



LYDIA LLOYD

WHEN THE
DUKE
LOVED ME



THE RAKE CHRONICLES

WHEN THE DUKE LOVED
ME

A Rake Chronicles Romance

Lydia Lloyd



When the Duke Loved Me

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Dedication

For my husband,
who believed in Lydia
before I did.

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Content Warning

While this book is more angsty than dark in tone and of course ends in an HEA, it does touch on some difficult subjects. It briefly describes sexual assault and predatory sexual behavior towards a minor. The book also contains a short representation of traumatic childbirth and discusses death caused by childbirth; lastly, it features a character who chooses not to parent a birth child.

CHAPTER ONE

Hampshire, England

July 1808

JOHN BREMINSTER SURVEYED the ballroom and smirked at his good fortune. No one stopped before him and bowed, no society mamas whispered in their daughters' ears as he passed, and no bright, false smiles flashed his way. The fine country people of Hampshire paid him no more mind than any other nominal gentleman. He was no longer the Marquess of Forster, heir to one of the richest dukedoms in England. No, tonight he was another man entirely. He had transformed into someone commonplace and it felt amazing. Better than wine, better than whiskey, better than winning at cards or walloping his friends in a curricule race.

Only one thing, in his experience, eclipsed the pleasure of his current subterfuge: a beautiful woman, bare and eager before him.

And tonight he would add to that lovely sight a singular enhancement. The woman he bedded this evening would be utterly ignorant of his true identity. She would fall prey only to *his* charms, not those of pedigree or coin.

He had, of course, not pulled off his transformation alone. His three best friends had spread his new name among the guests. He was now Mr. Overton, supposed penniless vicar and distant cousin of the Viscount Tremberley, one of said best friends and the host of this very ball.

Since they had left Oxford two months ago, the *ton* had dubbed John and his three best friends the Rank Rakes. They had earned their charming new moniker because they were all titled—and had quickly steeped themselves in the type of vice and dissipation that high society tacitly accepted but publicly deplored. John tended to regard the commentary about their

conduct as absurd overreaction. Really, to call them *rakes* was a bit much.

Although, he thought, with a grin he failed to stifle, he *was* currently pretending to be someone else to give novelty to the act of seduction.

He was now affecting—rather well, he thought—the manner of a poor relation on his first trip to his great cousin’s countryseat. He stood to the side of the room, the arms of his plain wool coat crossed, as if he were struggling to compose himself amidst the unfamiliar splendor.

Scanning the crush for a suitable woman, John noticed one of his best friends, the Earl of Montaigne, flirting with a particularly buxom maid. Montaigne seemed to have waylaid the girl on her way to the retiring room, where she would see to the needs of the ladies in attendance. A maid couldn’t very well ignore the entreaties of an earl but John could see that her lingering presence in the ballroom was causing eyebrows to raise amongst the other guests. The *ton* would never tolerate such behavior. The people here this evening, however, were only good Hampshire gentry. They would neither complain to Tremberley about an errant servant girl nor recognize John as the Marquess of Forster.

John suppressed an amused scowl at Montaigne’s characteristic behavior. His friend was addicted to women far below his station—servants were his particular vice—and he had clearly found his quarry for this trip to Tremberley Manor.

“God, Montaigne’s at it again,” said a voice from just behind him. He turned to see the last of their quartet, the Marquess of Leith, emerge from the darkness of a nearby balcony.

“He really must stop with the servants,” Leith continued, his eyes still trained on Montaigne. “It’s becoming grotesque.”

“Leith,” John objected, “you know servants are Montaigne’s *raison d’être*. He will never give them up. We’ll be in our seventies—you, me, and Trem long put through the

society ringer, old bastards who only care for whist and whiskey—and Montaigne will be below stairs, flirting with the housekeeper, the scullery maid, and the cook at the same time.”

Leith scoffed. John knew better than to think he was really disgusted. They watched as Montaigne dismissed the girl. The genteel faces on the other side of the room relaxed. They might be minor gentry and unlanded clergy but these people knew the reputation of the Rank Rakes and they didn't want to regret having brought their daughters to this entertainment. Nevertheless, John would bet his life that the girl had just agreed to meet Montaigne in his bed later that evening.

“I'd like to see him try and seduce someone unmoved by the sight of a guinea.”

“You'll have to tell him yourself. Mr. Overton would never speak to an earl in such an impertinent manner.”

“I forgot your little game.” Leith eyed the drab, cheap clothing of his disguise. “In that case, I won't waste any more time conversing with a man so unequal to myself.”

John laughed as Leith slid away. He was most likely headed to the corner of the ballroom to perform social penance with the matrons and long-shelved spinsters. Regardless of whatever self-inflicted punishment Leith took on now, John knew he would end the night with the courtesan he had invited down from London and whose good looks and bright gown announced her profession to anyone who cared to take notice. Montaigne might love a servant but not more than Leith loved a high-class harlot.

John returned to evaluating the crush, casting about for a woman who might be to his tastes.

Instead he caught sight of Tremberley signaling to him from the other side of the ballroom. He stood next to his current obsession, a woman he had rhapsodized about for nearly a week: Miss Marisa Plinty, a voluptuous raven-haired young widow, apparently known throughout the parish as

wild, unconventional and uninterested in marrying again. She and Tremberley had been exchanging lewd notes for weeks.

The viscount tipped his head once more in the direction of Miss Plinty and a young woman standing beside her. The other chit was largely obscured by the crowd, but John doubted that she would be worth his while. However, if he ignored Tremberley any longer, he would endanger his game. A man like Mr. Overton would never fail to heed his noble relative, which Tremberley, of course, knew very well.

John loped in his best friend's direction, losing sight of him for a moment due to the tightly packed bodies. Finally, he came upon the trio right near the edge of the dance.

He could see the young woman who was not Miss Plinty clearly now. She was clad in light pink but the color was too unremarkable for a woman so striking. Her dress courted obscurity while she refused to cooperate. Her blond hair appeared from certain angles nearly silver. She was tall—almost at his shoulder—and her frock had a fashionable bodice that made her round, full breasts no secret. John noticed the way a flush stole up her exposed décolletage to her cheeks.

Pretty, unusually pretty even, but not what he was looking for tonight. Or any night, really. Respectable, marriageable girls never were. Despite her allure, there was no mistaking that this girl, whoever she might be, was a young lady of the gentry looking for her match.

“Mr. Overton,” Tremberley said, forcing John to look away from the young lady in the pink dress. “Please let me introduce you to Miss Plinty and to her cousin, Miss Musgrave, visiting from Derbyshire.”

Both women dropped into curtseys—not as low as those he usually received as a future duke—and John gave a more dramatic bow than that he would normally tender towards two gentry chits from neither title nor family. He reminded himself to adjust his greeting to match his new persona.

“The pleasure is all mine, ladies. I hope you excuse the intrusion. While there is much beauty arrayed here tonight, I saw you both and resolved that I must become acquainted.”

Miss Plinty tittered. Miss Musgrave simply raised her eyebrows. Their eyes met and he felt a shock of attraction reverberate from his molars down to his heels. It was desire, unmistakable and almost painful. And very unwelcome.

The blue of her eyes was so dark that it appeared, at turns, almost black. When she raised her eyes to his own, though, they appeared only a sensuous navy. The contrast with her pale skin and silvery hair made his breath catch.

He cleared his throat.

What was wrong with him?

He had to master himself. He couldn't let his excitement at being free of his usual identity lead him to be overpowered by the first attractive female in sight. After all, he was used to beautiful women. He had had more than his fair share and he intended to continue. To be safe, he resolved not to speak to her, instead turning his attention towards Tremberley and Miss Plinty.

Still he couldn't stop himself from looking at the beguiling girl while his best friend and Miss Plinty exchanged pleasantries clunky with double entendre.

John sighed in frustration.

He knew what Tremberley wanted. He wanted what Tremberley *always* wanted when he signaled to you from across the ballroom.

John had to dispose of Miss Musgrave so that Tremberley could get Miss Plinty alone.

He was already trapped. He had no means of escape. Not if he wanted to keep his cover as Mr. Overton.

John gritted his teeth and turned towards the girl.

“Would you do me the honor of the next dance, Miss Musgrave?”

“It would be a pleasure, sir,” she said, her voice cool and light, a little haughty even, and she gave another of her shallow curtseys. As she dipped, she flashed a smirk, as if she knew exactly what Tremberley had just done to him. He cursed inwardly—and, yet, even as he did so, he couldn’t help admiring the creamy stripe of bosom that her curtsey revealed.

As he led her to the dance, he spared a glare backwards for Tremberley, who threw him a wink. He had been right—his friend clearly had plans for Miss Plinty that didn’t involve her maiden cousin.

At the center of the room, they glided into their positions. After the requisite two turns, he would pawn her off on Leith, who would hopefully still be interested in making up for Montaigne’s bad behavior. This evening John had every intention of misbehaving himself.

That plan faded the moment he took Miss Musgrave’s hand in the first sequence. John had thought dancing would dispel his attraction to her—he didn’t particularly care for the pastime; it was always a sure way to have him tire of a woman—but, instead, his initial instinct only deepened.

They had little opportunity to speak. The dance was fast and the thrum of conversation filled the room. Instead he watched her. Her eyes moved appraisingly over everything in their wake, her expression cheerful yet tinged with irony. She seemed aware that she was playing a role, the young miss at a country ball, but nevertheless her conduct was perfect, her every move in good taste. When their hands touched, he felt something disturbingly akin to yearning. He felt like he was in a bad novel, of the type his sister Henrietta had just discovered.

Yet this self-mocking thought would be chased from his mind the minute their fingers touched again.

John was so agitated after their two dances that he followed convention. He led her to an empty seat at the edge of the ballroom and proffered the following gem: “Would you like refreshment, Miss Musgrave?”

Usually, he knew how to delight a lady by staying just within the bounds of propriety. Now, he offered this line, delivered with the stiffness of an idiot just out of the nursery, to the bewitching woman before him.

He tried to train his countenance back into the familiar set of the bored aristocrat, before remembering that he was not supposed to be a brooding nobleman but Mr. Overton, the good-tempered vicar. So then he smiled, wide and inviting.

God, she must think I'm mad.

“You aren't going to set me here and dash off elsewhere, are you, Mr. Overton? If you're done with me for the evening, it is better to say it than pretend you are being a gentleman.”

“Not at all, Miss Musgrave. You mistake my intention,” he replied before he could check himself. That *had* been his intention. But now he was far from sure of his intentions. “I only worry for your comfort. If it is not refreshment, what is it that you desire?”

He sounded like an arse but at least he was managing whole sentences.

“To see the grounds.”

She flashed the same mischievous smirk she had before their dance.

This time, it made his bones ache.

And then the meaning of her words washed over him. She wanted to *leave* the ballroom. To go into the night. Alone and unchaperoned. *With him.*

He had never met a lady this forward. Could she be some sort of pickpocket murderess in disguise? Trying to cut his throat and take his blunt? Gently bred young ladies never made such bold requests. Although she *was* a relative of

Tremberley's Miss Plinty, which might go some way to explaining her forwardness. Even still, her request was very unusual.

"I am a bit of a history enthusiast, you see, Mr. Overton," she continued, lowering her voice. "And I want to see the ruins. The Tremberley Ruins. I understand that the viscount does not allow visitors into his gardens—but I am dying to see them for myself."

My God, is this chit flirting with me so that she can see the heap of old stones Tremberley has in the garden?

Tremberley received frequent requests from various quarters to tour the ruins. Lazy rogue that he was, he had put out that he disliked showing them—something about an old family dispute or some nonsense—because visitors cut into his time being a debauched layabout who only hunted, feasted and fucked.

At any rate, John would show her the stones. Tremberley wouldn't care a whit. He would be delighted that the old ruins, which he regarded as eyesores, had finally come to a use he could appreciate.

Because if John took her into the gardens, there was no doubt as to what he would attempt. His attraction to her was too marked to ignore.

A beautiful woman just to his taste asking him to see the grounds—well, how was he supposed to resist that lure?

If she would let him, he would ruin her.

John realized that Miss Musgrave was tracing the consternation on his face. She was probably worried he would censure her for prying into Tremberley family matters or rebuff her request as improper.

He stood and held out his arm.

"Whatever you wish, Miss Musgrave."

John tried to ignore the pleasure that radiated through him when she placed her hand on his elbow. He needed to control

himself. To approach her like a man, not a rutting animal. If he was going to ruin her, if he was going to have that on his soul, then he wanted her to beg for it.

He knew he should surrender her to the ballroom and walk away. He shouldn't be leading her out into the dark grounds. Not when her touch gnawed at his self-restraint.

And yet he couldn't relinquish her arm.

They exited into the hallway and then out the passage that led to the gardens. He nabbed a lantern from the wall and they left the manor, finding the gravel path that wound down to the ruins.

The cool night was heaven in contrast to the heat of the ballroom. The fresh air filled his lungs. He concentrated on walking, still trying to disregard her nearness. Their solitude seemed to press down on them, dissipating the flirtation of moments before. Her silence seemed an acknowledgment of the risk they had taken in leaving the safety of the assembled guests and setting out into the night alone.

"I assure you the ruins are really unremarkable," he finally said, trying not to choke over the words. Aloud in the night air, his voice was surprisingly smooth. The lantern illuminated the way through the garden and he could just see the looming silhouettes of the Tremberley Ruins up ahead. "I saw them for the first time yesterday afternoon with the viscount. I think he would have them cleared away if keeping them intact weren't part of the entail. They destroy all his plans for fashionable landscaping."

He couldn't forget his assumed identity, he warned himself. In her mind-addling presence, it would be an easy thing to do. His Mr. Overton scheme was working even better than he had ever dreamed, although it was leading him down far riskier paths.

"You can't be serious." Her tone was almost as light as it had been inside, making him wonder if he had read her silence wrong. "They were built in the time of the *Romans*."

John shrugged. He wanted to tell her that Tremberley didn't care about history, only about his next erotic conquest and showing up rivals from Eton, but Mr. Overton, the poor cousin, would never be that disrespectful, so he said nothing.

She dropped his arm and moved away from him towards the stones. Her departure made a spot just above his sternum throb. But he let her go, knowing that the space would help him think clearly—a faculty he sorely needed.

“I am glad that Lord Tremberley cannot uproot them. God knows what monstrosity he would erect in their place.”

“He is mad to even think of it.”

John had to smile at the blithe way she insulted a nobleman. Clearly, her enthusiasm for the stones was real. It hadn't been a feint. Perhaps, he thought with displeasure, she really had nothing untoward in mind when she had asked for an escort.

“Do you truly think Lord Tremberley would dispose of them if he could?”

John bit back his own laughter at this question, reminiscing about Tremberley stalking across the grass and kicking the stones and yelling at his steward, the impassive Mr. Foxcroft, that he wanted the damn things *out*.

“I am sure of it. And I understand his feelings. Lord Tremberley wants to control what belongs to him. He doesn't want his present dictated by the past.”

“These ruins are a miracle.” Her dismay was severe and yet, somehow—damn her—he found it arousing. “He can't escape the past. No one can. What we have of history is just the scraps—but we have to try to understand it anyway.”

John didn't answer. He could be relied upon to proffer a wry comment or charming anecdote but speculative metaphysical conversation was something he generally disdained. He never spoke like this to anyone.

In the lantern light, she was searching his face with those dark blue beams again.

Then she dropped her eyes altogether. And she began to tug on one of her long white gloves.

She was removing her gloves.

The sight made his blood boil.

“May I have the lantern?” Her voice was once more a slip of cool calm.

John handed it to her, his fingertips grazing her now-bare ones. Even from this glancing contact, he had to hold back a groan.

He watched her half-lit form flit from stone to stone. She ran her hands over the strange indentations, as if she could read their ancient language by touch. She then peered down over the mosaic and traced her fingers over its design, murmuring and smiling. He could not believe the pleasure he was taking from watching this woman study these crumbling stones. When she sighed and ran her fingers over their edifices, he *envied* the stones.

He had never met a woman who cared more for old stones than for him. When he was himself, he was used to the fawning and simpering of ladies. It was the first time he had been passed over for a ruin. He would have preferred her open and willing in his arms but he could appreciate the novelty of the situation.

Perhaps if she knew who he really was, she wouldn't ignore him in favor of the ruins. And yet John wanted to believe that she would have ignored any man for these stones. Watching her, he did believe it.

When he thought she had forgotten him completely, her voice floated to him across the darkness.

“You know the story of the Tremberley Ruins, don't you?”

He smiled at the question. It proved that her mind was only on the stones.

“I thought you said all history was just grasping at scraps?” He wanted to rile her and draw her attention. He was rewarded when her gaze drifted in the direction of his voice.

“Sometimes the scraps have to do.”

“I don’t know it. The story.”

And it was true. He didn’t.

Miss Musgrave raised her eyes once more, searching for his face beyond the radius of the lantern light. She was illuminated—he could see all of her—but he was in darkness. Finally, her eyes located his form in the shadows.

“You are Lord Tremberley’s cousin and you don’t know the legend?”

Bollocks. John Breminster not knowing the story made sense enough but Mr. Overton was a different matter altogether. He tried to find a plausible reason for this ignorance. The younger, poorer branches of great families tended to know the famed stories even better than the dukes and the earls. Lesser relations’ connection to a great family was an asset that needed to be constantly burnished.

He cleared his throat. “I am sure I knew once, when I was a child. But I have forgotten.”

Her eyes narrowed at this inadequate explanation. For what felt like an unbearable length of time, neither of them said a word.

John took a step forward into her circle of light. “Tell me the story.”

She stared at him for another heavy second. Then her gaze turned back to the ruins. “See the mosaic,” she said, pointing downward. “How it has these tiles, and the symbol in the middle—the animal? It’s the triple-tailed horse of the Atrebates. They say the king built this whole site. The entire structure was once a temple with this image at the center. See how they stand in a circle?”

He murmured his assent, moving deeper into the light. He felt he might lose control if he got any nearer to her and yet he couldn't resist the pull of her voice. The thought that he had been so close to her before, with her arm in his, made him feel a bit light-headed, as though he had been walking along the edge of a steep cliff without realizing it.

“When the Romans invaded what we now call Hampshire,” she continued, her voice going even lower, drawing him another step nearer, “instead of destroying the ruling tribe and its king, they decided it would be wiser to keep them in power as rulers loyal to them. To avoid slaughter, the Atrebates agreed. Looking to cement the loyalty of the local king, who was old and feeble, the Romans demanded that his son, his heir, marry the daughter of their general.”

He was standing in front of her now. If he wanted, he could close the length in one stride. But her eyes were still downcast, trained on the ruins.

“The problem was that the heir loved another woman—who he had known since he was a child. But the Roman general insisted and he had no choice. The heir agreed to marry the Roman girl. When she heard what the heir had promised, the woman he loved drowned herself in the Alre. The heir was devastated. He refused to bed his new bride and never produced a son to replace himself. The tribe fell into ruin. His heartbreak made his sacrifice amount to nothing. Instead of tending to his people, he built this temple. He thought if he built the perfect temple, she would come back to him.”

“And did she?” John asked the question without thinking, needing to know.

Miss Musgrave looked up at him in surprise. “She was dead.”

“Sometimes, in old stories, the dead come back to life.”

She shook her head. “Not in this one.”

The glow of the story, its warm sorrow, snapped the last of his restraint.

John stepped forward and took her bare hand in his own.

She startled but didn't draw away. He examined her fingers in the glow cast by the lantern. They were stained with ink. When his fingertips ran over the ink stains, she laughed and tried to pull her hand away. In doing so, she twisted closer to him, brushing up against him. He felt himself go hard at the contact, the softness of her body making all of him stiffen.

"My best ideas always come to me right before I dash out the door."

"And what was your idea tonight?" He imagined some note for her maid, or a shopping list, or a postscript to a letter.

"You will laugh." She paused, her expression uncertain. She looked once more into his face and then away again. "This is not my first time examining ruins. I am writing a book on the landmarks of England. Or, truly, the stories about them. I remembered how an old cottager once said that Corfe Castle looked like a single tooth poking up from a baby's gum. I thought it might make a pretty opening."

He looked down at her in disbelief. Who was she? What daughter of the gentry was writing a history of old stones? And yet he couldn't concentrate on the question.

"And do you find it inconvenient to have ink-stained fingers?"

"Only when I remove my gloves. Fortunately, a ball supper is usually conducted in near darkness. I am seldom revealed."

"So now you have been unmasked."

She gave him that radiant, mischievous smile again, the smooth apples of her cheeks catching the lantern light.

He reached down and softly kissed her. She returned his kiss with a pressure of her own. Her mouth, her taste, enveloped him, so sweet it threatened to undo him, but he fought to keep his kiss gentle, teasing her lips with his tongue

and drawing out from her a mewl of pleasure. Every bit of him tensed as she pressed herself into him and she opened her mouth to let him in further. He felt a groan escape his own lips. He would have been embarrassed by the sound—how she reduced him—but she felt too exquisite for him to care.

She broke away from him. He held still. He didn't want to take anything that wasn't freely given. That was, after all, the whole purpose of this evening, of his ruse, of being Mr. Overton. He wanted a woman to give herself to him and him alone, not a title or the idea of a man.

“I hardly know you.” She said the words so softly he would have missed them if he hadn't been starving for her voice.

“We can return to the manor.” He put all the sincerity he could into this statement but he was careful not to sound eager. He wasn't that much of a gentleman.

She said nothing in response.

John wanted more than anything to stay here with her. Still he held back his arts of persuasion. She needed to choose what came next.

Her fingers began tracing underneath his waistcoat, roving from the planes of his chest downwards. He stifled his reaction, still waiting for her to fully commit, but her fingers through the fabric tantalized him, making his breath come fast and shallow. He closed his eyes, the sight of her combined with her touch too much to take. Then, he felt her mouth on his again, teasing his open, sending shivers of desire from his lips to his groin.

“God, you're perfect,” he said, breaking the kiss. It was a reflex he couldn't suppress, just as he couldn't stop himself from reaching forward and wrenching down her tight bodice as he had wanted to since he had first laid eyes on her.

Exposed, her breasts were even more beautiful than he had imagined, her hardened nipples a pale raspberry that looked almost painfully sweet, just like her mouth. He cupped their

soft fullness in his palms before reaching down and taking the pebbled peaks into his mouth, glorying in the moans that he drew from her with each stroke of his tongue.

From within his arousal, he felt the urge to speak, to say again how she was perfection itself, but he found that it would kill him to form words. He had to completely surrender to this sensation. To her.

Because, with her against him, his mouth on her breasts, his hands exploring the peaks and hollows of her body, he knew the truth. He would marry her tomorrow if she wanted. He would marry her for only a few minutes more right now. He would make her his marchioness if it meant he could have her now and then again and again. He would have thought she was a witch, if she wasn't beyond loveliness, beyond perfection, beyond life as he had ever known it. Her body, her mischievous smile, her grace, and the way she had told that story. That story which seemed, in a way that he didn't understand, something like the story of his own life.

He couldn't say that right now, though, because he had to fill his senses with her. He lifted her up towards him and her legs clasped around him. Through the fabric of her dress, she pressed her heat to his cock, which strained against his breeches with an insistence previously unknown to him.

If you had asked him that morning if he found the Tremberley Ruins erotic, he would have laughed. Yet, if she would let him, he knew that he would not be able to stop. His shame at his abandon, at his ruining a gently bred woman on a pile of rocks, would only be a drop in the sea of his pleasure.

Carefully, he pushed her back on one of the long, tablet-like stones. He kissed her again, drinking her in, and into this fierce, wanting kiss, he put all his hunger for her, and she responded in kind.

Just as he had completely given himself over to this kiss, to the certainty of what would soon follow, he heard shouting. John ignored it and she did the same, not startling beneath him.

Instead, she reached for the falls of his breeches. Intoxicating sensation throttled through him as her hand rubbed his pulsing cock through the fabric. She looked up at him, that same beguiling smile playing across her face, but this time it sent a complete riot through his blood. More than anything, he wanted to plunge himself inside of her, to escape into the ecstasy that he knew awaited him there.

The shouting grew louder. He heard his name, his *real* name, *Forster*, and he realized that the shouting was for him.

Still he couldn't tear himself away. He hoped that whoever wanted to find him wouldn't. She was still stroking him through his breeches and, half mad, he found her skirts and began to push them upwards.

Light washed over them on their slab of ruin. She pulled back, looking in the direction of the shouting.

He turned towards the noise and the light. When his eyes adjusted to the brightness, he saw Tremberley standing over him, lantern in hand. Seconds later, Miss Plinty appeared at his shoulder.

“What the devil, Trem?”

His own voice sounded scarcely human, unrecognizable even to himself.

Tremberley cast the lantern down and bent over, trying to catch his breath.

In another scenario, John would have laughed at his friend's physical distress. But he was too angry now for mirth. He wanted to thrash Tremberley and only the hope that his best friend could soon be dispatched with kept him at bay.

Miss Plinty broke forward and lunged towards her cousin on the stone, grabbing her arm.

“He's not who he says he is, Catherine,” she said, her voice high with panic. “He's the *Duke of Edington*.”

Miss Musgrave looked alarmed. But then she laughed.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Marisa. The Duke of Edington is over forty years of age.”

Very true. But how did she know his father? Was she from Dorset? She had mentioned Corfe Castle, which wasn’t far from Edington Hall, his family’s countryseat, but he had hardly attended to it.

“You misunderstand. He is to *be* the Duke of Edington.”

“Properly, he is the Marquess of Forster,” Tremberley snapped.

John snorted. Tremberley never cared for rank until he did.

“This is ridiculous, Trem. What does it matter?”

He turned to his silver-haired beauty and gave a mock bow.

“You’ve caught me, Miss Musgrave. I am John Breminster, Marquess of Forster, at your service.”

His game for the evening—playing at Mr. Overton—hardly seemed consequential anymore. All he cared about now was *her*. That he be allowed back into her embrace. That they finish what had been interrupted.

When he rose from the bow, he saw that Miss Musgrave’s face had gone ashen.

“*You’re* the Marquess of Forster?”

“Yes. And I don’t want to blunt my own significance, but dare I ask, why should it matter to anyone here?”

“Because, mate,” Tremberley replied, “*she’s* Catherine Forster.”

Now he felt the blood drain from *his* face. He looked at *her* again and felt revolted—with himself most of all, for he should have known. With her silvery-blond hair and navy eyes, her smart mouth, her arcane facts, and most of all the power she had over him from first glance, how could she be anyone else? Of course she was a Forster. Not like him, who just carried the title, but a real one. The actual Forsters were a

different family altogether, although they too came from Edington, his parish, and had been there almost as long as the Breminsters. The *Forsters* had been the cause of the scandal that had destroyed his family and tarnished their name almost eleven years ago.

How could he have mistaken her for a common country girl? How could he have been so self-deceived? He could still feel his lust for her and something else, something tender and just beginning to come into being, pulsing below the surface of his humiliation.

“Get them off the grounds, Trem.”

He turned and walked towards the manor. He didn't spare another look at Catherine Forster.

It nearly killed him to turn his back on her.

But he wouldn't have been able to live with himself had he done anything else but walk away.

CHAPTER TWO

London, England

July 1815

Seven Years Later

MISS CATHERINE FORSTER, eight-and-twenty years of age, faced the men at the door and summoned her most regal bearing. She knew her dress had enjoyed a hard existence since she had first bought it from a Bond Street modiste too many years ago but her accent still suggested her education. Catherine hoped she could pass herself off as someone who had breeding *and* money—or as someone who could, at the very least, scrounge up a few pounds by the end of the week.

“Surely, you gentlemen are not going to put a sick child in *prison*,” she pleaded, putting on her best miss-of-Mayfair act, which was admittedly out of place in the doorway of crumbling 21 Halston Place.

“Not us,” grunted the short one. “Tis the order of the grocer and the clothier—they needs paying.”

“I think there has been a terrible mistake,” Catherine protested, angling her body to block the doorway, “because our account is not yet past due.”

“Nice ’un, miss,” the short man responded. “But we ’ave it on good authority that the misses and the little baronet at number 21 ’alston Place are to be taken to Marshalsea until the paying of their debts.”

“Good fellows,” she tried again, her mind working as they tried to muscle past her. They weren’t so callous as to bowl her out of the way completely—a promising sign. “Surely, we can come to a civilized agreement. My aunt...” Lady Wethersby wasn’t her aunt, really, but, in these situations, she simplified

“...will have the money soon. She has a sick child and has spent her funds physicking him.”

The tall man remained impassive. The short one stuck his head farther into the house, inserting his greasy crown into the space between her elbow and her hip. From most other men in London, the gesture would have been lascivious, but Catherine suspected that the only thing that raised this man’s pulse was the clink of coin falling into his hand.

Nevertheless, she rearranged herself roughly in the doorway, forcing the short man to pull back.

“If boy’s sick, where is ’e?”

Catherine took her opportunity. They had, after all, prepared.

“He is convalescing right here in the drawing room, nearly on his deathbed.”

She pushed the door behind her open, letting the man peer through the antechamber, but not surrendering her protective perch in the doorway. There, on a worn divan, lay Ariel Wethersby, his face a deathly white speckled with spots. Next to him, clutching his hand and looking stricken, sat his mother, Lady Wethersby. Ariel let loose a racking cough. When he removed his handkerchief from his mouth, it was covered in blood.

“We fear he has the smallpox,” she whispered to the short man, who stepped back quickly. “I don’t feel quite right myself. They say it’s terribly catching. If I gave you fellows a shilling apiece, perhaps you could tell Mr. Clapp and Mr. Sherman that you could not find us? We will pay our bill soon. The illness of the little one has taken a toll, but we will soon send the funds.”

The men now looked concerned with leaving as quickly as possible. Neither wanted to catch the disease that, if it didn’t kill you, left you disfigured for life. These two didn’t need any more demerits in the physical beauty category, Catherine thought, and they seemed to know it.

“C’mon, Ern,” the short one said, taking the shillings with his handkerchief. The tall man staggered down the steps after him.

Catherine shut the door and placed her back against it, heaving a sigh of relief before walking back into the drawing room.

“Good thinking with the blood, Ariel.” She reached the divan and picked up the handkerchief in which the boy had crushed a raspberry.

Ariel now pushed off the blanket, revealing himself to be a ten-year-old in blooming health. He began wiping his face clear of the thick paste in which they had coated him when they had heard the duns at the door.

“Although I think coughing up blood is a symptom of consumption rather than smallpox.”

“Mother told me to do it!” Ariel cried, halting his project of paste removal and throwing up his hands.

Lady Wethersby waved off this exclamation. “We needed to be *convincing*, my dears.”

“It did seem to scare them,” Ariel said, grinning. “They didn’t seem very clever.” His smile dimmed. “We have to think of something else to deal with the duns, though. I can’t go on dying forever.”

Lady Wethersby let out a squawk.

“Oh, Mother!” Ariel groaned. “Don’t cry.”

“To hear you talk of *duns*, my dear. What your father would say!”

Catherine felt a pang for Lady Wethersby, even though she was being ridiculous. It was just like Lady Wethersby to participate in a ruse to avoid debtors’ prison and then cry about their lost nobility. Not that their nobility *hadn’t* been lost. Catherine had to admit that dodging duns through ever-increasing schemes of desperation was, indeed, a long fall for Elena. It was also typical of Lady Wethersby to invoke how

her deceased husband would have disapproved of their current predicament when he was the one who had gotten her and Ariel into these difficulties in the first place. And Catherine, too, although Sir Francis's responsibility to her had been of a more tenuous nature.

"I *grieve* that I cannot provide more for the two of you. You both deserve so much better."

Lady Wethersby always claimed Catherine as one of her children. It made her more absurd—and at times even infuriating—behavior much more lovable.

"Don't worry, Elena," Catherine said, taking her hand. "I'll have the money soon. The editor at the *Winchester Daily* is going to pay me any moment now for my item on Castle Lachlan."

"We are so lucky to have you, Catherine. You, who work so hard for us."

With these words, Lady Wethersby threw her arms around Catherine and continued sobbing. Catherine patted her back and smiled at Ariel over her shoulder, who regarded his mother with his most exasperated expression. They had played out *many* similar scenes since the death of Sir Francis three years ago.

The death of the baronet had revealed the worst secret a member of the *ton* could harbor. The Wethersbys had run out of money. Sir Francis Wethersby had mismanaged his fortune, leaving his wife, his son and heir, and Catherine, who the Wethersbys had taken in when she was eleven after the death of her father, in seriously straitened circumstances. Their estate, Wethersby Park, had had to be rented to pay down their enormous debts. Since the late baronet's death, the three of them had subsisted on a small annuity from Ariel's great-aunt and Catherine's income from her history writing. Catherine wrote short articles for different newspapers on English ruins and landmarks. In the past three years, she had carved out this specialty, using pieces of a book she had been writing since she was sixteen.

Many would argue that women couldn't have academic expertise, but, luckily, no one in the newspaper world knew she was female, so she had managed thus far to avoid that pitfall. Readers loved her little folk histories, so editors kept asking for more and none had any idea that C.M. Forster, who wrote like a sprightly gentry gentleman of vigor and knowledge, was Miss Catherine Mary Forster, of the ruined Forster family and the disgraced Wethersbys, eking out a meager existence at dingy 21 Halston Place.

Unfortunately, she had almost run out of material. She had visited only so many ruins and collected only so much local folklore. And she didn't have the funds to travel to any new sites. She knew she could fabricate the histories, using her imagination and published travel diaries. But she loved her authentic little reports, made up of her descriptions of natural settings, regional myth, and conversation with real locals. The idea of cheapening her work pained her.

But they desperately needed the money. Last month, calamity had struck. Ariel's great-aunt had died, ending the annuity, and she had left no inheritance in its place as they had long hoped she would. Then, the duns had started to appear. They were unable to pay the bills that had maintained their bare gentility up until that point and which had been accrued back when they thought they still had the annuity. Now, they were forced to subsist only on Catherine's writing and her efforts had been...insufficient to say the least.

Catherine knew she had to keep trying. Elena would never say it, but part of the reason that Lady Wethersby and Ariel had it so hard was because of her. Many people had disagreed with Sir Francis's decision to take in the scandal-orphaned Catherine Forster, who looked, everyone said, so much like the woman who had unleashed it in the first place, her aunt, Miss Mary Forster. The scandal had ruined one of the oldest families in Britain, the Forsters, and the second involved, the Breminsters, had only hung on to societal acceptance by virtue of their vast fortune and high rank.

Sir Francis had insisted upon taking Catherine in, calling it a matter of honor. She was a child, an innocent, she had heard him say on multiple occasions, and her father had been his best friend. Therefore, when the Wethersby fortune was lost, fewer people tried to help Elena and Ariel than would have otherwise. Half the *ton* regarded their adoption of Catherine as an early sign of the Wethersbys' foolishness and the other half simply did not want to be associated with such total ruin in any way at all.

"Shall I put on the kettle?" Lady Wethersby said, raking away her tears and starting to smile.

Ariel rolled his eyes at his mother again and shook his head at Catherine. Elena often broke into tears of despair and then, with little warning, snapped back into her usual sunniness.

"Allow me to make you a cup, Catherine," Lady Wethersby pressed. "You deserve it—for all you do for us. Never thinking of yourself."

Ariel guffawed at his mother's mawkishness and Catherine laughed at his dismay, but, at the same time, she felt real gratitude for Lady Wethersby's kind words.

Because once, despite what Lady Wethersby said, Catherine *had* thought of herself. She had been one-and-twenty, well into marriageable age, and she had been so weary of how the Wethersbys' friends and acquaintances looked her over with pity. Catherine had wanted, for one night, to be someone other than the girl whose illustrious family had turned to ash and blown away. So she had convinced Marisa Plinty, who had been her best friend at school, to let her visit. She had begged Marisa to tell her Hampshire neighbors, all unknown to Catherine, that she was her cousin, Miss Musgrave. Her friend had obliged, letting her love of mischief overtake any shred of prudence she had left.

Back then, after the death of her strict middle-aged husband, Marisa had been newly and unexpectedly free—and thus more than a bit wild. Her friend had understood,

intuitively, without her having to explain, that Catherine had sought a little of that wildness for herself. Not long after that night, Marisa had run off with a linen draper and was now, to hear her tell it, quite happy, even if her relations had been horrified that she had remarried beneath her station.

But that night had taught Catherine that, for her, wanting pleasure, wanting freedom, wanting anything outside of her life with the Wethersbys, led only to danger and heartbreak. That night, she had led herself to the edge of ruin in more ways than one and nearly reignited the very scandal she had sought to escape. Her first foray into freedom had led her to the exact place she should not have been, alone with the exact man she should not have been with. It had been the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to her.

And for her that was quite the statement. After her first London season, her bar for total humiliation was really quite high. When she had been eighteen, Lady Wethersby had insisted that she debut, albeit in a quiet way, and she had even prevailed upon her husband to provide Catherine with a small dowry. Nevertheless, it had been a disaster. With her family history and lack of significant fortune, she was asked to dance only a handful of times. Any dreams she might have had for herself once—a husband, a family, a life that didn't revolve around her broken past—vanished.

There had been a great irony to her encountering John Breminster that night at Tremberley. Back then, she had heard reports from other members of the *ton* about the young marquess and his titled friends, who had all just finished school and come down to London for good. At that point, she had been sitting ignored in ballrooms for three years and the news that the heir of the Duke of Edington was beginning to make his rounds at *ton* parties had depressed her. She had begun to avoid the larger functions where she was likely to encounter him, dreading the possibility of being in the same room as the powerful young man who had every reason to loathe her. When they had both been children in Edington, she had only glimpsed him a few times and they had never met

formally. She had feared that he would say or do something to embarrass her if their paths crossed.

Of course, now she saw how foolish she had been. If she had known what he looked like, if she had seen him from across a ballroom, she wouldn't have been tricked by his false name and handsome face.

And then he wouldn't haunt her dreams. Because the humiliation didn't stop her from dreaming about that night—even seven years later. She dreamt of his touch, his mouth, his words in her ear. *God, you're perfect.*

She hadn't seen the marquess since that night. In the years before his death, Sir Francis had forgone a London season due to the illness that eventually killed him, although Catherine now saw that this evasion had also been a clever way to cover his dwindling coin. That said, she hadn't minded their absence from Mayfair at the time. She hadn't wanted to encounter the marquess after what had transpired between them.

The Marquess of Forster. How wrong that they shared a name when they were enemies. Her father had always resented the Breminsters for that very title because it had once belonged to their family. During the Civil War, the Forsters had supported Cromwell and, when Charles II came back into power, he had stripped titles from the aristocratic families that had been disloyal and rewarded those who had fought for the Crown. The Breminster family became the Dukes of Edington at this time and the king had given them the Forsters' title too, as a bitter punishment to their neighbors. Her father had always explained his disdain for the Duke of Edington with this bit of history. And then the scandal had happened and explanations of enmity were no longer needed.

Catherine had turned the scandal over thousands of times in her head. Part of her couldn't believe that society remained so fevered about it. Versions of the same thing happen every day among the *ton*. And yet she knew the shame was in the details. And in the publicity.

The year Catherine was ten, the Duke of Edington and his wife had had their annual garden party at their estate, Edington Hall. All of the genteel families of the region and many aristocrats from London had been in attendance. At this party, her aunt, Mary, and the Duke of Edington had been discovered *in flagrante* by a gaggle of society ladies, including the Duchess of Edington herself. The duchess had flown into a rage with the entire party as witness. Afterwards, her aunt disappeared, leaving no hint of where she had gone.

Then her father had done the worst thing of all. He had pursued a disastrous breach of promise suit against the duke. It had amplified the scandal, already well known to high society, across England. That had been the true stroke of financial and social ruin for her family. This move had absolutely appalled the aristocracy, who were used to infidelity but not notoriety so pervasive that it became widely known among commoners. The court case and thus the affair had been splashed in all the papers and society letters, making it one of the best-known scandals in England, not just by the aristocracy, but by, well, *everyone*.

The legal suit had lost her father his fortune and estate, Forster House. Days after his steward informed him that he had bankrupted himself, her father was found dead from an apoplexy on his bedroom floor. These days, Catherine tried not to think about her father or her aunt or Forster House itself. When she did, the pain was acute and physical. Like one of her organs was being removed from her body with a hacksaw.

The scandal had made her notorious by association. Decisions she had never made, rules she had never broken, passions she had never experienced—they had all determined her fate.

That was what she had been trying to escape that night at Tremberley. She had hoped to dance, to be admired, to have a little bit of the maidenhood that had been lost to her. And she had hoped to glimpse the Tremberley Ruins, so difficult to see with the viscount disallowing visitors and which she had wanted to study for her book. She had thought she was being

so clever combining research and pleasure when she asked the handsome vicar if he would take her to the gardens.

She would never forget how the marquess dismissed her when he found out her identity. *Get them off the grounds, Trem.* Like she was nothing.

Her eyes flew open, the thought running through her.

Tremberley.

Catherine had an idea.

She had been running out of material but she had not written about those ruins. She did not like to think of them as ruins, as *history*, because of that night.

“What?” Ariel said, reacting to her expression. “What is it, Cathy?”

“I have to write my editor.”

“An idea for an article?” Ariel said, hopefully. Catherine could see Ariel translating her wide eyes into treacle tarts and fresh scones and roasted turkey, the foods he loved to eat most and that had been, as of late, very scarce.

Her love for Ariel and Lady Wethersby radiated through her chest. She had to write to the editor of the *Winchester* immediately and ask about her payment—and propose her next column. She had to try for Ariel and Lady Wethersby. Her first family had been ruined by scandal and madness. She wasn’t going to let her second one be destroyed by penury.

“Good gracious! We’re out of tea.” Lady Wethersby held up the porcelain pot and its empty bottom reflected all of Catherine’s anxieties back to her.

“It’s no matter. I’ll write my editor.” She willed herself to push her fears aside. “And I will get us the money.”

CHAPTER THREE

JOHAN BREMINSTER, THE new Duke of Edington, stood outside 21 Halston Place, watching a very squat man and a very tall man walk away from the entrance. Their dodgy features and worn clothing announced them as duns. He wondered if they had the same prey and whether she was inside. The presence of the duns did not surprise him. The occupants could not have much money.

John had only been duke for a fortnight. His father had died, suddenly, from a fever, and John was still in shock from the speed with which his life had changed. He had not even known his father was ill. The fever had taken him that quickly.

When he heard that his father was dead, John rode back to Edington Hall in one night and a day, only stopping to tend to the horse as necessary. By the time he arrived back at his ancestral seat, a low hum of grief had moved through him. He could not believe that his relationship with his father had reached its end so unceremoniously.

As a boy, he had idolized the man, who had spent more time with his son and heir than most men of his station. He had taught him to ride, to hunt, how to manage an estate. He had taught him his letters and then later how to keep and decipher ledgers. Some of the fondest memories of his childhood were walking through the family apple orchards with his father and talking about...what? What had that boy and that man had to talk about? He couldn't remember, but he remembered that the conversations had absorbed him at the time. He had almost forgotten his old hero-worship of his father, which had been buried under years of heavy resentment that had often felt much like hatred. On that ride back to Edington, for that brief span between London and Edington, his love for his father had come back to him.

When he had arrived at the Hall, the family solicitor, Mr. Lawson, had greeted him. He soon had the will before him and those tender feelings—remorse, grief, a kind of sweet regret—had vanished. And anger had once again taken their place. He had not been able to calm himself in the two weeks since. Even when he affected placidity, he only felt molten, animate rage.

With this will, his father had done something so unforgivable that, in John's eyes, it instantly merged with his original sin, the scandal itself. John knew that if anyone heard what his father had enacted with his will, the old Forster scandal would be reignited in an instant. Mr. Lawson had laid it out in black and white. The man was a gentleman's solicitor par excellence. He turned aristocratic whims into ironclad legality. He followed the wishes of his title-holding clients with a military dedication. John hated him for helping his father make such an infernal document. He had screamed the man from the room after he had read it but it didn't change the facts. The will was immutable. And John had to act fast.

And so he was now, to his humiliation, seeking out Catherine Forster for help. He hadn't seen her since that night at Tremberley Manor, when he had almost begged the utmost from the last woman in the world he should have been slaving over. The *ton* said that Catherine Forster, that unfortunate girl, looked exactly like the woman, her aunt, who had started the scandal that had almost ruined his family. He could confirm, having seen her up close, *too close*, that she was nearly her aunt's replica. The older woman, the spinster renowned for her beauty, had been a familiar sight at Edington Hall in his childhood, coming to see his father about the crops or about a farmer's family that had encountered tragedy.

John had thought about that night at Tremberley many, many times. When he had held Catherine Forster in his arms, he had found an emotion, a sensation, that he had never been able to find again. He had tried in the years after to eradicate her from his memory and his body. In the months after their encounter, he had dreamt of her every night. He found himself

looking for silvery-blond hair and blue-black eyes on crowded London streets.

For the three or four years afterwards, he had bedded half the opera singers and unhappily married aristocratic women and renowned courtesans in England. He had only found echoes of what he had felt with her. With every woman he had bedded, he found himself unchanged. He still wanted to chase women with silver-blond hair down city streets and country lanes to see if they were *her*. He still thought of her in idle minutes—and at night. Whenever he pleased himself by his own hand, even after seven years and as his memories had grown threadbare, he was unable to find release unless he thought of her and that night, of her hand stroking him through his breeches, that sweet union he had anticipated so close and yet always out of reach.

He even scanned the shelves of London bookstores, looking for that history she had told him she was writing, wondering if it would appear, hoping for a piece of her that he could consume safely. He liked the idea that he could immerse himself in her from a distance. If such a volume existed, he never found it.

Before that night at Tremberley, he hadn't known Catherine. Not really. He had never seen her in society. In their childhood, he had observed her no more than a dozen times. They had played in the same orchards and fields. He had seen her from afar and, on occasion, when she didn't know he was watching, from closer range. In the year before the scandal, he had perhaps even acquired... It made him shudder to think of it. How odd it was. It made him blush even now, as a hardened man of nearly thirty. Nevertheless, it was true. He had developed, back then, a boy's love of her. Right before it had happened, they had been eleven—both of them. He remembered her collecting stones and flowers in the orchard, unaware that she had crossed the line between the two properties. Before everything had changed, he could remember thinking of ways he might draw this beguiling girl's attention.

He still didn't understand how, that night at Tremberley, he hadn't recognized her. Sometimes, he thought he had. That some part of him had recognized her and had wanted her anyway.

John had stopped bedding his way through London a few years ago. He couldn't go on that way but he also couldn't find happiness anywhere else. He no longer cared for women, for drink, for hunting, for sport, for cards. He was wasted, just like his father. Catherine Forster had doomed him.

He was resolute that his sister, Henrietta, seventeen and innocent, about to debut in society, wouldn't become like him. He would make sure Henrietta had a good match, a sparkling one, with a kind man, rich and titled. He would put the full force of his dukedom behind her. Henrietta wouldn't be ruined by the scandal. Not like him. He couldn't give her the title—he wished that he could—but he could give her every advantage it had to offer.

With this damned will, his father had jeopardized his sister's future. But John wouldn't let anyone—especially not his father—harm Henrietta.

John *would* save his sister. He would give her a good life.

He just needed to talk to Catherine Forster first.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN ANOTHER KNOCK sounded on the door, Ariel screamed, “Hand me the paint!” and then began frantically dabbing his face with the white paste he had just spent ten minutes wiping off.

“Ariel! Shhh!” Lady Wethersby hissed, before turning to Catherine, who, pen in hand, was halfway through a letter to her editor. “What should we do?”

“Ariel, lie under the blanket, forget the paint for now. It might be a messenger with my payment.”

Catherine peeked out the window. She could not see the whole of the person knocking but she could see his clothes. Too fine for a dun or a messenger.

“It’s a gentleman,” she whispered to Lady Wethersby, disappointed it wasn’t the money, but relieved it wasn’t the alternative. “One of your old friends, perhaps?”

“Here?” Lady Wethersby said, her expression stricken. She did not relish, Catherine knew, being discovered so fallen from her former station. Furthermore, Catherine could not think of who from their old life would venture so far from Mayfair. They hadn’t had visitors of the noble or even moneyed type since they took up these lodgings three years ago.

“I’ll answer,” Catherine whispered, wanting to spare Lady Wethersby. Recently, they had had to dismiss all of their servants but their maid-of-all work, Melinda. It was a searing fall for the widow of a baronet. Catherine wasn’t the appropriate footman but she could at least pass for a lady’s companion.

“Ariel, go upstairs. We don’t think it’s a dun.”

“But I want to see the visitor.”

“It’s quite all right, Catherine,” Lady Wethersby said, straightening her back. “If they have come, they must see me as I am. It is worse to pretend. We must meet them as we are.”

And then with all the elegance of her old manner, Lady Wethersby walked into the antechamber to receive their unexpected guest.

Catherine looked at Ariel, who cocked an eyebrow at Catherine and said, with a smirk, “Mother has grown up.”

Catherine laughed.

That laugh died, however, when she looked up from Ariel and saw—*him*.

John Breminster.

The Marquess of Forster.

It was as if her thoughts a few minutes ago about that night in the Tremberley gardens had summoned him in the flesh.

They stared at one another. He was somehow more handsome than she remembered, which she would have sworn couldn’t have been possible, that she must have exaggerated in the other direction—and, yet, here he was, proving that supposition wrong. He was older, too, but in a good way. If he had been a little boyish before, he had now weathered into a full-fledged man.

A strikingly handsome man.

She swallowed hard.

A strikingly handsome man whom she hated on principle.

She could not help but admire his eyes, green as the Dorset hills, and his fine, curling dark hair, which she knew from experience felt silken to the touch. She remembered his mouth from that night in the gardens, too, how it wasn’t lush, but firm and expressive, an inadvertent barometer of his desires. And he had desired *her*—before he knew who she really was. She hated that she knew how good his chest, broad and strong, felt

against her body. And that she remembered with painful accuracy the wonderful sensation of his mouth at her throat.

Catherine would have been sure she was hallucinating if it weren't for Lady Wethersby. She looked as if she had momentarily died and then been hastily resuscitated.

When Elena spoke, she didn't even attempt to hide the shaking in her voice.

"Your Grace. Miss Catherine Forster and my son, Sir Ariel Wethersby."

Ariel looked back and forth between the three of them, his eyes wide. Even Ariel, who knew nothing about the scandal in her family's past, was stunned. The appearance of a high-ranking aristocrat in dingy Halston Place was shocking enough on its own.

And then it hit her. What Lady Wethersby had called him.

"Your *Grace*?"

"My father has died," John Breminster said, bluntly, with no expression. She noted his black waistcoat, cravat and jacket. He was in mourning.

He was the Duke of Edington.

Her palms had begun to sweat and she wiped them on her dress. She felt faint but forced herself to keep standing. She didn't want him to think that his presence affected her in any way. *It didn't*, she told herself, biting the inside of her cheek and stealing a glance up at him again. She lowered her gaze once more. Looking at him proved dangerous.

Meanwhile, she stood there before him in a day dress faded to the color of pigeon, with a scorch mark on the sleeve, and her hair turned up hastily. To him, used to the bright gowns and perfect toilettes of Mayfair ladies, she must appear particularly wretched.

She said nothing in response to his revelation. She could not express the conventional sympathy. She did not relish the idea of anyone dying, but her disdain for the late duke kept her

from uttering the typical regrets. She wasn't sure she could speak anyway and she wasn't willing to risk trying.

Fortunately, Lady Wethersby did the honors, murmuring sympathy in her best society matron tones.

And then the marquess—*the duke*—interrupted her.

“I thank you, Lady Wethersby.” He gave an almost imperceptible bow, his voice curt and emotionless. “If I may, I would like to speak with Miss Forster. Alone.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Elena replied in her most mannered voice and then, enacting a total shift in demeanor, hissed in the direction of her son, “Ariel, come with me at once.”

Lady Wethersby moved to where Ariel sat on the divan and nearly lifted him into the air. Ariel flailed as he tried to fight off his mother.

“Let us—give Catherine—a moment with the duke.” She pushed her son towards the door.

“Oy! Mother!”

Ariel protested with every nudge and Catherine could not help smiling a little, despite her own distress. She could have sworn she saw the corner of John Breminster's mouth kick up for a moment. But then, just as quickly, his expression returned to its resting state of impassivity, causing her to wonder if she had only imagined his amusement.

And then Lady Wethersby was gone.

Catherine almost called her back.

She didn't want to be alone with *him*.

Forcing herself to keep her composure, Catherine looked up at the Duke of Edington. His eyes met hers and for a moment neither of them broke contact. In that instant, that night in the gardens felt very close. She could almost feel his lips on hers again, his hands wrenching down her bodice, his body pressed over hers.

He took a step backwards and looked away. The sensation of intimacy vanished.

In fact, the Duke of Edington looked a bit ill.

Of course, she had forgotten that he must find her disgusting. That he must only feel repulsion when he looked at her.

Catherine sat down on the divan. Mirroring her, he sat on the armchair opposite, the room lying between them like a leaden weight.

Catherine surveyed him, keenly aware he was doing the same to her. She shifted, not liking how her skin hummed at his nearness and yet unable to stop taking him in. He looked a little flushed but appeared otherwise composed. She still could not believe that he was here. She hated herself for admiring the way his finely formed neck rose from his cravat, for looking at his hands and wondering how it would feel if... No, she told herself, she *needed* to remember that he was her enemy.

They examined each other in silence for what felt like an eternity. She refused to speak first.

“You must wonder why I am here,” he said finally, his voice low and grave.

“I do wonder why you are here, Your Grace.”

“Surely, you must know it brings me no pleasure to disturb you.”

“As you must be sure it can give me no pleasure to receive you.”

If possible, his expression went even stonier.

“I do not trouble you without reason. I have come here because I think we both have something to gain.”

“I cannot imagine how that could be, Your Grace. My family has never gained from any association with yours.”

At her words, John Breminster drew back ever so slightly in his chair.

Catherine smiled at his recoil. He deserved it. He had everything. He had his dukedom. He was secure and safe forever. He could do whatever he liked. He probably would marry soon. He was most likely betrothed at this very moment, she thought wildly, unable to control the flow of her thoughts or her pulse, which pounded in her ears.

“You can hardly be suggesting that your family’s disgrace is the fault of mine. You must know that your father and your aunt brought their dishonor upon themselves.”

“And the dishonor of *your* father was similarly all his own.”

“That’s how you think of it?” Anger—no, rage, she could recognize it—filled his voice, making it go softer, not louder, and yet its edge seemed to only cut into her further. “Well, I have a distinctly different understanding. The story of a wanton seductress—a succubus—ruining a family.”

Catherine rose instinctively. Shock rattled her vision and her heart hammered in her chest. Not knowing what she did, she advanced towards him. He mirrored her action and suddenly she was inches from him. He looked down at her, his face fixed in what could only be described as a snarl. She could see the fine-grain stubble on his cheeks.

John Breminster was so close she was inhaling his scent. He smelled to her like leather and clean linen, fine gentleman’s soap, and something else too—heady and unique to him, like salt and loam. She thrummed with anger but nevertheless she was struck once again by those green eyes over the handsome cut of his jaw. The color once more reminded her of the hills at dusk, in the countryside, where they had both grown up. Why did he have to remind her of home while he insulted her? His presence here was intolerable.

And yet she had not been through the past seventeen years for nothing. She knew how to overcome herself. To hide what

she felt. Penury and obscurity had not made her soft. She looked him in the eye and willed her voice steady.

“Your father was a devil. Who preyed on a lonely, beautiful woman, and ruined her and her family with his selfish appetites. He used his power for ill. And that power was never taken from him. In fact, he left it to you. You wield it now. At this very moment. And she lost everything. *We* lost everything.”

In forming these words, even though she was still so angry, Catherine did feel a kind of relief. She had never had the opportunity to truly rail at another person for what she had endured through no fault of her own. It was delicious to blame the emissary of the man she had long held responsible.

John Breminster took a step towards her, bringing his face inches from her own.

“There have been times I have felt bad for you, Miss Forster, knowing that you did not choose your fate. But now I see that I needn’t have wasted my time. You forget that I know all about you. I remember very well that you nearly abandoned yourself to the advances of a penniless vicar in a dark garden. Who knows what you have done in the intervening years? I wonder where you learned it. Or is it inbred?”

Catherine heard her gasp before she felt it escape her mouth.

Many had insinuated his sentiment over the years. That she must be just as wanton as her aunt. But none had said the words to her face. And yet here he was, her enemy, presenting these smears to her as if they were curiosities to be mulled over.

“It seems we remember that night differently, Your Grace. I remember a young marquess playing games with a ballroom of respectable people and trying to seduce a young gentlewoman, at a private amusement, where she might have supposed herself safe. Some gentleman. Like father, like son.”

He reeled back at her words. She could see, even with his mouth closed, that his teeth were gritted.

Of course, Catherine knew she had not been all innocence that night. She had wanted to misbehave, to steal a little joy from the jaws of a quotidian life.

But she and this man weren't the same. She had had one scrap of pleasure with him, it was true, but his life must be an absolute tapestry of such moments. It was not fair that he condemned her when he had done the exact same and more.

He didn't move but merely kept staring down at her, his green eyes cold. A flare of fear went up within her at his expression. He was so much more powerful than her. When it came to anything that mattered—society, politics, money—he had it all at his disposal.

“Miss Forster, you are very lucky that I come here on a *very* particular errand. I presume that you do not live in this hole—” he cast a disparaging glance around the dingy drawing room “—by choice. I advise that you sit down and listen to what I have come here to say. It is quite possibly the only chance that you will ever have to better your present circumstances.”

Catherine wanted to scream him from the room. She almost did. She was mortified by his insults and his sneers at her misfortunes, most of which she would have never experienced if *his* father had been less of a beast.

“Sit. Down. Miss. Forster.”

She was ready to dismiss him. The words were at her lips.

Except the bottom of Lady Wethersby's empty teapot flashed in her mind. *I presume you do not live in this hole by choice.* The words were cruel—but they were true. Lady Wethersby had taken her in when she was an orphaned child, when others would not have, and her life was now harder due to the kindness she had showed Catherine.

She couldn't be selfish, she couldn't give in to her impulses, not like her aunt and the late Duke of Edington, not

like the man in front of her, not like she had before.

She had to listen to John Breminster.

Because she wasn't in a position to refuse opportunities. From any corner.

She was desperate.

Most likely, his words would come to nothing. But if there was a chance, even a slim one, that it would benefit Lady Wethersby and Ariel, she had to hear what he had come to say.

Using every morsel of restraint she could conjure, she retreated to the divan and took her seat again, smoothing her skirts. She fixed her gaze on her lap.

She heard him move back across the room. He had won in this show of strength and she tried to not let it sting. She listened to him settle his body, large and powerful, back into the worn armchair. Silence, thick and tense, filled the room. It was almost worse, she thought, the silence. She couldn't bear it, the pressure seeming to tick minutes from her life. Her hands ached in a tight clasp.

Thankfully, finally, he spoke.

“We will never agree about our families. We can never be friends or intimates. The past will always stand in the way. Our meeting at Tremberley Manor was an unfortunate mistake, an accident, for which neither of us can be blamed. I have forgotten myself just now but I will not again. I am not here today to dwell on old grievances and errors in which neither of us played a part. Our families were both damaged by their previous acquaintance. But perhaps if we can come to an agreement, we could both stand to gain before leaving the past behind forever.”

Catherine was a historian. She did not believe in leaving the past behind. Nevertheless she very much wanted to leave *this past* behind her—the scandal, her aunt, his family, the Dorset parish where everything had gone wrong.

“What I am about to tell you, you cannot repeat to anyone. Can you promise me that? Not even your nearest friends.”

“I can assure you, your Grace, that we share not one friend in common. You needn’t worry about what I say to anyone.” She emitted a dry laugh and then regretted it. It sounded bitter even to her own ears.

“I am serious, Miss Forster. You may think of me what you wish and I am sure half of the *ton* would agree with you. But my sister, she is an innocent girl. She does not deserve to be hurt.”

Catherine raised her gaze from her lap. When their eyes met, she felt her body to begin to hum again, that vexing, pleasing feeling working its way across her skin.

Half to cover up the severity of her own reaction, she gave a quick nod.

“I promise.” She had to work to keep her tone neutral.

She saw his expression soften—but only a fraction.

“My father, in his will, did something monstrous. To my sister, Lady Henrietta, primarily. And by extension, to me.”

He seemed to study her face once more, as if trying to divine whether she could be trusted. He didn’t look particularly heartened.

“In one month’s time, if I do nothing, a very large amount of money—a fortune in and of itself—will pass from my father’s estate to my second cousin, Baron Pierce Falk.”

Catherine suppressed a frown. Such a legacy made no sense. Why would a duke leave money away from his own children? It would certainly shock society. Noblemen didn’t leave funds away from their heirs. To do so was a kind of suicide.

“Henrietta is to come out this year. That exact amount: sixty thousand pounds—”

“*Sixty thousand pounds?* That’s not one fortune—that’s several.”

“I am aware.” He looked terminally unamused. “It was intended for my sister’s dowry. I could, of course, give her a dowry either way, although there is no replacing a portion of that size, even for a duke. The funds themselves, however, are not the sole nor even the chief problem. It is the talk that would be ruinous. Such a large bequest to Baron Falk—combined with the fact that my father will have settled not a farthing on Henrietta—would appear a frank admission that she isn’t his child. It would authenticate the gossip that has circulated since her birth and would destroy her future.”

Catherine remembered the rumors. After the duchess had discovered her husband and Mary Forster together, she had run off with the Baron of Eastwick. And then she had died six months later in childbirth. The girl had survived but the gossips said she wasn’t really the Duke of Edington’s daughter. The duke had always claimed her as his own but vicious speculation had still swirled around the girl, who no one had ever seen. She had never left Edington.

“I need to make sure I understand,” Catherine said slowly, letting a smile play over her face. She couldn’t help but relish circumstances so naturally distressing to the man in front of her. “Your father left *sixty thousand pounds* intended for your sister to *your cousin?*”

“Second cousin.”

“I agree that that is quite a problem. For poor Lady Henrietta most of all. But I don’t see how that leads you here. It seems there is nothing to be done about this unfortunate”—she smiled here, at her own pun, just to irritate him, and caught his scowl—“decision of your father’s. Like so many of his choices, it can’t be undone.”

“There is a condition,” he said, his voice rising to smother hers. His eyes were hard again, unreadable. For once, the line of his lips revealed nothing of his feelings. “It is, in fact, possible to save my sister’s dowry. To make it right.”

“And that condition is?”

“My father stipulated that the fortune will revert to my sister—if I can find Mary Forster.”

Her mind whirred. *Mary Forster*. She had not considered that her aunt would have any part in this Breminster family imbroglio. Or, for that matter, that anyone thought the woman could still be alive.

“My father wanted an annuity delivered to your aunt. Specifically, she needs to accept it.”

“*An annuity?*”

“A thousand pounds, to be exact. Per annum.”

A very large sum, indeed. Why would the duke want her aunt to have this money? Why would he risk his daughter’s future—if she was his daughter and right now that seemed a matter of great uncertainty—to make sure her aunt received such a yearly sum?

“He felt guilty.”

“I do not wish to speculate on my father’s motivations.”

“He must have felt guilty—why else leave it to her? It’s an admission of guilt.”

“*Enough*, Miss Forster.”

He had nerve, bringing her into this drama and then telling her to be quiet.

“How does any of this concern me? I don’t understand how you imagine I can help you with your problem.”

He frowned. She saw a flicker of confusion flit across his face.

“I am here, of course, to ask you how I can find Mary Forster.”

“That’s the only amusing thing you have said all morning, Your Grace.”

His sage-green eyes turned molten, his mouth tight with stifled outrage. “You refuse to reveal her location?”

“*Reveal her location?* I haven’t the slightest notion of her location. Why do you fathom she still lives? I myself have long assumed her dead.”

“My father believed she was alive. I have to think he knew, somehow, that she was living.”

“Not if he really wanted to leave his money away from your sister.”

“No. *That* is impossible.”

“Right now, that seems far from *impossible*, Your Grace. In fact, it seems likely.”

“*Enough.*”

Catherine saw his knuckles turn white on the worn armrests.

She scoffed. At his impertinence and his delusion. Really, his situation was hopeless. He just didn’t want to admit it.

“I believe he merely wanted your aunt to have the annuity.” His voice was rushed, heated, even as it strove for control. “He wanted to guarantee delivery. He knew that she lives. I am sure of it.”

Her chest tightened at the words. If Mary lived, she had chosen not to contact Catherine for seventeen years. Silence from the woman she had regarded as a mother was difficult to stomach. Her aunt had taught her about history, about ruins and significant natural landmarks, and how the knowledge of these things lay, first and foremost, with the people who lived amongst them. Mary had taught her that a cottager could have more knowledge than a king. In doing so, she had given her the purpose that had gotten her through the darkest moments of her life.

“Even if I accept that she is alive, why would I help *you* find her? She clearly does not want to be found.”

“Of course,” he said, that flicker of confusion returning, “I would pay you.”

Her heart started pounding in her chest.

She picked an imaginary thread off her skirt and swallowed hard, thinking of how much she needed, how much money could fix her long list of problems.

Because, if he would pay her to aid him in such a ridiculous chase, she would have to at least consider accepting.

Catherine did *not* want to find her aunt. She didn’t want to confirm that Mary Forster hadn’t cared enough to send her so much as a note over the past seventeen years. Equally, she dreaded finding Mary in such degraded circumstances that the lack of contact would make all too much sense. And she certainly didn’t want to work with the man in front of her. Her enemy. And the only man with whom she had ever...She shook her head. *Don’t think of it.*

The truth was that scruples were luxuries. And she had been forced to give up luxuries long ago.

“How much were you planning on *paying* me?”

He looked at her as if assessing her price. “Two thousand pounds.”

She stifled a gasp. It was a life-changing amount of money.

“Assuming that my aunt Mary still lives—”

“She does.”

“*Assuming that my aunt Mary still lives*, why would I betray my only living relation for a mere two thousand pounds? I may be poor, Your Grace, but I have my honor.”

“You aren’t *betraying* her. She can’t draw the damned annuity if I can’t find her. Although, in the event that she doesn’t want to accept it, I would expect you to convince her to be reasonable. If she can’t accept a small fortune for her own sake, maybe she would do it for yours.”

A cruel bubble of glee rose within her. She had a dual value to him, then.

“Why do you think she would refuse?”

“I have very little leverage where Mary Forster is concerned. While I hope she’ll be reasonable, I can’t make any assumptions. I need insurance.”

“Well, in that case, Your Grace, that only makes me more crucial to your success.”

“Stop calling me that. The honorific. Your Grace.”

“Why would I call you anything else? It’s proper, is it not? Or have I been out of society so long that they changed the rules?”

“I don’t care for the way you say it. Call me something else.”

“That would be untoward. And I can’t help that my contempt for you permeates the typical social forms. There is no alternative. What else would I call you? Edington? I won’t call you Forster.”

“That is what most people called me until recently. It’s what I went by at school.”

“How grotesque.”

“Don’t I know it. If I hadn’t—”

He broke off, seeming to remember where he was and whom he spoke to. Despite herself, she wanted him to finish the sentence. Was there a woman he loved, who had made it all worth it? Suddenly, she had the premonition that this unpleasantness with his father’s will was the last piece of business that stood between him and his marriage to the finest of high-society diamonds. She would be someone he had known since childhood and to whom he had written long letters while away at Eton and Oxford.

“Call me John. I think we can dispense with the pretense of propriety.”

“I will call you what I please.” She was thinking of what his betrothed would look like, how she would simmer and wait for his visits to her drawing room. She would call him by the proper honorific. Surely, the duke and this lovely young lady didn’t argue over the details of his vindictive father’s mad will. Nor would they have to stay at opposite ends of the room to keep from tearing each other to pieces. The thought of this little debutante sent a spasm of anger through her body.

“And I want ten thousand pounds, Your Grace.”

“Three.”

She broke eye contact with him and looked, instead, at his mouth. She could read his thoughts there. He couldn’t hide the truth.

“*Ten.*”

He winced. “Five.”

“*Ten.* That is my price.”

“That is quite a bit of money.”

“It is.” She gave him her most cheerful smile. “But you aren’t in a position to negotiate, are you, Your Grace?”

“Eight. And that is my last offer.”

Catherine knew he was bluffing. There was no one else for him to turn to, no one else who had a prayer of finding Mary Forster, and certainly no one else living who could appeal to her emotions.

“Ten thousand pounds, Your Grace.”

“Fine.” To her surprise, he smirked. “If you agree to call me John.”

Anger swelled in her chest. She hated him. She hated how he could use his power, his money, to take what he wanted, even from her. She hated how the sight of his face, a quirk of his mouth, could make her innermost muscles clench. She didn’t want to call him by his Christian name. She wanted to put as much distance between them as possible.

Catherine told herself to breathe.

He couldn't possibly enforce such a ridiculous condition.

He was just trying to irk her.

"Very well." She worked to look placid, as if calling him by his Christian name meant nothing to her. "But that is not all. I want one thousand upfront."

"How do I know you won't disappear?"

"That is what you think of me?"

"You're my best hope of keeping this mess from the scandal sheets. My apologies if I appear fastidious."

"I won't leave. I assure you I have nowhere to go. I need the one thousand for—we have expenses."

"I will have my man send the money at once."

As he said the words, his mouth gave a small twist that had looked suspiciously like pity and perhaps a dash of repulsion. She wondered if he had seen the duns at the door. She worked to keep a blush from rising to her cheeks and felt herself failing. She shouldn't care what he thought of her. Yet she loathed appearing weak before him.

To cover her own confusion, she stood. He did as well.

Then he took a step closer to her. The green of his eyes bored into her. She found that she could not break eye contact. For a moment, she had the wild thought that he was going to kiss her.

The moment seemed to expand infinitely, holding them both in its thrall.

He broke eye contact, but they were still close. He leaned towards her. Her pulse pounded in her ears.

"Pack a trunk," he said, his mouth low and nearly at her ear. "You won't come back here until we have found her. We leave for Dorset tomorrow."

And then, for the second time in her life, John Breminster, the Marquess of Forster, now the Duke of Edington, strode away from her without looking back.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THE DUKE of Edington reached his town house in Mayfair, he immediately sent a message to his solicitor—the infuriating, unsackable Mr. Lawson—directing him to expedite one thousand pounds to Catherine Forster.

That errand transacted, he sat in his study and thought of the woman in question. How her refined pink mouth had dropped its radiant smile when he had appeared in her drawing room. How she had looked almost ill when Lady Wethersby had left her alone with him. How her blue-black eyes had flashed in anger at his insulting speech, a speech that, as a gentleman, he should have never made and didn't even believe.

John swore aloud at the memory of his own conduct. Around her, he lost control. He should be used to taunts and disdain, especially about the scandal and certainly about the purported rakishness of his own conduct. He *was* used to them. What he had almost told her was true. His Eton years would have been pure hell if he had not had his three best friends to defend him. He had endured all manner of rude comments. He had even grown indifferent to them, learning to laugh in the face of derision and wear notoriety as a badge of honor. And yet her censure cut through him like a knife. As if the scandal had only happened yesterday and he were a knock-kneed boy of eleven facing scorn and infamy for the first time.

Her fingertips today had been as ink-stained as on that night seven years ago. What had she been writing? *Who* had she been writing to? Did she have a lover? Someone who came and visited her at Halston Place at night? A tight net of jealousy constricted his lungs.

John put his hands over his face as he had wanted to all afternoon. It had been a confusing mixture of pleasure and

pain to be in her presence. He had wanted to take the pins from her hair and spill her silvery-blond locks onto her shoulders. He had wanted to press her to him on that shabby divan. He had wanted to open her dress, to reveal the breasts that he already knew were nothing short of the divine, and lavish each with attention, to give her so much pleasure that she forgot who he was, who she was, why their coming together would always be a bad idea. It was a pestilence, it was a disease, these feelings.

Traveling with her—in close quarters no less—would be nothing short of torture.

Her words had scorched him. *Like father, like son.* Her intimation that the scandal had been the fault of his family, that Mary Forster had not been the primary agent of destruction, had enraged him.

And yet he had commanded her away from him, commanded her to sit, out of lust as well as anger. He had felt the temptation of continuing the argument, of letting the verbal attacks become even more personal. And he had felt, equally, the temptation of her nearness, how it threatened his sanity, how easily he could see himself pulling her into him and revealing his weakness. When color had risen in her cheeks, when she had spoken to him with such heat, he had recoiled at her words, at her condemnation of himself and the family from which he came. It had taken everything in him not to silence her—with a searing, mind-addling kiss.

Even as she enraged him, he could also see her vulnerability. He knew she didn't deserve the condition in which she lived. He didn't pity her, exactly. He supposed, if he was honest, it was something closer to begrudging admiration. He had faced gossip and sneers but never penury. What would he have become in her position? He sensed that he would have fared far worse.

With her beauty, intelligence, and pedigree, Catherine Forster should be married to a wealthy, titled gentleman, who could give her lots of fine children.

The thought of Catherine married to some faceless, upstanding aristocrat made him feel sick.

He tried to ignore the sensation.

He shouldn't care.

It shouldn't matter to him.

And yet the thought made him desperate.

She made him desperate.

Right before he had left Halston Place, he had nearly kissed her. If he had stayed a moment longer, his restraint would have broken. He had wanted to coax open her lips with his own, savoring her taste. For a brief second, he had even thought she had expected it. That she *wanted* him to kiss her. Her intake of breath when he had stepped closer—had he imagined it?

Such an intuition could only be delusion. She had made very clear that she hated him. She was plainly disgusted by him, his father, his title, everything about him. He was probably the last man in the world that she would desire in that way. His own traitorous attraction to her was a doomed instinct, a mistake of nature.

Tomorrow he would have to steel himself against her. For the sake of finding Mary Forster, for saving his sister, he needed to treat Catherine with cool politeness.

In an attempt to shake off these thoughts, John rose and left his study, nearly colliding with his new butler, Fitzgerald.

“Your Grace,” the man said, looking unusually nervous. “Lord Tremberley is waiting for you in your library. He has been here for over an hour. I informed him that you were out but he insisted on staying.”

John groaned. He was worn out from the visit with Catherine Forster. He wasn't in the mood to see anyone, not even his best friend.

The butler disappeared down the stairs to the kitchens and John made his way to his library. He had to face Tremberley, whether he liked it or not.

When he walked into the library, he found Trem, boots removed, stretched out on a divan, reading a novel and sipping a snifter of scotch. He had somehow procured a platter of cold meats and cheeses, which lay half consumed on a side table.

“I see you have made yourself comfortable,” John said, hoping to startle the unsuspecting viscount.

“I had no choice, given how long you lingered at Halston Place,” Tremberley replied, tossing the book aside. “It took quite the series of threats to convince your butler to reveal your location. After all, as I impressed upon him, you would want me, your best friend, to know your whereabouts. What if you found yourself in a scrape or challenged to a duel? It turns out that the young man isn’t quite ready to be your second.”

John grimaced. He would thrash the butler. He cast a glance behind him into the hall, hoping to catch the man scurrying by.

“No use looking for him. He’s probably gone all the way to the cellar, hoping to outrun you.”

He dropped onto the sofa. John had never shared his feelings about Catherine Forster with anyone. But Trem knew how he felt about her. John knew he must, because his best friend had always been delicate about the topic, never making it a subject of fun as he would have with anything else.

The loyalty didn’t surprise him. A special affinity had always existed between John, Trem, Leith and Montaigne. Since their first meeting at Eton, they had become a kind of family to one another. His friends kept him entertained and—he could admit it—from a potentially dangerous loneliness. Montaigne always had a scheme that involved visiting one of his many aristocratic relatives. Leith was always free for a whiskey and to listen to his complaints about his most recent loss at cards or—when he had been alive—a gloomy letter

from his father. And Tremberley was always happy to repeat the newest gossip or to host a party at the manor...as well as more than eager to meddle in John's affairs for his own amusement.

Furthermore, in recent years, as his despair over being unable to forget Catherine had deepened, none of his friends had complained about his increasingly dour company.

"Very well then." If Trem knew John had been at Halston Place, then he knew who he had seen there. Most of the *ton* knew the address as the abject corner into which the Wethersbys and their infamous ward had crawled. He reached for Trem's snifter and drained it in one swill. "Aren't you going to ask why I went to visit Catherine Forster?"

"I have a notion." Trem rose and walked to the sideboard. He helped himself to a new snifter of scotch and then filled his old one for John without asking. "Should I be tendering my congratulations?"

John fixed Trem with an incredulous stare. His friend was truly barking.

"Come on, brother." Trem settled back on the divan. "I know the tragic history, your father and her beloved aunt, and on and on. I know that you have sworn up and down to hate anyone by the name of Forster except yourself until you draw your dying breath. But I also remember that night. I figure that you have ended your war with yourself and have decided not to let history stand in the way of...well, your years-long desire to bed her."

John thought of Catherine. Her ink-stained fingertips. Her long silvery hair, wisps falling around her jawline. The swell of her breasts underneath her worn day dress. His cock jumped at this cascade of images. He knew he wanted to bed her but it didn't help to hear someone else say it.

"You're mad. Could you imagine what they would say in the papers? I couldn't do that to Henrietta before her season."

“I’ve heard by report that some things feel better than reason.”

“Go to the devil.”

“Surely it would disrupt Henrietta’s season. But, with her dowry, it would all come to rights.”

John winced at the mention of Henrietta’s dowry.

“I’m not going to marry her.”

“Fair enough, mate. I hear she has fallen on hard times. I am sure you persuaded her into a favorable arrangement. It is the prudent thing, of course. I would have suggested it myself, except I know your penchant for being honorable.”

“When have I ever been *honorable*?”

Trem waved his hand. “Perhaps honorable is not the right word. But you’ve never liked keeping a mistress.”

It was true. He had never enjoyed the idea of having that kind of power over—or obligation to—a woman. An evening was one thing and a standing relationship was another. But he wasn’t about to admit that Trem was right.

“God, you’re an asshole. I didn’t offer to make her my mistress.”

“If you’re intent on torturing yourself, I suppose no one can stop you. Although I don’t have the foggiest why you let all that bollocks from years ago interfere with a good time.”

“I don’t recall you thinking it was such bollocks when you nearly killed yourself running across your own grounds to warn me of *Miss Musgrave*’s real identity.”

“I was younger then, with a greater flair for the dramatic. Additionally, you had disappeared from the ballroom with the young lady, which could only mean one thing. I thought you’d like to know before you found yourself cornered into a marriage with the enemy.”

“Very wise,” he retorted, even though he knew Trem had indeed acted in his best interests.

“Besides, mate,” Trem continued blithely, “that was before I knew you didn’t mind her being Catherine Forster and all that. If you’re not fussed about it, I certainly don’t know why anyone else should be.”

“I *am* fussed about it. I could never *marry* her, Trem, for Christ’s sake.”

“Well, if not to make her a proposal—indecent or otherwise—then what in the bloody hell were you doing in Halston Place?”

John looked at his friend, weighing whether he should, for the second time that day, tell the truth about his father’s will. Seeing the concern on his friend’s face, John decided he could trust him, although he didn’t fancy the circle getting much wider on this particular piece of intelligence.

When John indicated that there was trouble with his father’s will, Tremberley turned a faint shade of purple. When John described the jeopardized sixty thousand pounds, Tremberley swallowed the contents of his glass. When John told him that the sixty thousand pounds that had been intended for Henrietta’s dowry would go to this damned cousin unless he found Mary Forster and made her accept the annuity, Tremberley whistled.

When John finished the tale, however, Tremberley kept quiet.

“You have nothing to say?” he ground out, annoyed that he had unburdened himself only to be met with silence.

“Just taking it all in, mate. That is quite the predicament. And he left it to Baron Falk? Your cousin? If you don’t find the lady in question, that is.”

“*Second* cousin.”

“Don’t you despise that fellow?”

“My father did, too.”

Tremberley whistled again.

“He must have really wanted you to find Mary Forster.”

“Evidently.”

“Just to be clear. This situation will require you to have many intimate tête-à-têtes with Catherine Forster? Travel with her alone? Perhaps under the cover of night?”

Really, if John couldn't find the butler, he might just thrash Tremberley.

“Purely necessary, of course.” Trem laughed, as he poured himself more scotch. “To sequester yourself with the one woman you have always inordinately and irrationally favored—but who you have promised yourself never to bed or marry. I am sure there was no other way.”

“If you don't shut your mouth, I will throw you out of my library.”

Trem raised his hands to show he meant no harm. He was wheezing from laughter.

“Only making sure I have all the details.”

Trem was looking at John like he was absolutely mad.

And, if he was honest with himself, John thought he just might be.

CHAPTER SIX

MOMENTS AFTER THE Duke of Edington had strode out of their little drawing room, Lady Wethersby burst through the other door, closely followed by Ariel.

“Tell me you have been saved!” Her hands were clasped and her eyes were shining.

“What?”

Lady Wethersby could make little sense under usual circumstances and, right now, as Catherine struggled to process what had just happened to her, she could barely absorb Elena’s words.

She was now apparently returning to Edington, where her whole world had fallen apart, where she hadn’t been since she was eleven. She didn’t know if she was equal to the task.

And that was only the beginning.

Because worse even than returning to her former home was that she would be doing so with John Breminster.

The past half hour in their tiny drawing room had been difficult enough. And it was palatial in comparison to a carriage, even if it did belong to a duke. She was pretty sure that, in such close quarters, they ran the risk of homicide.

She and the duke could barely have a conversation without it becoming an argument. Catherine was still boiling with indignation at his rude remark about her conduct in the Tremberley gardens. The idea that they would be together *for days* was insupportable.

“My dear girl. Surely, he has proposed marriage, enabling you to leave this hole and shine in society, as you ought.” Lady Wethersby’s words ran clean through her train of

thought, commanding her fractured attention. “I would want nothing less for you, Catherine dearest.”

“Are you going to be a fine lady, Catherine?” Ariel’s eyes sparkled with glee. Catherine watched as this question birthed an anxious addendum: “But then you would have to leave us.”

Marry? Lady Wethersby was truly cracked.

“He does not want to marry me. And I certainly do *not* want to marry him.”

“Not marriage?” Lady Wethersby pulled up short. “Then what on earth was he doing here? My dear, he may call again. There is only one reason a handsome duke calls on a beautiful young woman.”

Catherine found herself struggling for words—for what felt like the hundredth time that day—in the face of this absurd suggestion.

“How can you suppose such a thing?!” she said, casting her eyes at Ariel and indicating to Lady Wethersby that she did not want to say more for his sake.

“Of course, my dear, I receive your allusion,” Lady Wethersby said, her air decidedly philosophical, “all of that, your shared past. It is how you came to us, is it not? But you never know with such things—they can just as easily bind two people together as tear them asunder.”

Ariel stamped his foot. “*What* are you talking about? *Who* was torn asunder?”

“No one, my love,” Lady Wethersby said briskly. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Whenever you say that,” Ariel said, looking stricken, “it *is* something for me to worry about.”

He turned to Catherine. “Are you leaving us?”

Catherine noted the tentative fear in his voice and thought of herself at his age. Ariel was almost as old as she had been

when her aunt had disappeared without a trace. She would never do that to Ariel.

“I am not marrying *anyone*.”

“Then why did that man come to speak with you?” Ariel’s narrowed eyes flicked back and forth between Catherine and his mother.

Catherine had to think, quickly, of what to tell the two of them. It couldn’t be the truth.

“He came on business.” She looked down, inventing as her eyes traced the faded pattern of their carpet. “He heard that I write about ruins. He has asked me to work with him on compiling a history of the area around Edington Hall.”

She raised her eyes and saw Lady Wethersby poised between suspicion and belief.

“I would not have been his first choice. But he read one of my histories in the paper, the one about Corfe Castle, and he asked my editor if he could have the address of the writer. When he realized it was me, he almost resolved against calling but he wants the history to be the best and Dorset is my specialty. He wants it done before his wedding. As a present for his bride. He anticipates his engagement imminently.” She saw Lady Wethersby open her mouth. “And no, I don’t know the name of the lady. But it’s for her.”

“A strange gift for a bride. But perhaps she is of an academic disposition.”

“I assume he wants his new duchess to feel a connection to the landscape. It is his ancestral home, after all. Regardless, he has agreed to pay me a great sum. Upfront.”

“How much?” Lady Wethersby asked, breathless once more.

“One thousand pounds.”

Lady Wethersby fell to the divan, her hand over her heart.

“It is not enough to take back Wethersby Park. But it will be enough to pay our current debts,” Catherine supplied. “And it will improve our style of living. That is not all. If the finished project suits his tastes, there could be more.”

She did not want to say the full amount given how unlikely it seemed that they would actually find Mary Forster. Additionally, that would be a truly ludicrous sum for anyone—even a duke—to pay for a history. It would stretch her tale past credulity. If she did earn the money, if they did find her aunt, she could invent some reason for the astronomical sum. Maybe, by then, she could even tell Elena the truth.

“We have been saved!” Lady Wethersby cried. “It is even better news than I thought. We have been saved *and* we will not lose you, my dear.”

“I would not say we have been saved,” Catherine said, trying to temper Lady Wethersby’s expectations. “But it is certainly an improvement from this morning.”

After all, this morning twenty pounds from the *Winchester Daily* had seemed like a small fortune. She couldn’t help but smile when she saw Lady Wethersby’s beaming face. And she had to laugh when she heard Ariel’s sunny prediction that, in the not-too-distant future, she would buy him a treacle tart.

But then Catherine remembered John’s parting words.

“Elena, Ariel,” Catherine said, interrupting the Wethersbys’ bickering over what to purchase first with their windfall. “I do have to leave you. Just for a little while. To do this...work for the duke.”

“Leave?” Ariel said. “I thought you said you weren’t leaving—that this man wasn’t taking you away!”

The terror in Ariel’s voice shot a bolt of anxiety through Catherine’s heart.

“Just for a little while. I promise I will be back.”

“I’ll go with you.” Ariel puffed out his chest. “Who will protect you? You need to travel with a gentleman of your own

family. Ladies can't travel alone.”

With these words, he rushed Catherine and hugged her round the waist. She hugged him back fiercely.

In recent weeks, Ariel had begun to tell Catherine and his mother that he was too old for such embraces. Now, however, he seemed to have forgotten about his newfound maturity.

“I have to go alone,” she said, looking down at his little face, “but I will write, and I will be back. I have to do this for *us*. Think, Ariel, if I get this money, we could take back Wethersby Park.”

Ariel released her and she watched him consider this idea, his eyes moving from the carpet back up to her face. “And then I would be lord of the manor?”

“Precisely.”

“Catherine,” Lady Wethersby said, “I do not know—if you got this money—if it would be enough—for the debts—and, even if it was, I don't know if I could let you—”

Catherine put her hand over Lady Wethersby's.

“You and Ariel are my family. Please, Elena, if I can, let me do this for you. You have done so much for me. You have been my friend when I did not deserve it.”

“You have always deserved it,” Lady Wethersby said, choking back a little sob and giving her a small pat on her hand.

And then the other woman stood, her mind clearly flitting from this sentimental moment to the task before Catherine.

“Well, if you are going on a trip, you must take my trunk—it is the only one we have suitable for genteel travel. We can't have you going to a duke's estate looking like a common...” And then Lady Wethersby glided out of the room, leaving Catherine wondering how she had gotten so lucky with her strange little family.

An hour later, a messenger arrived with the promised salvation: a check for one thousand pounds.

That evening, as Catherine watched Ariel bite into a treacle tart, a smile stretched wide on his face, she resolved that she would do it. She would restore her little family to its former glory. She would save this family as she had been unable to save her first. She knew, down to her marrow, that it was within her power.

This money would put Lady Wethersby back into society and send Ariel to school, launching him as the proper baronet that he was born to be. And it would enable her to finish her manuscript, the volume that, besides Ariel and Elena, gave her life meaning. Her manuscript was the only other thing that made her feel like she might be able to gather the strands of her shattered life and, weaving them together, make something new and not irredeemably broken.

Only later, long after supper, when she was in her little room alone at the top of the house, did she have time to reflect back on the biggest obstacle standing in the way of her accomplishing this feat.

The problem that went by so many names.

His Grace.

Lord Edington.

The Marquess of Forster.

The Duke of Edington.

John Breminster.

Or, as he insisted, just John.

She lay in her bed and thought again of his handsome face—and the strong, taut lines of his body in his elegant suit of mourning clothes. The set of his mouth, which, at times, she felt only she must be able to read so well. Her stomach did an involuntary flip.

Catherine groaned and pressed her pillow to her face, trying to drive these images from her mind. To him, she reminded herself, she wasn't an object of desire but a loathsome necessity.

And she shouldn't forget it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEXT MORNING, the Breminster carriage arrived at Halston Place. As she studied the carriage from the window, Catherine concluded it must be the one undertaken for ducal errands that required discretion, such as ferrying women the duke should be associating with under no circumstances—never mind accompanying on cross-country road trips—to his Mayfair townhome. This carriage had no cornets or seals but rather a regal plainness.

A sleepy Ariel and a teary Lady Wethersby had risen to send her off. Both Wethersbys embraced her in the drawing room as the Breminster footman took her single trunk out to the carriage.

“I will send you a letter once I reach Edington. And please write me as often as possible. Otherwise, I will worry.”

“No need to worry, my darling,” Lady Wethersby replied, looking wistful nonetheless. “You have left us with plenty. We will be living in fine fashion in your absence. Do take care of yourself, Catherine dearest, and hurry back.”

If she stayed any longer in their drawing room, Catherine thought she might cry, so she hugged them both again quickly and hurried out to the carriage.

The vehicle lurched away from Halston Place. A stinging hurt threaded through her as she pulled away from the familiar façade. She hadn't been separated from Ariel and Lady Wethersby in longer than she could remember. She knew she had to embark on this mission to save their family—and yet leaving them pained her.

As the carriage continued to wend its way through the city streets, Catherine told herself that she would not compromise her principles completely. True, the suggestion that her aunt had been alive for the past seventeen years and hadn't

contacted her hardly caused her to feel loyal to the woman. But she couldn't forget what the Breminsters had done to Mary or her father—and, most of all, to herself.

She had resolved, late last night, before she fell asleep, to treat John Breminster with the disregard that his title deserved. She wouldn't be unnecessarily combative or even rude—she, after all, wanted to find Mary and receive her payment—but she refused to show him the respect that his rank demanded. His title might mean one thing to society but it meant another thing entirely to her.

As the carriage entered Mayfair, however, she didn't feel very dignified or brave. She looked out the window of the carriage and saw the people who used to populate her world before Sir Francis's death. Neat gentlemen in fine, striped trousers brandished walking sticks and ladies promenaded in silk dresses in every color from dove gray to fuchsia. A gaggle of young women, out for shopping in Bond Street, grabbed each other's arms and laughed, their heads surely filled with hopes and expectations that Catherine had long been unable to afford.

She reminded herself that everyone had sorrows, even the happy, brilliant people of Mayfair. After all, she had been one of them no more than three years ago and she had had plenty of problems then that would have been invisible to a passing carriage. But, as she neared Grosvenor Square, Catherine couldn't help but feel that she was the loneliest person between Park Lane and Regent Street.

When the carriage lurched to a stop, Catherine told herself to shake off her gloom. She needed her strength when encountering the duke. She didn't want him to see anything from her that even resembled weakness.

The footman handed Catherine down and she found herself in the mews beside a very handsome town house, a confection of Portland stone and marble porticos. She had to appreciate the man's discretion. Catherine appreciated that he had thought to have her enter through the back. She didn't have much more

reputation to lose but, nevertheless, she didn't need the additional complications of being seen entering Breminster House. Especially if she ever hoped to restore herself and the Wethersbys to their former position. As the footman ushered her towards the door, it opened, revealing a very young-looking butler, who appeared as uncertain and nervous as she felt.

“Good morning, Miss Aster. If you would be so obliging, His Grace has asked you to wait in his study.”

For a second, Catherine was confused. She had no idea who Miss Aster was and she half-wondered if the butler had mistaken her for someone else. Perhaps one of the duke's mistresses? A blush suffused her cheeks at the thought of being mistaken for such a person. Then it occurred to her that John Breminster would not have told his staff her real name.

She murmured her acquiescence and thanked the butler. He directed her to the study, asking her if she needed anything while she waited. She reassured him that she was very content at present.

In fact, once in the study, Catherine found it hard to focus on anything but the magnificent room in which she found herself. She felt a raw, cutting envy over every aspect of the space. *Oh to be a great man*, she thought, *and to have a study like this one*. The books soared overhead, reachable only by movable ladders, and the desk was massive. And this wasn't even the actual library, she reminded herself. That room would be elsewhere. While Catherine loved books and libraries, a study like this one was what she truly coveted. A room sanctioned for work of the intellectual variety. A room that told others that that work was important.

Catherine walked around the room, thumbing through the different books on the shelves, until she found a patch of history tomes. She scanned the volumes and bent down on her knees to reach a few in the corner that she knew by title but had never had the chance to read. Her heart beat faster as she ran her fingers over the spines.

Catherine heard a noise from the doorway and looked up.

The duke entered the room, looking freshly washed, in a pristine suit of clothes, and appearing somehow even more handsome than he had the day before. She unwound herself from her hunched-over position. She had to fight the urge to curtsy, engrained in her since birth, but she held fast to her resolution not to give him that type of homage.

“Good morning, Your Grace.”

He surveyed her and she could *feel* the wrinkles in her clothes. She hadn’t exactly had a dress on hand worthy of socializing with a duke. This dress was her best, a faded blue muslin, but it hardly deserved the name. Last evening even Lady Wethersby had mourned the state of her wardrobe, lamenting that they didn’t have time to purchase her new clothes before her departure.

“Really, Miss Forster. Already not honoring our agreement? It does not bode well for what lies ahead.”

Her stomach lurched at this accusation.

“I don’t understand you, Your Grace.”

“My condition to our agreement yesterday. You agreed to refrain from calling me Your Grace.”

He was an abominable man. Never mind that she had resolved not to honor his rank—and here she was spitting out the honorific. But calling him anything else, anything more intimate, rankled her equally.

“What about Edington? Or simply Breminster? It has a good, strong quality to it, I think.”

“John is what you will call me. That is what I paid for.”

“It hardly seems appropriate.”

“I didn’t notice your curtsy when I came into this room. Or was it so slight that I missed it altogether?”

“That is different.”

“Is it? Anyway, I believe I paid for this particular favor. You wouldn’t want me to revoke our agreement, would you? Ten thousand pounds is a lot for a woman of Halston Place to lose.”

She felt breathless at the prospect. He had her trapped.

“Only if you call me Catherine in return,” she spat out before thinking, only to avoid complete capitulation.

She knew she shouldn’t be tearing down any walls between them. And yet she couldn’t countenance him calling her *Miss Forster* while she called him John. She wanted them on the same footing. She had promised herself, after all, that they would be.

“Very well.” His smile was easy, as if what he called her mattered little. He indicated towards his desk and the armchair opposite. “Please. We have much to discuss.”

The duke went around the desk and sat in the leather chair on the other side. She hated herself for admiring the ease of his movement.

She sat down on the chair opposite. With the large oak desk between them, his proximity to her felt almost manageable.

Unless she looked at his hands. Or his mouth.

“We need to discuss our travel. I have a few details that I would like to share with you, if you do not object.”

She gave a slight nod. She had to admit that she was curious about his plan for addressing their problem. How would they find a woman who, if alive, clearly did not want to be found?

“We will set out this morning for Edington. There, we will question your aunt’s former intimates and ascertain what they might be able to say about her current location. I understand that many of the gentlewomen in the area were her personal friends and that she had a literary society for ladies. To keep chatter down, you will call on them when we return and tell

them you are trying to find her for your own purposes. If I were to make similar inquiries, they would undoubtedly begin to speculate. I also presume they would be more willing to give over her location to you than myself. Hopefully, these ladies can tell us where she might have gone or, better yet, if they have heard from her recently.”

Catherine worked to keep her face impassive but it delighted her to know that he needed her so badly. At least, in this capacity, she had power over him. And his plan was better than she had expected him to concoct. She herself hadn’t thought to ask her aunt’s friends. She hadn’t seen any of those ladies in years and the few that she had seen hadn’t treated her differently than the rest of the *ton*. None had seemed the types—despite their former bluestocking leanings—to carry on a secret correspondence with a ruined woman. Nevertheless, she saw the wisdom in beginning with them. They very well might know something that could help them.

“Once we arrive at Edington, I will return to the Hall and you will stay at the local inn, the King’s Arms, and we will only correspond through mail. I have a few trusted couriers there. On the road—it should only take two days by coach, if we make haste—we will travel under assumed names, Mr. and Mrs. Aster. We will stop at one inn, a quiet country place, where we can pass as a gentry couple of no note.”

“That’s what your butler called me—Miss Aster.”

“I have put it out among my own staff here in Grosvenor Square that you are a Miss Aster, a tutor on deportment, who I have hired for my sister before her coming out this fall. Only my coachman, Marcel, will know that you are neither tutor nor wife. He is my most trusted servant and his discretion is unimpeachable.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Aster.” She turned the new names over in her mouth, just to feel them there, but, as soon as she said the words aloud, she saw him blanch.

“Given the state of most genteel marriages, posing as a couple will take little effort. And, of course, at the inn, we will

have separate chambers.”

“Obviously,” she replied, keeping her tone even. She didn’t want him to think that she *wanted* to share a room with him. Technically, she told herself, biting the inside of her cheek, she didn’t.

“Do you have any objections?”

Catherine recognized his solicitude, no matter how brusque. It couldn’t be easy for him, given that he disliked her and all she stood for, to show even this meager level of consideration for her thoughts and feelings. Moreover, most men of his rank would hardly show such deference to their closest friends, never mind a woman they were only associating with out of desperation.

“I see you have everything planned,” she said, trying to sound reasonable if not friendly. “May I suggest, however, a small detour?”

She had not come unprepared. While his plan was better than she had anticipated, she had not been about to trust herself to his wisdom. And she had an advantage, knowing her aunt as she did.

He raised his eyebrows. “Please.”

“A week after my aunt disappeared...” she reached into her pocket and withdrew a small square of paper “...I received this letter.”

This morning, Catherine had gone to her armoire, a little miserable hunk of wood, and pulled out from the bottom drawer her small collection of keepsakes, which included her family Bible, miniatures of her parents, and her favorite collection of English folk tales. Here, she kept the one piece of evidence that hinted at where her aunt might have gone after that day at Edington Hall.

Catherine slid it across the table. She watched as he carefully unfolded the old paper. His strong fingers gently opening the soft creases made her pelvic muscles tighten.

Be mistress of yourself, she reprimanded her traitorous body.

As he began to read, he started tapping the table with his finger. An unconscious impulse, she was sure. To her mortification, this mindless tic sent another pulse of desire through her.

She forced herself to focus on the letter instead. She had read it so many times that she knew the words by heart.

Dearest Catherine,

With great regret my darling girl, I must leave you. By staying away I hope that society may soon forget my actions and be kinder to you when you must enter it. I am afraid that, for now, we are not to see each other. I will miss you keenly and regret with everything that I am that I must part from you.

Your father will explain when you are older why exactly I have had to leave—one day, you will understand much better, although I fear you will judge me severely. I know you will be a good girl for your father and keep him well.

I am with Martha now but will soon be leaving her. I will send more word when I can. You and your father cannot know where I am going but one day I hope to see you again.

Forever yours,

Mary

John Breminster now held the last artifact Catherine had of her sad family history. Her father was dead, her aunt was gone, and Forster House had been sold long ago. How strange that the very enemies that had destroyed her family were now the potential source of her salvation. This letter was the best last card she had to play.

He put the letter down. When he looked up, for a brief second, his mouth appeared softer, almost sorrowful. Then,

just as quickly, his stony expression returned.

“You said you did not know Mary Forster’s location.”

“And I do not. Martha was my aunt’s old nurse. She was mine, too, when I was very small. She lives in Lulworth, only a half-day’s travel from Edington, in a cottage. As my aunt said, she planned to leave her—and I know that she did. I never heard from Mary again and I have no notion where she is now.”

He nodded slowly, as if unwilling to trust her.

“Still, Martha is the last known person to have seen my aunt and so I believe we should visit her first. If she has nothing of use, we will not have traveled very far out of our way.”

“You are sure the old woman is still alive?”

“I know she is. I still supply her with a small annuity. She is very old and very poor but she may know something.”

Catherine saw a flicker of emotion flash across his lips. Pity? She wondered if it was for Martha or herself.

“That is generous of you...” He trailed off and she realized that he had stopped short of alluding to her own limited means. She blushed and hated herself for it.

“I don’t give her much.” She felt her face grow hotter under his gaze. “Only a few pounds a year but it makes a material difference to her happiness. The ruin of my family did not only affect us—it also hurt the people who depended on Forster House. I try to do my best by them when I can, which, I am ashamed to say, is not often.”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the desk. He seemed disturbed by her statement. Why he would care, she couldn’t fathom.

“Nevertheless, Martha would talk to me and answer my questions.”

“Very well. We go there first. We can stay at the same inn this evening—it is on the same road.”

Catherine paused. She knew she had to ask the question that came next. He seemed to be taking the search seriously but she still wasn't prepared to trust his judgment.

“As a valued servant to my family, Martha knew much about us. Have you questioned your servants? The ones who knew your father well and may have even handled his correspondence?”

“Of course,” he snapped. “I questioned every man, woman, and child in that house about my father's last days, the letters he sent, and whether he visited any unusual locations. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Do you think I am addlepated?”

“Not exactly. Although I do conjecture that men of stronger mental powers than yourself have missed what is right in front of him.”

“Very amusing, Catherine.” Her given name on his lips sounded far too personal—the collection of syllables sent a flutter of unwelcome pleasure through her body. “Only our housekeeper, Mrs. Morrison, had my father's confidence and she has been in our service since he was a boy. She even knew your aunt. I asked her if she knew what happened to Mary Forster. She told me herself she knows nothing of her location. She would not lie.”

They looked at each other across the table. Catherine felt her breath constrict. When they talked of their search, it was easier to bear the tension that crackled between them but, when the subject dropped, it became much more difficult to ignore. She looked at his mouth, trying to read the emotion there, and she wasn't sure—couldn't be sure—but she suspected he wasn't thinking about their journey any longer, either.

The duke broke eye contact and reached into his waistcoat, drawing out a small square of paper. “Before we leave, I

thought you should know I received this missive this morning.”

He handed the small letter across the table. Had some old piece of scandal resurfaced? Some bit of unpleasant, nasty gossip? She grabbed the letter and was surprised to see familiar, crooked handwriting:

Dear DUKE of EDINTON, YOUR GRACE,

Good DAY, SIR.

I, SIR ARIEL WORTHINTON WETHERSBY, write to you concerning MISS CATHRINE Forster. SHE HAS AGREED TO HELP YOU WITH YOUR HISTORYS, no less and NO MORE. MAKE NO MISTAKE. CATHRINE belongs to the HOUSE of WETHERSBY and, if you hurt her or do anything IMPROPER, I will meet you at DAWN.

farewell

SIR ARIEL W WETHERSBY, BART.

Looking at the note, Catherine felt the desire to laugh and cry at the same time. Tears pushed at the corners of her eyes and she smiled hard into her lap. She pushed the note back across the table wordlessly, finding that she couldn't speak.

“It is not every day that I am threatened by a ten-year-old.”

When she looked up, John was not smiling but his mouth almost looked like it wanted to. Even that bit of softness enhanced his countenance to dangerous effect. His manifest beauty knocked her doubly off-kilter.

She found her voice. “Ariel must have had Melinda, our maid, help him with the postage and the spelling. I will write him and say you received his letter and that he needn't worry about me.”

“As a grown man, I am used to handling my own correspondence. I have prepared this response and wanted to make sure you approved.”

He slid a second paper across the table. She read the message:

Dear Sir Ariel W. Wethersby,

I hereby promise to protect Miss Catherine Forster and to make sure no harm befalls her in my service. This is my pledge of honor. If I do anything to displease Miss Forster, I promise to submit myself to you, Sir Ariel, at dawn, for a swift execution.

I remain, humbly yours,

John Breminster, Duke of Edington

Catherine didn't like this man—or at least that is what she told herself whenever the sight of his chiseled features made her wish for more of what they had shared seven years ago—but even she could see this letter was incredibly kind.

“Thank you.” She pushed the note back across the table.

He looked at her, that softer expression still playing around the edges of his lips.

God, she still couldn't stop staring at his mouth—both to try and read his emotions and to better imagine it on her.

Blast. She needed to rid herself of such thoughts.

He broke the moment, moving to stand.

“I have to attend to a few things before our departure. My butler will see to any needs you may have.”

“I do have one request.” He looked at her, his eyes wide, as if he wanted to please her. She was so surprised by the open solicitude on his face that she forgot what she had been saying.

“Yes?”

“I was wondering if I could take a few of these books on our journey.” She pointed to the history books on the shelf opposite his desk. “They are rare volumes, not easy to obtain, and I have been hoping to read them for ages.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Do you imagine we’ll have much time for reading?”

In his mouth, the words sounded like a seduction.

“Perhaps a little,” she said, trying to keep any hint of innuendo out of her voice, “on the long carriage ride to Lulworth.”

“By all means. If you can bear it.”

She nodded her thanks.

Maybe this trip would be easier than she thought.

Then, before he left the room, he raked his hand through his hair, dispersing his silken curls into an even more tempting disarray.

Her mouth went dry.

Or maybe not.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JOHN LEFT CATHERINE and headed straight for his bedchamber. It had taken everything in him not to press his mouth to hers and bend her over his desk. He had no idea how he would manage a whole carriage journey. It didn't help that, with more familiarity, she revealed herself to be just as honorable, intelligent and formidable as she had seemed that night in the Tremberley gardens. In conjunction with her beauty—well, he was in a sorry state indeed.

He shouldn't have made her calling him John a condition of their working together. He shouldn't have insisted on it in her drawing room at Halston Place and he definitely shouldn't have forced her to comply in his study. He couldn't help that the prospect of his Christian name in her mouth gave him pleasure, just as he couldn't change the fact that every "Your Grace" from her felt like a rejection. She had asked him to call her Catherine in response and he had felt a lightness fill his chest. He had called her Catherine so many times to himself, in his own head, that addressing her by that name had felt almost unbearably intimate.

As if that wasn't bad enough, he had received that boy's letter this morning, which made clear that, in addition to being breathtaking and redoubtable, Catherine Forster inspired devotion in those closest to her.

There was also her charity towards her old nurse—it showed actual nobility, a quality that he knew from experience, few of the aristocracy truly possessed.

He had stood there in his study, clenching his fist to stave off his impulses, as *she* remained perfectly calm, talking about history books. She imagined she might get some *reading* done on this trip. Meanwhile, he was wondering if he would be able

to keep himself from proposing a series of indecent acts before they cleared the city limits.

His trunks were packed and loaded in the coach already. The footmen would have taken care of her luggage as well. They needed to leave now if they hoped to reach the inn by nightfall. They should be driving out of the city at this moment but he could not enter that carriage without taking care of himself first. Otherwise, he knew they would enter that enclosed space and he would be at her feet, promising her anything for a few more minutes of what they had shared in those gardens.

John undid the falls of his breeches hastily and took himself in hand. His cock was already erect and seeping, his hand coming away wet with his own seed. He swore at the state of himself. He couldn't believe that he was so swollen and bothered from merely speaking to her for a half hour. How did she do it?

He imagined Catherine sitting on the desk in his study and rolling back her skirts to reveal the tops of her stockings. He stifled a moan at the mental image, even though he knew no one would hear it. While he needed this release, sound still felt like too much of an admission. He desperately wanted to be able to resist her—but, in his mind, he was entering her. They were finishing what they had not even had the chance to begin that night. She was encircling him, taking all of him into her. Her bewitching blue-black eyes met his own as she clenched over him. He pumped himself into the roughness of his own fingers, closing his eyes to better imagine that it was *her* undoing him. He could feel his orgasm starting to build and he bit the coverlet, stroking harder. In his mind, he was taking Catherine's fingers into his mouth as he thrust into her, laving the ink stains with his tongue. Suddenly and almost without warning, he came explosively into his own hand.

He stifled another groan—but this time it was not a sound of pleasure he was suppressing. He swore aloud.

John had imagined a release would help him keep his composure during the long journey ahead. But instead he could feel himself stirring once more as fantasies of Catherine continued to play through his mind. If anything, with these fevered thoughts, he had made it worse. He was very uncertain indeed that he would be able to hang on to the little control he had left.



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, they were clattering along the streets of London and John had to admire Catherine Forster's ability to read in a moving vehicle. It would have made him nauseous but she clearly knew what she was doing. She had entered the carriage only moments after him, with a small trunk, which turned out to be full of papers and little pencil nubs and the books she had taken from his study. She had settled onto her side of the carriage with a great air of contentment. When he had tapped the roof and their vehicle seized forward, she hadn't even looked up from her page, which she still studied now with seemingly unbreakable concentration, making small notes on a piece of paper. She bit her lip when she read, worrying the skin with her teeth, and occasionally brought the end of her pen to her lips. Periodically, she uncorked a tiny inkwell and, with a grace he found damnably impressive, dipped her pen and made a note in one fluid motion. She didn't seem to notice he was there at all. And she wore no gloves.

He looked out the window, resentful even though he knew he had no right to be. He wasn't paying her to talk to him. Still, he wanted to speak to her. He just had nothing to say. Eventually, after searching his mind, he found something that felt appropriate—even safe.

“I am hoping we will reach the Crown Arms tonight. There, we can sleep, and, hopefully by tomorrow afternoon, we'll have arrived at Lulworth.”

“Yes, you said this in your study.” She did not look up from her book.

He cleared his throat, trying to cover up his embarrassment. "I believe there is another inn at Lulworth. We can stay there when calling on your nurse."

"Indeed." She finally looked up at him. "We could hardly stay with Martha herself. She lives in a one-room cottage. Hardly fit accommodations for a duke."

"Trust me, I've stayed in worse."

Sometimes worse was better, in fact. He remembered a night he had spent in the barn with a maid at Tremberley. He had been fifteen. He could have brought her into the house, of course, but then his friends would have plagued him. They had spent the whole night literally rolling in the hay. She was married now to the local butcher. He remembered his shock at seeing her in town the last time he had been there. She had been touting two little children and had been as comely as ever. He had given her a saucy tip of his hat and she had replied with a chaste little smile, the type a happily married woman gives an old lover.

To distract himself, he tried to remember that night in the hayloft with the now-butcher's wife. Instead, his mind kept transposing Catherine into the scene instead, her silver-blond hair splayed over the straw, her refined mouth asking for more.

He failed to suppress a sigh.

"Are you a nervous traveler, Your Grace?"

He opened his eyes. "I have *paid* you to call me John. If I have to remind you again, I'm letting you off at the next corner."

"My apologies," she said, not sounding sorry at all. "Are you a nervous traveler, John?"

It was the first time that she had used his Christian name and he went hard at the sound. *Damn her*, he cursed internally.

"Not at all. I would ask you the same but you are clearly adept at distracting yourself from the boredom of the road."

“I have truly traveled very little. I have never left England and have barely even left the south. I am sure you have traveled much more extensively and yet you seem not to know what to do with yourself.”

“I could never read through the rocking of the carriage.”

“I trained myself on the trips between the Wethersby estate and the town house in London, back when we had such luxuries. Such interminable carriage rides. You would learn how to read and ride too.”

Read and ride. The words were so banal and yet, somehow, they sounded wicked coming from her mouth. They did nothing to alleviate his physical distress. Despite having spent so recently, his erection was straining against his breeches to the point that he had to enact a discreet readjustment.

God, he was in a desperate way.

“I have been on many long carriage rides,” he said, trying to distract himself from his own thoughts, “and I have never learned.”

“What do you do then? On long carriage rides?”

“I prefer to ride beside the carriage myself but that wouldn’t do now, given that I am trying not to attract attention. Usually, when I go by carriage, I travel with my friends...” He trailed off. He didn’t want to say the truth, which was that he and his friends usually distracted themselves by drinking, gossiping and trading stories about women they had bedded. And reminiscing about old times at Eton and Oxford when they had lived for the type of mischief that, while technically more innocent than what they got into now, had been, somehow, more fun.

She was still looking at him expectantly.

He shook his head. “It’s not important. I should let you read.”

John regretted having said anything about his friends. He never spoke about Trem, Montaigne and Leith to outsiders. Others most likely assumed that the bond between he and his friends was not real, that they were just a collection of heartless rakes who enjoyed the same sins. No one ever considered that his friendships might be important to him for their own sakes.

She kept her gaze on him. “I have read about you and your friends in the society pages.”

He winced internally. Of course she wouldn’t understand.

“Most of the things that appear in there are bosh.” He couldn’t help but try and dispel whatever notion about him and his friends that had worked its way into her mind from that tripe. “You shouldn’t believe them.”

“What do you care what I believe?”

He coughed, trying to clear his head. It felt like everything she said was a trap. And he suspected that the discomfort in his breeches wasn’t helping his powers of conversation.

“I just mean, *one* shouldn’t. I didn’t mean *you*—you can believe whatever you like. It makes no difference to me.”

She still looked at him. Her expression appeared more curious than wounded. God, how could she make *inquisitive* seem beguiling. He thought of her aunt, the woman with the same hair and eyes, who had ruined his childhood. For the first time that day, he felt the right part of him harden: his heart.

They rode in silence for hours. Her reading through the books from his study and him with his eyes closed, sometimes dozing, other times looking out the window, and only intermittently succeeding at keeping lewd thoughts about the silver-haired woman next to him out of his mind. At midafternoon, they stopped, and Marcel procured a country lunch for them at a roadside tavern. After a few minutes, they were on their way again, making good time towards the Crown Arms.

They set about eating their cold luncheon with only the carriage wheels breaking the quiet between them. He had resolved not to speak to Catherine if he could help it, but then he saw her reach towards a fresh roll with those ink-stained fingers.

“Give me your hands.” He drew his handkerchief from his pocket and his flask from his waistcoat.

“Excuse me?”

“Give me your hands.”

“I would rather not.”

“Your hands are filthy. You can’t eat with your fingers covered in ink. To begin, God knows what they put in it.”

“If it were poison, I would have died long ago.”

“It’s filthy. And you don’t need to die for it to be unwholesome.”

She frowned. “Fine.” She stretched out her fingers, long and beautiful, towards him. “What are you going to do to me? Should I be frightened?”

He didn’t say anything. Instead, he pulled his flask from his coat and dabbed whiskey onto his handkerchief. He took the wet handkerchief and held the tip of her index finger, rubbing off the ink and smudging the white cloth black. The feel of her hand in his had him hardening again but the activity gave him a purpose. Oddly, he felt more in control of himself now, despite the contact.

“You are treating me like a dirty child.” Her voice sounded perturbed, but the way her fingers turned in to his touch as he worked the ink off told him that she wasn’t completely annoyed by the intrusion.

“Only because you behave like one.”

She gave an exclamation of indignation yet didn’t remove her hands.

He shook his head and continued cleaning her fingers. He wished he could suck the ink off, poison be damned, but that would rather defeat the point he was allegedly trying to make.

When he was done, she looked down at her hands.

“Thank you.”

“It’s no bother.” He put the dirtied handkerchief back in his pocket and looked out the window.

From the corner of his eye, he could see she was still looking at him.

“Are you betrothed?”

“*Betrothed?*” He snapped his gaze back to her. Despite the invasiveness of her question, her face was neutral. It gnawed at him.

“You are a duke, young, not bad-looking, rich.” She spoke as if commenting on the properties of a fine racing horse. “The mamas of the *ton* must be trying to *buy* you for their daughters. Which, I suppose, what else is a dowry for, really.”

“I will admit that some have tried. But I don’t have any plans to marry.”

“Why not? Don’t you need to continue your line? Not to mention that most noblemen like to shore up their estates with the thousands of pounds that a bride brings. Wouldn’t that help you in your current predicament? I am sure you wouldn’t be the first peer to take his wife’s dowry and give it to his sister or daughter in short order. And then there is the production of the heir. Marriage would appear key to solving all these ducal problems.”

And give me a whole other problem, he thought, *a goddamn wife.*

“I don’t care to marry.” The words came out of his mouth seemingly of their own accord, as often seemed to happen around her. He was saying something that he hadn’t even shared with Tremberley. Not that Tremberley would ask. To his friends, marrying was the equivalent of tying a rope around

the highest rafter and jumping. In their set, an aversion to matrimony was the baseline assumption. No clarification needed. “And anyway, replacing the money my father has willed to my cousin wouldn’t stop the gossips from ruining my sister’s prospects.”

“Still, your matrimonial aversion seems inconvenient given your position.”

“Not at all. I’ll enjoy myself as a duke, mind, but no wives. Let someone else deal with the whole ducal heap after my death. My cousin—not Baron Falk, thank God—would inherit the title after me. I understand he has a numerous family. Lots of heirs to be had on that side of the family.”

“Do you have a fear of women, Your Grace?” Her tone was light. Her levity seemed designed to rankle him—and he hated to admit that it was very effective.

“*John*,” he corrected her. “And don’t mistake me. I love women. I believe I’m quite notorious for it, in fact. I can’t be sure, however, not having read the scandal sheets as closely as yourself.”

He didn’t say the rest—that he couldn’t stand to marry a woman just to beget him heirs, when he’d wake up in cold sweats every night thinking about *her*, the impossible woman sitting across from him. Even sitting here arguing with her, not able to agree on anything, he found himself wanting to close the distance between them and make her forget about their disputes in the most pleasurable way possible.

She raised her eyebrows.

“It doesn’t sound like you love women, given how you dismiss out of hand being yoked to one for life. You imply that you find carnal relations with a woman pleasurable, but that’s hardly a love of women—and clearly the carnal relations are not that satisfying or else you wouldn’t be so happy to see the women go.”

“For the love of God,” he said, unable to stop himself, once more finding his cock at full mast, “stop saying ‘carnal

relations.”

Catherine laughed. He realized it was the first time since their reacquaintance that he had heard her do so. The sound thrilled him. He wasn't sure how much more of this torture he could take.

“And here I thought you were a hardened rake. Who knew the gossips were so wrong. You are rather squeamish, given your reputation.”

Her tone was so light. Innocent. She wasn't even looking up from her book. He couldn't believe, however, that she didn't know what she was doing to him. The words coming out of her mouth, even the quotidian ones, felt like a seduction. He was a hardened rake, indeed. He cursed to himself and shifted in his seat.

He hated her beautiful face, somehow smug and wise at the same time. Even though he knew it was irrational, he felt like she knew what she had done to him on that ruin seven years ago. She could sit there, indifferent to what they had shared, while he couldn't stop imagining taking her in this carriage.

“I had more women before I was sixteen than most men have in a lifetime.” He bit off the words and, as he was speaking, he realized that they were landing with more force than he had intended. “It's not something I'd expect a spinster like yourself to understand.”

Her face fell. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if he had struck her.

Then she opened them once more and turned towards the window, her eyes back on her book.

Fuck.

Her expression told him all that he needed to know.

He had taken it too far.

And she wouldn't be dignifying him with a response.

CHAPTER NINE

IN LITTLE MORE than twenty-four hours, the Duke of Edington had *implied* that she was a whore and had actually *called* her a spinster. Catherine was, seemingly, in his estimation, a spinster whore, or a whore spinster, depending on which identity took precedence over the other. Strange, she thought, because his decided implication in the carriage today was that, as a spinster, she was a dried-up husk who had never been touched by a man—not exactly true, as he well knew, but he wasn't wrong that her life hadn't been a decadent bacchanalia of erotic delight—while yesterday he had suggested that she was an abandoned wanton for what amounted, in the grand scheme of dalliances, to a few kisses in a garden.

Catherine fumed as she stood in the lobby of the Crown Arms while *he* arranged their rooms. It was late, after the supper hour, but nevertheless the pub attached to the inn was crowded. *So much for a quiet country place.*

Luckily, she recognized no aristocrats or prominent members of the gentry.

The duke walked over to her with a grim expression.

“I must tell Marcel that we have found a room. Wait here until I return.”

“*A room?*” she said, her mind whirring at the prospect of a *singular* accommodation.

“There was apparently a hunt. And only one room is vacant.”

She gave him a look, which, she hoped, communicated her unwillingness to share a bedchamber with the man who thought of her as a spinster whore.

“I am not delighted either. But what can be done? Would you rather bed down in the stable with Marcel?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

He gave her a look that she couldn’t quite interpret.

“I am going to speak with my coachman. Don’t move from this spot.”

He strode out of the lobby and Catherine had no choice but to wait for him. The thought of sharing a bedchamber with the Duke of Edington—*John*—had her shaking. She was angry with him at present and yet she couldn’t ignore the desire that coursed through her at the thought of warming his bed.

When they reached their room, the chamber was minuscule. The bed took up half the space and the only other accouterments were an old bureau, a washbasin, and a wooden jug for water.

He came in behind her and shut the door. He looked at the room and sighed. “Charming.”

“Trust me. I’ve stayed in worse,” she said, echoing his words from earlier, and he gave an unamused grunt in response. *I live in worse*, she should have said, and she wouldn’t have been far off.

“At least the innkeeper is sending up some refreshment.”

Her stomach rumbled at the thought. She was angry with him, but she couldn’t be upset at the prospect of food. She sat down on the bed. In the small room, there was nowhere else to sit. He set about removing his boots and his jacket and waistcoat. She tried to avert her eyes but it didn’t help. Just hearing his jacket fall to the floor made a heaviness pool in her belly.

Soon, a boy entered their room with a tray of cold victuals and she watched as the duke fished a shilling from his pocket and gave it him. His eyes went wide at the sight before he scampered off. *Why*, Catherine lamented to herself, *did he have to be kind?* If he was going to be an ass, why couldn’t he just be a through-and-through arse? Why did he have to call her a spinster whore and then give a serving boy enough money to feed his family for a month? It was the same as his

letter to Ariel. It would be much easier to revile him if he weren't given to unpredictable acts of kindness.

He placed the tray on the bed and sat down beside her. They ate the cold dinner in silence.

When they had finished, the boy appeared again and took away the tray. John provided him with another shilling and Catherine stifled a sigh.

Once the boy left, there was nothing to do but go to bed.

"I will sleep on the floor."

Catherine met John's eye and she felt that thrum of connection flow between them again.

She looked down at the uninviting wooden floorboards.

"No." She stood and began to untie her dress. Her fingers shook as she worked herself free of the laces. "The room is small, but the bed is big enough for us both. We can just pretend the other isn't there."

As if that would be possible, she thought, her pulse quickening.

She removed her dress, determined not to look at him, but also determined not to sleep in her stays. She removed everything until she was just in her chemise. Still not looking at him, she moved to the bed, pulled back the coverlet, and lay down. With her head on the pillow, she closed her eyes.

She heard John moving around the room and taking off the rest of his clothing, the little that he still had on. He blew out the candles. After a few more seconds, she felt his weight settle next to her on the bed. They lay there in silence and she was sure he must be able to hear her heart beating. She could hear—no, she could feel—his breathing. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to bring him closer to her. Unbidden, the night in the Tremberley gardens flashed through her mind. His lips on hers. *God, you're perfect.* And yet she remained with her back turned towards him, every moment its own separate eternity, unable to move an inch.

Then, to her surprise, he spoke.

“I am sorry about what I said. In the carriage.”

His voice was low and unguarded and that, with his weight beside her in the bed, sent her pulse quickening even more. She was powerless—she couldn’t help opening her eyes and turning to him. Dim moonlight poured in through the window, illuminating his face. His chest was bare. He was so beautiful that she froze, for a moment, in pure awe.

And then she remembered her anger. What he had called her.

“You do realize that you called me a whore yesterday and a frigid spinster today?”

“I didn’t say *frigid*.”

“Do you think I’m a spinster whore? Or a whore spinster? I can’t work out which one.”

“Stop saying the word whore.”

“Why?”

Up close, it was easy to study his mouth. He looked pained.

He reached over the small distance that separated them in the bed and took her hand in his own. “I wanted to suck the ink off your fingertips today.”

She should have been speechless but she wasn’t. Instead, a wildness came over her, as she imagined that night so long ago, how he had touched her, and how many times she had thought of it in darkened little bedchambers much like this one.

“I would have let you.” She felt her smile curving into her pillow, not knowing what possessed her, and yet she didn’t know how to lie to him in this moment. She couldn’t be more guarded, not with him so close.

John took her hand and, slowly, raised her fingers to his mouth. Her hands were dirty again, of course, because she had

continued her work after luncheon. She held her breath, unsure if he was going to do it, feeling both unwilling and unable to inhale.

And then his mouth closed over her middle finger, his tongue laving the tip. He nibbled and sucked, as if he was starving. The feeling did terrible things to her core. She could feel moisture pooling between her legs.

When she couldn't take the feeling in silence anymore, she let out a shaky breath, half-whimper and half-gasp. As if that had been what he was waiting for, he pulled her towards him, crushing her to his body.

And then he was kissing her and there was no restraint in the tangle of their mouths. The past dissolved as he pressed his body over hers. She opened her mouth to him and he fed hungrily on her. She ran her hands through his hair and he groaned, grinding into her, only her light chemise and his breeches between them.

Over her chemise, he cupped her breast roughly and then placed his mouth to her, sucking her nipples, already taut from her arousal, through the thin fabric. She let out a moan that, even to her own ears, sounded particularly abandoned. He teased her nipples with his tongue until the fabric of her chemise was completely soaked and she could feel, between her legs, more slickness, too much—she would never be able to hide it and she wasn't even sure that she wanted to.

His body felt just right, as if his touch unlocked some part of her, some capacity for extreme pleasure that she had difficulty believing in when she wasn't with him. She remembered this feeling from that night at Tremberley, but she had told herself that she had only imagined it. Now, in his arms again, she had to admit to herself how real it was.

His hands found her arse and he pulled her towards him, even harder now, and she felt his cock, hard and large, through his breeches. When she writhed against him, needing more of that feeling, she heard his sudden intake of breath. Whether it was shock or arousal, she was too gone to care.

He seemed to agree with her because he pushed her chemise above her hips. With him above her, his cock, still in his breeches, rubbed against her entrance. The friction was so good that she couldn't bear the sensation without an outlet—she cried out and he answered her, pressing his face into her neck, murmuring her name like he was in agony.

“Do you enjoy that?” he asked, his mouth on her ear.

She let out a sound that was somewhere between an assent and a sob.

He continued, placing his hand on her hip and pressing her to him in a desperate rhythm. At the same time, his lips found her neck and his tongue teased the soft skin there.

Even through the cloth barrier, Catherine was so wet that John was able to slide against her, giving her the friction that she needed. He thrust against her and she could feel pleasure mounting inside of her. With every brush against her clit, he took her higher and she could feel herself tightening, her innermost muscles both yearning for more of him and starting to yield to pleasure.

“Are you going to come for me?” his voice sounded unhinged, feral, and she would have been ashamed of her susceptibility to him, how clear it was, if she wasn't experiencing mind-addling pleasure.

She could see his face above her in the dim moon light. He appeared transfixed, dumbstruck, so different from the closed-off, haughty aristocrat that he had been in the carriage. Only this transformation could have inspired her to respond to such a question.

“Yes,” she managed to gasp.

He thrust against her once more and she met him with equal pressure, grinding against him until she saw stars. She came convulsively, shattering against him.

Even as she came down, Catherine knew she didn't want to stop. She had wanted him for seven years. She knew that she should hate him. And part of her did. He represented the

suffering that his family had brought to her—how they had hobbled her and made her nothing. But, for whatever reason, he also undid her, remade her. And now they were on this journey. Once they found Mary Forster and solved both of their problems, she and the Wethersbys would be restored to their former position, and she and John would separate forever. No one would know what they had done to save themselves and his sister, and no one would have to know what they'd shared in this little inn. They could enjoy each other, she thought, wildly, couldn't they—before they finished their task and never saw one another again? She saw no harm in her having this one passion before settling down to a long life as Lady Wethersby's companion and Ariel's dotting surrogate sister.

Wanting more, Catherine reached down to John's breeches, and stroked him through the fabric, loving the way his breath caught when her hand made contact.

He cursed and repeated her name. She continued to stroke him. His breath went even more ragged and she could tell, even with her dearth of erotic experience, that he was close to his own release.

Then, he began to touch the soft curls between her legs, his fingers brushing her opening and then parting her. She cried out and bucked against him.

He swore again. This time, however, he pulled away.

She almost reached out to him.

But then he stood up.

Through the darkness, she saw him moving, pulling on his boots and his white linen shirt and his jacket.

And then he was gone.

He had left their little room.

He had left her on their bed, panting from want of him, her breath still uneven.

Afterwards, for what felt like hours, she lay awake in the dark.

She didn't cry. The hurt felt too deep for tears. She had offered herself up and he had rejected her. He had walked away, as if disgusted by his desire for her, as if he had remembered his better self at the last moment. After he had shattered her, he then left her in pieces.

Catherine had felt discarded at many points in her life. Her aunt, the only mother she had ever known, had abandoned her. Her father had run headlong into a doomed enterprise that had destroyed him body and soul. Society had viewed her as an unfortunate piece of refuse.

And yet, right now, in this moment, this rejection felt more painful than all the others that had come before. Over the years, to keep going, she had told herself that her misfortunes didn't have anything to do with her personally. They were horrible accidents, bad luck, but not a direct result of anything that she had been or done. She wasn't alone because she was unlovable. She wasn't the problem. And, yet, for the second time, John Breminster had proven that, in fact, she wasn't enough. Just like everyone else, he didn't want her, so he'd left.

As the morning light filtered in through the small inn window, she made a resolution.

The last thing she wanted was for *him* to see how he had wounded her.

She might be unlovable and unwanted but she wasn't weak. She was stronger than falling apart in the face of rejection, especially from him. She hadn't survived what she had only to crumble now.

When she encountered him today, she would pretend nothing of meaning had transpired.

She would be light and nonchalant.

She would be indifference itself.

She would make sure that he never knew how he had hurt her.

CHAPTER TEN

JOHN WALKED IN the cool night air to calm his senses, swearing under his breath. Even out here, he couldn't shake the sensation of Catherine, how perfect she had felt beneath him. The sound and feel of her climax had been the most exquisite thing that he had ever experienced.

He knew if he went back inside the inn, never mind to their little room, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from taking her in the way that he so desperately wanted. It had taken a titanic effort to pull back from her. He could still feel her body through that thin chemise. He could still feel her wetness through his breeches, how tight and hot she would be once he unsheathed himself and entered her. He couldn't believe that it had really happened. It was like the fantasies of the past seven years had come to life in a single moment. He couldn't quite believe that she hadn't recoiled when, in that mad moment, he had brought her fingers to his lips. *I would have let you*, she had said to him.

Her orgasm had told him that she would have let him have all of her. He had wanted to make love to her more than he had ever wanted anything. Still, right now, he wanted to go back to that little room and bury himself in her and feel her close around him.

John groaned and ran his hands through his hair, swearing once more.

He found the hayloft, blessedly empty and warm, and lay down, hoping to quiet the tumult of his thoughts. Instead, he lay awake until dawn.

Mostly, he thought of Catherine. How glorious she had been for that brief interlude. Her skin gleaming in the moonlight. Her otherworldly blond hair spilling out like quicksilver over the pillow. Through her chemise, her breasts

had been full and perfectly weighted in his hands, her nipples taut and sweet in his mouth. He had been able to trace the flare of her hips and grasp the lushness of her arse. To hear her cries as she came for him.

And, yet, he had stopped.

If you had asked him a moment before he left if he could have stopped, he would have said no. No, he couldn't stop this exquisite pleasure. No, he couldn't relinquish this woman from his arms.

But then the image of that day flashed across his mind, without warning or sense.

That day. When the scandal had been unleashed.

His father and Mary Forster, in the study at Edington Hall. The strange woman with that same silver-blond hair bent over and his father behind her. Their expressions contorted and alien.

Because he had not only *been* at the party where they had been discovered.

He had discovered them.

He had been the one to expose them to the world.

And so he couldn't get too close to Catherine Forster. He certainly couldn't bed her. He could never tell her that he had seen his father and her aunt in the act or that he had been the one to accidentally publicize their horrible liaison to the world. He could never bear for her to know the truth—that he had been as complicit in the scandal, in ruining his family and her own, as his father had been. That his childish mistake had ruined her life and destroyed her family. It didn't matter that he had brought harm on his own family as well. She was innocent. And he was guilty.

Further, if he bedded Catherine, it made him just like his father, the man he had spent much of his adult life trying *not* to be like. His father had shirked his responsibilities and harmed those he had a duty to protect and so John had always sought

the opposite for himself. No responsibilities, no bonds of honor, no promises—only transitory pleasure. And before he had ascended to the dukedom, it had been easy to be free of such encumbrances.

Now, however, it was his duty to protect Henrietta, just like it had been his father's responsibility to protect him and his mother from infamy and heartbreak. He should be safeguarding his sister's interests. He shouldn't be risking another scandal—especially not when it had the power to harm her already imperiled future. He was being irresponsible, just like his father had been.

Finally, the exhaustion of travel overcame him and he fell asleep. But even in slumber, these thoughts circled just below the surface of his consciousness, like sharks.

He awoke with a resolution.

Today, this morning, he would tell Catherine that what had happened last night could never occur between them again. The idea that he would never again taste her lips or hear her come for him—it made him want to weep. But it was the only answer. The only way he could keep his sister safe.

He climbed down from the loft, the light boring into his skull. He did not feel at all rested. Even in sleep, images of Catherine from the night before had run through his mind. In his few stretches of true unconsciousness, he hadn't walked out of the room but he had stayed. And in the dreams, each time he stayed, she was gasping underneath him and they were both at the brink, again and again.

John shook his head, hoping to scramble the memory of such dreams.

He forced himself to run over their plan for the day in his mind. They needed to climb back into the carriage and head for Lulworth. Today, they had to find Catherine's old nurse, Martha, and ask her about Mary Forster. He couldn't let whatever *this* was with Catherine interfere with their plan. He couldn't let himself get distracted. For Henrietta's sake.

So, instead of going up to the room to see Catherine, which he immediately categorized as far too dangerous for his fragile self-control, he arranged their departure with the innkeeper.

As he turned away from this task, he nearly collided with Catherine herself. She looked very neat and very, very beautiful. She wore a dress he had never seen before and a neutral expression, as if she hadn't thought about him once since he had left her last night. Apparently, he had pleased her and then been forgotten, like a mediocre bon-bon. Meanwhile, he was mentally and spiritually exhausted from resisting the desire to run back to their room and fall to her feet. He could still hear her cries of pleasure in his ears, for Christ's sake. Meanwhile, she looked at him like he was stranger. No, worse, a man that she knew but who didn't occupy her thoughts.

He also suddenly felt very aware that his night in the hayloft had most likely done him no aesthetic favors.

"I am ready to depart."

For a mad second, he thought she meant she was ending their quest and leaving him altogether. Looking at her face, though, he realized she only meant the inn.

"The carriage will be pulled round in just a moment," he choked out. "We leave in ten minutes."

Catherine nodded and gave him a look that appeared almost mocking. He resisted the impulse to swear. And then she turned away from him.

He watched the line of her back head out the front door of the inn. The carriage pulled up just as she reached the drive and Marcel handed her into the enclosed space.

God help him.



ONCE HE HAD returned to the carriage and it began to move, neither of them spoke. She had her book out again and he wanted to rip it from her hands. She was even holding that infernal pen, as if he hadn't told her what her ink-stained

fingers did to him. Was she trying to entice him? Or just trying to read? She was impossible. How could she sit there, reading about people who had been dead for a thousand years, when he was struggling to breathe?

He knew he needed to start the discussion about what had happened last night. He needed to tell her it could never happen again. He couldn't approach it face on, however. He wanted some indication first that she felt anything for him at all other than indifference. After last night, he knew she must feel *something*, even if it was just the most banal of lusts, but her manner right now confounded him. He had never seen her so cool and collected. He had considered her poised before, but this *hauteur* was unknown to him. Was this how she behaved after being pleased? He had never known a woman to react in such a way.

He needed to master himself. He needed to make her understand that the past made anything between them impossible.

"What are you reading?" He felt confident that this overture, at least, was a safe start.

"It's your book. So surely you know."

"Just because I own it doesn't mean I have read it." He heard the scowl in his voice but was unable—like so much else—to control it. "I think my father bought them."

He had said it without thinking. She looked down at the book, which had been comfortably tucked in her lap, as if it had betrayed her. He half expected her to fling it from the carriage. Instead she merely kept her eyes on the pages, once again not responding to him at all.

Bollocks. Everything he said was wrong.

"Are you still working on your history book?"

"What?" Her eyes flew off the page and to his face.

"You said—at Tremberley—that you were writing a book."

“Yes.” Her eyes widened but her tone remained neutral. “It’s not finished. I have published a few short histories in newspapers under the name C.M. Forster. They don’t want a woman publishing such things, you know, and it’s easier to request higher payment when they think I am a man.”

He could have read one of her articles in the past seven years without knowing it. The idea mingled pleasure and pain. It angered him that she didn’t feel safe publishing as herself. As if a person needed to be a man in order to write a goddamned newspaper article.

“Newspapermen are bigoted fools,” he bit off.

She merely raised her eyebrows in response.

He shrugged but his mind was whirring.

It felt good to abuse someone, anyone, to relieve the tension inside him. And he was always happy to deride the monsters who had written such horrible things about his mother, his father, his sister (and himself and his friends, for that matter) and would continue to do so if they got the chance. Then it occurred to him that they would do the same to *her*, the beautiful, intelligent woman sitting across from him, if they could. They would rip her soft flesh from her delectable body and not even pay her to do it. She couldn’t put her real name below her little histories of England but they would splash it across the papers for the sake of scandal.

“I am hoping to collect them into a volume, eventually, for sale,” she continued, her manner making clear that she didn’t care what he was brooding about, “but I don’t have enough yet. I have about two dozen, not enough for a book. I need to visit more sites, but, with my current pecuniary limitations...”

“Is that what you will do with the money? The ten thousand pounds?”

“In part.” As she said the words, her lips curled in a little smile.

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that she might have a lover. Could she have a lover *and* have ridden him like

that last night? Of course, he thought, he shouldn't be naïve. How else would she have learned how to find her pleasure with such skill? She hadn't seemed like an innocent, he realized for the first time. Her kiss had been too scorching. Her response to him too ready.

"You have plans." He worked to keep his tone dry. "A lover, perhaps? You could marry him with this money if he isn't a man of means."

"A lover?" she said faintly, looking up from her page again.

"I'm not a fool. You made perfectly clear last night that you have had lovers. I'm not a schoolboy."

She studied him for a moment and then burst into laughter.

"*Lovers?*"

"I don't see what's so comical." He shifted in his seat. He really didn't, especially as she was now laughing hysterically and wiping tears from her eyes. She repeated the phrase, "Spinster whore," between breaths.

He wanted to command her to stop laughing and to repeat that he had never called her a "spinster whore," but he suspected that would only make her laugh more. And damn her, but of course he found her gasping and shifting arousing.

Once she quieted, he barked out, "If you could kindly explain, I'll be forever at your service."

She cast him a withering look. "You saw where I live. You saw *who* I live with. What do you think? That I take lovers in Halston Place? Or, when the Wethersbys were still in fine form, do you fancy that I was letting lovers in through my window, as my guardian paced below, a man who would have surely thrown me out on the street if he knew I so much as looked at a man twice? Particularly given how I had ended up in his care in the first place?"

He grunted. Of course, she described a situation in which having lovers would be quite difficult.

“I do not *have lovers*. I am a woman of eight-and-twenty who understands the mechanics of sexual intercourse and has read plenty of French novels. They’re Lady Wethersby’s avowed favorites.”

“I see,” he said, hoping he was catching her intimation. “So what you are trying to say is that, you haven’t...you yourself haven’t...?”

“Have I been with a man? I am not going to answer that question. You have no right to ask it.”

“I’ll give you twenty pounds to tell me.” He found himself desperate to know the answer. He realized that this conversation was taking a rather scenic route to his declaration that they could never do again what they had done last night. However, he needed to know the answer to this question. It felt, suddenly, vitally important.

“You can’t *buy* my answer.”

“One hundred pounds.”

“I’ve said no.”

“Five hundred pounds.”

She leveled him with a gaze. “Five hundred pounds? Are you serious?”

“As the grave.”

“I will expect the money. I am going to demand it.”

“I’ll give it to you the moment we arrive at Edington. I swear on my sister’s life.”

“You are a very odd man.” She gave him an arched look that drove him mad. “But, very well, I can’t turn down five hundred pounds. Few can, after all. No, I’ve never been with a man.”

Relief coursed through him. Not that it would have mattered if she wasn’t a virgin—he would have desired her just as much. It was more that, if she was truly a virgin, it felt

much less likely that she had some fellow waiting in the wings to whisk her off.

Then another thought occurred to him. “And before the night in the Tremberley gardens?”

“I am not answering any other questions. And I’m not even sure what you’re asking.”

“Had you ever kissed anyone? Before then? Or after?”

She met his gaze for a long second. For a moment, he thought her blasé demeanor might crack.

“No,” she said, with a smile that he couldn’t quite understand. “There, you get that one for free.”

He tried to repress his grin but found he couldn’t.

“Although, right after I arrived at the Wethersbys, a footman did *try* to kiss me. But Lady Wethersby caught him and sent him packing. She wasn’t cross with me, although some might have thought me a vixen. But she knew I had no hand in it.”

While John admired Lady Wethersby’s liberality, he was more entranced by the idea that he was, as of now, the only man who had ever touched or kissed Catherine Forster. It filled him with a possessiveness that made him a little light-headed—although, finding out that she had a series of affairs would have done the same, albeit to a more murderous tune.

“I don’t know why you’re so curious. What do you expect? You know the rules for gently bred ladies. You have a sister.”

He did have a sister. And if anyone tried to touch Henrietta, peer or ploughboy, he would run them through the nearest thresher. If they wanted her, they could ask, the proper way, and he could deliberate before he said no.

Although, he considered, he hadn’t exactly asked for Catherine. He thought of the Wethersby boy’s letter—a manly letter at its heart, even if a child had written it. He felt an unwelcome pang of guilt. He had already broken his vow to

the boy. He had said he wouldn't do anything improper. He had blown clear through that promise last night.

"I do have a sister and I *am* aware of the restrictions on gently bred ladies," he said, shaking himself out *of that* depressing train of thought. "But that night in the gardens, you..."

He found he couldn't quite complete the thought in a way that didn't seem eminently insulting.

"You thought I made a habit of it? You will remember that that night I was *also* attending the ball under an assumed name. I was hoping to steal a bit of amusement for myself. Given how that went, I didn't try it again. I've lived quite a sheltered life."

"Except for the French novels."

"God bless French novels." Her eyes, however, were back on the page.

He thought of her reading such material and nearly groaned aloud.

"And what kinds of things do you learn in these French novels?"

She looked up and fixed him with that mischievous grin. "All kinds of tricks. I doubt even the most abandoned rake would have anything to teach me."

"Well, well." He leaned towards her. "That's quite a challenge."

He was so close to kissing her. Their faces were only inches apart.

She raised her eyebrows.

And then he realized what he had been resolving, only an hour earlier.

He leaned back.

He broke eye contact with her.

“Catherine, I apologize. What happened last night between us can never be repeated. We can’t enter into something we both know to be doomed. It will only distract us from what we really need to do.”

He looked back up at her. He expected her eyes to narrow in anger, or storm in hatred, but—instead—she kept her expression neutral. Her only reaction was that her irises went a touch darker.

“Of course, Your Grace,” she said, cool but not cold, keeping their eye contact. She sounded both lighthearted and definitive, her tone cutting through his heart with its casual indifference, even though he had been the one to refuse anything further.

She had forgotten to call him John but he didn’t correct her.

Maybe, after all, they did need a little formality.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CATHERINE AND JOHN rode to Lulworth in silence.

On the inside, Catherine was boiling, but she had promised herself that she would maintain her equanimity. It helped that her poise seemed to rattle him. When he had told her that what had happened between them at the inn could never happen again, he probably expected her to rage or cry or, at least, pout. Instead, per her plan, she had agreed without protest and gone back to her book. Never mind that she had mostly mimed the act of reading for the rest of the journey, her thoughts racing. She *would* keep her apparent composure at all costs. After all, she told herself, she hadn't endured years of emotional deprivation and general hardship to fall to pieces in front of her enemy—or whatever John Breminster was to her.

She *was* angry with him but she could keep that to herself. His manner did help, a little. John did seem pained in his refusal of her. She even believed that he wanted her. Nevertheless, like every other man she had ever met, he clearly didn't want her *enough*. Whereas she had been ready to lose herself in his arms (and, well, *had* done), he was always the one to pull back. And that just about said everything, didn't it? In the end, his desire for her meant very little, if he always ended up recoiling and walking away.

Most of all, she hated how he kept on being kind to her, despite his rejections. More than anything else, his kindness made maintaining her calm difficult. Why, for example, did he have to remember about her book? She had mentioned it seven years ago and somehow he had remembered. Or his paying her *five hundred bloody pounds* to answer that ridiculous question about her virginity. She couldn't tell if he had really wanted to know or if it was just pity, a way to shovel money in her direction in compensation for his rejection.

Now they had reached Lulworth. John had asked whether they should stop at the local inn to ask for directions to the Hampton estate cottages, but Catherine had visited her old nurse before and knew the road to take. John directed his coachman, Marcel, down the appropriate lane and they soon pulled up to the little thatch of cottages that Catherine remembered from her visit years ago.

For the first time in forty-eight hours, her heart pounded for a reason *other* than John Breminster. Suddenly, she felt nervous at the prospect of finding some real answers about her aunt.

Catherine did not notice many signs of activity. A local landowner had most likely hired everyone to cut hay. That or a local livestock auction had emptied out the place. She only hoped that Martha, elderly as she was, hadn't gone with the others.

"I think it's best if I go alone," Catherine told John. "It will be easier if I don't have to explain to her who you are."

"Very well," John said, sounding nettled. "I'll wait here."

Catherine exited the carriage and nodded at Marcel, who sat above the horses. He was a stoic young man, with a face marked with smallpox scars, and he followed John's every command with a military dedication. He must be only eighteen or nineteen and Catherine could see why John had picked him out as his most loyal servant. Other than leaving her with the impression that he hero-worshipped John, the coachman had been so unobtrusive as to be almost invisible. She tried a smile in his direction, but he only looked confused. The poor man was probably already deeply bewildered by the situation in which he found himself. He must wonder why his employer was traveling under an assumed name with a strange pretend-wife who, now, was heading towards a rabble of humble cottages.

Pushing John and Marcel from her mind, she walked towards the cottages. She knew the one closest to the road was Martha's. Her stomach flipped as she thought about seeing her

old nurse again—and what she might discover when she did. Once more, she thought of how she really *didn't* want to find her aunt. She wanted the money from John but she had no desire to see Mary Forster again. It was strange to search for someone you didn't actually want to find.

When Catherine knocked on the little cottage door, no one answered. She tried it again and called out Martha's name, pressing her ear to the door. Nothing. No one was home.

For a panicked moment, it occurred to Catherine that Martha could be dead.

She put a hand to her rib cage, trying to steady herself. She needed to keep herself calm. Martha wasn't necessarily dead. She just wasn't at home. A normal occurrence, even for an old woman.

She needed to see if anyone else knew where Martha had gone.

Catherine walked farther into the little cluster of cottages, but she didn't see a soul. The whole place seemed strangely abandoned.

Catherine walked over to the one cottage where she remembered Martha's younger brother had lived. She looked in the little window and saw no one. Eerie, she thought. It was the middle of the day, and women should have been at work, spinning and weaving and baking. Even if they were attending a country fair or working at the squire's estate, there would be at least a few people here who stayed behind.

Then, she reached a cottage where smoke puffed from the chimney. Approaching the door, she knocked forcefully and heard movement from the inside.

Thank God, she thought.

The door swung open.

A short man with a very ragged appearance stood before her. He was missing several teeth. She could tell because he was grinning at her. Right behind him, she glimpsed the visage

of his equally filthy compatriot, whose clothes looked even more tattered.

For a wild moment, they reminded her so much of the duns at Halston Place—one short and solid, one tall and rangy—that she almost thought that the men, intent upon dragging her to debtors' prison, had followed her to Dorset.

The thought made her take a few steps back.

She looked up at the men again and realized she was being ridiculous. The tall dun at Halston Place had had all his teeth. The squat man in front of her had red hair, whereas the short dun had been bald.

Furthermore, while the duns had not been the pinnacle of respectability, they were a far cry from the men before her.

The tall man took a few steps towards her, into the light outside the cottage, and, suddenly, Catherine realized what she should have concluded from the first: that the men weren't cottagers.

They clearly hadn't bathed in weeks—perhaps longer—and not in a wholesome country way, where basic hygiene measures gave the appearance of neatness and good health, even if people didn't have as many opportunities for full baths. No, their dirtiness was menacing. Worse, certain articles of clothing on their bodies looked out of place, very fine and very new, as if they had been picked at random from a gentleman's closet. She swallowed. *Or a gentleman's body.*

Too late, she noted that the tall one, who had just taken another step in her direction, held a gleaming knife.

“Give me yer purse, miss. Isn't no one around here ter save yer. All the cottagers runned away. I guess ye didn't know that.”

He seemed drunk, a little at sea, and his companion was bleary-eyed.

“Gentlemen.” She held up her hands. “I don't mean any harm.”

“Yer quite a pretty maid,” the tall one said as he stepped towards her. “A bit strange ter look at, but pretty.”

“Er—thank you, for your gallantry. You really should let me go. I am not alone—”

“We’ve ’eard it all before, miss. Aren’t no one waiting round the corner ter save yer.” The man stepped forward again, brandishing his knife. “Give me yer purse and maybe I won’t ask yer for anything else.”

Terror coursed through Catherine. The man tried to grab her. She pulled away just in time and he failed to get a grip on her wrist. She escaped the shadow of the cottage and drew both men into the main lane that wended its way between the little dwellings.

She thought of calling for John, but, just as she was about to scream, she saw him come up the road from behind the men.

“Oy! Gentlemen. Away from the lady.”

They turned away from her and towards John’s voice.

“A nob,” the short one said, his drunkenness even more apparent in the sunlight.

“A rich nob,” said the taller man.

“All nobs is rich,” the short one replied, his tone resentful.

But his friend ignored him. Instead, he stepped towards John with his knife.

“Is this yer fancy woman, then? Bet you wouldn’t want to see what we will do ter her after we have disemboweled yerself.”

They were advancing on John. She could see, by the set of his mouth, that now that he had their attention he was unsure how to disperse them. Her heart pounded even harder when she saw that the tall man had his knife pointed at John’s chest.

“All right, fellows. Surely we can all be reasonable.”

“Reasonable,” the tall man said. “Reasonable is we take yer purse and yer fine carriage.” He gestured towards the road.

Catherine cast about her. She saw a digging spade resting against a fence post. John had raised his hands to speak but she had already decided to act. She took the spade handle in her hands and, closing her eyes, swung as hard as she could at the head of the tall man.

She heard the flat metal head of the spade make contact, like the thud of a cricket bat striking a ball at high speed. She opened her eyes and saw that the tall man was sprawled out on the ground, unmoving. Blood splattered from between his teeth. Her hands were shaking so badly that she dropped the spade, the reaction completely involuntary.

The short man took one look at his compatriot on the ground and ran with surprising speed to the edge of the woods. Catherine would have laughed at his jerky, drunken movements, if she could have made a sound.

She looked at John. They stood there for a minute, the spade at her feet, and she found she was unable to catch her breath.

And then before she could say anything, he had closed the distance between them and his lips were on hers. The surging rush inside of her, the excitement and terror of the situation, made her react instinctively. She kissed him back, wrapping her arms around his body. He let out a groan of pleasure when her breasts crushed against his chest.

The kiss was everything: hot and cold, angry and gentle, brave and full of fear.

And then, just as suddenly, he broke it off.

“Next time you walk off,” he nearly shouted, “I’m coming with you.”

These words, and his decision to separate himself from her once more—even if it was to make a vow to stay by her side—caused the spell to break.

Once more, she was angry with him.

Angry that he had kissed her.

Angry that he thought he could do so after what had happened last night and especially after what he had said this morning.

Instead of answering his declaration, she hit him on the chest, causing him to release her and step back.

“*You—*” she was still shaking, but now from anger, not fear “—are one to speak about walking off. Not once, not twice, but *three* times—you have walked away from me like it is *nothing*.”

“Catherine—”

“You always walk off, stride away from me, without even looking back. At the Tremberley gardens. Last night at the inn. Even in the drawing room at Halston Place. You always just *leave*. So I would prefer, *Your Grace*, if you didn’t *ever* walk away from me like that again.”

“All right. I won’t. I promise.”

He had his hand raised, as if he was surrendering. She still wasn’t satisfied.

“And that isn’t all. You said to me *this morning*. That this —” she gestured between them “—could never happen again. And, then you go...you go...and kiss me again, as if you had never said it.”

“Catherine, I am sorry...it was...I was frightened for you —and the men—”

She hit him again in the chest. “You seem to have changed your mind completely over the course of a few hours, going from ‘this can never happen again’ to doing exactly that! Is your definition of *never* a few hours?”

“Of course not.” The handsome sage of his eyes flashed. “I understand. I am not *proud* of my actions.”

She was silent. She had tired herself out. She didn't have anything else to say. He had rather admitted that she was right, which, somehow, wasn't as satisfying as she had imagined it would be.

"Please, Catherine. I was terrified when I thought something might have happened to you. I understand I have been contradictory."

"*Good*. Because you have been."

"Perhaps, we can't be—we can't do *that*. But, perhaps, we could be friends. We are in this insane, *mad* situation. And *you* are the only person in the whole world who truly understands it. Will you please be my friend?"

She looked at him, taking in his open expression. She was still hurt by his walking away, his hot-and-cold behavior, and the way he seemed to want her and not want her at the same time.

Nevertheless, she had to admit she liked him now, in this moment, more than she had since she had discovered he wasn't Mr. Overton. (Of course, last night, she had liked him quite a bit—but that, she told herself, hardly counted. She had been under the spell of his cunning tongue and cock). And he had, after all, just come to rescue her from two of the dirtiest men she had personally ever laid eyes on.

Not to mention, she wasn't exactly in the position to be turning down friends.

"Fine." She held up her finger to indicate that she had a condition. "As long as you *promise* not to kiss me."

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOHN AGREED TO her demand with a curt nod.

After checking to make sure that the tall highwayman was breathing (he was, indeed, still among the mortal), John offered Catherine his arm. They walked back to their carriage, where Marcel was waiting for them.

“Everything all right, Your Grace?” Marcel said. Catherine could see the concern in his eyes.

“More than all right, Marcel,” John said, his smile making Catherine a bit weak in the knees—and pelvic region. Not an ideal reaction to a friend, she thought, but she could work on it.

“I wish you had let me attend you, Your Grace. Those men looked like right hardened criminals.”

Catherine realized that Marcel had a direct line of sight to the cottages. He must have been the one who warned John about the men, because John himself wouldn’t have been able to see them from inside the carriage. Then, it also occurred to her that Marcel must have seen their kiss—and the rather heated discussion that followed. She felt her face heat with embarrassment. She hoped that at least their voices didn’t carry this far.

“Then you must have seen that we scattered them pretty quickly,” John said. “I couldn’t endanger my best coachman over such a trifle. As the duke, I am significantly more useless. If I sustain an injury, our journey can continue uninterrupted.”

“I would not say that, Your Grace,” Marcel said but Catherine could tell he was pleased with John’s flattery.

“Thank you, Marcel,” Catherine said. “You must have been the one to warn John about the men. I am indebted to you.”

“It was nothing, my lady,” Marcel said, turning a pale shade of burgundy. “I would have liked to come to your aid myself but His Grace ordered me to stay at the carriage.”

She smiled again at Marcel and, this time, the coachman managed to return the same back.

When they were once more in the coach, John growled, “I am making it a condition of our friendship that you don’t flirt with my coachman.”

“Flirt! Are you mad? The man saved my life.”

“I believe *I* saved your life.” He scowled.

“Right before I saved *your* life.”

He grinned.

“You are unexpectedly skilled at wielding a spade. You should have mentioned it during our negotiations. A talent like that is worth at least another thousand pounds.”

She rolled her eyes, but she also knew she wasn’t succeeding at keeping the warmth from her cheeks. She was flattered. And not a little proud. She had felled the man, although she was very glad that she hadn’t killed him. The prospect of *death* had not even occurred to her until John had leaned down to check his breathing.

“My point is that you were sulking in the carriage before Marcel apprised you of the situation.”

“*Sulking*. You *told* me to wait! I hardly could have guessed that the cottages had been abandoned and infiltrated by criminals.”

“You could not have predicted that. That was no one’s fault. Except perhaps mine, for insisting that we not stop in the village to ask for directions. My only point is that I wasn’t flirting with Marcel.”

“I have known my coachman for three years and I have never seen him turn quite that shade of magenta.”

“For a friend, you’re quite jealous, you know.”

“Not jealous. Possessive, maybe.”

She laughed and then swore internally. She was despicable. She was halfway towards swooning.

“Marcel adores you.”

“He’s the best of coachmen. I’ll have to find some way to reward him for his quick thinking today.”

As they spoke, Marcel was driving them to the village center. When they stopped in front of the inn, John told her to wait in the carriage.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he warned.

“I think I will be fine in the town square. And I have Marcel, anyway. More useful than you, really.”

“Go nowhere,” he repeated, pointing a finger and trying to look severe, but he had a smile curling on his face.

In two minutes, he returned to the carriage.

“Those were highwaymen who, apparently, have been menacing the village for days. I told the men that we knocked one out and that the magistrate should go and retrieve him before he wakes. Apparently, the cottagers have been staying elsewhere out of fear. Martha is at a farm only five miles down the main road.”

“Very well,” she said, nervous once more at the prospect of seeing Martha again.

John tapped on the roof. He looked out the window of the carriage and she could tell he was still tense. A small muscle worked in his jaw. He held his mouth in a line of tense worry.

“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?” she asked, wishing she could read his mind. “Or shall I guess?”

“I was just thinking of how I should have taken that spade and knocked out each and every one of that monster’s remaining teeth.”

“The highwayman?”

He nodded, settling his eyes on her.

“Don’t be ridiculous. He just wanted my purse.”

He looked at her darkly. “I doubt that was all.”

“It is difficult to know. He was obviously desperate.”

His eyes flashed. “You have sympathy for such a man? You certainly didn’t seem sympathetic when you were wielding that spade.”

“Not sympathy exactly. I just don’t feel that his hostility is...personal.”

He made an almost imperceptible sound and she checked the impulse to move closer to him, to smooth away his mood more directly. She had to remember that they were only friends. And, compared to yesterday, that *was* quite an improvement.

“I understand what it is like to feel desperate for money in a world where it doesn’t come easily,” she tried to explain, wanting him to understand that, though the men had scared her, she didn’t feel particular anger towards them. “Their actions were inexcusable, but I still understand how one could become what they are.”

He studied her, his disbelief radiating off of him.

“Right now, we have our own desperate scheme driven by the same motive. You want to save your sister’s dowry. And I want your ten thousand pounds to help my own family.”

“Help your own family?”

She felt the coach slowing. They were pulling up to a pretty farmhouse.

“Ariel and Lady Wethersby,” she clarified, as the coach rolled to a stop. “We need this money to live a better life. It could return Ariel to his proper sphere. It would make all the difference to us.”

For a moment, she saw his mouth soften.

And then Marcel opened the door to the coach.

Once her feet were on the ground, however, she was surprised to find John beside her.

“I thought we agreed I was doing this alone?”

“After our last separation? Tell anyone who asks that I’m your betrothed, Mr. Aster.”

She bit her lip. She didn’t like the idea of lying to Martha.

“Really, I’m sure the farm is safe.”

The main house looked quite cheerful, with stone masonry and a chimney that released optimistic little puffs of smoke. Although, she reflected, she had just mistaken the same for safety less than an hour ago.

“I’ll ask the proprietors if I can speak with Martha and will be out as soon as I can.”

He shook his head. “Not a chance.”

Looking into his face, she saw that he was resolute. His mouth was pressed into a tight thin line. Besides, she was shaky after what happened—she didn’t exactly relish going into another uncharted territory alone, no matter how benign-looking.

“All right. Come on then.”

When they knocked on the farmhouse door, a neat-looking woman in a white cap answered. She didn’t seem older than twenty but she must have been wiser than her years. Catherine noticed how she knew on sight that John wasn’t an ordinary caller. She saw him and fell into a deep curtsy. Looking back up at him, the good wife flashed her dimples. She was very pretty, Catherine thought, and wondered if John noticed.

“Good day, sir, ma’am.” She sent a little curtsy Catherine’s way as well. “How may I help you? I am Mrs. Jennings—this is my husband’s farm.”

“Is Martha Denney here? We heard in town that she is residing with you due to the highwaymen.”

“Yes, my lady.” Mrs. Jennings nodded, a little cloud coming over her face. “We all love Martha here and are glad to have her. She and my grandmum were girls together. But she isn’t quite well. I can take you to her, ma’am but she may be sleepin’. She is staying in one of the servant’s rooms. They don’t think she’ll last many more nights.”

“Is she still conscious?” John asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Jennings, with a laugh. “Same old talkative Martha when she’s awake. If you would like to see her, I can take you to her room.”

Catherine nodded and they followed her into the farmhouse, through its pretty parlor room, and up the stairs that led to the servants’ rooms. When they reached a room at the end of the hallway, Mrs. Jennings knocked on a door.

“Martha?”

There was no answer.

“She’s probably asleep,” Mrs. Jennings said, opening the door and disappearing into the room.

A moment later, Mrs. Jennings reappeared. “Right this way, ma’am.”

Catherine followed her into the room but John caught her wrist. Even with her nervousness at seeing Martha coursing through her, his touch sent trills of pleasure up her arm.

“I’ll wait here. I don’t want to disturb her with a stranger.”

A shard of warmth pierced her heart. He was a duke, looking for information he dearly wanted. Many men in his shoes wouldn’t care about the sensitivities of a poor old woman.

“I’ll be here if you need anything.”

She nodded in return, swallowing the lump in her throat.

Catherine followed Mrs. Jennings into the room and saw Martha sleeping in a little bed in the corner. As she approached, her eyelids fluttered open. Catherine remembered

how, when she was a girl, Martha had been a light sleeper. Whenever she had hoped to sneak past her sleeping form to run down to the kitchens for a treat, she would snap awake. The memory made her smile.

“Child?” Martha said confusedly, looking at Mrs. Jennings and then at Catherine.

Mrs. Jennings turned to Catherine. “I’ll leave you two—please ring the bell if you need anything.”

“Thank you for your trouble.”

Mrs. Jennings nodded, gave a little curtsey, and left the room.

Catherine sat in the chair next to Martha’s bed and took her hand.

“Martha. It’s Catherine Forster.”

She looked into the old woman’s face, lined and creased, and at her hair, mussed and white to the crown. She remembered her as a broad, strong woman, capable of controlling a room of children or humbling a man of any class. Catherine thought of how her home was only twenty miles from here. If Martha didn’t tell her something shocking, she would have to return to Edington—to see what had become of Forster House and visit the old sights that she had not seen in so long. The prospect only promised pain.

The old woman looked at her. “Dear child, do you think I am too ill to remember my favorite charge?” She sat up with great effort and when Catherine urged her not to trouble herself, she waved her off. “But what are you doing here, my dear?”

“I have come to see you. But I am sorry to disturb you. I did not know you were ill.”

“I won’t last much longer, thank the Lord. It seems that it is my time.”

Catherine didn’t know what to say in response to this blunt acknowledgment of mortality but Martha only laughed at her

discomposure.

“It is fine, my child. I have lived a very long life. I was already an old woman when I took care of you. What age are you now?”

“I’m ashamed to own it.” Catherine remembered why she had always loved Martha—she could put anyone at ease. “I’m eight-and-twenty.”

“A baby. Strange how I keep getting older and you stay young. Lucky you.” She smiled at her, her eyes twinkling despite her fragility. Catherine squeezed her hand, putting into that impulse all she couldn’t say in words.

“Eight-and-twenty is hardly young.”

“It is to an old woman like me. Now tell me of yourself, my dear. Are you still with the baronet’s woman? And the little baronet? I hope they treat you well.”

“They treat me very well, thank you.”

“They have fallen on hard times, too, eh? You deserve an easy life, my girl. You have had too much hardship. Have you found a man who can give you such a life? Such a beauty as yourself, with such a good spirit, you must have by now.”

“Not yet, Martha,” she said with a laugh, but her old nurse’s eyes held levity and gravity in equal measure.

“Don’t lie to me, girl. You were never good at it. I heard a man’s voice before you came into the room.”

“Oh,” she said, shocked that Martha was still so sharp. “He’s not—he’s just a friend. Who has been kind in bringing me here.” She couldn’t lie to Martha and tell her she was betrothed when she wasn’t.

Martha shook her head. “All the way from London? A man only travels that far for love.” Catherine felt herself color. “I won’t pry into your affairs, girl, but I can assure you, if he’s come all this way with you, he loves you.”

“It isn’t like that.”

Martha patted her hand. “Sometimes, we are the last to see it. But I trust you to figure out your own affair of the heart. You are a Forster. You will find the right answer.”

Catherine felt a powerful pang of melancholy dart through her. She had forgotten how people used to say things like that, long ago, when her family was still intact. Back when being herself had meant something.

“Now, I want you to tell me why you are here.”

“To see you, Martha.” She still hadn’t gotten used to the directness of her old nurse.

“I’m not affronted, child. I have seen you only once since you left Edington, when you were traveling through Lulworth with the baronet’s woman. I know that you do not come here for nothing and that you do not sacrifice to travel all this way just to see an old set of bones such as myself. Out with it. I don’t have much time these days for feints.”

Catherine bit her lip, even as she knew that Martha wouldn’t be offended by her ulterior motive.

“I want to ask about my aunt.”

“Mary,” Martha murmured.

“After everything happened, she came to you.”

Martha nodded. She waited a moment and then she spoke. “Mary—special but wild. Wild at heart. She always was. She never would do anything that she didn’t want to do. Even as a girl. Not Mary. Oh, how her father demanded that she marry the Viscount of Brightley and how she refused. That was when she was seventeen. You couldn’t force Mary to do a single thing if she didn’t have the appetite for it. And you couldn’t stop her from doing what she wanted if she had set her mind to it.”

The old woman let out a chuckle but her face also looked sorrowful, as if she remembered other times, other incidents, that were less humorous.

Catherine's pulse quickened at this characterization, particularly the story about the Viscount Brightley. When she was a child, no one told her tales like that. The way Martha spoke made clear that there was much that she didn't know about her own family. She yearned to hear Martha speak at length about the Forsters. But, she told herself, that wasn't why she was here.

"Do you know where she went? After she left you?"

Martha met Catherine's eye. For a moment, they looked at one another, the air growing heavy with the weight of the question.

"I haven't seen her since she left me and I haven't received any letters." Her voice had gone slightly faint and papery. The words seemed to cost her effort and, for the first time, Catherine felt rather than saw her illness. "I have often wondered where she went, what became of her. A woman like that—so remarkable, so unusual, so accomplished, to come to nothing? It has always bothered me."

She shook her head once more. "She made me swear that I would tell no one where she had gone, but I am not sure if I would still be protecting her now to keep it secret."

"Please, Martha. Tell me."

Martha sighed once more. "When she left me, she went back to Edington."

Catherine's heart gave a deep spasm of pain. If Mary had told Martha the truth, then she and John were headed in the right direction. The only problem was that if Mary had ever made it to Edington, Catherine had never heard about it. Possibly, Mary had seen her father, but, if she had, he had never told Catherine. She certainly hadn't seen Mary herself.

"When she came to me," Martha continued, "she was distraught. The duke—she loved him, and he her, but everything had gone wrong." The old woman sighed. "She was devastated. And at leaving you and your father, too. She

cried for days. After a while, she got a bit stronger and, by the time she left, she was quite determined.”

Love. She had never considered it. Her aunt had *loved* the duke? And yet she needed to focus on what was important. Love or not, she needed to know when she had left Lulworth.

“How long was she with you, Martha?”

Martha considered.

“Not a short time. Although it is hard for me to remember exactly. She came in the late spring, around planting time, and when she left there was snow on the ground. Half a twelvemonth, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Martha.”

And, just like that, the old woman had fallen back to sleep.

Catherine released her hand and then to her surprise, realized that tears were streaming down her cheeks. She wiped away the tears with her palms, embarrassed that she hadn't even noticed her own crying.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AS HE WAITED in the hall for Catherine, John contemplated the deal he had made with her.

He had promised not to kiss her.

He should be relieved, he knew. This outcome was exactly what he had told himself he wanted that very morning. There would be no more illicit near-tumbles or captivating orgasms or dangerous kisses with Catherine Forster in wayside inns or deserted villages.

It was for the best, of course. Now, they could focus on their mission. And he wouldn't have to be haunted by what he knew and she didn't: that he had been the one who had found his father and Mary Forster that day, that he had been the agent of destruction that had unleashed the scandal onto their world.

For all of those reasons, he should be glad.

And yet he did not feel glad.

It pained him that she had asked him not to kiss her. Clearly, their previous encounters had hardly left her yearning for more.

Not like him.

He felt more drawn to Catherine than ever.

She was fiercer than he could have ever imagined. The sight of her taking a spade to the head of that highwayman had left him nearly as stunned as the victim himself.

And then she had revealed why she wanted the money. To help Lady Wethersby and the little baronet, to give them back the life they had lost. He had imagined that, in desiring ten thousand pounds, she had mostly compiled schemes to benefit herself, give her a future with a husband and a family, but

instead she wanted to help those who had taken her in when she was a child. He should have known.

The events of the morning had impressed upon him that he wasn't worthy of her. Yes, they could never be together because of their families—it made their attraction, whatever existed between them, impossible. But even if all of that disappeared, he saw now that he could never deserve her. He had spent his adulthood carousing and sulking and feeling sorry for himself, while she had suffered without any outlet and little solace. Everything else aside, she deserved better than him, he thought darkly.

As he schooled himself on the wisdom of this thought, the woman herself stepped out of Martha's room and into the hallway.

Instantly, John saw that the conversation with Martha had upset her. He couldn't be sure but it looked like she had been crying.

John very much wanted to know what the old nurse had told her, but he also knew that the hallway of this strange farmhouse was not a place for their discussion. So, he offered her his arm and they made their way out of the farmhouse, bidding Mrs. Jennings a quick farewell in the entryway.

Only once they had returned to the carriage did John turn to her. "Did you find anything of use?"

Catherine didn't respond, looking down at her hands. He studied her face. She looked worried, perturbed, and he wanted to fold her in his arms, to heal whatever ailed her. He wanted to tell her that, no matter what, everything would work out. Unfortunately, that would be a lie. He could give no such assurances. He was no less harrowed by his circumstances than he had been two days ago and he very much hoped that she had discovered valuable information.

"Please, tell me everything she said."

She pressed her hands to her face and then withdrew them.

“When Mary left her, she went back to Edington.” She spoke as if measuring each word carefully.

“When Mary Forster left Lulworth? She went back to Edington?”

Catherine nodded.

“Then we’re right to return ourselves.” He was relieved that his initial plan had been sound.

“She must have told someone in Edington she was coming back,” Catherine continued. “Maybe one of her friends or maybe even...”

She trailed off, still looking down at her clasped hands.

And then her implication dawned on him. “My father? Why would she have told him?”

Catherine bit her lip. And then he *knew* she had learned something she didn’t want to tell him.

“Whatever it is, just tell me.” He didn’t like the frustration dripping from his own voice, but he hated the anticipation.

She nodded, swallowing hard.

“It was very strange speaking with Martha, because it was the first time anyone has ever spoken to me as an adult about my family. I mean, *really* spoken to me about them, not just a member of the *ton* sniping about the scandal.”

John winced. *Or me*, he thought, *using the scandal to insult her to her face*. Wanting to convey his contrition, he took hold of her hand. She didn’t evade his touch. Instead, she grasped back. *Was this what friends did?* He found he didn’t know the answer.

“It wasn’t that she said anything revelatory,” Catherine continued. Now he could hear the recent tears in her voice. “But the difference was in the details. She gave me this perspective on my family I had been too young to grasp at the time.”

She paused again, as if lost in thought, then she shook her head.

“Anyway, she told me something about Mary and your father that I had never considered before. She described what happened as—” she looked up at him “—well, she said, that they loved each other.”

John was stunned. *Love?* The word filled him with an old rage, the rage he had felt as a child, when he hadn’t understood why his father would have betrayed him and his mother.

“Bollocks. Bloody mad.”

Catherine shook her head but she still clasped his hand.

“It was strange. I had never heard that. Not from my father, certainly—nor in my years in society, either.” She took a deep breath. “When it happened, my father was enraged, destroyed. You have to understand—he relied on my aunt for everything. He wasn’t a strong man. He had been weakened by the death of my mother. She died giving birth to me. And my aunt stepped in, I think, and took care of him—of us. He never spoke of your father except as an enemy. A monster. And he was only alive for a year after Mary’s disappearance. It had never occurred to me that the duke and Mary might have loved each other.”

He had never considered it either. He had assumed that what had happened that afternoon had been a mad moment of lust, that Mary Forster had seduced his father in an instant, and that their lives had come tumbling down from this one mistake. Well, two mistakes—his father’s and his own.

“I don’t understand. I always thought that they just—that that was the only time.”

“Me too. But I think that we should at least consider that, from what Martha said, they had a relationship. That it might have been more complicated.”

John cursed under his breath. He hated thinking of his father and Mary Forster ensconced in some kind of sordid love story.

“My father never spoke of your aunt. Or the scandal—at all.”

Catherine looked up at him in surprise. “He never said *anything* of it?”

“No. We never spoke of it.”

It only festered beneath the surface, he added mentally, slowly poisoning our relationship until there was nothing left except the occasional explosive row.

“Perhaps he should have, but he didn’t.”

“Martha also said that Mary was with her for a long time—almost six months.”

“She lived with the cottagers for all that time?”

“Apparently.” With this word, she dropped his hand. “I just don’t know what it all means.”

“Neither do I.”

“But I think we are right to go back to Edington.”

He nodded, his mind still working through these new complications.

“I can visit her friends and see if any of them knew about her movements. And it occurs to me that we should look through your father’s papers. Does he have any correspondence that he left behind?”

“I am not sure.” He thought of the study where everything went wrong, where he still hated to be. He had hardly entered the study at Edington Hall since that day all those years ago. “I am sure he must have something of the sort. He died quite suddenly. Fever. It took him in days. And yet he still had time to organize the most infernal will ever created. Typical, for my father.”

He had let his anger leach into his words. He looked at Catherine, expecting her to gloat, to declare she had been right about his father’s character.

Instead, her expression was neutral. He saw no triumph in her expression.

“We should look through his papers. I think it’s most likely that she came back to see him.”

He nodded to show his assent. He dreaded the horrors his father’s old papers would dredge up but he also knew he had no choice.

John looked out the window at the countryside, lost in thought as the fences and hedgerows trundled by, running over this new information in his mind. At first blush, he felt repulsion at the prospect that his father had *loved* Mary Forster, that their affair had been ongoing. His father had, yet again, found a way to sink below his already abysmal expectations.

He had always assumed Mary Forster had seduced his father for power. Perhaps, she had hoped that, as a duke’s mistress, she would have access to certain favors and luxuries. She was an unmarried woman of an old and revered but not particularly rich family. The Forsters had been among the gentry but a liaison with his father would have offered Mary more. It hadn’t occurred to him that their relationship may have extended beyond the bounds of that one party, of that one moment of weakness on his father’s part, but now he felt ridiculous that he had never considered the prospect. He felt ill, thinking of it. How much more didn’t he know? And how much more would he find out before he solved his father’s last, horrible riddle?

John closed his eyes, trying to block out these thoughts, but he was unsuccessful.

Then, a single silver lining twisted into view. He had always seen his stumbling across his father and Mary Forster at that party as a horrible quirk of fate. How unlucky, he had thought many times, for him to reveal them at the exact moment they committed the sin that ruined all of their lives. If his father had been carrying on an ongoing affair with Mary Forster, it softened his own role. They could have been

exposed at any time, before or after his mistake. In that case, he bore less culpability. This possibility made him hate himself a little bit less.

Catherine gasped beside him. His eyes flew open, suspecting danger, but instead she was pointing towards the sea.

“Pray, let’s stop. We must stop here.”

They were on the road back to town, which ran by the ocean, and they could see the cliffs and the glinting water from the carriage. The gray sky made the seascape look forbidding and, to his eye, not particularly inviting.

“Catherine,” he said, caught off guard by her sudden change of demeanor. “I really—”

He was going to tell her that he didn’t care to leave the carriage, not in his state of mind. This news about his father had put him in a foul mood.

But he looked at her face and realized he couldn’t refuse her. Her eyes were so lit up that they looked a steady, magnificent blue. She looked so excited and so beautiful that, for a moment, he couldn’t breathe.

He tapped on the ceiling of the carriage and Marcel came to a stop.

“All right. Just for a moment.”

Catherine beamed at him and grabbed his hand, forcing him to nearly bound out of the carriage.

She pulled him in a quick trot towards the edge of the cliff. As he looked over at Catherine he saw how the breeze animated her features and burnished her skin. He felt his sorrow about his father subside a few degrees. As they stood by the edge, she smiled up at him, and—for a moment—he forgot who he was, who she was, and could think only of the beauty of the spot and the woman beside him.

“There!” She pointed and he saw a strange formation. It was a giant mass of rock that jutted out into the sea, but a hole

had been worn through it. As if a door had been cut out of the stone.

“I hoped we were on the right road. I used to come here, as a child, with my father and—” she looked up at him uncertainly, but then she seemed to resolve against equivocating “—and my aunt. It’s the Durdle Door. Surely you have seen it before?”

He shook his head. “But I’ve heard tell of it, of course.”

She clapped her hands and he almost laughed that an old rock could make her so elated, almost childlike.

“I’m jealous that you are seeing it for the first time. It’s one of the most famous landmarks in England. I had wondered if I would ever see it again. But we’re here.”

“We’re here,” he said, not able to keep a smile from creeping onto his face. “It’s not a ruin, though. I thought ruins were your specialty.”

“Ruins and landmarks. Anything, really, that has been there for a long time and that people tell stories about. This is one of my favorites. My first newspaper article was on the Durdle Door. It’s so beautiful. It’s hard to despair when one is near it, is it not?”

Her strange eyes beamed up at him again, still full of light.

“I suppose,” he said, but he met her eye, and he knew that she saw the *yes* that he felt.

“Do you know what they say about the Door?”

He groaned internally—his momentary happiness dimming. *If you tell me this story, he thought, I won’t be able to stop thinking about you for the next hundred years.*

He should tell her he didn’t want to hear it.

And, yet, he wanted to know the story, because it was important to her, and because he knew that whatever she told him would feel like a piece of his history, too.

“No,” he said, finally, his voice hoarse even to his own ears. “I don’t know what they say about the Door.”

“They used to say,” she began, looking out to where the rock hovered above the water. “If you walked through the Durdle Door, at midnight, at the full moon, at high tide, you would step into a different present, where the thing you regretted most had never happened. Your wife or child or husband would come back to life. Your fortune would be restored. You just had to go down into the waters and walk through. If the waves didn’t kill you and the rocks didn’t chew you up, you would walk into the present you wanted, where the past hadn’t happened, or, really, it had happened the way you would have liked.”

He groaned out loud this time.

“Jesus Christ.” He turned away from her and ran his hands through his hair. He looked out onto the sea, choppy and steel gray. Its turbulent movement and grim color seemed to reflect his anguish back at him.

“What?” he heard her say from behind him. “What is wrong?”

He whirled around on her. “Your infernal stories. That is what is wrong.”

“You don’t like my *stories*?”

“*Like* them?” he said, scoffing. He couldn’t imagine anything so mild applying to these tales of hers.

“I don’t understand. You do like them?”

“These stories of yours. This one, and the one you told about the ruins at Tremberley.” He stopped, unable to continue. “They’re...”

“What? They’re what?”

“They’re gutting. They always feel like the story of my goddamned life. Like you know everything that has ever happened to me.”

“I don’t know anything about you.”

He shook his head and looked out again at the Durdle Door. He wondered what present he would wish for if he could walk through it at midnight and survive to tell the tale. He imagined his parents alive, his sister happy and whole, and Catherine, just the girl from over the way, standing by him as something much better than a friend.

“Well, shall we try it?” he said, breaking the train of his own thought.

“What do you mean?”

“Going through the door. Changing everything that has happened. Any present has to be better than this one.”

She laughed.

“It’s not midnight,” she said. “Or a full moon.”

“Bollocks. It all could have been so easy.”

With those words, he offered her his arm again and they turned back to the carriage.

On his way back, however, it occurred to him that this present wasn’t so bad.

After all, he was with her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN JOHN AND Catherine returned to the inn at Lulworth, the innkeeper already had their rooms prepared. The maidservant left with Catherine—or his supposed wife, Mrs. Aster—and showed her up to her lodgings, while John stayed with the innkeeper to order their dinner and dispatch a message to Edington Hall. He wanted to alert his staff to his location and his planned return tomorrow evening. Furthermore, much like the last inn, this one also functioned as a pub, and John desperately needed a pint of ale and the opportunity to reflect on his day with Catherine.

After the innkeeper left him with his drink, he savored the first, blissful sip. He felt exhausted, physically and emotionally. The day had begun with him in agony over Catherine and his decision to leave their room the night before. Somehow, over the course of the day, this torment had been replaced by yet another type of anguish. He had convinced Catherine not to be his lover, but his friend. In the hours since, he had only grown more entranced by her. Before, he had idolized her beauty and her haunting power over him—now he had begun to see her not just as a doomed ideal, but a real person with an actual life. He now saw some of her sorrows, how they were similar and different from his own, and how she had borne them with a breathtaking strength. She had suffered more than he had and handled it much better.

And then there had been the kiss near the cottages, which had been hot and sweet, the prelude to something beyond pleasure. His blood still fizzed from that kiss and the hours of close contact with her. How many times had he wanted to kiss her again? To bring her over the brink once more, as he had last night? How many times had he fantasized about what they could do in the back of that coach? All afternoon, he had been besieged by conflicting emotions. His horror at their shared

past, his desire for her in the present, his dawning respect for what she had endured and the skill with which she addressed their present circumstances. It all melded together into an agonizing knot of pain and pleasure.

And none of it gave him clarity about the evening ahead.

She had asked him not to kiss her and he wouldn't. That said, it would make sense to supper together, in her room—he had given her the bigger chamber—and to discuss the plan for when they returned to Edington the next day.

Even now, after ten minutes apart, he yearned to return to his intimacy with her. He wanted its warmth and tension.

He was aware—all right, he hoped—that, with them so close, in a bedchamber no less, anything could happen. He savored that possibility. He knew he wouldn't be able to resist her if she broke her own rule and kissed him first. He had resisted the utmost last night—but he wouldn't be able to now. Not after today.

Then, a familiar voice sliced through his reverie.

And it wasn't Catherine's.

“Edington?”

He turned around and his stomach dropped.

Leith.

Of his three best friends, the worst to run into in his present circumstances was Leith. Montaigne and Tremberley were both easygoing by nature, but Leith was significantly more uptight, rigid even, and he did *not* like it when his friends took actions that he disapproved of. He was a particular man, Leith. His best friend was Montaigne and he himself walked out with a new courtesan every week, but if you wore the wrong color cravat or didn't bow low enough, he wouldn't let it drop.

“Mate,” John said, trying to crack a smile. “What are you doing here? In Lulworth?”

And then to his total disbelief another of his best friends walked straight into his line of vision.

“Montaigne?”

“Bloody hell,” Montaigne cried. “What in God’s name are you doing here, Forster? Sorry—” he said, correcting himself. “Edington now, I expect.”

John waved his hand to indicate that either title would do. He hadn’t seen Montaigne or Leith since his father’s death. Usually, when a nobleman came into a title, his friends, no matter how close or long-standing, took up this moniker as his new name. John had longed for this change of title since school. In fact, as a boy, on a number of occasions, he had wished his father dead just so that he could have the new name and no longer be known by Forster. Now that it had finally happened, however, he did not feel that long-anticipated relief. Instead, the new name left him numb.

His two friends stood in front of him and John enjoyed how amusing they looked side-by-side. They were so different—Montaigne, blond and mischievous; Leith, dark and conventional—and yet they both had identical expressions.

Of concern.

Bollocks. They knew.

It wasn’t that he thought his friends would betray him—or that he even minded telling them the truth. He just didn’t particularly feel like answering questions at this moment.

Montaigne signaled to the innkeeper to pour him and Leith pints. And then each friend took a seat at his table.

“Sit,” Leith said, too brightly. John obliged with a barely suppressed sigh.

“We’re traveling back from my cousin’s property in Cornwall,” Montaigne said. “He had us for a fortnight. Beautiful country. Beautiful hunting. Beautiful women.”

“Montaigne can find a woman anywhere,” Leith qualified, “but the companionship was a bit rural for my taste.”

“There were some of the bonniest wenches I have ever seen. But Leith would only scowl and drink my cousin’s admittedly very excellent whiskey. He won’t admit it, but it’s because there were no courtesans. He’s become addicted to city women.”

“I’m sorry if a woman’s goat-milking skills aren’t my idea of relevant erotic experience.”

“It doesn’t matter where she got it, brother, as long as I get to enjoy it.”

John had to laugh despite his uneasiness. Much like their appearances, Leith and Montaigne had always been an amusing mismatch of dispositions. While he and his friends were all bonded as brothers, Montaigne and Leith were particularly close, like he and Tremberley were. Unlike he and Trem, however, Montaigne and Leith were more different than similar, and yet seemed to receive endless amusement from disagreeing with one another.

“But forget about Montaigne’s milkmaid,” Leith said, meeting John’s gaze. “The question is, what in the bloody hell are *you* doing, traveling through the English countryside with Catherine Forster in your vehicle?”

Despite having expected such questioning, John didn’t know how to answer the query. Instead, he looked at his two friends, trying to find the words to explain how he had gotten himself into this situation.

How could he explain it?

Whereas Tremberley was nosy and liked his gossip, Leith actually took the *ton* seriously. He could be sharp and even judgmental. Montaigne didn’t care a fig for this sort of thing, often preferring the company of common folk, and, of all of them, followed the tide of society chatter the least. For that reason, Montaigne was also known as the most abandoned and rakish of them all. Multiple cartoons had been printed of him tugging chambermaids with a drunken look on his face. Those cartoons were hardly accurate—Montaigne wasn’t a drunkard

—but they were evidence of how little society enjoyed Montaigne’s indifference.

Leith, on the other hand, cared about their reputations—just never enough to stop being one of their set and never enough to stop being best friends with Montaigne. Hence, he was generally regarded as the most come-at-able in matrimonial terms by society mamas, who forgave his friendship with Montaigne as a quirk of young bachelorhood on par with mistresses and gambling debts.

Even though they were called “the Rank Rakes” by half of society, and notwithstanding Leith they had hardly been fastidious about their reputations, John felt a pang of guilt on his friends’ behalf. If his travels with Catherine exploded all over the headlines, they would be interrogated about his decisions by their acquaintances and families. In short, they would have to defend him. Montaigne—who was related to half of the *ton*—wouldn’t care, Tremberley would laugh, and Leith would storm and then settle into indifference; but they would all, nevertheless, stick by his side, even if it hurt their prospects in business or, further down the line, marriage. Not that any of them would admit to worrying about such a thing.

“It’s complicated,” John said, feeling indignant despite his guilt. He still didn’t appreciate having to answer to anyone.

Montaigne clapped him on the shoulder.

“Best to explain, mate. You know if this thing goes wrong, we’ll all have to hear about it, so better to let us know what the line is. Surely your woman can spare you for a bit longer.”

“She’s not my woman.”

“Bloody well looks like it, doesn’t it,” Leith said, taking a sip, and smirking at Montaigne. “I told you, Monty, that he would go back to her. You owe me fifty guineas.”

“Bollocks. I do, don’t I?”

“You made a *wager*?” John said, doubly indignant.

“We all know you’ve favored her forever, mate,” Montaigne said. “But I bet you wouldn’t take up with her. Women can be had anywhere.”

“For the undiscerning gentleman, indubitably.” Leith sneered. “And can’t you see he is going to try and set her up in town under a new identity? That way you can enjoy her and keep away the gossips. It won’t work, though. That scandal is still too hot. They’ll weasel it out.”

“You’re both mad—you know that, don’t you?” John said, feeling actual horror at their flippant speculation. “Tremberley too.”

“Trem just sees what we see,” Montaigne said, taking a swig of his pint. “But seriously, Edington, are you in trouble?”

“Are you being blackmailed?” Leith said, now deadly serious. “If so, we’ll spring you out of it. I don’t know what she could have over *you*—but I know Henrietta is to come out this season, so I could see where things might be delicately situated. At any rate, we’ll make that Forster harlot sorry she ever drew breath, if that’s the case.”

John stared at Leith, dumbfounded. He must be in trouble if Montaigne and Leith were concerned. His friends weren’t exactly the worrying types. When he’d run off with a French maidservant for two weeks while they were at Oxford, Montaigne had asked him, once he had returned and nearly been sent down for good, “So, all in all, how was the French hussy?”

“I’m not in trouble,” John spat out now, and then he reconsidered the statement. “Or, at least, it’s not Catherine’s fault. And don’t call her that, Leith. I won’t have it.”

“*Catherine*,” Montaigne said, raising his eyebrows at Leith.

“He’s bloody finished,” Leith retorted, as if John weren’t sitting right there. “He’s calling a gentlewoman by her Christian name, hot to defend her honor. It’s finally happened. One of our own has fallen.” Then, turning to John, he said,

“The *ton* will burst into flame when you marry her, you know.”

“I’m not going to marry her,” John hissed. “Look, I don’t want to bring either of you or Trem into the scandal sheets. And I hope it won’t come to that.”

Instead of looking relieved, his friends simply looked offended. Even Leith.

“Well, I can’t say I am *besotted* with the idea of this affair making its way into the papers,” Leith said, affront lacing his syllables. “But, if I truly cared about your scandals, Forster, I wouldn’t have befriended you at Eton and particularly not on the very day that the prefects nearly knocked the life out of you.”

“And I obviously don’t give a king’s shit what the scandal sheets say,” Montaigne added, “particularly as I have never read one myself.”

“I don’t think anyone has established if you *can* read, Monty,” Leith said.

Montaigne responded to this taunt by throwing a dried crust into Leith’s ale and laughing when the splash landed on his cravat.

“If you’re not marrying her or setting her up as your mistress,” Montaigne continued, while Leith tended to his cravat and signaled for a new ale, “what in the name of God are you doing traveling with her?”

“Unfortunately, it’s all too rational. How did you even discover that we were here?” It alarmed John that they had been able to divine this fact so easily.

“My coachman saw Marcel,” said Leith, “and when I asked the innkeeper’s wife if the Duke of Edington was here, she said no, that the only guests were ‘a beautiful silver-haired lady’ and a ‘grand nob’ by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Aster. And that they had been accosted by highwaymen near the cottages this morning and caused quite a stir among the townfolk.”

John swore to himself. They hadn't exactly been discreet.

"So, have you been entrapped?" Montaigne continued. "Do we need to spring you free?"

"She isn't blackmailing me. I already told you both."

He looked into the faces of his two friends and saw real concern etched there. In a hushed voice, after swearing them to a secrecy he already knew they would maintain, he explained his father's will and their mission to find Mary Forster to save his sister's future.

Montaigne drained his pint and Leith coughed. For a moment, his friends didn't have anything to say.

And then Montaigne spoke. "With all due respect, your father always was a bastard."

John grinned.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Leith said, shaking his head. And then he looked at John. "So, you're using her, not the other way around?"

"We're both getting something from the arrangement. If we are successful."

"I see," Leith said, "and so you are merely posing as husband and wife...you're not...actually bedding her?"

"Of course not."

"Really?" Leith said.

"*Really?*" Montaigne repeated, only in a more incredulous tone.

"*Really,*" John emphasized. "I promise."

"But you want to? Almost have? Are seriously contemplating the prospect?" Montaigne interjected.

"For the love of God, fuck off."

"Well, you shouldn't," Leith pressed. "It is a terrible idea."

“I’m not usually one to advocate for abstaining from pleasure,” Montaigne added, “but Leith has a point.”

“Don’t you think I know that? Why do you think I’m sitting down here with you two?”

John shook his head. He longed to leave his best friends and find Catherine upstairs. He had ordered baths for both of them and he imagined her drying off, her skin freshly washed and warming in front of the fire. He hungered to see her in such a state. He felt himself stirring at the thought and had to pull himself out of the fantasy.

“Forget it,” he said, turning to Montaigne. “Tell me instead of your cousin’s estate. Did anything of interest transpire?”

“Well,” Montaigne said, “as it so happens, my cousin has a new wife...”

John spent the rest of the evening laughing at Montaigne and Leith’s stories about this cousin’s estate. It seemed that they had spent most of their time giving the cousin advice on how to please his new wife in the bedroom. The poor woman was apparently deathly afraid of carnal relations and Montaigne’s cousin—a baronet—was desperate to prove to her that the act could be pleasurable.

“He was bloody *crying*, mate,” Montaigne said, near tears of laughter himself.

“We had to give him some *very* specific instructions,” Leith added.

“And you could hardly blame the lady for being so terrified,” Montaigne continued, wheezing from laughter. “My idiot cousin betrayed a seriously limited knowledge of female anatomy.”

By the end of the evening, John felt, as he always did, bolstered in spirit by his friends. Maybe, he thought, everything would work out with his father’s will. It seemed more possible when his best friends—high-ranking, powerful and the only people on earth who really knew him—resolved to stand by his side no matter what scandal came.

At the end of the evening, right before returning to their chambers, Leith stopped him.

“Just...be careful, mate,” he said, gesturing towards Catherine’s room.

John nodded. He took one look at Catherine’s door and then, swearing to himself, headed through his own.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN SHE HAD arrived at her room the evening before, Catherine had found a steaming copper tub waiting for her and had felt deep relief at the sight. As she had taken off her clothes and lowered herself into the bath, her thoughts kept turning to the man who had presented her with such a thoughtful luxury.

For a moment in the tub, spurred by their visit to the Durdle Door, she let herself fantasize. She imagined what it would be like if she and John didn't have the scandal between them. She imagined a reality in which her union to him wouldn't mean she had betrayed her family. She imagined how, in another life, if he had compromised her as he had yesterday, he would ask her father—who, in this version of events, would still be living—for her hand in marriage. She knew, in another circumstance, John would do it. He was an honorable man. He had had his share of women, but none of them, she was sure, were maidens. No, if they were in any other scenario, he would offer for her. And, of course, her father would consent.

A rushed marriage wasn't the best way for things to come about, but, if it ended with his daughter as a duchess, no father of the gentry—those without blood grudges against the family in question, that is—could be too displeased. After all, in marrying John, Catherine would, in a way, reclaim the title that her family had lost so long ago. If the scandal had never happened, her father could not have failed to be happy.

She closed her eyes and imagined her life as John's wife. How he would take her every night. She would breathe him in, look into his green eyes, run her fingers through his curling dark hair, and know that he was hers, forever.

Catherine opened her eyes and shook her head. The close proximity of the carriage, the kiss near the cottagers' huts—they had addled her mind.

She had forgotten the part where they had agreed to be friends. Where *she* had asked him not to kiss her.

And yet she hoped that he would come and supper in her bedchamber. She yearned for him to catch her lounging in this copper tub.

Catherine swore under her breath and sank beneath the water.

When she reemerged, she chastised herself.

In her little fantasy of an alternative present, she had forgotten the truth of the here and now.

Even if they had a million years together running around the countryside, John wouldn't marry her.

In fact, she knew the idea of marrying her could only shame him. After all, the scandal was already a hurdle to any respectable gentleman and, along with her lack of substantial dowry, had never failed to keep suitors away. She had never even received a proposal and, little wonder, she thought, for even her supposed beauty was cursed, because it was so much like her aunt's. And that was just for a normal gentleman, who had no connection to the whole affair. For John, the past made anything between them completely impossible. How could he ever marry a woman whose body screamed of the scandal that had ruined his family? That had marred his mother's life and led her to an early grave?

It was insupportable.

Depressed by these reflections, but still internally hoping he would appear and catch her in her state of undress, Catherine lingered in her bath until the water went cold and her fingertips wrinkled.

Finally, she had to admit that she had waited long enough. Once she had dried off and redressed, she heard a knock on the

door. She expected John but when she answered, it was a serving boy with a tray of dinner. The boy informed her that her husband, the supposed Mr. Aster, had encountered two old friends down in the pub. He didn't want his wife to trouble herself about him for the rest of the evening.

So, Catherine had gone to bed early, turning over John's whereabouts in her head. She assumed these "friends" didn't spell trouble for them, because otherwise his message would have been more urgent.

Perhaps, it was that simple. He had run into old friends and would rather amuse himself with them than speak with her. Or, perhaps, the friends weren't real at all, but rather he had found a woman with whom to spend the night.

And, really, he had every right.

She had no claim over him.

No matter how much that might hurt.



WHEN SHE WOKE the next morning, Catherine left her room in search of breakfast—and, if she was honest, John himself. When she entered the tavern, it was empty except for the keeper, who asked, "Breakfast, ma'am?" and she nodded her head, luxuriating in the unfamiliar feeling of pounds in her pocket.

She turned to sit at the long table and realized she wasn't alone. Two men sat there, digging into plates of eggs and kidneys, and they had their eyes fastened on her.

The blond one—not a blonde like her, but golden-haired—had the lightest blue eyes she had ever seen. He spoke first.

"Mrs. Aster?" he said, loud enough for the innkeeper to hear. "It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

"Yes, please join us for breakfast," the other man said, who had light brown hair and chestnut-colored eyes. He looked like a picture-book English nobleman and he had a suit of clothes to match. When little girls imagined the prince that they would

grow up and marry, she was certain that they imagined this exact man, although his storybook features were a bit bland for her taste.

Catherine had a strong suspicion that these men were John's friends. She just hoped that they really were his friends and not bent on revealing their scheme to anyone.

She summoned her strength and strode over to the men.

"Good day, sirs," she said, taking a seat. "Usually, a lady does not acknowledge men who address her in public without an introduction, but I understand that you're friends of my husband's?"

Both men looked a little taken aback by her assuredness. *Good.*

"It is not so often we meet the wife of such a dear friend so unexpectedly," the brown-haired man said, with a smile that, while not exactly menacing, had a bite to it.

"Indeed," the blond said. His smile held much more actual warmth. "We hadn't the slightest idea he was married."

"Gentlemen," Catherine said, not finding their game very amusing. "You still have not introduced yourselves."

"I'm Montaigne—as in, Earl of, and this—" he pointed to his companion "—is the Marquess of Leith."

Of course, she knew their names from the scandal sheets. So, these were two of John's legendary friends. Three out of the four Rank Rakes were currently lodged in this very inn.

"What are you doing here?" She was truly perplexed.

"Same as you," Leith said.

"Our presence here is purely coincidental," Montaigne clarified. "We had no idea you and Edington would be here."

Catherine didn't appreciate Montaigne's use of John's real name. Leith frowned at him as well.

With a scowl, Leith rose and went over to the innkeeper. Whatever he said, the man left the room. They had it to themselves.

“There,” Leith said. “Now we needn’t be concerned about being overheard.”

Catherine nodded. Although grateful for his discretion, she was still wary.

“John said he had met friends. I have read much about you in the society pages.”

Once the words were out of her mouth, she felt herself go crimson. They surely knew about her from the same source. And such reports were sure to have been unflattering.

“Nothing good, I hope,” Montaigne said, flashing a smile and revealing a perfect dimple.

“We know about you too, Catherine Forster,” Leith said, quietly.

No one said anything for a solid thirty seconds.

Montaigne broke the silence. “You call him John. No one calls him that but Lady Henrietta. And his father, but—as you know—he is no longer with us.”

“Neither of us wanted me to call him Forster,” she said in return, very gravely, but when she met the earl’s eye, he laughed. His levity in the face of her seriousness made her giggle. The Marquess of Leith looked at both of them like they were insane.

“Come on, Leith,” Montaigne said to his friend. “It’s a fair comedy. And, if she can laugh about it, so can you.”

At this moment, the innkeeper brought her tray and then disappeared once more.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Leith said, brusquely, not heeding his friend’s attempt at levity, “what do you win from this arrangement?”

Catherine put down her square of toast. “I beg your pardon?”

“You are helping him find Mary Forster,” Leith said. “Why would you do that?”

“Keep your voice down!” Catherine said, looking over her shoulder, but finding no one.

“I already told you I took care of the man,” Leith said, when she turned back. “Well?”

“Come on, Leith,” Montaigne whispered, although she could still hear him, “ease up.”

Somehow, the Earl of Montaigne’s attempt at kindness bothered Catherine even more than Leith’s questions. She may not have a title, she might not be a noblewoman, she might be disgraced, but she wasn’t a delicate, senseless maiden at the mercy of these men.

“He is paying me, of course. I am sure you two have heard all sort of odious things about me and my family. I am surprised that two gentlemen as maligned by the scandal sheets as yourselves would believe what they print. I am not a scheming whore, like my missing aunt, nor am I a babe-in-the-woods. Unlike the Breminsters, the scandal *actually* ruined my family so I *need* this money. I would appreciate if you gentlemen stopped insinuating I am up to anything more nefarious than helping your friend for the right price.”

She stared at the two men. They both looked taken aback. The earl had actually frozen with his fork halfway to his mouth and the marquess’s lips were set in a tight, unpleasant line, which said he did not like to be chastened.

“Look here,” Leith said, “we’re just—”

“Catherine?”

She turned round and looked up at John. He appeared extremely displeased at her choice of breakfast companions.

Catherine looked back at his friends and, as she did, she caught something in their eyes that before she had missed. As

they took her and John in together, the Earl of Montaigne and the Marquess of Leith both looked—well, there was no other way to say it. They looked *worried*. It eased her anger and even amused her a bit. The society pages had set these men up as the most abandoned of rakes. They didn't seem that abandoned at this inn breakfast table, staring at their friend like he was balancing one-legged on the top of a parapet.

She wasn't the only one with ridiculous protectors, she thought, recalling Ariel's letter. She had assumed these men merely caroused together, not that they actually cared for each another. She was starting to see that she had been wrong.

“Why are you talking to her?”

“Edington, don't bloody start,” Leith said. “As if we want any further involvement in this mess. In fact, we were just going. I am due back in London tomorrow and must make haste.”

“What did you say to her?” John barked at his friends.

“Brother,” Montaigne said, putting his hands up in a gesture of neutrality. “We're just getting acquainted. We know she's yours.”

Yours.

Catherine felt her heart fall into her stomach. She knew that, once again, she was failing not to blush. She couldn't have looked up at John at this moment if someone had offered her another five hundred pounds. Extending the agony, John didn't confirm or deny this assessment. Instead, he said nothing, and his friends just stood there.

“I'll see *you* back in London,” Leith said to John finally and then, with exaggerated meaning, “Until then, *take care*. Very nice meeting you, Miss Forster,” he said with a touch of frostiness and strode out the door.

Montaigne lingered. “We'll see you soon, Edington,” he said, softly. “You'll be all right?”

“*Leave,*” John snapped.

His friend nodded, but then he leaned in towards John, his voice dropping in volume. Once more, Catherine could still hear him.

“For what it’s worth, I like her.”

John barely managed a growl in response.

“Good day, Miss Forster,” he said, flashing another of his warm smiles.

And then the Earl of Montaigne was gone too.

John turned to her. “Were they bothering you?”

“No,” she said, faintly, “they weren’t—not really.”

“Did they do anything improper?”

“What!” she said. “No. What do you take me for?”

“Not you. *Them.*”

“I thought they were your *friends?*”

“They are. That’s why I’m concerned. I know them too well.”

“I’m your friend, too. Or have you forgotten?”

“You’re different, obviously.”

“Anyway,” she continued, “they hardly seemed like libertines.”

“Shows what you know. They bloody well are.”

“I am not looking to take on any extra aristocrats at the moment. I’m already traveling with one under scandalous circumstances. I don’t think my reputation could take it if I added two others to my retinue.”

“Amusing,” he said, his voice devoid of humor.

“They’re worried about you,” she said, trying to convey to him what she had seen. “They seem to think I am a bit dangerous. It almost made me wish I was. Rather more interesting than the truth.”

“I don’t find the truth quite as tame as you do.”

“Is it a problem that they discovered us here?” She brushed by his intimation. She didn’t know how to address it. If she focused on what he meant, she knew she would lose her composure.

John shook his head. “They won’t tell a soul.”

“They really are your friends.”

“Of course,” he said, sounding offended.

He looked like he wanted to say something else. But before he could speak, the innkeeper rushed into the room with a small square of paper.

“My apologies, Mr. Aster,” the man said. “I know the marquess said you wanted the dining room to yourselves, but I just received this for you. The messenger said it was urgent.”

John took the letter and gave the man the appropriate coin. He ripped the letter open and Catherine watched him read its contents.

As he read, Catherine couldn’t help admire his face, how his dark brown curls fell over his forehead and how his green eyes went a shade darker when he concentrated.

He crumpled the letter in his hand. “We need to saddle the horses immediately.”

His lips had gone white.

“What happened?” Catherine asked, alarm pulsing through her.

“My sister. She has fallen ill. They are afraid—” he broke off and their eyes met “—that she’ll die.”

“We’ll go immediately. Of course.”

Catherine could feel her own fright throbbing behind her eyes. Furthermore, she had no idea what to say to him in the face of such a calamity.

She did spare one thought for herself, however, as she headed for the carriage. *Dear God*, she thought, *I'm really going home.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

UNTIL DUSK, CATHERINE and John rode in silence. John was lost to his worry. He seemed to think that Henrietta had contracted the same fever that had killed his father. And Catherine had not yet figured out anything helpful or soothing to say.

She was concerned about Lady Henrietta Breminster, too, even though she had never met the young lady. All she knew of her was that she was seventeen and about to come out in society. And she knew the rumor that had long circulated and which John had dismissed as false—that she wasn't really the Duke of Edington's daughter.

Lastly, she knew—because it was so obvious—that John loved his sister very much.

Luckily, they were only hours away from Edington. With the way Marcel was driving, they would be there by midnight. John had told the coachman to make haste and he was doing it, taking turns that made Catherine's stomach flip.

Now, John looked out the window of the carriage, the lines on his face a portrait of anguish, and Catherine felt a gnawing hollowness in her chest at the sight of his pain. However, she was unsure how he would receive her attempts at consolation. Given the hostilities between their families, he might find her insincere.

Still, it hurt her to see him staring out the window like that, a knuckle at his mouth.

And she couldn't take any more silence.

Catherine leaned over the space between them and reached for his hand. He didn't move away but let her wrap her fingers around his. She counted it as a good sign, even though he kept his gaze on the road.

“You must be so worried.”

He squeezed her hand in return. “I always tell myself I will protect Henrietta,” he said, still looking out the window. “And yet I always fail.”

Catherine felt that pang again in her chest. She shook her head. “That can’t be true.”

“It is,” he said, and, for a moment, she heard his voice waver. “Ever since she was born, I promised myself I would protect her. But I’ve never kept that promise. I never came back enough, particularly in the past few years. I knew she was lonely in that big monstrosity with just my father. I came back twice a year, at most. And I could have done so much more. But I was selfish. I hated being there with *him*. And so I stayed away and let her suffer.”

“You *did* go back. That’s what matters.”

“And then the will. I should have known my father had this scheme and prevented it.”

“You never suspected he might do something of the sort?”

He shook his head. “It still doesn’t make any sense,” he said, now looking at her, and she was startled by the intensity of his gaze, more open than she had ever seen it. “She *is* his daughter. I would swear my life upon it. And I know he loved her. He doted on her. I always knew, with her there, he would go on for as long as he could. That’s why I can’t understand this provision. I have to think that he never intended for the money to go to Baron Falk. Only for me to find your aunt. That he knew I would. Somehow.”

“Look at me,” she said, and the sage of his eyes met her own. “If what you say is true, he would never leave the money away from Henrietta. He was afraid if he asked you to deliver the annuity to Mary, you would refuse. It was insurance. He knew you loved your sister. He knew you would let no harm come to her.”

“But I don’t know where Mary Forster is! We aren’t even close to finding her. And now Henrietta is sick. She may die.”

Catherine reached across the carriage, placing her hands on his chest. “We’ll find Mary. And Henrietta is young and strong. She is stronger than your father was.”

They locked eyes and, despite his anguish, she felt it there, again: the current that connected them, always, that hum of attraction that nothing seemed able to diminish.

He looked away. “We need to think of how to do this,” John said, quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“The original plan of having you stay in the inn. I won’t have it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not letting you stay there by yourself. You need to stay in the Hall, but you can’t under your own name, obviously. Even if you use an assumed name, I’m afraid you will be recognized.”

“I will be very safe in the inn,” she said, not wanting him to take such trouble when he was so worried about his sister. “I have to approach the Edington gentry, my aunt’s old friends, to ask them if they know anything, and it will look less suspicious than if I do it from the Hall.”

“No,” he said, hoarsely. “You aren’t staying in the inn. I won’t have it. I will tell everyone at Edington Hall that you are my sister’s tutor in society manners—in preparation for her season. And while we are there, we will be officially closed to visitors. We will blame the fever and Henrietta’s delicate health. If she recovers, God willing. If you take a circuitous route to your aunt’s old friends, you can approach them as yourself, as if you were coming from elsewhere, and no one will know the difference.”

“It’s too risky.”

“I won’t accept anything else.”

She didn’t respond. It *would* be easier to find her aunt this way—with both of them at the Hall, they could more easily

discuss and carry out their plan. And she would be closer to him. Which had its own appeal. She bit her lip. And its own problems.

The carriage lurched. Marcel had taken another hairpin turn and it nearly threw Catherine out of her seat.

Then, with another lurch, Catherine *was* out of her seat and in John's lap.

When she moved to return to her seat, his arms went up around her.

“Stay here. Just for a minute.”

She sank into him and felt his body respond to hers. He pressed his face into her hair, breathing her in, and she closed her eyes.

When she opened them, her face was level with his neck, and she admired the line where his smooth skin started to stubble.

Catherine knew he was worried and anxious, but she couldn't stop herself from what she did next. She pressed her lips to the place just above his collar.

When she kissed him, he sighed, relaxing his body, and so she traced her tongue along the length of his collar. He let out a low groan and she felt him growing hard beneath her.

“I said I wouldn't kiss you,” he said, his voice coming out strange.

“You did,” she said, laying another kiss along his jawline. “But I didn't say I couldn't kiss you.”

“Jesus Christ.”

Catherine kissed him, teasing his lips with her own, coaxing his mouth open. When she edged her tongue over his bottom lip, he reached to cup her face.

She pulled back. “Excuse me, Your Grace, but I believe we had an agreement.”

He looked up at her, his eyes clouded, and then, realizing what she meant, he laughed.

“Very well,” he said, returning his hands to the coach seat. “I’ll let you have your way with me.”

“Hmm,” she said, shocked by her own boldness, but possessed by a desire that seemed larger than herself. “Now I have to figure out what to do with you.”

Catherine repositioned herself on his lap so that she was straddling him underneath her skirts. She could feel his hardness between her legs and the sensation made her gasp. He felt so good. And the memory of the other night in the inn was still fresh. Searing.

“Don’t,” he said, panting now.

“What?” she said, moving a little, so that her core rocked against him, and he let out a stifled moan.

“*That.*”

“But you seem to like it,” she said, pressing her lips to his, and replicating that delicious movement. She felt her deepest muscles seize with the rhythm and she almost let out a mewl of pleasure but bit it back. She repeated the motion, drawing him into a long kiss, feeling that she might burst from the dual sensations. Breaking their kiss, she said, “So why would I stop?”

He seemed to have no response for that. He just looked up at her. In that gaze, in his slightly agape mouth, she saw his pure desire for her. She had known that desire was there but she had never seen its extent before. Now, when he looked at her without responding—or, rather, not saying anything in words—he conveyed more to her than he ever had before.

“I don’t want you to stop,” he said finally. “I want you. All of the time. You can’t know how much.”

She bent down and took his mouth in another kiss, trying to put all of her own desire into it, and he seemed to understand, responding in kind.

Balancing her arms on his shoulders, she continued to press herself against his firm length, and his breath started coming hard and fast.

“Catherine. My God.”

He took one of his hands off the bench and placed it on her arse, directing her movement, up and down. Even though it technically broke their pact, the sensation felt so good that she couldn't admonish him.

Catherine felt her muscles winding tighter every time he pressed her to him. She felt the pleasure within her become sharper, more concentrated, and the pressure kept building, both sweet and somehow torturous.

“Please,” she said to him, even though she wasn't sure what she was asking him to do, and she dug her fingernails into his shoulder. “Please.”

John, however, seemed to know exactly what she meant. He gave her a smile and then reached for her skirts, pushing them back until he exposed the tops of her stockings.

He brought his hand to the cluster of curls between her legs and, with an exploratory touch, entered her slightly with his fingers. When he discovered how wet she was, he looked up at her.

“So wet,” he said, bringing those same fingers to his mouth. “So sweet.”

She whimpered aloud at the sight, both because of the intimacy of the motion and because he had stopped touching her.

“Say you'll agree,” he said, as he began touching her once more.

“Agree?” In the haze of her pleasure, she had no idea what he meant.

“To stay at the Hall.”

“It’s...not a good idea,” she managed to say, breathless because he continued teasing her with long, gentle strokes.

Slowly, he slid his finger fully inside of her and she felt herself swell around him, her muscles seemingly moving of their own accord, following the pleasure of his touch.

“Say you will.” He thrust his finger into her and she felt her mind go blank. For a single moment, she was only exquisite sensation.

Still, she couldn’t give in. It wasn’t a good idea, but, more than anything, she was afraid of what would happen if they were that close for so long. She was so vulnerable to him. She wanted him too much. “I can’t.”

With another skilled movement, he found that spot, deep inside of her, that throbbed and brushed it gently.

“I need to protect you,” he said. “Let me protect you.”

Without waiting for her answer, he began to rub her, moving his fingers back out to the sensitive nub at the apex of her thighs.

She whined, pressing against him, wriggling for more. He gave it to her, alternating between entering her and rubbing her clit, until she was on the precipice.

With practiced restraint, however, he didn’t give her more. He refused to let her go over that edge.

“Agree,” he murmured. “Say yes to me.”

“I can’t,” she repeated. But she knew she was close to giving in, her mind syrupy with desire.

“Say yes and I’ll let you come.” As he said these words, he brought her a few strokes closer. She tried to move against him out of desperation.

“Mischievous girl.” He grinned up at her and held her still with his other hand. “Trying to cheat.”

“Please.”

“Agree,” he said, moving his fingers deep inside of her one more time, but keeping his thumb on her clit. She could feel the fullness of him inside of her as he touched her center of pleasure. She thought she might cry from frustration. He began moving his thumb in a torturously slow motion. “Say yes,” he repeated.

She knew that, with one movement, he could release all of the tension coiled inside of her. She was panting for breath and sanity. He had power over her. She hated how much. How weak he made her. She didn’t want to give in—not to his ostensible request nor the demand he placed on her body. And yet she doubted how much longer she could refuse him. Not when she wanted to give in nearly as much as she wanted to resist.

He gave another tantalizing tug of his fingers and she felt tears spring into her eyes. He did it once more and the sensation was pure joy. It broke her. She couldn’t resist anymore. She felt actual tears wet her cheeks and she would have been ashamed if she weren’t so desperate.

“Yes,” she gasped, finally, “I will.”

He smiled up at her. “Good.”

“Please,” she begged.

“Don’t worry. I can make it better.”

He drew her into a long kiss and accelerated his pace, stroking and kissing her at once. Again, the tandem sensation threatened to undo her. He broke the kiss and looked into her eyes.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his voice straining, his fingers bringing her to the edge. “God, you’re so perfect.”

Those words, from so long ago, forced her over the cliff, and she cried out, burying her head into the crook of his neck. She felt herself spasm, hard and delicious, over his fingers, the resistance that they offered deepening her pleasure, her mind completely gone to anything other than him.

She didn't know how long they sat like that. Eventually, however, he curled his arms around her and gently placed her on the seat next to him. She buried her face into his chest. She found she was too tired to say anything.

Before long, she caught herself drifting off to sleep. She couldn't fight the tide that drew her out into unconsciousness.

When she awoke, she realized she had been jolted awake by a lack of motion. The carriage had stopped and she knew. From the scent in the air, the exact pitch of the dark, she knew. She knew that she was home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFTER CATHERINE HAD fallen asleep in his arms, John had been torn between two torturous visions. The first was Catherine, as she had just been, glorious, almost making him lose control in the back of a carriage. His blood still hummed from the exquisite experience of pleasuring her—and his erection still strained against his breeches.

The second was a recurring image, in total discordance with the first, of his sister lying dead at Edington Hall. He imagined himself arriving at his home only to be told his sister was already dead. He saw himself standing over her bed, where she lay pale and still and gone forever. The pain of this image had him choking back tears whenever it appeared.

Due to the strain of these competing visions, it had been, for the first time in a long time, a relief to reach Edington Hall.

When they came through the gates, he saw Mrs. Morrison standing in the drive. Barely waiting for the carriage to stop, he jumped down. When Mrs. Morrison told him Henrietta was still alive and was expected to recover, he nearly kissed the ground.

He asked Mrs. Morrison to wake Catherine, who was still sleeping in the carriage, and take her up to her bedchamber. Then he went to see Henrietta.

In her great stone chamber, she was lying motionless in her canopy bed, which was so large it threatened to swallow her up. He looked at her pale face, her feverish brow, her light brown hair matted with sweat. Careful not to wake her, he got down on his knees and put his hands together. *Please don't die*, he prayed. He repeated it, again and again. *Just please don't die*.

Afterwards, he went to his own bedchamber, regretting its empty largeness and the cold expanse of his bedding, but

feeling like he had no right to interrupt Catherine's sleep, given how exhausted she had been in the carriage. He thought he had no chance of sleep when he put his head to his pillow. He stared up at the familiar ceiling, riven with worry about Henrietta and yet still very much wanting Catherine in his bed.

John jerked awake. Rays of light hit his face and he heard the unique, buzzing quiet of the country. It was morning. Somehow, he had slept. He rubbed his face, remembering Henrietta's illness and the heaviness of his anxiety. He knew he should rise and check on his sister to see if she had woken from her delirium, but his worry pinned him to the bed. He put his hands to his face and lay back.

And then again he couldn't keep his thoughts from Catherine, how she had taken her pleasure yesterday in the carriage. He worshiped the flush of her cheeks and the feel of her on his fingers. He always worried that she didn't want him the way he wanted her, that their encounter in the inn left her content with their strange kind of friendship, but yesterday she had certainly seemed to enjoy his touch.

He felt himself harden. He longed for her here with him, in his bed. Instead, she was down one of the long Edington hallways, wherever Mrs. Morrison had seen fit to place her. Hating himself, he grabbed his length, which was now fully engorged due to his replay of yesterday's scene.

He began rubbing himself, thinking of Catherine in his bed, with her blue-black eyes and her silver-blond hair and her legs reaching around to take him—

Then, a frantic knock sounded on his bedchamber door and, swearing an oath, he unleashed himself.

"Your Grace, your sister has awoken."

"One moment, Mrs. Morrison," he said, the hope leaping in his heart helping his erection subside. He pulled on his buckskin breeches and one of the clean shirts from his trunk. He quickly washed his face and hands in the basin that one of

the footmen had thankfully had the sense to lay out the night before.

Once he appeared half-decent in the full-length glass opposite his bed, he turned and opened the door.

“Mrs. Morrison.” His hands were still shaking from the contradictory emotions coursing through him. “Please, take me to her.”

As they walked to Henrietta’s chamber, the good-natured old woman, who had been with the household since he was a boy, brought John up to speed on Henrietta’s condition.

“Very good news, Your Grace. Her fever has broken. I think she is over the worst of it. She should be right as rain in a few days.”

His heart gladdened at this commentary, but he wouldn’t feel safe until he spoke to Henrietta himself and saw that she was truly recovering.

They walked the wide corridors of Edington Hall. Mrs. Morrison continued to chatter and required little response from him. Her verbal self-sufficiency allowed him to study the proportions of the massive dwelling where he had grown up and that now, so strangely, belonged to him and him alone. As much as he had deplored the place over the years, he appreciated now the striking way the light fell through the wide windows. It still seemed singularly odd to him that his father no longer lived here—he no longer lived anywhere at all, of course—and that he wouldn’t round a corner and run into the older man strolling slowly around the great hall.

In recent years, his father had walked the halls constantly. His gait had suggested he was ruminating on a heavy theme. Whatever it was, he had never shared it with John.

“That’s very good to hear, Mrs. Morrison,” he said, as they reached his sister’s bedchamber.

“One more thing, Your Grace. I put the lady you brought, Miss Aster, in your mother’s old chamber. I am very sorry, but

with little warning, we didn't have any of the guest chambers turned out."

Christ, he thought. He had imagined her down the guest wing somewhere, but she was but four doors down from his own room.

"Very well," he said, trying to keep his voice even. "No use placing Miss Aster all by herself in the guest wing. We wouldn't want her to feel marooned."

"She is a very nice young lady, Your Grace," Mrs. Morrison said, with a look that he found a trifle too knowing.

"Yes," he said, making sure his manner revealed nothing. "She will be an excellent tutor for Henrietta."

"Indeed, Your Grace." She gave a prim curtsy and he thought he may have imagined the intimation.

He appreciated how Mrs. Morrison, despite knowing him for so long and having once been a kind of second mother to him, tried now to treat him with reserve. It made him feel a little lonely, but he also respected that she didn't try and press her familiarity on him.

"I leave you, Your Grace, to Lady Henrietta. I will be back soon to check on her."

He nodded at Mrs. Morrison and turned to enter Henrietta's room.

John opened the door. Before he could process the exact location of his sister, she had her arms flung around his neck.

"John!" she squealed, jumping up and down. "You're back!"

He accepted her embrace, relief coursing through him that she was so well. Then, realizing that she had just flung herself out of bed despite having been unconscious in a delirium only hours before, he felt dawning horror at her recklessness.

"Back to bed," he ordered. "You need to rest."

She made a face but stalked across the room and returned underneath the covers.

“You were just deathly ill,” he chastised, hating how stuffy he sounded, but unable to help himself, “and now you are jumping about. That’s no way to recover.”

He sat down on the chair by her bed that, until this morning, had been used by Mrs. Morrison to nurse her.

“I feel *fine*. Mrs. Morrison is so hyperbolic. A little delirium and she calls you back over nothing. But I can’t say I’m angry, if it brings you back to Edington. It interrupts the never-ending dullness of my existence.”

She smiled up at him and her happiness at his return almost broke his heart.

“Your life won’t be dull for long.”

“Yes.” Her eyes flashed in a way that made him feel queasy. There was so much she didn’t know. She had no idea about his father’s will. She didn’t know that her enormous dowry, which was to have been her shield against the rumors about her birth, was imperiled. She didn’t even know that many in the *ton* speculated that she was illegitimate, having been sequestered in Edington all her life. She was just a girl, excited for her debut. “And I hear you have brought me a new tutor. For *society*. So I can be the belle of the *ton*.”

Henrietta raised her arms and made a pose of mock elegance, but he could see that her hope was real.

“Yes. Once you’re better, you can start your lessons.”

He would have to talk to Catherine. He hadn’t considered that Catherine would have to give her actual instruction. But now that she was staying at the Hall as Henrietta’s tutor, they would have no choice. He just hoped Catherine wouldn’t be too inconvenienced. Or irritated with him for not having thought of this complication.

“I shall be well by tomorrow and then I can begin,” Henrietta said, beaming. “The beginning of my brilliant

career.”

He laughed at her sarcastic imitation of a worldly tone. Yet, beneath the laughter, he felt only panic at her high expectations.

He remembered his vision of Henrietta lying dead in this very bed. He had even envisioned burying her in the family plot right beside their father and mother. The contrast between that image and the high-spirited sprite before him had him choking back emotion.

“Maybe. You need to focus on getting well. I will talk to Miss Aster and see if she would be willing to begin your lessons tomorrow.”

Henrietta gave him a quizzical look. “Not to be an aristocratic arse, but isn’t that what she is here to do? Why wouldn’t she be prepared?”

He sighed. He had forgotten how unrelenting Henrietta could be.

“Of course. But she may need a few days to recover from the journey.”

“I hadn’t thought the journey from London was so arduous.” Her blue eyes—light but warm—gleamed. “But I suppose I wouldn’t know. Since I have hardly ever left Edington. They will probably think I am a raw country girl in society.”

“I’m sure you’ll dazzle.”

She wrinkled her nose at his ironic tone. “On second thought, I’m sure Miss Aster does need a few days to recover, having spent two days traveling with *you*, the heart and soul of unpleasantness.”

He tried not to blanch at her focus on he and Miss Aster’s travels together. Instead, he gave her what he hoped was an easy smile. “Exactly.”

“Very well. I will rest so that tomorrow I can start my lessons.”

“Very good,” he said, preparing to stand.

“Can I ask you a question?” Henrietta said, before he could complete the action. His mind reeled, worrying she would ask more about Catherine.

“Anything. Of course.”

As he said these words, he felt the heaviness of his responsibility to her. He was all she had. He knew that he had to be prepared to counsel her on a range of subjects, but he felt at sea. The vastness of the danger before his sister unsteadied him.

“Do you miss Father?”

It wasn't the question that he had expected, but once she said it, he realized he had already failed as her guardian. Of course, she missed their father. He hadn't been dead a month. He had been so consumed in the aftermath of the will—and then with Catherine—that he had barely had time to think about how his father's death had affected his sister. He tried to summon, however, for Henrietta's sake, his feelings from before he knew the contents of the will, on that long ride home, when he had been overtaken by something much like grief.

“It is hard to imagine that I will never speak to him again. I keep expecting to see him walking the halls. Or, when I was away, to receive a letter from him summoning me home.”

Henrietta gave a little sad smile. “Did he send many letters summoning you home?”

John felt a rush of guilt. “Not often. And he didn't summon me exactly. But he made it known that he wanted me home anyhow.”

“We both did.”

“I'm sorry, Retta. I should have come home more. It was just—” He shook his head. He couldn't explain when she didn't know about the scandal.

“It’s not your fault. You couldn’t help growing up,” she said, tracing a pattern on the coverlet with her fingers. “It’s just that I keep expecting to miss him. But mostly I feel sad, because, when I try, I realize how much of him was already gone. It’s like I grew up my whole life missing him already. It always seemed that so much of him died with Mother.”

John winced. He had no idea how his sister could come so close to the truth when she knew so little about the past. In some ways, he had always thought his sister was lucky. She never knew his father before the scandal, so—he had reasoned—she would never have to know how diminished he had been. Now, he considered that it might have been better to have known him in his prime, to know the scale of the loss, instead of wondering at it.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “He loved you. That I know.”

He felt bitter guilt as he said the words, because part of him thought, *did he?* Had his father loved Henrietta? His will didn’t make it seem that way. And, yet, he had seen his father’s love for his sister with his own eyes. Over the past seventeen years, she had been the one thing binding them together. She was the one thing that they had always agreed on.

“And I loved him. He was always very kind to me. It’s just—even when he was here, it didn’t feel like he was, or not all the time.” She looked down. “That’s why I think we both always wanted you here. It made this place feel less like it was filled with ghosts.”

“Retta, I promise I will make it up to you.”

His little sister’s eyes flashed up at him again and then she cracked a wide smile. “By giving me the most glorious season a recently orphaned girl has ever had?”

He laughed and tried to push down the rising terror in his throat. “Yes,” he said, forcing himself to smile and look lighthearted, even with the panic beating hard against his skull. “No expense spared.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CATHERINE ROSE AND dressed, lacing her stays and stockings, and wondered where John might be in the truly gigantic Edington Hall. She resolved not to look for him when he was probably attending to Henrietta. Instead, she would reacquaint herself with the place alone.

And she would try not to think of what had happened yesterday in the carriage. Or feel too mortified. In the cold light of day, she felt exposed. She had *again* shown him so much of herself, of what she desired, and she could not shake the feeling that what she had revealed—what they had both revealed—had altered the shaky truce that they had found on the road.

She exited the bedchamber and walked down the grand stairs, marveling at the size and grandiosity of the place, which she remembered hazily from her childhood. A few times, she had come to Edington Hall with her aunt Mary to call on the family and had observed its grandness. She had listened to her aunt discuss issues in the parish with the duke on those occasions, the only times she had seen them in the same room together.

Forster House was older, but Edington Hall was much larger. It had made an impression on her then and she felt disloyal to her own family to admit that it still impressed her now. The wide windows looking out over the meticulous park, the expansive stone floors, and the bustling of the enormous staff, who moved about the house in the morning sun taking no notice of her, awed her. She felt a bit like an imposter, stalking around uninvited and unnoticed.

She happened upon the gallery and gazed upon the solemn faces of the former Dukes of Edington and their wives. She found the large portrait of John's father, done when he was

still young, and noted how much he looked like John, except for his dark brown eyes.

And then she looked up and saw John himself in the doorway.

“How is she?” She could hear the dread in her own voice. From this distance, his face was inscrutable.

“Henrietta is through the worst of it. Her fever broke last night. I had to force her to rest for today but she has made a remarkable recovery.”

“Thank God.”

“She’s fine.”

She looked him in the eyes. “I am very, very glad to hear it.”

He nodded grimly in acknowledgment. “We need to talk. About Henrietta. The tutoring.”

He was looking at the picture of the former duchess, his mother. She was the one who had given him his sage-green eyes, Catherine observed. She doubted the woman, who had been ruined by her husband and Mary Forster’s relationship, would approve of Catherine’s presence in her home. Catherine swallowed hard.

As if experiencing similar thoughts, John broke away from the portrait. They moved down the gallery.

“You’re going to need to give Henrietta real lessons.”

“Of course I will have to give her lessons. Surely, your sister would begin to suspect something if her tutor didn’t actually teach her anything.”

Catherine looked over to search his face. His expression was unreadable, the line of his mouth giving no hint of his true feelings. The openness from yesterday had completely vanished. She had no idea what he might be thinking or why he was suddenly so closed to her. Well, she did have one idea.

Clearly, she had been right that their newest intimacy had changed things between them.

“It hadn’t occurred to me.”

She said nothing. He clearly regretted choosing a cover that would involve so much contact with his sister.

He stopped in front of a picture of a puffy-looking ducal relation.

“It’s quite a lot of bother for a job you’re not even here to do.” He had almost returned to the mechanical politeness that he had offered her at the beginning of their journey.

“Consider it a part of my ten thousand pounds.”

He didn’t laugh, as she had expected, or even smile.

She wanted to ask what was wrong, but she didn’t. They started walking again.

Finally, he spoke.

“My sister does not know about the scandal. I ask that you say nothing of it to her.”

“What?” They had reached the end of the gallery and she turned to look at him, her back to the wall. “She has no idea what people say? Of what happened between your parents?”

“No.” They were face-to-face now in the corner. “And I don’t want to tell her. Not now. Not until I have her dowry back.”

“John, she deserves to *know*.”

Catherine couldn’t believe that he and his father would let his sister live so long in ignorance over such an essential fact of her existence. Catherine, of all people, knew what his sister would face in society. The same scandal had ruined her own season. She remembered the eyes of the *ton* on her, how her face and body had grown too hot under her gown, and the whispers as she walked through the ballroom. At least she had *known* why they treated her that way. She couldn’t imagine

being a young girl who expected acceptance and then met derision.

“You have to tell her before she comes out. She can’t go in not knowing.”

“I will decide what is right for my sister.”

“You haven’t been doing a very good job *deciding*, have you?” she retorted, incensed by his irritation at her, when she knew she was indubitably right. “You *or* your father.”

At the mention of his father, he took a few steps closer to her. His green eyes were hard, angry, angrier than she had seen them since that day in her drawing room, when they had faced off just like this.

“Don’t speak about *my* family, Miss *Aster*. You are here for *one* thing—to help me find Mary Forster. When you speak to my sister, you will follow my instructions.”

Catherine looked up at him, contempt for his irrational insistence on his authority beating through her. She refused to back down. Not when he was so wrong. She held his gaze, not letting her chin sink a centimeter towards her chest.

And, yet, looking at him, she once more reflexively admired his green eyes and inky curls, the handsome set of his jaw. She didn’t understand how they had gone from the intimacy of the carriage, back to the anger of their first meeting. He had done it. He had made it this way.

“It doesn’t seem that you know what is right, Your Grace.”

His expression didn’t change at her words, except for going, perhaps, an iota more stoic.

The door at the other end of the gallery swung open and they sprang apart.

A liveried footman walked through the door. “Breakfast for you and Miss Aster is served, Your Grace.”

John swore an oath and walked out of the gallery door. The footman waited for Catherine.

Catherine had no choice but to do the same. As she swept over the threshold of the gallery, she blinked rapidly in quick succession, determined to stem her tears.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CATHERINE WALKED INTO the breakfast room and found a young lady already seated at the table.

She studied the girl. Her light brown hair was arranged prettily around her small-featured, delicate face, and her yellow dress was fresh as the morning, giving an impression of innocence and tart mischief all at once. When she saw Catherine, her warm blue eyes lit up. She was a pretty girl, Catherine thought, and would shine in society, if she got the chance.

The surprise of encountering this girl pushed her tension with John from her mind, particularly when she heard an exasperated sigh escape from the man himself.

“Henrietta,” John barked. “What are you doing downstairs? You are supposed to be resting.”

“I feel fine, John,” she said, “and I wanted to meet Miss Aster.”

“This is absolutely inexcusable. You promised me you would rest. I insist that you go back upstairs.”

“I am already *dressed*, brother. I assure you I am well enough to *breakfast*.”

“You look pale,” he countered. Catherine noticed that Henrietta did look a little peaked.

“After breakfast and perhaps a wee turn about the gardens, I’ll go back to bed! I promise!”

John looked absolutely exasperated. It was clear to Catherine that he knew that Henrietta wouldn’t move.

“Fine,” he ground out, “but if you are ill again, I don’t want to hear about it.”

Their dispute seemingly over, Catherine turned towards the girl and gave a little curtsy. “My lady, I am Miss Catherine Aster. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The girl jumped up from her seat. “Oh, none of that formality! I hardly ever have visitors or fresh blood of any kind. I can’t bear if we are anything other than friends.”

Catherine smiled in return. She felt her hurt at John’s behavior melt a bit in the face of this sunny young lady. She looked over at John and saw that he was scowling. Obviously, his sister’s amiability ran counter to his plans to control the relationship between herself and Henrietta.

“I hope you soon feel strong enough to begin your lessons.” Catherine attempted to strike a balance between encouraging her familiarity and maintaining some degree of decorum.

“Absolutely,” Henrietta replied. “I am ecstatic with excitement. I have been looking forward to my season for as long as I can remember.”

“*Sit,*” John said to his sister. “Now.”

“He’s so dull, isn’t he?” she said to Catherine, nevertheless obeying her brother. “He acts so proper, but he clearly needs a shave. You’re not growing another beard, are you, John? Miss Aster, he had this *hideous* little beard when he was at Oxford. He came home and Mrs. Morrison tried to attack him with a razor.”

“Enough, Henrietta,” John said. Catherine was amused to see him blushing.

“No, Miss Aster, it was absolutely repulsive. Father and Mrs. Morrison and I were horrified to see him.”

“Retta,” he said, warningly.

“Oh, come now, brother. We can surely laugh about *the beard* now—I mean, certainly we did at the time, as well, but no reason we cannot laugh now, too.”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Catherine said, still hurt by their exchange in the gallery, but unable to resist Henrietta’s playful tone. “I would like to hear about it.”

John leveled Catherine with a gaze of dissatisfaction.

“What was the occasion for this beard? Was it fashionable?” she asked Henrietta.

“Never,” the girl replied. “Impossible.”

“I’ll have you know, dear sister,” John said, clearly exasperated but amused despite himself, “that it was a very fashionable beard and that all of my friends had them. The ladies found them quite fetching.”

Henrietta mimicked a gagging sound. “I hope they are not back in fashion next season or none of the gentlemen will be even worth flirting with.”

John glowered. “You will be flirting with no one.”

“That’s absurd, brother. What is a season without flirting?”

“She is right, Your Grace,” Catherine cut in, smiling, liking Henrietta more by the minute, and hoping to vex John by agreeing with his sister. He might not value Catherine’s opinion in regard to what the girl should know, but he couldn’t completely ignore the girl’s own wishes to learn about the world as it really existed. “There is no point to a girl’s first season without a little flirting. But we’ll discuss all of that in our lessons, including how to stay well within the bounds of propriety.” She gave Henrietta a wink.

“Where did you find *her*, John?” Henrietta said, looking a little shocked, and Catherine saw that most of her bold talk was bluster. “You *do* have much to teach me.”

“She will not teach you anything but what is decent, Henrietta,” John broke in, “and what a young lady like yourself should know.”

He shot Catherine a warning look and she suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. He was a true arse. He didn’t trust her with his sister, but he didn’t understand that no one knew

better than her what the girl faced. Perhaps he only still saw her as a disgraced and tainted Forster, but—for that reason—she was the best tutor for Henrietta. Because Henrietta, whether he wanted to believe it or not, was going to have to contend with many of the same labels.

“Of course, Your Grace. But flirting is part of what Henrietta must learn about before we set her loose in the world. There is conduct-book comportment and then there is reality—learning to balance the two is what makes a lady.”

John gave her another venomous look. For her part, Catherine was surprised by her own eloquence on a topic she hadn’t considered seriously in a very long time.

“Very well,” he said, coughing and looking away from her. “You have, of course, a sound philosophy, Miss Aster, but perhaps we can start with a subject other than flirting.”

“You must not mind him, Miss Aster,” Henrietta said. “If it were up to him, I would read Fordyce’s Sermons all day and dress like a Puritan.”

Catherine smiled in a way that she hoped was enigmatic, just to tease John a bit. He did look uncomfortable. From the set of his mouth, for just a second, she saw a brief glimpse of his deep anxiety. For Henrietta, she realized. The sweetness of his concern moved her. How many other brothers—how many other *dukes*—cared so much for their sister’s happiness? It could not be many.

“Very well,” he repeated. “I have affairs of ducal importance to take care of with my steward, so I will leave you ladies to further your acquaintance.”

He shot Catherine a look that she couldn’t quite decipher—was it a warning or an apology? She couldn’t tell, even when she directed her gaze to his mouth.

“You are truly,” Henrietta said, and Catherine could see her face beaming with love, “the most pompous arsehole who ever lived.”

“That’s me,” he said, jocularly, as he strode from the breakfast room. “But no lessons today. A quick turn about the gardens, Henrietta, and then back to bed.”

Catherine had never given lessons in anything. She might have become a governess or teacher, as an educated girl with no income, but no family would have ever hired her to guide their young, impressionable daughters, given the notoriety of her name. She had no idea how to speak to a pupil. She realized that her only models were her aunt Mary and Lady Wethersby. She knew neither woman would thrill John as a pattern for his sister’s manners, but they would have to do.

Five minutes later, wrapped in their shawls, she and Henrietta were in the garden.

Henrietta had a younger sister’s teasing nature around her brother, but once he was gone, she was touchingly respectful to Catherine, as if she wanted to show her eagerness to learn.

“Have you been to many grand balls?” Henrietta asked, as they strode down a pathway lined with blue irises.

“A few.” Catherine thought of several luxurious affairs she had attended with the Wethersbys before their fall from grace. “You must prepare yourself for the reality that most are very dull. It is not all excitement.”

“Of course,” Henrietta said, seriously, taking Catherine’s arm. It made her heart light to have the trust of this forward young woman, particularly when John seemed so wary of the influence that Catherine might have on his sister. “I’m *so* glad John brought you here. I should fall deathly ill more often.”

Catherine shook her head. “Your brother would not like that. He had already engaged me for this post when he heard the news. We were traveling here when we heard and he was very, very worried.”

“I know.” Henrietta sat on a stone bench and Catherine joined her. “I was only jesting, of course. I just miss him when he is gone.”

Catherine looked at Henrietta's girlish, wistful face. Her countenance had a strange china-plate kind of beauty that contrasted with her fiery demeanor.

"Miss Aster," the girl said, taking her hand. "May I reveal a delicate matter to you?"

Dear God, Catherine thought, *what was the girl going to say?* Catherine's mind flashed to her telling John that his sister had been impregnated by a stable boy and still wanted to have her season. Knowing Henrietta—and Catherine was beginning to—she would be *that* determined to come out.

John would probably be unhappy that his little sister had unburdened herself to Catherine. She should tell her to speak to her brother about any *delicate* matters.

Henrietta closed her eyes and Catherine had the words to stop her on her tongue. *Why hasn't she told her brother?* she wondered, in a panic. It must be of a sensitive, *feminine* nature. *Dear Lord*.

And, yet, the sight of Henrietta, so young and vulnerable, and so clearly in need of a friend, caused her to hold back. John would just have to accept that, when it came to his sister, she was involved now.

"I am not sure if you know," Henrietta began, "but my family—I am not sure what John has told you—but we are not exactly...lily white...in the reputation department."

Catherine tried to not react as she took in Henrietta's words. John had told her Henrietta had no knowledge of the scandal, but her tone of voice at present suggested otherwise.

"I am not quite sure what you mean." Catherine wanted to gauge Henrietta's level of information before she said anything. "You will need to be a little bit more precise."

Henrietta bit her lip. "Well, a very, very long time ago, my father, who is dead now, as I am sure you know..." She reached down to her wrist and fidgeted with the cuff of her gown. "He died very recently, actually, as I am sure you also know."

Henrietta's voice wavered. Catherine felt a pang of cutting grief for this orphaned girl. She knew all too well how she felt.

"Anyway," she continued, recovering her composure, "he had *a mistress*, or something like that—a woman, who was not my mother."

Catherine willed herself not to react. She *would* not reveal anything until she knew what Henrietta knew. God, how could John have been so ignorant? Henrietta had grown up in the epicenter of the scandal's aftermath and he had expected her not to know anything of it? The girl would have to be a dull one indeed to not know—and Henrietta seemed nothing if not sharp. Catherine should have never believed it. He had seemed so certain, but she should have suspected that he didn't have the measure of the situation.

"And this woman, she was from the estate only over a little way. She wasn't a courtesan but a regular gentlewoman."

Catherine braced for Henrietta to make a disparaging remark about her family.

"My mother found out," Henrietta said darkly, passing over the Forsters without comment, as if they hardly mattered to the story. "And became *very upset*, apparently. She stormed off and started her own—well, you know—with a baron, I think?"

Poor Henrietta, Catherine thought. She knew what it was like to try and piece together a history—the *same* history in fact—that no one would tell you directly but which nevertheless completely shaped your life.

"I'm not sure which one, to be honest, but I'm pretty sure, it was a baron," Henrietta said, as if she were talking to herself. "Anyway, it's not important. She ran away with the baron of something, or a baron-like figure. And, not long after, I was born. She died giving birth to me."

Catherine looked into Henrietta's delicate face. The girl was waiting for an acknowledgment. She did not talk to many

outsiders and Catherine could tell she wanted to see if it was widely known.

“I have heard the story,” she said, with a nod, wishing she could say more.

“Bollocks,” Henrietta said, “I suspected as much. I suppose everyone knows.” The girl sighed. “Anyway, apparently, many say that I am not my father’s child, because of my mother running away with the baron, or this baron-like personage.”

“He was a baron.” Catherine felt that she could at least provide that.

“Oh. Well, I suppose it’s good that he *was* indeed a baron. If I’m an illegitimate scandal, at least I am an *aristocratic* illegitimate scandal.”

Catherine laughed, even though her heart hurt for Henrietta. She was struck by how, in telling the tale, Henrietta was focused on the actions of *her* mother. It reminded Catherine of how she had always felt judged by her aunt’s conduct. She caught from Henrietta the same fear. The duchess’s conduct was an angle of the story that Catherine herself had never considered closely, but she saw now that Henrietta was mostly worried about how her own mother’s decisions might affect how others saw *her* in the present. She was comparatively unconcerned with her father’s role in the story or that of the gentlewoman from the other estate. Perhaps, Catherine thought, she herself wouldn’t have felt the same shame if it had been her father’s scandal and not that of the woman who had been—socially and practically—the closest thing she had to a mother.

“Anyway,” Henrietta said, “since you are my tutor, for the season, I felt as if I should tell you, because I’m fairly worried about how this will affect everything. And if my life is destroyed before it has begun?”

Tears had formed in Henrietta’s eyes. Catherine gave her hand an extra squeeze.

“Have you spoken to your brother about this?”

“No! How could I? Oh God, it would be mortifying, to talk about such things with him! He is so proper. And respected. And no one doubts *his* parentage. It would be too embarrassing.”

Catherine suppressed a laugh at John as “proper.” Clearly, not all the gossip of the *ton* had permeated the walls of Edington Hall. The girl was in for a shock when she first heard of the Rank Rakes. Even stranger, Henrietta thought that her brother had no shame over the scandal, because he wasn’t a woman and his parentage wasn’t questioned. She knew nothing of his torment over this very subject. She marveled at how little people in families knew of each other’s inner lives. She supposed, thinking of what her aunt had done with no warning, her family hadn’t been any different.

“Henrietta, we should speak to your brother. I believe he is under the impression that you know nothing of this.”

“I know. He thinks I’m so *innocent*.”

“How *do* you know?”

Henrietta laughed. “I have overheard the servants talking about it many times. It would be impossible for me *not* to know and yet John and my father never discussed it. I always assumed it was because they were too embarrassed—well, you know, of *me*.”

Catherine’s remaining patience with John fractured with these words. She watched in dismay as tears now slid down Henrietta’s cheeks.

“I am sure *that* isn’t true.” Catherine wished she could say more. Instead, she wrapped Henrietta into a hug. Anger swelled inside of her on Henrietta’s behalf. How lonely must she be to tell a relative stranger this entire story within moments of being alone with her?

When Henrietta stopped crying quite as much, Catherine drew back and took her hand. Her blue eyes were swimming with pain. Catherine thanked God that Henrietta was still

innocent enough to speak about this topic—that she wasn't so broken that she kept these thoughts inside.

“We will fix this, Henrietta. I promise. But we will need to talk to your brother.”

Henrietta cringed and more tears leaked from her eyes.

Catherine thought about her own season. Lady Wethersby had insisted that she have one, over the doubts of her husband, and, yet she had also steeled her for the reality. She had gone to many balls with the Wethersbys, but at only a few of them did she have any hope of attention from anyone approximating a suitor. The only reason she had kept going after the first was because of Lady Wethersby.

When she had cried in the carriage on the way home from that first ball, unable to control her emotions, Sir Francis had looked like he would die from discomfort. Lady Wethersby had reached over and taken her hand. Catherine still remembered what she had said: *It's not your fault, my dear. It has absolutely nothing to do with you, my love.* Those words of kindness had meant more to her than she had even known at the time. Maybe, she thought, biting her lip, she could do for Henrietta what Lady Wethersby had once done for her. Maybe, in her brief time here at Edington, she could make at least one thing right, even if everything else went wrong.

“I'll be there,” Catherine continued, “and we will discuss how you should deal with this issue in society. Everything will be fine. I promise.”

Catherine knew she took a risk making this promise. She wouldn't even be here in three weeks. She would leave after they found her aunt. And yet she remembered being seventeen, about to greet an unkind world, and she wished that she had had more friends. She wanted Henrietta's experience to be different. And it would be. She had her brother, she had the power of a dukedom, and for now she had Catherine.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JOHN SPENT THE morning with his steward in the library, running over parish matters, and he had dispatched a few letters to London. He had sent letters to his friends, telling them that he had reached Edington Hall. He also told them that his sister had fallen gravely ill but had made a miraculous recovery, which, in true Henrietta fashion, was nearly irksome in its rapidity.

He also sent a letter to the most popular modiste of the *ton*, Mrs. Warburton, and asked her to come to Edington Hall at her earliest convenience. He offered to pay her an astronomical sum if she would travel to Edington and fit Henrietta for her first season.

Then he had gone for his ride, trying to clear his mind of Catherine and his anxiety over Henrietta. While he found it easier than he should have to forget his worry about Henrietta, he couldn't stop thinking about his argument with Catherine. He didn't understand how their conversation had gotten so off track. He had panicked when she had admonished him for not telling Henrietta about the scandal. He knew Catherine was right. His sister would have to learn what everyone said about her in the *ton*. But he wanted to secure her dowry before he presented her with this reality, so he could reassure her that she would have every other strength to overcome the gossip. Catherine had pushed him and he had overreacted. She was probably angry with him now and he deserved it.

Despite these thoughts, the country sun managed to burnish both his face and his spirits. He couldn't fail to return to Edington Hall in a better mood than when he had left. He would make it up to Catherine, he told himself.

Luckily, Catherine met him at the threshold of his home.

"May I have a word, Your Grace?"

He winced at her use of “Your Grace,” even though he knew she was only using the honorific for the ears of others.

He was seized, suddenly, with the impulse to kiss her.

Instead, he merely nodded at her request.

Before he could stop her, she had stepped into the study.

His father’s study.

He wanted to call her back, but she had already disappeared. He chastised himself for his weakness. He could enter a *study*. He was being ridiculous.

And yet when he followed Catherine into the room, he shuddered. He had hardly entered the chamber since he had exposed his father and Mary Forster. By contrast, his father had spent more and more time there as the years wore on.

John sat down on the great oak desk, crossed his arms, and waited for her to speak, trying to put distance between them. After all, he didn’t want anything improper to happen *here*, of all places.

“I have just returned from a walk with your sister.”

With her words, his heart sank. He had left them to get acquainted. He had wanted to show Catherine that he trusted her with his sister and that he was sorry for his harsh words in the gallery. Henrietta was probably too clinging and forward for her tastes. She could be a bit exuberant. He had imagined Catherine might be charmed by her innocent, affectionate ways and that, after spending some time with her, she might understand why he was so worried about her. The girl was all tenderness and spirit. He was afraid she would buckle when exposed to what the world held in store.

Over breakfast, he had seen how Henrietta had been instantly besotted with Catherine, as he had known she would be. His sister had long needed a friend, a mentor, a woman of her own class to show her how to approach the world. It was hard to imagine a woman better suited to such a task than

Catherine, who was both tenacious and soft, intelligent and feeling.

Unfortunately, Catherine appeared to have already tired of his sister.

“And how was it?” he said, steeling himself.

He realized suddenly she looked angry. A fire glinted behind her blue-black eyes—and not the kind he liked.

“She *knows* about the scandal, John. She told me in the garden that she doesn’t know how to talk to you about it. I can’t believe that you and your father never had a conversation with her about it. She thinks it is *her* fault. That you are embarrassed of *her*.”

“*What?*” John said, his heart lurching in his chest. “She knows?”

“I am ashamed that I myself did not suspect it immediately. Of course she knows.”

“*How?*”

“She hears the servants talking! Of course she has heard. She isn’t dim-witted. Far from it.”

“I didn’t think—how would she—who here would talk to her about such a thing?”

“*No one*. That’s the problem. She has overheard everything and been told nothing. And it needs to end. I won’t stand for it.”

She *was* angry, he realized, but not because Henrietta was too taxing. No, she was angry on Henrietta’s *behalf*.

“We need to discuss it with her. And *yes*, I will be there, because I told her I would be. I am not going to let you make a hash of it. I don’t care if you think I am not good enough to guide her. We will discuss it with her *and* tell her what she can expect from society when she goes into it.”

“You think *I* don’t think you’re good enough to tutor my sister?”

“You made that very clear this morning.”

“No, not at all.” He had no idea how he had managed to give that impression, when his true feelings could not be more opposite. “That was not what I meant. I only wanted you to wait to speak with her about the scandal.”

“Well, she already knows.”

She looked magnificent in her anger. She was pacing in front of him, her hair coming out of its pins, her hands shaking as she gesticulated.

“I can prepare her and give her strategies. I have a few ideas for how we can make it easier for her, but *really*, John, how could you have never talked to her? Or your father? You described this innocent little girl, but she is nearly a woman and a smart, resourceful one at that.”

“Alright,” he snapped, rankled with his father—and himself. How could the old man not have noticed? How could he himself have been so naïve? He saw it now.

“I’m not going to let happen to that sweet girl what happened to me. She doesn’t deserve it—no one does—but *especially* not her. She’s been through enough.”

John drew a shallow breath. She was right. He had been a fool not to understand that his sister knew about the scandal, that he wasn’t protecting her, but harming her with his silence. Still, that was not what stole his breath. It was Catherine, how she was claiming Henrietta, how she wanted to protect her.

She looked at him, panting slightly from the exertion of her insistence. He stared back, watching how her bottom lip rose and fell.

And then he realized what she had said.

“Happened to *you*? What happened to you?”

Panic thrummed through his veins at the idea of her in pain. He would kill anyone who had harmed her in the past. Track them down and tear them limb from limb.

Catherine looked at him like he was cracked.

“My season was a disaster, of course. All the whispers, the implications, the pity. I was hardly ever asked to dance. I was either ignored or met with sneers. The worst was how everyone just stared. As if I were her. Mary.”

“You must have had suitors.”

“No dowry and a cursed name,” she said dryly. “Oh yes, I had many.”

“But you’re beautiful.”

“Don’t,” she said, her voice a warning. For the first time all morning, he saw real pain flicker across her face.

“Why? You *are* beautiful.”

“Not beautiful enough.”

Her words cut through him. She was wrong. Beautiful wasn’t enough to describe her.

She was absolutely magnificent.

She was luminous.

He found he had taken a step towards her.

“After that night in the gardens with you, at Tremberley, I couldn’t forget you. You haunted me for years. You still do. So never say to me that you aren’t beautiful enough. You are the most exquisite woman I have ever seen.” *Or touched*, he added silently.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t have to flatter me.”

He reached out then—not out of lust, but because he wanted to convince her of the sincerity of his words. When his hand closed around her wrist, she gasped. He knew his touch was abrupt. But he needed her to understand.

“It’s not flattery. You have no idea how you have tormented me. After that night, I wasn’t the same. I couldn’t—other women...I had them but it meant nothing. I could only think of you.”

“That can’t be true,” she said, her eyes narrowing. He saw the disbelief there.

Even though he knew very well where he was, the last place in the world that he ever would have found erotic, he pulled her roughly towards him. His hands were on her waist and the combination of feeling her and revealing what he had long kept secret distorted his senses. He was both completely aware of where he was, how wrong it was to be here, like this, with her, and yet he couldn’t stop himself.

Not when she wouldn’t believe him. Not when she refused to understand the effect she had on him.

“I thought of going to you a hundred times before my father died. Before I ever read his will. I thought I would go mad for thinking of you.”

The mention of the will, of his family, seemed to shift something in her. She put her hands on his chest.

“I dreamt of you,” she said, looking up at him.

“I did more than dream.” Her eyes went wide. Even though his senses screamed out to him that he shouldn’t, that he was right where he shouldn’t be, he couldn’t stop himself. He kissed her mouth softly, letting his lips linger. He swore that he could become drunk on her sweetness. She was that potent. But he wouldn’t let it go further than this—not here.

“I couldn’t spend,” he said, laying another kiss on the corner of her mouth, “but for thinking of you.”

He heard her intake of breath at his confession. And then she pressed her mouth to his, pushing him backwards towards the desk. Before he realized it, his back was against it, nearly seated on it, and she was between his legs. Her mouth was on his and the friction of her between his legs, pushing up against his hardness, was too sweet to break.

Despite the haze of pleasure, his mind warned him about his location. The memory of his father and Mary Forster flashed in his mind, as it had that night in the inn, but this time it didn’t repulse him, but drew him further into her. He

couldn't explain why. Perhaps it was because of her complete domination of his every nerve. He was used to being the ravisher, but he had never quite felt the reverse. Her touch had him raw and open.

He broke their kiss and pressed his forehead to her own, panting.

Their eyes met.

And he couldn't mistake her look.

He knew what they were about to do.

A knock sounded on the door.

"*John*," Henrietta called, "I received a letter from Lady Trilling. She wants us to visit her tomorrow. Shall I write back and say yes?"

With a horrid crash, he realized what had come so close to happening, and *where*. He felt his stomach turn. *What was wrong with him?*

Catherine pulled back from him and was looking at him with alarm.

"One moment, Henrietta," he choked out. "Just a moment."

He put his hand to his mouth and cursed.

Self-disgust pooled within him. *He was no better than his father*. The words pounded in his skull, coming from somewhere deep inside of him.

When he felt Catherine touch his shoulder, he shrugged her off. He couldn't bear her affection when he felt so worthless.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AFTER THEIR ENCOUNTER in the study, Catherine didn't see John for three days. He avoided meals, sending his apologies through Mrs. Morrison or his steward, and left Catherine and Henrietta to their lessons.

At first, she thought she had merely imagined that John had been particularly upset when they had been interrupted by Henrietta in the study. After all, why would it matter? His face had fallen into a peculiar expression, as if something terrible had occurred, but she couldn't understand why that would be the case. Henrietta hadn't discovered them. No one was the wiser.

At that moment, his countenance had reminded her of the way he had looked that night in the Tremberley gardens. He had had that same expression of horror and disgust.

She hadn't been sure, however, until she had put her hand to his shoulder. He had thrown off her touch and stormed from the room. He had left. Again.

And now it had been three days and she had hardly seen him.

This state of affairs left Catherine in a low-lying, softly bubbling rage. John didn't have to continue what had happened between them in the carriage or the study, but he had no right to *avoid* her, as if what had happened was her fault.

And, after all, he had kissed *her* in the study. He had been the one who had called her beautiful. Who had confessed feelings that had overwhelmed her completely.

So, she resolved to avoid him in turn. And she had plenty to occupy herself.

First, she was busy with Henrietta, who had made a complete recovery from her fever and was avid to learn about

the *ton*. She had begun instructing Henrietta on society etiquette and precedence, as well as answering her many questions about courtship and how to behave in a seemingly endless number of improbable circumstances.

Second, she had written a long letter to Lady Wethersby and Ariel, giving an abridged account of her journey, including the multiple inns, the Durdle Door, and her visit to her nurse Martha and excluding her fiery, mind-addling encounters with the Duke of Edington.

When she wasn't with Henrietta, she had found time to work on her book in the Edington library. She had edited a thorny passage on Stonehenge. She had fantasized about what she would do once she had the full ten thousand pounds and could focus on her research. She would go and see Wayland's Smithy, the famous burial mound in Wiltshire, and Roche Rock in Cornwall. She would watch the morning light stream through the arched windows of Fountains Abbey and take in Castleton from the top of Peeveril Castle. She would be free to do her work. And unlike her other fantasies, she didn't need a sage-eyed duke to make them come true.

That morning, however, she hadn't been able to take the silence anymore. John might not want to talk to her, to be with her in *that* way, but they nevertheless had work to do. They needed to resume their search for Mary Forster and they also needed to talk to Henrietta about the scandal. Catherine had been tempted to do it herself, but she knew that, for Henrietta's sake, John needed to participate in that conversation.

For these reasons—and definitely not her desire to be alone with him—she confronted John after breakfast, which he had, of course, not eaten with her and his sister. He was striding out of the Hall, seemingly intending to go for another ride around the countryside, an activity that had begun to look much like a method of avoiding both of the women in his house.

“Miss Aster,” he said, inclining his head as she accosted him.

She scoffed and looked around them. There was absolutely no one in sight.

“Miss Aster? You cannot be serious.”

“What?” He reeled back at her tone, casting what appeared much like a longing look at the stables.

“You may have forgotten, but we have pressing business. Finding Mary Forster? Talking to Henrietta? Do you remember or have any care for these objectives?”

“Lower your voice!” He pulled her outside the Hall and looked over her shoulder to see if anyone lingered nearby.

“No one is listening to us,” she hissed.

“We can’t be too careful.”

“Very well.” She looked around now that they were outside. “I think we’re most definitely alone *now*.”

“We’ll talk to Henrietta.”

“Tomorrow,” she countered. “We’ve already waited too long.”

“Fine,” he barked, anger flaring in his eyes, which only made her more exasperated with him.

“And finding Mary Forster?”

“Tonight we can start with my father’s papers. Meet me in his—in the study.” With that, he strode off again.

“Thank you, Your Grace!” she yelled after him, just to annoy him, and he turned and scowled at her before disappearing into the stables. “Have the very best of mornings!”

Then, that hitch in his speech came back to her.

His study.

Of course. She couldn’t believe she had been so daft. It had been a well-known detail among the *ton* that Mary Forster and the Duke of Edington had been found copulating in his

study. And, of course, yesterday, they had been in that very same room.

Perhaps, the study was the key to his strange mood.



SHE DID NOT have time, however, to consider John's feelings on his study much further, because today was a momentous day for her charge. Catherine had to admit that she was a bit excited herself.

Today, the modiste, Mrs. Warburton, was coming to Edington.

John had—rather thoughtfully, Catherine had to admit—asked Mrs. Warburton, the most elite of her profession, if she would come to Edington and measure Henrietta for a new suite of clothes for her season.

Henrietta had, of course, insisted that Catherine attend her fitting.

Only moments after Catherine jointed Henrietta in her parlor, they heard a carriage pull up outside the Hall. Henrietta rushed to the window and Catherine followed. A neat little carriage with plum trimmings had appeared out front. Its door opened and one of the footmen handed down a little woman, clad in a gorgeous black silk, who was quickly followed by three assistants dressed in modest but becoming slate gray.

“She’s here!” Henrietta exclaimed and clapped her hands. “She’s here! I think I might faint.”

“You will not *faint*.” Catherine laughed at the healthy glow in Henrietta’s cheeks.

Catherine had taken to amusing Henrietta with the finest *bon mots* of Lady Wethersby, who she had merely referenced as an old friend of her father’s, the fictional Mr. Aster. To tease her young charge, Catherine offered one of Lady Wethersby’s favorite sayings of ten years ago.

“A taste for excessive ornament reveals the unadorned soul within.”

“Oh, Catherine!” Henrietta retorted. “You cannot believe that!”

“I can’t say I do.” Catherine laughed. “Not least because Lady Wethersby has a great weakness for baubles herself.”

“Don’t worry...” Henrietta giggled “...I plan to be very modest and plain in my dress. Only a jewel or two at once, I promise.”

Catherine knew society would scarcely tolerate more than pearls on a debutante, but she let Henrietta indulge the fantasy of jewels for the present.

Soon, Mrs. Morrison was leading Mrs. Warburton into Henrietta’s chamber, followed by footmen carrying an array of long mirrors and bolts of fabric. The three assistants filed in after their mistress.

Unlike most *ton* modistes in London, Mrs. Warburton was not French. She had no delicious accent or mysterious past.

Rather, as everyone knew, her family had been in the garment business for as long as anyone could remember. She had grown up, as she was fond of telling customers, between a bolt of chiffon and a needle. She had the demeanor of a severe schoolmistress and, in person, would have passed for such if it hadn’t been for her beautiful black silk, which fit her to perfection and made her look quite comely.

Luckily, even in the Wethersbys’ time of plenty, they had never frequented Mrs. Warburton’s, famous though she was. Lady Wethersby could never abide by what she called Mrs. Warburton’s “medieval” cost. When Catherine had asked her guardian what she meant by this description, Lady Wethersby had replied, “Because to pay those prices, my girl, is to be positively put on the *rack*.”

When John had told her that Mrs. Warburton was coming, Catherine had admonished him for not checking with her first. It was entirely plausible that she could have known Mrs. Warburton personally. After all, the modiste was such a figure among the *ton* that Catherine felt she *did* know her, even

though she didn't. His reply indicated that, either way, he felt confident that Mrs. Warburton's silence could be bought. Catherine couldn't tell if he was being too optimistic or if he was paying her a truly medieval sum.

Living up to her no-nonsense reputation, Mrs. Warburton immediately and brusquely commenced with her business.

Soon, Henrietta was down to her stays, getting measured for all manner of garments and actually quivering with excitement. Whenever Catherine met her eye, she gave her a wild smile.

"Are you excited for your season, Lady Henrietta?" Mrs. Warburton asked, when she caught Henrietta's smile in the mirror for the fourth time.

"YES. I am SO excited, Mrs. Warburton. And I am endlessly thankful that you have come all the way from London to measure me."

"It is no trouble, my lady," Mrs. Warburton said and Catherine stifled a scoff. She was sure that for what John was paying her, it *was* no trouble. "I hope you have a strong hand to lead you. It is a consequential moment in a girl's life."

"Surely," said Henrietta, "that's why I have Cath—Miss Aster. She has been teaching me everything."

Catherine and Henrietta had dispensed almost instantly with the formalities in private, but Catherine knew she should encourage her to keep up "Miss Aster" in the presence of the modiste, if only so the girl could practice. She didn't have the heart, though, to admonish her when she was in such high spirits, and Catherine didn't like Henrietta calling her Miss Aster anyway. It only highlighted how Catherine was deceiving her.

Mrs. Warburton cast a look in Catherine's direction. Catherine suspected that the older woman thought she looked a bit shabby for the chaperone of a duke's sister.

"And she has been telling me all of these comical expressions *her* old chaperone used to say," Henrietta

continued. “What was the one about secret engagements, Catherine?”

“She once warned me,” Catherine supplied, “about secret engagements. She told me: *A secret engagement is just an illicit dalliance by another name.* Although, she seemed so taken with the idea that it sounded rather pleasant.”

Henrietta let out a peal of laughter, but the modiste merely looked disapproving. Catherine knew that Mrs. Warburton was known for her rigid propriety regarding morality and manners. This conservative attitude did not extend to her evening gowns, however, which were famous for their sensual lines. When Catherine had been in society, girls used to credit Mrs. Warburton’s creations for making their matches. Catherine had been a little surprised that John had chosen Lady Warburton for his sister, but she suspected he didn’t have a granular understanding of the different modistes of London and had simply chosen her as the best known. Another reason, she thought to herself bitterly, why he might have consulted her. Not that Henrietta would mind debuting in a series of alluring Warburton confections.

“A secret engagement is so romantic,” Henrietta said. “It always is in novels.”

Catherine opened her mouth to chastise Henrietta. Mrs. Warburton looked like she was about to explode. The girl needed to be more guarded in her speech around strangers.

Before she could speak, however, another voice sounded from the doorway.

“I utterly agree with your old mentor, Miss Aster,” John said. “That’s something for you to remember, Retta. If you ever enter into a secret engagement, I’ll horsewhip the gentleman in question.”

“John! You can’t be in here!” explained Henrietta, even though she was once more fully clothed.

Mrs. Warburton, for her part, swept down into a low curtsy. “Your Grace,” she said.

John gave a small bow in return.

“And, if I may say, Your Grace,” the older woman said, “I agree with your pronouncement on secret engagements.”

“They’re never romantic,” John said to his sister, “and always a bad idea. If you ever contract a secret engagement—I don’t care if he is a prince—I will refuse the match on principle.”

“But brother, all that secret yearning? The lingering glances? And no one knows but those involved! How can you say it is not romantic?”

John met Catherine’s eye and she could have sworn he blushed, albeit faintly.

“Mrs. Warburton,” he said, clearing his throat. “Could you ask one of your assistants to escort my sister to her bedchamber to pick out fabrics?”

Henrietta objected to being ferried out of the room. But John insisted and she had to oblige.

“Shall I follow as well, Your Grace?” Mrs. Warburton asked.

“No, Mrs. Warburton,” John said, once Henrietta was gone, “I would like you to measure Miss Aster now.”

“Your Grace?” the modiste said in confusion.

“She will have a suite of clothes, including evening things, as well.”

“Y-Your Grace,” Catherine stuttered out, sure that she had turned crimson from her hairline to her chin. “I cannot accept —”

“I am your employer, Miss Aster,” John said, “and I will not have myself contradicted.”

Catherine could say little more. The modiste looked equally taken aback by this turn of events, but she could scarcely object either. She gestured for Catherine to come over to the dais.

Instead of leaving the room, John sank into one of the chairs opposite the platform.

With her eyes, Catherine urged him to leave. First, she was angry with him. Second, she knew Mrs. Warburton would find this behavior *highly* irregular.

Indeed, Mrs. Warburton cast an eye over to John.

“Your Grace?” she questioned.

“I am going to remain in this seat, Mrs. Warburton.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” she said, swallowing, her face downturned in what Catherine could only interpret as moral outrage.

Nevertheless, the modiste removed Catherine’s plain gray dress and undid her stays, leaving her standing in her chemise.

Catherine met John’s eyes in the mirror.

He looked almost feverish, his lips unusually red. He fidgeted in the chair but did not take his eyes off of her.

Her anger flared as she saw the unmistakable desire in his gaze.

After ignoring her for days, he showed up and ordered her to undress in front of him and London’s most fashionable modiste, vowing to give her an absurd, far too lavish gift.

He was *infuriating*.

And she would punish him.

For ignoring her.

And for only coming within ten yards of her when she couldn’t contradict him, when he had the upper hand.

Well, she would teach him not to toy with her.

“May I remove my chemise, Mrs. Warburton? I would like the measurements to be as precise as possible.”

The woman blanched.

Catherine locked eyes with John in the mirror again. His apparent shock only goaded her onward.

They had cavorted in a carriage, humped in a bed, kissed near a row of cottages, and nearly lost themselves to lust in one particularly infamous study. But he had never seen her wholly nude.

“Of—of course, miss,” said Mrs. Warburton, casting a mortified look at John. Still, she motioned for one of her assistants to help Catherine step out of her chemise.

Now, when Catherine turned to the mirror, she was naked except for her stockings. Rather than shrink, however, she stood tall in the mirror, even though her own cheeks blazed in mortification.

She ran her hands, briefly, over her breasts and down her hips, as if she were imagining how a frock might fall.

She turned around so that she was facing away from the mirror and then twisted back to see herself from behind, making sure that he could see every inch of her.

Finally, she found the strength to meet his eye.

His mouth had fallen open. His eyes were glassy.

And he looked—there was no other word for it—ravaged.

So, to top it off, she smiled at him, preening before him as if she knew that she was the one thing he wanted more than anything.

At that, he fled the room.

Good, she thought, turning back to the mirror, her hands shaking. *Let him remember that.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*I*NFERNAL WOMAN.

John was on his way back from the stables—he had supped *again* with Marcel; that was the extent to which he wanted to avoid Catherine—and he still could not quiet the riot in his mind.

Since Catherine had bared herself to him, all he could think of was her naked body.

The sight would be forever seared into his mind. Her full breasts, with their pink rosebud nipples, and the soft swell of her hips. How her stockings stopped halfway up the loveliest, shapeliest legs he had ever seen. And, most of all, that thatch of blond hair between her thighs.

She had done it, of course, on purpose.

To punish him for avoiding her.

And, on some level, he knew he deserved it.

He had only stayed in the room in the first place to make sure that she would actually be measured by the modiste. He feared, if he left, she would somehow beg off of the measurements. She deserved this one gift, he thought, for everything she had done for Henrietta.

All right, obviously, that wasn't the *only* reason he had stayed in the room. The sight of Catherine in her chemise had been a...heavy enticement to stay as well.

Then she had taken the chemise *off*. His options had been reduced to taking her on the dais in front of Mrs. Warburton or leaving the room altogether.

In moments, he had to meet her in the study, to root through his father's old papers. If anything served as a

reminder of why he couldn't ravish Catherine on any Edington Hall surface, it was this task.

He hated that room.

And he hated that Catherine's proximity would make him want to do indecent things in it anyway.

He was still anguished about what had almost happened in the study, how history had almost repeated itself. Henrietta had almost discovered him and Catherine as he had once discovered his father and Mary Forster.

Now he had to dig for information about the scandal. He had to try and learn more about the day that he had always only wanted to forget.

Except now he didn't want to forget it just because it was painful, but because he wanted Catherine. He desperately wished he could abolish those memories from his consciousness and start with her anew.

The only problem was that he couldn't.

He was infected with the memory of what he had seen as a boy.

He swore to himself.

He had arrived at the study.

Of course she was already there, sitting in his father's chair, the candle burning before her.

"Good evening, Your Grace."

He shut the door behind him.

When he looked back at her, his mouth went dry. *God*, she was beautiful.

"Do not call me Your Grace." He glowered. "We *have* been over this."

"My apologies," she said, coolly. "I forgot we are alone. Where should we begin?"

This question brought him back to their surroundings and the task at hand.

“The desk. It’s the only place I can think of where he might have left any letters.”

“This whole manse and it is the only place? What of his rooms?”

“I checked. Yesterday.”

“So you *have* been doing something for the past three days.”

“Yes,” he bit off, not enjoying her insinuation.

John moved towards the desk and knelt before the drawers. One by one, he emptied them of their papers onto the desk.

Then, he drew up another chair and sat across from her. He reached to pick up one of the letters, but she didn’t move.

“Aren’t you going to help?”

“It feels...” she said, seeming to search for the word “... wrong.”

“He’s dead,” John said, affecting a hard-heartedness he was not sure he felt, “and all of this is mine now. Anyway, I thought you wouldn’t mind the violation. As I recall, you didn’t like the man. And, at this point, I can’t say I much do myself.”

It felt a small thing to admit to her now. Only a few days ago, it had felt like a betrayal of his family, a surrender to the enemy, but now it felt easy to say.

Catherine shook her head. “Once, yes. But it is more complicated now.”

He threw one letter down and reached for another. He knew most of these missives would not be interesting. “What do you mean?”

“Now that I know you. And Henrietta. He was your father. He may have done bad things. As did my aunt. But, like her,

he couldn't have been all one thing or another. Like her, he must have been a complicated person. It makes it difficult to dig through his old correspondence without compunction."

Her broad-mindedness moved him but he didn't want to show it. It felt like too much at once, as he sat in this room and dug through these old letters.

"Well, banish your scruples. Because I don't want to sort through all these papers alone."

"Very well." She sighed and picked up a sheet of paper. "Have you found anything of interest?"

"Nothing that pertains to Mary Forster," John said, looking back at Catherine, who was now silent, her attention fixed on a letter in her hand.

"What is it?"

"Oh, I don't think you want to know."

"Dear God, what?" He felt the blood drain from his face. *What now?*

She grinned. "I am afraid to say that you were the most atrocious student at Eton College."

He felt the blood return to his face. He was pretty sure that, this time, however, it was turning him a shade of red visible even in the low candle light.

"What does it say?" He tried to reach for the letter but she put it out of reach.

"Master John insists upon neglecting his lessons. He pays the servants to bring him sweets from town, often aided by his friends Tremberley, Montaigne, and Leith—equally disobedient boys."

"Give it back." He reached again for the letter. He knew it was somewhat ridiculous of him, but he didn't want her reading any more about his childhood antics and thinking he was even more entitled and spoiled than she must already.

"No! This reading is too good."

He rose to come round the desk and she popped up from her chair, trying to evade him by rushing to the corner. He pursued her, catching her round the waist and pinning her other arm with his own. With his other hand, he managed to pry the paper from her fingers.

She was laughing and squirming beneath him, trying to snatch the paper back. He couldn't help but keep her in place for the game of it.

"Hold still," he said, trying to pin her and read the paper at the same time. "This letter was written by Headmaster Heath. He always got it wrong. Montaigne, Trem, and I were bounders, but Leith followed the rules—or, mostly, anyway."

He was panting from the exertion of taking the note. He looked down at her and could see she was breathing hard too.

He thought of earlier that day, her naked before him, and the combination of these two realities undid him.

He kissed her, pressing her to him. She gave a sigh of surprised approval when their lips met.

"You nearly killed me today," he murmured into her neck. "But I suspect you already know that."

"I do, rather." She pressed herself into him, returning his gesture. He groaned. "But," she said, breaking away, "we're not done sorting these letters."

She walked back and took a seat at her desk, leaving him stunned. She had just walked away from him! As if she hadn't a care in the world for him. She now held a letter in her hand, which she quickly discarded as irrelevant. He still stood in the corner of the room.

"It doesn't feel good to be left, does it?" she said, tartly, picking up another.

"Excuse me?" he said, walking over to her.

"You always walk away," she said, waving her hand.

"I'm sorry about...what happened here...the other day."

“It’s fine. I don’t care.”

“It doesn’t seem that way.”

She looked up at him, fixing him with a stare.

“Do you remember how that night ended?”

“Which night?”

“The first one. With us.”

He realized she meant the night in the Tremberley gardens.

“Of course. We parted ways after we were discovered.”

She sighed, her exhalation pure exasperation. “*No*. You *left*. I believe you said to Lord Tremberley, ‘Get them off the grounds.’”

“I shouldn’t have done that. But I was shocked. I had no idea who you were.”

“I didn’t know who *you* were either. And yet you left me there, with my bodice wrenched down, with Marisa and a mortified viscount, who told us we needed to leave immediately.”

He said nothing. He had never considered the scene after his departure.

“You don’t think I was mortified, too? And horrified? That you were—you were *you*. But I didn’t treat you like that.”

“You didn’t see your face.”

“*Still*. I didn’t *leave*. And you always *leave*. That night in the gardens. In the inn. In the study. Even today with Mrs. Warburton.”

“I assure you neither yourself nor Mrs. Warburton wanted to see what I would have been forced to do had I stayed in that room.”

“This is just a jest to you.” She was now working through the letters at a fast clip. She laid each one down again with an angry smack.

He reached out and took her hand, stopping her progress.

“It is not a jest to me. When I leave, it feels that I have no other choice. It is not because I don’t want...to be near you. It is because I can’t figure how to be.”

His own words surprised him. She met his gaze now.

“I am very sorry, Catherine. I never want to hurt you.”

He saw her take in the words. She still didn’t seem completely assuaged, but right now these words were the best that he could do.

They sorted through the rest of the papers until they reached the bottom of the stack. There was no shortage of letters from Eton and Oxford complaining about his halting progress in school. John was surprised his father had saved them all.

“There’s nothing here,” he said, when they reached the end.

“We had to try. In a day or two, we should begin calling on her friends. They very well may know more.”

Catherine was hidden from view, as she was bent behind the drawers, returning their stacks to their former homes.

He heard her moving a drawer violently back and forth.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” The scraping frayed his nerves.

“I think I found something.” Her voice sounded breathless.

“What?” He rounded the desk.

She was holding a torn piece of paper in her hand.

“I found it stuck in the drawer. Tucked into the seam. But I know it’s in Mary’s hand. I spent hours looking at that letter of hers, the last one she sent me.”

“What does it say?”

She handed the fragment to him. The page was ripped so that her sentences were fragmented, but, unmistakable, in the

lower left corner of the page, he read the words, *I start for Edington tomorrow, as you asked.*

“She came back to see him,” John said, stunned. “He knew.”

“He *asked* for it. She was coming back because he wanted her to.”

They sat in silence, looking at the scrap of paper.

“Someone has to know,” Catherine said finally, “what happened. They met here. She came back here to see him.”

“But he must not have known where she went after. If he had known her location, he could have easily put it in the will. Why wouldn’t he have known? I don’t understand it.”

“Neither do I. But it means we’re on the right path.”

Their eyes met.

John swallowed hard, because this new piece of knowledge seemed to have knocked something loose in him.

He needed to tell her the truth.

He couldn’t bear to have it between them anymore.

He needed to see what would happen if this piece of the past no longer stood in the way.

“I didn’t tell you the truth before. Or, at least, not the whole truth, about why I left. At Tremberley. Or the inn.”

She looked up at him. Her eyes glinted, dark and beautiful, in the low light. “Are you going to now?”

“I know you understand,” he began, his pulse thrumming, “what I have been through better than anyone. But, still, we’re not the same.”

He began to pace the room, running his hands through his hair, but she didn’t press. She waited. Finally, he stopped before her.

“*I discovered them. That day.*”

John saw the knowledge hit her. It made her eyes dilate. For the past three days, he had hated himself for hurting her, hated himself for recoiling when Henrietta knocked, and hated himself all over again for that *day*, when he had sealed their fates with one childish mistake.

“What do you mean?”

He had never told anyone about his own role in the scandal. Not even his best friends. The only people who knew were the ones who were there. It was a detail that had not made it into the papers. He supposed it was seen by others as incidental. But it wasn't for him. It had never been a detail.

Nevertheless, he wanted to tell the truth to Catherine now, even if she rejected him. He wanted her to understand everything. He couldn't let her think he recoiled from *her*.

“My father wasn't with the guests on the lawn. My mother wanted him by her side. She was vexed, I think, that he wasn't mixing with her guests and usually he was very gregarious. And she asked me to go find him. I searched everywhere. It felt like it took an age.

“I realized I hadn't checked his study. It hadn't occurred to me that he could be there, because he was supposed to be at the party.”

“I know they were found in the study.”

He nodded. Of course, she would.

“When I got here, I pulled open the door and there was my father and Mary Forster. And then my mother appeared, with three of her friends, right behind me, at that exact moment. I guess my mother had gotten frustrated with how long I was taking.”

Catherine's eyes were wide. “So, three days ago, when Henrietta was at the door...?”

“I couldn't imagine how I'd come so close to making the same mistake. I hated him for years and yet—how am I any better?”

“I never knew that. That you found them.”

“I didn’t want to tell you. It’s possible my mother would have found them a moment later.” He had run through it many times in his own head. “But maybe not. She may have had an adult’s intuition to not pull open the door.”

She blinked at him. He was acutely afraid that she would hate him. That she would hate him for having been the agent of her destruction.

Instead, she reached out and put her hands on his shoulders. “You were a child.”

Her beauty stunned him in that moment. Not her features, which were so striking at any time, but the gentleness on her face, how it pulled him inwards.

“It wasn’t your fault. They were the adults. They should have known better.”

“But I am the adult now. I am the same age as he was when—when it happened.”

“We are the adults, but we’re not them.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes.”

“John, you’re not a married man with a family. And Henrietta isn’t your ten-year-old daughter. She is your seventeen-year-old sister.” She smirked up at him. “And she knows how to knock on a door before entering. And you know how to lock one.”

“Don’t—you acquit me too easily.” He wanted to believe her words. They felt like a balm to something inside of him that had pulsed and bled for a long time. But they were hard for him to accept.

“I’m sincere. I know how it looks—how *we* look. And I understand that what you saw that day must haunt you and how you must have felt responsible. But we aren’t the same people.”

She had her hands on his chest now. His breath caught with every stray movement of her fingers.

“Every time we touch,” he said, “I take a risk. If anyone knew about us, how I feel about you, it would harm Henrietta’s chances. Her future.”

She looked up into his eyes. “It’s a risk, but it’s not the *same* risk.” She sighed, unwinding herself from him, and his body revolted against this withdrawal. “And you have to accept that, regardless of what we do, Henrietta will have a challenge before her.”

She tried to step away, but he held on to her hand. He examined it in the candlelight.

“You have ink on your hands again.”

“From the letters,” she said with a smile. “And I might have been doing a little writing before meeting you here.”

“You minx. You know what that does to me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” He looked down at her fingers. “It shows you’ve been in a world all your own. Where you haven’t been thinking of me.”

“I’m always thinking of you.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her, pressing her back on the desk until she was sitting on it. The same position as three days before but reversed.

She drew him into her, between her legs, and he realized that the desk was the perfect height for them to come together. He wanted, however, to go slowly, to savor this moment. He focused on kissing her, breathing her in and telling himself that, while he may not have Catherine forever, he had her for right now. And now there was no one here to interrupt them.

“Touch me,” she said, looking up at him. “Like you did before. In the carriage.”

He smiled at her, loving that she had enjoyed that, that she had thought about it since.

Instead of reaching underneath her skirts, however, he reached for the back of her dress.

“Patience. First, I want to see you like I did today.”

She smiled in that mischievous way. It was the same smile she had had on her face when she had bared herself to him this afternoon. And that she had worn that night, years ago, in the Tremberley gardens.

“I was so angry with you for ignoring me. I wanted to punish you.”

“You succeeded.” He leaned down and kissing the hollow of her neck, and he felt her shiver with pleasure. He drew her from the desk and spun her around so her back was facing him.

“It was agony to look at you and know I couldn’t have you.” He undid the ties of her dress. “Showing me every perfect inch of yourself when you knew that I could do nothing about it.”

The dress was now pooled around her feet. He began to undo her stays.

“Why did you have me measured by Mrs. Warburton?”

“I want to do something for you. Let me.”

“It’s too much to accept.”

Her stays came off, just leaving her in her chemise, and so he took that off, too.

And then he turned her around to him.

“Trust me. It’s not.”

She flickered like an apparition in the candlelight, the strands of her miraculous hair playing tricks with the darkness. He wondered if somehow he was hallucinating and she wasn’t there at all.

But he knew she was real—because she reached out and touched him.

He relaxed into her touch, every nerve alive to her, uncertain of what she was going to do but desperate for it anyway. She pressed her body to him, kissing his mouth and then his neck, before undoing the buttons of his waistcoat.

“I want to see you too.” Obliging, he removed the linen shirt that separated her bare skin from his.

She pressed her exposed breasts to his bare chest for the first time and kissed him. It felt amazing, the sensation of her against him, somehow, impossibly even better than he had imagined, her skin like one of Mrs. Warburton’s bolts of fine fabric. He drank her in, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from taking her tonight. He had resisted what felt like a thousand times before, but he didn’t have it in him anymore to stop. Maybe he shouldn’t want her but he did. He accepted it.

He pressed her back until she was sitting on the desk again.

“Now,” he said, his voice a rasp, “you have been patient.”

He reached down between her legs and found that place where he knew he could make her come apart. Already, she was wet and waiting for him, so lush and perfect. When he touched her, she gasped, digging her fingers into his shoulder.

“Shhh,” he said, “easy.”

Teasing her at her wet entrance, he started kissing her neck, adoring the fluttery moans that escaped her throat. As he did so, he kissed each breast, sucking on her blush pink nipples. She let out another series of desperate sounds at this sensation, steadying herself once more on his shoulder.

He dropped to his knees before her.

“What are you doing?” she said, her voice fogged with pleasure in a way that made him go, somehow, harder.

“Trust me.” He pressed his face into her sweetness, finding with his tongue the little bud of pleasure he knew would drive her wild.

Once more she gasped and grasped his shoulder.

“John. What are you...”

He responded with his tongue, licking her slowly, letting the pressure build, and she began to make keening sounds of pleasure that nearly undid him. He slid his finger into her, slowly, and she repeated his name. He continued, waiting until the tension built, until she was all coiled muscle, so tight around his finger.

Then, he stopped his ministrations and stood.

“John. Please, don’t stop.”

“I won’t.” He undid the falls of his breeches.

She reached out and touched him, stroking him along his hard length, her fingers lingering where he ached for her. She repeated the motion and he bit back a curse. She met him again with that wicked, mischievous smile.

“You like that,” she said, stroking him again, sending a ripple of pleasure through his entire body.

“I do,” he said, roughly, “but I can think of something I would like more.”

On the desk, she was at exactly the right height for him to enter her, and so he pressed himself, just gently, to her wetness.

At the contact, something within him unlocked. He felt, for the first time in his life, that he was truly where he was supposed to be.

“Please,” she said. “Please.”

He eased into her soft, tight core and he thought he might pass out from the pleasure. He couldn’t stop himself any longer and he rocked out of her a bit before easing himself in to the hilt. She whimpered as he drew, slowly, in and out, and

then he found, with his hand, in those luscious curls, her pleasure point. He rubbed her as he rocked inside of her. He felt her tighten around him until he was close to spilling. He had to slow.

“Don’t stop.”

He put his thumb on her bottom lip. “My greedy girl.”

She smiled up at him, in that cheeky way he loved. He almost came right there.

Instead, he took her into a kiss, savoring the sensation of himself inside of her—impossibly tight, impossibly wet—and her lips on his.

He started to move once more, moving gradually faster and faster, until they found their pace. She placed her hands on his shoulders and pressed herself upwards, so that he could drive even deeper into her. At the extra pressure, he swore once more, and looked deep into her eyes, pumping into her.

He reached down between her legs and found her clit swollen with pleasure, so ready for his touch it was obscene.

The moment he touched her there, she came apart, crying out his name.

He knew he couldn’t stay inside of her for a moment longer. He withdrew, spilling on her exposed thighs and curls, swearing, his body rocked by the pleasure she had given him.

He had had many women. But that had been the most sensual, soul-bending experience of his life.

And now that he had had her, it was clear. He knew he would never stop wanting her. He would never be able to let her go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BEFORE JOHN HAD come to Halston Place, Catherine had had a plan for her life. Somehow, she would find financial security for herself and Lady Wethersby and Ariel. She would settle down to her research and her role as surrogate sister and daughter.

But now everything had changed.

She and John had made love in the cursed study, the scene of the original crime, the scene of the scandal that had brought them together. In doing so, they had not only transformed that space, but her life as she knew it.

In doing so, she found that that context, the history that had kept them apart, didn't matter to her anymore.

She didn't care what his father and her aunt had done. She didn't care how *her* father had just made it worse or how *his* mother had just compounded the ruin.

No, all she wanted now was John.

Because she was a different person now than she had been before. Now, she was truly his. She didn't want to go back to her old plan.

"John," she said, after they had cleaned up and redressed, taking his hand. "I—"

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to explain how she felt.

He looked back at her.

"I know." He brought her knuckles to his mouth.

When they gained the hallway, it was late, and he still had hold of her hand. She knew, without him having to say, that they were going to his room. She knew, there, they would re-experience the wild pleasure of minutes before.

As they rounded the corner to the corridor where their rooms lay, Catherine nearly collided with Mrs. Morrison.

“Your Grace!” she shouted. “Miss Aster! How you startle me!”

The old woman clutched her chest in surprise. Instantly, Catherine felt like a schoolgirl caught out of bed by a particularly stern headmistress.

Mrs. Morrison eyed John’s hand clamped in her own and, instinctively, she dropped his hand. Then she realized, such a gesture probably only made them look more guilty.

Bollocks.

“Mrs. Morrison,” John said, “my apologies for startling you.”

He attempted to move past her, but the woman stepped in his way.

“What are you doing walking around the Hall at such an hour, Your Grace?”

“It is not your place to ask such questions, Mrs. Morrison.”

“Not my *place*?” The woman started back.

“Mrs. Morrison,” John said, his frustration manifest, “I am merely giving Miss Aster a tour of the grounds.”

“*A tour of the grounds?*” the old woman said. “Master John—I mean, Your Grace. I am supposed to believe—*a tour of the grounds?* This old woman wasn’t born yesterday.”

Catherine watched as John’s features froze. Clearly, he had known Mrs. Morrison for a *very* long time indeed.

“Very comical, young man. You are playing with fire. Poor Miss Aster. Are you all right, dear? I hope he hasn’t done anything untoward. That is not—” she cast a disapproving eye at John, and then straightened up “—how Edington Hall raised him.”

“He did not do anything untoward, Mrs. Morrison,” Catherine said, caught between mortification and hilarity, “I promise.”

“See, Mrs. Morrison?” John said brightly. “All is well. If you could not mention this tour of the grounds to Lady Henrietta, however, that would be much appreciated.”

Mrs. Morrison snorted. “Indeed *not*. As if I would tell Lady Henrietta about such an occurrence. She is but a *maiden*. I, however, am not. And having *toured the grounds* once or twice in my day, I’d recommend that you be a bit more careful, Master John—Your Grace.”

John and Catherine stood, only a few paces from his room, and waited for Mrs. Morrison to leave. The old woman, instead, stared at them with raised eyebrows.

They all stood still for a solid minute.

Oh, really, Catherine thought. This is ridiculous.

“Good night, Your Grace,” she said, moving in the direction of her own room, and giving John her best smile. “Good night, Mrs. Morrison.”



THE NEXT MORNING, as she finished dressing and pinning up her hair, Catherine heard a knock on her door.

She opened it, half expecting the stern face of Mrs. Morrison, but instead seeing John, his devilish green eyes glinting.

He entered the room and, quickly, swept her into a kiss that left her breathless and light-headed.

“I made another promise to you yesterday.”

“What?” she said, hardly remembering anything of yesterday other than him easing into her on that very ducal desk.

“I promised you we would talk to my sister. And this morning we shall. Over breakfast.”

“Henrietta, of course.” She had, in the excitement of yesterday, completely forgotten her young charge.

She looked up at John and saw the uncertainty on his face.

He did *not* want to talk to his sister.

Which gave her the distinct impression that he was doing this, at least in part, for her.

“We need to talk to her,” Catherine reinforced.

“And we need to talk about last night,” he said, giving her a scorching look. Catherine had the distinct impression that, after such a talk, her life—which had already changed so much—wouldn’t be the same.

“Henrietta first,” she teased, “as you promised.”

When they reached the breakfast room, Henrietta was already seated in a dress of light blue, her hair pinned up charmingly in a hairstyle that suggested much preening before the glass.

“Catherine!” Henrietta said when she saw her. “What do you make of my coiffure? I had Gretel do it from some of the fashion plates that Mrs. Warburton brought with her.”

“It’s charming, Henrietta,” Catherine said, taking a seat. “Very bewitching.”

The girl blushed at the compliment. “Brother?” she said, baring her head and twisting it for his commentary.

“Er,” he said, “quite a bit of frizzling, no?”

Henrietta gasped. “You really are atrociously rude, you know? It’s a wonder anyone can stand him, Catherine.”

Catherine smiled but didn’t say anything more. One of the difficulties of interacting with both Henrietta and John was that she couldn’t be too familiar with John without giving away to his sister that their relationship was more than it seemed. Miss Aster wouldn’t tease her employer.

Instead, she said, “Well, I think it’s quite fetching.”

“See? Brother?” she said. “Fetching. I will be *fetching* the admiration of all society gentlemen once I make my debut.”

“You’ll be fetching nothing,” he retorted. “Other than what I allow.”

Henrietta scowled at John.

“But, Retta, I do need to talk to you.”

Instantly, the girl’s eyes went wide. She looked at Catherine to save her.

“It’s what we talked about, Lady Henrietta. I have talked to His Grace and he wants to clear up a few misunderstandings.”

“We don’t really...” Henrietta began, her voice high, her eyes roving about the room. “It’s fine, really—what is there to discuss, after all?”

“Retta,” John said, ignoring his sister’s discomfort, “I’m sorry I have never discussed the scandal with you. I should have. And father should have. You’re not a child, as Miss Aster has recently informed me. I should have discussed it with you. And I want to answer any questions you might have. About what happened.”

Henrietta was now deeply focused on the bottom of her teacup.

“Henrietta,” Catherine said, “I think you did have a few questions—didn’t you?”

The girl raised her gaze. The look there, scared and uncertain, clawed at Catherine’s heart.

“Am I really not father’s daughter?”

“Of course you are,” John broke out at once. “I am certain of it.”

“How can you be?”

“I was here when you were born,” he said, surprising Catherine. “I was back from school. I came back the night you were born, in fact.”

“Really?” Henrietta said. All of a sudden, she looked a bit disgusted. “*You saw mother give birth to me?*”

“Of course not. But I was here the night you were born. I held you the very next day. You were born within these walls. I promise.”

“Then why does everyone say otherwise?”

Catherine watched John hesitate.

“Our mother ran off, as apparently you know, with the Baron of Eastwick. But, when she left, she was already pregnant. I remember. They had just told me, in fact, right before the scandal broke, that I was to have a sibling.”

Henrietta exhaled. Catherine could see her relief relax her delicate features.

“Six months after our mother ran away, she came back to give birth. And I heard what happened. It’s not something I would ever forget. It was...rather loud. The next morning, she was dead. And there you were.”

“So I’m really Father’s?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“It’s just a vicious rumor,” Catherine supplied. “You will learn, Henrietta, that society is full of gossips who like to embellish tales that are already sad.”

“Why? Who would be so awful?”

Catherine turned to John. They exchanged a look full of mutual knowledge. She knew that she could better explain than him.

“You are about to be a young lady in society,” Catherine began, “and it can be quite competitive. Vicious, even. The main focus of the season for most young ladies is to find a husband. In these marriages, a great deal of money and status changes hands. Parents want the best for their offspring—and their own prospects. Rumors, gossip, scandal—these are all

things, among others, that are used to compete for the best matches.”

“So no one will want me? Because of the scandal?”

“No,” Catherine said, “there will be many who *do* want you. You are young and beautiful and the sister of a duke.”

“And you’ll have a dowry of sixty thousand pounds,” John broke in. *Well, hopefully*, Catherine added to herself. Once they found her aunt.

Henrietta wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want to be loved for my *money*.”

“You won’t be,” Catherine said, shooting a look of warning at John, willing him to be more sensitive to Henrietta’s reasonable vanity. “You should feel lucky, though, to have such a large dowry, because it will make marrying the man of your choosing much easier. There are few things worse than falling hopelessly in love and having the match be impossible for reasons beyond your control. A pain many young ladies have endured.”

“Why would a match be impossible?” Henrietta said, her voice a rapt whisper.

Catherine hesitated. “A man may love a lady but his relations might object to her lack of fortune. Or he may have concerns and responsibilities that desperately need funds, and so, out of duty, he cannot commit himself to her. The dowry smooths the way. You must be grateful for it.”

“I see,” Henrietta said. “It is as much an aid to love as it is an enticement for it.”

“It can be,” Catherine said, “and this is part of what we will continue to discuss in your lessons. You must be able to judge if a man cares for *you* and not your dowry. That is the disadvantage of a large dowry. You will receive certain suitors who are not sincere. The one consolation of penniless girls is that their attractions are all their own.”

Catherine felt John's eyes on her. When she turned to look at him, she could tell, by the set of his mouth, that he was impressed by her words to Henrietta.

"Do you have any other questions, Retta?" John asked.

She shook her head.

"You will need to learn how to meet whispers," Catherine said, "but that's why you have me."

"Thank God for that," John said.

Catherine and Henrietta spent the rest of the day together, discussing her future. Rather than ignoring them as he had done, John joined them for lunch and supper. He teased Henrietta on her high expectations for her season. And he gave Catherine glances that made her shudder with desire. Catherine couldn't remember a time that she had laughed so much as with Henrietta and John. She had, of course, had laughter with Lady Wethersby and Ariel in the past three years, but it was the survivalist kind, as they skidded from scrap to scrap. In Edington Hall, with Henrietta and John, it was a different kind of laughter. The laughter of safety. They could joke and caper without having to think of their next ploy for survival.

Now Catherine was in her bedchamber, having slipped into her night rail. She hoped that, once the house settled, John would come to her.

Just as she had that thought, she did hear a knock. She smiled. It was a little earlier than she expected but she was glad nonetheless.

She opened the door. "Mrs. Morrison?"

The older woman stood there with a grave expression.

"Is everyone well? Is Lady Henrietta ill?"

"Everyone is alive and well, Miss Aster. I wanted to speak with you. Alone."

“Of course,” she said, letting her in and closing the door behind her.

She was bewildered by what the woman could want. But Catherine had a good opinion of her and would happily help her with whatever she sought.

“Yes, Mrs. Morrison?” She felt unsettled by the woman’s gaze. It was too insistent, too probing.

“If you think I don’t know who you are,” the older woman said, shaking slightly, “then you must think I am even a bigger fool than you are.”

She drew back at the words. “I beg your pardon?”

“I suspected when I first glimpsed you. But then when I saw you yesterday evening, coming back from God knows where with His Grace, I really knew. I know who you are, *Miss Forster*.”

Catherine reeled back. She found she couldn’t form words.

“Don’t play dumb with me, girl. My mother was friends of old with your nursemaid, Martha Denney. Besides, I remember you coming here as a little girl. With your aunt.”

Catherine was shocked. She had not thought it really possible for anyone to recognize her. She had been so young when she left.

“I remember His Grace—the former His Grace, Reginald—running around with Mary Forster, oh yes. I know everything that goes on in this place. Those two—” She broke off and Catherine saw a flash of pain in her eyes. She shook her head and it was gone. “Why would you come back here?”

Catherine had no idea how to answer.

Another knock sounded on her door. She turned to open it, praying it was John and not a footman onto their scheme.

Thankfully, it was John. His sinful grin dissipated when he saw Mrs. Morrison standing in the center of her room.

“Mrs. Morrison?”

“She knows, John,” Catherine said and she could hear the quiver in her own voice. “She knows who I am.”

“How in God’s name would you know that?” he said, addressing Mrs. Morrison.

“*Your Grace,*” she said, her voice shaking with anger. “What do you take me for? Do you think a fake name could truly fool me? I’d know a Forster anywhere—look at her hair, her eyes! I’ve lived here my entire life. I’m not some transient scullery maid. That you would try this sort of shenanigan and not tell me what you are up to—you are a foolhardy boy, just like your father before you.”

Catherine watched as he advanced on the old woman.

“I am *not* like him. That is not what this is.”

“Oh, boy. You aren’t your father, but you are *much* like him. As if there could be stronger proof than this.”

“You can’t tell anyone that I am here,” Catherine said, coming forward, ready to plead.

“*Tell* anyone?” Mrs. Morrison said, whirling around on her. “Are you mad? I will not tell a single soul. I am concerned others will find out and we will have another scandal on our hands. *What are you two doing?*”

“Mrs. Morrison.” John stepped forward. “I appreciate your concern. And I apologize for the subterfuge—you have correctly divined that all is not what it appears.”

Catherine looked up at him. His face was indecipherable. Where was he going with this story?

“And because I trust you,” he said, “and because, as an orphan, you are the closest thing to a parent that I have left, I will tell you the truth.”

He took a step towards Catherine and linked his fingers through hers. “We are secretly engaged.”

“*Secretly engaged?*” the old woman gasped.

“Yes,” he said, with authority. “We can’t possibly be *publicly* engaged—because of the scandal—until Henrietta has had her season and is married. We don’t want to mar her chances. Once she is married, we will announce our engagement and marry.”

Mrs. Morrison’s mouth moved up and down, eliciting no sound.

“Very well,” she finally managed, “I am sorry to have disturbed you, Your Grace.”

“That’s quite all right, Mrs. Morrison. Though, of course, I would appreciate if you wouldn’t tell anyone about all of this.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” she said, curtsying. “As ever, I am the heart and soul of discretion.”

With that, she exited the room.

Catherine looked at John, shocked by his proclamation. She had no idea if he said they were engaged for show or if he really meant it. Was this a proposal or just another cover?

He returned her gaze, saying nothing. She couldn’t read the line of his mouth.

Her face was blazing. He had to say something. He couldn’t just leave her to sort out his meaning for herself.

And yet he remained silent.

His quiet was killing her. She couldn’t bear it.

“Are you sure that was wise?”

“My apologies,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said such a thing without asking you. But it was the only thing that seemed plausible to staunch her concern.”

He still hadn’t clarified what he meant. With these words, however, it seemed far less likely that he was seriously making her an offer of marriage.

“Of course,” she said, unable to decipher his expression.

“I am sorry for having disturbed you.”

And then he left the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JOHN WASN'T EXACTLY sure where last night had gone wrong. He had been headed to Catherine's bedchamber to speak with her about *them*. While he didn't exactly have a speech memorized, he had had the broad contours of a plan, which somehow he had ended up revealing to Mrs. Morrison instead of the woman who brought him to his knees.

Once Mrs. Morrison had left the room last night—*meddling woman*, he would sack her for interfering in his relationship, if she wasn't a second mother to him—he had turned to look at Catherine.

And the expression on her face—the horror—had convinced him immediately that it was better that he hadn't presented his plan to her in private. This way, he could pretend it was just for Mrs. Morrison's sake that he had unfurled such an option. He had saved himself some humiliation. She clearly did not want a future with him. He had been an idiot to think she would.

Worse, after this rejection, John would now have to endure being once more in a close-quartered coach with Catherine Forster. They were finally going to question her aunt's friends.

In fact, he was waiting for Catherine to meet him at this very moment.

And, of course, he cursed, it was raining, which worked very well for their subterfuge, but did nothing for his black mood.

Finally, his footman handed Catherine into the coach and he tapped the ceiling.

"I really could have gone alone, Your Grace," she said, once they had set off, her tone cool. "Honestly, your company is an unnecessary risk."

John gritted his teeth. He had taken pains to disguise his presence. They were driving a hired hack from the village and Marcel was not at the helm. The hack itself was so unremarkable that no one could tell it apart from a thousand others. He had instructed the man to drive to the Edington town center and then out of town, before calling on the first house, so that no one would suspect they had come from Edington Hall directly.

“I will obviously stay in the coach.”

“Good.”

“I would appreciate it, however, if you could tell me where in the hell we are going.”

Catherine was supposed to have compiled a list of gentlewomen of her aunt’s acquaintance. She still had not shared this list with him.

“Fine.” She took a list from her reticule and handing it to him. “Most of these ladies will be worth asking. We should end with Lady Trilling, who was my aunt’s closest acquaintance. They were girls together.”

John grunted. Lady Trilling was also a friend of his family.

“What?” Catherine said, in response to his sound.

“She was a friend of my father’s, too.”

“I suspected when you and Henrietta went to call on her the other day. Tell me, does she still have her parrot?”

“Jolly is very much still alive,” John said, the thought of the bird making him grimace, “unfortunately for everyone.”

“I always liked Jolly!”

“I did too—when I was a child. Then I found the infernal racket amusing. Now it’s just head-splitting.”

“I suppose I will have to judge for myself,” Catherine said, her words laced with irritation that John could not comprehend.



BY THE END of the afternoon, Catherine had visited five homes. Each lady had received her, if not warmly then at least cordially. Some had been more civil than others, but she was sure that she had comported herself exactly as she should. She had enacted the ideal mixture of timidity, shame, and grief as she sat in their tastefully furnished country drawing rooms and asked questions about her missing relative.

Most had seemed sympathetic, in fact. Lady Langley had said she remembered how close Catherine had been to her aunt and how hard it must have been for her to wonder all these years. That statement had made Catherine's heart contract uncomfortably.

Unfortunately, none of them offered anything about Mary Forster or her whereabouts.

Lady Trilling had been particularly kind, but she had also posed an unforeseen complication. She had silenced the squawking of her parrot—who, John was right, was louder and more annoying than she remembered—and inquired after Catherine herself in minute detail.

“Oh, yes,” the older woman said. “Of course I know Lady Wethersby from London. A very vivacious, lovely woman. I haven't seen her in some time. I know that...” She had trailed off, seeming unsure of how to characterize the situation.

“Sir Francis left his family in reduced circumstances,” Catherine said, completing the sentence for her.

“I shall write to Lady Wethersby,” Lady Trilling said, “and renew our association. I always liked her immensely.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

She hoped Lady Trilling wouldn't mention her search for her aunt to Lady Wethersby—or, best of all, not write anything to Lady Wethersby in the first place. But she couldn't forbid the woman from doing so without looking suspicious.

Especially when the action was otherwise honorable and likely to be appreciated by Lady Wethersby.

Now, she was back in the carriage with John, and they were no closer to finding her aunt.

He, too, seemed displeased that their excursion had not yielded any extra information about Mary Forster.

He also seemed unhappy with her for a reason that she didn't understand. She did not understand his sour mood when he had been the one to toss off the possibility of a future together without consideration for how it might make her feel. She was hurt by his callousness and yet he was the one who seemed upset with *her*.

Instead, he looked out the window into the driving rain, refusing to regard her or even address her.

The only sound was that of the rain hitting the roof and the wheels of the coach.

“What will you do if Baron Falk does indeed inherit the money?” Catherine knew the question would needle him, but frankly she wanted to provoke him.

“What could I do?” he spat out. “Nothing.”

“What is your opinion of your cousin?”

No response. She looked over at him. He still was looking out the window, rather pointedly it seemed.

“Does he deserve the funds? Maybe he deserves them more than the Duke of Edington—who already has so much.”

She heard a thwack. She realized with alarm that he had hit the side of the carriage with his fist.

“My cousin is not *worth* anything.”

“I take it you don't like the man.”

“He is repulsive.”

“Would you like to elaborate on that conclusion?”

“No.”

“I don’t think it is very fair that you won’t tell me about him. If it is relevant to our search, I should know about it.”

“It isn’t relevant.”

“I insist you tell me.”

He turned towards her. “*No.*”

Before she could say anything, however, she saw, outside the carriage, a sight that made her heart constrict.

Forster House.

Before she could stop herself, she had rapped on the roof of the carriage. Before it had even come to a complete stop, she was out of the carriage, looking over the great green expanse that led down the hill towards the dwelling.

She soaked in the sight of the old house. The gabled roofs and the gray stone were the same as ever—even the paddocks in which she had kept her pony were still there. She still felt ownership over it. As she gazed down on its pretty hedgerows, one thousand memories flooded back at once.

“Goddamn it,” she heard John say beside her, “I am sorry, Catherine, I should have told the coachman not to take this road. Marcel knows not to, but the hack driver...”

She hardly heard his words. She just sucked in the old sight, vaguely aware that some mixture of tears and rainwater were running down her face. She didn’t know which was which and she didn’t care. She was mesmerized, transfixed, broken, by the sight of this house.

And then she was in John’s arms. She realized, too late, that she was sobbing.

He held her up, even as her knees gave out. His grasp on her was firm.

“Catherine, I’m so sorry,” he said, into her ear, stroking her hair, not forcing her to move, even though the rain slid down into their clothing, wetting their hair, soaking everything. “I’m so sorry.”

Finally, once they were well and truly soaked, he directed her back into the carriage. They pulled away. She didn't watch the house recede. She couldn't bear to watch it fade away again.

In the carriage, he pulled her onto his lap. She cried into his shoulder, letting the image of the old house soften behind her eyes while he comforted her. She should care, she knew, that last night he had humiliated her, that she shouldn't show such weakness to him, but his arms felt so good around her that she couldn't resist his embrace.

He held her until she quieted, murmuring reassurance into her ear. Somehow, she felt her anguish slipping into desire.

She kissed him first and he returned it, gently, as if uncertain of whether they should really proceed.

Catherine was sure, however, that she wanted him. When she reached for his cravat, however, he said to her, "Not here. We'll be home soon."

A minute later, they pulled up in front of Edington Hall. He led her through the front entrance, through the great hall, and then up the stairs to his bedchamber.

Catherine had never been in his bedchamber before. It was handsomely appointed, as all the rooms in Edington Hall were, but it still held an air of boyishness. She realized, with a jolt, that he hadn't moved into his father's rooms. This room was still the one he had used as the heir.

She turned around and saw him lock the door. Finally, he turned around.

"You're all wet," she said.

"So are you."

Quickly, he peeled off her dress. While she saw to her stays and chemise, he took off his boots and over things, until he, too, was wearing nothing.

She marveled, as she had been unable to in the dim light of the study, at the magnificence of his bare form.

The sight—his powerfully formed thighs, the smooth planes of his chest, the way his muscles flexed with his smallest movements—almost made her forget about the sorrow that had just cut her so deep.

Despite her sadness, she wanted him. No, not despite. *Because* of her sadness, she knew that she wanted him. That she could still want him so much when she felt this way—it proved that she would never stop wanting him. The only thing that would stop her pain would be more of him. To be closer to him.

He pressed her gently onto the bed. There, he brought his mouth to hers, kissing her neck, and then her breasts, and then between her thighs. When his tongue reached inside of her, she gasped, the pleasure clouding out all other sensation. But she wanted more. She needed to be closer to him.

“I need you,” she said, her voice sounding unfamiliar to even herself in its urgency. “More. Please.”

And he obliged her, teasing her with his fingers and making her arch into his hand. But that wasn’t what she wanted.

She reached out towards his cock and stroked it, drawing him nearer. His cock hovered just at her entrance. But he stopped.

“Is this what you want?” he said, his voice ragged. She could see in his eyes the depth of his hunger for her—and it gratified her. Immensely.

“Yes. Please.”

“Catherine,” he said, “I don’t want... You are upset—”

“Then make me feel better,” she said, knowing that it was the only thing that would work. Him, inside of her.

She reached up and kissed him with abandon. He groaned inside of her mouth. She took him in hand again and guided him towards her. When the head of his cock entered her, John let out another groan.

“You want me,” she said, as she opened her legs and eased him in further. “Say it.”

“You know I do.”

“Say it anyway,” she replied, giving him the smile she knew undid him.

“I want you,” he said, thrusting into her, “So much.” He was timing each thrust to his words. The shock of each hit her at the same moment. “More than I’ve ever wanted anything. Or anyone.”

With each thrust, he created a wave of pleasure that, when it crashed inside of her, seemed only to build further.

“I could be dead,” he said, pausing, holding back, “and still want you.” He entered her then, to the hilt, and she saw stars.

He stopped again. “Touch yourself,” he growled.

“I don’t understand,” she said, nearly delirious. He released her arse and drew her hand to her clit.

“Here,” he said, “Trust me.”

Catherine listened, stroking herself, and he was right—the pleasure was greater and she could feel her orgasm building inside of her. He began moving again, each push and pull tantalizing her and pushing her closer to the edge.

With one last torturing movement, she came apart, crying out, and she could feel herself clenching and unclenching on his cock, as if her core was trying to draw out his seed through sheer force.

A half moment later, he left her and, jerking back, spent on the coverlet beside them. She could tell, from his shout of surprise, that he had narrowly avoided the alternative.

They lay there, catching their breath, and Catherine shut her eyes, knowing he would soon leave.

Instead, he didn’t move. When she opened her eyes, he was looking at her.

“Are you all right? I wasn’t sure...you said you wanted—”

She caught his hand. “I did.”

He still looked worried. “Catherine, about yesterday...”

She frowned, her heart beating. Here it is, she told herself. The explanation. His apology for mocking her with such an unrealistic possibility.

“I shouldn’t have told Mrs. Morrison that we were engaged without asking you.”

It wasn’t what she had expected him to say. How could he not understand?

“That wasn’t the part that I minded.”

He looked confused.

“How do you think it feels?” she said, frustrated with his lack of comprehension. She met his green gaze. “To have you say that we are engaged, even if it just to Mrs. Morrison, just as a feint, while I know that you would never actually...”

“What?”

“Don’t make me say it!”

“I have no idea what you’re going to say.”

She gave him an incredulous look. “You would never marry me.”

In response, John actually laughed. The man *laughed*. Catherine wasn’t sure whether she should hit him or storm from his room, although the latter would take some time as she was currently completely undressed.

“Are you *laughing*?”

He took her hand. “You know what I said to Mrs. Morrison? About the secret engagement?”

“Of course.”

“That was the plan I wanted to suggest to *you*.”

Her heart stopped. Such a possibility had not occurred to her.

“That we would marry? After Henrietta has her season?”

He nodded. “But then I saw your face, after Mrs. Morrison left, and you seemed horrified at the idea.”

“No! I just wasn’t sure if you were serious. When you said nothing, I assumed you weren’t.”

“I was perfectly in earnest.”

She stared at him. How could they have so misunderstood one another when they wanted the same thing?

“So, will you? Marry me?”

Even though she felt dangerously happy, she couldn’t resist teasing him.

“You mean enter into a secret engagement with you? Someone once told me that a secret engagement was an illicit dalliance by another name.”

“Well, it will definitely be an illicit dalliance. It will just be an illicit dalliance that ends in our marriage.”

She kissed him, drinking him in, trying to remember everything about this moment. How handsome he looked, his green eyes burning for her, and the way her heart felt that it might burst.

Then she heard the very distinct sound of coach wheels fraying the gravel drive outside. She broke their kiss.

“Bloody hell,” John said, rising from the bed and looking out the window. Catherine followed.

A very worn hack had pulled up to the gate. The wheels were missing a spoke or two and the outside of the cab was seriously tattered. The rain, still coming down, only made the vehicle look the worse for wear.

She and John exchanged a look of pure confusion.

She saw the question dawning in his eyes. Could it be Mary Forster?

Then, the door flung open, and a gentleman stepped out.

And then two others.

“Bloody meddlers,” John exhaled.

Catherine smiled up at him. “I knew they were worried about you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THAT NIGHT, CATHERINE, John, Henrietta, and the three visiting Rank Rakes had an informal supper in the great hall. Henrietta, of course, had been delighted by the appearance of the Earl of Montaigne, the Marquess of Leith, and the Viscount of Tremberley. John knew that Henrietta had always looked forward to his friends' visits to the Hall, in large part because they—especially Tremberley, who, as his best friend, had visited the most over the years—doted on her.

Leith's carriage had broken down and his friends had been forced to take a dilapidated hack that let in water all the way from Woking. Now, John watched Catherine and Henrietta laugh as Montaigne imitated Leith finding a water beetle in his cravat. He felt contentment in his bones. He couldn't remember a time he had felt so happy. With the exception of Henrietta still being under the impression that Catherine was "Miss Aster" and Mary Forster continuing to elude him, he couldn't recall a single thing wrong with his life.

After supper and a lively game of charades, Catherine and Henrietta retired. Catherine had to nearly drag Henrietta up the stairs, because she wanted to stay with the gentlemen all evening. However, that far exceeded the bounds of propriety, especially since Henrietta was soon to debut and become a society young lady in earnest. When the ladies finally departed, John had to face his friends alone.

"As you can see," John said, when they turned their questioning faces towards him, "I'm very well."

"Don't know what you're talking about, mate," Montaigne said. "We just fancied a visit to the Hall."

"You're rather arrogant," said Tremberley, "assuming we came here for you."

“Indeed, we came to see your sister’s lovely tutor,” Leith said. “I found her rather fetching when we met in that wayside tavern. I wondered if I might press my suit here.”

“Go to hell,” John said. “And you can’t. She is taken.”

His friends’ faces went from jovial to deadly serious all at once. It was really quite an amusing sight. Montaigne’s light blue eyes, Tremberley’s hazel ones, and Leith’s dark brown all went equally round.

“You did marry her,” Tremberley said. “I knew you would. Goddamn!”

“Not yet,” he said. “We can’t yet. Not until Henrietta has her season and finds her own match. But, once she does, we will.”

John couldn’t keep the smile from his face, half out of his own happiness and half from the abject horror on his friends’ faces.

Nevertheless, they gave him their congratulations, although they did seem glad that the marriage wasn’t imminent. They would have time to adjust to one of their set departing from bachelorhood. Montaigne called it the end of an era.

The next few days passed in this same state of happiness. With his friends at the hall to entertain Henrietta, he didn’t feel as guilty about stealing moments with Catherine. Not to mention that every night he went to her bedchamber and they had encounters that left him a changed man. With every touch, she tethered him to her all the more. He was utterly, desperately, conquered and, worse, he didn’t long to be anything else.

Two days after the arrival of his friends, they were all walking in the orchards, which had started to give forth apples. Although most of the fruit was still green, Henrietta was bent on collecting the few ripe ones that, every year, came early. His friends were squiring her on this mission so he could walk beside Catherine out of earshot of the others.

“Now that I am your betrothed,” she said in that half-mocking tone, which had become—over the past week—one of his favorites that she used with him, “there is one thing I would like to know.”

“Anything.”

“Why do you hate your cousin so much? The one who is to come into the money, if we don’t find Mary Forster?”

“Ah. That.”

They walked in silence for a moment and he tried to organize his thoughts. He wanted to explain it to her in the right way.

“When I first heard about my father’s will,” he started, “I might have let the sixty thousand pounds go, if it weren’t that he was leaving it to Baron Falk. I could give Henrietta a perfectly respectable dowry from my other funds. Yes, it would have seemed that my father was saying that she wasn’t his daughter, but there is a chance I may have decided to weather it to spite the old man. That is how badly I didn’t want to find your aunt or reopen this mess.”

She smiled. “And how badly you didn’t want to ask me for help.”

“Yes,” he smiled, “I certainly didn’t want to do that.”

They walked a bit more. The sun on his face, the shadows cast by the apple trees, and Catherine’s quiet expectation made him feel tranquil, despite the difficult history he was trying to relay.

“But my father left the money to Baron Falk. And I could never let *him*—and my father knew this very well—have sixty thousand pounds from our estate.”

He noticed now that the others were fully out of sight. He couldn’t hear their voices anymore, so he took Catherine’s hand. He intertwined her fingers through his with ease, as if they had always done it, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“When I was younger, Baron Falk and his father used to come and visit Edington Hall. In autumn, for grouse hunting and fox chase, that sort of thing. My father and the late baron were close. When his father died, Falk himself was still welcome, of course, and he continued to visit. And then when Henrietta was twelve, and Falk and I were around three-and-twenty, he proposed to my father that he and Henrietta marry.”

“He wanted to engage her when she was *twelve*?”

Of course, John thought, Catherine had likely heard of aristocratic marriages arranged at young ages. It was irregular, if not unheard of, for a man to try and engage a twelve-year-old girl. But that had not been Falk’s intention.

“He didn’t just want to engage her,” he clarified, “he wanted to marry her.”

“*At twelve*?”

“He told my father he could wait until fourteen if he could receive an advance on her dowry,” he scoffed, “but you must understand. This was a betrayal of the intimacy between our two families. While I had never particularly liked Falk, his father was a fine fellow, and we had all spent much time together.”

“Of course. Your father must have thought he was mad.”

“At first, my father felt sorry for him. There were many reasons, of course, why my father would refuse such a suit. Chief among them that he had no intention of engaging, never mind marrying, his twelve-year-old daughter to *anyone*. When he made his proposal, my father flatly refused, and told him that he would have to approach Henrietta as any other suitor might once she was of age. But he tried to be kind. Falk’s father had been almost like a brother to him and my father, at first, thought that perhaps Falk had misplaced his grief at being orphaned onto the hope of marrying Henrietta and joining our family.”

“I can see your father’s thinking, particularly if he cared for Falk.”

“But that wasn’t the end of it,” John said, gritting his teeth. “We found out, after that visit, after he had left the house, that he had been trying to win Henrietta’s affections.”

“*What?* The affections of a twelve-year-old girl?”

“Nothing sordid, thank God. He didn’t try to touch her. She reported nothing of the kind. Still, he was on very familiar terms here, much like my friends are now, and who knows what would have happened if he had been allowed to persist. Mostly, he made overtures designed to win her affections. Little presents and the like. She remained innocent of his intentions, but it was clear to us the meaning of such behavior. We didn’t tell her what had transpired in terms of his proposal, of course.”

“Of course.”

“And there was more. My father discovered that he had, in the two years since his father’s death, mismanaged his estate. He had gambling debts. He was desperately in need of funds.”

“He wanted her dowry,” she said, looking up at him.

John nodded.

She stopped walking. “Your father knew you would never let him have it. And your father never would have, either. That’s why you were sure he knew Mary Forster was alive.”

“It was one of the only things my father and I agreed on in the past ten years. My father would have *never* wanted Falk to have this money. He also knew that I hated the Forster name—and Mary Forster in particular—with a passion. He knew what I went through at school. He would have never left Falk the money if he thought there was a real chance I wouldn’t be able to find Mary Forster. But he also knew I would only try to find her under real duress.”

“He made it the lesser of two evils.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s so devious.”

“It’s fiendish. My father was a terrible rogue. He must have wanted his money to reach Mary Forster very badly. And he knew where to have me.”

They walked in silence again, their hands still intertwined. John felt lighter having told her about Falk.

“Well, we must make sure that Falk does not get the money.”

“I fear he will. We only have two weeks left. My father might have rather overestimated my abilities.”

She looked up at him now, smiling. “But your father did not underestimate me.”

“I don’t think he counted on you at all,” he said, with a laugh.

“No, I expect not. But, luckily for you and him, I will help you find her. And convince her to take the money.”

He pulled Catherine towards him and kissed her. Was it possible to have a lifetime of moments this wonderful? It seemed like he had stolen this scene from someone else’s life.

He took her hand again and they kept walking. He spotted an apple, prematurely red, on a lower bough. He plucked it off and bit into it, the sweet juice filling his mouth.

He offered the apple to her and she laughed, taking a bite. He loved watching her smile at the sweetness.

“I used to watch you, you know,” she said, returning the apple to him, her blush making her even more beautiful.

“What do you mean?”

“In these orchards, near the boundary between our properties, I used to watch you. You and your father would walk here sometimes and it was one of my favorite places to play. And sometimes I would see you two and spy. I was curious what this great man would say to his son.”

He couldn’t speak.

It sounded like the beginning of one of her fairy tales, like the kind of myths she was so dedicated to committing to paper.

“I remember that once you complained to him that the cook had struck you for stealing a pie from the kitchen.”

He stopped and looked at her, pitching the apple core to the ground.

“I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t—”

“No, please, continue. What did my father say?”

“He said to you, ‘Son, you aren’t entitled to any pie that you can’t steal clean.’ I remember it because it made me laugh.”

John laughed, too. He remembered that moment now. It rang some ancient bell at the back of his brain. On the ride home from Edington after his father’s death, he had wondered about those long conversations that they had had in the orchards. He couldn’t remember what had been said. He had thought that that piece of his childhood was gone forever. Now she had restored it. She had given it back to him.

He drew her towards him again.

“Should I not have told you that?”

“I am so glad you did. I had forgotten. And I used to watch you, too. You were this little fairy girl with your hair full of light and these strange blue-black eyes. I would watch you play when you couldn’t see me. You looked like you were hunting for treasures. I was always working up the courage to talk to you. I never did. And now I wish I had. Because then we would have known each other.”

“I don’t,” she said, leaning in and kissing him, “because then we might not be here.”

He heard Henrietta’s yell of delight and turned to see his friends trudging back over the hill. He released Catherine. Just in time, too, because Henrietta came wheeling towards them a second later.

“John!” she yelled, coming up to him, followed by her three assistants. “Tremberley said we are going to a ball! That you are going to take me to Lady Langley’s ball!”

He had meant to surprise Henrietta and Catherine, but of course his friends had spoilt it.

“Sorry, brother,” Tremberley said, looking genuinely contrite. “I was just mentioning to Leith that we would be attending...and Lady Henrietta overheard.”

“Is it true, John? Is it true?” Henrietta jumped in front of him, from one foot to another, looking more like a cottager of ten than a supposedly well-bred girl of seventeen.

“Very well. It is.”

Henrietta let out a peal of delight.

“My first ball!” she said, grabbing Catherine’s hands. “Oh, Miss Aster, we are going to a *ball*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LATER THAT NIGHT, in bed, Catherine tried to convince John that the ball was a terrible idea.

“*It’s a masquerade,*” he countered. “No one will see your face and hence you will be impossible to recognize.”

“But Henrietta isn’t out yet,” she tried, hoping that John would see that his sister was too young to go to a masquerade. “It’s improper.”

“It’s a country ball.” John shrugged. Catherine knew he was right. Younger girls *did* go to events all the time to experience society before they actually entered it, particularly in their home parishes. “We’ll chaperone her the whole time. She certainly won’t stand up to dance.”

“And I’m Henrietta’s tutor. Such people don’t go to balls.”

“You’ll be there as her chaperone, which is entirely proper. No one will know the difference between tutor and chaperone. And all the more reason you should be with us. It’s actually more appropriate than her attending with just her brother and his three friends. And you can explain the whole environment to Henrietta.”

“It’s too risky.”

“Trust me. Furthermore, Leith, Tremberley, Montaigne, and I will attract all of the attention.”

“You’re *very* arrogant.”

“Hardly.” John gave her a wicked smile. “We’re four unmarried, young noblemen. The society mamas can’t help themselves. And the other reason you can’t object is that it will help us find Mary Forster.”

“How?”

“The ladies of the neighborhood may have been reluctant to tell you what they know about Mary, given that you are her niece. At a masquerade, we could eavesdrop and figure out more. It is in fact imperative for us to attend,” he said, kissing her behind her ear and pressing his firm body into hers. “Absolutely necessary.”

“You really think they would discuss it so openly?”

“It’s possible. And we are somewhat desperate.”

True, she thought. Since the failure of the other day, Catherine and John had tracked down a few servants who had worked at Forster House and still resided in the area. Unfortunately, they hadn’t known anything about Mary Forster or her whereabouts.

She supposed he was right. They needed to try every avenue that didn’t provoke suspicion.

And the masquerade *did* sound rather diverting.



THE NEXT TWO days passed in a flurry of preparation for the ball, particularly for Henrietta.

“It’s always an absolute *crush*,” Henrietta chattered at breakfast the morning of the masquerade.

“How would you know?” Tremberley retorted. “You’ve never been.”

Everyone else laughed, even Catherine, though she felt slightly guilty at her amusement at her little charge’s expense.

Henrietta blushed and looked somewhat abashed, but not as much as she probably should have.

“You all went a few years ago, when you were in Edington for the grouse hunting. That’s what you said when you returned.”

“Very well, Lady Henrietta,” Tremberley said. “If I said it, it must be true.”

“*You* didn’t say it,” Henrietta corrected. “It was Leith. He had spilled punch down his front and he said some boulder hit him with his elbow because it was such a crush.”

“That was *me* with the elbow,” Montaigne exclaimed, flexing the crook of his arm in Leith’s direction. “Boulder! I’ll do it again, if you’re not careful, Leith.”

“I’m terrified,” Leith said, deadpan, from behind his newspaper.

Catherine had come to adore John’s friends. Montaigne was sunny and thoughtful, with an easygoing disposition. He was always ready to come to the aid of another or smooth over a gaffe made by someone else. Leith appeared cold on the outside, but really his frosty exterior was a thin front for the considerate, careful man within. And Tremberley, John’s best friend of all, was comical and nosy, but he also had a melancholy side. His face held knowledge, pain, which Catherine recognized, and it reminded her that he, too, had been an orphan for most of his life.

She was grateful for how they all cared for John. And that they did not object to their engagement. Their acceptance made it feel real.

Meanwhile, Henrietta was in ecstasy that she would be permitted to wear one of her ball gowns early. Her new dress from Mrs. Warburton had arrived only that morning. She was so happy about her gown that it made Catherine a little depressed that she only had her faded black muslin to wear. Lady Warburton had only had the time to rush Henrietta’s first evening dress.

But then, after breakfast, Catherine went back to her bedchamber and found a beautiful dusky-red gown. A matching mask and a note lay beside it on the bed.

She picked up the note.

For my perfect Catherine, who has made me happier than any man—especially me—deserves. John.

She traced the words of the note with her fingertips, blinking back tears. *Damn it, why does he always have to be so kind?* He made it so hard to not be completely, stupidly besotted, with him.



THE EVENING CAME and it was time to depart for the Langley affair.

John knew that taking Catherine to the ball was a risk, but he couldn't resist. He couldn't marry her yet, but she still deserved to experience society, even if she was technically doing so as Henrietta's chaperone.

Ever since she had told him of how humiliated she had been when he had left her in the Tremberley gardens that night so many years ago, he had wanted to make it up to her. He knew if he had told her that that was his motivation, she would reject the outing. So he had told her it was for Henrietta and that it would be a good way to potentially dig up information from the Dorset gentry. And these things were true. His primary motivation, though, was to please Catherine, to give her what she deserved. He wanted to give her a night of good memories to replace what had happened before. When he had received the invitation to the Langley masquerade, he knew he had to do it. It was a little risqué to take Henrietta to a masquerade, given that she wasn't out yet, but she would be surrounded by gentry matrons who had known her since babyhood.

Now, he stood in the entryway of Edington Hall, waiting for Henrietta and Catherine and his friends to emerge. All were running late. He had gotten Catherine a gown for the occasion, a beautiful color that would suit her.

He turned around and there she was.

Catherine.

The sight of her—it was too much. She was walking towards him down the long Edington Hall main staircase. She was always beautiful, but in the dress, with her hair carefully

turned up, she sparkled. He could see the tops of her breasts rise and fall with her breath as she approached. A bolt of desire went through him, so strong and hot that he had to clench his hand into a fist to keep from rushing forward and enveloping her.

She smiled at him shakily and he went to take her hand, but she shook her head and mouthed, "*Henrietta.*"

And, indeed, his sister appeared at the top of the staircase, adorable in her new green evening dress.

"How do I look?" she said, giving a spin, and nearly upsetting a candelabra.

"Very elegant," he snorted. Henrietta stuck her tongue out at him.

"You look very beautiful, Lady Henrietta," Catherine said from beside him. Henrietta smiled at the earnestness of her compliment.

"Yes," said Tremberley, coming into view. "Very lovely."

"You look almost respectable," Henrietta said to Tremberley. "You two as well," she added to Montaigne and Leith, who had just appeared.

Tremberley put his hand over his heart. "How you wound me, Lady Henrietta. To be thought disreputable at all times is my heart's fondest ambition."

His sister scoffed at this mockery and flounced her way down the stairs. Clearly, John thought to himself, Catherine had yet to work with his sister on how to take the steps with grace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHEN THEY ARRIVED at Langley Abbey, John could see that Henrietta had been right. It *was* an absolute crush, which just suited his purposes. He didn't want anyone looking at them too closely and the packed bodies would make the aristocracy particularly careless. In the carriage, they affixed their masks—Catherine helped Henrietta with hers and he tied the ribbons of Catherine's. He felt her shiver as he touched the nape of her neck.

“*Later,*” he said, so quietly that he wasn't sure she had heard. But as they exited the carriage, she squeezed his hand, and he knew that she had.

He was satisfied with Catherine's mask. It completely disguised her face, rendering her undetectable.

The ballroom was so thick with bodies that, when the master of ceremonies announced their arrival, he could barely be heard over the din of the revelers.

Excellent. That was exactly what he wanted.

Almost instantly, the crowd absorbed Leith, Montaigne and Tremberley. He imagined the first would be canvassing the crowd for a courtesan to his tastes, the second for a comely servant, and the third for a bored widow in a complicated marriage. He doubted he would see them again until tomorrow morning.

John, Henrietta, and Catherine traveled through the ballroom. John hardly recognized anyone between the masks and the infrequency with which he attended balls in Dorset. He wanted to dance with Catherine, to repeat the experience they had had at Tremberley, but he couldn't leave Henrietta in the throngs until she was established with the society matrons.

He saw Lady Trilling standing with Lady Langley and Lady Toller—exactly the trio he wanted.

When Lady Trilling saw him, she put out a hand and waved. His mask was just a domino and hardly disguised him at all.

“Lady Trilling,” he said, as they strode over and took her hand. “You are looking marvelous tonight.”

“Oh, don’t flatter an old woman, Your Grace,” she said, her gaze falling on Henrietta.

“Is this Lady Henrietta? Between her charming little mask and her evening dress, I hardly recognize her.”

Henrietta gave a neat little curtsy and John saw Catherine give a little smile of pride.

“Yes,” John said to the group. “This is my sister, Lady Henrietta. She is making her debut next season and we have brought her here, Lady Langley, to your ball, because we thought no event could better acclimate her to high society.”

Lady Langley gave a little head bow at this compliment.

“On the subject of instruction,” he said, gesturing towards Catherine, “Miss Aster is my sister’s tutor and chaperone in all society matters. Lady Langley, Lady Trilling, and Lady Toller, this is Miss Aster.”

At the word “chaperone,” he saw the ladies’ eyes grow dull, but they nodded politely. Catherine did a pitch-perfect curtsy, just humble enough to come off as a paid companion, but one familiar with high society. *Excellent*, he thought. He didn’t want them examining Catherine too closely.

“Lady Trilling,” he said, having prepared for a potentially adverse reaction to his next step. He hadn’t planned to ask so quickly upon introductions, but he heard them strike up the waltz. His request would be somewhat irregular, but he was hoping to carry it off due to his rank and through alluding to Henrietta’s instruction. “Would you mind chaperoning Lady Henrietta while Miss Aster and I dance?”

Even beneath her mask, he saw Catherine reel back. He hadn't warned her. He knew she would have never agreed. Henrietta frowned, clearly not happy to be left with the old women. His sister would have to be patient. He could see Catherine wanted to refuse—but she couldn't without drawing attention to herself.

Lady Trilling and her companions looked surprised.

“We promised my sister we would show her how the waltz is done at an actual ball,” he said in his most winning manner. “It's the next best thing to practicing right here and now—which of course I would never allow.”

Lady Trilling bowed and murmured, “Of course, Your Grace,” clearly confused but not attempting to question such an oddity. He held out his arm to Catherine.

“Miss Aster?”

Catherine took his arm, having no other choice.

“Only one glass of champagne, Retta,” he said to his sister, who scowled at him. “We'll only be gone for a moment.”

Once they were out of earshot, Catherine said to him, under her breath, “What are you thinking? We can't *waltz*. Do you have any notion how odd this looks?”

Already, she was in his arms, and they were moving in time.

“I do. But I had to make it up to you.”

“By having me recognized?”

“No. The ball at Tremberley—and how it ended. I wanted to dance with you again.”

He felt her relax in his arms. She said nothing, but he knew he had won the argument. Instead, he focused on her, how amazing she felt, and how every time they came together, he lost his breath a little. She was, of course, excellent at waltzing. She met his eyes and he could see in their blue-black depths, behind the mask, that she was not angry any longer.

The next time he pulled her in close, almost at the end of the song, he said, “One day, very soon I hope, we will dance in front of all of society and you will be my duchess. One day, everyone here will know you are mine.”



CATHERINE’S HEART POUNDED under her gown. She hadn’t waltzed in years, and she thanked God that Lady Wethersby had hired a tutor who had taught her so well that the steps were second nature. She had been furious with John when he had asked her to dance in front of Lady Trilling, who shouldn’t be tempted to study her any more closely than necessary. And yet as she danced with him arm in arm, she felt her anger dissolve.

When he promised that one day everyone would know that she was his, her anger was completely forgotten.

Of course, it shouldn’t surprise her—they were engaged, after all—but she loved that he wanted to claim her, when she had been so neglected by this world.

And, as they danced, every touch made her thrill for what they would share later in bed.

Her body mourned the slowing of the music and that they would have to go back, for now, to pretending they were mere acquaintances. He offered his arm as they headed back across the ballroom to rejoin Henrietta.

Except, when they started making their way over to Henrietta, Catherine saw that she was no longer standing beside the matrons.

Lady Trilling and the two other ladies still stood in the same spot, now speaking to an older, stooped gentleman, who Catherine recognized from her childhood as the Marquess of Barton.

“Where is Henrietta?” Catherine asked John as they approached.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out.”

He kept his voice even, but she could tell he was nervous.

As they approached, Lady Trilling turned as if to alert Henrietta. She frowned when she saw the girl was gone.

“Your Grace,” she said, looking alarmed, “Lady Henrietta was just here, but it appears that she may have...wandered off.”

“Wandered off?” he asked. She squeezed his arm in warning.

“She likely went to the retiring room, Your Grace.”

“I’ll find her,” Catherine said to John. “Why don’t we walk there together? We can take a turn and see if she is anywhere in the crowd.”

Lady Trilling looked concerned. “I’m very sorry, Your Grace. I’m sure she couldn’t have gone far.”

“It is no matter,” he said and bowed. “I’m sure you’re right, Lady Trilling.” However, Catherine thought, the tight line of John’s mouth, even beneath the domino, could not fool the older woman.

Once they had left Lady Trilling and her friends, John broke out in a string of oaths.

“How could she have let her out of her sight?”

“We shouldn’t have danced.” Guilt radiated through her chest.

“Goddamn it. We were gone for a matter of minutes.”

They struggled to move towards the retiring room. The packed bodies made navigation difficult and Henrietta was nowhere.

“I have known Lady Trilling since birth,” John seethed. “She knew my father when he was a child. You think she would be able to keep an eye on my sister for the length of a waltz.”

“I can’t believe that she would let her out of her sight. Henrietta must have walked off without alerting her.”

They had reached the hall. Catherine turned to John. “I will check the retiring room,” she said. “You should continue looking in the ballroom. She could be anywhere. I’ll meet you back here.”

He didn’t relinquish her arm.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “I’m not seventeen at my first masquerade.”

“Be careful,” he said, in a low voice, and she nodded. Slowly, she made her way to the retiring room, having to wedge herself through the packed entryway to the one space designated just for ladies.

The retiring room itself was also extremely crowded. She looked for Henrietta’s green dress or light brown hair but didn’t see her. She snaked through the room, edging her way through two crying young ladies not much older than Henrietta, a gaggle of society matrons who had stationed themselves in front of the glass, and myriad women tying and retying stays, tapes, and sashes. No Henrietta. She was about to leave the room when she heard a snippet of conversation that rooted her to the spot.

“...and she is calling around now, looking for her, but from what I understand Mary doesn’t want to see her.”

“But why ever not?”

Catherine did not dare look up and see who was speaking, but she knew the voices belonged to the older ladies by the mirror. She froze, thinking they could not be discussing what she thought. Still, she pretended to adjust her stocking and continued listening.

“Well, she has apparently told Julia that she doesn’t want *anyone* to know where she is, and Julia is simply at a loss for what to do.”

“Where *is* she?”

“Julia won’t even tell *me* that. I haven’t the slightest idea but I suspect it can’t be very far from here. Julia seemed to suggest that she had communicated with her recently.”

“No. *Really?*”

“Yes. And yet Mary knows her niece is looking for her and still does not want to be found.”

“How curious.”

“I know. I really shouldn’t say any more. Julia would set her hounds on me if she knew I was even speaking of it.”

At that, the other lady asked about the eligibility of one of the night’s bachelors, and the subject of this Mary and her niece was dropped. But Catherine had heard enough to turn her stomach for the second time that evening.

She moved to leave the room, casting a look back over her shoulder to see the identity of the ladies. There were two—the plump Mrs. Kinsey, in a yellow dress, and Lady Merton, in a turquoise gown, both of whom she had called on earlier that week to ask about her aunt.

For a second, every thought of Henrietta had left her head, but when she exited the retiring room, she remembered that the girl was missing. Her panic returned. She looked for John in the crowd and didn’t see him.

Hearing that gossip about her aunt had knocked something loose in her. She felt even more anxious about Henrietta and the bodies seemed to press in even more. She closed her eyes and tried to think of where she could have gone.

Then a sweat broke out across her entire body.

She had once been not much older than Henrietta, feeling desperately hurt and neglected, and finally in a place where she might win some recognition, some attention. She had been young and high-spirited and ready to make a mistake just to see how it felt.

She couldn’t have.

And yet Catherine knew better than anyone that she very much *could* have. Catherine had gotten lucky that night seven years ago—her indiscretion with John had never been discovered. Not every girl, she knew, was that lucky.

“Bollocks.” She tore off in the direction of the ballroom, not caring that she jostled people rudely out of the way. She sent a man’s glass of port sailing onto his waistcoat and barely mumbled an apology. She pushed her way through the crowd and finally made it to the ballroom, where movement was easier. She didn’t look for John. It was more important to reach Henrietta. She tore onto the balcony, where couples and triads congregated, many speaking loudly over one another, already in their cups. But none of these groups contained Henrietta. She exhaled. Perhaps, she had worried for no reason.

She saw a row of stone steps that led down to the garden. Somehow, she knew.

Catherine tore down the steps. Still, over the sound of the revelers above, she could hear little.

Then, a voice. “Please. I don’t—not—I don’t want to—”

“Henrietta!” she called, running in the direction of the girl. “Henrietta! Where are you?”

As she ran, her mask fell to the ground. She did not bother to pick it up.

She saw the green dress and then Henrietta’s crying face. A man had her pressed up against a wall of ivy, but she clearly had no interest in his embraces.

“Get off of her!” Catherine shouted.

At the sound of her voice, the man released Henrietta. Catherine grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

“Catherine!” Henrietta sobbed. Catherine put her arm around the girl.

“Henrietta,” she said soothingly. “It will be fine. I am here now.”

She looked at the unfamiliar man, who had gone stark white, and looked about her own age. He had a shock of dark brown hair and not an unpleasant countenance, although, right now, it was disfigured by a snarling, aggressive look.

“There has been a misunderstanding,” he began but before he could say more Catherine stepped forward and slapped him across the face.

He looked up at her in shock. Then he lurched towards her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JOHN HAD SEEN Catherine exit the ballroom through the balcony doors. He followed, wondering what the hell she was doing and why she would think that Henrietta had gone outside.

After he had followed the steps off the balcony, he saw Henrietta, who looked terrified, her face streaked with tears, and Catherine, facing a man who he couldn't quite see.

He saw Catherine step forward and slap the man, hard, across the face. The man lunged at her.

And then John was hauling the man off of her. The man had grabbed Catherine by the shoulders, but John pushed him off, yelling curses, and the man hit the paving stones of the garden path.

When he looked up, he saw that it was his cousin.

Damn it, his *second* cousin.

Baron Pierce Falk.

“Bastard!” John shouted down at him.

Falk grinned. His face had always been a few shades too pale for the rest of him. In the moonlight, it looked particularly ghostly, as if he were a corpse that had been reanimated.

“Your sister gave herself up to me in this ivy. Or she would have if we had had a few more minutes to ourselves.”

John gave him a swift kick in the ribs to shut him up and he screamed out.

“You’ll regret that,” the baron choked out, “when I’m your brother-in-law.”

“Over my dead body. You will *never* marry my sister.”

“Her virtue is already compromised, Edington. You have to marry her to me. To avoid a scandal.”

“Fuck scandal. And, anyway, who would believe a drunken, gambling, bankrupt, raping devil like you?”

And he gave him another kick for good measure.

Then, John looked up and met Catherine’s eye. He saw she was trembling with wordless rage, even as she had both arms around Henrietta, who looked harrowed, but physically unharmed. He surmised that Falk had tried to press himself on Henrietta, but Catherine had interrupted him.

From behind him, he heard more footsteps coming down the path. He looked up and saw Lady Trilling. She saw her take in the scene—him standing over Falk, who was splayed out on the ground, the pale and shaking Henrietta, and Catherine with her arms around his sister.

Catherine.

Without her mask.

He saw Lady Trilling’s eyes go wide at the sight of Catherine’s face. Her gaze slid back to John and then to Falk.

“It seems Lady Henrietta isn’t feeling well,” Lady Trilling said, her voice clear with only a slight tremor in it. “I will call for your carriage, Your Grace, and meet you around the front in ten minutes. I believe there is a passage through the side garden, if you want to avoid the crush of the ballroom for Lady Henrietta’s health.”

Lady Trilling turned to the man still on the ground. “Lord Falk,” she said in a sharp voice, “if you ever mention that Lady Henrietta wasn’t feeling well this evening to *anyone*, I will insist that you pay the significant debt you owed my late husband. Do not be mistaken. I can make your life *extremely* difficult.”

Falk gave a moan of recognition and John contemplated whether he should pummel the man further. He wanted to beat him, very badly, for what he had done to his sister and for

grabbing Catherine. Seeing that he looked stricken by Lady Trilling's threat, however, John pulled back. If he resisted now, Lady Trilling's gambit might work and his infernal second cousin might keep his mouth shut about Henrietta.

With a great effort, John turned away from Falk. With Lady Trilling, he and Catherine led Henrietta to the front of the manor.

As they entered their carriage, John asked the older woman if she could tell the Viscount of Tremberley that he had returned to Edington Hall with Henrietta and Miss Aster.

"Catherine Forster, you mean," the old woman said to him, her face inscrutable behind her mask.

"Er, yes. I would appreciate if—"

"Don't worry, Your Grace. I will tell no one."

John gave her a nod, only able to hope that she would keep her word and stepped into his carriage.



IN THE CARRIAGE, Catherine's heart pounded for a multitude of reasons. The principal reason, however, was that Lady Trilling had seen her. There could be no mistake that she had seen Catherine without her mask. Lady Trilling must now know that the tutor and chaperone staying at Edington Hall was not an anonymous Miss Aster, but Miss Catherine Forster. She was impressed by Lady Trilling's strength back in the gardens with Baron Falk. Given what she had heard in the retiring room, however, she knew she was liable to tell her friends sensitive information and that her friends were not the heart and soul of discretion. She hoped Lady Trilling would stay quiet about Henrietta, at least, even if she revealed Catherine's identity.

A grim silence pervaded the carriage. Catherine had her arm around Henrietta, who still sniffled. John had his eyes closed, with his head back on the seat. She had a feeling he

was trying to resist the urge to run back to the Langley gardens and beat Baron Falk to death.

“Are you all right, Henrietta?” she asked the girl for what felt like the hundredth time.

She nodded and sniffed.

“What did he do to you?” John broke in. “How did you end up in the garden with him? How were you separated from Lady Trilling?”

“John,” Catherine warned, keeping her voice firm. It didn’t matter how she had gotten out there—it wasn’t her fault.

Then, too late, she realized that she had addressed him by his Christian name. She prayed that Henrietta was too upset to notice the slip.

John softened his tone and took his sister’s hand.

“I’m sorry, Retta. I don’t blame you at all. None of this is your fault. I just want to understand what happened. I won’t be mad. No matter what you say.”

Henrietta cringed and Catherine suspected that she feared her brother *would* be mad. She had been her age, horned in by propriety—how many times had she fantasized back then about dissolving into a ballroom and finding her own fun?

“I-I-I left Lady Trilling.” Catherine squeezed Henrietta tighter around the shoulders. The girl relaxed into her embrace. “I wanted to see the ballroom. And I was angry with you for leaving me.”

“It was only for one dance,” he said, softly, but Catherine knew Henrietta was right. She knew if Henrietta understood their relationship, she wouldn’t be upset about the dance, but she was in the dark. They hadn’t told her because they wanted to protect her, because their relationship wasn’t appropriate for a girl of her age to know about, and yet it endangered her not to have all the information.

“I know,” Henrietta said. “It was stupid. I’m sorry.”

“How did you meet Falk?”

Henrietta looked down into her lap. “I was walking around the ballroom, taking everything in, when a man approached me and said he knew me. I asked how that could be and he pulled off his mask and it was cousin Pierce!”

“Second-cousin Pierce,” John grumbled.

Henrietta rolled her eyes. Catherine was glad to see that she wasn’t so spiritually maimed that she couldn’t express irritation at her brother.

“Anyway, I remembered him from those times when he would come and visit. You probably don’t remember, but he was always very nice to me.”

John grunted an acknowledgment.

“He asked if I wanted to see the Langley gardens, which were just off the balcony. I thought he was family! Then, when we got down off the balcony, he started kissing me! Which was disgusting. He is *so* very pasty. And I told him to unhand me but he wouldn’t! And then Catherine came behind him and told him to release me and he did. And then she slapped him!”

“Yes,” John said, with a smile, “I saw that part.”

“Is that what I should have done?” Henrietta asked Catherine. “Slapped him? Is that what ladies do?”

“Not exactly,” Catherine said, “but he was very, very far from acting like a gentleman, so you could have slapped him, or screamed, or done anything to break free of him.”

“Retta,” John said. “You can’t go walking in gardens with men.” He gave Catherine a guilty look. “Even gentlemen you know. It’s not safe.”

“He said back there,” Henrietta murmured, “that my virtue was compromised? Am I ruined?”

“Most certainly *not*,” Catherine said.

“Why would he say that, then?”

Catherine didn't say anything at first. It was John's place to dictate how much Henrietta knew.

When he said nothing, however, Catherine knew she had to speak.

"You need to tell her, Your Grace," she said, quietly. "It doesn't protect her not to know these things."

John sighed. "He was hoping that he could say he had compromised you enough that the only way out was marriage. That was clearly his aim. It wouldn't matter *what* he did, of course. I would never consent to a marriage, but he was hoping that..." He trailed off, unable to continue.

"He hoped that, if he forced himself on you," Catherine supplied, knowing that John didn't have the heart for this part, "then you would have to marry him."

"But why?" Henrietta said. "He barely knows me."

"He wants your dowry," John said. Catherine saw the bitterness in his face. *He almost has it*, she thought, and shuddered.

Henrietta's mouth fell open. "How disgusting," she said, as if she had found an alley rat in her chamber pot.

"He should be hanged," John said. "I'm sorry, Henrietta, I should have warned you about him. Father and I never told you, because it was so distasteful, but, when you were twelve, he offered for you."

"*Offered for me? When I was twelve?*"

"Yes. You remember when he visited and made himself pleasant to you?"

"How horrific!"

"Father refused him, obviously, and we found out that he was after your dowry."

The carriage had pulled up in front of Edington Hall and Catherine felt immense relief that they were home.



LATER THAT EVENING, Catherine was back in her room, in her night rail. She had held Henrietta's hand until she fell asleep. The girl was rattled, but Catherine suspected she would feel much better in the morning.

She heard a knock on her door. She rose to open it.

John came into the room.

He wrapped his arms around her and she rested her head against his chest.

There was so much that they needed to discuss, but the feeling of his arms around her chased those thoughts away.

He reached down and kissed her. When she kissed him back, he gave one of his low growls that sent desire cascading through her body. She pressed her body into his, as she had wanted to all night but couldn't in front of the crowds of the ballroom. She felt that he was already hard beneath his small clothes, which he wore with only a loose linen shirt.

He stripped off her night rail.

"You're perfect."

Catherine smiled, because that is what he always said—he had said it in the Tremberley gardens and he had said it to her every night they had been together since.

She sat down on the bed, holding his gaze. She watched as he stripped off his nightclothes and left them in a puddle on the floor.

He came down on top of her and, without hesitation, she opened her legs and guided him into her.

At first, he didn't move inside of her. They just looked at one another, breathing hard, him holding her wrists above her head.

He started moving, slowly, and she could feel the tension building inside of her from the beginning, as he pushed in and

out little by little. She could see the same pleasure that she felt building in his face.

As she edged towards climax, almost lost to the exquisite feeling of him, he looked down at her and said, “I want to make you mine.”

“I am yours,” she said, the pleasure almost at the point where she couldn’t speak.

“I want to spend inside of you.”

She gasped at the raw need behind his words. In this moment of intense pleasure, she couldn’t care about the consequences, how it would trouble their plans. She wanted him to fill her up, to make her completely his own.

She looked up at him and nodded vigorously. “Please. I want you to.”

“After this, there isn’t—you can’t take it back.”

“I want you to. Please. Make me yours. I am yours.”

At these words, he let out a ragged moan of want. She came apart, too, grasping his shoulders and crying out.

She wasn’t sure how long passed, as they lay in a daze. Then he turned towards her and took her hand.

“I can’t wait. I want to marry you. Soon. I can’t wait a few years—or however long it takes for Henrietta to find her match. I want to marry you much sooner than that.”

“But we can’t.”

He shook his head. “If tonight taught me anything, it’s that I am not protecting Henrietta by lying to her. I told her I wouldn’t lie anymore, but what else am I doing with you? I want her to know about us. I want to marry you. It might disrupt her season, but it will be better for her in the long run. And Henrietta adores you. She’ll be so happy.”

“I fear it’s unfair to her.”

“Right after I went to see you at Halston Place, Tremberley thought I had gone to ask you to marry me. He saw what I should have from the beginning. And when I said I hadn’t asked for your hand, that I couldn’t do that to Henrietta, he said something that has stayed with me. He said, Henrietta is a duke’s sister, with an enormous dowry, it would all come to rights. And he said some things felt better than reason.”

She smiled at such a characteristic speech from John’s best friend. But she still couldn’t speak.

“Please,” he said, looking down at her, “say you’ll marry me. Not in a few years, but a few weeks. Soon. As soon as we can do it.”

“What will we say to Henrietta?”

“The truth. She’ll understand. I know she will. Please. Marry me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WHEN CATHERINE AWOKE the next morning, she wondered if she had dreamt the night before. Then, she felt John curled around her and she knew that it was real.

They were getting married.

Not in three years, not in one, not after Henrietta was out and married, but in a few weeks at most. They had resolved that, today, they would tell Henrietta the real nature of their relationship. Then they would alert their friends and family to the engagement. They would plan a small wedding as soon as possible.

She felt John stir beside her and kiss behind her ear. She smiled at him and, in his eyes, she saw a softness that had never been there before.

A knock sounded on her chamber door.

John's relaxation turned to alarm. She grabbed his robe from the bedpost and wrapped it around herself before opening the door.

Mrs. Morrison stood on the other side of the threshold.

"*Miss Aster,*" she said, with her characteristic irony, "Lady Trilling is here to see you."

She looked at John. In the excitement of the night before, they had completely forgotten that Lady Trilling had seen her. That said, it hardly mattered now.

"And, Your Grace, your friends have returned," Mrs. Morrison said, raising her voice so it could be heard through the doorway. She couldn't see John from her perch in the doorway, but she knew he was there. "They said they will be heading back to London this evening. After they sleep off last night, I presume."

Catherine turned back to Mrs. Morrison. “Lady Trilling is here now? It’s not even noon.”

“She said it was a most pressing matter.”

“Very well,” Catherine said. “Tell her I will be down shortly.”

Mrs. Morrison curtseyed and left.

“Shall I come with you?” John asked.

“I think it would be better if I spoke to her alone. She only asked for me. And I forgot to tell you, in the chaos of last night, but I think she might know where my aunt is. I don’t think she was completely truthful to me before.”

“*What?*” John sat upright in bed.

Catherine nodded vigorously and relayed what she had overheard the night before in the retiring room.

“Your aunt doesn’t want to see you?” he asked, after hearing the story.

“Apparently not.” Catherine tried to ignore her pang of pain at his question.

“Jesus Christ.”

“I will probably have to tell Lady Trilling why we are looking for my aunt. She doesn’t want to give over her location, but she may do it for a good enough reason.”

“I think she proved herself trustworthy in regards to Henrietta’s reputation last night. I have no objection to telling her the truth, if you think it will help.”

“It may,” Catherine said. “I am glad she’s here, whatever she wants, so that I can question her more closely. Maybe, this time, she’ll give me the answer I’m looking for.”

John gave her a smile. “You are quite fetching when you are determined. And when you are slapping a baron.”

“My first time,” she said, laughing and drinking in how his gaze ran over her.

“All right. Go and see Lady Trilling. Come to me once you’re done. I will be in my study. I had never cared for the room before, but now, for some reason, it has a pleasant association.”

She kissed him, savoring the sensation. After dressing hastily, she swept from the room, resolute that she would draw the answers from Lady Trilling that they needed.



WHEN SHE ENTERED the drawing room, Lady Trilling was seated in an armchair near the fire.

Catherine curtsayed before her.

“I think we can dispense with the formality, Miss Forster.”

“Please, Lady Trilling. Call me Catherine. You have known me since I was a child.”

“Very well, Catherine. We have much to discuss.”

Catherine sat down across from the matron. “Indeed, I think we do.”

“Last night was quite the commotion.”

“I hope it doesn’t become gossip.”

“It won’t,” Lady Trilling responded quickly. “No one noticed the chaos in the garden, and I commanded Baron Falk to leave discreetly, so no one saw his disorder. Of course, I felt responsible for letting Henrietta out of my sight. For that I apologize to you and His Grace. May I ask how you and John came to be acquainted?”

“He asked me to help him with something,” Catherine said. “Something very important. That concerned us both.”

“Finding your aunt,” Lady Trilling said, with a glimmer in her eye.

Catherine nodded.

“And what is your plan for your little liaison, once you do find her?”

Catherine startled but Lady Trilling gave her a warm smile.

“If you think you can convince me, Catherine, that your association with John is of the chaste and friendly variety, I would spare yourself the effort. Between the waltz and how he looked at you in the garden last night, I could not be convinced of such a circumstance, no matter what you said.”

Catherine saw no reason to lie to the woman. Perhaps, it would even make their quest for her aunt more sympathetic.

“We plan to marry.”

Lady Trilling’s eyes went wide. Instead of expressing shock, however, she said, “I thought that might be the case. And how long-standing is this engagement?”

“It is very recent.”

“So, you were only brought together by this endeavor to find Mary Forster? No engagement stood before then?”

Catherine thought of the night in the Tremberley gardens and willed herself not to blush.

“No. You are exactly correct.”

“Why do you want to find her?”

“I will tell you but you must tell no one. We have conducted ourselves in absolute secrecy because it could jeopardize Henrietta’s prospects.”

“There is nothing I could desire less than to see such a sweet girl as Henrietta harmed in any way.”

“John knows you are a true friend to his family. He has granted me leave to tell you the truth.”

Lady Trilling gave a nod of satisfaction. And so Catherine told her the details of the late duke’s will.

Lady Trilling appeared shocked, even scandalized, but she kept her composure.

“I hardly know where to begin. His Grace *hated* Baron Pierce Falk. He offered for Henrietta when she was still a

child, looking only for her dowry. He told me himself.”

“I am well aware. It is my understanding that he never actually intended for Falk to inherit the money. It was to make sure John found my aunt Mary.”

“Goddamn it, Reginald,” the older woman swore. “*That man*. He would never let it lie.”

“What do you mean?”

Lady Trilling sighed. “We were all children together—Reginald, me, and your aunt Mary. Ever since I can remember, those two—they could never leave each other alone. I always thought they would marry one day. When we were young, it seemed they would. They courted—and *more*. They weren’t careful. They were heedless that their parents would agree, because their properties bordered one another, and they had grown up together.”

Lady Trilling shook her head.

“But the duke—John’s grandfather, Wilberforce—didn’t agree. He refused the match. And threatened to cut Reginald off without a penny if he married Mary Forster.”

Catherine felt her heart plummet. “Why did the duke oppose it?”

Lady Trilling leveled Catherine with a gaze. Quickly the answer came to her.

“Her dowry. She didn’t have enough of a portion for a duke’s son.”

“You’ll excuse me for saying that the Forsters were good gentry, but they weren’t rich. A very old family, certainly, but no longer as moneyed or powerful as they had once been. The duke felt the match was beneath his son and heir.”

“And he listened,” Catherine said, as if she had always known the truth, even though she had never heard the story. “Reginald broke off the connection.”

It twisted Catherine's insides to imagine her aunt and John's father as a young couple separated by the cruelty of circumstance. She thought of Mrs. Morrison's insinuation about Mary and the former duke. She too must know this story. Of course she did.

Lady Trilling continued, interrupting her thoughts. "Their engagement was never official. But to them it was very real. I saw it myself. And even though Reginald listened to his father, afraid to defy him, he never really gave Mary up. Even when he married Gloria, who came from a family worthy of a duke's heir and who was a beauty in her own right. She wasn't a hard woman to love and he loved her in his way. But she wasn't Mary."

"Why didn't my aunt marry another man? She must have had offers."

"She did. But your aunt—she wasn't about to accept a man she didn't care for. And she loved Reginald. And then your mother died and your father was wrecked. She stayed on at Forster House for you and him. And I don't think she was even unhappy."

"Even with the duke living next door? Married to another woman?"

Lady Trilling gave a shrug. "She didn't like it, I know. But Forster House was her home. And a woman always knows when she has a man's first affection. I think with Reginald, she always knew—she was first in his heart. For years, they didn't do anything more than speak in passing, on county matters, in front of other people. And Reginald had real happiness with Gloria, who gave him John. He was a good father. And your aunt was happy with you and your father and her friends."

"I don't understand then. How...how—?"

"How did everything go wrong?" Lady Trilling arched an eyebrow. "I can't say for certain, although the obvious is plain. They started up again. She has never told me how or why."

Catherine caught the reference to the present tense. She knew that she had been right. Lady Trilling was the key. She knew exactly where to find her aunt.

“They had been so young when their plans for engagement were broken off—nineteen, twenty. When you are that young, you think life is infinite. They were heartbroken to give each other up, of course, but I think neither imagined it as a permanent separation. Then ten years passed and life seemed shorter. Gloria was lovely, but she wasn’t the woman who haunted Reginald’s dreams. And you and your father were impossibly dear, especially you, but still you weren’t her child.”

The words stung, but Catherine worked to keep her face impassive.

“I didn’t have a mother,” she said, quickly.

“Yes,” Lady Trilling said gently, “and you were so much like her own child that I believe for a long time it sufficed. But she still wanted to carry a child of her own. To have a child with a man she loved. She didn’t want to be a spinster for life. It wasn’t in her nature.”

“Then why didn’t she marry? Why begin things again with Reginald?”

“It was undoubtedly foolish. But they couldn’t help it. I tell you all of this because I want you to have compassion for your aunt.”

“She doesn’t want to see me,” Catherine said, looking down at her hands.

“She doesn’t want to see *anyone*. I am the only one from her old life who knows where she is and I have never told another soul. Reginald used to beg me to tell him. He knew how close we were and that she wouldn’t go anywhere without letting me know where she was. I would only tell him that she was still alive, but I swore to her that I would never tell Reginald where she was. And I never did. She knew that if he knew, he would come and try and win her back. After what

happened, she didn't think of him fondly anymore. In fact, she does not care for the Breminsters at all now. She grew to hate Reginald."

"So you won't tell me where she is?" Catherine said. "Not even for Henrietta?"

Lady Trilling met her eyes. "I have never told anyone until now. Doubtless, my oldest friend will be furious with me for breaking her trust. But hopefully she will understand why I felt I had to."

Lady Trilling handed Catherine a piece of paper. She looked down and found scrawled on it a direction, a few towns over—a simple, plain country place, where members of society almost never went.

"If you call on her tomorrow afternoon, I believe you will find her in the most ideal circumstance to receive you."

Catherine nodded.

"You have to understand," Lady Trilling urged, "I do not think she will be happy about your engagement to John. She may be very angry or even cruel. She'll come to accept it. But it will be a shock."

Now, Catherine knew she would see her aunt again. After all she had just heard, she only dreaded the prospect more.

CHAPTER THIRTY

JOHAN AND CATHERINE spent the next day planning, mulling over the best way to approach Mary Forster, given what Lady Trilling had told them. The good news was that they knew where Mary Forster was now. The bad news was that they very much doubted she would accept the annuity without some convincing.

They had barely had time to bid Montaigne, Leith, and Tremberley goodbye. John lent them one of his carriages to take back to London so that they wouldn't have to bear the indignity of another hack. Before his friends left, he and Catherine relayed to them what had happened the previous night with Baron Falk.

"Shall we murder him?" Tremberley said, his teeth gritted. "I really wouldn't mind."

"I don't think it will be necessary," Catherine said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Lady Trilling seems to have him in a subdued state."

A half hour later, the Rank Rakes bowed out of the Hall, bidding adieu to Henrietta, who shed a tear at their departure. As they left, each gave Catherine quiet good tidings on the nuptials that they knew were now happening sooner rather than later.

After the departure of his friends, he and Catherine planned in bed, trying—and failing—not to get distracted by each other. Finally, after hours of talking it through, they had a plan they hoped would work.



THE NEXT MORNING, after a carriage ride of nearly two hours, they pulled up to a small, prosperous-looking farm in a sweet spot right near the bend in a river. This part of Dorset was

outside of Edington and had very few high-ranking families in its vicinity. There was a local squire, Mr. Peckham, whom John knew by repute, but even he was not fine enough for the *ton*.

John had been utterly nonplussed about the new information they had learned about his father and Mary. It had never occurred to him that, before he had even been born, his father had been involved with Mary Forster. That they had grown up together he should have perhaps suspected, but he had assumed that, despite the proximity of their properties, they had been like he and Catherine: barely acquaintances, only aware of each from afar. Now, he could see that he and Catherine had never been introduced as children because of what had transpired between Mary Forster and his father. In retrospect, that his family had been on such cold terms with their neighbors of an ancient, revered family did appear peculiar.

He imagined the childhood that his father must have had with Mary Forster. How they must have run through the apple orchards together and caught tadpoles in the ponds, how he must have been transfixed by her first as a little girl, her bright hair lit up by Dorset sunshine. It didn't soften him exactly to his father, but it did give him a different point of view.

Now, they stood in front of the quaint little farmhouse, quite grand and genteel-looking for such a place, covered in vines and flowers. It was beautiful without being at all fashionable. The exact sort of middle-class, heart-of-England establishment with which the nobility had nothing to do. They were close enough to Edington that Mary could still easily monitor its goings-on, but far enough away that no one, in the normal course of her life, need recognize her. She had been hiding in plain sight.

“Are you prepared?” he said, looking at Catherine.

She looked up at him and nodded.

Once they dealt with this one hurdle, he thought, he and Catherine could be together, as they should have always been,

as they always would be. They would tell Henrietta about Catherine's real identity and they would announce their engagement to the world. He leaned down and kissed her, fortifying himself for this encounter, not caring if anyone in the farmhouse saw.

They walked down the quaint path to the door and knocked. His heart beat painfully as they waited. He wondered if Mary herself would answer the door, but instead a maid, in a neat cap, opened it.

"Is Mrs. Ryerson at home?" Catherine asked, the only indication of her nervousness a faint tremor in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am," the girl said, bowing. "Who may I tell her is calling?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Aster," John said. They had decided on the ride over that, in the event of encountering a maid, they would use their old traveling pseudonyms, in case Mary Forster heard their real names and refused to see them.

The maid called them into a little parlor and asked them to wait. Earlier, he and Catherine had speculated that Lady Trilling had told them to call during Mary Forster's normal receiving hours. Without even having to speak, he and Catherine exchanged a look that confirmed that their surmise had been correct.

Then, at the door that led to the rest of the house, John noticed a boy, around ten, peering in at them. He had bright blue eyes, light brown hair, and a curious expression. He nudged Catherine and she turned to look at the child, too. The boy pulled his head through the door and disappeared.

In moments, the maid returned and beckoned them into a parlor.

A woman in her late forties sat on a neat but modest sofa, with a piece of work. She looked up expectantly at her visitors in the doorway, clearly unsure of their identity. At first, John thought that they had the wrong woman. This woman looked

so plain and docile, her hair not the dramatic silver-blond that he had remembered, but more yellow and ordinary.

But then he noticed her eyes. That blackberry color was only a shade or two different from Catherine's. It was her.

She rose to greet them. He realized, as he watched her do it, that she still didn't know who they were.

Then he saw her look at Catherine. She stopped moving.

"Aunt Mary," Catherine said, moving forward to take her hand, but the woman moved back, towards the sofa, rejecting the overture. Despite this recoil, Catherine continued, "It is so good to see you after all of this time."

The woman looked at Catherine, not saying anything. She merely stood there and stared at her. Her expression was inscrutable. She looked almost frightened.

Up close, he was shocked to see that he could trace very little of Catherine in Mary Forster's face. Now, the similarity between the two women appeared superficial to him: they had similar coloring, it was true—their hair and eyes created a similarly unusual contrast. Together, however, he saw that their similarities had been greatly exaggerated. Salacious gossip and his child's mind, which had painted Mary Forster in broad strokes, had imagined the two women as identical, when the truth was much more complicated.

To start, their features were very different. Mary Forster's face was delicate, almost too small and unremarkable for beauty, if it hadn't been for that strange coloring, whereas Catherine had an expressive, fine brow and much more pronounced features that looked as if they had been carved by a sculptor. Mary Forster was a small woman, thin, with petite limbs, whereas Catherine was tall and voluptuous, his bountiful goddess. His stomach lurched as he realized his mistake. He had once been ready to cast off their relationship for a similarity that now appeared hardly worth noting.

"Please, Aunt Mary," Catherine continued uncertainly, "don't be afraid. We don't want to cause you any trouble."

The woman's throat worked for a moment and then, finally, she spat out, "*Afraid?*"

Mary shook her head and strode across the room. He thought she might take Catherine's hand in greeting, but instead she went to the door and beckoned her maid. John heard her tell the maid that she was not to be disturbed with any other visitors for the rest of the afternoon. Then she shut the door to the drawing room.

Mary walked back to the sofa and gestured for them to sit in the two armchairs that sat opposite. Then, she took up her piece of work and said, in a low, hard voice, "What are you doing here, Cathy?"

His fiancée looked rattled by this cold reception. Still, she sat down in one of the chairs opposite her aunt. Before Catherine could answer her question, however, she tendered another one.

"And why would you bring *him* into my house?"

"You're married now," Catherine said, not answering either query. "I was unaware."

"I assume Julia told you," Mary responded. "I shouldn't have trusted her, but I have a terrible history of being weak-hearted where my old companions are concerned."

With these words, she shot John a look of pure venom. He didn't say anything. They had agreed that Catherine would do the talking until it came to the crucial point.

"Lady Trilling did tell me where to find you," Catherine said evenly. "I have been looking for you. *We* have been looking for you."

For the first time, he saw surprise light up the woman's eyes. Then, quickly, another emotion clouded their peculiar color, turning them dark and angry.

"What could either of you ever want with me, Cathy? And how could it ever involve *him*?" Despite the vehemence of her tone, her hands didn't stop moving over her work.

“We were once quite close, aunt. For years, you were like a mother to me. I have missed you terribly.” John had to admire Catherine’s careful work trying to coax out another reception from this hostile woman. “I am surprised you would say that.”

“Your mother died when you were a baby,” Mary retorted. “I am not your mother.”

The cruelty behind these words made John’s hands tighten on the arms of his chair. Mary Forster didn’t have to be glad to see him, but he had no right to speak to Catherine this way.

“Mrs. Ryerson, you may speak to me as you wish, but I cannot let you speak to your niece in such a manner. She is only trying to help you.”

“*Help me?* How dare *you* address *me*. They say your father is dead and you are now the duke. From the way you burst into my house, I can see you will continue his legacy of selfish entitlement.”

She turned to Catherine. “I am ashamed you would associate with this man.”

John was ready to lay into her, but Catherine leveled him with a gaze. He knew he had to stick to their plan. For her sake, he didn’t offer any rebuke to this woman, who seemed just as vindictive and cruel as he had always imagined.

“Lady Trilling says that your husband, Mr. Ryerson, is a good man,” Catherine said lightly.

A little smile crept onto the woman’s face. Quickly, however, she vanquished it.

“Julia was very sly to have you come when he was out. She knows that, during my usual visiting hours, he goes to market.”

“How did you meet?” Catherine asked. John expected a firm rebuttal from Mary Forster and she did not disappoint him.

“It is a long story. And not one that you have any right to hear.”

“Regardless, I am very happy for you, aunt.”

The woman gave a bitter smile. “I doubt you care one way or another about my happiness, Cathy.”

John hated the expression of hurt that bloomed on Catherine’s face. He was already enraged on her behalf, but her voice betrayed no irritation when she replied.

“That is not true, aunt. I care very much.”

The woman said nothing, her eyes on her work.

Silence filled the room. He wished Catherine would get to the point.

“No,” the woman finally said. “You don’t care about my happiness. You have only come to me now because you want something.” The woman looked up from her work. “But I cannot fathom what it would be. Or why Julia has betrayed me. I have nothing to give you.”

“I am here to help you, aunt.”

The woman fixed Catherine with a firm gaze. “You are here to help yourself.”

John couldn’t bear it anymore. “Mrs. Ryerson, we have tracked you down because, in his will, my father left you an annuity. One thousand pounds a year.”

Mary looked up in alarm. Only now did she set her work aside.

“It is a healthy sum.” John continued, “You have children, according to Lady Trilling—a boy and a girl. That money could help launch them in the world. It would be a mistake to turn it down, but it is no matter to me what you do with it. I am merely carrying out my father’s wishes.”

She fixed him with a stare. “I don’t want Reginald’s money, as he well knew. He was a weak man with an important position. What a waste, I came to discover. It was hard to see the man beneath the title, how little he was worth,

until it was too late. I would have done many things differently had I known.”

She gave an indignant laugh.

“And you seem no different, *Your Grace*. A weak man protected by a title. I don’t know how you have pressed my niece into helping you, or how you manipulated Julia into giving up my position, but I want nothing to do with any of it. I don’t want the annuity.”

“I must ask you to reconsider,” John insisted, irate at the woman’s manner. “It is a matter of great importance that you accept it. Think of what that money could do for your children.”

“How dare *you* speak of my children,” Mary countered. “They do not need any of Reginald’s tainted money. I am sorry if you have only now realized your father’s worth, *Your Grace*. I have no doubt my acceptance of this money is attached to untold stipulations in his will. He may, indeed, be moving you like a marionette, but he will not do the same to me. I pity you if it is so, but I will not accept anything from Reginald.”

John wondered if she could really be so sanguine about not accepting one thousand pounds a year. It was an incredible sum for a family like hers, who lived in this quiet way.

“What I don’t understand,” she said, “is why you, Cathy, would endeavor to help him.”

“That’s none of your concern,” John snapped.

“I could have hardly thought it would harm you, aunt,” Catherine said. “To give you money.”

“Then you are even dumber than I feared, for surely you should understand that Reginald only ever hurt me. Anything that comes from him is cursed. I learned that long ago.”

“Catherine,” John said, quietly, reaching out to touch her just as they had planned. When his fingers met her arm, she looked at him, and he could see real pain there, even though

they had expected her cruelty and prepared for just such a moment as this one.

When he looked up at Mary Forster, he saw their little tableau had worked.

She stood and she pointed at him, her finger shaking. “*You*,” she said. “*You*.”

“Aunt,” Catherine said, “please calm down.”

She whirled on Catherine. “What are you thinking? Did you not learn from my mistake? He’ll *never* do right by you, Cathy.”

“We’re betrothed,” John ground out, quickly, seeking to extinguish any hint of impropriety.

“*Betrothed*,” Mary spit out, her eyes flashing, and she looked mad. “You aren’t *betrothed*. If the Duke of Edington was betrothed, I would have heard it. Everyone would have.”

“It’s very new,” Catherine supplied.

“Cathy, he will *never* marry you.” Her eyes swept over them and her knowing glance washed John in shame, despite him knowing that he had nothing to be ashamed of.

“I can imagine what has transpired between the two of you. I have lived it. *You*,” she said, looking at John, “are filthy. Does your shamelessness know no bounds? You, who as a little boy discovered us, now befouls my niece?”

John couldn’t take it any longer. As they had expected, Mary Forster was not going to be reasonable and accept the money out of her own self-interest. It was time for the next part of their plan.

“Catherine,” he said, turning towards his fiancée. “We should leave. I will not sit here and be insulted.”

He made for the door, but he knew she wouldn’t follow. It had been their plan, but he was still stung, somehow, when she didn’t move. He hated leaving her with this woman.

“Catherine,” he said, putting urgency in his voice, even though he knew she would stay.

“John, I can’t leave. Not yet.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Cathy,” the woman said. “If you are with him, we have nothing else to discuss.”

“*Aunt,*” she said, real ire in her tone. He saw her swallow hard to compose herself. “You do not know the circumstances of our engagement. I am sorry if the news of it upsets you.”

She turned to John. “I am very sorry, John, but I must speak with my aunt further.”

“Very well, Catherine,” John snapped, not finding it at all difficult to pretend at anger, even though he knew her reluctance to leave was just pretend. “If you choose to stay here with this woman, then I suppose you can find your own conveyance back to Edington Hall.”

With that, he strode away from Catherine Forster. But this time, it was at her insistence.

She knew her aunt, she had told him. And she was certain that she would need to be alone with her to succeed in their mission. Only then could she prevail upon her to accept his father’s last, unwanted gift.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CATHERINE WINCED AS she heard John's carriage spin down the gravel road. She reminded herself that he wasn't really displeased with her. John had not actually left. He was waiting with the carriage down a nearby country lane, the one they had spied on the way into the farmhouse. He hadn't really left her here. He hadn't really walked away.

They had planned the appearance of a quarrel in the hopes that it would soften Mary towards her. She had known she would have to speak with her aunt in private if she wanted her to accept the annuity. They had planned to have her detect their relationship, too. Catherine had hoped it would stir up her dormant warm feelings towards the Breminsters and make her more susceptible to accepting the bequest.

Thus far, it did not appear to be working.

It was jarring to see her aunt and hear her cruel words. But she also felt admiration for the woman in front of her. She had made a new life for herself, despite all that had happened to her. And Catherine knew her aunt had a soft side. She was the one who had taught her about the land, how it held stories. Catherine just needed to find a way around her pride and reflexive steeliness.

With these reassuring thoughts, Catherine took a deep breath.

"What a loyal lover," her aunt mocked, her work in her hands once more. Now that John was gone, Catherine could hear a new lightness in her voice. She suspected that John's presence had addled her aunt into a cruelty that was not her natural mode.

"You didn't have to antagonize him," Catherine said. "I don't remember you being so harsh and unforgiving."

“You have no idea what I have given up to that family. How much I have lost.”

Sensing her susceptibility in John’s absence, Catherine moved out of her chair and onto the sofa. She took it as a good sign that her aunt didn’t protest.

“You can’t know, Cathy, what they did to me and now I fear the same is happening to you.”

“Nothing untoward or improper is happening to me,” Catherine said, wincing a bit at the obfuscation. It was true in spirit, if not to the letter. “John and I are engaged. We will be very happy together. And I have you to thank. He came to me because he needed my help to find you. In trying to find you, we fell in love.”

“Another thing to thank Reginald for. He would, of course, not think twice about sending his abandoned son after my niece. I read the scandal sheets, girl. I know what they say of the new Duke of Edington.”

“You of all people should know not to believe what is printed in scandal sheets.”

Mary gave her a piercing gaze. “I have always found the scandal sheets to be accurate, if uncharitable.”

Catherine shook her head at this obstinacy. “You have to accept the money, aunt. John is right. Think of your children.”

“My children don’t need Reginald’s money,” her aunt scoffed. “Although I have to wonder what Reginald did to get his son and heir in my drawing room. It must be wicked. Pray tell, what did Reginald put in the will to compel you both here?”

“How do you know that it wasn’t just a bequest? To make amends?”

“Reginald always wanted to find me. I suspect that he hoped, if he found me again, I would marry him. And I couldn’t imagine anything more horrible.”

“Why? Didn’t you love him once?”

Catherine did not understand this part of the story. It had occurred to her, when Lady Trilling told her the tale, that John's mother had died only a year after the scandal. If they had been so in love, wouldn't they have married? Lady Trilling had said the duke still loved her aunt up until his death, but that Mary had soured on her former lover. For her, what had changed? How had she gone from willing to risk anything for him to hiding from him?

"Tell me about Reginald's will first."

She and John had agreed that, if it felt right, she should tell Mary about the will. Perhaps she would take pity on poor Henrietta, although Catherine had to say that right now her aunt hardly appeared soft-hearted. But she had to try.

"You must remember the duke's daughter?" she said, feeling a heat steal up her cheeks. The duchess had been pregnant with Henrietta when her aunt had been bedding the woman's husband. Surely her aunt remembered.

Her aunt bent closer to her work. She gave a small nod.

"She was always to have a very significant dowry. Sixty thousand pounds. And the duke left it away from her, in his will, to a relative that he and John both hated, unless he found you and gave the annuity."

Mary's eyes looked up from her work and cast it aside once more. Her eyes were wide again.

"He jeopardized his daughter's future *to send me an annuity?*"

"Yes. He very much wanted you to have this money. He added the provision in a codicil a few days before his death."

"Reginald," her aunt said, shaking her head, her whole manner oozing disgust with her old lover. But Catherine also saw sadness lingering at the edges of her contempt. "I don't need his money. She is his daughter."

"He loved you," Catherine added, cheered that her aunt seemed incrementally softer.

“You don’t understand.”

“Why not take the money?” Catherine paused. “Your children will benefit.”

“Don’t speak of my children,” Mary repeated, “when you couldn’t possibly understand.”

“Then explain it.”

“It is not easy to explain.”

“I am sure you can find a way.”

Mary sighed and looked at her, a challenge in her eye. “If I tell you the truth, you can never tell another soul. Not the duke. Or the girl. Especially not the girl.”

“Why would I tell Henrietta?” Catherine said, confused, the question out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

And then she looked into her aunt’s eyes and caught a terrible meaning.

“No,” Catherine said, comprehension dawning. “It is not possible.”

“It is. I assure you.”

Catherine tried to grasp this implication, to see it as a fact, but she couldn’t. All she felt was disbelief. “It cannot be true,” she repeated. “John heard his mother giving birth to Henrietta. He heard her screams.”

“He didn’t hear her screams,” Mary said, with a strange smile on her face. “He heard *mine*.”

Catherine felt ill. And yet she didn’t rise. Her aunt’s words fell over her like a spell, fixing her in place.

“All those years ago, the Duchess of Edington and I were both with child. Reginald, coward that he was, kept the duchess’s pregnancy from me. He had told me that he hadn’t touched her in years, but I discovered, after we were found out at that garden party, that he had lied to me. The duchess was with child and it wasn’t anyone else’s but Reginald’s. I found

out when I was at Martha's, where I stayed for the six months after the scandal broke."

"You told me in your last letter that you planned to leave Martha's."

"When I wrote to you and your father, I still planned to go abroad. When Reginald and I parted that day, that was our plan. That had been our plan ever since I found out about the pregnancy. John was going to school and Reginald claimed he no longer loved Gloria. He would go abroad and so would I. There we would live in scandal but together and happy. Once I was at Martha's, I received a letter from Gloria, telling me in no uncertain terms that she was with child and to stay away from her family. I wrote to Reginald and he admitted it all in his response. But he still wanted to leave England with me. He wrote that he couldn't live without me. He told Gloria that he chose me and that is what prompted her to run off with the Baron of Eastwick. But I was not about to pledge myself to a man who had lied to me. I saw Reginald for what he was. Worthless.

So I stayed at Martha's, with no plans and no money. I couldn't return to Edington, where I would only make the scandal worse by going back to Forster House. My brother was furious."

"He was heartbroken," Catherine interjected, indignant on her father's behalf.

"You didn't read his letters," her aunt said, with a shiver.

"He bankrupted himself defending your honor."

"Defending *his* honor. I never asked my brother for that. He was obsessed with the title, the one our family lost centuries ago, and he had never recovered from the offense of Reginald marrying Gloria. I was wild at seventeen. Everyone knew I had been precipitous in my affections with Reginald. I had wanted him and so I had him. I wanted to marry him, when I was seventeen and when I was thirty. And my brother

was furious that the man had taken what belonged to the Forster family—my virtue—and paid nothing for it.”

Catherine opened her mouth to defend her father again, but Mary held up a hand.

“My brother is no matter. It didn’t signify in the slightest, because, at the very end of my pregnancy, Reginald wrote to me. The duchess had returned to Edington Hall, gravely ill, and she and her child had both died. He wanted me to return to Edington and marry him immediately. That way, my baby would be legitimate. It would have been beyond scandalous. We would have never recovered in society, but he was prepared to do it.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Mary looked her in the eye, her stare bleak, as if she were back in that moment. “I didn’t love him anymore.”

Catherine was stunned. How, she wondered, could her aunt’s love for Reginald, which had driven her to so many bold acts, have just disappeared?

“He wasted so much of my life with his lies and his cowardice. I didn’t want to live with him, have a family with him. I already loved the child growing inside of me, but I must admit that—as much as I loved her, already, and I did—I still loved myself more. I didn’t want her to be the tether that bound me to him. Besides, that was no life for a child. So, when he wrote, I went, but I made it very clear to him that I had conditions. I would give birth and, if I survived, he would keep the child and I would go free. We would never speak again. The child, for my freedom. He would raise her as Gloria’s child, so that she would appear legitimate, and she would be a duke’s daughter. He didn’t want to agree, but what choice did he have? I wouldn’t marry him.”

“You gave up your child?”

Catherine felt shock from the crown of her head down to her feet. She had thought so much about how her aunt had abandoned *her*. Now, she understood why she had never heard

from her. Catherine wasn't the child she had given up and left behind. *Henrietta* was that child.

"I did. And it broke my heart. But my heart was already broken. Reginald had seen to that. I was dead already, inside. You must understand, Cathy. He had begged me to have his child. He made all sorts of promises. I listened. I didn't want the child tying me back to him. She would have always given him a way back into my life. And I knew there was a better life somewhere else—for myself."

Catherine wasn't sure that she could understand, but she wanted to try.

"But you stayed. Near Edington. You didn't want to leave her completely."

"It's true. But I needn't have stayed so close. Reginald lived until she was seventeen. She will have a season, marry, and no one will know the secret. She will have a good life. I made the right choice."

"Don't you want to meet her?"

Mary shrugged. "I have seen her, here and there, over the years. She is a beautiful girl. And she is fine without me."

"Is that what you thought about me?"

"Yes," Mary said, blinking, "in fact, I did."

"But I wasn't," Catherine said. "I have only suffered for what you did. You have no idea what I have endured for your mistakes."

"You come to me, dear," her aunt said, using her kindest voice yet, "engaged to a duke. Is that irreparable suffering?"

With a sinking feeling, Catherine realized that her aunt was right. She was engaged to a duke, but she couldn't be for much longer.

Because Catherine couldn't ever tell John that *Henrietta* was Mary Forster's daughter. He still hated Mary. Even more so after this meeting. The knowledge would threaten his

relationship with Henrietta. Who knows if their bond would be the same after learning such a shocking fact.

And she couldn't marry him with this secret between them. She had seen what lies and deception wrought.

She couldn't have that type of life.

Not even for him.

She would have to break off the engagement.

She felt a sob almost come up from her throat, but she swallowed it. She didn't want her aunt to see what her confession had cost her.

"You needn't look so despondent, Cathy. For you see, this story has a happy ending. I love my husband, Mr. Ryerson, very, very much. He may not be a duke, but he is everything a man should be."

Catherine found she couldn't speak. Instead, she barely managed a murmur in reply.

"I do not approve of your engagement. And I doubt the marriage itself will ever transpire. I do not trust any Breminster to do right by any Forster. But you are, after all, my niece—my only brother's child. And I can hardly deny Henrietta what should be hers. I will accept the annuity. You can tell *your* Duke of Edington that."

"Thank you, Aunt Mary," she gasped, finally finding her voice. She had accomplished their goal, but she felt hollow. It had come at a terrible price.

"Mama?"

Catherine turned and saw, at the door, a young girl, around the age of ten. Vaguely, Catherine realized that she must be the twin of the little boy she had seen earlier. She had warm brown eyes. Catherine had an intuition that they were just like her father's.

"Come here, my love," her aunt said, in a tone completely unlike any she had used with her or John.

The child came into the room, gazing at Catherine with curiosity, as she leaned into her mother's embrace.

"This is Cathy," her mother said, "a little girl to whom I used to teach sums and letters. But she is all grown up now."

The girl snuggled into her mother's arms and Catherine saw a smile play on her aunt's face as she embraced her child. Yes, Catherine thought, she was a good mother. She had been a good mother to her. It was why she had always missed her.

"She is leaving," Mary said to the child. "Will you go fetch Maria, my love? We are going to lend Miss Forster our carriage. She has to go all the way back to Edington Hall."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JOHN WAITED IN the lane, simmering with worry. Which then morphed into resentment as the moments slid by and still he saw no sign of Catherine.

Every minute seemed an hour.

And, finally, something like an hour *had* passed and he couldn't wait for Catherine any longer.

He told Marcel to turn the carriage around and return to the farmhouse, which was difficult on the narrow country lane. The maneuver took another painful ten minutes.

Finally, he found himself back at the sweet farmhouse, desperate to find his fiancée inside.

The same maidservant answered the door. He was told that Catherine had already left in Mary Forster's carriage. John was aghast at this revelation—it went against their plan—and he inquired where the carriage had gone.

“To Dorchester, sir. To the stagecoach, I believe.”

His mind flashed back to a simple carriage that had passed him on the way here with all of its windows drawn.

John swore a string of vile oaths that caused the maid's jaw to drop.

Then, he got back into his own coach and told Marcel to drive as fast as possible to the Dorchester coach stop.

John didn't know what Mary Forster had said to his fiancée.

He only knew that he needed to find her.

When he arrived at the coach stop, however, it had already departed, and there was no sign of Catherine. He assumed she had gone back to London, but he couldn't be sure. He could

chase down the coach, but he wasn't sure if that made sense. Perhaps she hadn't left at all. Perhaps it was a trick Mary Forster was playing on him. He didn't understand.

After all, why would she have gone?

He decided to return to Edington Hall, hoping to find his fiancée there. Instead, when he arrived, Mrs. Morrison informed him that Catherine had not come back.

At these words, he began to feel feverish. A scrim of sweat broke out over his entire body.

He swore again, earning himself a scolding from Mrs. Morrison. He told Mrs. Morrison to let any letters or visitors into his study and to call for his solicitor, the accursed Mr. Lawson.

His butler came in with a note and he sighed with relief. It must be from Catherine. She would tell him what was happening.

He tore it open.

John,

Mary will accept the annuity.

I am returning to London and must break our engagement.

Please do not follow me.

Catherine

He put the letter down in a daze, but he could already feel the pain permeating his body, as if something had been physically ripped out of him. He experienced a flash of anger at Mary Forster, who, he concluded wildly, must have convinced Catherine not to marry him.

Or, perhaps, he thought, with a sinking feeling, she had always planned to break the engagement once they found Mary.

No, he told himself, that didn't make any sense.

What they had was real.

It couldn't be a part of a subterfuge or scheme.

John knew he needed to go after her—to go find her in London—even though she told him not to follow. Something else must have happened with Mary Forster. Something he didn't understand.

He stood up and felt the floor sway under him. Fresh sweat sprung up again over his skin. Really, he felt quite odd. He sat back down in his chair out of necessity and then heard a knock on his door. He called for the person to enter.

It was Mr. Lawson. The man looked less than elated to be summoned. He was twenty years older than John and wore little spectacles. Most of his hair was gray. He looked at John warily as he entered the study and John didn't blame him, given how furiously he had cursed the man out when he had last seen him. At one point, he had been in a such a lather that he had threatened legal action against Mr. Lawson himself.

“Your Grace,” Lawson said and gave a deep bow.

“I found her,” John said. Lawson's eyes brightened.

“Miss Mary Forster, Your Grace?”

“Mrs. Ryerson,” John corrected.

He slid the piece of paper that Lady Trilling had given Catherine yesterday morning across the desk. It felt like a lifetime ago. He had been so sure of their love then. And now he didn't know what to think.

Lawson looked relieved. He was a solicitor's solicitor, the loyal vassal of many high-ranking gentlemen, but John knew that he liked assets tied up neat and tidy. He couldn't have enjoyed his father's gamble.

“And she accepts the annuity, Your Grace?”

“She does,” John managed, the strange pain flashing once more and making him lose his breath. He thought of Catherine and felt he might pass out.

“I will call on her first thing tomorrow morning, Your Grace, and present her with the formal paperwork for the annuity.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lawson.”

He thought of what he had promised Catherine—the remaining nine thousand pounds—and how she had, irrespective of everything between them, undoubtedly upheld her end of the bargain. She deserved the money, even if he couldn’t win her back, or understand what had happened, although he desperately hoped he could.

“And, Mr. Lawson, please forward a check for nine thousand pounds to Catherine Forster at her address in London. The same as before. Immediately, please.”

Suddenly, he remembered that day in the carriage when he had told her he would pay her five hundred pounds to answer his question about her virginity. They had both forgotten about it in their alarm for Henrietta.

He smiled despite his pain.

“Nine thousand five hundred, Lawson, actually,” he said. “To Miss Forster.”

Lawson gave him the sure nod that meant it would get done.

John expected him to depart, but he stayed on the threshold.

“Your father requested that I give Mary Forster a letter from himself when I saw her,” Lawson said. “I suspect the letter was almost as important as the annuity itself.”

Two weeks ago, John would have raged at the solicitor and told him that he better not deliver that letter. Now, he found it difficult to care. His father had been a complicated man who had made many mistakes. He thought of Catherine, with her haunting blue-black eyes and her full breasts and her strange hair like white lightning and her arcane stories and her quiet, thoughtful intelligence, and he could understand, now that he

feared that he had lost her, why a man might go to such lengths to try and win his love back.

His mother hadn't deserved what she had encountered in her marriage. She had been a lovely, good woman in her own right. He was still angry with his father, but he wasn't going to let that anger rule his life. Not when he had to go to London and see Catherine. Once he was done with Lawson, he was going to have Marcel saddle the horses. He would search the whole city if necessary.

"Very well," he said to Lawson.

The man nodded and John rose to see him out, regretting his harsh words to Lawson in the past.

But when he stood, the room swayed. He found himself on the floor.

"Your Grace?"

Mr. Lawson was over him and then so was Mrs. Morrison.

And then everything went black.



THE NEXT TIME he came to consciousness, he was lying in his bed. He felt an immense pain in his head. He felt a pair of cool hands on his forehead and looked up and saw Henrietta.

"Shhh, brother. You must sleep."

He must have fainted. It dawned on him that he must be quite ill. He thought of Henrietta's fever and his father's illness and he wondered if the same had overtaken him. From the pain in his head and the sweat all over his body, he suspected the answer was yes.

He tried to say, "Catherine," to Henrietta. He needed to explain that he had to go and find her. He couldn't lie here in bed when she was moving further and further away from him.

The words came out as nothing, a sort of groan, and he realized afresh that he was truly very ill.

“Sleep, John.” He felt a cool cloth on his forehead.

He needed to reach Catherine, but he felt himself dragged down into the hot soup of his own unconsciousness.

Before everything went black once more, he imagined her face before he had left her back at that quaint, poisonous farmhouse. He wished with everything he had that he could go back to that moment, that he had stayed beside her no matter what, that he had never followed their plan, but then he lost himself to darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CATHERINE DIDN'T CRY on the coach ride back to London. She was jammed into a packed carriage with a sundry bunch of equally miserable people for the two-day journey. But she barely noticed them. Her mind was whirring over John. She already missed him. It had nearly killed her to send that awful note. She had wanted more than anything to run back to him after learning all she had from her aunt. She had ached for him from the moment she got in the coach. She wanted nothing more than to bury herself in his arms and have them work together to solve their newest problem. She wished she could run her hands through his silky curls and take in his fresh scent of leather and soap. But she couldn't do that to Henrietta. And she wouldn't marry him with such a lie between them.

After all, Reginald's lie had ruined his chances with Mary. Catherine would wager a large sum of money that her aunt's current husband, Mr. Ryerson, knew her aunt's true identity. A relationship founded on lies wouldn't survive. It would just spawn pain. Like Reginald and Mary, like Lady Wethersby and Sir Francis. She couldn't keep the secret of Henrietta's birth from John and she also couldn't tell him the truth. She couldn't be the person who told him that Henrietta's mother was the woman who had made swaths of his life a torment. That his sister's mother was the woman who had helped to destroy his own so utterly.

Now, looking back at her interactions with Henrietta, she couldn't help notice things that, at the time, had floated below the surface of her consciousness. She had felt a kinship for the girl almost immediately and, it turned out, for good reason. They were cousins. Other scraps of visual information flitted back to her: the way her smile curled in the sun, the texture of her hair, the shape of her nose. They recalled her aunt now, she

could see. But, without being told, she would have never put it together.

As she looked out the window of the coach, Catherine's thoughts drifted to the former duke, Reginald, whom she had resented for so long. As it happened, he had suffered for his crimes. It must have hurt him to watch his lovely young daughter grow up and remind him every day of the woman he had loved and lost. No wonder he was faded and aged before his time. No wonder he had stalked Edington Hall in his last years. She too would have been agitated and haunted. His own daughter had been the greatest ghost of all.



BY THE TIME Catherine arrived back at Halston Place, it was evening. She went up the same drab steps and knocked on the door.

An unfamiliar and very young footman answered, beckoning her into the parlor.

“You must be Miss Forster,” he said, looking a little awed, bowing low.

“I am,” she said, smiling, “I’ve come back.”

And then she noticed that the entire space had been transformed. The furnishings were new. The walls had been repapered. No longer the dingy apartments she had left, the place shone.

She stood there, in shock, as the footman took off her wrap. Lady Wethersby and Ariel must have used part of the thousand pounds to redecorate the place. Despite all she had lost in the past twenty-four hours, she felt a glimmer of joy, because she knew, at the very least, her pain had bought a better life for Lady Wethersby and Ariel.

Lady Wethersby came into the parlor and, seeing her, screamed.

“My darling!” She embraced her. “I hope you do not dislike the changes here at Halston Place.”

“It is magnificent,” she said, hugging Lady Wethersby again and feeling, for the moment, so glad to be home.

“Catherine!”

She looked up and saw Ariel, outfitted in a neat new kit befitting his status as the heir to the Wethersby baronetcy. He ran to her and hugged her around the waist.

Before she could stop it, she was crying. All the tears that she hadn't shed with her aunt, all the tears that she had suppressed on the coach ride home, burst out and ran down her face silently.

“Catherine! What is wrong?” Ariel said, reeling back in shock.

“Catherine has had a long journey, my love. And traveling by stagecoach—it would reduce any woman to tears. Here, Catherine, sit.” Lady Wethersby gestured towards the sofa. “Melinda is bringing the tea.”

When Melinda brought the tray, Catherine had the opportunity to admire her new dress, which befitted her role as housekeeper of their refurbished establishment. Once Melinda bustled out of the room, Ariel tried to pepper Catherine with questions about her history writing, but Lady Wethersby cut off his line of inquiry. Catherine felt grateful for Lady Wethersby's sensitivity, although it was somewhat out of character. She was usually very curious herself.

“This came for you this morning,” Lady Wethersby said, sliding a letter across the table. Her pulse doubled. She knew it could only be John's response to her letter.

When she broke open the seal, however, she saw only a check for nine thousand five hundred pounds and a curt message from his solicitor, Mr. Lawson, indicating that the enclosed was for services rendered.

Nine thousand and five hundred.

For a second, she was confused, but then she remembered the question he had asked her in the coach.

She swallowed hard.

He hadn't chased down her stagecoach nor had he arrived here before her on horseback, but he had sent those extra five hundred pounds. For some reason, those extra pounds gave her a little hope that she would see him again.

Even though she knew she shouldn't hope for such a thing.

She dreaded the prospect of having to explain to him why she couldn't marry him without telling him the truth.

At these thoughts, she felt tears threatening again and pushed them back. She didn't want Ariel, who gazed at her over his tea with curiosity, to see her cry again.

"What is it, Catherine?" he said, fear in his voice.

"It is the rest of the money that the Duke of Edington paid me for writing the history."

"How much?" he said, frowning.

Lady Wethersby swatted her son's arm.

"Sir Ariel!"

Her son stuck out his tongue in response.

"It is ninety-five hundred pounds." She handed over the check to Lady Wethersby, whose mouth dropped open.

"*Ninety-five hundred pounds.*" Her voice was full of wonder.

"How much would bring back the estate?" Catherine asked, softly.

"Catherine," Lady Wethersby said. "You earned that, I can't let you—I could never."

"Wethersby Park is my home, too, you said. Why wouldn't I want to save my home?"

Lady Wethersby said nothing.

"How much?" Catherine repeated.

“Five thousand pounds would restore us to our country estate. And let us keep these quarters in town.”

“We can rent more fashionable lodgings than these,” Catherine said, quickly, not wanting Lady Wethersby and Ariel to feel any deprivation.

“No, I have grown fond of the place,” Lady Wethersby said, looking around. “Particularly now that it is has been properly spruced.”

“It is *home*, Catherine,” Ariel said, with a tone of chastisement. “Halston Place has always been there for us. We shan’t abandon our old friends when we grow great.”

“Very well,” she said with a laugh, “Wethersby Park and Halston Place it is.”

She reached out and held the hands of her only real family members. At least, she thought, this entire journey hadn’t been for naught. She had done it. She had saved them.

“I’ll write the solicitor tomorrow,” Lady Wethersby said, her voice shaking, and Catherine was, despite her misery, more than a little happy. She was surprised how well the emotions could coexist.

After Ariel and Lady Wethersby showed her to her new bedchamber—redone with new furnishings and paint—they left her to sleep. She was exhausted from her journey and yet she couldn’t lose consciousness.

She kept thinking about John.

Would he come after her? she thought. He had never said he loved her, but she knew he cared about her and had truly wanted her for his wife. She hated to think that he would just let her go.

She heard a knock on the door and rose to answer it.

Lady Wethersby stood in the hall.

When Catherine saw the concerned look on her face, alight with maternal anxiety, the very look she had hoped to see on

her aunt's face back at that quaint little farmhouse, she burst into tears for the second time that day.

Lady Wethersby hugged her close and patted her on the back.

“There, there, my fine girl. My brave girl.”

Catherine let herself sob into her shoulder until she didn't have any more tears.

Then, Lady Wethersby drew back and said, “May I come in?”

Catherine nodded and they both sat down on her bed.

“What happened with the Duke of Edington, my dear?” Lady Wethersby began. “If you don't find it an intrusive question.”

Catherine looked at Lady Wethersby quizzically. How did she know? She supposed she was a bit emotional for someone who had just come back from a trip writing a history book for profit, but she still didn't understand how Lady Wethersby *knew*. She had only written once from Edington. After all, she had only been gone for a little over two weeks.

“My dear, you didn't expect me to believe that story about preparing a history for his betrothed, did you?”

Catherine felt a blush steal across her cheeks. She *had* expected Lady Wethersby to believe it.

“I knew there was something more to the story from the beginning, but I didn't want to bother you with having to explain it, when I knew you were just trying to protect us. And then my old friend Julia Trilling wrote and said that you had seen her. And that you were asking after your aunt.

“I won't ask you to explain it all to me,” Lady Wethersby continued, “but I want to make sure that you are all right. Did he hurt you, my dear?”

Catherine asked herself why she wasn't telling the full truth to the one person who had always been there for her.

Lady Wethersby had been more like a mother, more like a parent to her than anyone else in her life, at least in the past seventeen years. Even when life became difficult for Lady Wethersby, she had never left Catherine behind. She had always been there.

Catherine began to answer Lady Wethersby's question and, before she could help it, the whole story spilled out: the night at Tremberley gardens with John; the duke's will; her aunt and Henrietta; and why it all meant she and John couldn't be together.

When she had finished, Lady Wethersby looked shocked but pensive, as if she had divined some moral from the tale that had eluded Catherine herself.

"I knew he loved you," Lady Wethersby said, "from the moment I saw how he looked at you in our dingy little drawing room."

"I don't think he'll come for me. I know that we can't be together, but still...I want...I wish he would."

"He will," Lady Wethersby said. "You'll see."

Catherine shrugged. She couldn't be as sure.

"I am sorry your aunt was so severe with you. That must have been very painful."

"I had always thought of her as my mother. When I heard she was alive, I didn't understand why she had never tried to find me. Now, I understand why—I wasn't the child she left behind."

"I doubt it is that simple. And I suspect that she, too, will come around. She might have feared your anger and your judgment."

"I don't know, Elena."

"Well, you'll have to be patient. Although I have to say I have more faith in the duke. *He* will be back. Do you love him, my dear?"

Did she love him? Of course she did. She had never been able to imagine herself with anyone else, even before he had showed up again, more handsome than ever and tortured by circumstances beyond his control.

“I do.”

“Then the two of you will find a way.”

“But—”

Lady Wethersby held up a hand. “I can’t say how you will fix the problem of your aunt and Henrietta. But I do know that two people who are truly, desperately in love, will always find a way to come together in the end.”

With these words, Lady Wethersby kissed her cheek and said good night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

YESTERDAY AFTERNOON, JOHN had awakened feeling shaky but much better than he had in days. For the better part of a week, he had barely been capable of raising his head from his pillow. He had snapped up in bed, waking his sister, who dozed on a nearby chair.

“John! You’re awake!”

She had started crying then, saying that she had been so afraid that he would die, and that she couldn’t find Catherine and that she had hardly known what to do without her. John managed to tell her, despite the buzzing in his head, that Catherine had gone to visit her family in London. He wanted to tell Henrietta the truth about their relationship. However, he couldn’t tell her now, when he and Catherine were no longer engaged, and when he had just awoken from an intense fever and could barely focus his eyes.

The doctor saw him and pronounced him on the mend. Then he slept through the night again. In every waking moment, he thought of Catherine, and his fever dreams had been full of her, too. These visions combined strange flashes of the past and what he presumed was an imagined future. He saw them with a mob of silver-haired children with green eyes in the orchards of Edington Hall. He saw the silver-haired children walk in the park outside Forster House and, in his heart, he knew that they owned the place. These dreams were vivid and detailed. And they only led him to yearn for Catherine more before plunging him back into that viscous sleep.

Finally, twenty-four hours after that visit from the doctor, he stood in his chamber, fully dressed, with the intention to travel to London immediately to see Catherine.

He heard a knocking at his door and bade the person to enter, expecting to see Mrs. Morrison informing him that his horses had been saddled, but instead Henrietta appeared.

“Mr. Lawson is insisting on seeing you,” she began with no other preamble. “I told him you were too ill to speak with your *solicitor*, but he is insisting.”

John felt a stab of panic. He worried that Catherine had sent back the money he had forwarded to her—or that Mr. Lawson hadn’t been able to find Mary Forster.

“Where are you *going*?”

“I have to go to London on business,” he said. “I will be back in short order.” *Hopefully with Catherine*. He needed to explain everything to Henrietta, but he didn’t want to be delayed any longer. He could explain when he returned.

“You can’t *leave* again.”

“Retta, it will be for a very short period of time. My illness has delayed me but my business is very urgent.”

“Why can’t you tell me where you are going?” she said, her eyes narrowed. A flutter of guilt ran through him. They still had not really discussed what had happened with Baron Falk, either. Not the way they should have.

Why was he always, somehow, failing Henrietta?

“I will tell you once I have spoken to Mr. Lawson. It must be pressing if he has come here with no notice. Please tell Mrs. Morrison that I will meet him downstairs in the study. Then, I promise, I will tell you what I am doing.”

He would explain it quickly, he resolved. He wouldn’t reveal Catherine’s identity. Just that he had fallen in love with Miss Aster and wanted to propose to her. To relay the entire story before his departure would be impossible.

Henrietta did not move from the spot.

“Please. I promise I will explain once I have spoken to Mr. Lawson. Whatever the devil he wants.”

Henrietta met his eye and nodded. This quiet acquiescence, more than anything else, made John believe that Henrietta had really feared for his life. Usually, she would have rolled her eyes and called him a rude name.

Henrietta exited his chamber.

John sighed and looked at himself in the glass.

He would deal with his solicitor and his sister and then he would go and find the woman he loved.

Love. The word had threaded through his fever dreams. He should have told her when he had proposed marriage. He had been so focused on what kept them apart and how it could be surmounted. He should have told her that he would do anything for her, that without her his life made no sense.

He wouldn't make that mistake again.

John entered his study and found Mr. Lawson waiting for him.

"Your Grace," he said, giving a little bow, "I am much relieved to hear of your recovery."

"Thank you, Mr. Lawson," he said, "but I am about to go on a journey, so please make haste."

"I visited Mary Forster. Or, as I should say, Mrs. Mary Ryerson."

John nodded.

"She has accepted the annuity. If you hadn't convinced her before, the letter from your father seemed to accomplish the task."

"Delightful," he ground out, trying to make it as clear as possible that he didn't care at present for the resolution of his father and Mrs. Ryerson's old *tendre*.

Mr. Lawson gave a tight smile in response.

"The will has been completely executed now. The money that would have gone to Baron Falk will not leave the trust for

Lady Henrietta. There is, however, one last thing.”

John’s heart dropped. “What the devil do you mean, Lawson?”

“I am sorry,” the man said. “I didn’t mean to give alarm. The will has been completely executed. The dukedom and everything that your father owned besides is now completely yours, with no encumbrances. I did promise His Grace, however, that I would give you this letter once you had found Mary Forster and she had accepted the annuity officially.”

Mr. Lawson drew a square of paper from his coat and placed it on his desk.

John felt sick to his stomach. For the first time since he had awakened that morning, leaving for London left his mind.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Lawson. Why didn’t you give me this letter earlier?”

Mr. Lawson grimaced. “I promised His Grace that I would deliver the letter only after you found Mary Forster. We were not just lord and solicitor, but friends. I respected him and felt sorrow for his troubles. I hope you do not find it impertinent for me to say so.”

“Out,” he commanded. “We are done here.”

John wanted to add, *for good*, but he stopped himself.

Mr. Lawson was correct. He and his father had been friends and he did not want to be vindictive to a man who had been loyal to his family for so long, particularly when he might later think better of it. Still, he found his withholding of such a letter while he had twisted in the wind hard to tolerate at this moment.

Mr. Lawson nodded and left.

John stared at the letter on the desk. He could pitch it into the fire. He probably should. And yet the idea of one last communication from his father was too tempting. He was still angry with the man and the visit to Mary Forster had done little to disrupt that. He still wanted to understand why his

father had stitched up such a snare for him. With those thoughts, he tore open the letter.

Dear Son,

If you are reading this letter, I have presumed on your good nature past the point of endurance. For that, I am gravely sorry, just as I am very regretful that I must presume upon it further.

By now, you have succeeded in finding Mary Forster and giving her an annuity—to that, she is entitled, and I knew you would prevail upon her to take it, particularly when you explained the circumstances in which I situated the funds. I also flatter myself that she has enough regard left for me that she will not refuse my dying wish.

I wronged both her and your mother. I loved the two of them in different ways and, in giving up neither, lost both. For that, I apologize to you as well, for you too had to bear the consequences of my recklessness.

I do not presume to give you advice, my son, given my own failings, but I would be remiss if I did not share the one piece of wisdom I have paid for in pain beyond measure. If you ever love a woman, really and truly, seize any opportunity you have to unite yourself to her, even if the price seems too high or the obstacle insurmountable. If you survive to my age, you will live to watch this supposed mountain dwindle to an anthill.

I write you this letter, however, not to give you the final tidings a good father should communicate to his son upon his deathbed. I have been, at best, a tolerable father to you and, even now, I still stand to give you more difficulty.

I have told Lawson to give you this missive because your sister deserves to know the truth. I am sorry for the pain that this information will cause—to you and to her—but it will be invariably better than keeping this

secret any longer. I trust you to find a way to tell her. I know you will do what I never had the courage to do. For this again, my boy, I apologize once more, but I rest easier knowing my faults have made you infinitely better than I ever was. I can forgive the hard masters of my own existence when I know I have a son and heir who will inevitably surpass me in every way.

Therefore, I must tell you the truth. Henrietta is not your mother's child. She is the natural child of Mary Forster and myself. Henrietta was born at Edington Hall, to Mary Forster, on that very night you returned from school all those years ago. I concealed the truth from you as well as the rest of the world. Please, find a way to tell your sister this truth gently. She deserves to know that she has one parent left living.

For years, you have been my pride. I have always thanked God that I have you, my son and heir, to carry on the line. Despite our differences, you have been a great comfort to me in recent years and, as ill as I am at present, it contents me greatly to know that, if I should fail, you will be there to guide Henrietta. For I know that even this rude knowledge of her true parentage could never disrupt the love you bear her.

With all my love,

Your father

John had to read the letter a few times over. He felt like he was not absorbing the words, even though he understood their semantic meaning after his first glance across the page. The room didn't spin, but seemed to almost recalibrate, as if his very being was forced to adjust to this new knowledge.

His mind spun back to that farmhouse near the sweet bend in the river, to the figure of Mary Forster, and that eerie familiarity that had surrounded her every movement. He had attributed that sensation to his memories of Mary Forster herself, so potent and terrible. But now he wondered if he had recognized more in her movements.

She was small like Henrietta, with the same delicate features and thinness, like a doll. Yes, he could see it—how they could be mother and daughter.

He felt a strange lightness as he looked around what had been his father's study, what had been the scene of that awful day. Everything looked different in the wake of this information, which he could not yet fully understand and yet made a horrible kind of sense. Perhaps, on some level, he had always known. Perhaps, it was why the scandal had ripped through him, even years later, because he could tell something was unsettled in the air of Edington Hall. It had been a mistruth hiding in plain sight, in the guise of his innocent little sister, who had no knowledge of it.

His father had really managed to make a hash of his life, he thought, sinking down into a chair. As he himself wrote, in choosing neither woman, he had ended up alone—and with a child from each. No wonder he had seemed faded and sunken in his later years, John thought—what joy and what sorrow, to have your two children remind you, unconsciously, of the two women you had betrayed? Or the two loves you had lost?

And then it hit him.

Catherine knew.

Nothing else explained her abrupt departure.

She had always castigated him for running. He realized now that she would only do the same if she had a reason.

A very good reason. Like this one.

He couldn't be sure, but he had a strong suspicion that Mary Forster had told her this information. She must have found out and wanted, selflessly, to spare him and Henrietta the pain. It would be in her nature to neither want to tell him this secret nor marry him with this secret between them.

He heard a creak near his study door and looked up, fearing that the noise signaled Henrietta entering, ready to have the discussion he had promised her. The discussion that had just become infinitely more complicated.

Instead, Mrs. Morrison stood in the doorway. He rose out of his chair at the sight of her figure hovering at the threshold.

“Did Mr. Lawson just leave you, Your Grace?” she said, her face a matte white. He realized, with one look at her worried eyes, that she knew much more than she had ever communicated.

“You know,” he said, evenly.

She entered the room and shut the door behind her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he said, anger flaring at the one person who must have known all along, who must have colluded with his father. “I asked you. You told me you didn’t know a thing. You *lied*.”

He had never seen her look so ill or stricken.

“It wasn’t my place,” she said, her tone desperate, “and I hardly saw what good telling you the truth would do. I didn’t know the one thing you needed to settle the legalities. I didn’t know where Mary Forster was. But I was there that night, when your father spoke with Mr. Lawson about the annuity, and I had a good notion what he put in that letter to you.

“So I knew, sooner or later,” the old woman continued, “that you would know the truth. But I also knew that telling you the truth myself wouldn’t give you what you needed.”

“How did you know about Henrietta?” he said, forcing the words from his throat. It galled him that Mrs. Morrison had known before him.

She gave a slightly dry laugh.

“I started here, at Edington Hall, as a girl of fourteen, gone into service, when your father was a boy of five. I knew him almost his entire life.”

He gave her a frustrated look meant to convey that he didn’t have patience for a long history.

“Who else would he trust when your mother and the babe died and he sought to conceal the death? Who else would he

trust to shepherd Mary Forster into the Hall not a week later under the cover of darkness, so swollen with child that she could hardly step down from the carriage? I attended your sister's birth alone. I thought Mary Forster was dying from how she screamed."

"I remember," he said, with hard emphasis.

"You thought you heard your mother's screams, as did everyone else," said Mrs. Morrison. "It ended up being convenient, how much she screamed. It made no one doubt that your mother had died in childbirth. In truth, your mother went quietly."

He looked at Mrs. Morrison, her gray hair in a simple knot atop her head, with her black housekeeper's dress so tidy and neat as usual. He hadn't thought her capable of keeping such a secret.

"I need to speak to my sister. If you will excuse me, Mrs. Morrison."

At this dismissal, the woman didn't move. Instead, she took a step forward, with a look of such vulnerability on her face that it startled him.

"What happened to her, Your Grace?"

"Mary Forster?" he asked, bewildered as to why Mrs. Morrison would care.

She nodded rapidly.

"She is married now and lives a few hours from here. To a Mr. Ryerson."

"Is she happy?"

"I have no idea. Why do you care?"

Mrs. Morrison shook her head.

"I suppose I shouldn't, but she was always such a high-spirited girl. When they were young, Your Grace, before Reginald married—" She broke off. "They crept around these lands together, around the Hall. They were besotted with one

another, and everyone knew it. I haven't seen anything quite like it, in all my years." Her voice wavered and it sent a strange emotion snaking down John's chest.

"I know you must be angry with your father and you have a right," she rushed out. "He made many mistakes. But you must understand what they were once. My heart broke for them when your grandfather refused to let them marry."

John stared at Mrs. Morrison. He had known her his entire life. She was not a romantic or sentimental person. And yet her eyes brimmed with tears at the memory of this long-dead love, this youthful dalliance that had faded out years ago. Her words made real to him what his father's letter had simply stated: his father had loved Mary Forster with a rare passion. And if Mrs. Morrison—*Mrs. Morrison*—was in tears, more than thirty years later at its memory, then it must have been a very unusual love indeed.

"You and Catherine," she said, poised on the threshold of the room. "You remind me of them—how they were then."

With these words, she slipped from the doorway.

He remembered that strange story Catherine had told him all those years ago of Tremberley: the Hampshire king who had given up his one true love to marry another woman for duty. It had felt like the story of his whole life and, back then, he had hardly known why. Now, he knew. For the first time in his life, he really understood the past, and he felt some of his bitterness towards his father melt away. He still felt anger towards him, but—for the first time since the scandal—John felt the burden of his father's sorrow slip off of him. He had done what he could to right his father's past. Now he had to focus on his future. Instead of trying to avoid making his father's mistakes, he would follow his advice: *if you ever love a woman, really and truly, seize any opportunity you have to unite yourself to her.*

And he wouldn't start by running off to London. He couldn't take this part in haste. He needed to do it the right way.

No, he needed to start by talking to his sister.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

IT HAD BEEN nearly two weeks and Catherine still had not heard from John.

She tried to not let this fact rule her existence. After all, she told herself, they had had a whirlwind two weeks together, in which so much had happened. Perhaps, she thought, they had merely fancied themselves in love; perhaps their intense connection was just an illusion—for him. *She* couldn't forget him, of course. She found herself flashing back at odd moments to those nights in his bed, when he said her name with that exquisite yearning, as if, in giving herself to him, she healed him, made him whole.

Nevertheless, if he had really wanted her, she reasoned, he would have appeared and begged for her back. It had certainly been long enough for him to show up and declare himself.

She scolded herself for this longing. Why pine after a man and wish he would chase after you, when you knew you couldn't accept him? It was nonsense.

Catherine tried to distract herself with Lady Wethersby and Ariel.

Luckily, it was a busy time for their little family. Her total payment from the Duke of Edington had made their estate whole and then some. They were soon to resume residence at Wethersby Park. Their tenants were to be out by the end of the month. They had traveled up to the estate—only two hours from London by carriage—to look over the old place and note any improvements that might be made now that the family would take up residence again.

Catherine had pulled Lady Wethersby aside last week and told her that Ariel needed to go to school. They hadn't had the money for Eton in years past, so it had been little issue, but now they could easily afford the fees. Lady Wethersby had

resisted. She didn't want to send her boy away, but Catherine had told her that it was necessary for Ariel to take his place in the world—and the college still wasn't as expensive as private tutors. She acquiesced and, in the fall, Ariel would be off to school for the first time, an event that he eagerly anticipated, his jubilation somewhat ruthless to his mother's feelings.

At this moment, however, these changes had not yet arrived. They were back at Halston Place, sitting in the newly appointed drawing room, after the supper hour. Ariel was constructing a model boat they had bought from a fancy shop earlier that day. Lady Wethersby was splitting her attention between a new French novel, the biscuit on her plate, and superintending Ariel's project. Catherine was looking out the window, trying not to think too much of John.

The new footman entered their little drawing room, and said, "A caller, ma'am."

"At this hour?" Lady Wethersby said, casting a look at Catherine, but she didn't move from her spot on the sofa.

"It's probably your dress, Elena," Catherine said, thinking of the new, somewhat impractical gown that Lady Wethersby had ordered from the new French modiste on Bond Street.

Then she turned towards the door and saw John. He looked a little tired and uncertain of his reception, but it was really him, with his green eyes and inky curls. His expressive mouth was curved into a half-smile. She stood when she saw him but didn't move any further.

"Your Grace!" Lady Wethersby said, sweeping into an elaborate curtsy.

When Ariel did not give any sort of bow, she turned to her son, and barked, "Ariel!"

Ariel looked at John and gave him a slight, aristocratic nod.

"Edington," he said, which, while a perfectly natural response for a jaded London rake, sounded ridiculous coming from a ten-year-old boy.

“Lady Wethersby, Sir Ariel,” John said, giving each an elegant bow, and then turning to her. “I have come to speak to Miss Forster. I beg you to allow me an audience with her.”

His words made her recall their first reunion in this very drawing room. She had been so surprised to see him then and so filled with that peculiar mixture of animosity and attraction that had marked their first days together. Now, she felt only yearning and love as she gazed upon him.

“Come at once, Ariel,” Lady Wethersby yelled. “We must leave Catherine and Lord Edington alone.”

“Mother,” he said, in a tone that always indicated trouble. “It is not proper for an unmarried lady to speak to an unmarried gentleman unchaperoned.”

Catherine laughed despite herself. When they were in Bond Street the other day, Lady Wethersby had bought a book for Ariel on the manners, forms and customs of society. On the return home, he had studied it with avid attention for a few minutes and then cast it aside as “pure bosh.” Apparently he had absorbed something.

“At once, young man!” his mother called from the doorway, and Ariel grumbled before making his way to the open door.

“I *knew* that book was bollocks,” he said to his mother, who swatted him on the arm and scowled, before turning to Catherine with a smile.

“We’ll be very near, if you need anything, my dear.”

Catherine nodded. “Thank you, Elena.”

And then she and Ariel were gone. Catherine was alone once more with John.

She turned to him when the door closed. She felt the absence of two weeks crackle between them as she looked into his green eyes and he stood there, stiffly, on the carpet.

Just as she tried to think of something to say, he closed the space between them and took her in his arms, placing his

mouth on hers in a hungry, devouring kiss that almost made her swoon. She knew she shouldn't—she would have to, in just a few moments, refuse him, if he had indeed come here to renew his addresses.

Still she couldn't resist meeting his kiss with her own. When he pressed her body into his, her mind went black. The conversation that they must have soon enough disappeared from her consciousness. She lost herself to the feeling of this embrace.

He broke the kiss and looked down at her.

“Catherine,” he said, his breathing ragged. “We must speak.”

Her stomach flipped. She didn't want to discuss—to discuss meant the end of this, of them.

“Please, sit,” she said gesturing towards the armchair, but instead of sitting there, he took her by the hand and led her to the sofa.

When they sat down, he didn't relinquish her hand.

She looked into his face and saw consternation there, as if he was uncertain of how to begin. She knew she should stop him from speaking, but she wanted so very much to hear what he had to say—what it would sound like if they had a happy ending.

“Catherine. I must first say what I should have said long ago. I was selfish and vain. I should have never let the past stand in the way of my feelings for you.”

He touched her face.

“I love you. I will always love you. Since that night in the Tremberley gardens, since I was a boy, I have loved you and only you.”

As their eyes met, she said nothing, just letting the words slide over her. She knew she wouldn't be able to stop her tears. They were already sliding down her face. They were the words

that she so wanted to hear, but they were also the words that fixed nothing.

“I love you, too,” she said, her voice shimmering with pain. “But I can’t—”

“Catherine, you are the person I am supposed to be with, who I need to be with, and I think I am that person for you. We have let the past interfere long enough. I won’t have it. I love you more than anything, more than all of my past, more than the present and the future put together. It doesn’t matter what you say now, if you turn me away. Nothing could change my love for you. I am yours, to refuse or accept, until the day I die.”

His words took the breath out of her lungs. She looked into his sage-green eyes and felt her vision blur, the tears crowding out his face. How could she refuse him, after all that he had said? But also how could she not?

“I can’t,” she managed to choke out.

She wanted to tell him the truth. She wanted to be selfish. She wanted to lie her head down on his lap, to run her hands beneath his crisp shirt and over the planes of his chest. But whenever desire began to overtake her, she thought of Henrietta, alone and defenseless, who had no one else in the world but her brother, while she had Lady Wethersby and Ariel.

For a moment, he said nothing. And then he continued.

“Please. Just listen to what I have to say. I have learned the most incredible information, something I suspect you know, or otherwise I would say you wouldn’t believe it.”

Catherine felt her pulse change direction. She looked up at him, sharply recoiling. When she looked into his eyes, she could tell.

He knew.

“You-you know?” she stammered, shocked, the information hot, as if it had scorched her. She didn’t

understand how these two things could be true: that he could be here before her and know about his sister's true parentage.

"You know about Henrietta? I am correct?"

"*You know about Henrietta?*" she repeated, incredulous. For a moment, they stared at each other wide-eyed. And, in that stare, passed years of communication, decades even—she could feel the cause of his delay in reaching her, why he hadn't written, and that he must have been doing wonderful things.

Just as quickly, just as that information had passed between them in an instant, she found herself in his arms, her mouth on his, taking him into a full kiss. She could hardly breathe, she felt dizzy from the shock and the lack of air, and yet she didn't care; she needed to be close to him, to hold him, to have him all at once. He returned her ardor with equal force, pulling her onto his lap. She could feel the heat between them rising to a point where she could no longer think, no longer process, and she was about to give herself over to it, when he pulled away.

"Catherine," he said, panting, "marry me."

She answered with another kiss.

During this reunion, John and Catherine didn't linger long over the particulars. Once he saw in her face that his knowing about Henrietta made all the difference, he found it difficult not to keep kissing her face and drawing her into him, which led to them getting lost in one another again, for minutes on end. Finally, they recalled that they could not quite abandon themselves in Lady Wethersby's drawing room, particularly when it seemed more probable than not, Catherine reflected, that her ear was pressed to the door at that very moment, interpreting every sound.

Nevertheless, John managed to convey that he had found out about Henrietta from a letter penned by his father and that he had told the truth to his sister, who had taken the news about as well as one could hope. For her part, Catherine indicated that she had only fled because she could not have

married him while keeping such a secret. And yet she feared if she told him the truth it would cause a rift between he and Henrietta.

Before they could talk over the details any further, Catherine realized that they had been in the parlor together for three-quarters of an hour.

Her prior intuitions about Lady Wethersby were confirmed when she opened the door to the sitting room and her dear Elena almost fell onto the floor.



THAT EVENING, JOHN truly met Lady Wethersby and Ariel for the first time. Of course, he had met them before, in the small parlor of Halston Place, and he had, of course, corresponded with Ariel. But this time, he *properly* met the little baronet and his mother, and they became the great friends that they would always remain afterwards. Ariel quickly took to seeing John as the older brother whom he could consult on all matters not fit for ladies. For her part, Lady Wethersby doted on John, as if she had only been waiting for permission to do so.

In the ensuing days, Catherine was reunited once more with Henrietta and the three other Rank Rakes, whose townhomes she visited and where they all drank many toasts to her upcoming nuptials. However, in this excitement and the bustle of wedding preparation, she and John spent vanishingly little time together.

Finally, however, the night before their wedding, Catherine heard the distinctive tap of rocks at her bedroom window at Halston Place. She opened it and laughed to see John down below.

“You can use the front door,” Catherine shouted down, even though it was rather late, and Lady Wethersby and Ariel had long been asleep.

“And scandalize Lady Wethersby?” he whisper-shouted. “I don’t think she would ever forgive me if I publicly compromised your virtue before your wedding day.”

Catherine laughed. Despite knowing well that Catherine's virtue had been fully compromised, Lady Wethersby had insisted that she and John spend their evenings apart ahead of their wedding.

"You are going to be a great lady of the *ton*," she kept proclaiming. "You can't have everyone thinking that this marriage is a patched-up business."

"But it *is* a patched-up business," Catherine had said, before Ariel had strode into the room and started asking what exactly was a patched-up business.

Lady Wethersby had shrieked, "Nothing, my love! You walk so softly I never know when you are about to enter a room, dear," which tipped off an argument about the right acoustics of a gentleman's walk. Ariel was confused because she had previously told him to walk less clamorously.

Thus, due to Lady Wethersby's strong preference (and which Catherine suspected only stemmed from wanting Catherine with her as much as possible for the little time they had left living together), she and John had not been able to reunite in the way that they both so wanted.

After he found his way up a trellis—newly installed by Lady Wethersby, it was, thankfully, bare of flowers as of yet—he hoisted himself through her window and took her in his arms. The feeling of him against her, and the knowledge that after tomorrow she would have him forever, made her press him even closer. His lips were at her neck and he had nearly lifted her off the floor.

"Catherine, I need to tell you something."

His words struck a note of alarm within her and she pulled back. He took her hand and led her to her bed. Anxiety expanded within her. Was she, somehow, going to lose him again?

He gave her a smile, which nevertheless looked a little weak.

“Don’t worry. No more horrible revelations. I merely never had the opportunity to relate to you what happened after I found out about Henrietta. And I wanted to tell you before tomorrow—because I don’t want to cause you any alarm.”

She didn’t understand. She still feared any new information that might threaten to tear them apart again.

“Of course. I’ve been selfish, thinking only of my own happiness.”

“I’ve been little better,” he said, taking her hand again. “But it’s nothing so terrible. Only I hope you won’t be angry about what I did.”

He had such a strange expression on his face that she had to laugh.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as you know, I told Henrietta about her mother, almost as soon as I found out. I told myself I wasn’t going to lie to her anymore or keep things from her.”

Catherine had seen Henrietta in the past few days, but they had barely had a moment alone. The girl seemed cheerful, if not a little paler than usual, and Catherine had worried that she hadn’t quite processed the shock of what she had learned.

“And she took it as well as she could, you said.”

“She was Henrietta,” John said, with a little smile. “She was surprised, of course, but she also said that it made sense. She said she had always heard she might not be our father’s daughter. And yet she said that she had always struggled to feel a connection to my mother. But then she had supposed it was because she was dead.”

“Poor Henrietta,” Catherine said, thinking of how her soon-to-be sister-in-law had cried when they first met over the rumors about her parentage.

Realizing he had promised a revelation, she said, “But I already knew all of this.”

“Yes,” he said, “but what I didn’t manage to tell you is that, after I spoke to Henrietta, I knew that I had to do more. Mary Forster is her mother and our last interview... Well, you saw what happened. Partially by our own orchestration. But nevertheless.”

A bolt of ice went through Catherine’s heart.

“You didn’t. You went *back*?”

The left side of his mouth kicked up at her horror. “I did.”

“Oh, John!” She clasped her hands to her mouth. “You didn’t.”

He nodded in response.

“But she doesn’t want anything to do with any of us. Not me. Not Henrietta. She told me herself.”

“She said much the same to me when I showed up again. And I assure you, her greeting was none too cordial.”

She placed both hands over his. “The fact that you tried—” Emotion forced her to stop speaking. That he had gone back for her and for his sister almost broke her heart in two.

“It’s all right,” he said, fixing those green eyes on her. “You will perhaps be surprised.”

She gave him a quizzical look.

“I was my most charming self. And she railed against me for a while. But I told her that I had every intention of marrying her niece and that I knew now that my sister was her daughter. I told her that I had no desire to keep her from my sister and that I would like Henrietta to know her mother, if possible.”

Catherine shook her head and hoped that, despite his pledge to be honest with Henrietta, he hadn’t told her about what must have been a resounding rejection from her mother.

“I appreciate the effort you have made for both Henrietta and myself.” She looked up at him and he had a strange smile on his face.

“I know she was harsh with you that day we visited her, but I suspect she was trying to protect herself. Or perhaps we underestimated her susceptibility, despite her protests to the contrary, to anyone who holds my particular title.”

Catherine felt a jolt of hope. “What do you mean?”

“After I had well and humbled myself,” he said, “and I mean *well and humbled*, I was, I have to say, really *quite* begging, she came around. She said she would love to know Henrietta and that she hoped that she hadn’t spoken too harshly to you.”

Shock coursed through Catherine’s system, mixed with the first inklings of a very extreme happiness.

“I don’t understand,” she said, taking his hand again. “How did you...? Why would she...?”

“I’m not sure. I think it must have been some combination of seeing you, my father’s letter, and my extreme groveling. When she thought I hated her, she felt that I could only harm her. When I made clear that I did not blame her for what had happened so many years ago, she softened.”

“She must want to know Henrietta,” Catherine said, softly, casting her mind back to the exchange she had had with her aunt, and how she had brushed off Catherine’s question about why she had stayed nearby. She loved the daughter she didn’t know.

“And I think she wants to know *you*,” John said, looking into her face, “and how could she not?”

He leaned in and took her into a deep kiss, making her body heat all over, and then drew away.

“This is all a long way of saying that I have reason to believe that your aunt will be at our wedding tomorrow. That is what I wanted to tell you.”

Catherine felt her face might break open from smiling. How had he added the last thing that had been lacking, the

only thing that might have kept her happiness from being complete?

She kissed him and he enveloped her in his arms.

This time, they did not stop until dawn broke through the windows and it was time to attend their own wedding.

EPILOGUE

Four Months Later

TOMORROW, CATHERINE AND John were leaving Edington for the north of England. There, Catherine had quite a few sites to see. They were the last ones she needed to visit to complete her book. Since their marriage, she had taken over both the study in Edington Hall and the Mayfair town house to John's endless amusement. He had never particularly appreciated these rooms—"I wonder why," he'd say to her, with a smirk—and he preferred to do his own work on a divan in the library, holding a glass of scotch. Nevertheless, he enjoyed happening upon Catherine at work in her two studies and attempting to distract her with various, as he liked to put it, "carnal arts."

Now, however, Catherine needed to travel to finish her research, having done all she could at such a convenient distance from their bed.

The only complication occurred two weeks ago, just after they had settled all the details of the trip, when Catherine began to suspect that, in seven months' time, the Dukedom of Edington would have a new sprig on its illustrious tree. While she and John were elated at this news, she *was* worried that the pregnancy would make her ill while they traveled. She had wondered if they should postpone.

John had insisted that they continue with their journey as planned. That morning, in fact, he had shown her a special carriage he had ordered from London. It would allow her to lie down while they traveled, if need be.

"Of course," he said, "it could also be used for other purposes."

As usual, the rakish twinkle in his eye made desire pool in her belly.

Their wedding had been much larger than she had expected. John had insisted on inviting all of society and more members of the *ton* had accepted invitations than she would have ever thought. In the months since their marriage, it had become clear that, in the eyes of the aristocracy, their union seemed to resolve the scandal, rather than reignite it, as if they were making right the wrong done by their predecessors. That their marriage had been panacea rather than new outrage only smoothed the way further for Henrietta, a circumstance for which Catherine and John were both grateful. Indeed, Henrietta was currently in London, enjoying her season under the chaperonage of—who else—Lady Wethersby and Lady Trilling.

Henrietta *had* been nervous before the start of her season. As she had confessed to Catherine, she had dreaded encountering Baron Falk in society. But not long before Henrietta's departure for London, they had received news that Baron Falk had fled to the Continent. He had been exposed in the scandal sheets for his near-bankruptcy and "vile acts towards the fair sex." And apparently, before his departure, he had been so badly beaten in a London alleyway that he had to hobble up the gangway at Dover. More surprising still, John had had nothing to do with this series of events. John and Catherine were left to conclude that, as the debtor of many and probable enemy of still more, Falk could have been attacked by any number of people.

While the acceptance of the *ton* had its gratifying elements and its usefulness, Catherine had long trained herself not to care about their opinions and she found that now she couldn't break herself of the habit. At the wedding itself, she had instead focused on their friends. Ariel had walked her down the aisle, of course. And, as she now loved the Rank Rakes as her brothers, she had beamed a particular smile at the Viscount of Tremberley, the Earl of Montaigne and the Marquess of Leith as she made her way towards John. She had been delighted, too, to see her old friend, Marisa Plinty, now Devereaux, with her two little children and handsome linen

draper husband, smiling wide as she proceeded to the altar. She had also saved a grin for Marcel and Melinda, who stood side-by-side in a pew and had just begun courting.

She had nearly broken down into tears herself when she saw Mrs. Morrison and Lady Trilling, the former of whom had cried very softly and the latter who had cried very loudly. For her part, Lady Wethersby had kept her tears in for as long as she could—much longer than Catherine had thought possible—before breaking down with gusto during the vows.

When she was making her way out of the church, Catherine had spied her aunt Mary standing beside a very respectable-looking man with kind, brown eyes, at the very back of the church. When their eyes had met, she saw the tears in her aunt's. In that moment, Catherine forgave Mary for every hardship she had ever suffered due to her actions.

Now, the evening before their departure, Catherine and John walked together over the very apple orchard where they had first spied each other as children. As they frequently did, they were walking the path that took them up to Forster House. Seeing her old home did not bring Catherine the pain it once had. Now she had so much happiness of her own that she could see the old house as merely a beautiful sight.

As they walked, John questioned Catherine on where she was in her book and whether she thought that this trip would enable her to finish it. She told him that she thought so. She just needed a few fresh pieces before she could present it to publishers in London. She knew that being the Duchess of Edington would make that process easier, a reality she frequently teased her husband about, and which he refused to grant. He didn't like to take responsibility for even her hypothetical success in such a way. She would publish her final product under her old pseudonym. Still her authorship would be known among the *ton*, not least because of her husband's excessive boasting.

“At the very least,” she said, placing a hand on her belly, “I should finish it before the completion of another project,

which has a very definitive deadline.”

He blushed at this allusion—a rare sight, indeed, on a Rank Rake, she thought to herself—and pulled her into a kiss.

Breaking their kiss, he looked at her very intently. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Another? I thought after the lounging carriage I would have run out of surprises for at least a month.”

They had reached the crest of the hill and could now see Forster House.

“The carriage was nothing. Anything, after all, for the woman I love.”

Catherine smiled. She knew he loved her, but the words still created a little thrill of surprise in her. She couldn’t believe that she had gotten so lucky as to marry the only man she had ever desired to the point of ruin. To have the man without the ruin, she thought, was something indeed.

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to her.

“If you have already secured a publisher for my book,” she said with a laugh, “I will be very angry with you. I haven’t even finished it yet. I can’t have you stacking the deck in my favor just because I am your duchess.”

“Nothing of the sort. I swear. Open it.”

She opened the paper and, at first, she couldn’t decipher the formal script.

“It’s the deed,” he said, when she said nothing. “To Forster House.”

“John.” When she looked up at him, she could feel the blood draining from her face.

“I bought it for you. I hope you aren’t vexed. I bought you Forster House,” he repeated as if she hadn’t heard him the first time.

He flushed a very handsome shade of crimson and gestured towards the house.

“It’s yours.”

She felt the tears on her face before she even realized she was crying. And then she was in his arms, kissing him senseless, before she could speak.

When she finally regained the power of speech, she said, “I can’t believe—I can’t believe you *bought it*.”

“I found the owner,” he said, his arms around her, “and made an offer too good for him to turn down. I have kept the tenants in it for now. We don’t need two manses, after all. But, I thought, one day, it might come to some use—now that our family has started to grow. And, after all, you should have it. I want you to have it. It’s yours to do with what you want. Just like me.”

Catherine kissed him again and it was fiery and sweet, sensual and riotous.

No one had ever done anything so wonderful for her in all of her life, except for when he had given her his love in the first place.

It shouldn’t have surprised her. He was John Breminster, after all.

Her old enemy.

Her lover.

Her husband.

Her duke.

Her happiness who went by so many different names.

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Lydia Lloyd writes high-heat historical romance set during the Regency period. She enjoys creating love stories between roguish heroes and complex heroines that are driven by authentic conflict and steamy encounters. Lydia holds a PhD in nineteenth-century British literature and, when she isn't writing historical romance, works as a teacher and scholar.

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