



Touching
TIME

B.W. HAGGART

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SOUL MATE PUBLISHING

New York

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Cover Design by Ramona Lockwood

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Published in the United States of America by

Soul Mate Publishing

P.O. Box 24

Macedon, New York, 14502

ISBN: 978-1-64716-256-6

www.SoulMatePublishing.com

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For Joy.

You are in these pages, babe.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my generous group of readers, Jenn Atkins, Sandy Reeve, Linda Hawley, Bobbie Fite, Cindy MacIntosh, and Barbara Brown. You are all such special people for putting up with me. Thank you to another special person, Debby Gilbert for her patience and continued support.

Chapter 1

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.”

—John Keats, *Endymion*, 1st stanza

Belton Mansion, Sussex, England

“Unbelievable,” Sam Dalton scowled at his wristwatch as he strode out onto the flagstone terrace which overlooked acres of gardens. Ten twenty-three in the morning. He should be on a plane to Chicago. Instead, here he stood while Lord Covington dithered in the library behind him, wasting both our lawyers’ time as all seven sit and wait for Covington to make a decision, any decision.

“The English don’t do business, they do tea.” With an impatient glare at the manicured landscape below, he finished the thought. “And gardens.”

He’d come within an inch of throttling ‘His Lordship.’ He’d never met anyone who could procrastinate so decisively. Sam growled his frustration as he leaned on the ornate sandstone balustrade which surrounded the terrace. He stared down at Covington’s spring roses, lavender, and hyacinth in their neat little beds. *Damn the man!* If he were only half as methodical in selling Sam’s estate as he was with his plants, it all would be his by now.

Sam pulled out his cell phone and started leaving messages, letting everyone know stateside he’d be in England for at least another week. Fifteen minutes later, he finished with a call to his brother Pete. It was four-thirty in the morning in Chicago, but he knew his brother would be awake, painting through the night in his studio, or just as likely, rising early with some

inspiration. When Pete answered, Sam said he wasn't coming home yet. "I've got to close this deal."

"Still? Why is this so damn important? You have more than enough business in the U.S. I mean, that is where you run your company, after all."

"I told you. Dalton Developments needs to expand, to become international. Besides, some European businessmen like Waltrop have tried to stop me ... you know what that bastard did. It's a challenge that can't go unanswered."

"Where are you, exactly?"

"Belton Park, on a terrace above the gardens."

There was a sigh from the phone. "Try relaxing. You know, 'smell the roses' right in front of you."

"Pete, if I don't have time to talk to you now, I sure don't have time to waste on sniffing flowers."

"Why? You've spent all this time trying to buy Belton and the gardens for your next conference center? Go ahead, enjoy. Take a whiff."

With a wry smile, Sam shook his head, but took a noisy breath of flower-perfumed air. "There, I took a whiff. It makes me twitchy. It reminds me: I can't leave Covington alone with my lawyers for long. He'll come up with more conditions."

Pete laughed. "You're hopeless, you know that? I'll talk to you tonight."

Sam pocketed his phone and slapped the sandstone balustrade. He had a corporation to run and being six hours ahead of Chicago only left a four-hour window each workday to communicate with his team. Ridiculous.

He surveyed the verdant lawns and artfully arranged woods beyond the lush gardens, rolling on as far as he could see. Belton Park would make a magnificent conference center, the lynchpin in his European expansion. He was betting everything he had on it.

Turning to go inside, he caught sight of a large group of visitors, many in shorts and tank tops, clustered in the gardens below. He heard faint ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ from the sightseers following a docent in a Regency period dress as she explained the history of the extensive grounds. He smiled. Handled right, that would be one more money-maker.

Slapping the balustrade with new resolve, he glanced once again at the panorama of gardens. *What does Pete think I’m missing?* Half-smiling at the question, he inhaled one more lungful of the rose-scented air but paused in mid-breath. The atmosphere suddenly felt electric. Stranger still, the agitated air seemed to emanate from the direction of a rosebush growing in a huge stone urn some yards further down the terrace.

The plant shuddered a little in the breeze, weighed down by the many bright red roses blooming on it. One rose drooped and lost a single petal. It gently fell, coming to rest on a flagstone just as the shadow of a cloud gamboled across the terrace, darkening the surroundings for a moment. A rippling, almost visible silence enveloped him.

~ ~ ~

Belton Mansion

Sussex, England

May 4, 1818

“Will they ever stop?”

In the music room, Victoria Covington gave up trying to read Keats’ new book of poetry to her bosom *ami*, Kitty. The loud, staccato conversations going on in all parts of the house made it impossible. In frustration, she shut the book and pressed it against her forehead. “I am at my wit’s end.”

She settled further into her favorite piece of furniture, her mother’s Chippendale sofa. She sat with feet up, knees high, back against one arm of the seat. While it was a very unladylike position, it felt lovely to be off her feet after a

morning of streaming through the house like a hound after a fox, assuring each guest had hot water, scones, and clean linen.

Sitting on the remainder of the sofa, Kitty Roland cocked her head and patted Victoria's knee. "It has been over a fortnight. Do your uncle's guests plan to summer here?"

Victoria laughed as she gazed out the bank of windows. She loved the estate, the calm, ordered beauty, the expanses of spring color—particularly the southern view, which is why she had set the love seat in the music room. It faced the large windows, which provided a spectacular view of grassy knolls decorated with blooming maples, walnut, and chestnut trees.

"I fear so. As much as I enjoy sharing Belton Park with others, eighteen days of continual commotion is destroying my serenity." A loud thump sounded overhead. She shot a speaking glance at the ceiling. "Yes, that is the word, 'serenity.' Uncle Reggie invited far too many guests to his house party, and it is becoming a constant trial to feed and entertain them all, let alone keep the household performing in a proper fashion."

She gave a deep sigh and laid her head on the back of the couch, looking at Kitty. Her friend sat primly, hands in her lap, smiling back at Victoria. Her dark hair framed her open, heart-shaped face nicely. After a moment, Victoria sat up and waved her hand at the house around them. "As mistress of this house, I should be playing hostess right now, but I would absolutely explode if forced to graciously dissemble for one more minute."

Leaning over to Kitty, who responded in kind, Victoria whispered dramatically, "My dear uncle, thinking he is clever, included among our guests a multitude of young, and not so young, coxcombs."

"Whatever for?"

Victoria pulled away, surprised Kitty hadn't guessed. "So they could *view* me, you ninny. They have chased me around

Belton Park the last week and a half as though I'm the 'Anthony Pig,' some prize to be caught."

"Oh, but you are, Tory. Any man would be lucky to have you to wife."

"Kitty, give over." She shook her head. "I have avoided those eager gentlemen for the same reason I refused all those offers during last year's Season. Their ingratiating attentions drove me to fits, particularly the ones who insisted on lisping, Devonshire style, as though it was high *ton*."

A corner of her mouth twitched. "At church service yesterday, when the congregation sang 'Jesus, Soothing Shepherd of My Soul,' my lisping beaux all whistled in chorus. The poor Vicar shivered on every 'S'." Tory laughed with Kitty.

"Tory, you are too cruel. You are an accomplished woman. Mayhap one or two of these men do have a *tendre* for you."

"And you are too amiable, too kind. They want my dowry and perhaps the *cachet* of my name, no more." Victoria exhaled sharply through pressed lips and settled deeper into the love seat. "And to think my parents wasted their guineas on my language and music tutors, a needless increase in my worth entering the marriage mart." Finding the humor in the situation becoming a chore, she took Kitty's hand. "I do not desire their attentions. I certainly do not have the patience for such stuff and nonsense on a beautiful Monday morning."

"Perhaps you should introduce me to some of these 'coxcombs,'" Kitty said, smiling. "As I must marry *someone*, it would at least relieve you of one admirer."

Laughing, Victoria said, "Kitty, I would never do such to any woman, most of all you."

More shouts and bumps on the ceiling punctuated Victoria's words. Raising an eyebrow and smiling, she said, "It has been wonderful to slip away and play 'least in sight' with you." Tory stood, glancing out the French doors at the empty terrace. "Happily, no one has yet discovered our hiding place."

Her smile turned to a frown. She used to enjoy the company of men, not avoid it, but since her coming out, the only interest they displayed was for her sizable dowry. Apparently, her oft-heralded beauty only made her more bankable.

“Oh, Kitty, my uncle, as kind as he is, also views me as income. The interest from my dowry is what keeps the Covington finances from a reckoning with the wolves. As he can’t touch my dowry or live without the interest, I have to receive a marriage offer from someone wealthy—very wealthy—if I am to obtain his blessing.” She gave a shrug at Kitty’s shocked expression. “Of course, he will negotiate the marriage settlement to make himself the trustee of any jointure I obtain.”

“I had no idea. It is beyond awful! What can you do?”

“I don’t know.” Neither her uncle nor her many admirers were interested in *her*, Miss Victoria Ann Covington. “Do you think there exists a man who could appreciate me for myself?”

Kitty sagely nodded at the question, but after a moment’s reflection said, “It is a shame, but I am quite certain men are hardly ever interested in women that way.”

Victoria frowned. “Perhaps you are right. I should resign myself to never marrying. At least, as a consequence, I can remain here in my own Belton Park, reading poetry to your ten children while attending to Uncle Reggie’s finances, so we would never lose the estate.”

“Tory, you are too morose. I am sure it is just the strain of hosting such a raucous horde for so long.” She grinned. “I am confident there is a man who would love to have you read poetry to him as much as I *and* my ten children.”

Tory gave her a quirky smile and shook her head at her friend.

Kitty gave her a fond look. “Things will take on a brighter aspect tomorrow.” She stood and retrieved her walking coat. “Time will provide an answer.”

“Must you go?”

“You know I must. Mother is packing.” Kitty gave the statement the consequence of a funeral. “She can never place anything in a trunk without creating a regiment of wrinkles. That, and her tizzy fits.” Kitty offered a resigned smile. “Preparing to travel always overwhelms her good senses. We leave for London in two days’ time.” She pointed a finger dramatically in the air. “And I must man the battlements.” Victoria laughed and embraced her friend. Kitty said goodbye, promising to return tomorrow. Opening the French doors, she left by the terrace to walk the two miles home.

Victoria stifled her anger at her perverse situation, as both a hostess and an heiress. She gazed out at the portion of the terrace visible through the open French doors. Unlike the library and dining room, the music room was at the end of the terrace, the glass-paneled doors facing down the length of it.

She picked up Keats’ *Endymion* and sat again. From the sofa, she could see the rosebushes in several Greek urns placed along the balustrade. The shrubs were bursting with blood roses, vibrant red and green against the tan sandstone.

She took a deep breath, and their aroma caught her attention. The sweet rose smell seemed to carry the sharp tang of a thunderstorm, although Victoria glimpsed only a few stray clouds.

Resting her forearms on her knees, she admired the roses stirring in the breeze. The mantel clock chimed the quarter hour.

The bush settled in the light wind under the weight of dozens of blossoms. One rose sagged and a single petal fell away, fluttering to a flagstone just as the passing shadow of a cloud dimmed the terrace. Yet the rosebush seemed to brighten. It flickered as though two plants contested for the same vase. The air crackled with energy. A heavy blanket of silence enveloped Victoria as the noises filling the house ceased as if on cue.

Victoria felt gooseflesh on her arms, even in the May warmth. Was she developing a fever? She marked her page

with the book knife and set down Keats' poetry next to her gloves. Leaning back in the kincob-covered sofa, she rubbed her eyes. Eyes closed, she sighed at the marvelous quiet. The way she felt, the continual commotion would certainly have brought on a headache.

What had caused the sudden silence? Uncle Reggie must have acted in her absence, and finally organized the picnic. Excellent. Everyone would be gone for hours. *But no.* He was hopeless when it came to arranging such things. Someone would seek her out once he made a muddle of orchestrating the food and carriages. Through the open windows, she heard footsteps on the terrace flagstones.

She wanted to ignore whoever it was, but the lingering, pungent scent of the roses bothered her. Sitting up, Victoria opened her eyes and examined the rosebush. It appeared now as it always had, and yet something was wrong. She blew out a breath and cursed her sense of responsibility for pushing her to investigate.

Victoria set her feet on the hardwood floor and stood, feeling slightly lightheaded, but it passed quickly. Going to the open French doors, she looked out.

What she saw made her blink in surprise.

On the terrace, one of the guests stood in the bright sunlight, peering intently at her rosebush. She failed to recognize him, which was hardly surprising when he wore such strange apparel.

The dark brown coat was cut too short, without any collar she could see, and his biscuit-colored trousers were cut too full below the knee. The man's neck cloth was a wild Sardinian blue and tied to hang down the front of his shirt, like a badly done Mail Coach knot. She could see it because he left his coat unbuttoned. She couldn't help but smile at the ridiculous sight. More bizarre, his shirt, a pale blue, had the collar turned down *over* the neck cloth.

“He has no waistcoat,” Victoria murmured, amazed. What was he doing outside in such an undressed state? He appeared well shaped and attractive enough, but his dark hair was dreadfully short. *Who could he be?* Had her uncle hired a harlequin troupe to perform for the guests? She grinned, hoping it was the case. The man’s head came up, and seeing her standing in the doorway, he turned to face her.

Intrigued, Victoria stepped out into the spring air. A strange ‘pop’ sounded, vibrating all along her body. She stopped, unable to fathom what had just happened. The man quickly buttoned his coat, as well he should. He stood waiting, studying her in a rather untoward manner. She watched him watch her for a moment. Nothing else unexpected happened.

With a sigh, she accepted her fate. Whoever he was, she served as the mistress of this house for Uncle Reggie, so she should greet the odd man, particularly if he needed directions concerning his troupe of entertainers.

As she approached him, he examined her for a moment and then smiled. She was unable to do anything but smile back. His broad grin and handsome features were that potent. Taller than average, he displayed an energy in just standing that she found quite appealing. His engaging, cinnamon-colored eyes threatened to hold her attention too long. She quickly looked elsewhere, rather than be rude.

He appeared quite at home in his outrageous attire. And the coat! The beautiful material had the shimmer of silk. What tailor would create such an absurd coat from such elegant cloth and then bother to fit it so skillfully across the man’s broad shoulders? Idiocy, but politeness demanded she ignore it. She stopped before him, hands clasped in front of her.

“Good day, sir.”

Before she could say more, he pointed to the rosebush. “Did you see that just now? I’d swear that damn plant lit up.”

“Yes, I ...” She began but stopped because he’d cursed. She thought to call him on his horrid manners, but as the hostess,

she decided decorum should prevail.

“I do not believe we have been introduced, though I cannot imagine how it is possible. I’m Miss Covington, Lord Covington’s niece.”

The man’s brows wavered a bit and then he smiled again, holding out his hand to her. “No apologies necessary. I didn’t know he had a niece. I’m Sam Dalton.”

Victoria regarded his outstretched hand, wondering what he was about. With a start, she realized she’d left her gloves on the sofa. *Bad form*. She hid her hands behind her.

He hadn’t provided a title with his name, not even a mister. She glanced sideways at him, eyes narrowed at his poor manners and coarse language. With that accent, he was obviously an American. It might explain his curious attire and *faux pas*. She had met few Americans, but she’d heard many dressed and acted strangely. Here she had the evidence. *Well, no matter*.

Victoria curtsied. “Mr. Dalton. Welcome to Belton Park. May I provide directions?”

Mr. Dalton dropped his hand and laughed. He *laughed* at her! Still grinning, he said, “Very nice. You add a great deal to the ambiance.”

She frowned. Was that a compliment? “To Belton Park?”

Smiling, he nodded. “Yes, Belton Park. You look very authentic, even your hair.”

Victoria stepped away from the man, hand to her blond curls. Authentic hair? Did he think she was wearing a wig? The comment sounded impertinent, but he appeared so pleased with his pronouncement, it was difficult to say.

She stood, back straight, and forced herself to say calmly, “I own, sir, I have not the slightest inkling of what you mean.”

The man chuckled, and with a gleam in his eye, he stepped forward, gesturing up and down her body. “Your act and getup

—it’s far prettier than the gal’s down there.” He pointed to the garden with a tilt of his head.

Victoria stiffened at his crude gestures and too warm words. Act? Getup? Gal? Was it some new cant? She glanced down at the garden and then stared. Among the shrubs and flowers were more than two-dozen scantily clad men and women, many with their limbs bare to mid-thigh—and higher! She whirled around with a gasp, leaning against the stone railing to steady herself. “There-There are half-naked people in our garden.”

Mr. Dalton stepped closer, almost touching her. His air of concern quickly changed to amusement. “Ya got me. I’m impressed, but you can stop acting now.”

Victoria didn’t respond to his insult. She was too shocked and his large body, so close, disturbed her further. In a strained, small voice she asked, “Are they your troupe?”

“My what? No, they’re just tourists.”

“Tour-ists?” she asked, bewildered. “In ... in such an undressed state?”

Just then a music box sounded, playing Beethoven’s Fifth in bell-like tones. The man reached into his coat and pulled out what appeared to be a large black snuffbox. He held up a finger saying, “Excuse me, but don’t go away,” and moved off several steps. He touched the box with a finger, put it to his ear and stared at a nearby elm tree. “Yes? Charlie. What are you doing up?” He paused. “Well, hopefully he’ll start sleeping through the night soon.” Another pause. “No, damn it, I won’t be coming back today. That’s right, we still haven’t finished the negotiations. The old fart’s still being difficult as hell.” He glanced over at Victoria and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Embarrassed as she was by his language, the man’s bizarre behavior alarmed her more. Was he foxed this early in the day? She took another a peek over her shoulder to make certain an unclothed crowd still sauntered through the gardens. Had an asylum been released on the property?

She could feel her face grow warm considering the implications of it all. The amiable smile the American gave her as he talked to his snuffbox confirmed them. Madness! Victoria marched quickly back to the music room and locked the French doors. She must warn her uncle.

Chapter 2

“In what manner or fashion I was in the future, whether actually or spiritually, I am not competent to declare; but I was in it, not as a dreamer, but seeing, and hearing, and understanding, as previously I had seen, heard, and understood, in my past world.”

—John Banim, *Revelations of the Dead-Alive 1824*

Trying to think, Tory watched the lunatic from the music room. He stood staring in her direction with a perplexed expression as he slid his snuffbox into his coat pocket and then strode into the library as if he belonged there.

Victoria pressed her forehead against the glass. The servants were not turning those people out of the gardens, so no one could be aware of their presence, and probably not about the stranger now in the library. She just hoped none of the guests had seen the man, or worse, wandered into the gardens. But if Uncle Reggie found ‘Mr. Dalton’ in his sanctuary—now, that would be quite diverting. Half-smiling at the thought, she decided she must find her uncle, or if he were off, then the servants. She turned to go, but immediately froze.

The music room had been transformed.

The white-lacquered pianoforte was now a massive black instrument with huge keys. Her harp had disappeared from the window alcove, and the walls were an ugly beige. All the beautiful landscapes were gone. The room had the sweet, stringent smell of an apothecary.

Victoria swayed with a strange vertigo. She gripped the back of the sofa as if it were the last link to her sanity. Dark mahogany bookshelves lined two walls, and she didn’t recognize any of the furniture. Yet her mother’s sofa remained. Keats’s *Endymion*, and her gloves still lay where she’d left them.

With a weakness in her limbs, she tried to comprehend the changes. How could anyone have altered everything in just the time she'd been on the terrace? Why would they want to? She stared at her hand. It was shaking. Still lightheaded, she thought, if she were to faint, this seemed an appropriate moment.

But no. She would not collapse in a pucker, no matter how tempting. She refused to be so hen-hearted. She must find her uncle. He would explain everything.

When she entered the front hall, her confidence faltered. Here too, nothing remained the same. The pretty rosewood tables were missing, along with the flowers she'd had their housekeeper, Mrs. Harper, set out just hours ago. In their place were abominable, black-lacquered sideboards. *In an entry hall?* She heard men's voices coming from the library. Uncle Reggie must have discovered the interloper.

She hurried into the room but halted like a horse balking at a jump.

In the center of the cavernous room, around an odd, knee-high table, sat eight strange men on two long couches and several chairs. Scattered across the table were papers and notebooks of every description, along with empty bottles and cups. The men were all wearing a version of Mr. Dalton's absurd attire. Victoria glanced around the room in a panic. The ceiling-high shelves crammed with books still covered every wall, and the vast Persian rug lay across the oakwood floor as it always had, though it now appeared faded and threadbare. From what nameless obscurity did all these men and the awful furniture appear?

Mr. Dalton stood to one side of the group, confident and in command, eyeing her with a bemused expression. She had stopped by an easel which faced the group of costumed men, but she didn't admire the large picture displayed there. She wanted to hide behind it. Her home had been invaded, violated by a troop of demented rattle pates. Staring at the incredible

scene, Victoria tried to think of what to do. What did one say to a room of bedlamites?

Mr. Dalton raised an eyebrow and turned to a portly man who sat in a chair at the far end of the low table. “Lord Covington, I think your niece has forgotten what she rushed in to say.”

Victoria stared in confusion. The man was not Lord Covington! Why was he addressing him as such? He sported a gray mustache and a most peculiar gray tweed coat with brown patches on the elbows. His gentle, vague expression and rumpled clothes reminded Victoria more of their vicar than any noble.

The man puffed out his cheeks and harrumphed, stirring the hair of his shaggy mustache. “I’ve never seen this woman before in my life. I don’t have a ...” The so-called Lord Covington squinted at Victoria, then pulled some glasses from his sweater vest and put them on, inspecting her as though she were a badly done painting. He gawked at her, open-mouthed. Victoria clenched her jaw at his horrid manners, her fear fueling indignation. The man could not possibly be a peer, exhibiting such a lack of breeding.

Mr. Dalton turned and glowered at her. “Really? Not your niece?” Giving Victoria a dismissive glance, he said, “Well, it’s who she claimed to be moments ago. Does she work for you?” The man with the mustache continued to scrutinize her intently as though he hadn’t heard the question.

Victoria went rigid at Mr. Dalton’s offensive words. “I am not *anyone’s* hired help.” She glared at him for a moment, fingers holding tight to the sides of her skirt, trying to regain her composure. She faced the group of men. Only Mr. Dalton appeared dangerous, but how could she know for certain? Were these men all conspiring to take over Belton Park? Did these lunatics hold her uncle captive? Their guests? Their furniture?

She mustn’t show any fear. Remain calm and reasonable, that’s what she must do. Victoria cleared her throat and in a

firm voice asked, “Do you gentlemen know where I might find Baron Covington?”

The men glanced at each other and smirked in unison. Finally, one of the older men, thin and balding, gestured at the man in the tweed coat. “This is the *Viscount* Covington. You won’t find any barons here.” The men laughed.

Victoria blinked, her thoughts roiling. She stepped back to leave them to their ravings but bumped into the easel. As she righted it, she recognized the picture resting there. It appeared to be a rather nice lithograph of Belton Park, viewed from one of the upper balconies. The print had been hand-colored and showed a brick retaining wall on the far side of the eastern garden. Uncle Reggie had talked about building the wall for ages but hadn’t had the funds to attempt it. The wall appeared quite wonderful the way the artist had envisioned it, with terraced spaces for decorative plants. She looked at the bottom of the picture to find the artist’s name, and saw in bold type BELTON PARK, THE SOUTHERN EXPOSURE 1823.

1823? Five years from now? She frowned at the picture and faced the men. “When was this done?” There were some snickers at her question. Victoria clamped her jaw shut, confusion and fear leaving her hands damp and clammy.

In a Yorkshire accent, the thin man said, “1823, of course. What are you about, young lady?”

Victoria couldn’t think of a response. Dread and embarrassment twisted her stomach, which only provoked her. She stood with her fists tight against her sides, her mounting fear fueling an indignant anger at their invasion, what they’d done to her home.

Mr. Dalton strode toward her, a coarse scowl on his face. “We don’t have time for this nonsense.”

His approach seized her attention and she faced him warily. So close, he towered over her. She refused to be intimidated by this boorish jigglebrains or the mad mare’s nest around her. She stood her ground when he stopped in front of her, his

expression murderous. “I don’t know what the hell your game is, but it’s over. Now, get out of here.”

Suddenly she was furious. Victoria stamped her foot, outraged at his words. “You, sir, are bumptious—rude and crude, even for an American!” She had the satisfaction of seeing the man’s eyes widen and his head snap back as if dodging a blow. Turning, she glared at the roomful of men and pointed a finger at them. “None of you belong here!” She collected her shredded dignity escaped as quickly as her fear-deadened limbs would carry her.

Once in the hall, she didn’t know where to go or what to do. She was trembling in earnest now. Seeing the main staircase, she rushed up the stairs and down the south hall. At her bedroom door, she shivered at the transformation all around her. She stood on a light blue carpet which felt as deep as a sheep’s fleece under her feet. It covered the entire hall floor, which meant the expensive material had been cut to shape. A very wasteful decision she thought as she tried to shake the tremors from her hands. Her bedroom door was painted the same white as the walls. It was locked. She fished in her skirt pocket for her keys, but even with shaking hands, she could see none of them were small enough to fit the lock.

Her sitting room! Victoria turned to the next door down and there it was, still a dark wood color. Uncle Reggie had given her the room adjoining her bedroom as a parlor. She tested the door and found it unlocked, but she hesitated with her hand on the porcelain doorknob. She knew the interior wouldn’t be at all as she’d left it. Nothing was.

Victoria opened the door and started to weep. Instead of her comfortable chairs, sofas, and inlaid, monopodium tables, there was a canopied bed. None of her beloved books or the bookshelves remained, nor her beautiful chest-on-chest. There were no paintings or vases with flowers—just a nasty-looking cabinet, dressing stand, and a few chairs around a side table. Wiping away her tears, she stumbled over to the bed and touched one post to make sure it was real. The connecting door to her bedroom had vanished. Bare wall denied there had

ever been a door there. Victoria crumpled to the floor and sobbed in terror.

She was the one who'd gone mad.

Chapter 3

“As a human being, one has been endowed with just enough intelligence to be able to see clearly how utterly inadequate that intelligence is when confronted with what exists.”

—Albert Einstein 1919

In the library, the men all started talking at once, but Lord William Covington stared after the young woman who'd fled the room, thinking fantastical thoughts. He felt the shock of recognition, but it was impossible, total nonsense. *The girl can't be who she appears to be.*

He required several attempts with agitated fingers before he was able to light his pipe. Puffing on it vigorously, he ignored the conversations going on around him and went to the bookshelves. Amid clouds of pipe smoke, Covington began a determined search, pulling out volumes large and small, only to shove them back in again. He knew they were here.

“Ha!” He yanked out four books, which he set on a nearby end table. He began flipping quickly through them until he located the pages he remembered and began to read. One book was larger than the rest. He flipped it open to a marked page and froze. After staring at the page for a long time, Covington set down his pipe and glasses and rubbed his face with both hands. The idea was ridiculous, insane—but it *was* her.

But how to make sure?

Sam Dalton's deep voice broke in on his reverie. “Covington, what are you doing with the books?” When he didn't answer, Dalton demanded, “What are you going to do about that girl? She's a nut case.”

Covington noted with some satisfaction the American still appeared irritated. At first, he'd excused the American's flinty behavior because he wasn't thirty yet, but for weeks now, he'd wanted to say what she had so eloquently declared. Covington tucked the books under his arm and went to stand next to

Dalton. He had to peer up over his glasses because the man was four inches taller.

“Oh, I don’t know what I’m going to do yet.” There was a tremor in his voice, forcing him to clear his throat. “Where did you first see her? What exactly did she say? Did she give her full name?”

Dalton rolled his eyes at the rapid-fire questions. “No, just Miss Covington. She came out through the doors at the end of the terrace.” Dalton took a deep breath and said in a disgusted tone, “She introduced herself as your niece and then left abruptly when I took a call on my cell—excuse me— *mobile phone*.” Covington nodded thoughtfully.

Dalton finished with a shrug. “I assumed she was working as a docent or a hostess.” After a moment, he asked in a perplexed tone, “What’s ‘bumptious’ mean?”

Covington puffed on his pipe rapidly for a moment and patted Dalton’s arm. “Don’t fret over it, old man.” He spoke in such a brisk manner Dalton eyed him quizzically. “I heard her run upstairs. I’ll just pop out and see about her.”

“What?” Dalton’s face fell. “*Now?* We’re in the middle of negotiations, for Christ’s sake.”

“Oh, do carry on without me.” Covington left the room before a visibly flummoxed Dalton could formulate a response.

The Viscount walked slowly down to the music room in an effort to contain his excitement. He wanted to run. On entering, he saw the love seat at the far end of the room. The graceful piece of furniture sat alone, facing the windows, alien in its solitude. He shivered at the sight and repeatedly whispered, “Bloody hell.”

Laying down his books by the phone, he slowly approached the unfamiliar couch and touched the maplewood back with a tremulous hand, as though it might disappear, but it was solid. It existed. On the seat, next to the leather-bound book and book knife, white gloves lay neatly folded, speaking

eloquently of another era, other customs. He picked up the book, knowing what was written on the spine. Most of the pages were still uncut, not separated at the edges, denoting a new book, though book pages hadn't required a book knife for more than one hundred and fifty years.

Flipping the crisp pages, he found the date of publication—February 1818. He shook his head amazed. In the early eighteen-hundreds, first editions noted the month, but this book smelled of ink, appearing to be newly printed. Dazed by the significance of it all, he gently ran his fingers over the red leather cover, and then across the back of the love seat, feeling the scrolled woodwork and knobby, multi-colored threads of the Indian-woven kincob upholstery.

Covington shook himself, set the book down, and went to the phone. He spoke to the kitchen with what he hoped was some composure. He adjusted all his books under one arm and stepped out of the room and up the stairs. He felt strangely detached, yet alive to the moment, an extraordinary moment.

He found her where he thought he would. Opening the door slowly, he came quietly into the bedroom. He fought a sudden urge to cry along with the weeping girl crumpled on the floor. She seemed so miserable, holding herself, stiffly rocking back and forth.

“My dear ...”

She started and hastily stood up, straightening her dress and wiping the tears away. A terrified expression flitted across her face, but she drew her shoulders back and a self-possessed gaze quickly replaced it, her blue eyes steady on him.

The two simply stared at each other for a long moment. Covington smiled tentatively. “Please, sit down. I’ve ordered some tea brought up. You appear as though you could do with some refreshments.” He offered her his handkerchief, but she shook her head and retrieved her own from a pocket in her dress. It had VAC embroidered in blue on the corner.

The girl shuddered as she took several controlling breaths and dabbed away the last tears. She nodded and sat where he indicated at the side table, squeezing the handkerchief into a tight ball in her lap. She watched him apprehensively as he sat in the chair opposite her. Carefully, he set the books down between them.

“My name is William Covington.” He tried to speak as calmly as he could.

She frowned and her eyes narrowed to consider him for a moment. “How do you do? Sir, I regret the bramble downstairs, but your friend was an absolute bounder.” The last words were spoken with some spirit, but she held up a slim hand rather than say more. Smiling ruefully, she gazed at the tablecloth. “I apologize. I find myself very ...” She hesitated and found the word, “... confused.”

“He isn’t my friend, and yes, he is a bounder.” He chuckled at the word and saw her relax a bit. “Confused? Yes, quite understandable. Perhaps I can help sort things out. You’re Victoria Ann Covington, are you not?”

She blinked in surprise, saying, “Yes,” holding out a hand as if to ward off her embarrassment. “I failed to introduce myself.”

Covington hadn’t realized he held his breath until she’d said ‘yes.’ He exhaled and pulled out his handkerchief again, this time to wipe his forehead.

Cocking her head to one side, she watched him with a thoughtful expression. Abruptly, she said, “I have never heard of you.”

She immediately closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and unsteadily exhaled. “Heavens, I do beg your pardon.” Recovering, she held out one slim hand, palm toward him, a peace offering. “I have never heard your branch of the family mentioned. How did you know my name?”

“Well, that’s the story, isn’t it? You’re something of a legend among the family.” Studying the lovely woman in her light

blue, scooped-neck morning dress, he could see it. It was really her. She was wearing the star pendant. It glowed against her skin. He fought to contain his elation. “May I see your necklace? It’s striking. Where did you find it?”

After a moment’s hesitation, she undid the clasp and handed it to him with a perplexed expression. “Find it? It belonged to my mother. I am never without it.”

Covington nodded, examining it. “Yes, yes, of course.” It had the family crest, a unicorn head, embossed on the back of the gold inlaid star, along with the letters C.P.O. for the family motto *Certes Prospice Optima*—Always Perfect Observance, or was it Certain Watchfulness? He raised one bushy eyebrow at his own ignorance. Few would know how awful the Medieval Latin really was, or why it had taken the family until 1824 to correct the mistakes when a family member who actually knew Latin drew attention to the miscast motto.

“Beautiful work.” He handed it to her and leaned back in the chair, frowning at his pipe, which had gone out. He watched her gracefully return the pendant to its place around her slender neck. Covington pursed his lips in admiration. Even with her face tear-streaked and pale, she was far lovelier in real life than in her portrait. There was a bright, patrician air about her the painting only hinted at.

Victoria eyed him, obviously aware he was studying her. “Sir, where is Lord Reginald Covington? What are you doing here? And who are those ...?”

Covington held both hands out to stop the flood of questions. “Please, call me William. I’m not directly related to your uncle, but I do believe we are family.”

The young woman shook herself, as if she could physically shed her doubts and fears. She offered a wry turn of her lips. “A distant cousin, mayhap?”

Covington smiled at her efforts to lighten the mood. “Yes, quite distant.”

With more determination, Miss Covington asked, “Sir, how is it possible? Tell me, what has happened here? To Belton Park, my rooms? Why are you wearing that costume?” Her mouth compressed, she leaned forward, hands on the table. “I insist you tell me—*where is my uncle?*”

Facing an exasperated Victoria Covington, he tried to decide how to proceed. He offered what he hoped was a comforting smile. “Your uncle is fine, I am sure. As to what has happened, it’s hard to say, but I know it’s fantastic. Unimaginable.”

He stopped when he heard the rising excitement in his own voice. He took a deep breath. “I’ll attempt to explain, my dear, but you must be patient.” Just then a young woman in a Regency dress carrying a tray knocked on the open door. “Ah, Janice, the tea. Thank you.” If Janice was here, the tour of the gardens must be done.

A frown tightened on Miss Covington’s brow as she watched the young woman carry in the tea tray. He could imagine her thoughts. She was in her own home, yet neither Janice nor the dishes on the tray were familiar. He moved the books over, and Janice set the tea tray on the table.

Miss Covington immediately stood and thanked Janice with a quick smile, dismissing her with such authority Janice chirped a “Yes, mum” and backed out of the room with only a startled glance at Lord Covington. Miss Covington poured the tea, filling each cup half full. He admired her poise. He could see this everyday ritual was helping her maintain some composure.

She asked his preferences for sugar and milk, then handed him his cup. When he refused a scone, butter and jam on a plate, she sat down again with her cup in both hands, profile to him. He could see her hands tremble as she surveyed the room. She closed her eyes and took a sip of tea. He suddenly felt a deep sadness surge through him for this woman, leaving him chilled, along with an overwhelming awe for what she represented—and what she faced. She was very much family, and he must protect her.

“My dear, you and I have a great many things to discuss and I’m unsure where to begin.”

~ ~ ~

Sam gripped the huge dictionary with both hands hard enough to make the binding creak. He re-read the definition.

Bump.tious\ *adj* [*bump+tious* (as in *fractious*): presumptuously, and often noisily self-assertive: OBSTRUSIVE, arrogantly invasive.

Why should he care what the woman—no, girl— called him? She was a complete stranger, and crazy to boot. He barked a few choice expletives and slammed the book shut on its stand. His words and the resultant boom reverberated through the library.

The lawyers in the room fell silent and watched him. He eyed them back, thinking of the time being wasted while he paid his four lawyers \$400 an hour *each* to just sit there and wait for his lordship, not counting Covington’s three British lawyers—solicitors they were called. Sam stared out the window for a long moment to regain his equilibrium, and then faced the still mute group.

“*Well?* Where do we stand?” When the group jumped in unison at his question, Sam realized he’d spoken too harshly. He combed his fingers through his hair—hard—and marched over to Ben Lytecastle, Covington’s lead counsel. Looking down at the slight man, Sam tried to soften his words. “Ben, with Covington’s new requirements, what needs to be resolved?”

The bald Englishman squared his glasses and examined his notepad. In a supercilious voice Sam found more and more grating, he said, “The need for guarantees concerning the upkeep and integrity of the property and the period authenticity as well as the continued employment of the current staff.”

Sam breathed out slowly. “We’ve agreed in some form to everything, even the asking price, Ben.” Scanning the group,

he met the eyes of all the men, one at a time. “Karl, what do we need for resolution?”

Karl Hoffman, Sam’s lead lawyer, shrugged, long blond hair dancing with the motion of his head. “Lord Covington.”

Covington’s lawyers squirmed but said nothing. Lytecastle pursed his lips in a drole manner and nodded.

Hands on his hips, Sam glared at the floor, barely holding on to his frayed temper. “All right, I’ll go find him. Why don’t you all take a break and be back here in twenty. Then we can begin at the top of the list.”

The entire group relaxed and smiled as they got up. The conversations immediately grew animated. Sam knew it would be approaching forty minutes wasted by the time everyone was back and ready to work. With four lawyers, it came to a thousand dollar ‘break.’ Perhaps the informal discussions might help the process, but he doubted it.

Sam shook his head. He’d been involved in buying and selling real estate for years, but he’d never seen anything comparable. He hadn’t believed anyone could vacillate so resolutely.

Or ... it could be Günter Waltrop and his Venture company, *Eigenschaften*? He’d tried to horn in on Sam’s business, and had stolen one project in France last year. Could Waltrop be sabotaging the sale with counteroffers behind the scenes? Sam’s sources hadn’t reported anything, but he couldn’t help but be suspicious.

Sam bared his teeth, rolled his neck, tight muscles resisting, and strode out of the library in search of Covington. He’d mentioned going upstairs. At the foot of the stairs Sam hesitated, realizing Lord C. would probably be in the company of the nut case.

Crazy or not, she irritated the hell out of him, but he couldn’t put his finger on why. She couldn’t be more than twenty-one or two, yet she acted the queen of the manor. In a few short minutes, she’d gotten under his skin, making him

feel like a recalcitrant eight-year-old. He'd never met a woman who could do that—not even his mother, once he turned nine. The blonde reminded him of the actress Kate Beckinsale in her haughtiest role—a cool, velvet British accent and a disdainful beauty which could skewer male egos at will.

When he'd first met her, she'd seemed such a demure thing, pretty, but naive and easily embarrassed.

What an act.

He was sure a blown gasket motivated her outrageous performance, telling everyone to get out. Sam ran a hand through his hair, irritated with himself. He should pity her instead of fuming about her opinion of him.

Sam slapped his palm on the stair banister. For all he knew, if Covington did find her wandering the upper stories, he might be in danger. She could be homicidal. He doubted his Lordship could fend off a paraplegic pigeon, let alone that pocket lunatic. An injured or dead Covington would delay the negotiations forever. With the thought broiling in his brain, he took the steps two at a time.

At the top of the stairs, he listened for a moment and heard Covington's slow drawl down the hallway. Walking quickly, he came to a partially open door and stopped. Covington was explaining something, but he couldn't hear the words, only the soothing tone. Probably trying to calm the fruit loop.

Sam gritted his teeth, listening to Covington's droning. After investing nearly four weeks in negotiations, how could the man just wander away from a hundred-million-pound deal because some mental case disrupted their meeting? He should have sent the staff after her. Well, he'd had enough of both Covington and his meandering priorities. He knocked loudly on the door and stepped into the room.

Covington was seated with his back to the door. He didn't turn around; he just looked over his shoulder. Miss Covington sat stiffly facing him. Her expression seized Sam's attention.

Her crystal blue eyes held such a lost and haunted look he forgot what he was going to say.

Covington actually sounded annoyed at his intrusion. “Mr. Dalton, this is a private matter. I will be down when we’re finished.”

The situation felt very strange. What had been said to Miss Covington to make her appear so frightened? If Covington had never seen her before ... Was he threatening her?

He leaned forward and asked, “Are you all right?”

She stared blankly at him for a moment, her hands knotting her handkerchief. She then squared her shoulders. “Yes, Mr. Dalton, I am well. Thank you for asking.” Her strained expression suggested otherwise.

“You’re sure?”

With an impatient, almost frantic shake of her head, she said, “Mr. Dalton. Please go,” Her tone a mixture of barely contained terror and complete disdain for him.

Sam flinched at the double message. She didn’t like him one bit and certainly didn’t trust him to actually help, no matter how desperate she might be. He turned to Covington, mostly to avoid her eyes. “Okay. I’ve called a twenty-minute break. Perhaps you could see your way free to do some business by then?” Sam didn’t bother to hide the sarcasm.

Lord Covington sat fiercely puffing on his pipe. “Of course.”

Sam left, unsure whether he should shut the door or not. He hesitated, hating the feeling, but left it open. He swore as he retreated down the hall. *Covington*. He really disliked the procrastinator. But what he hated more was how awkward the girl made him feel, even when she appeared near panic.

~ ~ ~

Victoria exhaled in relief when Mr. Dalton left. She couldn’t think when the horrid man was near. She placed her wrists on the edge of the table and leaned forward, glaring at Lord

Covington. He had been speaking nonsense for the last few minutes.

“Sir, what do you mean this isn’t ‘my time?’ Why should it be ‘your time?’ If you think to wrest control of Belton Park from my uncle, you are very much mistaken. You certainly cannot persuade me with such gammon or by wearing ramshackle clothes and stealing furniture.”

Lord Covington fluttered his hand in denial. “No, no. I have no designs on your uncle or his property. I haven’t been very clear, have I?” He frowned then blew pipe smoke for a moment before continuing. “This is very difficult.” He picked one of the large books on the table and opened it in front of her, gesturing to where a strip of browned newsprint lay. “Perhaps if you read this first.”

MISSING

Lord Reginald Covington has reported his niece missing to the District Magistrate at Horsham, Sussex. Miss Victoria Covington has not been seen since Monday last. Baron Covington and she were hosting a large house party at his estate, Belton Park, Sussex, near Petworth, with many notables attending. Miss Covington had been well received in London during her first Season last spring. Lord Covington is said to be distraught over her disappearance.

The unusual circumstances surrounding the disappearance are numerous. Miss Covington went missing among a house full of guests, many enjoying the surrounding grounds at the time, but no one witnessed her departure. Guests reported seeing her enter the family music room with a new volume of poetry, which cannot be located.

A family friend places her there before noontime. Also missing was a family heirloom, a Queen Anne love seat. However, her personal effects were not disturbed. She is 5 feet, 3 inches tall, with blond hair. When last seen she was wearing a blue morning dress. The Baron is offering a reward of £200 for any information concerning her whereabouts. Contact Sir

Terrance Aperton, District Magistrate, Coarse Lane, Horsham with the particulars.

Victoria sat back as if struck, unable to make sense of it. Unwilling to make sense of it. She focused on the date in the upper left-hand corner: May 9, 1818. She shook her head. “But today is the fourth.”

The man claiming to be her relative regarded her with sad eyes. “Yes, it is May ... in the year 2019.”

Victoria shot out of her chair and stood shaking at the far end of the room. “Do you think me a fool?” She pointed at the newspaper, indignation holding her rigid. “This is nonsense of the foulest kind.” When he didn’t respond, she shouted at him, “Why are you doing this?”

He picked another one of the books and opened it. “Do you recognize this portrait?”

She stepped close enough to see the print. It was of her. It appeared to be a copy of the portrait hanging in her uncle’s study, exact in every detail, color, and line. She couldn’t believe it. Her wonder brought her closer. She could even see the brush strokes. Victoria laid her hand on the print and felt the glossy finish. She tested the weight of the page, amazed at the paper’s lightness. Sitting down, she flipped the cover over to see the title: *The History of the Covington Family, 1520 to 1990*.

Looking back at her portrait, she saw the heading on the page opposite the picture: “Victoria Ann Covington, only daughter of Baron Charles and Amelia Covington, 1797-1818.”

Staring at the words, she whispered, “I’m dead.”

Lord Covington huffed and gently said, “No, no, not at all. You’re very much alive, my dear, only in a different time—some two hundred years in the future.”

The room faded into the distance, and it felt as though someone else spoke in the silence. “But I remember. I remember when Mr. Constable painted this. It was three years

ago November—on my eighteenth birthday,” she whispered, staring at her portrait.

“My uncle was a great admirer of Mr. Constable’s landscapes, and he bought several. When he met me, Mr. Constable asked me to sit for him, even though he rarely painted portraits. Uncle Reggie was beside himself. Mr. Constable was an unusually quiet man.” Victoria smiled softly as she ran a trembling hand over the print. “Even so, he seemed quite comfortable with me. We conversed for hours while he painted. He spoke mostly of his fiancée and art.”

She realized she’d been babbling and stopped, focusing on the page opposite the portrait. She shivered when she realized she was reading her own biography. The words told of her life at Belton Park and of her parents’ deaths in a carriage accident when she was fifteen. Her Season had been delayed till her twentieth year because of the financial problems associated with Uncle Reggie assuming the family title.

She read the names of some of the men who had offered for her. Her disappearance was described, with the same mysterious facts given in the *Morning Post*. Her short biography ended with the author savaging her heart with his cool, dispassionate words.

“Victoria Covington was declared dead in 1822, without a single clue being discovered concerning the events of May 4th, 1818. Baron Covington gained control of her dowry of £36,000, but never recovered emotionally from the loss of his only family. Socially, he was shunned. Many considered him the prime suspect in Miss Covington’s disappearance, and it was widely whispered he had needed her dowry to maintain his station. In his remaining years, Baron Covington used her money to improve the grounds of Belton Park she had loved so much. He died in 1827 without issue, a broken man. A nephew, Sir Arthur Pembrose Covington, inherited the title and the extensive estate.

“The mystery surrounding Miss Covington’s disappearance has become part of Covington family lore. Stories of

kidnappings, tragic lovers' rendezvous, and ghostly sightings continue to this day among the locals of West Sussex in the Duncton and Rother River districts."

She felt the tears trail down her cheeks and watched them create large wet spots on the page. She could not seem to breathe. Her chest ached and her thoughts swirled uncontrollably, like leaves in an October storm. This wasn't possible! Poor Uncle Reggie. Her friends? Kitty? What had happened to them? They were all generations dead in the distant past? She was alone, thrust into a foreign world, a nightmare.

This is not happening.

Victoria looked up in shock at Lord Covington, unable to speak. The room dimmed, and her chair suddenly decided to tilt toward the floor.

Chapter 4

“Nothing puzzles me more than time and space and yet nothing puzzles me less, for I never think about them.”

—English Essayist Charles Lamb, 1810

When she awoke, Victoria found herself lying on a wide, soft bed, the quilting of the coverlet silky under her hands. The ceiling was a soothing mauve, reflected sunlight casting bright patterns across it. There were no cornice moldings, making the ceiling look bare and unfinished. Three odd glass chandeliers hung high across the middle of the room. She couldn't see any candleholders. The unadorned strangeness of it all made her remember, and remembering made her want to scream.

She sat up—too quickly, because a wave of dizziness blurred her vision. Her scream came out a groan. A damp cloth on her forehead fell into her lap and she grabbed it and held it over her eyes, blocking out the offending sights.

“How do you feel?”

Victoria recognized the voice but couldn't bring herself to call him Lord Covington. An emptiness settled in her chest, the outlandish surroundings leeching the life from her. She frowned at the sensation, then straightened her back and squared her shoulders, as she always did when faced with unpleasant, unavoidable tasks.

“I feel disoriented, thank you.” She took the cloth away from her eyes and examined her surroundings. It was a colorful, expansive bedroom with large windows on two sides. A breeze gently played with the frothy curtains framing the windows, mocking her. Floor-length, they lapped at a thick blue carpet, which covered the entire floor like an ocean, daring her to comment. The dominant colors were mauve, pale blue and periwinkle, the bed cover a riot of those hues, as though bottles of paint had been spilled on it.

The four-poster bed she sat on was not covered above and had no side curtains. *Very peculiar*. Unadorned furniture was scattered around the room, the chairs upholstered in the same chaotic colors as the bed cover. *What room is this?* She tried to identify what part of Belton House she was in. Then it came to her.

She narrowed her eyes at William Covington. He sat lounging in a large wingback chair watching her as he chewed on the stem of his pipe.

“What happened here?”

Covington smiled. “You fainted. Janice and I brought you here.”

Waving off the obvious, Victoria gestured about her. “I am referring to my uncle’s study. What have you done?”

“I didn’t do anything. This is my daughter’s room.”

She stared at him. “You let your daughter do this? Where are the vaulted windows?” She pointed at two square windows at the end of the room, putting a hand to her head. “Where is the balcony? The wainscotting? The oak doorframes? Horrid! All his beautiful paintings, the books and figurines? What did you do with all the wonderful chairs and footstools covered in Moroccan leather?”

Covington shrugged sympathetically. “Gone long before my time, I’m afraid. This had been used as a bedroom since before I was born.”

Victoria pulled up her knees, arms around her legs, and hid her face. Her lovely home had disappeared, looted upstairs and down by the centuries. She took a shuddering breath and surveyed the room again. It was so foreign. She was fond of the cool colors, but there were so many of them splashed about without apparent form or purpose. “Is this how bedrooms are appointed in this day and age?”

Covington chuckled. “No, not many, but I admit this room does have an overdone, post-modern air about it.” Victoria just frowned at the indecipherable words. “Sorry, my poor attempt

at humor. Um, yes. This style is sadly out of date. My daughter, Roxanne, chose the furnishings ten years ago. She hasn't lived here for a long time."

"Oh? Where is your daughter?"

"Gone. She left five years ago, where I don't know."

Victoria stared at him unable to comprehend what he was saying. "Your daughter broke off relations with you? And her husband allowed it?"

Covington shook his head sadly. "She isn't married."

Victoria gasped, which in turn produced a puzzled frown from Covington. Suddenly his expression cleared.

"You're wondering how a respectable woman could get on in the world without the protection of family or a husband? Things are very different now, my dear," he said, shrugging as he played with his pipe. "Roxanne had a university education and a good job when she left."

"Oh." Victoria tried to understand, to imagine what would have to be different for a woman to make her own way alone in society, where a gentleman and peer would allow his daughter to work. She'd attended a university? Dozens of questions burst in her head, tumbling over one another. They overwhelmed any rational thought. She just sat staring about the room.

Finally, Covington rose and brought her a crystal glass of something from a decanter on a tray atop the side table. "Here, take this."

Sitting on the bed with her feet on the floor, she took the glass and swallowed the golden liquid all at once. It turned out to be brandy, fire all the way down her throat. It made her eyes water, but it also burned away the fuzziness. Covington took the glass, but remained quietly standing by the bed, as though he didn't know what to do or say.

More clearheaded now, she turned to Covington and asked, waving a hand at the room, "How is this possible? Is there

some science or alchemy practiced in this time where people are snatched from their lives and tossed into the hereafter?”

Covington held out his hands in denial. “No, no, your presence here is quite amazing, unheard of. I have no idea how it happened. It could be any number of ...”

Victoria glared at him through long tendrils of hair which had escaped their pins. She impatiently tucked them behind her ear. He hurriedly described theories of time and space, vortexes, of how this *might* have happened.

She rubbed her forehead and inhaled a shaky breath, finishing by pulling her hair back and pinning it in place. When finished, she clasped her hands over her heart and stared off into space, Covington’s explanations of time travel a distant drone.

But how had it happened *to her*? She remembered the flickering rosebush, the hushed sense of strangeness. Even Mr. Dalton had noticed it. The visceral ‘pop’ as she left the music room. How could a rosebush possibly cause such dislocation?

She exhaled sharply through her teeth and stood up. It didn’t matter. She wouldn’t understand in any case. She *was* here. She had to go home.

On impulse, she stepped past Lord Covington to the windows, surprise silencing him. She knew the windows looked out on the front circle. Below, her gravel carriage drive was now an oiled roadway grayish-black and smooth. Unfamiliar trees and bushes grew around the drive, though the fountain remained, squatting in the middle of the central green, empty and moss laden. Ivy and honeysuckle still grew bright and green on the walls of the east wing, but the plants now seemed out of place.

Next to the front steps were parked what she assumed were coaches of some sort, brightly painted, resting on four black wheels without any spokes. Impossibly curved windows were placed around the cab like a Berline or mail coach, but there were no tongues or harnesses.

Beyond, a new line of large ash trees blocked what used to be a lovely view of the Rother River. Victoria closed her eyes. The familiar only made the new and strange much more confusing, the changes much more disturbing. She wanted to hide under the covers—*her* covers.

“Why is my bedroom locked?”

Covington came over to her and answered after a moment. “Your uncle felt certain you’d return, so he had the room locked, kept just the way you left it. Later, he had it sealed, nailed shut. It hasn’t been opened since you disappeared—sort of a family tradition.” Covington hesitated, adding, “Well, once it was opened to fix a roof leak, but nothing was touched. I’m told it was very dusty.”

Victoria could imagine what she would find if the room were opened after two centuries. All her memories, all her lovely things. Her heart suddenly felt old and desiccated. She stood staring out the window, not seeing the alien landscape, just hurting.

After an indeterminable time, she came to herself. Aware that Lord Covington still stood by her, she asked a question which had repeatedly come to mind.

“How did you recognize me? How, if roaming between the past and present is so unprecedented?” Victoria turned to the round-faced man for the answer.

His mustache bobbed in every direction as he chewed on his pipe stem. He harrumphed, an embarrassed expression coloring his face. He began to pace the floor.

“No, no. As I said, time travel is just as fantastic a notion for me as it is for you.” Victoria waited, not believing him. Covington must have noticed because he cleared his throat. “You see, I was ten when my mother first told me your story. She took me into the music room where your portrait hung at the time and told me all about you, showing me the newspaper report.” Glancing at her and then his shoes, he shrugged. “I became infatuated with you ... uh, your story,” he mumbled,

blushing redder when he met Victoria's eyes. He cleared his throat. "The mystery was addictive. For several years I learned all I could about you and the Regency Period."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ah, yes. The Regency Period when the Prince Regent ruled. Uh, the Prince became Regent in 1811, didn't he?"

Victoria nodded. "Yes, seven years ago when I was ..." Her voice faded away. It wasn't seven years ago.

Covington nodded. "He became King George IV in 1820 when his father died. The decade between 1811 and 1820 is called the Regency."

"I see." Victoria shuddered. Her world had become an academic idiom.

"You looked so much like your portrait, even the star pendant, all brought you to mind when you entered the study. I read your diary, you see, and knew you always wore the pendant. Few people, if any, would have been aware of it. Your brief appearance in the library had memories surging through my old brain. I knew what had happened when I found your loveseat in the music room."

"You read my diary—when you were ten years old?" Victoria whispered in a scandalized tone. She held a hand to her throat, remembering what he must have read. "My goodness."

Covington stopped and stared at the floor, shuffling his feet. "Well, yes, but you were supposedly long dead, so it didn't matter, you see. It was kept in the library. I think your uncle read it for clues to your disappearance and didn't return it to your room."

"Klews?" Victoria saw her hands were shaking again. "It didn't matter," she whispered to herself. She couldn't look at him, knowing what he'd read. She must leave, return to a time when it did matter. "How do I return?" She waited, but he didn't answer. "Is there a method for returning?"

“No.”

She blinked at the finality in his voice. She wanted to scream and break things. Instead, she advanced on Lord Covington and stopped, her face a foot from his. “How can you be so certain? You admitted my presence here is unheard of.”

He stepped back, hands out in front of him in a plea for understanding. “It *is* unprecedented. It’s fantastic, but I know you don’t go back because history says Victoria Covington never reappeared. You were never seen again, my dear. So obviously, you didn’t return.” Covington lit his pipe and gazed out the window. “I know this is confusing and frightening, but we must think about making a life for you here.”

“*Here?* I don’t belong *here.*” Victoria paced, clenching and unclenching fists until she stopped next to Covington. “I look outside and what is not totally unrecognizable, has been altered—and not for the better.”

In a quiet voice, Covington said, “Perhaps, but you are here to stay.”

Victoria felt the truth of it drain the strength from her limbs, but she was beyond crying. Later, she knew she would be shedding barrels of tears. “Why did Providence deign to bring me to this time? To what purpose?”

“I have no idea, but as you must live in this time, perhaps you’ll discover an answer.”

“Live? Where do I live? *How* do I live?” Victoria eyed Lord Covington. He had allowed his own daughter to work in Trade. What possible familial obligations could Lord Covington feel toward her, a *very* distant relative? She knew how difficult it was for an unprotected woman, and the kinds of work available—in 1818.

He said his daughter had a good job. What constituted a good job for a solitary, well-bred woman in the year two thousand and nineteen? She watched him, wondering, and felt numbed by the unknowns.

“We’ll figure out something,” he said, a small smile appearing then disappearing like a nervous twitch.

“As simple as that? Do you think me shawny? Even I can measure my ignorance with a passing glance about this room.” She waved a hand at the rectangular plates attached to the walls, both at eye level and close to the floor. “What is the purpose for all these tiny levers and holes? The very walls leave me mystified. How can I possibly gain sufficient understanding to navigate your world?” She eyed him, daring him to contradict her.

Covington cleared his throat, a sheepish sound but continued. “Well, yes. I’m sure we’ll work out all the details, my dear. You’ll see.”

Victoria mouthed the word, “Details.”

He smiled, saying, “Many things are really quite simple. See.” Walking over to the switch nearest the door, he flipped it with a flourish. The overhead chandeliers lit up, bright even in the afternoon light.

Victoria gasped when Covington switched the light off again. “Can gas lighting have been so perfected?” she asked, staring at the light fixtures. “What ignites the flame?”

“It’s not gas. It’s an electric light-bulb.”

“An electric light bulb,” she repeated, snorting in a terribly improper fashion. “Yes, I can see how ‘really simple’ it will be.”

Covington waved away her skepticism with his hand holding the pipe, scattering ashes. “Have patience. It will come to you. As to where you’ll live, live here. This can be your bedroom. You’re family after all, and as a Covington, my responsibility.”

He smiled warmly, arms open in invitation, and Victoria could almost see Covington as a ten-year-old. She was touched by the manner of his offer. Even so, she knew the smile she returned was weak and unconvinced. She glanced around the

room again trying to imagine living in it, and the bright confusion of colors made her head hurt.

Covington continued, his apparent enthusiasm for the idea growing as he talked. “Certainly, you have a great deal to learn, but you’re intelligent and have ample time. We’ll talk about it over supper. You’ll see. Right now, I must get down to Mr. Dalton.” Covington peered at his pocket watch. “No doubt he’s furious by now.”

Victoria turned away from the window. “Why are you dealing with that rag-mannered man? Are you hiring him for some kind of work?”

Covington chuckled, but then his face went all doughy. “Uh, no, he’s buying Belton Park.”

Victoria froze, gripping one of the bedposts, leaning on it for support. Her stomach convulsed as though she’d been struck in the solar plexus. She’d lost her family and dear friends, her world in an instant. Belton Park was now ravaged by time, but it still remained, her last anchor, the last connection to her heart. It had always been her refuge, and after her parents died, what remained of her life. This couldn’t be happening. It was the final violation. She closed her eyes to the dizziness.

No.

She faced him, sensing she was fighting for her sanity. “You cannot sell it!”

Covington took a step back. She advanced on him. All the terror of the last hours narrowed to this new, ultimate horror. “This is the family seat, your home. *My* home. You offer me sanctuary here when you are planning sell it to that, that *American*? It is your inheritance. Would you abandon your family, its history, its traditions, its very future? You cannot!”

“My dear, you don’t understand.” Covington patted the air between them with his hands in a futile attempt to calm her. “I have little choice. The grounds take most of my income to maintain. I’ve had to let the house go. You must have seen

how shabby it has become. The financial issues involved are ___”

“Are what? So beyond redemption you have to give away the land?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be giving it away. But this is the twenty-first century, my dear. The fiscal considerations are much more complex than in your day.”

Victoria narrowed her eyes. “Devil in it! *My day?* You would end six centuries of family, of tradition because of some *complexities?*”

Covington waved his hands about, a whine creeping into his voice. “I have tried every way I know to keep Belton, but it has become too much for me. And who would I pass it to? My daughter is the last Covington, and she doesn’t want Belton Park—or me. I didn’t see any alternative.”

Victoria shook her head emphatically. “No. Whatever your reasons, this is *not* how landed families deal with financial difficulties.” Victoria could feel herself shaking with rage and crossed her arms in front of her to control the tremors. She stepped between William Covington and the hall door. “You cannot sell Belton Park.”

Covington furtively scanned the room, obviously contemplating escape routes. Seeing none, he pulled out his tobacco pouch and began refilling his pipe.

Victoria took a deep breath. “Lord Covington.” He started, nearly dropping his pipe, apparently surprised by her first use of his title. She went and sat in the upholstered chair by the hall door, carefully smoothing her skirt out over her lap. Studying him, she saw the discomfiture in his eyes, so she asked, “Do you *want* to sell Belton Park?”

After a moment, lighting his pipe, Lord Covington he puffed out a cloud of smoke. He gave her a look of resignation. “No, not really.”

Victoria nodded and cocked her head, studying her relative. “You must know I do not wish to brangle with you. Please

bring a chair over and tell me the particulars of this proposed transaction and why you feel it must be done.” She placed her hands on her knees, arms straight, and raised an eyebrow. Uncle Reggie and the servants always recognized her determination in the stance and did not challenge her. She hoped it conveyed the same resolve now.

When he sat down, she tried to smile reassuringly. “And once you have explained, we will find a more acceptable solution, one commensurate with your station.”

He responded by vigorously chewing on his pipe.

Chapter 5

“Everything has its time. Ours was that of innumerable projects;

yours is that of implementation.”

—L. S. Mercier, *L’An 2440 [The Year 2440]* 1770.

A comment of the book’s narrator to his Twenty-fifth Century guide.

William Covington entered the library sometime later, to find it empty except for Sam Dalton. He stood facing the open doors to the patio, hands clasped behind him, shoulders stiff, legs rigid. Even from across the room, Dalton’s barely contained anger was evident, his one hand repeatedly making fists. The low afternoon sun cast an orange glow on the library, terrace, and the gardens beyond—much like Dalton’s ire, Covington thought.

He took a deep breath and marched up to the man. He was far more willing to face Dalton’s rage than he had Victoria Covington’s tenacious resolve.

“Mr. Dalton.”

Dalton continued staring out the windows. In a tight voice he said, “Lord Covington.”

“Mr. Dalton, I know these negotiations have been a trying time for you.”

Dalton whirled around, a fierce scowl knotting his face, but before he could speak, Covington continued, waving his hand toward where the lawyers had sat during the morning. “I will cover the costs you incurred today. I apologize for all the delays, but I have just found family I didn’t know I had, and it created complications I couldn’t forestall.”

Dalton’s eyebrows shot up. “You mean she *is* your niece?” He glared at him in disbelief. “I thought you said you’d never seen her before?”

“I hadn’t, for many years. It took me some time to recognize her. Her name is Victoria Covington. She recently lost her entire family and barely managed to reach Belton Park today.”

Covington forced himself to smile, knowing he sounded like a child trying to explain away the broken vase at his feet. He’d never been able to lie convincingly. Dalton glared at him and returned to looking out on the terrace.

After a moment, Covington coughed. “However, if you are still interested in Belton Park, I believe I can offer you a much better contract than we discussed previously, saving you tens of millions without many of the sale restrictions and obligations I was asking for.” When there was no response, he asked, “Are you interested?”

Dalton whirled around. “Damn it, Covington, what the hell are you playing at?” When there was no answer, he asked sardonically, “Are you after *more* guarantees? Is this going to take another month?”

“No, and no. If you agree, I’m willing to sign off as soon as our lawyers have the papers drawn up.”

Dalton stepped back and peered at Covington as though he were a broken jack-in-the-box, unsure when ‘jack’ was going to pop out if he cranked the handle again. He pointed at him. “I’m telling you now, this is it. Any more delays, and I’m walking.” Dalton glowered at him and waited.

Covington slowly nodded, keeping eye contact. “Understood.”

Dalton grunted once and held his hands up in surrender. “All right, if you’re serious, I’m still interested. But so help me ...”

“Rest assured, Mr. Dalton, I’m able to offer something I feel is superior. The hour is late. Shall we meet tomorrow morning? Come for breakfast at eight and I’ll explain everything. We can have the lawyers appear at eleven if we have come to an understanding.”

Dalton rubbed his chin and eyed the older man. “You say I’ll save millions?” Covington nodded. “And you’ll be asking for fewer guarantees?”

Covington smiled and nodded again. Victoria had said Mr. Dalton would be intrigued. Her idea might just work. If it did, he meant to add something to the final agreement he hadn’t discussed with his newfound relative.

“What brought on this sudden one-eighty?”

“A discussion with my niece. I’ll explain tomorrow.”

After a moment, Dalton sighed and agreed to meet in the morning, but he continued to glance suspiciously at Lord Covington as they trekked to the front circle and his car. Covington grinned as he watched Dalton drive away. The last fifteen minutes was the first time he’d enjoyed haggling with the American. Whistling as he walked back to the house, he found himself looking forward to tomorrow’s breakfast.

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“Where is it?” Victoria peered under the bed one more time, but it simply wasn’t there. She stood and surveyed the room. It wasn’t under the bedside tables, or any of the chairs. “Blast!”

It had been hours since she’d visited the garden house and she felt ready to burst. The garden house. Of course.

She went to the far windows overlooking the south gardens. The afternoon shadows were blue fingers among the rows of flowers and bushes, but the modest white building was nowhere to be seen. It didn’t make any sense. Why had they torn it down? What did people of this century do to relieve themselves? There had to be a chamber pot someplace in the bedroom.

Across the room, two doors beckoned. Perhaps one of the doors led to a water closet. They were becoming a fashion. Victoria sighed. A fashion twenty decades ago. Who could tell what was *à la modalité* now?

Opening the first door, Victoria found no bench seat with a porcelain bowl inset in the middle, no pipe or water tank suspended above. Instead, she stood in a windowless pantry-sized room with clothes hanging from bars along the walls on all three sides. A very peculiar closet.

Odder still, arranged on the floor under the clothes were the most bizarre shoes she'd ever seen, in every conceivable color. More than one pair of what resembled slippers had spikes for heels three inches high. Who would wear such monstrosities? There were no stray chamber pots on the floor or the shelves above the wire-hung clothes.

The pressure was increasing, and she was becoming desperate. The second door opened on a blue room, part of the walls covered with azure and white tile, Italian style. She wrinkled her nose. The chemical smells of the bedroom were stronger here. The counter to her left was covered with a white slate which felt so smooth as she ran her hand over it, she was certain the polish had required weeks to achieve. There were two porcelain bowls set into the marble counter, each with a drain at the bottom, but she saw no plugs. *They must be for washing, but how do they hold water?* Victoria groaned. *Hold water.*

It was a bathroom! A large white tub squatted to her right up. Amazing. It was the largest slipper bath she had ever seen. It sported a drain to nowhere in the toe, and it seemed to be made of *porcelain*! Its lion's paw feet were affixed to the floor and a patterned cloth curtain hung down around the outside for retaining the heat, she thought, much like bed curtains. Very Impressive.

During her Season in London, Lord Cathcart had amused her when she and her uncle visited his house. With the pride of a rooster, he had ushered them into a whole room devoted to bathing. There he had shown off a similar curtain arrangement, but with a water tank above for what he called a shower, touting it as the first stair of fashion. And now, there was a shower pipe above coming out of the wall.

Leaning against the counter in wretched discomfort, she eyed the tub, wondering if she dared. She searched under the counter in the cabinets, but no chamber pot. Victoria would have laughed at her plight if it hadn't been so uncomfortable.

“Mum? Are you there?”

Victoria stood as straight as possible and toddled carefully into the bedroom. Janice, the maid who'd delivered the tea, stood at the bedroom door. Her petite hands flitted from the front of her dress to hide behind her, a pair of frightened chicks. She curtsied awkwardly, obviously coached by Lord Covington. It was a touching thing to do.

“His Lordship says everything went as you thought it would with Mr. Dalton. Supper will be served in ten minutes,” Janice said, her small mouth turning up at the corners.

Victoria nodded back. “Thank you, Janice.” Just as Janice turned to go, Victoria stopped her with a sharp, “Wait!” The maid started, eyes wide.

“Uh, Janice. Perhaps you can help me. I-I need to pluck some roses and don't know where.”

Janice frowned in confusion. “Now, mum? There's roses in the garden, of course.”

“No. I mean I need to visit the porcelain.”

“Mum?”

“Blast!” Victoria pursed her lips at her outburst and sighed. Delicacy be hanged. “I need a chamber pot.”

“A what?” Victoria just stared at Janice and Janice stared back in silence for several seconds.

“A commode?” Seeing Janice's blank expression continue, Victoria gritted her teeth. “I need to relieve myself. Where would I do that?”

“Oh. In the loo behind you,” Janice said, perplexed, pointing to the tiled room.

Victoria could not believe it. “The what?”

Janice eyed Victoria intently for a moment and carefully said, “The bathroom, where you just came from.”

“Show me.”

“What?”

Victoria wondered how long they would be trading the word ‘what?’ in their relationship. She took a deep breath and began again. “Janice, I have never seen such an indoor facility. Please show me.” Standing awkwardly, she added, “Quickly.”

Janice led her to the far end of the bathroom. Out of sight behind a dividing wall, a white, bowl-like contraption rested in a trifling alcove. Victoria just stared at it. There was water in the bowl, but no water tank above, or metal trap in the bottom, just a hole.

Janice said, “This is where you sit and pee and then you push this handle down to flush it.”

Victoria ignored her embarrassment at Janice’s words, but when she pointed to the roll of “toilet paper,” Victoria quickly interrupted the explanation, asking, “Flush it?”

Janice leaned over and flipped the metal handle. With a whoosh, the water emptied out the bottom of the bowl.

Victoria jumped back, shocked by the violent rush of water. Where had it gone so quickly?

“What is this thing called?” she asked, waving a nervous finger at it.

“A toilet.”

She frowned. “You mean similar to a lady’s toilet?” She failed to see the connection between a woman’s vanity and this shiny white thing. It seemed a French word could still possess diverse meanings, even in this day and age.

Janice regarded Victoria with a curious smile. “You really are from the outback, aren’t you?” When Victoria frowned, baffled, she grinned. “The sticks, the boondocks?” When there was no response, Janice stepped closer and apologized. “I’m

sorry, but you seem so sophisticated, I can't believe you don't know about toilets."

Victoria frowned, but decided to trust Janice. She had to have the confidence of at least one woman if she was to learn what she must. "It's true. I'm ignorant of such things." She understood Janice's reference to the boondocks now. "And no, I am not from hereabouts, so I will depend on you and Lord Covington to instruct me in the mysteries of this house."

Janice nodded enthusiastically and demonstrated how to wash one's hands at the sink. Victoria's amazed response to hot water running from the silver taps seemed to thrill the maid. She immediately started to turn the bathtub shower on when Victoria interrupted.

"Janice, please inform Lord Covington that I will be down in a few minutes. Thank you for your help," she said, and gestured to the bathroom interior. "Now, I need to freshen up."

Janice nodded and smiled, backing out of the bathroom. "Do you know where the dining room is?"

Victoria snapped back, "Of course"—she hated being patronized in her own home—then nodded and closed the bathroom door. Sagging against the door, she wondered if dining would be as daunting, embarrassing, and strange as this bathroom proved to be. She took a shuddering breath and cautiously approached the 'toilet.'

Chapter 6

“If we consider how few years are past, since we improved Astronomy, ... founded Philosophy on actual experiments, since the compass and needle traced out the mariner’s unerring road on the ocean, ..., or even the secrets of Anatomy, ... if we reflect, that the small compass of time, which all these great events have happened in, seems to promise vast improvements in the growing centuries ...”

—Samuel Madden, *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century*, in six volumes (1733)

The food tasted bland, and there were only two modest courses, a single salad and a remove of braised beef and vegetables. No wine, just water and tea. It was all served *à la Françoise*, which she thought strange, as there were only the two of them to be waited on. Yet, no servants stood in the dining room. Victoria closed her eyes, fighting a headache. The electric lights in the chandelier glared overhead, a weight on her shoulders. The décor about her proved as disappointing as the food. She eyed the wainscoting on the walls. It was now nothing more than unadorned strips of wood dividing a bare, white wall above, blue below.

“You look exhausted, my dear.”

Victoria glanced up from her plate to find Lord Covington peering at her from across the table, his forehead wrinkled with concern. They both sat at one end of a dining table which could seat twenty, its long mahogany top running half the length of the dining room. In her time, there had been a longer teak table.

She smiled weakly. “Under the circumstances, I would think it is an appropriate response.” When Covington offered a slight smile in return, she nodded. “I am tired.” Rubbing her neck, she said, “And I’ve developed a headache. I fear I have been very poor company.”

Covington shook his head at the last comment and rang the bell sitting next to him on the table. An older woman of prunish mien appeared and he asked her to bring some 'Tylenol.' When she returned, he indicated it was for Victoria and the woman, Margaret, laid two large red and white pills on the tablecloth before her. Victoria couldn't believe she'd failed to serve them on a plate.

"Go ahead, drink them down. It will take care of your headache. Off to bed with you now. You'll need your rest for the breakfast meeting tomorrow."

Take care of her headache? Victoria swallowed the pills with some water but didn't move. "Explain again why I should attend this meeting?"

"It's your plan, so I'll need your help to sell it."

"This is a business meeting and 'my plan' is no more than what any landed family would do in similar financial straits." She rubbed her forehead. "Or at least, in *my* time." She sat back and sighed. "How can I possibly convince Mr. Dalton of anything?" She eyed him skeptically. "Do women participate in business negotiations in this age?"

"Well, yes," Lord Covington said with a nod. "Women do most everything you'd consider the traditional province of men."

She shook her head. *Inconceivable*. Men could not possibly transmute so dramatically, even in two centuries, but he appeared to be serious. She closed her eyes; the idea only accentuated the headache. It frightened her to think of the implications, if true. How had women changed? How could she participate in such female society? She had no idea what would be deemed proper. She took a deep breath and faced Lord Covington.

"Well, my presence may be acceptable, but welcome?" She shook her head again. "He thinks me mad, and I certainly find him disagreeable. If I met him tomorrow, I would have to apologize, and I would rather not."

“Apologize? Whatever for?”

Victoria stared at him for a moment, confused. He didn't know? “The scene in the library this morning, my anger? I did cut his high ropes.” When he smiled, she cocked her head. “Why, we couldn't converse socially with such an embarrassment between us. It would only lead to further brambles, besides being bad form all around.”

Covington still appeared unsure. “But he's the one who insulted you first.”

Head down, she rubbed her temples wearily. “Perhaps, but I obviously cannot depend on Mr. Dalton to adhere to the dictates of common courtesy, so I must apologize first.” She sighed. “It is the only way to avoid another fracas with the splenetic man.”

Covington shook his head and tried to hide his smile, but failed, so he shrugged. “Well, even so, I would very much appreciate your presence tomorrow morning. Please. I feel I need you there. I am sure Mr. Dalton will be more disposed to our plan as a consequence.”

Victoria eyed him, realizing his speech had taken on a more correct air, almost proper in form. She sighed, saying with a half-smile, “Very well, *Uncle*. It's not as though I have any pressing engagements.” She stood, and he followed suit. “I believe I will retire now.”

The bell was rung again, and when Margaret came out, Covington gave some instructions Victoria didn't hear. He came over and took her hand. “Janice will meet you in your room to help you. I think she's laid out a nightgown for you.”

Victoria nodded, ignoring his unseemly reference to her sleeping arrangements. She said, “Thank you,” and turned to go, but Covington, with a shy expression, still held her hand.

“I'm glad you're here,” he said, all sympathy and conviction. “Everything will turn out, you'll see.”

Victoria gave him a small nod and left, unwilling to trust his predictive powers.

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The bedroom was day-bright with the ‘electric light bulbs’ burning overhead. Under their light, the multi-colored bedspread seemed to glow. Victoria sat on the bed and just stared at the strange sleepwear she’d found, too drained to even try to make sense of it.

The white night rail was very plain, with no Belgian lace whatsoever. It felt soft in her hands, even though it wasn’t linen or silk. Inexplicably, it had words printed in blue ink across the front of it, “Don’t Read This Shirt.” There was a little picture of an animal under the last ‘T’ with the words, ‘Aardvark Styles.’ *Incomprehensible.*

There was a knock at the bedroom door. Victoria mumbled, “Come in.”

Janice entered, but stopped when she saw Victoria sitting motionless on the edge of the bed staring at the gown. “I hope that’s all right,” she said. “I found it in the dresser. The T-shirt’s so large, I figured Lord Covington’s daughter used it as a night gown.”

“T-shirt?” Victoria said without energy, still staring at the clothing she held in her lap.

“Well, yes, it is too big to be a shirt really, but I hope it’ll do.”

Victoria glanced around the bed and turned back to Janice. “Where is the nightcap?”

“The nightcap, Miss? Did you want a drink?”

“No, a cap for my head. I wouldn’t want to soil the pillows.”

Janice’s confused expression never wavered, but she said, “Oh, don’t worry about that. If you want, I can throw the pillowcases in the washer tomorrow morning. Okay?”

Washer? Victoria closed her eyes, as if things could be more intelligible in the dark.

“If that is not too much trouble.”

“Not at all.”

Victoria nodded, then stood with her back to the maid. When nothing happened, she looked over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

Janice responded by raising both hers. “Do you need something?”

“Yes. I need you to undo the buttons. I can’t reach them.”

“Well, lord love a duck. I thought those were just decorations. There must be thirty buttons.” Janice came over and began unbuttoning the back of the dress. “Cripes, but these tiny things are hard to do.” Finally, she got them all and Victoria stepped out of her dress.

Janice smiled, eyes alight with curiosity. “My, that’s a pretty petticoat—all that embroidery. It’s a shame to cover it up. You could go dancing in it.”

Victoria eyed Janice and tried to decide if she was serious, but gave up. She untied the front, lifted the full-length petticoat over her head and laid it on the bed next to the dress.

She stood for a moment waiting, then looked back at Janice, but the woman was now gazing at her in wonder.

“What is it now?”

“That’s a corset.”

Victoria wearily nodded. “Of course it is. Now please unlace it.” She examined Janice again in her day dress. Victoria had assumed Janice was wearing a jump or wrap stays, as did many servants. Victoria was unable to discern what undergarment supported her, but she was now far too tired to be scandalized.

“But why are you wearing it? Oh!” Janice’s face beamed. “You’re certainly one for authenticity, but the corset must be horribly uncomfortable.”

“For heaven’s sakes, why would it be uncomfortable? It is a quite ordinary long corset and the busk is small.” Victoria gave Janice a speaking glance. “Please undo the laces. In a few moments, I fear it will be the only thing keeping me upright.”

Janice untied it and stood back. Victoria sighed when she was able to step out of it. She pulled off her stockings, and handing them to Janice, she began untying the front of her chemise.

Victoria glanced up when she heard no movement. Janice stood motionless, staring at her as though she had three heads. Victoria was beyond caring and hid her embarrassment being gawked at while she lifted off the chemise and pulled on the ‘T-shirt.’ It was big on her, falling to mid-calf. Happily, it was very soft. She turned to see Janice still staring at her.

“Janice?” Victoria held out her chemise along with the dress and petticoat. “Could you have those all cleaned for tomorrow morning? They are the only clothes I have.”

Janice nodded, taking the clothes, but Victoria stopped her when she retrieved the corset. “No, don’t wash it.” Janice returned it to the bench chest at the foot of the bed, but her strange expression remained.

“Will that be all, Miss?”

“Yes.” Janice turned to go. “No.” Janice stopped and faced her again. “What *is* the matter?” Victoria asked with weary persistence. “Have I said something to disturb you?”

“No, Miss.”

Victoria waited, but when there were no more explanations forthcoming, she snapped, “What?” with more force than intended, then winced. It was another ‘what?’ between them.

“Really, Miss. I didn’t mean to stare, but it’s just ... well, it’s just ... you surprised me, that’s all.”

Victoria sat down on the bed, too tired to remain standing. *She was surprised? If you only knew how unexpected my day has been.* Victoria laughed out loud at the understatement then

abruptly shut her mouth when she heard the hysteria rising behind the laughter. With an embarrassed grimace, she said, “Janice, please tell me. Is it my clothes?” Janice shook her head. “What have I done now?”

“Oh, it’s nothing you’ve done, Miss. Really. You don’t shave your legs, or your underarms.”

“What?” Victoria eyed at the girl. “Is that an expectation now?”

“For the most part.”

Victoria caught herself before she demanded to see the girl’s legs. She put a hand to her head and groaned. “Janice. Can we talk of this tomorrow? Evidently, there is a great deal I need to know, but not tonight.”

Janice nodded and turned to leave, then paused at the door. “What time do you want to be up?”

Victoria tried to think. *Up?* “If the breakfast is at eight, please wake me at six-thirty. Oh, and bring a comb and brush. And a toothbrush and powder, please.”

“Yes, Miss.” Janice frowned at the clothes in her hand and asked, “And do you want me to bring you some underwear?”

Longing for sleep, she said impatiently, “Yes, my chemise.”

“No, I meant some panties. Or do you prefer not wearing any?”

Victoria couldn’t imagine what ‘panties’ were. She needed to close her eyes. She wanted oblivion.

All this may be just a dream.

Pulling back the covers, she slid into bed and uttered a little moan of pleasure. It felt wonderful. Unlike the room, the sheets had a pleasant flower scent.

Laying her head in the pillow, she mumbled, “Whatever you think best, Janice. Good night.” Janice turned out the lights, but Victoria stared into the dark exhausted, sleep slow in coming. The events of the impossible day and the challenges

of tomorrow and the days to come kept rumbling around in her head like a runaway freight wagon loaded full of unimagined troubles.

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“Good morning, gentlemen. I apologize for being behind my time. I’m afraid I was past praying for last night.” Sam rose with Covington as his niece swept into the dining room. He stood amazed when the morning light shining through the windows caught her like a stage light, a vibrant opening to the first act. Despite her continued use of strange phrases, she was hardly past redemption this morning. Miss Covington appeared transformed, neither naive, nor panicked, but brightly calm and poised. Her golden hair was pulled away from her face and piled on top of her head, accenting her graceful neck, cheekbones, and straight back. Even though she was wearing the same dress, she seemed so different now, a self-possessed woman rather than a harried schoolgirl in curls.

She glided across the room with the grace of a queen and flashed them an incredibly warm smile, the kind men sell their souls to receive. Sam felt himself turn stupid under its influence and immediately grimaced at his weakness.

“Quite all right, my dear,” Covington replied. He indicated the chair at the end of the table, so Sam faced the Viscount, with Miss Covington to his left sitting in between them. “You are radiant.”

Sam followed her flowing approach, aware of only her. She radiated a physical presence that seemed more substantial than anything else in the room. She passed behind him with a rustle of skirts, and in the midst of his heightened awareness, the sound sent a shiver down his spine. She stopped behind her chair on his left and glanced sideways at him with an amused expression. He realized she expected him to pull the chair out for her.

Feeling awkward, trying to understand what had just happened, he helped with her chair. He sat concentrating on the Viscount across from him, waiting for him to start the

meeting, or at least pass the butter, anything to refocus his tortured attention. *Damn, I'm a grown man, and hardly a novice when it comes to women. What's the hell's the matter with me?*

“Mr. Dalton ...”

Sam froze and mentally sighed. Her voice was wonderful, cool and clean, unhurried. He knew he'd be lost if he looked at her, so he grabbed the plate of scrambled eggs and began serving himself. He half-expected her to call him on his bad manners. “Yes, Miss Covington?”

“I want to apologize for the things I said to you yesterday. I was distraught and misspoke.”

Surprised by her confession, Sam turned to see her earnest expression, her blue eyes regarding him. Her head was haloed by the sunlight behind her, hair bright like molten bronze. He blinked at the sight. This time the tingling, stupid feeling rolled over him in waves. It required a conscious effort, but he broke eye contact with her and glanced at Covington. He was watching him with a small smile on his face.

Of course. He was being played. His neck knotted up. Covington's niece was part of a bait and switch. She appears out of nowhere yesterday and brings business to a screeching halt, then this counteroffer. Others had tried to distract him with such tactics, particularly the use of an attractive woman, but none had been anywhere near as successful or so quickly. Sam scowled. *Well, I know this game too.*

He smiled at Miss Covington, feeling the combative cool energize him. “Apology accepted. We were both upset. I had no idea what you'd been through. I hope you can forgive my outburst too.”

Her eyes widened a bit, and she slowly nodded, offering another heat-conducting smile. “Of course, Mr. Dalton.”

Sam smiled back, secretly satisfied with her surprise. *Bumptious, was he?* He'd assumed Covington was simply inept at negotiations, but if the purpose of this little *tête-à-tête*

proved an attempted manipulation, the man was dangerously skilled at the long game.

He could see it now. Wear him down with weeks of dickering, finally springing the offer on him Covington had in mind all along. And of course, do it while Sam didn't have his lawyers with him, just Miss Covington as a charming distraction.

He studied her out of the corner of his eye as she took the plate of eggs from him, served herself, and passed them on to his Lordship. Her gestures and expressions were congenial and serene, as though she had all the time in the world, dining with the best company in England. He couldn't think of another woman who acted even remotely similar. She made the act of spooning eggs performance art.

Sam frowned at his plate. *Keep your eye on the ball, Dalton.* He could see why Covington had placed her between them at the head of the table. The typical move would have been to seat him across from Miss Covington. As it was, he could see her out of the corner of his eye to his left whenever he spoke to Covington across from him, a constant and alluring distraction. Sam was impressed and warmed to the challenge.

He watched her spear sliced apples from a bowl with her fork, pushing them off onto her plate with a knife. She cut each slice into several pieces. He enjoyed her little start of surprise when he picked out a few slices from the bowl with his hand and popped them in his mouth.

With one last glance, he decided her looks weren't all that stellar. He preferred leggy redheads. In fact, he had a date with one tonight. Thinking about Carrie Marsh should keep his mind off the diminutive blonde next to him. Yes, he'd ignore her.

“So, Lord Covington, tell me about your new proposal?”

Chapter 7

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.”

—An Ancient Greek Saying

Victoria tensed at the request but remained ready for the bartering to begin. She felt so much better this morning after a long night’s rest, even with the dislocation upon waking in this strange new world, and then a good long cry. Only the thought of losing Belton Park drove her from the protective cocoon of her bed. However, the shower had been a revelation. With Jane’s help, she’d felt awake, clean, and alive, ready to face Mr. Dalton, the negotiations, and a very new day.

His initial gaze of appreciation had also been gratifying. But now he was frowning like a tax collector and seemed to avoid even a glance in her direction. She raised an eyebrow in reflection. He either feels she’s not part of the bartering or she is too much of a distraction. She found the latter prospect more to her liking and would disabuse him of the former.

Lord Covington placed both hands on the table and leaned forward. “I suggest a lease arrangement—twelve to fifteen years with an option to buy at the end.”

Victoria chewed her lip and watched Mr. Dalton. He sat straighter, his features taking on a tight appearance which didn’t bode well. But all the man said was “Go on” in a mild voice.

“We lease the estate to you for two million pounds a year, less than half of any loan payments you would incur, unless you had planned a cash purchase?”

Mr. Dalton pursed his lips and gestured to continue.

Covington nodded. “You can make any improvements or changes you desire, within the conditions we already agreed on concerning the grounds upkeep and Regency-period modifications.”

Mr. Dalton gazed at the table for a moment. Victoria could tell he wasn't thinking about the offer; he was trying to compose himself. He expelled his breath and said, "You're dropping the conditions you introduced yesterday?"

Covington nodded.

"While I would save some money initially," Dalton mused, "I can't see any advantages in sinking seventy million pounds in improving *your* property which you *might* sell to me twelve years later. Inflation alone could wipe out fifty percent of the current purchase value."

Covington nodded. "I understand. We are willing to either deduct the cost of improvements from the sale price if we do sell at that time, or we'll reimburse you the entire cost of the improvements."

"That sounds more interesting, but weird." Dalton frowned, turning a suspicious eye on Victoria. "Who is *we*?"

Covington harrumphed. "My niece and I, of course." Under Mr. Dalton's harsh examination, Victoria refused to wilt, though she dearly wanted to look away. She gazed back at him as Covington added, "She's the one who developed the idea of a lease agreement."

"Really."

The insulting tone made her face grow warm, but such attitudes were to be expected, so perhaps men and women's social positions weren't so different now. She ignored the comment and instead pondered the man's behavior. He seemed so volatile, hardly staying with one mood for more than an instant, yet he was single-minded about purchasing Belton Park. Victoria smiled at the insight.

"Mr. Dalton, do you need more time to consider our proposal?"

"What?"

"What is it about our proposal that gives you pause?"

Eyeing Victoria, he appeared exasperated. “After nearly a month of dithering? This is completely out of the blue.”

“Yes, I can see how this offer would appear unexpected. I have the impression both you and Lord Covington never considered a lease option. True?”

Mr. Dalton frowned hard at her, but Victoria just gazed back, eyebrows raised.

Suddenly he grinned. “Well, yes. I generally buy properties.”

Victoria smiled, pleased with her spot-on speculation. “I know little about high finance, but I’ve learned managing this estate ...” Victoria swallowed her words. “My *family’s* estate. Landed families who find themselves up against their obligations rarely sell the land but instead lease it.”

“Up against their obligations?” Another indulgent smile followed the question.

“Find themselves facing financial shortfalls.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “One can lose far more in interest on mortgage payments each year than what you would pay in simply leasing this property, *plus* any improvements.” She glanced at Lord Covington for support.

He nodded and gestured for her to continue.

“If you bought Belton, you would wish to recoup your costs in selling many years later.” Victoria smiled at Mr. Dalton with some enthusiasm. “While I do not truly fathom your plans for the Park as a ‘conference center,’ from what Lord Covington says, you will make a great deal of money from the uses you have in mind once you’ve finished the improvements. That is true even though Lord Covington will retain the greater lands and the subsequent tenant rents.”

Victoria hesitated, afraid she was overstepping, acting the *parvenu*, brass-faced in the extreme. Regardless, it was *her* family estate. She sat straighter and continued. “In twelve years’ time, the use of the property will easily compensate you for your improvements, will it not? You will make far more by

leasing than you would earn if you bought this estate and sold the property in twelve years.”

Dalton’s frown turned to a scowl as he quickly did some calculations on the pad of paper next to his plate. Victoria noted that he was left-handed. His silver writing utensil held her attention. It wasn’t a pencil. It wrote in blue ink cleanly, though Mr. Dalton bore down on the paper. There was no blotting and even with his large hands; he didn’t get ink on his fingers. The letters and numbers were not formed in the same manner as a quill pen or a metal nib.

Mr. Dalton finished his calculations. “Okay, I can see how this will benefit my firm, but this represents either some serious financial expenses on your part or millions less if you sell twelve years from now.”

Lord Covington shrugged. “True, but I’ll be relieved from the burden of upkeep for a dozen years, have the estate brought back to its former glory, which I am unable to accomplish myself—and I save a good deal of rent money in the meantime.”

Mr. Dalton offered a wry twist of his mouth in return. “A win-win situation?”

“Exactly.”

Victoria watched Mr. Dalton take the pen and doodle as he continued to talk to the Viscount about the details. She couldn’t keep her eyes off the pen, or his hand. It was strong and masculine, but obviously very dexterous. He balanced the pen on his long forefinger and twirled it absent-mindedly as he talked and then laid it down. His company’s name was inscribed on the slim shaft. It was an amazing instrument.

Victoria suddenly realized Mr. Dalton had said something to her and looked up.

Mr. Dalton didn’t repeat his question but silently offered her the pen. So, he had noticed her interest.

Shimmering gold brown, his eyes held her captive. His smile was warm, and a bit indulgent. Her face prickling with

chagrin, she took the silver pen with a thank you. He flipped pages on the notepad and offered it to her with a blank page showing.

Victoria took the pad and frowned. The page wasn't blank. There were little blue lines printed across the white paper. They were guides for writing, similar to what her tutors used to draw on the fool's scrap to practice her letters. Very strange. Mr. Dalton's penmanship seemed adequate, hardly in need of such aides.

Mr. Dalton returned to his conversation with the Viscount again, but she could feel him continue to watch her in a furtive fashion. Curiosity overwhelmed her embarrassment. She found the button on one end of the pen and pushed it with her thumb. Out popped a metal point. She ran it across her finger, and to her surprise, ink appeared. She grinned with delight and put the point to the pad of paper. After scribbling for a moment, she wrote her name, amazed there was no need for an inkwell. She immediately thought of how astonished her friends would be and wondered how letters to them would appear written with this marvelous instrument. She wrote 'Dear Kitty' on an empty line.

With a gasp, she realized what she'd written and dropped the pen. Kitty would never see another letter from her. She noticed the room had gone quiet. Both men watched her with the same inquisitive expression. She blinked and felt tears welling up. Mortified, she pushed her chair back and mumbled, "Excuse me, gentlemen." She ran out of the room before they could even stand.

~ ~ ~

Sam stared after her, mystified. One minute she was acting like a giddy seven-year-old with a new toy, a ballpoint pen of all things, and the next she was tearing-up and running out of the room. He turned to Covington, only to find him grimacing, staring off into space. This was one strange family.

He frowned at the 'Dear Kitty' in flowing script. "Lord Covington, just how stable is ...?"

“There’s nothing wrong with Victoria,” Covington interrupted, a stern glare accentuating his statement. “She recently lost her entire family in a freak accident. She’s been forced to leave her home, her friends, to live here with me.”

Sam nodded and apologized for the question, feeling empathy for the girl’s situation. However, that didn’t explain her excited behavior with the pen, though she had been cute in her enthusiasm.

“Mr. Dalton, is our proposal acceptable?”

The entertaining image of Miss Covington playing with the pen evaporated and Sam turned to Covington, suddenly impatient to have everything concluded. Leaning forward, Sam said, “You’re saying we can use the grounds and estate as we wish?”

“Yes, within the confines of the previous conditions. We’ll continue to live here, but that won’t be a problem, will it?”

Dalton tapped his knife on the edge of the table, thinking. “Not at all, particularly if you’re willing to act as a host for conferences now and then.” To have a real live Viscount on call would have its advantages.

“You can put that in the agreement, if you like.” Covington cleared his throat. “I do have a few stipulations concerning Miss Covington.”

Sam rolled his eyes. *Here it comes, the real reason for the new proposal.* “Yes?”

“I want you to hire her as a consultant for the renovations and later as a docent. She knows more about the Regency period than any person alive—particularly Belton Park.” Sam gave Covington a searching glance. His last statement had been delivered with a conviction he seldom heard from the man. Usually, every word sounded tentative, as though he expected the world to contradict him.

“You want that as a stipulation in the lease agreement?” Sam asked. Covington nodded. “If what you say is true, I

don't have any problem with it." Sam frowned a moment later. "You mentioned a *few* stipulations."

"Well, yes, just one more." Covington took a sip of water and pulled out his pipe. "Do you mind?" he asked, holding his pipe.

Sam shook his head, knowing something irritating was coming because Covington was going through his all-too-familiar procrastination ritual.

"This is more of a request. It's not an item for the agreement." Covington paused, cocking his head. "I have the feeling you would know how to do this, while I have no idea what it entails."

"What?"

Covington lit his pipe and blew a cloud of smoke. "I would like you to obtain a National Insurance number and birth certificate for Miss Covington, or perhaps a British passport if it would be easier."

"You're joking."

"Quite serious." Covington sat serenely puffing on his pipe as he waited for Sam's reply.

"You're talking about forged documents." Sam eyed the older gentleman, who finally nodded.

Sam stood and went to the nearby window. He thought better on his feet. Nothing about this meeting had gone as he expected. While the lease idea appeared quite attractive, now Covington wanted him to produce illegal documents as a *favor*?

"Covington, what makes you think I could do something like that?"

"You have a reputation for getting things done," he said with a smile, a smug twist to it.

Sam pursed his mouth. If you were a successful businessman, the assumption was you did it by breaking the

rules. He may have bent a few, but he didn't break them.

"No dice." He glanced at Covington, who showed no reaction. "Just why does Miss Write-and-run need them anyway?"

"She grew up in, in Indonesia. When she lost her family, all their records were lost."

"So how did she get into England?"

"Illegally."

Sam gave the man an incredulous shake of his head. "So, she became an expert in the Regency period living in Indonesia."

"Er, exactly."

Sam grunted in disbelief, thinking he'd need hip waders soon if Covington kept this up. "Just what do I get for sticking my neck out for you and your niece?"

"What do you want? I'm not willing to change the monetary portions of the proposed agreement, but I might be able to add something to it."

Sam stared at Covington for a moment, wondering at the transformation. Suddenly today, the man sounded like a practiced negotiator. It made him uneasy, but he had a very good idea what Covington could do for him.

"All right. I'll get you the documents IF you agree to help me break into the social circles you move in AND find other English estates to buy ... or lease. *That* does go into the lease agreement." For the first time this morning, Covington blinked, nonplussed. He chewed his pipe, staring at the white lace tablecloth for nearly a minute. Sam smiled, satisfied at least some of the meeting hadn't gone as Covington planned. Sam offered his hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Covington stood and shook his hand. "Agreed." He took his pipe out and tapped it on his plate. "I suppose we can call in our lawyers now?"

“Fine.” Sam pulled out his cell phone, but paused, getting an idea. “Let me offer the consulting job to Miss Covington.”

“Yes, that might be best. Seem more like ...”

“A real job?”

“No, no. Your idea. You’ll be glad to have her services. She’ll work diligently to return the Park to its Regency glories. She loves Belton Park as much as I do.”

“And how did she form such an attachment while living on other side of the world.”

Covington’s mouth moved soundlessly for a moment, but then he shrugged. “She’s visited here when she was younger, and read a great deal, of course.”

“Of course.” Sam squinted at the Viscount for a moment. He was a terrible liar, but how much wasn’t true, he couldn’t tell. “Right. I’ll call and get our lawyers over here.” Sam opened his cell phone. “And while we’re waiting for them, I’ll go talk to Miss Covington.”

Covington cleared his throat. “Mr. Dalton.”

Seeing his anxious expression, Sam stopped dialing. “Yes?”

“Victoria may need some time alone. She’s still in mourning.”

“And you think I’ll make things worse.” When there was no response, Sam quirked the corner of his mouth. “I’ll be gentle. Knowing she has a paying job might help.”

“It might.” Covington didn’t sound convinced though. He stuck the pipe back in his mouth. “I suppose you should be the one to tell her. You’ll be her employer, after all.”

Sam nodded. “Good.” He opened his cell phone and dialed his lawyers. Listening for the pickup, he smiled at Covington who was obviously still uneasy. “I’ll talk to her before the lawyers get here.” Sam gestured to the door Miss Covington had used in her retreated. “If I can find her.” He suddenly

wanted to know just what parts of Covington's story about her were true.

Chapter 8

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players:

they have their exits and their entrances.

and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.

—[William Shakespeare](#) “*As You Like It* (1599) act 2, sc. 7, l. 139

“*Die Schnapsidee!*” Karl shouted over Sam’s cell phone. “That’s mad! Why would Covington agree to such a thing? It’s a hundred million he will lose.”

Sam smiled at the German lawyer’s outraged sensibilities. “I have my suspicions,” he said as he hiked among the flowerbeds of the East Garden. “But it doesn’t really matter as long as Covington signs the agreement. It’s a terrific deal.”

Sam frowned. It was. In fact, he was annoyed he hadn’t thought of it himself. He exhaled through pressed lips. He was always too insistent on owning properties outright, to make them his and his alone. Leases were too much like partnerships. You had to depend on others.

“Karl, we get everything we want, and it frees up the money we would have spent on Belton to acquire other estates,” he said as he entered the south garden.

“When can you get your *endstück* over here with the whole crew?” Sam asked. “I want the papers ready to sign no later than Thursday.”

Of course, Karl claimed finishing by Thursday was *ausgeschlossen*—impossible.

He’d been through the house and even looked out over the North Gardens from the balcony, and the East Gardens on foot, but no Miss Covington. A reconnaissance of the South

Gardens was next. As he listened to Karl's strident objections, he entered the leafy maze-like paths of the garden.

He finally interrupted the German. "How about you get over here and we'll work on getting it finished in two days? See you all in, what, an hour?" Karl groused about that too, so Sam agreed, "Fine, see you in an hour and a half," and hung up. Pocketing his cell, he shook his head derisively at the general inertia which seemed to afflict Europeans.

The sunlight streaming through the trees drew bright patterns across the gravel walks. The vibrant May colors of green leaves and multi-hued blossoms were everywhere. Sam slowed his stride and smiled.

The garden's luxuriant atmosphere was hard to ignore. The fragrant scents were so heavy he could taste them. Yellow motes of pollen drifted lazily among the secluded paths, statues, and arbors, a light snow surrounding him. The quiet was only broken by the hum of the bees and his footsteps crunching on the gravel walk. He stopped, irritated with himself. He was getting sidetracked. Continuing his trek through the foliage, he saw a patch of blue move through the curtain of flowering plants and bushes.

He cautiously stepped off the gravel walk and approached through the soft loam of the flowerbeds. Peering around a tree, he saw her on a stone bench in the sun. She sat faced away from him, hunched over, her body shuddering.

A deep awe filled him, to witness to such heartache. He thought of leaving, but how she held herself seized his attention. One arm was close to her out of sight, but the other was stretched away and down behind her, as though she could hold some of the sorrow at bay. It reminded him of the stance heroines took in old melodramas, one hand on the forehead and the other out behind them.

Her hand contorted, first a fist, then fingers splayed, weaving in the air like an oriental dancer, where their hands tell a story, each twist of her wrist conveying a new, deeper pain. It was hypnotic.

Her grief made his throat contract and stirred thoughts of his parents' deaths nine years ago in a car accident, the same accident crippling his brother Pete. He hadn't surrendered to the pain then, and the remaining pain he felt now appeared insignificant compared to hers.

Sam sighed at the thought, wondering why. *I hadn't had the time to feel much.* Pete had been in the hospital, and he'd had to ... *Hell, what's the point of dwelling on it?* He turned his back to her and put his hands in his pockets. He'd wait for her to collect herself, rather than intrude on her mourning.

Silently, he reviewed what he meant to say, what he had to find out. He was supposed to accept she'd become an expert on the Regency living in Indonesia. *And* obtain fake I.D. for her because she'd somehow managed to enter the country illegally. He scowled and shook his head. The story was absurd, and he couldn't believe Covington expected him to buy it. Impatient to make sense of it, to uncover the real story, Sam glanced over his shoulder to check on her.

Her weeping had subsided. She sat up, back straight, wiping away tears with a handkerchief. When she was done, she threw her shoulders back, her palms on the bench on each side of her, her eyes closed. Her face tilted toward the sun, as if she were posing for the May photo in a calendar.

Sam studied her from his hiding place, baffled by his impressions of her. She was intelligent and engaging, strange and brittle, melancholy and child-like. Yet, for all that, he sensed a rare strength in her.

Her profile reminded him of a classical painting in its clean lines and smooth features. Her lips were slightly parted, their enticing curves kissed by sunlight. The graceful curve of her jaw and elegant neck completed the picture of perfection. Sam rubbed his eyes, trying to erase the impression, and looked again. She seemed as much a part of the garden as one of the centuries-old Greek statues scattered about, each representing ideal beauty.

He knew very little about her, and the last few minutes had convinced him. His ignorance ran far deeper. *Lord, but she was a captivating mystery.*

Sam closed his eyes, uncomfortable with his lapse into the poetic. With a certainty which disturbed him, he knew the woman before him represented something totally outside his previous experience.

To break the spell, Sam opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He also admitted to the tickle of fear he felt when he contemplated spending time with her.

Dalton, you're thinking nonsense.

This was just business and he simply needed to know who he was dealing with if they were going to work together. He clenched his jaw. For him, a business relationship stayed a business relationship. *Always.* And he still wanted to know why Lord Covington had lied about his niece.

With a jerk of his head, Sam had a thought and muttered, "If she is his niece." The request for illegal documents suggested something more sordid behind the supposed 'uncle and niece' relationship. He shook his head, rejecting the idea. *No, not her.*

Sam stepped out onto the gravel, walking around the flowerbed. He saw her flinch at the sound of his steps, but she turned and faced him with a composed reserve as he approached.

"Mr. Dalton."

He smiled, partly because he wanted to put her at ease, and partly because her regal bearing and quiet poise was so much at odds with her red nose and puffy eyes. The word 'adorable' flitted across his mind, unwelcomed, as it incited an impulse to protect her. He suddenly wanted to tell her everything would be all right, to hold her, and just as quickly, he clamped down on the urge. Stopping at the other end of the stone bench, he nodded.

"Miss Covington."

A variety of emotions crossed her face, but taken together, he could see she didn't want him here. He'd planned to say something about her breakfast exit, but he couldn't think what. He detested the feeling of uncertainty she inspired.

With undisguised resignation, she gestured to the other end of the bench. "Please, have a seat, Mr. Dalton."

He sat and considered at the empty space between them. "Call me Sam."

"Mr. Dalton, you and I have known each other for but a few hours, much less a fortnight." With a formality bordering on indignation, she said, "It would not be proper. In fact, I should go inside." She stood, but Sam remained seated, and she hesitated, probably out of politeness. It seemed to be the overriding thought in everything she did.

"I understand your concern, with your uncle working out a business deal with me," he said, injecting a conciliatory tone, "but I don't think it requires such enforced formality between us."

Without facing him, Miss Covington said, "Perhaps, but I prefer it."

Sam didn't say anything until she looked at him. "As you wish, Miss Covington."

She nodded and walked over to a large rosebush blooming on the opposite side of the clearing and pensively touched a crimson petal of one blossom. He watched her in silence, frustrated. He didn't know what to say that might comfort her. Her damned English reserve chafed too.

With her profile to him, she finally spoke in the quiet. "Have you reached an accord with Lord Covington?"

"You mean Uncle Willie?" he said, hoping to break through her cool correctness.

She barely turned her head and glanced at him, lips pursed in what could only be a chastising quirk of a smile. "Mr. Dalton, are you familiar with the word impertinent?"

“I have some experience with the concept,” he drawled, pleased with the smile he’d pulled from her. “But if you feel I need further education, I’m willing.”

Even as he said it with a teasing tone, inwardly he cringed. *You’re flirting with her!* He rarely flirted, and never in such an innocuous manner. Yet, her light laugh and impish grin made him forget his uncharacteristic behavior. She appeared ready to continue their playful exchange. He wanted to. It made him feel very weird.

Before she could speak, he cleared his throat. “I understand from your uncle that you’re a scholar of the Regency period, and an expert on Belton Park’s history.”

She turned, startled. “Pardon?”

Sam answered by raising both eyebrows.

“Oh,” she breathed, and nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Well, what can you tell me about this garden during the Regency?”

Still focused on the rose, she quietly asked, “Are you testing me, Mr. Dalton?”

He gave her a half-grin. “Yeah, I suppose I am.”

Cocking her head, she gazed at him, her crystalline blue eyes searching his face. “And what, pray tell, do passing marks herald?”

For the hundredth time in the last two days, Sam marveled at her words, the cadence of them. Who talks like that? The British in Indonesia? From his experience, certainly not here in England.

Sam smiled and cocked his head in return. “It heralds employment.”

“You would have me work for you?”

“Well, you don’t have to make it sound so distasteful.” Sam had anticipated something more positive from her than

wrinkling her nose like the offer was a bad smell.

She studied him for a moment, actually looking offended, and then laughed, a throaty sound of pure pleasure.

Sam smiled in turn, liking the infectious lilt of it, even though he didn't know what was so funny. There was nothing childish about her laugh.

“Mr. Dalton, are you handing me a hum? Why in heaven's name would you want to employ *me*?”

Sam frowned at her words. This wasn't what he'd expected at all. Obviously, Covington hadn't told her of his plans for her.

“Uh, I need people who know what Belton Park was like during the Regency if I'm going to remodel it in the authentic style your uncle and I insist on. Your uncle says you are very knowledgeable. You could help direct the research, planning, and renovations. You'd certainly be one of the primary consultants.”

He offered an encouraging smile. “Depending on how it goes, you could help Dalton Enterprises with several estates.” *There, that should be too good to pass up.*

She came over to the far end of the bench and sat down with a rustle of skirts. Placing her hands in her lap, she turned her head to look at him. “Mr. Dalton, you seem to be a man in command of many resources, many people. Would you be content with my services?”

“I'm willing to find out.”

“Frankly sir, I find it difficult to imagine you being comfortable placing so many responsibilities in the hands of someone of my sex, someone you know only as a passing acquaintance—someone who had you in a snappish pet only yesterday, I might add.” Her steady gaze met his as she waited for his reply.

Well, shit. What would Covington do with their deal if she didn't take the position? He smiled at her words though,

unique, cool, and charming all at once. He tried to decipher what they said about her.

He gave up and nodded, acknowledging their reasonableness. “Well, yes. I can see why those would be concerns.” With a droll twist to his mouth, he said, “So, why don’t we set my skeptical, male mind at ease, shall we? Tell me about the South Garden here.” He took in the surroundings with a sweep of his arm. “What would it have been like during the early eighteen hundreds?”

She pursed her lips at his challenge and surveyed the garden. After a moment, she smiled at him. Sam sat lost again in the brief radiance. God, but he wanted her to continue smiling and laughing. In his dazed condition, he missed her first words.

“... when Capability Brown designed the East Garden.” She raised a hand to indicate the direction. “He did it without ever visiting the estate. He simply laid out the garden on paper and indicated what should be planted where. We still have his plans.” She smiled, gazing about, pride in her voice. “Several friends and neighbors wanted to buy a copy of them when ...” Her voiced faltered, and she glanced at Sam, “Um, I believe they are still with the estate documents along with the other garden designs.” She took a deep breath.

“Who?”

“Capability Brown?” She waited and after some silence, blinked. “Oh. He was a renowned landscape artist and architect. He preferred gardenless forms and often created lakes and streams among wide lawns. He is why we have a lake to the east. Mr. Brown died in 1783, but in Sussex, he did the gardens for Battle Abby, the Ashburnham and Penhuest estates, and Rose Hill.”

She leaned toward him. “You will find this amusing. Rosehill is owned by John ‘Mad Jack’ Fuller, the MP for Sussex. Last year, he had an altercation with the Speaker in Parliament, which led the Sergeant-at-Arms to put him out, quite a public disgrace. It seems he was foxed at the time.”

“Last year?”

Miss Covington blushed. “I mean eighteen-seventeen. Uh, the next year, Mr. Fuller had the Green Man pub in Brightling pulled down so he could construct a pyramid tomb for himself in the churchyard. The locals never forgave him.” She shrugged, still appearing a bit embarrassed. “He is—was a bit of loose fish.”

Sam laughed at her delivery. “So, who did this garden?”

“Oh. The other gardens were fashioned by other designers, Mr. Knight created the North Garden and here, Mr. Repton. Unfortunately, the other gardens have changed, the North Garden especially, but this garden has remained very much as I know it, uh, being described in Mr. Repton’s plan.” Her hand fluttered nervously. “I enjoyed his efforts to create a natural, wild, and meandering atmosphere.”

She stood and walked over to the rosebush again. Sighing, she indicated a space around the roses. “A lovely silk tree once stood here. Many mistakenly called it a mimosa, I believe. It shaded the bench for good portion of the day. The tree had been shipped from ...”

“Indonesia?”

She looked at him oddly and murmured, “No, India. A cousin of my fath ...” She paused and started again. “... of the twelfth Baron Covington, Horace Braneswell, brought it back with him in seventeen ninety-seven to commemorate my ... the birth of the Baron’s daughter. It was the only one in Sussex or the whole of England for many years.

“Several years later, the prince attempted to grow silk trees at his Pavilion in Brighton after viewing ours, but they all died within a year. He ha-had several growing there, uhm, by eighteen-eighteen,” she finished with an odd little glance at him.

Sam wondered again at her odd hesitations and syntax, but decided it was nervousness. Considering she was totally

unprepared for the ‘test,’ her information was good. He was impressed.

She gazed up, her hand out and weaving to her next words. “The silk tree was so unlike the trees of England. It displays brilliant green, soft leaves, neatly arranged in groups of nine—eight paired along each branch and one at the end—resembling a fan.” She splayed her hands demonstrating the fans, her arms the branches. She gazed back at him in this dance pose. “Wide, with branches reaching out low, the tree creates wonderful patterns as the sun shines through it.

“July is when it blooms, exquisite light pink blossoms, blushing clouds perched along the tops of the branches. Their scent is quite lovely. When the wind blows, its long, sweeping branches flutter like a cat attempting to shed water from its paws.” She shook her arms and peered askance at him, as though suddenly self-conscious.

“It does sound beautiful. You’ve made me see it here. Perhaps we can find another silk tree to replace it.”

She beamed at him, practically dancing over to the bench and sat down, knees toward him. “Does that mean you have decided my knowledge is sufficient for your needs?”

Sam laughed at her exuberance while using such strange grammar. “Yes. I think so.”

“I’m glad. Belton Park was so beautiful. It will be again.” Immediately, she launched into a detailed description of the Park in 1818, and what would need to be changed. The sun was warm on his back, the air candy-scented, and she sat with her full attention on him, a combination holding him enthralled. The bright sunlight created a mosaic of appealing lights and shadows across her face. He abruptly realized he was enjoying himself—just sitting in a garden listening to a woman talk of history and plants.

He sat captivated by the knowledge seemingly at her fingertips, and the way she made it come alive. He soaked in her vivacious warmth, but when she spoke of cutting down the

dozens of ash trees across the road to restore an unobstructed view of the Rother River, he abruptly held up his hands.

“Whoa, there. Back up a little. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There’s plenty of time to talk about this, particularly razing an entire stand of trees.”

Miss Covington had moved closer to him on the bench in her enthusiasm. She was now leaning toward him, hands propped on the bench inches away from his thigh. Her eyes grew round, seeing how near she was to him. She stood quickly and moved back to the end of the long bench.

There, she spoke without looking at him. “You are quite correct, Mr. Dalton. You have yet to conclude any agreement with Lord Covington. I should really speak with him before I consent to any contracts.”

Blushing as pink as the roses, she murmured, “Please forgive my rash zeal. I love this estate, and my passion for it carries me away at times.”

Sam felt a jolt at the word ‘passion’ and quickly shut off any images ignited by the thought of her being passionate with him. She’d been so close, leaning toward him, the scoop neck of her dress falling open to reveal the swell of her breasts. Yet, the most intoxicating sight had been her eyes, vivid blue with excitement. Clearing his throat, he said, “No problem. That energy is just the thing we’ll need when we start.”

He could feel her retreat like the loss of heat when a cloud hides the sun. It was just as well, he sighed to himself. Karl and his legal team would be here soon.

He stood, saying, “Well, I enjoyed this, but I have to go meet my lawyers.” He smiled when his eyes met hers, and feeling very gallant, offered a little bow and his arm. “May I walk you back to the house?”

She stared at his arm across the distance separating them and gave him a sad little smile, appreciative, but pained. He frowned at the curious response, but when she curtsied, charmed him into smiling again.

She gazed at him and whispered, “No, thank you, Mr. Dalton. I think I shall walk in the garden a little while longer.”

He started to leave, feeling bereft by her decision, when he remembered something he’d wanted to say. “I was sorry to hear about your family. Was Kitty a relative?”

Miss Covington stiffened and stood rigid for a moment before answering. “Thank you for your sentiments, Mr. Dalton. Kitty is—was a dear friend.” Her lips thinned and she turned away.

Was. She’d lost more than just family. “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.” She nodded. He didn’t want to leave her. “Are you coming to lunch later?”

Her brows knitted quizzically. “Lunch?”

He nodded and she answered with a baffled expression. “Do you mean nuncheon or dinner?”

When Sam gave her a confused shake of his head, she bit her lip and glanced at him again. He could tell she was trying to figure out some difficult problem. What, he couldn’t imagine. With some hesitation, she said, “We enjoyed a breakfast of truly epic proportions this morning, so I suppose I shall wait until supper. Thank you.” She turned and walked down a path away from the house.

Sam watched her go. He wanted to walk beside her. He wanted to flirt with her some more, make her laugh. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, irritated with his brainless desires, eyeing her slim figure as she disappeared deeper into the garden. He grunted and then took the path back to the house, thinking about their conversation. *What the hell was a nuncheon?* He’d have to ask Covington, but he assumed it must be some Indonesian custom.

He hadn’t gone far when he slapped his thigh in frustration. *Damn.* He’d forgotten to ask where in Indonesia she and her family had lived. Well, he could have someone research her when he got her a passport and I.D. He’d find out who she was one way or another.

Chapter 9

“For ever since immortal man hath glowed
With all kinds of mechanics, and full soon
Steam-engines will conduct him to the moon.”

—Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto 10, stanza 2, 1821

“There you are.”

Victoria looked across the grassy slope to see Lord Covington ambling down toward her, his unbuttoned sweater flapping with each step. From the position of the sun, she knew she'd been crying and woolgathering for hours. She stood and brushed off her dress. She did feel better for it, but as drained emotionally as she was yesterday, maybe more so. With one last glance at the broad lake and the surrounding weeping willows in all their expressive silence, so like her time, she turned and climbed up to meet him.

“I hope you did not worry. It was such a beautiful day, and I-I wanted to be alone.”

Lord Covington stopped and wiped his brow with his handkerchief, waiting for her to reach him. “Worried? You ran out of the dining room so upset. Of course, I was worried.”

Victoria nodded. “I had to leave.” She laid a hand on her forehead. “And the meeting was going so well. I became so utterly bemused by that blasted writing *thing*, I forgot myself.” She pursed her lips and glanced around her. “I forgot where I was—*when* I was.”

Remembering, she lowered her head and shook it. “As it was, Mr. Dalton found me in the South Garden, and it proved quite awkward.”

She clenched her jaw. She'd realized during her wanderings his appearance in the garden had been very well timed. When had he'd come upon her? Had he witnessed her crying? What did he think of her behavior at breakfast?

She sighed over the probable answers. “I assume he informed you of my desire to wander the grounds.” Covington gave a nod. She gestured, suggesting they walk up the grass-covered slope. Daisies dotted the lawn and she reached down, picking one as they hiked to the top, but said nothing while she twirled it between her fingers.

Lord Covington finally filled the silence between them. “Are you all right?”

She nodded but avoided eye contact. Feeling ‘all right’ left a great many things still roaming the commons.

He sidled up beside her. “Dalton did tell me he talked to you, but didn’t mention any awkwardness. So, what did he do?”

Victoria looked up. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, was he polite? He didn’t become obnoxious, did he?”

Victoria considered the questions and then offered a crooked smile. “No, he was a perfect gentleman.” She did admit to herself that she hadn’t expected it when he’d first appeared in the garden. “He offered me a position as a ‘consultant.’” She stopped, eyeing Lord Covington expectantly.

“Well, I ... He told me he did.” He glanced around, thrusting his hands into his sweater pockets.

“Do not manage me, my lord. It was entirely your scheme, was it not?” She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “He would have never thought of such a havey-cavey proposition on his own.”

Lord Covington threw his hands in the air. “All right. Yes.” He turned to face her with a gleam in his eye. “However, I think it’s a marvelous idea. You’re the very one to return Belton Park to its former glories.” He smiled and leaned in to say in a conspiratorial manner, “And Dalton thought you were excellent. He couldn’t say enough about your expertise.”

Victoria sniffed at the comment and began to walk again, the afternoon sun stretching her shadow out before her on the gravel walk. “I’m sure Mr. Dalton was quite able to say enough, which he probably did.”

She halted with a sudden frown. “Is his offer common now? Are women hired for this sort of work? Or have I compromised my reputation in even contemplating such employment?” She let her hands fall to her sides. So many questions. “I felt so lowered to even be considered as a laborer in Trade.”

Then she realized what she’d said. “I am sorry, my lord. I certainly do not doubt your good intentions. I do appreciate the opportunity you created, but, really, I am at a complete loss as to how I should proceed.” She held her hands out in bleak admission. “In just one short conversation, I embarrassed myself *several* times in simply describing the gardens.”

She knew she was working herself into a huff, but she could not hide her panic. With a wobbling voice, she insisted, “I must hide who I am, when I’m from. I cannot hope to succeed in such a pretense.”

“You did fine from all accounts, and as you learn more, it’ll become easier to ...”

“Lie.”

“No, you’re not ...”

“I’m lying.” Victoria raised a hand to halt the debate and walked on. “I will have to lie about so much—for the rest of my life, and I will contrive to make myself ridiculous. I don’t even know what I should be manufacturing falsehoods about.”

They came to a bench alongside the east wing and Victoria sat down with a dejected collapse. She said, feeling utterly lost, “I know nothing of the social mores in this time, not to mention the conventions surrounding a woman’s employment.”

Lord Covington sat down beside her. “You don’t have to lie to me.”

Victoria glanced at his puppy eyes and smiled reassuringly. “No, I don’t, and I’m grateful.” She patted his hand. I know how fortunate I am to have been ‘discovered’ by you.” Without his intervention, she would have been toted off to Bedlam by now.

He took his pipe out of his mouth and studied it thoughtfully. “From Dalton’s remarks, I don’t think you embarrassed yourself. It may feel awkward, but hardly a catastrophe.”

“It *was* awkward, terribly so, if not catastrophic. It was nearly so more than once. He’s no cawker. Mr. Dalton will see through my subterfuge sooner or later.”

“Perhaps polite society during your time was a bit more exacting than it is today.” He gazed over his glasses at her.

She shrugged. “I am beginning to realize that, but it hardly means I’m spooning sugar on honey cakes.” For a moment, she stilled, eyes closed, then she opened them, stood, and began to pace.

“I was out in the garden, in a secluded spot, alone with Mr. Dalton, yet he seemed not to understand my concern.” She stopped, aware Lord Covington had stilled, his sad hazel eyes, so intently focused on what she was saying. But why, if current propriety was so relaxed?

She raised her hand in a gesture of befuddlement. “I think he was, or at least I thought he was, flirting with me, but he abruptly changed the subject and began asking me about my knowledge of Belton Park.” She clasped her hands in front of her and glanced at Lord Covington. “Do men flirt in this day and age?”

He nodded slowly with a comic grin on his face.

She wrinkled her nose at his droll expression. “I do not know what to expect or how to behave.” She put a hand to her forehead. “I was so at sixes and sevens, I must have appeared the hobcluch.” Covington gave her such a mystified raise of his brows. she clarified, “A dunce.”

Covington shook his head. "Is this what you've been worrying about all afternoon? You could not have behaved so strangely if he's still willing to hire you."

"Yes, but only after he was compelled to put me in my place."

Covington sprang to his feet. "What? What are you talking about? Did he say something to upset you?"

"Only what any proper gentleman would," Victoria said. "Or is it?" She flipped a hand, as if she could wave away the question, and muttered, "Oh, confound it! It's being asked to dance a cotillion without a step of instruction."

Pacing in front of Covington, she threw up her hands helplessly. "When he asked me to help return Belton Park to its unspoiled form, my enthusiasms ran away with my common sense." Victoria laid a hand to her throat, remembering. "He seemed to share my excitement. I found myself nearly in his lap before he called my attention to it, asking me to 'back up.'" She hugged herself, feeling all things wretched.

"We were alone, unseen in the South Garden. He could well have assumed my affections and taken advantage." She wrung her hands in disgust. "If he had, I could not have blamed him for the error."

"I would have blamed him if he tried anything."

"Yes, yes, of course." She turned to Lord Covington. "How can I work alongside men, *alongside him*, if at the slightest provocation, I overstep myself?"

Other than listening sympathetically, Lord Covington said nothing. He just stood with a thoughtful expression on his well-used face.

Victoria massaged her forehead. "What must he think of me now? Just when I had begun to entertain hopes that he, at least, would cease to judge me demented." A hollow opened up in her chest at the thought.

Sighing, she came and sat down on the bench again. “*Then* he pretends, out of pity I am sure, that nothing untoward has occurred and asks me if I will take ‘lunch’ later.” She felt close to crying again, but she clamped her jaw shut until the downish feelings passed.

“I doubt very much Mr. Dalton sees you as someone to be pitied.” Lord Convington lit his pipe and sat down again, puffing away without saying more. They sat quietly for a few minutes. She appreciated the comfortable silences between them as much as his reassurances.

A low roaring sound began in the distance, faint at first, slowly building. Victoria glanced at the few clouds in the sky, shading her eyes in what she thought was the direction of the sound.

“What is that noise? I heard it twice today, but cannot imagine what it is, for it lasts too long to be thunder, and dies away in the oddest manner.”

“It’s a jet plane.” He pointed to the western sky.

Victoria squinted. The sky? She could make out a tiny dot moving across the blue, a thin line of white forming in its wake as she watched. The sound seemed to be coming from some place well behind the speeding speck.

“What is it, a balloon?” She knew it wasn’t, but the silly question just popped out. She’d seen a hot-air balloon in London’s Hyde Park take brave souls aloft for exorbitant fees. Balloons didn’t move in such a fashion.

“No, it’s a metal machine which flies. It’s an airliner carrying more than two hundred people to the United States.” He puffed on his pipe once, and added, “It took off from Heathrow Airport outside London and will be in New York in seven hours.”

Victoria blinked, trying to imagine such a wondrous thing, such a petrifying ability to travel through the ether so rapidly, over the entire Atlantic Ocean. She couldn’t, and she felt a

dread seize her as she watched the glinting spot run across the sky with a distant roar.

Man had accomplished such a thing.

She opened her mouth to ask a question, but closed it again, unable to untangle the dozens which had instantly flooded her mind. How different must be people of this present time. It all threatened her reason. So, in a daze, she asked another, safer, question, one that harbored far fewer terrors for her. “Lord Covington, what is a ‘lunch’?” Her voice wobbled near High C on *what*.

He stared at her for a moment and laughed. “My dear, you are a marvel.” He looked as if he wanted to hug her, but instead he frowned, cleared his throat, and stuck his pipe in his mouth. “A lunch is what you missed this afternoon. It is the noonday meal.”

“You mean a formal meal such as breakfast, dinner, and supper?”

“Yes. Lunch and dinner are much the same thing. Generally, people sit down for it. Are you hungry?”

Victoria nodded, deeply relieved to be discussing the familiar. “Yes. I feel as empty as a rector’s wine glass.” She smiled when Lord Covington chuckled at her words. “What are we having tonight, my lord?”

“I think it would be best if you called me uncle,” he said, smiling. “You are family, and it is much more in keeping with the situation.”

“If that would please you.”

“It would.” He stood and offered her his hand.

She took it and rose, grinning, remembering. “Shall I call you Uncle Willie?”

He dropped her hand in mock outrage. “If you do, I’ll toss you out on your ear, young lady.”

She laughed, feeling better, and nodded as she took his offered arm. “Uncle.”

“Let’s go find out what’s for dinner, shall we?” Lord Covington glanced at the object encircling the wrist of his free hand. She could see its face was lit with green numbers, 4:46. Lord Covington saw her examining his wrist, so he held it up for her to see. “It’s a wristwatch.”

It resembled no watch she had ever seen. She didn’t know what to say, so said nothing. After a moment he lowered his arm and began walking with her. She exhaled in relief.

They headed down the path, but they hadn’t gone far when Lord Covington turned and said, “We should see to your education, my dear. You do have a great deal to learn, and you certainly can’t be discovering things as you did today, all ‘havey-cavey.’”

She knew she must have let her unease show because he patted her hand on his arm. “You have done amazingly well—spectacular in the extreme—in the last two days. Give yourself credit.” He cocked his head meaningfully. “I, more than you, know the gulf between your time and the present, and no one could have done better. Even so, we must have a plan.”

Victoria glanced at him as he made this pronouncement, feeling a heavy flutter of trepidation at his words. She bit her lip, certain that such a course of study would be crammed full to bursting with the unexpected, inexplicable, and the terrifying, if her brief garden conversation with Mr. Dalton, his ‘pen’, the ‘wristwatch,’ and the ‘airliner machine’ were any indications.

~ ~ ~

“Hey, Tiger, have I lost my mystique tonight?”

Sam lifted his gaze from his wineglass into the green eyes of Carrie Marsh. “What?”

“Oooh, I think that was a yes.” She took her wineglass and leaned back in the plush booth, a little smile floating on her red lips. Oscar’s was one of the finest restaurants in London.

The red leather and black oak interior seemed to glow in the dim lights. So did Carrie's eyes, amid the shadows of the private booth.

Sam smiled, appreciating Carrie's ability to use her charms, and the surroundings, to the best advantage.

"I'm sorry. I just concluded one of the strangest deals I have ever experienced today. It's been bizarre."

"You mean Belton Park. That's gone on forever. Obviously, it has more allure than I've been able to muster tonight."

Sam shook his head in apology. "Belton is unfair competition. It's a whole host of problems, and just this morning, a lot of surprises." He shrugged. "Don't worry. Your allure is intact and in rare form."

Sam admired her classic features, killer dress, and her dazzling mahogany hair, but Carrie wasn't having any.

"Sam Dalton, you've done nothing for the entire dinner but grunt in response to my brilliant repartee."

He laughed and took her free hand, which had been strategically resting on the table within easy reach. Suddenly he felt like flirting. "Guilty as charged. It's been scintillating, and I've been off in business La-La Land. I've some serious penance to do before the evening is through, don't I?"

"I should say so."

Sam studied his date, while she dared him to ignore her. She had beautiful eyes, but less almond-shaped than Miss Covington's. No, Sam concluded, Miss Covington didn't compare to Carrie. Carrie was a model, tall, tanned, and always displaying a generous amount of cleavage. Self-possessed and clever, she was very demanding. His smile widened in response to what he was seeing, and Carrie smiled back. It wasn't a chore to meet her demands.

"Much better. It's nice to be appreciated." She set the glass down and began to play with Sam's hand. "In fact, I just might

tell you what I had decided you didn't deserve to know several minutes ago."

"Oh? Have I redeemed myself so quickly?" he teased, and called for the dessert tray, but Carrie shook her head, so he asked the waiter for the check.

"No, not by a long mile, boyo. But you are on the right track." She cocked her head and said, "If you promise to not to lose your focus, I'll tell you."

"Oh, you want a performance guarantee. Tough assignment. I don't know. How long do I have to maintain this focus?"

She leaned forward, elbows on the table, cleavage commanding attention. "All the way, Tiger, all the way."

He raised an eyebrow, amused. "It sounds like a win-win proposition."

"It could be. It all depends on you. Do we have a deal?" She stood and let him put her mink over her shoulders, watching him from the corner of her eye. He wondered why Carrie, being British, didn't have an accent. Thinking of Miss Covington's, he thought the patrician inflections charming.

Oops. His attention was wandering again. He glanced at Carrie who had been waiting patiently for his response. With a wry expression, he said, "Deal. I feel like a challenge tonight."

"Well, good." She took his arm, but she continued to watch him.

Sam flashed a grin at her, knowing its effect on women, but it faded as he realized their banter didn't satisfy. For some unknown reason, he'd enjoyed the brief wordplay with Miss Covington this morning far more than flirting with Carrie.

As they strolled out of Oscar's, Sam was aware of all the eyes following them, or at least Carrie. He was sure she was as aware as he. Proud to have such a gorgeous woman on his arm, he knew his looks and money were what kept Carrie by his side. Sam frowned. Abruptly, those reasons felt inadequate somehow, though they never had before.

Once they'd settled in his limousine, he told the driver to go to the Park Regency Hotel but glanced questioningly at Carrie. She nodded and snuggled against him. He closed the window between them and the driver and turned the music on low.

Carrie leaned closer and kissed him. "Thank you for the dinner."

"My pleasure."

"I received a call from Günter Waltrop yesterday." Her words were a warm breath in his ear. "He offered me an outrageous sum of money and some free publicity if I'd spy for him, concerning your activities here in England and the Belton Park business."

Sam frowned. "Really." He put his arm around her and whispered close, "Did you accept his generous offer?"

Carrie punched his arm and laughed. "You're impossible."

"Am I? Well, then it should be an interesting evening, shouldn't it." He leaned in and kissed her. She pressed herself along his side and ran her hand through his hair. *What an amazing body she has.* Taking a breath, he pulled away, saying with a serious tone, "I'd be careful. The man has no scruples. And he enjoys corrupting women."

She squashed her breasts up against his arm. "Mmm. I think I'll leave that to you, if it's all right."

Sam grinned. "It's a responsibility I'll take very seriously." He bared his teeth at a thought. "Besides, Waltrop might've already found a woman." Now, why had he mentioned Victoria Covington? He didn't believe it even as a possibility, did he?

Carrie sat up. "And who's this?"

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Nobody you'd know. Just arrived from Indonesia. She's the strangest female I've ever met."

"Pretty?" Carrie asked with a tilt of her head.

Sam shrugged, but nodded. “Short, pale, and blond. Not at all what I prefer.” Sam regarded Carrie and realized he wasn’t telling her the truth.

“And how is that?”

He recovered, and whispered seductively close, “Tall, tan, and clever.” He nuzzled her neck. “You’re fascinating in ways she can’t ...” He continued to follow the line of her jaw with his lips, feeling the effort to finish the sentence required too much energy, too much thought. Unexpectedly, this whole exercise seemed less exciting than it had a minute ago. He didn’t want to compare Carrie to Miss Covington.

“In ways she can’t *what?*” Carrie persisted, a shivery smile in her voice as he continued to kiss her neck. But for Sam, it suddenly felt like he was just going through the motions.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

The answer annoyed Carrie. In fact, the evening went downhill from there.

Chapter 10

“Time changes everything except something within us which is always surprised by change.”

—Thomas Hardy 1888

“There. That should do it.” Lord Covington turned the pad of paper around so Victoria could read it.

She tried to comprehend the list of topics written in his tight scrawl, but she hadn’t slept well the night before, dreaming of roaring dots in the sky, whooshing toilets, and Mr. Dalton’s voice insisting she ‘back up.’ Victoria nodded politely and turned to take in the surrounding gardens. Even shaded as they were out on the terrace, the morning air was warm. The sunlight on the spring leaves of the trees and terraced foliage created waterfalls of vibrant greens across the gardens. The sun’s bright reflections danced on the ripples in the little ponds and the connecting streams in a mesmerizing display. Somewhere, an English mock bird practiced his repertoire. It all soothed and settled her.

Victoria let a soft sigh escape and sipped her orange juice, relishing the tart-clean taste. Fresh juice was such a luxury, the amount such an extravagance. A whole pitcher of the nectar sat within her reach. The kitchen must have denuded all the orange trees in the orangery to produce this amount. *If that was the source now ...* Returning her focus to the pad of paper, she laid a hand next to it. “So, this is the curriculum you feel I should master?”

He chuckled. “Most will prove to be easy, my dear. Some will be harder to learn than others, but you don’t have to learn it all at once.” He pointed to one underlined word. “Using the telephone will be easy to learn, and the cell phone can be as simple or as complex as you desire.”

Victoria bit her lip. *Telephone?* She knew enough Greek to recognize ‘tele’ as distance, and ‘phone’ meaning ‘sound’, but

‘far-away noise’ seemed a rather vague description. *Cell phone? A sound in a cubicle? Oh, drat! This isn’t helping.*

Lord Covington didn’t seem to notice her frustration. He leaned back and placed his hands, fingers interlaced, on the top of his head. “Entertainment will be a little more complicated, I think.”

“Why? Have plays, games, and music changed so much? Can I hope Society has finally lost its affection for Hazard?”

Lord Covington chuckled. “Things are different, my dear. The way people are entertained has changed.”

Victoria pursed her lips at the less-than-helpful explanation as Janice came out with the breakfast tray. She blinked, dumbfounded.

Janice was wearing men’s trousers.

She stared as Janice moved around the table laying out dishes. The trousers were tight across her hips and ... Victoria shook herself and glanced at Lord Covington. She frowned hard when she saw he’d hardly noticed Janice, even though she was obviously not wearing a corset. A quiver of dismay ran through her.

She furtively studied Janice’s clothing, like Wellington spying out the French positions before battle. When Janice left, Victoria earnestly tapped the pad on other words. “Perhaps we should begin my studies with ‘Clothing and Fashion’?”

Lord Covington nodded as he dished sausages onto his plate. “Yes, in fact I have—”

“Mr. Dalton and Ms. Montez.” Janice stood just outside the glass doors of the library, hands clasped before her.

A frowning Mr. Dalton strode out the library doors past Janice, without waiting for his companion. His gait faltered a bit as he glanced down the terrace toward the music room. Victoria turned in the same direction. The rosebush. He was studying the plant they’d both seen glow two days ago. For the

hundredth time, she examined the sandstone urn and its abundant greenery, unsure what she hoped to ferret out from the examination. She shook off her questions and turned back to Mr. Dalton approaching their table, dressed in a tan suit and blue shirt and tie. Victoria had never seen such colors on a gentleman, either half or full dress.

He blocked her view of Miss Montez, who followed behind him. Curious about the woman, Victoria could see she was tall, her dark head just visible over his shoulder as they approached. When Miss Montez came into full view beside him, Victoria froze.

Dressed in black and red, the woman wore a plain, tight skirt, which stopped at least an inch above the knee. Mouth open, Victoria stared at her bare legs.

Was she going to be introduced to Mr. Dalton's light-skirt? Was she expected to greet someone who flaunted her naked limbs in broad daylight? And her painted lips and eye makeup were so ... blatant. It all marked her as the most vulgar of Cyprians.

She pulled her eyes from those exposed limbs and closed her mouth, noticing the woman wore a jacket and red shirt cut similar to Mr. Dalton's masculine attire. Her red shoes had thin heels, perhaps two inches high, clicking on the terrace slate, which made her hips rock in an odd fashion. How did she keep her balance?

Victoria looked away feeling quite muddled, her face prickling with embarrassment. She balled her fists in her lap, attempting to compose herself.

Mr. Dalton stopped at the far end of the glass-topped breakfast table. "Lord Covington, we've brought the contracts we hammered out yesterday,"

The men seemed unfazed by the half-naked woman in their midst, as though everything was in fine twig. Why would the woman willingly expose herself in such a fashion? *No, there*

had been 'tourists' the day she appeared, baring more than Miss Montez. Still, it all felt very, very wrong.

Lord Covington responded with a “Good morning.” Victoria watched him for some hint as to how to behave. He shook Mr. Dalton’s hand and smiled at the woman.

“Lord Covington, you’ve met Pen Montez, my contracts lawyer. She finished these agreements last night.” He motioned to the valise the woman held. “She worked hard on them.”

At the word ‘lawyer,’ Victoria’s head snapped up. *A lawyer?* She barely kept from blurting out the word.

Mr. Dalton gestured to Victoria. “Pen, this is Miss Covington. Miss Covington, Pen Montez.” At the introduction, Miss Montez studied her employer curiously for a moment, then turned and held out her hand to Victoria. “How are you?”

Seeing the woman’s open expression, Victoria tried to relax. *Propriety and breeding, propriety and breeding. A gentlewoman is always polite.*

Victoria stood and took her hand. “I am well. Thank you for asking.” The woman’s grip was firm and her gaze direct. Victoria offered the best smile she could marshal and waved a hand at the empty chairs. “Won’t you be seated?”

Miss Montez sat, laid her leather valise on the table, and took out several bundles of papers. Victoria watched her, reminded of all the solicitors she’d sat with after her parents died. She felt dazed by the many contradictions Miss Montez presented.

She turned to Mr. Dalton, who was still standing, “May I offer Miss Montez or you orange juice or coffee?”

Instead of responding, he frowned at her. “Isn’t that the same dress you’ve worn the last two days?”

Victoria stiffened, running her hands over the skirt.

He stepped closer. “Don’t you have anything else?”

She glared at him. The continued assaults on her sensibilities made her speak without thinking.

“Yes, it is the same, Mr. Dalton, and obviously, no, I do not.” She sat, making an effort to control herself. Tilting her head, she gave him a speaking glance. “A gentleman would not call attention to the fact.” She shot her ‘uncle’ an accusing glance for failing to say anything in response to Mr. Dalton’s rudeness.

Mr. Dalton raised an eyebrow, obviously taken aback by her strong feelings. He slowly smiled, as though he enjoyed her sharp words.

“I apologize, Miss Covington. However, remember,” he said, offering a lopsided grin, “I’m still struggling to learn the subtleties of being *impertinent*.”

Victoria’s mouth moved without speaking. *Is he flirting again?* The man was quite exasperating.

With a dry tone, he continued, “As pretty as your dress is, I hope you’ll be getting some more clothes.” He arched an eyebrow at her uncle.

Lord Covington squirmed in his seat and scowled. “Well, of course she will. We have clothes coming this afternoon.”

“We do?” Victoria closed her eyes. The blurted question suggested that Lord Covington was picking out her clothes without her knowledge, as though she were a kept woman. The men were bandying about buying her clothes, a dreadful lack of decorum. She must put a stop to this.

Victoria put a hand to her throat. “My uncle was kind enough to arrange things since I am new to ...” She faltered, but finished, “... to England, so I will have a wardrobe soon.” Arching her brow in turn, she asked, “Is *that* satisfactory, Mr. Dalton?”

He chuckled at her mimicry and nodded with a charming smile that brightened his eyes.

She smiled too, in shaky relief, appreciating his silent peace offering.

The warmth in his eyes abruptly vanished. Without looking at her again, he moved his chair to the far end of the table on the other side of the Viscount, laying one folder in front of him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she became aware of Miss Montez appraising her. Miss Montez glanced once at Mr. Dalton and leaned toward Victoria. “Some time, you’re going to have to tell me what you’ve done to Sam. He almost relaxed there for a nano-second.”

Victoria opened her mouth to reply but shut it again. She hadn’t done anything. And what was a ‘nano-second’? Miss Montez called him ‘Sam.’ Was she intimate with him?

When she didn’t respond, Miss Montez tapped the folder. “Would you like me to go over your contract with you?” Her nails were painted red to match her lips.

Victoria nodded, trying not to stare at her and her abundant makeup, red lips and eyeliner and green shading on her eyelids. Only wig-wearing, elderly women such as Lady Cork, actresses or Cyprians of the worst sort wore makeup. Why did women of this day paint their faces?

Flipping through the contract, Miss Montez coolly summarized the contents, which were all printed. *Amazing*. Had she set the type last night? There were several stipulations concerning Victoria’s work, including requirements she draw up a plan for refurbishing Belton Park, serve as a docent—whatever it was—and act as hostess for a minimum of two parties or conferences a month.

Miss Montez brushed past several pages she mysteriously labeled ‘disclaimers’ and paused a few pages from the back. “Here’s your package: £60,000 a year, a company 401k, and an expense account. A very attractive offer.” She sat back and watched Victoria.

“Sixty thousand pounds?” Victoria squeaked. “Sterling?”

Miss Montez nodded.

The sum was more than what the Duke of Devonshire was reputed to earn annually with his many estates. She was stunned, even though she'd seen how much the value of the pound had shrunk while discussing the lease costs for Belton Park. She released a shaky breath and gestured for Miss Montez to continue.

Before she could say more, Mr. Dalton spoke from the other end of the table. "And add something in expenses for some dresses."

"You overstep yourself, sir. I told you, I'm taking care of her clothes." Lord Covington leaned forward and brandished a fork with a sausage stuck on it at Mr. Dalton.

Mr. Dalton looked askance at the quivering link. "Glad to hear it. I was referring to her *business* wardrobe. She'll need Regency dresses as a docent and hostess, and they can be expensive." Lord Covington glared at Mr. Dalton, who glared back. Both men began arguing over who should pay for the 'business' clothes.

Appalled by the horrid *faux pas* being repeated, Victoria turned her chair away from the men, and found she ended nearly knee to naked knee with Miss Montez.

Miss Montez didn't seem fazed by the beastly brangle at all, even though she certainly could see the two men squabble over Victoria's shoulder. Victoria took a ragged breath, unable to think of what to say.

Considering her confident bearing, Victoria found it difficult to believe Miss Montez would agree to being anyone's mistress regardless of the way she dressed. Such nakedness was apparently accepted, but expected? Victoria trusted her intuition, but how could she judge anything? Maybe all lawyers dressed as Miss Montez.

On the other hand, she would certainly believe Victoria was someone's ladybird with the obscene row going on at the other end of the table. Both men were beyond enough!

She was the hostess here, and hardly a missish Miss Nancy. It would be frightfully cow-handed to allow the bramble to continue.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned to Miss Montez and asked in a loud, but sharp voice, “So, how long have you labored in Mr. Dalton’s employ?” Victoria was gratified to hear silence fall behind her.

Miss Montez watched the men behind Victoria with a glint of pleasure that turned into an errant chuckle. “Four years.”

Both men cleared their throats. Mr. Dalton said something and the two gathered their papers together. Mr. Dalton sheepishly smiled over his shoulder. “We’ll be inside if you need us.”

When the men had disappeared into the library, Miss Montez leaned forward and patted Victoria’s hand. “Well done.”

Victoria put a hand to her forehead. “More cabbage-headed than downy, Miss Montez.” Seeing the woman’s long legs crossed through the glass tabletop, the skirt riding up her thighs, Victoria quickly leaned forward too, her embarrassment inspiring the next question. “Does Mr. Dalton expect all the women he employs to dress as you do?” Victoria held her breath, hoping she hadn’t offended her companion.

Miss Montez laughed. “No. I do tend to dress more formally than most, though I rarely use much makeup.”

More formally? This is full dress? But not much makeup? Victoria tried to imagine herself in the same apparel. She sagged in her chair, feeling undone by it all.

Miss Montez, seeing her discomfort, shrugged. “I wouldn’t worry about it. You can wear whatever you’re comfortable in. Besides, you’ll need several period dresses to fulfill your duties.” She re-crossed her legs and settled back in the black metal chair. “I just feel I should always dress professionally ... but feminine, of course.”

Professional? Sitting, Miss Montez's skirt was nearly baring her thighs altogether. This was truly bizarre. She noticed Miss Montez had smooth, hairless limbs. Curiosity flared. Victoria wanted to know more about her apparel, but more importantly she had to know more about earning a wage. Paramount, she wanted to win over Miss Montez. "What is it like to be in Mr. Dalton's employ?"

There was an enigmatic smile in response. "Good. It's interesting work, and he pays for excellence, which is one reason I've stayed with the company." Miss Montez gazed at the table for a moment. "Oh, he's going places. He's a brilliant businessman, listens to advice, and learns from his mistakes. He's had to, to be where he is at just twenty-nine."

Victoria frowned at the description, because while fascinating, it failed to tell her what she wanted to know. She opened her mouth to ask, but Miss Montez answered first.

"Yes, Sam's a pain-in-the-butt. He's exacting, and generally impatient about everything, micro-manages far too much, but he's fair and in his own gruff way, considerate, and very ethical." Glancing at Victoria in a knowing way, she half-smiled. "And believe it or not, he doesn't flirt or play around in the office. Lord knows he could, if he wanted."

Victoria blinked. Pain-in-the-butt? Micro-manage? Play around? Confused by the information, she started to ask another question, but Miss Montez seemed to read her mind again.

"I wouldn't worry about working with Sam. You seem to have his number." Miss Montez grinned. "Far better than most people I know."

Victoria could only guess what 'having his number' meant, but she smiled back tentatively. Relaxing, she examined her companion, with her short black hair, *à la Brutus*, combed somehow to curve around her face. It appeared very cool and comfortable. Her dark eyes and winged brows were very dramatic. "Are you Spanish, Miss Montez? I understood Mr. Dalton's business is located in the United States."

For a moment, Victoria was afraid she'd said something wrong, because Miss Montez eyed her critically. Finally, she smiled. "Call me Pen. Yes, I'm Hispanic. I grew up in Los Angeles." At Victoria's frown, she added, "California?"

Victoria held out her hands apologetically. "I'm sorry, Pen. There is a great deal I do not understand." She feared she appeared a simpleton.

"Yes, Sam said you just arrived here from Indonesia. You must've lived in a fairly isolated spot. Your family, Miss Covington, were they missionaries or doctors?"

Victoria inwardly cringed. Another person, another lie. "Landowners." She didn't wait for more questions. "Please, among friends, I'm Tory." Though excessively forward and far too familiar for such a brief acquaintance, she could see first names seemed to be an accepted practice regardless of class distinctions. What better place to test her understanding than with Pen while avoiding questions?

Pen smiled and nodded. "Tory." Pen described California, Dalton Developments in Chicago, her university years and how she became a lawyer. Fascinated, Victoria asked dozens of questions, which at times produced answers she actually understood.

Sometime later, Mr. Dalton came out onto the terrace with several men and women, some she recognized from her first day. More lawyers. "We have to witness and notarize the preliminary contracts. This shouldn't take long."

It required the better part of two hours. When everyone prepared to leave, Pen held out her card. "If you have any questions about the contract—anything at all," she added in a low voice, "my number here in London is on the back, and you can reach me in Chicago at the office number after I fly back." Victoria frowned. Everyone should have presented their cards when they arrived at the front door.

Victoria took the card, seeing several lines of numbers on it, wrinkling her forehead. "So, I have your number too?" Pen

looked blank for moment, then gave a delighted laugh, as though Victoria had said something witty.

When Pen didn't say anything further, Victoria filled the silence. "Thank you. You have been most considerate. I'm sure to have more questions. How long will you be staying in London?"

"Oh, a week or more." Mouth pursed, Pen gave Mr. Dalton a speaking glance, saying, "He's had me fly over three times in the last two months. It's getting real old, I can tell you."

"Yes, I can imagine," Tory lied.

Mr. Dalton came over to Pen and raised an eyebrow. She nodded in some silent code. He turned and said, "Lord Covington, Miss Covington, I'm going back to the States at the end of the week, so I need the project timelines finished and signed off by then. I'll be gone probably three weeks, and when the lease starts, I'll be moving into Belton Park."

Victoria's mouth dropped open and snapped shut, as she didn't know what to say, but she automatically shook Miss Montez's hand in farewell when it was offered. Pen smiled. "I enjoyed talking to you, Tory."

With Pen's use of her familiar name, both Lord Covington and Mr. Dalton glanced at Victoria. The provoked expression on Mr. Dalton's face made her smile inwardly.

She turned to Mr. Dalton with her hands clasped in front of her, trying to ignore the dangerous social implications surrounding his living under the same roof with her and Lord Covington. She'd just assumed any Dalton employees would reside in the Dowager House. People today seemed to constantly cross the lines of propriety in a brazenly perpendicular fashion.

Taking a deep breath, Victoria finally nodded. "Thank you for delivering the contracts personally, Mr. Dalton. We will be prepared to make you comfortable when you return from America."

Mr. Dalton started to offer his hand, but stopped, irresolute, until she held out her hand. They shook briefly, his grasp, firm and warm. Her touch seemed to bemuse him for a moment. He finally said, "You're welcome."

He nodded and walked away, but before he and Pen reached the library, he turned and said, "Miss Covington. I'll send over my thoughts about the remodeling. I will need an inventory of the Park inside and out when I return. I'll talk with Lord Covington and you sometime in the next two days." Before Victoria could reply, he and Pen were gone.

She glanced at Lord Covington, who offered his sheepish half-smile and then stared at the thick contract sitting on the table. Her head was spinning. She felt the orange juice burning her stomach and balled her hands into fists. The food on the table was now cold, not that she had found it particularly appetizing even when properly heated.

Victoria surveyed the patio and gardens, but she felt suddenly so distant from it all, so apart. The gardens were beautiful, and the May morning was all one could want, but she remained more isolated than any exile in New Wales. She hated the waxen, draining sensation caused by her embarrassments, the lies, and her stumbling performance this morning.

Her mouth tight and grim, she drew herself up and threw her shoulders back. She was going to conquer this, this life. She had to. She realized Lord Covington still stood at the other end of the table, and she was embarrassed all over again. His highhandedness in arranging for her wardrobe without a word to her, and *then* bickering with Mr. Dalton about it in front of guests, was inexcusable.

He silently watched her with an apprehensive expression. As well he should. Controlling an urge to ring a peal over him immediately, she decided it would be better to speak with him later, when she could calmly broach the delicate details of his impropriety.

Now, she must prepare herself for more guests, more indignities. “When do you expect the mantua-makers?”

Lord Covington gaped open-mouthed. “The what?”

There was the word ‘what?’ again. “The *couturière*?”

He still gazed at her, befuddled.

“The *modiste*?” Victoria said, frustrated.

“Is that French?”

Victoria sighed. Wind-milling her hand as though she could roll the information out of him, she said, “The individuals you invited—the tradeswomen who will measure me for my new wardrobe. When will they arrive today?”

“Oh, them. The clothiers will be here at one. But they’ll have all the dresses and such with them.”

Victoria frowned. “Ready-made clothes?”

“Oh, yes. But not to worry, they’ll fit them here.”

It did not sound promising. Only servants and lower classes might wear ready-made apparel. She grimaced. Everything was so unexpected. She rang the table bell for Janice. Victoria had a great many questions needing answers and a great deal to do before these tradespeople arrived.

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It was a perfect morning for a drive, but Sam struggled between the irritation and curiosity Victoria Covington inspired. He’d been ready to ignore her. Straight away, she’d disarmed him with her own exasperation over his comment on her dress. A half smile played across his lips—her temper was formidable. No one had ever called him on his lack of decorum in such a civilized manner.

“Well, what do you think?” Sam yelled over the roar of the wind whipping through the Jaguar convertible. Pen didn’t answer at first, but instead watched the speedometer until Sam got the message. He wryly shook his head at her but slowed down.

When the air blowing around the car was less thunderous, she said, “About what?”

“Miss Covington.”

Pen grinned, obviously because he continued to call her Miss Covington. Sam scowled back.

She relaxed deeper into the bucket seat, with a quirk of a smile still on her lips. “I don’t know. It’s amazing. I think she’s absolutely clueless about the modern world. Although she tried to hide it, my clothes, her contract—and your behavior—all bewildered her.”

“She didn’t seem all that bewildered.” Sam knotted his brows. “Do you think I’ve made a mistake hiring her?”

Pen combed her wind-tossed hair with her fingers. “I can’t tell from the short time we talked, but I like her. There’s an honesty and a depth to her I find intriguing.”

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, most women—and all the men I know—try to impress and make things happen, in business meetings, for instance.” She gave Sam a wry glance which he ignored. “Tory tried to make us comfortable when she obviously wasn’t. She smoothed over every social wrinkle decisively but was still willing to dance without leading. That’s rare in my experience. She has a quiet strength. It reminds me of my grandmother. She was from a wealthy Chilean family—very Old World.”

Sam frowned at Pen’s description, so different from her usually cryptic remarks. He waited impatiently for her to say more but gave up. “And—?”

“And I think she’s either going to fall flat on her face, or she’ll be running your business here before you know what’s happened.” With a brief, knowing smile at Sam’s questioning glance, Pen said, “Hey, you asked,” and settled deeper in the tan leather seat. She silently watched the passing countryside.

Sam gave her a disgusted glance and repositioned his sunglasses on his nose as he drove the winding, hedge-lined

road. His foot pressed down the accelerator as he considered Pen's words. While he respected her judgment, particularly with people, her answer annoyed him. Why was it whenever he asked a woman's opinion about another woman, he felt more baffled by the answer?

Chapter 11

“Time, which changes people, does not alter the image we have of them.”

—Marcel Proust 1897

Victoria stopped in the middle of the grand staircase, hand gripping the banister, and listened intently. The stairs and front hall were silent; no one was about. She felt terribly exposed nonetheless, more than if she wore only her petticoat. The ‘terry-cloth’ robe Janice had found enveloped her, warm and towel-soft, but her ankles and much of her calves were still bare for all to see, and underneath, just a ‘bra’ and ‘panties’ covered her, borrowed from the clothes Covington’s daughter left behind. They were strange and uncomfortable, obviously too small around, but too big in the bust. It raised any number of embarrassing questions. Yet, Janice insisted it was what these tradeswomen would expect. She wanted her corset. Turning her head, her hair brushed across her neck, the satin caress calming. The hot shower had been wonderful, the hair dryer a revelation. Only washed minutes ago, her hair was dry, tied in what Janice amusingly called as a ponytail.

She tiptoed down the stairs to the landing, and hip-hopped through the South Wing in the fuzzy, floppy slippers Janice had found for her. The tradeswomen from Tate and Winterspoon asked to meet on the first floor. It seemed the women were incapable of toting their samples upstairs. *Honestly!* From Janice’s directions, the clothiers were to meet her in the ‘sunroom.’ Apparently, like her uncle’s study, the most beautiful rooms had been converted into bedchambers.

The sunroom was easy to locate because the doors still had a ‘fanlight’ above them, bathing the hallway in a golden glow. The elegant semi-circle of window glass etched with climbing roses remained. At the doors, Victoria smiled as she admired it. It remained just as it had ... *three days ago.*

Kitty and she had shared many a contented coze with friends in what had been an arboretum. She longed for that familiarity, ached to talk to Kitty.

A wave of sorrow struck her, stealing her breath with its violence. She buried her face in her arms against the doorjamb and sobbed. Not only had she lost those she loved, now her home cruelly reminded her of that loss with the least provocation.

Victoria slowly came to herself, unsure of how long she'd been crying. She had fallen to her knees. Her sides ached and it required several ragged breaths to compose herself.

Wiping the tears away, she peered down the wide hallway, and seeing no one, stood. She immediately bent over and rubbed her calves. Her legs and underarms still tingled where she'd used the odd-shaped razor on them, and the nicks on her knee and ankles still stung.

Between Janice's response to her unshaven legs and arms, and Miss Montez's hairless limbs, Victoria decided they were social necessities along with the bra and panties. With Janice's tutoring, she had shaved in the hopes she could avoid any awkwardness with the clothiers this afternoon. In the future she resolved to concoct or find some hair remover. Women couldn't possibly practice such torture on a regular basis.

She stood and stretched her shoulders. The straps on the bra Janice had provided pinched. It felt indecent, nothing approaching the comfort and support of a corset. Why did undergarments always have to irritate one someplace? Shifts could wrinkle under the corset causing welts, but the bra felt like binding tape around her ribs.

Victoria pursed her lips at the thought and opened the doors into the room. Thankfully, neither the clothiers nor Janice had arrived. The hardwood floor shone brightly. The long skylight in the center of the ceiling remained, allowing the sunlight to warm the room.

The canopied bed made Victoria quirk her mouth with pleasure. It was a real tent bed. Stretching across most of the far wall, the series of French window opened out on an extensive brick patio and the South Garden beyond. Open or closed, the series of window doors made the room a part of the garden outside. Suddenly, she resolved to make this bedroom her own. After all, all of her future clothes would be here.

Janice came in and laid what appeared to be several colorful periodicals on the bed. Smiling, she turned and said, “You made it. Is everything okay, Miss?”

Victoria nodded, but raised an eyebrow at the use of ‘okay.’ Such an odd word. And Janice seemed to employ it with every other sentence.

Janice pointed to the materials on the bed. “I brought some of my magazines, there’s *Vogue*, *Grazia*, *Tatler*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Vanity Fair*. You might see some fashions you like while you wait. The clothiers just drove up.”

“Yes, thank you.” Victoria stepped closer. “Janice, do you wear trousers often?”

She grinned. “Trousers. I’d rather wear trousers than a dress any day.”

“So, women wear trousers in the summer?”

“Or shorts. Trousers more often in the winter.” Janice turned to leave. “Is there anything else you need?”

Victoria could only say ‘no’ and thanked her. She shuffled over to the bed in the too-large slippers. She spread out the thick magazines. Lord Covington had shown her the photographs hanging in the halls, but the vivid colors of the magazines were still overwhelming in their realism.

Many of the magazine covers displayed women wearing dresses with a shockingly low *décolletage*. All the covers contained the same kind of captions detailing clothes, personal grooming and intimate relations.

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“The Latest Fashions, runway to the sidewalk.”

“The Best Sex Ever—How to please your man.”

“Look Ten Years Younger—makeup tips of the professionals.”

“Summer Fun—What to wear and what to bare.”

The women’s magazines she had so avidly read, *Ackerman’s*, *La Belle Assemblée*, and *Lady’s Monthly Museum*, included fashions and articles, but with far different topics, such as scintillating biographies of women such as Emma Hamilton and Caroline Lamb or descriptions of the Lake country.

The current topics incited an indecent curiosity reminding her of her fourteenth summer. She had been searching the bookshelves in the library one June day for something to read. On a bottom shelf, behind the row of books, had been hidden two volumes, *The Medical Mirror; or Treatise on the Impregnation of the Human Female*, and *Fanny Hill; Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

Victoria had slipped down at night for several weeks to read the two books by candlelight. Both had been terribly licentious—and fascinating—but they had left her confused. The medical book stated emphatically women were indifferent to the embraces of a man, and many found them disagreeable. Yet the novel *Fanny Hill* had been filled with compelling, thoroughly embarrassing descriptions *and pictures* of the pleasures to be found in a man’s arms. She could never be sure how her mother and father viewed the issue, but she suspected it wasn’t the former opinion, no matter how scientific.

Unbeknownst to either, she had observed them kissing for extended periods of time more than once. Both seemed to enjoy the experience. She certainly remembered them smiling and laughing a great deal during such interludes.

It strained the imagination to think such things were discussed openly in the magazines. The views expressed in *Fanny Hill* had triumphed and been made public. She flipped

open *Vogue*, and immediately shut it. The page showed three women wearing bra and panties much as she was, boldly cavorting in the ocean surf with men wearing nothing more than panties! The caption read “The Hottest European Models and the Latest Swimwear.” Swimwear? Hot models? She closed her eyes, imaging them—or her—on the beach at Brighton and shivered.

When she was seventeen Uncle Reggie had taken her and Kitty to Brighton to go sea bathing. The bathing dresses they had worn covered them from neck to ankle. It was like wearing a wet tent, though she enjoyed swimming. She remembered seeing men bathing in the nude far down the beach. Both Kitty and she had been disappointed—very little could be discerned. And now?

The answer was patently obvious.

On another page, there were two naked women wrapped in each other’s arms. They gazed out at her from the page, daring her to criticize their nudity. She flipped the pages. Men, too, were shown stripped to the waist—and farther, with the forms of Roman gods. Some pages exhibited fully clothed people, others didn’t. Many of the tops were cut too short, exposing the midriff ribs to hip. One woman stood behind bottles labeled ‘Obsession.’ She wore a man’s shirt completely unbuttoned, exposing skin from throat to navel. The woman’s upper eyelids were painted a vibrant purple, her lips a bright red. Would she see this on London streets?

Victoria closed the magazines and slid them all under the pillows on the bed. Would she have to dress in such an exposed fashion? She pressed her forehead against the brass post, her thoughts whirling. She closed her eyes to quiet her mind.

The possibility of being fashionably exposed like the women in those magazines made her shiver in the sun-warm room. She couldn’t wear, she wouldn’t dare wear, many of the fashions displayed in those magazines. Would she still be

accepted in society? Or would she be an oddity, forced to live apart because of her antiquated modesty?

Victoria frowned. Was she too much a child of her day? *Her day*. It made her feel positively ancient. What would Mr. Dalton think if she wore modern clothes? She thought of him, and images of men and women cavorting in *Fanny Hill* made her eyes open wide. *What disturbing combinations!*

Someone knocked on the door.

Thrusting nervous hands in the robe pockets, Victoria took a deep breath and composed herself. She was going to find out what kind of woman she could be. She prayed they had brought clothes which actually covered a body.

“Come in.”

Janice entered and announced, “Mr. Tate and company.” Before she finished, in burst a slim gentleman dressed in shiny black shirt and trousers. A man? The two women following him were both dressed in bright blue trousers and white blouses. Victoria froze, mortified, bending at the knees to hide more of her bare calves.

Mr. Tate smiled at her, examining her like she was a horse being sold at Tattersall’s or Langhorn’s. He waved to the two women to hurry as they wheeled in several tall, metal trolleys, which they positioned around Mr. Tate, like risers on a stage. The trolleys had long poles across the top supporting dozens of hanging garments. The procession demanded Victoria’s attention. There were so many colors, all wrapped in a filmy, transparent material that rustled as the trolleys moved.

The little man stepped closer with a bright expression, holding out his hand, palm up. “You must be Miss Covington. Yes, you are just radiant, love. I think a ten—or perhaps without your bulky robe—an eight?” Both women nodded from among the trolleys. He pointed to one trolley. “For those American styles, size four or three.”

Victoria stared at the man, who seemed to flit about like a goldfinch, his blond mane of hair waving left and right with

his quick movements. He must have seen her befuddled expression because he reached over and took her unoffered hand, holding it high as though he meant to dance with her. Her raised arm pulled up the robe to bare even more of her limbs. Embarrassment made her face heat uncomfortably. She pulled her hand away and stared back at him.

“Oh, yes, an eight.” He took a bow and threw out his arms as though ending a play. “I am Ray Tate, but everyone calls me Mr. Ray.” Pointing a sweeping finger in the direction of the women still bringing in boxes, he said, “This is Denise, a marvelous hairdresser, and the dark-haired beauty is the incomparable Lacey. She will be doing your makeup and nails.” He took her hand again, eyeing her fingers, and squinted.

Victoria raised an eyebrow, freed her hand, and held it close. “Nails?”

“Yes, of course. We received the call yesterday reporting a full-blown emergency brewing here and a complete makeover was essential, though I can hardly call you an emergency, can I?” Small white teeth appeared, giving his face a feral mien. “No, no, you really are the perfect canvas for our art.”

Mr. Ray pulled a measuring tape out of his trousers pocket with a flourish. “Now, let’s get to measuring you, and then we’ll find something beautiful to match your lovely skin and eyes.” He came and took Victoria’s wrist. Raising her arm up, he started to lay the tape along it, but stopped. “Dearie, you will have to shed that puffy thing. I can’t get a decent measure over all that terry cloth.

She blinked, realizing what he was asking. Victoria stepped away and raised a hand when he attempted to follow with his tape, eyes on her tied robe sash.

“Are you a corsetiere?” The indecent stories about men who measured women for their corsets were infamous among her friends.

Mr. Ray stared at her for a moment and shook his head. “That sounds so space-agey, a corsetiere. I love it.” He laughed but shrugged. “I’m just going to measure you, love. I do this *all* the time.”

Victoria crossed her arms and shook her head. “Not with me, not this time.”

Mr. Ray *tsked*. “You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before, darling.”

“Then I am sure you will not miss viewing it today.”

“Well, honestly!” Mr. Ray turned to his two companions, hands on hips. The two women looked between him and Victoria, obviously surprised.

Victoria knew she must salvage this, but the man had to go.

“Mr. Ray, please forgive me. I am new to England and have lived a fairly ...” She hunted for a word. “... provincial life. I am terribly uncomfortable with the thought of you measuring me, uh, disrobed.”

“Well, love. When in Rome ...” He flourished a hand sporting several rings. “Now is the time to whisk away such pesky provincialism. You can dress in the bathroom, but we do need to measure you.”

“Not if it means having you in this room while it’s done. Please, Lacey and Denise can do the honors while you wait outside.”

Mr. Tate shook his long blond tresses in irritation and scowled at her, as though she were being extremely silly.

Victoria smiled, though she wanted to throttle the man, and stepped closer to him. His head topped hers by only a few inches, so it was easy to establish eye contact.

“Mr. Ray. You really are *gentil et doux au goût*, and even I have heard of your impeccable taste.” *More lies*. “I certainly wouldn’t want to be bereft of your talent, but I would much rather the ladies measure me, please. We will call you in as soon as they’re done.”

The man's expression softened with the French expressions for 'genteel' and 'sweet,' but he still didn't move toward the door.

Victoria pulled a sheet of folded paper from her robe pocket and opened it to show Mr. Tate. "While you wait, would you consider whether this hairstyle would suit?" She handed him the sheet with a woman's head drawn on it.

Mr. Ray glanced at it, then looked again. "You drew this?"

Victoria nodded. "I saw the hair style, uh, recently, and admired it, but didn't have a picture of it. I am sure you will know the name of the cut. I would value your opinion on the matter. I have worn my hair long all my life, but short curls seem the fashion today."

It appeared to mollify the man, but as he gazed at the drawing, he said, "This has an Enlightenment charm to it. You're quite the artist."

"Me? No, nothing more than what most gentle-born ladies can accomplish. I am horrid with watercolors."

Mr. Ray glanced at her with an odd expression but nodded. "All right, I'll consider this while you're being measured. Although," he said, glancing at the drawing, "this short style is called The Halo. It would mean cutting off all this lovely hair." He actually reached over and felt her ponytail.

She stepped away and eyed him sternly. "Mr. Ray."

He *tsked* again and flipped the outstretched hand. "I'll be right outside." He handed Denise the tape measure and left.

Denise and Lacey shared a smile after he shut the door. Victoria took off the robe and Denise started measuring her. Lacey wrote down the numbers, but said while gazing at the clipboard, as if she were telling secrets, "You know, Miss Covington, Mr. Ray is completely harmless, although I can understand your concern if this is the first time you've been professionally fitted."

Victoria held her tongue. From her experiences of being fitted, nothing about it had been professional so far. As Denise put the tape around her bust, Victoria asked, “Is it common practice for Mr. Ray to measure your women clients *déhabillé*?”

Denise nodded as she wrapped the tape around Victoria’s waist and read the number to Lacey. “Oh yes, but he’s totally gay, so it’s rarely an issue.”

Victoria frowned, unconvinced. With an occupation allowing him such liberties with women on a daily basis, no wonder he had a gay time of it.

The two ladies finished, and Victoria drew on her robe. Denise opened the door and Mr. Tate rushed in, the drawing fluttering in his hand. He stopped in the middle of the room, let the two women see the picture, and announced, “Love, I think this haircut is perfect for your face shape.” He motioned for the clipboard and receiving it from Denise, the prince accepting his due. He intently studied Victoria’s measurements.

Finally, he nodded, waving the women forward with a flick of the wrist and approached Victoria. “Well, love, are you ready to be transformed?”

~ ~ ~

Sam stopped at the great doors of Belton Park, set down his leather valise, and checked at his watch. Five forty-five. It had been an exhausting day, but he couldn’t wait until tomorrow to talk to Miss Covington. This afternoon, his people told him their preliminary research on her had come up empty, as though she didn’t exist. Pen’s evaluation of the woman while driving back to London this morning had bugged him all day. He’d come back to get some answers, even though it would be more than an hour driving back to London tonight.

He’d see Lord Covington about the lease timeline and confront Miss Covington alone. He suddenly realized the two of them might be preparing for dinner by now. It didn’t matter.

He needed to talk to her. He grabbed the metal doorknocker and banged away several times, booming sounds like thunder echoing inside.

As he buttoned his collar and tightened his tie, he wondered if Lord Covington would invite him to eat with them, not that he was hungry, but it would give him an opportunity to question the two about their stories. He shook his head. He seriously doubted Covington would invite him to dinner, though Miss Covington might suggest it out of politeness.

The mousy maid answered the door, the same one who had announced Pen and him this morning. She stuttered, “C-Come in” and quickly stepped back from the door. He raised an eyebrow. She always acted as though she expected him to sink his teeth in her arm.

“Is Lord Covington in?” Sam strode past her into house, his shoes tapping loudly on the Italian tiles.

“No, sir, but he’s planning to be home for dinner at seven.”

Sam smiled. “Janice, right?” She nodded quickly. “Is Miss Covington receiving visitors?”

The maid blinked several times, and then gave him an anxious frown, as though she’d been suddenly asked to hang from the chandelier. “Uh, she’s in the music room. If you’ll wait here, I’ll go see.”

Sam strode past her. “Don’t bother, Janice. I’ll find her.” The poor girl just rocked back on her heels, eyes round. As he crossed the hallway to the East wing, he heard a piano playing, the high ceiling of the hall making the music whisper from all directions, as though it, too, inhabited the mansion’s spirit. The echoing melody gave no hint as to direction, but he knew how to get to the music room.

The light runs of bright notes grew distinct as he neared the music room. He recognized the tune but didn’t remember the name of the classical piece. Sam stopped at the doorway, and peered in. At the far end of the room, behind the grand piano, a small woman sat playing intently. Her shoulders moved

gracefully back and forth in time with the music, her hands hidden by the black bulk of the instrument. Even across the room he could see her expression change with each measure she played.

It took him a moment to realize the curly-headed woman was Miss Covington. She wore a long-sleeved blouse with large flower designs in rich blues, white, and yellows. The front fell open enough to reveal a tan camisole underneath. The light, playful melody seemed to match her new look, notes dancing, only to hesitate on tiptoe at the end of a measure.

Sam smiled at the amazing transformation while he listened. Yet, he felt a weird sense of loss. In just a few days, he'd begun to think of her as 'the Regency miss.' Her long hair and the blue empire dress had seemed to be so much a part of her.

She softly finished the piece and flexed her slim fingers. Sam put down his valise and strode into the room. "Very nice."

Miss Covington jumped at his voice, one hand to her throat. "Mr. Dalton. You frightened the breath from me." She frowned hard at him as he approached. "You really should announce yourself, sir."

"I didn't want to interrupt you." He moved around to the side of the piano. "I see you did get some new clothes."

The blouse had a collar, which he liked, as it and the short hair accented her elegant neck and the aristocratic tilt of her head. "Very nice, though I'm sorry you cut off such beautiful hair."

Miss Covington studied his face for a moment. Sam assumed it was to determine if he were telling the truth. He grinned and shook his head at her for doubting him.

She gave him an annoyed squint at his silent reproof. "Thank you, Mr. Dalton."

Sam noticed she was wearing a little makeup, a subtle lipstick and some eye shadow. It made her all the more striking, particularly her blue eyes. Amazing. She blushed

when she realized he was studying her, which made him grin again.

Running her fingers over the piano keys, she said, “Short hair seems to be all the rage at the moment.” She put a hand to her curls and shrugged. “I enjoy the lightness. I never realized how heavy my hair was.”

“Well, the short hair is definitely cute.”

“Cute?” She frowned and cocked her head. “Does that mean you find it agreeable?”

Sam laughed. “Yes, absolutely.”

She didn’t move or say anything more.

“You’re uncomfortable with me because your uncle and I argued this morning.” It wasn’t a question. He grimaced when she remained silent. “Look. I apologize.”

She frowned at him for a moment, then shook her head. “No, Mr. Dalton, I am uncomfortable with you.”

“Now, don’t go detailing my failures as a gentleman again. I’ll admit them and keep them under wraps—temporarily.”

Her mouth twitched but said nothing.

“I have brought some things for you, but there’s no table to show them to you here. Perhaps we could move to the library or a study?”

Her cheeks grew pink. With a sigh, she stood and stepped away from the piano. The woman was wearing slacks. They were straight-legged and tan—a nice contrast to the colorful blouse. And they really showed off her figure. He almost whistled playfully, but her nervous fidgeting and lack of eye contact stopped him.

“You look marvelous.”

Her hands stilled, obviously uncomfortable with his approval, but she did offer a brief smile. Sam found himself fascinated by her changing expressions of chagrin. While she seemed pleased with the compliment, each tweak of an

eyebrow, every little twitch of her lips revealed subtle nuances of her feelings. He was surprised that a woman with such classically gorgeous features would have such an animated, expressive face. What could she possibly be embarrassed about?

Sam realized he was staring—again—so to ease her discomfort, he changed the subject and put his hand on the piano. “What were you playing?”

Her shoulders relaxed a bit. “Beethoven’s *Bagatelle* in A Minor.”

“What? I never heard of it, but I recognized the tune.”

“It’s also called ‘*Klavierstück für Elise*.’”

Sam was surprised. She pronounced the German effortlessly.

“You mean ‘*Für Elise*?’ She nodded hesitantly. “I haven’t heard your particular arrangement. I don’t care for much classical music, but I enjoyed that.”

She regarded him strangely. “It’s the only arrangement I am aware of.”

“An Indonesian version?” He was fishing, but he didn’t want to ask her about her origins outright. He enjoyed talking to her. He didn’t want to give her a reason to lie, at least not yet.

“No. It’s Lewis van Beethoven’s arrangement.”

“Who? Don’t you mean Ludwig von Beethoven?”

Frowning, she clasped her hands in thought. “Well, as long as he has lived in England, he’s been known as Lewis.” She blinked and quickly said, “I mean, *when* he lived in England. He affected a link to a noble family with the ‘von’, but everyone knew he was Dutch with a ‘van’ before his name. Happily, such pretensions do—did not affect his creative genius.”

“Regardless, you played it well.”

“Thank you. I don’t know many pieces on the pianoforte.” She flexed her fingers again and gestured toward the black instrument. “The keys are so large and far apart, I think I strained something.” She gave a wan smile. “Actually, the Welsh harp is my instrument.” She glanced at the bay window, which made Sam look, wondering if she expected to see a harp there.

“So, is there someplace where we can sit at a table while I show you what I have for you?” He motioned to his black valise sitting in the middle of the floor by the hall door.

“Yes, of course.” She walked to the wall and pulled a cord by the bookshelf before returning to stand by a sofa a good distance from him. The small couch sat oddly alone in the middle of the floor, facing the windows along the far wall.

Sam raised an eyebrow as she waited there, then grabbed the phone on the nearby lamp table. “Hello. Where can Miss Covington and I have a sit-down meeting?” He listened and then cupped the mouthpiece to ask, “Would you prefer tea or coffee?”

She mumbled in a dazed fashion. “Tea.”

He finished by saying, “Yes, tea. Thank you,” and hung up. When he turned back to Miss Covington, she had the oddest expression on her face as she stared at the phone.

“You honestly thought the bell cord still worked?”

“Of course.”

“Why bother when you have the telephone?”

“Oh, that’s a telephone.”

Sam put his hands on his hips. “Miss Covington, exactly where did you live in Indonesia?”

She hesitated, the color draining from her face. “I ... It had a different name.”

She was a worse liar than her uncle. “So, what’s it called in Indonesia?”

Chapter 12

“With us, acts are exempt from time, and we
Can crowd eternity into an hour,
Or stretch an hour into an eternity.
We breathe not by a mortal measurement,
But that’s a myst’ery.”

—Lord Byron, fallen angel Lucifer speaking in *Cain*, 1821

Miss Covington held her hands to her sides and closed her eyes, her fingers moving, one after another. She appeared to be counting. Finally, she opened her eyes. “Mr. Dalton, I ...” but stopped when she saw his face.

He had her. If he pushed, he could get the whole story right now.

Damn. He couldn’t stand seeing her frightened, but stalwart expression. It made him feel like ... *Shit.*

She began again, “Mr. Dalton, I must seem ...”

Disgusted with himself, he waved off the explanation. “Forget it. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” He marched over to retrieve his valise. “Janice said we could use your uncle’s study.” He motioned her to follow.

He waited for her at the doorway, but she just stood considering him, hands pensively clasped before her. Finally, she crossed the room to him. Her now composed expression, continued eye contact and flowing walk made his heart suddenly hammer against his sternum. As the distance between them closed, his imagination ran rampant. He could see her walking right into his arms. The stupid feeling returned with gale-force.

She stopped in front of him and offered a smile, which only partly compensated for his disappointed imagination. In a soft, contralto voice she said, “Thank you, Mr. Dalton.” Her blue

eyes held his. “You, sir, are in danger of behaving like a gentleman.”

“Uh.”

When he realized what sound he’d uttered, Sam pursed his lips. “Well, be warned, the urge doesn’t strike often.” He found her half-grin in response uncomfortably gratifying. “Shall we go? Do you know where we can find your uncle’s study?”

Miss Covington gave him an assessing glance, and then shook her head. “I guess you’ll have to lead the way.”

He wondered who was teasing whom. “It’s supposed to be near the library.” He stepped aside for her to pass and then followed her out.

They walked in companionable silence and found the study two doors down from the library. Sam set his valise on the low table which rested in the middle of a large sectional couch which curved around it. He sat down and pulled out two binders and a laptop computer. Victoria stood watching him.

He patted a spot beside him on the couch. “Sit down. You can’t see anything from over there.”

She frowned for a moment, but finally sat down several feet from where he’d indicated. He eyed her wryly and turned on the computer.

“I’ve downloaded all of the schematics for the manor.” She cocked her head, brows knitted.

“The files include the floor plans and grounds for Belton Park, both from what we’ve found from the early eighteenth-centuries and the current blueprints. I’ve listed my thoughts about what needs to be done in the same file.” Pointing to the binder on the table, he said, “This has all the file names and materials and the other, the manuals for the laptop programs. I’ve also listed what I need from you on a separate page. You have a company email address now. This laptop has a WiFi connection to the house server, so you can email me whenever you need to.”

He slid the binders over to her. She ignored them, her eyes never leaving the now-lit computer screen.

The screen displayed a kaleidoscope of photos comprising Dalton properties flashing the Dalton Developments name. He punched a key and the screensaver disappeared, replaced by another screen, a panorama of Chicago centered on the Hancock skyscraper. He sat back and waited, but Miss Covington, simply gaped at the laptop.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” Her voice squeaked. “Nothing, nothing at all.” Her expression didn’t change.

“I can’t believe you’re a technophobe.”

“A what?”

“Are you one of those folks who are frightened of computers?”

“Frightened?” she said, as she considered the machine. “Why should a person be frightened?”

“Exactly,” he said approvingly and pointed to the laptop. “This one’s yours.”

“Mine?” She pulled her eyes away from the computer screen and turned her shoulders to face him. “You are going to give this to me?”

“It’s the company’s. It should make your work a lot easier.”

She held her arms rigid against her body, hands clenched together over her heart. “Mr. Dalton, I don’t know how to operate ... that.”

“At all?” He didn’t hide the incredulous tone in his voice.

“At all,” she admitted, biting her lip.

Stunned, Sam tried to imagine what she’d been through in the past to leave her so ignorant of technology while otherwise displaying a sophisticated knowledge of the arts, languages

and history. Seeing her apprehension, he leaned toward her. “Tough day?”

“W-What?” She cocked her head questioningly, a tear escaping down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away.

“Difficult day today?”

She gazed at him oddly for a moment, then nodded and took a handkerchief out of her pants pocket to dab her face. When she’d finished, she sat up straight, holding the handkerchief in her lap. “Today has been excessively trying, Mr. Dalton. Thank you for the gift.”

“You make it sound like a death sentence.”

There was a flicker of a smile in response, but she said nothing.

He turned his shoulders to face her, laying his arm on the back of the couch. “Look. It’s similar to playing a piano, only these keys,” Sam said, indicating the laptop keyboard, “make letters, words and pictures on the screen instead of music. You can call up information. Learning the piano is much more difficult.” He hesitated, but added, “Although, you can play some music with this too.”

Miss Covington tilted her head and eyed him sideways, like a cat deciding whether to jump in someone’s lap. A little smile wavered on her lips even though another tear threatened to run down her cheek.

He took his arm off the back of the couch and put his hands on his knees. “Come over here and I’ll show you.” Sam positioned the laptop so both of them could see the screen, if she moved closer.

Slowly, she scooted next to him, and examined the computer with her hands on her knees too. Sam realized this was the closest he’d ever been to her—and he liked it. He could smell lavender and roses. Shoulder to shoulder, she was so small compared to him, but very substantial, very real. She seemed to radiate an energy that left him tingling all along his

side. As she sat there, she appeared to relax, while he felt his senses begin to vibrate.

Shyly, she glanced at him and gestured to the computer. “So, Mr. Dalton, what should I attempt first?”

~ ~ ~

Lord Covington was late for dinner. His solicitors had so many questions and documents to review in preparing for the lease. He was anxious to see how Victoria had fared with Mr. Tate and company. Concern flared when Janice informed him Mr. Dalton was with her in the study.

As he approached the opened doors, he heard laughter, male and female, and drew his brows together. He peered into the room. Facing him, Dalton sat beside Victoria, dwarfing her, their heads together as she worked the keyboard of the laptop. She was peering hard at the screen, biting her lip. Her short curls framed her face, her eyes as bright as the colors of her blouse.

He hardly recognized her. She was suddenly a child of the modern world. Regret struck deep, and he wanted to shout, “NO!” Hiding in the hall, back against a wall, he squeezed his eyes shut. He knew she must learn how to be a twenty-first century woman—and quickly. And he wanted to help her. It was just ... He pulled out his pipe and began filling it with more effort than success.

He'd hoped to enjoy her company as family from ages past, a representative of a fascinating time, just a little while longer. He saw her as such a magical gift, so special, as a balm for his loneliness. But in only a few days, Miss Covington was already being taken away, suddenly and irrevocably—like winning the National Lottery only to have the government confiscate it. He feared a modern “Tory” would replace Regency's Victoria, becoming little different from his daughter.

He finally lit his pipe and, puffing vigorously, thought of his daughter, why Roxanne left, and why he'd let her.

Victoria's laughter floated into the hall, filling him with sudden awe. Her courage astounded him. After just three days, after losing everything she knew, coping with an unimaginable world, she could still laugh. Old regrets blossomed, an ache in his chest. He had only lost his wife, Amanda, and in so many ways he'd given up. Shame also intensified the pain. He hadn't had the courage to carry on, even to comfort his only daughter when she needed him. Compared to Victoria, he was the worst of cowards.

He'd failed Roxanne, and he didn't know what he could do about it, but he wasn't going to fail Victoria. Standing away from the wall, he straightened his coat and entered the study.

Covington saw Victoria push a key with her forefinger and the first notes from a piano rendition of *Für Elise* filled the room. She gasped and sat back, a hand over her mouth. She saw him standing in the doorway and broke into a wide smile. "Do you hear? It is absolutely astounding." She listened intently for a moment. "And it is so perfectly played."

Mr. Dalton also smiled, obviously enjoying her enthusiasm for the electronic miracle, but his smile faded. After a moment, Lord Covington realized Mr. Dalton was staring behind him ... The painting!

Mr. Dalton left the couch and marched over to the framed portrait. "Who's that?"

Lord Covington saw the panicked expression on Victoria's face and waved a hand low to reassure her. He stood beside Dalton and together they gazed at the large portrait on the wall. Leaning forward, Dalton read the brass plate on the frame. "Victoria Ann Covington, 1815. Painted by John Constable." He glared over his shoulder at Victoria for a moment and back to scowl at Lord Covington. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

Chapter 13

“Time is just one damn thing after another.”

—Sam Dalton, 2019

“Well?” Sam demanded, pointing at the painting. “Are you going to tell me this is just some weird coincidence?” He clenched and unclenched his fists. *Damn!* He glared at the painting, knowing why there was no record of a Victoria Ann Covington. The schemer had simply created a fake person. He frowned at the implausible portrait. It looked *old*. How could it be so like *this* Victoria behind him if painted in 1815?

“Mr. Dalton.”

Sam pulled his eyes away from the portrait.

Covington stood puffing on his pipe in a furious manner, his face red, his brows smashed together, nearly hiding his eyes. He took his pipe out of his mouth and regarded its bowl, calmly saying, “There’s nothing coincidental about it.”

“Really?” Sam pointed back at Victoria. “You admit you and she concocted this?” He did a double take at the empty couch. Miss Covington was gone. *Damn it to hell!* Sam planted his hands on his hips and glowered at the floor, disgusted with the situation, disgusted with his angry outburst.

Even so, this smelled like a scam, but there didn’t seem to be any benefit to be gained, all the odd demands and behaviors. Selling Belton Park, ‘take the money and run,’ would have been any normal con. This weirdness made him even madder and more suspicious.

He faced Covington, hands still on his hips. “What the hell are you playing at here? First, you throw demand after demand at me, suddenly changing the sale to a lease, because of your niece, and *then* add bizarre amendments just for her.” His right hand shot out to point at the painting. “And now this.” He glowered down at the older man. “Nobody plays me.” He

stormed over to the coffee table and began throwing things into his valise.

Covington watched him for a moment, and said, as though all was still quite civil and reasonable, "Mr. Dalton, why don't you come with me, and I'll explain."

Sam didn't move as the old man walked out of the study. "Covington," he growled in a warning tone.

Covington poked his head back in the doorway, seemingly uncertain before Sam's anger, but he finally crooked a finger and said, "Come, come. You'll see."

Sam blew out an angry breath. He wanted to hear Covington's explanation. He wanted a rationale, any excuse which would justify his concluding the deal for Belton Park. More, he wanted to believe Miss Covington wasn't a charlatan, wasn't mental.

He hated his weakness. He knew, if he weren't careful, Covington and his niece could cheat him. It's what too many people did when money was involved.

He followed Covington down the main hall and back to the grand staircase. At the top of the stairs, Covington turned right. When they reached the arched entrance to the west wing, he flipped on the overhead lights, which revealed an enormous hall with a chandeliered ceiling twenty feet high. The wide chamber seemed to extend forever. Tall windows ran the length of the outer wall. The inner wall to the left was nearly hidden by dozens of paintings, of various sizes, several feet high to miniatures, all portraits.

Covington tapped his pipe on a nearby ashtray which graced the center of a little lamp table. He gestured to the long line of paintings. "Inspect them. You will find seven Victorias, five Anns, and a whole host of family here. And I'm sure with scant effort you'll see several women who bear a striking resemblance to Victoria and the portrait downstairs."

Sam hiked down the hall, gazing at the many faces staring down at him. More than one set of eyes seemed to follow him

accusingly.

Covington ambled behind him, packing his pipe with tobacco. "I would be surprised if you *didn't* see a resemblance between the portrait downstairs and Miss Covington. She is family, after all." He stopped and re-lit his pipe, filling the air with pungent smoke.

Sam paused and studied one portrait of a fresh-faced young man wearing a white wig, broad hat, and yards of lace. He could easily have been Miss Covington's brother and appeared equally benign. Sam let go a heavy sigh, facing Covington, feeling the fool. The man stood waiting, his shaggy mustache fluttering as he puffed on his pipe. He seemed harmless too.

The family similarities in appearance were a clever rationalization, but it didn't explain enough. The portrait conveyed too much of Miss Covington, the exotic, almond shape of her eyes, the soft smile with the same sculpted lips, and the inquisitive tilt to her head. It was her. He'd bet the company jet on it. The painting even flaunted the star-shaped pendent she habitually wore. He was trapped in a hall of mirrors. Rubbing the back of his neck, Sam determined to dig until he got to the bottom of this mystery. Eyeing Covington, he decided he should start with some repositioning.

"Look. I apologize for accusing you and Miss Covington just now." The silence which settled between them seemed heavy with age, thick with the emotional weight of the centuries of ancestors gazing down on them. For some strange reason, the odd sensation relaxed him. He had no trouble waiting for Covington's response.

"Apology accepted," he said, pipe wiggling in his mouth. "I imagine it was a shock to see a two-hundred-year-old portrait of my niece." He measured Sam with an intent expression. "But Miss Covington is the one to whom you should apologize."

Sam nodded, his face tingling, mortified. "Yes, I will." When he didn't say more, Covington nodded too, turning to gaze at the paintings.

Sam studied the man for a moment, and then walked over to him. “Lord Covington, while I was wrong to react as I did, I find myself hard-pressed not to suspect some kind of hoax. It’s a problem, and only you can help me.”

Clearly annoyed, Covington eyed him for a moment. “I will if I can.” Before Sam could reply, Covington motioned him to follow as he turned and strode down the hall, his steps echoing among the faces of the long dead.

Sam caught with him when he reached the stairs. As they descended together, he said, “This is my problem. It has several parts. First, our Miss Covington doesn’t exist. My people can’t find one scrap of information on her.”

Covington stopped puffing on his pipe and harrumphed. “Sir, if you’re suggesting ...”

“Second, her uncle has no siblings, no nieces. The third part is your patently absurd story, claiming she’s from Indonesia and entered England illegally.”

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Covington stood in the hall and waved his pipe in the air like a sword. “Now, see here, you can’t ...”

“Save it, *my lord*. It isn’t going to fly. If you want my help with her papers, you’d better give me some idea of what’s going on. Otherwise, the deal’s off right here and now.” Sam paused at the bottom of the staircase and leaned an arm on the walnut newel post. Covington seemed to shrink into himself. He gazed at the tan and blue tile floor as though he were evaluating the glaze designs.

“Well?” Sam asked.

Covington took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Sam raised an eyebrow, wondering what it was about the British and their rituals with pipes and handkerchiefs.

“You’re quite right. Victoria is not from Indonesia. I am all the family she has left. She was raised in England under very,

shall we say, peculiar circumstances.” He peeked out from under his bushy eyebrows to see Sam’s reaction.

“Go on.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you more, other than she’s been through more than most people could comprehend, let alone endure.”

Covington started walking toward the study. “I simply want to see her happy without her past ruining her life.”

Sam followed and caught the man’s elbow. “So why doesn’t she have a birth certificate, or any medical records? Is Victoria Ann her real name?”

Covington jerked his arm away. “Mr. Dalton, it is her real name, but she has no papers or records of any kind. They were all lost or destroyed.”

“That’s not good enough.”

Covington stopped in the hall and glared at him. “I can say no more. Whatever past she is going to have will have to be invented, with or without your help. If it means calling off our agreement—so be it.”

Sam looked hard at the man and waited. *Fascinating. He is serious.* Covington would throw tens of millions of pounds out the window rather than reveal anything more about his fake niece. Sam absently stroked his chin, imagining what *that* meant.

“Is Miss Covington disabled in some way, abused as a child, the daughter of a mass murderer? Is she some monstrous skeleton in the Covington closet?” When there was no response, frustrated, Sam slapped his thigh. “Covington, I’m trying to understand, but I can’t think of anything which explains—or justifies— this.”

Before Sam finished, Lord Covington had hunched his shoulders in a bulldog stance. “There is *nothing* wrong with my niece, physically or otherwise. She’s an intelligent and well-bred young woman, who’s had a-a culturally deprived

childhood perhaps, but certainly not unhappy.” He took a step toward Sam. “I won’t stand for ...”

“Neither will I. No one will be able to trace her fake passport or papers back to me—just you and her.” Sam squared his shoulders and hardened his voice. “And the contracts are written so you two will be in a world of legal trouble if either of you create complications, with the lease or her work as a consultant.”

“*How dare you!* To suggest we’re out to cheat you,” Covington roared, hollering, “chuffing bloody hell,” while stomping back and forth in front of Sam. “You come into my house and bully everyone, dicker abdominally, impugn my good name, and *now* my family.”

Sam continued to rest against the newel post, watching Covington’s indignant tirade with a raised eyebrow. The man seemed sincere, and Sam was learning some new words. Satisfied—and relieved—he’d learned what he needed to know. Whatever the puzzling origins of Miss Covington’s cultural and technological ignorance, her relative was willing to trash the deal to protect her past. While their relationship remained vague at best, he didn’t see anything but a familial concern for Victoria.

“Okay, okay,” Sam said, holding out his hands in surrender. “I apologize!” Covington stopped in mid-sentence and glared at Sam. “Understand, I’ve been buying properties for a decade, dealt with business games and scams of all kinds, but I’ve *never* run into any transaction this bizarre.”

“Obviously. This is England, not Chicago. We aren’t some American business out to rob you, even if we don’t understand business as well as you do. You Americans have the junk bond sales and billion-dollar Ponzi schemes. You won’t find them here.”

Sam grinned wryly. “Okay, if you’ll forgive my suspicions, I’ll deliver Miss Covington’s I.D. and fabricate a personal history.” He stopped to lock eyes with Covington. “But I expect the rest of the papers to be signed tomorrow morning.”

Covington glowered at him a moment longer and gave a quick nod. He held Sam's gaze, still incensed. Sam could see where England's squat, round 'John Bull' character came from. The cartoon could have been modeled on Covington.

"Terrific. Now, I should go find Miss Covington and apologize before I head back to London."

Covington eyed him intensely for a moment. With an irritated edge to his voice, he said, "I won't have you testing her in the manner you just did me. Do you understand?"

With a start, Sam turned to him and slowly smiled. He appreciated Covington's astute, if unexpected conclusion. From Covington's open-mouthed expression, the smile of approval had taken him by surprise too. "I wouldn't think of it," Sam said with a dismissive shake of his hand. "No arguments, no testing, just an apology, and I'm out of your hair."

Covington straightened his wool sweater and paused when Sam didn't say any more. He measured Sam for a moment, a deep frown bunching his brow. "Why drive back tonight? Come have dinner with us. Stay the night, and you can meet your lawyers here to sign the papers tomorrow."

Sam did feel drained. It'd been a tough day all around, including several apologies and one to go. However, Covington's offer was quite a reversal. Sam had never seen him as angry as he'd been moments before. He leaned over a bit to catch Covington's eye. "You sure?"

Covington puffed on his pipe rapidly, his forehead pensively wrinkled. "You have been asked to do some things you have every right to question." He lit his pipe. "I think we need some time to mend hedges if we are to trot along amicably—as we will have to after the lease is signed." He raised an eyebrow. "Don't you agree?"

Sam straightened and smiled. There was something to be said for the social niceties of the British. "Thank you. Yes." He swung his arms wide, clapping his hands together, and glanced

around. “So, do you know where Miss Covington might’ve gone?”

~ ~ ~

Victoria stomped across the sunroom, alternating between frustration and tears of embarrassment. *Lord, she was tired of the tears.* She felt so flattened by Mr. Dalton’s vulgar reaction to the painting. Escaping to her room was cowardly but she couldn’t face one more humiliation, one more reason to fabricate lies about herself, one more wall between her and the rest of the world—between her and Mr. Dalton.

With a sharp, angry “Ooh,” she beat her thigh with her fist. She halted by the corner of the bed and rested her forehead against the cool brass post. *How could anything be repaired now?* For every step forward in this new world, she fell back three.

All day, people conspired to confuse and discomfit her, and Mr. Dalton proved the worst offender. She glanced at her fawn-colored trousers and huffed. He was a maddening conundrum of a man. He caught her with the telephone in the music room, and on the brink of disaster, unexpectedly became all that is considerate. She wrinkled her nose. And then the portrait. The house remained a maze of traps, each capable of exposing her, proving her a fool or worse.

Why Mr. Dalton had become such a charming, patient teacher as she fumbled with his computing machine was beyond her ken. The uncanny contraption was magic, bewildering in its capabilities, yet he made her attempts to manipulate it an entertaining adventure.

She’d felt so comfortable with him. His nearness had created a warm excitement she had found quite pleasant—and curious. For her, it was a singular experience.

She pursed her lips. Suddenly, he goes to alt, quarrelling with Lord Covington, and holding her guilty of base deception because of her portrait. *And she was guilty of deception,* every time she opened her mouth, so why shouldn’t he doubt her?

His suspicions hurt all the same. Victoria bit her lip, trying to control the tightness in her throat.

For the umpteenth time, she scratched her ribs where the bra continually rubbed her. “Oh, for the love of heaven!” Pulling up her shirt and camisole for better access, she scratched in a most unladylike fashion and sighed with relief. But the bra would itch again, she knew. *What an invention.*

She scanned all the clothes she’d chosen, now hanging in the closet, thinking. She had no desire for company now, and with these modern clothes, she could dress and button herself. “Why not?” she asked aloud. The blasted bra could—and should—go. She pulled the shirt and camisole off and undid the bra with some effort, tossing it on the bed. After scratching some more, she put her clothes back on without the bra.

Victoria smiled. The camisole felt the same as fine linen against her skin. Even in her room alone, it felt so risqué, but terribly freeing to be wearing the light clothes without any undergarments *as well as* wearing men’s trousers. *Who would have imagined it?* She strolled over to the open French doors.

Folding her arms under her breasts, she leaned against the doorframe and admired the foliage dotting the brick patio. Someone had cleverly placed urns about, each bursting with petunias, lavender, and peonies.

She loved the numerous French windows at Belton Park, particularly in the sunroom, though it seemed they were called ‘French doors’ now. The windowpanes reflected the garden colors and last golden light from the setting sun.

A knock on the hall door interrupted her reverie.

“The devil in it!” She didn’t want to see anyone, including Janice. Taking a deep breath, Victoria called out across the room, “Come in,” keeping her back to the bedroom door.

She heard the door open, but no sounds of anyone entering the bedroom. Without looking, she said impatiently, “Come *in.*” There were steps on the wood floor and then silence. She couldn’t believe the girl’s reticence. “Janice, please inform

Lord Covington I will forego dinner tonight. I haven't the appetite."

"Well, he and I will be disappointed."

Victoria whirled around, mouth open in shock. There *he* stood, a few steps in from the doorway. "Mr. Dalton, please leave."

"I understand why you're mad at me. I—"

"Confound it, Mr. Dalton. *Here*"—her hand swept the bedroom—"You should not be *here*."

He scowled, but after a moment, he tried to smile. "You know, I made a similar comment to Lord Covington when he invited me to dinner." Shrugging when his humor failed, he said, "You did invite me in."

Victoria gave him a speaking glance for suggesting she would knowingly ask him in. "Does my uncle know you are here?"

"Yes. He thought I might find you here."

He did? Shoulders set, she pointed with a rigid arm at the door behind him. "Leave my bedroom at once!" He'd forced her to say it, to admit it was her bedroom he'd entered.

The scowl was back. With a cock of his head, he asked, "Is there something wrong, Miss Covington?"

"Wrong?" She bristled. "Wrong!" Her eyes narrowed as he glanced at the bed and the bra lying there. She felt her face prickle. *The man is insufferable.* "You invade my bedroom, and you have the temerity to ask what's wrong?" When there was no response, she stomped her foot. "Sirrah, I insist you leave."

He glowered in a frightening fashion for a moment, then his eyebrows shot up in understanding. "Oh, I shouldn't be in your bedroom." His sarcastic half-grin called her prim and missish. "Well, that's easily corrected." He sauntered out, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Victoria sagged against the doorframe, hand to her forehead. What had Covington been thinking to have Mr. Dalton seek her out in her bedroom? Was Dalton such a mongering cad?

It was hopeless. The painting and now this. There could be no social connection with Mr. Dalton after this, not after compromising her in such a fashion. The servants must know, and with them the rumors would grow. Victoria rubbed her temples. What reputation she might have shaped would shortly be beyond repair. In one fell stroke, he rendered all their plans for naught. This was a beastly end to an exceedingly reprehensible day.

She could feel the tears coming again and took out her handkerchief. It was still damp. She smoothed the lace out, so the embroidered VAC showed and ran her fingers over the tight stitching. After a shuddering breath, she bit her lip, thinking she should really see about making some more handkerchiefs if her life was going to be so ...

“Is this better, Miss Covington?”

Startled, she threw her handkerchief in the air. Mr. Dalton stood outside, at the garden end of the patio, by a flowering azalea, appearing pleased with himself. Victoria quickly retrieved the handkerchief and wiped her eyes. She crossed her arms in an attempt to hold herself together and remain discreet.

Breathless, she managed to say, “Mr. Dalton, you *must* announce yourself.” She had to squint because the sun was behind him, a halo of orange around his body as he stood eyeing her with a frown.

“Announce myself. I see.” He obviously didn’t.

“Yes, you should have Janice inform me of your desire to speak with me, and I would come to you in the study or parlor.”

After a momentary frown, he turned and gazed out over the garden. “Very nice.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I can see why you might prefer this to dinner,” he said, an edge to his

voice. “The view here is far more attractive than one with only me and Lord Covington across the table.”

Head down, she whispered, “Please stop.”

“What?”

She balled her fists at his imprudent persistence. “Please stop taunting me. I do not wish to trade words with you anymore.” She closed her eyes briefly and pressed her lips together before saying, “Would you be so good as to leave. Now.”

Mr. Dalton studied her with his arms folded across his chest. He didn’t say anything immediately, which made her feel exposed, afraid he could see through what few clothes she wore, see through her lies. After his disturbing invasion of her bedroom, and now this, she felt she could hardly trust his intentions. She held herself tighter, ready to run inside the bedroom and lock her doors.

Finally, he said, “I wasn’t taunting you, but I’ll stop, if you will.”

“What?” Victoria blinked and closed her eyes again. Heavens, she was exceedingly weary of those ‘what’s.’ When he didn’t answer, she stood away from the door, but it required so much energy. She felt like an empty casket, drained of all spirit. She repeated, “What are you talking about?”

“Why don’t you come sit down?” He motioned to one of the iron lounge chairs. “Please.” The stuffed, rose-colored cushions covering them were inviting, and she was so exhausted. But she shouldn’t.

Chapter 14

“Time is the moving image of eternity.”

—Aristotle

Mr. Dalton sat down on a chaise lounge. “I promise I won’t move from here.” He added an inviting smile and pointed to the lounge chair across from his. “Please.”

The black-framed garden furniture all faced out toward the garden. He put his feet up, crossed his legs, and relaxed against the reclined cushions, hands behind his head. A wry glance her way made it clear he thought she would be a silly miss not to do the same.

With a shuddering sigh, she sat on the nearest lounge chair, arms crossed and back straight. He didn’t say anything, but smiling, he eyed her until she too reclined on her lounge chair. She kept her arms crossed in front of her.

He settled deeper into the cushions. “Now, isn’t this better?”

“Mr. Dalton, why do you persist in ...”

He held up a hand. “Me first.”

She glared out at the garden. “By all means.”

“I came to apologize for the scene in the study. My behavior was uncalled for, and I am very sorry.” When she didn’t respond, he added, “Your uncle accepted my apology, and I have hopes you will too.”

Victoria gritted her teeth. “Mr. Dalton, it matters little whether or not I excuse your behavior in the study, when your behavior moments ago was inexcusable.”

“*Inexcusable?* How so?”

The question stunned Victoria with its arrogance. She opened her mouth to ring a peal over him when she saw his face. There was an expression of such genuine curiosity, she forgot what she meant to say.

“At your invitation, I was just standing in the doorway. I wasn’t climbing into your bed.”

His exasperation was evident in his tone, but she still didn’t know what to make of it. Further mortification appeared imminent, jangling her nerves.

“You did say ‘come in’.”

She glared at him. Only cads of her acquaintance had slyly whispered of her bedroom—or any bed—in her presence, never mind *entering* a lady’s chambers. Victoria raised her brows. Never before had she been alone with a man in such confusing or compromising circumstances.

As though he were reading her mind, he said, “I’ve been in both men’s and women’s bedrooms without even a hint of impropriety or complaint.” Scandalized, Victoria stared at him, appalled at his confession and the implied situations. She could feel herself blanch as her imagination filled in the details.

“With permission, of course and of course, a completely platonic adventure for the most part.” He shrugged. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, still reclining on the lounge. “My earlier lapse isn’t the cause of your stomping fit just now.”

“My *what?*”

He grinned at her outrage and rolled over on his side, leaning his head on his arm against the lounge chair. “I’ll tell you what. I promise to stop arguing with your uncle and accusing you two of trying to trick me if you’ll agree to stop finding reasons to be angry with me.”

Through clenched teeth, she said, “And what kind of cork-brained compact is that? My part would seem wholly dependent on *you* behaving.”

There was a pause, and then a burst of laughter, which made her turn her head to eye Mr. Dalton. His reaction left her mystified, his laugh deep and genuine. He was lying on his

back again, grinning at the sky. His red tie was loosened and his coat open, revealing an uncommon amount of white shirt.

An unexpected thought crossed her mind. She realized she had rarely seen any gentleman in just his shirtsleeves, even her father. Victoria closed her eyes, irritated at her meandering thoughts. She felt as lost as a motherless lamb in this impossible situation.

“What is so amusing, Mr. Dalton?”

“You.” He grinned at the incensed shake of her head. After a moment, he toned down his delight with a quiet smile. “You’re right. If I behave myself, you’ll probably find it easy to do the same. Truce?”

“A truce is unnecessary, sir, as I have never been at war with you.” She continued to feel uncomfortable under his gaze. She sat up and held her arms over her chest, hands clasped under her chin. Studying him from the corner of her eye, she said, “I find you a most perplexing creature—in the extreme. You dance blithely across the bounds of propriety and common courtesy without a thought or care. I am at a loss to know what to expect.”

There was a chuckle in his voice when he replied, “And I find you perplexing and unexpected as well, Miss Covington, with your strict code of conduct and unexpected rules of etiquette. I had no idea I was so ignorant of ‘propriety’ until I met you.”

Victoria frowned hard. There it was—he had given voice to the invisible gulf separating her from him. She felt her unparalleled isolation, complete and without precedent, a sudden blow to the chest.

How could it be all she knew of decorum was now summarily ignored by society? Were Mr. Dalton’s transgressions now only in her mind? She sat up and brought her knees close against her chest, as though she could shield herself against such thoughts.

She spoke carefully. “Mr. Dalton, I realize our circumstances are very dissimilar. I am sorry if I have placed exploded expectations upon you.”

“Exploded?”

She sighed. “Out of fashion, *démodé*.”

One eyebrow lifted as he considered her words, which made her even more self-conscious. Fidgety, as tightly strung as a harp string, she stood, arms held stiff across her chest, and walked to the edge of the patio. The sweet smells of honeysuckle and jasmine hung heavy in the air where the plants climbed the stone on both sides of the patio. The low sun, gold through the trees, did not warm her.

With her back to him, she said, “Mr. Dalton, I may seem a stickler for addled manners and morals, and perhaps I am, but I do not see that as sufficient reason to continually doubt my motives concerning your lease agreement with my uncle. You seem a most committed grumbletonian.” She pursed her lips, knowing her impulsive judgment would not be understood. There would be another blasted ‘what?’

He did not disappoint. “A what?” His tone suggested he found her behavior quaint and entertaining.

He was laughing at her again. Exasperated beyond endurance, she whirled around, fists tight, her arms rigid against her sides. “You are the most suspicious man, constantly searching for the wicked in everyone when you aren’t mocking them.” She gasped, realizing what she’d done and covered her chest with her arms. Mr. Dalton’s raised eyebrows made it evident he understood—had seen—the import of her actions. She spun around, horrified.

There was a long silence behind her. She couldn’t imagine what he might be thinking of her, of doing now. She held herself tight to keep from trembling. Finally, he approached, the scrape of leather soles on brick jarring. She froze when he stepped behind her. She could feel the heat of his body.

“It is getting cold out here, isn’t it?” A heavy, citrus-smelling material settled around her shoulders. It was his coat.

Like the most circumspect gentleman, he was giving her a way to cover herself without broaching her embarrassment. She pursed her lips in consternation. He was the most confounding ... “Thank you, I was a bit chilled.”

Her eyes went wide, realizing he was now in just his shirtsleeves, inches away, and she wanted to see him so. Victoria bit her lip and pulled the coat tight around her to avoid acting on the sudden desire. This whole state of affairs was far outside her notions of polite behavior. His actions now couldn’t be the norm, could it? She had to say something.

“Mr. Dalton, why do you insist on believing we are out to hoodwink you?”

From behind and above her, the rich timbre of his voice seemed to reverberate through her whole body. “Hoodwink,” he said with a chuckle. “Now there’s a word I haven’t heard in a long time.” There was a moment of silence with a deep exhale of breath, which ruffled her hair in a most disturbing fashion.

“My parents were killed in a car accident in my last year of college. My younger brother Pete was crippled.” He paused abruptly but continued a moment later.

“The girl who caused the wreck was drunk at the time, but she had a rich daddy who owned a big development firm. He sued my brother and me, claiming the accident was my father’s fault, that he was suicidal and had purposely tried to kill himself and our family.” The pain she heard in his voice sounded sharp and deep, but why was he revealing this to her now?

“They hired the best lawyers to lie for them. Our and their insurance companies, seeing an opportunity to avoid paying the large settlements due us, refused any legal aid and would not pay until ‘fault’ was determined.

“They thought they could get away with it because a twenty-one-year-old college student would be easy to squash.” Unsatisfied outrage simmered in his words. “Since then, I find being ‘suspicious’ a safer and more realistic approach to business, to life.”

Victoria could only guess what a car accident was, but it sounded dreadful. “I’m sorry. I know the pain of such loss. My parents were both killed in a carriage accident.” She realized what she’d said. A stab of fear shot through her.

“A carriage?” After a moment, he cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to hear that. Were your parents Quaker or Amish or did they have a carriage for sport?”

“What? No, no they weren’t Quaker. Staunch Church of England Anglicans.” She wasn’t sure why he’d asked that of all things.

“Well, they sound very old-school.” He said it lightly, and his hands went to her shoulders. “Are you warm enough?”

She said “yes” though the pressure of his hands made her shiver. He was touching her, and he shouldn’t without permission, but all she wanted to do was to close her eyes and lean against him—have him say everything would turn out pat and perfect. Instead, she asked, “What happened?”

“I sold our home to fight them. A good deal went for Pete’s hospital stay and rehabilitation. I bought and sold some properties, an insignificant shopping mall, in an effort to turn a quick profit. I did well enough to form Dalton Developments.

“The suit dragged on. Four years after the accident, I bought out rich daddy’s company, sacked him and sold off the parts. The insurance companies were quick to settle when I started buying up their stock.” His voice took on a lethal bite.

This whole conversation disturbed her, his revenge, this awkward state of affairs between them, even though she wanted his explanation. Would he presume an unwarranted intimacy because of it? She had no idea, so she chewed her lip nervously.

In the ensuing quiet, she could sense his anger at the world like an icy wind on her arms. She rubbed them distractedly and asked, “So, it is wiser to distrust everyone?”

“Yes, particularly where money is concerned.”

There was an iron taste to his words, and she needed to dispel the tension in the air.

“You had your revenge and emerged victorious. What do you live to conquer now?”

He remained silent for what seemed ages, but when he finally spoke, there was a defensive humor in his voice. “Are you making fun of me, Miss Covington?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps a little. I wanted to unfurl your frown, to lighten your mood.”

“I see. And how did you know I was frowning with your back to me?”

“I felt it, Mr. Dalton, I heard it.”

“Hmmm.” There was the sound of shoes shuffling on brick as he shifted his weight. “Now?” he drawled. “Now, I want to make my company the biggest and the best I can—do something important. I enjoy history. I almost had a degree in nineteenth-century architecture. One goal is to preserve that history, to share it.”

He paused, and she could imagine him staring off into space. “However, I promised myself no one would ever threaten my brother’s life again. No one will ever cheat us again.” He didn’t speak for a time. Finches and skylarks chirped and warbled in the garden, filling the afternoon silence around them.

“The world’s full of bastards, and a number of them have taught me painful lessons.” He sighed. “But it doesn’t excuse my behavior. Again, I apologize.” Victoria felt him peer over her shoulder before he asked softly, “Am I forgiven?”

His warm breath on her neck made her shiver, and she lost herself to the delicious sensation. After a moment, she realized

he was still waiting for an answer. Recovering, she gave a mock sigh. "I suppose I must, as my uncle has seen fit to pardon your transgressions with a dinner invitation."

A chuckle rumbled in his chest, the vibrations a light caress across the slight distance separating them. "You go on and insist on your proprieties, Miss Covington. It's a far more attractive way of dealing with the ... what would you call them?"

"Scoundrels and blackguards."

"Yes, the scoundrels and blackguards." There was a tender smile in his voice. "Neither of us trust people. Your approach is a far more civilized method than my accusations. Please continue to let me know when I am behaving like a 'scoundrel.'" He placed his hands briefly on her upper arms and patted them once, stepping back again.

What did one say to such a request? She tried to comprehend the man behind her, his words, what he had to become to achieve such a revenge. She failed, so she asked, "How is your brother now?"

"He's healed but confined to a wheelchair. Pete's an up-and-coming artist," he said, his voice tinted with pride. "I want him to see Belton Park, meet you and Lord Covington."

"I would be honored."

There was another chuckle from behind her. "I'm sure you'll make him feel honored too."

She frowned, trying to decipher whether it was a jest or a compliment. He was so perplexing. She asked without thinking, "Do you miss you parents?" Cringing at how he drew out such embarrassing behavior from her, she added, "I mean I am sure you do. I miss mine."

"Yes. I miss them. I miss ..." His voice trailed off. She waited silently, knowing, as a man he needed to sort out his memories, and his emotions.

“I miss our family weekends golfing. All four of us would spend Saturday afternoons on the greens and then have dinner at the club. Pete easily beat the pants off the rest of us by the time he was sixteen.” The pain was there in his tone. “Do you golf?” Hope tinted his words.

“No. There were no courses near Belton, I mean, my home.” *Quick, change the subject.*

“I know there is a women’s golf competition at Musselburgh ... well, in the past.”

“You mean the course in Scotland?”

“Yes, the competition has been held for the last eight ... that is, the first one was held in 1810.” *Groan.*

There was another chuckle from behind her. “You never cease to amaze me.” After a pause, he said, “Actually, an authentic Regency-era golf course and equipment might be an interesting draw here or close by. There is certainly enough open acreage around here.” She heard him step away. “Miss Covington, would you be interested in some dinner now? I promise to be the perfect dinner guest—with some incisive prompting from you, I imagine.”

She turned to answer but paused instead. Spectacular in his shirtsleeves, he stood so close to her in such an undressed state, she failed to notice his offered arm. His wide shoulders and narrow hips were accentuated by the cut of the shirt, its crisp white a vibrant contrast to his tanned face and hands. Her heart beat faster, and her mouth went dry. His potent smile led her to respond in kind, in spite of the excessive mental confusion it caused. Only then did she see his arm held out to escort her to dinner.

“Um, Mr. Dalton, I accept your gracious invitation, but please go on ahead, as I need to ... I must freshen up a bit.” His cinnamon eyes met hers.

As they silently gazed at each other, his smile grew soft. “As you wish, Miss Covington.” He turned to go.

“Mr. Dalton.” He stopped at the open French doors. She held out his coat. “It wouldn’t do for me to be seen returning your clothing in the dining room.”

He grinned as he took the coat. “Of course not.” He again headed toward the house.

“Mr. Dalton.”

“Yes, Miss Covington.”

She cocked her head, arms across her body. “Not through my bedroom, if you please.” She raised an eyebrow. “We wouldn’t want you to be seen leaving my bedroom either, would we?” She gave him a little chastising half-smile.

He dropped his head and laughed, then raised it and nodded. “Absolutely not. Thank you for bringing it to my attention, Miss Covington.” He threw his coat over his shoulder, and as he passed her, he offered an impish smile. “I’m glad we were able to talk this out.”

“I too.”

He faced her and bowed. She answered with a curtsy, returning his grin.

Victoria could hear him whistling “Für Elise” after he disappeared around the corner of the wing. She hugged herself, enjoying the amiable success of their exchange, considering the disasters she had envisioned. The familiarity of the conversation was unique in her experience, the topics singular in the extreme. In her experience, only close friends and family ever discussed anything as personal as what Mr. Dalton shared.

She rubbed her arms where his hands had held her and sighed. While it was a redeeming *détente cordiale*, she was spruce enough to know that for someone knowing the world as Mr. Dalton did, who seemed to have visited any number of bedrooms, their discussion comprised nothing remarkable for him.

She thought of Pen Montez. No doubt Mr. Dalton and she had enjoyed similar discourse. She put a hand to her mouth. Had he been in Miss Montez's bedroom? Victoria threw up her hands with an exasperated "Heavens," cutting short such immoderate thoughts. She had thought Pen a light skirt only yesterday.

She entered her room and went directly to the bathroom to wash her face. Gazing in the looking glass covering the wall above the basin, she studied her appearance, amazed by the waterproof makeup. It was still in place after all her tears. With some relief she saw her blouse and chemise had revealed nothing. She returned to the bed, humming "Für Elise." As she finished dressing, bra in place, she spotted a corner of a fashion magazine peeking out from under a pillow. She thought of the women pictured on its pages, undoubtedly the kind which would gain Mr. Dalton's notice. Mulling over her *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Dalton, she gave a shudder, but could not say whether the tremors sprang from the temporary reprieve, her reputation seemingly unharmed ... or from a more compelling font. Now, she must get through dinner without displaying any more ignorance.

Chapter 15

“That best portion of a man’s life, his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love.”

—William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” l. 34 (1798)

William Covington was flummoxed. He had hoped to smooth over the continuing friction between his adopted niece and Mr. Dalton when he’d invited the man to stay the night. When Dalton insisted on tracking her down himself, Covington was sure there would be further need for his intervention. It was obvious watching them talk across the dinner table now, that nothing more was required.

Sam Dalton could be mistaken for an old family friend, a charming dinner guest. And, of course, Victoria remained the perfect hostess. While he became more bemused by the friendly conversation as the dinner progressed, he was enjoying it.

“Tell me about Chicago, Mr. Dalton. Is it a large town?”

Covington cringed. Her education needed to be accelerated.

Dalton regarded her a moment, as she was sitting across from him, and glanced at Covington to his right at the head of the table. He went back to cutting his veal. “Very large, about four million. But the city’s only half the size of London.”

Victoria paused in mid-bite. She slowly put her fork down on her plate, her expression a bit glazed. “Oh. But that is still a substantial metropolis.”

Dalton smiled. “Yes, very.” He turned to Covington. “Have you ever been to Chicago, Lord Covington?”

He cleared his throat. “Uhm, no, I haven’t. Just New York in the sixties, and a holiday in Florida several years ago.” He tightened his brow, giving Dalton an annoyed squint in hopes he would abandon his probing.

Ignoring Covington's silent message, Dalton smiled at Victoria. "Chicago's called The Windy City. The wind blows off Lake Michigan almost all the time. Of course, I've also heard it's called 'Windy' because of our politicians."

"If you two ever visit," Dalton said, raising a hand up, "I'll take you to the top of the Hancock Center for drinks. It's one of the tallest buildings in the world—one hundred stories."

Victoria's mouth fell open and she quickly closed it.

Dalton leaned forward on his elbows. "When the wind blows, the top of the building vibrates and sometimes sways. Very exciting."

"Is it safe, do you think?" she asked, attention on her plate.

"I hope so. My corporate offices are on the sixty-eighth floor and the five below that—as well as an apartment on the ninety-seventh."

Victoria's head popped up and she uttered a breathy, "Well, of course." Covington grew uneasy as he watched Dalton study her while she returned to savaging her broccoli.

Dalton leaned back in his chair. "It's an amazing building. Most Chicagoans call it Big John for John Hancock. My apartment is so far above the clouds I sometimes have to call down to find out what the weather is on the ground." Victoria continued to focus on her plate.

"The express elevator to the bar at the top travels a shaft down the entire center of the building. A fifteen-mile-an-hour wind constantly whistles through the space between the floor and the base of the elevator." He grinned. "Women have to hold their skirts down when leaving the elevator."

"I will be sure to wear trousers," Victoria murmured. Both men laughed, and a companionable silence ensued while all three finished their meal. Covington appreciated that Victoria wouldn't know about elevators. He grunted, pleased with her performance, and took a sip of wine.

Dalton laid down his silverware and regarded Victoria for a moment. “Tomorrow is supposed to be another warm day, and my team isn’t arriving until nine. What would you say to a morning swim?”

Her eyes grew round, but she managed to ask, “In-In the lake?”

Dalton sat back. “N-o-o-o.” He watched her, wearing a curious expression. Covington hadn’t seen that particular expression before, and he grew concerned, certain it didn’t bode well.

Victoria frowned and glanced at Covington. “I do not understand. The East Lake is unsafe, and the trough by the folly will be dry by this time of the year.”

“The what, where?”

Victoria pursed her lips at Dalton’s question. Covington suddenly realized Victoria hadn’t seen the swimming pool. Furthermore, if he remembered correctly, men often swam in the nude during the Regency—and never in the company of women. He closed his eyes. Poor Victoria. What should he say?

Victoria sighed. “The trough or the folly?”

“Both.” Dalton offered an innocent expression with his answer.

She regarded him wryly for a moment. “The trough is the ditch running around the north and east edges of the lawns to keep the animals out. It is deepest near the folly.”

“What animals?” The ingenuous quirk of his mouth remained.

She pursed her lips at Dalton’s question. “The livestock, whenever they are pastured in the fields beyond grounds.”

“And the folly?”

Victoria spoke with a patient tone. “The folly, Mr. Dalton, is the ornamental Gothic cottage on the north side of the house. I

believe it was built from one of John Plaw's pattern books."

Dalton nodded. "I see. Actually, I was thinking of swimming in the swimming pool." At Victoria's blank expression, he added, "You know, the Olympic-sized body of water on the north side of the house."

Victoria turned to Covington with a puzzled frown, but it changed into a desperate glare when he didn't say anything.

Covington blinked. "I don't believe Victoria has ever seen the pool."

Dalton raised an eyebrow. "I thought you told me it was originally built in the fifties."

"It was."

Without missing a beat, Dalton laid his napkin on the table. "Well, if we are done with dinner, why don't we all take an after-dinner stroll. You can see the pool and I can check out this *folly*. It's a beautiful evening." He rose and stood by the double doors leading to the main hall, waiting for them to follow. All the way down the hall, Covington watched Dalton, wondering why he was being so amenable.

A few minutes later, they all emerged from the north side of the house through the observatory. Covington turned on the pool and patio lights, anticipating Victoria's reaction, and from his expression, so was Dalton.

She stopped on the steps leading down to the acre-sized, slate-covered pool patio. The pool stretched away from them, ripples reflecting the moon and the surrounding patio lamps. The glow of underwater lights threw radiant ripples across the surrounding trees.

Covington smiled sadly. Amanda had loved the pool area. His wife thought of the lamps as 'globes of soft fairy light.' Her many potted orange trees and shrubs still decorated the slate patio with shadows and reflected light.

Victoria stood gazing at the scene, a rapt expression on her face. The air was soft and cool. Her hands lifted away from

her body, slender fingers slowly caressing the evening breeze. In turn, it playfully tugged at her sleeves and curls.

Covington thought she was enchanting, just smiling in the lamplight, almost on tiptoes. He glanced at Dalton and saw he too was taken with the sight.

A dozen tables with large, striped umbrellas covered the patio area, looking a bit faded now. The chair and lounge cushions were also striped a friendly blue and white Amanda had chosen so long ago. At the far end of the patio, a hot tub glowed under a gazebo, and beyond rested a large bathhouse, nearly hidden by azalea bushes and willows. Covington viewed it all wistfully. He remembered the many wonderful parties Amanda and he had held here before her death.

Victoria turned and offered a captivating smile. “This is quite splendid.” Pointing to the pool, she said, “It is a quarter the size of the east lake. And the water is so clear.” She wandered among the tables and stopped next to the pool’s rock waterfall.

As she knelt by the edge of the pool and ran her hand through the water, Dalton sidled close to Covington. “Never seen *any* pool before, has she?”

“It would appear so.”

Dalton grunted, and said thoughtfully, “She’s a fascinating combination of charm, hardheaded intelligence, and a naiveté that is, at times, breathtaking.” He leaned his head closer. “I *am* going to dig out her story.”

“Mr. Dalton, it’s none of your concern.” He felt a prickle of panic in the pit of his stomach.

Dalton shrugged. “Perhaps, perhaps not. But as I’m responsible for creating the legal identity of an employee; I think it is part of the territory.”

They both watched Victoria silently for a time as she sat running her hand through the waterfall. Dalton finally shook his head. “Oh, I won’t do anything to embarrass you or her. Both of you are now far too important to my business plans to

risk it, but she's too damn intriguing an enigma to simply ignore, and you're not talking."

Covington glowered at Dalton. "Is this some subtle attempt at blackmail, to get me to reveal more?"

Dalton regarded the man intently for a moment. "Before I forget, her papers will be here tomorrow. The notary will get her fingerprints when she signs her contract, so everything will be in place by the end of next week. She'll have a birth certificate on file in Sussex with the age and birthdate you gave me. You'll get a copy."

"Did it cost overly much?"

Dalton scowled. "I suggest you start using the passport and National Insurance number as soon as possible. Get a driver's license. Take her to the doctor—anything which will have her using her new identity and creating a paper trail."

"Yes, thank you. I appreciate your help in this matter." He took out his pipe, wondering how he could head off the man's urge to pry. "But about Victoria, Mr. Dalton. I would prefer ..."

Dalton walked away, calling out to her. "Well, how about it? Care for a swim tomorrow morning? Or maybe right now, a moonlit swim? As you can see, the pool is heated."

Victoria stood irresolute, shaking water off her hand, looking to Covington for direction. He caught up with Dalton. "I don't believe she's purchased a swimsuit just yet." He saw her sag with relief.

"If *you* need one, Mr. Dalton, you're welcome to borrow one of mine." He glanced at Victoria to make sure she understood.

Dalton thanked him with a sardonic grin, probably at the idea Covington's swimsuits would fit him. "I have one in the car. I packed this afternoon because I'm leaving for Chicago right after we sign the papers tomorrow. I'm glad I did, so I could take advantage of your gracious invitation."

He sauntered over to Victoria. “Well, I’m sorry we can’t have our swim, but I’m going to give it a try, maybe after the contracts are signed.” He offered her his arm and they promenaded toward the bathhouse, Covington scurrying to catch.

“Do you swim?” She nodded yes to Dalton’s question. He said something low, and she laughed. Covington came abreast of the two but didn’t add to the conversation.

He chewed over Dalton’s suggestion to get Victoria to a doctor. Medical practices today and women doctors would amaze her, but he felt he was forgetting something. The question of doctors and his niece bothered him long after the three of them had said good night and gone to their respective beds.

~ ~ ~

“Well, aren’t we happy.”

Sam glanced at Pen and gave her a playful grimace as she strolled over to join him at the end of the refreshment table. For the last several minutes he’d been watching Miss Covington as she moved among the two dozen lawyers and accountants, noting the smiles she coaxed from each, men and women, American and European, all veteran business warriors. The final agreements, costs, and signings had gone off without any delays and few squabbles, and it wasn’t eleven yet. It had been a ‘congenial morning’ as Miss Covington noted.

Sam leaned over, speaking sideways to Pen, while keeping an eye on Miss Covington. “And why shouldn’t I be happy? This lease is the first step to taking our company to international prominence. Dalton Developments could be worth a billion dollars by this time next year.”

Pen also followed Miss Covington’s travels around the room as she answered. “The Aito sale last year in New York was easily as important, and you didn’t stand around grinning.” She gave him a rueful glance. “You didn’t stand

around at all. Immediately after the signing you were on the phone with another client and left within a half hour.”

“And your point is?”

“Well, this signing has gone off well, and it’s been more of a party than a business meeting.” Pen took a sip of her coffee and made a face. She set the cup down. “Even with the awful ‘refreshments.’ And to top it off, the Boss has been standing in the same spot for almost five minutes with a silly grin on his face. I’d say it’s a milestone of some kind—unnatural—but a milestone.”

“Pen, as much as I enjoy your wry and witty observations, the convoluted purposes behind them can be irritating, and far too much like a lawyer.” Sam eyed an unrepentant Miss Montez for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, Miss Covington’s done a great job today. It’s always a pleasure to watch a skilled performance. She got a laugh out of Karl, which is unheard of, even in the best of circumstances. He’s been grouchy with a cold or something all week.”

“Yes, I saw. They were conversing in German.”

With a shrug, Sam said, “Yep. Covington says she also speaks French, some Spanish and Italian too.” He scowled at her smug expression. “And yes, she made the whole thing go smoothly, but I don’t want to hear one damn word about ‘I told you so.’”

Pen laughed but shrugged. “Actually, I was wondering how you’re going to keep to your ‘hands off’ policy,” she said, nodding toward Miss Covington, “with our new employee.”

“Pen, you’re taking advantage of my good mood. *Don’t.*”

“Come on, Sam. You’ve been watching Tory all morning.” She eyed Sam, obviously to gauge the level of his irritation. “Oops, I mean Miss Covington.”

He gritted his teeth. Pen was in rare form today. If she weren’t such a fine lawyer, and if he didn’t count her as a good friend, he would ... He glanced back at Miss Covington. She handed empty coffee cups from a couple of his accountants to

Janice. From their expressions, she'd charmed both. She was wearing an empire cut dress of dark blue with a large Bird-of-Paradise design in green and red across the skirt. Rather than coming off as frumpy or too ceremonial, it flowed around her curves in a light and festive fashion.

"I know you like her."

"Pen, ever heard the legal advice, 'cross-examinations can be harmful to your health?'" Pen laughed but continued to watch him furtively. "Of course I do. What's not to like? However, my daddy told me many years ago, 'Never go to bed with a woman with more problems than you.'"

Her generous mouth became a thin line. "Sam Dalton ..."

Laughing at her outraged expression, he said, "It seems you like her too," and laughed some more. "Pen, you're going to make someone a wonderful sister someday."

Sam enjoyed Pen's annoyed twist to her mouth. "To give an example of a problem, earlier this morning I complimented her on getting everyone socializing before the signings. Considering that these lawyers had been at each other's throats all month, I made some comment about her averting World War Three." He raised his hand in disbelief. "Surprised, no, shocked, she asks, 'There have been two world wars?' She stared, a deer-in-the-headlights moment, but recovered and said, 'Of course, how silly of me.'" He raised his eyebrows.

Pen said nothing.

Sam grunted. "No, I don't understand it either. You'd think she's lived in a cave her entire life. How can she be so accomplished and so ignorant at the same time?" He wanted to know what her story was. And he'd sure as hell like to know how he could be so attracted to a woman who has so many *Twilight Zone* moments.

He clenched his teeth. "It's just curiosity." She was a mystery to be solved. "Perhaps you can find some answers when you spend the day with her."

Pen's expression denied any interest in 'finding answers' for him. Before she revved up to tell him what to do with his suggestion, Sam motioned toward the hallway. "I have a portrait I think you should see."

He would have said more but Miss Covington tottered over to them, setting several cups on the refreshment table. She glanced unhappily at what was left of the food and drinks there and turned to Sam and Pen. "We have no more coffee or hot water for tea."

With a fleeting expression of irritation, she said, "Mr. Dalton, I must apologize for the refreshments this morning. Dare I say *abysmal*? I pray the morning did not suffer for it."

"Actually, Miss Covington, the morning went very smoothly, thanks in large part to your efforts." He got a kick out of the formal address she seemed to pull from him.

She smiled. "I'm relieved. Everyone does seem to be enjoying each other's company." Sighing over the food before her, and surveying the room, her gaze fell on Janice carrying a tray. "I must speak to the cook about the food and the lack of service. We should have had at least one more server. Mr. Dalton, Miss Montez, please excuse me."

"Pen, remember?" Pen raised an eyebrow.

"Of course I do! But this is a business meeting." At Pen's questioning cock to her head, Miss Covington said, "Such informality while you act in your capacity as a lawyer seems terribly inappropriate for a professional setting." The sincere tone of respect in her voice made Sam glance at Pen to see her reaction. She was blushing. *Wonders of wonders.*

After watching Pen move her mouth silently a couple of times, Miss Covington rescued her. "Perhaps there is another form of address for such business activities?"

Sam grinned. "Yes, the title is 'Ms.'"

"Mzzz Montez?" Miss Covington pursed her lips thoughtful for a moment. "And this denotes a professional standing rather than a woman's marital status?"

“Exactly.” Sam noted Pen’s compressed mouth. “Now, didn’t you insist on ‘Ms.’ when you came on board four years ago? I distinctly remember some memo to that effect.” Pen gave him a scowl, plainly embarrassed by the ancient history. She’d been pretty ‘in your face’ when she’d started with Dalton Developments, insisting on what he thought was an outdated form of address.

Miss Covington eyed the two of them for a moment with a dubious expression but nodded. “I see. Well, Mr. Dalton, Ms. Montez, excuse me.”

As he watched her leave, a graceful swish of long skirts, he grew concerned. He just might follow her, to overhear her meeting with the waitstaff. From his earlier impressions of the group, Miss Covington was in for a rough time.

Chapter 16

“Time flies over us but leaves its shadow behind.”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

Even though the morning had gone well, Victoria was angry, with the cook, with the housekeeper, with herself, but mostly with the situation. She ignored the awful paintings and furniture that occupied—decorated was too fine a word—the main hall. As she hiked toward the back of the great house and the kitchen, she tried and failed to imagine how a Viscount could command so little respect as to warrant the atrocious service he’d received over the last week, and especially today for such an important function.

Then there was the housekeeper, whom she had met only once, providing only one maid for the service. What conditions must exist for such behavior to prevail. Yet Lord Covington had mentioned twenty-two staff when she had inquired, sixteen gardeners and groundskeepers, along with the six house staff. One cause for this morning’s flaws was obvious: No butler to oversee the staff.

She tightened her jaw and stepped more purposely toward the kitchens. It had been exhausting, compensating for such a monumental failure in the service. And how many times had she said something wrong this morning? Her High German had surprised Herr Hoffman. Why, she could not fathom. Why would a Hessian with a law degree speak anything but proper German?

Both Pen and Mr. Dalton had been watching her with undisguised interest while she played hostess, as though she were the *divertissement* for the gathering. However, Mr. Dalton and Pen had appeared aghast rather than entertained by some of her *faux pas*. World War *Three*? What had civilization come to?

And what did they think of her now? She fervently hoped Pen would remain committed to their London outing. Even

though the thought of riding in a 'car' gave her pause, curiosity held sway.

Stopping before the kitchen, she took a calming breath. There was no point in becoming all a-twitch about it. She must take one catastrophe at a time. Now her guests needed coffee. Shoulders back, her spine straight, Victoria strode into the kitchen.

The kitchen remained as huge as she remembered it, but now it gleamed, sterile metal tables set below rows of hanging copper pots and pans, the ceiling and walls bare white. The brick wall for the stoves to her left remained, but now steel doors with glass inserts were set where the iron gates had once hung. Curtained windows were framed by cabinets, and under them a long counter with three sinks.

Everything was neat, but not the inviting atmosphere she had known. Their cook, Mrs. Abercrombie, had made the kitchens a bustling place where something good was always being prepared. Victoria smiled. And ready to be sampled. Another stab of homesickness hit her as she examined the wooden block filled with knives at the end of one table.

Now, there was little evidence cooking actually occurred anywhere in this room. She couldn't even smell coffee brewing.

Victoria heard conversation and laughter at the far end of the kitchen, so she weaved between the wide steel tables toward the sounds. There in a room off the kitchen sat five women at a long table, cups in hand and a large coffee pot between them.

Three were younger and dressed in black so she guessed they would be the maids and help. The other two women were older, surely the one all in white being Mrs. Dority, the cook. Victoria guessed she was the thin, square-faced woman, who dominated the conversation. Spite seemed to animate her features, even when she laughed, as she did now. Mrs. Hemphill, the housekeeper, sat slumped across from Mrs. Dority, her back to Victoria, her body a lump of inanimate

matter compared to the gesturing Mrs. Dority. As Victoria approached, it became apparent the cook and the maids were ignoring her.

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Sam had trotted down the hall in time to see Miss Covington enter the kitchen. He needed to hear how she'd deal with the cook. He had to give her full marks for meeting the service problem head-on, but he remembered Mrs. Dority from the tour Covington had given him several weeks ago. She'd acted as though they were invading her domain without permission. The message was clear—she didn't serve anyone.

He'd left a stunned Pen in the study staring at the portrait of "Victoria Ann Covington" so he could catch the action. There was a pair of swinging doors on the other side of the kitchen leading to the dining room. If this cook were true to form, she'd be sitting at the servants' dining table, where he'd seen her before. He eased close to the doors and pushed one slightly ajar in time to hear Miss Covington say, "Mrs. Dority." He could just see them across the kitchen.

Mrs. Dority took her time responding. The cook stood and without leaving the table, towered over her. "What?"

"How do you do? Lord Covington's guests are wanting more coffee and the serving trays are empty."

"Well, it takes time. We'll get it up there as soon as we can."

"And when may that be?"

"Look, missy. You've delivered your message. Have Lord Covington call down if he needs some kind of schedule."

Sam was furious. That damn woman was gone. Before he could pound through the doors, Miss Covington stepped forward, with an expression so authoritative, it stopped him cold. What would she do?

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The women at the table froze, waiting. A hot shiver of anger ran down Victoria's spine, shocking her. A servant *never* spoke

to her betters in such a fashion. The cook must know Lord Covington was family.

Victoria took another step forward, aware she had no official status in this house, but aware too that she could not let such a blatant challenge to her station go unanswered. She had learned such lessons, having run the staff for Uncle Reggie since she was seventeen. Such colossal insubordination, such disrespect must be corrected.

Mrs. Dority hadn't moved but glared hard at her. "I don't know what you expected. I've heard all about you. You blow in here and think you're going to tell me what to do? You don't even know what a loo is." There were chuckles around the table and the women relaxed when Victoria failed to immediately say anything. Mrs. Dority sat down, saying something to the other women, most of whom laughed, leaving Victoria rigid with embarrassment and indignation.

"Mrs. Dority."

The group all turned back around, surprise on their faces. Mrs. Dority, however, glared at her with obstinate disdain. Victoria stepped close to the table looking down at the cook.

Taking in everyone at the table, Victoria said, "I'll tell you what I expect. I expect common courtesy." She paused, to let the statement settle in. "I expect a cook to take enough pride in her work to serve edible food and drink in adequate portions." Another pause. "I expect employees to avoid embarrassing the master of the house and their employer."

Mrs. Dority was out of her seat. "I don't—"

"Yes, you don't. You are either unwilling—or incapable—of meeting such expectations." Victoria waved a hand dismissively. "But no matter. Mr. Dalton is your employer now, and I am confident he has rather more stringent expectations than I."

Mrs. Dority nearly shouted, "Lord Covington said we was to be kept on regardless of the lease agreements, so Mr. Dalton won't be saying anything about it. And neither will you."

There was a smugness to Mrs. Dority's words which spoke volumes about Lord Covington's unwillingness to wield a firm hand with his hired help.

Victoria eyed the cook. This was an intolerable situation, and Lord Covington should never have let it come to pass. "Yes, I can see what you are relying on. However, Mrs. Dority," including the rest of the women in her scrutiny, "I have seen the lease agreement, and obviously, you have not."

She turned to leave but had another thought. "Mr. Dalton plans to have conferences here with *hundreds* of clients, all needing to be fed and entertained. You five seem incapable of providing for even twenty guests."

With that, Victoria stamped out of the kitchen, arms stiff at her sides, her hands shaking. *Never in all her life ...* Down the hall, she finally let her back muscles relax and exhaled heavily. She did not hear any laughter, which was well, but it was still maddening. Mrs. Dority, what a contemptible, jolter-headed Xantippe. If she could, she would dismiss the lot of them, if only for laughing along with the cook's sass. Why had Janice mentioned their conversation about the bathroom? She would have to speak to her sternly, to have shared such a confidence, particularly among the servants.

She felt her face grow hot thinking about it but made an effort to put the humiliation out of her mind as she entered the library again. She did not see either Mr. Dalton or Ms. Montez, and felt a pang of loss, but spying Janice among the guests, she headed in her direction.

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Sam strolled down the hallway with a smile on his face. He could hear a gratifying amount of scurrying, pots banging and frantic voices from the kitchen. He shook his head. Miss Covington may not know about any World Wars, but she sure knew how to win a firefight all the same.

He was finding himself liking the woman more and more, in spite of, or maybe because of, the epic contradictions she

continued to reveal. He had a feeling Pen was right. She just might be running his operations here soon and making him like it.

Chapter 17

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may
Old Time is still a-flying
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.”

—Robert Herrick, “To the Virgins, to make much of Time.”
1630

The late morning was hot and muggy, even in the shade of the orange trees standing in massive stone pots around the pool patio. Victoria had taken off her leather shoes, pumps they were called, of all things. She sat with her bare feet on the lounge chair, and she loved the freeing sensation. She had never worn shoes without stockings or socks, even with the light slippers which were *de rigueur* in her time.

The computing machine lay in her lap, being difficult. It did not help that her skin prickled with chills, even in the warm air. She plucked at the skirt of the long silk dress she wore. The cloying humidity made it stick uncomfortably to her skin.

She sighed heavily. It had been a difficult week—a monumental understatement, if ever there was one. But all the papers were signed, and the lawyers and accountants gone.

Perhaps she could relax now with her home, her heart, having been saved. She happily anticipated restoring the gardens and especially the interior of the mansion to its former *grandeur*.

She glanced at the north side of the great house, admiring the curved Greek Portico supported by six white columns rising majestically to the second story of the house, imposing and inviting all at once. Belton Park radiated peace and permanency, and she desperately needed that comfort. Given half a chance, the terror of living beyond her time threatened to overpower her. If she could return the family seat to its

former radiance, perhaps her very existence wouldn't feel so alien and misplaced.

Like this blasted computing machine. It failed to respond to punched keys, determinedly flashing a warning ending with an exclamation mark. She hit the armrest of the lounge chair with her hand, ready to swear, when she heard approaching footsteps. She settled for a contrite "Oh, mumble puppies."

"What did you say?"

Mr. Dalton strode toward her wearing a terry robe which ended mid-thigh, his legs bare and his feet in blue sandals. She blinked at the tan skin displayed. His calf muscles bunched as he walked. She quickly returned her attention to his face.

"Mr. Dalton," she squeaked to hide her surprise. She tucked her bare feet under the hem of her long dress. Gazing back up, she tried to keep her eyes on his face. It was no help because the robe hung open at the throat, exposing more tanned skin. There was nothing to do but stare at the computer screen.

"Miss Covington. What did you just say?"

"Are you referring to 'mumble puppies'?"

"Where did *that* come from?" Chuckling, he sat down across from her on another padded lounge, knees toward her. *More naked knees.*

"My father. He caught me cursing one day, though 'blast' is hardly of consequence." She looked at him to see if he agreed, and could not tell, so she shrugged. "Perpetually anxious about my behavior, he provided a more ladylike alternative, suggesting I utilize 'mumble puppies' or 'sugar' as expletives. Nonsense, I know, but childhood instruction is difficult to amend."

Mr. Dalton grinned. "I like it. It sounds terribly British. And what was the cause of this ladylike outburst?" He picked up a thick book lying at the foot of Victoria's lounge. He hefted the black tome, as though he were estimating its weight as he waited for her answer.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “It’s this computing monstrosity. It simply will not behave. It insists on repeating the words ‘Battery Low!’ I do not know whether it is a military term, or this ‘battery’ has fallen down inside, or mayhap the machine is just despondent over my many mistakes.” Said half-jokingly, Victoria really didn’t know what to make of the message.

With a chuckle, Sam leaned over and took the carrying case for her computer from the nearby patio table. He removed a tangle of cords and boxes. “You have to recharge the battery because it’s low on electricity. It runs your ‘computing machine’ when it isn’t plugged in. Plug this end of the cord into the computer and the other into a wall socket and the battery will be good as new in about twenty minutes.” He demonstrated by plugging it in to a nearby outlet in a rock wall, leaving the computer machine on the table.

He was doing it again. His genial, velvet tone made her stomach flip-flop, while making her feel the greenest muttonhead. He sat so close and in such a state of undress, it was difficult *not* to think about what was under his robe. His bare forearms caught her attention. They were worthy of study, well-muscled, brown, and dusted with golden hair. She realized he expected an answer and pulled her attention away from his fascinating form.

“Oh,” she breathed. Refocusing on his face, she tried to remember his instructions. “Thank you, Mr. Dalton.” A deep breath didn’t settle her. *This is an impossible scene.*

“Sam.”

“Mr. Dalton.”

“Sam. I can’t have you calling me Mr. Dalton while everyone else I work with calls me Sam. Mr. Dalton is for associates I talk to once a year, or my clients’ employees.”

“What am I, but a client’s employee? And we’ve been barely acquainted a week. I hardly compare to your many business associates.”

“I’d like to think we’re colleagues, and becoming friends,” he said, waiting until her eyes met his. “Besides, you must know by now, everyone calls me Sam—among other things.” He offered a half smile with his aside.

The sky remained cloudless and cerulean blue, the sun warm on the tops of her feet, but she felt goose bumps raise all the same. She looked anywhere but at Mr. Dalton sitting across from her.

“It is my hope also. However, I wish to avoid any appearance of over-familiarity.” She sighed and confessed, “I have a great deal to learn concerning proper address in business.” *Particularly when my employer is half-naked.*

She glanced at him in an attempt to judge his reaction to her confession. He was leaning toward her, bending at the waist. His brown and white striped robe had fallen open enough to reveal a sculpted chest of solid planes and compelling valleys, and such a broad expanse of it. She could do nothing but stare. She barely heard his next words.

“The proper address? Miss Covington. If I understand your concern, let me put it to rest. I don’t date my employees. Period.”

“What? You don’t *date*?” She frowned, attempting to decipher the meaning. “Well, yes, obviously, you are not engaged.”

He frowned in turn and sat up. “What? What does being engaged have to do ...?” Sam studied her, his head close enough for her to smell his cologne, a heady scent of musk. “You’ve never gone on a date before?”

She wrapped her arms around her knees, unsure how badly she’d misspoken this time.

“No, Mr. Dalton, like so much of your society, I have not experienced a ‘date.’” She stared at the lawns beyond the pool patio, a bite in her words. “The only ‘date’ I am aware of in a relationship is the meeting to ‘set the date’ of the marriage.”

“Well, you are old-fashioned, aren’t you?”

Victoria gave him a speaking glance. “I have never hidden the fact, but you, *Mr. Dalton*, are the only one who has ever felt the need to continually remark on it.” She had always prided herself as being a modern. *Now—now she was hundreds of years beyond ‘modern.’* She felt her face go tight with the deep frustration, the never-ending shock and embarrassment, always unaware of some common knowledge, and the burning fear of discovery behind it all. She must conquer this.

“I find being so ‘old-fashioned’ a constant annoyance. What do *you* mean by ‘a date’?”

He paused, eyebrows high at her tone. “Uh, the date I’m talking about is where a man and a woman go out together, to dinner, on a walk, to play tennis, take in a movie—to get to know each other, to simply enjoy each other’s company.”

“Alone?”

“Alone.” He watched her with an odd expression. “Sometimes couples will go out together.”

“Heavens.” She finally gave a short laugh at the complete dismantling of propriety in courting. She leaned back in the lounge and bit her lip to keep from showing more of the turmoil threatening to overwhelm her.

She shook her head. *Of course.* Here she sat, conversing alone with a man who calmly wore little more than sandals and a short robe. The broiling combination of embarrassment, her lack of bearings in this social sea, and the vast possibilities presented her by the limited decorum of this age heated her like a fever.

To deflect such confusing sensations, she said in jest, “Just the two of them, alone? I understand why a couple would have to set a date.” After a moment, she sighed again, feeling the fool when he did not laugh. “I have a great deal to learn.” She glanced at him, worried. How could he *not* guess she was not from this time?

“Let me help you.”

“What?” It was *not* what she’d expected him to say. “Mr. Dalton, I do not feel ...”

“Sam. You can start by learning the proper mores for business by calling me Sam. And if you want to really go native, you could at least permit me to call you Victoria.”

He paused and then said, “Miss Covington, even Victoria sounds so formal and staid. Not you at all. You may be proper”—he smiled—“decorous, but you’re warm and approachable just the same. Tory suits you much better.”

Tory. When he said it, the word produced such a mesmerizing pulse shivering along her arms. *And the compliments.* He closed the space by moving his lounge chair, then sat elbows on his knees. His smile indulgent and the gold flecks in his amber eyes so beguiling. His lips held a small but inviting smile.

“You, sir, are plying it with a trowel.” When he laughed, she gave a tentative smile in return. “Very well—Sam.”

He nodded acceptance, his grin instantly broad and bright. He sat up, pulling away. It was a warming fire being withdrawn. The strange sensation led her to stare at his fascinating chest again.

“Great. So, what do we have here?” He read the cover page of the black book still in his hand, “*History of England and the British Commonwealth* by Laurence Larson.” He glanced at Tory and made a face. “Jeez, this was written in nineteen twenty-two. Why not read something a little more current?” He stopped and gazed at her thoughtfully. “You were searching for information on World Wars One and Two, weren’t you?”

Embarrassed and frightened by the accuracy of his conclusion, she shook her head to deny it, perhaps a little too violently. “I simply wanted to read about English history, and this was the first book I saw in the library which might satisfy my curiosity.”

“Uh-huh. How is it you can know so much about Regency history, but never have heard of the two world wars?” His eyes narrowed as he spoke, a fiercely curious expression that made Tory’s throat constrict.

Would he ... *could* he guess her secret? No. With her excessive ignorance continually revealed, he would deem her a raving mooncalf. She fought the leaden panic the thought ignited. Lies remained her only defense.

In a controlled voice, she said, “I will admit my father was rather negligent in stocking his library if the book did not deal with his favorite topics such as the Regency.” Another lie. Her father had been very eclectic in his choices. She held her breath for what seemed an eternity before he spoke.

“So, no TV or radio, huh?”

She hesitated, not sure she understood the terms, but decided to nod.

“Well, just a point of information.” He wiggled the book in the air. “This will refer to World War One as the Great War because World War Two didn’t start until nineteen thirty-nine, after the book was published.”

Tory closed her eyes. She was feeling drained. Mr. Dalton’s presence proved very stimulating, and it required so much energy to hide her reactions and sidestep his probing questions. “Thank you—Sam—I appreciate any guidance you might provide.”

He stood, her eyes following him. “My pleasure. Any time.” He examined her face silently, in what should have been a very untoward manner, but she was held, lost in the alluring sparkle of his brandy-brown eyes, the tang of his scent, his nearness.

He smiled. “You have freckles.”

The spell suddenly broken, irritated, she spoke without thinking. “Only seven.” When he chuckled, she sat back, arms crossed, mouth pursed. “I plan to fade them with lemon juice and Denmark lotion.”

“Oh, that would be a shame.” He continued to study her. “Tory, I know you’ve had to face some bad times recently. I’d like to help, if you’ll let me. Whether it’s helping you navigate our society, or if it’s just someone to listen.”

Tory didn’t know what to say. She suddenly wanted him near, teaching her—but she felt a warmth spread in her middle imagining what he could be willing to teach her. She had a growing sense of what was deemed possible in this day and age. She’d read several articles in *Cosmopolitan* last night. Yet she was tired, tired of being an ignorant chit, disheartened by the thought he pitied her.

She met his gaze. “Yours is a very generous offer, Mr. Dal— Sam. But I am sure you have far more important things to do, which is why you are leaving today.”

“I’m leaving, but I’m only a phone call or email away.” He raised an eyebrow in a teasing fashion. “You do know about phones, right?”

Tory just glowered at his impertinent question. “Do you remember what a trough and folly are?”

Sam laughed. “My offer is hardly generous. You’re very important to my company’s expansion into England and Europe. I’m depending on you—to make Belton Park Regency *authentic* and exquisite, and to act as hostess, manage the conferences, and to charm conference attendees the way you did our lawyers today.” He gazed back at the house for a moment. “Actually, you could say I’m staking a great deal on you—millions of pounds and the future of my company.”

Stunned, Tory stammered, “Mr. Dalton, I ... Perhaps ...”

“Sam.”

“Sam. I am sure there are many people who could do the same work as I. I have such ...” Tory hunted for a word to describe her ignorance or needs and failed. “... such a want of qualifications, of crucial knowledge.” She wanted to have the power to make Belton Park whole again, but to have so much

dependent on her. It was terrifying and seemed to her unwise in the extreme.

She spoke with considered gravity. “It is one thing to acquiesce to my uncle’s requests and provide employment for me—it is quite another for you to risk so much on my efforts alone ... or are you just bamming me?”

“Bamming?”

“Teasing me.”

He studied her for a moment, but gave her an expression of such admiration, the world came to a halt and her thoughts vaporized under his gaze. She was suddenly willing to accept any task he might request.

Breaking the spell, he said, “I don’t think you are much of a risk. I’m offering my help. You won’t be alone. Not at all. Pen is also willing to help. And there will be other Dalton staff and Regency experts involved, as well as a veritable army of folks when we start the renovations. I’ll be getting you an assistant too.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She labored to collect her thoughts. “You trust me to meet all these challenges?”

“Hey, you know I don’t trust anyone—particularly where money is involved.” Sam shrugged. “I just think you’re a good bet.”

Tory frowned, unsure whether being referred to as a ‘good bet’ was a compliment or not. He didn’t trust her? She opened her mouth to say something, but found the appropriate response was not there. She closed her mouth again. *What would happen if she failed him, failed Belton Park?*

“All I ask is that you do your best.” He grinned and pointed at the laptop resting on the table. “You might start by mastering your ‘computing machine’ and producing some preliminary plans for the renovation.” He laid the book in her lap. The light pressure on her thighs was slight, but disturbing.

Tory did not respond, her mind numbed by a hundred possible consequences. He only intensified her brain-stirring muddle of desires and apprehensions.

“I’m looking forward to working with you, seeing what you do with Belton.” He chuckled and cocked his head. “And figuring you out.”

“What? Figuring me out?” A business term? His open expression gave little indication of his meaning. She eyed him, annoyed with his teasing lack of expression. “Thank you. With help, I have hopes of quickly ‘getting up to speed’ as ... as you put it.”

“Your servant, Miss Covington.” He laughed at himself. “I mean, Tory.” He stretched and untied the sash to his robe. “A swim is what I need. It’s such a hot, beautiful day. I missed my chance this morning.”

With a concerted effort, she drew herself together and glanced at the sky. “Yes, it is unseasonably warm. I have never seen it this warm in May. We should have had at least a shower or two this seven-day.”

“Global warming.” Sam threw off his robe.

Tory turned to him, not understanding the reference, but the sight of him nearly naked took her breath like a hard fall. Now, his only attire, miniscule black drawers, barely covered his ... She could not ignore the sight with him standing before her, an embarrassing part of his anatomy hovering at eye level.

She gazed higher, taking in entire his torso. He was the most beautiful naked body she’d ever seen—the only one that wasn’t marble. He was an Adonis. A warm brown, his body appeared so big, yet sleek. Solid muscles rippled, their fluid power drew her, demanding that she reach out and touch them, feel them move under her exploring fingers.

He smiled down at her, as though he knew just what she was thinking, feeling. She felt her cheeks tingle, blushing but could not refrain from furtively watching as he stretched.

With a groan of pure pleasure, he said, “Man, to think I can swim here every day when I get back.” With that, he sauntered over to the pool.

As he was faced away from her, she stared boldly at his broad back, its sculptured curvature narrowing at his waist. Biting off a smile, she found herself scandalized by her willful behavior—but not enough to stop. His long legs seemed to emphasize the tight curves of his ... *Heaven’s name!* She tried to comprehend the possibility of viewing such a sight every day when he returned. *What an astonishing day and age.*

A phrase from *Fanny Hill* flitted across her over-stimulated mind, “*Oh lord, the pleasures of wanting a man, and he a man worthy of my needs.*”

Sam dived gracefully into the pool and her eyes avidly followed his progress as he swam, his thick arms rhythmically pulling him across the pool and back, over and over again. The fever she felt ... she wasn’t sure of its cause anymore. Was it from her exhaustion or the gentleman now plowing through the water with such strength and beauty?

A man she could address by his Christian name employed her—*her*. He had entered her bedroom only yesterday. And just now stood nearly naked before her—yet she’d known him for less than a week. *And there would be no social repercussions or apparently, any suggestion of intimacy.* She shook her head.

Unimaginable.

Tory rubbed her arms. Though she had never experienced the sensations before, she recognized the inexplicable desires coursing through her, heating and chilling her all at once. She wanted him—and in the most carnal fashion. While her reading had allowed her to identify her responses, the stimulating tingle in her limbs, the sparks pooling in her middle, she had not a clue regarding what was to be done, if indeed she could or should attempt to act on them. She felt so strange. And here she was, entertaining thoughts of seduction, leagues outside the realm of conduct for a gentle-born lady.

She rested her head against the back of the lounge chair, feeling slightly dizzy. *My lord, what would this next week bring?*

Chapter 18

“Time goes, you say? Ah, no!

Alas, Time stays, we go.”

—French poet Pierre de Ronsard, 1570

“Hey, have you heard a word I’ve said?”

Sam looked up from the folder he had been staring at while he worried one of the corners with his thumb. ‘Victoria Covington’ was typed on the tab. His Executive Vice President, Charlie Benedict, sat across from him, drumming his fingers on the mahogany desktop.

“I heard most of it.” Sam glanced around his office, trying to discover why it hadn’t felt right since he’d returned to Chicago three days ago. He faced Charlie and nodded. “Everything seems to have run smoothly the month I was in England. You did well.”

Charlie grunted “Thanks,” and ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair. “Look, boyo, you’ve been running around like a madman since you returned. You’re the only one who seems to know how we’re going to finance this expansion into Europe.” He threw himself back in the chair, making the plush cushion sigh, giving Sam his annoyed frown, a combination of one raised eyebrow and a twisted corner of his mouth on the opposite side. The expression skewed his whole face, drawing a smile from Sam.

It was obvious Charlie thought Sam’s smile was sarcasm. “We need a plan of action, a financial forecast. We need some S.O.P.s for functioning here when you go off to England *again* for hell knows how long. It was a scramble here for just a month. With twenty offices to manage, this is a major change.” Charlie jumped out of his chair and strode toward Sam. “We’ve been growing too fast. He slapped a hand on Sam’s desk to emphasize his concern. “Damn it, we gotta prepare.”

Sam nodded and hiked across the wide expanse of thick tan carpet to the long conference table. It sat facing the media center which filled the far end of the immense room. He glanced out on the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan when he reached the table. He could sit at the table and gaze down the length of Michigan Avenue far below. He wondered what Tory would make of it. With a sigh, he shook his head, impatient with himself. *You need to stop thinking about her.*

Sam called his partner over.

Charlie lumbered to the conference table with a resigned expression on his square face. He was no taller than Sam but appeared bigger simply because of his stocky build. He always gave the impression of a moving, unstoppable wall. In a suit and tie, the impression seemed to be magnified, rather than civilized. Which wasn't a bad thing in business.

Laid out on the long table were six binders in various colors. Sam pointed at them. "There you go. The financial work is in red, and the update on our business plan and expansion in the blue. The yellow one has how I see the organization functioning while I'm in England."

"When did you do all this?" Charlie snagged the blue folder and began leafing through it.

"I've been working on them since I got back. That is"—he grinned—"when I wasn't running around like a madman."

With a comic scowl in response, Charlie started leafing through the documents. "Yeah, you have been a madman. Monica has been complaining you're working me too hard, keeping me in the office till all hours of the night."

Sam shrugged with a wry grin. "Well, when I'm in England, you'll be running things, so you can see your charming wife whenever you want to." He grinned again and gestured toward the yellow binder. "Remind me to add that to the organizational procedures."

"You bet I will," Charlie said, grunting his approval as he read through the financial forecast. "You must've been all

night, every night to do this.”

“Yep, sorta,” Sam said. “Rea helped. She thought it was about time I got to work on them. So, I didn’t have a choice.” Charlie grinned back and shook his head.

Rea Cleveland entered through one of the ceiling-high double doors. The maroon door whispered shut as she reached his desk and laid a file on it. As an executive assistant, Rea Cleveland was all Sam could ask for and more. She’d been with him since he started Dalton Developments, more than seven years ago—his first secretary.

At forty-three, she was a handsome, commanding woman, who always dressed in business suits, her black hair going silver in streaks at her temples. She knew everything there was to know about the company and ran it herself half the time.

He’d offered her an executive position and the office in Upstate New York, but she’d refused it, saying, “Me? I don’t want the responsibility. Besides, you’re easier to work *for*, than *with*. Just give me a raise for putting up with your sorry self, and I’ll be happy.” He couldn’t remember when she’d ever actually appeared happy, but he’d given her a substantial raise just the same because she made him laugh. In the last few days, Sam and Charlie fought over whether Rea would go to England with Sam or stay in Chicago. Both were afraid to ask her preference.

She faced him and squared her reading glasses on her wide nose. “Mr. Dalton, you have a call from Ms. Montez on line four.” No drill sergeant could put more authority into a such a simple statement. He hesitated as always, having to keep from answering with a ‘Yes, ma’am.’ Thinking of Tory, he realized Rea too called him Mr. Dalton—when she actually called him anything at all.

“Tell Pen I’ll call her back. Charlie and I need to finish this.”

“She said it was urgent, *extremely* urgent. Line four.”

Sam frowned as Rea gave him the eye. He shook his head and grinned at her stern expression. “All right, Mother Superior, just for you.” He held up a finger to tell Charlie he wouldn’t be long as Rea closed the door behind her, but not before giving him a throaty “Uh-huh” in his direction.

“Hey, Pen. What’s so important?”

“Sam, I’ve been calling you since yesterday.”

“Yeah, you and five thousand other people. I’ve been gone a month, remember? So, now you’ve got me, what’s up?”

“Tory’s sick.”

Sam paused to digest this, realizing it must be serious if Pen was calling him about it. “How sick?”

“Covington said the doctors here are giving her less than a fifty-fifty chance.”

“What?” Shock shivered through him. “She was fine when I left four days ago. How in the hell could she get so ill, so fast?” A foreboding chill settled in his chest.

“At first, the doctors thought Tory’s immune system had failed, but after running some tests, they don’t know what to think.”

“What hospital is she at?”

“She’s still at Belton Park. They didn’t think it was safe to move her, so Lord Covington has turned her bedroom into a hospital.”

“Who? Specialists?”

“The lead physician is a Dr. Gwen Roland. The rest are consulting physicians from hospitals in Horsham and London.”

“Any good?”

“Yes, all reports are that they are all very good.”

“Well, tell her to spare no expense.”

“She’s already heard it from Lord Covington. Everything that can be done, is being done, Sam. Luckily, Dr. Roland was free. She’s between positions and has been on a family holiday near here.”

“Is she there? I want to talk to her.”

“Sam, she’s not going to tell you anything.”

“The hell she isn’t. Get her on the phone.”

“She can’t tell you anything without Lord Covington’s permission.”

Sam gripped the desk, leaning over the phone. “Then get *him* on the phone.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and a strained sound; Pen growling under her breath, a sure sign she was way past aggravated. “Sam, I’m calling from London and it’s one a.m. here. I went to Belton *yesterday* to take Tory shopping. That’s the first I knew of it.”

Sam scowled, suddenly feeling frantic. He rapped the desk with his knuckles repeatedly to dispel the tension while he thought. “Pen, what’s happening? Is this an infection, a virus? What’s wrong?”

“She’s developed pneumonia for sure, but they’re doing a whole battery of tests to find out. Tory’s running a hundred and four temperature. From what Lord Covington says, she’s delirious.”

The sick feeling was growing, knotting his gut. “I want you down at Belton tomorrow. Let me know what’s happening.” He took a deep breath. “Stay there and help Tory any way you can. I want you to get Covington’s permission to have Dr. Roland talk to me. Got it?”

“Yes. I got it.”

“I’ll fly over tonight.”

Both Pen on the phone and Charlie in the room with him made sounds like cats coughing up fur balls, shouting in

unison, “NO!”

In a flat, firm tone, Pen said, “Sam, you stay right there.” The phone buzzed with the intensity of her words. “Too much depends on you, too many people depend on you. You couldn’t do anything here except irritate people, like you’re irritating me. You do what only you can do—in Chicago.”

Charlie was calling out much the same opinion over the top of Pen’s phone lecture. Sam gritted his teeth and waved him to silence. He was the boss, but he tried to listen—and it *was* a stupid idea. He hated it when he had to be told the obvious, but that’s what he wanted to do—go to her. “You’re right. Just keep me informed. I’ll be calling you at seven your time in the morning, on your cell phone.”

“Sam, I’m going to bed now. And don’t you *dare* call me before nine, *my time*.” Pen’s tone sounded as incensed as Charlie appeared.

Sam took a deep breath and in a gruff tone muttered, “Pen, thanks for calling me. I’m glad you’re there.” It was hard to say. “Just make sure that Tory is ... just do what you can.”

He hung up the phone and rubbed his neck distractedly, all of a sudden feeling emotionally exhausted.

“Are you all right? What’s the problem?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He took a deep breath. “Pen just told me Covington’s niece is seriously ill.”

“Who, our Regency expert?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Pen can do anything there that you could.”

Sam doubted it but kept quiet and stared out at the skyscrapers of the Chicago district, alight with flashing reflections of the sunset caught in a thousand windows. He squinted at them, then his watch, and finally at Charlie. “It’s six.” He pointed to the folders on the table. “Why don’t you take those with you? Use the company limo and go home to your wife. You can have the limo bring you back in the

morning.” At Charlie’s surprised response, Sam shrugged. “I was going to go check out a piece of property on Fifth, but I just decided not to.”

Charlie thanked him for the offer and tucked the folders in his briefcase.

“We can throw out ideas tomorrow,” Sam said, “starting in the morning. The implementation program can be later this week. First thing in the morning, you and I can figure out what each of the team will be responsible for. Rea gave Donnie, Matt, Lisa, Diego and Tess copies of the files, so they will be prepared for the meeting.” Sam glanced at his partner.

Charlie studied Sam silently for a moment and shrugged. “All right. Nine-thirty it is.”

With a deep sigh, Sam slumped down on the corner of his desk and twisting at the waist, popped his back. “You might be right. These sixteen-hour days are getting to me.”

At Sam’s confession, Charlie paused to study his friend. He snapped his briefcase shut and asked, “Sam, seriously, are you okay?”

“Seriously, yes.”

Charlie continued to eye Sam surreptitiously as he collected the rest of his papers and headed out. At the door, he stopped and faced about. “How about coming home with me? Monica fixes a mean pot roast. We can talk on the way, and you can stay the night. I’ll even let you win a couple of games at the pool table.”

Sam shook his head. “Pete’s expecting me.” He wagged his head back-and-forth thoughtfully. “It has been a long time since I’ve seen Monica and your boys.” With a hopeful expression, he said, “Later this week?”

It was agreed and Charlie left. Sam walked out to Rea’s desk and told her she could go home early tonight—six was early for her. When she protested, saying she had lots to do, he shooed her out by thanking her for bringing in Pen’s call. She left, but not before reviewing his calendar for tomorrow with

him, penciling in the morning with Charlie and crew. When he thanked her again as she entered the elevator, she gave him a searching look as the doors closed.

Sam strode back to his office and collapsed in his desk chair. He felt helpless, and it left him in knots. It was Pete fighting for life in a hospital all over again—that frightening, world-out-of-control sensation leaving him frantic, while being forced to just sit and wait.

But Pete was the only family he had in the world. Victoria Covington was something else entirely. He'd been shocked by his own response to Pen's news. He certainly liked Victoria and needed her for the Belton Project, but inexplicably, he felt her death would be a gut-wrenching travesty, worse than the destruction of the Taj Mahal or Alhambra Palace. She was too extraordinary. The world would be a far poorer place without her.

He shook his head in disbelief. The thought of losing her was making him physically sick, his stomach aching as if he'd been kneed. Damn it. He'd known her less than a week.

The folder with her name on it was still there, taunting him. He flipped it open and surveyed what he'd already read several times. His people had determined that Viscount William Covington didn't have any nieces—legitimate or otherwise. According to the Indonesian and the Sumatran governments, there were no Covingtons living in the region, past or present.

What was stranger, though he made sure that Sussex was thoroughly canvassed, no Victoria Ann Covington had ever been heard of before a week and a half ago, other than various ghost stories circulated among the locals. If the report was to be believed, she sprang out of nowhere and he was the first person to ever see her. He threw the folder across the room. *Ghost stories, my ass.*

~ ~ ~

The beer tasted flat. The Cubs' game was a blow-out, and Sam found he couldn't relax, even stretched out in a recliner. Pete wheeled energetically out of the kitchen with his perpetual grin but braked when he saw Sam's expression. "What? Is it my meatloaf?" He glanced at the wall TV. "Or are the Cubs still getting spanked?"

Sam grunted. "The Cubs. Your meatloaf was good, not too spicy." He turned to Pete facing him in his black wheelchair, and realized he'd cut his hair short for the summer. Pete hadn't said a word when he'd done it.

At twenty-six, he should be out with his friends—with girls—not cooking for his big brother. Pete was so involved in his painting.

"So, did you go to your doctor's appointment today?"

"Yes, *Dad*."

Sam scowled. "Well, what did he say?"

"Hi." Pete scooped up the plates and rolled back into the kitchen with them in his lap.

With as much patience as he could muster, he asked evenly, "Anything else?"

Pete came back out into the living room, the rubber treads on his wheels squeaking across the wood floor. He braked in front of his brother. "That I'm in good health, and still can't move my legs. Surprise. And what did you do with your day?"

"I worked."

"And I didn't, is that it?" Pete thinned his lips and shook his head at his brother.

"No, that isn't it." Sam tried to change the subject. "Have you seen any of those basketball friends of yours?"

Pete sighed. "Yes, every Tuesday and Thursday, as usual. You want me to fill out an itinerary for you? I could email it to Rea each morning."

"Damn it, Pete. I'm just interested, okay?"

“So, why does it always feel like an interrogation? You don’t quiz Charlie this much, do you?” Pete raised an eyebrow at him and grinned. “Or do you?” The guy could probably charm the habit off a nun, Sam mused. When Sam didn’t answer, Pete asked, “Still worried about my social life?”

Sam just waited, a bland expression pasted on his face.

“Well, let’s see. I painted and talked to my agent, Max the Magnificent. Remember, I still have that show in November.” Pete eyed his silent sibling. “Oh yeah, and I actually made a plan to go *out*.” He raised his hands as though he was opening a circus act, then doing a three-sixty with his chair. “I’m going to hit an exhibit at the Art Institute Thursday after playing some hoops.”

He moved his wheelchair closer and asked in an ironic tone, “You know I have this nifty van now, don’t you?” Sam rolled his eyes, and Pete shrugged.

“See, I get out during the day. You, you just *work*.” He said it in a stuffy, deep voice, and wheeled around to see the TV, well-developed arms stretching his shirtsleeves with the effort. He tilted his head sideways and glanced at his brother. “You need to get out more, bro. How about coming with me Thursday to the Art Institute. It’s just down the street. It’s a Van Gogh exhibit.”

Seeing no reaction from Sam, he grunted. “Vincent van Gogh is just the painter for you. Manic and moody.”

“Ha-ha.” Sam raised his bottle. “It’s the beer—it’s warm. You want one?” Pete shook his head, so Sam dumped his beer into the sink and returned to the recliner. Pete was now watching the game, so Sam stared at the TV without seeing it.

All Sam had accomplished in the last nine years was for one purpose: to care for Pete, to keep the family safe. His company demanded more and more time away. Now, hundreds of peoples’ lives depended on him, not just Pete, so he didn’t have as much time to spend with him as he used to. Yet, sometimes it seemed that Pete wanted him out of his life

altogether. It bothered the hell out of him and left him feeling strangely lost.

Victoria Covington. One more person he couldn't protect, and didn't understand. He closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. Pete and Tory. He didn't know what to say or do. Sit and wait, sit and shut up? He needed to hit something.

He thought of the last time he'd seen Tory. He'd been so sure she'd be embarrassed when he came down to the pool for a swim. He felt guilty now, but he'd wanted to see what she'd do—to provoke her. And she hadn't disappointed.

Her shock when he sat down next to her in his robe was real enough. She avoided looking at him most of the time. He crossed his arms, settling deeper in the recliner.

The same dismay had flitted across her face when he'd thrown off his robe—for a moment. You'd think she'd never seen a man in a swimsuit before. As he stood there in his Speedo, her face had suddenly expressed far more than some inexperienced young woman.

It didn't make any sense. Yet, she watched him the entire time he swam and didn't take her eyes off him when he got out. She made little effort to hide her inspection, but it never seemed bold nor was it an effort to flirt. Her expression said she wanted nothing from him, even though he was her paycheck. She was just a woman openly enjoying the sight of him, perhaps astonished by the sight of him. A tiny smile of pleasure *had* played on those enticing lips, but it was mixed with a thoughtful contemplation, a Mona Lisa smile that he found perplexing. He'd never been admired by a woman quite like that. Usually, women's responses were self-promoting, part of a larger campaign to get his attention. She kept surprising him. *Her* responses to things—to him—were never typical or self-serving.

Sam closed his eyes, awash in his own sharp, but confused feelings. He wanted to believe desire had darkened those

lovely eyes, that the attraction he felt was mutual, but he wasn't sure.

Now that woman could be dying.

“Sam?”

“Yeah,” he breathed and opened his eyes.

“You going to tell me what's going on?”

“It's just work.”

“Right.” Pete sat back in his wheelchair. “If you don't want to tell me, fine, but don't ask me to buy that.”

Sam gave a half shrug. “Are you still coming with me to England at the end of the month?”

“Yep, but don't change the subject.”

With a disgusted flip of his hand, Sam said, “Don't be a pain in the butt.”

Pete smiled back unrepentant. “Hey, when I sit on my butt all day, it comes naturally. So, what's wrong?”

Sam didn't know—except that he couldn't help Tory. “You know, I toss pushy siblings out into the hall when they get annoying.”

“Not a chance. Unlike you, I got brakes, and I can beat you arm wrestling three out of three.”

Sam eyed his brother, got up, and cleared off the end of the dining table. Pete grinned and rolled over to the table and helped prepare for their match.

“Remember, you have to put your feet up,” Pete insisted, pointing to another chair. “This is an all arms contest.” Sam lost the bout two out of three, but the last round probably didn't count—they were laughing too much.

Sam didn't tell Pete about Tory and her illness. Because he didn't know what to say.

Chapter 19

Time's the king of men; he's both their parent, and he is their grave, and gives them what he will, not what they crave.

—[William Shakespeare](#) “*The plays and poems of William Shakespeare*” by E. Malone. 10 vols. p. 531 (1790).

A single lamp lit William Covington's book, a circle of light in the darkness. He'd been trying to read for an hour, but he was still staring at the same page of *The Bookman's Wake*. He gazed at the rented hospital bed and the patient lying there in the shadows. Tubes and wires ran from her to machines and bottles surrounding the bed. An oxygen mask covered her nose and mouth. Pale, she seemed to have lain unmoving for days. Her shallow, rapid breathing filled the silent room, the smell of stale sweat and antiseptics hovering like a wraith.

Covington glanced at his watch. Two-thirty in the morning. He watched over Victoria while her nurse slept in the adjoining room. Her fever had finally broken a few hours ago, but only after three days of heated delirium, ice packs, and antibiotics. He hadn't slept much. Dr. Roland had left at twelve, saying all they could do was wait.

Even in the dimness, he could see the angry red spots covering her arms and face. The back of the bed was raised to help her breathe, the tube in her mask quietly hissing oxygen. Her hair, stringy and damp, clung to her skull. If her chest hadn't risen with each shallow breath, she could've been mistaken for a corpse. He closed his eyes to dispel the unwelcome image. He reached under the railing along the bed to take her hand. It was limp and clammy to the touch.

He gave her hand a squeeze. “Stay with us, my dear. You can't go now.” He continued to hold her hand and watch her until he dozed off, forehead on the cold steel of the bedrail.

He woke with a start, unsure what had disturbed him. He felt the pressure of her hand in his. Her eyes were open watching him. He sat up and smiled as best he could.

“My dear.” The weary relief in his voice couldn’t hide the remaining fears. “Are you thirsty?”

The blue, bruised eyes stared at him for a long while, but finally she gave a nearly imperceptible nod. He took her mask off and held a cup of water with a straw near her mouth, but she stared at it with a lack of understanding. He explained how the straw worked and she tried it, coughed a little, and drank some more. She shook her head when she’d had enough. Slowly running her tongue over her chapped lips, she looked around her at the dim surroundings without any apparent comprehension, then back at him.

“Am I dying?” Her voice cracked, weak and raspy.

“No,” he said too harshly and pursed his lips. “No, but you are very ill.”

She turned her head toward him, eyes pleading, and croaked, “Bury me with my parents.”

Taking her hand in both of his, he said fiercely, “You *will* recover, so I don’t want to hear such talk.”

A tear trailed down her face. After a struggle, she murmured, “Perhaps ... Perhaps this is what was planned by Providence, for me to appear, to save our family’s home.” She swallowed hard. “My fated labors are finished.” She gave a queasy little smile. “The advent of this illness could not be more auspicious.”

“You’re talking nonsense, young lady. I’ll hear no more of it.”

He laid his hand on her forehead, which felt cool and moist. “I want you to start thinking of what you will be doing once you’re well.” He gazed at her over his reading glasses. “Do you understand?”

She didn’t answer but took her eyes off him and feebly moved her arms, finally focusing on the intravenous tube inserted and taped to her wrist. With a shiver, she asked, “Am ... am I being bled?”

Curiosity, this is a good sign, he thought. “No, you’re being *given* nourishment and medicine.”

She frowned at this explanation and closed her eyes. “What’s wrong with me?” Opening her eyes, she seemed to see her arms for the first time, little red spots covering them. Her face grew slack with fear. “I have the pox.”

“No, not smallpox. Chickenpox.”

“What?” She coughed painfully, having taken too deep a breath.

“Chickenpox. It isn’t smallpox, so you mustn’t worry. Chickenpox isn’t lethal.” It was small lie. It could kill adults.

She inspected her hands and arms, turning them slowly, as though each weighed ten times normal. She laid her head back against the pillows and let a rattling sigh escape at the exertion. Her eyes closed, she said, “I feel so ... so weak, so dizzy.” She didn’t speak for several moments, until Covington thought she might have dropped off to sleep and replaced her mask. Without moving, she whispered in a faraway voice, “Tell me again, my lord, that this malady has not brought me to *nonplus*.”

“You are going to get well.”

She opened her eyes and searched his face for the truth of his assertion. Closing them again, she lay still, breathing hard, and mumbled as she drifted off, “Promise me you will bury me in Belton Park.”

~ ~ ~

Pen answered her phone. “Well, it’s nine o’clock in the morning, so this must be Sam Dalton.”

Sam narrowed his eyes in annoyance. “What have you found out?” He was in no mood for cutesy comments from a smart-mouthed lawyer.

“Sam, I just got to the Park. Give me a chance to find out, for the love of Maria.”

“Is Covington there? I’ll talk to him and save you the trouble.” He could hear Pen huff, but he didn’t care.

“Just hold on.” The names she wanted to call him hanging silently at the end of the sentence. After a minute, she came back on. “He’s coming.” She paused. “It must be two in the morning in Chicago.”

“So?”

“Okay, be a butthead,” she whispered.

After a moment, Sam said, “Is that a legal term, Montez?” injecting it with a wry ‘I don’t give a damn what you think’ tone, but he was actually shocked that she’d said it. Obviously, he’d pushed too hard. She was also upset about Tory. He sighed. He had to do cleanup. “I know you are concerned about Tory too.”

All she said in reply was, “Here he is.”

“Mr. Dalton?”

Sam was taken aback by the exhausted tone in Covington’s voice. “How is she?”

“She’s still very ill, but her fever has broken. She’s having trouble breathing. The most recent lab tests show she’s come down with chickenpox, some kind of swine flu, and strep throat—all at once. And that has caused her pneumonia.”

“All at once?” Covington hesitated in answering just long enough for Sam to suspect that he knew why it was possible but wasn’t going to tell him.

“The doctors don’t really know why. It seems your lawyer, Karl Hoffman, had a mild case of the flu last week.”

“But who gets chickenpox these days?”

“Janice, our maid, you remember her?” Sam said yeah impatiently, so Covington continued. “She visited her cousins last week, and one of their children had a mild case of chickenpox.”

“So, you’re saying she caught them all within a week of arriving there?”

“The doctors think so. They’re still studying it, but a week’s incubation period is about right for the three diseases. Right now, they’re pumping her full of antibiotics and hoping for the best.”

“I want to talk to this Dr. Roland.”

“I’ve told you all that she’s told me.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“Mr. Dalton, this is a family matter.”

“Lord Covington, I can help, but I need to talk to the doctor.”

“How could you help?”

“I’m someone who followed his brother, who nearly died, through the medical maze of terminology and diagnoses for over a year. I know the questions to ask.” *And continue asking*, Sam thought. He waited, and silently waited some more.

“If I agree, you’ll tell me everything you’ve talked about afterward?”

Sam glared at the ceiling. “So, I can talk to her?” There was an irritated huff on the other end, which elicited a thin smile from Sam. “You can be in the conversation, on the same line, or it can be a conference call if you’d want. I’ll pay for it.”

“No need. Doctor Roland just came in. She arrived about an hour ago and has been in with Victoria. She can put it on speaker phone. Just a minute. I need to prepare her ...”

Prepare her? Cute.

“Hello. This is Dr. Roland.” She was a confident alto, with a very cultured accent, if not as aristocratic and precise as Tory’s.

“Good morning, Doctor. This is Sam Dalton. How is Miss Covington?”

“She’s very ill.”

Sam silently snarled. If he heard that one more time ... Why medical people felt they had to constantly hedge, he’d never know, but he was used to it. “Is she on the mend?”

“Mr. Dalton, there are a number of things we don’t know yet. We’re working to control the pneumonia and the fever’s broken.”

“Doctor?”

“You’re asking me to make a prediction here.”

Sam didn’t say anything.

There was a sigh. “All right. If I had to guess, I’d say yes. She’s slowly on the mend.”

“But?”

There was a silence for a moment. “Well, Miss Covington presents some unexpected problems, which I have never encountered before, nor has anyone else I’ve consulted.”

That was Miss Covington—unexpected. Sam took a deep breath. “Okay. Like what?”

“When we thought her immune system had collapsed, we spent a great deal of Lord Covington’s money on lab tests, particularly testing for viruses and antibodies.” There was a pause, which Sam was sure meant the good doctor was glancing at Covington.

It was like pulling teeth. Anything out of the ordinary and no one wanted to offer conclusions. “And you found ...?”

“I spoke to the Chandam Labs in London yesterday. Miss Covington’s immune system is in perfect order, only it’s primed for illnesses such as smallpox, cholera, and diphtheria. Oh, and a form of rubella or German measles, which hasn’t been seen here in over fifty years.” Dr. Roland waited for a response, but Sam didn’t know what to say.

“In other words, Miss Covington’s body is primed to fight diseases we haven’t seen in England for very long time, but

she didn't seem to have any resistance to weak strains of chickenpox, strep throat, or the flu."

"How is this possible? I thought chickenpox had been eradicated."

"Most strains have. A few very mild strains do exist. Miss Covington simply didn't have the resistance most of us are born with or vaccinated for."

"Could living in Indonesia be the cause?"

The phone vibrated with an energetic "No. How could she live in southeast Asia and not have *any* resistance to the flu?" There was an exasperated sniff over the phone. "I have no explanation for it, but I have a series of vaccinations for her once she's well. She doesn't seem to have ever had *any*," the doctor said, a disgusted edge to her voice, "except what appears to be a crude vaccination for smallpox. Her parents should be charged with negligence."

Sam rubbed his neck and wondered if Lord Covington felt as shaken as he did. *Why are there no explanations for Victoria Covington?* "But she's going to be okay?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You *think* so?"

"Well, assuming she doesn't catch anything else."

Chapter 20

“Time is nothing but the form of inner sense,
... because this inner intuition yields no shape, we endeavor
to make up for this want by analogies.”

—Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 1787

“No, wait.”

Sam threw an arm out in front of Janice to keep her from announcing him. From where he stood on the terrace, he could see Tory in profile through the open doors to the music room, sitting in the ornate couch facing the windows.

Silently, he examined her. Covington had reassured him a number of times that she was recovered, but it wasn't enough. He had to see for himself. Was she the same woman he'd left more than a month ago?

She seemed to be studying a book in her lap, lit by the sun through the windows. She turned her face to the light, eyes closed. Her cheekbones were more prominent, and there were hints of shadow under her eyes. It didn't matter. Her skin glowed in the sunlight, enhanced by the contrasting dark blue of her shirt.

He expelled a ragged breath. When he'd spoken to her on the phone last week, it had been awkward. She seemed to dislike talking to him 'disembodied,' as she put it. He could understand. He needed to see her too, to know she remained real. He flexed his shoulders to relax.

Tory glanced down at the book, then out the southern windows. She closed her eyes again, head up. The posture reminded him of her sitting on the garden bench the day after they'd first met.

He nodded to Janice, who had been eyeing him, puzzled. “Go ahead and announce me.” Janice entered the room and quietly spoke to Tory and nodded to him as she left, returning to the library.

As he approached, Tory gave him a smile stopping his breath, his world. Her expression and its warm radiance were for him alone, an acceptance, an invitation. He couldn't think for what seemed an eternity.

“Mr. Dalton? How are you?”

Snap out of it, Dalton. Rattled by his unexpected reaction, Sam spoke too quickly. “Hi! I'm good, and I can see you've recovered.” He paused. “You look wonderful.”

At the compliment, she glanced at him under a skeptical brow. “Why, thank you.” No hand went to her hair, now longer and brushing her shirt collar. Her hands remained in her lap, holding the small volume she'd been reading. The absence of such a typical woman's response struck him as odd. What did it say about her? *Damn.* He was staring at her again.

He took a breath to refocus and gestured to the empty space on the couch. “May I?”

She nodded and moved the laptop and the papers beside her to the floor. She made sure there was more than a foot of empty cushion between her and him as he settled down on the couch.

He eyed the space, frustrated, and tried to think of something to say. He cleared his throat and started to speak just as she did. He gestured for her to continue.

“I wanted to thank you for the lovely flowers. So many, I ...”

“I just hope they cheered you up.”

“Yes, very much so.” She appeared uncomfortable with the topic and changed the subject. “Have you come to stay? Lord Covington only mentioned you would be by.”

Sam shook his head. “I'm in London for the week, until our office is set up there. When done, Pete and I will move in here.”

“Your brother too?”

“Yep. Right now, he’s seeing the sights in town.” He pointed to the book in her hand. “What were you doing just now?”

“Reading poetry. I find it soothing.”

“Poetry?” He grimaced. “And the head up, eyes closed?”

She glanced at him, and then gazed out the windows as though she were trying to catch a glimpse of some mystery among the trees. “I read a few lines and attempt to sense the sentiment contained there.” She ran a hand over the book cover. “At times, events in my life come to mind, or mayhap, new thoughts worthy of contemplation. Often it is simply comforting.”

Sam held his hand out for the book. She used a metal letter opener to mark her place and handed it to him. The book was thin and bound in textured leather. He checked the spine, saw Keats name, and opening it, read the title page.

ENDYMION.

A Poetic Romance.

“THE STRETCHED METRE OF AN ANTIQUE SONG.”

INSCRIBED TO THE MEMORY OF THOMAS
CHATTERTON.

Book I

Sam laughed. “‘Stretched metre’? Is Keats admitting he’s drawn-out and windy?”

Tory chuckled but raised an eyebrow. “No, Mr. Dalton, it has to do with how he formulated the rhyming.”

“It has been a long month. Remember, it’s Sam.”

She gave him a half smile and gestured to the book. “Give it a go. Read the first three or four lines and close your eyes.” She demonstrated by sitting back and closing her eyes as he’d seen her do before. “Just reflect on what the words might mean.”

“I’m afraid poetry is not something I read, but all right, if you insist.” With a wry grimace, he positioned himself as she had, knees together, back straight, head up, hands folded in his lap.

“Are you quizzing me, Mr. Dalton?”

Without moving, he glanced at her. “If you mean, am I having some fun at your expense—Yes, *Miss Covington*, I am.” Sam chuckled at her expression of mock annoyance and tapped the first page with his finger. “I’ve heard this line before—‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever,’ and I’ve even heard of Keats.

“I’m pleased to hear he is still known to ...” She stopped. “I’m glad you recognize his name.”

“Yeah, but I sure don’t recognize this poem. I can’t even pronounce it.”

“It’s a Greek myth, you wet goose.”

“Is it? Well, that explains everything.”

Tory laughed at his bemused tone. “Endymion was a handsome shepherd boy, the mortal lover of the moon goddess Selene. She begged Zeus to make him immortal, so they could be together. He granted her wish, but she could only visit him at night.” She gave him a playful glance. “They had fifty children.”

“Oh, I see, an epic poem.”

Grinning, she shook her head at his joke. “You are attempting to fuzz me.”

“I’m attempting to what?”

“Pull the wool over my eyes?” she suggested. He cocked his head, offering an angelic expression.

She gave him a chiding glance. “You, sir, are trying to avoid my poetry exercise.”

“Ya got me.” He grinned, enjoying her feigned, long-suffering patience. “What do I do again?”

“Read a few lines and close your eyes.”

He shut his eyes and became aware of the sweet breeze through the open doors gently brushing his face, but nothing poetic came in the dark. “And again, what is supposed to happen?”

Tory laughed, the sound musical. “You are hopeless. Shall I read it to you?”

He nodded and felt her take the book from his hands with a light touch. It stirred him, like a whispered promise.

After a moment, she read, “*A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.*”

Her velvet voice was comforting—and more. In his mind’s eye, he could see her enticing blue eyes, her welcoming smile. How could her warm voice soothe him and excite him, inciting a need to touch her, all at the same time? Enigmatic, *she* was a thing of beauty.

In a sultry contralto whisper, she said, “Let the words lead you. No need to force a response.” He pursed his lips and shifted uncomfortably. His response was anything but forced.

She continued, her British vowels making the verses a song. “*It will never pass into nothingness, but still will keep a bower quiet for us, and a sleep, full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.*”

Quiet breathing. He felt his chest slowly rise and fall. He realized he was relaxed.

A bower quiet for us. Yes, he was definitely thinking of an ‘us’ at the moment, though he shouldn’t.

It will never pass into nothingness. The line unexpectedly gave him a chill. She *had* nearly passed into nothingness. She *was* transitory. Then a deeper, more disturbing thought settled in his gut. She had come into his life suddenly from nothing, nowhere—only six weeks ago.

This moment with her could be all he had.

~ ~ ~

Tory silently watched him, glad he was here beside her. She had thought of him often in the last weeks, particularly their last poolside encounter, remembering his body, the details of his face, his playful humor. His solid presence next to her was better than any memory. His bronzed face was peaceful yet radiating a strength and banked energy which drew her, a vigorous fire on a winter's night.

She blinked. Her cold nights. Her illness, the chill of death, had left her feeling she'd never be truly warm again. It had left her wanting more from life.

More from Sam Dalton.

His dark brows and forehead knotted in a frown. His mouth tightened into a thin line. Was he angry? She bit her lip. Could he sense her desires?

He opened his eyes and gazed at her with such an intensity, she leaned away from him. There was a hunger in his expression which left her breathless in its abruptness. They stared at each other for some time, then his eyes softened, whiskey-colored, reflecting the sunlight.

“Well”—he took a breath—“that was interesting.” He leaned back in the sofa and offered her a forced smile.

She tried to smile back, confused by his response, unsure what had just occurred. “I have never known Keats to irritate anyone, except perhaps Lord Byron.”

“Irritated? I'm sorry, I wasn't.” He looked away. “I was ...” He turned to her again and his eyes fell on the brown bruise still visible on the back of her left hand. Before she could react, he reached over and took her hand in his. He gazed at the discolored skin with a sad expression, as he ran his thumb lightly over the spot where the I.V. tubes had been inserted.

The gentle strokes sent ripples of tingling warmth up her arm, completely bewitching her. She watched his fingers stroke her skin, lost in the sparks of sensation they created. He said her name and she looked up.

Their eyes met. What she saw there made her blood pound in her temples, though she couldn't put a name to it. She suddenly felt so vulnerable, yet whole, fully alive in a new and startling manner.

"I'm sorry, Tory. I'm so sorry you had to go through this," he whispered as he covered her hand in his. The pain in his voice, the empathy shining in his eyes, brought the shocks, the frustrations, the terrors of her weeks in the modern world bursting to the surface, and she fought the sting of tears. *Devil in it!* How could he destroy her composure so quickly? Was she so brittle?

Without any hesitation, he pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her.

His solid arms seemed to penetrate and burst the shell surrounding her, walling off her isolation and dread. As a tangy scent of orange and spice enveloped her, his large hands covered her back, warm and firm. She buried her head in his shoulder, arms in front of her, lost in the sheer breadth of his chest, now a wall of protection. There she found the acceptance and life she desperately desired. An oceanic dam of heartache and fear shattered.

~ ~ ~

Sam sat stunned as he felt Tory sob into his shoulder. He'd pulled her to him without thinking, just reacting to the lost expression on her face. With her actually in his arms, small, soft and yielding, feeling her silken hair caressing his face, he knew he'd pulled her into more than just his arms. As he held her close, he tried to absorb all her pain by sheer will.

After some time, she stopped crying. Sam took hold of her shoulders and pulled her away. Tear-stained, her face was flushed, her blue eyes luminescent. So close, he could smell the salt of her tears and the flower scent of her hair. He watched as she ran her tongue over the stimulating curves of her lips as she studied his mouth in turn.

Footsteps on the terrace slate outside jarred him back to reality.

Chapter 21

[“Make use of time, let not advantage slip.”](#)

—[William Shakespeare](#), (1593) *Venus and Adonis*,
stanza 22, l.129-32.

Tory jerked back out of his arms and quickly wiped her face with her handkerchief, her brain fizzing in frustration and embarrassment. She glanced at Sam.

Appearing dazed, he ran his fingers roughly through his hair as he blew out a breath.

Janice appeared at the terrace doors. “Miss, would you care for tea now, or perhaps a cold drink?” Tory thought a tall whiskey would be just the thing, but as it was morning, she settled for tea. Mr. Dalton asked for a ‘Coke.’

The seconds ticked by after Janice left, neither speaking. Tory watched the emotions play across his face, afraid of what he might be thinking about her behavior.

“Mr. Dalton.”

He blinked and focused on her. She cleared her throat, “I-I apologize for creating such an *embrouillement*. You were very kind to ... That is, it was ...” Sam interrupted her, which was just as well. She wanted to finish the sentence with ‘wonderful.’

“No apology necessary. I hope it helped.” He waited for her nod and sat back, creating some space between them. “I know what it is to be seriously ill. My brother struggled for more than a year.” He smiled. “You’ve had a very difficult month, losing your family, being forced to come to a strange country, and then becoming so sick.” He offered an empathetic expression, with the words “Feeling better?” which seem to increase the distance between them.

When Tory finally gave a brief smile, he ran a hand through his hair again as though searching for his next words. “So,

how have you been doing with the laptop and plans for Belton Park?”

Tory eyed him for a moment, discouraged—no, irritated. One thing remained unchanged for the last two hundred years, the male’s inability to admit to displays of emotion, much less address them.

With a resigned nod, she bent down and retrieved the papers under the laptop. There were more than thirty pages of handwritten notes. She thrust them at him. “There. I haven’t mastered typing yet, so for the sake of expedience, I penned the lists. I’ve walked the grounds and inspected the Dowager House.”

When he took them from her, she sat back and stared out the window, fuming and confused. How would a modern woman navigate this sea? She wanted to say *something*, at least admit openly what had just happened, what she had felt, what he might have felt.

But instead, she pointed to the papers. “I have listed all the changes in three sections: the grounds, the main houses, inside and out, and the furniture requirements. I’ve penned some drawings of how the exterior should appear and some of the rooms. At this point, I have no notion of the cost for such refurbishing.”

“Not your worry. Those questions are for my buyers. They will price everything.”

Then silence. Sam’s attention on her notes was total. He didn’t notice when Janice brought the refreshments. She sat on the sofa next to him with her tea untouched in her lap as he read. She stared out at the south parklands, unable to calm the emotions roiling her stomach. Sam continued to read, penning notes—criticisms? —in the margins for what seemed forever. Had he felt *anything*?

“What’s an ‘Angel Tester’?”

Tory started, splashing tea into the saucer, and glared at him. “It’s a bed canopy without foot posts to support it. The ends

hang from the ceiling. The tent bed in the sunroom is an example.”

“Oh.” He shuffled through the pages, picking out various words. “And a *chiffonier*, a *begère*, a *trompe l’oeil*, an *acanthus*, or these *girandoles*?” He grinned.

She quirked the corner of her mouth when he appeared fascinated with all her answers. He seemed oblivious to her frustration, having apparently forgotten their embrace. Even with the time to think, Tory could only conjure inappropriate or humiliating openings for discussion concerning what now appeared to be just her own consuming response to him.

The last time a man held her in his arms, she had been two and ten, when her father comforted her after she’d fallen from her horse, spraining her wrist. Afterward, he seemed to realize she was growing into a woman and had stopped holding her. The loss had hurt, leaving her confused, and then he died. Uncle Reggie had proven equally distant.

Sam’s embrace was wholly unique in her experience. She wanted his arms around her again, to be lost again in that security, free to revel in his touch.

But apparently, Sam Dalton did not desire the same from her. She rubbed her forehead, hard. No, for him, such embraces could be common occurrences in this day and age, where women were offered ‘release’ in his arms whenever they needed comforting. She pursed her lips. The ill-phrased thought drove her imagination to run rampant, all in ultimately depressing directions.

None of the articles concerning *affaires de coeur* addressed a lack of response. Blast this modern world. At least in her age there had been rules and common expectations to help sort out such confusions.

Sometime later, Sam finished with his reading, and his questions. She stood, finding it difficult to sit close to him. She leaned on the piano nearby and finally sat on the piano bench facing him.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to tire you out with my incessant questions.” He straightened the pages and stood up. “This all looks very good. The drawings are excellent,” he said, waving the sheets. “You could be an architectural artist.” She brightened at the compliment.

He gazed at her for a moment, then said, “If it’s all right with you, I’ll take these and get them copied.” He stood and strode over to her. “And return the originals to you. Okay?” Tory frowned, wondering who would do all the copying by hand.

Sam smiled down at her. “You have such neat, attractive handwriting and a period feel to your drawings. We could use both with some of our promotional materials.” While he seemed pleased with his inspiration, Tory could only frown at the tedious labor involved, writing out the same pages hundreds of times. *Not for all the jewels in London Tower, Mr. Dalton.*

“This is terrific.” He held her papers and smiled. “The history is fascinating.” With a wry shake of his head, he considered her for a moment. “What you need is a break.”

She silently mouthed, “A break?”

Sam grinned. “Ms. Montez never got to take you out. How about we go for a ride tomorrow?” At her hesitation, he smiled and leaned down close. “If you feel up to it. Just a short trip. Your uncle said you know a great deal about the history of Gwen Roland’s family.”

Tory frowned, bewildered. “I ... well, yes, I suppose I do.”

He playfully acted as if he were looking at her over non-existent spectacles. “I had a chance to talk with Dr. Roland several times on the phone. Apparently, the Covington and Roland families have been neighbors for over two hundred years.”

When she didn’t answer, he shrugged. “Well, from what she told me, her home is a couple of miles from here, and the

family has made part of the downstairs into a museum and archive. Would you like to see it?”

The idea of getting out of the house was imminently appealing, and seeing her best friend’s home held attractions, but also distressing memories, missing Kitty as she did. Worse, it would mean traveling by auto.

“I do not know. I ...”

“I understand if you aren’t well enough yet.”

She sat up straighter. “No, I am recovered. According to Dr. Roland, I have ‘amazing recuperative powers.’” She rubbed her arm absently. “She has given me countless injections for ‘viruses’ and infections. My arm is black and blue.” She fidgeted when she saw he was waiting for her to explain her hesitation.

“I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Nonsense. I would enjoy it, and you could use a change of scenery. You might even find some sources for your Belton Park research. There will be period furniture. Perhaps you can show me a *trompe l’oeil* or *acanthus*.”

My Belton Park research? What was he flannelling on about? Then it dawned on her. He rightly assumed she could only know what she did about her home, her life, having read it in books or by studying documents. Tory covered her face with her hands, feeling the fool, disturbed by her failure to comprehend the current state of affairs—again.

Blast and damnation. When will it end? She stood and squared her shoulders but hesitated. So close, he towered over her, commanding and competent, while she felt so inadequate and weak-minded. She wanted his arms around her once more.

“It’s supposed to be beautiful tomorrow,” he coaxed with an indulgent smile and a cock of his head to catch her eye.

“I would be pleased to accept your generous invitation.”

~ ~ ~

“Ready to go?”

Tory felt her face grow warm with his examination and approval. She ran her hands over her trousers and mused, *Go out in public?* She stared off into space. *Confound it!* Covington said it would be all right for a short outing, even though there would be no chaperone. Upper-class women of the twenty-first century seemed to be little encumbered by either clothes or propriety. With him watching her as she approached, Tory became aware to every place her clothes touched her, where the silk and jersey whispered against her skin. How could his simple regard sharpen her every sense? All the men who had danced attendance during her Season in town had not affected her to one-tenth the degree Sam Dalton could with a glance.

She clenched a fist against her thigh. “Let me collect my gloves and a shawl, I mean sweater.” *Why would anyone want to sweat in the knitted coat?*

With her first trip to London for her season, she had traveled farther from home than she’d ever had in her entire life, and then the unknown had loomed daunting, promising the novel and strange. In the end, she had succeeded with the *Beau Monde*, gaining an acceptable amount of ‘town bronze.’

That experience hardly compared to what she felt now, what she faced traveling ‘just a couple of miles’ to Kitty’s home. She had little idea what kind of patina she must develop to move comfortably in this *Nouveau Monde*. And if she did, would Sam Dalton even notice, much less care?

~ ~ ~

Sam leaned on the main doors and watched Tory as she walked across the hall toward him. Gloves? Her white-gloved hands seemed to disappear among the folds of the white wool sweater they were holding. And he had plenty of time to enjoy the view—the tiled hall was more than ninety feet across. He approved of what he saw and didn’t hide the fact. The blouse and pants hugged her figure, their blue hue delineated her

curves enticingly. Her striking almond eyes, bright cerulean blue even yards away, held his attention.

~ ~ ~

When she reached him, he opened the front door for her without a word. She halted outside on the stone steps and waited for him, back straight, the bright sun making her squint. Her frustration grew more primal, and her body demanded action. *But what to do?*

She impatiently gazed around the front lawns and black-topped the carriage circle. Off to one side sat a green wheeled vehicle studded with bright silver. It sparkled in the sun, sleek and dangerous. A few times in the last weeks, she had caught sight of autos whizzing by on the road fronting the grounds, but because of their implausible speed, there was little to see. The vehicles seemed to appear and disappear on carriage circle out in front of the mansion. She'd never been able to catch sight of one arriving or leaving. They remained unfathomable, even with her uncle's explanations.

Sam strode past her and went down a couple of more steps before he realized she'd stopped. When he turned around, she was eye-level with him. He smiled. "Yes?"

Tory just waved him on. Sam strode to the roofless vehicle and opened the door for her. She walked over and eyed the 'car.' "What kind of vehicle is this?"

"It's a convertible, a Jaguar F-Type."

As she feared, the explanation meant nothing to her. It wasn't a phaeton or four-wheeled coach. *Converting into what?* She carefully sat in the low-slung seat, the tan leather squeaking as she sank into it. When Sam hopped in the other side, he turned to her and waited. She frowned. "What?"

"Buckle up."

"What?"

"Seat belts?" When she gave him a blank look, the auto rocked as he leaned close, his arm coming around in front of

her. He seemed so huge, his chest and shoulder blocking her view, filling her senses. He grabbed straps of some kind behind her which made a hissing sound as he pulled them. One came over her shoulder, and his large hand brought it down across her chest. It settled between her breasts in a most distressing fashion. She closed her eyes, chagrined.

As he tugged on it, it rubbed against her, too intimately. Attached to that came another strap across her lap, and his hand pressed against her hip as he secured it with a snap, as though he meant to ensure that her every nerve jangled. “There, all secure. I take it you’ve never dealt with seat belts.”

“No.” Opening her eyes, she watched him belt himself in a similar fashion.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” She said it so emphatically, that Sam eyed her, his question evident. Pursing her lips, she twisted in the seat to face him. “During my childhood, my life was bounded by my father’s estate. Contained and safe, I was content, and within those confines I’d resolved to live out my life, without prospects or issue.” She took a measured breath to calm herself.

“Now, I have met Pen, a lawyer, and Dr. Roland, an experienced physician, and I see how uneducated and provincial I am—how inexperienced in living. My world is not cloistered anymore, and I understand little of it. I nearly breathed my last a fortnight ago.” She pursed her lips. “Now, I want more for my life, much more.”

“Such as?”

Chapter 22

“Instants, considered without the things, are nothing at all; ... they consist only in the successive order of things.”

—Leibnitz, 1715

“Such as? So many things.” Victoria heaved a sigh and waited, not knowing what she should, could say.

“I know you’re not Covington’s niece.”

Tory started and opened her mouth to deny it, but he spoke first.

“You’re probably not even related.”

Her face tightened, stunned. “I *am* a member of the Covington family.”

“Yet, you don’t have *any* records, any history to prove it, do you?” He scowled hard at her, not expecting an answer. “You seem to have just sprung out of the ground the day I met you.”

Fear beat through her like a panicked flock of birds. *Not now.*

She waited, head down, anticipating the demands for answers, the accusations, unable to think of anything else but the unavoidable disappointment she would see in his eyes, where there had been admiration moments before.

“Tory.” Heavens, but she loved the sound when he said her name. She held tight to the bittersweet feeling. His face was no longer a scowl. Now, he appeared lost. She inwardly cringed. It was because of her.

“So, you’re not going to tell me who you really are.”

She took a deep breath, not knowing what to say. When she failed to answer, he growled out a “Fine” and leaned closer. “I can understand why you might not trust me.” She wanted to deny it, but how? His hand kneaded the back of her leather seat, and the resultant squeaks jarred her nerves. “Just

remember, I've already bet a great deal on you—with nothing to go on but what I see in you.”

She began to speak, but he interrupted. “I have to be a good judge of people in my business, and I have a pretty successful track record.” He narrowed his eyes. “I trust my instincts. I think I'm right about you—your abilities, knowledge—your character—but, at the moment, I can't justify those impressions.”

He flipped a hand in the air. “Listen to me, I sound as though I'm giving a speech to your Parliament.” Leaning in close, in a mock whisper, he said, “It's because of you.” His misgivings were palpable. Their eyes met, and each silently acknowledged the whole situation was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

“Mr. Dalton, I can't ...”

“It's Sam.” He put a finger to a button by the wheel in front of him and paused to say, “Ready?” He pushed the button and a roar erupted from nowhere, the entire vehicle shuddering in response.

Her hands flew out to grab the door handle. The roar settled down to a thrum she could feel vibrate through her seat. Sam eyed her incredulously, his arm slung over the wheel. Seeing his relaxed posture, she belatedly realized her knees were against her chest, her feet on the dashboard, and sheepishly returned to them to the carpeted floor.

“You all right?”

“Yes. You startled me, 'tis all.” She smoothed out the folds in her sweater across her lap, covering her hands with it, to hide the tremors. She could feel him watching her as she stared out though the front glass.

His hand went into a coat pocket, and he pulled out a pair of dark spectacles, which he placed on his nose. Tory frowned. She'd come across pictures of Mr. Osworthy's green glass spectacles in magazines, but she never thought to see Sam wearing such an exotic item.

He smiled at her expression and reached over to a compartment in the dash and took out another pair. He placed them on her nose. Surprisingly, the world didn't go as miasmic as she feared.

He studied her for a moment, then drawled, "You be cool, girl."

"What?"

He laughed. "You look very mysterious in sunglasses, but definitely cute." She eyed him and his use of the word 'cute'. It still sounded a questionable compliment. 'To be cute' meant being too knowing or 'flash' and streetwise ... *in her time*. She would seem the fool if she asked what he meant.

He did something unfathomable with the lever between their seats and moved his feet. The vehicle suddenly lurched backward for a space, then forward, gliding onto the black driveway.

They began to pick up speed, Sam turning the wheel in front of him. Her hand flew to the door grip again when the increasing velocity pressed her back into the seat. She forgot to breathe as they sped toward the entrance of the Belton Park circle, no jerking from a team of horses, only the roar of a smooth acceleration. The road curved left, then right, the land beyond the pavement all but hidden from sight by the tall hawthorn hedges.

The auto flew at the stand of ash trees covering the slope across the road. In the last second, they swerved right and raced down Petworth Road, the violence of the unexpected turn throwing her against Sam, which felt as though she'd hit a tree trunk. She made a noise when the belts held and cut into her.

"Whoa. Sorry." He helped right her with one hand. "I guess I should keep it slow, huh?" She nodded vigorously, fervently opposed to experiencing 'fast.'

Slow? She stared, open-mouthed, as the fields and trees hurtled by her, at speeds faster than her mare, Mary Ann, ever

achieved at a full gallop. The wind whistled violently through the compartment, tugging at her.

She held her spectacles in place with a shaking hand, the other painfully clinging to the door handle. The auto hummed effortlessly down toward Wivelfield and Kitty's family home without so much as a rattle or bump. She could believe they were standing still if the countryside hadn't blown past in a blur. Her hair whipped about her face as she stared, jaws tight.

A mile down the black ribbon of road, an auto could be seen speeding toward them. The bright red machine seemed to skim over the folds in the land and disappear, only to materialize again at the next rise.

Tory glanced at Sam, but he seemed to be unconcerned. Yet their prodigious speed on such a narrow road—how could they avoid colliding? The auto suddenly roared into view in front of them. She closed her eyes and braced for what must be her death. A whooshing growl rocked their vehicle, and when Tory peered behind her, the auto was past and nearly out of sight. Her hands were cramped, and she flexed them. She could feel Sam watching her but could not bring herself to meet his gaze.

Sam spoke over the sounds of the wind, eyes on the road. "It must be strange sitting on the right near the center of the road. Being American, I just rent cars with the steering wheel on the left side." Tory assumed he meant the driver's position should be on the right of any coach as they had been in eighteen-eighteen.

She had just begun to breathe again and enjoy the experience of flying across the Sussex countryside when Sam slowed and turned onto the shaded lane leading to the Roland House. Soon the auto's wheels crunched across a white gravel drive and stopped before the house, where other vehicles of various shapes and colors sat in a row.

Tory stared in horror. Someone had painted the three-story house an ugly dish brown. She shuddered and took off the sunglasses to be sure she was seeing aright. Why would

Kitty's descendants choose such an odious color? The Roland home had been a lovely yellow with white window frames and dark stone corners.

All the handsome elms and mulberry trees had been removed some time in the past and now the building, naked among the bare grounds and shrubs, struck Tory as quite desolate and forlorn. Even the flower garden behind the house appeared to have been replaced by lawn.

Lost in her sad discoveries, she didn't realize Sam had spoken. "What did you say?"

"The museum is around the side."

The servants' entrance. Tory nodded and tried to unbuckle the seat belts. Sam watched her struggle for a moment, then reached over and pushed a red button. The belts instantly snapped open and pulled away on their own, stopping when they hung behind the seat. Tory just stared at them.

"White gloves don't go with your outfit. You could be mistaken for a French waiter."

"A French waiter?" She turned and frowned at him. "That is a most unkind comparison."

"You're right. Apologies," he said, offering her a teasing smile. "How about taking them off? You've gotten grease or something on them from the car."

Tory pursed her lips at the smudges on the fingertips.

"Thank you, Mr. Dalton." She slipped them off, laying them and the sweater on the dashboard.

The car shook as he got out and he came over and opened the door for her. "It's Sam, remember?" He took her hand and helped her out, his touch immediately capturing her senses. Once he let go, she rubbed her fingers, uncomfortable with a desire for more. She studied him as he led the way down the path to the side door, wondering if her consciousness would continue to fizz at every innocuous contact. Little wonder

gloves were *de rigueur* in polite society. She took a deep breath. What used to be her society.

Sam opened the large door to the Roland Museum without knocking and held it for her. A hallway sign directed to them to the left, and she entered what she recognized as Kitty's drawing room, now sporting floral wallpaper rather than the green watered silk Kitty had loved so much. Instead of the chairs and couches she remembered, the large room held glass cases and hundreds of pictures on the walls. Knickknacks of every description cluttered tables and the fireplace mantel. Other visitors wandered about.

Sam passed her, nodding to an attendant, then paid a fee and marched to one end of the room. He examined pictures and the glass cases without comment, but quick intent. She surveyed the displays, lined with family items, razors, dishes, snuff boxes, and fans. She read the commentaries below each item, but after a few, pursed her lips at the patronizing tone of the written explanations, which were too often in error.

One note card remarked on the Roland family's rule about not swimming in the lake on their property between six in the evening and eight in the morning—for health reasons. 'One example of many quaint, but antiquated practices concerning health common during the Regency.' She shook her head in disgust. *The addle-pates never heard of mosquitoes and gnats?* She smiled though, thinking of all the times she'd swum with Kitty at the lake when they were young.

In one case, she saw a necklace she recognized. It held a cameo, attached to two strands of pearls, one above and below the oval, both meant to encircle the neck as a choker. They were linked together at regular intervals with strung lengths of mother-of-pearl beads. Her throat tightened. A month ago, it had been hers, a gift from her father. The portrait in ivory was of her mother.

The label below stated the necklace had been owned by a Mrs. Ophelia Peabody, 1819, and willed to Katherine Spencer in 1828. Mrs. Peabody? She had been a close friend of her

uncle's. The woman had always been consumed with avarice. She could remember her close admiration of the necklace at a ball in London last year. She must have persuaded Uncle Reggie to raid her bedroom for the treasure. *That was mine.*

“Are you all right?” Sam came and stood next to her, close.

She drove her nails into the palms of her hands. “Yes, of course. I just recognized the necklace. I ... I once owned one very similar. It had been a gift from my father.”

“It's very different. I don't remember seeing anything like it before.”

She shrugged, feeling empty. “It was a style during the Regency.” Time had invaded her home and stolen everything. In a daze she stumbled on, not really seeing the faded artwork and tarnished items in the cases, until she came to a family portrait.

The painting was of workman quality, but the woman sitting among her family was obviously Kitty Roland. She read the plaque.

“Mr. Arthur and Mrs. Katherine Spencer, and their four children, Victoria, John, Reginald, and Ann.”

She felt tears come but continued to study the painting. Kitty appeared content, and her children handsome and healthy. Her husband had an arm around her, a rare convention in posed portraits. It spoke well for their marriage. The tears came, but they were now for Kitty's happiness. Resting next to a dress in a glass cabinet sat a card, identifying the dress as the one worn in the portrait. It gave Kitty's age as seventy-six when she died, grandmother of ten. *Oh, Kitty.*

Her handkerchief was very wet by the time she had dried her tears. She hoped Sam hadn't seen how upset she'd been. She felt drained, and only half the room had been viewed.

Sam called her over a few minutes later. Pointing to a glass case, he said, “Isn't the girl in the portrait your namesake?” In a blue velvet bed rested a miniature of her, identified as belonging to Mrs. Spencer. Kitty must have had it painted

from her Constable portrait after she disappeared. She nodded to him.

Next to the miniature, a page of a letter sat in view. *God in heaven*. It was her last letter to Kitty, flannelling on about the new decorations in her uncle's study. The faded ink and yellowed paper taunted her. She remembered writing it just a month ago when Kitty was in London. She gasped, glancing at Sam. He stood further down the row of cases, wholly engrossed in a display of dueling pistols. She closed her eyes in relief. If he had read the letter, he could not have failed to note the striking similarity in handwriting to her pages of notes he read only yesterday.

A commentary next to the letter told of her disappearance and the fact the museum still retained over ninety-two letters she had written to Kitty. She cringed. Most all of her letters were stored here. When she thought of what she wrote at age fifteen, she was tempted to steal them one and all, and burn the lot.

Prudence demanded she lead Sam away, before he saw her letter. She moved next to him and took his arm. "Would you be amenable to a walk about the grounds?"

He smiled down at her. "With you? Of course."

As they stepped out into the sunlight, she thought of the lake and woods behind the house where she and Kitty had played. She led him in the lake's direction along a foot path she recognized. She surprised herself. During her Season and after, she avoided any situation where she was alone with a man, sidestepping any request to walk alone, avoiding any possible impropriety. Yet, here she was, arranging to be alone with Sam. She felt so strange, not sure what to make of the situation or herself.

"Sam, tell me of your plans for Belton Park once we have restored it."

"Haven't I told you?"

She shook her head. "Only the vaguest of descriptions."

“I have been seriously remiss, as you English say.” With an infectious enthusiasm which grew as he described his dreams for his company and how Belton Park figured in their realization. “It’s just our first step into Europe. We’ll find a number of estate properties similar to Belton in England, Scotland, France, Italy, and Germany.” He glanced at her with a grin. “The theme conference center is the next big thing in business training and organizational development. It will also open the doors to a wide variety of opportunities, real estate, tours, and holiday packages. That’s been our experience in the States.”

“Theme conference?” She frowned. “Something resembling Vauxhall Gardens?”

He laughed. “No. This isn’t a conference at Disneyland. Businesses want to provide unique draws for clients and conference participants. With Belton Park, you have the facilities, an attractive venue, but included *within* their stay, an experience of another world and time. We’ve been very successful in the United States.” He leaned over with a smile to say, “There is more history in Europe to provide.”

“It sounds ambitious, exhilarating. But why? Wouldn’t rentals be simpler?”

He gazed at her for a moment, then shrugged. “We do own many rental properties. I enjoy development and I enjoy history. It’s been profitable to combine them. The Regency is a popular and fascinating period. The dress, the manners, all the social rules for the upper class in a changing wartime culture.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know how to respond to his critique.

“If you’re ambitious”, he said grinning, “you know, dream big and you can build something important, something meaningful in the scheme of things.”

“Meaningful?”

Sam remained quiet for a time as they walked. “I once thought of being an architect. It’s a form of self-expression, of cultural expression I found fascinating. Architecture,

buildings, reflect not just the people who built them, but their attitudes, the ...” He stopped and hunted for a word.

“The emotions.”

He smiled at Tory. “Exactly.” He took her arm, his firm grip creating goose bumps. As they strolled arm-in-arm, he explained, “When guests see Belton Park, live on the grounds for a few days, the Regency lives, another way of life is remembered. It provides perspective. Participants have probably attended dozens of conferences. Here, folks walk away with far more than just information provided by the conference, conventional, unrelated diversions or just a retreat in comfortable surroundings. They share an experience, have a chance to be immersed in another world, another time, and discover another view of life. It makes the whole conference unique, memorable without going to the extremes of a Jan Austen weekend or Disneyland.”

Tory nodded, unsure what those ‘extremes’ entailed. “Yes, a worthy goal.”

They followed a dirt path from the back of the house into the woods. “And you’re one of the talents who will make it happen.” After a few moments, Sam smiled down at her. “For any number of reasons, I’m glad you’ve agreed to work with Dalton Developments, helped work out the agreement with your uncle.” She smiled at his words. “Someday, you’re going to have to tell me how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Make everything work out and manage to have everyone like the results, including me.”

Gratified by his praise, she glanced at him impishly. “I will confess, as the mistress of Belton, I found you to be a most exasperating challenge.”

He chuckled, glancing at her with a seductively wicked expression. “I doubt I was *that* much of a challenge.”

The path led into a clearing, and they stopped at the edge of the lake. Victoria was pleased to see it remained much as it

had ever been. Willows and oaks lined the dark waters, lit by stray sunbeams as warm air and grassy banks invited visitors to lie down, a quiet, shaded escape from the world. Sam smiled at the scene, took a deep breath and turned to her. She shook her head at his obvious expectation she could provide historical commentary.

“The Rolands and their family friends used to swim here during the summer, boating too. I can see the flow through has been damaged.”

“Damaged?”

She pointed to the green carpet of algae covering the water at the far end of the lake. “The stream fed the lake, then carried away the stale water at the far end. Now, it’s failing to keep the lake from stagnating.” She described the district families who partied here, children swimming, and the games played centuries ago. She sighed, her heart aching. “It was a long time ago.”

“Still, this is lovely all the same. I can see it the way you describe it.” He chuckled, hands on his hips. “That is the first time I’ve ever used the word ‘lovely’ in a sentence.” He gazed at her with a soft expression, a light smile brightening his face.

She stood close to him, gazing up into his eyes. The esteem she saw in their amber depths warmed her, filled her. Kitty’s family portrait flashed in her mind, and their last conversation. She had asked Kitty if a man could appreciate her for herself. Here, a man did admire her for herself, not her dowry, nor her social standing.

He placed his hands on her arms creating a tingle down to her toes. His gaze held her as securely as his hands. It felt so right. She closed her eyes and lifted her lips to him.

After a moment, his fingers brush away a tear on her cheek, surprising her. She stepped back, hand to her face.

“I’m sorry if I startled you. Are you all right?”

His worried expression made her blink, wipe her eyes and nod. “I am well.”

He examined her for a moment, frowning. "I didn't mean to exhaust you." Instead of asking about her tears, he herded her down the path toward the Roland House. "Let's get you back to the Park."

They returned to his automobile in silence. What a hobbled, innocent fool she must seem to him. Glancing at him as he drove, she fumed, wondering what a woman had to do or say to earn a man's attention romantically. Certainly not with tears. *Damn all the tears.* A stabbing irony made her wince, because she could never truly reveal herself to Sam or the reasons for her continual weeping. Never, not if she wanted him to kiss her.

Chapter 23

“O God, O God, that it were possible
To undo things done, to call back yesterday;
That Time could turn up his swift sandy glass
To untell the days, and to redeem these hours
But! I talk of things impossible,
And cast beyond the moon ...”

—Thomas Heywood, his play

A Woman Killed with Kindness, 1607

The crunch of newly laid gravel greeted Sam as he drove with Pete onto the carriage circle. The fountain in the center gleamed, clean and white, filling the courtyard with the sound of splashing water. Sam couldn't wait to see Tory. He had thought about their visit to the lake the rest of the week. He had nearly kissed her. He thought she'd invited a kiss, but her tears had stopped him. The silence returning to the house seemed an indictment. He didn't know whether it was because he'd almost kissed her or because he hadn't. It ate at him. The conundrum was new to him where women were concerned. He shouldn't, couldn't be romantically involved with a business colleague, but he had to know how she felt about him. He needed some closure. *Right. Keep telling yourself that.*

The morning's cold and damp didn't seem to spoil Pete's first view of the mansion. “Hot damn, Sam. You didn't say it was a palace.” Pete leaned his head out the window to get a better view as Sam pulled the Jag up to the front steps. “How many rooms?”

Sam smiled at his brother's enthusiasm. “Ninety-four, and another twenty-five in the Dowager House. Of course, the Brits count the pantries and closets.” Sam parked and hopped out of the sports car. From the trunk, he retrieved the collapsible wheelchair, the side pockets of the chair already

filled with art paraphernalia. He set it on the passenger's side of the Jag and stepped away when Pete opened the car door. Sam knew better than to offer Pete help getting into his chair. With his upper arm strength and long practice, he didn't need it.

At the top of the steps stood a dark-haired beanpole in a black, three-piece suit. Smiling, Sam's first impression was Lurch from the Adams Family, square-jawed and pale, but the man wore the immaculate suit like a general, and a complementary expression of unflappable, incisive intelligence. Sam climbed up the steps to him. "You must be Parsons." He held out his hand.

"I am, sir. And you are Mr. Dalton, I believe." He took Sam's hand firmly but gave it one shake and returned to attention.

"I'm glad Miss Covington found you so quickly. Have you settled in?" Sam glanced around and saw trenching machines and a crew working down at the north end of the house, upgrading the sewage system. "You've been here three days?"

"Yes, sir. I arrived on Sunday."

"Good. And how are things going?" Sam asked, raising a hand in the direction of the workmen.

"Do you wish for a report now?" Parson's expression remained bland and attentive. He glanced down at the car where Pete had finished getting into his chair and nodded in his direction. "I think between the two of us, we can lift your brother to the top of the steps."

They walked down to Pete, and Sam introduced Parsons, who spoke while they shook hands. "I have taken the liberty of settling your things into the East wing, adjoining rooms. I understand that Mr. Dalton is an artist." Pete nodded. "You have a corner suite with several windows and a fine southern exposure. Next to your rooms is the wing's service elevator, for which I have left a key. We have built temporary ramps for

your chair at the end of the wing until the permanent ones are finished.”

Pete smiled and glanced at Sam. “Mr. Dalton?” He chuckled. “I could get used to this.” Turning back to the butler, he raised a hand. “Haul away, Parsons.” It was easy for the two of them to set Pete down at the entrance. He quickly wheeled through the open doors and into the middle of the main hall. He whistled and listened to the distinct echo. “Man-alive, I’m gonna have to invite the guys,” he said, glancing down the length of the connecting marble-floored halls to each wing. “Imagine the races we can have here.” Pete whipped his chair around to see a pretty blonde in a dark blue dress waiting inside the doors, unnoticed by him during his impulsive entry.

“Well, hello.”

Parsons turned to Pete and Sam. “Sirs, this is Suzanne. She is our upstairs maid and will be able to assist you unpacking.” She curtsied and went to stand behind Pete’s wheelchair.

Sam began to say Pete wouldn’t want any help, but Pete interrupted him. “Suzanne, why don’t you show me the way to my southern exposure and let’s see about getting my stuff put away.” She grinned at the wicked charm in his tone, looking to Parsons for permission. He raised an eyebrow and nodded. She nodded back. Message received, thought Sam approvingly. As she wheeled Pete away, he called back, “Sam, we’ll come find you when we’re done.”

Turning to Parsons, Sam noted he was his height, white hair showing in streaks. “Well,” he said, watching his brother and Suzanne disappear, “it seems you have anticipated every need.”

“Not me, sir. Miss Covington.”

“I take it she insisted on the curtsies from Suzanne and your white gloves?”

“Yes, sir.” He almost peered down his nose at Sam. “It is all part of the authenticity you will want when the guests begin to arrive.”

“True.” With a flash of curiosity, Sam asked, “How exactly did Miss Covington find you and the other staff so quickly? The internet?”

“No, sir. She had titled families and the wealthy phoned, asking for recommendations.”

Sam stopped to stare. “She did what?”

“She asked around, person to person. Lord Covington is well known among Sussex and Kent families. I had just been let go by Sir Stanley Walters. He was in financial difficulties. A number of the staff I suggested from previous experience.”

Sam smiled and shook his head. “And how is it, working for her?”

“Very agreeable. She is thorough, and if I may say so, very experienced in managing a large staff.” He paused for a moment. “I’ve served a number of great houses, and I am looking forward to the work here, in demonstrating the ancient traditions.”

Sam wasn’t surprised Tory had taken over the hiring and managing the new staff, but the pride and approval in Parson’s voice was remarkable after just a few days. “Ancient traditions?”

“Of the service profession, sir. And the class manners valued during the Regency period.”

Sam studied the butler for a moment. “Well, I imagine the conference work and numerous guests coming and going will be somewhat different from what you’re used to.”

“Not at all. Many of the wealthy tend to run their homes as large hotels.” Sam chuckled, not only at the comment, but Parson’s stolid delivery.

“Well, good. I can expect great things from you from what Miss Covington tells me.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Parsons' monotone made Sam frown. "So, where are Miss Covington and the viscount at the moment?"

"Miss Covington is acting as a guide for an unscheduled group of French visitors."

"Oh? Where's Janice?"

"She had another group scheduled and doesn't speak French."

"Hmmm. French tourists?" Sam said, thinking. "Well then, take me to Lord Covington and on the way, you can bring me up to speed."

Parson gave him a baffled, "You want what?"

With a wry smile, Sam shook his head. "Tell me what's been done so far, what's going on."

Parsons gave an officious "Of course," raised an arm in the direction to go, and fell in beside Sam.

"Sir, you've seen the workers for the water and sewer lines. They're scheduled to be done next week, enlarging and repairing both systems. A Mr. Godil and his men are renovating the east side of the house and building the new balconies and window bays, or rather rebuilding the old ones. The stables are being cleaned and painted. I understand you've found a good source of marble, so it isn't an issue anymore."

"And the roof?"

"The crew under the direction of a Mr. Pennyhill will be here at the beginning of next week."

"Terrific. Do you think we'll be ready for our opening and costume ball in December?"

"I believe so, sir. Miss Covington and I will have our timeline on your bedroom desk this afternoon. You may review the staff at supper."

"How about my surprise for Miss Covington? You've talked to the head gardener, McCabb? Now that he's had time to

study the problem, does he think it can be done in one day? Or does Ms. Montez need to keep her away longer than that?"

"Yes, sir. One day. There should be minimal lawn damage from the heavy equipment, which he can fix with sod. He's retained an excellent nursery to do the more arduous labor."

"Terrific. I appreciate your orchestrating this. Please relay my appreciation to Mr. McCabb too."

"Of course." Parsons stopped before reaching the study doors. "Sir, I need to clarify my responsibilities here."

"And you can't do that with Miss Covington and his lordship?" Sam still got perverse pleasure in saying 'his lordship,' but wondered why Parsons could possibly have a problem.

"No, sir." He stood straighter. "I find myself in a delicate situation. Miss Covington and his lordship are the ones who retained my services. You are simply leasing their property. However, I find you're paying my wages."

"Okay. And ...?"

"It places my loyalties on the cusp, as it were. What I do in the Covington household reflects on their family, but I'm your man."

Sam eyed Parson. His British accent gave his little explanation a peculiar severity. "So, there's a conflict of interests."

The Butler visibly relaxed. "Exactly, sir. I exercise complete discretion, but I must know what to do when you expect services or decisions from me which will not be acceptable to Miss Covington or his lordship."

Sam frowned, annoyed with the problem, but he admired Parson's foresight in asking it now. "If you have concerns about my orders or decisions, I want three things from you, Parsons."

"Yes, sir?"

“First, I want you to tell me, Lord Covington, and Miss Covington your concerns.” The butler raised one dark eyebrow. “I also ask you to *not* be the conduit for any debates between the Covingtons and me. You can share your concerns with us all, but if the Covingtons have problems with my decisions, *they speak to me*. I don’t want you in the role of third wheel.”

Approval flared in Parson’s eyes. “Of course. And the third thing?”

“Keep being proactive. I like it.”

Very good, sir.” Parsons nodded, then spoke again. “Sir?”

Sam had started walking, but stopped and eyed Parsons. “Yes.”

“The bathrooms, sir.”

“What about them?”

“I think you’ll find Lord and Miss Covington are not happy with your plans to build a full bathroom in each guest room here at Belton and the Dowager House.”

“Thank you, Parsons. I’ll see about it.” He followed the butler into the study. Sam shook his head, as if to loosen water trapped in his ears. He was sure he heard British accents coloring his own words. Damn, this whole house was catching.

Lord Covington sat smiling behind his huge desk facing the door with Pen, of all people, on one side and on the other Lytecastle, Covington’s lawyer.

“Good morning.” Sam smiled back. “So, what’s going on here?”

Lord Covington grinned and pointed with his pipe. “Ms. Montez and Mr. Lytecastle are going over the staff contracts, both the old staff, including the ones you fired, and the forty-five new hires.” Even with the comment about Sam firing the cooks, housekeeper, and waitstaff, he seemed jolly enough for two people. As he lit his black pipe, Covington said, “Why

don't you join us? There are some questions only you can answer."

Pen pointed to another chair. Sam grabbed it sighing, resigned to paperwork, but he was going to make it quick. He wanted see Tory as soon as she was done with her tour.

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After Suzanne brought Pete back down to the study, Sam used that as an excuse to leave the others to their work. He followed Pete out onto the terrace, glad to feel the sun. The clouds were scattering and blowing north. Below in the South Garden, at least forty people stood listening to Tory, who was surrounded and dwarfed by the crowd. She was still the most striking figure in her blue empire dress, hair pulled back.

From the graceful motions of her hands, he knew she must be telling a story. He loved the way her hands moved, like a dancer's. The crowd all leaned in with smiles on their faces, following her every gesture. Even fifty yards away, he could hear her speaking French. The sensuous language fell so effortlessly from her lips and made her voice sound lower. It struck him as magic, revealing an exotic new woman. Suddenly everyone laughed, and Tory waved them on to the next stop.

"That's Victoria Covington?" Pete gave a low whistle and glanced back at his brother. "My god, she's gorgeous. You said she was pretty, and you never said she spoke French."

Sam shrugged. "And German and a bit of Italian and Spanish from what I hear."

"I gotta get her to talk to me in French. Is she seeing anyone?" Pete's predatory tone made Sam glare at him.

"No one and not you either. She doesn't need that kind of grief right now."

Pete stared at Sam incredulously. "Oh, really? As in *stay away* from your recent conquests, Demi Vega and Carrie Marsh, or is this just a business necessity as in 'keep away or death will visit you on swift wings'?"

“The latter, although because you’re my brother, it may just be mayhem on quick feet.”

Pete grinned. “My, aren’t we waxing poetic.” He rolled his chair around to face Sam. “This sounds serious, and you never said a word.” He pulled pensively at his ear. “But you *have* been really distracted the last few weeks.” Pete whipped around and reached up, planting his forearms on the balustrade. With his arms, he lifted himself out of the wheelchair, so his upper body rested on the stone, just in time to see Tory and the group disappear around the corner.

Over his shoulder Peter asked, “Was she the one near death a month ago? Damn, she looks healthy enough now.” He eased himself back down into the wheelchair and grinned at his brother. “Your doing?”

“I just got back. You were with me, remember? And it wasn’t a joking matter.” He frowned at his brother’s intent expression. “We aren’t an item. She’s been through a lot, and you know I don’t date clients or employees.”

Pete wheeled over to Sam. “Oh?” His brother gave him an incredulous glance, leading Sam to shrug, but it didn’t hide his ambivalence. “Half the time she is so sophisticated and competent, the next surprisingly naïve and fragile, given to tears.” He ran a hand through his hair. “She’s had a tough time of it, both her illness, losing family and friends, and dislocation here. Regardless, she doesn’t need any emotional complications from me or *you*.”

Pete said with a playfully shocked expression, “Jeez, empathy? What have you done with my brother, and can I pay her to make it permanent?”

Sam scowled hard at him. “You better play nice, or I’ll send you to your room—in Chicago.”

Pete grinned and started to speak.

“Pardon me. Are you Sam Dalton?” A middle-aged woman in tweed and a French accent stood behind Sam.

Pete chuckled. “We were just debating the question, but the jury’s still out.” The woman glanced at them both, confused.

Sam shot his brother the evil eye and turned around. “Don’t mind him. It’s jet lag. I’m Sam Dalton, and this joker is my brother Pete. What can I do for you?”

“I’m Madeleine Thomière,” she said, and held out her hand to Sam. “Lord Covington said I should talk to you.” When they shook hands, she pulled him around to face the balustrade. With a wave toward the garden, she cooed, “Miss Covington is with my group. We were to have visited Arundel Castle today, but their French guide took ill last minute, and a portion of the gardens and castle were closed because of renovations. Belton was so close, so I enquired here. Last minute, Miss Covington kindly agreed to take us herself.”

Sam had some difficulty getting his hand back, but she didn’t seem to notice. She smiled enthusiastically. “She has been wonderful.”

“You were lucky to have Miss Covington give you a personal tour.”

“*Mais oui*, I concur.” She moved closer and said low, “Her French is *incroyable*. How did she master *français* in the period dialect? And her knowledge ... I learned things about the Duke of Norfolk and Arundel I never heard on their tours, and we’ve been going for years.”

“Ms. Thomière, I’m glad you enjoyed your visit. Miss Covington will appreciate hearing it.” He moved her toward the terrace steps to the Garden. “I hope we’ll be able to share your recommendation and more importantly, you’ll visit us again.” He put out his hand to say goodbye but she shook her head.

“No, no. I want to talk business, if you please.”

Sam gave her a very Parsonian “Of course,” and raised his eyebrow at his brother.

“Don’t mind me, bro. I got lots to do.”

With an annoyed glance at Pete's "bro," Sam led her into the library and to one of the couches. When they were seated, Sam asked for some coffee and tea from the maid, who seemed to be hovering around, just waiting to serve him. "Now, what can I do for you?"

She watched the maid leave. "You have a very responsive staff here."

"Yes, we're proud of them."

Madeleine nodded and smiled. "*Plutôt bien*. I represent *Agence des Voyages International*, and I wonder if we could have Belton Park as a regular part of our English tours. If we could keep the price Miss Covington gave us for this tour, with French speakers of her quality, I can promise three or four tours of forty a week from May to September."

Madeleine laughed, giving him a teasing glance. "Her stories are priceless. The one about the Prince Regent and his bachelor haunt near here, Uppark House, was a gem. And your gardens and their history. *Magnifique*. Miss Covington seems to know historic Sussex quite well." Madelaine leaned over and patted Sam's forearm. "She generously gave us several wonderful suggestions for sightseeing."

Sam took some notes, including getting those suggestions, extremely gratified to know he'd made the right decision, having Tory under contract. She'd sold Madeline already. "And what price did Miss Covington quote you for your tours here?"

"Nine pounds." When Sam frowned, she fluttered her hand energetically. "But we can promise to share any contract information with our Italian and German offices. And perhaps arrange overnight stays and conferences too—for our French clients at least?"

Sam nodded, because he'd priced Arundel, and they had a popular tour program on beautiful grounds, but it cost eleven pounds or more—and offered no conference or hotel space. He'd even approached Dr. Susan Leven, a Regency scholar

who had worked for the Norfolk family at Arundel Castle now and again. He'd be calling her in to substantiate what Tory was doing along with various other historians he'd contracted. He'd learned with his first efforts in the Carolinas, one could never have too many experts sign off on something this important.

He hadn't expected Tory to know how to undersell Arundel. He grinned to himself. But of course, he shouldn't have been surprised. She'd sold him a lease, hadn't she?

It was an excellent start. Sam did the numbers in his head. This one tour today brought in three hundred and sixty pounds. A simple tour contract with just Madeline's company alone could generate at least forty thousand pounds revenue per season. He finished his notes for the agreement with *Agence des Voyages International*, smiling at the tour possibilities Madeleine continued to enumerate as he wrote.

It wasn't too long before Sam walked out onto the terrace with a happy Madeleine Thomière, saying goodbye, promising the contract in a couple of days. At the top of the terrace steps to the South Garden, he saw Pete sitting in his wheelchair, intently drawing on a board across his lap, lost in the beauty around him, lost in a world of his own creation. Sam smiled, glad for him, but he envied the emotional self-sufficiency he could only imagine.

Standing there, he remembered Tory's letter, and patted the coat pocket where he'd tucked it. He felt a grin spring to his lips. Tory had written him in London. He couldn't remember the last time he'd received a handwritten letter from anyone. He'd been in London a week and a half, longer than planned, but Tory continued to dislike talking on the phone.

When he'd called, she'd said very little in response. He didn't want to broach their lake experience over the phone, but then she wrote him an amazing letter. Its unique qualities included the envelope. The several pages of the letter were folded so all four corners met to make an envelope. She'd written the address on the outside of the blank sheet used as

the last page of the letter. It was closed securely in the middle with tape and a wax seal. *A wax seal.*

It read like a love letter to Belton Park, but it had been written for him. She wrote about Belton Park and their plans, including such wonderful descriptions of the gardens and rooms with little drawings, changes she had outlined and waited for his approval. He'd read it so often since receiving it he could recite whole passages.

He sucked air between his teeth. The letter also stabbed at his doubts.

"I long to tell you about myself, the Singular Conditions of my life, but dare not; not when it might subvert our chances of success with Belton Park. I ask you to have Patience."

Patience. She seemed to capitalize words she considered important.

He watched Pete, intense and completely absorbed in his art, and wished he could close out the world so effectively. With such concentration, he could freely indulge in appreciating Victoria Covington without distractions—or the need for patience. He stared at his brother for a long time unseeing, trying to make sense of his roiling impressions of Tory, of his conflicted emotions.

A tap on the shoulder broke the spell, and he jerked around to see Pen with a smirk on her lips. "Hey there, space cadet, can I corral you for a moment? We have some staffing conundrums you need to solve." Before following her, Sam stopped to tell Pete he'd be back soon, but he doubted he'd been heard. He did one last scan of the gardens but didn't catch any glimpse of Tory. He exhaled heavily as he entered the study.

Chapter 24

‘Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art’.

No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake forever in a sweet unrest ...

—John Keats, Poem “Bright Star.” (1819)

Tory hummed “Sally Solomon” as she stepped down the garden path headed for the house, her fingertips lightly brushing the tops of flowers and leaves as she passed by. It had been so freeing, to speak as herself, a Regency woman, Victoria Ann Covington, if only as entertainment. Conversing in French had also been a pleasure.

She simply told stories about the house and Sussex as she would have shared with any guests, pointing out those things she found interesting. The French men and women appeared to enjoy her presentation, even when some of the men dropped innuendos asking questions, or someone made confusing allusions to ‘things going viral’ or ‘Mickey Mouse’, and unfathomable comments as *dragner, c’est nul*, and *flasher sur quelqu’un*. She simply deflected them, remaining in character, which they all found amusing.

Taking in the east face of Belton House and its three rows of windows reflecting the sunlight, brightened her heart as well as the view. Everywhere inside, the constant noise of construction remained perturbing, making the calm of the gardens all that more inviting. She could see balcony frames going up outside. Lord Covington’s daughter would soon lose her second-story bedroom when it became a study again. For the hundredth time, Tory wondered about Lord Covington’s daughter and why she’d turned her back on the family.

She examined the gardens as she ambled, nodding to the gardeners as they worked in different corners of the grounds.

The gardens overflowed with blooming flowers and scented air. Everything was peaceful, right and tight. The new staff had performed well in the last few days, particularly the new head butler, Parsons. She felt deeply gratified to be useful and competent once again. And Sam was returning today. She could hardly contain her excitement. It bubbled like champagne.

Up ahead, a couple strolled down the garden path. The man was all dapper and dash, tall and slim. His beautiful suit seemed an incongruity in the warm weather. His companion, a striking redhead, paraded down the walk, a most determined exquisite in what Tory now understood was a pantsuit in deep green silk. The two seemed to be purposely walking toward her. Some feet from her, they halted, blocking the path, both inspecting her most impolitely as she stopped before them.

Tory returned their gaze, absently toying with her star pendant. The man seemed intensely interested while the woman's inspection reminded her of her Season, where many debutantes regarded other women as competitors. Tory nodded, unwilling to curtsy where neither of them appeared ready to return the honor. "Good morning. Do you need directions?"

"*Guten Morgen, Fräulein.*" The man continued speaking in German, saying they had been listening in on her presentation and had enjoyed it very much. How did he know she spoke German?

"*Das ist erfreulich, Herr ...?*"

"*Günter Waltrop.*" He motioned to the redhead without taking his eyes off Tory. "*Das ist Fräulein Carrie Marsh.*" With an implied importance out of keeping with the innocuous statement, he said, "*Und sie sind Miss Covington.*"

"Yes, I am Miss Covington." She could tell by her glower, that Miss Marsh did not speak German. "Good to meet you, Miss Marsh." Tory smiled at the woman, who still appraised her with ill-disguised enmity. She faced *Herr Waltrop*. "How may I help you?"

Herr Waltrop asked some rather innocuous questions in English about the gardens and where she'd learned such classic German, studying both her and the manor house as he did. His last question, spoken in German, gave her pause. Miss Marsh wouldn't know what he'd said. Waltrop asked if she enjoyed working for the man leasing Belton Park. When she responded in German, "I take pleasure in working with him," he offered a cold smile, thanked her, and the two strolled back the way they came.

Tory watched the couple disappear among the foliage surrounding the parking lot, frowning at their exchange. What an odd couple. Herr Waltrop was a sly boots, to be sure.

She headed toward the library where she knew Lord Covington and Pen were working. As she neared the terrace stairs, she spied a man sitting in a wheeled chair at their head. He seemed to be drawing energetically. Taking his measure, the family resemblance, the wheelchair, and the art, he must be Peter Dalton. It meant Sam was about too. A light step brought her close to the artist without disturbing his concentration, so when he looked up to take in more of the scene, he blinked to find Tory standing in front of him.

"Uh, hello."

"And good morning to you, Mr. Dalton." Tory could not fathom why anyone would say 'hello' in greeting others. It sounded far too much like a curse.

"I'm Victoria Covington."

"I know. Sam pointed you out while you were doing the tour." He gave her a smile as devastating as his brother's. "Loved the French. Could you say something to me in French?" He sat back and waited, with an expression of delighted anticipation. How could she refuse?

"Je suis ravie de faire votre connaissance—mon bel esprit."

He smiled, as though lost in the taste of an excellent brandy. "That's something. You can talk to me in French all day. What'd you just say?"

“I said ‘I was pleased to make your acquaintance—my witty gentleman.’”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll be *your* witty gentleman any time.”

She eyed him and his liberal use of the Dalton charisma. “Well, thank you, Mr. Dalton. I am gratified to know I can call on your considerable charm when needed.”

A flummoxed expression crossed his face, but he finally smiled and moved his chair so she could step out onto the terrace.

As she watched him maneuver his chair, she caught sight of his drawing. It was in pencil, but she couldn’t make any sense of the shapes. She stepped next to him and pointed to the pad in his lap. “What are you rendering?”

“I’m *drawing* the garden.”

Her brows came together as she tried to see the garden in the maze of lines and shadow.

Pete smiled. “It’s an abstract. It will make more sense with color.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what to say, so she clasped her hands in front of her and changed the subject. “I was sorry to hear about your accident, but it seems you are doing very well. Your brother is quite proud of you.”

“Thank you.” Pete cocked his head a moment, regarding her. “Most folks don’t say anything quite as direct—to me at least.” He pulled his mouth back into a wry expression. “Or tell me I’m doing well.” He looked off across the gardens. “Yeah, I am.”

She was certain Pete would have said more, but Sam marched out of the library toward them, a scowl greeting Tory’s smile. “What did Waltrop want?” Taken aback by his vehemence, Tory didn’t respond. “What did you tell him?”

“And good day to you too.” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

Hands on his hips, he glowered back. “Well?”

“He had some questions about the garden and asked if I enjoyed working with you.”

“What did you tell him?”

Tory pursed her mouth for a moment, giving him a speaking glance. “At the moment, I am reconsidering.”

Sam blinked and opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Pete chuckled and to Tory’s surprise, Sam reddened. He pointed toward the garden, saying “Don’t talk to Walthrop again,” and stomped back to the library.

Exasperated, Tory turned to Pete. “What was he all uppish about?”

“Walthrop is a business rival. He stole Sam’s first European real estate deal last year.”

“Oh.” Hurt by his obvious mistrust, not even a greeting after a week and a half apart, her disappointment must have shown.

“Don’t worry about it. He doesn’t stay angry very long and from his red face, I bet he’ll be apologizing soon.” Pete sighed and returned to his drawing, speaking over his shoulder. “Sometimes I think I’m the lucky one. I lost my folks and the use of my legs. Sam lost his whole world.”

Tory stepped around to face Pete. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t get me wrong, it took a long time to come to terms with the loss of my legs. I mean, before and after the accident, art is still my life. Before the accident, Sam had his whole future planned out. He’s like that.” Pete leaned an elbow on one arm of the wheelchair. “He was a star halfback for Northwestern and could have gone professional. He was engaged to a Tracy Atherton Montgomery, not only the most beautiful girl on campus, but also daughter to one of the richest men east of the Mississippi. He was one semester from getting his degree in Architecture and probably could have gone to work for Tracy’s daddy with a six-figure job.”

“I-I didn’t know.” Tory found a wrought-iron chair and sat down across from Pete, discovering belatedly it was still wet from the early-morning rain. Hiding the embarrassing—and uncomfortable—discovery, she asked, “So he abandoned his career plans and came home? Certainly, Miss Montgomery would have supported him at such an hour.”

“Hospitalized, I was out of it for several months. Sam never said much, but from what I gather, Tracy wanted the football hero, the class president, the guy who was going places. She dumped him when he quit college to get the money needed for my care.” Pete’s face hardened. Tory could tell he was still angry for his brother’s sake.

Pete shrugged, displaying the same Dalton *faux* indifference. Tory bit her lip considering all Sam had gone through. Pete offered a consoling smile. “Oh, it’s all right. Sam just thought he wanted Tracy because she fit his plan. He got over her quick enough, but all told, he doesn’t trust people much now.”

Tory nodded. “Except perhaps his brother?”

“You think that, do you?” Pete offered a wry expression.

She gave him a tight-lipped grin in return and looked at her hands in her lap. “So, Sam is not living the life he would have chosen for himself?” With a little sigh, she added, “He talks little about himself. He did tell me about the accident and legal troubles.”

“Yeah, Mr. Mum, that’s him.” Pete said with a disgusted grimace. “He sacrificed everything for me, surrendering his dreams, and as much as I appreciate what he did, now when I don’t need any more sacrifices, he doesn’t know what to do with me—or himself. But will he talk about it? Nope.”

Pete wheeled closer. “Don’t go feeling sorry for him. He hates it. Besides, he’s doing great by any standard. It’s just that he had to turn off a good deal of himself to get things done after the accident, and now? He’s been on automatic for so

long, I think he's forgotten how to turn them back on again, how to live."

He leaned back and repositioned the board across his lap. Looking up, he studied her for a moment. "I'm hoping things might be changing." He glanced around, and confided quietly, "Of course, it's a completely selfish hope. He can be a pain in the butt when he's in protector mode, a helicopter bro, which by my count has been forever."

Tory laughed, delighted with his droll delivery. His reference to a 'butt' of wine was original but 'helicopter' lost her. "He's been a devoted brother. I wish I'd had a brother."

"Oh, Sam has his moments, when he isn't playing emperor of the world."

Tory nodded with a grin. "Yes, he does assume that exalted title at times, particularly when his grand plans are frustrated."

Pete chuckled and began telling a story illustrating Tory's insight.

~ ~ ~

Sam returned to the terrace to see Tory and Pete laughing, heads close together, and acid jealousy burst in his gut, his hands doubling into tight fists. It surprised the hell out of him. He stood breathing slowly to calm himself. The last time he'd felt this way was in high school—not even with Tracy. *Damn.*

Seeing Sam approaching, Tory touched Pete's shoulder to interrupt him.

Pete turned, one eyebrow raised in salute.

Taking one last, deep breath, Sam tried to smile as he approached them. "I apologize for my outburst just now. I was ... irritated to see Waltrop here. He's a conniving SOB." Pete gave Tory a significant glance which she seemed to understand. Another stab of jealousy. Looking back at Sam, she waited.

Uncomfortable with the lack any response to his apology and their silent communication, Sam soldiered on. "I see you

two have met.” They nodded. “What were you laughing about when I came out?”

“You, big brother.” Pete glanced at Tory, beaming impishly. “She’s easy to talk to, and we seem to agree on a number of things regarding you.”

Sam frowned tightly but nodded just the same. “Well, it’s a shame. It’d be far more entertaining *for me* to referee a disagreement.” He looked at Tory, who was regarding him with an intent expression he couldn’t read. When Pete cleared his throat, Sam realized they had been staring at each other.

Sam scowled at the wide-eyed air of knowing artlessness his brother gave him.

Pete dropped it just as Tory glanced at him and then gripped the wheels of his chair. “Well, folks, I’ve this driving need to speed to my ‘suite’ and start breaking out the paints. It was great finally meeting you, Victoria,” he said with teasing emphasis on her name, “and do come up and see me sometime. I would love to do your portrait.” He winked at her and rolled his eyes toward Sam. “And I have some abstracts I want you to see.” With one last chuckle and a mischievous glance at Sam, he wheeled off toward the library. Sam heard him mutter something about “finding out where Suzanne was hiding.”

Tory watched him navigate the doorway into the library. “It appears impertinence runs in the family.” She turned to smile slyly at Sam. He couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yes, the family curse.” He started to sit by her, but she shook her head.

“The seats are wet from the mizzle.”

“The what?”

“The light rain earlier.”

“Mizzle, huh?”

“Well, what word would you employ?”

“A drizzle.” He grinned at her pursed mouth. “How about we retire to the music room and a dry seat?”

Tory stood but turned so he could not see her wet backside and began shuffling down the terrace. Chuckling, he kept pace with her slow progress. “Would you care for something to drink? Maybe something warm after talking so much. A towel?” He received a brief wrinkled nose. “By the way, Madame Thomière was very impressed with your tour.”

Tory smiled at his compliment. “I’ll have tea, thank you.” They entered the music room and Sam phoned for tea, a Coke, and a towel. She stood irresolute. “Sam, I cannot sit on the furniture with the back of my dress dripping wet.”

Sam scratched his head. “Yes, a difficult problem.” He snapped his fingers. “The Raleigh solution, of course.”

“The what?” She stood waiting as Sam sat down on the Queen Anne sofa and motioned her to come over.

“Well, Sir Walter laid out his cape to cover a mud puddle so Queen Elizabeth could cross without ruining her shoes, right?”

“True.” She eyed him suspiciously, waiting for him to lay out his coat.

He suddenly grabbed her and plopped her down across his lap. “There, the furniture is saved by a lap, my gallant sacrifice.” She tried to get up, but he wouldn’t let her.

“Sam Dalton, release me.”

“No. We have the furniture to think of, and you must be tired after your long walk with the tour.”

“But the servants will see. You’ve ordered refreshments here.”

“My, you’re right. They will.”

“But what will they think?”

“That we like each other?” Sam held her closer.

“Sam, it isn’t done. Let me up, please.”

“But you won’t have a place to sit.”

“I’m in earnest.”

“And from the feel of it, you’re also rather damp.” Tory crossed her arms and eyed him, so he lifted his chin dramatically. “I will not be moved.” He put his arm around her waist. “This is nice. I apologize for my outburst earlier. I’ve missed you.”

Tory melted a bit but tensed when she heard footsteps. Smooth as a dancer, Sam stood up, and caught Tory, making her squeak in protest before he set her on her feet, just as the maid entered with the tea tray. Sam stood behind Tory to hide her and now his wet spots. The maid smiled at them both and set the tray and towel on the side table next to the sofa.

After glaring at Sam, Tory introduced the tall brunette to him. “Mr. Dalton, this is Doreen, our new downstairs maid.” Doreen curtsied, asked them if they needed anything else, and when they said “No,” she left the way she came.

Turning to him, Tory placed her hands on her hips, giving him a stern eye. “So, you do have some sense of propriety, at least when the help is about.”

“Well, it is true. I may act differently in private—with you.” He leaned over, grabbed the towel, and when she attempted to put some distance between them by standing on the far side of the tray, he scooped her up and sat down again with her on the towel in his lap. As they were now facing the tea set on the near side of the table, he asked, “Tea?”

“I can’t fix my tea from your ... from this position.”

“Then, Miss Covington, allow me.” He poured and added cream to her tea one-handed, just as he’d seen her do it and gave it to her. With the tea balanced on her knee, she inspected his hand securely holding her waist.

“Am I being held hostage?” Her incensed expression softened when he smiled at her. At close range, so cute with her raised eyebrow, it made him hold her tighter. She felt so

good in his arms, her hip against his stomach. She hardly weighed a thing.

“Drink your tea.” She did, and he drank his Coke. When she examined his glass curiously, he held it out to her and told her what it was. Her eyes grew round as she took a sip.

“It’s quite brilliant. It bubbles like sparkling wine. And you say it’s a Coke?”

He nodded. “I take it you haven’t tasted a Coca-Cola before?”

Tory sighed and shook her head.

“I’m glad I could introduce you two.”

She watched apprehensively as Sam set his Coke down and took her tea, finding a place for it on the tray. He pulled her against his chest. “I wonder what else I can introduce you to?”

She tensed, narrowing her eyes at his suggestive remark, unsettled, but obviously curious. He continued to just hold her, surprisingly content.

Tory relaxed, willing to enjoy the warmth and intimacy of his arms surrounding her. His hand moved down her back to rest on her hip. “And wonder of wonders, she is wearing a corset.”

She again tried unsuccessfully to free herself from his hold. “That is *not* the conversation of a gentleman.”

“I wanted to talk to you about your continual reference to what gentlemen do and don’t do.”

“Is that so? I will be glad to instruct you thoroughly on the topic *once you let me go*. Holding me thus, is not what a gentleman would do.”

“I see.” He unceremoniously dumped her on the couch next to him.

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She straightened her skirts and gave him an angry glance. Secretly, she was disappointed. She had enjoyed sitting in such close contact with him, even better than his first embrace. No tears this time. Her body hummed with anticipation.

Sam leaned away from her, an elbow on the arm of the couch and frowned. "You, Miss Covington, are a problem."

"What do you mean, sir? Are most women you haul into your lap more compliant?" Tory could imagine the answer was yes.

With a chuckle, he shook his head. "No. You are the first woman I've 'hailed into my lap.' My problem is I want to break my own rules of no romancing employees and find myself unsure of how to proceed with you, so I do 'ungentlemanly things.'"

"You want to romance me?" Tory pursed her lips. "A gentleman would announce his intention first." *What an absurd conversation.* "Why me? I would think Pen or other, taller women would be more ..."

"... my style?"

"More compatible, both in size and more knowledgeable about current romance decencies, even a Coke."

"Decencies?" He grinned at her pursed lips. "I do love teasing you."

She wrinkled her. "Don't make light of this. I don't know how a respectable woman should act if she is romanced. Obviously, you are no help as a guide." When there was no response other than a sustained grin, Tory said, "In my experience a man declares himself and asks the lady if he can make addresses, to call on her, perhaps go out for a ride or walk. There are no laps involved."

"Sounds pretty formal, and hardly romantic."

"Perhaps." Tory had harbored similar sentiments, but it did make it easy to keep men at bay. She had never seriously considered wanting something less formal, warmer from a

man, much less sitting on a man's lap. Some had tried to seduce her, even attempted to compromise her into marriage, which she'd avoided. Now when she did want something more intimate, the modern way did not seem clear at all, just highly inappropriate.

"However, I have declared myself, sort of. Now, I'm considering how to romance you." He chuckled at her aghast expression. "Tory, your formality makes me nervous, so I acted on impulse." He gave a wry shake of head when Tory gave him a chiding wrinkle of her nose. "Hey, there was a towel between us."

"My formality?"

"Tory, you often seem so substantial and self-contained and ___"

"Substantial? What in blue heaven does *that* mean?"

"Let me finish. You are genuine." He hunted for the word looking around the room. "You seem unadulterated, and at once warm, but unapproachable."

Tory didn't know what to say. She'd never been described in such a manner.

He shrugged at her quizzical look. "I am not sure how to act as a 'gentleman' to your satisfaction or whether I should act on my—"

"Your what?" She sat up, back straight with her hands in her lap, all attention on him.

"Would you let me finish?" He laid a hand at hers to emphasize his request. "There, I sound like I am discussing music over tea rather than expressing my ... my desires where you are concerned." He took a deep breath. "Tory, I'm very attracted to you, but I am not sure how to proceed." He frowned and took a breath. "This is way out of character for me." He was silent for a moment. "See, I even sound formal. I don't know what to do about it, but I want to be as impertinent and inappropriate as hell."

Tory smiled softly, appreciating his conundrum. It was hers too.

“I am not the talker my brother is. Pete says I am a doer.”

His intent gaze, bright and charged with contained energy, warmed her in the most curious places, leading her to say, “Do what?” Her eyes grew round when she realized what her question invited. Sam was not slow to answer.

He scooted over, his arm coming to rest on the back of the couch behind her. He leaned in, his lips coming within an inch of hers. There he paused, his eyes on hers. The request was hers to accept. Her stomach fluttered and arms tingled with the portents. She closed her eyes and closed the distance to his lips. When her mouth touched his, a spark seemed to jump between them. She pressed her lips to his and felt him smile, answering with his own pressure. She lost herself in the sweet taste of him, the exciting, silken feel of his lips moving on hers, slow and languid. He covered her mouth, caressing in a way which left no doubt of his passion for her.

Chapter 25

“Blush-tinted cheeks, half smiles, and faintest sighs,
That, when I think thereon, my spirit clings
And plays about its fancy, till the stings
Of human neighborhood, envenom all.
Unto what awful power shall I call?”

—John Keats, “*Endymion*,” 1818

Her senses danced, her soul wanted more. She wanted to sing. This man desired *her*. Victoria sank her fingers underneath Sam’s open shirt collar and laid her palm on his bare neck, warm and firm. A thrill ran through her as she sensed his pulse strong and rapid under her hand. To be able to touch him with so much familiarity, to be this close, it astounded her. *And this on her mother’s Queen Anne couch.*

His tongue touched her lips, once, then again. She paused, intrigued and taken aback by the unexpected feel of it. As he glided the tip of his tongue across her lips, a little smile trembled there, while she collected the nerve to try it herself.

The scrape of shoes on stone startled them both, and Tory flew to the other side of the sofa, reaching for her tea just as Doreen entered the terrace doors.

“Excuse me, miss, but Mr. Parsons asked me to see if you needed anything else before he had me work in the west wing.”

Tory cleared her throat. “No, nothing. Thank you, Doreen.”

Both of them watched her leave, and grinned at each other. Tory twisted her mouth in a perplexed and puckish manner. “Parsons has taken his notions of attentive service a bit far, has he not?”

Sam chuckled and scooted over close and touched his forehead to hers in what Tory thought was a wonderfully

tender gesture. “Yes, but Doreen’s timing was good. Another minute and I doubt I’d have heard a bomb go off in the room.”

“Mmmm,” Tory purred, raising her head to run her cheek across his. “This courting is a consuming pursuit.” She felt Sam chuckle in agreement, so she asked, “Was that a *détacher le baiser* you attempted?”

He looked at her, clearly confused. “I touched you where?”

She blinked, her face warming. “A French kiss?”

“Oh, yes, sort of. Did you like it?”

Tory offered a modest smile, uncertain this was something she should admit, but seeing Sam show no signs of discomfort, she nodded.

“It’s also called a deep kiss, though ours was hardly that deep.”

“Is it?” Giving him a quirk of a smile, she said, “How interesting, a deep kiss. I did not realize ...”

“Well, maybe we need to go where we won’t be interrupted.” He stood and took her hand. “Just to save the furniture.”

Tory gasped and jumped up, giving a worried glance at the sofa. She relaxed when she felt no dampness. She faced Sam and eyed him conspiratorially. “The garden?”

He shook his head at her and stood. “The staff would find us there, or all those tourists roaming around. I was thinking of getting away, toward Brighton or Bath.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Well, yeah. I’m not keen on inviting your uncle or Pete along—it’d spoil the ambiance.” He wrinkled his brow, reviewing something. “I think I could get away for a day trip tomorrow.”

She could not believe he was suggesting such a thing. “A whole day alone?” Her heart fluttered fearfully, and she could tell by the tingling in her cheeks that her face had gone pink.

Seeing her unease, Sam shrugged. “Not necessarily. How about going out for lunch? Or just some sightseeing for a few hours?”

“That would be preferable.” What were the social ramifications of being alone with him for so long? What would he be assuming by her willingness to go with him? She wanted to go, but ...

“What are you concerned about?”

“An outing would be wonderful. I need to confer with Lord Covington before we make plans.”

“What, you don’t think you can get a day off of work?”

“That’s not ... I want to ensure I am not doing anything to compromise the family.” She simply wasn’t sure what remained proper, or mayhap it was her own fears of where kisses would lead in such a society unconcerned with her world’s propriety.

“The family?”

“Covington’s ... the family’s reputation.”

“And going out with me would endanger it? You’ve already been out with me to the Roland House.”

“Yes, a short trip. I conferred with my uncle first.”

Sam gave her an odd look. Planting his fists on his hips, he glared at the ground. “You have to ask for permission?”

“*No*, I just need talk to him about ...”

“... whether being alone in my company will besmirch you and your uncle’s reputation.” He stepped closer. “Is that it?”

Tory had said something wrong, out of place in trying to be careful. Any previous intimacy evaporated with his tense stance, but she had no notion how to make it right.

She held out her hands in supplication. “Sam, please understand. I don’t know what is expected of me, what is

socially acceptable. I want to speak to my uncle before we make any plans for an extended outing.”

“Socially acceptable.” Sam made a snicking sound between his teeth and looked out into the garden for a moment. “Fine. Let me know what you two decide.” With that, he left the room, leaving Tory empty and lost, reviewing everything, regretting everything.

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“What do you mean she’s not here?” Sam strode over to Lord Covington, who sat behind his study desk. “Where is she?”

Covington took a sip of his tea and set it carefully on the breakfast tray in front of him. Frowning, he said, “She and Miss Montez drove to London early this morning. Said they were going to make a day of it. They planned for today. I thought you knew.”

Sam stomped over to the French doors and stared out into the fog blanketing the terrace and grounds, turning the world gray. He was ready to start beating something.

“Yes, I *know* they were going today. I expected Tory ... them to say something to me before they left.”

All of yesterday afternoon and evening, Tory had been ‘indisposed’ according to Parsons and Janice and Suzanne. Everyone had treated him as though he’d been caught stealing the silverware, always polite, but silently blaming him for whatever was upsetting their mistress, obviously more loyal to her than to the man paying their salaries. Now, Covington eyed him accusingly. It was driving him crazy. Sam only wished he knew exactly what he’d done.

“When did they say they’d be back?”

“Late. They planned to shop, have dinner in town and then see a movie—maybe an old movie, *Harry Potter* and the something or other.”

Sam turned and saw Victoria Covington's portrait hanging on the opposite wall. It looked so much like Tory. *Damn*. He shook off the confused feelings it evoked. "Do you mind if I work in here today? My office upstairs hasn't been finished yet."

"Of course not. We have a number of things to talk about." Covington finished his tea and pushed the tray back.

Sam shot him a questioning look as he set his briefcase and laptop down on a desk near one wall of books. "Yes, yes, we do."

Covington smiled. "I heard about the French tour contract."

"Yes! If Tory wows the German and Italian groups the way she did the French, well, we'll have to clone her—and we'll have the money to do it." Sam chuckled. "You'd think the French see enough manor houses in their own country."

With a shrug, Covington said, "Yes, but you know the English countryside is so strange and exotic—not being French." Covington knotted his brow, gazing at his desk, deep in thought.

With another shake of his head, Sam said, "So, do you want to talk about the bathrooms now, or can we talk about Tory?"

Covington started, obviously surprised Sam had guessed his thoughts. "What about her?" Covington's question was followed by a patently unconvincing look of innocence.

Sam just scowled at his abysmal acting. "We had a disagreement yesterday about whether it is socially acceptable to go on extended trips *with me*, and suddenly she was 'indisposed' all last night. Now, she's gone without a word."

Still furrowing his bushy brows, Covington took out his pipe and began filling it. "Mr. Dalton, Victoria has been here two months. She's had to cope with a new home, a new culture, a nearly fatal illness, employment, and you."

"You mean my questionable reputation?"

Covington harrumphed. “No. I didn’t know you had one. Do you?”

Sam gave an irritated shake of his head suggesting Covington knew better.

“I mean, with your lease and job offer—the whole business concerning Belton, it’s to be expected there would be misunderstandings over what’s proper behavior, emotional ups and down, and days that are just confusing. She’s at a vulnerable juncture. Don’t push her.”

With a bitter laugh, Sam brandished a hand in the air. “Yeah, yeah. Half the time *she’s* pushing me. Am I supposed to wait for her, or try and catch up?” He flopped in a couch near Covington, throwing a leg over the armrest. “I am getting really tired of trying to guess what the hell’s going on.”

“Well, so is she.”

Sam glared at Covington, whose attention was suddenly dominated by the intricacies of buttering up a breakfast roll. “What was so concerning about my invitation yesterday?”

Covington gave him a questioning look.

“Why did Tory feel she had to consult with you before agreeing with any planned outing with me?”

“Well, you see, she didn’t know what the current social and business mores were concerning such an invitation.”

“No idea, huh? And she couldn’t talk to me about it?”

Covington gave an eyebrow shrug as reproof and answer to such a silly question.

Sam took a deep breath. “So, it is a matter of trust, the dangers of being alone with me.”

“Rather, in a general sense, it’s an issue for any woman.”

A gnawing emptiness began to fill him, something he hadn’t felt in a long time, not since he’d grasped the fact that after his family’s accident, Tracy and her father didn’t want him around either. Tory didn’t trust him and now found reasons to keep

him at arm's length—particularly after their kiss, one he thought she wanted.

Fine. To hell with both of them. He was fed up with the mixed signals, the bizarre behavior, the emotional roller coaster they'd had him on from the beginning. So, Tory didn't want his help at this 'vulnerable juncture.' *Terrific.* He had plenty to do without worrying about her.

He stood and crossed the room, dragging a chair next to Covington's desk. "So, what are your problems with adding bathrooms to the bedrooms which don't already have them?" His tone was harsher than intended, but at the moment, he didn't care.

"Well, it, that is to say ..." Covington stared at his pipe. "You're going to have to cut up—bloody well ruin—every other bedroom to create enough space to stick bathrooms in both the Dowager House and the manor."

"And so? Are you suggesting we just offer the rooms without toilets or baths?" Sam leaned back in the chair and tapped his fingers on the oak top of Covington's desk. "I don't think they'd be very popular with the conference set."

"Well, neither will the clients appreciate the reduced capacity created by every third room being turned into closets to make space for the two bathrooms," Covington puffed with his own sardonic edge. "Certainly not authentic Regency."

Sam frowned and absently scanned the study, thinking 'authentic Regency' as he did, again amazed by the wall-to-wall bookshelves, particularly considering the vast numbers of books in the library and music room. He admired the high-ceiling openness of the study. Part of the charm was the comfortable cluttered feeling it had, even with all the floor area. His eyes fell on the portrait again. Studying it from across the room, he noticed how the colors blended in magical ways, softening them as one stepped back from the painting. It *was* Tory. He blinked when he realized Covington had been waiting for him.

Sam sighed. “All right, Your Lordship, you’ve outlined the problem admirably. Any alternatives?”

Covington nodded, coughed once, and then withdrew several sheets of paper from under some books in front of him. He gazed at them closely over his glasses.

Sam clenched his fists. He knew what was coming. “What wonderful compromise has Tory figured out *this* time?”

Covington flinched at Sam’s conclusion. He dropped his pipe and spent some time cleaning up the ashes, brushing burning tobacco off himself and the papers. “Um, yes, she did develop an alternative.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense.”

Covington eyed him over his glasses, looking unhappy, probably with his attitude. “She thought, to keep the Regency atmosphere, the walk-in closets could be made into half-baths.”

“The closets are too little for a toilet and sink.”

“Yes, just a toilet. Most great houses had water closets or a chamber pot in a closet.” Covington checked the papers. “The sink can be in the bedroom proper. There are sinks available as part of dressers, copper or porcelain wash basins available in the style of those which sat in most bedrooms of the period—only then, water was brought to them in pitchers.”

“You still need to have a shower or bath for guests.”

“Ah, yes. But in the Regency, the bath was either brought into the bedroom or parlor—or a bathing room was separate. As there is more than one parlor or drawing room on each floor, turn one into a bathing room.”

“So, some folks will have the rooms with a full bath, and the rest get to traipse down to the showers?”

“No. You put a large slipper bath in the middle of the bathing room.” When Sam eyed him questioningly, he added, “You know, one of those six-foot brass tubs with the high backs. With a fire going in the hearth, it will recreate the

Regency period for guests.” Covington smiled with glee, obviously having fun imagining it. “Those slipper baths are very big. A unique bathing experience. There were actually gravity-fed showers in some Regency residences. They could be replicated as part of the slipper baths. As it’s just the bath, they can be scheduled. The poor folks who have paid more for a private bath don’t get the full Regency experience.”

Covington paused and without waiting for Sam’s response, said with a grin, “And did I mention, you’ll save more than five hundred thousand pounds in construction costs and time saved?”

Sam stood and paced with his hands behind his back as Covington watched him. Finally, he turned and said with an edge to his voice, “It’s a great idea. Just the thing I’m coming to expect from Miss Covington.” He grabbed his briefcase and laptop. Striding over to Covington, who now had an anxious expression creasing his round face, Sam held out his hand. “I assume Tory has the plans already written up.”

With a sheepish smile, Covington handed the papers over. Sam turned and marched to the door.

He paused to glance at the portrait, and then Covington, suddenly angrier than he’d been in a long time. Everything felt *wrong*.

He held out the papers, jaw muscles twitching. “The tour agreement and now this, all in less than forty-eight hours. What do you British say?” Sam stared at the ceiling for a moment. “Ah, yes. Simply Brilliant.”

He glared at Covington until he flinched, then growled, “You know, I only wish my other employees performed half as well, while so confused and vulnerable.”

He didn’t wait for any excuses Covington might offer. He stormed out and down the hall, determined to work out of his room for the rest of the day.

Chapter 26

“Time is a storm in which we are all lost.”

—William Carlos Williams 1910

The sun shone warm on the gardens, but the air remained cool, a typical summer’s morning in Sussex. Arms wrapped tight across her chest, Tory walked out of her bedroom and across the patio into the east gardens. She turned south in hopes of finding more sun, while avoiding people. The rows of flowerbeds, straight gravel walk, and neatly manicured trees and shrubs, so familiar, tore at her frayed emotions. They seemed to mock Tory’s jumbled state of mind, derisive evidence that her world remained, everything in its proper place as it had been in eighteen-eighteen.

She knew now. Nothing remained of her world, regardless of appearances. Yesterday, what had replaced it, the here and now, proved to be an overwhelming and incomprehensible assault of the miraculous, chaotic and decadent.

Her head ached, the result of a fitful sleep after returning home with Pen last night, her continued distress the result of all she’d seen in London. She still felt sick and disoriented. The cloying smell of the garden flowers only made it worse.

The day had started well, and Pen was good company. She had described the route they would be taking and mentioned passing Heathrow. Tory wanted to see ‘the airplanes.’ Unfortunately, her little drive with Sam had not prepared her for the whizzing, jumbled mass of automobiles streaking down the wide ‘motorways’ and ‘turnpikes.’

At the airport, the two of them sat in Pen’s auto and watched bright metal machines the size of frigates roar down roads of concrete, only to leap into the air and fly away. She waited for them to fall, saying as much. Pen thought her ‘joke’ hilarious.

In London, Victoria tried not to gape at the cool steel buildings rising into the sky, mountains tens of stories tall,

square, egg-shaped, and round. She wondered if the sun ever shone on the wide avenues below them. The stores displayed twelve-foot banners of nearly naked men and women, and no one seemed to take notice. The stores and ‘shopping malls’ were filled with oddly-dressed and undressed people scurrying about. And everywhere, single women walked alone in the crowds—their independence thrilled and chilled her at the same time.

Her London had disappeared, Hyde Park to Cheapside. Here and there, she recognized a building or monument, sitting uncomfortably wedged between modern glass and chrome. The pitiable sight of St. George’s on Hanover Square, squat and discolored, dwarfed by the surrounding glass and steel buildings, made her want to weep.

By mid-afternoon, Tory was emotionally drained. A welcome respite came when they entered a dining room, or as Pen had called it, ‘a restaurant,’ which remained odd, as there were no French dishes, no French language on the menu. Even so, she enjoyed the experience, the food, and the excellent service. Yet, even here, manners were forgotten. Someone had placed the prices of each entree on the menu. Terribly gauche.

But that was before the movie theatre. Pen took her to see a screening of an older movie she called a classic from her ‘teen years.’ *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* sounded identical to those improbable, romantic stories published by the Minerva Press such as *Jane and the Highwayman* or Mrs. Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The moving picture was about a boy attending a school similar to Eton—except it proved to be co-educational and the curriculum was magic instead of Greek and Latin.

Victoria stopped and leaned against an elm tree that bordered the south gardens, her head on her arm. She closed her eyes against the bright sun, but instantly opened them again. The images from that ‘movie’ were seared in her memory. They haunted her sleep last night.

Lord Covington had shown her a ‘telly’ when she’d been sick. A minute of the flashing, disjointed pictures and sounds was all she could take. The movie proved far worse. The scenes were eighteen feet tall, and the sounds seemed to assault her from all directions. She watched a woman swell like a balloon and float away. Buses and people appeared and disappeared. Disembodied heads talked and unattended brooms swept the floors. When Pen took pity on her and explained that they were man-made ‘special effects,’ it didn’t help. The black banshee creatures, floating in a non-existent wind, were the nightmares that made her turn her head, and even now haunted her thoughts. They were every horror ever imagined, brought to life on the massive shadow screen. Werewolves and mythical creatures strode across the movie landscape, so real, she’d felt sure they would step out into the theatre. She could not bring herself to watch much of the movie and wondered at the ability of the many young children in the theatre to do so.

She stood away from the tree and smoothed her skirt. The movie was not real, she knew, but that knowledge did not keep the nightmares at bay. They *looked* real. They *sounded* real. The terror they incited *felt* real, like a children’s ghost story told in the dark made palpable.

The drive back in the dark constantly threatened her composure, with oncoming lamplights blooming in the distance, only to flash by so close, bright, and loud. Her stomach had jumped painfully with each one. To get her mind off all that she’d seen during the day, the monsters and blinding lights racing toward her, she’d closed her eyes and asked Pen questions.

As she began to walk down the garden path again, she fought the continuing shock, remembering. She had asked about dating. With little encouragement, Pen had talked about her dates, her ‘first time,’ boyfriends, including Steve, the man she’d lived with until recently. She blamed their demanding jobs for causing the end of their relationship. As she talked, Tory tried to understand why she would live with a man out of

wedlock, yet envied her such freedom with intimacy. When asked why she'd live with him, Pen gave a sad laugh. "I thought I was in love. But that is why living together is helpful. You find out whether it really is love, whether a marriage would work."

When she asked if such arrangements were common, Pen gave her a puzzled "Yes," noting that Janice and a number of the Belton Park Staff were 'living in sin.' Said lightly, Pen showed little concern with such relationships and no implied disgrace.

All she could think of was sitting on Sam's lap, his arms around her. She wanted to talk to him, have him explain this to her. And finally, Pen had called Steve her 'significant other.' At that, Tory's stomach had begun to ache in earnest. That was the term found in all the fashion magazines.

"Confound it." She stopped when she reached into her pocket and realized she had forgotten her handkerchief. With one hand she wiped away the tears and sniffed back more that were threatening to fall. Tory gritted her teeth. "Significant other. I am a fool."

When they returned home, she had invited Pen to stay the night. Once Pen was seen to her room, Victoria rushed to her bedroom in the hope she was wrong. But no. The articles, "Twelve Ways to Please Your Man," "What He Really Wants," "From First Kiss to First Night," all used the same words to describe the man—'your man,' 'the man in your life,' 'the love of your life,' 'your significant other,' ad nauseam.

She had stupidly assumed, like some milk-and-water miss, that Pen was as chaste as she, that the articles were talking about *married* men and women. There was no suggestion in the articles that illicit coupling was involved, like those found in *Fanny Hill*. Pen seemed completely forthright about the man she lived with. She liked and admired Pen.

Why hadn't she seen it? Of course, if magazines trumpeted the details of such carnal activities, it stood to reason that couples were actively involved in them too.

She struggled to comprehend how all of Society could have become so wanton, how women could be willing to abandon the sanctity and security of marriage so readily—even with their own income, but she understood now why Sam was so baffled by her behavior. As she approached the south garden, Tory stomped her foot, mortified remembering how she had foolishly initiated the First Kiss without any notion what it could lead quickly to—but that seemed to be what was expected. *What Sam expected?*

With the palms of her hands, she rubbed her eyes, as though she could erase the pictures in her head. There was no calming the turmoil in her heart. Her acquiescing to a kiss and more had been the act of a deluded twit.

What was she to do now? She had no inkling of how to proceed. She could not ask Lord Covington. Too embarrassing by half. She would have to wait for Pen.

She could not agree to complete intimacy without marriage, but where to place a limit? Even if it was sanctioned in this day, it was not something she could give herself to. She knew herself well enough to know that she would fail to freely enjoy the experience in the ways she believed it could be enjoyed.

But she could not marry him. How could she agree to become his wife and not reveal her true self, her genuine identity? She had refused to marry because men of her time didn't want her true self. To contemplate marriage now would be little different. Her husband would not know her, and certainly would not truly be marrying *her*. A marriage built on such an insidious lie would be a sham, doomed to fail.

But if she did tell him about her origins? He could only assume she was a lunatic, a madwoman, and certainly would refuse to consider marriage. There was no solution, nothing she could do to gain what her heart so desired.

Discouraged by the conclusion, Tory held a hand to her aching stomach as she entered the south garden. She rounded the corner of a hedge—and staggered back in shock. Across from her bench, there stood, not a rosebush, but a mature silk

tree, its arching branches in full bloom. She whimpered at the possibility that unawares, she had returned to eighteen-eighteen.

But no, glancing around, she could see the different flowers and plants of the modern garden remained. With shaking hands out before her, she approached the tree. She needed to touch it, to make certain it was not another miraculous ‘special effect.’

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“What are you doing here?” Sam strode into the dining room expecting to see Tory and Lord Covington, and instead found Pen sitting down to breakfast.

She sat up, obviously taken back by his tone. “Well, we got ...”

“Never mind. You got back late last night.” He didn’t sit down. He could see someone else had already used some plates. “Has Tory eaten?”

Pen shook her head. “No, just Lord Covington. When Janice went to tell her breakfast was ready, Tory wasn’t in her bedroom.” She gave him a hard expression. “I don’t know where she is.”

He clenched his teeth, but said sweetly, “And how was your shopping trip yesterday?”

There was a frown and a shrug. “Tory’s great. We had a good time, but she seemed distracted, even nervous at times. She didn’t enjoy the *Harry Potter* movie.” She said in an accusatory tone as though he was the cause of the film’s failure, before returning to her breakfast.

Sam clenched his teeth. God, he was sick of this. “How long have we known each other, Pen? What, five years?”

“About that.” She looked at him curiously.

“And while I’m your employer, we *are* friends, right?”

“I would hope so.”

“And because we’re friends, I let you tease me unmercifully.” It wasn’t a question, and Pen responded with just a brief smile.

“And during all that time, whenever you’ve had a problem with me, you’ve never hesitated to bring it to my attention.” She nodded, a little grin showing. Sam turned up a corner of his mouth. “I’ve always valued that.”

“The point being?” Pen asked.

“Oh, I’ve always believed the condemned should know what they’re accused of.”

Her hands stilled, and she laid down her silverware. With a pursed mouth, she said, “Sam, what did you do to Tory?”

“That’s what this is about? *Nothing* that I’m aware of.” He stared out the window. He thought he knew where Tory would be now. With an irritated flip of his hand, he said, “She certainly hasn’t seen fit to explain anything to me.”

“She’s upset and you’re the one who upset her.”

“Has she said that?”

“Well, no.”

He grabbed a piece of bacon from the dish. “I see.” He took a bite of it and turned to Pen. “First Tory, then the staff began playing this passive-aggressive ‘damn the boss’ game.” He glared at her. “And now you.” He waited, but she didn’t deny it.

Sam stood rigid, locking eyes with Pen. “If you ever again wander around giving me the evil eye because of something you *think* I did wrong, friend or not, I’ll fire your ass.” He finished the bacon in his hand and leaned close to her. “Got me?”

With a tight face, she said, “Yes. Understood.” He nodded and strode toward the French doors leading to the gardens.

“Sam.”

“Yeah.” He knew he was still scowling.

“Are we still friends?”

He paused with a hand on the door handle and considered her question for a moment. She appeared apprehensive. He sighed. He hated this kind of crap, hated worrying her. He wasn't good at the balancing act between friend and boss. “Pen, we're going to be friends for a long, long time.” He gave her a half grin. “You're a lawyer, and you know too much.”

Once out the door, Sam headed for the silk tree, disappointed that Tory might have seen it before he could show it to her. He slapped his thigh. It probably didn't matter. For whatever reason, his suggestion two days ago for an ‘outing’ seemed to have ruined any chance of a relationship, and the ‘why’ was driving him nuts.

He wanted to spend time with her *alone* and he wanted to understand what was going on with her.

He stopped to rub his neck in frustration. He had no idea what he was going to say to her, or what kind of explanation she might give. After a moment's thought, he swore when he drew a blank and continued on. Every time he tried to make sense of the situation, of her, he got a headache. Women were hard to figure out, but Victoria Covington was off the charts. Yet, he'd never wanted to understand a woman as much as he did her.

When the silk tree came into view, he saw Tory standing with her hands pressed against its trunk. She slowly stepped away but continued to stare at the tree. She looked exhausted. No, shell-shocked. “Tory.” She started and turned to face him. “Are you all right?”

She ignored his question, waving a hand at the tree. “Did-Did you do this?”

Sam nodded, frustrated. This had all gone differently in his head. He took his coat off, threw it over his shoulder, and approached her, but when he got close, she backed up. He stopped and waited.

“It's astounding. How?”

The urgency in her question bothered him. “We found the forty-foot tree for sale near Brighton. It was dug up and loaded on a flatbed truck.” At her uncomprehending expression, he blew out a breath. “Okay, a lorry, a dray—whatever you Brits call a big trailer rig.” She continued to stare at him. “Mr. McCabb arranged to have the lorry unload above the garden, and a crane lowered the tree into the hole the gardeners prepared for it. Mr. McCabb repaired all the tracks dug in the lawn.” No reaction. “Tory, it was supposed to be a surprise, completing the south garden, one you would appreciate.”

Her hands came together, fingers interlaced in one tight knot. “Yes. I do. It’s beautiful. Thank you.” She circled around him and sat on the bench, murmuring, “A whole tree.”

She sagged there, focused on a place in the middle of the walkway. He didn’t know what to say, so he sat down too, on the other end of the stone bench.

“I owe you an apology,” she whispered. “What?”

“You were correct. We ... I should have respected the business prohibitions you mentioned. I should never have agreed to ...”

“A kiss?”

With a nod, she finally faced him. She seemed embarrassed, but something else shone in her eyes—regret—and fear?

“Tory?” He stood to go to her, but she shook her head frantically, hands out to stop him.

“Please. I’m so sorry I misled you. I promise I will hew to a more businesslike manner in the future.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You didn’t mislead me.”

“Mr. Dalton. I have so far refrained from admonishing you for your cursing, but I wish you would desist in my presence.”

Sam blinked. “What?” *Cursing? Right.* He wasn’t going to be sidetracked so easily. He paced while he talked. “Are you

saying you don't want to date me? I thought you enjoyed my company, my kisses.”

She cringed at the questions, fidgeting anxiously with the hems of her long skirt. “Yes, I ... did.”

When she didn't continue, he rubbed his forehead in frustration. “So, this is all about my asking you to go out with me?”

She pursed her lips and opened a hand in offering. “In part, I did not understand what your expectations might be, society's, the consequences when I invited your kisses.”

Sam stopped and eyed her. “What consequences, what exactly are you afraid of?”

“I do not wish this bandage, Sam.” Shoulders rigid, she frowned hard at him when he scowled back, saying nothing. “You are making this complicated.”

“And how do I avoid that?” When she didn't respond, he rolled his neck. “I don't understand. I just want to get to know you, enjoy your company.”

She gave a quick shake of the head “I did not know what ... a kiss could lead to.”

“Lead to? What are you so concerned about? You don't trust me?”

“No. I don't trust myself. I didn't realize the social prospects of ‘going out’ with you.”

“Tory.” He gave her an intense examination, then his eyebrows shot up. “We, you and I, make our own expectations, our own ‘social prospects.’ That is between the two of us. Other peoples' expectations don't count.”

“I wish it were true. They *do* matter in your social circles.”

“Is this a concern about the possibility of our having sex?”

Tory flinched at the word ‘sex,’ but pulled her shoulders back and raised her chin. Sam forced himself to ignore how

the action thrust out her breasts, remaining focused on her words.

“I suppose it is both. For those reasons, I will not join you on a date, or where it might lead.”

“Okaaay. We can still see each other, even with sex off the table. Does it preclude kissing too?” He gave her a wry, but worried quirk of the lips.

“I could not ... freely indulge in such things outside of marriage.”

“I see.” This was the screwiest conversation he’d ever had with a woman, particularly one he liked. Sam leaned back. “Why? Are you religious?”

“I’m no more religious than the next person, I suppose.” She glanced at him questioningly. “I am a member of the Church of England.”

“Which doesn’t preclude kissing.”

Tory pursed her lips. “It does when it would carry us much further.”

“You don’t think I could control myself?”

“I ... Oh!” She covered her face with her hands for a moment, then stood, fists at her sides. “I am sure controlling our impulses would be a trial for both of us.”

“So, no signs of affection until after marriage?” They could still go out, he thought, even under such absurd restrictions. He sat and crossed his arms. “Is that it?”

Tory stared at him for a moment, abruptly rigid with anger. “You ... are you suggesting I’m attempting to tease you into marriage vows? That I’m some sort of ... of panderess?” She said the last word with such contempt, it shocked him.

“No! I wasn’t ...” Hot shards of anger seared him as he watched her display of righteous outrage, the same kind of indignation Tracy had shown when he’d decided to quit college and care for his brother. She called him a selfish idiot

for not thinking of her and their friends. Tracy then, and now Victoria assumed the worst, regardless of his true intent or feelings.

Why had he thought she was different, where his money and position weren't the draw? He stalked toward her. She took a couple steps back toward the silk tree but raised her chin and glared at him.

“Oh, yes, let's see the offended virtue. How dare I question your motives?” He smacked the tree trunk with his hand, making her wince. “Have you *ever* been straight with me? Continually questioning my intentions, even with a simple date, angry with me, that I might question *your* motives? Hell, woman, why are you so surprised, so insulted I've never guessed your *true* concerns?”

Chapter 27

“History is not a burden on the memory but an illumination of the soul.”

—John Dalberg-Acton 1875

Hand on the tree, Sam leaned in. What was Tory really after? His face inches away from hers, he bit off the words, “But you *are* interested in marriage.”

“No.” She wouldn’t face him, yet her tone remained definite.

“At all, or just with me?”

She crossed her arms and glanced at him then closed her eyes. Yep, here it comes.

“Sam, please.” She ducked under his arm and moved away. “I will not marry.”

Damn it. She had a sincerity about her which he found impossible to doubt. It leached away his anger even as he tried to hold on to it. He didn’t want to be mad at her, he wanted to kiss her, smooth away the unhappiness knotting her forehead. *Damn!*

“You plan being celibate the rest of your life?” She glared at him resentfully, as though the decision were a necessity, not a choice. “Are you so afraid of me, of making love?” With a shake of her head, she turned away so he couldn’t see her face.

“Why? What have I done?” He couldn’t conceive of such an alive and sensuous woman never knowing physical love. “I can understand not wanting to marry, but no sex? That’s a rather extreme decision. In your case, a travesty.”

She whispered, “A travesty?” She turned to face him. “It’s who I am.”

Stunned by her declaration, he found it only goaded his frustration. “And who *are* you?” When she didn’t answer, he

breathed an exasperated sigh. She didn't make any sense. "People change."

"Do they?" Her words were sharp, but her shoulders drooped. "For myself, I find it an exceedingly arduous task."

Sam tried to make sense of this crazy conversation. "What exactly is the problem? I want to help." He grimaced. That sounded stupidly self-serving. Tory, however, seemed to treat his offer seriously.

"Thank you, but no. It's not a matter of my changing. It's a matter of who I am." She sagged, worn and frightened. He wanted to hold her. He moved toward her, but she stepped away, and shook her head. "I cannot, no matter how I might want to."

There was a longing in her gaze that wrenched his heart. "Tory?" He closed his eyes for a moment to collect himself. He felt he would go nuts. "Tory. I care for you, I want to get to know you, to be with you. I want *you*. I thought it was mutual. What are you so damn afraid of losing? My respect? It's obvious you're a virgin, and your first time is important. I certainly don't want to hurt you, or pressure you into anything you don't want to do." He raised his hands in offering. "Strictly platonic, we could go out for lunch, take a day trip."

For a dozen heartbeats, the two of them just stood at either end of the bench gazing at each other. It seemed to Sam that even with her arms crossed, she shivered in the warm air.

She finally placed her hands at her sides. "I wouldn't do that to you, Sam. I do not think I could do that, not with you." She stared off into space. "I would fail, lose myself in the attempt."

Sam gaped at her, at her inexplicable answer. "What the hell does *that* mean?"

Her eyebrows came together in a determined frown, only to quickly part in a wide-eyed look of sorrow and back again, as though her face couldn't decide which emotion to express. She drew herself up.

“I will work hard to see Belton Park is a success, and I pray my imbroglia, my failure to appreciate the ... I will work not to hinder our mutual business venture, or the satisfactory execution of my work.” Without another word, she escaped down the path.

What had just happened? Bewildered, Sam wanted to chase her, but couldn't, seeing her turn her back on him, having no idea what he could say he hadn't already. As he watched her disappear into the garden foliage, he didn't know whether he had been rejected or had he somehow frightened her away? Whatever it was, it hurt like hell.

The next morning, he found her in the library with Lord Covington. He tried to get her alone to talk to her, but Tory began talking business, including her uncle in the conversation. Try as he might, he never could catch her alone that day. Always painfully formal, she kept her distance and ignored any questions which had anything to do with the two of them. It was maddening to sit next to a woman he had held, kissed, laughed with, who now seemed only a wooden beauty, as distant and cool as any aristocrat.

As much as he reviewed their conversation in the garden, he could not figure out what she meant by “I do not think I could do that with you. I would lose myself in the attempt.”

No matter how many times he asked in the following days, she wouldn't elaborate. He moved out of Belton Park before the week was out and returned to London. Pete decided to stay.

~ ~ ~

At a second floor study window, Tory watched Sam pack his car and drive away. He did not ‘take his leave of her.’ Though she felt she would die from the pain, she knew it was for the best, a matter of survival, her sense of self. If she hadn't pulled back from the precipice, refused to acquiesce to current mores, Sam and she certainly would have ended in a far deeper agony. Sam would never have been satisfied with her compromising, her hesitancy, hiding who she was. ‘Pulled back.’ Sam had used the phrase, and it fit. Even in the same

room, only a yard between them, it seemed she had drawn back an entire continent's length. She had known him only a short time. The coming days would prove whether it was harder to have him in the same room and not be able to touch him or to have him utterly absent and still in her heart.

~ ~ ~

Sam shook the water off his raincoat on the front porch of Belton Park. The October storm created a curtain of water draped over the portico roof, the world seen through it tinted a uniform gray.

Very much the way his life had felt the last three months—gray.

He closed his eyes. He couldn't stand seeing Tory. Every meeting found her unfailingly aloof and proper. Yet, like some masochistic addict, here he was again instead of sending messages or talking to Covington on the phone—he couldn't seem to stay away. He'd had just a handful of conversations with her, yet he felt he knew her, but obviously didn't. No other woman had ever made him feel this conflicted. With a last angry shake, he banged the massive doorknocker several times, just to hear the massive echo in the hall. Almost immediately, the butler opened the tall door.

Sam eyed the man. Had he been waiting by the doors? "Parsons, how've you been?" he said, loud enough to be heard over the downpour, and handed the butler his briefcase, so he could take off his coat.

"I'm well. And you, Sir?" Parsons closed the door and stood waiting.

"Wet, but otherwise fine." Sam had to smile as he handed him his coat and took the briefcase back. After three months, Parsons still had his white gloves. "Where is everyone?"

"Master Dalton is in his suite painting and Lord Covington is in the study upstairs." Now that the downstairs study had been transformed into the parlor it had been two hundred years ago, Covington had claimed the refurbished study on the

second floor, with its sculptures, red leather furniture, and reconstructed balcony.

Sam had gagged at the cost but was forced to admit the results were spectacular. He waited, but as usual, Parsons didn't say anything about Miss Covington. He sighed.

"Why is it, Parsons, whenever I ask where folks are, you never tell me where Miss Covington is?"

Parsons gave him a quizzical frown. "She's in the parlor, finishing a tour." He produced a slightly hurt expression. "Sir, when you ask, I always tell you."

Sam gave him a heavy-lidded glance. "Right." *Very smooth.* "While I'm thinking about it, thank you for your reports on the progress of the renovations and the staff training. They've been very thorough."

Parsons continued to stand by the door with Sam's coat, holding it out as water dripped from it. "Certainly, Sir. Lord Covington and Miss Covington also receive them."

Sam waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. "Parsons, I'm always impressed by what you so skillfully *don't* say."

"Thank you, Sir. Part of the butler's craft."

He shook his head wryly. "No doubt. Oh, I almost forgot. Did it arrive?"

Parsons actually smiled. "Yes, Sir. It has been tuned and placed in the music room as you requested."

Sam smiled back. He wondered what Tory would think about this surprise. "Would you tell Lord Covington I've arrived? I'll be with Miss Covington in the parlor."

"Very good, Sir."

Tory's voice reached him before he'd traveled very far down the hall. It resonated with that attractive confidence and cheerful lilt of hers. He gritted his teeth at the sounds. He resented how her voice still pulled at him, inciting an ache in his chest even after all these months. It hurt even worse

because he seemed to be the only person whose presence immediately robbed her voice of those beautiful qualities.

He stopped at the parlor doors but didn't go in for that reason. He leaned against the wall and listened. Tory had started impersonating the Victoria Covington of the portrait for the tours soon after he left. It worked. She seemed capable of pulling facts and stories out of thin air to answer any questions. She lived the part and people fell in love with her. Here it was the middle of a wet October, and they were still booking more than one tour a day.

The group laughed at something she said, and he heard her ask, "Any questions?"

In a blatantly American drawl, someone responded, "Did any royalty ever visit Belton Park?"

"Yes. The Prince Regent visited Belton several times. I met him when I was four years old, in 1801. He borrowed several garden ideas from here, including planting silk trees at Brighton similar to the one in the East Garden." In a soft voice, Tory said, "However, I have fonder memories of Princess Charlotte, the Prince's only daughter."

Sam leaned closer to hear, knowing everyone in the parlor was probably doing the same.

"She was one year older than I. She was eighteen when she visited Belton in the late summer of 1814. It was part of an attempt to escape London, because of the victory celebrations, to be sure, but also because she had just broken off her arranged engagement to the Prince of Orange. Her father, the Regent, was furious with the loss of the promised tie to the Netherlands. The Prince of Orange was the same age as Charlotte and known as Slender Billy." Tory laughed, and folks couldn't help but laugh with her. "I attended a ball during my season in London three years later, and I heard the Duke of Wellington say the prince was 'a dissolute, untidy, and stupid young man.'"

There was some laughter, but Tory said, “The Duke would know. Slender Billy had been under his command at Waterloo. He had placed him with as few troops as possible several miles from the battlefield.”

Someone said something, and Tory answered, “Oh, yes. The Princess thought so too. Princess Charlotte was tall—well, she seemed tall to me, and pretty, but quite unpracticed in the social graces. Prinny was scandalized by her behavior.” There was the murmur of another question. “Prinny? It was a name Society gave the Prince Regent.”

“Princess Charlotte had grown up sheltered, enduring a rather confused life at Warwick, because of her parents’ estrangement. She knew little of deportment. She would constantly fold her hands behind her with her shoulders always pushed forward, like so.”

Sam chuckled with the tour group. He could imagine Tory acting out the behaviors.

“She never stood still, but she laughed a great deal, and proved to be a chatterbox.” When the laughter died away, she spoke with some tenderness. “Even so, we became fast friends.

“She met Leopold, the third son of an impoverished Prince Francis of Saxe-Coburg. She decided to marry Leopold, which caused quite a commotion. After a great deal of family drama, the prince’s brother, the Duke of York, persuaded the prince to accept the marriage. He finally invited Leopold to his residence at Brighton in February of 1816.” He could hear the rustle of her dress. The sound still made him shiver.

“Surprisingly, the Prince and Leopold stopped at Belton Park on the way to Brighton, even though my Uncle Reggie was not on intimate terms with either. So, because of that honor, I met Leopold.” She paused for affect. “He was tall too, handsome. I remember his hazel eyes. Very pleasant and well-mannered, but I found him a bit of a prig.” Sam had to laugh at her inflection.

“They were married the second of May. They were happy, and he improved her address, much to the Regent’s delight, and Leopold become less of a solemn stick. She soon was expecting. Newspapers often printed bulletins on the couple’s progress at their residence, Claremont.”

Tory quietly continued in a hushed tone. “On a November day very much like today, Princess Charlotte died giving birth to a stillborn son. She was no older than I. The whole nation mourned her loss.” Silence followed her statement. Her voice and inflection were so compelling, he could willingly believe Tory had experienced it all. Sam marveled at how she accomplished it day after day.

Someone asked, “Did you, I mean, did Victoria Covington ever marry?”

After the smattering of laughs quieted, Tory said, “No.” That had Sam’s attention. He wanted to hear more, but instead they were directed to move on. “Please come with me to the music room, and I’ll tell you the end of her story.”

Sam swore. They had reopened the servants’ concealed jib doors from the parlor to the library, and from the library to the music room, so the group didn’t have to come out to the main hall. She would see his surprise, before he could show it to her. After the catastrophe with the silk tree, he couldn’t predict how this would go.

He trotted down to the music room and reached it before the group. He sat on a chair in the corner furthest from the joining door to the library. While he waited, Sam examined the delicate curves of the new Welsh harp resting in the window alcove. He noticed the bookshelves were gone and colorful landscapes now hung in their place on bright white walls. The rain sang a muted refrain against the terrace slate outside, a Greek chorus announcing the next scene.

As though part of the wall had swung back, the jib door opened, and the group filed into the room, their hushed conversations hardly louder than the rain. Tory entered, her back to him. She had her hair tight atop her head, and she was

wearing a period dress which sported a light green print. At least thirty people in the tour group surrounded her and faced him across the room, though they didn't pay him any attention because Tory was speaking.

“Less than a year later, May 1818, Miss Covington was sitting here.” She indicated the sofa off to one side of the group. “Because of a house party, guests filled Belton Park to capacity. By Monday, May 4th, as mistress of the house, Miss Covington had been in charge of entertaining them for near two weeks. She needed a respite. A ‘break’ I believe you call it.”

Tory scanned the group, and he got to see her face in profile. Sam felt his heart beat faster at the sight. The blood in his veins hadn't been moving until she entered the room. His body seemed to come alive in her presence. He was happy to just sit and watch her, as her graceful hands weaved the story in the air for her audience.

“Miss Covington came here that morning to find some solitude and peace. The sofa had been her mother's and she'd positioned it here to look out the bank of windows behind you. She loved the view.” Tory waited as the group looked out the windows.

“The music room served as her study, if you will. She would read or play the Welsh harp which sat ...” Tory stopped, her arm raised toward the alcove. She stared at it a moment. Dropping her arm, she walked over to it, oblivious to the curious looks among the group.

As though it might disappear, she gingerly touched the harp, smaller than those seen in an orchestra, running her hand down the arch and delicate wood filigree. She froze and raised her head in Sam's direction, as though she'd sensed his presence through the harp. No smile, just an intense gaze.

“Do you play?”

She started and looked at the speaker in the group. “Yes. All well-born ladies were expected to master an instrument.”

“Why?”

She laughed. “It added to their *cachet* on the marriage mart.” The comment was followed by a sad smile. “Remember, the only music available was played by hired musicians or family members. There were no CDs, videos, or MP3s. Great composers were creating many popular pieces at the time—Beethoven, Liszt, Haydn, Mozart, the Italian composers, and many more. No one wished to forego music’s pleasures.”

Tory sat on the stool behind the harp and brought the instrument to her shoulder. She lightly ran her fingers over the strings, creating a sparkling riff seeming to dance through the room. “It’s in tune,” she whispered surprised, and gently smiled at him. Sam couldn’t do anything but smile back.

She flexed her fingers and set them on the harp with a nod to her audience. “I have not touched a harp this half year, so bear with me.” With her eyes closed, she picked out a hauntingly simple tune, quick, but sad. She added harmony and chords and the music soared, light and carefree. And in a soft, but clear voice, she sang a lilting melody.

*“All for a fair damsel I’ve lately been told,
Her parents died, left her a hundred pounds in gold;
She lived all with her uncle; was the cause of all her woe,
So soon you’ll hear the maid so fair when she proved her
overthrow.
Her uncle had a ploughing boy that Mary loved fair well,
It was in her uncle’s garden, some tales of love they told;
All for a wealthy squire so often come to see,
Still Mary she loved her ploughboy on the Banks of Sweet
Dundee.”*

Sam watched her face, followed every expression, relishing every detail, every movement of her mouth, like a starving man at a banquet. She finished with a trill of strings and after a

collective sigh, the group gave her enthusiastic applause. A familiar-looking blonde in the back asked, “The song was very pretty, but it doesn’t sound similar to any of the composers you mentioned.”

“No, it isn’t. Victoria was very fond of country ballads. This one is ‘The Banks of Sweet Dundee.’”

Another member of the group said, “It sounded both sad and happy.”

With a laugh, Tory nodded. “It’s Irish, so it is what one would expect. The tune was also used in the Scottish ballads, ‘Gilderoy,’ and even a church hymn, but I favor the Irish version above all others. Another using the same tune is ‘My Love Nell.’ You from the United States will appreciate this one:

*“Now, come all ye boys, both far and near,
And a warning’ take by me:
A bird in the hand, as you may understand,
Is worth twenty thousand million on a tree.
Though they try persuade you for to name the day,
But you say: Wait till the time suits me.
Then as slippery as an eel, they’ll turn on their heel,
And sail for Amerikay.’”*

Laughter punctuated the last line. One teenager who seemed taken with Tory asked, “So, why didn’t Victoria marry? She seems like she’d be a real catch.”

She set the harp upright. “You must understand, Victoria Covington possessed a substantial dowry. The men who courted her wanted her for her money.” She shrugged at the group frowns. “It’s an old story, like the song, but she would have none of it.”

“Then what happened to her?”

Victory gazed at the teenager a moment, then stood and walked over to the sofa. “She disappeared.”

The group gasped in unison.

Tory nodded. “She was last seen by her close friend, Kitty Roland, sitting right here,” She laid a hand on the back of the sofa, saying, “About ten thirty in the morning,” in a house full of guests, she vanished, along with the sofa and her copy of Keats’ newly published poem, *Endymion*.”

“What happened?”

She spread her arms. “No one knows. Nothing of her was ever found.”

The group began all speaking at once, and Tory, standing off by herself, suddenly looked very alone. After a moment, she stepped into the midst of the visitors to answer questions. He couldn’t hear her, but even though she was one of the smallest people among them, she visibly dominated the group.

After about a quarter of an hour, Suzanne walked in and Tory raised her hands. “Thank you for coming today. I hope you all found Belton Park as beautiful and charming as I do. Please come again. Your bus is out the front doors, which are down the hall to your right. Suzanne will escort you. Stay dry.”

There was more applause, and several folks were shaking her hand and talking to her for several more minutes.

Finally, the last of the group pushed past him and out into the hall. He stood and watched Tory approach him, remembering another time she’d walked across the music room toward him. For him, it produced the same images. Three months of frustration and longing bubbled just below the surface, warming his skin. He found it hard to remain calm.

“Mr. Dalton. I—”

“Sam.”

She pursed her lips and looked away. Faced him again, she started to speak, but the blonde from the group came back in the room. Sam finally recognized her, Dr. Susan Leven, one of the Regency scholars he'd contracted. He quickly introduced her.

"Miss Covington. What a pleasure meeting you." Dr. Leven held out her hand to Tory, who took it with one firm shake. "I've been hearing such good things about the tours here, but I had no idea the talent, the wealth of information you had at your fingertips, answering so many questions with such wonderful stories." She offered a genuine smile.

Dr. Leven was in her mid-forties, but she had a youthful energy Sam found attractive. Her long hair was in a ponytail and her granny glasses hung from her neck on a chain, the rather telling incongruity making him smile.

Tory nodded. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Susan, please." She stepped close to Tory and tilted her head toward her in a 'girl-talk' gesture he recognized as excluding him. Sam ground his teeth. He was starting to envy everyone who got to talk to her. He took a deep breath, determined to wait them out.

They started to walk out with Sam following. "You must tell me how you ever discovered the Prince, Charlotte, *and* Leopold visited Belton Park. I fancy myself a student of Princess Charlotte's life, and I've never read anything about it."

"Oh, Princess Charlotte stopped on her way to Brighton and on the way back. I remember—"

From behind, Sam saw Tory tense. "Excuse me. It was during Miss Covington's 15th summer."

Susan Leven laughed. "Of course. Still in character. Charming. I really want to see your sources."

"Certainly. I'll be happy to provide them when I finish my work. I've had very little time to collect it all together." Sam

frowned. Collect what? She didn't bring anything with her. The only thing he'd seen her study was Keats' book of poetry, which he assumed was from the house records and library.

"Yes. Seeing how busy you are, I can understand why Mr. Dalton retained me to organize your references and sources for the Conference Center's bibliography. I hope you can get them to me soon. I want to have a preliminary list finished to distribute at the Christmas Ball in December."

"When would you need them from me?" Tory's voice sounded suddenly tired and on edge.

"In a week or two? It would give me at least two weeks to organize them, along with any sources I might have, some which are not on your list, and have a layout finished and off to the printers for the Ball."

"Of course," Tory said with some hesitation, then turned and held out her hand to Sam. He took it gently, wondering what she meant by the gesture. She didn't shake it, but said, "Thank you for the harp, Mr. Dalton. It is beautiful and completes the music room perfectly."

He laid his other hand over hers. "You are very welcome. Having you mention you played, and your birthday is in a month, I thought ..." He gave her a soft frown, unsure how to say what he wanted to in front of Dr. Leven. "Hearing you play made it worth every penny." She slipped her hand out from between his and gave him a blue-eyed glance with a ghost of a smile before walking down the hall with Dr. Leven.

Sam watched them go, angry at the dismissal. The story about the disappearance of Victoria Covington in 1818, Keats' book, the harp music, her tour presentation—it melted together and scrambled his guts. There was something very weird and unsettling there, something he felt he should recognize, but couldn't seem to put the pieces together, or what puzzle he was attempting to solve.

He sighed heavily, his chest aching. Emotionally, he was a mess, but he did realize one thing, something he should have

recognized long before this. He was in love with Victoria Ann Covington.

Chapter 28

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind ...

—John Keats, ‘Ode to Psyche’ (1819)

“What am I going to do?” Tory paced up and down the library, beating her thigh with her fist. Her ponytail whipped around each time she turned to pace back along the new Persian carpet. Lord Covington just sat and watched her from one of the wingback chairs close to the fireplace. The crackling flames there cast wavering shadows across his face.

“Dr. Leven expected my sources two days ago. I’ve sent her half of what I need to substantiate the changes made at Belton or my tour recollections. I’ve gone through all the documents and books in the house and rifled the attic and cellars. The water damage didn’t affect just my old bedroom, it destroyed important records.” She tucked stray curls behind her ears. “I cannot fend off Dr. Leven and Mr. Dalton much longer.”

Lord Covington fidgeted between the arms of the large chair. “I don’t know. Perhaps there is more in your diary we’ve missed? Is there something you might still find on the internet?”

Tory shook her head.

“Maybe we can go into London and scour the libraries there. I know there are a number of records concerning the prince and his family at the British Museum.”

Tory fell into a chair across from her uncle. “What do I tell Sam, Mr. Dalton, when I cannot produce the references?”

“I don’t know.” Covington simply stared at his empty pipe.

Tory felt her stomach tremble like a wounded animal. “If I cannot give him proof my changes are authentic, or my tours, it will ruin all our work, everything we’ve done.”

“I’ll keep pondering the problem, my dear. I just can’t think of anything at the moment.” Lord Covington heaved himself out of the chair and pulled out his tobacco pouch and began filling his pipe.

For a moment Tory stared at the floor, then quickly dug into her jeans pocket, pulling out a piece of paper which she held out to Lord Covington.

“What’s this?” He looked at the paper through his heavy eyebrows as he lit his pipe.

Tory cleared her throat. “It’s your daughter’s address and phone number. She’s living in London.”

Lord Covington stared at her until the match burned his finger. “Bloody hell.” Shaking his hand, he glanced at the chastising expression on Tory’s face and slumped.

“Please excuse me, my dear.” Covington did a credible imitation of a disciplined schoolboy. She raised her eyebrows in pardon and handed him the paper. He gazed at it as though it would devour him. “How did you get this?”

“I asked Parsons to ask Mr. Dalton to get it, so she could be invited to the Christmas Ball.” She took his arm. “I won’t if you do not want me to, but I would think you would wish to see her. She is your daughter, your family.” She stepped away from him. “Certainly, far more than I.”

Covington barked, “That’s not true,” patting her on the shoulder. “I know it doesn’t feel that way at times, but you are very much family.”

Tory laid her hand on his. “You’ve been a dear, and I do love you, you know. You are the best of uncles and I owe you so much. Even so, Roxanne should be here for the ball. All your friends and even distant relatives will be. I do not know what caused the estrangement, but you need to talk to her. You miss her, I know.”

Covington frowned hard, studying the handwritten note as he headed for the door. “Yes, I do.” His expression struck her as old and lost. She held firm, and finally he nodded. “Please, send her the invitation. I don’t know what she’ll say. I’ve failed her in so many ways.” He mumbled to himself as he shuffled out, “She’ll be angry to know we’ve changed her bedroom into my study.”

“It’s not important what she’ll say, but what *you* say.”

Tory watched him leave without answering her. She wrapped the sweater around her instead of wearing it, a fruitless effort to dispel the helpless chill settling in her heart. Going to the far shelves, she decided to examine the books there one more time. Once there, she could not muster the energy to take any books down again. Instead, she wandered out onto the terrace. It was warm for the end of November, even though it was overcast.

She surveyed the gardens, now wearing winter’s dead leaves. The thought made her glance at the rosebush in the Greek urn. She walked over to it and fingered a remaining bud, now shriveled brown. What had happened that day in May? Why was she here? She was still lost in thought when someone spoke behind her.

“Is that our rosebush?”

She spun around to find Sam standing several feet away, regarding her. She couldn’t think, and when she didn’t say anything, he frowned and slowly walked over to her.

Eyeing the bush, he said, “Was it really May when you and I met here?” He gazed at the bud in her hand, or was it her hand he studied so intently? “You never did say whether you saw this bush glow, just before you came out of the music room.” He watched her expectantly.

“I saw it.” Tory’s mouth was dry, and she couldn’t seem to stop shivering. Sam suddenly took off his thick overcoat and laid it on her shoulders. She said, “Thank you”, but the overcoat only made things worse. His scent, sweet and tangy,

now surrounded her, and his warmth from the coat seeped into her.

Why was it so much harder now than three months ago? She seemed unable to avoid him when he visited, unable to stop thinking about him when he didn't, and his presence seemed to melt her brain. She should be leaving right now, getting away from him.

"I-I did see it shine. It struck me as very peculiar. I've never seen anything similar before or since."

"Neither have I." Sam brushed off the balustrade and leaned on it, seemingly unconcerned about his suit jacket getting wet. Smiling, he pulled a shriveled bud off a branch and began absently picking the dried petals apart.

"That day I'd just finished making several phone calls. I noticed the roses and was thinking about what Pete said on the phone." With a self-deprecating laugh, Sam said, "He was telling me to 'take time to smell the roses,' then this rose bush lit up. Weird, huh?"

Tory gave him a baffled glance and returned to staring at the rose in his hand. "I don't understand. What does 'taking time to smell the roses' signify?" Sam eyed her, but she didn't care. She was tired of avoiding questions which made her appear strange or dimwitted.

"It means Pete wanted me to slow down and enjoy my life, rather than just plan it." Sam shrugged. "You know, *carpe diem*."

"Aaah." Tory nodded. "Wise advice. It is very difficult to plan one's life. Other things keep happening."

Sam chuckled at her resigned expression, but said no more when he saw she wasn't laughing too.

In her nervousness, she tugged at his coat around her shoulders, looking anywhere but at him. "Before the odd light, I was gazing at the roses from the music room, thinking I'd never be appreciated for myself." Her brows wavered. She was divulging too much. She couldn't help it. He listened to her.

Sam looked at her intently. “There’s a great deal about you to appreciate. I don’t know how anyone could fail to recognize it.”

Tory tried to smile a thank-you, but was afraid if she spoke she would say something even more inappropriate, revealing, and she so desperately wanted to be inappropriate with him, to put aside her inbred propriety and just be with him. She could not be with him without telling him the reasons for her reserve and who she truly was.

She felt him step close. “Tory?” His deep voice vibrated through her.

Before he could say anything, before she behaved stupidly, she stepped away. “Mr. Dalton, we didn’t expect you today. What brought you down to Sussex?”

Sam frowned at her, but he stepped back. It hurt, just seeing him retreat, and anger welled up, over the situation, over her lack of finesse.

“I came to see you. I’ve been told by Dr. Leven you still haven’t sent her all the references for the development we’ve done here. We need them. Now.”

“Yes, I understand. I will collect all the materials she needs.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

Sam rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at her sideways. “Not good enough. You’ve already had several months. You said you’d have them to Dr. Leven two days ago.”

“Mr. Dalton—”

“Sam, all right? Sam. We’ve known each other far too long, far too well to continue the Mr. and Miss crap.” Tory blushed at the ‘far too well,’ but frowned, guessing what ‘crap’ meant.

Sam waited until her eyes met his to say, “You have two days.”

Tory opened her mouth but with no excuse, closed it again and stared at the garden, unable to face his glowering visage.

“I’m sure you understand.” He leaned closer, his voice taking on a hard edge. “If you can’t document the changes we’ve made here, the *millions* I’ve spent, the whole project is historical junk. Overnight, I’ll be, the project will be, a joke in Europe, and Dalton Development will take a serious hit, at best setting us back years.” He paused, waiting for Tory to look at him. “*Two days*. If your sources aren’t produced, I have to have time to plan our damage control.”

“Sam, I ...”

“Perhaps I gave you too much leeway over the changes, not asking for the evidence before making the changes.” He sighed, eyeing her. “That’s on me.”

“No, Sam ... It will ...”

“It’ll also mean that you’ve reneged on our deal, and Lord Covington will owe me something in the neighborhood of hundred million pounds for the renovations here.”

Tory’s shoulders slumped. She wanted to cry, but she refused to show it. “Thank you for the clarification.” She turned to leave, but Sam caught her arm and brought her close.

“Tory, this is business. I *need* the documentation. I don’t want to hurt you, I ...” His face was only inches from hers. He glanced at her mouth and looked into her eyes. “I ...” He just continued to stare at her with a hungry expression.

“You, what?” she whispered, overwhelmed by the heat in his gaze.

He closed his eyes and the muscles in his jaw jumped. “I-I’ll be back in two days. We can talk then. There is a mountain of details concerning the Christmas Ball.” He let her go and entered the library.

“Mr.Dalt— Sam.”

He came back out. “Yeah?”

“Your coat.” She removed it and held it out to him. He looked at her in an unfocused manner. She knew he was thinking of the last time she’d returned his coat to him on her bedroom patio. When he didn’t come get it, but continued to gaze at her, she marched over and handed it to him. He grunted in a low voice, “Get your research to Dr. Leven. Two days,” and left.

She watched him go, and went inside, slumping in a library chair, still feeling the cold in her bones. It seemed no matter what she did, or could do, Sam continued to distrust her. Or perhaps he had trusted her too much and because of that, he would be terribly hurt. She understood now how one’s heart could physically ache.

She grimaced with self-loathing. She had to prove what she knew to be true. The fear that she could destroy all he’d worked so hard for ate at her. She felt she would go mad if he came to hate her.

“Deliver the research,” she snarled. She had done the research. No books or sources spoke of the gardens and interior of Belton Park, except in agonizingly few comments here and there.

Deliver the research. She felt tears well up. *Blast the man.* Easy for him to say, but *where?* She had to think, so she put on a coat and scarf, walking outside and into the gardens. She hoped the cold air would clear her head. If not, the cold would provide the discomfort she deserved. She found the stone bench before the silk tree, sat, and stared off into space.

She had been sitting for some time when a voice speaking German startled her.

“There you are. Your staff said you might be here.”

Günther Waltrop appeared among the bushes in a long black coat which made his lanky frame seem even taller.

“Mr. Waltrop, you wanted to see me?”

“Yes. I hear you are having trouble finding the necessary sources to justify all the changes Dalton has made to Belton Park. Is it true?” He stopped several feet away and waited.

She didn’t like his tone or that he was speaking in German. “What do you want?”

“Why, nothing from you. I simply wanted you to know that if no sources are found, I will buy Belton Park and pay what your uncle will owe Dalton.” When she looked at him aghast, he said, “Not to worry, you and he will be free to live here as long as you want, rent free, and I will employ you.”

“Mr. Waltrop, why ...?”

“So you see, you don’t have to do *anything* for me. I didn’t want you to worry about what seems to be the future outcome to Dalton’s efforts here.” Mr. Waltrop smiled and gave a bow.

As he turned to leave, Victoria said, “I fear you will be disappointed, Mr. Waltrop,” with a bravado she didn’t feel. He simply nodded, still smiling, and left the way he came. At the same time, she heard more footsteps rapidly approaching from the other end of the clearing. She turned to see Sam burst into view. He stopped when he saw her, then watched Mr. Waltrop disappear among the garden foliage.

With a fierce expression, Sam doubled his fists. “I saw Waltrop’s BMW out front, and the staff said he was asking where to find you.” Sam took a step toward her with his arms stiff at his sides. “Is he why you haven’t delivered all your references?”

“No! How could you think such a thing?”

“How ...?” He glared at her for what seemed ages and then turned and left without another word.

Victoria covered her face with her hands, cursing Waltrop and the fates. She went to find Sam to explain, but he had left. She returned upstairs to the newly completed study and sat staring at the floor, the room growing colder as the evening wore on. She could not shake the hopeless lethargy gripping her.

For the thousandth time she wished Kitty were here. For a long time, she sat remembering her friend, feeling the chill winds of time blow through her soul, scouring her emotions. But her friend couldn't help her. Or Lord Covington, Or Sam. Or Pen.

She laid her head against the back of the chair. She was so tired. Her eyes closed of their own accord. She had not been able, or perhaps willing, to believe anyone would question her, her knowledge, doubt her word. Not someone of her class, not someone raised at Belton Park. Exhausted, she fell asleep naming all the kinds of idiot she had become.

She woke with Sam's words *Get the research* echoing in her head. The library lay still and gray in the half-light of dawn. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and rubbed her arms. She was cold, even though she still wore her coat, and someone had put a comforter over her. Her body ached, stiff from sleeping in the chair. As she stretched, the word 'research' repeated in her head, a chiming mantel clock wound up by her dreams.

The first time Sam had mentioned doing research was at Roland house. She should have listened, but she was too blasted busy getting out before he saw her letters.

Her letters.

Tory sat up, gasping. *Her letters! Her letters to Kitty.* She'd described everything about Belton Park to her, inside and out. Kitty had always complained she spent too much ink on the gardens and furniture and not enough on gossip, such as her account of Prinny's visit. And all her letters were at the Roland house.

She rushed to the phone and woke Janice, who was now her assistant. When Janice answered, Tory asked her to drive her to Roland house, but remembered they didn't open until ten. It was a long three hours of collecting all the changes she'd recommended inside and out which still required some kind of historical support.

When Janice and she arrived at the Roland House, the curator wasn't cooperative.

"You want copies of ALL the letters?" The bald man shuffled over to rows of shelves filled with books and folders, slowly returning, scratching his head indecisively. "I don't know if I can do that. Copying such documents can destroy them if done too often."

"I am Miss Covington, the Roland's neighbor at Belton Park. It is extremely important to the renovations we are doing now. How often have they been copied?"

The old man straightened his wrinkled vest and stroked his chin, "Well, well, never." Looking embarrassed, he scowled and tapped the counter with his index finger. "It'll cost you. I have to charge twenty pence a page."

"Yes, yes. Anything, but please, I need them *now*." Janice examined the museum displays behind her, which made Tory uneasy because of her last visit. She quickly directed Janice to help the man, as Tory had no notion how a copying machine worked.

The man came back from the rows of shelves with five large expanding folders, resembling the ones her lawyers had used for legal papers when her parents died. He placed them on the counter and looked at her with watery eyes. "Do you want the Roland letters too?"

"The what?"

"The Roland letters. There are letters over a seven-year period Katherine Roland wrote to Victoria Covington. Do you want them copied too?"

Tory frowned, laying her hands on the wood counter separating the museum from the documents area, and her from the old man. "Any letters Kitty Roland wrote to-to Victoria Covington would be at Belton Park."

The old man wiggled his eyebrows with a dry chuckle. "No, not these. Katherine Roland wrote these for seven years *after* Victoria Covington disappeared."

Chapter 29

And suddenly all your troubles melt away, all your worries gone, and it is for no reason other than the look in your partner's eyes. Yes, sometimes life and love really is that simple.

—William Wordsworth, (1798)

“She’s in the upstairs study, Sir.”

Sam glanced up the grand staircase and back to Suzanne. “Thanks. Don’t bother to announce me. I’ll just go up. Please let Lord Covington know I’m here and will see him later.”

Suzanne smiled her assent and left him to take the stairs two at a time. Dr. Leven had received Tory’s work yesterday, but had been so amazed by the sources, she’d also asked for copies of the letters themselves from Roland House. She’d called him and gone on for a half an hour about what a brilliant find the letters were, how remarkable the content was, particularly for the Belton Park work. One would think the Rosetta stone had been uncovered. Finally, Sam had asked her to Fed Ex a copied set of the letters to him. When he saw them, he called Roland House to make sure they were authentic. After which, Sam had had a scotch—a double.

He hiked quickly down the long hall to the upstairs study and looked in but didn’t see Tory. His eyes felt like beach sand, so he rubbed them and looked again. Sleep had eluded him for the last four nights. The first three nights because Waltrop had visited Tory and thinking how to handle the imagined fallout from the failed project. Then last night, because of the letters. He couldn’t figure out what game the Covingtons might be playing. Why wait until the last minute to produce the letters? Why would Tory fake Victoria Covington’s handwriting? It made absolutely no sense when the letters themselves were authentic. So much effort for what? He muttered to himself and stepped into the upstairs study.

He appreciated the room; it radiated a man's sensibilities, strength and calm good humor. Dark wood furniture covered with red leather complemented the cream-colored lamp shades and dark book covers on the shelves. There was even an ornate brandy decanter with crystal snifters on a tray in the middle of the room. He expected any moment to smell cigar smoke.

Then he saw her. She sat curled up on the bench seat in the bay window at the far end of the room. When he got closer, he realized she was asleep. A red and tan comforter covered her, with just the cuffs of her sweatpants and white socks showing. He smiled. Her tennis shoes were nearby on the floor—amazing, tennis shoes. A box of tissues sat on the floor near her in the middle of wads of used tissues. What, no handkerchief? Rather than wake her, he sat in a chair across from her, slowly so the leather wouldn't squeak.

Her honey hair was loose, framing her cheeks like a lover's hands. Her face seemed shadowed, dark smudges under her eyes evidence of her exhaustion. He'd heard she'd worked all day and night to get the references done for Leven. But why now? How did she know about the content of the letters in the first place? According to the curator at the Roland House, *no one* had ever looked at the letters in the fifteen years he'd worked there, not until Tory asked for copies two days ago. If she'd know about them more than fifteen years ago, when she supposedly visited, she would have been a child then.

Nothing made sense. He laid his hands on the arm rests and leaned back in the chair gazing at her. But as usual, when he was near her, somehow the bizarre questions surrounding her faded away.

She mumbled something and changed position. Several sheets of paper fell from under the comforter. Another thirty or more xeroxed pages lay scattered across the floor. Sam quietly collected them. He slowly lifted the comforter to find at least ten more pages in her lap or grasped in her hand. He gently pried them free and sat on the floor before her. They were more photocopies of handwritten letters, but they weren't in Tory's hand—Sam ground his teeth—Victoria Covington's.

The writer filled the pages with far more elaborate, but less consistently neat script.

They were all addressed to ‘Dearest Tory.’

Sam found the author’s signature, ‘Kitty’. Why would Tory make *copies* of the friend’s letters? They hadn’t been among the letters he’d seen. He noted the first few letters didn’t have a year with the date. May 7, May 9, May 13, July 5, September 20. Then he found one addressed January 5, 1819, another August 26, 1820, apparently finishing with the last one, December 19, 1826. He stared at the dates for a long time. Kitty wasn’t part of Tory’s life, but Victoria Covington’s. He thought of the second day he’d known her. She’d written ‘Dear Kitty’ on the legal pad and begun to cry. Was it all an act? *Everything?* But why? Why? He could feel his neck muscles knotting and took a deep breath. He scanned the letters. The May 7th letter seemed to be the first.

Tory, what has happened to you? I can only imagine you have been forced to leave. We are all sick with worry. I know you would have confided in me if you planned to run away or had a Secret Lover. Your uncle is beside himself with worry but has refused my help—after interrogating me for hours. He suspects me of helping you disappear. He is disrupting the entire District in an effort to discover anything of your whereabouts. I Pray you will be found before I finish this letter. How can I continue without you? I must do something, and writing you is all I can think of. I need to talk to You. I have read all your Letters to me in some hope of discovering why you have disappeared. Yet all it did is make me miss you all the more. Where are you, Dearest? Come back to us.

Sam scanned the next several letters, but they were very much the same—worried prayers and descriptions of the efforts to find her friend. Kitty took to wandering the countryside in hopes of discovering some clue to Victoria’s disappearance. She seemed to sink into depression when it became evident Victoria Covington would not return. There was a change after two years and many letters. Kitty began to

tell her friend about her own life, about the district, their mutual friends, and about Victoria's uncle. June 1821, she met a young man at a house party in Kent.

My Dearest Tory~

A nice coze is long overdue. I have so much to tell you. His name, dear Tory, is Arthur Spencer. He is the Second Son of the second son of the Earl of Leffield. He whimsically jests he should have 'the Second' after his name, Twice! He is a promising young Physician from London. I know you might frown the way you do, with your mouth tight enough to expose your dimple, on learning he is in a profession, but he is a True Gentleman.

Sam stared at the line. He knew the frown, and that dimple. He shook his head to dispel his outlandish imaginings and went back to reading the letter.

But you would pretend not to believe it at first, would you not? Instead, you would tease me, until in a pique, I revealed more than I intended about my admiration for him. Well, no need to wheedle it out of me. He and his brothers came late to the Tremaine's House Party. You know them, Caroline Bradmore's cousins.

As you can imagine, I made no attempt to gain his attention, having little confidence I could attract such a Handsome Man in a house full of debutantes. Me play the coquette? But the dear told me he had a case on me from the very first. He thought I had an affecting Mystery about me, as if my continuing sadness over your absence could be a Beguiling Quality.

I know just how you would gammon me too; you would ask "Is he a dangler?" So, before you start; no, my dear Tory, he is not. In point of fact, his brother told me in the Strictest Confidence that I am the First woman he has ever shown any interest in. And it is true, I have asked about, knowing you would wave one expressive hand and say it's all mops and brooms. I am happy, dearest, so very content. I only wish you could be as happy. Please be well.

He flipped to the very last letter, written in December 1826.

My Dearest Friend,

Tory, I am astonished! Seven years have passed since you left us. For so long, the best part of my life was remembering you. How I missed you. Without your gamesome banter and knowing view of people, I felt so at sea. I am confident you will understand when I say dear Arthur has now become my truest anchor in the world.

I confess I have failed to write as often of late, but I have been so busy with our brood, my four Beautiful Children. You do know I named my first girl after you? Of course, you do. How many times have I told you? You may think me strange, or stranger than customary, but from the very first, I believed you did know. I have not written to you all these years simply to assuage my own pain over your dreadful disappearance. I have no explanation for such weak-mindedness, but do I believe it is true, none the less. You know what I write.

Arthur has never once asked why I continue to scribble my letters to you, dear that he is, but I realize I must finally let you go, wherever you are. And I know you, as always, appreciate my reasons. Knowing me as you do, you probably determined my need long ago. My Heart aches for you, aches to see you, even now. I love you, and pray for you every day, and will continue to do so. Arthur is in the room with me and asks that I send his love. And no, Tory, he is not bawling me, though I can see that smirk of yours. Know he does send his love, for I have told him all about you. How could I fail to tell him about my Truest Friend, the finest woman I have ever known? Oh, Tory, how could I be so lucky to have had you as a friend, and found, been found by such a Man? I desperately wish the same for you. I cling to the image of you loved for yourself, and in the arms of your loved ones.

Forever your Bosom Friend, Kitty

Sam stood and laid the letters down on a nearby table, his own deep well of pain and loss plumbed by the little snippets of letters to a lost friend, written by a woman long dead. They

left him emotionally raw, needing to clear his throat and collect himself. He understood Tory's tearful response to reading them. Gazing at her, he couldn't think, to grasp anything logically. Facts and memories whirled in his head and whipped into a turbulent, frothy fog, numbing his brain. All he could do was feel. Perhaps he was mentally worn out, he didn't know, but the sensation gave him a strange, lightheaded clarity.

All he knew was he hurt, he wanted, he cared, and he understood, understood with absolute certainty, that such desires overflowed the world, in Kitty Roland's time and in his. Right now, he needed, needed to hold Tory.

Slowly, gently, he got his arms around her and lifted. In his arms, she was limp as a sleeping child and felt as light as a dream. He backed into the chair behind him and rested her, comforter and all, in his lap. She made little sighing sounds causing him to smile, but she settled her head against his chest and continued to sleep.

He stared out the window for a time, attempting to inventory his emotions, the quiver in his throat. He came to one firm conclusion: cradling Tory in his arms felt right, clean and good. He gazed at her fingers curled, slim and lovely against the quilt patterns. He cupped her hand, so small in his, and enjoyed the silken feel of her skin.

~ ~ ~

Tory burrowed deeper into the warmth, purring contently. She felt so relaxed and jointless. She'd not been so comfortable in a long, long time. A tangy, soap smell pleasantly tickled her nose. With a sleepy smile, she decided she must frequent this window seat more often. It offered such a matchless sense of security. The comforter was a marvel, possessed of quite solid, muscular arms. She ran her hand along one forearm encircling her waist, enjoying the smooth feel of the cloth covering ...

Something was not quite right. *Oh, dear.* She was confident quilts did not have arms, particularly the well-turned example

under her hand.

She opened one eye against the sunlight streaming in the study windows. There above the comforter, she could see, very close, a strong chin and a set of fine lips. She studied them for a long while, her drowsy mind unwilling to grasp their significance beyond the pleasant view. Her entire seat moved, only to settle again. Yes, she lay comfy in Sam Dalton's lap.

Tory held her breath. Was he still angry with her? He could be, she supposed, even if she was being held by him, but she wanted only one thing, to enjoy it. So, she did.

So close, she studied his face, dark lashes fluttering against his cheeks every now and again. He must have been satisfied with my research, she thought absently, if he's holding me in such a tender fashion. She sighed and closed her eyes, lost in a deep sense of well-being, as though the world and its troubles did not exist here inside his arms.

Sometime later, she opened them again, to find cinnamon-colored eyes gazing down at her.

"Good morning, Miss Covington." His deep voice vibrated through her. "Did you sleep well?"

With a smile at his formal address, Tory leaned back against his arm to face him. "Yes, quite well. Thank you for asking, Mr. Dalton." She quirked the corner of her mouth. "And you?"

He smiled back.

For several moments they simply regarded one another without speaking, as though everything needing to be said, had been. Finally, Tory asked, "What time is it? Have I been here long?"

"You mean, in my lap? Days, if my numb legs are any indication." He lifted his arm from around her waist and looked at his watch. "It's about eleven, so three hours."

"Does my uncle know you are here?"

"Yes."

“In your lap?”

“There you’ve got me. I don’t know.”

Tory started to get up, but Sam held her. “Please, Mr. Dalton, I do need to get up.”

“Sam.”

She gave him a disgusted look. “Sam.” She tried to remove his arm across her lap and failed. “Why are you holding me?”

“Well, I saw you sleeping there”—he nodded to the window seat facing them—“and I felt like holding you. You were really too adorable asleep not to.”

“I’m awake now, so ...”

“And still adorable.”

Her hands stilled. She raised her head to ask again to be released when his lips found hers. He pressed his mouth on hers, his arms tightening. She had been holding her breath for three months and he was offering her a chance to breathe. Her hand went to his cheek and into his soft hair. With her other hand she grabbed his shirt front and pulled herself closer.

His mouth covered hers so perfectly, igniting a fire in her middle which began to burn through her body. She opened her mouth and sighed into his. He responded with increased urgency. His tongue lightly touched hers and the spark of pleasure it incited made her still.

Unexpectedly, he broke the kiss, leaving her gasping. His brown eyes, so close, flared in the morning light. She could feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest under her hand, which still held a fistful of his shirt. She shyly smiled at his desire, recognizing it for what it was, and that she was the cause. Unrepentant, she wanted to take advantage of her success and pressed herself against him for another kiss.

Instead of gathering her close, he tensed and held her at arm’s length. His eyes seemed to bore into her, and she looked away, suddenly appalled by her behavior, but more shocked by

the severed bond, the warm intimacy, turned instantly cool outside his embrace. She let go of his shirt and looked away.

What was she doing? She'd struggled to distance herself from him for the last three months, and now conducted herself like the veriest *débauchée* the instant she was in his arms.

"I've missed you too."

She glanced up at his words, frowning at the patronizing tone of his comment but could not look away, captured by the intensity in his gaze. She bit her lip and searched for something to say but failed.

"We have to talk."

She blinked at his words and with a ragged breath, chose to stare at her hands.

"Tory, look at me."

She hesitated but did as he asked and tried not to lose herself in his eyes.

"You and Lord Covington have gone to a monumental amount of trouble, but I can't figure out why." When she started to respond to his odd statement, he stopped her by placing his fingers on her lips. He ran them over her bottom lip and across her cheek, a delightful feeling which fogged whatever thoughts she might have had.

"Lord Covington must have worked hard to find you, someone who resembled the original Victoria Covington so closely. And the amount of effort involved in learning to write and talk like her, learn her history through those letters, I can't imagine." He laid his hand on her knee, disturbingly warm through the sweatpants. "You mastered the piano, harp, French, German, and the rest. Why?"

What could she say? It was an outrageous conclusion, insulting, and totally understandable. How could she feel so close to him, ask for and receive such intimacy and still keep him from knowing about her? No, utterly impossible, and unfair to them both. Despair numbing her chest, she looked

about for something to say, but before she could answer, he continued.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. I definitely love the results. Dr. Leven is impressed, and so am I. With those letters, Belton Park is going to be a far greater success than I had envisioned—because of you.” He blew out a ragged breath, still holding her tight. “I don’t see the necessity of or the advantage in all the time and energy expended. I would’ve agreed to the deal,” he said, smiling at her, “and still been fascinated by you, without all the mystery and play-acting.”

She stiffened. “Play-acting?”

“Extremely elaborate play-acting, masterfully done. *Why the masquerade?*”

Her mouth worked silently, but she couldn’t think of anything to say to such a preposterous and lowering conclusion. With all he knew about her, all she had confided, he judged it all some monumental deception? What could possibly explain it all, other than the truth? She sat in his lap, silent, brain awl, unable to cobble together a credible response.

“Were you play-acting with *me*?”

Tory started at the question but glared at him. *How dare he?* Did he think her kisses just now were part of some scheme? “Is that what you think of me, our intimacies just now?” When he didn’t answer, she closed her eyes. What else *could* he think? She slumped in despair. This would ever be between them. “Please let me up. Now.”

He released her and gave a heavy sigh when she stood. “I don’t know *what* to think anymore.”

Her fears left her feeling weak and helpless after the safety of his arms. To gain some time, she folded the comforter and laid it on the red stuffed pillows covering the window seat and picked up the discarded tissues on the floor. She spied Kitty’s letters stacked on the table nearby and in turn, eyed Sam as he

sat waiting for an answer. More of her personal life, Kitty's life, revealed but made all the more implausible.

"I was *never* play-acting with you. Lord Covington and I are not bam baiters out to perpetrate some colossal hoax."

Sam grew very still. "I'm relieved to hear it. I'm very interested in your explanation for it all."

"You would think me mad."

"Try me." He stood and waited for what seemed an eternity.

She debated whether to tell him, agonized over it. When she faced him, she couldn't tell him, not with his crossed arms and patient, too-reasonable silence.

She had nothing reasonable to offer him. She tried to hide the emptiness she felt. With a wave of a hand, she said, "It's of no consequence. I'd rather you believed my life a sham than to have you think me a madwoman."

She could not bear the thought of him believing her mind-hobbled, which he surely would if she told him her story. She knew how lunatics were treated. She had once seen a madwoman on the streets of London mocked by unfeeling crowds, restrained and hauled away. The insane were viewed as less than human, mindless creatures, regardless of their position or behavior. *Even the King*.

Sam rose from the chair and frowned down at her. "I can't imagine what you could say which would convince me you're crazy."

She closed her eyes and didn't respond.

"That's all the answer I'm going to get?"

She nodded, arms rigid against her sides.

"Damn it, Tory," he muttered as he ran his fingers roughly through his hair. After a moment he strode to the window and glared out at the cold morning, a silent white on gray. Outside, the bare branches of the surrounding trees reached up in supplication toward the sunless sky. He laughed, the sound

unexpectedly light and wry. Tory pursed her lips, unsure what it might portend. He twisted at the waist to gaze back at her, hands clasped behind him. “You know, six months ago I would have gone ballistic right now, stark-raving mad. Remember? The first time we met, you called me *bumptious*. Only this time I would have been ten times worse.”

Tory cocked her head at his confession. “Then why aren’t you furious now?”

Quietly, without turning around, he said, “Because six months ago I hadn’t met you, gotten to know you. Six months ago, I didn’t care about you. Six months ago my being disagreeable, my fits of anger, were my defenses, for fear of being cheated, of trusting the wrong person was a form of cowardice.” He offered a sad smile. “You taught me that. I snarled because I was afraid of being bitten again.”

Tory took a step toward him but stopped when he faced her with a ‘don’t’ glint in his eye.

“Make no mistake. I want to shake you senseless right now. And I absolutely detest your non-answers.” He closed his eyes for a moment before saying, “I have to fly back to Chicago. I’ll be gone a week, and I’ll be bringing back a number of folks, clients and colleagues, for the Christmas ball. They’re all on the guest list.”

Was that to be it? Tory felt a stab of shame. What did she expect?

She recognized her own cowardly behavior. She had inflicted the same cool dismissal, avoiding him the last three months. Now, with one tantalizing embrace everything was supposed to change? *Fool*. Her dilemma had not altered, but his presence had become an ever-intensifying torture. Her fears were still very much before her.

She watched him walk away, quickly maneuvering between all the statues, tables, and chairs. He stopped when he reached the door. There was a soft smile on his lips which didn’t reach

his eyes, bright and piercing. “Tory, I’m looking forward to seeing you in a ball gown. I know you’ll be spectacular.”

He went through the doorway, but stepped back in. “Pen is remaining in London, so if you need anything in finishing the preparations, call her or you have Mrs. Cleveland’s number. I’m depending on you.”

Tory stared across the study at the empty doorway long after he left, unsure what to feel or think.

Chapter 30

“The two most powerful warriors are patience—and time.”

— Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, (1865)

“Have we forgotten anything?” Tory turned to the three people surrounding her in the center of the ballroom. Her words echoed, mixing with the clacking and thumps of the musicians setting out their music stands and chairs. The wood floor mirrored the last rays of the December sun shining in the surrounding ceiling-high windows. Someone had already started a fire in the huge hearth at the far end of the room in preparation for the Yule log.

Parsons opened his schedule book. “All the decorations, favors, and banquet tables are set out.” He surveyed the holly, mistletoe, ivy, and ribbons strung along the window tops and winding down the columns around the dance floor, the kissing bough hanging above him as evidence of his claim.

“The one hundred and seven guests staying at Belton have all arrived, and those who RSVPed should be here by seven for the receiving line. Everyone, guests and staff, has been fitted for their costumes or are bringing their own. The waitstaffs has been briefed and the cooks say the dinner will be ready at nine, though they are complaining about the period costumes and starched cravats.” Any number of guests would be viewing the kitchen during the festivities.

Tory nodded her approval as she smiled at the last item, though the phrase ‘period costumes’ gave her a queasy feeling each time she heard it. “And the refreshments in the hall, the card rooms, the musicians?”

“Everything is taken care of, Miss.”

She thanked Parsons, saying how handsome he was in his suit and tails. She turned to Pen, who was reviewing the paper in her hand.

Pen said, “All the rooms have the historical material, maps and instructions, list of activities, and the agenda for the ball tonight and the rest of the weekend.” Pen blinked when Tory said nothing. “Oh, and of course, the Dalton brochures and information packets are in each room.” Pen’s mouth twitched wryly, as she had rarely been involved in the marketing part of the business.

“Wonderful. Thank you for handling that, Pen.” At Tory’s compliment, Pen smiled.

Tory gazed at the third person in the group. “Are you and Mr. Dalton pleased so far, Mrs. Cleveland?” Tory still felt a bit in awe of Rea Cleveland. She had never met a Negro before, having only seen a few on the London streets or serving as a tiger on the back of some gentleman’s curricule, though many lived in London. She was ashamed to admit to herself that she’d been surprised to find Mrs. Cleveland’s hand warm when she took it. She did feel they had bonded, both quickly recognizing the fierce organizer in the other. Tory also enjoyed Mrs. Cleveland’s wry comments.

“Darling, I’ll be pleased when I’m sitting in my room with my feet up, sipping one of Parson’s hot rum toddies, and not before.”

“You won’t be coming to the dinner or ball?”

“Lord, no, even assuming I could find one of those empire dresses to fit me, as tall as I am. And with my build, everyone would be holding their breath, waiting for my top-heavy self to keel over.”

Tory didn’t know what to make of her explanation but smiled at the image just the same. “Well, I hope at some point tonight, you will at least come take a peek at the results of all your hard work this past week.”

Mrs. Cleveland waved a dismissive hand. “With all the photographers I’ve hired, I know I’ll be seeing photos of this ball for too many months with all the promotional work the boss man has lined up.”

“So, all the businesspeople, local families, and clients you were hoping would attend, have confirmed with you?”

“I don’t know why you’re asking me, you have that list and have shown most of them around this palace in the last two days, given them the history of the Park, shown them the skating pond, horses and stables, the pool tables, led dance instructions for hours on end—enduring their jabber and I don’t know what all. I think you’d be ready to rest your feet, not dance all night. I’m sure Parsons can mix two of his toddies.” Mrs. Cleveland glanced at Parsons, who, with a very serious expression, offered an “Of course.”

Tory grinned at Mrs. Cleveland’s invitation, thinking about all the people she had met, all expensively dressed, this age’s moneyed aristocracy. Unlike most of the summer’s tourists, these groups’ questions, their ‘jabber’, revolved around the cost of everything. Spending time with Mrs. Cleveland promised to be far more pleasant.

“Mrs. Cleveland, I would love to join you for a toddy. Unfortunately, I fear I am employed in some capacity until late tonight. Perhaps tomorrow evening?”

The tall woman nodded. “Well, at least call me Rea. You’ve called me Mrs. Cleveland for the last week, and when you say it, you make me sound like your third-grade teacher.”

“Rea, then.” Tory frowned, wondering if she’d somehow insulted her, but when Rea’s smile never wavered, she said, “Please let me know if there are guests to whom I should be particularly attentive to, or who need help socially.”

“I’ll think on it.” She did for a second. With a wave of her hand, she said, “Nope, you’re doing just fine, from what I’ve seen.”

“Thank you. It’s all becoming a blur.” She glanced at the three very tall, very competent people around her and suddenly suffered a loss of confidence.

As a gentle-bred woman, she expected, as her right, deference and a leading hand in running the family holdings.

She could hear her father carry on at the dinner table about ‘the necessary subordination in civilized society’ and how the class differences must be upheld, after reading some report in the *Times* about gentry marrying into trade or worse. She gazed at her companions. These three were supposedly her social inferiors, servants, yet that was not her relationship with them.

Even Parsons, though he thought to keep the class distinctions, remained far too familiar in his address and opinions to be a servant of her day. Not servants. The term was now ‘staff.’ Not social inferiors, but colleagues, somehow equals in running Belton and organizing the ball. She felt strangely at sea at the thought. She continually feared her outmoded breeding and *tonnish* expectations of two centuries past would lead her into some *faux pas*.

She took a deep breath. “It appears we are as ready as we can be. Thank you. You all have things to do, and Pen and I must dress, so we’ll be off.” But she hesitated when she saw a gaggle of guests approaching, obviously seeking assistance.

Rea saw them too and winked as she said, “You two go on. I’m sure we can panic adequately if there are any problems. Now, shoo.” She and Parsons faced left, shoulder to shoulder, and met the oncoming horde. From the tentative expressions on the guests’ faces, the two appeared formidable in their willingness to help.

Tory and Pen grinned at the scene. There were, thought Tory, benefits to working together as equals, sharing the work and triumphs like partners at Whist.

As the two of them headed down the hall toward the sunroom, Pen remained quiet, probably as nervously excited as Tory about the evening, so she pointed out the results of all the last months’ renovations as they passed, including the little ‘cameras’ tucked in corners at ceiling level in the halls and main rooms. The main hall glistened with new paint, polished marble floors and beautiful furniture, and the hot house now regularly supplied a variety of fresh flowers.

Yet, the new interiors and polished furniture goaded her, daring her to believe she was actually home, to believe the world remained unchanged. It was seductive, even now after six months of the Modern World, provoking an odd longing for familiar Society more acute than any homesickness she'd suffered. She feared it would be worse when everyone magically appeared dressed in 'period costumes' for the ball and dinner.

~ ~ ~

After an hour in the sunroom, both Tory and Pen were dressed. Earlier in the month, Mr. Ray had visited at Tory's request, to teach Janice and her how to fix hair in the Regency styles. Hairpins, combs, and curling irons required little instruction, according to Mr. Ray.

"There, all finished." Tory clasped the gold *ferronière* around Pen's head and stood back to admire the result. A single zirconium teardrop dangled from the gold headband, resting in the center of her forehead. Tory admired Pen's reflection. "You are a Persian princess. The light green is a perfect color for you."

Pen smiled and touched her hair, where Tory had curled it, pulling the ringlets down to frame her face. "So, this is how I'd dress in 1818." She flared her skirt. "Think it would go over then?"

"I'm certain you would. Rounded shoulders were quite the thing in London society. Yours appear so straight and strong, you will be in great demand. "You are beautiful, but only"—she paused—"in a very elegant way, you understand." They both laughed. They collected their fans, embroidered shawls, and reticules and stood facing each other, for a last-minute inspection.

"Tory, you are simply gorgeous." Pen smoothed down Tory's white patterned net over the blue gown. "Did they really wear such things?"

“Of course. It shimmers like gossamer over the silk, does it not?”

Pen nodded enthusiastically.

Tory whirled around, the blue watered silk sparkling as she spun. Would Sam like it? Would he dance with her? Would he even speak to her? She prayed he would. He hadn't since walking out of the study more than a week ago, even by telephone. Perhaps he had at last lost all patience and closed her accounts. Being unable to think of more she could possibly say to reassure him left her despondent.

She inspected her dress in the mirror, aware she was unpracticed in the arts of allurements, but maybe—if only for tonight—with this dress, she could draw him near, reassure him, without words, without impossible explanations.

She took one last glance in the dresser mirror, to assure herself her hair remained piled on her head after her spin, still held in place by the pins and silk garlands of little blue flowers.

She frowned again at the *décolletage* exposed in the mirror. When she bent over, the dress revealed far more than she found comfortable. With the stays pressing her breasts, there was a great deal to see. The dressmaker shortened the rounded neckline half an inch too much when she shortened everything else for Tory's size. She tried a tucker, but the lace stuffed in the bodice didn't match the cut of the dress. Well, perhaps it would further entice Sam.

With a shrug, she stood and tugged her white gloves to the elbows and offered Pen her arm. “Shall we go and see what everyone else is wearing tonight?”

Linking arms with her, Tory walked to the hall. Glancing at Pen, she smiled. It was as comfortable as holding on to Kitty's arm during her season.

The sounds of conversation and laughter reverberated off the walls, reminding Tory of the many parties and dances held here. The hallway opened on the entry area and the scene

made her stop. On the far side of the cavernous room, men and women milled in full dress apparel, the black-and-white of the men's formal attire and the multi-hued dresses of the women creating a kaleidoscope of parading color. The receiving line had begun to form. She smiled to see Parsons and the footmen all in powdered wigs. He had insisted, even when she assured him they were not *de rigueur* for a country ball, however formal.

One of the taller men in line facing away from her broke off a conversation with several people to glance her way. She stopped breathing. Sam. He stared and she stared back across the many yards separating them. He wore an immaculate dark blue coat, an embroidered cream vest, and a dazzling white neck cloth elegantly tied in a Mail Coach. His legs were stunning in the dark blue breeches and white stockings. He could have stood as a paradigm for every Corinthian of the *Haut Ton*.

She finally smiled, knowing she was staring. He had taken such care in his dress—and he'd combed his hair *à la Brutus*, a casually curled style all the rage in her day. He stood there silently until others joined him, all gazing fixedly at her and Pen. She waited to see whether Sam would speak to her. At least he hadn't given her the cut direct. Pen stood quietly, arm-in-arm with her, a private smile on her face as she watched Sam and Tory.

He smiled back and she relaxed. He said something to his companions and went over to a table by the wall and picked up a small box before he approached.

He said hello to Pen with a significant cock of an eyebrow, while complimenting her on her dress. Pen curtsied with a teasing grin, forcing Sam to answer with a bow. Turning to Tory, Pen excused herself with a wink. Sam waited for her to leave and faced Tory. She held her breath in anticipation while he gazed at her gown for a moment and bowed at the waist. "Miss Covington. You have appeared stellar in the past, but tonight you are exceptional—easily the belle of the ball." She curtsied and thanked him. "You, sir, appear born to the

appellation Adonis. No assembly could ask for a finer *beau idéal* as their host.”

“That sounds positive.”

Tory laughed a bit nervously. “Yes, it most certainly is.”

Sam glanced at the black box in his hands and then at her. “I can think of only one thing which might make your appearance more spectacular. You aren’t wearing any jewelry.”

Tory’s hand went to her throat. She’d removed her mother’s necklace as it was the wrong length for this low neckline. It drew too much attention to her cleavage. “I have none.”

“Well, perhaps I can help.” He opened the box, showing her the contents. On a bed of black satin rested *her* necklace, the one at the Roland house, the one her father had given her. And next to it were matching pearl earrings.

Her hand went to her mouth. She couldn’t speak for fear she would cry. Sam took her arm and led her underneath the grand staircase out of sight of the gathering guests.

“May I put it on?” At her continuing silence, he hesitated when he took it out of the box. “It’s only a replica. I hope it’s okay?”

Tory weakly nodded and turned around. His hands, warm against the back of her neck, closed the clasps on the two linked pearl necklaces. They rested one above the other, encircling her neck to her collarbone. She quickly put on the earrings and faced him again. His pleased expression, the sparkle in his eyes, was all the response she needed.

She went to a mirror hanging by the entrance to the hallway. He stood behind her as she admired the necklace.

“It is beautiful. You have given me too much.”

“Have I now? I believe this is the first thing I’ve ever given *you* and it is a selfish gift. I wanted to see you in it, see you at your most authentic tonight.”

She turned to him, finding herself close because he hadn't moved back. Yet there was a reserve to him, as though the clothes created a wall between them, more than time and history. "It is not the first. There is the laptop, the silk tree, and you found the beautiful Welsh harp."

He shook his head. "Nooo. I'm glad you enjoy them, but those weren't for *you*. They were all were part of the renovation *you* wrote up. They don't count."

She eyed him skeptically, her mouth pulled to one side.

Sam took a step back, studying her. "There's the dimple."

Tory frowned uncertainly, afraid she would know what he meant if she thought about it, so she stepped away from him and asked, "So, is my appearance now sufficient for the evening ahead?"

He grinned, but all he said was a deep-throated "Far beyond sufficient, my lady," and led her to the receiving line.

She stood next to Sam greeting the more than two hundred guests. The ranking host, Viscount Covington, stood to the other side of her, as was proper. Everyone appeared to be enjoying the clothes, the music coming from the ball room, the beauty of Belton Park, the festivities and even the Regency manners.

Lord Covington's friends who had visited many times before still marveled at the restoration. There were smiles and laughter all along the receiving line, the guests enjoying the unique experience of a different time. There were wonderful clothes, amazing fabrics Tory could not identify. Some styles were terribly outdated for eighteen-eighteen, but still very smart.

Everyone seemed to want to make a fashion statement, from turbans and aigrettes, feathers displayed in the women's hair, to the ornately tied neck clothes and quizzing glasses several guests proudly twirled. It was so odd. She could easily forget the people around her were not from her time, instead of

modern and intimate with so many unbelievable marvels. Perhaps things change, but people do not.

At some point the crowd parted and Pete muscled his way in.

Tory gasped. He rolled up in a wooden wheelchair with a single rear wheel, attired in a black superfine coat, a lawn shirt, buff breeches, and shiny, tasseled hessians.

Sam had begun to emulate all the pointers Tory had been giving their guests, first by bowing to Pete and saying, “Mr. Dalton, so glad you could put in an appearance.” Sam shook his hand, but Pete never looked at his brother. Instead, he gaped open-mouthed at Tory. Sam made an exasperated noise. “Miss Covington, may I introduce my brother, Mr. Peter Dalton, who is practicing to be a trout.”

Pete shot a playful sneer at his brother but gave Tory a broad smile. “My god, Tory, you look like you stepped out of *Pride and Prejudice*. You. Are. Gorgeous!”

Tory laughed and thanked him for his fervor, curtsying. “Those are a very fine pair of hessians. Quite dashing.” She raised an eyebrow at him and shook her head. “But, sir, only half dress for a formal ball? No cravat? Really?”

Pete shrugged at her teasing, “That’s reassuring. I was afraid I’d ruin my image as a free-spirited artist if I came fully dressed.” Sam grinned and leaned toward his brother to say something when Parsons announced a latecomer. Tory didn’t hear the names of the couple called out amid the multitude of conversations echoing in the hall, but noticed Sam tense, his jaw muscles twitching.

Down the line flowed the most striking woman Tory had ever seen. She wore a daring green silk dress with an *en coeur* bodice, the point of the heart-shaped neckline dipping well below her bust. It was Miss Marsh. The statuesque woman possessed rich, dark red hair, elegantly arranged off her neck and topped by a sparkling tiara which appeared to display more diamonds than Tory had seen in her entire Season in

London. She seemed to glide over to Sam, and smiling happily, called him by his Christian name, and thanked him for her invitation to the event of the season. She gave him a less-than-chaste kiss, holding the cheek-to-cheek embrace far too long.

Tory decided she didn't much like the woman. Sam pushed her away with an irritated twist of his mouth. As well he should, Tory thought.

"Miss Covington," Sam ground out, "may I introduce Miss Marsh, and her companion, Herr Günter Waltrop."

"Yes, we've met."

Waltrop wore a little Cheshire cat smile and a well-cut evening coat with wide lapels. She recognized the period cut. German, historically accurate in every detail.

The man took Tory's gloved hand and kissed it. "It is indeed an honor to meet you again, Miss Covington. I have heard a great deal about you since meeting months ago in the gardens—all complimentary." No mention of their more recent encounter in the garden. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Sam glare and Miss Marsh shrug. What was that all about?

"Thank you, Mr. Waltrop, you are most welcome. Miss Marsh, a pleasure." She curtsied to them both, and both smirked at her in return. Sam's pinched expression said it all. She caught his eye and gave him a warning shake of her head.

He stared at her for a moment but took a deep breath. His expression changed, replaced by a bored, practiced aspect which made her shiver. She had seen it far too often on the bucks in London Society.

"Mr. Waltrop, I've heard a great deal about you from Carrie." Sam gave Carrie a speaking glance. "And I'll be interested to hear what you think of Belton Park and our celebration." Waltrop did nothing but offer a little bow. With Carrie on his arm, Sam directed them into the hall and the refreshment tables. "Please, the ball is about to begin, but there are a number of period dishes to sample and drinks—

champagne, Christmas Punch, ratafia, wines, brandy, and even ale.”

Tory watched him introduce the couple to others while she finished greeting the few guests remaining in the receiving line. When the last one had wandered off to enjoy all the entertainments offered, she turned to Pete, who had replaced Sam as a greeter. “He failed to introduce you to Mr. Waltrap and Miss Marsh. I need to speak to him.”

“Pffsst.” Pete made a face copying Tory’s pursed lips. “Sam just wanted to get Waltrap and Miss C. away from *you*.” She blinked at the information but grinned at Pete’s totty delivery. She enjoyed his daffing ways. He was so droll as he charmed guests who were rather uncomfortable with his handicap. She smiled in anticipation each time a new couple or group came up. Yet it was Sam’s humor she enjoyed the most. Pete made light of everything, and poking fun at others, the situation, and himself, but Sam’s jokes were a shared warmth, often self-deprecating, each jest creating a new closeness.

Both watched Sam continue to escort Waltrap and Miss Marsh around the hall. Tory frowned. “Well, those two certainly were coolers.”

Pete grinned. “Which means?”

“What? Oh, they cooled the atmosphere. Mr. Waldrop is a business competitor, but what is Miss Marsh to Sam?”

“Well, Sam dated Carrie for a while, right up to the week he leased Belton. I imagine she got an invitation through the company contact list, because Sam wouldn’t have purposely invited her.”

Tory frowned, jealous of Miss Marsh. She certainly resembled those women in the fashion magazines. There could be little wonder in Sam choosing to escort such modern perfection.

“Waltrap, on the other hand, seems more than just a competitor. From what Sam says, Waltrap spies on Dalton Enterprises, trying to find those like Miss Marsh who can

provide information and access—for money, working to steal Dalton projects. Sam said Waltrop offered Carrie money to spy for him. He must have ‘convinced’ Carrie to bring him as her plus one.”

“Honestly? What intentions could he harbor tonight?”

Pete shrugged as his eyes followed Miss Marsh around the refreshment table. “Got me. Case out the opposition? Snag some clients? Sabotage the evening?”

Frowning, Tory crossed her arms, considering the possibilities, but she could not worry about such things now. It was time to start the ball.

Chapter 31

That time flies fast the poets sing;
Then surely it is wise,
In rosy wine to dip his wings,
And seize him as he flies.
This night is ours; then strew with flowers
The moments as they roll:
If any pain or care remain,
Why drown it in the bowl.”

—From a popular Regency drinking song: “Drown it in a Bowl”

Carrie Marsh was unhappy. She watched from the sidelines while scores of costumed couples danced and promenaded around the ballroom. She was disgusted by it all. Her expectations for the ball and supper had been dramatically disappointed. Everyone was now back from dinner, dancing in the ball room once again, but little hope remained for the evening. How she hated dancing, or anything particularly athletic. Her feet hurt. She was sure she’d partnered every man in the room, except two—Günter Waltrop and Sam Dalton. Günter was too busy trying to steal Sam’s prospective clients and Sam was definitely too busy dancing and romancing the tiny blonde.

While she’d considered using the evening to enhance her relationship with Waltrop, what she really wanted was reuniting with Sam. She quickly saw that wasn’t going to happen. He’d never once looked at her, yet he continually watched Miss Covington, as though he were appreciating prime London real estate.

What Sam saw in that *child*, she couldn’t imagine. She could not have graduated college yet. She felt old knowing she had at least five years on the—what was the Regency word?

Oh, yes—chit. And the chit was such a proper, demure little thing. She bet her family had money. Carrie wrinkled her nose at the girl's pathetic effort to show some cleavage with her silly corset-thing and a neckline far too high for the purpose. The whole effect was to push up and flatten her chest rather than reveal it. Self-defeating stupidity.

Irritating as it was, too many men seemed inexplicably taken with her, despite the fashion disaster. In fact, she'd heard Waltrop ask her for a dance, with Sam glaring at the man in what could only be the green glow of possessiveness.

She knew the feeling.

While she watched Waltrop and 'her shortness' dance, the evening suddenly got even more tedious. Carrie noticed several men around the room eyeing her, with the obvious intention of asking her to these ridiculous country dances, with all their running around the ballroom, kicking and handholding. Considering the cut of her dress, she wasn't going to entertain all the men with her bouncing boobs. At least three of the dandified squids staring across the ballroom at her had already waltzed the grope and tickle with her, so she wasn't about to repeat the experience. God, she was so ready to leave. Why had she agreed to come with Waltrop? She quickly stomped out of the ballroom.

Even after a seven-course dinner, there were still lots of people around the refreshments, and all the odd food. Others were walking to and from the library where cards were being played, and the music room down the hall where a choir and band performed period pieces.

She frowned as she approached the tables, hoping there weren't any more holiday dessert surprises like the dinner's plum pudding. She was sure the tradition of putting gifts and jewelry in the Christmas pudding was going to require a trip to her dentist to repair some veneer. And what did she bite down on? A wedding ring? She sighed. So much for the predictive powers of pudding. Why didn't she get a coin? She heard

some laughter and glanced over to see Sam's brother talking to several people, most of them women.

Three men.

There were three men who hadn't asked her to dance, but Pete Dalton didn't count. As she found a cut-crystal cup for some punch, she realized that like Sam, the gimp hadn't given her a glance all evening. She shrugged it off to his injuries but followed with a frown. He was flirting outrageously with those women, holding hands with one young thing as he talked. She tried paying no attention to the enthusiastic group, but her effort to ignore their laughter made her forget why she was holding the cup.

"How about pouring me some too?"

Carrie blinked, unsure how long she'd been standing there staring at the cup. Looking down, she found Pete Dalton beaming up at her. "What?" She noted the group he'd been talking with was now wandering back to the ballroom.

"The punch. Could you pour me some? Please. The bowl is so far back on the table. I can't reach it with the dipper, or the siphon. It's good stuff."

Carrie resented the embarrassment of dealing with the handicapped but wasn't sure why the discomfort should be so intense now. "Siphon?"

"Yeah. Fill a cup about half full, then take the siphon"—he indicated a silver-metal tube—"and get the rum. It settles to the bottom of the punch."

She did as he asked, but held the silver straw, unsure what to do. With a patience she found irritating, he explained, "Take the siphon and stick an end down to the bottom of the punch bowl. With a thumb over the top of the tube, take it out. Pour the rum in the siphon into the glass by removing your thumb."

He watched as she drained the siphon into the cup, as though she were some cretin. He nodded and smiled when she handed him the cup. "Thanks. It's called fathoming the bowl."

“Oh.” She held the silver siphon. “Like the song. I wondered what that meant.”

Pete’s eyes followed the metal tube as she held it above him. He grinned. “It took me a while to make the connection. Try it, it’s good.”

She poured a cup for herself, siphoning in the rum. As she turned to leave, she gave Pete, who hadn’t moved, a parting nod.

“So, how much did Waltrop pay you to let him escort you here?”

Carrie froze and glanced around, hoping no one else had heard. Amazingly, Pete and she were the only ones near the refreshment tables. “Look, you little shit, I—”

“Whoa, Red, don’t have a hissy fit. If you don’t want to tell me, don’t.” He turned his chair to wheel off, but Carrie wasn’t through and jumped to block his path. She hated being called ‘Red.’

“Where do you get off? I had an invitation, and I can bring any—”

“An invitation from Sam?” When she didn’t answer, he nodded. “Yep, anyone you want. But Waltrop isn’t somebody you socialize with, and he was not invited.”

“How do you know that? I was—”

“You certainly don’t like him, so he must have given you *something*.” Pete clasped his hands in his lap and waited, composed interest and even concern evident in his intent expression.

Carrie couldn’t look him in the eye. He knew he was right and so did she. Suddenly she didn’t feel like lying about it or getting mad, not when she *had* taken money from Waltrop. She squared her shoulders. “A house on the French Riviera near Cannes.”

He gave a low whistle. “Impressive. You certainly don’t sell cheap.” She stiffened at the comment. He was calling her a

whore, but before she could lay into him, he spoke.

“I’d have done the same thing.” He shook his head. “Waltrop’s an idiot. He always pays top dollar for so little.”

She didn’t trust his open regard. *So little*. Was he talking about her? “So, you’d have taken Waltrop’s money if he offered it?”

“Well, the price would have to be astronomical, but hey, Sam’s my brother, not yours. And yes, Waltrop did proposition me.”

Carrie blinked, and seeing his wry grin, laughed at herself. “Günter knew my weakness. I’d been negotiating for the chateau for months. It’s lovely, but way too expensive for me.” She shrugged. “But not Waltrop.”

She paused, realizing she hadn’t calculated the effect of her body in the last few minutes, even the shrug, which usually finished off most men. She frowned at the man in the wheelchair, examining him thoughtfully. Handsome, well-muscled above the waist, cute all decked out in his boots and ruffled shirt—and a very engaging smile.

She couldn’t believe what she’d just told him.

Pete gazed at her for a moment and gestured off down the hall. “I’ve been hearing interesting sounds from the music room. You seem to be all danced out.” He adroitly maneuvered his chair around her and stopped facing toward the hall. “How about you and I wander down and have a listen while we enjoy our punch? You can even sit down.” He grinned, raised an eyebrow, wedged his cup in his lap, and waited.

Carrie considered him for a moment, then nodded. “Sure.” Inexplicably, the evening’s frustrations, the pressures to be perfect and perpetually on guard, all drained right out of her. She abruptly felt a thousand pounds lighter. She cocked her head as he waited. “Do you want me to push you?”

He glanced over his shoulder as he began wheeling down the hall. “Nope,” he said. “I don’t know you that well.” And then he gave her a charmingly raffish grin. “Yet.” Carrie

smiled as she ran to catch up, wondering what exactly she was getting herself into.

Pete let her catch up. “So, tell me about this wonderful chateau near Cannes.”

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Tory smiled as she watched scores of couples happily kicking up their heels dancing the simple “La Boulangere.” Represented in the surrounding crush were the English, French, Germans, Americans, and even colonial natives from India and Araby. And here they were, still animatedly dancing well after midnight. Voltaire had been right. Commerce brought the cultures together in amiable accord. Everyone seemed pleased, and she knew Sam was happy with the business results. He was now laughing with an English businessman, a Mr. Watts, who wanted to have his corporation’s retreat here this next spring.

She admired Sam’s form, his *presence*, as though the spirit in the room flowed from the spot where he stood. People were drawn to him, and he did not recognize how magnetic he was. The breeches and stockings showed off his limbs to good effect. Had he been in town during her Season, she knew the *Haute Ton* would have dubbed Sam a true *distingué*. It made her heart swell just to watch him animatedly talk and joke with everyone. She was so glad she had seen him in full dress.

And he danced beautifully.

It had been such a pleasant surprise. They had stood together in the center of the ballroom to welcome the guests, and opened the ball with the first dance, as the host and hostess were want to do. Lord Covington declined the honor, citing his age and left feet, so Sam did the honors.

Sam had signaled the band and they had played “Für Elise” as the first dance. Their height difference should have been awkward, but it wasn’t at all. Everyone watched them swirl about the room at first, then couples began joining in. Who

would have guessed such a rippling, elegant piece as “Für Elise” could work so well as dance music?

And he did something she had never experienced. He danced to the speed of the music, hesitating and quickening his steps to the melody, even twirling her, which caught her completely unprepared. His dancing skill saved her. The entire set had been wonderful.

Sam had claimed the next set and had scowled, supremely disappointed, when she had explained—for the tenth time—dancing more than two sets together was deemed unseemly. Undaunted, he’d claimed two waltzes after supper, arguing that as the host, he had twentieth century customs to uphold too. Everything was going so well.

~ ~ ~

“Wie geht es Ihnen?”

Turning around, Tory found Mr. Waltrap standing there. Thin and intense, the man reminded her of an undertaker, only more elegantly dressed. He had not talked to her before supper. Why now? She responded with “Well, thank you” in German.

“Sie sprechen schönes Deutsch.” His compliment, ‘You speak beautiful German,’ sounded perfunctory, but his gaze wasn’t.

“Vielen Dank,” she said with a curtsy. “What part of Germany do you call home?” she asked. *‘Woher aus Deutschland sind sie?’*

He continued to speak in German. “Hanover, but I now live in Frankfurt. I have my main offices there.” He moved closer. “I believe the next waltz is ours?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Waltrap. This one is spoken for. Yours is actually the next after this.”

With a glance at Sam, he nodded. “I can guess with whom. The next waltz then?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I will leave you to it.” He gave a courtly bow and retired.

Tory smirked, thinking of the waltzes to come. No matron monitoring the dances. Lord Covington had laughed at her when she’d asked his permission to have waltzes at the ball, and to be able to waltz herself. She watched Sam shake hands with several people and walk over to her, his grin as white as his neckcloth.

“Finally, you’re alone, and just in time. The next dance is ours.”

“What *folderol* is this? Me alone? *You* have been the center of a crush for the last hour.”

“Very true. The business has been great.”

“So, the evening is a success?”

Sam took her hand and gazed at her significantly. “On every level.” The music started again, as a prelude to the waltz. He studied her thoughtfully, as he guided her out to the floor. “You did a spectacular job with the decorations, but maybe we could have a Christmas tree next year.”

“A what?”

“Christmas tree?” Sam eyed her oddly as they took their positions for the waltz.

Tory wracked her brain for some inkling of what he meant. “Oh, you mean the German custom. I believe Queen Charlotte has—had one each Christmas season. She is from Mecklenburg.” When he eyed her quizzically, she covered by saying, “So, you want to do this again next year?”

“Yes.” The music began and Sam swept her around the floor, the firm pressure on her hand and waist gently directing her. It was heaven. A soft expression settled on his face, but his brows were still furrowed. She frowned too. “I heard of some Russians and Austrians who began decorating evergreens after the Congress of Vienna.”

Sam's expression didn't change, so Tory let herself enjoy the swirling steps. How such a big man could be so graceful, she didn't know. "Where did you learn to dance so well?"

Sam grinned. "In college. The football coach required us all to take dancing classes. Thought it would improve our balance and agility." He shook his head. "Don't know it if it did, but I enjoyed the class, including dancing with so many girls." With a little squeeze of her hand, he added, "So, I took all the dancing classes I could. Hey, I was young and enjoyed holding girls." He gave her a devilish expression and held her closer. "Still do."

She hit him on the shoulder with her fan. "You, sir, are a practiced rake."

"Why, thank you for noticing. So true, so true, Miss Covington," They both laughed. Too soon, the music came to an end.

They bowed and curtsied to each other before leaving the floor, as Tory had instructed everyone. Tory smiled walking with him off the dance floor. "It was lovely. Thank you."

"May I have the next dance too, before all those men attempt to snag you?" He nodded toward several men eagerly watching her approach them.

Tory sighed. "Actually, Mr. Waltrop has claimed the next waltz." She felt Sam tense next to her.

"The man is a practiced skunk."

Tory quirked the corner of her mouth, amused by his vehemence. "Oh? And how could he earn such an appellation tonight, pray tell?"

"Stealing clients and trying to ruin the ball."

"Really? I take it that is not common practice?"

"Well, I don't bother with it, but corporate espionage and sabotage aren't unusual. Waltrop seems to have chosen to focus on Dalton Enterprises, getting personally involved—like

tonight. He probably paid Carrie ... Miss Marsh to bring him as her date.”

“He can’t steal clients tonight; the ball has been too successful. So, what could he hope to gain?”

“There is information, an idea of what we are doing and how well it’s being received so he can create competing programs.”

“Amazing.” She wanted to ask more questions, but she was interrupted by a voice behind her.

“Ich denke, Fräulein Covington ish glaube jass dies unser Tanz ist,” Walthrop said, asking for his dance.

She turned and smiled, saying, *“Natürlich—selbst verständlich;* why, yes—I believe it is.”

She could feel Sam’s eyes following them as Walthrop led her out on the dance floor, bowed and took her right hand, holding it up, but his other didn’t go to her waist, but behind his back. With her left hand, she in turn held her skirt, giving him a quizzical smile. “Are we waltzing German style, Mr. Walthrop?”

Still speaking in German, he said, “Indeed, we are.”

A German waltz began, and she knew he was the reason. Leading with just the pressure on her right hand, they circled the room.

“I would not have attempted this style with just anyone, but you are obviously an accomplished dancer.”

“Vielen Dank.”

“Not at all. From what I have seen tonight, you’re talented in many areas. I hope what Dalton is paying you is commensurate with the quality of your work. You certainly came up with some stellar sources, those letters I’ve been reading in each room. It was a surprise, waiting till the last minute to reveal them.” Portions of her letters were displayed in the rooms she had described so long ago.

“It all settled out rather well, don’t you think?” Tory was glad they were speaking in German, for it would not do to have the other couples around them hear his comments.

“Would you be interested in working for me at three times the pay?”

Tory stumbled a bit but caught herself. She stared at him. “*Mein Herr*, I am disappointed.”

“Oh, were you hoping for more?”

She scowled at his insolence. “Not at all, I was hoping it was my dancing ability which brought you to the dance floor.”

“Oh, it was. We could have had this conversation anywhere.”

“I’m flattered.” Her flat tone left no doubt as to her real feelings, but he just smiled, which did not improve his countenance.

“Exactly why are you so intent on acquiring my services, or information about Mr. Dalton’s organization?”

“Business. Any advantage is money.”

Tory didn’t speak for a time, considering what he’d said.

“So, you are personally engaged in offering bribes for ...?”

Mr. Waltrop made an unpleasant snick sound with his teeth. “Bribes? *Fräulein Covington*, I want to know what Dalton is doing in Europe.”

“Well, I think Mr. Dalton should be flattered.”

With a frown and a questioning grin, Mr. Waltrop said, “And why would you say such a thing, *mein schatz*?”

“Well, obviously, you think Mr. Dalton has information and business prospects you do not.”

“Yes, that goes without saying.”

“You must also think him a topping fellow.”

With a smirk, Waltrop said, “Which is?”

“Someone much smarter than you.”

He glared at her for a moment and then laughed, a metallic bark that made others turn their heads. As they danced on, he ended with a low chuckle, and shook his head. “You are quite an unexpected treat. And why would you say that?”

“Why else would you expend so much time and treasure to glean so small a fraction of his business plans?” She quirked her mouth and studied him. “No, if you had your own inspired business goals, you would be spending effort on them, not Mr. Dalton’s.” She raised her eyebrows to accentuate the conclusion. “Mr. Dalton doesn’t concern himself with *your* businesses.”

Anger flared across his face, and his hand squeezed hers painfully as they went into a turn. Suddenly his face cleared, and he smiled faintly. “I pride myself on being objective, Miss Covington, and blunt. I appreciate your directness.”

“Many northern Germans share those virtues. I know Marshal Blücher mastered them.”

Mr. Waltrop chuckled. “Are you sure you’re not part Prussian? You have bested me, I fear.”

They ended the dance in silence. As they bowed, he asked, “And what would you suggest I do, Miss Covington? Mr. Dalton is moving into Europe, which is *my* territory.”

“I’m hardly the one to ask, but if you covet his ideas so much, partner with him. Who said, ‘Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer’?”

Without missing a beat, he answered, “Bismarck.” She knew better but kept silent. Taking her arm, he led her off the dance floor. “So, how could I possibly do that and make money at it?”

She could see Sam waiting, a dark expression distorting his features. She smiled at him and his face relaxed. She thanked Mr. Waltrop for the dance. “Mr. Waltrop. I understand you are a very successful businessman. Surely you can craft at least *one* mutually profitable proposal.” She curtsied to a frowning

Mr. Waltrop and strolled over to Sam, who stood with several other couples. He was paying too much attention to her and not enough to the conversations around him. She could not feel sorry in the least.

Chapter 32

“O Sovereign power of love! O grief! O balm!
All records, saving thine, come cool, and calm,
And shadowy, through the mist of passed years:
For others, good or bad, hatred and tears
Have become indolent; but touching thine,
One sigh doth echo, one poor sob doth pine,
One kiss brings honey-dew from buried days.”

—John Keats, *Endymion*, book II, 1818

Tory surveyed the ballroom and checked the cathedral clock in the entry. Two-thirty in the morning. Sam was sitting with several men and women near the fireplace. Chairs which had lined the walls now were circled in an animated, impromptu meeting. Waltrop was one of the group. She saw Pen animatedly talking to a handsome Englishman at a side table. Pen waved and returned to her conversation.

A satisfied weariness settled on Tory. She strolled into the hall, gathering her shawl about her. The many couples were gone from the refreshment tables and the servants were clearing away the remains. Most had set aside their white wigs, and donned aprons to protect their costumes. She spoke to them, thanking them for a successful evening and giving a few instructions, which were probably unnecessary.

Parsons hurried by, and she stopped him to check on everything, but there seemed to be nothing for her to do, so she wandered down to the music room. The band was just leaving, instruments and stands loaded on large carts in the hall. She congratulated the musicians on their performances. All seemed to appreciate being part of the celebration. One handed her a card saying they would be happy to do any holiday or special event, particularly if it included period dress and music. She smiled. She had someone else's number.

She watched them roll their equipment down the hall and stepped into the music room. She was exhausted, but still too in the boughs even to think of sleep. The piano bench beckoned, and she sat. As she fingered a tune on the keys, she reviewed the evening. Everything had gone so well. The ball and the dinner, which she had worried about. The demands on the refreshment tables had kept the servants hard pressed, but all went without a wrinkle. The many couples she had seen to the door or retiring to their rooms had been effusive in saying how much they enjoyed the event.

It was a triumphant cap to six months of hard work. Her mind whirled thinking all she had to learn since May. Abruptly, she stopped playing. *What now?* More tours, more Christmas balls?

She felt her stomach tighten. Sam would surely leave Belton Park for Chicago now everything here was done and its ‘opening’ successful. She began tapping out “My Love Nell,” sure that depressing thought was born of her fatigue.

“There you are.” Sam stood in the doorway, but for his unbuttoned coat, was every inch a gentleman. What woman would not sigh when he entered a room? She closed her eyes to collect herself. It had been a grueling half year and after this evening, she had very little will power left where he was concerned. She had to resist him, keep her distance if she were to maintain any semblance of sanity.

He walked over to her and looked down, making her terribly conscious of her *décolletage*. She continued fingering the piano keys, eyes down. He listened for a moment, and then motioned her to move over on the piano bench. She stopped playing, laying her hands in her lap. The last time they’d been alone, he had left without explanation and avoided her for a week. With a smile, she finished the thought—he’d also given her the necklace. She didn’t know what to think, but his body so close to hers set her to vibrating like a harp string.

He slumped a bit as he sat and blew out a ragged breath but gave her a soft smile. “Man, what a night.”

“Are you pleased?” *Keep the talk light.*

Sam peered down his nose and in an awful British accent intoned, “Exceedingly well pleased, my dear.”

Tory shook her head at his teasing. “And your business discussions?”

“Oh, babe, it went far better than I could have hoped. We may have more action than we can handle. We’ve booked twenty weeks of conferences already!”

Tory smiled at his elation but cocked her head. “Babe?”

“That’s you.” He kissed her on the nose and hopped off the bench to stand, feet apart, fists at his hips, a pirate captain on his aft deck. “A number of venture capitalists are interested in investing, more tours and endorsements—can you believe it? And your uncle was amazing. He’s found at least four new estates we might lease or buy.”

“Where has he been all evening? He did give an amiable toast at dinner, but he simply refused to dance with me, even to open the ball. And after spending so much care with his attire.” Lord Covington had appeared every inch a Lord.

She’d been irritated with his absence from the ballroom, but she smiled at Sam. “Although I found his stand-in delightful.” The heat of the smile he returned made Tory look away, annoyed at the flirtatious response that had slipped out. *Blast, but it was hard not to flirt, not to kiss him.* If she were not careful, she would surrender to his charms and forget herself. She could not risk such an indulgence again.

Seemingly unaware of his effect on her, he stepped closer. “Your uncle has been holding court in the library, playing Whist and Hazard I believe. He knows a lot of people, several titled estate owners and wealthy individuals. Seems that before his wife died, the two of them were the center of the social scene in Sussex and Kent.”

“I’ve never asked how she died.”

“The Lockerby bombing.” Tory knew her face must have registered confusion. “You know, the terrorist bombing of a PanAm flight out of Scotland, 1988?”

“Terrorist bombing?”

“Well, with nine-eleven, the terrorists are using planes *as* bombs now, but it was a shocker at the time. Hundreds were killed.” Sam waited, but Tory could not make sense of it. Even the Luddite bombs had not killed hundreds.

“What’s the matter?”

Tory shook her head. “It must have been awful for him.” *Loss, she understood loss.*

“Yes, I’m sure it was. I think that’s partly why he let things go. At least before you arrived.” He chucked her under her chin. “He enjoyed himself tonight. I think he’s missed having lots of people around.” Tory gave a tired smile, happy for Lord Covington, but sad at hearing about his wife. She stood and stepped away from the piano. She didn’t want to hear any more about business, the evening, Lord Covington’s wife or future plans, such as Sam leaving Belton for other estates. She faced him, determined to go to bed, but was too exhausted to think of the appropriate words.

“What did you say to Waltrop?”

“Pardon?” She frowned at his change of subject. “Oh, nothing. I only spoke to him while we danced.”

“Well, you must have said something.” Sam took hold of her shoulders and leaned down. “He made a very interesting proposal, and intimated it was *your* idea.”

Tory pursed her lips, feeling sleepy and vague around the edges. “All I said was that you were the smarter businessman.”

Sam chuckled. “You didn’t?”

“I did.” She gave a dismissive shrug. “So, what did he say exactly?”

“Oh, he was sure you must be part German—high praise.”

“Are you going to partner with him?” *Stop asking questions and get away.*

Sam shrugged. “I’ll take it slowly. His first proposal was over the top, but that’s a typical start to negotiations. He may be an SOB as a competitor, but he has a solid reputation in honoring his agreements.”

He moved closer, so Tory had to crane her neck to keep eye contact. He put his arms around her, and she resisted for an instant, sighed, and laid her head on his shoulder. She’d missed this horribly.

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“You’re amazing, you know that?” Sam felt her shake her head ‘no’ against his chest. Sam laid his chin on the top of her head and held her close.

He heard a heavy exhale from her. “In my previous life, I was not all that unique—at least, the men I knew never thought so.”

“*Unbelievable.* They all were idiots. Tonight, I think everyone fell in love with you—including Waltrop.”

She made a very unladylike noise and pulled away from him. “Waltrop? I doubt that very much. Certainly not Miss Marsh.”

Sam chuckled. “Probably not her.” Giving Tory an admiring glance, he frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t think Miss Marsh is capable of that kind of appreciation. I’ve known a number of women, spent far more time with them than I have with you.” She tensed, but Sam gave her a chiding half grin. “Yet, somehow, even with all the unanswered questions surrounding you, I feel I know you better than any of them.”

“Sam, I don’t want to lead you on ...” Seeing his face, she stopped.

~ ~ ~

Damn. His nervousness must show. Instead of answering, Sam led her by the hand over to the sofa and sat down with

her. He wanted to do this right, but he also wanted to hold her again.

When he reached for her, she pushed him away. “No, please. I have to go ... go to bed.”

Sam bared his teeth. Right now, he wasn't going take no for an answer, at all. He scooped her up and set her down on his lap.

She struggled to get up. “The servants *will* see us.”

He held her tight.

“Let them.”

He just gazed at her. Even with a peeved expression on her face, she was so beautiful, so unique, it made his chest ache. She waited, but he could tell his silence worried her. Finally, he took her hand in his, the other hand on her waist. Okay, here goes. “I was the one man who didn't fall in love with you tonight.”

“What? Sam, are you still angry with me?”

He smiled. “No, sweetheart. I mean that I fell in love with you weeks—months—ago.” She froze, as though she hadn't heard correctly. She leaned away from him, studying his face, her other hand pressing against his chest. He covered it with his.

“Don't look so dubious.” With a half-smile, he ran a thumb across her cheek. “I love you.” He raised his brows, holding her hand tighter. “I've never said that to a woman before. Feels strange. True, but quite singular, to use a Regency phrase.”

Sam had wondered what she would do, but the tears forming were good, right? “I love you—every quirky, unexpected thing about you, from your unforgettable smile and sharp intelligence to your considerate warmth and fierce temper,” adding with a half-smile, “even the tears.” He stroked her hand. “I have only one concern.” Meeting her eyes, he took a deep breath. “Do you love me?”

“Sam.”

“I know. I know. But in spite of my many faults, including my own unruly temper, do you love me?”

“It’s not ...” She wiped away some tears and he handed her the end of his untied cravat. She stared at it, and then at him, and they both laughed.

“Do you love me?”

Her face turned serious again. “Sam, I ... There are things about me ...”

Sam’s impatient rise of one brow stopped her. He said, “Oh yes, there are million things I don’t know about you. They don’t matter compared to what I do know.” He waited, watching her struggle with her emotions, expressions coming and going in rapid succession.

Sam kissed her, a soft, tender caress which left his lips tingling, wanting more. She opened her eyes wide. “You were engaged. You *never* told your fiancée you loved her?”

Sam chuckled. “Love your eyes. No, I never did. Her father decided we were engaged and told everyone. I never asked Tracy to marry me. At the time it seemed embarrassing to deny something we both thought we were heading toward eventually.” He raised his brows in mock surprise. “Boy, was I wrong, and I’ve never been so glad of it than right now.”

Sam took the black box out of his pocket. He opened it so Tory could see the diamond ring miniature within. “This was my mother’s.” She gasped. He could see her lips tremble. She stared at the ring. Sam bit the inside of his lip. A weird expression was frozen on her face.

~ ~ ~

Her world was collapsing again. Tory closed her eyes, knowing how this must end. A bleak fatalism settled in her chest. *Oh, why did he have to do it?* As tempting as it was, she would be a fool to accept. She could not spend the rest of her life with him living a lie, never revealing her genuine self, with him believing she was some sort of trickster. No, sooner

or later, she would stumble somehow, and tell him. His scorn *after marriage* would be a hundred times more crushing.

She shut her eyes again rather than see the ring. Sam had become her dearest desire in the world, but a forlorn hope none the less.

“Sam, I ...”

“Whoa, let me finish. I know we’ve only known each other six months.” His eyebrows rose. “And half of the time you would hardly speak to me, but I think I know why. I was afraid too.”

She shook her head, but he misunderstood.

“I’ve told you before, I trust my intuition. I love you, your fascinating mix of British reserve, intelligence and warmth.” He leaned in and whispered, “And passion.”

She slowly shook her head.

“It’s true. You’ve made me see a whole new side of life, helped me remember my life. You have somehow dissolved my suspicious temper. You are such a special person. I can’t imagine living my life without you in it.” He slid off the sofa and knelt before her. “I think this is the proper form. I need to match my formal dress.” He held out the ring. “Marry me.”

She held her hand out to stop him saying more. As he watched, she tried to compose herself, taking deep breaths. Tears welled up. “Sam, I am honored by your offer ...” Her voice failed her.

“Now, don’t you go all formal too. I know you said you didn’t plan to marry, but I didn’t plan to love you or want to spend my life with you.”

She shook her head, her frown a tortured mask.

Sam clenched his teeth. He didn’t know what to do with her reaction to his proposal.

“This is something I want to do, need to do. I only regret I didn’t ask sooner.” When she didn’t respond. “Is it something

you want? I need a yes.”

She pulled angrily off the shawl draped across her shoulders. “It must be no.”

Sam felt like he’d been sucker-punched. It must have shown on his face because she gaped at him wide-eyed and stood up. She stepped away from him, wiping at more tears, trying to catch her breath.

He knelt there stunned. “Why?”

“I cannot marry you. It would be deceitfully selfish, not with all the questions you have regarding me. I would not have that,” she gulped, “do that to you.” Sam jumped up and started to speak, but Tory held out her hand firmly, though it trembled. “Please. How could you marry someone you believe perpetrated an elaborate hoax on you?”

Not that. “I don’t care.” Damn, he was sorry he ever pushed the issue a week ago.

“You should. Could I marry you when you think I’m a consummate liar and fraud?”

Sam swore under his breath. “Look, I’ve tried to make sense of it. I can’t. All I know is what I see, what I feel. *You* explain what it’s all about. I’ll believe you, because whatever else you are, you are someone I have come to admire and trust. I know I *do* love you and I *do* want to marry you.”

Tory fought the desire to throw herself into his arms, but her frustrated hopes, fears, and hopeless love began to work against her. She found herself mindlessly furious with the situation, the unfairness of it all, angry with this stubbornly reasonable man who would surely believe she was completely without reason if she revealed the truth. Her shawl slipped. She balled it up in her hands and threw it on the floor.

“You want to know? You want an explanation?” She made a distraught, growling sound deep in her throat. “Yes, yes, you deserve one.” She marched over to the French doors and flung them open, pointing out at the terrace. The cold winter air

raised gooseflesh, but the chill also brought her some clarity. “Only I *can't* explain it.”

Tory took a deep breath and suddenly wanted to end the charade, at least with *him*. She was so tired of pretending not to be herself, of lying about what she did and didn't understand. So tired of being afraid someone would discover she was a fraud. So afraid of Sam's reaction. A little sob of pent-up emotion escaped.

But she knew it didn't really matter what she said at this point. There were no words, nothing. Sam would be angry and hurt, regardless.

“Do you remember the day we met?”

Sam nodded, unsure what she had in mind, but suddenly afraid. This was *not* the way he'd imagined it going. Why was she so angry?

“Do you remember the bush glowing?” He slowly nodded again. She pointed at the sofa. “I saw it brighten and glow sitting here. I came out onto the terrace to see what had happened and met you.”

Sam gave a faint smile remembering his first glimpse of her. “Oh, I remember. So?”

“So, I had been reading a new work of poetry, Keats' *Endymion*.” Sam frowned at her ‘new work.’

She stood straight and squared her shoulders. “I was born in 1797 to Amelia and Charles Covington, the Baron Covington. I am *the* Victoria Ann Covington. I was seventeen when the portrait hanging in the parlor was painted.”

Sam blanched, his voice faltering, holding out his hands to her. “Tory?” She faced him unflinching, mouth tight.

“Come on, this isn't funny. I'm sure—”

“Devil in it!” Tory threw her shawl down. “There is *no* humor in any of this! How do you imagine I know all that I know? By studying my own letters to Kitty, letters no one had

seen until last month? How could I *not* know what a phone is, about World War Two or, or your pen?”

Sam shook his head, as though he could keep from hearing her words. The worst part of it was, he had entertained such nonsense from time to time. Now, guilt stained his thoughts. Had he unwittingly encouraged her in this delusion? He studied her for some clue.

“Why have I failed to understand you so often, from the very first day? Why are there no records of me anywhere?” She ran out of words and stood panting. As terrified as she was of losing him, it felt liberating to finally admit it. Seven months of frustrations and lies came boiling to the surface.

Sam kept glancing around the room trying to think of something reasonable to say, but he gave up and focused on her. “Are you trying to ... You want me to believe ... you traveled some two hundred years into the future?”

“Yes”

“How?”

Fists clenched, she glanced out the French doors. “*I don’t know.*”

Sam frowned at her. “Because a rosebush lit up?”

The disbelief, the anguish in his voice was awful to hear. Tory closed her eyes and sighed, “I have no idea how I came to be here, none whatsoever.”

“Tory, why are you saying this nonsense *now*?”

Her shoulders slumped, but her gaze didn’t falter. “Because I’m tired of lying. Because you want to marry me. Because you said you’d believe me.” She stepped toward him. “I want you to believe me. I *need* you to believe me.” Tears began to roll down her cheeks again. She knew how this all must sound to him. “If you are to marry me, you must.”

He stood open-mouthed, staring at her, as if she had become some kind of phantasm. Abruptly, he slapped a hand on his thigh.

Had she gone completely mad and he hadn't noticed? "Tory, this is crazy! *No one time travels*, much less by rosebush." He waited, but she didn't seem to have anything else to say.

"Is this a test, to believe you? It's one hell of a pre-nup." Still, she didn't respond. Provoked by her silence, he yelled at her. "Why are you doing this, inventing this story, this ridiculous condition?"

She looked every inch the aristocrat now, even with tears streaking her face. "*Because it happened to me. Because that is who I am.*" She stopped, seeing Sam's face. The winter cold settled in her soul. "I knew you would not believe me. I cannot explain how it came to be or why." She sagged and leaned on the door frame. "In your position, I too would think me demented."

"*Damn it to hell*, Tory, I don't think you're mad. The story *is* crazy. Why?"

She didn't answer or look at him.

Her evident capitulation frightened him as much as her crazy story. He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Why are you doing this?"

Though her upper arms were held against her sides, she was able to place a hand on her throat, over his gift. "Sam, you're hurting me." He froze, and slowly let go. He stood back, appearing dazed. She put her hand on his arm and gripped it urgently. "I'm saying it, Sam, because it's the truth. If you want to marry me, you deserve to know who I truly am, how I came to be here."

Sam closed his eyes for a moment, muttering, "The truth." He opened them, glared at the hand holding his arm until she let go, and without a backward glance, he left.

Tory watched him quit her and stared at the empty doorway. "I will never see him again." She slowly bent down to retrieve her silk shawl where she'd thrown it. It was all too much. She fell to her knees and sobbed uncontrollably into the blue silk.

Chapter 33

“Time can perfect a man as well as destroy him.”

—Chanakya, Philosopher, (290 BC)

Covington sat down at the main table and gazed around the dining room. The room sparkled now; gorgeous moldings and wainscoting lined the ceiling and walls with elegant swirls and scrolls. Silk wallpaper radiated taste and charm and white marble framed the entrances. He leaned back in his chair contentedly. Life was good and no clouds threatened on the horizon.

Only a few guests had recovered sufficiently from last night’s festivities to make it down to breakfast. They were now scattered at the various other small tables in adjoining rooms and around the long dining table where he sat. The low murmur of conversations abruptly stopped, and Covington looked up. Sam Dalton stood at the doorway. Even though he wore a handsome sweater and trousers, he resembled death warmed over. He hadn’t even combed his hair. He nodded to some of the guests and came straight over and sat down as people went back to their discussions.

“Mr. Dalton, how are you this fine morning?”

“Crappy.” He scanned the room briefly to see if anyone was listening, then leaned in and whispered, “This secret you’ve kept all these months—does it have to do with Tory’s delusions?”

Covington jerked, dropping the kipper on its way to his mouth. “What-What are you talking about?”

Dalton eyed him and snarled, “She thinks she was born in 1797.”

Another abrupt silence made Covington turn to smile in an effort reassure the people staring at the two of them. He quietly suggested, “Why don’t we go into the library to discuss

this?” while nodding to folks until they returned their attention to their breakfast.

Dalton marched out without waiting for him. Lord Covington grimaced. *What has Victoria done?* He picked up his plate and silverware and tossed a piece of kipper in his mouth before heading for the library. If he had to deal with an irate Sam Dalton, at least he was going to eat well.

Covington found Dalton pacing the room, stomping about, a bull in a paddock. He walked over to a table and set his plate down. “So, what’s this all about?”

Dalton stopped and planted his fists on his hips. “Oh, nothing, other than your fake niece is telling crazy stories.”

With a sigh, Covington forked some egg in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully while Dalton silently fumed. He took another mouthful. He didn’t see any advantage to denying anything now. “Victoria isn’t psychotic. She *was* born in 1797.”

“What?” Wide-eyed, Sam simply stared at Covington, but after a moment, put a hand to his face in an apparent attempt to wipe away the expression. “*You too?*” Without waiting for an answer, Dalton turned and walked away, but came to a stop halfway to the door and said over his shoulder, “This whole family is out of their fucking minds.”

Before he could leave, Covington spoke in a reasonable tone. “If you care about Victoria at all, you’ll at least hear our side of the story.”

Dalton stood for a full minute without speaking. He groaned like a wounded animal and turned to face Covington, his expression more murderous than skeptical. “Let’s hear it.”

Covington pulled down several books, the same ones he’d shown Victoria so many months ago. If it worked once, perhaps it would again. He laid them out at the other end of the table, opening them to the appropriate pages. “Why don’t you read these while I finish my breakfast, then we’ll talk.”

~ ~ ~

Sam raised his hand to knock on Pete's door, but paused when he heard bright laughter from the room—a woman's. At eight in the morning? He rapped twice.

“Come on in.”

He opened the door and stopped, astounded by the sight. A redhead sat across from Pete on his bed. She was wearing his white, ruffled dress shirt, one long, bare leg braced on the floor, the other curled under her. Her hair was a wild mass of curls. Pete, in just sweatpants, faced her on the bed. They both had their hands out, hers palms up, and his open hands face down over hers. Suddenly one of the woman's hands flashed and slapped Pete's before he could pull it away.

She laughed again. “That's two for two!”

The woman and Pete turned to look at him. Sam did a double take. “Carrie?”

The redhead smiled, free and genuine. ‘Hi, Sam.’ There was no makeup on her face and the shirt was buttoned up. No cleavage displayed? Yet Carrie Marsh had never looked so beautiful—or so relaxed. She'd often been sultry and languid, but never serene.

She glanced back at Pete, who shrugged, and in one deft move, slid over to his wheelchair and lifted himself into it. Sam watched Carrie as she watched Pete, but didn't see any pity or distaste on her face. All he saw was acceptance and what could be admiration. She didn't try to help him. Well, points for her.

Pete smiled at Sam, then Carrie. “Hey, Red, how about calling to find out where our breakfast is, while I see what my big brother wants so early in the morning.” She nodded, and Pete wheeled over to Sam, the impressive muscles of his chest and arms flexing. Sam gazed at Carrie as she rose gracefully, and went to the phone, the shirt falling to mid-thigh.

She seemed transformed. She wasn't paying any attention to how she appeared or how she might affect him—the other male in the room, which wasn't the Carrie Marsh he knew.

With every man present, everything was manipulation, playing to the audience.

Pete broke in on his reverie by rolling past him out into the hall. Sam followed and closed the door. Pete waited, but when Sam just stared at him perplexed, he laughed. “Okay, Sam, what’s up?”

“Uhm, I’m going to London and don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Pete frowned at his mild tone, but then gave him a knowing grin. “You and Tory, right? Did she like Mom’s ring?”

Sam closed his eyes. “*No*. I have work to do.”

With an incredulous expression, Pete turned his chair to face him and waited until Sam opened his eyes again.

“You’re making a *big* mistake, bro. Tory’s fantastic. You two could be good together.” He waited, but Sam just endured the observation. With a shrug, Pete said, “I can’t imagine how you could conceivably have a problem with *her*.” He eyed his brother. “But hey, that’s your business.”

Sam felt a defensive anger flare. “And Carrie’s yours?”

“Yep. My problem, all mine.” He grinned ear-to-ear. “Ain’t it cool?”

“Pete, She’s ...”

“YOLO, brother, YOLO.”

“What?”

“You Only Live Once.” He wheeled back into his room, but before he closed the door, he turned and grinned. “Oh, Carrie and I are driving down to Cannes for the week, but Parsons will have the phone number and address.”

Sam just stared at him. Pete shook his head, concern tightening his face. “Sam, don’t do anything stupid while we’re gone, okay?”

“Me?” Sam shook his head dismissively but said, “Have fun,” and headed down the hall, his body rigid. He felt completely lost. When had his brother stopped needing him? Don’t do anything stupid? When had their roles reversed?

~ ~ ~

The room was warm. The blankets were warm. Why did she still feel so cold? Tory rolled over and squinted at the light streaming through the French doors. The garden and patches of frost beyond the wall of framed glass sparkled brightly. The scene outside didn’t cheer her. She closed her eyes, realizing it must be late morning. She groaned as she turned to lie on her back. Her body ached all over, but the pain centered in her chest, a deep, sick feeling. She would have started crying again if she’d had any tears left.

There was a knock on the door. She croaked, “Come in,” but it wasn’t loud enough, so she called out again. As she peeked over the covers, she saw Suzanne enter with a tea tray, followed by Lord Covington. She didn’t want to see anyone, certainly not in her bedroom. With a thank-you, Covington dismissed Suzanne and pulled a chair next to the tea tray by her bed. “Good morning.”

“You should not be here, family or not. Go away.” He just smiled and poured some tea, adding cream and sugar the way she preferred it.

“Have some tea, and a sticky bun. It’s a specialty of Andre’s. Our cook is a marvel.” When she didn’t move, he held out the tea. “Please.”

Said in a firm tone, one Tory hadn’t heard before, he clearly would brook no refusal. She struggled to sit up, pulling the covers up to her throat. “I am quite capable of serving myself,” she said peevishly, but took the saucer and teacup.

Covington scowled at her briefly and fixed himself some tea. “Dalton talked to me this morning.” Tory paused in sipping her tea but said nothing. “Why did you tell him?”

She put her teacup on the table. “He proposed last night.”

In quick succession, her uncle smiled, frowned, and finally gazed at her sadly. “You want to marry him?” Tory covered her face with her hands and nodded. “Why say anything?”

Her fists hit the covers. “Say nothing, when he thought I was a schemer *and* a fraud?”

“I doubt it.”

“Truly? He considered you a charlatan too.”

He cleared his throat. “Well, yes. He still does.” Tory waited for him to explain. “I told him you *were* Victoria Ann Covington. I showed him the same materials I showed you the first day. I explained the events, everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“What did he say?”

“Oh, he asked a question or two, but when I was through, he didn’t say anything. He just stared off into space.”

“And then?” Tory leaned forward, annoyed with his drawn-out story.

Covington put his cup down. “He left for London.”

She sat back against the pillows, and closed her eyes against the disappointment, however ill-founded her hopes. “So, that is that.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Covington took out his pipe and tobacco. Seeing her pained, impatient frown, he smiled sheepishly, pocketed them, and changed the subject. “I called Roxanne.”

Tory cocked her head at the news. “But she didn’t attend last night.”

“No, she couldn’t come. Some business.” He smiled. “But thanks to you, she and her *husband* are going to visit Christmas week.”

Tory clapped her hands. “Oh, that is marvelous. I am so happy for you.”

Covington grinned back. “I want her to meet you.” His expression grew serious. “I owe you a great deal, my dear.” He harrumphed as his cheeks turned red. He shrugged and smiled at her. “If my daughter is willing to see me after all these years, perhaps Sam will come to his senses. Don’t give up on him. You didn’t on me, and I was a far dicier proposition than your Mr. Dalton.”

Tory tried to smile back. She had a great deal of faith in Sam. But what he had to take on faith concerning her was far beyond the plausible. She could not imagine *anyone* believing such a tale. Lord Covington watched her, concern and affection in his eyes. Well, with one happy exception. She succeeded in giving him a smile.

Chapter 34

“The common man is not concerned about the passage of time, the man of talent is driven by it.”

—Schopenhauer 1870

“God runs electromagnetics on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday by the wave theory, and the devil runs it by quantum theory on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.”

—Sir Lawrence Bragg 1921

“I don’t know what your problem is, but you are one sad picture.”

Stretched out on the couch in his London office, Sam ignored the comment and continued to retrieve articles on the laptop balanced across his stomach. “Go home, Mrs. Cleveland. I’m staying a bit longer.”

“Home, the man says.” Shaking her head at him and talking to herself, she went to her desk and retrieved her purse and coat. “Home. He knows it’s three thousand miles away. I have a London hotel room to go to—there’s nothing ‘homey’ about it.”

Sam gave her a squint-eyed glance. “Suffering in your five-star accommodations, are you?”

She strode back to him and waited until he looked up at her. She frowned and spoke in her most motherly tone, which always struck Sam as a cross between a judge sentencing a mass murderer and Mother Teresa comforting the dying. “I’ve told you this before, Sam Dalton. You can’t think your way out of every problem. You have to go on something else besides facts and bottom lines.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

She eyed him with a deep “Uh-huh,” and after a moment laid a couple of pieces of paper on his desk. “I’m talking about faith and heart.” Sam watched her, waiting for her explanation.

She paused at the door. “Sometimes, even intellectual giants like you have to do what they know is true, what’s best, no matter how stupid it makes them feel.”

As usual with her lectures, he didn’t know whether to be angry, charmed, or chastised. At the moment, he was too tired to be any of them other than mystified. “Are you being sarcastic?”

She pursed her lips. “Well, you go ahead, make yourself miserable and break that little girl’s heart. I won’t lift a finger to save you—not this time.”

He glowered at her. “What little girl?”

“I saw the receipt for the ring cleaning. No mystery there.” With that, she left.

He ran a hand through his hair and tapped the plastic surface of his laptop. *I bet my corner office she’d be singing a different tune if she knew ‘that little girl’ was claiming to be over two hundred years old.*

He’d been frantically searching the internet all day. Psychoses, delusions, multiple personalities, syndromes and all the rest. He’d even researched scam artists. Nothing seemed to fit. He frowned at the computer screen and his latest find.

‘Individuals with personality fixations will work to draw others into their fantasy life, attempting to get them to play along, enter in the delusion in *any* fashion possible. The more intelligent the patient, the more complex, detailed and engaging the fantasy.’

That didn’t seem to fit either. Tory had kept it a secret, making no effort to ‘draw him in.’ She knew how he’d react when she told him. There was no need nor benefit in claiming to be a time-traveler. He knew what he was offering her financially with marriage.

With her smarts, she could have concocted it all. Yet, hearing her story from Covington, it was extremely complex and detailed. He closed his eyes. And engaging. Could she

have tricked Covington into going along with the fantasy? Or perhaps Covington, over time, got her to believe it. Or maybe the two of them had started believing the scheme themselves.

Sam clenched his teeth. His head hurt; his chest hurt. He didn't want to believe any of this. Not of Tory. He heaved himself out of the couch and got a cup of coffee, which had to be reheated in the microwave down in the lunchroom. He came back and set his laptop at his desk. Sitting down, he leaned back as far as the chair would tilt and rubbed his eyes. God, was he dog-tired.

The sounds of downtown London came to him as a low hum. He gazed out at the night lights and wondered what Tory was doing, feeling. He thought of her harp, and abruptly pictured her playing discordant notes with a demented expression. *Shit*. He snapped his chair upright.

He set his fingers on the laptop's keyboard. What else could he search? He'd exhausted all the key words for mental illness he could think of, even with the help of the on-line encyclopedias. He couldn't think. He kept hearing her voice claiming to be Victoria Ann Covington, born 1797.

Time travel.

Had any psychologists found patients who claimed to have traveled in time? There were certainly enough of them who claimed to be aliens, elves, and travelers on the astral plane. He typed in 'mental illness, time travel.' There were dozens of pages about time travel—or mental illness, but only one item dealing with both, A Time Travel Psychosis.

It described the 'Jerusalem Syndrome': A rare travel psychosis Syndrome appeared 1999, where more than 50 visitors to Jerusalem were diagnosed, having been found wandering in the Judean desert wrapped in hotel bed sheets or crouched at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, waiting to give birth to the infant Jesus. Disregarding the tourist who came to Israel packing a psychosis already, and those who were unbalanced and got an environmental nudge, there seemed to be a third group.

Completely sane persons without any psychiatric history, and without drugs, arrived here in Israel as normal tourists, reports Dr. Bar-El. Here they develop this specific, imperative psychotic reaction which he has named the Jerusalem Syndrome. They believe they are living in Biblical times, 33 A.D. Dr. Bar-El states besides their bizarre behavior, everything else about the tourists is normal.

Sam grunted at that. Everything else was normal? What was left, their use of silverware? He sighed and massaged his forehead. What, Tory suffered from Belton Park Syndrome? Realized she resembled the Regency Victoria and snapped?

He felt his headache go into overdrive and dug out the aspirin bottle in his desk. He took three with the coffee and pursed his lips at the laptop. Nothing fit and there were no explanations about helping someone afflicted with any of the illnesses. He typed in ‘Time Travel.’

There were pages of Einstein and the Theory of Relativity, SF movies, and *Star Trek* blogs. On page seven, there was an odd entry: *Time Travel and Quantum Mechanics—As It Currently Exists.* ‘A series of Special Lectures by Dr. Leonard Tildon, Physicist, visiting fellow, Cambridge University.

He scrolled through the website, which included dates for the presentations and Tildon’s introductory lecture. He began reading, finding the science hard going, but frowned, when he came to a strange statement:

None of the laws of Physics prevents matter from going back or forward in time. Quantum Mechanics, Quantum Uncertainty suggests such events are possible. Like a broken egg becoming whole again, it has a very, very low probability of occurring.

Sam felt a tingle of curiosity but refused to fan the spark of hope it ignited. Was Tildon some loose cannon in the scientific world, or just entertaining wild possibilities?

Tildon wrote:

Researchers have demonstrated that an event in the future can indeed influence something in the past. It's called Retro-causality. In other words, time can run backwards as well as forwards.

Tildon then provided pages of scientific jargon and formulas. With a grunt, Sam skimmed to the conclusion, and there it was.

With quantum uncertainty, we can also see a particle existing in two or more places AND time at once across quantum fields. Time travel appears be taking place deep down in the recesses of our atoms, particles moving backwards and forwards in time, faster than light.

It is one of the more profound quantum mechanical facts which arose in the latter half of the 20th century: Quantum time travel, instantaneous connections between particles, influencing each other over immense distances, even across the known universe does happen, referred to as Quantum Entanglement. My question is whether this can pertain to masses of particles, such as a human being.

Sam read through Tildon's credentials as a theoretical physicist, which were impressive, then tracked down his Cambridge phone number.

~ ~ ~

Sam paused outside The Clarion Call, a pub on Market Street in Cambridge. More than an hour's drive on M11 north from London had given Sam more than enough time to call himself every kind of idiot for this 'fool's errand.'

A group of students piling out of the pub nearly hit him with the double doors. A short, ponytailed blonde flashed him a smile by way of an apology, and Sam held his breath. She reminded him of Tory. He held the door open as he watched the girl saunter down the street with her friends. Tory was no older than that college student, yet Tory seemed so much more ... substantial, wiser, more mature. Sam shook his head and entered the dark recesses of the tavern.

He stood inside with his hands in the pockets of his raincoat and waited. The place smelled of beer and cigarettes. Noisy groups of young people milled around with pints in their hands debating animatedly. Through the jostling crowd a tall, thin man in a cardigan sweater squeezed his way through. He readjusted his glasses on his long nose and smiled as he approached.

“You can’t be a student.” Tildon held out his hand. “Sam Dalton?” Sam nodded as he took it. Tildon indicated he should follow him back through the sea of spirited youth to a booth. Sitting across from Tildon, Sam was glad to hear the noise in the room was reduced to a minor roar by the high-sided, wooden booth.

Tildon, his boyish face alight with a grin, leaned forward to be heard. “Would you like a drink, seeing as how you are paying for this meet?” Sam nodded just as a college girl in an apron stopped at their table. Tildon smiled up at her. “Hi, Tara. I’ll have a Guinness.” He looked at Sam.

“*Hefeweizen*, thanks.”

After she left, Tildon continued to lean in, giving Sam a much better view of his receding hairline and angular nose. “I’m just here at Cambridge for the semester. I work at Cornell, theoretical physics, but I have to connect with the real world every once and while.”

“You mean I’m the real world?” Sam had researched the man, his respected place in his field, and his interest in fringe ideas.

“No, your money.” Tildon laughed. “I have to admit, you got my attention. Who agrees to pay two hundred pounds to have lunch?”

“Would you have come if I hadn’t?” Sam raised an eyebrow at his companion’s grin and laid the two hundred pounds from his wallet on the table between them. He wanted Tildon to take him seriously. He heaved a sigh. He was going to sound like a nutcase if he weren’t careful.

“We’ll never know.” Tildon grinned and swept the pound notes off the table and into his coat pocket. “However, I do have a rabid curiosity. I researched you too.”

Sam sat back, an impatient quirk to his mouth. “You seemed to be saying, in your lecture on the Cambridge website, that time travel *is* possible.”

“Damn, I’m going to have to rethink my lecture. I meant to say categorically that time travel *is* a reality—at the quantum level.”

“You did say it, but you also wondered if it could apply to people. Can it?”

“Perhaps.”

“You said anything can happen in an infinite universe, it’s just some events have a higher probability of happening than others.” Tara sashayed up and set down their mugs of room-temperature drinks.

“By Jove, I think he’s got it.” He grinned but continued when Sam just tapped his fingers against his beer mug. “Yes, I’ve thought about time travel. Particles do travel instantaneously across space and time. Particles are all in what is called a ‘Super Position,’ where they are everywhere at once in the Quantum Fields. You and I, everyone are all part of those same Quantum Fields, sooo theoretically something as large as person could be entangled with another place and time—it’s just really, *really*, improbable. You could win the lottery a million times over before it happened.”

Sam leaned forward. “Or it could occur today.”

“Okay, yes. However, if you tell *anyone* I said that, I’ll deny it.” Tildon sipped his Guinness thoughtfully. “Understand, this is just a pet theory of mine. I started thinking about this and decided to spend a year at Cambridge, after a couple of students showed me a news story. I believe such an entanglement event happened at Chatsworth, which is near here, in Bakewell, Derbyshire.” He took a swig of his beer until Sam raised his eyebrows at the delay.

Waving his beer mug, Tildon continued, “Anyway, the spectacular grounds there are a tourist draw and this one group walking the gardens felt an electric static kind of sensation. Suddenly a nearby fountain seemed to shimmer. The group saw people around them, dressed in sixteenth century gowns and collars, but transparent. The impression lasted at least ten seconds and just as quickly was gone. Twelve people, including a groundskeeper, claimed to have seen it, stating the ghost-like people seemed to see them too. They even heard screams from the phantoms.”

Sam’s jaw tightened as his stomach knotted. “You say the fountain shimmered?”

Chapter 35

“Plausible impossibilities should be preferred to unconvincing possibilities.”

—Aristotle

Sam closed his eyes and took a deep breath before saying to Tildon, “Couldn’t it be just a shared hallucination?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Tildon frowned, studying Sam. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“I see. All right. I believe some things have to align, based on Quantum Mechanics and M theory, and the rest.” He saw Sam’s perturbed expression and chuckled. “I won’t bore you with the mathematical details.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Okay, imagine this table is the universe. It’s like a TV screen. Close up, you see pixels dancing around. The Quantum fields. Move away, the perspective changes and you see moving pictures. Our reality. It’s called decoherence. General Relativity describes block time. That means *all* events in *all* time are on this screen, this universe, future, present and past, spanning all time and space.” He stabbed a finger at one end of the table, making the mugs jump. “We know that quantum particles at this point in the universe can instantaneously affect other particles at,” he said, putting a finger on the other end of the table, “the other end of the universe.” He waved a hand over the table. “The whole universe is fields of entangled particles interacting over great distances instantaneously—speeds far faster than light speed, creating webs of entanglements: decoherence. That has been proven.”

Sam impatiently gulped down the rest of his wheat beer. “I thought faster-than-light travel was impossible.”

“That’s what we thought.”

“We’re still talking about time travel, right?”

“Yes. Distance is important in time travel. If someone just traveled forward in *time* from say, 1800 to the present, they’d die instantly.”

“What?”

“The earth in 2020 is light years from where the earth was in 1800. Travel in time from 1800 to our time, *but not in space*, and you die arriving where the earth was two hundred years ago, now a cold vacuum.”

“You’re not talking about that happening, but something else.” Sam wind-milled his hand to get Tildon to hurry with the explanation, which made Tildon smile.

“This is really important to you, isn’t it?”

Raised eyebrows as a prompt was Sam’s only reply.

Tildon frowned but continued after a moment. “So, quantum mechanics takes care of the distance problem. For two quantum events, two particles—time doesn’t matter—if connected, they move or react to one another instantaneously, *regardless of the distance.*”

“So how does all this apply to your theory?”

“Ah, there’s the mystery. Physicists aren’t sure why or how, we just know it happens. I think, *I believe*, through chance, one event can be so similar to another someplace else in time and space—just a moment—the fabric of the universe fails to distinguish between the two. That’s how I think it can happen to human beings. An entangled decoherence, if you will. They are part of that event, that confusion of the quantum fabric.”

Sam tapped his fingers on the table. “How alike do these events have to be?”

“Again, my theory and the science suggest that’s variable. The universe decides.”

“What?” Sam’s bark made several patrons turn around. He leaned over to Tildon and spoke in a much quieter voice.

“We’re talking science here, right?”

Tildon laughed at his incredulous tone. “Yep. It’s part of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. Particles have *all* possible values AND positions in space and time until we observe them, then the wave function collapses, and they become a definite one thing or the other. So, basically, the entire universe is one big wave function waiting to be observed and collapse into what we see.”

Tildon nodded at Sam’s incredulous expression. “It’s okay if you have trouble with it, physicists do too. Schrödinger called the Uncertainty Principle ‘transcendental algebra.’ I love that.”

Sam closed his eyes and pushed his back hard against the wood of the booth behind him. It was more than a lack of sleep, too much coffee and now a pint of beer on an empty stomach. The implications were turning his ideas of what was possible upside down. “So, a person might be caught in an event which is similar enough to another someplace else that they could actually switch locations in both time and space?”

Tildon slapped the table. “That’s it! *Caught* is a good analogy. *And* the persons, the observers involved in such a chance happening might just influence whether it happens or not—and how it happens—with their intentions, collapsing the wave function. If the Chatsworth report is true, I think it’s what *almost* happened, only there were too many people, some wanting it to happen, some frightened, so together, they failed to influence the universe enough to make a complete wave collapse, a full transfer. The universe isn’t just an either/or machine but has multiple shades of gray—uncertainty.”

Tildon leaned forward, intent. “You see, I believe the chances of such a transfer increase geometrically when events separated by time occur around the same objects. Parts of Chatsworth haven’t changed for centuries. The glowing fountain was built in the 1600s. The chance entanglement might have been water falling in similar patterns from the fountain, or a leaf from the same tree falling as it had in 1600, or ...”

“What? A leaf?” Sam gripped the edge of the table. He held up his hand to stop Tildon when he started to answer him. He felt he might explode. “Is that *possible*?” Sam grimaced at his outburst. He had people staring at him again.

“Is what possible?”

In as calm a voice as he could manage, he asked, “Leaves falling, clouds casting shadows creating the, the entanglement? Could *that* cause people and objects at random to shift from one time to another?”

Tildon cocked his head, an intense expression settling on his face, and studied Sam for a moment. “I believe so, at least it’s my theory. That’s what I’ve been saying. Similar events with the same objects, whatever they may be, could create this entanglement between locations *regardless of time or distance*. As I said, it’s a theory. I don’t know what particular set of similar circumstances is necessary for the universe to act so out of the ordinary.”

“Do you think it actually has happened more than once in England?”

“That’s what I wanted to investigate.” Tildon sat up, excited. “Yes, there are a number of similar instances reported across the British Isles. For example, in Cornwall last year, hikers say a large boulder glowed and a black slate cottage suddenly appeared in front of them, where a dog tied in front began barking at them, then it all disappeared. I see a pattern among all the reports I’ve collected so far, particularly with the reported glowing objects. The shimmering boulder in Cornwall was much older than the Chatsworth fountain.”

Sam cringed inside, but had to ask, “Any reports of successful time travel?”

“No, none of the ones I’ve investigated. I think I know why. At Chatsworth there were a dozen observers in our time and many more who were *transparent*. With so many observers, obviously with mixed emotions about the event, it failed. In Cornwall, no transparency, but there were only two people on

one side of the time entanglement, so it failed, or”—Tildon grinned—“the dog didn’t want it to happen.”

“Then what has to happen to actually have time travel occur?”

“I think it requires a minimum of two *people*, one on each side of the entanglement to *want*, or at least accept the connection for some reason, act on it positively, with the other person, observers collapsing the wave function”

Sam closed his eyes for a moment, then asked, “Do you think that’s happened?”

Tildon laughed. “Only those two people would know, and why would they admit to such a thing?” Seeing Sam sit up and eye him intently, he shrugged, dispelling the conclusion. “But the odds are very much against it. I have no way of knowing if such entanglement did occur. What can I say?”

Sam frowned, body rigid, frustration tightening his face. “That’s what I love, scientific certainty.” Sam rubbed his face with both hands, feeling emotionally spent. Every nerve in his body seemed to hum violently, producing an irritating whine in his ears. *Damn*. Was Tory’s claim *possible*? Was that what he experienced with the rose bush? He was being pulled apart. He wanted it to be real, he just couldn’t accept the possibility with no proof. It was too *weird*.

Sam spoke harshly, his words more of a challenge than he intended. “I don’t remember much from my science classes in college, but I do remember Ockham’s Razor—the principle that the simplest explanation or theory is invariably the right one. The simplest and most reasonable explanation is those people at Chatsworth *were* hallucinating or colluding to create the story together.”

“Is it?” Tildon chuckled. “I always get a kick out of how that old reprobate’s words get tossed around. Willy Ockham didn’t actually say that five hundred years ago. It was ‘*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccesitate*,’ which

paraphrased is ‘No more theories and assumptions than necessary.’”

Sam flipped a hand in the air. “Yeah, yeah. Still, doesn’t that mean the simplest theory or most reasonable answer is nobody travels in time?”

Tildon gazed at the table, twisting his mouth in thought. “The problem with Ockham is we often don’t have the slightest notion of what constitutes the simplest or necessary theory.”

Sam grunted, and gave Tildon an irritated nod of his head. “Go on.”

Tildon sat back and put his hands behind his head. He smiled at Sam, even while Sam frowned. “Today, we often don’t have a *clue* what constitutes the *simplest* answer to *anything*. Think of Quantum Mechanics itself. Or of the monumental collusion the group of complete strangers at Chatsworth had to accomplish for just that one event. Maybe time travel *is* the simplest, least assumption-heavy explanation for what happened at Chatsworth and Cornwall.”

Sam rubbed his neck. “Okay,” he sighed. “So, in the end you just *believe* the Chatsworth vision was time travel, but have no solid evidence it happened at all?” When Tildon nodded, Sam gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “That doesn’t sound particularly scientific, Professor.”

Tildon smiled wryly at Sam, his growing curiosity with Sam’s questions evident. “Oh, but it is. Physicists first have beliefs and then work to find the scientific and mathematical evidence to support them.”

Sam shook his head doubtfully.

“You don’t ask questions unless you *believe* there are answers—and then you have to *believe* your answers can be correct if you’re going to go to the effort to prove them. Einstein *believed* his *theory* of General Relativity long before he could generate meaningful mathematical descriptions, let alone having experimental proof. It didn’t come until some

fifteen years later.” Tildon sat back, obviously impatient with Sam’s resistance. “Hell, it would never have been proven if he didn’t believe *first*.”

“Evidence and hard facts are good things, and the primary tools and ultimate goals of physics, of science—but they are not the entire process achieving those goals.” He accented his comment with an unapologetic cock of his head, obviously enjoying his own words. “I feel science is like falling in love with the Universe, a complex, mysterious mistress. You commit to your love, your beliefs *first*, then you work long and hard to develop the evidence that your faith is justified. Scientists try hard to eliminate faith and stick to facts, but it’s not how the world works. Faith is a necessary ingredient in science.” Tildon grinned at his conclusion.

Sam blinked and expelled his breath in a rush. It felt like he’d been kicked in the gut. He stared at his hands. They were shaking.

Tildon sat up. “Lord, man, are you all right?”

Dazed, Sam slowly nodded. His heart pounded against his ribs, ready to burst. He felt he’d been parked, engine racing, facing down a steep hill, brakes straining to hold, and Tildon had just kicked the emergency brake loose. At the bottom was Tory.

Sam got to his feet and laid down two ten-pound notes. He glanced back at Tildon with a laugh. “Yes, sir. I think I am.”

Tildon stood too, frowning. “Now wait. Are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

“Maybe sometime, Professor. Right now, I have to go. You definitely earned your pay. Thank you for entertaining my question.” He shook Tildon’s hand enthusiastically and as he dashed for the door, he could hear Tildon sputtering, “What question?”

Chapter 36

“People like us who believe in physics know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.”

—Albert Einstein

“Anyone who is not shocked by the quantum theory has not understood it. Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real.”

—Niels Bohr

Tory pulled the comforter tighter around her shoulders and glanced at the tea tray. It sat on the table beside the sofa untouched. She didn't know how long she had been sitting there staring out the music room windows. She felt hollow, as though all that remained of her was a shell. No one could tell she was empty on the outside. It had rained last night, and a cold damp smothered the lifeless earth.

It had been four days since she confessed to Sam. It seemed an eternity to Tory, never fully alive to her surroundings. She couldn't sleep. Lord Covington and Pen didn't know what to do for her, so they mercifully left her alone. All their guests had left for their own holidays, so the house had been quiet for the last day. She would have surely trounced someone if she had been required to act as hostess. It was still and cold in the music room. The fire in the fireplace behind her didn't warm. She pulled the comforter around her feet.

What if? If she hadn't told Sam, she could be sitting here with her fiancé, planning a life together. In her other life, she had been content, even happy to consider a life without marriage and family. Now, having known Sam, a solitary existence seemed a torture stretching into the future.

She shook herself, as though she could rid herself of her regret like a coating of dust. *Why had she told him?* Was being fully known by him so vital to a successful marriage? To her

happiness? It was a miracle Lord Covington had realized the truth and accepted her. Now she had lost so much by wanting more—by wanting a true intimacy.

She sat limp and let her breath slowly escape, a fleeing soul. It mattered little now. *What was done has left everything undone.* A sad little smile formed. Kitty had often said that when Kitty had gotten herself in trouble with her family or various young men during their Season in London. She could feel tears forming again. Kitty.

Tory struck her thigh with a fist. *Devil in it!* She knew she could not have done anything differently, not when she loved him.

Turning around, she put her feet on the sofa, her back against one arm, and rearranged the comforter. She rested for a moment, wiping away a stray tear, realizing she hadn't reclined in the couch this way since that day in May. Her head felt tight, so with both hands, she pulled the pins from her hair and let it fall loose and massaged her scalp. Since it was cut five months ago, she had let it grow again. Absently, gazing off at nothing, mind numb, she began combing her fingers through her hair.

There was a noise out on the terrace. People were talking. She tried to ignore them, but she recognized one voice as Lord Covington, and he sounded excited. She closed her eyes, willing them all away, but the conversation continued unabated. With an exasperated sigh, she rose, wrapped the blanket around her and opened the French doors.

By one rosebush stood her uncle, and Sam. She felt the shock down to her toes. They were deep in conversation.

“So, the urns have always been positioned on the terrace this way, since the fifteen hundreds?” Sam glanced back at the other urns farther down the terrace.

“Oh, yes. Tradition, don't you know.” Lord Covington patted the rim of the stone urn. “Mr. McCabb believes some of these bushes are over two hundred years old, but I know that

can't be true. The current bushes are probably just cuttings from earlier ones. This variety, the Blood Rose, is very old. Goes back to the War of the Roses." He smiled at Sam, but Sam had just seen her standing in the open doorway.

Sam said something to Lord Covington without taking his eyes off her. With a nod, her uncle turned to smile at her and disappeared into the library.

Perplexed, she glanced back at Sam with a frown. His gaze had become intense. She couldn't seem to move. His expression was so strange, so forceful. Would he still accuse her of deceit, or was he just steeling himself to approach a madwoman?

She shivered in the cold air and pulled the comforter close around her. He looked warm in his thick blue sweater and trousers. *Beautiful*. But for the sharp ache at seeing him, she could admire his form all day. She realized she was holding her breath and exhaled. He was still staring at her, and yet she could think of nothing to say, seemingly rooted to the spot.

At last, he broke his gaze for a moment. When he turned back, he started walking toward her. She refused to endure any more angry accusations. She could not bear it, not from him. But just as she found the power to run away if she must, he broke into his compelling smile. She froze. He stopped in front of her. "Hi."

She started to speak, but felt her throat close up, her mouth dry. He waited, with a soft smile on his face as though he would willingly stand there forever in anticipation. She finally croaked out a "Good afternoon."

"Why don't we go inside where it's warm?" He backed her into the room and closed the doors behind him. He stood so close she had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. "You look as if you just got out of bed, with your hair down and the blanket around you." His eyes took on a playful fire. "I like it." He was teasing her. She pulled her mouth tight. Did he think to cosset the bedlamite?

“And there is that dimple.” He grinned and held out his hand. She grew tense but didn’t take it. He let his hand drop and sauntered over to the sofa.

She still could not find any words, though questions clamored in her head. With him sitting, waiting for her to do the same, she could feel her nerves jangle. She was so tired, loved him so much—and he was teasing her. She fought the tears, the nervous irritation. “Why-Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you.” He hesitated. “I believe you.”

She blinked, unsure she’d heard him correctly. “You what?”

Stronger this time. “I believe you.”

She felt a flash of anger. “I am not a simpleton, do not gammon me. Not you, not with this.”

“I believe you are Victoria Ann Covington, born to Baron Charles and Amelia Covington, November 7, 1797.”

She scowled at him, unsure what to think. “Why?”

He laughed with a sad smile. “I suppose your doubt is fair play. I didn’t believe you.” When she didn’t reply, he dropped his head and sighed into his chest. His expression turned serious, eyes bright and ardent. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry it took me this long to come to my senses. To accept what was so obvious, when you think about it. To accept my own faith in you.”

Could she believe *him*? “How?” She shook herself and stepped closer to him. “How could you believe such a fantastical tale?” She wrapped the blanket around her tighter. “Why now?”

He reached for her, and she resisted, but he raised one eyebrow, indicating he would not be trifled with, saying, “Please.”

Reluctantly, she allowed him to pull her down to sit next to him. She shivered. She had been cold, and he was so warm, next to her. His arm came down on the couch behind her and his hand began to rub her shoulder. The change in temperature

make her shiver. Without conscious thought, she rested her head against his arm. Could this be true?

“Why?” The simple pleasure of resting on his arm, something she thought never to do again, made her throat constrict.

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. “You are persistent.” He repositioned himself closer, touching hips, but she still faced straight ahead. He leaned over to meet her gaze. “Well, it wasn’t any one thing, more of a critical mass.” She frowned at the phrase, which he realized he needed to translate. “I mean there were many straws needed to break my stubborn, proverbial back.”

“Oh.”

“One straw was your diary. Covington gave it to me two days ago.”

She pushed away. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, yes. You were a real *hoyden*, weren’t you?”

She flopped back down against the seat back, arms folded. “I would never have written a word if I’d possessed the slightest inkling of how many people would read it as a novel”—she gave him a speaking glance—“without permission, I might add.”

“Tory?”

She looked at him.

He lowered his mouth on hers. His hands went to her hair, and he entwined his fingers in it. She lost herself in the sensations, silken feel of his lips, being filled by his love. He broke the kiss and held her face.

“Will you marry me?”

She felt tears come in earnest and she reached for her handkerchief, but he held out one for her, grinning. “I figured I should be carrying one for you today.” Pursing her lips, she

snatched the handkerchief out of his hand, but chuckled weakly as she dabbed at the tears with it.

“Marry me? I think I’ve met your conditions. Uncle Willie has given his consent.” She smiled at his words, but his question suddenly made her afraid and it must have shone. “I think I will go absolutely bonkers if you don’t.” He scratched his chin thoughtful for a moment. “Bonkers. I believe it’s a British word.”

She smiled again, but she couldn’t trust such a sudden reversal. She had to know. “Sam, how can you believe I am from the year 1818?”

“Is that a yes?”

“Confound it. Answer my question.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His hand cupped her shoulder and he pulled against him. “Most of it has to do with what I know about you. You are the most honorable, honest woman I have ever known. I should have believed you.” He chuckled. “I certainly tripped over enough pieces of evidence in the last six months.” She cocked her head to see his face better. “A blinding amount, as a matter of fact,” he said, embarrassed. “I was an idiot.

“I also talked with a scientist yesterday, before I read your diary.” He suddenly lifted her onto his lap, comforter and all. She stiffened, wrinkling her nose at his wiser-than-thou expression. With a deep sigh, she laid her head on his chest, her cheek against the soft sweater. She was home.

He did love her, and he did believe her, who she was.

It was hard concentrating on his words while watching his lips. She wanted to kiss him until he could stand no more. “He told me according to modern, theoretical physics, it *is* possible to travel in time. He just said it was a highly unlikely event.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It means that traveling in time is possible, but the probability, the odds of it happening are very, very small.”

“My appearance here was some wild chance?” She flipped her hand. “What, I was plucked from my time by some cosmic mishap—Providence rolled celestial dice at long odds?”

He glanced down at her. “God, I love the way you talk, and to think you were saying such things two hundred years ago.”

She laid a hand on his chest. “Half a year ago.”

Sam didn’t speak for a moment. “Yes.” He ran his hand down her back. “The scientist actually believed our thoughts and intentions when the roses shimmered could have played a part in your appearance.” Sam settled closer to her. “According to your journal, the day before you jumped to the present, you wanted someone to appreciate you for yourself and escape the house party. I needed a reason to stop and enjoy life. Our thoughts could have influenced your successful travel across time.” He smiled at her. “I wouldn’t call your presence here long odds or a dice throw.”

“Oh, and how would you describe it?” She ran her fingers over his chest, and then impulsively tucked her hand under his sweater, amazed at her daring, running her hand over his naked torso, making his muscles jump. He laughed and took her other hand in his.

She so was consumed with exploring under the sweater, she didn’t hear him at first when he said, “Now why should I answer any more of your questions, when you won’t answer even *one* of mine?”

She pursed her mouth, but saw he was anticipating the appearance of her dimple, and stopped. “What question?”

He cupped her chin in his hand and kissed her, then laid his hand over hers still wandering under his sweater. “I can’t concentrate when you are doing that. Will you marry me?”

She hesitated to broach the subject but had to. “Sam, I am the most ignorant of women. I know nothing of this age. You will be forever explaining the world to me, too often an embarrassment. I want to be an equal partner in our marriage. And how can I ever be that?” She scowled. “I have attained

only a trifling notion of what relationships in marriage require in this day and age.” She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. “A lifetime of study would not prepare me.” Absently, she rubbed her hand across his. “I fear I would bore you to spigots within a fortnight.”

For a long while Sam didn’t say anything. He simply held her and gazed out the windows before them. She began to fear she had convinced him of her unsuitability.

“I still have difficulty imagining what the experience must have been for you, to be thrust into the middle of my time—and I was right there, watching you struggle with the experience.” He ran thoughtful fingers through her hair and down her cheek, his eyes tracing their path. “You are amazing.” His hand produced the most delicious tremors down her arms.

He laid a finger along her jaw and turned her face to him. His thumb caressed her chin and lips as he spoke. “I think the biggest chore I face in marrying you will be keeping up.” He smiled tenderly. “Bore me? Not possible. From the start, I’ve had to run to keep pace with you—that is, when you weren’t completely surprising me with some unexpected idea or solution to an impossible problem.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her. His wonder and respect played along her lips, as his hands weaved through her hair. She felt she’d melt and grabbed his sweater to hold herself upright. When he ended the kiss, they were both breathing hard.

“Another demanding task when I marry you will be to remind you of all the astonishing, brilliant, and extremely admirable things you do and have done already. One failing you seem to have is a pitiful memory.”

She frowned at him, half-playfully, unsure of what he meant.

“You have organized and conquered my company’s premier project, the entire renovations for Belton Park, the finances,

the staff, my clients, the history of this place, sundry tourists, my employees and family, all while struggling to bridge a two-hundred-year gap in ...” He thought a moment. “... well, in everything.” He smiled at her. “And that conquest includes me.”

Tory stared at him for a moment, confused. “I certainly did not set out to conquer you, Mr. Dalton.”

“A good thing too. I would have fallen much sooner and been a hopeless wreck by now.”

She made a face at him and shook her head. “All I did was what any woman would have done while mistress of a great estate.”

“I seriously doubt *any* woman would have accomplished the same—certainly not with me, babe.”

She blushed at the ‘not with me, babe,’ and popped him in the shoulder with her free hand but pursed her lips at his other remarks. “It’s true, Mr. Dalton.” She raised her brows in worry. “I have failed in any number of my duties.”

Sam eyed her askance, his doubt making her raise her chin. “In point of fact, I have not *once* visited Lord Covington’s tenants or seen to their needs. They must be sorely tried by my oversight now that it is winter.” Sam frowned quizzically.

“I had expected Lord Covington to invite them to the ball, so they could dance at the windows and our guests could toss them coins. Parsons had a bucket full of shillings ready at my request.”

Sam laughed. Tory scowled at him. “I wanted to be prepared.”

Shrugging, she said, “Well, perhaps it is a silly tradition, but our tenants centuries past seemed to enjoy the frivolity of it.” Sam just laughed harder and held her tighter. She stiffened in annoyance for making such sport of her explanations and gave him an elbow in the ribs.

He gave a mock groan, but still chuckled. “I can see my work is cut out for me. Lord Covington has lots of *renters*, but most aren’t tenant farmers. You didn’t fail at anything or anyone there.”

She sighed. “I am not surprised by the news. Lord Covington never once mentioned his work with his tenants. For a long time, I assumed he just didn’t want my help, having done it alone for so long.” She rubbed her face with her hands. “I should have ferreted the truth out months ago.” She gave him a one-eyed glance. “But I have been distracted by a great many things this half-year.”

“Yes, I’d say so.” Sam gazed down at her in his arms. “You, woman, are a wonder, and I don’t want you to change at all. Of course, there are any number of things I am looking forward to teaching you.” The heat in his glance made Tory blush and smile all at once over the shared, intimate implications.

His voice lowered, and the soothing sound thrummed through her. “I love you so much it hurts. I love you enough to span a millennium of customs if necessary.” He held her shoulders. “I need you. I want you to distraction. Only you could have saved my sorry self. So now, will you marry me?”

She played with the sleeve of his sweater, imagining for the thousandth time how it would be married to him, to travel about the world, bear his children, and grow old together. So many unknowns. But Sam was right. How many incredible unknowns had she faced already? She needn’t face them alone ever again. And Sam Dalton was a far more promising unknown than she could hope for. It was what she wanted, now more than ever.

Tory took a deep breath and recited the words expected of a gentlewoman. “Yes, Mr. Dalton, I would be honored and delighted to be your wife.” She pursed her lips. “Satisfied?”

He laughed and hugged her, and she laughed too.

“I do love you.”

“I doubt I will ever tire of hearing it.” She ran her hand over his cheek and gazed into his warm eyes. “I love you too, desperately, from your decisive mien, teasing humor, principled mind to your warm and caring heart and even your ready temper.”

Sam eyed her. “Even that?”

“And even that—to a point.” Tory grinned. “Your temper springs from a passionate soul.” They gazed at each other content, yet a general tingle of anticipation made it difficult for Tory to sit still.

So, she took hold of his sweater. “Now you know all my secrets and I have answered your question, sir.” She eyed him expectantly. “If my appearance here isn’t some scientifically perverse roll of the dice, how would you portray it?”

“You’re a stubborn woman, Victoria Ann Covington.” Sam pursed his lips for a moment. “How would I put it? What would I call you finding me across two centuries?” He kissed her, held her tight, and looked into her eyes. “A miracle.”

Epilogue

“Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

—Confucius

An Afternoon, Weeks Later

Tory and Sam strolled arm-in-arm along the garden walkways talking of the future and Belton Park. The cold unnoticed, they strolled at a languid pace, Tory periodically sharing what she knew of the gardens’ history and the improvements. Sam didn’t think he’d ever felt this at peace with the world. He was in no hurry, content in the present, Tory’s voice weaving a familiar spell over the surroundings. That is, when he wasn’t interrupting her with a kiss.

“Mr. Dalton!” Up the garden walk hurried, of all people, Dr. Leonard Tildon, waving a folder. “Lord Covington said I would find—” Tildon stopped abruptly and stared at Tory. He recovered but didn’t lose the awe in his voice. “You’re Victoria Covington.”

Sam tensed, unsure where this would lead, what Tildon would do. He obviously had done his research on Victoria and Belton Park. He’d just confirmed his suspicions about why Sam had contacted him.

“It’s Mrs. Victoria Dalton now.”

Sam frowned at Tildon’s continued slack-jawed wonder. “Tory, this is Professor Tildon from Cambridge. I told you about him.”

Surprising him, his wife calmly smiled and with her hand out, said, “Professor Tildon, it is a pleasure. From what Sam has told me, we owe you our gratitude.” Sam glanced at Tory. *What was she doing?*

Tildon took her hand and shook it, the amazement in his expression growing as his eyes followed her hand back to its resting place on Sam’s arm. A smile spread across his face.

“Uh, the pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Dalton. The portrait I saw online doesn’t do you justice.”

“Thank you.” She gestured toward the Manor. “We were about to go in for tea. Will you join us?”

Sam gave Tory a quizzical frown, eyebrow raised by way of asking, *What the hell are you doing?* She just smiled and patted his arm.

“Yes. Yes, that would be wonderful.” Tildon glanced at Tory repeatedly as they entered the Manor House. Tea was set out on a low table. Tory served the two men and then sat by Sam, fingering her star pendent. Opposite, Tildon sat in chair facing them, furtively glancing at Tory.

After a period of silently drinking tea, Tory said, “What brings you here today, Professor?”

“Well, I ...” He picked up the folder he’d been carrying and handed it to Sam. “I guess this could be a wedding present.” Sam slipped a stapled set of papers out of the folder and showed it to Tory. It was an article, “Quantum Time Travel.”

“Our discussion and your questions provided more perspective on my theory. The article is the result.”

Tory tapped the paper. “Am I in this article?”

“No, no. I wouldn’t do that, even if I could provide *convincing* proof of my theory.”

Sam relaxed somewhat. “Have you submitted to a scientific journal?”

“Not yet. I wanted to ask you two some questions if I may, about ... about the day ...”

Tory offered an indulgent nod. “What do you want to know?”

Tildon scooped around the couch like nervous racehorse. “I can’t believe you are willing ...” With growing excitement, he took out a notebook, settled leaning forward, pen in hand.

“What was the sequence of events that led to ... that you two experienced?”

For the next hour Sam and Tory related what they remembered of that day. Finally, Tory stood. “Is there anything else you want to know?”

“Well, no, not at the moment, though ...”

“You are welcome to visit any time.”

Tildon stared in disbelief. “Why are ...?”

“With this knowledge, you are now a member of a very select group ... of four. I felt you deserved to know what we experienced. We owed you that.” After a pause laden with meaning, she said, “If you discover others, please inform us.”

Taking his arm, she led Tildon to the front hall. Dropping her hand, she smiled. “I know you will want to remain a member of our group.” Tildon nodded, puzzled. “Sam and I may share our experience with others, invite others into our travel club, but you can’t inform or invite anyone, and you know why. Any effort to do so, would lose your membership.”

Tildon nodded thoughtfully, then looked at them with a grin. “I won’t do anything to endanger such a priceless association.” He shook their hands. With one more glance at Tory, a mumbled “Amazing,” and a “Goodbye,” he drove away.

Standing in the driveway watching Tildon’s car disappear around a hedge, Sam frowned. One arm around Tory, he said, “Why did you admit to who you are?”

“I saw no point in lying to him when he wouldn’t have believed it. I thought it better to accept that he knew and—how would you phrase it?—‘and work with that?’”

Sam laughed. “Well, okay. I know the poor guy has fallen under your spell, but how do you know he won’t let others know, trying to prove his theory?”

Tory put her arm around his waist and laid her head on his arm. “Oh, he’s a gentleman and loves to know secrets others don’t. He will cherish being a member of our exclusive time

travel club. Besides, if he did tell anyone, who would believe him?" She shrugged. "Then again, with the last seven months of severe practice, I have become exceedingly accomplished at fabrication."

Sam chuckled as he bent down to kiss her thoroughly.

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