No, he won’t.” Richard resumed his seat behind the desk. It irked her to see him weaseling his way into her father’s place. “If he truly wanted you, he would be here with an offer for your hand. And what did I tell you about other men’s names on your lips? Count this as a warning. Next time there will be consequences.”

Her heart accelerated because she feared he was right about Cyrus. Hadn’t the same traitorous thoughts invaded during sleepless nights? Cyrus had ignored her previous entreaties for his return. He cared more about ancient ruins than he did her. Cyrus might truly love her, but he took for granted she would be waiting for him when he was finally ready to marry.

“Tonight we will attend the Hammond’s ball,” Richard said.

“I will not go. And if you make me, I will show everyone the bruises you left on me.” There was some satisfaction in his shocked expression, but it was soon replaced by amusement.

“Fine. I will let Mother know you are feeling ill. You will spend the rest of the day and tonight in your room. I’ll have a tray sent up. Will bread and water do?”

She’d managed to get herself sent to her room like a recalcitrant child. It would still be better than having to spend the evening with Richard. Although it meant she wouldn’t see Dawson either. She shook the worry away. Why was she thinking of Dawson? It was too early for a response from Cyrus.

It was just that Dawson was... steady. Strong. Confident. Being in his orbit offered a comfort she sorely craved. He was a reminder of her carefree childhood and her only connection with Cyrus beyond his infrequent letters. Surely that explained why Dawson had been dominating her thoughts.

It didn’t matter. Dawson couldn’t help her now. No one could.

CHAPTER 5



*B*y the third day of her exile, Sarah had threatened to send for a doctor, but Richard put her off. The standoff between Adriana and Richard would end too soon for Adriana's peace of mind. The bruises had faded to yellow and would soon be a bitter memory.

Once Richard and his mother departed for the evening's entertainments, she planned to sneak out of her room. It was too dark to sketch in the gardens, but she could add details and improve upon her current work. The house was quiet, and while she enjoyed solitude, she was beginning to fight pangs of loneliness.

According to the letter she'd received that morning, Maddie was traveling through France with her new husband. Her happiness sang through her words, and Adriana didn't want to be the cause of any worry. Maddie deserved joy in her marriage. She had been brave enough to bet on love with her gambler, after all. Anyway, Maddie could not offer Adriana the kind of help she needed.

She opened the drawing room door, and the bright light in the fireplace stopped her short. It was dangerous to leave such a blaze unattended. She quickstepped toward the hearth. Paper curled and blackened as flames consumed the fuel. For a

moment, she was befuddled. Was someone burning books? The burning pile shifted. A drawing of *Inachis io*, a common peacock butterfly, brightly colored and lovely, fluttered, charred around the edges. It was *her* drawing. They were all her drawings.

Based on the mound of ash, it was more than her latest sketchbook that burned. It was every sketchbook she had with her in London. She fell to her knees and reached out even knowing she couldn't save more than a few scraps. Her fingers stung, and she drew her hand back, slapping the bricks under her knees in impotent rage.

“Looking for this?” The voice behind her sent a wave of shock roiling through her. She turned, still crouched like a wild animal. Richard stepped out of the shadows, holding a few loose pages of her drawings. He leaned over her and tossed them on top of the fire.

She could do nothing but watch months of work and pleasure go up in flames. Staring at the destruction, her hands drawn into fists in her lap, she murmured, “Why do you hate me?”

“I don't hate you. You misunderstand my intentions. I want to mold you into the sort of wife I can be proud of. That means stripping you of the will to deny me anything. You may paint landscapes using watercolors. No more silly insects. Is that understood?”

She rose on a tide of fury even though her knees trembled with her shock and fear. “You are not my husband and never will be. I would rather throw myself into the Thames than marry you.”

“I do love your spirit, even if it is unseemly. I am curious whether you will bring such heat in bed.” His smile was

predatory.

“You seem to have a problem with your hearing.” Instinct sent her back a step. The door was close, but she would never make it to her room if he was intent on catching her. Not only was she in skirts, but Richard was bigger and stronger and faster. She might be able to make it to the entry though. A scream would summon the servants—if they were still awake.

He beat her to the drawing room door, slamming it shut with his foot and grabbing both her arms. “Now, now, where do you think you’re going?”

“Won’t your mother wonder where you are?”

“I was so overcome with worry about your health I left the ball to check on you. I insisted she stay and enjoy herself. Mrs. Dunham is escorting her home. Perhaps Mother will even invite her in for a nightcap. They will find we gave in to our passion. Yes, it will be deemed impetuous, but we can marry by special license. Your father will not object to the cost to save his daughter’s reputation.”

“You are deranged.”

“No, I am determined.” His eyes narrowed, and his upper lip curled.

She yanked to the side. His grip was inescapable, but not tight enough to leave a bruise this time. Her breaths were shallowed by terror. Before she could scream, his mouth came down on hers.

Teeth cut into her lip. She wasn’t sure if it was hers or his. The salty tang of blood hit her tongue. He repositioned them, wrapping an arm around her waist and forcing her close. One of her hands was trapped between them. He held her free wrist in a vise, immobilizing her upper body.

She kicked him in the shin. His grunt was satisfying, but his hold didn't loosen. The arm around her waist shifted and before she even realized what he was doing, the back of her gown and her chemise ripped. She wasn't wearing stays. His hand was on the bare skin of her back. Revulsion fed her panic.

He hooked his foot around her legs. Her world went topsy-turvy, and he was no longer holding her, his mouth no longer punishing hers. Before she could scream, she slammed into the floor, the rug the only thing breaking her fall. Her breath was knocked out of her.

She kicked her legs to try to pump air back into her lungs. Richard pushed her skirts toward her waist and knelt between her knees. "I'm going to enjoy taming you."

He pushed her shoulders to the floor with his weight on his hands. It hurt. She squeezed her eyes shut and wished herself to the field she could see from her bedroom in the country during the summer, surrounded by tall grass where she couldn't be seen. And then...

His crushing weight was gone. She scrambled backward until her arm hit the wooden legs of a chair. She pushed her skirts down. It took a moment to process what she was witnessing.

Wyn, the new footman, had Richard's neckcloth twisted around his hand. They were similar heights, and although Wyn was leaner, the planes of his face were harsh, and an aura of danger snapped around him. Even Richard seemed to sense it, because his next words lacked their usual confidence. "Who the hell are you?"

It surprised Adriana that Richard didn't remember Wyn from their encounter in the garden a few days earlier, but his

ignorance only underscored Richard's prejudices. Servants were beneath his notice.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself." Wyn punched Richard in the face with a brutality that made Adriana gasp.

Richard's head jerked back, and blood spurted from his nose. He sagged, but Wyn only twisted his neckcloth tighter to keep him upright.

"You have no idea what you've done." Anger worked its way through Richard's strangled shock.

"I have a fair idea. I've saved this young lady from being raped by a bastard. You'll not lay another hand on her, or by God, I'll slice your cock off and feed it to you. Do you understand me?" Wyn's voice had grown even more gravelly.

"I'll end you." Richard threw a windmilling punch at Wyn's head. Wyn blocked it and jabbed Richard once again in his already bleeding nose. An animallike wail echoed in the hands Richard cupped over his face.

Wyn pushed Richard away. He fell to his knees and curled in on himself. Wyn turned to Adriana. Even though the man had saved her at great cost to his own future, a stab of fear had her heart racing into her throat. She cowered and didn't take her eyes off him.

He wiped Richard's blood off his knuckles onto his livery and then squatted a few feet away, his hands dangling on his knees, their gazes level. "I'm sorry I didn't arrive sooner. Are you injured?"

"No. You saved me from..." Adriana swallowed. Wyn had already stated the reality of what had almost happened. She couldn't shy away from it now. "...being raped."

“Yes.” The starkness of the simple agreement squeezed her lungs.

This wouldn't stop Richard. It would only delay him. Wyn would be sacked in the morning, if not sooner, and Richard would try again. Panic slowed her ability to think and plan.

“Come, let me help you.” He rose and offered his hand.

She held her ruined bodice to her chest with one hand while accepting his help with the other. He didn't comment on the way her hand—and the rest of her—was trembling. Once she was on her feet, he backed away. The space made her feel safer.

“Thank you.” It seemed wholly inadequate for what he had done for her when all he would receive in return was his notice. He would get no references. His life in service might well be over. “I'm so sorry. You've risked too much tonight.”

“It was worth it.”

“I don't know if I can save your position.”

“I wasn't cut out to wear satin breeches.” The corner of Wyn's mouth ticked up, and he gestured toward Richard. “That one won't be bothering you tonight—I'll make sure of it—but lock your door anyway.”

“I don't know how to repay you. I have some pin money. You are welcome to it all.” Anything she could offer felt inadequate.

“Let's not worry about that now. Go to bed and try not to waste another second of worry over this pile of shit.”

The start of a laugh bubbled up, but it turned into a sob she barely stifled. She escaped to her room and not only locked the door but shoved a chair under the handle for good measure.

She didn't know what the morning would bring, but it would be nothing good.

She went straight to the bookcase and stared at the empty space where her sketchbooks had once resided. How long had they been missing? It had been days since she had thumbed through them.

She mourned them like a death of an old friend. Was that so far off the mark? Her drawings were her most constant companions. Few in society really knew her, but then again, superficial amusements of the typical debutante did little to encourage friendships. If anything, the competition for a husband turned them into rivals. Both Maddie and Cyrus were on the Continent. Lady Dorn was sequestered in Cornwall. Who did that leave?

An image of Dawson flashed into her head. Steady, strong Dawson. He had his own worries managing his inheritance, yet she was sure if she sought his advice, he would offer help. Could he make her father see sense?

Lying in bed, her mind reeled around what the coming days might bring. To calm herself, she recited the Latin names of every moth and butterfly she had learned. There was something about the ancient language that rooted her, and by the time she had reached *Tyria jacobaeae*, a restless sleep finally found her.

She woke with gritty eyes and a feeling she might drown in the pit of her stomach. Jones brought warm water for her ablutions and helped her dress in a dark green high-necked gown. It was time to stop feigning illness and face the future. She pinched her cheeks to lure some color into them.

"Is Wyn on duty this morning, Jones?" Adriana asked. Perhaps if the footman verified the events of the previous

evening, Adriana could convince her stepmother to allow her to retreat to the country to her father.

“I believe so, miss.”

A slight waver in the maid’s voice set Adriana on alert. Wyn had not been sacked. Yet. What had Wyn told the rest of the servants about what had occurred?

“Has Mr. Pace-Verney arrived?” Adriana asked reluctantly.

“N-no, miss.” Now the maid’s voice was like a leaf rattling in the wind.

Adriana turned from the looking glass to watch Jones make the bed. Guilt radiated from her hunched shoulders and averted eyes.

“Do you know how Mr. Pace-Verney acquired my sketchbooks?” Adriana asked.

Jones clutched a pillow to her chest, words tumbling out. “Mr. Pace-Verney said he had a surprise planned. I assumed he was going to have some of your lovely drawings framed as a present. I had no idea...”

“Of course you didn’t. It’s all right.” Even though Adriana was angry, she couldn’t blame Jones. Denying Richard would only have brought her trouble. “I’ll come down this morning. No need for a tray. You can see to your other duties.”

“Yes, miss.” Jones dropped the misshapen pillow on the bed and fluffed it before retreating to the door. “I’m terribly sorry, miss.”

Adriana nodded and even managed a small smile. It wasn’t like the world had lost the paintings of a great master. As the door shut softly, she whispered, “They were just some silly insects.”

As if the universe had heard her, a Monarch butterfly landed on the sill outside her window, its wings slowly pumping and showing off. She blinked and pressed her face closer. Monarchs were rare. Even in the country, she had never studied one this close. Seeing one at this moment in London was like catching lightning.

It lacked black dots on its hind wings, which meant it was a female, beautiful and wild and free. Her fingers itched to take up an instrument, but she had neither ink nor paper. The butterfly took flight. If only she could escape so readily.

Adriana was still staring at the empty spot on the sill when a light knock sounded.

“A gentleman has called and is asking for you, miss,” Jones said through the door.

Adriana pressed a hand against her stomach to keep it from crawling into her throat. “Who is it?”

“Lord Westhorpe. He’s waiting in the drawing room for you.”

Dawson was here? She had fallen asleep thinking of him, and he’d walked through her dreams. Although she couldn’t remember the details, warmth flooded her cheeks. Had she summoned him?

There was no way for him to know of her plight, but he might have come with news of Cyrus to share. Adriana flew down the stairs but hesitated in the doorway. Dawson stood in profile, looking out the front window. The air around him seemed to vibrate as if he’d been pacing before she arrived. He had removed his riding gloves and slapped them against his thigh. Sarah was nowhere to be seen.

“This is an unexpected pleasure. Have you brought news?” Adriana forced a smile and took a step into the room, leaving the door ajar as propriety dictated.

He turned, his face stern. His gaze swept over her face and down her body, not in the way of a gentleman admiring her figure on the dance floor, but in an inventory of parts. “Are you well?”

He must have heard she had forgone attending functions the past few days. “I am feeling much improved. Thank you for asking. Would you care to sit?”

His mouth moved as if he had more to say, but he merely joined her, taking the armchair while she sank onto the settee. She faced the fireplace, and the pile of ash brought a sting to her eyes. Already the evening before had the feel of a bad dream, but the ache of her body and the remnants in the hearth reminded her of not only her loss but the perilousness of her situation. She was desperate for good tidings, yet his expression was that of a man bearing news of a death.

An awkward silence thickened. Her already-frayed nerves unraveled further, and her smile dipped, becoming more and more difficult to hold. She popped up. “I’ll have tea brought in.”

“Not necessary,” he said gruffly.

Any further attempt at politesse was beyond her. Her throat was tight and dry and her voice hoarse. “Cyrus is not coming home, is he?”

CHAPTER 6



“*H*e is not,” Dawson said shortly.

It wasn’t exactly a lie, but neither was it the truth.

Dawson hadn’t heard from Cyrus yet, but his brother would not return home in time to save her. Cyrus was enthralled with adventure and selfish in his pursuits. There wasn’t time to allow him to mature and do the right thing. Based on the previous evening’s events, Pace-Verney had no intention of playing fair.

Adriana cleared her throat, but her voice broke on her first words before steadying. “It was too much to ask of him. He has been looking forward to his tour for years. When we were younger, he would go on and on about the great sites he would explore, the exciting people he would meet, the verses he would write.”

“It wasn’t too much to ask of him.” Dawson would never have left Adriana to begin with. His brother was an imbecile.

“Thank you for stopping by. I should—”

“Marry me instead.” The words popped out before he could stop them.

She rocked back a step, her hand at her throat. “Excuse me?”

He rose and squeezed his gloves, his hands clammy and his collar tightening until he wasn't sure he could take a breath. "When does your father return to town?"

"I don't know. A fortnight? Perhaps longer if estate business detains him."

"You cannot remain here."

She had already looked wan when she entered, but any color leached from her face. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Adriana. Pace-Verney is a blackguard who will not stop until he has secured your inheritance by any means necessary."

"How do you know that?" She grabbed the back of a chair, her knuckles going white.

"I have heard whispers at the club, and I observed him at the musicale. He already assumes he owns you. Do you want to marry him?" Of course she didn't. He knew the truth from her own hand, but he didn't want her to suspect he'd read her correspondence to Cyrus.

"Of course I don't. That's why—" Her chin wobbled, and she looked toward the window to hide her emotion.

"That's why you are so desperate for Cyrus to return. You want him to marry you."

"I don't *want* him to marry me. I *need* him to." Her desperation was palpable.

Protectiveness reared along with less noble emotions. Triumph. Satisfaction. He was used to putting his own wants and needs aside for the greater good, first while serving England during war and then when he'd assumed the responsibility of his title.

But Adriana was what he dreamed of and craved. She had been out of his reach, and now suddenly she could be his. It was underhanded and selfish and a betrayal, but his regret and guilt would pale in comparison to the joy of sharing a table and bed with her every night and day for the next fifty years.

“Cyrus is not here, but I am. Marry me. I will protect you.” He took a step toward her.

“Are you serious?”

“I need to secure the Westhorpe succession. You need a husband. It’s a perfect solution to both our problems.” His rapid heartbeat belied the logic of his argument. He was as desperate to wed her as she was to wed... well, anyone else but Pace-Verney.

“You don’t love me.”

Oh, but he did. What if he admitted the truth? His lips parted with the ease of a rusted gate, and instead of honesty, a half-truth emerged. “Marriage is a partnership.”

“Like a business arrangement? You want to expand your holdings.”

He hadn’t even considered the fact that eventually inheriting the baron’s land would expand the Westhorpe estate in Bainbridge. Material gains were a more conventional reason for marriage than the reality of being desperately in love with her. “The Bainbridge estate would nearly double in size.”

“Indeed.” She looked to her hands for a moment and then boldly met his gaze. “What would I get from the arrangement?”

His heart skipped a beat. If she was negotiating, then she was taking his offer seriously. “What do you want?”

“Freedom,” she said simply.

He weighed a response. “I need heirs, and even more, I want a family. If you intend freedom to mean a marriage in name only, then I cannot offer you that.”

Sudden red slashed her cheeks but only emphasized her paleness. “I-I understand. I will bear you children, but I do not wish to spend my days embroidering samplers or darning your socks. I want to continue to study lepidopterology.”

His lips twitched in spite of the gravity of their discussion. He placed a hand over his heart. “I promise to never ask you to darn my socks, and I’m not in need of a single sampler. My gardens will be yours, and it will be my duty to supply you with as many sketchbooks as you can fill. I’ll even build you a library to house them in if you wish.”

She let out a long, slow breath. “You’re an earl now and surely expect a lady who is an adept hostess. That is not me.”

“I have no wish to become a social arbiter nor a political force. I am responsible for three large estates along with a handful of smaller properties, some of which have been neglected. In fact, I must travel to Fernlow Manor in Northumberland soon.”

“When would we marry? In the fall?”

“Pace-Verney would not allow that to happen, and I fear your father would not either.” Not to mention Cyrus could return and claim her before then. He was keenly aware which brother she would pick if given a choice. “Too much is at stake. I can acquire a special license, and we can marry tonight.”

“Tonight?” There was a squeak of shock in the word.

“Do you wish to spend another night under Pace-Verney’s protection or mine?”

She shuffled to stare out the window and rubbed her arms in silence. He said nothing. It was a decision she must make even if he had weighted the odds in his favor.

“May I ask a boon?” She turned to face him.

“Of course.” He would give her anything in his power. Except for the time to wait for his brother or be ruined by Pace-Verney. The risk was too great.

“This is an unexpected development. I never considered... That is, I am very much surprised at your offer.” Her gaze flicked down his body.

He resisted the urge to shift on his feet. Did she find him repulsive? His time in the army had hardened him body and soul. He enjoyed the outdoors and physical activity. Unlike Cyrus, who was built like a greyhound, lean and graceful, Dawson was a mastiff, muscular and rough.

She cleared her throat and continued. “I understand the need to provide heirs, but I would very much appreciate time to become accustomed to the idea of sharing a marriage bed.”

Would he have preferred to take her straight to bed and convince her they would suit in the most primal way of all? Of course. He was fairly vibrating with his need now she was so close to being his, but this was time he would gladly give her. It would be his penance for the half-truths and secrets.

“Of course. I’m not a beast. I want you ready and willing.” He winced slightly at his wording considering he was manipulating her into the marriage.

What other option did he have? Pace-Verney had come perilously close to raping her. Wyn would be sacked as soon as

Pace-Verney was healed enough to step out of his rooms. Adriana would be vulnerable. Dawson had days, not weeks, to ensure Adriana was protected. His name was the only thing he could offer that would make a difference, and considering she was close to accepting, she understood how perilous her position was too.

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth and moved to stand at the hearth, her eyes on the ashes of her sketchbooks. “Cyrus and I have been friends for many years. We could talk about everything from politics to art to science. You and I hardly know one another.”

His mouth dried, and he took a moment to gather his words. He couldn't fall to his knees and offer his heart, but he could at least give her a measure of honesty. “I admire you. I find you amusing and interesting and very attractive. I realize marriage to me is not what you anticipated for your future, but I believe we will rub along well enough.”

“What about Cyrus?” she asked softly.

Cyrus had thrown away his numerous chances. Even so, guilt bubbled through Dawson's defiance. How would Cyrus react when he returned to find them married? There was no doubt Cyrus cared for Adriana, but did he truly love her? If his letters weren't all swagger, Cyrus had fucked his way through Europe. He wasn't ready for marriage, and even more, he didn't deserve Adriana.

“He will understand the circumstances.” Dawson hoped he spoke the truth. “The news will be a shock, but we can write and explain the situation.”

She nodded, staring into the ashes for a long moment. His lungs seized as he waited for her answer. Then her head snapped up, and she turned to face him, her chin high, her

expression resolved and unfortunately grim. “I accept your offer.”

His breath released as a dry chuff of laughter, equal parts relief and dark humor. “I’m not marching you to the gallows. If I didn’t truly believe we could find happiness together, I would not have suggested marriage.”

Her mouth twisted. She might have been attempting a smile, but it resembled a grimace. “I never nurtured starry-eyed dreams about marriage. I have always understood it was an inevitable conclusion to my life, but it seemed to exist in a distant future. Now the future is upon me, and I’m feeling anxious.”

Could Dawson somehow extricate Adriana without marrying her? Maybe. Probably. He had contacts at the highest reaches of power, but any action on his part that didn’t involve marriage would likely prove costly to her reputation.

Could he offer her the comfort of her father? The baron would be frustrated his plans to marry her to Pace-Verney had been thwarted, and he would be furious if Dawson married his only daughter by special license without his blessing or presence. If the baron understood the lengths Adriana would go to avoid a marriage to Pace-Verney, he might back off his insistence she marry at all. That would be best for Adriana.

Even though he would be losing what he wanted most, he said, “If you would prefer, we can travel to your father’s estate and explain the situation.”

A spark lightened her expression, but before she could respond, a commotion in the entryway swung them both around to face the drawing room door, shoulder to shoulder. The low murmur of voices was outmatched by Pace-Verney’s

outraged yell. “Where is the new footman? I will put a bullet in his head.”

“Oh dear. I hope Wyn has made himself scarce.” Adriana squeezed her hands together.

Dawson wasn’t worried. Selwyn McKelvey was a brute, and even more, he was an intelligent brute. A lethal combination. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

She gave a shake of her head. “You don’t understand. He put himself at risk for me last night. He punched Richard.”

“And what necessitated such violence?” He’d already received a report from McKelvey, of course, but he wanted Adriana to trust him with the truth. Which was ironic considering he was not being honest with her.

“There was a... misunderstanding.”

A quaint word for attempted rape. Anger simmered in Dawson’s chest. The clash of boot heels against the marbled entry grew louder. Pace-Verney stalked into the room, stopping short upon seeing Dawson. Had he hoped to catch Adriana alone?

Dark blue bruises ringed both eyes, and his nose had puffed up to twice the usual size. A split on his upper lip was scabbed over. It was gratifying. Dawson would be sure to send McKelvey a bonus.

“Westhorpe. Take yourself off. I have business to discuss with Adriana.” His tone was rude and aggressive, but his thunderous expression was aimed at her.

“Anything you care to discuss with her can be done in my presence,” Dawson said with a calmness he didn’t feel. Knowing what had happened the night before made him want

to launch himself at Pace-Verney and break something more vital than a nose. His neck, perhaps?

Pace-Verney transferred the full brunt of his ire to Dawson. “Get out, Westhorpe. Now.”

Adriana gripped Dawson’s arm. Was she scared of Pace-Verney or scared for Dawson? She didn’t need to be either.

Dawson’s smile was closer to a baring of teeth. “I believe my betrothed would prefer if I remained by her side.”

Pace-Verney’s gaping mouth and slow blinks would have been comical if it wasn’t for the threat of violence vibrating around him.

“The baron will never allow you to marry her. She is mine.” Pace-Verney stepped forward, his shoulders bowing up and his hands fisted.

Adriana flinched, but Dawson couldn’t spare the time to reassure her. “She belongs to no man. She is her own woman, and she has chosen me.”

“You cannot marry her,” Pace-Verney said in a low voice.

“The special license in my pocket with our names on it says otherwise.”

His pronouncement drew Adriana’s startled gaze, but he couldn’t explain now. Part of what made Dawson a successful operative for the Home Office was the way he prepared for every eventuality. Although he hadn’t been at all certain she would accept him, he’d wanted to have every hurdle cleared just in case.

“No. She must wait until her father returns. Contracts have already been drawn up.” Pace-Verney was stalling so he could

enact his plans. If Adriana couldn't recognize the danger, Dawson would have to—

“Nothing has been made official. Dawson and I are marrying with all due haste.” Adriana's chin rose even as her voice took on a decided tremble.

“You can't marry him. You need your father's approval.” A thread of desperation had entered Pace-Verney's voice.

“Actually, I don't. I'm of age.”

“Your father will leave you without a penny. You will get nothing by marrying her, Westhorpe.” The red suffusing Pace-Verney's face mixed floridly with the purple bruising.

“On the contrary, I will have the most precious thing of all—Adriana as my wife.” Dawson ignored her quick intake of breath. “And I believe you overestimate your influence with the baron. I am an earl and a man he has known since my birth. He might be unhappy with my methods, but he will bless this marriage.”

Pace-Verney launched forward. Dawson had anticipated the move. He took Adriana's hand from his arm and spun her out of the way before dodging Pace-Verney's hammy fist. The momentum sent Pace-Verney stumbling past Dawson, who helped him along with a well-placed foot in his hindquarters.

Pace-Verney sprawled across the rug and looked over his shoulder with such shock on his face, Dawson couldn't help a little smile from blooming even though he knew it would only infuriate Pace-Verney further. “I would advise you to either stay down or pick yourself up and drag yourself back to your rooms to nurse your ego and your face.”

Adriana had retreated to lean against the wall next to the drawing room door. Her face was drawn and anxious. Dawson

went to her. A young maid and the butler could be seen hovering outside. “I think it would be best if you packed a small valise and came with me now. We can send for your things later.”

Her gaze bounced between Pace-Verney and Dawson. She opened her mouth, but then shut it, nodding once before whispering, “Yes. I think I must. You will wait for me?”

He had already waited an eternity but would wait forever if necessary. “Always.”

CHAPTER 7



*A*lways. It hadn't even been the most romantic thing Dawson had said over the course of the confrontation. Of course he was merely putting on a show in order to convince Richard the marriage was real.

Adriana walked up the stairs like an automaton. Jones was at her side, wringing her hands in her apron. "Are you really going to marry Lord Westhorpe, miss?"

Marry *Dawson*? It was unreal. She had never contemplated him in the role of husband. It had been her and Cyrus, a matched pair, since they were young. Cyrus's father and brothers had teased them with regularity about officially arranging a marriage. Except Dawson had never joined in, had he? He had never made sly comments about what had seemed inevitable.

"Will you help me pack, Jones?"

"Of course." The maid cast her a wide-eyed glance. "That was really something."

Jones's statement could have described any number of events of the past hour. "What was?"

"The way Lord Westhorpe trounced Mr. Pace-Verney." Jones glanced over her shoulder as if Richard might overhear

the blasphemy. “Was it Lord Westhorpe who planted him a facer and left him bruised?”

The question made her think of their poor footman. “Have you seen Wyn, the new footman, return from his errand?”

“Yes, miss, although he went off again. I’m not sure where.”

Adriana would have to hope he’d left and planned to never return. They had reached her room, and she had another thought. “I will need to speak with Lady Coffey.”

“I would expect her to rise soon but—”

“What is going on? Has the baron returned? I heard voices, and no one is answering my summons.” Lady Coffey floated into view wearing a silk dressing gown of blue and cream stripes. “Ah, there you are Jones. I require your assistance.”

Jones’s gaze flicked between Adriana and Lady Coffey.

“May I have word, Sarah? Privately?” Adriana asked.

Jones made a quick exit before Lady Coffey could reply.

Worry drew her stepmother’s brows low, and she crossed her arms over her bosom. “What has happened?”

Part of Adriana wanted to tarnish Richard in his mother’s estimation, but would Sarah even believe her? Would she accuse Adriana of being overwrought? “Lord Westhorpe has asked for my hand, and I have given it. I am leaving with him.”

“When?”

“Immediately. I’ll pack a satchel for now and send for the rest of my wardrobe.”

Sarah's hand crept to her neck. "But you are to marry Richard."

"I don't love him."

"And you love Lord Westhorpe?" Sarah made a dismissive sound that reminded Adriana of her son. "I thought you were enamored with his brother. Weren't you begging your dear father a week ago to allow you to wait for him?"

Heat burst in her chest. Was it embarrassment or shame? "Dawson is an honorable man."

"He is an earl. Is that his appeal over Richard?"

"I realize this seems sudden, but I have known Dawson all my life."

Sarah tightened her sash and set her hands on her hips, standing in the doorway and blocking any escape. A frisson of fear had Adriana wondering if she had stepped into a trap.

"What will your father say?" Sarah asked.

"It will be a shock, but Father knows and respects Dawson. He will come to accept the match. I'm sure of it." She wasn't actually sure of anything anymore. Her father could be stubborn and intractable when his plans went awry.

"He wants you to marry Richard. As does everyone."

Frustration helped to tamp down the embarrassment and shame and fear she battled after her momentous decision to marry Dawson. "I don't want to marry Richard. My feelings are known, yet you and Father choose to ignore them. I am being forced to take my future into my own hands. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to pack. Lord Westhorpe is waiting downstairs."

Sarah's expression hardened. Gone was the loving wife and the accomplished hostess. In their place was a woman who could be as ruthless and cunning as her son. Perhaps she truly loved Adriana's father, but just as likely, she had manipulated him in order to better her and her son's life.

Sarah jabbed a finger in Adriana's direction. "You are making a mistake. I will convince your father to leave you nothing. Nothing! It will all go to Richard, and he will marry a lady who is deserving of him."

"Oh, I dearly hope Richard gets what he deserves." Adriana swung her door closed, forcing Sarah to retreat or get pinched in between. A few beats of silence followed. Adriana braced herself, not sure what Sarah might do next. Footsteps receded, and a door slammed farther down the hall. Adriana let out the breath she'd been holding.

Could Sarah turn her father against her? Would he give her childhood home and the gardens she had spent years cultivating to Richard? The possibility rankled and made her feel like she was surrendering something by marrying Dawson.

The events of the previous night flashed. Her on the ground with Richard ripping her bodice and shoving her skirts up. If she stayed to fight for her birthright, she would lose one way or another.

No, she was making the best choice from her scant options. At least Dawson had promised her a limited sort of freedom. After she provided him with heirs, they could have a marriage in name only and would be free to pursue what truly made them happy.

Tears stung and made her sniffle. Cyrus had abandoned her to this fate. He cared for her, but obviously not enough to

forgo the pleasures of his travels. Everyone wanted Cyrus as their friend because he made life fun. Part of the reason she loved Cyrus was because he never took anything seriously and made her laugh, but sometimes life was serious and tragic and hard choices had to be made.

An ache made her rub at her chest. She was angry at Cyrus, but she was mostly heartbroken the future she had painted in her imagination was running together like watercolors left in the rain. She had thought them a perfect match for one another. His carefree spirit paired with her levelheaded sensibility.

Instead, Dawson Shaw, Lord Westhorpe, would be her husband. A shiver filled her aching chest with a now familiar nervousness. Dawson was intimidating and a little scary. In a family full of carefree men, Dawson had been the outlier. In a way, she supposed she understood him the best even if he made her feel the most uncomfortable.

She would share his name and his bed. It was the last bit that ratcheted up her anxiety a hundredfold. If she was lucky, they would only have to share a bed a handful of times before she provided him with the requisite heir and spare.

At least, she wouldn't have to face her fears yet. He had given her a reprieve, and she would drag it out for as long as possible. She had weeks, maybe months, to come to terms with sharing a bed with him.

As soon as Sarah was dressed, she would unite with Richard, and they'd do their best to impede her departure with Dawson. The thought galvanized her, and she shoved items into a small traveling bag. A night rail, a change of underthings, stockings, and two gowns.

No sketchbooks had survived Richard's revenge. She ran a finger over the stack of books on the table, but only picked up the novel Maddie had given her with a wink and a promise of a thrilling adventure. She would need a distraction in the coming days.

The silver brush and hand mirror that had belonged to her mother sat on her washing stand. Adriana had missed her mother many times throughout the years but none as keenly as this moment. What advice would her mother have given her? What would she have done in Adriana's position?

Adriana picked up the silver mirror and blinked at her reflection. Her Italian mother had married an Englishman and left everything behind when she was even younger than Adriana herself. Her mother would have given her a blessing. Gently, she wrapped the brush and mirror in the skirts of one of her packed gowns and snapped the valise closed.

Her stepmother's voice carried through her room's closed door and down the hall. Adriana spared a thought for poor Jones having to mollify her but was glad not to have to deal with the manipulation and guilt her stepmother was so adept at applying.

Adriana descended the stairs, hoping Dawson would be waiting to open the door for her. No such luck. She set her valise down in the entry and slipped into the drawing room.

Static energy pulsed and threatened to explode into violence at any second. Richard stood at the hearth, his hands fisted, a glare promising death and dismemberment directed at Dawson, who sat on a settee, his legs crossed, his stance seemingly casual except for the tense stillness of his body.

Adriana cleared her throat. "I'm ready."

“Excellent.” Dawson rose and adjusted his cuffs.

Richard cut his gaze to her. The vitriol set her back a step. “This isn’t over.”

The panic she’d suppressed last night rose to overwhelm her. Her heart pounded a warning to run. A large warm hand engulfed hers and squeezed. Her fear dissipated like fog to the rising of the sun.

It *was* over. The weeks of worry were at an end. Not in the way she had imagined, but Dawson made her feel safe and protected. How would Cyrus have handled Richard? She feared Cyrus would have let himself be bullied.

“Goodbye,” she said simply but with the finality of a death knell.

Not releasing her hand, Dawson led her out, swinging up her bag along the way. The skies had turned gloomy, and a misty rain wet her cheeks. He did not have a horse or carriage waiting.

His stride was long and swift as if he too felt the danger nipping at their heels. If she hadn’t been hampered by her fashionable skirts, she could have matched him step for step, but after a block, she had to tug on his arm to slow him to her pace.

“I apologize for not being better prepared,” he said. “To be honest, I wasn’t expecting you to leave with me forthwith.”

“Does that mean you haven’t actually procured a special license?”

“Oh no, that I have. I was up at dawn waiting for an audience with the bishop.”

“How could you be certain I would accept?” She tilted her face to look at him, and water trickled off the brim of her bonnet.

“I wasn’t certain, but the license is good for three months. I had to be ready if your position became untenable, which I assume happened.”

She tensed, expecting him to ask her what had forced her hand, but instead, he said, “I have a clergyman friend who can marry us this evening.”

Her breathing grew short and shallow. She had agreed they must marry in haste, but now that she was away from Richard, the reality of her decision was sinking in. She would be married before she went to sleep tonight. A wife to the wrong brother.

Dawson continued, oblivious to her emotional upheaval. “Based on the reaction of Pace-Verney and your stepmother, I think it best that we depart for Northumberland in the morning. I will send the direction for your trunk.”

She stopped short, her hand locked in his and pulling him to a stop as well. “Everything is happening so quickly.”

He turned to face her. He wore no hat, and the mist glistened like a spider’s web on his dark hair. A rivulet ran down his cheek from his temple. “Are you already regretting your decision?”

“I regret having to make this decision at all. I wish Father had heeded my wishes from the beginning. I wish Richard wasn’t a blackguard. I wish Cyrus had returned.”

His gaze dropped but not before she saw a flash of something resembling hurt. She didn’t understand why. He

was sacrificing his own future happiness to save her. He should be equally resentful at their predicament.

“I apologize for my brother’s behavior. I realize I’m not who you would choose to marry, but I can’t leave you at your stepbrother’s mercy. Your life would be miserable with him.” He let go of her hand and shifted her bag between them.

She missed his hand around hers which only added to her confusion. Dawson was a wealthy earl. He could have his pick of ladies, and he was being forced to marry her out of duty and guilt because of Cyrus’s shortcomings.

“No, I am the one who should apologize. You are giving up the chance at a love match because of me. I don’t want to be the cause of your unhappiness, Dawson.” She studied him, trying to discover the man behind the stoic mask he wore with such ease.

His dark brows offered the perfect frame for his brown eyes with their amber flecks and spikey dark lashes. His nose was just a little crooked, and his lips were drawn into a firm line above his square jaw and chin. It was not a gentle face, but his features came together in a way that spoke of strength and intelligence.

He was attractive. Very attractive.

The thought came to her with a measure of surprise. Perhaps she had never noticed because he was not classically handsome like Cyrus. Dawson was attractive in a way that tugged at something deep in her chest and made her want to set the lines of his face to paper even though she didn’t usually draw portraits.

“This marriage will not make me unhappy,” he said gruffly, then stalked off.

She stared at his retreating back for a moment before scampering after him. The chill in the air was settling over her like a cloak, and by the time they reached his town house, she was shivering.

The last time she'd been in his home had been to deliver her desperate message for Cyrus. How could he have read her missive and ignored her plight? Her hem dripped on the floor as Dawson gave instructions to a butler who had the training to not appear shocked at the announcement of their imminent marriage.

“Very good, my lord.” Hayworth, the butler, favored her with a small inclination of his head. “If you will follow me, miss, I shall escort you to chambers where you can rest and repair yourself before...” The butler let his words trail off and cleared his throat. “A bath will be sent up shortly.”

“Thank you.” She followed Hayworth up the stairs, looking over her shoulder. Dawson stood still and watched her go. The connection was magnetic.

Only when she almost tripped did she pull her attention away from him to where she put her feet. The butler led her to a room on the second floor decorated in light blues. The rug was thick and soft and muffled her steps. “It’s a lovely room.”

“I would like to offer felicitations on your upcoming marriage to Lord Westhorpe.” Before she could respond, a young woman in a mobcap and crisp white apron entered with a shy smile on her face. “Ah, this is Suzy. She will attend to you this evening since your lady’s maid did not accompany you. Should we expect her?”

“The maid who attended me at home will remain there.”

The butler inclined his head. “In that case, I will speak to my lord about hiring someone to see to your comforts.”

Adriana opened her mouth to protest, but snapped it shut. As a countess, she would be expected to be well-dressed and perfectly coiffed. Would she need a new wardrobe? Her dresses were modest and not the first stare of fashion.

A footman entered with a tub followed by servants with pitchers of steaming water. The sight intensified her shivers. As soon as the tub was filled and they were alone, Suzy helped Adriana out of her clammy gown and into the tub. She hissed with relief and closed her eyes as the warmth enveloped her.

It was barely past noon yet seemed later because of the gloom and rain. She would have been content to climb into bed and pull the covers over her head for the rest of the day. She couldn't of course. Her wedding to Dawson awaited.

The thought struck her as preposterous. A laugh welled up, but it had a panicked feel. Holding her nose, she submerged her head. While the outside noise was muffled, the worries battering around her head grew louder. She broke the surface and gulped in a breath.

The maid was in the process of unpacking her meager bag.

“Lord Westhorpe mentioned plans to leave for Northumberland in the morning, so there is little use in unpacking,” Adriana said.

“Oh, I see. I suppose he has been waiting for you.”

Considering the speed at which Adriana had been forced to make her decision, it was unlikely, if not impossible. “I'm not the reason for his delay.”

“My lord had planned to leave earlier this month. He didn't say, of course, but he changed his plans the day you

visited. Now here you are marrying the master.” The maid raised her eyebrows and grinned.

While Adriana had little experience with lady’s maids, she was sure Suzy lacked the discretion required. However, indiscretion could serve Adriana very well in the present circumstances. “What is being said belowstairs about me and Lord Westhorpe?”

“We are all pleased as punch. My lord spends too much time brooding since the tragedies. He rarely attends social functions to even look over the selection of young ladies on the market. Mrs. Pollard, the housekeeper, lamented that he was a lost cause.” Her little moue turned into a knowing smile. It seemed Suzy enjoyed a bit of drama as well. “Mr. Hayworth reckons the master has been enamored of you for years, and that is why he never showed an interest to any other young lady.”

“That’s ridiculous! We have merely been acquainted since we were young.” Adriana bit her tongue before she said more. The girl would spread the gossip like thick jam on bread. “Would you help me with my hair?”

As Suzy washed and rinsed Adriana’s hair, she nattered on about the other servants and how long they’d worked together and what each was like. She learned Suzy had eyes for the coachman, but as of yet, nothing had come of it. The footman and the scullery maid had a flirtation, but Suzy feared the young man was destined to break little Edna’s heart. Hayworth, the butler, had no family and had been with Dawson on the Continent even before Waterloo.

It only took a few nods and hums to encourage the girl to keep up the oddly soothing chatter while Adriana’s hair was brushed. She dreaded being left alone with her own thoughts.

Only once the water had cooled did Adriana signal she was ready to step out.

Suzy disappeared through a connecting door and returned with a dressing down of dark blue and gold.

“Does that lead into Dawson’s chambers?” Adriana pointed to the door.

“It is Lord Westhorpe’s room, yes. Bundle yourself in this and settle by the fire while I see to your gown for this evening. Can I send up a spot of tea?”

“No, thank you.” Adriana dried using a length of soft linen and slipped her arms into the dressing gown. It was obviously Dawson’s. Even if the size and masculine cut didn’t give it away, his scent enveloped her. She tied the sash around her waist and dipped her nose toward the lapel, taking a deep breath. Dawson’s scent reminded her of a spring day.

The familiarity was comforting but also made her stomach squirm. She was beginning to associate the strange dichotomy with Dawson. How could he make her feel both safe and nervous?

Suzy shook out Adriana’s favorite gown—a Pomona green muslin absent any frills—laid it over her arm, and bobbed a curtsy. “I’ll return shortly, my lady.”

Adriana opened her mouth to correct the maid, but she had already slipped down the hall. Adriana wasn’t Dawson’s lady—yet.

After settling in the oversized armchair in front of the fire, Adriana ruminated on the future she had imagined with Cyrus by her side. Would it have been a happy one? She and Cyrus were the best of friends. She could picture them at breakfast, passing the morning papers and discussing art and politics.

They could have worked side by side, her on her drawings and Cyrus on his poetry. One day they might have traveled the Continent together and explored the ruins and wonders Cyrus had discovered on his grand tour.

Those dreams were dead, and her imagination stuttered to a halt trying to picture what her life with Dawson might be like. Would she be left alone at the breakfast table while he was preoccupied with his political duties, dry ledgers, and estate management? Would she be expected to play lady of the manor and plan menus and visit the village with baskets?

Stretched in front of her was a vast loneliness she wasn't sure how to navigate. A tear escaped, and she brushed it away with the heel of her hand. She leaned her head against the cushioned wing of the chair and closed her eyes, determined not to cry.

No doubt countless women had attended their weddings with red-rimmed, tear-soaked eyes, but Adriana didn't want to make Dawson feel like he was handing her a death sentence. Unlike Richard, he was a good man who only had her best interests at heart. He was making a huge sacrifice as well.

The warmth of the fire and her restless sleep the night before caught up with her. She drifted off into a half sleep, her thoughts a jumble of feelings she couldn't parse. Weaved through the sadness was a buzz of something she couldn't place. It was not anticipation or excitement, but it wasn't dread either. Whatever she was feeling was confusing, and she was happy to surrender to her dreams.

CHAPTER 8



A rap on the door jolted her awake, and for a moment, she couldn't place where she was. Reality flooded back, and she rubbed her eyes trying to clear the grogginess. Suzy had let herself in and was hanging her freshly pressed dress on the wardrobe door.

"I came back earlier, but you were dead to the world. I thought it best to let you sleep considering what the night will bring." Suzy winked.

Adriana drew the lapels of the dressing gown closer, not sure how to respond. Certainly not with the truth, although she suspected everyone would know they hadn't shared a bed by morning. "Thank you. I needed the rest."

"I can do your hair. I grew up doing my sister's. Would you like curls?" Suzy patted the back of the chair in front of the dressing table.

Adriana sank onto the cushioned seat. "No curls and nothing fussy. It doesn't suit me."

The looking glass was warped and made her nose look even more prominent. Adriana fought the urge to make sure it hadn't magically grown longer. When she was young, she had wished her Italian nose away for an English-sized button nose.

One that didn't incite hurtful teasing from the village children... and Cyrus.

She had laughed along until she was alone. Her tears had soaked many pillows over the years. Every time she caught her reflection when she was young, she lamented her lack of beauty. Her father had assured her she would grow into her face and become a great beauty like her mother. Adriana hadn't achieved that standard, but she had been called striking, and Cyrus's artist friends were forever asking her to sit for them.

Maturity had quelled her insecurities, but while staring at her distorted reflection, she wondered what Dawson saw when he looked at her. Another more jarring thought rattled around her head. Would bedding her be a chore? Was he relieved she wanted to wait to share his bed? Her stomach clenched at the thought.

Suzy was not pinning her hair into a chignon like Adriana had expected, but was intricately braiding sections away from her face, her fingers flying while humming an unfamiliar tune. Adriana submitted, closing her eyes and forcing her stiff back to relax.

Finally the tugs and the pinning ended, and Suzy gave a little sound of satisfaction. "There now. What do you think?"

Adriana opened her eyes and blinked at her reflection, turning her head this way and that to examine Suzy's work. The braids had been drawn away from her face and gathered into the rest of her hair which was pinned in looping sections that brushed the back of her neck. It reminded Adriana of the women in portraits she had admired in the Royal Academy galleries. It felt medieval in style and suited Adriana perfectly.

“It’s lovely.” Adriana smiled at the maid’s reflection in the glass.

Next, Suzy helped Adriana dress in the Pomona green gown. She felt like a *Geometra papilionaria*, or a large emerald moth, one of her favorites. She often saw them in the country but hadn’t seen a single one since coming to London. As a wedding dress, it wasn’t the stuff of a young girl’s dreams, but the familiarity grounded her.

“Lord Westhorpe is entertaining a clergyman in the drawing room,” Suzy said casually, but Adriana didn’t miss the glance from under her lashes.

Her knees turned to water. Knowing her hasty marriage to Dawson would be the topic of discussion among not only the servants but society at large in the coming days did not help settle her nerves.

The longer Adriana was left to her own thoughts, the more nervous she would become. “I’m ready. I think.”

“You look lovely, my lady.” Suzy’s smile seemed genuine.

“Only because of your skill. Thank you.”

“Of course.” Suzy linked her hands behind her back and rocked on her feet. “I can help you into your night rail later unless Lord Westhorpe has already offered his assistance?”

Heat exploded in Adriana’s chest and climbed up her neck. Would Dawson want to undress her? Would his fingers pluck the pins out of her hair and then move to the ties and buttons of her dress? Maybe one day, but not tonight. The truth of their arrangement would offer even more fodder for the gossips.

“I can manage. You will have your usual duties to see to.”

Suzy merely nodded and led her downstairs. The maid bobbed a curtsy and disappeared down a narrow servant's corridor. Adriana paused to smooth a hand down her dress and shuffled to stand just inside the drawing room door.

The two gentlemen had not noticed her yet. Dawson stood with his arm propped on the mantel, a glass of amber liquid dangling from his fingers. He too had bathed and wore dark trousers, a silver waistcoat, and a black frock coat offset by snowy white cuffs and cravat. The severity of the colors and cut suited him, and once again the urge to take up a sketchbook and ink made her fingers tingle.

The second gentleman in the room noticed Adriana first, nodding and raising his glass in welcome toward her. Dawson swung around and set his drink on a side table on his way to greet her.

She slipped her hand in his and hoped he couldn't feel her trembles. Although he didn't offer a smile, he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze as he drew her toward the fireplace to offer introductions. Suzy had insinuated Dawson's guest was a man of the cloth, but he was the opposite of the portly vicar of her country parish.

With his wavy blond-brown hair and lean muscular build, the gentleman looked nothing like Dawson, yet they seemed to belong to the same set of toy soldiers. It was in the way they held themselves tall and straight and the serious look around their eyes. Then the man smiled, and warmth lit up his face and drew her forward.

"My friend Josiah Barrymore," Dawson said. "We served together, but now he has taken up the cloth and oversees his own parish on the edge of London. We are lucky he happened

to be in town. Barrymore, may I present Miss Adriana Coffey.”

Mr. Barrymore took her offered hand, his blue eyes twinkling. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Shaw—pardon, Westhorpe. I’m not sure if I’ll ever get used to the change. Westhorpe shared stories of you and his brothers growing up together in Bainbridge.”

Her gaze shot to Dawson. He had talked about her? It was an odd thought considering he had rarely even acknowledged her existence when they were young. “Yes, our families grew up quite close,” she said.

“It sounded idyllic. I grew up in the heart of London, and although the town creeps ever closer, my parish is still mostly farmers.” He launched into a tale of a lost cow and how he found it inside the church one Sunday morning. The farmer had to send his son over to muck out the sanctuary before services could begin.

Adriana laughed in spite of her nerves. Although she could still sense something more serious and even a little dangerous brewed under his smiling countenance, Mr. Barrymore had a way about him that set her at ease. His parish was lucky to have him.

“Wasn’t there something you wished to give to your bride, Westhorpe?” Mr. Barrymore asked.

“Yes, of course. I’m afraid I don’t have a ring to give you, Adriana. I thought you would want to choose one yourself from the family jewels. Or we could have something commissioned. Whatever would most please you.”

Adriana rubbed her bare finger. Her family did not have the long pedigree and history of the Westhorpes. She did not

own any jewelry that was fine enough to be stored in a safe. “One of your family pieces would be lovely.”

He nodded and cleared his throat. “I thought to give you something else. I know this can never replace what was destroyed, but...”

He unfolded the secretariat to reveal a thick new leather-bound sketchbook, chinks, oils, and ink. Anything she could possibly need stood at the ready. She picked up the sketchbook to riffle through the thick empty pages. It was better quality than her old books, and her fingers itched to mark lines down. When had he had time to procure such treasures?

She hugged the sketchbook to her chest and turned to face Dawson. “Thank you. This is better than jewelry.”

His smile was like a streaking star across the sky, brief yet beautiful, leaving her to wonder if she had imagined it. Warmth kindled in her chest.

Mr. Barrymore laughed. “You are a lucky man to snag a wife who prefers paper and ink to diamonds and rubies.”

“I count myself extremely lucky indeed.” Dawson’s tone was almost reverential.

Of course he had to put an acceptable veneer on their hasty wedding for Mr. Barrymore, but his words made her feel like they were deceiving a man of the cloth.

Mr. Barrymore raised his brows looking between them. “Are the two of you ready?”

“I am,” Dawson said.

A lump expanded in her throat but she managed a nod.

“It will be over in a trice,” Mr. Barrymore said in a comforting way that made her think of having a splinter

removed. “We will need witnesses, Westhorpe.”

“Yes, of course.” Dawson rang the bell and waited.

The butler, Hayworth, and Mrs. Pollard, the housekeeper, stepped into the room. Mrs. Pollard grinned, her cheeks rosy and her hands clasped under her chin. Even stoic Hayworth was smiling.

It took a moment to position themselves. Mr. Barrymore stood with his back to the fireplace, and Adriana and Dawson faced one another in front of him. Mrs. Pollard and Hayworth stood facing Mr. Barrymore on their other side. With the wall behind her, Adriana tensed and glanced toward the door and freedom.

No. She wasn’t trapped. After all, she had agreed to marry Dawson. This was her choice. Her only choice.

“Since we aren’t catering to a roomful of relatives, I believe we can skip the preliminaries and jump straight to the vows, yes?” Mr. Barrymore raised his brows.

Without looking away from her, Dawson gave a brusque nod. His hands hung at his sides, and to the unacquainted eye, he might have appeared relaxed. Yet she recognized the tension around his mouth and shoulders. Did he fight the same nerves and anxiety swamping her?

Not sure what to do with her hands, she linked her fingers tightly at her waist and forced herself to focus on Dawson’s face. Between her pounding heart and the roar of the blood in her ears, she felt like she was back underwater in the bath with the world around her muffled.

The intensity of Dawson’s eyes ensnared her. Mr. Barrymore’s voice parsed itself into words in her head.

Thankfully, he seemed to be speaking to Dawson. It was the marriage vows.

“Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

In a husky voice with a confidence she wished to borrow, Dawson said, “I will.”

“And now it’s your turn.” Mr. Barrymore settled a smile on her and repeated the same vows.

It was actually happening. Her head grew swimmy. Without conscious thought, she reached for Dawson. He took her hand in both of his. His grip was reassuring, and she found it easier than she imagined to murmur her consent. His thumb glanced over the back of her hand in a caress that caused her to shiver.

Mr. Barrymore had been right. It was done in a trice. She was married.

“It’s not usually the done thing before a congregation, but you may claim your bride with a kiss in the old ways if you wish, Westhorpe, while I get our witnesses to sign.” Mr. Barrymore bestowed them another of his smiles and ushered Mrs. Pollard and Hayworth out the door, leaving it ajar.

Dawson cleared his throat. “We don’t have to—”

“No, we should,” Adriana said. “We are married, after all.”

A kiss would make it real, because at the moment, she felt like she could wake at any second.

While it was not her first kiss, it was her first kiss with Dawson. Her husband. Her lungs quit working properly. She swayed slightly. Was she going to swoon?

Dawson's brow furrowed. He slipped his hand around her waist to splay at her lower back, sweeping her closer but not fully into his body. She grabbed his upper arms. He was solid and stable, and she regained her emotional footing. Finally able to take a breath, she relaxed in his loose embrace.

Adriana was tall, which some men viewed as an affront to their manhood. Cyrus had teased her about their equal stature. Dawson was taller and broader than his brother. It was surprisingly thrilling to feel small in his arms.

Their faces were close. His gaze dipped to her mouth, and she ran her tongue over her bottom lip, holding her breath for what was to come. One corner of his mouth quirked up. It was the start of a smile she would not see bloom.

He kissed her, his lips brushing over hers as gentle as the wings of a moth. They alit on her mouth once more, this time with intent, tugging at her bottom lip. His tongue glanced over her plumped lip. Her swift intake of air was welcomed by her oxygen-deprived body.

She wasn't sure exactly what to do, but she wanted to do something. Animals learned through mimicry, so that's what she did. She sucked his bottom lip between her teeth and ran her tongue along the length. The sweet taste of mint and brandy spun her senses.

His arm tightened and shifted her closer. Her chest brushed against his. The slight pressure against her breasts was startling and novel. A fire kindled in her belly. She wanted more and leaned toward him, her hand drifting up his arm to his shoulder.

He drew away. She blinked and swayed on her feet. Dawson's kiss had been nothing like Cyrus's wet clumsy fumbling. Of course they'd both been young and

inexperienced. Dawson was a man of the world. He'd probably had more practice.

Mr. Barrymore's voice thanking the housekeeper and butler preceded his reentrance to the drawing room. Adriana signed the necessary papers with a shaky but legible hand. Dawson did the same, his strokes of the pen bold and straight.

She stole a glance at his profile. The kiss had left her reeling, but he seemed calm and unaffected. Did that speak more to her inexperience or his lack of desire toward her? He was an enigma.

"Stay and eat with us, Barrymore. We're departing for Northumberland in the morning. Who knows when we'll see one another again." Dawson clapped the man on the shoulder.

Mr. Barrymore hemmed until Adriana lay a hand on his arm. "You must stay. I insist."

She wasn't ready to be alone with Dawson over a dinner table. How could she make pithy conversation when all she could think about was how her lips tingled and her breasts ached?

After dessert, Dawson invited Mr. Barrymore for a drink in his study. After exchanging goodbyes with the handsome vicar, Adriana retreated to the solitude of her room.

She and Dawson would leave for Northumberland at first light. Her earlier nap had taken the edge off her weariness, but the nerves that had fueled her through the ceremony and dinner were ebbing into exhaustion.

She managed her own ablutions with cool water left in the basin and dressed in the one night rail she had packed. She picked up Dawson's dressing gown from the foot of the bed and glanced at the door connecting their two chambers.

Would he miss it tonight? It was only polite to return it. She half expected the door to be locked, but it swung open to reveal the masculine counterpoint to her light-blue-and-yellow bedchambers.

His was dark blue and crimson. His shaving kit and a basin stood on a wash table inside the door along with a watch fob and a silver comb. She lifted the stopper of a crystal bottle and sniffed. It was the light fresh scent she associated with him. Cyrus preferred a muskier scent that had always made her nose twitch. Biting her bottom lip, she daubed a small amount of Dawson's cologne on her wrist.

The large four-poster bed was the focal point of the room. It was neatly made, and she ran a hand over the coverlet on her way to the heavy oak wardrobe. Should she hang his dressing gown up or lay it across the bed?

With the wardrobe halfway open, the door to the room swung open. She started like a deer in the crosshairs. Dawson came to an abrupt stop upon spotting her. His cravat was untied and hanging on either side of his unbuttoned collar. A distracting tanned vee of skin was visible.

Her tongue loosened and ran away. "I was returning your dressing gown. I didn't pack one and Suzy procured yours after my bath and I wasn't sure if you had another and—"

The door snicked shut, stopping her flow of words like a dam. Closing the distance between them, he took the dressing gown out of her numb fingers and tossed it onto the bed. He hadn't yet spoken. Was he angry?

"I shouldn't be here," she whispered.

"My wife is always welcome in my chamber."

Was it hearing him call her his wife or the husky timbre of his voice sending a shiver through her? She had left the smaller braids in her hair, but the bulk of the thick mass tumbled around her shoulders. Ever so slowly, as if he might spook her, he fingered the ends hanging over her shoulder, his gaze fixed on the task.

Her nipples tightened and her breasts ached with the same heaviness she had experienced when they had kissed. The back of his fingers brushed the side of her breast. The ache intensified and traveled to throb between her legs. The cogs of her brain were stuck. It was... confusing.

He dropped his hand from her hair, his gaze meeting hers. "It has been a trying few days for you, and tomorrow will be long as well. You should sleep."

"Yes." The word barely emerged from her tight throat.

He took her by the shoulders and leaned forward. He was going to kiss her again. Did she want that? Her body answered for her, her eyes closing and her face tipping higher.

His lips touched her forehead in a brief caress. It was the kiss of a brother or a friend or a favorite uncle perhaps.

"Sleep well." He turned her around and nudged her through the connecting door, shutting it in her face.

She stared at the handle, but it didn't move. By the time she blew out the candles and climbed into bed, her overriding emotion was disappointment. Had she actually wanted Dawson to kiss her again? It was preposterous. It was a betrayal of Cyrus.

A deep breath of his scent on her wrist stirred a sense of shame because the answer was an unequivocal yes.

CHAPTER 9



Adriana pressed a hand over her mouth to stifle her gasp. The heroine of the book she was reading had asked a gentleman to teach her how to properly kiss, and he had done exactly that. The resulting description made her temperature rise. It was absolutely outrageous... and more than a little titillating.

She read the scene again before snapping the book shut and staring out of the carriage window at the passing scenery. The night before had consisted of broken sleep and tangled sheets, yet she couldn't relax enough to nap on their journey either.

She loosened the collar of her dress and reopened the book. The book's title, *A Lady in London*, was innocuous enough, but the rousing adventures Maddie had promised inside had not been of the sort Adriana had expected. Although she should have guessed at the scandal-ridden pages based on the saucy wink Maddie had delivered along with the book. She missed Maddie. And Cyrus. And her father.

Cyrus hadn't returned for her. Adriana's father might be disowning her this very minute. Lady Dorn's letters were sporadic at best, and with Maddie gone from London, Adriana had no one to confide in. She had only Dawson. Her husband.

The two of them had been alone in the carriage since dawn, and Dawson had barely spoken to her beyond the usual pleasantries. At the moment, he was busy with correspondence. Earlier he had been comparing papers to a thick ledger he had open over his knees. His concentration was fully on his work. She might as well have not been there at all.

She exchanged her novel for her new sketchbook. The crack of the spine and the scent of unvarnished paper never failed to send a thrill through her. She closed her eyes and pictured the delicate lines of a *Pyrausta aurata*, or mint moth. The beautiful reds and golds were more commonly found among its butterfly cousins.

She set her thin charcoal to paper to outline the wings but drew something else entirely. With long graceful lines, she captured what her mind had been drawing over and over—Dawson's hands.

Usually her aim was to imbue a moth or butterfly or flower with detail and delicacy, but his hands weren't delicate, and her usual technique wasn't capturing their brutal strength.

She bit her bottom lip and flipped to a clean sheet, trying short, bold strokes this time. Better. She drafted sketch after sketch until she was satisfied. Unexpected beauty lived in the power she had captured. She traced a finger over the hand on her page, imagining his warm callused skin instead of the cool smooth parchment.

The squirmy, slightly sick feeling in her stomach was back.

Hoping to take her mind off the possibility of being ill, she turned to another page—at this rate the book would be full before they even reached Northumberland—and drew Dawson's profile. She glanced up to find his gaze on her and froze midstroke.

“I apologize for not giving you the attention you deserve, but the Northumberland estate has been woefully ignored.” The ledger and his correspondence had been tucked away. He nodded his chin toward her work. “I am pleased to see you drawing.”

“Yes.” Her face heated, and she slapped the sketchbook closed. Had he seen what she had been working on? That would be mortifying. She lay the novel on top of her sketchbook. “I have been quite content to draw and read.”

He tilted his head to consider the novel, but before he could ask her any questions about the story, she asked, “Has the estate been mismanaged?”

“Ignored at the very least. My father chucked all correspondence from the estate manager into a drawer. Some of the letters still had their seals intact. Father preferred Bainbridge and London.” He closed his eyes and ran a hand down his face. Shadows ringed his eyes, and strain was evident around his mouth. When had he last enjoyed a peaceful night’s rest? How many of his troubles were due to her?

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He opened his eyes, but they were narrowed. “Why? You are not to blame for the estate’s troubles.”

“No, but I have added to your burdens.”

“You are not a burden, Adriana.”

“Do not lie to me.”

“Very well.” His lips twitched but didn’t curve into a smile. “You are a... complication, but not an unwelcome one, I promise you.”

“How can you say that? You have been through hell losing your family and then the pressure of assuming the title. You shouldn’t have to bear my problems as well. Cyrus should have—” Adriana bit off her words with a frustrated huff. It wasn’t fair to blame Cyrus either.

Dawson leaned forward on the seat, and with a tentativeness that surprised her, he covered the hands she had balled on top of the book. Feeling the warm rough skin she had sketched in two dimensions soothed her. He sandwiched one of her hands between his.

“I realize we were not as close as you and my brother, but that does not mean I don’t care for you. The burden I could not bear is if you were hurt and forced to marry a cruel man. You deserve better. You deserve better than me. You deserve love and happiness.”

“So do you, Dawson.” Her voice trembled, and exhaustion catapulted tears into her eyes. One escaped, the trickle tickling her cheek.

He wiped the tear away with a finger. The slight touch was like a butterfly’s wings on a pond, sending ripples out until her entire body trembled with the aftereffects. “I am not a poet or a painter. I have no skill expressing flowery sentiment, but I am steadfast. I would ask you not to give up on happiness so readily. Perhaps we can find it together.”

Surprise mingled with confusion. What sort of marriage did he want? She whispered, “Perhaps.”

He sat back and looked out the window. “We’ll break soon for fresh horses and food. I’ll make sure you have somewhere private to refresh yourself, but we still have some ways to go until we stop for the night. I want to reach my estate as quickly as possible.”

“I understand.” The carriage was plush and well sprung, but she was looking forward to stretching her legs and rubbing her aching bottom.

Their promised stop was brief. Even so, the fresh bread and stew along with warm water and a brisk walk through the small village refreshed her. Back underway, her eyes grew heavy with the swaying of the carriage. It had been a long week of worry and fear on top of too many sleepless nights.

She scooted to the window and, like a cat, settled on a patch of warm afternoon sunshine. With her head notched against the panel and the back of the squab, she gave in to a nap.

She woke gradually, her senses coming alive one by one. She was so comfortable, she tried to lull herself back to sleep, but it was too late. The ongoing jostle of the carriage meant they hadn't yet reached the inn where they would pass the night. The steady thump of a heartbeat under her cheek, along with the softness of a lawn shirt, had her eyes popping open.

The far side of the carriage was empty except for a stack of papers. She took a deep breath. He smelled of his fresh citrusy cologne along with an earthier undertone of tobacco. It was nice. Very nice.

She burrowed her nose between this shirt and waistcoat and took another deep breath. Slowly, she became aware of their intimate positioning. Dawson was sprawled in a corner of her squab napping, one leg stretched along the seat, the other booted foot on the floor. She was curled in the vee of his legs and was using his chest as a pillow.

The sun had fallen to the horizon, and long fingers of shadow gripped the inside of the carriage. She lifted her head off his chest very slowly so as not to disturb him. Troubles

didn't chase him in his dreams. The worried crinkle between his eyes was gone, and his mouth...

She stared at the soft curve of his bottom lip. Her lungs tightened, and she daubed her own lips with her tongue. Would he someday kiss her like the hero of the book she had been reading? Would he use his tongue? Would Adriana enjoy it as much as the heroine had?

Oh dear, the sick feeling was back in the pit of her stomach accompanied by a flood of heat that made her squirm. Her movements woke Dawson. His head lolled toward her, his eyes blinking open.

"Hello," Adriana said inanely. She should at least quit using him as a pillow, but she was still lodged between his legs, one shoulder cradled into his side.

"Hello." His voice was gruff.

"I'm sorry." She braced her hands against his chest and put a few inches between them. It wasn't any less of an intimate position though. In fact, it only emphasized how well muscled he was.

The typical London dandy, which Cyrus prided himself on being, wasn't muscled at all. Such gentlemen were refined and delicate and graceful. Their forms were to be coveted and admired. Yet Cyrus had never inspired her to put charcoal to paper.

"No, I apologize if I overstepped. You were restless, and I grew tired as well. I thought we should be comfortable if we must spend so many hours in a carriage."

"You are my husband. You could not overstep."

"But I'm not your husband in truth—not yet—and I don't wish to take liberties where you have not permitted them." His

voice was terribly formal considering her fingers had inched under his lapel of his waistcoat and his leg pressed into her bottom.

“That was considerate.” She cleared her throat. “I am a bit thirsty though. I don’t suppose you have anything to drink?”

“As a matter of fact, I do, but I’m not sure it will be to your liking.” He shifted her over and twisted to sit next to her, both feet on the floor now.

She regretted asking since it meant a change in their seating arrangements but tried to smother the feeling.

He retrieved a flask from a leather satchel and held it out to her. “Brandy.”

“You know Father is a teetotaler. He doesn’t even permit me to imbibe ratafia.”

“I’ve seen you drink champagne at events.” He raised a teasing eyebrow.

“Only when Father is not in attendance.”

“You are a married woman now, and you don’t need your father’s permission to do anything. Or mine, for that matter. Decide what you want for yourself.”

His words unknotted a tangle in her chest that had grown so large there had been no room for happiness or hope. Dawson wasn’t cruel and controlling like Richard. Neither was he like her father, who loved her but wanted her to be someone she wasn’t.

“I don’t know if I even like brandy.” Her mind was already made up. She held her hand out.

“No time like the present to find out.” He handed her the flask.

She unscrewed the cap and took a sip. The sweetness hit her tongue a second before it burned a path down her throat. She coughed and laughed, her eyes watering.

“Is that a yes or no?” He smiled broadly, and her breath caught. His eyes crinkled, and the slightest of dimples carved itself in his right cheek. A dimple. He had a dimple, and she had never noticed because the event was so rare.

A pleasing warmth bloomed from where the brandy settled in her stomach. “It’s too soon to draw a conclusion to the experiment. I need another sample.”

This time he laughed—low and rumbly and soft. The effect on her was immediate. Her insides jumbled. She tipped the flask up and took a bigger sip. This time she was prepared for the burn and only grimaced. The soothing warmth reached all the way to her fingers and toes.

“I do like it.” She took another gulp, but before she could tip it up a fourth time, he scooped the flask out of her hands.

“You like it now, but imbibing too much too quickly will change your tune.” He took a long pull off the flask himself before tucking it back into the satchel.

They sat side by side in the darkening carriage. Adriana curled her hands over the edge of the velvet cushion under her thighs. His leg was only inches from her fingers. “How much farther to the inn, do you think?”

He checked out the window. “A few more miles, but the going will be slower in the gloaming even with the lanterns.”

The brandy had done something odd to her. She wasn’t foxed, but she didn’t feel quite herself either. The distance from her brain to her tongue had shortened, and there was nothing to stop the next words that popped out of her mouth.

“Why didn’t you kiss me?”

“What?” His head whipped around to look at her. “When?”

She had three choices. One, she could curl up in the corner and stick her fingers in her ears. Two, she could throw herself out of the moving carriage. Three, she could answer him. She prepared herself for total humiliation no matter which she chose, but answering him sounded less physically painful and slightly more mature. After all, she was a countess now.

Unable to temper the accusation in her voice, she said, “Last night in your chambers. You kissed me on the forehead.”

He ran his hands down his thighs and shifted toward the door. Was he considering throwing himself out of the carriage? An inappropriate giggle rose, but she quashed it. Maybe she *was* foxed.

“I was honoring our agreement. Trying to give you the time and space to decide when to consummate our marriage. I don’t want to force my attentions upon you.” There was no smile or laughter to temper his formal, aloof expression and tone.

He confused her. She confused herself. She had asked for space, yet her feelings were hurt he hadn’t kissed her. She understood how a babe was conceived, and it wasn’t with a kiss. She wasn’t asking or wanting to consummate their marriage—yet.

She was more curious than ever after reading what the hero had done to the heroine of her novel. Did such feelings only live on the pages of a book, or could they exist between a man and woman? Between her and Dawson?

“You said earlier that I can decide what I want. Well... I want a kiss. A *real* one.” She narrowed her eyes on him. If he

kissed her cheek or even worse, her forehead again, she would make him read the passage of import in the novel. “Now kiss me.”

CHAPTER 10



*K*iss me. The command sent Dawson's heart into a jig. This wasn't a dream, was it?

He swallowed and rubbed his dry lips together, unable to find a single coherent word in answer.

She blew a tendril of hair off her forehead with an exasperated huff. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. Had the few sips of his brandy impaired her thinking?

“And not a namby-pamby kiss here.” She pointed to her cheek. “Or here.” She jabbed at her forehead. “I want a kiss here.” She tapped her lips, and he stared.

He had dreamed of kissing her—and doing other less wholesome things with her—for so long he couldn't quite believe the opportunity was at hand. The too-chaste kiss after their vows had only whetted his need for her.

Bloody hell, he wanted to make it good for her. Which meant he couldn't pounce on her or let the moment spiral out of control. A kiss was the first step of seduction. He had to make her want more. If she didn't enjoy it, she would never willingly seek out his bed.

They had both twisted slightly to face one another on the squab. He took a deep breath, leaned forward, and brushed his

lips over hers. Her eyes closed and her face tipped closer. Keeping his body away from hers, he lowered his mouth to hers once more, this time pressing his lips more firmly against hers. He couldn't resist tugging her bottom lip between his and nipping the tender flesh.

She gasped. He pulled away, not sure if he'd overstepped, but she followed him, leaning against him. He wrapped his arm around her waist.

She shook her head. "That's not how *he* did it."

So they were going to discuss how his brother kissed. It was no less than Dawson deserved. He would ignore the dagger sticking out of his heart. "I am not surprised you and Cyrus experimented together—"

"No, no." She waved her hand dismissively. "I don't mean Cyrus. Although we did kiss once to see what all the fuss was about. I must say I was underwhelmed."

His burst of relief was short-lived. "If not Cyrus, then whose standard am I not living up to?"

She retrieved the book she had been reading earlier, flipped straight to a dog-eared page, and jabbed her finger. "His name is Ricardo. He's Moorish. Is that the difference?"

He took the book out of her hands, tilted it toward the dying light from the window, and skimmed. A laugh bubbled up, but he suppressed it, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "Where did you get this? I can't imagine your father having it in his library."

She gave a little snort-laugh he found more than a little adorable. "To go along with all his tomes on agricultural practices? I think not. Maddie gave it to me."

He would have to thank the precocious American the next time he saw her. He tossed the book on the opposite seat. “I am shocked, Adriana.”

“Are you?” Her expression had turned to worry. “Does that mean you won’t kiss me like Ricardo? Is it to be cheeks and foreheads the rest of my life?”

There was no stopping his laugh this time. How long had it been since his heart had been this light? Too long.

“You’re teasing me.” She pushed against his chest, but he tightened his hold around her waist, keeping her snuggled close.

“Just a little. I should have guessed you would be curious. It is something I admire about you.”

Her squirming stopped. “Do you? Most gentleman find my curiosity unseemly.”

“Do not ever think you need to suppress or change your natural inclinations for me. You please me by being yourself.”

Could she hear the deep-seated longing behind his gruff reply?

“That is kind of you to say, but...” She bit her bottom lip. “What if I am a disappointment? My experience is rather thin on the ground when it comes to carnal relations.”

She was a virgin. It hadn’t mattered a whit to him, but the relief to not be competing with his brother in bed was fierce. Possessiveness battled guilt at his underhanded manipulations. There was no turning back. He might as well enjoy the road to damnation.

“You will only disappoint me if you are not honest about your desires and what you like and don’t like. You should not

tolerate my attentions just because I am your husband.”

“I understand,” she said in a way that made Dawson think she didn’t truly understand. But she would. “At the moment, I desire for you to kiss me like in my book.”

“I will happily expand your experience. As long as you truly desire a kiss and it’s not the brandy talking. I would not have you harbor regrets.”

“Oh, I see. The alcohol has had an effect on me, I must admit, but only insofar as it has encouraged me to speak my mind. I was...” Her lashes swept down, hiding her eyes from him, and one shoulder lifted in a half shrug. “...disappointed last night.”

“I never want to leave you disappointed, lady wife.” He brushed his fingertips over her cheek and jaw, wondering at the silkiness of her skin.

She lifted her face, closed her eyes, and puckered her lips. “I’m ready.”

Despite the weight of expectation, he couldn’t stop a small smile. Their mouths mere inches apart.

Was she imagining Cyrus in his place? The torturous thought was no less than he deserved, but his guilt dissolved in the knowledge it would be *his* lips on hers and *his* hands on her body. He cupped her cheek, his fingers trembling slightly.

He nuzzled his nose against hers, once, twice, three times, and then brushed his lips across hers before touching her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. Her mouth parted on a sharp inhale, and he slipped his tongue between her lips in the prelude to what was to come. The taste of fine brandy was decadent and highly arousing. As were the throaty little sounds she was making.

He wanted to lay her down, lift her skirts, and devour her inch by inch. He wanted to take her until they were both sated and exhausted, but even more, he wanted her to crave him as much as he craved her. He didn't want to be merely her husband but her lover.

He took a deep breath as he slowly deepened the kiss, slanting his mouth across hers. She started in his arms, but instead of pulling away, her hands slid to wrap around his neck, leaving her breasts pressed against his chest.

Thank God their hips were well apart, because an erection raged against the confines of his breeches. She might be curious about a kiss, but he didn't want to shock her with what happened next.

With a tentativeness that was as endearing as it was arousing, she made a foray into his mouth with her tongue. He welcomed her with a groan. Her tongue rubbed against his before retreating. He continued to tease her lips and give her tastes of his tongue. She squirmed and plucked at the lapels of his jacket. He recognized the sounds and movements. She was a woman who wanted more.

Satisfaction roared through him, giving him the confidence and patience required in the moment. He skimmed his lips across her jaw to her ear, tugging her lobe between his teeth and letting his hot breath tickle the sensitive area.

“Oh my, that feels nice.” Her voice was thready.

“If you think this feels nice, just wait,” he murmured.

He trailed his lips down her neck. She had loosened her collar at some point in their journey, and he peeled the fabric apart to find the hollow of her throat, hot and fluttering with the quickened beat of her heart.

She weaved her fingers in his hair, the gentle tugs shooting pleasure through him. His erection throbbed with an insistence he found distracting. With a boldness that surprised him, she fisted her hand in his hair and drew his face up to instigate another kiss.

He had worried his agreement to give her the time and space to overcome her hesitation about sharing a bed with him would result in months of longing and frustration. Those worries disintegrated.

She was as passionate and curious in lovemaking as she was in her scientific pursuits. Their kisses were slow and languorous. He would nurse the embers of her passion in order to stoke a conflagration.

The carriage jerked to a stop. They broke apart, both breathing hard. Men's voices and the jangle of harnesses and the smells of stock and food penetrated his sexual haze. They had reached their waypoint for the night.

Her eyes were wide, and her hand was still tangled in his hair. What was she feeling? Regret or confusion or shock? He had risked his life numerous times in battle, but he wasn't brave enough to ask.

"You must be wanting a bath and a good night's rest after the long day of travel." He cursed his stilted voice. The ease they had achieved physically was gone now the outside world intruded.

She snatched her hands to her lap and scooted to put several inches between them. Bit by bit, she reassembled her composure, lifting her chin, pasting on a serene smile, and smoothing her travel-rumpled skirts. He was more aware than ever of the soft curves hidden underneath.

He needed fresh air and a brisk walk. Or a dip in chilly water. Or an hour alone with his hand. Who was he fooling? Two minutes with his hand would be more than enough time considering how close he was to the edge. Embarrassingly close for a man of his age and experience.

He descended to the graveled yard. The air was cooler and sweeter out of the city. One gulping breath followed another until his ardor subsided to something manageable. He turned to offer Adriana a hand out of the carriage.

While she'd done an admirable job repairing herself, her hair was still in disarray from his fingers and her collar remained unfastened. How easy it would be to grab the edges of her gown, rent the front to her waist, and discover how sensitive her breasts were to his touch.

After their interlude in the carriage, the reality of bedding her was tantalizingly close. The depravity of his imaginings would only scare her away. Was he any better than her scoundrel of a stepbrother?

He had to believe so. Unlike Pace-Verney, Dawson wanted her ready, willing, and begging for his touch. But if she was aware of the depths of his primal need, would she turn away in disgust? Ladies expected to be wooed by gentlemen. His seduction would need to be slow and subtle.

He murmured, "May I?" before raising his hands to her collar.

She froze, her eyes huge on his face. He fumbled with the tiny buttons at her collar, his fingers brushing over silken skin. The urge to wrap his hand around her nape and draw her into his body for another soul-baring kiss was almost undeniable.

“There now.” His voice was rough and foreign sounding to his own ears. His usual cool detachment had been burned to ash. He needed a moment away from her. With an abruptness he couldn’t help, he said, “I’ll see to our rooms,” and stalked away.

CHAPTER 11



Adriana stumbled on the uneven gravel, off-balance in every way. She wished she could blame the brandy she'd downed in the carriage, but lying to herself wouldn't change the facts. Dawson had kissed her senseless. Quite literally. Her mind was not functioning like it should. Her thoughts clamored around the question of what happened next.

What if they hadn't arrived at the inn? Would they have gone on kissing for minutes or hours? She touched her lips. They still felt tingly and warm despite the refreshing breeze whistling through the inn's courtyard. Kissing Cyrus had been not unpleasant, but kissing Dawson had been a revelation.

In the animal world, the male sought out and dominated the female, and based on the underhanded comments from matrons, she had presumed sex was a perfunctory duty to produce offspring. It was often referred to as a chore, not a pleasure. At least, not for ladies.

The feel of his fingers at her collar sent a shiver through her. Would it be different between her and Dawson? Were his kisses merely the prelude to further delights?

It didn't sound like she would find out tonight. Instead of offering to continue their interlude in the inn where there was privacy—and rather importantly, a bed—Dawson had left her

to see to their rooms. Plural. As in more than one. Which meant they would not be sharing a bed.

Who was she upset and frustrated with? After all, she was the one who had insisted on time and separation. That was before. Before he had awakened in her a restlessness she barely understood. It was like a damnable itch she couldn't reach.

“My lady?” A voice rumbled at her side.

It took a moment to realize the man was addressing her. She was now a lady.

Forcing her kiss-shocked lips into a slight smile, she greeted a weathered man in a much-mended overcoat of buttery leather. “Yes?”

“My boys need to see to your horses. There's a warm fire and refreshments inside.” The man spoke slowly. Two young grooms snuck glances over the man's shoulders. The boys were identical in looks and shared the same raw-boned face as the man, marking them as father and sons.

All three looked worried she would not be able to find her way to the door. While she hadn't descended into the realm of simpleton, she certainly had lost a few wits in the carriage with Dawson.

“That sounds lovely. Thank you.” Adriana lifted her skirts to keep them from the dirty cobbles and made her way into the common room of the inn.

Dawson was nowhere to be seen. Adriana wasn't sure if she was disappointed or relieved. The smell of peat was strong, and a haze filled the room. A table in the corner was occupied by a lady and gentleman who could have been

husband and wife or brother and sister or neither. Perhaps they were lovers meeting for a tryst.

The lady was well-dressed and pretty in the way of many Englishwomen with her blond hair and creamy complexion. She sat stiffly on the edge of her chair and cast periodic glances toward a table of four men playing cards, puffing on pipes, and sipping on ale. The man slouched in his chair and swung a nearly empty whiskey glass between his fingers, looking bored.

Otherwise, the inn was sparsely occupied. The common area was clean, and the aromas of stew and bread overlay the scents of smoke and farm animals. Adriana took a deep breath. It reminded her of Bainbridge, and a wave of homesickness swept through her.

Her thoughts flew to her father. Surely he had received word of her marriage by now. Would he react in anger? A marriage to Richard would have been a tidy solution to several problems, but her father was well aware of her antipathy toward the match. He might be disappointed, but he shouldn't be shocked at her rebellion.

A bosomy woman emerged from a back room, wiping her hands on an apron. Her graying hair was twisted into a loose bun at the nape of her neck, wispy tendrils escaping to curl along her temples. Her cheeks were red from the heat of the kitchens.

She bustled over with a wide, welcoming smile. "Lady Westhorpe, is it? I'm Bess. Would you like to refresh yourself in your room?"

Once again, a jolt went through her at the use of her formal title. How long would it take for her to get used to hearing it? "Yes please. I am travel weary."

“I’ll have my girl Amy bring up a basin of warm water. She can help you with your clothes. Your husband said your maid isn’t traveling with you.” Bess’s accent was coarse but good-natured and full of energy. How did she manage it? Her days must be long serving those who traveled from dawn until dark on the road.

Before her father inherited his title and remarried, Adriana had lived a simple country life. The bulk of her wardrobe had consisted of sturdy gowns she could wear while tramping over the hills and through the forests searching for moths and butterflies. Only after her father married Sarah and she insisted they spend the season in London did Adriana visit a modiste and acquire a bit of polish along with her new wardrobe. Nevertheless, it still felt odd to have another person wait on her.

“I can manage on my own this evening, but thank you,” Adriana said.

A twinkle sparked in Bess’s blue eyes. “How silly of me. You are newly wed. Your husband will no doubt see to your undressing.”

A blush fired in Adriana’s cheeks like throwing dry tinder on embers. She stuttered out something, but Bess only laughed and led Adriana to a staircase tucked into the corner of the common room.

The stairs were narrow and creaked under their weight. The scents of cooking and smoke grew faint, and the noticeably cooler air helped douse Adriana’s blush. But not for long.

Bess led her to the last room along the hallway and opened the door. “Here you are, my lady. I’ll have warm water sent up shortly.”

“Thank you.” Adriana stepped inside. A bed dominated the far wall with a battered wardrobe alongside. A small fire sent tendrils of warmth through the room. Her leather valise was sitting alongside a worn satchel on a low chest at the foot of the bed.

Her bag was the same one her mother had used so many years ago when she had married a simple country squire and moved into his farmhouse. The leather was still stiff, and the bone handles shiny from disuse. Her mother had not lived a year past her wedding day, dying two weeks after giving birth to Adriana.

Adriana had dreamed of traveling the length and breadth of England and beyond. Yet as a woman, the freedom required to turn such dreams into reality had been beyond her reach. If she were being honest with herself, she envied Cyrus and his lack of care and responsibility even as she resented him for it.

These concerns were as old and well-worn as the satchel sitting next to hers on the bench. Its leather was soft and wrinkled. Several small tears had been repaired by neat stitches. This satchel had tales to tell.

Why was Dawson’s bag in *her* room? Adriana spun around, her skirts swishing around her ankles. A young girl elbowed open the door, her tongue caught between crooked teeth, and deposited a full basin of steaming water on the dressing table.

“Where is Lord Westhorpe’s room?” Adriana asked.

The girl shifted on her feet and looked around them. “You’re standing smack in it, my lady.”

“He did not let a second room?”

“No. Why would he?”

Adriana searched for a suitable excuse and came up empty. “He wouldn’t, of course. Do you happen to know where he is?”

“He’s taking an ale downstairs. Said he would give you time to refresh yourself.” The girl looked pointedly to the basin. “I believe your dinner has been ordered.”

“Thank you.”

Only when the door latched closed did Adriana let her tense smile drop. Had Dawson assumed after their fiery kiss in the carriage that she was ready to share his bed?

It was true that her curiosity had been piqued. The squirmy awkwardness she felt around Dawson had turned into something entirely different in his arms. Still squirmy and a little awkward but with more than a hint of anticipation of what was to come.

And yet she wasn’t ready to share his bed.

She tried to ignore the way the sentiment lilted into a question in her head.

Another base need made itself known. Her stomach growled. She washed her face and hands and rebraided her hair, pinning the coil at her neck. The reflection in the looking glass was more governess than countess, but it was the best she could do.

A soft rap sounded at the door. “It’s me. Dawson.”

She let him inside. His gaze darted to their bags, and he looked apologetic. “As I’m sure you’ve surmised, only one room was available. I apologize. I will sleep in the chair or, if you would prefer, in the stables.”

The last thing Adriana wanted was for gossip to spread through Dawson's Northumberland household before she had a chance to even meet them. "Don't be ridiculous. You don't have to sleep in the stables."

"Are you hungry? There's a hearty-looking stew and fresh bread downstairs." Dawson's manner was formal.

"That sounds wonderful." The inflammatory heat they'd generated in the carriage had cooled into a new and confusing awkwardness.

She preceded Dawson out the door, feeling self-conscious in her own skin. She should say something. Make pleasant small talk about... what? The weather? That was always a safe topic.

She glanced over her shoulder. "It's much cooler than I—"

Her toe snagged on an imperfect board, and she stumbled toward the stairs. Before she could even try to catch herself, she was anchored to Dawson, his arm tight around her waist, her back to his front.

One shuddery breath followed another, but she wasn't sure if it was her near fall or his hard body pressed against her that was the cause.

"I've got you. You're all right." His warm breath tickled her ear, and she tilted her head to give him greater access.

The scrape of his night beard against the shell of her ear sent a shiver through her. Except she wasn't cold. Her body's reaction to his nearness made her feel out of control. It was worrisome. Nothing about the way he made her feel followed the rules of logic.

She let her head rest along the slope of his neck and shoulder. Dawson's brawn shouldn't thrill her. In fact, it was a

betrayal of her wish for equality with the male sex. Except she was beyond thrilled. She was fighting the urge to press even farther into his body and nuzzle his neck. What had happened to her reasoning and sensibility?

The reality was that she had given up any hope of equality by marrying. No matter how kind and considerate and attractive, Dawson owned her and her inheritance. In fact, she had been forced into accepting a marriage she did not want to escape a marriage that would have killed her. There was no fairy tale.

She stiffened in his hold. “Thank you. You saved me from a nasty bump.”

“I would save you from all unpleasantness if I were able.” His earnestness gave her pause.

Dawson kept surprising her. One minute he was aloof and chilly, the next he was setting her afire or saying something frightfully romantic. She was too tired and hungry to form any theories about him at the moment. As they descended the narrow stairs, she kept her hand firmly on the rail.

“We are dining in a private salon. I thought you’d prefer that.” He pointed toward a narrow hall and a closed door.

She wasn’t so sure she would. At least in the common area, they could make conversation about the goings-on around them. How was she to sit across the table from him and not imagine his lips on hers or his tongue inside her mouth? She tugged at her constricting collar.

Halfway to the salon, a man weaved his way toward them with his arms flung wide. “Shaw! Or I suppose it’s Lord Westhorpe now. What an absolute delight to see you here. I’ve been positively dying of boredom.”

The woman trailing him wore a pinched expression on her wan face. It was the couple from the corner Adriana had noted on her arrival.

“How nice to see you, Henry. Miss Chester.” Dawson’s tone was polite, and his expression was neutral, telling her little of his opinion of the two. He drew Adriana to his side with a hand on the small of her back. “May I present my wife, Lady Adriana Westhorpe. This is Mr. Henry Chester and his sister Miss Faye Chester. They are our closest neighbors at Fernlow.”

“How lovely to meet you both,” Adriana murmured.

Miss Chester gave her a perfunctory smile and inclination of her head before her mouth drew back into a slight frown.

“Are you headed north or south, Henry?” Dawson asked.

“North, unfortunately. Faye and I met with a tiny spot of trouble in London, and Father banished us.” Henry’s shrug and contrite expression were offset by a cocky wink as if whatever mischief he had fallen into would make a good story.

“I’m sorry to hear of your troubles,” Dawson said.

“It’s damnably inconvenient. The season was just getting interesting, and poor Faye here—”

“Henry.” Miss Chester bit out her brother’s name in a sharp voice.

“Yes, well. That’s neither here nor there, I suppose.” Henry rubbed his hands together. “Are you going to dine? Faye and I are famished, but all this smoke ain’t good for the digestion, you know.”

The silence that followed was expectant and dragged into awkwardness. Adriana found herself offering an invitation to

break the tension. “Would you care to join us for dinner?”

Henry’s face brightened. “That’s good of you to ask. So unexpected, but very welcomed. We’d love to. We’re sick of our own company, aren’t we, Faye?”

“Yes, Henry.” Although the words were dutiful, it was obvious the last thing Miss Chester wanted was to join them for dinner.

Dawson sighed but smiled and gestured the Chesters ahead toward the private dining salon. Adriana was inwardly relieved to have a buffer between her and Dawson for dinner. Anyway, from her understanding, Fernlow was isolated enough without making an enemy of their neighbors. Especially as they would be in residence at the same time.

Based on first impressions, Miss Chester did not seem a candidate for bosom friendship, but Adriana would hold out hope.

The private salon was a cramped space more suited to two than four guests. The table was rectangular with two benches. Adriana shared a bench with Dawson, his thigh pressing against hers. Every nerve ending along her leg tingled. She stole a glance, but his profile was typically inscrutable.

Bess bustled in with bowls of stew followed by the young maid carrying a loaf of bread. Dawson cut the bread and offered a piece to Adriana. Thankfully, Henry carried a bulk of the conversation with natterings about London and the plethora of gambling opportunities he was missing.

Adriana tucked into the delicious stew with unladylike enthusiasm. Miss Chester ate delicately, casting glances in her direction. Adriana patted her mouth with a napkin and cleared her throat. “It has been a long journey. I was famished.”

“Obviously.” Miss Chester offered a small smile before taking a delicate nibble off her spoon. “The food in these common establishments does little to inspire my appetite, I’m afraid.”

“Stews and roasted vegetables made up most of my childhood meals. Our country cook is traditional.” Adriana tore off a hunk of bread and dipped it into her stew. “However, I must admit I developed a taste for the more sophisticated food our London cook prepares. Her pastries are delicate and delicious.”

“You will find Northumberland will not offer such delights. The village of Warlock is provincial at best, and the hills and sheep go on forever.”

“Warlock?” Adriana turned to Dawson. “I assumed the village was called Fernlow.”

“Fernlow is the estate’s name. It is named for the creek that runs through the property.” Dawson gestured toward Henry. “The Chester family estate is named Kildare after a marauding Scot who claimed the castle for a time.”

Adriana tried to keep the awe out of her voice. She really should have known all this considering she was Lady Westhorpe. “A castle? With turrets and arrow notches and a drawbridge?”

Henry laughed, but Adriana didn’t feel like she was being made fun of. “The moat was filled in quite some time ago and the drawbridge replaced by doors, but we do have two turrets.”

Miss Chester cast her brother an indulgent look. “It’s not as romantic as it sounds, Lady Westhorpe. It’s drafty and rotting away over our heads.”

“You must pay us a call once you are settled for a tour.” Mr. Chester held up a glass in her direction.

“I would be pleased to.” Adriana poked Dawson with an elbow. “Is Fernlow a castle too?”

“I’m afraid it is a very plain but sturdy manor house built by my grandfather.”

“And how did the village come by its name?” Adriana asked.

“John Warlock was the man who founded the village,” Mr. Chester said. “He was a Scot.”

“That’s only partially true. His real name is lost to the centuries. He was branded a warlock by his brethren,” Dawson said matter-of-factly.

“Are you implying he could perform magic of some sort?” Adriana couldn’t believe Dawson believed in fairy tales.

Dawson shook his head. “Before warlock took on a magical or demonic meaning, the Scots branded any who broke their oath a warlock.”

“What oath did he break?” she asked.

Mr. Chester leaned forward, a twinkle in his eyes. “It was for love, of course. Our John Warlock fell in love with an Englishwoman, so they say, and left his clan for her. Some tales recount that he died defending her from an incursion, and she pined for him the rest of her life. Others claim they died at a hundred and are buried in one another’s arms. All very overwrought and romantic.”

“It is tiresome, in my opinion. I miss London already, don’t you?” Miss Chester asked the table, but her gaze landed on Adriana.

“I haven’t had time to miss it, and to be honest, I enjoy country life. While I can’t claim an extensive knowledge of sheep, moths and butterflies fascinate me. I hope to cultivate a garden to attract them.” Adriana tensed, waiting for Miss Chester’s reaction.

Miss Chester’s gaze sharpened. The impression of an insouciant debutant was pierced. Was there more behind Miss Chester’s mask? “That is an unusual pursuit for a lady.”

While there was no animus behind Miss Chester’s comment, it sowed doubt in Adriana’s mind. Could she live up to the title of Lady Westhorpe? What if she disappointed Dawson and everyone else around her, including herself? She finished her dinner in silence.

Henry thumped his fist on the table. “You must plan a ball to celebrate your recent nuptials. Wouldn’t that be grand, Faye?”

“I don’t believe I saw an announcement in the *Times*. Did you have a short engagement?” Miss Chester asked.

Dawson’s leg tensed against hers under the table, although she could see no evidence of his discomfiture. “An announcement is running this week. Adriana and I have known one another since childhood, and we saw no reason to wait.”

Henry drained the rest of his ale, his eyes turning glassy. “I can’t remember the last time you, or any of your family for that matter, have taken an interest in Fernlow. The village will be in a tizzy at your arrival.”

“It’s been some years, that is true, but things are different now. I am responsible, and I take my responsibilities

seriously,” Dawson said with a lightness Adriana knew he did not feel toward the work.

“Childhood friends, you say? Who is your family, Lady Westhorpe?” Miss Chester asked.

“My father is Baron Coffey. Our land abuts the Westhorpe estate in Bainbridge.”

Miss Chester’s face grew ashen. “I see.”

Adriana had not been introduced to either of the siblings in London, and Adriana’s father only attended social functions when forced. “Are you acquainted with my father?”

“I don’t believe so, no. But Henry has met Mr. Pace-Verney. He is your brother, is he not?” Miss Chester’s gaze had shifted to her own brother, who seemed equally shaken.

Richard was a scourge on society, and Adriana wondered what he had done to earn the Chesters’ dislike. “He is my stepbrother, actually. My father only married Richard’s mother three years ago.”

With a jovial smile once again on his face, Henry cleared his throat and stood. “You ladies must be tired and ready to retire. How about another drink, Westhorpe?”

While Adriana didn’t appreciate being dismissed, she was ready to retire. Miss Chester escaped as soon as possible, disappearing up the stairs.

Dawson caught Adriana’s elbow before she could do the same. “I’ll have fresh hot water sent up for your ablutions.”

She murmured her thanks. He was giving her privacy. As often as Dawson was cool and inscrutable, he was equally kind and thoughtful.

As soon as the water arrived, Adriana stripped and washed with the sweetly scented soap. It was heavenly to feel clean. She slipped on her night rail and handed her dress off to the maid to be refreshed.

Then, with nothing else to do, she climbed under the covers to wait.

CHAPTER 12



Dawson stood outside the chamber door and hesitated. He didn't want to catch her unawares in the middle of her ablutions. Or did he? Now he couldn't get the image of her stripped naked and running a damp, sweet-smelling cloth over the curves of her breasts and down to the dip of her waist and beyond.

He stared at the bulge in his breeches. That's the last thing he needed. He was no longer an adolescent. Bloody hell, even as an adolescent, he had exhibited more control on his baser desires. It seemed his body was ready to rebel.

He took a deep breath and knocked softly. At her command to enter, he stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and stood awkwardly inside the door.

She was in bed with the covers pulled up under her arms. The pristine white of her night rail glowed in the candlelight. She'd thoughtfully left a brace burning on the dresser next to the basin of water.

"Good evening." Why was he greeting her as if he hadn't spent the best part of his day kissing her in the carriage? "I apologize we got waylaid by the Chesters downstairs. It was gracious of you to extend an invitation."

She gave a small laugh. “Mr. Chester seemed to expect one, and they are your neighbors, after all. Or rather, *our* neighbors.”

The invitation should have come from him, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to issue it. He’d wanted Adriana to himself. Not something he was ready to admit. “They are at least a half-hour ride from the estate. I’m afraid after London, you will be sorely disappointed with the social opportunities available.”

“You should know better than most that I don’t require balls or musicales to entertain me. In fact, I very much dislike making stilted conversation with strangers over teacups.” There was a worry in her words he wanted to alleviate, but her tone lightened as she continued. “As long as you have a well-stocked library and a garden, I’ll be more than content.”

“There is a garden, but I have no idea what state it is in. The library is mostly tomes about shepherding and breeding and shearing. As I recall, every painting features sheep, and some of the upholstery does as well. So. Many. Sheep.”

Her laugh was throaty and rich. A zing went through him. He had made her laugh. It’s not that he was humorless, but he had never been as charming and witty and dashing as his brothers, especially Cyrus. As a result, he had never tried to compete with them.

“Will we visit Bainbridge after your business is concluded at Fernlow?” There was a mixture of emotions in her voice. Longing, yes, but also uncertainty.

“Are you concerned about your father’s reaction to our marriage?” he asked.

“Of course I am. Aren’t you?”

“No. In fact, he’s lucky I’ll have time to temper what I would like to say to him. He should have known what sort of man Pace-Verney is. He should have protected you.” Did his fierceness give away the depth of his feelings? He moved to his leather satchel to root around for a clean shirt.

“Where will we spend most of our time? In Bainbridge or Fernlow or London?” she asked softly.

It was a question she had the right to ask. He just wasn’t sure how to answer. Dawson’s sorrows squatted in the corners and behind the doors of Bainbridge House ready to ambush him. He missed his family more in the places where they dwelled in his memories. His father behind the big oak desk in the study. His mother at the pianoforte butchering Beethoven. His brothers in the stables and riding across the hills.

“Wherever you wish.” His grief used to be sharp like the jab of a knife into his chest, but now it was like a toothache he could never quite shake. Although lately it sometimes faded to where he barely noticed the pain, which was a painful realization in itself.

“It sounds as though Fernlow has been neglected, and it may take some time to straighten things out,” she said.

He almost confessed the tumultuous feelings pinging through his chest. Instead, he cleared his throat and said in a steadier voice than he expected to find, “Fernlow was never the focus of Father’s attention as long as it remained reasonably profitable. He visited once a year. Mother accompanied him a handful of times, but she found Warlock and the countryside too desolate for her liking. I was usually the only one who was willing to travel with him. Unfortunately, I haven’t been in several years now. My duty to the country came first.”

His brothers had had no interest in visiting their northernmost estate, but Dawson had loved the wildness and solitude of Fernlow Manor and the charm of Warlock. The trips had offered time with his father without his brothers there to overshadow him. His memories were fond, and he turned them over often in his head wondering what his father would think of Dawson inheriting the title and responsibilities.

“What is the countryside like?” she asked. “Besides the sheep.”

“The moors can be dangerous. Bogs have trapped many a man and sheep. Some never to be found again. The wind can be fierce and howls like a wild animal. Even this time of year, it can be chilly.” Her eyes were getting bigger and bigger, and Dawson added hastily, “It’s harsh but also beautiful. You will have no shortage of subjects to sketch. I hope I didn’t frighten you.”

“Frighten me? I am eager to see and experience it. I’ve always wanted to travel, but Father is more than content in Bainbridge. He barely tolerates London. You know how he is.”

It felt good to connect with her through their shared experiences. “I do.”

And just like that an awkward silence bloomed between them. Her gaze dropped and skittered to the side where there was nothing of interest but a scarred side table.

He turned toward the basin of water on the stand. “If the weather remains fair, and we don’t encounter any problems, we should arrive the day after tomorrow. That is if we get off early. I’ll wash and...” *And what?* Strip the sheets and the virginal white nightdress off her body and claim his rights? No. He would settle himself in the chair and do his best to chase sleep.

“Yes, we should try to sleep.” She scooted farther under the covers and into the shadows.

If he were any sort of gentleman, he would bed down in the stables. Except with Henry and Miss Chester at the inn, he didn't want to have to explain why he was sleeping with the horses and not his new wife. While he wasn't sure of Miss Chester's propensity for gossip, Henry couldn't keep his chin from wagging after a few drinks.

His cravat was wilted and hung loosely. He removed the length of wrinkled cloth and set it and his collar aside. After shrugging off his jacket and waistcoat, he hesitated. Normally, he would strip his shirt off, but even though his back was turned, a tingle went down his spine. She was watching his every move.

Her curiosity shouldn't be surprising. She was endlessly fascinated with nature and the behavior of animals. However, she hadn't treated their kiss like a scientific endeavor. Or maybe she had at first. Whatever data she had hoped to glean had been obliterated by the passion that had flared between them. His nerves still snapped with unspent sexual tension.

While he might only be a poor substitute for Cyrus, she had welcomed his kisses. Could he one day dream of securing her heart? He couldn't allow such hope a foothold considering his duplicitousness.

After washing as best he could, he snuffed out the candles before changing into a new shirt. He kept his trousers on. The chair creaked as he settled onto the thin cushions. The slats knobby against his back. It wasn't meant for a decent nap much less a full night's rest.

He stared into the small coal fire and shifted, his bottom already going numb. The chair groaned as if it too were in

pain. It would be a miracle if the blasted thing survived the night intact.

“Dawson.” She said his name like an exasperated nanny might.

“Yes?”

“You can’t sleep in that chair.”

“I’ve slept in more precarious and uncomfortable places,” he said truthfully.

“Be that as it may, neither of us are likely to get any rest with the noise that chair is making every time you blink.”

“Are you inviting me into your bed?” He’d meant to sound light and teasing, but his question came out with more hoarse desperation than he intended.

“Not as man and wife, just as—” She bit off her words.

Just as... *what?* Friends? Not yet. Lovers? Someday, God willing. He was in limbo—or was it purgatory?—until she decided otherwise.

“A mission of mercy?” he asked.

“Exactly. I fear neither the chair nor your back will survive the night,” she said dryly.

“I will gladly accept if it won’t be too awkward.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The bed is large enough for two, and you are my... h-husband.” She stumbled over the last word. If she was trying to reassure him that she was comfortable with the situation, she was failing.

He approached the bed as if it might be booby-trapped. She scooted to the far side as he slipped underneath the covers. While the mattress was soft and the sheets smelled of fresh

breezes and sunshine, it wasn't any more restful, knowing she was within arm's reach of him. He forced himself to take deep, even breaths.

Adriana tossed and turned and huffed out little sighs that she probably didn't mean to be arousing but were driving him quite mad.

After what felt like an eternity wallowing in his lustful purgatory, she turned toward him and tucked her hands under her cheek on the pillow. "Are you awake?"

"Yes." As if he could sleep with her heat so close he might combust.

"What sort of places have you slept that are more uncomfortable than that chair?"

It was not the question he was expecting. "My time as an officer took me many places. Few of them have been outfitted with feather mattresses."

She was quiet for so long he wondered if she had dozed off. "It was dangerous."

It wasn't a question, but he answered with both the truth and an understatement. "Times were fraught on occasion."

"Did you wish to buy a commission or were you forced to?"

"What do you mean?"

"Most third and fourth sons are expected to make their own living. Your father wished Cyrus to enter the clergy," she said.

The mention of Cyrus made Dawson's guilt flare while dwelling on his father's plans for his sons brought on a wave of grief. Ricocheting between the two emotions was

disorienting. He chose to focus on the humorous. “Can you imagine Cyrus as the spiritual leader of a flock?”

Dawson expected Adriana to laugh and agree at the absurdity, but instead, she seemed to be turning the possibility over in her head. “Actually, I can. He is quite charismatic and could give a rousing sermon. He can be caring and empathetic, although I fear he would struggle to maintain a moral compass. Women are drawn to him, aren’t they?”

Dawson sucked in a breath. Did she suspect Cyrus’s grand tour included enjoying the sights in numerous women’s beds? It was not a topic he wished to discuss with her. As underhanded as his actions had been in manipulating her into marriage, he didn’t want to further denigrate Cyrus in her esteem.

“He is charming as were my older brothers. I seem to be the only one who didn’t inherit the Westhorpe charisma.” The words used to describe Dawson had been *dour* or *serious* or *aloof*, but it was those traits that had kept him alive and would turn around the family fortunes.

“I suspect those who rely on charm alone end up sorely disappointed,” Adriana said.

“Perhaps.” He hesitated, but then added, “But they seem to have more fun.”

The bed shifted. Adriana propped herself on her elbow, her head cradled in her hand. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the faint light provided by the flames hissing in the grate, he could just make out her fine profile. His fingers twitched with the urge to trace the slope of her nose to her soft lips. He imagined his hand trailing even farther down to the ribbon tying the front of her white nightdress. His cock stirred.

He had to stop the direction of his imagination.

“Did you?” she asked.

“I’m sorry. Did I what?” A kick of panic had his heart racing. Had she guessed the prurient nature of his thoughts?

“Did you buy a commission because you had to or because you wanted to?”

Relief punctured his panic, but it was replaced by unease. His clandestine missions for the Crown weren’t tales of courage and derring-do. They were secret and morally gray. “Both, I suppose. With two older brothers and a father who I assumed would live forever, I needed a profession. A purpose. In another time, I might have become a solicitor, but with the unrest abroad, I found myself on a different path.”

She nodded slowly as if digesting his explanation. “Your mother told me you worked in London for Wellington with dispatches and such.”

He had coded and decoded dispatches between missions, but not for Wellington. “That is mostly true.”

“Mostly? You said earlier that you had slept in more uncomfortable places than the chair. What did you mean?” When he didn’t immediately answer, she continued. “After Waterloo, so many soldiers were pensioned, but not you. Why?”

Neither his parents nor his brothers had been privy to the duties he performed for the Crown. In fact, he had gone out of his way to give the impression he had been a paper pusher for Wellington. His missions out of the country were seldom more than a month long. He had been able to answer letters from his mother in a timely fashion and even travel home to visit them on occasion.

“I suppose I am—*was*—a spy.”

She bolted upright in bed. “A spy?”

He shushed her. The walls were thin, and even though he had left the Crown’s service, old habits reared. “I didn’t work for Wellington though. I worked for a man named Hawkins.”

“I never read about him in the papers.” She settled back down to her elbow, but closer now, her braid brushing his arm.

“It would be a failure on his part if you had. He was the Crown’s spymaster.”

“But the war ended after Waterloo. Why weren’t you pensioned along with the rest of the soldiers?” she asked.

“I was never a regular soldier. My job was to prevent the next war.”

“With France?”

“With anyone. Russia is on the rise. Fear is growing in the Ottoman Empire that Russia desires their riches. Britain cannot allow it, of course.”

“Tangling with Russia sounds dangerous.”

“It can be a dangerous game.”

“A game? Like blind man’s buff or charades?” Her whisper sounded disbelieving.

Charades wasn’t terribly far off the mark, actually. “Or chess,” he said lightly.

“In that case, I imagine you made an excellent spy. Cyrus told me no one, not even your father, could best you at chess even at ten years old.”

The memories of the chess matches he’d shared with his father and brothers prodded the ache in his chest, but the

purity of his grief had been infected by a squirmy, pinching guilt. Cyrus, his one living brother, was the one who was haunting Dawson.

Adriana settled her head onto her pillow but remained on her side, close to him. So close his hand rested at the top of the dip in the mattress where her body lay. Like teetering on a precipice, he could take the leap and reach for her. Would she welcome his touch or jerk away? He drew his hand into a fist and remained still.

Dawson had faced the worst of humanity and thrown himself headlong into danger. He had survived on his wits and courage, but now he found himself in bed with the woman he had wanted for ages, and his courage had abandoned him along with his wits. He was frightened.

“Do you wish you were still out there playing the game?” she asked a little dryly.

While he had never wanted to ascend to the title and bear the responsibilities that came with it, a tiny kernel of gratefulness glowed and warmed him. “I am exactly where I want to be.”

CHAPTER 13



I am exactly where I want to be. His words echoed through her. He surely didn't mean it literally. He hadn't planned on being saddled with her.

"Passing a night on a lumpy mattress in an inn with a woman you had no plans on wedding until two days ago?" She couldn't keep the sarcasm at bay.

He turned on his side to face her. They weren't quite close enough to touch, and it was too dim for her to make out his expression, but she could imagine him wearing the same serious expression he wore most of the time.

"I am exactly where I want to be," he repeated, softer but with no less insistence.

She didn't understand him; she never had. On first glance, one didn't notice him because he was so good at blending in like a buff-tip moth with the bark of a tree. He didn't flaunt like the popinjays populating the ton. Yet the closer she got to him, the more complicated and intricate his true nature became. He fascinated her in a way Cyrus never had.

The knowledge frightened her but excited her too. The combination was heady and disorienting at the same time. More than anything, she wanted to learn more about him and

about other things shared between a man and woman. Things he had begun to teach her in the carriage.

“Are you tired?” she asked.

“I should be, but I find having a wife sharing my bed is rather...”

His pause trailed on forever and words shot out of her mouth before she could stop herself. “Baffling? Shocking? Stimulating?”

“Is that how you’re feeling?” His deep voice invited confessions.

The darkness wrapped around them. Much like in the cocoon of the carriage, she felt safe and eager to grow and emerge with knowledge she didn’t currently possess. “Yes. All that and more. Will you...”

Now it was her turn to take a long awkward pause, but he didn’t try to fill it for her. She would have to find the words on her own.

“Will you show me more?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

His answer was a glancing touch along her cheek before moving to her hair. He found the tail of her braid and untied the strip of cloth, unwinding the loose plaits and spreading her hair over her shoulders.

“You have bewitching hair.” He leaned forward, but he didn’t kiss her. Instead, he brushed a lock of her hair over his lips.

Even though it was impossible, her scalp tingled with pleasure at the caress. In a wavery voice, she said, “It’s unruly. Not at all suited to the modern styles.”

“You possess a classic beauty.” He grasped her shoulder, and she allowed him to guide her to her back. He draped his leg between hers and pressed his chest against her breasts.

She gasped. Instead of feeling trapped and uncomfortable, she arched her back and spread her legs wider. In the carriage, too much had separated them, but here only his trousers and the thin lawn of his shirt and her night rail were keeping them apart. The hard slopes of his body were cushioned against her curves.

She craved the differences between them as if he was the opposite and equal reaction she needed to exist. This was probably not what Newton was referring to.

He was braced on his elbows, and she skimmed her hands up his arms to his shoulders, mapping the bulge of muscles along his biceps and back.

His lips glanced over her cheek to land on her mouth. A quick learner, she welcomed him with a parting of her lips. His groan came from deep in his chest. Her reaction had pleased him. It made her feel both powerful and like a newborn colt finding its legs, uncertain but eager to gallop.

His kiss was languorous and heady and made her want more. She squirmed. He drew up his knee until his thigh was pressed snugly against her core. Instinct made her want to buck her hips and rub against him. Only his weight prevented such shamelessness.

Heat rushed through her, but it wasn't all embarrassment. It wasn't even *mostly* embarrassment. Her core throbbed hotly against his thigh. She turned her face away from his to press her cheek into the pillow, trying to pull more than a shallow breath into her lungs.

Dawson trailed his mouth down her throat to the neck of her night rail. The tie gave with a tug of his fingers, and ever so slowly, he peeled the fabric away. The cool air of the room caressed her bare breast for only a moment before his lips did the same.

Shock stilled her body and brain. She gazed down at him. His eyes were closed and his hair mussed. Her nipple had drawn into a bud, and Dawson flicked it with his tongue.

Her head fell back to the pillow, and she gripped his shoulders in an instinctual bid to locate her sense of equilibrium. Tingles of pleasure radiated from where he nuzzled and kissed and—dear Lord—sucked at her breast.

He moved to her other side and bestowed the same pleasures on that breast. Except the more he teased her nipples, the achier and more uncomfortable she became between her legs. She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his head up.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked already pulling away.

“Yes.” Belying her knee-jerk response, she curled her foot around his leg to hold him to her. “I mean, no. Actually, I don’t know.”

“Talk to me. Tell me what you like and don’t like.” His voice was soothing, but while he talked, his hand covered her breast and gave it a gentle squeeze.

It felt so good she wanted to cry out. She was not sure how to put her thoughts into words. “What you are doing feels incredible, but it is also making me achy and uncomfortable.”

If she wasn’t so lost in her own tumultuous feelings, his husky chuckle might have stoked anger. He hitched his thigh harder between her legs. “Is this where you ache?”

“Yes.” The word emerged on a slight moan. Would allowing him to perform his husbandly duties give her relief? Tears of frustration and fear sprang to her eyes. “I’m not ready to consummate our marriage, but I can’t think right now.”

“I can ease your frustration without breaking my promise.”

“You can?” The hope he offered was like a line to a drowning woman.

He eased away from her to lay on his side, his head propped on his hand. “I would enjoy nothing more than to give you a taste of pleasure.”

“But not by entering me with your”—what was she supposed to call it?—“instrument?”

He nuzzled his lips against her ear and whispered, “I will not fuck you with my cock. Not until you beg me to.”

Fuck. Cock. New, very unscientific words to describe procreation. They felt wicked and somehow stoked her arousal higher. But *beg*? He expected her to beg him? Her pride made an appearance. She would do no such thing. She was no dog.

She had drawn her knees together when he had shifted to her side, but he tutted and nudged her legs apart, draping one heavy leg over hers. Her breasts remained exposed, and a sudden vulnerability had her pulling the edges of her night rail together.

“Why are you hiding from me now?” Dawson leaned down to brush his lips over hers.

“I don’t know.” And she didn’t. Except this was Dawson. A man she had never thought to share such intimacies with. In the dark, he had shed his aloofness. He was in total control, leaving her reeling and unsure.

He covered her hands with his own and kissed the corner of her mouth. “You can trust me. I won’t hurt you. This is for your pleasure.”

While she was only beginning to discover what was behind the stoic mask he presented to the world, he wasn’t a stranger. Dawson was honorable, and she did trust him. It was why she had sought his help in London, after all.

She released the death grip she had on the thin cotton and let him guide her hands. One he pushed to the side and one he raised above her head. His hands and mouth had already stripped away any shame, and the meager light helped to mitigate some of her unease at the exposure. Nevertheless, she squeezed her eyes shut.

He caressed her breasts, squeezing and pinching her nipples. The feeling danced along the edge of pleasure and pain, and she bit her lip to keep from doing what she had promised herself she wouldn’t do—beg.

His hand drifted to her belly, his fingers brushing the top of her mons through the cotton. She tensed, but then his mouth found her nipple, and all she could focus on was the spiraling sensations.

He kicked the covers away and pulled at her night rail until it was bunched around her upper thighs. Cool air kissed her core, making her aware of the sensation of wetness between her legs.

Adriana had researched how butterflies and moths reproduced, and she had read much about the mating rituals of mammals. She had thought men and women were different. They had conscious thoughts and ideals of morality guiding them.

In reality, they were just animals. The wetness between her legs was to ease the way of his cock. Her body was more than ready to fulfill her duties as his wife.

He trailed his hand up her inner thigh toward her core, and her overriding emotion was relief. The moment he touched her, she groaned. Even the slightest brush of his fingers brought pleasure.

He bucked against her hip, and her eyes popped open. His cock felt huge and very hard. She swallowed and stole a glance at him, but his focus remained between her legs.

He slipped a finger through her folds. “You are very wet.”

Adriana had touched herself, of course, but not in a bid for pleasure. She had merely been curious about anatomy. “The wetness is to ease your way, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. It signals your arousal.” He pushed his finger inside her and then drew it out.

The brief moment of being filled heightened the drum beat of her need, and she fisted the sheet to keep from crying out for him to press deep inside her once more. What he did next shocked the thought aside. He licked her wetness from his finger and hummed like he’d tasted the finest chocolate.

He drove his finger inside her once more. Her body clenched around the digit, and she tilted her pelvis, trying to draw him even deeper. Before she could censor herself, she said, “Your cock is bigger than your finger. Will it hurt?”

“It might sting a bit when I enter you, but only the first time. I will be sure to prepare you. Like this.” A second finger joined the first, and he gently worked them inside her, pumping slowly.

The fullness was part of what she was craving. Would pleasure rise exponentially with how full he could stuff her with his cock? A shiver went through her.

“Does this hurt?” he asked.

“It feels wonderful.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. “But it’s not enough.”

“Will you allow me to give you what you need?”

“Yes, I will.” She tried to convince herself she was in control, but she knew better. She was close to begging him.

His fingers continued to pump in and out in a slow but steady rhythm, but his thumb slipped to her apex and rubbed. Lightning flashed through her.

She clasped his forearm and dug her nails in, not sure if she wanted to pull his hand away or drive him even deeper. He flicked her nipple with his tongue before drawing the tip of her breast into his mouth and sucking.

Pleasure crashed down on her, enveloping her and tossing her in its tempest. When it spit her out, she was breathing hard and dazed, her limbs lax and heavy from the experience. Dawson wasn’t beside her anymore but on his knees, next to her.

As if in a dream, she watched him unfasten his trousers and reach inside. His shirt partially camouflaged his actions, and suddenly, she cursed the shadows. What was he was doing? He pumped his hand over his cock. He was brutal in his ministrations. With his other hand, he reached out and cupped her breast. In contrast, his touch was gentle when it squeezed her flesh.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out the words before letting out a low, guttural moan.

What was he apologizing for? She wasn't sure and was too embarrassed to ask.

Warm fluid hit her breasts in spurts, startling her to a conclusion. He had released his seed on her.

“Don't move. I'll retrieve a cloth as soon as my legs quit shaking.” His slight chuckle was rueful.

When he retreated to the wash basin, she gathered his fluid on her finger and sniffed it. Earthy and masculine. He had tasted her wetness, hadn't he? She licked the pad of her finger. It was unusual but not unpleasant.

She flinched when the cool cloth touched her breasts. His cleaning was quick and impersonal. He returned to the basin. Her night rail still gaped at the top and was bunched around her hips. While his back was turned, she repaired herself and pulled the coverlet over her.

She lay back and stared at the ceiling. What would happen now? She was in uncharted territory. If she dwelled on the specifics of what had happened—his fingers inside her, the mind-bending pleasure, his spend on her breasts—she might combust with embarrassment.

Her intention had been to wait to parlay their marriage vows into reality. That had lasted a day. A day spent in his company in the confines of a carriage where her curiosity and imagination had too much time to roam.

He returned to bed, his trousers refastened and his shirt tucked, to slip under the covers next to her. Awkwardness descended. A sliver of space separated them, but she could feel the heat from his body.

“Are you... well?” he murmured stiffly. None of the naughty tease from their encounter remained.

“I am.” Their interaction reeked of social politeness.

“We should rest. Tomorrow will be another long day of travel.” He shifted to his side, his back to her.

She wasn't sure if she was disappointed or relieved at the dismissal. After forcing her eyes closed, she tried to calm the turmoil in her head to let sleep in. It was a hard-fought battle, but eventually she slept and dreamed not of the brother who she had hoped would save her but the one who did.

CHAPTER 14



Two more grueling days of travel followed. Dawson did not share her bed again. He didn't even share her room. She had been given a reprieve. Honestly, she wasn't worried he might take advantage of her innocence; it was the strength of her own needs she didn't trust.

She was aware of addictions to opium. Returning soldiers dealing with injuries often found themselves in opium dens to manage the pain. Even ladies could succumb through their nightly tinctures of laudanum. She had never understood the obsession. Until now.

It was not opium, but Dawson that was the source of her budding addiction. She flipped to a new page in her sketchbook and smoothed it flat. In her mind's eyes, she pictured a *Mythimna pallens*, or a common wainscot moth, but when her lead touched the paper, she began yet another drawing of Dawson. This time his face.

He was asleep in the corner of the carriage across from her, and she studied him in a way she was uncomfortable doing when he was awake and could catch her staring. Why had she never noticed the strong line of his jaw and the stubborn set of his chin? He hadn't bothered shaving while they traveled, and the dark stubble lent him a rakish, dangerous air.

In sleep, his mouth was softer, and the corner gave the hint of a tiny, secretive smile. Did he dream of their interlude at the inn as she did every time she closed her eyes?

His broad cheeks framed a nose that, unlike hers, was perfectly proportioned if slightly crooked. His eyes were deeply set under strong brows but were offset by the long lashes casting crescent shadows underneath.

His dark hair was thick and didn't stay under his command for long, a lock falling over his forehead. Of course he didn't help matters by running his hand through it when he was distracted or deep in thought. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it, but she had become aware of even his smallest gestures.

Faces were more difficult to capture than moths or butterflies, and she wasn't happy with the result. She flipped the page and tried again. And then again.

He stirred, rubbing a hand over his face and looking out the window. "We are approaching the village of Warlock."

She closed her sketchbook and scooted closer to the window. Warlock was nestled in a narrow valley between two rises. The road ran atop one ridge and left them looking down onto picturesque thatched roofs and stone walls left by the Romans. Late afternoon sunrays shone between two massive gray clouds and lit the town like God's hand. She hoped it was a good omen.

"It's lovely. Will we be stopping there?"

"No. The road forks ahead, and we will push on toward Fernlow. You will be able to visit when the mood strikes. It's a short ride by horse or a good stretch of the legs if the weather is fine. The estate has a chapel, but we haven't kept a

clergyman on for decades. The village church is quite lovely if you're interested in attending."

"Are you interested?" she asked.

"I have not attended services since I returned from France, and I don't plan to." He kept his gaze out the window.

While she enjoyed the ritual of Sunday services, she had never found solace in the long sermons preaching sin and salvation, but local landowners were expected to attend and set a good example.

The countryside was stark and beautiful and wild. Even more so than she had expected. Trees cropped up around the rolling fields. Low stone walls snaked over the fields. Shadows cast by the dark clouds gathering overhead lent the feeling ghosts wandered the moors.

Dawson pointed out various landmarks. Finally, he sat forward as they emerged out of a small copse. "Here is Fernlow Manor."

The manor was gray stone. Its lines were stark and regular as if it were a soldier combating the elements. There were no columns or balconies or adornments of any kind, yet there was a beauty in the simplicity and a strength she could appreciate.

"How old is Fernlow?" she asked.

"It was completed by my grandfather fifty-odd years ago. He was simple in his tastes, and apparently my grandmother refused to travel this far north with him, so he built it as a gentlemanly retreat and a place to indulge his interest in growing the family's wool business."

She looked him with some surprise. "Is it profitable?"

“It was when my grandfather was alive. My father and brothers did not wish to spend their time or energy on breeding sheep, so it has limped along. I hope to make the estate self-sustaining and invest in improvements with the profits. If all goes well, Fernlow will offer much-needed employment for the village.”

“I had no idea you were interested in sheep.”

“I’m interested in money and how to make sure my”—he cleared his throat—“*our* children don’t inherit a mass of debts.”

Our children. Adriana’s collar grew tighter, and she tugged at it. Of course the expectation of their marriage was to produce heirs, but the night in the inn had muddled the straightforward transactional nature of their agreement. The pleasure he had offered with his touch had nothing to do with getting her with child.

As he continued to talk about sheep and his plans, her gaze fell to his hands, and her stomach tightened. It was hard to imagine the buttoned-up, stoic man across from her explaining how the sheep bred to survive the harsh environs of Northumberland produced prized wool was the same man who had delved his fingers inside her and put his mouth on her naked breasts.

Heat rushed through her. She scooped closer to the window. The cool breeze was refreshing, and she forced herself to focus on anything but the man across from her.

In the distance, she could see a stone tower rising and pointed. “What is that structure?”

“It is the original Fernlow Castle, built hundreds of years ago when my ancestors had to protect themselves from

marauding Scots. All but the watchtower has fallen into ruin. The sheep have taken it over and often shelter there in poor weather.”

Dots of white were strewn as far as she could see. “How many sheep do you have?”

“They number in the hundreds. One reason I’m here is to make an accounting. Lambing season is upon us as well, and I hope for it to be a success.”

“How exciting.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I can’t tell how sarcastic you’re being.”

“Not at all. I’m unfamiliar with sheep but always ready to learn more of the natural world.”

“Your curiosity knows no bounds.” The way he said it made her cheeks heat.

Was he still referring to sheep or her curiosity in bed with him? Even though she was the one to delay the consummation of their marriage, she couldn’t stop thinking about what they had done together so far. And when they could do it again.

She was bemused and flummoxed. In all her imaginings, she had never thought of Cyrus in the way she was fixated on Dawson. Dawson, who always seemed so self-possessed and mature and in control. Not so in the darkness in the bed they had shared. When he had gripped himself and pumped, he—

“What is going on in that head of yours?” His question jolted her back into the moment.

Her gaze shot from his hands to his narrowed eyes. “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe it. Your mind is always active. It is one of the things I admire about you.”

What would he think of her if he truly knew what was on her mind? She covered her discomfiture with a stiff smile and tried for a flirty tone. “Just one of the things you admire?”

Had she sounded needy instead of flirty? She was terrible at coy banter. Like any skill, it had to be honed, and she had not put in the work to become adept. Her assumption that she and Cyrus would eventually marry had freed her from the expectation of finding a suitable husband through the batting of her eyes and inane twittering.

At social functions, she sought out people who interested her. Once she spent an entire ball in the company of an ancient gentleman who had an interest in ornithology. Another time, it had been with a dowager who had studied plants to attract butterflies. Rarely, if ever, did a marriageable gentleman interest her enough to engage in a conversation.

Her question seemed to fluster Dawson. “I— You— I admire many things about you. Your fine mind, of course. Your talent for drawing. And your...”

Adriana stared with astonishment as he tripped over his words. He was as bad at banter as she was. “And my... what?”

He cleared his throat and looked up at her through his lashes. “Your beauty, of course, is unmatched.”

She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “I never thought you were one to lie.”

He fully met her gaze, the intensity startling. “I strive to be honest in everything I do or say, madam wife. The truth is you are the most beautiful woman I have ever encountered.”

She dropped her arms and clutched the velvet squab. Her heart lurched in her chest. Was she flattered or hurt that he would feed her an obvious falsehood? “That is a ridiculous thing to declare, Dawson. I own a looking glass and sharp eyesight. I’m too tall, my hair is not at all fashionable, and my nose—”

“Suits you perfectly. You are merely reciting what society deems to be pretty at the moment. Your beauty is classic and is more than just an inventory of your parts. It radiates from within you.”

Her stomach joined her heart in bouncing erratically. Dawson wasn’t one to plaster any woman with false compliments, and there was no one in the carriage to impress. He didn’t even need to woo her as she was already his wife. Was he being sincere? Did he truly think her beautiful?

Even Cyrus had never called her beautiful. He’d called her striking once and, on her London debut, almost pretty. Even her father had bandied about words like interesting and patrician. She had never thought the off-hand comments had hurt until now. Dawson calling her beautiful and seemingly meaning it applied a balm to those past wounds.

“That is the nicest compliment anyone has ever paid to me,” she said around a lump in her throat.

He leaned forward, his hand inching toward hers. “Adriana, I—”

The coachman yelled for the grooms as the carriage rattled to a stop.

She desperately wanted him to continue with whatever he was about to say, but he merely said the obvious. “We have arrived.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He pushed the door open and hopped to the ground without lowering the steps. She moved to the opening. The cool breeze that had teased them through the window had stiffened and cut through her traveling dress.

Dawson stretched, and she couldn't help but stare. His form and style were as out of step with the ton's image of beauty as hers. His shoulders were broad and arms and legs were muscled like a farm laborer. She had never admired the popinjays who strutted through the ballrooms with their padded jackets and thin limbs.

Dawson turned and beat the footman to the carriage steps, lowering them and offering Adriana help down. When she slipped her bare hand into his, a zing went through her.

He leaned in to murmur, “I know you are weary, but I must introduce you to your staff.”

Her staff? It was sobering to think she would be in charge of running not just this house, but managing the households across all the Westhorpe estates. Her modest upbringing had not prepared her for such responsibility.

The staff had gathered on the graveled front in a line to greet them. At a glance, she counted a butler, a housekeeper, a cook, two maids, and one footman. Two young grooms bustled about the horses, and there were probably others too busy for the fanfare.

With a smile pasted on her face, she tugged Dawson to a stop while they were still out of earshot. “I've never run a household. What is expected of me?”

He squeezed her hand. “Mrs. Hannigan, the housekeeper, has been here for thirty years. You can rely on her counsel.”

Adriana nodded and let Dawson guide her forward, nodding as each servant introduced themselves. She tried to set the names to her memory, but her nerves erased them as soon as she moved to the next person. The only two she remembered were the housekeeper, Mrs. Hannigan, and the butler, who was also her husband, Mr. Hannigan.

The couple were in their sixth decade. Mr. Hannigan was tall and gaunt with thinning steel-gray hair. Mrs. Hannigan was plump with rosy cheeks and red curly hair that was doing its best to escape from her mob cap. There was an understandable wariness in both their faces.

Everyone went their separate ways to continue their duties as Mrs. Hannigan gestured Adriana and Dawson toward a drawing room. “The staff offer their felicitations on your marriage, my lord.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hannigan.”

“The two of you must be exhausted after the long trip.” Mrs. Hannigan stopped in the doorway. “We received your missive with the news yesterday morning and were able to ready the mistress’s bedchamber.”

“Excellent. Would you like a bath, Adriana?” Dawson asked.

The offer sounded like heaven. She’d been wearing the same traveling dress the past three days. “Very much so.”

Mrs. Hannigan gave a crisp nod. “I’ll have the bath brought up and water heated. It will take time though. Would you like a tray brought in while you wait? We had fresh bread delivered this morning, and Cook made jam this week.”

Adriana’s stomach perked up. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

Mrs. Hannigan favored Dawson with an affectionate smile. “It is wonderful to see you so well and happy, my lord. We were all grieved about your parents and brothers.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hannigan. It has been a difficult year.”

“Warlock is abuzz with your arrival. I’m afraid the word got out when we took on extra help to open up the house.” A warning crept into her tone. “You will probably be inundated with visitors.”

“Yet another thing that has changed.” Dawson gave a rueful chuckle. “No one ever cared when I was in residence before inheriting the title.”

It seemed as if Mrs. Hannigan was tempted to give Dawson a hug or at least a pat on the arm, but she merely inclined her head. “I’ll return with a tray, my lord.”

Alone with Dawson, Adriana scooted closer to the fire and warmed her backside. Mrs. Hannigan seemed to know Dawson well, which surprised her considering how seldom he had traveled to Fernlow. “Mrs. Hannigan seems quite fond of you.”

Dawson meandered the room picking up items to examine before replacing them and moving on as if taking inventory. “I spent more than one school holiday here. The trip on horseback is considerably faster. I enjoyed the wildness and seclusion. I could read or hunt or wander the hills without feeling the pressure to try to belong.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked up from a figurine of a sheep. “I was the puzzle piece that didn’t fit. You must have noticed. My family loved me, and I loved them, but they didn’t understand me. I wasn’t

born charming or carefree or any of the things that made my brothers easy to be around and well-liked.”

She opened her mouth to argue but merely gave a quick shake of her head. He was right, of course. Even when they were all young, he had been the odd man out, observing the fun from the periphery.

“But what makes you different is also your strength.” She gestured around the room. She couldn’t imagine any of his brothers here but definitely not his eldest brother who never passed over a party. “William was charming and well-liked, but he would have let Fernlow Manor molder away until it looked like the ruined tower. You will make the estate profitable and provide jobs for the people in Warlock. You’ll make a difference.”

“I’ll try, but I may not succeed.” He turned sheep figurine in his hands, his gaze fixed on the gaudy gewgaw.

She closed the distance between them and lay her hand over his. “You will succeed because under your seemingly stoic mask, you care a great deal for those around you. Probably more than you are willing to voice. Look at what you have done for Cyrus. And for me. Who else would sacrifice so much to protect me?”

“Don’t convince yourself that I’m selfless, Adriana. I am anything but.” The harshness in his voice startled her.

Before she could question him further, Mrs. Hannigan pushed the door open. “Here we are.”

Following close behind was a young maid carrying a tray with total concentration, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. The tray made it successfully to the side table, and Mrs. Hannigan herded Adriana and Dawson to the two chairs sitting

closest to the fire. After pushing cups of tea into their hands, she returned to place two plates piled high with bread and meats and jams onto a small table between their chairs.

“Tuck in. I’ll be back once Lady Westhorpe’s bath is ready to escort her to her chambers.” Mrs. Hannigan smiled down at them. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Lady Westhorpe will need a maid. Do you have someone who will suit on staff?”

Mrs. Hannigan eyed Adriana but not in an unfriendly way. “Will your maid be arriving later, my lady?”

“No. I shared a maid with my stepmother, and she remained behind. I can make do with little help.”

Mrs. Hannigan made a dismissive sound. “Nonsense. If one of the girls we have is not qualified, we will find someone else. Should we be expecting your trunk to arrive soon, my lady?”

Adriana exchanged a glance with Dawson. Thankfully, he answered. “We married rather precipitously. We are not sure when, or even if, Lady Westhorpe’s trunk will arrive before we return to London.”

“But you plan to stay through the lambing, I understand?” Mrs. Hannigan asked.

“That is correct.”

“There is an excellent seamstress in Warlock. I will send her a note tomorrow. In the meantime, the previous Lady Westhorpe, God rest her soul, left some frocks although they will be sorely outdated. I will freshen them and have them sent to your room, my lady. Hopefully, one or two will suit until new gowns can be made.”

“Thank you.” Adriana’s relief was sharp. “I am heartily sick of the traveling dresses I brought.”

Mrs. Hannigan slipped out the door, and Adriana and Dawson ate in silence. Once the edge of her hunger was appeased, she studied the room.

The furnishings were heavy oak and the primary color of the upholstery was a dark blue with yellow accents. The draperies were a heavy dark velvet that looked shabby, but the rug underfoot was plush and vibrantly colored. Although it was clear the room had been cleaned and aired, there remained an undertone of tobacco and a slight mustiness of disuse. That would fade with time, and otherwise, the room was quite comfortable and homey.

The chair she occupied had deep cushions and a wide seat. It was the sort she could imagine curling her legs onto while she read a book during a rainy afternoon. The large oil painting over the fireplace was a bucolic landscape featuring abundant sheep.

“You have a free hand to redecorate. Fernlow Manor has lacked a feminine eye toward the appointments. My mother cared naught for the place,” Dawson said.

“It’s rather homey, isn’t it?” She cast a rueful eye toward the draperies. “Although it could use with a bit of sprucing if we plan to spend considerable time here.”

Dawson’s mouth softened, and his shoulders dropped noticeably at her pronouncement. Had he been worried about her reaction to the manor? “Would you mind if we did?”

She lifted a shoulder and gave him a half smile. “I’ll let you know after I discover the variety of lepidoptera inhabiting the grounds. I’m excited to explore the gardens.”

“The garden has received even less care than the manor, I fear.”

“I enjoy a challenge.” She took another bite of the hearty bread slathered with butter and jam. Once she’d washed the bite down with tea, she said, “I must research the plants hardy enough to live in this area that will attract butterflies and moths. Maddie would know.”

Adriana missed her friend for more than just her knowledge of plants. Maddie’s unflagging optimism and high spirits were infectious. Adriana could use some of both right now.

“I left instructions with my London man of business to send word upon the Northcutts’ return to England so you can resume your correspondence until you see her again,” Dawson said offhandedly.

Adriana’s breath caught. That Dawson had thought to do such a thing was astounding. Once married, ladies often had to forsake old friendships and follow their husbands’ whims. Somehow Dawson seemed to recognize her deepest needs and fulfilled them without question. First by providing her with new sketching materials and now by ensuring she and Maddie could remain friends.

“That was very thoughtful. Thank you.” A slug of emotion thickened her words.

His gaze was sharp on her face. “I will do anything in my power to make sure you are content with our arrangement.”

The same intensity she had felt in the darkness with him sprang between them like a spark on dry tinder. Warmth cascaded through her and made her squirm. She was feeling far from *content* at the moment.

Mrs. Hannigan returned to announce her bath was ready.

Thankful for the interruption, Adriana rose and followed the housekeeper up the staircase and down a hall to her chambers. While the room might have been meant for the lady of the manor, it was distinctly masculine. The four-poster bed was made of mahogany and covered in forest green. The walls were papered with silver stripes. She had stepped into a forest of silver birch trees.

The only concession to feminine sensibilities was a rosewood dressing table with a matching delicate chair. A steaming bath sat close to the fireplace that was crackling its welcome.

Mrs. Hannigan cleared her throat and said, “I’m sorry it’s not—”

“It’s perfect.” Adriana wasn’t being polite. She had never been drawn to the pastels of current fashion.

Mrs. Hannigan’s eyebrows rose, but she merely gestured a young woman forward. “This is Elspeth, my niece. She will act as your maid until we can find someone more experienced.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hannigan.” Adriana was already working on her collar as the housekeeper softly closed the door behind her.

Elspeth had fine straight ginger hair that stuck out from her mobcap and thickly lashed brown eyes that dominated a pale, freckled face. “Let me help, miss. I mean, my lady.”

It was on the tip of Adriana’s tongue to correct the girl, but she was a lady now. How long would it take her to get used to her change in station? “How old are you, Elspeth?”

“Seventeen, my lady.”

Elsbeth looked younger, and her hands shook as she helped Adriana shed the wrinkled traveling dress and step into the bath. After the girl unpacked Adriana's meager bag, including the dressing gown she had appropriated from Dawson, she hovered when all Adriana wanted was solitude.

"You can leave the dressing gown for me to wear and then see to your other duties, Elspeth."

"But you'll want me to wash and comb your hair." Elspeth didn't move from behind the bath.

Adriana tried to gentle her voice. "I am used to doing both myself. I am fatigued and would appreciate a bit of solitude."

Elsbeth shuffled to the door but kept glancing over her shoulder like a chastised dog as if hoping Adriana would call her back. She didn't. Finally, Adriana could relax into the warm water.

The past several days had been a whirlwind. Everything was new and different and exhausting. But, if she were being perfectly truthful, also exciting. The mundane path she had been on for years had veered into the unknown. What awaited her around the next bend?

She lay her head back and closed her eyes. During the hasty wedding ceremony and the headlong trip north with Dawson, Cyrus had not occupied her mind. Her conscience pricked at the admission. As much as she dreaded it, he deserved the truth from her own hand. She would write to Cyrus after her bath.

Exhaustion crept up and enveloped her like a cloak. She took up the sweet-smelling soap and cleaned the dust from travel away. After washing and combing her hair while still in

the bath, she climbed out and wrapped herself snugly in Dawson's dressing gown.

She would braid her hair after she tested the bed. Climbing onto the mattress, she groaned with pleasure as she stretched out. It was heavenly.

A moment. She could close her eyes for a moment and then rise to braid her hair and write to Cyrus.

The next thing she knew, she opened her eyes to a banked fire and darkness.

CHAPTER 15



Dawson couldn't sleep. He had dozed off in the carriage trying to keep himself from marveling at the beauty of his new wife sitting across from him. Of course he had awoken from an erotic dream where he had done more than touch her and bring her to climax. It was a wonder she hadn't noticed the hard cock straining at his breeches. It had taken a conversation about sheep to bring his ardor under control.

He had checked on her earlier and found her asleep atop the forest green coverlet, her dark hair damply curling around her like some fairy-tale princess cursed by an evil witch. Her bare leg peeked from the folds of the dressing gown she had commandeered from his wardrobe on their wedding night.

While he would admit to looking his fill, he had merely covered her with a blanket from the foot of the bed and retreated to the study to assess its state.

Its state was a mess. He worked at sorting the papers and ledgers into piles under a brace of candles until his eyes grew tired. Mrs. Hannigan had brought him a tray with a simple dinner of meat pasties.

“Your lady is still soundly sleeping, but I left a tray in case she wakes later feeling peckish.” While Mrs. Hannigan's tone was as even as ever, her face reflected the unusually long

hours she was working because of their arrival. “Is there anything else I can get you, my lord?”

“No, thank you. You go on to your cottage and take Mr. Hannigan with you. We will require nothing more this evening.”

“We would be happy to relocate to the manor if that would be more convenient for you, my lord.”

“I wouldn’t hear of it. Neither Adriana nor I require doting upon. I will be busy with the lambing soon and getting the estate’s accounts in order, and Adriana will want to explore and work in the gardens. She is a lepidopterist.” He couldn’t keep the pride from his voice.

“A *what*, my lord?” Mrs. Hannigan, on the other hand, sounded as if he’d informed her Adriana had leprosy.

“A lepidopterist studies butterflies and moths. Adriana is particularly interested in moths.”

“The bugs that eat wool?”

He hadn’t considered the possible detrimental aspects of moths on their wool stocks. “Yes. Perhaps she can help determine deterrents.”

Mrs. Hannigan hesitated in the doorway. “She is very unusual, isn’t she?”

Dawson wasn’t sure if Mrs. Hannigan was paying a compliment or offering criticism. “My wife is wickedly smart and talented. It seems to me as if that is less unusual among the fairer sex than society would lead us to believe.”

Mrs. Hannigan merely blinked before inclining her head and retreating. Tomorrow he might apologize for his brusque

tone, but he would not countenance anyone insulting Adriana for her intelligence or interests.

He continued to organize the study until one of the candles guttered. It was late, but he remained restless. Blowing out the remaining candles, he wandered through the dark house to the drawing room to pour himself a small glass of brandy from the sideboard.

The view from the front windows was eerie and beautiful. Tendrils of mist had snaked through tall grasses and between the trunks of the trees lining the drive. The moon was full and high. A sense of being home settled into his bones.

As he sipped the spirits, Dawson's thoughts strayed through time, picking at the past and lamenting what he could not change. A creak brought him out of his reverie. Setting his glass aside, he cocked his head and listened.

His time in service had honed his senses. The smallest observation could mean the difference between living and dying. The tread was light and surreptitious. Was Adriana awake?

His heart ticked faster, erasing the fatigue that had crept up on him. A door opened with a slight whine of hinges and then closed. Footsteps trod closer. He tensed, both hoping and dreading she would discover him. Instead, his study door opened with a very slight whoosh of air, but no squeak.

The softest of aahs signaled Adriana had found what she was looking for. Could she smell the recently extinguished tapers? He remained still and silent by the window, not sure what to do. The indecision he battled around her wasn't new but was still discomfiting. He had proven himself more than capable of making split decisions that had saved lives, his and

others. Yet around Adriana, he waffled and hesitated until the moment to act passed him by.

Footsteps shuffled once more in the hall. Had she found a book? Was she retreating to her room to pass fitful hours alone? He took one step toward the hall and then froze when the drawing room door swung open.

Adriana entered with a single candle in a holder and a red leather-bound book. Her hair was unbound and danced around her shoulders. She was clad in his dressing gown. The sleeves were rolled to her wrists, and the hem brushed the floor. She was barefoot and the slash of her pale leg peeped out with each step. She wasn't wearing a night rail.

The circle of light brushed the edge of the shadows cloaking him. It was now or never. He cleared his throat.

She let out a little scream and dropped the candle. It snuffed out on its fall. He took a step forward, and a heavy book caught him across the temple before landing at his feet. His reveal was not going well.

She scurried backward, but the plunge into darkness after the candlelight meant she was blind and nowhere near the door. His eyes adjusted faster, and he caught her sleeve.

“It's me. Dawson. I didn't mean to frighten you.”

She quit struggling, although her arm was tense and her breaths came in pants. “Dawson? What on earth are you doing up?”

“I couldn't sleep. I worked into the night and was unwinding with a brandy. Would you like a glass? It might help settle your nerves.”

“Yes please.”

He returned to the sideboard and poured her a measure of brandy into the same glass he had used. He pressed it into her hands. “Here you are.”

She coughed on the first sip, but quickly downed the glass and handed it back to him. “I threw a book at you,” she said with a strained chuckle. “For just a moment, I thought you were Richard.”

His hand tightened on the glass as he set it aside. “Pace-Verney can’t hurt you anymore. I wouldn’t allow it.”

“It was a silly thought. It’s just he tried... in the drawing room and I—” Her words choked off.

For once, he didn’t second-guess himself. He merely pulled her into his chest and held her. Her trembles ceased, and she let out a big sigh, the tension draining out of her.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered against his shoulder.

“You have nothing to be sorry about. Not only am I your husband, I hope you consider me a friend.” When she didn’t pull away, he felt confident enough to press a soft kiss against her temple.

He took a deep breath. She smelled like lavender soap, clean and fresh and alluring. His hands shuffled higher on her back to play in her unbound hair.

This time her sigh was breathier, not one of relief but pleasure. Her head rose from his shoulder, and her arms encircled his neck. Like their time together in the inn, it was dark and intimate.

Did he dare kiss her?

While he waffled, the decision was made by Adriana. Her lips brushed his jaw on their hunt for his mouth. He threaded

his fingers into her hair and cupped her nape, allowing her to lead. She explored his mouth with the gentleness of butterfly wings. Finally, she touched her tongue to the seam of his mouth.

Accepting the invitation, he tightened his grip in her hair and slanted his mouth across hers to deepen the kiss. With subtle tiny movements, he shuffled them toward the large armchairs in front of the grate. Coals glowed a faint orange in the hearth, giving out a slight warmth.

As he guided her, he continued plundering her mouth and sipping on her lips, one hand still clutched in her hair, the other mapping the curves of her spine and hips. He finally herded her to the chair, the seat against the back of her legs. It took only the slightest of motions to set her off-balance. She plopped down with a breathy exclamation.

He set his hands on the top of the wings and loomed over her. She tilted her head back, her hands fiddling with the lapels of his borrowed dressing gown where they had parted slightly. The flash of pale skin cemented his conclusion that she was naked underneath.

His cock throbbed. With their current positions, he imagined releasing his fall and guiding his cock toward her mouth. Would she turn away in disgust or would her curiosity demand she explore him from the flanged head to the base?

“I don’t think reading is going to quiet my restlessness,” she said.

It took a moment for him to grasp her meaning. His gaze shot to the book still on the floor. “What did you find in the study?”

“A history of Warlock and the surrounding area.”

“That sounds like it would put anyone to sleep.” He stroked the back of his fingers down her cheek. “May I offer my services instead? Would you like me to try to soothe your restlessness?”

“Yes,” she said almost before he had finished the question.

She attempted to rise, but he pressed her back into the soft chair and lowered himself to kneel in front of her. He put his hands on her knees and squeezed. Her muscles were tense.

“Relax,” he said in a voice he might use with a skittish horse. Gently, but firmly, he pushed her knees apart and scooted between her legs.

“That is a task easier said than done considering...” She released the front of the dressing gown to gesture between them.

He took the opportunity to take her hand in his and press a kiss to the palm. “I realize this is all new, but I promise you will sleep much better afterward.”

“Like taking a tonic?” she asked.

He tried not to dwell on the tonic he would like to shoot down her throat, but his cock jerked and leaked a tiny amount of prespend at the erotic picture she didn’t realize she had painted for him.

“Close your eyes and let me touch you.” He immediately regretted the command. The last thing he wanted was for her to picture Cyrus in his place, but it was too late. The edge of a moonbeam cast a dim shadow of her lashes against her cheek.

He took the hand he’d pressed a kiss onto and raised it above her head to hold the wooden edge of the chair top. Then he forced the fingers of her other hand to loosen from the fabric of the dressing gown and lifted it to join the first.

Her eyes were squeezed tighter now, and she bit her bottom lip. He leaned forward, his hands curled lightly around her hips to kiss her. When he felt her apprehension turn to a different sort of tension, he ran his hands down her thighs to slip inside the gown where it had parted at her knees.

Although he had surmised she wore nothing underneath, the reality of his hands touching her bare thighs made his control wobble. He dropped his face to her neck and took several deep breaths. Her chest rose and fell in a similar rapid pattern.

Once he had a handle on his own desire, he focused on her once more. He needed her to understand the marriage bed did not have to be a chore. He couldn't imagine rutting just for the sake of breeding. He wouldn't do it. If she did not truly want him in her bed, then he would live celibate.

However, based on the trembles of her legs as his hands wandered higher, he wouldn't have to make that sacrifice. He caressed the soft skin of her inner thighs with his thumbs, inches from the center of her desire. Her legs parted wider, all but begging him to touch her. He gave her thighs a firm squeeze, then removed his hands from under the dressing gown.

Her head lifted and her eyes opened. "I am not finding this to be soothing in the least, Dawson."

The use of his name settled in his chest, encouraging him to continue. At least she recognized who was kneeling between her parted legs. "I must ruffle your feathers a bit if you're to get the full effect."

He tugged on the tightly cinched tie until it surrendered. Her hands flew to clutch the material together. "Wait! I'm not wearing my night rail."

“I have been acutely aware of that fact since you stepped into the drawing room.”

Her mouth formed an *O* of surprise, but nothing but a sharp intake of breath sounded.

“Put your hands back where they were.” While only a hint of the gruff force he could command had entered his voice, she obeyed with an immediacy that fired his blood.

He was glad it was dim so she couldn't see how much his hands shook as they slowly peeled the dressing gown apart. In the same thought, he cursed the darkness because he could not fully see and appreciate the beauty he was revealing.

Her breath shuddered, and she squirmed, not away but closer. He circled her rib cage with his hands, his thumbs glancing against the underside of her breasts. A distressed sound came from Adriana's throat.

“Am I hurting you?” he murmured, knowing he was not.

“You are torturing me, and I think you know it.” There was frustration and need wrapped around her accusation.

She was perfectly correct. He wanted to build her desire until it was all she could focus on. Until modesty and ladylike lessons disintegrated. Until she couldn't remember she had longed to marry his brother.

Savoring the moment, he ever so slowly shifted his hands up to cup her breasts. It was his turn to let out a long, shuddering breath. They filled his hands with an exquisite perfectness. He brushed his fingers over her nipples, already peaked with arousal.

Her hands left the chair back to find purchase on his shoulders, her fingers biting into his muscles. He continued to

explore the satiny skin of her breasts, caressing and squeezing the firm flesh and tweaking the nipples.

He had learned during their encounter at the inn how sensitive her breasts were. Just as in his former work as a spy, he would use any and all information he gathered to win the day. Although in this instance, they would both win.

He leaned forward to nuzzle the side of one breast with his cheek and nose. The friction of his night beard against her softness incited a moan from her throat and made her arch for more. She did not attempt to mask her reactions, and he bared his teeth in animalistic satisfaction.

He trailed his lips toward her nipple and swirled his tongue around the velvety, ruffled areola. She gasped, one hand moving to fist in his hair. He closed mouth over her nipple and sucked.

Her hips bucked farther down the cushion, pressing her core against his stomach. A ripple went through him. Her bare folds were probably leaving a damp spot on his waistcoat. He wanted to rip it and his shirt off, but it meant releasing her breast and he couldn't pull himself away.

He flicked his tongue across the nipple before lavishing similar attention on her other breast. She clutched him ever closer, her hips undulating slightly against him in a primal rhythm she did not recognize yet.

“I feel like I might die,” she said breathlessly.

With her nipple still in his mouth, he said, “In a way you will die. I will give you *la petite mort*.”

“A little death?”

“The same little death you experienced at the inn.”

“Oh, in that case, kill me please.”

He laughed, but it was strained just like the front of his breeches. “It is a struggle to tear myself away from your perfect breasts.”

“Are they? Perfect, I mean.”

“Spectacular.” He sucked hard at her nipple, inciting a moan as she rubbed herself against him.

With great difficulty, he raised his head but allowed himself one last caress and a gentle squeeze of her breasts. He sat back on his heels and pushed the dressing gown completely apart. She tried to close her legs, but he was firmly wedged in between. She resorted to trying to cover her mons with both hands.

He *tsked*. “There is no need to be modest. Anyway, it is too dark to see the delights you are trying to hide from me. Don’t you want relief?”

She hummed, but he needed more.

“Don’t you?” he asked more firmly.

“Yes,” she whispered and moved her hands to the arms of the chair. It was enough, but she added plaintively, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can’t seem to stop myself from wanting to rub against you. I feel like a cat in heat.”

“Considering some call this a pussy, you are not far off in your comparison.” He ran a finger through her folds and stopped breathing.

Her pussy was plumped and slick and soft. He had to press a hand against his cock to stem an unseemly, embarrassing climax in his breeches. Something that had never happened even when he was a green lad.

“I have a pussy, and you have a cock,” she said as if savoring the new words she was learning. “A cat and a rooster. It really doesn’t make sense as they can’t mate one another.”

He might have laughed if he wasn’t so close to the edge of his control. He had planned to make her spend with his fingers like he had in the inn, but her womanly scent was too tempting. What he was about to do would shock her, no doubt. Did she deserve a warning?

“I’m going to feast on you.” It came out gruff and harsh and not at all a question.

“What do you mean?” She raised her head to look down on him.

The moon had risen higher during their interlude, its beams illuminating more of her face. He remained in the shadows, but kept his gaze fixed on hers as he leaned forward to lick up the seam of her folds to flick her clit.

Her legs trembled, but she didn’t try to close them or push him away. He took a thigh in each hand and pushed them farther apart, opening her fully to his ministrations. He mapped her folds with his tongue and lips, savoring her sweetness.

He was in heaven, feasting on manna.

A tug on his hair brought him out of his honeyed stupor. Although his grip held her in place, she was desperately trying to shift his attention to her clit. The breathless sounds coming from her were desperate.

It was time to give her what she craved. What he craved. He worked his tongue over and around her clit before pulling the bud between his lips, rhythmically sucking and flicking it.

Her back arched, and she let out a strangled cry. Her body pulsed against his lips, and her honey flowed. He let go of one of her legs and slipped his finger into her channel, trying, and failing, not to imagine the slick walls clutching at his cock.

He pumped his finger and lapped at her clit through her aftershocks and until the tension drained from her. With hands that shook, he lowered her legs and drew the edges of the dressing gown closed over her nakedness.

He needed... No, he was needy. He rose to his feet, but before he could step toward the door and a modicum of privacy to relieve himself, she sat up and grabbed his hips.

She looked up at him, her breaths still fast and shallow. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders. The dressing gown remained parted, and a strip of her white skin led into the shadowy place he craved more of. She made a highly erotic picture, and it didn't help that his cock was inches away from her mouth, separated by only his breeches. He swayed slightly.

"I must go and..." Dear God, what excuse was he to give her? He must go, take himself in hand, and shoot his spunk while thinking of her honey?

"In the inn, you were hard with arousal. Are you now as well?" Her innocent curiosity would be his undoing.

"Yes." He was afraid even speaking a single word would uncork his desire, and he wouldn't be able to stop from taking himself in hand while standing in front of her in the drawing room.

"You need the same relief you gave me, don't you?"

This time all he could manage was a grunt. He tried to step away, but she fisted the waist of his breeches and held him with more strength than he anticipated. Not that he truly

fought her. He was willing to endure torture to remain in her orbit.

Her hands shifted, and he looked down to watch her work to open the fastenings of his breeches. She shouldn't be subjected to his base desires. He needed to woo her, not scare her away from his bed forever. He would stop her.

He didn't. His fall opened, and his cock jutted out. The tip weeping in anticipation.

Thankfully, the moon which had graced him with a view of her face during his ministrations had risen above the window. Women were soft and sweet and welcoming. Men were brutal and ugly and messy. He offered a prayer the veiny monster inches from her lips remained shrouded in shadows.

She grasped him loosely, and he gasped. Releasing him, she looked up. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," he croaked out.

"Show me how you want to be touched. You know so much of what I will enjoy, and I know so little. It's honestly a travesty that young ladies are kept ignorant while—"

Her words cut off when he took her hand and wrapped it tightly around his shaft. With his hand over hers, he demonstrated how to stroke him from tip to base, his hips thrusting instinctively in her fist.

He shouldn't force her to touch him. He let go of her hand, but she continued to stroke him. His bollocks tightened in anticipation. The entire village of Warlock could arrive on their doorstep to pay a call. The house could catch fire and burn to ash around him. The servants could line up and watch. He could not stop now.

He grabbed the wings of the chair to keep from wrapping his hands in her hair and pulling her mouth to his cock. His hips moved faster. She was watching the length of him shuttle through her hand, his prespend offering lubrication. It was an erotic sight.

With the swipe of her tongue over the tip of his cock, the moment became carnal and wanton and the stuff of his dreams. Her strokes slowed as she traced the flanged head with her tongue. The light pressure made his knees wobble. He leaned into the chair for support, the movement also driving his cock to brush against her lips.

“Take me into your mouth. Please.” The words breeched the dam of his conscience.

There was no disgust or hesitation on her part. She merely opened her mouth and welcomed the tip of his cock into the warmth. Only an underlying sense of decency kept him from thrusting deeper.

This was enough. More than enough. He was seconds away from spending. Pulling free of her mouth, he covered her hand and stroked twice before he erupted. He hoped most of his spend was confined to her chest but couldn't be sure in the darkness. He braced his feet farther apart and let his hand fall. Hers remained on his still-firm cock, slipping from base to tip.

“Allow me to apologize,” he finally said in a hoarse voice.

“Why?”

There were too many reasons he should apologize. Yes, she was his wife, but he had promised her time to get used to the idea of sharing his bed. While technically it wasn't a bed they'd shared, he'd begged her to take him in her mouth. Wives weren't expected to perform such acts.

“I have a handkerchief somewhere.” He checked the pockets of his waistcoat and came up empty. “I find myself unprepared. I’m sorry.”

She rose, pulled the dressing gown closed, and cinched it. “Why do you keep offering apologies? Do you regret what transpired?”

“I was overly impetuous.” It was at least a partial truth.

“I see.” Her tone implied neither anger nor disappointment, yet he could sense both in the air. “I believe I will be able to find sleep now. I bid you good night.”

She might as well have been leaving a social function and not the most erotic encounter he had ever experienced. She only bumped into one side table on her shuffle to the door.

“Good night,” he said formally.

She paused in the doorway. “I hope we didn’t leave a mess.”

He looked to the chair. That was not something he wanted to explain to Mrs. Hannigan.

“Candle wax on the rug will be tricky to remove.” She added.

Relief at her meaning had him brushing her worry away. “The reason you dropped the candle at all was because I frightened you. It was my fault, so I will incur any admonishments from Mrs. Hannigan.”

“Will I see you in the morning?” she asked.

“I am leaving at dawn to ride the estate with my new manager.”

He thought she might have nodded, but she didn't reply otherwise before she disappeared.

He collapsed in the chair he would never look at the same again to gather his wits and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 16



Adriana awoke famished. And sticky. She had fallen into bed as soon as she had left Dawson in the drawing room and slept soundly. She had dreamed, or course. Dreams she would be embarrassed to relay to anyone, even Maddie.

In fact, if it wasn't for the remnant of the night's activities across her chest, she might question whether she had dreamed the entire interlude. Although her knowledge before last night had been so lacking even her prodigious imagination would have never concocted such a charged and satisfying encounter.

She pulled a pillow over her face and groaned, alternately relieved and disappointed she wouldn't face Dawson over the breakfast table.

A scratch on the door heralded the freckle-faced Elspeth balancing a breakfast tray with a focused concentration. She made it to the night table at Adriana's elbow, only to overturn a pot of jam as the tray clattered down.

"Drat," the girl muttered before her gaze shot to Adriana. "Excuse me, my lady."

"It's fine." Adriana righted the pot before too much of the thick jam could escape. Her stomach growled. She had slept through dinner the night before and hadn't touched the simple

tray Mrs. Hannigan had left the night before. A different hunger had been appeased instead.

“Lord Westhorpe thought you might be up early and famished after last night.”

Adriana froze for a terrified moment. Did everyone in the household know what she and Dawson had done together in the drawing room?

“He thought it best to let you sleep instead of waking you for dinner,” Elspeth said.

“Ah, yes. I needed the sleep after the long trip north.” Adriana’s heart slowed, and she swung her legs around to slather a thick piece of bread with butter and jam before taking a healthy bite.

The maid cast surreptitious looks in Adriana’s direction while she tidied the room. Adriana tightened the tie of the dressing gown. She looked down to see a whitish stain marring the jewel-toned brocade. Her face heated. “Would you mind bringing fresh water for my ablutions?”

“Of course, my lady.” Elspeth curtsied, which Adriana would put a stop to at the earliest opportunity, and departed.

Adriana polished off the rest of the tray, then went to the cool water still in the bath to attempt to sponge off the stain of Dawson’s spend.

How had she gone from reluctant and averse to even the thought of sharing Dawson’s bed to tonguing his cock and letting him do the same to her? It had been glorious. All of it. Her only regret was her inability to study him clearly in the darkness.

She stared at her reflection in the looking glass. Her hair was unbound and wild and her face flushed. Her eyes were

wide but not with innocence. Not anymore. Now that he had given her some knowledge, she was thirsty for more.

Mrs. Hannigan returned holding a basin of warm water with Elspeth trailing behind. “Good morning, my lady. I thought you might feel peaked after your travels and lack of dinner, but it seems the good night’s sleep and a hearty breakfast have set you to rights.”

“Indeed. Thank you, Mrs. Hannigan. The bread and jam were especially delicious.”

“Our bread comes from the baker in Warlock. She is quite talented.” Mrs. Hannigan’s gaze dropped to the damp spot on the dressing gown. “If you would like to dress, Elspeth can clean your dressing gown today. Too much jam, I daresay?”

“Jam. Yes. I was a little too enthusiastic in my hunger this morning. The baker is a woman, you say? Isn’t that unusual?” Adriana asked, genuinely curious, but also wanting to change the subject.

“Indeed, but she learned at her father’s knee, and the quality of her creations can’t be denied.”

“I would like to meet her.” A woman with a passion for anything out of the ordinary interested Adriana greatly.

Mrs. Hannigan’s brows drew together, and she gave a slight shake of her head. “Mrs. Kinard is a fine woman, but not the sort you will be socializing with. There are several families in the area that will expect invitations and will no doubt use your recent nuptials to issue their own.”

“We met the Chesters on the road from London,” Adriana offered, determined not to argue with Mrs. Hannigan about who she should and shouldn’t associate with.

“The Chesters have lived here for centuries. You would do well to cultivate a friendship with Miss Chester. However, entertaining can wait until we get you properly outfitted. I am still sorting dresses, but Elspeth cleaned your green dress if you would like to wear that today. I have sent word to Mrs. MacGrath in the village to expect you this afternoon so she can take your measurements. She has several bolts of cloth you can choose from, and you can order whatever flourishes and ribbons you require.”

“I prefer my dresses simple and unadorned.”

Mrs. Hannigan’s mouth tightened and erased the aura of the warm matron. “Now that you are a countess, you will be required to act as hostess and dress in the first stare of fashion. I’m sure you don’t want to embarrass Lord Westhorpe.”

She had learned with her father how to cede the field to fight her battles elsewhere. “That is the last thing I wish.”

“Good. I’ll leave Elspeth to see to your dress and hair.” Mrs. Hannigan swept out and left a sense that she was disappointed in Adriana in some way. It would not do to make an enemy of the woman, that was for certain.

After sponging Dawson’s scent off her skin, she allowed Elspeth to dress her in the pretty green dress she had worn for her wedding ceremony. “It sounds as though my morning is free. What’s the weather? I would like to take a walk around the grounds.”

Elspeth braided and pinned Adriana’s hair. “It is a fine day at the moment, but my granny said the skies were red this morning.”

“And that means?” Adriana asked.

“Storms brewing later.” An ominous tone darkened the maid’s mien, and a shiver skated across Adriana’s neck. Then Elspeth smiled, shrugged, and added. “Or not. My granny is wrong at least half the time, but she sees things, if you take my meaning.”

Elspeth’s wink made her meaning quite clear. Adriana did not believe in such nonsense and her answering smile was polite at best. The maid slipped out with the basin of cooled water to empty, leaving Adriana blessedly alone.

Her father’s modest estate in Bainbridge meant Adriana had known the few servants they’d kept since childhood. There was no question of who had been in charge of the house, and it wasn’t her. She had liked it that way. The lack of responsibilities had left her with plenty of time to explore and sketch and indulge her interest in lepidopterology.

Now though, she was feeling the lack of experience keenly. As she had last night with Dawson. She had thought herself knowledgeable compared to the green girls she had come out with, and she was in some respects, but in terms of running a household and pleasing a husband, she felt woefully inadequate to the task.

Although... Dawson had expressed his satisfaction in the most primal way possible. While they hadn’t consummated their marriage in the legal sense, she wondered how long other husbands spent with their head between their lady’s legs. Or how many wives stroked and tongued their husbands’ cocks?

She fanned herself with her hand and ignored the heavy throb in her loins. Fresh air and a distraction would set her to rights.

After gathering her sketchbook and pastels, she pinned on a bonnet and slipped out the front door. The air was brisk, but

the sun shone intermittently through the clouds skating across the sky, offering patches of warmth.

The gardens were unkempt and overrun, but she didn't mind. Less interaction with man meant a more natural landscape. She found a nest of red squirrels and a browned empty silk cocoon of a moth already transformed.

Before she knew it, Mrs. Hannigan was calling her from the back of the manor. "I have fixed you a tray in the drawing room. Once you are finished, the carriage will take you into the village. I will not be able to accompany you, unfortunately, but the carriage will return to collect you well before dinner."

Adriana, relieved not to have to deal with Mrs. Hannigan's opinions on her fabric and style choices, happily agreed to the plans.

A half hour later, Adriana stepped out of the carriage in front of the dressmaker's shop on the main thoroughfare of Warlock. At first glance, it was a bustling, charming village. While it was smaller than Bainbridge, the placards denoting the various businesses weren't chipped or weathered, and the businesses and cottages were well maintained and prosperous-looking with abundant fresh flowers growing in yards and along window boxes. The winters in Warlock must be desolate and colorless, and in response the villagers seemed to revel in and appreciate the spring.

The coachman turned the carriage around and headed back to Fernlow. Mrs. MacGrath welcomed her warmly and ushered her into the cramped cottage that functioned as both home and business. The seamstress wore one pair of spectacles and another sat on top of her auburn hair. A measuring tape hung around her neck, and she wore a pincushion on her wrist with

silver pins winking. She was trim and pretty and no more than thirty years of age.

Tea was offered and accepted, and while they sipped and enjoyed fine buttery short biscuits, Mrs. MacGrath discussed the list Mrs. Hannigan had sent.

“It seems you need a full wardrobe, my lady.” While it was a statement, Mrs. MacGrath’s eyebrows rose.

“Dawson and I... I mean, Lord Westhorpe and I married by special license and left the next day, but I have a cadre of dresses in London that I’m sure will be sent along.” Adriana tried to quash the doubt in her voice. For all she knew, Richard had burned her wardrobe like her sketchbooks. “I only need a few dresses to tide me over.”

Mrs. MacGrath cocked her head and examined Adriana, but in the way of a professional evaluating her subject. “Will you need night clothes? Shifts? Stockings?”

“All of that. I’m not sure what Mrs. Hannigan requested in terms of style, but—”

Mrs. MacGrath waved her hand. “Mrs. Hannigan, bless her, has always wanted to shepherd a lady through high society and has strong opinions on patterns and fabrics. It is unfortunate she ended up marrying a Northman. I can see you prefer more classic lines, and with your coloring, I would recommend rich tones. No fripperies for you.”

“Exactly.” The relief she felt at being understood made the next two hours of poking and prodding and pinning fly by. It was the first time she actually enjoyed the process.

In the end, she ordered too many dresses, including one evening dress based on a modern French pattern that Mrs. MacGrath assured would flatter her tall, lithe frame.

She stepped out of the dressmaker's expecting to see the carriage waiting. A wooden cart pulled by an old nag rumbled by. The weathered man on top nodded a greeting and stopped in front of the Woolly Sheep, Warlock's inn and tavern.

Adriana weighed following the man inside. She wouldn't have hesitated in Bainbridge. The innkeeper and his wife had known Adriana since she was a babe, but she was a countess now and not sure what was acceptable. Mrs. Hannigan's admonishment to not bring embarrassment onto Dawson or the earldom rang in her ears.

She looked up the road toward the house. While she couldn't see the manor house, the distance was, as Dawson had said, merely a good stretch of her legs. In any case, she would probably meet the carriage on its return to collect her.

She started up the road at a brisk pace, but got distracted several times by insects and animals she startled out of the grouse that lined the deeply rutted road.

It was the ruts that should have offered warning. Or perhaps Adriana should have put more stock in Elspeth's grandmother. A sharp wind carrying a familiar scent had her looking upward.

"Oh, dear me," she muttered.

The deep ruts had been caused by heavy rains, of course, but she had been so focused on the teeming life around her she had failed to notice the dark clouds gathering to snuff out the meager sunlight.

How far did she have left to go? She could see neither the village nor the manor, and she had yet to familiarize herself with landmarks to judge her exact whereabouts.

She pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders and quickened her step. It would not be the first time, nor would it be the last, that she was caught out during a storm, but when the first raindrop plopped on her neck, a shiver went through her. It wasn't a warm spring shower. It was stinging and icy cold like the wind.

Thunder rumbled as the heavens opened. Blind to the road, she stumbled along, trying to avoid stepping in a rut. Although the rain slowed her progress, she pushed on, expecting to see the trees lining the drive to the manor emerge from the sheets of rain.

Instead, the road narrowed until it resembled an animal trail. She stopped short. Somewhere along the way, she had veered off the carriage road. She sought refuge under a tree and considered her options.

She could wait out the storm, but considering she was unfamiliar with the weather patterns of the area, that could be all night. Her teeth were already chattering. Her only option was to backtrack until she found where she'd gone wrong. Surely she wasn't too far off the mark. She would be back at the manor in no time.

Through the rain a tall stone structure emerged. The first jolt of relief was followed by dismay. It wasn't Fernlow Manor but the ruins of the old castle she had stumbled upon. At least, it would offer some shelter, and she could regroup until the rain eased. Dawson had warned her, hadn't he? The countryside was unpredictable and could be dangerous.

She wasn't the only one to seek shelter from the storm. The braying of a dozen black-faced ewes drew her closer. None of them kicked up a fuss as she weaved through them to tuck herself under a narrow overhang. The relief of not being

pummeled by the icy drops was immediate, but her shivers didn't abate.

A pebble fell from high above her and skittered to join the stones at her feet. She glanced up, praying nothing more substantial came tumbling down. There was nothing she could do but wait out the storm in what little protection the tower offered.

Closing her eyes, she sat and brought her knees to her chest and curled around them. Her imagination summoned a fire and hot tea doctored with a dollop of brandy. Her shivers slowed. Could she will herself warm? What was the hottest she had ever been?

In the drawing room armchair with her dressing gown parted and Dawson kneeling between her legs. The things he had done with his mouth had set her on fire. Why had she made him promise to wait to bed her? Now that she might not get the opportunity, she could admit that she wanted to be a true a wife to him with all the pleasure such a union would bring.

It was a mystery why Dawson made her blood stir when Cyrus did not. In the countless hours she had spent alone with Cyrus, she had never been overcome with the urge to draw him or touch him or kiss him.

Her time with Cyrus had been lighthearted. Their marriage would have been comfortable and easy and... passionless. He would respect her in bed and out. How soon would it have been until he procured a mistress? A woman of experience like the actress he had taken up with before his grand tour. The thought of him in another woman's bed hadn't bothered her. What *actually* bothered her was that him taking a mistress did not bother her.

Her mind was beginning to circle itself. What if Dawson took a mistress?

She would rip every hair out of the woman's head and then kill Dawson. Bloodthirsty violence wrecked her usual calm logic. The intense anger gave her motivation. She would not die before informing Dawson he was not allowed to seek satisfaction with another woman. The overriding thought drove her to her feet.

A horse's neigh cut through the sound of rain. The sheep milled about at the sound of an interloper. She grabbed up her sodden skirts and scrambled through the mass of animals. A large black horse and cloaked figure were some distance down the path.

Her heart and body recognized the rider. It was Dawson. She yelled and jumped and waved her arms in the air. His head swiveled toward her. He wasted no time in reaching her. Her shawl slipped to the muddy ground. It would not make it home, but she would.

He swung to the ground before his mount had come to a stop in a feat of seemingly effortless masculine grace. He took her face between his gloved hands. "I was afraid..." Emotion clogged his throat and darkened his eyes.

"I'm well. Cold and sodden, but alive." The knowledge she was safe sapped her final surge of strength. She shivered and swayed toward him.

"I must get you home and into a hot bath."

"That sounds heavenly. And some tea and brandy?" She let him sweep her into his arms and maneuver her onto his horse. Not that she had the strength or will to fight.

He mounted behind her, pulling her into his body and wrapping her in his cloak. “Whatever you wish, you shall have.”

While she wouldn't claim she was warm, she was definitely not as cold as she had been. The rain was still torrential, turning the ruts into tiny rivers and making footing for the horse treacherous. Based on his muttered cursing, their pace remained too slow for Dawson's liking.

She shifted slightly in his arms in order to see his face. Rain sluiced off the brim of his hat which was drooping. His gaze remained narrowed on their path forward. She relaxed against him, entirely confident in his ability to navigate them home safely.

It was a strange thing to feel so safe with him. She had once felt so with her father until he tried to force her to marry Richard. She had never felt safe with *him*. Cyrus's capriciousness meant she had been the one to point out dangers and steer him clear.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” While he did not sound angry, there was a deep current of emotion in his voice.

“But I did not heed your warning.”

“Storms can come on suddenly in these parts.”

“I thought I would meet the carriage on its return, but I did not.” She had the almost uncontrollable urge to trace the line of his jaw. He had not shaved that morning, and his stubble was tempting her. It had felt delicious against her breasts in the drawing room.

His sharp startled gaze met hers for an instant before returning to the path. “The carriage did not wait for you?”

“There was no reason to wait. It had not returned yet when I finished with Mrs. MacGrath, so I decided to walk.” When he didn’t immediately reply, she intoned in a low voice, “Red sky at morning.”

“Are you turning feverish?” A definite thread of worry had appeared to draw his brows closer.

“I don’t believe so. Just cold. And relieved. Elspeth informed me this morning that her Gran observed a red sky this morning which meant storms were brewing.”

“Ah. I see. I suppose even a broken clock is correct twice a day.”

Dawson led his mount over the bank at the edge of the road and into an open field. In the distance, she could make out the stark lines of Fernlow Manor. She shivered to think of the hot bath she hoped awaited.

His arms tightened around her. His body was hard and hot behind her. Was steam rising between them? Although scientifically impossible, she wouldn’t have been shocked.

“Dawson.” Something must be said, and if she waited, she might lose heart. Or else her senses would return with warmth.

“Yes?” He spared her a longer glance now they were out of the rutted road.

“I fear I must extract another promise from you.”

“Of course. Anything.” The confidence of his answer gave her the courage to continue.

“Promise me you will never take a mistress.”

He pulled at the reins and stopped their progress in his surprise. He tugged off a glove and cupped her cheek. The

heat was exquisite. “I fear you are suffering from hypothermia.”

She closed her eyes and nuzzled into his callused palm like a kitten. “No. My mind was merely wandering before you appeared.”

“All signs of hypothermia. We must get you warm.” He nudged his horse into a faster walk.

“My thoughts have never been clearer.” That wasn’t entirely true, but her worry was like a splinter she had to excise now. “Is your reluctance to issue a promise to forgo a mistress insight into your feelings on the matter?”

A gruff sound that resembled a laugh vibrated against her. “May I ask why your mind wandered to this particular subject as you succumbed to the wet and cold?”

Her thoughts were sluggish, and her usual reserve washed away. “Cyrus kept a mistress. An actress. Did you know?”

“I did,” he said reluctantly. His sudden tension against her was reflected in the tight set to his mouth. “This arrangement upset you.”

It was a statement which made her feel even worse about correcting him, because it should have upset her. “Not in the least. That is odd, isn’t it? *I’m* odd. I saw her perform once in *The Taming of the Shrew*. She is talented and very beautiful. I understood why he wanted her.”

It had been a magnificent performance. No doubt, Cyrus had been drawn to her artistry as much as her beauty. Adriana had not felt threatened. Her friendship with Cyrus was like a stately oak, deeply rooted, and would last long after the bloom of his liaison with the actress had withered.

“If it’s any consolation, the affair ended before he left for his grand tour.”

Adriana took a moment to evaluate her feelings. “I feel only indifference. Which is why I don’t understand the violence I feel when I think of you taking a mistress.”

“Violence?”

She cupped his cheek this time, reveling in the rasp of his night beard, to force his gaze to hers. He needed to understand the ferocity of her opinion on the matter. “If you take a mistress, I would rip every single hair out of her head. Then I would emasculate you.”

Without releasing her gaze, he said, “I had no idea you were so bloodthirsty.”

“Neither did I.”

He took her hand and pressed a warm kiss in her palm. “I promise to never take a mistress.”

With his promise, the green-eyed beast inside her slumbered, and she found her own eyes wanted to close as she rested her head in the crook of his neck.

CHAPTER 17



Dawson's heart galloped along for too many reasons. Top of the list was how cold she felt in his arms. Her face was too pale, and her hand on his cheek had been icy. Her eyes were closing and her body going lax. He had seen men drift to sleep in the cold and never awaken.

The house was close. He needed to keep her with him for just a little longer, and then there would be a warm fire, a brandy, and a bath waiting to revive her.

He shook her. "Wake up, love. Keep your eyes open for me."

Her eyes fluttered open. "But I'm tired."

"You can sleep later after I get you home and warm. Won't your bed be more comfortable?"

She snuggled closer. "I find you more than adequate."

His heart leaped once more. Had the cold addled her mind? He reviewed their conversation. It was the only explanation, because it had sounded like she would be jealous if he took a mistress.

She'd known about Cyrus's mistress. The woman Dawson had paid off all while gritting his teeth at his brother's asinine need to emulate the so-called great poets by experiencing

every vice London had to offer when Adriana was right there waiting for him.

And yet she had sounded admiring of the woman. Unlike the completely fictional mistress she had assigned to Dawson. What did it mean? Probably nothing.

Finally, they crossed from the grass onto the well-maintained gravel road to the front of the house, and he could nudge his horse faster. The front door opened. Hannigan stepped out, looking every day of his six-plus decades.

Dawson dismounted with Adriana in his arms, a feat he had perfected while transporting wounded soldiers. He swept past Hannigan to find Mrs. Hannigan looking equally as haggard as her husband.

“The water is hot on the stove. The lads are ready to bring it up to her bath,” she said.

“A tray with hot tea and brandy as well.” He took the stairs two at a time.

“We’re dripping everywhere.” Her teeth were chattering, but a hint of color had returned to her face.

“If you are concerned about a damp rug, then I believe you’ll recover.”

“Of course I’ll recover. Were you worried?”

Worried? He’d experienced a terror he had never known. Not even on the battlefield. The helplessness he’d felt was still raw. If he’d lost her... He hugged her tighter to him as he passed through the door to her chambers.

Every able-bodied servant had been enlisted to carry water, and the bath was filled quickly, steam rising tantalizingly. He

set Adriana on her feet, holding her waist until he was sure she could stand.

She shuffled toward the bath, her fingers plucking ineffectually at the fastenings of her dress. “That looks amazing.”

Mrs. Hannigan returned, followed by Elspeth carrying a tray with the requested tea and brandy, along with bread and cheese and a side of the succulent quail the cook had prepared for dinner.

“We’ll take it from here, my lord.” Mrs. Hannigan turned her back to him to direct Elspeth to undress Adriana.

Before he could reply, Adriana said, “My husband will assist me. You and Elspeth can leave us, Mrs. Hannigan.”

Both women inhaled sharply in unison. Elspeth looked between him and Adriana with wide eyes while Mrs. Hannigan sputtered, “But that’s... Surely you don’t mean it.”

Adriana’s gaze remained on the bath. “I do mean it. Leave us please.”

“You heard your mistress.” Dawson peeled off his great coat and his hat and handed them to Mrs. Hannigan. “Could you have Hannigan see to these?”

Dawson herded the two women out and closed the door, locking it for good measure. Then he began working on Adriana’s ties. The dress was sodden and the ties knotted. The longer it took him, the more she shivered.

“It’s a good thing you just ordered new dresses.” He ripped the back open along a seam and pushed the sleeves down her arms.

She shimmed out of the rest and stepped into the bath with her shift and stockings still on, sinking up to her shoulders. Her moan was one of relief and pleasure.

He had never watched a woman bathe, but he had heard of young ladies, especially innocents, wearing their underthings into the bath. He couldn't stop his gaze from wandering. Her shift had turned translucent and flashed the pink of one of her nipples.

He was soaked through as well, but suddenly feeling very warm. "Would you like tea or a brandy?"

"A brandy please." She submerged completely in the water.

By the time he returned with a generous glass of brandy, she was rubbing the water out of her eyes. The color had come back into her face and fingers. She took a sip and grimaced.

"Feeling better?"

"Much." Her attention turned to him. "You are soaking wet as well. Go change. I'm not going to drown."

He retreated to his connecting chamber, shed his wet clothes, and changed into loose trousers and a dressing gown. A knock sounded on his door. He wanted to ignore the summons and return to Adriana but answered it anyway.

Hannigan was outside the door. "How is Lady Westhorpe?"

"Warming up and feeling better. Thank you for asking. What have you discovered?" Dawson kept his voice low.

"The coachman is ill, my lord. Very ill. I've sent for the apothecary from Warlock in fact."

“A fever?” A ripple of fear had Dawson gripping the jamb in a bruising grip. He couldn’t consider losing Adriana.

“No fever, my lord. He has required use of several chamber pots.” Hannigan obviously didn’t want to go into details about the coachman’s malady even though such decorum wasn’t necessary with Dawson. He had seen the worst of what could happen after infections took root.

“Force him to drink water even if he heaves it back up. Once he is feeling better, find out what he ate.”

“Would you like to speak with the apothecary when she arrives, my lord?” Hannigan asked.

“She? What has happened to Mr. Honeycutt?”

“Passed two winters ago. His daughter took over his practice. There was a fuss at first, but there was no one else. She is actually quite good.”

“Lady Westhorpe will not require her services.” Dawson cast a glance over his shoulder to the connecting door. “You can give me a report in the morning.”

“Very good, my lord.” Hannigan gave a shallow bow and melted in the shadowy hall.

On soft feet, Dawson approached the connecting door. The first thing he noticed on his return was the empty bath and the lump of wet cloth on the floor. She had removed her shift and stockings. Based on the burst of fragrant soap, she had washed. That would have been a sight to behold, and he cursed his butler’s timing.

Instead, he was treated to another equally alluring view. The candles had been extinguished, and Adriana was seated on a stool in front of the fire in a white night rail, brushing her hair.

He had imagined many things when he'd married Adriana, mostly acts of the carnal variety. What he hadn't considered was the mundane, like his wife brushing her hair before the fire as she stared into the dancing flames. The beauty of the everyday was so powerful it set him back a step.

His movement drew her attention, and her smile tugged him forward.

"I thought you might like to soak longer," he said.

"I was hungry and thirsty." Her empty brandy glass sat on the tray.

He swallowed hard. "Would you like help with your hair?"

"Yes, I would." She held out a silver brush.

He took it and scooted the chair closer so she was sitting below him on the stool, bracketed by his legs. Glad she couldn't see how his fingers trembled, he stroked the brush through her damp hair.

They were silent. Her arms came up to rest on his knees, and her head tipped back slightly, her enjoyment plain. She appeared none the worse from her near-disastrous adventure.

With her eyes closed, she said, "The brush was my mother's."

He thought of his own losses. At least he had known his mother. She had lived to see her children grown. "Was it difficult growing up without her? Did you miss her even though you never knew her?"

"I didn't feel her loss until I was around your family. I was grateful to be welcomed as I was. My father..." She gave a little shake of the head. "He did his best, but I think with a mother to guide me, I wouldn't be so odd."

He shuddered to picture Adriana simpering behind a fan and pretending she was not as intelligent, or even more so, than all the gentlemen of the ton. “You are not odd; you are extraordinary.”

She flashed him a smile. “You are too kind, but most do not share your opinion.”

“Society is blind. I, however, have always seen you for who you are.” It was as close as he would come to admitting his long-standing admiration.

“Do you miss your mother?” she asked.

“Every single day. She could be difficult, but she was also great fun, as I’m sure you remember. I cherish the memories.” His social-butterfly mother had not understood Dawson’s shyness, but she’d gone out of her way to make sure he was included if he wished.

“A brush and a mirror are the only things my mother left me. Except for my nose.” She let out a small laugh.

“Your nose is perfect,” he said truthfully.

“I almost believe you mean that.” There was no pain or anger in her voice, but she must have been hurt by comments in the past. He’d heard Cyrus tease her more than once.

“I do mean it. You are beautiful.”

She shifted to gaze up at him, her expression solemn. As she studied his face, he forced himself to not look away. What did she see? No one would ask him to pose for a statue or sit for a portrait. He was not an ideal English gentleman. Not like Cyrus.

Her head tilted slightly, and she stroked a finger down the edge of his jaw. “I’m glad you didn’t shave.”

“It’s too scratchy.” His voice had grown scratchy too.

She cupped his cheek and caught his lower lip in a glancing caress. His entire body tensed and went on alert.

“I enjoyed the rasp against my skin the other evening.” She stood and turned to face him.

The glow from the fire turned her thin lawn night rail translucent, offering him glimpses of her shadowy curves. Her breasts were eye level. Her nipples poked at the fabric, and it was all he could do to keep himself from sucking her breast, cloth and all, into his mouth.

“I’m still slightly chilled,” she said.

“I’ll call for a hot water bottle for the bed.” He tried to rise, but she put her hands on his shoulders and pressed him back down.

“That would take too long. I’ve read that skin-to-skin contact is the most expedient method to warm up.” Her fingers moved to play in his hair.

Was she asking him to join her in bed? Hesitantly, he said, “I have read something similar.”

“We should test the theory.” She stepped toward the bed, casting him a look he could only interpret as come-hither.

Wearing her night rail, she slid beneath the covers and scooted toward the middle of the mattress. Should he remain clothed? His dressing gown was long and bulky. He compromised, slipping it off and tossing it on the end of the bed. Then he joined her, bare-chested but with his trousers still on.

They rolled toward one another, meeting chest to chest, their arms thrown across one another’s torsos. She ran her

hand up his flank to explore his shoulders. A shiver passed through him at her simple, yet devastating, touch.

He slipped his hand down her spine to cup and squeeze her buttock, shifting her closer. She gasped and brought her leg up to curl over his and tug his knee between hers. Even he wasn't obtuse enough to misread the invitation, but after his promise to her, he needed her to speak the words.

"Do you want me to fuck you, wife?" He cursed the crudeness of his words, but he was like a racehorse kept in the stable for too long and desperate for a gallop.

"Yes." And if her affirmative answer wasn't enough, she slid her hand into the waistband of his trousers to rake her nails along the top curve of his arse.

"Thank God. The tastes of you haven't been enough."

"For me either." She leaned in to nip at his earlobe.

His cock pulsed, but he ignored it. He had to keep himself under control if he wanted to be invited back into her bed.

He drew the fabric of her night rail higher. The hem was at the top of her thighs when he edged his hand underneath. He tested her readiness with the slide of one finger between her legs.

She was slippery, but it wasn't enough. He wanted her crying out her pleasure and need. He shifted to his knees to lift her night rail over her head. She shimmed to help him. He threw it over his shoulder, heedless to its fate. If he could, he would burn all her night things so she was naked every night. Naked and wet for him.

She fumbled with the fastenings of his trousers, but he twisted his hips and pressed her hands into the mattress.

“This is not fair. I want to see you. Explore you.” In any other circumstance, he might smile at the thwarted whine in her voice.

“You will, but I’m already at the edge of my control, and this is your first time. Let me make sure you are more than ready.”

She huffed but didn’t make a grab at his trousers when he released her to continue kissing the soft skin under her breasts and then lower to her belly. Without prompting, she parted her legs to welcome him. It seems she had enjoyed their interlude in the drawing room as much as he had.

He took full advantage of the greater access he enjoyed in bed, pushing her legs farther apart and her knees toward her chest. He took his time tracing his tongue from her rosebud through her folds to her clit. Her taste was a combination of the bath and her natural sweetness.

“I could live on your pussy,” he murmured against her clit before sucking it between his lips.

“Why is that such a titillating thought?”

“Because you want me to feast on you morning, noon, and night?” He had no idea where the outrageous things he was saying came from. Only with Adriana had he ever expressed himself in such an honest, primal way. Based on the way she had grown wetter and squirmed against his mouth, she enjoyed it very much.

She grabbed his hair in her fist and climaxed against his mouth, holding him against her with an unexpected strength. Not that he was fighting to get away. In fact, he continued to lap and kiss her pussy long after her hand had fallen away and her legs grew lax in his grip.

It was time. He rose to his knees and worked at the fastenings, pushing his trousers down and kicking them to the floor. His entire focus was on getting his cock into her pussy. Closing his eyes, he counted to ten while fisting the base and squeezing hard to keep from embarrassing himself.

While he was cobbling together a modicum of control, she sat up and gripped his thighs. He opened his eyes to gaze down at her. “What are you doing?” he asked thickly.

“I want to see you better.”

“If you touch me, I will spend, and I want to be inside you this time.” His voice was gruff, and he pushed her back down to lay under him. It wasn’t romantic in the least. Probably not what she had dreamed of and certainly not the romantic wooing he had planned.

Even so, she opened her legs and pulled him down for a kiss that was wild and raw. The head of his cock brushed her core, and she gasped against his mouth. He braced himself on his elbows to gaze at her, wishing yet again for more light.

He wanted to say something reassuring and flowery. If he were a poet like Cyrus, he would have composed an ode or a sonnet to her beauty. Instead, he opened his mouth and asked, “What did I tell you at the inn?”

“I don’t remember.” Her head thrashed on the pillow.

He shifted his hips forward so the head of his cock stretched her folds. The grip of her body was hot and wet, and the urge to thrust deeper was the drumbeat of his pounding heart. His arms trembled, yet somehow he found the strength to lean in and whisper in her ear, “Yes, you do, Adriana. Beg me.”

CHAPTER 18



Of course she remembered. She just hadn't expected him to actually hold her to that particular promise. This was all her fault for insisting on time to get to know him. She had been denying them both the most exquisite, intense pleasure in existence.

The head of his cock was barely inside her, but the stretch was only making her want more of him. She wanted all of him. No, she *needed* all of him.

"Please, I want your cock. Give it to me." The plaintive note in her voice was embarrassingly real.

Except she had no room for embarrassment when he filled her another inch and then another. It burned slightly as he stretched her, but pleasure dulled the ache. The pinch of losing her virginity was shockingly anticlimactic considering the importance history and society placed upon it.

One last thrust had him seated against her with a chesty groan. He held himself over her, not moving except to take several deep breaths. She grasped his biceps and tilted her pelvis slightly to find a more comfortable angle.

"For all that's holy, don't move." Dawson's voice was low and strained, and he huffed out a lungful of air.

“Are you well?” she asked.

His laugh sounded pained, and he leaned down to give her a brief kiss before setting his forehead against hers. “I should be asking that of you. Are you in pain?”

“There was a pinch, but now...” The squirmy feeling in her stomach was back.

Only now she could quantify the feeling. Desire. Attraction. The realization stunned her. Her body had wanted him from the beginning. She had never felt anything like it for... well, anyone, except Dawson.

Adriana did not walk around with her head in the clouds. Unlike the heroines in the cloying poetry Cyrus favored, she would never toss herself off a cliff because a man had thrown her over. And as many Sundays as she had spent on the hard pews of Bainbridge’s chapel, she had never witnessed proof of a higher power. Her nature was innately pragmatic and logical.

Yet how could she not believe fate or luck or a deity had conspired to bring her and Dawson together? The events that had to transpire were mindboggling. In fact, they were too complex to enumerate when Dawson was beginning to move above her.

He pushed himself higher on his hands and at the same time pulled his hips back. Was he leaving her body? Was he finished? She dug her fingernails into his arms to try to force him to stay.

“But now... what? What do you want?” he asked.

“Show me more.” She tipped her hips higher when he continued his retreat until only the tip of him remained.

“With pleasure,” he murmured.

His hard thrust made her gasp. The sudden fullness made her toes curl. He withdrew again and reentered her with a sharp pump of his hips, settling into a rhythm she instinctively understood because she had witnessed it in the wild. They really weren't so different from animals.

Tension coiled in her belly. Another climax hovered, but before she could ride the wave, his pumping grew erratic. With a final stab, he held still as his cock throbbed inside her.

He collapsed to his forearms, his face buried in her neck. His lips were traveling and leaving soft kisses in their wake. She turned her head, and he nuzzled her ear, inciting shivers. They remained joined for a long moment.

Something trickled down her buttocks. His seed. He had released inside her. She wasn't as ignorant as many young ladies. She understood how procreation worked. He might have planted a babe in her belly. Before she could decide how she felt about the facts of life, he withdrew and rose.

“Don't move. Let me clean you.” Without any outward show of bashfulness, Dawson walked naked to the basin. The light from the fireplace highlighted his firm backside and muscular legs. The indentation of his spine was flanked by broad muscles that shifted as he rinsed out a cloth. Her fingers itched to capture the raw power in her sketchbook.

Her gaze migrated lower on his return. His cock dangled, softer yet still large enough to make her eyes widen. He pressed the cloth between her legs. It was strangely more intimate and embarrassing than what had just transpired between them.

The cool cloth made gooseflesh break out, and she pulled the sheet over her breasts in a bid for warmth and modesty.

Was the cloth bloody? Were the sheets? In olden times, they might be put on display as proof.

What happened now? Would he tuck her in and pat her head and retreat to his room? The marriage was consummated. There was a chance for an heir to the earldom. Did they wait until her courses came to try again? The sting of tears was as unexpected as they were sudden. She sniffed to keep them at bay.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“A little.” She really wasn’t, but the last thing she wanted was to cry in front of him. He would want to know why, and she wasn’t even sure herself.

“Do you...” He bit his bottom lip and looked toward the connecting door. “I can stay for a bit. If you want or—”

“Yes.” Should she pull on a night rail? What was deemed appropriate between husband and wife?

He made the decision for her, slipping next to her and drawing her toward him, her back to his front, both of them naked.

While she hadn’t thought herself actually chilled, the heat from his skin against hers felt decadent and welcome. She closed her eyes and savored the moment. His arm was draped over her waist.

She touched his forearm. The hair was coarse against her palm. She trailed her fingers up to the crook of his elbow to explore the soft skin and then back down to his wrist. The thick muscle jumped. Her arms felt puny in comparison. She curled her hand around his, linking their fingers.

He tightened his grip and gave her a gentle squeeze. “Feeling warmer?”

If she said yes, would he leave her to spend the rest of the night in a cold bed? “Not warm enough.”

He slipped his leg over hers, the rough hairs against her thighs titillating. “Better?”

She hummed and closed her eyes. The day had been long and stressful. Huddled at the tower, soaking wet and freezing, she had never imagined this as the conclusion. She was safe and sated and could keep sleep at bay no longer.

It was dark when she stirred. The fire had burned to embers. What had awoken her?

An insistent throb between her legs.

Dawson was still slumbering behind her. No. Not slumbering. He was cupping her breasts and playing with her nipple. Each brush of his thumb over the bud coiled her need tighter.

She burrowed closer to him. Something large and uncomfortably hard pressed between the crease of her buttocks. It took a moment to recognize it as his cock. His hand drifted from her breast to brush her stomach and then lower still. Was she dreaming?

She kept her eyes closed and lifted her leg to rest on top of his. Dawson hummed his approval, tugged her earlobe between his teeth, and slipped his hand between her legs. His fingers teased her by circling her clit and then darted to plunge inside her. Her hips moved, asking for what she could not.

He slipped his other arm underneath her and tilted her back against him. Now one hand could cup and squeeze and torment her breasts while the other continued to work between her legs. While she appreciated his attentions, she wanted more. The *more* that was nestled against her arse.

She reached behind her and pushed his cock down until it was between her legs, the head bumping against her folds.

“We can’t. You might be sore. I don’t want to hurt you.” His voice was strained.

She rubbed the head of his cock against her clit and moaned. If she continued, she would climax, but she wanted to know what it would feel like with him inside her. She was so wet, it was a simple thing to shift her hips enough to reposition him at her opening.

His surrender came with a groan. “You must tell me if you’re too sore.”

His cock slipped inside her, the fit like a perfectly tailored glove. In fact, she was a little sore, but it was a satisfying kind of sore like her muscles after a long walk. The angle of his thrusts were different and added a new layer to her pleasure.

His fingers returned to circle and rub and pinch her bud. While the pace of his thrusts remained leisurely, the depth and power of each one increased. Her desperation rose until she was squirming and making sounds she didn’t recognize.

He pinched her clit and one of her nipples the same time he pounded into her. Her climax was all-encompassing. Having the hard length of him for her body to clasp was beyond anything she could imagine. She was vaguely aware that he followed her into pleasure, their bodies pulsing in tandem as she milked him.

Exhaustion swamped her. He pulled out of her body, leaving a trickle of his seed. Sex was a messy business no matter one’s species. She smiled into the pillow before drifting into sleep.

CHAPTER 19



Adriana awoke naked. And alone. Perhaps she should have been grateful not to have to face him in the morning light after what they'd done. Her body clenched thinking about it, half in embarrassment and half in the desire to do it again. And again.

But it wasn't gratefulness she felt. It was... hurt tinged with anger.

He had taken something from her. Not her virginity. That had been given without regret. No, she had wanted to watch him open his sleepy eyes in the dawn. She'd wanted to smooth his bed-rumpled hair and see his smile. His walls would be lowered, and she would have been able to peek over to see the truth of himself he was protecting so fiercely.

Glaring at the closed connecting door, she rose and cleaned him from her body with the cooled water. After engaging in relations twice in one night, the twinge she felt between her legs was to be expected, yet wasp stings had hurt worse. All the fuss about the marriage bed and losing one's maidenhead seemed overwrought.

Now that their marriage had been consummated, she had questions. Her assumption that they would engage in relations, wait to see if she was with child, and try again if needed had

been disproven. Her cheeks heated at the way she had pushed his cock between her legs. She had been shameless in her need. Was that why he had left before she woke? Was he disgusted by her wantonness?

Rain continued to patter against the windows. She would not be walking or sketching today. A shot of disappointment was tempered by the realization Dawson would be stuck inside as well. She paced in her dressing gown. It wasn't her nature to sulk in her room, and while she didn't enjoy confrontation, neither did she wish to bury her head under the covers.

The dress she'd worn the day before had been ruined by both weather and Dawson's urgency to warm her in the bath. She opened the wardrobe. Two of the promised dresses belonging to Dawson's mother hung there.

They were summer fare and a decade out of date, but pretty nonetheless. The waists were higher than current fashion and the fabrics light and airy. The light blues and yellows and whites were not to Adriana's taste, but she had little choice until Mrs. MacGrath finished the first dress of her order or her trunk arrived. The latter of which might never happen. While her father wasn't a cruel man, he was strict and could be stubborn with his grudges.

She pulled out a buttery yellow frock with colorful flowers embroidered around the neckline and hem. She held it to her chest and stared at herself in the looking glass. Dawson's mother had been a lively woman with a wicked sense of humor. Cyrus resembled her in both looks and personality. Both had dark blond hair and an innate grace that made them excellent dancers. Lady Westhorpe had always made her feel welcome, even before her father had unexpectedly inherited a title. She was greatly missed in Bainbridge.

Adriana shook the melancholy thoughts away and dressed. The simple cut and closures meant she wouldn't need to ring for Elspeth, thank goodness. Adriana wasn't in the mood for the girl's chatter or speculation. She glanced at the rumped bed. At least there hadn't been any blood staining the sheets to have to explain.

Adriana shook out the skirts and examined herself. The bustline scooped low, and the bodice was so tight the swells of her breast were spilling out. The hem hit her a good two inches above her ankles. It was borderline scandalous.

She reached for the tapes to peel the dress off, but then stilled, cocked her head, and took in her reflection again. Last night she had been positively bedraggled, and Dawson had still wanted her. How would he react if he saw her in this dress?

Was she brave enough to find out? A long-dormant sense of mischievousness blossomed. Ever since her father had inherited his title and married Sarah, Adriana had felt the need to quash her adventurous spirit in favor of decorum. She had put aside childishness, but couldn't one have fun without being childish? In fact, the game she planned to play with Dawson wasn't childish in the least. It was very adult and not at all ladylike.

A shawl offered some modesty. Although she'd heard nothing from the adjoining door leading to Dawson's chambers, she rapped lightly and announced herself before peeking inside. As expected, the room was unoccupied and the bed neatly made. When had he left her?

How was it supposed to work between a husband and wife? Would Dawson come to her bed for relations and then retreat to his own room at his whim? What if she didn't want

to have sex? What if she did, but he didn't come to her? Could she climb into his bed? It sounded complicated and took away any control she had over the situation.

She continued down the stairs, seeing no one. Fernlow Manor was understaffed for a house of its size. If they planned to spend any length of time in the north, and especially if they were forced to host social functions, Adriana would need to see about hiring more help. That in itself would be a boon for Warlock.

At the bottom of the stairs, she dithered over her next move, pulling her shawl tighter as a chill crept over the marble in the entry. She shivered from a combination of cold and nerves.

Mr. Hannigan appeared, his eyes wide and his arms extended as if she might swoon at any moment. "I am surprised to see you up and about after your trying experience, my lady."

She waved her hand. "I appreciate your concern, but I'm no worse for wear. I'm looking for Dawson. Lord Westhorpe, I mean. Can I assume he's in his study considering the weather?"

"Yes, my lady, but he is working and expressly requested not to be disturbed. You might prefer to rest in your room for the day. Mrs. Hannigan would be happy to bring you a hearty porridge to right your humors." He spoke to her like he would a defiant child.

Adriana detested porridge and didn't believe in humors but understood Hannigan meant well even as she found his tone and attitude frustrating. "As I said earlier, I am recovered from my misadventure. I must speak with Lord Westhorpe."

“But he is not to be disturbed. I can’t go against his wishes and announce you.”

Had she been hoping to use Hannigan as a buffer? Yes, she had. “I’m his wife. I don’t require you to announce me.”

With more confidence than she actually felt, she rapped on the study door with a shaking hand and let herself in before Hannigan could stop her.

Dawson looked up from where he had three ledgers open and countless papers strewn across the massive desk and stood. Surprise flashed across his face before he reassembled his usual stoic mask. A fire burned in the grate. After the chill of the marbled entry, the room felt cozy. The enormous picture hanging over the fireplace was yet another bucolic scene of rolling hills and sheep.

Bookshelves lined one wall from floor to ceiling. The books closest to her were heavy and thick and pertained to sheep. Everything revolved around the birth and life cycle of the sheep. She could understand why it would be difficult for someone like Miss Chester to be cloistered in Northumberland.

“How do you fare this morning?” he asked.

“I am well.”

“That’s good to hear.” A long pause gathered before he said, “The rain has settled in, I’m afraid.”

“So it seems.” Their stilted conversation was frustrating. And confusing.

Was she to pretend nothing had changed between them? He remained standing behind the desk, radiating control and coldness. Opposite of the man in her bed the night before. If

he would not approach her, then she would have to take the reins.

She stopped behind one of the wingback chairs set in front of the fireplace. It looked a cozy place to curl up with a novel while he worked if she could locate one worth reading among the stacks.

She shrugged off her shawl and lay it over the arm. A quick glance down made her falter. The rise and fall of her bosom with her quickened, nervous breaths was indecent. A flush raced from her breasts up into her face. It was too late to change her mind. What was the worst that could happen? Total rejection.

If she considered last night a data point, then it supported the theory that Dawson wanted her sexually, at the very least. Trying to act seductive, she sashayed past the tomes on the nearest shelf, running her finger along the spines while giving him her best sultry-eyed gaze. The dust she stirred up tickled her nose. Two quick sneezes ruined the illusion.

He shifted to lean over the desk on his fisted hands, remaining silent. At least he wasn't laughing at her.

"I thought to retrieve paper and pen to write to Cyrus." She chewed the inside of her lip while searching for something to break the awkwardness. "You appear to be busy with estate business."

"I am, yes. Very busy. Mr. Abernathy, the new steward, is meeting with me this morning." His voice was rougher than it had been, but his expression remained impassive. "Everything you need for letter writing is in the escritoire in the drawing room."

“I should have checked there first.” She moved closer and peered at the top of the desk, but there were too many papers scattered about to draw any conclusions as to what he had found. “Are you untangling the finances?”

“Slowly. The estate has not been properly managed since the last steward passed away. That was two years ago. I don’t know why Father did not immediately hire someone new.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No.” His hands were clenched so tightly his knuckles were turning white. She rested her fingertips a few inches away, not sure what to do in the moment. She wanted to touch him or mention the previous night but was uncertain of her reception.

Perhaps what happened in the dark of night between husband and wife wasn’t meant to ever be discussed or brought out into the light. She had no examples. Her father had been a widower until Sarah came along, and Adriana had never witnessed the two of them being affectionate. Not so much as a peck on the cheek. She didn’t allow her imagination to venture into what might occur between them in the bedroom.

Must she accept distance and coldness as part of her bargain? The conclusion based on his current state made her want to cry. Before Dawson could witness her chin quiver, she turned away and shuffled toward the door, hoping he would stop her, but he remained behind the desk.

She hesitated with her hand on the latch. With her back to Dawson, she found a small measure of courage. “I very much enjoyed our time together last night. I’d hoped we might nurture the intimacy, but I understand now you are not interested in anything but a producing a possible heir.”

With that, she slipped out the door and leaned on the other side, her hands over her face.



NOT INTERESTED? Was she mad or had he finally gone round the bend?

He was extremely interested, but also in shock. He'd been prepared to wait weeks or even months for her. The night in her bed had exceeded any fantasy he had concocted through his years of pining. She had been passionate and curious and playful.

Fears she might regret her decision in the harsh light of morning had kept him awake, and he'd slipped out of her bed like a coward before dawn. The time she'd spent lost and wandering the moor had been fraught with high emotions. What if she had merely been riding the delirious wave of relief at escaping death?

But his biggest fear had been one he could not speak. What if she only wanted him in the dark of night because it was easier for her to picture someone else. That someone being his brother.

His brain was skipping to catch up with their encounter in his study. She had been wearing a thin cotton frock that was too short and too tight. Her breasts had almost broken free of the scooped bodice with her violent little sneezes. His body pulsed.

She had informed him that she'd enjoyed their time together last night. Obviously, she was not referring the shivering ride back to the house navigating muddy roads and

rain. Had she meant the time they'd spent in bed? Could she have been *flirting* with him?

Why was he so terrible at this? He had learned to read people's intentions and ferret out their secrets during his work, but he lost any semblance of skill in her presence. Or it required a different skill set, one he had never honed. After all, he had been enamored of Adriana for so long he had never attempted to woo another woman.

He considered his next move. She had approached him in the light of day. It was cloudy and raining outside, but the draperies had been opened. She had been able to see him perfectly well. Should he go after her? Assure her that he too enjoyed their time together? Emphasize his desire to do it again? He would be a fool if he did not, and while he might be a coward, Dawson was no fool.

He strode to the door and ripped it open. Adriana stumbled backward into his arms. Pink burnished her cheeks, and her breasts quivered with her gasp. He had no idea what to say, but he knew what he could do to affirm his interest.

He kissed her.

This time he didn't need to gentle her or ensure she wasn't shocked by his ardor. He nipped her bottom lip, and she welcomed him, tangling her tongue with his. Her hands came around his neck and delved into his hair.

He kicked the door closed and fumbled the lock closed while still plundering her mouth. He scooped her in his arms and carried her to his desk, setting her on top. They broke apart briefly, both breathing hard.

He would have thought after slaking his desire last night—twice, much to his chagrin—the edge to his desperation would

be dulled, but the opposite had happened. Now that his cock had experienced the tight wet fit of her body, an addiction had overtaken him. It did not matter that it was late morning or that he had a meeting with his new steward or that he had only the desk or the floor or the wall to choose from.

He was going to fuck his wife.

“Do I take it this means you are interested in furthering our intimacies for reasons other than procreation?” she asked with a breathless tease.

He took her hand and guided it to the front of his trousers. “Is this a sufficient answer?”

She swallowed and nodded. “More than merely sufficient, I would guess. Not that I have any basis for comparison.”

His laugh mixed with a groan when she squeezed his cock. He took a step back from her and wrapped his hands around her exposed ankles, her stockings silky against his callused palms. “This dress doesn’t fit you in the most delightful ways.”

“My only day frock was ruined last night, and I couldn’t face putting one of my traveling dresses back on.”

If he ripped all her dresses from her body, she would have to wear her chemise all day and remain naked all night. Or better yet, naked all day and night. He skimmed his hands to her knees, pushing her skirts up. Her legs were primly pressed together, but it only took a slight push to nudge them apart enough to step between them.

She was leaning back on her hands, showcasing her rosy bosom. Her eyes were wide. “What are we going to do?”

Had he shocked her? Her experience was limited to their few encounters. He could either make excuses, or tell her

exactly what he wanted them to do together. “Well, unless you’re too sore, I would like to fuck you on my desk or on the floor or against the wall. Wherever you prefer.”

Her gaze slid to the floor before fixing on the only stretch of wall without books over his shoulder. He tensed waiting for her response. Her mouth formed an *O*, but she merely blew out a sharp breath before meeting his gaze. “Can we try them all?”

His laugh was one of relief and more than a fair bit of delight. “Gladly, although not all three this morning.”

She wiggled her hips closer to his. “Then we shall start on the desk since we’re already here.”

He leaned closer to claim her mouth. There was no hesitancy in the way she returned his kisses. It shouldn’t be a surprise a woman with a keen curiosity would push the boundaries of discovery. She wanted to know everything, and he was more than willing to show her.

She fumbled with the fastenings of her dress. The bodice loosened. He hooked a finger at the edge of the bodice and tugged it down. Her breasts spilled over the top, her nipples peaked.

She dropped back to her elbows and arched her back, her breasts on decadent display. He slid his hands along her bare outer thighs, dragging her dress to her hips. Leaning down, he flicked his tongue over each nipple before pulling one into his mouth. Her head fell back with a soft, very arousing, exclamation.

He brushed over her mons to slip a finger into her folds. She was wet, but still he worried. With his lips still caressing her nipple, he murmured, “Are you certain you are not too sore?”

“I am not sore at all, just wanting. What have you done to me?” It was a question he had no answer to.

He understood why *he* was obsessed. She had bewitched him, but he couldn't imagine why she sounded as desperate for him. He decided not to question his good luck.

Although she claimed not to have suffered any ill effects from their first night together, he wanted to ensure she was more than ready to take him. Falling to his knees, he grasped her thighs to support her legs as his mouth landed on her pussy.

He feasted upon her. Under the clean scent of lavender soap, he could taste a muskiness that fired a primitive sense of ownership. It was remnants of his seed. His cock throbbed and begged attention, but he ignored his own need for hers.

While tonguing her clit, he looked up at her body. She was still propped on her elbows, watching him, her mouth soft and her eyes hooded. He sucked her clit into his mouth and nipped it. She collapsed back on the desk, her hand groping for purchase. A ledger fell to the floor with a thump. She gripped the edge of the desk with one hand and fisted the other in his hair, drawing him even closer to her core.

Writhing from her climax scattered a sheaf of papers to the rug. Her thighs tensed and tried to close around his head. He held her open to continue lapping at her softness until her body grew lax.

He stood and gazed down at her. She was a goddess. Tendrils of hair had come loose from the knot she'd fashioned, and her body was flushed in the aftermath. Her breasts were trembling, her nipples hard buds that begged for more attention.

He couldn't stop his hands from wandering to cup and squeeze the tempting mounds. She pushed herself to sitting and cupped his cock and bollocks. "Is it my turn to touch you?"

"I don't want to spend in your hands or mouth. I must fuck you. Turn over. Now."

CHAPTER 20



Normally, she did not appreciate being told what to do. In fact, she had learned to practice a quiet defiance with her father and Sarah. When given orders like who to cultivate a friendship with or how to govern herself in social situations, she would nod as if she agreed wholeheartedly with the plan and then do whatever she wished. She would not be dictated to.

Yet she scrambled to obey the harsh command Dawson gave her even though she didn't understand why. Her legs trembled when they touched the floor. She turned to face the desk and set her hands on the edge to steady herself.

Her skirts had fallen, and she looked over her shoulder to see what Dawson planned to do next. His eyes were dark and half-lidded and cast downward. He was freeing his cock, but she was only able to get the briefest of glances before he pushed her torso toward the desk top, his hand clasping her nape.

The wood was rough and hard against her breasts. Her nipples were almost painfully sensitive. Her rising skirts tickled the back of her thighs and didn't stop until they were pooled around her waist.

Her backside was entirely exposed and vulnerable. What on earth was he planning?

The answer slid through her folds and prodded her entrance. Oh, that felt nice. She angled her hips higher, and his cock slid inside her. She lay her forehead on the desk and pushed back into him with a throaty sound she could not stem.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Wonderful.” It was strange how quickly her body had become used to welcoming him. There was no twinge or soreness.

He had taken her from behind the night before, but the pace had been leisurely and dreamlike, the angle shallow. This was neither. He grabbed her hips and drove himself deeper than he had ever been. He took long strokes, each one jostling her against the desk. The friction against her breasts was a confusing stew of pleasure-pain.

She didn't have the chance to decide which was dominant. He slid his hands under her, cupping her breasts and drawing her up and close to his chest. The new angle wasn't as deep but pressed on a place inside her that made her squirm.

“I want you to climax again, this time on my cock.” His breath was warm and erotic in her ear.

“I can't.” Surely she couldn't achieve another climax so soon.

“Yes, you can. Let me show you.” He took one of her hands and guided it between her legs.

Their fingers slipped over and around her clit. This was not proper. It couldn't be. Then again, she was nearly naked in his study with his cock buried inside of her. Apparently, propriety was not a consideration when it came to carnality.

He continued to take small hard thrusts. She reached to explore where they were joined. His cock slipped through her fingers with each jab. Feeling the way her body grew wetter around him made her knees wobble. It was coarse and primal and erotic.

“Touch yourself.” Another command she didn’t hesitate to obey.

Her fingers moved to her clit. First she tried a light touch, feeling self-conscious, but her body demanded more. Once again he pushed her over the desk. This time she braced herself on one elbow while she worked her clit.

He pounded into her. It was shockingly rough but showed her what she needed. She rubbed herself harder and wilder, chasing the coil of tension she knew would release as pure pleasure. With a cry, she came against him, her body gripping his cock. His hips bucked even harder. With one final thrust, he attained his own pleasure.

She reached farther to trace his cock from its root to where it was still buried inside her. Fluid leaked around her fingers, a combination of the two of them. He withdrew with a long sigh and pressed his handkerchief to her core. She straightened, tucked against his chest, his arm banded tightly around her, his hand cupping her breast. He pressed a kiss on her neck.

Her bodice was down and her skirts up. Dawson, on the other hand, had remained in his shirt and waistcoat, only loosening his trousers enough to free his cock. Should she feel embarrassed at the disparity?

Instinct had her arching her back, her breasts begging for more attention. He obliged, cupping both and gently squeezing and caressing the sensitive curves. She nestled her head in the crook where his neck met his shoulder. Her voice was raspy

when she finally tried to speak. “While I don’t want you to think I’m dissatisfied—”

“I should hope not considering you came once on my mouth and once on my cock.” He nuzzled his smooth cheek against hers. His tangy shaving cologne smelled delicious.

“*But...*” She turned to perch on the edge of the desk and clutched his waistcoat for emphasis. “Next time it is my turn to explore your body to my satisfaction.”

He tucked himself back into his trousers, hiding away what she was most curious about. “It’s hardly my fault you tempt me beyond thought and control.”

He cupped both her breasts once more and lifted them to meet his kisses. She grabbed at his shoulders. The rain outside and the coziness of the study gave the feeling of being in their own cocoon. Could she convince him to give the floor a try? The rug in front of the fireplace looked plush and comfortable.

A hard rap startled them both. Her heart skipped faster. For a moment, they were frozen, staring at the door.

“My lord?” Hannigan’s voice carried too clearly through the door. “Mr. Abernathy is here for his appointment.”

“Damn and blast,” Dawson muttered. “My new steward is here to begin reviewing the accounts.”

Adriana hauled up her bodice and worked on refastening it. Dawson brushed her hands away and finished the job faster than she could have managed. “I’m afraid we made a mess of your papers.”

From the other side of the door, Hannigan cleared his throat in a loud, exaggerated manner. “My lord? Are you well?”

“Tell Abernathy I’ll see him in just a moment,” Dawson called out.

“Yes, my lord. Miss Faye Chester has also arrived to call on her ladyship,” Hannigan said.

Dread filled Adriana. She hadn’t expected to receive visitors with the dismal weather. “Look at me. I can’t receive anyone wearing this dress.”

Dawson’s gaze heated as it pursued her form. “I would be most content sharing tea with you.”

She stifled a laugh. “That’s because you are incorrigible. Northumberland might not be London, but gossip has power everywhere.”

“You had a shawl when you entered, did you not?”

Adriana retrieved the shawl. Dawson tied it to conceal the swell of her bosom and then turned her around so he could neaten her hair.

“What on earth am I supposed to say to her? We share nothing in common.” She had never been good at the chitchat required to cultivate the superficial friendships that formed the social net of society.

“Explain your trunk has not arrived, and you are waiting on the seamstress in Warlock to fashion you a wardrobe.”

“I can’t beg off? Claim exhaustion from my plight yesterday?” She spun and grabbed his shoulders. “I could help you with the ledgers.”

“While I have no doubt your quick mind would be of great help, I fear we would spend our time fucking on every available surface.” His smile was devilish. “Abernathy might be scandalized.”

A blush heated her cheeks even after all they had done and the promise of what was to come. With his shoulders still clutched in her hands, she drew him closer. “How am I supposed to carry on a conversation?”

With his lips a hairbreadth from hers, another rap broke them apart. “I’m going to sack Hannigan. In fact, I’ll sack all the servants so we’ll have Fernlow to ourselves and can fuck our way through all the rooms on every wall, rug, and chair.”

She stepped away and fanned her cheeks with a hand. “You are not helping my state of mind. I would never have guessed how depraved your thoughts are behind your aloofness.”

“You regard me as aloof?” His expression had closed off.

Had she hurt his feelings? “I did. Not anymore.”

He gave a brusque nod. “We have kept them waiting long enough.”

She followed him to the door but caught his hand on the lock. “We will come together again tonight?”

His mouth softened, and he pressed it to hers in a quick kiss. “Tonight.”

He opened the door. Hannigan was on the threshold. A tall gentleman with black hair and spectacles stood behind him, partially hidden in the shadows. Hannigan’s gaze narrowed as he took in the floor behind them. “Should I send a maid in to clean up the mess, my lord?”

“That won’t be necessary, Hannigan.”

Dawson briefly introduced Adriana to Mr. Abernathy before giving her a bracing nod and closing the door to the study.

“Miss Chester is in the drawing room, my lady. Would you like me to send for a tray of tea?” he asked.

“That would be lovely. Thank you, Hannigan.” Adriana approached the drawing room door, making sure the shawl covered her décolletage before pasting on a smile and entering.

The armchairs and the settee were unexpectedly empty. Miss Chester was gazing out the window even though the view was obscured by the rain. Her expression was grim with a touch of melancholy. She traced a rivulet down the glass, seemingly unaware Adriana had even entered the room.

It was Adriana’s turn to clear her throat to garner someone’s attention. Miss Chester started and spun away from the window. Her expression changed like a curtain opening onstage. She smiled, although her lips remained pressed together, and her eyes narrowed as if evaluating Adriana.

Could the other woman divine what Adriana had been doing on Dawson’s desk not even ten minutes earlier? She fiddled with the shawl and stepped forward to gesture toward the sitting area. “How nice of you to call, Miss Chester. Especially in this weather.”

“If one waits for the weather in Northumberland, then no socializing would ever occur.” Miss Chester glided to take a seat in the middle of the settee, arranging her pretty blue skirts.

Adriana sank into one of the armchairs—not the one Dawson had done incredibly erotic things to her on—and tucked her feet as far under as possible to hide her bare ankles.

“Mrs. Hannigan will be here any moment with tea. I’m sure you must be chilled,” Adriana said.

“How very kind of you.”

An increasingly awkward silence followed. The tick of the clock on the mantel grew louder and louder in Adriana's ears. Finally, she landed on the only thing of interest to happen since she arrived. The only interesting thing she could discuss in polite company, that was.

"I actually got caught in the rain yesterday. I was putting an order in with Mrs. MacGrath and finished before the carriage returned. I thought it would be a simple stroll, but the heavens opened, and I became lost. It was a lucky thing that Dawson found me taking shelter by the old tower." Adriana gave a little laugh like it had been a good lark.

Miss Chester's smile fell. "That was very foolish. You might have died on the moor. It happens more than you realize."

The somberness of Miss Chester's words chilled Adriana to the bone. Had she really been that close to death? "I suppose you are more aware of the dangers having grown up here."

"Yes, but even men and women who have lived here all their lives have been victims of the moor. It is not something to be taken lightly especially in the rain or dark." Her expression lightened. "But you seem to have suffered no ill effects."

Before Adriana could answer, the door opened and Mrs. Hannigan entered with a tea tray. In addition to a pot and cups, she had included a plate of sweet scones with cream and jam.

"Is there anything else, my lady?" Mrs. Hannigan asked.

"No, thank you." Adriana had watched Sarah enough to know that she should pour for them both. Another silence fell while they sipped on their tea.

“I assumed you would have no need of our poor Mrs. MacGrath with your London finery.” Miss Chester put her teacup and saucer down to take a scone and eyed Adriana up and down.

“Dawson... I mean, Lord Westhorpe.” She would never get used to calling him by a title he wasn’t supposed to bear. “We have known one another since childhood, as you know, but our marriage was rather sudden. I hope my trunk will catch up with me here, but until then I needed a few dresses. Mrs. MacGrath is up to date on current fashions. I was quite happy with her fabrics and patterns.”

“It’s a love match then?” Miss Chester asked.

It took all Adriana’s self-control not to press her hands against her flaming hot cheeks. She had hoped to steer the conversation toward fashion. Not that Adriana knew or cared about the topic, but she did not wish to discuss the reason she and Dawson married in haste.

“That’s right.” Adriana could feel her lips quivering at the effort of holding a smile. It was a lie, but what else could she say? *I thought myself in love with his brother, but now...?* Now what? It had become quite clear that while she did and always would love Cyrus, she was not *in* love with him and never had been. But that did not mean she loved Dawson. Did it?

“How very sweet.” Miss Chester nibbled at her scone before setting it aside with her tea and brushing crumbs from her skirt. “Will your stepbrother visit you here?”

“There are no plans for a visit at the moment.” The mention of Richard was a dunk in cold water, and if Adriana had any say in the matter, Richard would never set foot in Fernlow Manor. “Were you personally acquainted with Mr. Pace-Verney?”

“Yes, but only slightly through my brother. The two of them enjoyed a night at the tables occasionally.” Miss Chester cast a look at Adriana through her lashes. “Are the two of you close?”

A dry laugh escaped Adriana before she could stop it. “Not at all.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Miss Chester was most definitely fishing for information. “Do you not find him agreeable?”

Considering what had transpired in the drawing room drove her to marry Dawson by special license, the answer was unequivocal. How much to divulge? While Adriana did not know Miss Chester well, she could not encourage a tendresse with a monster. She set her teacup down and scooted to the edge of the cushion.

“May I speak frankly, Miss Chester?”

Miss Chester’s lips twisted, and she rose. “I shouldn’t have interrupted your morning. I can see myself out.”

Adriana stepped between Miss Chester and the door. “While I will not go into details, I would warn you against Mr. Pace-Verney. Any connection with him will not make you happy.”

Miss Chester’s hand drifted to press at her stomach as if she might be ill. “Happiness is not something a woman like myself can ever hope for. Good day, Lady Westhorpe.”

She swept around Adriana and into the entry. Her carriage waited on the graveled drive. The rain had eased, but Miss Chester’s pretty blue dress was splashed by the time the carriage door closed. Adriana hoped they arrived home safely.

The conversation troubled her, and she stared out the window long after the carriage disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER 21



Adriana located paper and ink and sat at the escritoire struggling with how to even begin a letter to Cyrus. Perhaps by writing to Maddie instead, a path to break the news to Cyrus would become clear, but even finding words to explain the situation to Maddie was impossible.

She gave up and retrieved her sketchbook, turning to a fresh page. Closing her eyes, she tried to picture a moth, any moth, but Dawson's backside came to mind. She would draw it to get it out of her head and then return her focus to what she had always loved to draw—moths and butterflies.

His firm backside appeared in curves and dips on the white page. His muscular legs were attractive additions as was his back. She hadn't done justice to the firmness of his arse nor the broadness of his back. She flipped the page and tried again. And again.

As soon as she got a good look at his front that evening as promised, she would try to capture it on paper. Her core throbbed like another heartbeat. She closed the sketchbook and held it to her chest. If any of the servants—or even worse, Dawson himself—stumbled upon the book and looked inside, she would walk straight out onto the moor, find the nearest bog, and put herself out of her misery.

As evening fell, Mrs. Hannigan informed her that Dawson and Mr. Abernathy were taking a tray in the study as they continued to work. Adriana decided to do the same in her room and wait for Dawson.

She washed and slipped on a thin cotton night rail from the collection left behind by the former ladyship. It was a fussier confection than she usually wore. The neckline was scooped and gathered with a thin pink ribbon she tied in a bow between her breasts. It was cut like a chemise with straps and no sleeves. Like the borrowed dress, it was too short, but the voluminous top was comfortable. While it was impractical for the Northumberland weather, the cut was feminine and alluring.

She had never dressed with the intention of being feminine and alluring. She had never wanted to. Until now. Instead of a moth, she wanted to be the butterfly.

Groaning, she retrieved the novel she had read on the trip north, settled on the armchair in front of the fire, and read from the beginning again. If she was lucky, Warlock would have a repository of novels she could borrow until the shelves of the manor's study could be diversified.

While the novel wasn't as thrilling the second time through, innuendos she had been too ignorant to catch the first time were titillating. When the hero slipped a hand under the heroine's skirts, she now suspected he wasn't merely giving her knee a squeeze.

Finally, rustling in Dawson's room had her cocking her head like a hound catching the scent. Setting the book aside, she padded to the door, which she'd kept ajar, and pushed it open a few inches.

Dawson had shed his coat and waistcoat and stood with a hand propped on the mantel, looking into the flames and sipping on a brandy.

“You must be exhausted,” she said, remaining in the doorway, unsure of her welcome.

“The last steward’s handwriting was atrocious.” Everything about him stilled upon spotting her, except his gaze.

She didn’t need to look down to know her nipples had reacted to his blatantly admiring perusal. Courage shot through her like a shot of the brandy he set aside, and she stepped farther into his domain.

The room was dimmer than her own. Only a few candles in the brace were lit to supplement the flickering warmth of the fire. The furniture was larger and more masculine and the bed coverings a deep blue with glinting gold thread. The rug underfoot was large and plush as she joined him at the hearth.

“Do you want me to leave you in peace?” she asked.

He traced the neckline of her night rail with a finger. “There is no peace without you.”

Her nipples drew even tighter with a cascade of pleasurable shivers even as the warmth somewhere around her heart grew from his unexpectedly romantic words.

His next question was a dunk in cold water. “Did you finish your letter to Cyrus? I can post it with mine tomorrow.”

She hadn’t even begun her letter to Cyrus. Sketching Dawson in his natural state had distracted her to the point she had completely forgotten Cyrus. She would rise early and write the letter.

“I will have it ready in the morning.” There was no need for Dawson to know what she had been doing instead.

“How was your visit with Miss Chester?” His hand skimmed down her side, barely brushing her breast, to clasp her waist and draw her closer.

It was a challenge to hold a coherent conversation when he cupped her bottom and nuzzled the side of her neck. “Quite odd, actually. She asked me about Richard.”

His head came up sharply. “She asked about Pace-Verney? Why?”

“She didn’t say, but I got the impression she might hold a tendresse for him.”

“I suppose they met through her brother.”

“It sounds as though Richard and Mr. Chester frequented the same sort of seedy establishments.” She discarded his collar and tugged his shirt out of his trousers. “I warned her off him, but it was obviously not what she wanted to hear, because she left abruptly.”

“Did you tell her what he did... or tried to do?” Dawson’s grip tightened on her as if she were still in danger.

“No. I made no mention of his intent to marry me either. Should I have?”

He grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled it over his head. Her worries over Richard and Miss Chester disintegrated. Finally, it was her turn to explore his body. She ran her hands from his flanks to the hair dusted over his chest. Where she was soft, he was firm.

Before she realized what he was doing, he unfurled the pink bow. The neckline of her night rail gaped. He tried to

shuffle her backward toward the bed, but she planted her feet and pushed him away.

“What do you think you are doing?” she asked primly.

His eyes went wide. “I thought... I mean, don’t you want to... further our intimacies?”

The uncertainty in his voice was gratifying in a strange way. She had been the one battling the condition since their vows. In fact, she still was considering she really had no idea how to please him like he’d pleased her so thoroughly.

“Did you forget our agreement? It is my turn to explore and catalog you.” She hadn’t meant to sound so much like a scientist ready to pin him to a spreading board. Although pinning a specimen made for easier study, she preferred to capture the image of the butterfly or moth while in the wild on paper. It made her too sad to take such beauty out of the world forever.

Dawson looked flummoxed.

This is what she had asked for, so she must take charge of the situation. What did she want above all? To be able to actually see him. She pointed to the chair angled toward the hearth and the warm glow. “Sit.”

“Trousers on or off?” The dry aloofness was back in his voice, but his raised eyebrow and half smile added a charm that was not as obvious as Cyrus’s but just as appealing.

“On.” As he walked toward the chair, she added in a low voice, “For now.”

His step faltered, but he was in the chair in record time, his legs braced in a wide vee. She gathered the hem of her night rail and lowered herself to her knees in front of him. His gaze wandered to where her bodice gaped and offered him glimpses

of her breasts. Her first instinct was to retie the bow, but she stopped herself when she noticed the bulge in his trousers.

A sense of power welled up. She placed her hands on his knees. His thigh muscles jumped. She was causing this reaction. It was unexpected and lent her confidence. She had not recognized her long-standing nerves toward him as attraction until experiencing it. Did he feel the same toward her, or were men attracted to every female?

She ran her hands up his thighs, keeping her gaze on the bulge. She did not think she could meet his eyes while asking him the questions she sought answers to.

“I have questions,” she said.

“Ask me anything,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Do men find all women attractive?”

“What do you mean?”

“It is accepted, and even expected, for men to share many women’s beds. Males of most species aren’t very discerning. The physical reaction is the same whether there is marriage or deeper feelings involved.” She ran a finger over the bulge. It pulsed with his sharp intake of breath. “This reaction would occur with any woman offering her body, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ll own that for many men it does not matter who shares their bed, as long there is satisfaction.” He brushed his fingers over her cheek and tipped her chin up, forcing her gaze to his. “That has never been the case with me. I desire a deeper connection with my bed partners.”

“Have there been many?” Was that stab in her chest jealousy? She was afraid it might be. It was only natural to not want to share one’s husband, wasn’t it?

“No, and there has been no one for quite some time. My life has not been conducive to love affairs.” His eyes grew as gentle and warm as she had ever seen them. “You are special to me in many ways, Adriana.”

It wasn't a declaration of love—not that she expected one—but her heart ached with a longing she couldn't identify. She took a grounding breath. This wasn't about love anyway; it was about sex.

She fumbled with the fastenings of his trousers, pulling the flap aside. Her focus turned from the internal to the external. Finally, she could study him at her leisure.

His cock sprang from a nest of dark hair. The skin along the shaft was smooth and velvety to the touch. It was odd that such a brutal, utilitarian instrument could also bring her such pleasure.

The tip was flanged, and the slit on the end leaked his seed. She stroked up and down the shaft. He scooted his hips down the chair, bringing his cock closer and exposing his bollocks. Maddie had told her they were highly sensitive and a man's weakness if hit.

Were they as sensitive to pleasure as they were to pain? She cupped them and gave them a gentle squeeze. His chesty moan was her answer. She played with his bollocks until he ground out, “You are driving me mad, woman.”

“Good. Now you understand how I felt when you were teasing me on the drawing room chair.” She smiled but kept her focus between his legs.

“Can I kiss you?” she asked.

“Of course.” He shifted forward, but she pushed his chest back into the chair.

“I meant here.” She wrapped her hand around his shaft and flicked her tongue over the slit to taste him. She wet her lips and savored the saltiness of him. “It was something you enjoyed in the drawing room.”

“It would be heaven to have your lips around me, your mouth sucking me deep, but you don’t have to. Is it not expected of ladies?”

He had given her much-needed hints as to what he liked and more troubling information to dissect. She sat back on her heels. “Why is it not expected of ladies?”

He was gripping the arms of the chair tightly. “I don’t know. Because it does not lead to procreation. Because it is crude and messy.”

“Is it expected that gentleman bury their faces between their lady’s legs?” She continued to stroke him with a firm hand.

“Some ladies would be scandalized, I suppose.” His voice was strained. “I promise to answer your questions later. I beg you to quit your torture.”

Hearing him beg sent a thrill speeding through her. No wonder he had wanted the same from her. She took the tip of his cock between her lips, running her tongue along the flange. His cock pulsed in her mouth and released more fluid. She sucked and swallowed, humming her satisfaction.

“More. Take more please.” The plaintive roughness of his voice was fascinating.

With his cock still in her mouth, she glanced up at him. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back. One of his hands crept into her hair to cup the back of her head. She slowly took more of him into her mouth until the tip of him hit her throat.

He fisted his hand in her hair and gave a gentle guiding tug away until only the tip of him remained in her mouth. He pushed her back onto his length and then pulled her off. If her mouth wasn't stuffed full of his cock, she would have said, "Aha!" She understood what he wanted and moved without his guidance, stroking and sucking him.

The hand that had been in her hair moved to slip inside her night rail. He played with her nipple until she was squirming with her own need.

With a groan, he scooped his hands under her arms and stood, bringing her with him as if she weighed nothing at all. "While I will spend in your mouth someday soon, tonight I need to be inside you."

"Because you require an heir?" she asked.

"Because I want to feel your tight wet pussy clutching my cock as you come." He backed them toward the bed, kicking off his trousers along the way, and lay on his back, slightly propped on the pillows. "Straddle me."

She clambered onto the bed and did as he commanded, her night rail spilling over his stomach. The length of him rested against her core, and she moved her hips, searching for what felt good. She braced her hands on his bare muscled chest and rotated her hips again. His head rubbed against her clit in the most delicious way.

He pushed her night rail up her body, and she whipped it over her head, impatient to continue grinding herself against him with nothing in the way of her pleasure. Her body was slick, and the friction was starting a fire in her core. There was plenty of light to watch him watch her, his gaze traveling from where she was rubbing herself so shamelessly against him to her bobbing breasts.

Her need outpaced her quickly diminishing modesty with him. There was no mistaking his own arousal, and she shook her hair over her shoulders to give him a better view. He shifted higher on the pillows to cup her breasts and pinch her nipples.

Their gazes finally met, and she couldn't look away even though the intensity burning between them was too much to bear. A fortnight ago, she would never have predicted where she would end up. Now she couldn't imagine her life any differently.

“Ride me, my love. Take your pleasure.” The gruffness of his command made her heart stumble.

He lifted her just enough to impale her on his cock. The new position settled him deep inside her. She didn't need him to guide her. She had gained enough experience to know what they both needed. On thighs strong from her walks, she lifted and fell on him, reveling in the control he granted her. Her pace increased until their union was wild and rough.

Her climax was blinding in its pleasure. Vaguely, she was aware he had grabbed her hips to pump a few more times before he too spent.

Her trembling arms buckled, and she draped herself over his chest, her face tucked into his neck. Both of them were breathing hard, and neither of them spoke. Her heart slowed and matched the thump of his. Only when he slipped out of her did he roll her to his side and rise for a cleansing cloth.

She allowed him to clean between her legs, too lethargic and sated to do it herself. He rejoined her in bed and pulled the covers over them, tucking her back into his front and threading their fingers together.

“Have we tried them all?” she asked.

“All of what?”

“The sexual positions. I thought there was only one people used. Once in the retiring room at a ball, I overheard a newly married lady say she stared at the canopy while her husband labored between her legs.”

“Ah.” His chest moved against her with his soft laughter. “I would not want you to become bored. There are many other positions we can attempt. We can even try to discover a new one.”

“I would like that.” She was all about new discoveries. “I would also like for you to spend in my mouth if you wish it.”

Dawson let out a long breath. “You are a wonder.”

Was her curiosity unusual? Assuredly so. What about her consuming attraction to her husband? Based on the limited observations she’d made in her time as a debutante, she thought that too might be a rarity.

His breathing grew deep and steady behind her. He had to be exhausted after his hours poring over the accounts. She let her mind play over their encounter. Something niggled at her, but it had nothing to do with what they had done. It had been something he had said.

He called her my love for the second time. The first had been during her ill-fated adventure in the rain. Obviously, a term of endearment meant nothing in terms of true feelings. Except hearing him say it had sparked something within her that was worth examining.

Of course she had known and cared for Dawson like she had the rest of the Westhorpe family. She had worried about him when he had taken a commission and been relieved

whenever Cyrus had informed her a letter from him had arrived.

He had been a distant brother figure. In fact, she had assumed one day he would be her brother through marriage to Cyrus. Never had she seen past his aloofness to the passion and intelligence and humor underneath.

What if she had married Cyrus and only recognized the man Dawson truly was after it was too late? The way her heart ached made one thing clear. Her feelings for him were growing by the day. At this rate, she would be in love with him in no time.

If she wasn't already.

CHAPTER 22



The next fortnight passed in a flurry of activity. The lambing began and drew Dawson out of bed at all hours. Adriana didn't mind, especially after witnessing a newborn rising on its spindly legs in search of its mother. It made her heart burst.

Dawson had shown Adriana they did not need a bed at night to seek their satisfaction. They'd nearly been caught in the stables early one morning against a stall door, Adriana with her skirts up and Dawson with his pants down.

Dawson had explained Mrs. Hannigan's worry over moths and the wool shearings and suggested Adriana might investigate what could be done to prevent damage. His confidence in her abilities made feelings she was afraid to put into words grow more unwieldy by the day. While she prepared the moth enclosures for breeding and testing various scenarios, she offered to keep organizing the estates accounts.

It wasn't for entirely selfless reasons. Dawson was exhausting himself trying to tend to both the lambing and the details of the estate, and they were enjoying one another too much to merely sleep at night.

While Mr. Abernathy, the new steward, didn't act outwardly averse to working with her, the same couldn't be

said of Mrs. Hannigan. The barbs were becoming more pointed.

“The former Lady Westhorpe would never dream of dirtying her hands with bugs or ink. She was a paragon. She would have hosted a soiree by now.” Mrs. Hannigan sniffed and deposited a tray of tea and sandwiches on the desk for Adriana and Mr. Abernathy.

Adriana was slow to anger. She had inherited her father’s even temperament even if he refused to acknowledge it. But her anger had been kindled and sparked higher with each comment Mrs. Hannigan made. She’d had enough.

Adriana rose and set the quill in the inkstand. “I knew the former Lady Westhorpe well, Mrs. Hannigan. Better than you, I daresay, considering she barely spent time at Fernlow Manor. She detested the isolation and the endless talk of sheep and the lack of what she considered proper society. I, on the other hand, think Fernlow Manor is lovely and Warlock is charming and love spending time in the country. Once we get the accounts straightened out, I have no doubt that the estate will be profitable and a boon to the area. I have the best interests of the estate and its people at heart. I hope you understand that and will support rather than hinder me. You are dismissed.”

Adriana regained her seat and looked down at the lines of numbers in front of her, ignoring Mrs. Hannigan. Once the door closed, however, she sat back in the chair with an exclamation of annoyance.

“She doesn’t approve of me,” Adriana said.

“That she doesn’t,” Mr. Abernathy said with dryness of tone she appreciated.

Adriana tapped her fingers on the desktop. “Have you heard if she disparages me in the village?”

Mr. Abernathy cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable with the direction of her questions. He was discreet and circumspect, which made him an exceptional steward. “As you know, I am new to the area myself.”

Adriana didn’t know much about Mr. Abernathy except he had come from London but was originally from Scotland. The burr in his voice had been smoothed but still lilted his words. He resided in a charming cottage on Fernlow land but close to the village.

“That is an evasion, not an answer,” Adriana said chidingly.

A half-shouldered shrug signaled his agreement with her assessment. “She is not disparaging of your character, but she has hinted at your odd interests.”

That was nothing new and to be expected. “I am considered an oddity where ever I am.”

“It seems to me that oddities are not that odd in Warlock.”

“What are you implying?” Adriana cocked her head toward Mr. Abernathy.

“There is an unusual number of independent and capable women in Warlock.” He stood and put the ledger he was copying in front of her. “Can you decipher this? I’m not sure the former steward was even literate.”

She squinted and tried her best. Once done reciting the numbers, she asked, “How long have you and my husband been acquainted?”

To his credit, Mr. Abernathy didn't react or look up from his work. "What makes you think we were formerly acquainted before he hired me?"

"I drew that conclusion based on how comfortable he is with you. Did you work together in London when he was commissioned?"

Mr. Abernathy looked up from his work. "We served together for a time."

"Did you work for Hawkins as well?"

His eyes bulged slightly. "How much did Westhorpe share about his work?"

Adriana decided it was time for discretion. "He must think highly of you to bring you to Fernlow."

"It was more he felt sorry for me. I'm glad for the war's end, but it's hard times for work." He shrugged. "And while it isn't Scotland, it feels more like home here."

Two hours later, Adriana left Mr. Abernathy bent over the desk. His talent for numbers was wasted on account ledgers, but he didn't seem to mind the work. He had a story to tell, but like Dawson, he had a reserve that kept her from probing any further.

As she wandered into the drawing room, she ruminated on Mrs. Hannigan. She might be right about one thing. It was time to host a social event.

Adriana had sent her father and Cyrus letters at the same time, but she had not yet received a reply from either man. Neither had she received a trunk with her belongings. It hurt her heart to think of her father so angry with her decision to marry Dawson that he refused to ever speak to her again.

That night, after she had joined Dawson in his bed for quick, hard coupling, they lay in the darkness, her head cradled on his shoulder as he drew lazy circles on her back.

“How long have you known Mr. Abernathy?” she asked.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. “We worked together in the Home Office. He’s good with numbers and needed the work. Plus I trust him.”

Muscles she hadn’t known she’d tensed in the wait for his answer loosened. She was relieved he hadn’t tried to hide the truth. “No word yet from Cyrus or my father?”

“It’s too soon to know whether our letters have even reached Cyrus. As for your father...” He squeezed her closer and pressed a kiss on top of her head. “I will travel to Bainbridge to discuss our marriage with him after lambing season.”

“And when will that be?”

“Another two weeks according to the master herder.”

While sending Dawson to face her father’s ire would be easier, her conscience lodged a protest. “Mrs. Hannigan encouraged me to host an event for the area gentry. Should I begin planning something?”

“I seem to recall Warlock holding a fete to celebrate the end of a successful lambing season. We could invite some of the townspeople and landowners to Fernlow. Something small and manageable either before or after.”

“What if we invite my father and Sarah? He will witness my contentment and give his blessing. I’m sure of it.” She wasn’t actually that sure, but she had to try. “I will send invitations to London and to Bainbridge so there can be no excuse for him not to accept.”

“That sounds like a fine idea. I look forward to showing him around the estate.” After a long moment of silence, he asked quietly, “And are you? Content, I mean?”

She hid her face against his chest, afraid her burgeoning feelings would be writ large. She was more than content. She was happy.

And confused. And overwhelmed. How could she confess to such emotions, especially to the man who engendered them? “I am content. And you?”

His arms tightened around her. “Very.”

While a small amount of relief at his speedy answer welled up, disappointment cast a pall. What had she expected? A declaration of real affection? Nothing of the sort. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but wonder if her stew of feelings might actually be love.

Impossible, and yet... When apart, she couldn't stop thinking about him. She had almost filled her new sketchbook, not with butterflies and moths but with every inch of him she admired. Well, not *every* inch. Although, after tonight, that might change.

When they were reunited after a day spent apart, her heart grew warm and she couldn't stop smiling. She found herself looking for excuses to touch him, even if it was a simple brush of her fingertips against his arm.

Was that love?

He made her feel safe and protected but, even more, appreciated for the very traits others had mocked her over. Even Cyrus had assumed she would put his aspirations for poetry above her own interests after they married. In contrast, Dawson had turned to her to help him with the accounts and

the problem of moths in the wool. She stood taller when he was around because he was proud of her, and in turn, she was proud of herself.

Was that love?

Maybe love was like an estate ledger. Any one thing might not be love, but if added up and accumulated, it counted as love.

She had not expected their hasty marriage to be a catalyst for a love match. She reined in her thoughts. It wasn't a love match if it was one-sided. He was content. No, *very* content. That did not mean he loved her—or could ever love her.

He tipped her chin up with a finger and raised his head slightly. “What are you thinking about?”

“N-nothing. Why? What are you thinking about?” Her cheeks grew hot.

“I'm thinking about the way you're squirming against me and how I'm weary but not that weary.”

Her laugh was born of relief. He hadn't guessed the mawkish direction of her thoughts. Sex was a way for her to express her feelings without putting her heart in the line of fire. She slipped her hand between his legs to find him hard.

“Your cock never seems to tire,” she teased.

“It is forever vying for your attention.” He rolled on top of her.

She welcomed him between her legs, and he settled his erection against her core. He pressed inside her slowly but inexorably, not stopping until he was fully buried, his pelvis flush against her. Propped on his elbows over her, he didn't move.

“Look at me.” All his tease had decamped to be replaced by something raw and elemental.

She obeyed, digging her nails into the broad muscles of his back upon meeting the intensity of his gaze. Only then did he take a long stroke. His rhythm remained steady and slow and deep.

Tears stung her eyes for reasons she couldn't fathom, and she bit the inside of her mouth to keep them at bay. Each stroke seemed to strip away her defenses as if he were searching for the truth of her. She wanted to say the words that were on her heart. She had to say them.

“Dawson, I—”

His hips twisted, and the new angle had a gasp stealing her words. He did it again and then again. Was it greedy to want another climax? She braced her heels on the bed and met each thrust. She clung to his shoulders, and he dropped closer to kiss her.

It was a wild kiss that left her breathless and moaning his name as she was caught in the throes of pleasure. Her body clenched around him in waves. His hand scooped under her buttocks and tilted her pelvis up. His thrusts grew harder and faster until he bucked into her and held himself still and tense over her.

He pulsed his release inside her a second time that evening. She was sated and could barely keep her eyes open in the aftermath. She needed to curl next to his big warm body and sleep.

A mewl of discontent escaped her throat when he rose from the bed. A soft cloth smelling of lavender cleansed away

any stickiness. He was wrapped around her again soon enough, her bottom notched into his lower belly.

It was difficult to sleep now without him. When he arose to tend to a difficult lambing in the middle of the night, she tossed and turned until he returned chilled and smelling of the night. She would have to confess her feelings at some point, but it could wait. After all, he was her husband, and they had a lifetime together.

CHAPTER 23



Three weeks later, Dawson adjusted his cravat and tugged on the sleeves of his frock coat. It had become tight across the shoulders after the physical work he had undertaken during lambing season. The bulk of the births had been successful with countless sets of twin lambs born, two sets of triplets, and even one set of quadruplets.

Nature could be cruel, and Dawson insisted on intervening if an ewe or lamb appeared to be struggling. As a result, they had only lost a few lambs and two older ewes. The master herder had deemed it the most successful season of his thirty-odd years.

Between the hours spent on the moor in the cold, miserable, sometimes backbreaking work of birthing and wanting to spend as much time with Adriana as possible, he had burned the candle at both ends until it almost flamed out. Thankfully, the season ended as abruptly as it began.

After a week of uninterrupted sleep and lolling between the sheets with Adriana when he was awake, he was recovered. Would he ever tire of bedding her? Considering whenever they were in the same room, he never tired of observing her graceful movements and the tiny expressions of amusement or happiness or contemplation flitting over her

face, the answer was a resounding no. His infatuation with her had grown into an all-consuming love he wasn't sure what to do with.

What if she didn't want his heart? What if contentment was all she would ever feel with him? He'd thought all his problems had ended once she had come to his bed willingly, but no. It had made him want more than just her body. He wanted her heart.

For the moment, he had a different gauntlet to face. Baron Coffey's arrival was imminent. Adriana paced the entry in one of her new gowns. Mrs. MacGrath's creation outshone any of Adriana's London frocks.

It was a deep rusty orange that suited Adriana's olive complexion and dark, glossy hair. It was absent any frills or fripperies. The only adornment was dark gold embroidery along the neckline and hem. He couldn't take his eyes off her. It went beyond a pretty dress. Her allure had never been about her beauty. It came from within.

She had spent the week preparing for the soiree they were hosting to celebrate the end of lambing season. While she admitted she would rather have been overseeing her moth and wool experiments, she handled the planning with a confidence that shouldn't have surprised him. The woman he had watched gravitate to the corners of any social function and never put herself on display was changing. Instead of a moth, she was turning into a butterfly.

"What if he challenges you to a duel?" she asked as she stalked by him.

When she turned to paced the other direction, he caught her arm. "Can you picture your father taking part in a duel?"

She huffed a laugh, but it was rife with nerves. “No, but what if he gives you a stern talking-to?”

“Sweetheart, I was at Waterloo. A talking-to by my new father-in-law does not worry me.” It actually did worry him a bit. What if the baron outright asked him how he felt about his daughter? He was not going to confess his undying love for Adriana to the baron before he found the courage to tell her.

Hannigan cleared his throat as he emerged from the drawing room. “A carriage approaches.”

Adriana ran to the nearest window to peek out and then turned to lean against the wall. “It is Father’s carriage. Oh dear.”

Dawson took her shoulders and gave them a bracing squeeze. “The initial greeting might prove awkward, but I promise everything will be fine. You are his daughter, and he loves you.” *As do I*, he wanted to add but didn’t. Now was not the time to upend what little control she had over the situation at hand.

“You’ll remain at my side?” Her eyes were beseeching and a little panicked.

“Always.” He skimmed the back of his hand down her cheek and took her hand. “Shall we?”

She nodded, and as promised, they stepped out of the house side by side.

Lady Coffey descended from the carriage first with the help of a newly hired footman from the village. Her father was next. He stretched his back, set his hands on his hips, and stared at them. His stare promised either a pummeling or death later.

“What have you to say for yourself, Dawson Shaw?” The baron voice boomed and echoed off the stone front of Fernlow Manor.

Dawson stepped forward, but when he tried to let go of Adriana’s hand, she merely clung tighter and matched his stride.

“My wife and I welcome you and Lady Coffey to Fernlow Manor. Your trunks will be taken up to your room and baths drawn, but that will take time to ready. Please come join us in the drawing room for refreshments.” Dawson gestured toward the door.

Only then did Adriana break away from him to herd Lady Coffey inside. The baron followed stiffly, the glare he favored Dawson with communicating his ire at being handled.

As soon as they were seated, Mrs. Hannigan bustled in with a tea tray followed by Elspeth with a platter of bread, cheese, and succulent fowl along with sweet treats.

Adriana poured cups of tea and added two lumps of sugar for her father, a splash of cream for Lady Coffey, and handed his over black.

“I trust you are well, Father. Have you come from Bainbridge or London?” Adriana sipped her tea.

“Bainbridge,” her father said shortly.

“How does the garden fare? The tulips should be blooming.”

“It’s very pretty, although I can see the head gardener moping about because you aren’t there. The gardens miss you.” The baron looked toward a figurine of a sheep. It was obvious the baron had missed her too.

“I miss the gardens as well. And you too, Father. I didn’t plan to leave so abruptly.” Before either the baron or Lady Coffey could launch into an interrogation, Adriana said, “I am surprised you were in Bainbridge considering the season is in full swing.”

“Yes, well. Richard got into a spot of trouble,” the baron said.

Lady Coffey sat forward, her gaze darting around the room, finally settling on Adriana. The long trip had left circles under her eyes. Her dress was wrinkled and equally road weary. “It wasn’t his fault. Your leaving fairly broke his heart.”

The only thing Richard Pace-Verney loved was himself and money. Dawson bit his tongue and merely murmured, “That is a shame.”

Lady Coffey turned a vitriol-filled gaze on him. “What is *shameful* is the way you stole Adriana away in the dead of night and absconded with her to the great wilds of Northumberland. Did you at least travel to Scotland to marry over the anvil before you ruined her?”

Dawson’s brows knitted. “It was not dead of night; it was midmorning. We married by special license that evening in front of a clergyman before we departed London. Mr. Pace-Verney was aware of our plans. I’m surprised he didn’t inform you.”

Lady Coffey’s mouth was tight, but she said nothing. The baron cleared his throat. “What’s done is done, but I’m glad to hear you married properly. How do you find the north country, daughter?”

“Wild and beautiful. The gardens need work, but I love a challenge.” She scooted forward. “I’m working on an experiment to determine how to reduce wool losses due to moths.”

“I see.” The baron shot Dawson a look that might have been surprise or displeasure. It was hard to read his expression through the bushy eyebrows and ample mustaches the baron favored.

After a long moment of silence where only the *tink* of cups on saucers broke the silence, Adriana cleared her throat. “We have invited the Chesters to dine with us this evening. Mr. Henry Chester and his sister Miss Faye Chester are close neighbors. They were recently in London. Have you made their acquaintance?”

Lady Coffey shook her head, but took the mention of London as an invitation to launch into a recital of the scintillating society events that had occurred since his and Adriana’s marriage and subsequent departure. If she was attempting to make Adriana feel jealousy or sadness at what she had missed, she did not understand her stepdaughter at all.

Mrs. Hannigan returned. “Lord and Lady Coffey’s rooms are ready and baths await. I will show them upstairs.”

All four of them rose. Lady Coffey stepped smartly after Mrs. Hannigan, but the baron stopped in front of Dawson. “May I have a private word with you in your study, boy?”

While it was true the baron had known Dawson since he was in short pants climbing trees and getting muddy, he now outranked the baron. Nevertheless, Dawson kept his voice cool and even as he gestured toward his study. “Of course. Right this way.”

Dawson intercepted a biting glare from Adriana. She wouldn't appreciate being discussed while not present, but while the baron had not discouraged Adriana's pursuit of lepidopterology, he was old-fashioned in many ways. He regarded these types of discussions as the purvey of gentlemen. No doubt, he would have an apoplexy if he knew Adriana had been helping Abernathy get the accounts up to date.

Surprisingly, Adriana did not argue and trailed Lady Coffey to help get her settled. Dawson led the way into his study. He closed the door and gestured for the baron to take a seat while Dawson moved to sit behind the desk. It was a subtle signal of who exactly was in charge at Fernlow.

"What have to say for yourself, boy?" The baron was perched on the edge of the chair, his fisted hands braced on his thighs and his chest bumped out.

"Firstly, I will point out that I am no longer a boy. I am a man who has been to war. You may call me Westhorpe or Dawson, if you prefer, but not boy. Secondly, if I am not mistaken—and I'm not—Adriana made her feelings on being forced to marry Pace-Verney very clear. She took actions to avoid that fate."

"She never gave Richard a chance to—"

"Pace-Verney attempted to rape her in order to force her hand."

"No." The baron sat back in his seat. "I don't believe it. When?"

"While you were in Bainbridge. Ask her yourself."

The baron's face had turned red. "I cannot discuss such indelicacies with her."

“Pace-Verney is a bounder. Surely you can see that.”

The baron shifted and pulled on his mustaches. “I allow that he can act rashly on occasion. Marriage would have been a settling force upon him. I wasn’t blessed with a son, you know. I need someone—”

Anger sizzled under Dawson’s skin. “No, you were blessed with a daughter of great intellect, kindness, and beauty. Any father should count himself lucky beyond measure.”

The baron stumbled over his response. “I do. Of course I do. I have missed her greatly these past weeks.”

“But not enough to send her things or write her back. The last thing she wants is to be estranged from you. She loves you very much.” Dawson gentled his voice when he really wanted to shake sense into the baron.

“Sarah convinced me I should punish her for disobeying me.” The baron’s voice grew less assured.

“Sir, you know me well. I am an earl with a healthy income. I do not gamble or drink to excess. I care very much for your daughter. Can you honestly say you disapprove of the match?”

The baron threw his hands up before slumping back in the chair. “Of course not. For years, I assumed Adriana would marry a Shaw. I just expected it to be Cyrus, not you.”

“I believe we all expected that eventual outcome, but events precipitated otherwise. I would like to think Adriana does not regret the change in circumstance.” At least, he prayed that was the case.

“I believe I’m ready for a bath and a nap before dinner.” The baron rose, looking considerably smaller and older.

“Of course. I’ll ring for Mrs. Hannigan.” Dawson rose and pulled the bell by the door. “We dine early as you do in Bainbridge.”

“Very good.” The baron hesitated a moment and then offered Dawson his hand for a shake. Dawson took it, relieved the issue of their hasty marriage felt settled, at least in the baron’s eyes.

Once the baron was led away by Mrs. Hannigan, Dawson went on the hunt for Adriana, finding her combing through the trunk of her things the Coffeys had brought with them.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“He was indignant, as was to be expected. I explained that Pace-Verney is a miscreant who attempted to hurt you. He deflated some at that. It seems your stepmother convinced him you needed to be punished by withholding your things and a timely reply from your father.”

She shook out a brown velvet dress and tilted her head to study it. “Sarah is not evil. She is an opportunist. Since she failed to contrive a marriage between me and her son, she will attempt to drive a wedge between me and Father.”

“It might have worked for a time, but he misses you.” Dawson leaned against the bedpost and regarded her. “He will have a hard time disapproving of me as your husband.”

She tossed the gown on the chair and smiled over her shoulder at him. “Why is that? Because you are brilliant and kind and handsome?”

His heart stuttered at her assessment. Did she truly see him that way or was she teasing him? “Because I am an earl and possess multiple estates.”

She came to him and wrapped her arms around him, resting her forehead against his jaw. He nuzzled his face against her hair. They fit together so perfectly. Did she feel that way too?

He should say it. He opened his mouth and took a stuttering breath. *Just say it, coward.* The words got stuck somewhere between his heart and lips.

A scratch on the door heralded the arrival of Elspeth. Adriana ushered her in. Elspeth bobbed a clumsy curtsy in his direction before moving to help sort through the trunk of gowns and the assortment of underthings and slippers and whatever else was sent by the Coffeys.

“Oh, a sketchbook! I thought Richard burned them all. Jones must have found it in Bainbridge.” With a smile on her face, she flipped through the pages and then hugged it to her chest. “It is only half-full, which is excellent. I’ve almost filled the book you gave me.”

“Already?” To his knowledge, Adriana had spent more time on her moth and wool experiments and with the accounts than exploring the gardens and sketching.

The look she gave him under her lashes was accompanied by pinkened cheeks. “A new environment is always stimulating to the creative mind.”

As Dawson had not inherited any artistic gifts, he would take her at her word. “I will be glad to order you more supplies.”

“How much longer will we remain at Fernlow?” she asked.

Elspeth’s eyes grew huge, and her hands stilled. Whatever he said next would end up as kitchen gossip. “Are you missing London?”

“Not in the least. Actually, I need more time for my experiment, and I would like to direct work on the garden.” She lay the sketchbook on the bed she no longer slept in and pulled out another gown, this one russet.

“While I can’t claim to have an eye for fashion, I must say that I like your new gowns. Mrs. MacGrath is a talented seamstress,” Dawson said.

Adriana regarded the gown with a frown. “I agree. I will wear the sapphire blue tonight, Elspeth.”

“Very good, my lady.” Elspeth took the new blue gown from the wardrobe to freshen it for the evening.

Once they were alone, Dawson said, “We can stay here as long as you wish. Summer should be pleasant.”

“Could we invite Maddie and her husband for a visit? She can help me decide what should be planted.” She turned with a light her eyes. “And Lady Dorn as well? Although I have not received a letter in quite some time. I hope she is well. Her obsession with the night sky consumed her after her husband’s passing.”

“Did her husband disapprove of her scientific ambitions?”

“No, he encouraged her. Lord Dorn was a mathematician and astronomer himself.”

It wasn’t uncommon for an older gentleman to make a match with a much younger woman. “Did they have children?”

“No. Geneva has never expressed a desire for a child.” Her tone was speculative. “Theirs wasn’t a love match in the traditional sense, although she cared for him greatly. Lord Dorn offered her his name and protection after her father died. He was a French émigré after the Terror. Geneva was just a

babe at the time. Things couldn't have been easy for them in Wales after Napoleon took over."

They would have been regarded with suspicion, especially in the countryside. "No, I imagine not. We can invite whomever you wish."

"What of your friends? Any that you would like to invite?" She continued to sort through the trunk.

Friends? He had associates. Dawson tried to imagine sitting across a formal dining table from McKelvey and had to stifle a guffaw. The man couldn't help but look dangerous. What on earth would they discuss? Which members of the House of Lords were currently being blackmailed? The going price of assassinations?

Dawson had left that world behind when he assumed the earldom. Mostly. Hiring Abernathy was an exception, and Dawson obviously wasn't above using men like McKelvey when needed. How would she react if Adriana discovered her footman had been placed by Dawson to protect and report?

He didn't want to find out. As casually as possible, he said, "No one comes to mind at the moment."

She came to him and took his hand in both of hers, rubbing her thumbs down his palm. Tingles went straight to his cock as they always did at her slightest touch. "You miss your brothers, don't you?"

He nodded. Of course he did, but they hadn't really been his friends either. They had not understood Dawson. Not like Adriana did. She was the only one who had ever made him feel accepted.

He wrapped his hand around her nape and tilted her face to his. "We have a few minutes before we must dress for dinner."

“A few minutes seems like a pittance of time.” Even as she said it, one of her hands trailed to cup him between his legs. Her wide eyes and gasp signaled her surprise to find him already hard. “You are insatiable.”

“Are you any less hungry for what I can give you?” He left her briefly to lock the door and then turned her to face the bed, pressing her torso to the mattress and flipping her skirts to her waist.

Her answer was to spread her legs wider and pop up onto her toes, offering herself to him. He fumbled with his fastenings with one hand while his other delved between her legs. She was wet, but he wanted her close to the edge when he entered her. He ignored his desperate cock to concentrate on her pleasure.

He rubbed her clit with his palm while driving two fingers inside her. Leaning over her, he pressed kisses into her neck. “Tonight, I’ll strip you naked, prop you on my pillows, and have my dessert.”

“Or I’ll sit you in the chair and have mine.”

“There is a position that would allow us both our just desserts,” he whispered in her ear.

“I can’t wait.” Her voice was strangled, and he wasn’t sure whether she referred to the satisfaction that would come now or later.

He had learned exactly how to drive her wild, and he needed both hands. With one he pinched her clit while he fucked her with his other. She squirmed, but he didn’t relent. As soon as he felt the quivers of her pussy, he replaced his fingers with his cock, stabbing hard and deep. A cry strangled

out of her, and she fisted the coverlet in both hands as her body clenched around him.

He grabbed her hips. Her dress pooled around her waist, leaving her pale buttocks bare. Her stockings were gartered above the knee with pretty pink ribbons. He pounded into her hard, rocking her with each thrust. The combination of prim and naughty made for an erotic sight. One that had him spending in ropes across her bare buttocks. He rubbed the fluid into her skin with the head of his still-hard cock.

The look she gave him over her shoulder made him want to cancel dinner entirely and stay in bed with her the rest of the evening.

“You’d better clean me up before Elspeth returns,” she said in a husky voice.

He wiped her buttocks clean with a trembling hand. Even after all these weeks, his control was shaky at best. Tonight he would make it up to her. He would love her like she deserved, and perhaps even tell her the same.

CHAPTER 24



Adriana's knees were shaky as she descended to gather before dinner. She couldn't say whether it was nerves from being the hostess or the encounter with Dawson earlier. The one thing getting her through the evening was the thought of curling up next to him after the house was quiet and rehashing what went right and wrong about the dinner.

Adriana peeked in the dining room. The table looked elegant, and the candles were ready to be lit. The smells coming from the kitchen were mouthwatering. While her father would be happy to eat pheasant and potatoes, Sarah expected more elegant fare. The Chesters also had high standards after their time in London.

As there was nothing else for her to do, she poured herself a finger of brandy from the sideboard in the drawing room and waited. Her father was the first to join her.

"Daughter." He cleared his throat but said nothing else.

It was odd seeing her usually self-assured father uncomfortable, especially with her. Adriana didn't like the new dynamic between them. "Would you like a brandy? Dawson keeps an excellent stock."

"I would, thank you." Her father eyed her glass. He didn't offer a comment even though she was very aware that he did

not approve of ladies partaking in spirits.

She poured him a generous glass and waited for him to take a bracing sip. “I hope you understand why I married Dawson.”

“He explained a bit. You tried to tell me, didn’t you? I didn’t listen. I still feel as though Richard can be a great man, if only you—”

“Do not make excuses for him, Father. He will never be a great man. He is a wastrel and cruel. I will never forgive him.” Her voice was strong, and she was standing tall. “You underestimated me. You believed him over me. You hurt me.”

Her father had gone pale, and his mustaches quivered. “It seems I have much to ask forgiveness for.”

“Yes, you do. You are my father, and I trusted you to protect me.”

“I failed you.” His shoulders slumped as he accepted the truth. He had arrived full of bluster, but he had known the truth. “Will you forgive me?”

It was easy enough to forgive him considering how things had worked out, but what-ifs circled like vultures. “Of course I will.” At the gleam in his eyes, she added, “Eventually.”

Silence gathered, and Adriana sipped her brandy. Her father downed his in one swallow and poured himself another.

“I take it you are happy enough with the wrong brother?” he asked.

“Dawson is not the wrong brother, just the unexpected one. But, yes, I am happier than I imagined.”

“What of Cyrus? What does he have to say about the match?”

Adriana gave a small shake of her head and finished off her brandy. “We haven’t received a reply from the letters we sent him.”

“I imagine he will be upset.”

“I imagine so, but he wasn’t ready to marry, and I was desperate.” While it was the truth, it made Adriana sound like she’d settled for Dawson which hadn’t been the case. Or, at least, it wasn’t the case now. Like some of the best experiments, their messy, confusing beginning had coalesced into a beautiful conclusion.

Dawson joined them with Sarah on his arm, and not five minutes later the Chesters arrived. Miss Chester was dressed in a rose-pink gown twinkling with glass beads sewn onto her bodice. It was too fussy for Adriana’s taste, but Miss Chester looked very pretty. Her thick blond hair was formed in perfect curls at her temples and framed her deep blue eyes.

They soon moved to the dinner table where Mr. Chester’s jovial manner and endless stories dominated the conversation, but Adriana didn’t mind. After all, the main reason he had been invited was to help dissipate any lingering tension. Mr. Chester reminded her more than a bit of Cyrus, and for the first time, she recognized how tedious such company would be on a daily basis.

She looked down the table at Dawson. He was listening to Sarah and nodding. What Adriana had deemed aloofness was really an admirable comfort with silence and solitude. As if sensing her attention, he swung his gaze to meet hers and favor her with a small smile. Warmth blossomed in her chest.

After dinner, as was custom, the gentlemen retreated to the study while the ladies settled in the drawing room. Adriana poured them each a glass of ratafia and took a seat across from

Miss Chester. While Sarah prattled on about missing London, Miss Chester sipped her drink and looked more and more tense.

“How is your son, Mr. Pace-Verney, Lady Coffey?” Miss Chester asked with the force of a released arrow.

Sarah turned toward Miss Chester. “He is well enough. You have a brother, so I’m sure you understand how untamed young gentlemen can be until they are settled through marriage.”

“That sounds like an excuse to me. I hope the majority of gentlemen have more sense than a horse that requires settling,” Adriana said tartly.

Sarah set her glass aside and primly folded her hands on her lap. “If you had given my dear Richard a chance, you would have been very happily married, living in a fine house in London, and enjoying the whirl of the season instead of banished to this godforsaken place with more sheep than well-bred people.”

Adriana held her tongue with difficulty.

Miss Chester quaffed the remainder of her ratafia and turned to Sarah. “Warlock is a fine place, Lady Coffey. The people are good and honest, which is more than I can say about untamed London gentlemen.”

Adriana had the urge to applaud but kept herself to a murmured, “Well said, Miss Chester.”

Before Sarah could retort, the crunch of galloping horse hooves on gravel carried through the quiet night. Adriana rose to look out the front window. She could make out two horses carrying men but not their identities. Was there a problem with the herd? A deep dread filled the pit in her stomach.

She exited the drawing room to find Dawson ahead of her, his brow knitted. He stepped outside to greet the two men, the baron on his heels. Mr. Chester had joined his sister and Sarah in the drawing room. Adriana stepped just outside the door and shivered.

The wind whistled over the moor, plucking at her hair and whipping her skirts around her ankles. The first man dismounted and took off his beaver hat. His blond hair was longer and curled over his forehead, but he was unmistakable.

Cyrus had returned.

The other man joined Cyrus, shoulder to shoulder on the drive. Richard Pace-Verney ran a gloved hand through his hair and smiled with a menace that made Adriana take a step back into the protection of the house.

“I assume my invitation got lost on the long and winding road to London,” Richard said with a lightness not reflected in the mood.

Cyrus was not smiling, and he did not look away from Dawson. “You betrayed me!”

“I—” Dawson shook his head and stepped toward Cyrus. “Did you get our letters?”

“You couldn’t wait? I don’t believe it. You are a bastard who always pined over what the rest of us had. First you took the title and the inheritance, and now you have taken the woman I love through foul means. You are not handsome or charming enough to win her fairly. Tell the truth!” Cyrus finally looked over to fix her with a furious glare. “Better yet, tell *her* the truth!”

Adriana wanted to defend Dawson, but all she could do was cling to the doorjamb as the wind buffeted her.

Her father took charge of the situation, greeting his stepson coolly and ushering everyone into the drawing room. Brief introductions were made. Miss Chester had moved to the far corner, and her brother, his face serious for once, stood close by as if she required protection.

Sarah greeted Richard with a smile and no surprise, only satisfaction. Had she planned this ambush? Adriana would worry about subterfuge later. The immediate battle was unfolding in front of her right now.

Dawson, pale and grim, stood in the drawing room doorway. “We should discuss this in private, Cyrus. It is a family matter. Come to my study.”

Cyrus tossed his hat onto the nearest chair and scanned the room. “It seems we are mostly family. The Chesters can act as judge after I tell my tale.”

“What tale?” Adriana asked. This was not how she imagined a reunion with Cyrus would unfold. She had expected hurt and shock on their first meeting after everything that had happened but not vitriol.

“The tale of how my brother manipulated you out of jealousy and selfishness to take what was mine.” Cyrus took a step toward Adriana.

She took a step back. This was a man she did not recognize. His usual smile was absent, and his brows were knitted together in a scowl. For the first time, she could see the resemblance between the brothers.

“If you were so eager to claim me, why didn’t you return sooner?” All the hurt and anxiety that had plagued her during those weeks of uncertainty came tumbling out.

“I didn’t realize the severity of your plight until I received your last letter.” His lashes concealed his eyes for a moment before meeting hers again.

He would have had to be obtuse to not understand her dilemma leading up to her marriage to Dawson. “When did you arrive back in England?”

“Three days ago.”

“What did you do when you received my final letter?” she asked.

“What do you mean? I made plans to return.”

“Immediately? Dawson had it delivered by courier. Unless he was greatly delayed, then you took your time returning. It has been almost two months. I would have been married either way by the time you returned.”

Cyrus thumbed over his shoulder at Richard. “To him? I doubt that. He has his sights set on Miss Chester.”

Everyone’s gazes shifted to Miss Chester who was doing her best to hide behind her brother. Mr. Chester wasn’t large or intimidating, yet Adriana could imagine he would have taken on all comers to protect his sister. “Pace-Verney will never touch my sister again.”

Again. Adriana only had a moment of welling sympathy to spare for Miss Chester before Cyrus turned his attention back to her.

“Ask my brother about the man he planted in your town house in order to make you feel unsafe.” Cyrus shot a narrow-eyed glare at Dawson.

“What are you talking about?” Confusion spun her head. “What man?”

“McKelvey. The footman he hired to spy on you,” Cyrus said.

“Do you mean Wyn?” she asked, still confused. “No, our usual footman had to see to his family. Wyn was sent by the agency. He—”

“Lies!” Richard stepped into the fray, pointing a finger toward Dawson. “Tell her. I found McKelvey. I told you I would make him pay for what he did to me. I know he was in your employ.”

Adriana made a scoffing sound and waited for Dawson to deny the charges levied at him. Instead, he shook his head with a snarl curling his upper lip. “I would ask if you hurt him, but I know you couldn’t. Did he wipe the floor with you again? Or did you run?”

Richard’s face flushed, but he directed his next words toward Adriana, not Dawson. “The man you call Wyn is a mercenary. A killer for hire. That’s the sort of villain your husband associates with.”

Richard, Cyrus, and Dawson were all lined up in front of her now, and she looked between their faces, searching for the truth. Her gaze settled on Dawson. “Did you plant Wyn in our town house in order to spy on me?”

His jaw ticked, giving away his answer before he finally spoke. “Selwyn McKelvey is a former associate from my time working in the Home Office. He is trustworthy, and I turn to him when I need a man with a particular set of skills. Skills that bolstered England against Napoleon, I might add. I hired McKelvey and placed him as a footman so he could keep you safe when I couldn’t.”

A buzzing filled her ears, and she rubbed her temples. Her world and what she thought to be true was going topsy-turvy. “What about our old footman? Did you have Charlie killed?”

Dawson sat his fisted hands on his hips and regarded her with an air of exasperation. “He was paid generously to make himself scarce until McKelvey contacted him to return. You know I would never do anything so dastardly.”

His exasperation fed her own annoyance even though she knew he wouldn't have an innocent footman killed. Nevertheless, she had been a horse with blinders on, led to do the bidding of the men around her. All them bore fault: Dawson, Richard, Cyrus, and her father.

“I'm wondering if I know you at all, Dawson,” she said coldly. Guilt crimped her heart when pain flashed over his face, but she ignored it.

“That's right, you don't.” Cyrus stepped forward. He wore a smile again, but it was more oily than charming. “He is cold and mean and will never make you happy.”

Dawson was warm, kind, and had made her very happy indeed, but she decided not to argue the point. She jabbed a finger into Cyrus's chest. “And you are any better? By my estimation, you did not leave Italy until you received the letter announcing my marriage to your brother. Tell me that is not the case.”

“It is not,” Cyrus said stiffly, his gaze sweeping the floor at their feet.

“You are not an adept liar, Cyrus. You never have been. Has a wounded ego brought you home?” she asked.

“I beg you to seek an annulment.” Cyrus took one of her hands in his.

She stared at their joined hands. Familiar long, graceful fingers held hers, but they were slightly clammy. She fought the urge to yank her hand free.

“It is far too late for that,” she whispered, raising her gaze to meet his. She didn’t want to hurt him, but he needed to understand how real her marriage was.

“But Richard said...” Cyrus looked to his partner in this debacle.

“One of the servants overheard the deal you made with Westhorpe. You begged him to wait to consummate your marriage until you were comfortable with the notion, and he agreed.”

Her face blazed. It was bad enough to be discussing this with Cyrus and Richard, but her father was in the corner, looking like he wished to be anywhere else, and the Chesters were still huddled together behind one of the chairs. To have her personal decisions fodder for gossip was mortifying.

“That was weeks ago,” she said.

“I assumed you would hold out for months if not longer.” Cyrus turned to face his brother. “Did you manipulate her into bed too? Did you force her?”

“Be careful or you’ll find yourself on your arse, brother.” The timbre of Dawson’s voice was low and filled with a very real threat.

“Yes, you’ve always been the brute. Brawn over brains or talent. You were jealous.” Cyrus shoved Dawson’s shoulder, but the attempt didn’t even shift Dawson back a step. In fact, he took a step closer to glare at Cyrus.

Just when Adriana was going to step between them, Cyrus turned back to face her. “Then seek an annulment based on

fraud. He lied in order to get you to marry him.”

“And then what?” Her own exasperation rose.

“Then I will marry you.” Cyrus stood up straighter. “You love me, and I love you.”

The pronouncement seemed to roll off his tongue with ease. She truly believed he did love her, and she loved him, but not in the same way she loved Dawson.

She loved Dawson.

Her knees trembled as if the earth shook. Why did the certainty of her feelings have to hit her at this moment in front of everyone? She looked to Dawson.

His face was a mask of concern, and he took a step forward. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” *Everything.* She turned back to Cyrus. “How many other women did you bed on your grand tour?”

“What?” Cyrus barely choked the word out.

“You heard me well enough. How many other women did you bed?”

Clearing his throat, the baron broke the tableau apart. “That is quite enough. Such things should not be discussed in front of, or *by*, the fairer sex.”

If the rebuke in her father’s tone wasn’t clear, the look he sent Adriana was unmistakable. Apparently, ladies weren’t to acknowledge intimate acts existed outside marriage and the need for procreation. The silence around intimacy gave way to fear for most ladies.

Before she could argue the point, Mr. Chester put an arm around his sister to guide her through the room, fixing a

disintegrating glare onto Richard. “We will take our leave as this is a family matter. Do not attempt to contact my sister, you blackguard.”

With that, the Chesters made their escape, and part of Adriana wished she could leave with them.

“We have more to discuss,” Cyrus said. “Take a seat, Adriana.”

His commanding tone set her teeth on edge. While it was true she had enjoyed Dawson telling her what to do in bed, it was only because he allowed her to be in charge when she desired.

A thought popped into her head. Why couldn’t she walk out? She was the lady of Fernlow, the Countess of Westhorpe.

“I am going to retire for the evening. The rest of you can go hang.” She strode out and stomped up the stairs. The door to her room made a satisfying slam. She locked it and, after a moment’s hesitation, locked the connecting door too. She and Dawson would have to have a long discussion, but not yet. Her heart was too raw and vulnerable.

She paced, stared out the window, and lay on her bed in fits and starts. Elspeth brought her a basin of warm water for her ablutions. According to the maid, everyone had continued to argue after she had walked out but had eventually gone their separate ways. Dawson had refused to offer Mr. Pace-Verney a bed and sent him to the inn in Warlock, unmoved by his threats and Sarah’s begging and tears.

Relief and gratitude washed over her. Dawson understood how detestable she found Richard, but she quashed the warmth that started to well up. Had he manipulated her into accepting

his suit? The question hung like a millstone around her neck. She needed to approach the question with facts, not emotions.

Dawson had nothing to do with her father's insistence she marry Richard, nor Richard's attack. Yes, he had surreptitiously placed Wyn in their household to protect her. While the thought rankled, she could forgive him that. Without Wyn, her life would have been altered in ways she couldn't imagine now she was safely on the other side.

There were many things she couldn't imagine now. Like waking up with Cyrus as her husband instead of Dawson. Even if she wanted an annulment, which she didn't, things weren't the same as they once were. Her heart had changed allegiances.

Nevertheless, she had questions. How had Dawson known she was in danger? Had he read her letters to Cyrus? Had he sent them in a timely manner? What had his letters implied about her situation? Had he told Cyrus there was no need to return with haste?

It was well past midnight with sleep a distant dream when she grabbed a shawl and made her way outside and into the gardens. A deep breath grounded her in who she was and what she wanted.

"Adriana," a man's voice intoned.

She spun around to face Cyrus. He was still dressed but looking worse for wear. His cravat hung loosely around his neck, and his shirt hung partially untucked. His hair was disheveled, and he was swaying slightly on his feet.

"Are you foxed?" she asked.

"Brandy helped take the edge off my pain. How could you marry him?" It was despair, not anger in his voice.

Guilt reared even though she hadn't seen another path forward when she had accepted Dawson's hand. "You don't understand how precarious my situation was with Richard."

"He's a bit of an oaf, but he sought me out and told me the truth of what you and Dawson planned behind my back."

Of course she had Richard to thank for sowing chaos and driving a wedge between them all. She closed the distance and lay a hand on his arm and squeezed. "There was no plan."

"Dawson had a plan. He always has a plan." Cyrus sniffled and rubbed his nose. "He's wanted you since the beginning. He manipulated the situation so he could have you."

Adriana shook her head. "From the beginning? No. That's not true. He barely looked in my direction until I asked him to post my letters to you."

Cyrus made a guffawing sound. "You didn't notice? He was always lurking about, watching you. Jealous of my connection with you. He sent me on my grand tour and saw the perfect opportunity to swoop in."

"You are being ridiculous. All you spoke of for years was how much you were looking forward to your grand tour. He did not send you away. You left me." She hadn't meant to add the last bit, but bitterness rose. "I was desperate, and all you wrote about was the fun you were having."

Cyrus took her hands in his and with great earnestness said, "I returned home to marry you. I swear it."

"But you read my letter and did not return immediately. Can you admit that much?" She knew the truth, but wanted to hear him say it.

"Well, not the next morning, no. I had business to attend to before I could leave, but I have been forever devoted to you."

The way his gaze drifted to stare over her shoulder gave away his half-truth. She would bet his business involved a woman.

“Your devotion did not preclude you from taking a mistress in London. How many women’s beds did you frequent in your travels?” she asked in an even tone even though her insides were a tumult.

Her question shocked him, and it took a moment for him to gather his wits. “I am a man with a man’s weakness of flesh, but those women meant nothing to me. It’s you I have always loved. You are my muse.”

“I believe you.”

His smile was one of relief. “I knew you would because you love me too.”

“I do, but—”

He kissed her. Shock froze her. She tried to process what she was feeling physically and emotionally. Cyrus’s lips were clumsy and too wet for her liking. A shudder went through her, not of ardor, but distaste. She turned her face away and his mouth trailed along her jaw toward her ear.

Dawson stood in the shadows, staring in their direction. The moon cast a glow over the scene. Pain flashed over his face before he shut down his emotions, leaving only a stoic mask. But she had seen behind his mask too often to be fooled.

She tried to tear herself away from Cyrus, but he had grabbed her waist. Dawson turned on his heel and disappeared.

“Get off me.” She bit out and shoved Cyrus hard in the chest.

He stumbled back. “What’s wrong?”

“Dawson saw us.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? He should witness the manifestation of our love.” Cyrus’s treachery turns of phrase had never appealed to her, but now they made her feel sick.

“I do love you, Cyrus. I always will”—when he stepped forward to try to take her in his arms once more, she held up a hand to block him—“but as a sister and friend. We were never meant to be anything more. Our connection was easy and comfortable, but never passionate. I love Dawson.”

It was a strange thing to be admitting something so momentous for the first time not to Dawson but to his brother.

“That’s impossible! He’s so... so... boring and humorless and unemotional. He’s intelligent and diligent, I suppose, but he possesses no zest for life. He can’t make you happy.” Cyrus’s shock was real.

“You don’t know your brother at all.” She shook her head as she was finally able to draw conclusions after studying him for the past weeks together. “In fact, I think he feels things so deeply he’s fearful of expressing himself lest he get hurt. He protects his heart. He protects everything he loves. Including you. And... *me*.”

Her body buzzed. Cyrus had been right. Dawson loved her, and she suspected he had loved her for longer than she realized. He’d protected her when no one, not even her father, would. Had he acted in a less-than-gentlemanly manner in marrying her with haste? Yes, but Adriana didn’t consider the sin unforgiveable.

He had seen Cyrus kiss her. Would Dawson assume she had welcomed his brother’s attentions? Hurting him made her hurt.

She took one of Cyrus's hands in hers and squeezed. "You aren't ready for marriage, but when you are, I'm sure you'll make some lady a fine husband. I look forward to welcoming your family to our table someday."

He snatched his hand out of hers. "I will never be able to sit across the table from you and my brother and feel anything but betrayal."

"I understand." And she did. Although, knowing Cyrus as well as she did, she also understood that his heart was fickle and would find another muse. The shock would fade, and someday they would come together as family once more.

"I must find Dawson and settle things." She ran into the house and searched high and low, but he was gone.

CHAPTER 25



Dawson huddled in the corner of the stall. His horse snuffled and pawed at the hay underfoot, his restlessness a reflection of Dawson's own. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Cyrus and Adriana kissing in the garden under the moonlight. Cyrus had probably recited an ode he'd written for her. She had been swept up into his adoration and warmth, unable to resist the old flame. It had looked painfully romantic.

Pain. He rubbed his chest. There was no outward wound, but where his heart once beat was a scene of carnage. It was nothing less than what he deserved. He should be grateful for the past weeks with Adriana and resign himself to a future without her. Loneliness swamped him.

He'd intended to saddle his horse and ride away. His blasted boring logical side took over. The risk to his horse on a darkened moor was great. Plus he had nowhere to go. Pace-Verney was holed up at the only inn in Warlock. If Dawson found himself there, he would be tempted to kill the man with his bare hands. The Chesters had been overwrought after the confrontation. He could hardly turn up on their doorstep in the middle of the night begging sanctuary. There was nowhere else to go to lick his wounds.

Here he remained, hiding in the stables and unable to face what awaited. The time had come to pay for his machinations. Cyrus and Adriana deserved to be happy. Together.

A tear he hadn't shed even when burying his parents and brothers trickled down his cheek. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

"By God, are you crying?" Cyrus peered over the stall door at him.

"What? Of course not." He looked to the rafters and blinked. "Maybe a little. What's wrong with me?"

Cyrus let himself in the stall. Dawson's horse shuffled closer and nudged Cyrus's shoulder. He clucked his tongue and rubbed the horse's cheeks.

"Is that a rhetorical question? Otherwise, we could be here all night." Cyrus raised his brows toward Dawson while continuing to lavish affection on the horse.

"Yes. No." Dawson sighed and banged his head against the wood slats of the stall twice. "I'm so sorry. I'm a blackguard, and you have every right to hate me. I hate myself."

"But you love Adriana," Cyrus said simply.

"I've always loved her. I know it was wrong to covet the woman you had an understanding with. I would have never married her if the situation hadn't been dire."

"How dire?" Cyrus was looking at the horse not Dawson.

"Pace-Verney almost raped her. The man I planted, McKelvey, stopped him in the nick of time. He would have tried again and again until he succeeded. I had to get her out."

"Why not tell Coffey? He would have stopped it."

“He was in the country and—” Dawson stopped the flow of justifications he’d comforted himself with. “I could have taken her to Bainbridge and relayed what I knew. I could have found a temporary situation for her with one of mother’s old friends as a companion.”

“Instead, you forced her to make a choice that was no real choice at all.” The anger in Cyrus’s voice flayed Dawson’s already-raw conscience.

“You’re right.” Dawson set his elbows on his knees and hung his head. “It is her choice now. I will let her go without a fight if she wishes to leave with you and make a life. An annulment will be difficult, but I will try. You can live together wherever you wish. I will remain here. Bainbridge and the London town house will be yours to use at your discretion. Any child you have will inherit the title and lands.”

“That is generous of you.”

“And I will provide a large stipend, of course. I want Adriana to be free to pursue lepidopterology. The two of you can travel the world. She would like that.”

“And you will remain here with the sheep in your purgatory?”

It would be his hell without Adriana, but he wouldn’t quibble about semantics. “Something like that.”

The hay crunched as Cyrus moved closer. The scuffed toes of his travel-worn boots came into view. Cyrus kicked Dawson’s foot, unbalancing him. Dawson looked up at his brother.

“Enough of the self-flagellation,” Cyrus said. “I thought I wanted to see you squirm with guilt, but this isn’t fun at all. Do you truly believe that Adriana picked me over you?”

“I know she has. I witnessed you kissing in the garden.” Dawson shook his head, but the image remained.

Cyrus propped his shoulder against the side of the stall and crossed his arms and one foot over the other. “I kissed her. She pushed me away.”

“She did?” The tiniest spark of hope warmed his chest. “Why?”

“Because she loves you too, you lucky dolt.”

The spark fizzled. “That’s impossible.”

“Why?” Cyrus asked.

“Because I’m nothing like...” Dawson gestured up at his brother. “She loves you.”

“Apparently, she only loves me like a brother or a good friend and always has.”

“She said that?” Dawson hauled himself to his feet.

“I didn’t believe her either. Until...” Cyrus picked at a splintered plank with his fingernail, his attention on the useless task.

Dawson wanted to shake his brother’s attention back to the conversation. “Until what?”

“Until I came across her sketchbook.”

Adriana protected her sketchbook from prying eyes, and he had never breached her trust by looking through it. “She doesn’t like people to look at her drawings.”

Cyrus’s gaze swung to his, his brows arched. “Is that what she told you?”

“I can sense it in the way she tucks it away when I am around.”

Cyrus barked a laugh. “I would encourage you to look at her drawings.”

Dawson did not know how Adriana’s sketches of moths and butterflies would help clarify matters. “What now?” he asked.

“I plan to depart at dawn. Alone.”

The relief that flooded Dawson incited its own guilt. “Where will you go?”

“London to regroup, I suppose. Is the town house open?”

“Hayworth remains in residence, and you are welcome to stay as long as you want.” Dawson hesitated but asked one of the questions weighing on his heart. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“I expect I will.” Cyrus gave a casual one-shouldered shrug, but his voice reflected a distance that was new. “I would have married Adriana to save her from Pace-Verney’s clutches.”

“I know,” Dawson said. “You are a man of honor.”

“But...” Cyrus drew the word out before adding, “If I’m being honest, I’m not ready to marry and tend sheep in the country. I want to suck the marrow out of life first.”

Cyrus didn’t understand that love was the best part of life. Dawson could tell him, but he had a feeling Cyrus would have to figure it out on his own. “Just try not to suck the life out of the family coffers at the gaming tables, will you?”

Cyrus let out a surprised laugh. “Did my humorless brother just make a joke?”

“A poor attempt at one.”

“Perhaps we were all wrong about you. Except for Adriana.” Cyrus clapped Dawson on the shoulder. “I left the sketchbook in the drawing room. Go make things right with your wife.”

“Be careful on the road.” Dawson hesitated a moment before pulling Cyrus in for a hug. It was just the two of them left, and Dawson was grateful for the forgiveness his brother was extending, however tenuous. “We are the last of the Westhorpes, and I don’t want to lose you too.”

Cyrus returned the hug, slapping Dawson’s back before pulling away. “You haven’t lost me. I require time and distance to lick my wounds, but I’ll be in touch. Do you know if Mrs. Lavelle has taken on a new protector?”

“I gave her a generous settlement after you left her with no word. You might need to beg her pardon with a shiny bauble or two, but I’m sure she would accept your offer.”

“Pass on my goodbyes to Adriana, would you?” At Dawson’s nod, Cyrus stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered toward the gardens.

Dawson made his way into the house. It was quiet. Adriana’s sketchbook was waiting on the table in the drawing room. He sat on the edge of the settee and stared at the leather cover. It felt like an invasion of her privacy, and he already had enough to apologize for. He sat back and didn’t touch the book.

“Did you look at my drawings?” Adriana asked from behind him.

He shot to his feet and shook his head. “I’ve already betrayed you in so many ways. I didn’t want to add another.”

She stepped farther into the room, wearing the dressing gown she had commandeered the first night of their marriage. It was cinched tightly, and the hem brushed the floor, covering her from neck to ankle. Her feet were bare and brought her closer.

“Go ahead.” She nodded toward the sketchbook. “I want you see my recent obsession.”

With a shaking hand, he leaned over and flipped the cover open like an adder might strike him from the page. He stared at a beautiful rendering of a masculine hand. It was so unexpected he turned another page and then another.

The next pages revealed the profile of a man. He swallowed. It was him. She had drawn him in the carriage on their way to Fernlow. His attention was elsewhere, his expression stern and cold. He wanted to look away or apologize for his austere nature, but instead, he turned another page and another.

The sketchbook was filled with drawings of him. One where he was smiling froze him. It was the same face he saw in the looking glass each morning, and yet it was a stranger. He kept thumbing through the book until he reached a sketch of him without a shirt, a mischievous gleam in his eyes and a wicked smile on his face. The evolution of the drawings was a punch in the gut. Or had he evolved?

The sketches gave him something precious. Hope. He couldn't hold part of himself safely locked away any longer. What was he protecting? Not his heart. It belonged to her. His pride? He would fall to his knees and grovel for her forgiveness in a heartbeat. First though, he had to be honest with her about everything.

“I did not initially intend on forcing you to marry me. I had put my faith in Cyrus to return. Honestly, I couldn’t understand why he hadn’t hired the fastest horse and made his way home to marry you.”

“Why did you install one of your men in our household?” While her voice wasn’t full of anger, it held a note of coolness.

“The morning you called to drop off the last letter, I could tell something was amiss. I broke the seal and read your letter to Cyrus before I posted it.”

“But you did post it?”

“Of course.” He had no right to the twinge of outrage that reared at her accusation. “At the same time, I contacted McKelvey. I trust him.”

“You’ve known him a long time?”

“More than a decade. He’s a good man.” The platitude was a lie, and he had promised to tell the truth. “Actually, he’s not a good man in the strictest sense, but I knew he would protect you.”

“Because you paid him to.”

“Well, yes. He’s got to make a living somehow. But beyond the coin I offered, he does follow his own moral code. I don’t regret placing him in your house to protect you, Adriana, considering what would have happened otherwise.”

She thumped her palm against her forehead. “That’s why you were on our doorstep the very next morning offering me a way out. He had relayed the events to you.”

“He had.”

“You hadn’t heard from Cyrus, had you?”

“I didn’t explicitly say that I had.”

“But you knew I thought that was the case.” The anger and hurt in her voice heaped shame onto to him like a yoke.

His face heated. “I did, and I didn’t disabuse you of the notion. I saw an opportunity, and I grabbed hold. Cyrus was right. I could have taken you straight to Bainbridge and told your father everything. I could have contacted one of Mother’s old friends and sent you for a visit. There were other options besides forcing you to accept my hand.”

“You did not give me a chance to choose my own destiny.” The disappointment in her voice was a cudgel to his heart.

“You wouldn’t have chosen me. It was selfish and cowardly, and I have battled guilt and shame and regret ever since.” He drew in a deep breath, determined to be honest. “Given the chance, I would make the same decision because the joy I have found with you, even if it ends tonight, has been worth the burden my conscience has carried since. I understand if you never want to see me again. You can take the Bainbridge house. We will be married in name only. You would be free to pursue lepidopterology, and I would wish nothing but happiness on you.”

“And what of you?”

“I would remain here. Alone. Or...” He swallowed down a slug of emotion that was a mixture of fear and hope.

“What is my other choice?”

“Or you can remain by my side as my wife and lover and friend. I will spend my life atoning for my mistakes. I thought I loved you when I manipulated you into marriage, but I didn’t understand how deep and eternal my love for you would become. It will never wane or falter.”

She swayed slightly. Her knuckles on the hand clutching the dressing gown had gone white. Was she surprised or shocked or, worse, disappointed?

He continued. "I will love you no matter what you decide."

"What if I choose Cyrus?" she asked.

Dawson's stomach flopped to the floor. Had Cyrus been wrong about her feelings toward him? "Then I would give you both my blessing and not stand in your way. It is your life and your decision. I never should have taken that away from you. I don't know if you can ever forgive me, but—"

"Stop." She held up a hand.

He shut his mouth and waited for her verdict. His body went numb. Was this how a condemned man felt the seconds before the trapdoor opened under his feet?

She looked toward the heavens and took a long breath. "Thank you for giving me the choice this time."

He didn't deserve her thanks. He deserved her recriminations. "But—"

"Hush." She stepped closer and set her fingertips against his mouth.

He couldn't stop himself from lightly kissing them. Her eyes warmed, and his heart picked up speed. Was he being given a reprieve?

"You love me." It wasn't a question, and the way the corners of her mouth tipped up slightly made a reply unnecessary.

The words came anyway. "I have always loved you and always will."

“There is really no choice at all.” She snaked her hands around his neck and pressed herself closer, brushing a kiss against his jaw. “I could never leave you.”

He banded his arms around her and breathed in her scent. Love and gratitude and disbelief threatened to overwhelm him. “You are choosing me? Freely?”

“As it so happens, I love you too. I almost confessed my feelings countless times over the past weeks.”

His knees went wobbly, and a rush sounded in his ears. He shuffled them to the armchair and collapsed onto it, pulling her down with him. She curled on his lap, her legs dangling over the arm, the slit in the dressing gown parting to reveal the length of a bare calf and knee.

“You love me? Why? After”—he gestured broadly, unwilling to list his deficiencies—“everything. Why?”

“It took experience for me to understand why I never felt fully comfortable with you before we married.”

“Because I am humorless and aloof?” Considering he’d been described thusly by his own family, he knew it to be true.

She huffed a sound of annoyance and forced him to look at her with a firm hand on his cheek. “Yes, you can be reserved, but you are mostly shy and protective of your heart until you are ready to share. I realized the way my insides jumbled around you was actually desire. I find you exceedingly attractive. It’s why I couldn’t stop sketching you.”

He nuzzled into her soft palm, unable to believe she was on his lap and telling him things he’d only dreamed about hearing from her lips. “You can forgive me?”

“I’ll admit I am angry and tired of men telling me what to do. You have given me a choice, and I choose you. I will

always choose you.” She pressed kisses to his jaw and cheeks and finally his mouth.

“You love me.” He had to say it aloud to convince himself he wasn’t dreaming.

“Would you like me to prove it to you?” She raised her eyebrows at him.

“You don’t need to prove anything to me.” He tried to resume their kiss, but she was repositioning herself into a straddle across his legs.

The dressing gown had pulled apart and revealed her legs almost to her waist. She was naked. Before he could react, she untied the sash at her waist. The fabric parted. Her breasts were rosy, and her nipples were budded. The sight was too tantalizing to pass up.

He scooped his arms under her back, his hands curling around her shoulders to offer support, leaned her back, and feasted on her breasts. He nuzzled her nipple, flicking the bud with his tongue before sucking it between his teeth for a gentle nip. He made sure to lavish the same attention on both breasts.

She squirmed on his lap. He felt a tug at his trousers. Her fingers were clumsy but determined. She wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked him, her touch tight and firm. It was his turn to squirm under her ministrations.

She grabbed the back of the chair, lifted herself, and fitted him at her entrance. “Look at me.”

He tipped his head back and looked up at her. Her hair waved around her shoulders, and her face was flushed, her eyes full of emotion. Love. What he saw was love.

As she impaled herself on his cock, slowly taking him, inch by inch, she lowered her mouth to his. Their kiss was

pure and sweet and in direct contrast to the decadence of their joining.

Once he was fully seated inside her, she lifted her mouth from his. “I love you, husband.”

“I love you, wife.” His cock throbbed with his desperation to take a stroke, but he remained still. “Take what you need from me. All I have is yours.”

She plucked his bottom lip between her teeth and let it slip free as she straightened to brace her hands above him. Her hips rolled, and he tightened his hold on the arms of the chair.

She shook her hair over her shoulders and bit her lip. Her movements quickened, and soon she was rising and falling on him with an intensity that was close to pushing him over the edge. After the tension and anxiety and emotional turmoil of the past hours, they both needed release.

He grabbed her hips to help maintain the rhythm she had set. “Touch yourself. Fall with me.”

Her hand moved to between her legs, and his gaze dropped to watch. She was stunning in the throes of need and seeing to her own pleasure. As she inched closer to climax, his grip tightened, and he thrust upward with his hips.

Her climax swept over her with a throaty cry that had his bollocks tingling with the onset of his own spend. He forced his eyes to stay open to enjoy the sight of her writhing on his lap. Her skin was flushed and pretty. Her breasts quivered, and her nipples tightened.

“You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.” His voice was rough and full of emotion. He didn’t know if he deserved her after what he had done, but he would never take her for granted.

“And you the most handsome.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and collapsed into him, supple and soft.

He smoothed his hands up her bare back and down to her buttocks in soothing strokes. It was a long time before either of them spoke.

“Have you seen Cyrus?” she asked hesitantly as if loath to introduce a dose of reality.

“Yes. He is departing for London at dawn.”

“Do you think he will ever forgive us?”

Considering Cyrus was asking about his former mistress, Dawson had a feeling his brother would move on before the season had even concluded. “He’s already on his way to forgiveness. His feelings were hurt, not his heart. Although he would have married you, he admitted he wasn’t ready to commit himself.”

“It would have been a disaster. I fear we would have ended up hating one another. This way we can remain friends, which is what we were always meant to be.” Her sigh was one of contentment.

The jealousy he’d once felt toward Cyrus had been replaced with hope that his brother would find love and build a good life, but only when he was ready.

“I will have to deal with Pace-Verney on the morrow. What do you think I should do?” Dawson asked.

She sat up to favor him with a side-eyed stare. “Is this your roundabout way of getting me to bless his murder?”

“Is that what you want?” He was curious to hear her answer.

“Have I pictured him face down in the Thames? I won’t deny it. But I don’t want you to hang for murder.” She shook her head as if he had been joking.

“I would make sure it looked like an accident, but I take your meaning. If not murder, then what?” He brushed her hair over her shoulder and peeled the dressing gown back to lay a kiss on her collarbone.

“I don’t even know how to respond to that, so I’ll just say that we need to get him out of Warlock and away from Fernlow. I don’t care where he goes. Sarah will not like it though. She will want us to include him in the social activities.”

“Your stepmother is not the lady of Fernlow. She has no say here. I’ll ride to Warlock first thing in the morning and deal with him.” Murder might be off the table, but a good arse kicking was still a possibility.

“Do you think you can find out how deep the connection is between Richard and Miss Chester?” she asked.

“I’ll try. Pace-Verney is not known for his discretion. I hope Miss Chester does not bear too many scars from her association with him.” Dawson would do what he could to repair the damage, but his influence on society was miniscule.

Adriana yawned. “Can we go to bed now?”

Dawson stood and set her on her feet for only long enough to refasten his trousers and tie the sash of her dressing gown. Then he swept her into his arms and carried her up the stairs. She pressed a kiss at the corner of his mouth and snuggled her face into his neck with a contented sigh.

Once in his room, he undressed and slipped her dressing gown off. He curled himself around her under the covers, her

back to his front, and laced their fingers, not wanting to let her go. She drifted to sleep within minutes.

The despair he'd felt in the stable when he was sure he'd lost her forever made the happiness flooding him all the sweeter. As sleep finally weighted his lids, he loosened his grip, knowing he could let her fly because she would always choose to return to him.

EPILOGUE



Two months later...

Adriana studied the moths fluttering around the freshly sheared wool in the glass container and made notes in a notebook. She sidestepped to the next container and observed a second set of moths trapped with a scrap of woven wool cloth. Interestingly, the moths did not seem interested in the freshly sheared wool but had already eaten away at the cloth. She would need to obtain wool at every stage of the process and repeat the experiment.

Excitement had her heading straight to Dawson's study. She knocked once and entered. "Dawson! The experiments are yielding interesting results."

He glanced up from a letter he was reading, his expression one of distraction and worry. "That's excellent news."

Had something happened to Cyrus? He was traveling in Russia with two friends from Eton. All three fancied themselves artists of one type or another. Dawson had received sporadic letters filled with adventure and high spirits.

"What's wrong?" She set her notebook aside and joined Dawson behind the desk. "Is it Cyrus?"

Dawson's reserve had completely disappeared with her. They shared everything from their worries to their desires. It never failed to amaze her at how satisfied and happy she was in a marriage she had not wanted.

He set the letter on the blotter and turned toward her. "The lady you correspond with in Cornwall... What's her name again?"

It was not the question she expected. "Lady Geneva Dorn. I am actually quite worried about her. I have not received any correspondence from her in months."

Dawson expression darkened further. "I received a letter from Selwyn McKelvey."

The sudden change in topic confused her. "What does he want?"

"He is requesting aid." He handed her the letter. "You should read it."

She scanned the letter and covered her mouth when she reached mention of Geneva and the dangerous forces at work. "How on earth did their paths cross? And why Scotland?"

"Keep reading." Dawson tapped his fingers on the desk top as she continued.

"Geneva has made a discovery!" A shot of excitement had her pacing the floor. "Not that I'm surprised. She has worked terribly hard, especially after her husband died."

"How exactly did her husband die?" Dawson asked.

"He had become ill with a wasting disease, I believe." Adriana stopped and thought for a moment. "Or no. I'm not sure she ever explicitly relayed the cause. He was older by three decades at least. She wrote of him fondly."

“Unlike Madeline, you’ve never actually met Lady Dorn, have you?”

A niggle of unease crept up her neck. “Unfortunately, the opportunity did not present itself, but our letters were frank. I knew her far better than anyone I met in a London ballroom. You can’t understand what it is like being out of step with society. When one finally meets another who is on the same path, the friendship is forged fast and deep. It was the same with Maddie.”

“I wouldn’t understand?” He rose and pulled her into a loose embrace. “I felt exactly the same until I found you.”

Her heart stuttered. Was that why her connection to Dawson grew so strong so quickly? She wrapped her arms around his neck. “We are very lucky, aren’t we?”

“Indeed.” He kissed her, soft and sweet. “I feel an obligation to aid McKelvey after what he did for you. Not to mention the fact Lady Dorn might be in danger.”

“You will travel to Scotland? I will accompany you. Geneva is my friend.”

He hugged her closer. “I’ll be traveling fast and light on horseback. I’m used to such privations. You are not.”

“You’re saying that I would slow you down?”

“Well... yes.” While she might not appreciate the sentiment, he was being honest. “Although, if you would like to write her letter, I will do my best to hand deliver it to Lady Dorn.”

“A fine idea. You must promise me to be careful,” she said sternly.

“Always. I have too much to live for.”

“When will you leave?” she asked.

“At dawn.”

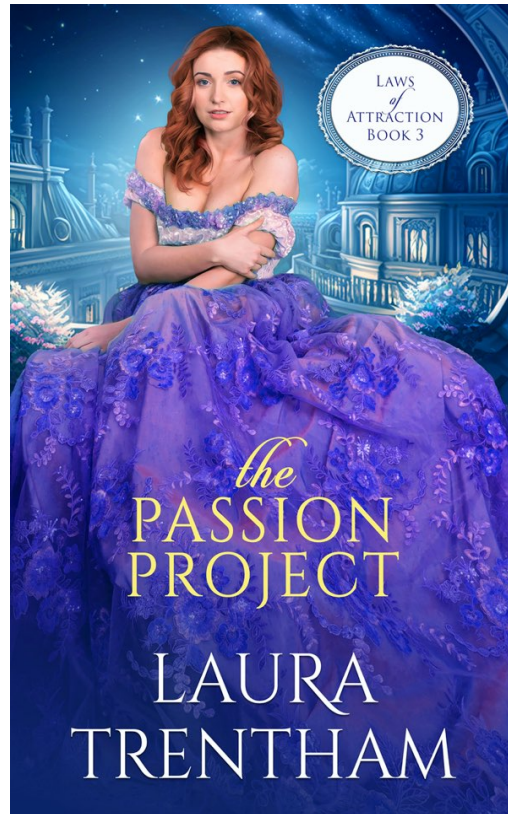
“Then we have tonight to say our farewells?” she asked coyly.

His eyes twinkled with a wickedness she had come to know well and enjoy greatly. He pushed the ledgers and papers to one side of the desk. “We should start immediately. Plan for a long, very hard goodbye.”



I HOPE you enjoyed Dawson and Adriana and their adventures! Next up is Geneva and Selwyn’s story. It’s a tale of comets and subterfuge and of course, passion. I love it so much! [THE PASSION PROJECT](#) is sexy and dangerous and fun. I can’t wait for you to read it.

One-click [THE PASSION PROJECT!](#)



Read on for an excerpt:

A bang startled Geneva. The sheaf of papers she held scattered on the rug. She grabbed the arms of the chair, her fingers growing numb and her heartbeat filling the ensuing silence. Had it been a loose shutter? She stooped to gather the papers. The pounding came again, driving her to her feet. She clutched the papers to her chest.

Someone was at her door. Who was it? Friend or foe? Villager or stranger?

Peter would have called out, and social calls were rare even in the best weather. She looked around wildly before shoving her research under the settee cushion. Although it wasn't late, an artificial night blanketed the land. She sidled to the storm-battered window and peeked out at her caller through a slit in the curtains.

A huge figure hunched against the storm's onslaught. The cloaked man banged again, and she jumped even though she'd anticipated the sound. His hat molded to his head, the brim wilted. Water sluiced over his shoulders. He must be miserable. But was he dangerous?

Stepping back, she chewed her lip. Practical Peter would tell her to ignore the man and pretend she wasn't home. Although, the light from her windows may have drawn him to her through the rain. Perhaps her imagination had added inches to his height and breadth that weren't there. She pulled back the curtains for another peek.

A face stared back at her. Her scream echoed in a room used to quiet. She scrambled backward. A high-backed wooden chair caught her at knees. She windmilled, but there was no use in fighting the laws of science. Inertia would have its day.

She hit the floor. Hard. Her lungs emptied, and she clawed at her high-necked gown. Air, she needed air. Water dripped on her face, and she popped her eyes open. A strange man with silver eyes hunched over her.

"Here now, you'll be fine. Got the breath knocked out of you. Give it a moment."

Still feeling as though a noose was tightened around her neck, she fumbled with the buttons at her throat. A small sob escaped.

His hands pushed hers away. Cold, wet fingers opened the buttons along her neck to below her collarbone. Silver eyes held hers, calmed her, until her lungs caught up for lost time. She nodded as her breathing eased.

The man loomed. His harsh features reminded her of the Cornish cliffs. Sleek black eyebrows added dark portent to his silver eyes. Cheekbones jutted prominently under tanned skin. A square jaw covered in black stubble framed a crooked nose a hair too big to be classically handsome. Only his lips and his ridiculously long eyelashes lent him an ounce of softness.

The man pushed back onto his haunches. The puddle grew around him with every passing second. His gaze travelled from her hair to her toes but lingered on her limbs. Her skirts had risen to expose her legs almost to her knees. She twitched the fabric down and tucked her feet under her, mimicking his pose.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Her voice was breathy, but she couldn’t entirely blame her spill for that. Could she catch him unsuspecting and bash him with the chair? The man was large and oozed danger. She wouldn’t stand a chance against him.

“My name is Selwyn McKelvey. I’m an unlucky traveler seeking refuge. Terribly sorry I frightened you. May I ask your name?”

His voice was deep and gravelly with a hint of an accent she couldn’t place, and his well-formed lips exposed straight, blessedly white teeth. A breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding gusted out. Not the black-toothed stranger from the village then, but a stranger nonetheless.

“My door was locked. How did you enter, sir?” How many times had Peter lamented the fact she spent most of her evenings in solitude? A solitude she generally welcomed. Why hadn’t she concealed her kitchen knives strategically around the manor?

Her gaze flitted over the poker leaning against the blue Cornish stone of the fireplace and back to the looming man. Could she make a run for it? No, he was too close.

“Your door was unlocked, madam.”

“It most certainly wasn’t.” Or was it? Her mind twirled circles, dizzying her memories. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d forgotten to throw the bolt, distracted by her work. And, she’d been particularly anxious this evening to verify her calculations.

“It most assuredly was, madam. You’ve no need to worry. I’m merely a botanist, lost and wandering in the storm. When I saw the light from your window, I nearly wept with relief.” He smiled.

Although, she doubted the man had shed a tear his entire life, the smile softened his features, revealing a shallow dimple in his left cheek and turning his flinty eyes molten. Her clenched hands unfurled and her hunched shoulders fell an inch.

With his smile firmly in place, he continued, “I travelled from Exeter, but I’ve come across no villages in miles.”

They still regarded one other in animalistic, protective squats on the floor. She had a decision to make. She could churlishly send him back into the deluge, allow him to warm himself at her hearth, or dive for the poker.

She bit the inside of her cheek, never taking her gaze off him in case she made a grave miscalculation. “Sandrin is the nearest village but farther along. You’re welcome to remove your coat and warm yourself by the fire.”

“That would be most appreciated. I’m chilled to the bone.” He rose to his full height and held out a large, bare hand to

help her to her feet. Tentatively, she placed her hand in his. Her warmth seeped into him or did his coldness flow to her? She shivered. With little effort required on her part, he hauled her to standing. Red calluses between his fingers had her mind performing leaps of logic.

“Where is your horse, sir?”

His head tilted. Drips cascaded off the lowered edge of his hat. “Why do you assume I have a horse?”

“The calluses along your fingers. Recent ones from handling reins, I would postulate.”

He rubbed at the calluses. The graceful movements of his fingers entwining ensnared her gaze. His hands were broad, but his fingers were long, lithe instruments, the nails clean and maintained. A stray thought inserted itself into the chaos of her thoughts.

“Do you play the piano-forte?” she asked.

He seemed taken aback, his smile gone and his brows drawn in. “No, why would you ask?”

“Your hands appear to be skilled instruments.”

His lips parted, but words took a long time coming. “My horse went lame. I left him in a barn and walked quite a distance.

“My barn is the only one hereabouts.”

“I expected the house to be closer. I was truly beginning to despair.”

“The distance is a mite inconvenient. My husband had the barn built on the highest hill for better gazing.” At the quizzical tilt of his head, she said, “He was an astronomer.”

“I see.” He shrugged off his outer greatcoat and removed his hat, hanging both on pegs by the door. Short, black hair was plastered flat against his head.

Geneva drummed her fingers against her thighs. What exactly did he see? She would have expected her declaration to garner surprise or more questions. “You’re a botanist, did you say?”

“Indeed. I’ve published several pamphlets of my findings. Perhaps you’ve read them?”

While she was interested in many things, botany was not one of them. She evaluated him again. Danger still snapped the air around him, but perhaps botany proved as dangerous a pastime as astronomy.

“I’m afraid I haven’t. What brings you to Cornwall?” she asked.

“Cornwall is a special place, full of flora found nowhere else in Britain.” He raised an eyebrow. As she’d never travelled farther than Exeter since her flight from France as a babe, she could mount no dissent. He could very well be correct. Cornwall’s climate was certainly unique. It stood to reason its plants would be unique as well.

He dripped his way across her rug to stand in front of the hearth, facing her and rubbing his hands together behind his back. “May I ask your name?”

“Lady Dorn.”

“A delight to make your acquaintance, my lady. An even greater delight to acquaint myself with your fire.” He sketched a small bow from across the room. Steam curled around his arms and shoulder as his frockcoat dried.

Her logic and instincts waged a war. Dare she trust him?

He gestured to his path of destruction. “I apologize for the mess. You should call for a servant to clean it before it ruins the wood.”

“I should,” she said, but didn’t bother to do anything of the sort.

The two of them were alone.

One-click [THE PASSION PROJECT!](#)



START MOST of my series FREE!

Spies and Lovers Series Starter (FREE)

[An Indecent Invitation, Book 1](#)

Cottonbloom Series Starter (FREE)

[Kiss Me That Way, Book 1](#)

Sweet Home Alabama Series Starter (FREE)

[Slow and Steady Rush, Book 1](#)

EROTIC HISTORICAL ROMANCE by Leah Trent

Fieldstones Adventure Novellas Series Starter (FREE)

[An Impetuous Interlude, Book 1](#)

ALSO BY LAURA TRENTAM



*H*istorical Romance

Spies and Lovers

[An Indecent Invitation, Book 1](#)

[A Brazen Bargain, Book 2](#)

[A Reckless Redemption, Book 3](#)

[A Sinful Surrender, Book 4](#)

[A Wicked Wedding, Book 5](#)

[A Daring Deception, Book 6](#)

[A Scandalous Secret, Book 7](#)

[SPIES AND LOVERS BOXSET: Vol 1](#)

[Spies and Lovers Boxset: Vol 2](#)

LAWS OF ATTRACTION

[The Courtship Calculation, Book 1](#)

[The Marriage Experiment, Book 2](#)

[The Passion Project, Book 3](#)

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Sweet Home Alabama Novels

[Slow and Steady Rush, Book 1](#)

[Caught Up in the Touch, Book 2](#)

[Melting Into You, Book 3](#)

[The Sweet Home Alabama Collection](#)

COTTONBLOOM NOVELS

[Kiss Me That Way, Book 1](#)

[Then He Kissed Me, Book 2](#)

[Till I Kissed You, Book 3](#)

[CHRISTMAS IN THE COP CAR, Book 4](#)

[Light Up the Night, Book 5](#)

[Nobody's Hero, Book 6](#)

[LEAVE THE NIGHT ON, Book 7](#)

[When the Stars Come Out, Book 8](#)

[Set the Night on Fire, Book 9](#)

[THE FOURNETTE FAMILY BOXSET, Books 1-3](#)

[The Cottonbloom Novella Collection, Books 4-6](#)

[The Abbott Brothers Boxset, Books 7-9](#)

HIGHLAND, Georgia Novels

[A Highlander Walks Into a Bar, Book 1](#)

[A Highlander in a Pickup, Book 2](#)

[A Highlander is Coming to Town, Book 3](#)

HEART OF A HERO Novels

[The Military Wife](#)

[An Everyday Hero](#)

WRITING as Leah Trent

Historical Erotic Romance

Fieldstones Adventure Novellas

[An Impetuous Interlude, Fieldstones Adventure Book 1](#)

[A Naughty Notion, Fieldstones Adventure Book 2](#)

[A Mysterious Masquerade, Fieldstones Adventure Book 3](#)

[A Dangerous Desire, Fieldstones Adventure Book 4](#)

[The Fieldstones Adventures Boxset](#)

CONTEMPORARY EROTIC ROMANCE

Bad Boys Breakfast Club

[Big Bad Boyfriend, Book 1](#)

Boss in Bed, Book 2

I love to hear from readers! Come find me:

Laura@LauraTrentham.com

www.LauraTrentham.com

Sign up for [Laura's Newsletter](#)

Join Laura's [Facebook Squad](#)

Are you interested in receiving a FREE book?!

Join my newsletter! There will be links in your Welcome Email for TWO free books!

Sign up for [Laura's Newsletter](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed *The Marriage Experiment*! If you have a chance please leave a quick review! Although, many readers know me from my Southern-set contemporary romances, the first books I wrote were the Spies and Lovers historical series! I grew up reading the historical “bodice rippers” of the late eighties and early nineties along with wonderful gothic romances. Now that I have the opportunity to publish all of the Spies and Lovers series, I’m so excited! The Spies and Lovers world has expanded with the Laws of Attraction series!

I was born and raised in a small town in Northwest Tennessee. Although, I loved English and reading in high school, I was convinced an English degree equated to starvation! So, I chose the next most logical major - Chemical Engineering- and worked in a hard hat and steel toed boots for several years. Now I live in South Carolina with my husband and two children. In between school and homework and soccer practices, I love to get lost in another world, whether it’s Regency England or small town Alabama.

My first two Falcon Football books received TOP PICKS from RT Book Reviews and a STARRED review from Library Journal. KISS ME THAT WAY, Cottonbloom Book 1, won the Stiletto Contest for Best Long Contemporary and finaled in the National Readers Choice Award. THEN HE KISSED ME, Cottonbloom Book 2, was named an Amazon Best Romance of 2016 and was a finalist for the National Excellence for Romance Fiction. TILL I KISSED YOU, Cottonbloom Book 3, is a finalist in the Maggie contest. LEAVE THE NIGHT ON, the latest Cottonbloom book, was named an iBooks Best Book of the Month and a Recommended Read from NPR. AN INDECENT INVITATION and A BRAZEN BARGAIN were both finalist for the 2014 Golden Heart® Award.

NOTE: This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE MARRIAGE EXPERIMENT

Copyright © 2020 by Laura Trentham

Cover by Erin Dameron-Hill

Edited by Victory Editing

eISBN: 978-1-946306-45-6

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

 Created with Vellum